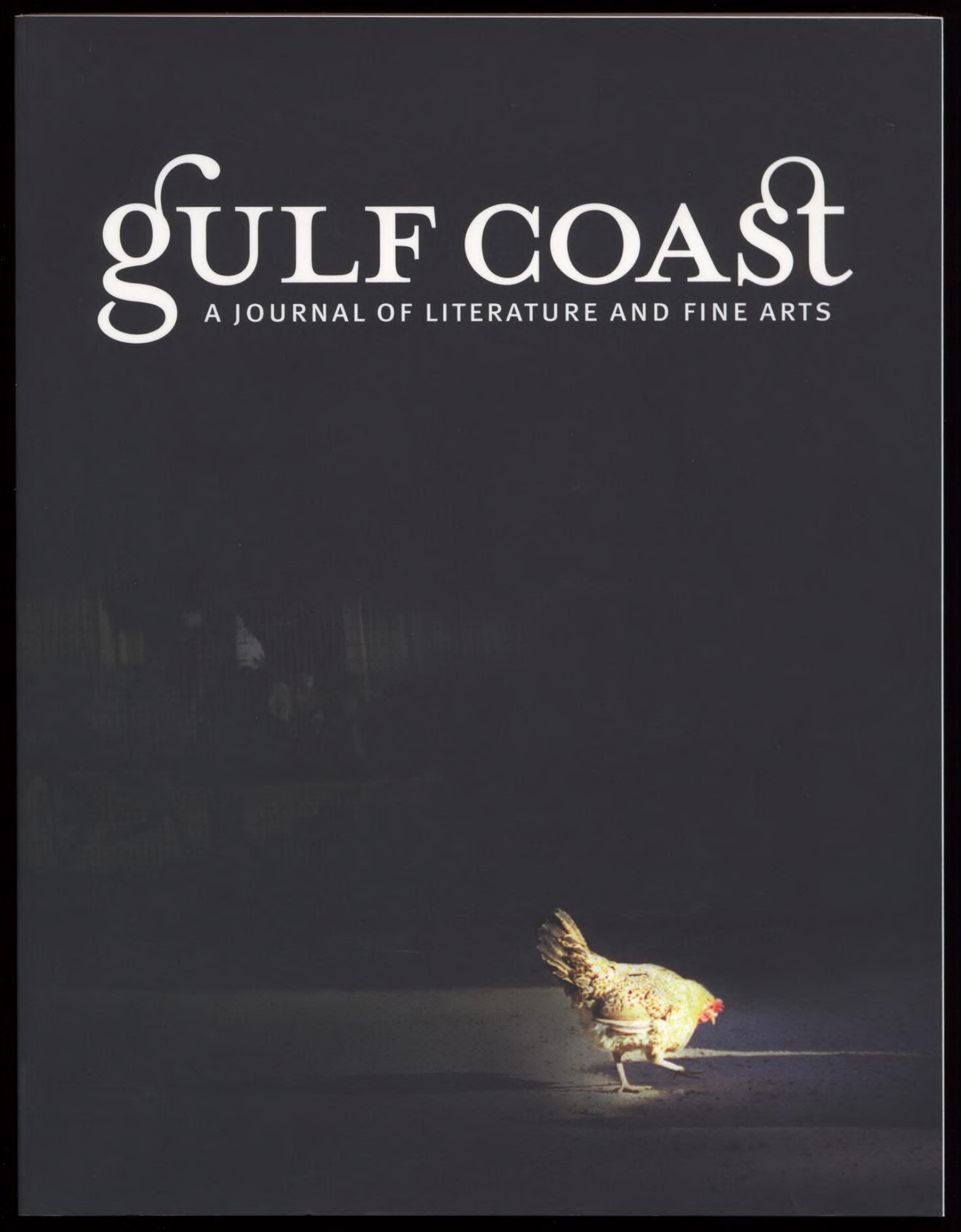
gulf coast

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS



GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 24, ISSUE 2

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Not long ago, in a writing workshop, the teacher asked, "What are some of the primary characteristics of an author's first book?" The group thought for a moment and then gave a short list of traits commonly found in debuts: autobiographical elements, coming-of-age stories, oh so meaningful realizations. All the usual crimes, of which we all in the room were to one degree or another guilty. Then someone said, "They're morose."

Huh.

I thought back to my own writing, what I hoped to one day hold up as a book, and noticed that it contained some serious stuff. Not serious in the sense that it was particularly important subject matter, but serious in that it was fairly lacking in any sense of humor. It just wasn't very funny. I also thought back to some of the prose that came close to getting published in *Gulf Coast* and why they didn't ultimately make the cut. A few very good stories and essays come to mind that might have been great had they a lighter touch, an occasional respite from the heartbreak.

It is doubtful that there are many readers of literary work—be it prose or verse—or who hasn't at some point been reading a book and thought, "I just wish this was just a little less… relentless."

Recently, my wife and I went to a performance of the Dominic Walsh dance company here in Houston. The movements of the dancers were breathtaking. The work certainly incorporated elements of ballet, but the most of the five pieces in the program eschewed linear narrative in favor of a more abstracted exploration of the body and its connection to other bodies. It asked us audience members to consider the significance of muscle and skin, the weight of flesh in gravity. It was nearly exhausting, the way a great book can make you feel that you've been through an experience (for, of course, you have). The final piece of the evening was a triptych. The first part began slowly, methodically, seriously. But then something wonderful happened. Part two was nothing like anything else in the program. The

music came on and it was a jaunty little ditty. The choreography took on movements that were less *Swan Lake* and more hokey-pokey. I glanced around and in the glow of the stage lights everyone in the audience was smiling.

So what role does humor play in the work of "serious" artists? That question was the start of what ended up being this issue's roundtable discussion on "funny" fiction. Elisa Albert, Steve Almond, Brock Clarke, Sam Lipsyte, John McNally, Deb Olin Unferth all joined up in the virtual world to try to suss out just what humor is and where it fits in what we sometimes refer to as serious literature. Whether they found an answer, we'll leave up to you, but we think you'll agree that in the right hands, even a lack of answer can be kind of hilarious.

This is not a humor issue, though. This issue of *Gulf Coast* contains fiction from the likes of Etgar Keret, Josip Novakovich, and Kevin Wilson; nonfiction from Alan Barstow, Marilyn Martin, and Amy Lee Scott; poetry from Victoria Chang, Joy Katz, Shane McCrae, and Matthew Rohrer. We also have the winner and runners-up of the 2011 Barthelme Prize for Short Prose and the art of Allison Hunter and Angelbert Metoyer. Not all of this is funny. Some of it is pretty damn serious. But we think that between the heartbreak, the introspection, and the emotional upheaval, you'll find moments of wit and jest, biting observations and the occasional *bon mot*. A little hokey-pokey in your program.

After all, life is pretty funny sometimes.

We hope you enjoy the issue.

Ian Stansel

Unfunky UFO, 1981

The first Space Shuttle launch got delayed until Sunday,
so we watched the shuttle's return in class instead—
PS113's paunchy black & white rolled in, its antennae
adjusted sideways & down for better reception so the set
looked like a teenager after his love letter got returned
to sender. The same day, Garrett jacked my new pencil
box. The same day, Cynthia peed her jeans instead of going
to the bathroom & letting Garrett jack her pencil box.
Both of us, too upset to answer questions about space
flight, so we got sent to the back of the class. Me, smelling
like the kind of shame that starts bar fights on Tuesday
afternoons. She smelled like pee & denim. The shuttle
made its slick way back to Earth, peeling clouds from
the monochromatic sky & we all—even the back-of-the-bus
& scientifically marginal—were winners. American,
because a few days before, a failed songwriter put a bullet
in the President in the name of Jodie Foster after she
returned his love songs unopened. The shuttle looked
like a bullet, only with wings & a cockpit, & when it landed,
the class broke into applause & the teacher snatched
a thinning American flag from the corner, waved it back
& forth in honor of the President & those astronauts.

Jason Bredle

Birthday Party

When I walk into a room the first thing I do is size everyone up fiscally. You people have scored very low. Where are the gifts? Have you heard the latest about politics and religion? Guess what I did last night. I dipped myself in chum and surfed off of Shark Bay Beach. It's like riding a sword through a tiger storm, my friends. You bet I want to do it again! And yet part of me feels empty, or like my head is full of monsters. Oh you people, I forgive you. In my memory, the cherry blossoms are always in bloom. You know how it is. You go to a birthday party for a guy named Kyle. When you get there nobody knows who Kyle is. You realize Kyle isn't a person, but something inside you. He's what makes you do the things that make you hate yourself. His favorite cake is red velvet.

Marni Ludwig

Ceremony for Lying Completely Still

I say I had my accident,

after which two men ran
into the street while I counted

the number of steps it took
to get to where the door hurt.

All drawings are by thieves
with beautiful hands.

All silences are accurate.

I like a mask. I like music.
When I get sick I take my logic
with a spoon.

Did you notice if he was wearing gloves?
I've come to trust only questions.

At approximately 2 p.m. I was lying face-down
on the floor, asking nicely for an afternoon.

Lisa Glatt

Happy Birthday, Clementine

No matter how much my best friend Kelly dressed it up for the party, the balcony was too damn small. I was standing with a man I'd just met on a pretty shag rug that obviously belonged inside. There were little colorful lights strung across the bars at our feet, but the balcony still felt like a fire escape—a place you bolted to in an attempt to save your life.

I was counting my drinks because I wanted to remember everything. I'd recently blacked out for the first time, woken up in bed with a guy I didn't know, and this time I wanted to know what happened. It wasn't that I felt guilty or bad for doing what I so obviously did, but I wanted to remember what that was. If I couldn't conjure up images of a chest, a pair of arms, and couldn't remember kisses, what was the point?

I had, as my mother would say, just slimmed down, losing twenty pounds and fitting into my favorite skirt and a sweater I considered doll-sized, and I was very aware of the inch of give I had at the waist which helped me shake my head no at the cheesy doodle my new friend was holding out as an offering. The doodle was wrinkled, the cheese smelly, and his fingertips were dusted orange.

I felt pretty standing on the little balcony with the man I'd just met. He was listening intently to each thing I said, which made me feel even prettier. It was a party I'd thrown for Kelly, although I didn't really do much except for having the idea, sending out a mass e-mail, bringing a case of beer and a store-bought birthday cake. It wasn't Kelly's birthday but the cake was on sale, and I wanted to walk into the party with something surprising. I was at that age where I wanted to be mysterious; it was like holding in your stomach—it never really worked. Or it worked temporarily, and then there you were again, an open book and your belly was bigger than you'd remembered it. But I was twenty then and didn't know how hopeless it all was.

On top of the cake, someone had written in blue cursive, "Happy Birthday Clementine," and my new friend was impressed with this. He said it was cool and that the minute I walked in and set the cake on the dining table, he noticed my high-heeled boots and wanted to say hello. Hello, he said. He was talking, flirting,

and I was flirting too, but in my peripheral vision, I saw a guy I loved for a short while who didn't love me back. He was looking down at the cake and shaking his head like it was the saddest thing he'd ever seen. He stepped away and out of my view then, and I felt like I'd lost something.

My new friend was asking if it was hard to walk in my boots. I was shaking my head no, but I wasn't quite there. I was wondering where the guy I loved who didn't love me back went. I was wondering if just seeing me in my favorite skirt and tiny sweater would fill him with regret.

You look like you know some things, my new friend said.

How old are you anyway? he asked. What kind of cake is it? he wanted to know.

A birthday cake, I said.

Chocolate or vanilla?

I don't know. It's for Clementine.

Who's Clementine? He looked around.

She's not here.

Where is she?

Good question, I said. I was wondering what had happened to Clementine, if she'd been punished, done something bad like shoplift or cuss at a teacher, and so her whole birthday party was canceled. Or maybe she'd done something terrific, like get straight A's or fend off a kidnapper, and a store-bought cake wouldn't do anymore. Perhaps her mother was mixing eggs and flour and sugar into a bowl because her Clementine was so great, more intuitive than she'd ever imagined.

I lived in my head a lot then, smoked pot a couple nights a week, but mostly I drank at parties or bars, flashing my fake ID and trying to summon maturity to my face. I wanted to be in a relationship because I wanted someone to kiss me goodbye and hello, again and again and again. I'd never had a boyfriend, but I'd loved the guy who thought the cake was sad, and I'd had lots of sex with guys who'd been my friends, and then who were, like me, struck by the awkwardness of having had sex with a friend, and so pulled away even though we'd had so much fun just hanging out and getting stoned before we got all carried away.

Kelly had had a baby a few weeks earlier, and the baby was still so tiny that I marveled at her just being out in the world. Shelter seemed inadequate—the

building, the apartment, the crib, the blanket—nothing was enough. The only time I thought she'd live through the night was when I was holding her two nights earlier. Tonight, though, I was thinking about my own needs.

The man I was talking to on the balcony was an African-American man. There were a lot of men of color at the party: Latinos, two guys from the Middle East, and four black businessmen who went to MIT. There was also a very short white guy who kept saying, Hey bro, and How'z it? and embarrassing himself. Most of the other men were big with broad chests and deep voices. My new friend's skin was light, and his features were small and pointy. He had one of those noses you stare at because you can't imagine the necessary amount of air squeaking its way inside, and his lips were too thin like my grandmother's. And he giggled. When I said something funny, he'd actually lift his hand to his mouth and hee-hee behind it. There was something endearing about his giggle when most of the other men at the party, including the guy I loved who didn't love me back, were knee-deep in their own testosterone, their laughs from their bellies carrying across the room and out onto the balcony, dwarfing my new friend's giggle all the more.

He had a newly shaved head that he told me was temporary. It made him look vulnerable, and if I'd had a hat to spare, I would have given it to him. I'd spend one night, a morning, and an early afternoon with this man, and then two weeks thinking about him, and I'd move on right around the time his soft curls would be growing back.

At some point a young woman joined us on the balcony. She had offerings: a bowl of artichoke dip and a plate of crackers. We were polite but not overly so. My friend accepted a cracker, swiping the dip while the woman held the plate steady. He was chewing, nodding his approval, but he was looking at me.

I refused the offerings and made them eat alone.

Tasty? she asked him.

He said artichokes, especially the hearts, were one of the wonders of the world.

I looked at him and felt betrayed. They're overrated, I said.

No one said anything.

Inside, the party erupted with laughter, and the woman turned around to see what all the fuss was about. I'm going back in, she said, taking the dip and crackers with her.

And we were alone again, the way we obviously liked it, and without looking at each other, we'd made something clear: our very own after-party was all planned out. Sure, there were things we'd stumble over, things that filled each of us with doubt, but there was always alcohol, the fruity vodka drinks I was sipping and counting, and there was the proximity of the tiny balcony which could have probably brought even the most unlikely people together, at least for a night.

I was proud of my freedom and weight loss and fitting into my skirt and sweater, and I told him so.

The weight loss and skirt I understand, he said. Freedom, though, what do you mean?

I live alone, I said. No roommates, no parents.

Independent, he said.

That's me, I said.

What are your parents like? he wanted to know.

Like anyone's parents, I lied. My parents weren't like anyone's parents; they were very fat parents who were sometimes very thin. They were very thin parents now with skin hanging from their faces. They'd refused the foods they loved all spring, so my mom was wearing short sleeves again and my dad was tucking in his shirts. I imagined them sitting in their big house on their big couch talking about fat grams and calories and fake eggs and artificial sweeteners.

I was not very fat but I looked like I could be one day. I was the girl you thought might be athletic under her clothes but when you got me naked, I was all soft with a marshmallow belly. I wondered if the guy I loved who didn't love me back was disappointed when he touched my belly on the way into my panties and if that had any effect on his decisions.

I might one day be very fat, I told the man on the balcony.

I like a woman with a little something-something.

I might have much more than a little of everything, I said.

What's your mom look like? he asked.

She looks great.

He nodded happily.

Now, I added.

Hmm, he said thoughtfully.

Ask me in two weeks, I said, and then I was quickly embarrassed because the man on the balcony had said nothing about talking to me in two weeks, and I knew how presumptuous I'd sounded.

I've got someone, he said, looking down at his ring.

I see that.

We're having problems, he said.

Did you do something?

We both did things.

That's too bad.

She's away. He paused. *They're* away, he corrected himself.

You've got more than one?

I've got a kid, too.

Don't tell me more, I said.

Okay, he said. Then we were both quiet for a few minutes, looking out at the night sky. Have you seen Kelly's baby? he finally asked me.

I'm her best friend, I said. I see the baby all the time.

Oh, he said.

The baby was asleep, or maybe she wasn't asleep, but we told ourselves she was. Earlier while I was buying the birthday cake, Kelly was putting her in the crib with the baby monitor turned off; Kelly was only twenty-one and didn't want a baby to begin with but hadn't been up for an abortion. You might not like the way that sounds, but I'd been up for an abortion twice already, at sixteen and at nineteen, and Kelly had come with me to the clinic both times. I'd always thought that she agreed with me, that she knew it wasn't murder, but when Kelly got pregnant, all that changed. She kept saying that her fetus was a person like those people outside the clinic said it was.

I started to think back to the conversations we'd had about abortion, and I couldn't remember her saying anything either way. Maybe my assumption had to do with Kelly's omission, what she refused to say out loud, but either way it pissed me off. It's not like I would have carried the pregnancies to term if she'd passed her opinion, but still I felt duped.

The guy who got Kelly pregnant was someone she'd slept with only three times, and the last time she claimed he hadn't even come inside of her. He came on my belly, she said.

We were driving down Fourth Street, coming up to Redondo, and trying to decide on something fast and greasy to eat.

I've never heard of such a thing, I said.

Some sperm are so determined, she said.

Maybe, I said, doubtful.

Have I ever lied to you?

I thought about this. Yes, I said.

Well, I'm not lying now.

Okay, I said.

It's true. He came on my belly and now look at me. She paused and sighed. You know, she started up again, I should warn other girls. I should be one of those preachy chicks that go to high schools and talk to kids about what's possible. I'd talk about the dangers of premarital sex, and by the time I left the auditorium, they wouldn't even want to kiss.

That would be sad, I said, feeling like I was about to cry.

We didn't say anything for several blocks. It seemed to me that the way Kelly was driving, heavy-footed and rushing through the yellow lights, she wanted me to disappear. Maybe she didn't like that I wasn't sympathetic enough. It seemed to me that there was a choice to make, and maybe she didn't like that I'd made that choice. Twice.

I believe in abortion, I finally said.

It's not for me, she said.

It's for everyone, if you want it bad enough, I said.

Well, she said, adamant, it's not for *me*.

This made me feel like she thought I was less than her, not a good person, and suddenly I wanted Kelly to have an abortion more than anything. I wanted to hold her down in the front seat and give her one myself.

We settled on tacos and ate them inside her car in the parking lot. We were mostly silent, looking out our windows at the SUVs we were sandwiched between.

How are you going to support a baby? I finally said. You don't have any money, I reminded her, which was an extra mean thing to say because I myself had money and would always have money. My parents had money—they had so much of it that they had to share.

I'll make do, she said.

I popped the last bit of my taco in my mouth and didn't look at her.

I will, she insisted.

I nodded at the window, then picked up the napkin from my lap and wiped my lips.

Kelly's baby was a girl, and her name was Mary. I thought it was a horrible thing to do, name her after a virgin who couldn't have possibly been a virgin, but I didn't tell Kelly this. Instead I said, When you get out of the hospital, I'll throw you a party. And that's what I did. And that's how I ended up on the balcony with my new, married friend.

At some point, the guy I loved who didn't love me back came out on the balcony and asked us if we wanted to get stoned.

No thanks, my new friend said.

Suit yourself, he said. Hey you, he said, turning to me. Where's the rest of you? He was smiling, admiring me.

I said nothing. My new friend laughed nervously.

I'm going to smoke this, the guy I'd loved said, holding a fat joint in the air. And then I'm out of here. I'm catching a plane in a couple hours. Off to the Netherlands, he said, proud.

I wanted to tell him that no one had asked him where he was going, but I stayed quiet and sipped my drink instead.

We don't smoke, my new friend told him, but of course the guy I'd loved knew I smoked. He looked at me.

Nasty habit, I said.

You can pretend, but you can't hide, he said.

I shrugged.

Oh well, he said. See you.

My new friend leaned back, his elbows up on the railing, and watched the guy I'd loved walk away.

What? I said.

Nothing, he said.

I looked at the dark sky and wanted to say something about the stars I couldn't see but didn't want to sound romantic, so I stopped myself. I looked down at the street where an old man was walking a huge white dog. The dog stopped at a tree to pee, and I thought I'd better think of something to say.

I never imagined Kelly being a mother, I finally said. The whole time she was pregnant, I thought, Oh no, what has she done?

She's a good mom, he said.

She's not a good mom, I said.

That's a terrible thing to say, he said.

But it's true, I said, moving off the balcony and leaving him.

The people inside were snorting lines of cocaine off handheld mirrors. There were people on the couch, the love seat, three people at the dining table surrounding Clementine's cake. A girl with big hair swiped a finger in the frosting and lifted the blue swirl to her tongue. I wanted her to go to jail for that, for leaving Clementine's name only half intact, now reading, "Happy Birthday Cleme." Several mirrors were passed around; people dusted off their noses and stuck their frosted fingertips into their mouths, coating their gums, and then the guy from the balcony came up to me and said he didn't do cocaine and he could see that I didn't either, the way I stayed away from the mirrors, and that maybe that meant something and perhaps we should try again.

I asked him if he liked cats.

I like them, but they don't like me.

Don't be egotistical, I said. They don't have an opinion about you either way.

I'm allergic, he clarified.

I need you to know a couple things, I said. One, I could gain back that twenty pounds at any moment. I may be gaining them back right now, I said, eying Clementine's cake.

Okay, he said.

And two, I don't believe in cat allergies.

You'll believe me when I sneeze.

People sneeze all the time. Don't blame the cats, I said.

Whoa, he said, backing up, don't get all aggressive.

I'm not getting aggressive, I said. I'm getting defensive.

Time for another drink, he said, moving toward the kitchen and away from me.

I talked to a goateed teenager who lived downstairs and had come up to the party uninvited. He called me "dude" one too many times so I walked away. I found a woman in the hallway to stand next to. She had a conservative hairdo, sensible shoes, pink blush striped across her cheeks, and what looked like a freshly-pierced eyebrow. There was a red ring surrounding the gold stud which made it look like a tiny planet sat on her brow. The woman asked me about my future as she twirled the stud.

Are you going to finish college? she said. Kelly says you're very smart and that you used to play the violin.

I was too nervous for the violin, I said.

What do you mean?

If you fuck up on the first note, which I often did, you can't fix it. You can't save yourself, is what I'm saying.

Hmm, she said, considering this. Then, Do you have a boyfriend?

I shook my head.

Do you want one?

Doesn't everybody?

Not necessarily, she said, twirling, staring at me.

You don't look like a woman who'd pierce her eyebrow, I said.

Oh look, she said, lifting up her blouse and revealing a belly softer and bigger than mine.

She had to spread out the fat so that I could see her pierced navel.

You're very with it, I said.

You were focused on my hair, she said. And you couldn't see the rest of me.

Just then my new friend came back and asked me to dance, although no one was dancing and the music was barely audible.

Excuse me, I said to the woman. This man wants to dance.

She winked at me, and her pierced eyebrow moved.

He steered me down the hall towards Kelly's bedroom. I hesitated at the door.

The baby's in there, I said.

We'll whisper, he said.

Mary was sleeping, so quiet in her crib that I walked over to make sure she was still breathing. She had her arms crossed in front of her belly which made her look like a little old man. Still, I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Oh no, I said. She's got a patch of dry skin. It's all red. Poor baby.

My new friend and I sat on the bed, and I talked about my cats. I've got two, I said. Durante weighs twelve pounds, and Cleo weighs twenty.

Fat, he said.

I know, I said.

What's the vet say?

The vet says that I'm killing Cleo with treats.

That's what you're doing then.

I wanted to tell him how the treats were tiny fishes or little chickens, that her favorite treats had flaxseed and vitamin E and looked like strips of apricot jelly or cheddar cheese, that those particular treats were so good for Cleo, so healthy, if only she didn't insist on so many of them. I wanted to tell him how when I poured them into my palm, I was certain they couldn't kill anyone. I wanted to tell him how sometimes I walked Cleo around the house, all twenty pounds of her, her chest to my chest, her paws over my shoulder, and thought about all the weight I'd lost. I wanted to tell him how sometimes I held her in front of my belly, imagining I'd gained it back.

Are they fixed? he asked.

Yes, I said, but I'm not sure I made the right decision.

Why do you say that?

I think they really want to have sex with each other, and sometimes I feel guilty that I took that away from them.

It's for the best.

You just don't want cats in the world. You're an allergic, anti-cat man, I said.

He giggled behind his hand, and this time, it wasn't as endearing.

I looked around Kelly's room, at the couch against the wall, at the framed photographs on her dresser: her mom and dad in Hawaii with the black rock of

Diamond Head behind them, her brother in his cap and gown flipping off the camera, and the two of us in Mexico eating lobster in white bibs. There was a short stack of parenting books on her nightstand. Look at those shiny spines, I said. Kelly hasn't cracked one of them open.

Give her a chance, he said.

I said nothing.

My wife and girl are away, he said.

I thought we weren't going to talk about those people, I said.

Okay, he said.

We were quiet for a few minutes. A drunk couple knocked on the door and opened it at the same time. Oops, sorry, they said in unison. They stood there staring at us.

Close the door, please, I said.

They left the door open and stumbled away, laughing.

We've got a feral cat colony in the neighborhood, my new friend said. And there's this one tom who actually ate two kittens.

I don't believe you, I said.

It's true. I found the half eaten kittens one morning on my way to church, he said.

Oh no, I said. You go to church?

So?

I wanted to have sex tonight.

Just because I go to church doesn't mean I won't have sex with you, he said.

It means *I* won't have sex with *you*, I said.

Kelly popped her head in then and discovered us. Come in. Save me, I said.

You're my best friend, she said, and I could tell she was drunk because she sat down between the two of us and put one arm around me and one around him and kissed our cheeks, and she wasn't the sort of person to do a thing like that. It made me sad for a minute because I thought about Mary and how Kelly might not kiss her enough, about how she'd left her in here with the baby monitor turned off and how all night she could have been choking or crying or not even breathing. I wondered if Mary would grow up to believe in abortion and if her mother would tell her about me, how I was the friend who suggested such a thing, and if Mary would hate me or admire my honesty.

They cut the cake, Kelly said.

What kind is it? he asked.

Chocolate, she said, looking at me. No one's eating it though. Some bitch keeps rubbing her finger through the frosting.

I hate that girl, I said.

Why aren't they eating the cake?

The cocaine, I said.

You'll take some home? she said.

Okay, I said.

I'm going to check on the baby, Kelly announced, standing up.

Good, he said.

She went to the foot of the bed and stood with her back to us. She said something to the baby that I couldn't make out, and then she said something about her arm looking red and funny, and then my new friend's hand moved closer to me, his fingers brushing at my skirt.

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By the time we got to my house, it was five in the morning. The sun was making its way into the living room, and Durante was in the middle of the couch sleeping on his back with his legs splayed. It looked like he was imitating a dead cat. Cleo was on the kitchen counter taking a nap too. She looked fatter than ever.

How can you afford this place? he asked.

My house wasn't huge but it was impressive for someone my age: two bedrooms and a den, a backyard full of flowers I planted myself. My dad makes a lot of money, I said.

My boyfriend for the night looked like he was about to cry. His eyes were red and about to spill over, and he sneezed three times in a row, so fast he couldn't hear me bless him, which was just fine because I was an atheist anyway.

Told you I was allergic, he said.

I don't believe in God, I said.

Maybe you will one day.

No, I've thought it all out. I paused. Do you still like me?

I do.

You can kiss me, I said.

And he did.

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By noon, we were sitting in my living room drinking coffee and eating Clementine's cake which was very moist and tasty, despite the bitch's fingerprints. You have to take the rest home with you, I said.

Okay. He leaned over, scraped my plate with his fork, picking up the frosting I'd left behind. That's the best part, he said, enthusiastically. He leaned back on the couch with one arm up behind him. I haven't been to church in a very long time, he said.

Thank God, I said, smiling. I mean, I don't want to tell you how to live, but really.

Did you mean what you said at the party about your cats? Do you feel guilty for getting them fixed?

Maybe their lives are meaningless.

They seem pretty content to me, he said.

All they do is walk around the house and eat and sleep.

And we looked at the two of them walking around the house.

And then we watched them eat.

And then we watched them sleep.

And then he kissed me, and we moved into my bedroom.

And an hour later, he left.

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That night I went to Kelly's apartment to help her clean up. It was the least I could do because I was the one with the idea for the party. She was sitting on a stool in the kitchen in her robe and slippers talking to her mom on the phone. She was nervous and upset, describing the dry skin on the baby's arm, but whatever her mother was saying on the other end made her feel better, I could tell.

After I cleaned the counter and swept the floor, I went outside and stood on the little balcony. I thought about my one-night boyfriend for a few minutes, conjured up images of his chest and arms, images that were mine because I counted my drinks and stayed mostly alert. Then I headed in to see Mary. It looks like she had a fine time, I said to no one.

When Kelly got off the phone and came to find me, I was sitting on the couch with the baby propped up on a pillow. She had spittle on her face, and her eyes were open and blue and sort of crossed—it looked like she was trying to get control of them. I won't say that she was smiling because babies her age don't smile yet, so I'll say she had gas, but it was the best look on her face. What a beautiful, gassy baby she was. What a perfect girl, even with the patch of dry skin on her arm.

Would you just look at her, I said.

I know, Kelly said. She fixed her breasts in her robe. Did you have sex last night? she asked.

And this morning, I said. And this afternoon.

Don't be insulted if he doesn't call you. I know he really liked you. It was on his face.

Maybe he'll call, she said.

He won't call, I said. But I think you're right, he liked me. And right then I believed it and knew that I liked him too, that I'd liked him at the party right away, that we'd disagreed about things, parted ways, and then made up and got back together, that there was a whole miniature life as a couple we lived in just twelve hours.

He thinks you're a good mom, I said.

Not yet, she said.

How about the three of us go out to dinner? I said. My treat. Go get dressed. I'll take you wherever you want to go, I told her. And then Kelly was picking Mary up from the couch and cooing at her, and I was imagining my friend growing into someone who didn't have dirty mirrors around the house, imagining her growing into a mother.

This is just where we are right now, I said.

She ignored me the way she sometimes did when I said things she didn't understand or agree with.

Get the baby seat and her blanket, I said.

I'm going to put some aloe on her arm first, Kelly said.

I stood in the living room waiting for the two of them. I saw a mirror sandwiched between the couch cushions and leaned down to get it. There were my chin and lips and cheeks coming into focus, growing huge. I put the mirror face down on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

When I wrapped up the remaining piece of Clementine's cake for my married friend, I felt him watching me. He was sitting at the kitchen table fully dressed and ready to go, and I was standing at the counter in a T-shirt and underwear. I covered the cake with plastic wrap and told him that I'd never been a person who ate a whole anything, not a pie or a cake or a box of cookies, but that I understood doing so. I told him that I understood wanting something so badly that even too much of it wasn't enough.

Soon, Kelly and Mary and I were walking together to the garage, and Kelly was telling me how her mom was planning to come out and help with the baby, at least for a little while.

And then Kelly was leaning over, securing Mary's baby seat.

And then, before stepping into the front seat, I saw Mary's greasy little arm from the window, the spot where Kelly had applied the lotion. I looked at her glistening skin and thought that that's what it was like being alive, your cells changing all the time and you becoming new.

Alan Barstow

Marriage in a Time of AIDS

Tomas could stare his students into silence. While I had to plead, *Okay, let's get started, please sit down, please be quiet*, all Tomas had to do was fold his arms, sweep his eyes across the class, and wait. At Hallelujah Combined School in Namibia, Tomas started his teaching career three years earlier, and I had started mine as a Peace Corps volunteer just six months ago. But now Tomas stood before me silent and unsure. He looked over each shoulder, then settled his eyes on my feet. The morning break had begun, and we stood in the staff room away from the windows that opened onto dozens of blue-uniformed students swapping stories and snacks.

"The short one," he breathed, using his girlfriend's code name, a Namibian take, I guessed, on hip hop's *shorty*. "She's pregnant."

Soon after Tomas moved to Aakwetu village to teach, he and the short one began dating in secret. If their paths crossed at the *cuca* shops, the corrugated metal-roofed shebeens that made up Aakwetu's center, or at the public water tap beyond the school's gate, they passed each other without even a wave or greeting. I saw her for the first time only a month earlier. In line to buy fried bread, a local delicacy called *oshikuki*, Tomas took my hand and gestured with his chin to a young woman sitting on a blanket, doling out the oily bread wrapped in scraps of newspaper. A mound of silver coins grew beside her.

"Her aunt has gone to town," Tomas said, "so the short one is working her business."

She, in her early twenties, and Tomas, twenty-five years old, had similar features: both were short and stocky, had round faces with prominent cheekbones, and kept their hair shaved to the scalp. While she wore sandals, cut-off khaki shorts, and an old T-shirt with pockmarked fabric, Tomas wore a neon yellow Arsenal jersey, dark jeans, and leather shoes. Without acknowledging her presence, nor she his, Tomas bought our snacks from another woman.

But in the last month everything changed. On the sand court behind the grade eight block, they played volleyball, *together*. Tomas talked to the short one, *in public*. At the water tap Tomas was seen hoisting her five-gallon jerry can onto his

shoulder and carrying it in the direction of her father's homestead. And last week he even led her to me and said, "Alan, you know Maria."

"Pleasure," she said. Big, round eyes, the irises as dark as the pupils, focused on my feet. Unsure of her English, she covered her mouth with a thick hand. She'd failed the nationally administered grade ten exam years earlier, a test that only 50 percent of tenth graders typically passed, so she wasn't eligible to enroll in the eleventh grade. Her schooling over, she worked in her father's fields, pounded grain into flour, cooked the local staple *oshimbombo*, millet porridge, and brewed traditional beer at her father's *cuca* shop.

"Of course I know Maria," I said. In the traditional way, our left hands held our right forearms as we shook. She bounced at her knees; I nodded. She wore a *meme* dress, an unflattering, one-piece, billowing frock that old women wore.

And now, as Tomas still focused his eyes on my feet, everything—his nervousness, her *meme* dress, their public encounters—made sense: they were pregnant.

Tomas said, "I'll go at the weekend," meaning that on Saturday he'd travel to his father's homestead, a hundred-mile, four-hour journey by foot and taxi. "I'll tell my father we want to marry."

"That's fantastic news," I blurted. I was twenty-four years old, and marriage to me was an abstract inevitability. I'd never had a serious girlfriend, but I had no doubt that I—that everyone—would one day marry and slip seamlessly into adulthood. I reached out to embrace Tomas, but he shrugged and stepped away.

"It is fantastic," he said, but his tone was flat, as if he spoke of the heat or a staff meeting. He turned to the window, and I, confused, stood beside him. Through the burglar bars we watched students amble towards their classes, girls holding their girlfriends' hands, as was customary, and boys holding their friends' hands.

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Come Monday, all Tomas offered of his discussion with his father was, "It's done. The wedding will be in December." On the verge of marriage and fatherhood, he didn't look at all happy or excited. Love and relationships, it seemed, were as inscrutable as AIDS, which in 2003 was said to plague one out of every five Namibians.

Yet I believed that love was the only reason they wanted to marry.

In Aakwetu, because weddings were expensive affairs, marriage was uncommon. The groom's family had to pay for an extravagant engagement party, a formal wedding ceremony, and lavish feasts to which the entire village was invited. Traditionally marriage meant the bride left her family to join her husband's, so the groom compensated his in-laws with a *lobola*, a bride price, paid in cattle, grain, and tools.

Most couples chose to raise their children out of wedlock. In fact, half of Hallelujah's teachers had fathered or mothered children with people whom they had no intention of marrying. Children were a sign of adulthood, a measure of masculinity, femininity. Childless men were rumored to be impotent; women who weren't mothers were said to be sterile or have diseases.

It would've been common for Maria to raise the child on her father's homestead. Tomas would've sent money for doctor's visits, clothes, and school fees. The child would've spent weekends and holidays with Tomas. If, in the future, they still wanted to marry, Tomas and Maria would've had the opportunity to save money so the wedding expenses would've been better absorbed. If not for love, then why else would they marry so soon?

As the wedding approached, Tomas lost weight, his face became gaunt, and he no longer played soccer or volleyball after school. Students and colleagues avoided him. His free time consisted of transporting cattle from his father's farm deep in the bush, amassing food and refreshments for hundreds of relatives, and borrowing more and more money from his family. He and Maria needed a home, so Tomas bought an undeveloped section of the mopane forest. After long days of teaching during the hottest times of the year, when simply talking, eating, or sleeping was difficult, Tomas cleared his new land of brush and trees. Out of blocks he mixed himself from sand and cement, he built an *okambashu*, a hovel with a concrete floor, single window, and corrugated metal roof. No more than one-hundred square feet, his home was just big enough for a pallet, trunk, table, and chair.

In December, summer and the rains burst upon northern Namibia. Night awoke with the chirp and whir of insects, with choruses of frogs like mallets on a wooden xylophone. Once dry pans swelled with rainwater, and cattle and goats grew fat on wild grass. As families plowed and planted, Tomas's relatives crowded

into his father's homestead. When I arrived, a hundred people had bivouacked around the cinderblock buildings and grass-roofed huts. From the homestead fence fluttered a white sheet tied to a pole—the symbol of *efundula*, a wedding.

Tomas met me at the homestead gate. Around us goat meat *braiied* on half-a-dozen cook fires, and Tomas's relatives laughed and drank bottled beer or a sour traditional beer called *omalovu gwiilya*. Caught up in their emotion, I slapped Tomas on the back and said, "Are you ready to be an *omusamane*, a husband?"

"I haven't slept in three days," he said. He raised an index finger to massage his temple. His eyes were sunken and his shoulders slumped. Sweat marks traced down his filthy ankles. He stank—the ripe onion smell of sweat; the grainy smells of wood smoke, grilled meat.

He said his days and nights had been a blur of traditions and celebrations: drinking and dancing, speeches from aunts and uncles, ritual cleansings with traditional oil. And each night, while his family slept, he and a handful of siblings struck out into the village. They woke up neighboring homesteads with dance and song until the families allowed Tomas to catch one of their chickens and hobble its feet with string, to add to the wedding feast.

Tomas listlessly introduced me to his family. We found his father with blood up to his elbows, eviscerating a slaughtered cow. He was a short, stout, kind-faced man—unmistakably Tomas's father. He hacked off a foreleg and handed it to me.

"A good cut," Tomas said without smiling.

All night the family drank and ate and danced. It was the eve of his wedding, and Tomas was surrounded by family and friends, but he sat alone, morose and glum. Something more than exhaustion fueled his dark mood, I knew, but the family's energy infected me, and all night I partied with them, celebrating Tomas even though he abstained. At some point I fell asleep with my shoes on, the tent flap unzipped, oblivious to the mosquitoes that feasted on me.

I woke at sunrise to a 750-mL bottle of beer and a plate of beef cubes in a light gravy. Three sips and I was drunk again. While the family bathed and dressed, Tomas, already wearing a pressed tuxedo and shoes polished to obsidian, sat in a plastic chair. His shaven, moisturized face looked as fragile as glass.

"Want some meat?" I called.

"I'm sick," he whispered. "High blood pressure." His blazer hung open, the tuxedo shirt unbuttoned, and he held his right hand pressed against the flesh of his chest.

Midmorning everyone climbed into a caravan of *bakkies* until the pickups were so overloaded the wheel wells sat an inch above the tires. Men wore suits and cowboy hats, and women wore multi-colored frocks with matching head wraps and carried short staffs with horsetails mounted on the ends. The caravan crept onto the two-lane, undivided B1 tar road. Children blew plastic whistles, men sang hymns, women ululated and waved the horsetail staffs—everyone cried, "*Iiyaloo, Tomasa! Efundula, efundula, efundula*! Congratulations, Tomas! A wedding, a wedding, a wedding!" Despite the songs and ululation, Tomas dozed, his head lolling back and forth.

After an hour we turned onto a sandy two-track road that led to the Lutheran church near Aakwetu. Careful not to bottom out on the sandy swells, we inched along at ten miles per hour. Outside the church ululated and sang a hundred and fifty men and women, Maria's family. She wore a veil and a white gown with a collar that rose to her chin. Tomas joined her on the concrete steps, and without speaking or embracing they entered the sanctuary. The service lasted almost two hours, and Tomas and Maria stood the entire time. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, flexed his head to each shoulder to stretch his neck. She, six months pregnant, her baby-belly unmistakable, rested her hands on the backs of her hips.

After the service we climbed into the *bakkies* again, and the caravan snaked through the forest to Aakwetu. At the edge of Maria's father's field we processed by foot, singing hymns and ululating. White umbrellas shielded the new couple from the sun. Before them, children and old women whistled and danced and sang. Holding a metal spear above his head, Maria's father emerged from the homestead gate. He stomped a quick staccato in the sand, chanted, "*Wakasho! Wakasho! Wakasho!*" He stomped towards the bridal party and thrust the spear at them.

A circus tent enclosed the homestead, and a white flag flapped from the center pole. At wooden tables we ate a feast like I'd never seen before: baskets of millet porridge; six-gallon tubs of rice; macaroni salad, potato salad, and carrot salad with raisins; pots of chicken, beef, and goat meat. On every table sat glass bottles of Tafel Lager, Coca-Cola, Sprite, and Fanta.

As sunset approached, Maria's father coaxed a generator to life. Multi-colored bulbs hung from the trees like incandescent fruit, and the homestead was bathed in soft pastels. From a single speaker blared Kwaito music, a blend of house and rap and African beats. Young and old danced in the sand, hands clapping, hips gyrating. At the head table, Tomas and Maria remained stone faced, her hands on her belly, his eyes barely open.

Close to midnight the lights dimmed and the music slowed. Then, everything cut out. "*Fokof*," someone swore in Afrikaans. Children laughed. Bumbling in the darkness. A chair fell over. Liquid sloshed. I smelled petrol. Two pulls of a cord and the lights came back on and the music started mid-beat. Ululations and dancing started anew. I looked to the head table. Maria had fallen asleep, slumped on the plastic armrest. Next to her, Tomas's chair sat empty.

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After the wedding a doctor confirmed Tomas had high blood pressure. He prescribed a medicine and instructed Tomas to limit his stressors. But Tomas's stress level only increased—Maria told him his relatives gossiped about how fast she'd become pregnant.

There was no honeymoon. They spent the rest of the December holiday at his father's homestead, sleeping in Tomas's boyhood room. When school resumed, Tomas returned to Aakwetu, but Maria stayed on with his family, who lived two miles from the only hospital in the area. Tomas visited each Saturday, and Maria told him that his stepmother, sisters, and aunts made fun of the way she spoke Oshiwambo, pounded millet grain into flour, and washed clothes. She'd never before lived on a homestead that had electricity, let alone a TV and DVD player; she'd never before cooked in an indoor kitchen, let alone one with a microwave and refrigerator. Soon her feet and ankles swelled. Standing became painful, and her belly grew as big as a cast-iron *poiki* pot. She begged Tomas to finish building their homestead so that after she gave birth she could return home. Now, in addition to weekdays teaching and Saturdays visiting his wife, Tomas spent the rest of his free time working on his land.

One Saturday I woke before dawn, fried a banana for breakfast, and set out on the path to the *cuca* shops. Tomas and I had agreed to travel to town together, he to visit Maria, who would give birth any day, and I to buy groceries and run errands. The normally bustling *cuca* shops loomed dark and quiet. Across the clearing a donkey, its front feet hobbled with reeds, stood on its hind legs to tear thatch from a straw roof.

On a bench outside the headman's shop, Tomas slept folded over himself, his forearms a pillow on his knees. He woke as I approached, mustered a greeting. The folds of his sleeves had creased his face.

"Sorry to wake you," I said. "Should we go?"

"There's a good news," he said. "The headman will drive us to the tar road. We won't have to go by foot."

Soon the distant whine of a *bakkie* broke the morning quiet. The headman's yellow pickup swung into view, and he backed his truck up to his shop. The king's representative in the village, the silver-haired and heavy headman was dressed sharply in pleated slacks and a button-down shirt. His wife, Kuku Aruma, taught first grade at Hallelujah. She remained in the truck while Tomas and I helped the headman unload a dozen crates of beer bottles. As thanks, he popped the cap on a Tafel lager, fished three glasses out of a basin of water, and poured the beer. In the early light we toasted and drank, and then we heard voices outside.

Abram, a man in his late thirties, stood by the passenger window, his head low. Through the window, Kuku Aruma leveled a finger and scolded him in Oshiwambo.

"What's she saying?" I asked.

Tomas, head cocked, whispered, "She's telling him to go wash." The headman gave a knowing nod, a wink, and for the first time in a long time, Tomas smiled. We'd all received Kuku Aruma's abuse before. One time, because my book bag was dirty after walking to and from the tar road, she'd called me a "junk boy" and told me I needed to dress like a teacher.

We listened to her rant and finished the beer. The headman locked his shop, and Tomas and I climbed into the *bakkie*. Abram watched. Sand matted his hair and his blue jumper was spotted with grease. He moved to the rear of the truck, but Kuku Aruma wagged a finger at him.

In English she said, "Have a ride next time. After you washing."

The headman smiled weakly. He shut the rear gate, started the truck, and steered north onto the two-track road. Like a child who'd been grounded, Abram stared after us.

When we entered the forest, Tomas playfully rapped the roll bar and said, "Abram thinks he looks like a man."

I said that it looked like Abram had gotten so drunk he'd passed out in the forest.

Tomas laughed aloud. "You have to understand, in our tradition we value cattle and the fields. Clean men don't work in the fields. If he's dirty and stinky, he thinks people will say, 'This one is a worker. This one is a man.'"

"People really say that?"

"Not Kuku Aruma." In a high-pitched voice, he imitated the headman's wife: *"Abram, you are so dirty. Look at your pants—soiled. Look at your shirt—filthy. Look at your hair. Abram, look at your hair!"* Tomas laughed. On and on he laughed, holding the roll bar, shifting his weight from foot to foot to compensate for the sandy swells, the sharp turns around termite mounds, the sudden stops before stray goats. He took a deep breath, then another and another, exhaling so hard his cheeks flared.

This was the normal Tomas. The one who drew people to him. I missed him, and I had to keep this Tomas laughing and talking. Eight o'clock in the morning and buzzed off of a single beer, I opened my mouth and out slipped a question: "Are women supposed to stay clean?" When Tomas's smile froze and the lines at the corners of his eyes returned, I wished I'd remained silent.

"No," he said, "I suppose not." He stared ahead, and then he brought a fist down onto the roll bar. "But you know, it's the same with sex."

"What?" I blurted.

"Even with AIDS."

I was stone sober now. More than a year I'd lived in Aakwetu, and no one had ever spoken about sex before. Few had spoken openly of HIV. AIDS awareness billboards in the towns read "If you're not infected, you're affected," but in Aakwetu the infections and effects were only whispered about.

"Women are supposed to remain faithful," Tomas said, "but some men, even married men, believe having many girlfriends proves their manliness. Of course

the men know they could be spreading AIDS, but the disease acts after so many years, and being a man is today, now."

I turned and looked at him. I had no idea what to say. Another question slipped out: "What do you believe?"

"Me? I was young once. I went with different women. Now, I want to be a *tate kulu*, an old man. I want the short one to be an old woman like Kuku Aruma. What man hasn't wished for these things?"

Tomas swept his eyes over the forest. We passed a fence with a set of mattress coils as its gate. Wood smoke twirled above the homestead, and barefoot boys paused from driving their goats out from the *kraal* to wave. Tomas called each of their names.

"When we learned the short one was pregnant," he said, "the doctor recommended we get tested for HIV. I can say we're both negative."

"That must be such a relief."

"You have no idea," he said. I thought he meant I had no idea how much of a relief testing negative was, but he spoke on, his voice low, his jaw set: "You know Tate Penda?"

The father of one of my students, he drove his truck like a taxi to the tar road.

"His wife knew he had other girlfriends," Tomas said. "You know Maria Shikongo, on the school board? Her husband worked in Walvis Bay."

I taught her in my community English class and her grandson in eighth grade.

"Meme Frieda?" he asked.

She and her husband taught at Hallelujah. I knew them all.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"They're infected."

"No."

"Yes. I can go on."

"How do you know all this?"

"The students, their mothers. I'm a young man. They tell me because they want to think things can be different."

"What things?"

"Don't you see?" He gripped my hand. "It's the husbands. We're the ones bringing the disease inside the home."

What I saw, through the gaps in the trees, was the glint of sunlight hitting lorries and taxis on the tar road. And what I finally understood was what had tormented Tomas since he told me the short one was pregnant. Everything—his sullen temper, anger, and stress—now made sense. Marriage wasn't something he believed he'd slip seamlessly into. He was terrified of the kind of husband he could become.

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I knew it was naive to blame the entire pandemic on husbands. I knew husbands who were faithful. The headman was such a man, I believed, as was the principal, even Tomas's father. But I began to understand Tomas's distress. He loved his wife; he wanted them to live long, happy lives. He was living with a fear I'd never dreamed of.

Maria gave birth to a girl before their homestead was finished. So, Tomas called for *uukungungu*, gatherings of neighbors to help with big jobs, much like Amish barn raisings. But Tomas didn't have a single cow or goat or chicken to feed the volunteers, so he invited only his colleagues at Hallelujah, and beer was his only offering. On Friday six met at his *okambashu*.

Lucas, the history teacher, surveyed the felled trunks and half-removed stumps and said, "My friend, you have much work to do." He pointed at the *okambashu*. "How will your family fit in here? Like a small boy you'll be sleeping outside by the fire."

"It's big enough for this," Tomas quipped, hefting a six-gallon jerry can into the sand. He unscrewed the top and tilted it forward, letting a pale green liquid fall into an enamel cup. He took a sip, passed it.

Lucas tasted the beer. "*Omagongo*. There's hope." Made from the citrus marula fruit, the beer tasted like limeade and flat tonic water.

With axes and shovels we began clearing the forest in a widening circle. We felled mopane and acacia trees and trimmed the limbs to be used as framework for future dwellings. We bent our backs, digging out tree stumps, breaking through root systems, felling more trees. At sunset the wind turned our sweat cool. Only when the moon was halfway across the sky did Tomas call it quits. He started a

fire, and, dirty and tired, we slumped down around it, shaking our heads at how much more work was left. Tomas passed around metal cups and empty glass jars filled with *omagongo*. The sour beer left us licking our lips, asking for instant refills.

"Tell me, Tomas," said Samuel, Hallelujah's geography teacher, "when did you know this would be your future?"

Tomas shook his head. "Me, I had no idea."

None of us were from Aakwetu; none had dreamed we'd live here. I talked about joining the Peace Corps, of the adventure of a new country and culture. Lucas shook a finger at me and said, "Africans dream of life in America, but you Americans come to Africa. This is one of your colonial tricks. There's some problem in your country. You want all the Africans to go there so you can take all this." Pointing to the *omagongo*, he said, "You can't have my beer, man."

"Even me," Tomas said, "I thought I'd go to America one day."

"You'll come to my wedding," I said. But once spoken those words sounded so empty, a child-like, romantic wish. Forget that a plane ticket cost three months of his salary, that his family, rain and drought, planting and harvesting, now determined his days. Would I ever love someone who loved me? Could I let myself be loved? My eyes met Tomas's, and I dropped mine to the enamel cup in my hand. He'd been consumed with the fear of whether he could be faithful, and now I wondered if I could. To Tomas, at the time, it was a matter of life or death, and to me... Well, I hadn't grown up in a place reeling from AIDS. I was only beginning to understand what marriage and fidelity meant.

Someone began to hum, then sing, and then everyone was singing. Lucas jumped up. "You know this *toi-toi* song," he said, referring to a song from Namibia's liberation struggle against the apartheid regime of South Africa. He clapped his hands and stomped his feet until we had the rhythm: a clap and stomp; clap and stomp; two claps.

"Come, Guerillas," he chanted.

"Come," we responded.

"Guerillas."

"Come. Come."

"Are you free?"

"Guerillas."
"Free men!"
"Guerillas."
"Come. Come."
Then Lucas worked Tomas into the song.
"Is Tomas free?"
"Guerillas."
"Free Tomas!"
"Come. Come."

Tomas stepped into the middle of the circle. Arms spread, palms up, he stomped a staccato around the fire. The dust he kicked up burned red and orange. Lucas accelerated the rhythm, and Tomas matched it. He twisted, gave a jump kick. Sweat hurried down his temples and glistened on his cheeks and neck. Somehow Tomas took over the rhythm, and we had to match him. Here was our Tomas again. Before dawn he'd be walking to the tar road, I knew, to visit Maria and his daughter, and when he returned at dusk he'd grab an axe and go back to work, and during all that time he'd burn with the question of what type of husband he'd become. But in this moment, I believed—I had to believe, for him and for me—that Tomas was free, free to be whomever he wanted.

On and on he danced, until our rhythm, not his, splintered and fell apart. Tomas stood before us in the dust he'd raised, clutching his knees, chest heaving, beads of sweat on his shaven head twinkling in the firelight.

Matthew Rohrer

Poem for Virgil Banescu

Bear and reindeer cut up on a plate.
An endless cave.
A duvet of darkness.
Your notes piping and plaintive I think
are still down there though
they traveled ahead of you
too. They walked all the way
back to the vineyards
where we slept. You were
now and then just a tiny
bit cruel to children
because you were a child.

Jeff Alessandrelli

At the Age of Fifteen Some of the Necessary Facts of the World

During his lifetime pursuit as a professional daredevil, Evel Knievel broke 433 bones, a Guinness World Record.

Over 100 countries grow shrimp, which is more than grow corn or wheat.

Sixty million people were killed during World War II.
Only fifteen million people were killed during World War I.

One day I want to meet someone
named Allison Wonderlund.

The Grecian god Tantalus was kicked out of Olympus for, among other things, cannibalism, human sacrifice, and infanticide. He was banished to Tartarus, the deepest, netherest region of the Underworld. He endlessly suffered, but always with hope of redemption. With a feverish expectancy. From Tantalus the verb *to tantalize* is derived.

The first Kentucky Fried Chicken opened in Utah.

There are 4,058,347 million miles of road in the United States. 91% are paved.

Most of the time I like the pink candies best, better than the red ones, better than the green ones, better than yellow.

"Everything changed when Morgan the Magician arrived."

A standard 12-ounce slice of prime rib has 1165 calories, offering its consumer 225% of the Food and Drug Administration's suggested fat intake for the day.

In 1906 Alois Alzheimer identified the first published case of presenile dementia (later to become known as Alzheimer's disease) in the person of Auguste Deter. In Alzheimer's examination of Deter, the following conversation between doctor and patient took place:

"What is your name?"
"Auguste."
"Family name?"
"Auguste."
"What is your husband's name?"—she hesitates, finally answers:
"I believe... Auguste."
"Your husband?"
"Oh, so!"
"How old are you?"
"Fifty-one."
"Where do you live?"
"Oh, you have been to our place."
"Are you married?"
"Oh, I am so confused."
"Where are you right now?"
"Here and everywhere, here and now, you must not think badly of me."
"Where are you at the moment?"
"This is where I will live."

"Where is your bed?"
"Where should it be?"

And this one, taken from Alzheimer's transcribed notes:

Around midday, Frau Auguste D. ate pork and cauliflower—

"What are you eating?"
"Spinach." (She was chewing meat.)
"What are you eating now?"
"First I eat potatoes and then horseradish."
"Write a '5'."
She writes: "A woman"
"Write an '8'."
She writes: "Auguste" (While she is writing she again says, "It's like I have lost myself.")

Fifteen million people, sixty million people.

433 broken bones. 1165 calories and 225%.

Tantalus is waiting expectantly. He knows and knows he will be saved.

"Everything changed when Morgan the Magician arrived."

The pink pink candies.

Alois Alzheimer died at the age of 51, of heart failure. Auguste Deter died at the age of 56, of what by the time of her death had already become known as Alzheimer's disease.

The hard bright sweet sticky pink candies.

"Everything changed when Morgan the Magician arrived."

4,058,347 miles. 4,058,347 million miles.

It's like I have lost myself again.

Matt Rasmussen

From "Elegy in X Parts"

X.

The self-murder mystery
begins like this:

We are more likely
to kill ourselves

than be killed
by someone else.

I am the pistol
saying *I will only*

say this once.
Do not open

the tiny door
in the back

of your head.
All alone when

all alone, we
are asleep

inside our
murderer. There's

a metal word
in the chamber

of my mouth
and my eyes

are bored out.
I'm a noose

using the body
against itself.

I see
what's too awful

to be true—
that house

with one lit window,
my brother's

punctured skull—
yet is.

X.

Your hands were delivered with the mail like postcards. There was nothing written on them, but I knew they had come from somewhere far away, because all the fingernails were painted

like stamps. I looked at the backs of your hands as if they were landscapes and tried to enjoy the sunset of your skin and riverbed veins, but could only wonder why we don't have a word

for the backs of our hands. I think I put them in a drawer somewhere. Then they appeared in our glove basket, so I put them on. I punched one hand into the other, staring into

the foyer mirror. I was in a movie about to beat someone up *real bad*, but I didn't actually have to, it was just a movie. My face looked incredible in the mirror, and I said, *Inside*

all our hands are smaller, more evil ones, even though you aren't supposed to say anything true in a movie.

X.

Kafka said, *A book*
must be an axe

for the frozen sea
inside us, which sounds

great, but what good
is an axe against

a frozen sea?
Perhaps this is why

he said, while dying,
Destroy everything.

There is little comfort
in knowing there

are worse undertakings
than killing yourself.

Is it dangerous
to say these things?

I don't think so.
Or I do. Either way,

don't believe me.
There is no refuge

from yourself.

Tom Lake

Part Miracle

In 1989 the theme of the eighth grade dance is "Dirty Dancing." The boy is thirteen. He wants to ask a girl to go with him (or maybe take his chances, meet an obliging girl there, in the gymnasium transformed by crepe streamers and cardboard stars); he wants to see the movie of the same name. But the teachings of Good Shepherd Fellowship Church swirl around him like a net of gluey fibers. He frees himself only if he wiggles, bends, equivocates. Like running through a spider web in the woods, he would say, those teachings stick to him whichever way he turns. Like a shield of supernatural protection, the pastors and his parents would insist, a thick wall between him and ghosts, gremlins, bio-exorcists, adolescent werewolves, slug-like aliens who favor hookah pipes and enslaved princesses in chains, aliens in general, and sexual content, all the signs and proofs that a cartoon, movie, book, or song is "of the devil."

And the boy has never had a girlfriend. Has never come close, is too shy to say much at school, and on the day when he warms up to some acquaintances at lunch, he forgets to filter his conversation. He blabs about his current fascination with heraldry, fess and pale and chevron, esoteric lore he's gleaned from the encyclopedia. They stare at him and his face burns, and he decides silence is his new plan of action, and he thinks about a dollhouse so hot it's about to burst into flames, talons on a scaly hand that rearranges the doll-beds and doll-chairs. On Sunday, Pastor Deborah preached that "Satan is like an interior designer. He picks out all the furniture and the colors for the earth. Unsaved people fill up their houses with his products all the time because they look good to sinful eyes."

Pastor Deborah and her husband, Apostle Tom, were unsaved as young adults. "I played drums in a rock band," Apostle Tom says. "I tried to get high on drugs, and all I ever got was low on misery." The boy's parents lean forward, stretch their hands toward Apostle Tom, make the pews wobble a little. Pastor Deborah testifies, "I did dope and crystals for years. I weighed eighty-four pounds, had a safety pin in my nose, raised ferrets and tarantulas, kept a pistol under my blouse, and

wrote poems about electric chairs. I wanted to die, but then I met the Lord, and He brought me to life." The boy's parents say, "Amen."

The boy fears that his sins, though ho-hum and monotonous, thread their roots all through him. Dishonesty, pride, envy, greed, lust. He also fears the Bermuda Triangle and flying saucers. Sometimes, he won't look at the night sky, afraid he'll see a dot of light veering across the heavens. He refuses to watch *Unsolved Mysteries*, with its weekly parade of kidnappers and serial killers. On a planet infiltrated by Satan and his minions, able to sabotage the small daily affairs of humans (Pastor Deborah prays to cast the devil out of her battery when her Blazer won't start), the list of fears seems like a giant sheet of flypaper, another sticky net.

Sex scares the boy too. But it can also pull him, like the magnetic wand that moves iron filings to give whiskers, hair, and eyebrows to Wooly Willy, the cartoon face on cardboard that he wanted for a Christmas present when he was little. The boy weighs his *Dirty Dancing* options. The movie is set at a Jewish resort in the Catskills in 1963, and doesn't that sound like a more wholesome era? But the very title of the movie dooms the boy's hopes. If the movie was still playing in theaters, he could lie to his parents, say he wanted to see something with a less incriminating name. Can he convince them to rent the video? Say it's for a school project? In the fourth grade, when the teacher assigned reports from a very spooky and possibly satanic book (*The Telltale Lilac Bush and Other West Virginia Ghost Tales*), she granted him an alternative subject—the agricultural products of Switzerland.

And actually, the boy tends to agree with his parents and the pastors, to consider a term like *dirty dancing* a study in redundancy. Most dancing is dirty, or potentially so, dangerously brushing the line between impure and pure, vulgar and clean.

Alone in his bedroom at night, the boy imagines that he dances with a generic girl: soft, slender, otherwise blurry and faceless, like the comic book sleuth The Question, who wears a mask of skin-colored Psuedoderm to render his face a blank slate. Picturing a specific girl would be an act of lust, technically speaking, as best as he understands it. He's seen a *Dirty Dancing* poster inside the locker above his: Baby Houseman in her clingy pink dress posing with Johnny Castle, her mambo teacher. He imagines he meets an anonymous girl who makes him nervous, his knees bump her legs, she smiles at him, his hand grazes the small of her back, her breath warms his cheek—

And then he shuts off the pictures in his brain. With his left hand, he grabs his right wrist. He believes that he is split in half, and then instead he thinks there are two of him, one who wants to war against the other, and the other who would outsmart the war-maker and sink into the sand, soft spineless creature that wants never to be seen.

And then he decides he can't keep thinking these thoughts, he's got to find something else to think about. He tears paper from his notebook. He draws a blue line, dividing the paper into two columns. As fast as he can, he scribbles "things that are good" at the top of one column. He leaves the other column blank.

Then he bears down on the pen, writes in purposeful block letters: *this hand, its muscles and tendons, hinge joints and twenty-seven bones, part miracle, part machine.*

Altared There in a Darksome Place

Ota Benga, a Mbuti pygmy from the Congo, was exhibited at the St. Louis World Fair, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Bronx Zoo. In 1912, the Baptist Ministers' Association of New York sent him to the Virginia Seminary at Lynchburg, where he was tutored by the poet Anne Spencer.

Benga throttles the pencil. Mrs. Spencer eases his grip.

His alphabet wobbles, zigzags down the page.

He takes her son Chauncey traipsing for hours in the woods. As if all the vibrant things that abide there know them as kindred, offer to them red flash of cardinal, spruce grove's closet of wind.

They bring home chanterelles, trout on a string.

In Mrs. Spencer's garden, Chauncey learns to clean fish from the flick of Benga's wrist. The scales they scrape loose rain down on her bed of clematis and hollyhocks.

She shivers at the gleam of fish-mail and the honed blade, his revering eyes, her dream of iridescence everywhere.

Matthew Mahaney

Unsleeping

11:21 p.m.

I'm laying down but my body isn't right. I swing and reshape, realign my arms with the mattress but pretty soon I'm too aware of my teeth again. They've never fit quite right in my mouth, always shifting and leaning like bare feet in wet sand.

11:46 p.m.

As a kid I used to complain that there wasn't a pill that would just put you to sleep right away. I also wished for a helmet you could wear to bed that would let you control your dreams. I don't remember what I thought the helmet would look like or what it would be made of. I just wanted something other than my limited dream options, which come in two categories. In the first, I'm a secret agent on a mission that inevitably fails. Eavesdropping on secret meetings, crouching in ventilation shafts, leaping from skyscraper rooftops to wrap my fingers around the steel frame of a departing helicopter. It doesn't really matter since I always end up getting shot or falling to my death.

12:08 a.m.

I spend a lot of time not asleep in my bed wondering if other people sometimes scare themselves with the things they do when they're alone in their homes. If they ever let loose sounds they didn't plan to, sounds they never imagined taking shape within their lungs, little not-quite-Tourrete-type noises and nonsense words. Do other people's limbs sometimes turn briefly into violent propellers or severed electrical cords without warning? Do their bodies occasionally capsize or careen into the furniture and walls?

12:53 a.m.

The second type of dream involves seemingly ordinary scenarios that are immediately made stressful by my realization that something is irreparably wrong. Maybe I'm driving a borrowed car on crowded, unfamiliar streets when I remember I have a flight to catch in seven minutes and I still have to pack. Or I'm home for Christmas and the house is on fire and I can't make a sound when I try to yell at everyone to get out, to run, to notice the smoke, the bullets biting chunks from the walls of a childhood home I thought I had forgotten.

1:47 a.m.

As I shift from back to side, from legs straight to bent at the knee, I think about how difficult it is to share a bed. How I lay awake wondering if she's actually asleep or still trying to get there, wondering how many minutes it's been since I last cracked my ankles, my knuckles, my elbow, how long since I last flipped my pillow, last shifted my body into a new position of discomfort, last reminded her of my presence.

2:33 a.m.

Am I the only one who sometimes finds it impossible to sleep because I'm too busy picturing miles of red and blue thread unspooling from the tiny holes in my eyelids, the ones my eyelashes grow out of? Too busy breathing deeply and opening my eyes just enough to see the first hint of light each time I exhale, until I'm convinced I can feel the carbon dioxide slipping out from between my eyelids as they separate.

3:12 a.m.

Sometimes laying on my back makes me cough. The more I shift and try to get comfortable, the more I cough. It feels like little explosions beneath my ribs, little pockets of dust and debris releasing with a shudder and floating up my throat. An imagined rasp infects my breathing. To take my mind off the sandstorm now

building in my chest, I picture rows of shelves lining the wet walls of my lungs, the many books and picture frames that line them. Every cough causes something to fall, landing in a pile at the bottom of my chest. This gives me something to focus on, a visual rather than the sound and tremors each cough produces. Eventually the coughing subsides, though I still can't fall asleep. I have to wait to cough one last time, wait for it to dislodge the one remaining book from the top-most shelf. I can't go to sleep until this happens, until I can clearly see and feel the book tip over and fall to the floor. It sends up the most perfect cloud of dust when it finally lands.

Victoria Chang

[The boss wears wrist guards I risk carpal tunnel without them can't]

The boss wears wrist guards I risk carpal tunnel without them can't
see anything but her fingers palm hidden palm line of the liver line

of Apollo line of deposition hidden the line of the heart leaks out the end
of it sneaks out of the guard the black guard covers the heart line is it wavy

is it long and curvy broken is it broken mine touches my life line my heart
breaks easily my daughter's heart line begins below the middle finger she is

selfish please don't be a selfish boss please be a boss please be selfish the
middle finger is the longest the middle is used by those without power who want

it the fingers are stuck together once our neighbor lost his middle finger while
fixing a lawn mower no longer able to flip off someone the middle finger does

not resemble a bird the bird is something with power the bird can fly away

[The boss looks over us
the boss likes us the boss
lurks us the boss irks us]

The boss looks over us the boss likes us the boss lurks us the boss irks us
smirks us hurts us the boss smiles at us lies to us confirms her offer of

employment to us the boss gives us provides us preferentially us accommodates
us no animus no animal no nitpick she picked us and her and her to

knit together we tried to knit my father back together starting with *I am Victoria*
I am your daughter you have two daughters I am I can I have to be knitted back together

professionally a professional who professes only when pointed to when asked to
provide feedback to the boss I take the feed from the bag and eat it I take the

feed back and ask for better tasting meat I am a flaw an obsolete definition of
a flaw is a burst of passion or a passing wind in an office a burst of passion can

only lead to the door out the door down the stairs through another door into
the passing wind where there once used to be a fountain with a gold sphere and

people eating lunch people eating lunch people covered with chalky dust

Fritz Ward

Love Letter Committing Some Other Crime

Dear 1989, the definition of happiness is a tiny human knot. To mimic the man I want to be again, I imagine the shipwreck of your voice inventing me. A hum and a howl and a suture. We were never the children we imagined ourselves. In a chamber of my heart, there's a black bear and a bee. Honey, can you trust me again? Until that midnight, let these crimes suffice: the chokedamp grass, your sunburned thighs, a postcard of the last white buffalo. Come here with all that sadness.

A Husband Is a Telescope with Long Legs

Of course, a martyr here
is a satyr there. Without orgasms
and consequence—*Yes,*
then what?

In the high-heeled garden,
the wife's willowy fists sway
in the breeze. The smell of gardenias on her neck
has the hint
of impending violence. Here, I'll be the lover,
you be the scent.
No is so much louder
than *Yes*—
I miss her—
lies, pasture.
Half the vignette
was always a pleasure
pit. And the other?

—*Yes*, I told her, *I have this fear*
only your *mouth* *can asphyxiate.*

Shane McCrae

The First Part of the Earth

We the thirst brother the

we water from the inside from the lips

From nowhere to the lips

We water inside brother we to say it water

from the inside

thirst and we / Can't never have us like it's

water got a color got a black

Brother we hungry water like

We was the first / Part of the Earth

It's we don't even know

How any we could satisfy our hunger what

Satisfy us because it ain't / Was nothing here before us brother the

Thing meant to satisfy it come before

the hungry thing / So that the hungry thing will find it there

And known what it was for

2011 BARTHELME PRIZE FOR SHORT PROSE

Good prose provides an emotional experience (feeling) wrapped in an intellectual experience (reading). The particular problem of short prose is—well, its shortness. How can several hundred words compel without begging? Allow me to introduce Erica Olsen's "Grand Canyon II."

The story begins innocuously—"For a long time I wanted to go back to the Grand Canyon"—but ends by doubting the worth of the entire actual world. Like all good narratives, it suggests great consequence. This ultimately comforting story, in its intense particularity and assiduous coherence, casts a beacon on elemental themes: the past is another country. The task of memory is impossible. No one exists and nothing ever happened. But somewhere in your brain, a beautiful lie is being spun....

Sarah Manguso
CONTEST JUDGE

Barthelme Prize Winner, 2011

Erica Olsen

Grand Canyon II

For a long time I wanted to go back to the Grand Canyon. Then came the dual catastrophe: an earthquake that left Grand Canyon Village in ruins; a mining accident, the details of which have never been released to the public. So, it's too late. No one knows how long the decontamination will take. A visitor center and replica canyon off Interstate 40 near Williams, Arizona, had long been proposed as a way to relieve stress on park resources; after the disaster, those plans were revived and Grand Canyon II was approved and constructed. The new park replicates the five-mile stretch that historically drew the most visitors, from Grand Canyon Village to Yaki Point, encompassing the main overlooks and the Bright Angel and South Kaibab trailheads. It is a geological clone made possible by the recent advances in rapid prototyping with which we have all become familiar. Using technology similar to that developed for bioprinting organs for transplant, Grand Canyon II was printed in 3D by depositing layers of igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary rock, from the inner gorge to the upper canyon, from Vishnu schist to the Kaibab formation. Grain by grain, the canyon was remade. In an office in Los Angeles, I worked on the editorial team, checking contours, textures, Munsell color specifications. I proofread the Coconino sandstone. The design files replicated native plants, the effects of erosion, marine fossils, even graffiti and the scars from mule shoes and trekking poles. Birds and animals find their own way in: flickers, hummingbirds, a thriving population of Abert's squirrels, the omnipresent mule deer. After the first few hundred feet, depth is an illusion. The river is waterless. These compromises were found acceptable by most visitors.

My parents took me to the Grand Canyon, the original, in 1970, when I was five years old. It was the first and only time my Norwegian and Korean grandparents met. Years later, looking at that ritual of American astonishment (for my generation, Kodak is the color of the past itself), I can't help but see the diminishment of our lives. The now curled and lonesome snapshot reveals something deceptive,

essentially untrue, about the scene, the big promise at our backs. They didn't travel. In me there must have been, already, the promise of unsuitable boyfriends. But for a long time I wanted to go back to the Grand Canyon, though it's not clear to me if it was a dream, an obligation, or some less easily defined but no less pressing need. In any case, it's the new park that I pay to enter. The crowds are busy with cameras and views. I fill my lungs with ponderosa-scented air. I brush away a fly.

Did you think for some reason I wouldn't be taken in? Would you believe that being here pierces me like an artifact of my own memory? At the edge of this vast and unimaginable copy, I remember tent-shade and fire-warmth, I reach for absent hands.

Barthelme Prize Honorable Mention, 2011
Sonja Vitow

Master Bedroom

I.

After you left, I tried to sleep in our bed and found the mattress too hard on your side and too soft on mine. I laid in the middle and pretended I was both of us which worked for a little while. The bedroom was too hot, so I opened the window and filled the room with new air. I started to shiver, so I closed it again. I started to suffocate so I opened the window again, dizzy from lack of oxygen and the six Marlboros I took from the pack you left in your bureau. The midnight wind breezed through the window and made the papers on my bedside table dance. Their happiness made me suffer so I closed the window again. I pulled the curtains so they overlapped and clung together. I left the room.

II.

That's the last time I was in there. I walk past the shut-tight door and pretend there's nothing behind it. I sleep like a nomad, often like a cliché on the living room sofa, once drunk in the bathtub, on the hammock outside if it's nice out, tight in the closet when things are really bad. My back hurts when I wake up but it's the sort of pain that I can handle.

III.

Now I think about the room as half-storage, half-black hole. I throw things in there when I don't know where to put them, knowing that I will never see them again. The first thing I tossed into our empty bedroom was the photo album from our trip to the Greek Isles. I buried our suntanned faces in more trash: unread instruction manuals, watches with dead batteries, vintage T-shirts I swore I would save for my children. There are no neat piles of carefully stacked papers in that

room, but wild communities of colorful discards who root, leaf and multiply behind the closed door.

IV.

The purple orchids from the kitchen died last week, and yesterday I finally remembered to store their hollow ceramic pot in the bedroom. I approached the door that I often pretend is not there and viewed the giant pile of earthly flotsam, which fills the square footage of the floor and even grazes the ceiling. The pot knocked hard into the mountain, careening into its shape and causing the great structure to tumble outward like an avalanche of poorly kept secrets. The detritus threatened to spill out of the bedroom, to flood the whole house with all these things I used to own. I slammed the door shut and dedicated the full weight of myself to keeping it closed, pushing hard against the mess that you made.

Barthelme Prize Honorable Mention, 2011

Paul Zaic

Why I Became a Fireman

A fireman is a very noble thing to be. They said, You're too short to be a fireman, Marty, and really, what service do you think you're providing the world as a short fireman with a master's degree in nothing-in-particular, and to that I said, Phooey. Have you seen the fires lately? They're getting worse, the fires. It takes all kinds, these fires do.

A fireman is a series of decisions made by a child. I was a child, and so I made a series of decisions, noble decisions, and so here I am putting out fires. They said, You seem very enthusiastic about this, Marty, and I like that in a fireman, enthusiasm, I really do, but what I also like in a fireman—what I really look for as a key attribute—is the ability to pick me up and carry me, and looking at you, Marty, looking at me, I don't think you could pick me up and carry me—not down stairs, not down much of anything at all, come to think of it—and that worries me, Marty. Stick to the books they said. Phooey.

A fireman is a person who hates fire and all that it represents. They said, Let it burn, Marty, let it burn, it was never worth anything anyhow, Marty, we were living a lie in that house, Marty, a fresh start we could have. You could call up old Ned Brighton at the old firm and see about your old job; that old Ned Brighton, you could call him up, they said.

A fireman would never, ever call up old Ned Brighton at the old firm, Barbara. A fireman hates fire and all that it represents. A fireman is a series of decisions made by a child. A fireman is a very noble thing to be.

"I Start From a Place of Outrage and Sadness"

A conversation on humor in fiction with Elisa Albert, Steve Almond, Brock Clarke, Sam Lipsyte, John McNally, and Deb Olin Unferth

The conversation that follows took place over e-mail in the fall of 2011 and grew out of a belief among Gulf Coast*'s editors that, while humor occupies a prominent place in American culture, we still don't entirely understand the function of that humor. What exactly is happening when a writer, television host, or stand-up comic invites us to laugh at something? What kind of work is being done, and how is it being done? We considered asking some cognitive psychologists to explain it for us, but they would have used big words we didn't understand, like "cognitive psychology." In the end, we decided to stick to what we know and gathered together some of the funniest fiction writers working today to get their take. In addition to having interesting and enlightening things to say on the means and ends of humor in fiction, they also found time to place the Three Stooges in their proper historical context.*

—Zachary Martin

Zachary Martin: Humor is such a living thing that it seems unwise, if not impossible, to try to pin it down. Maybe we can begin by taking its pulse. How comfortably do you think humor resides in the world of literary fiction today? Are there any new or surprising ways you see humor being employed in fictional narrative?

Sam Lipsyte: I'm not sure about a term like "literary fiction" (and I use it myself occasionally, as a shorthand, and I should stop), but what I really do notice is an extreme humorlessness out there. A lot of people who should know better have forgotten that serious writing (another bad category name?) is often quite funny. And I think that attitude is passed on to new readers.

Elisa Albert: Yeah, taking oneself too seriously is an express train to Humorlessland. And lots of literary fiction does tend to take itself really fucking seriously. Also? Trying too hard. Very unfunny. And cleverness. Not at all funny. But there I go trying to pin it down. It's relatively easy to pin down what's *not* funny. I'll go

out on a limb and say humor and power don't go hand in hand; it's usually the disempowered or the disenfranchised who will reliably bring the absurd and make it sparkle. [...]

Brock Clarke: I do think readers, and writers, have a hard time talking about fiction that they find funny [...] I don't know who or what is to blame, exactly, but I do think there's a larger cultural tendency to confuse reverence with seriousness. And once you do that, anything that you think of as literary fiction can't also be funny because it's not serious. But then again, I just used the least funny phrase ever—"larger cultural tendency"—so what do I know?

SL: "Larger cultural tendency" is pretty funny, in fact, but only because you pointed it out and made it so. That's craft.

John McNally: Years ago, I taught a course on the history of humor in American literature, and what I came to realize was that what someone finds funny is already programmed into his or her DNA. I couldn't make any of my students find something funny that they didn't already think was funny. There are a lot of things you can fine-tune in people, but humor doesn't appear to be one of them.

Deb Olin Unferth: When was the great age of funny serious writing? I think of Kafka, Beckett, Stein, and many of the other modernists as being the funniest, most natural, most depressing of the humorists. But was there another great age?

EA: Every age has its great humorists. Rabelais. Swift. The Bible's pretty hilarious, especially as illustrated by R. Crumb. Did anyone see the Werner Herzog cave painting film? I'd bet there are some satirical cave drawings. But humor's hard to translate over time. Comedy can be so intensely specific, so fleeting, so rooted in the precise, idiosyncratic moment.

Steve Almond: The basic misunderstanding Brock mentions begins way back with Aristotle, the idea that the comic and tragic modes are somehow separate

and opposed. That's complete nonsense. The comic impulse arises directly from feelings that are inherently tragic: sorrow, shame, disappointment, moral outrage, and so on. Humor is how we contend with the bad data, always has been, from Aristophanes right up to Jon Stewart. [...]

For me, the key distinction is whether the funny stuff is there to force us to face otherwise unbearable feelings, or whether it's just an advertisement for the writer's wit. My favorite writers, many of them crammed into this roundtable clown car, are funny not because they're trying to be, but because they face the dark shit. They get to the truth quicker than I can, by more transgressive paths and with more forgiveness.

JM: I think Steve just conjured the saddest image imaginable: a clown car crammed full of writers. As to his larger point, I think Flannery O'Connor is the perfect example of someone who was funny because of her worldview, not because she was trying to be funny, but because she was always facing darkness head-on in her work. And yet I can't tell you how many times I've taught O'Connor only to hear from students, "She's so depressing." Or they'll look at me like a crazy person when I begin talking about the humor in her work. The idea that something can be both tragic and comic is simply beyond some people. What's the Mel Brooks quote? "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die."

EA: We need humor to save us from realities too painful to otherwise handle. So if a given book isn't going to do the truly difficult work of finding a way to make light of its own dark matter, we should, I think, find a way to do that work for the book. Like an exercise, a game. Do a shot every time the character's father rapes her. Take a hit every time the protagonist almost gets eaten by cannibals. It's just how we survive. If you've never been through anything really heinous, wrong, really just *bad*, you could be forgiven for thinking that the apocalypse or the funeral of a child is a fully somber affair. The crazy truth is that nothing we go through in life, not even the worst shit imaginable, is only one shade of any emotion.

ZM: I often show my undergraduate students *Comedian*, a documentary about the year or so Jerry Seinfeld spent putting together a new act. It's always a revelation to them that it takes that much time and dedication to craft *anything*, but especially humor. There are always a few students willing to admit that they thought comedians just made things up, off the cuff, night after night. Do you feel like that misunderstanding extends to more literary forms of humor as well and to your work in particular?

DOU: It's easy for the novice to look at someone's work and have no conception of the time that went into it, or to look at it without seeing the elegance and the contribution to the form. But I suppose, yeah, writing that's funny is often lauded for being funny and *only* for being funny, as if that was all the author intended. I recall when Sam's *The Ask* came out, and review after review talked about how hilarious it was. While the reviews were raves, I wished they could stop talking for one second about how funny it was and pay attention to how devastatingly vulnerable it was.

BC: When talking to students, I always wheel out a line from Donald Barthelme. I ask them, "What must wacky modes do?" The answer: "Break our hearts." Writers themselves have a hard time striking that balance, so it's not surprising that reviewers and readers have a hard time recognizing how important the balance is, or even know how to talk about it when they do see it. But still, it's annoying.

It's also annoying when fiction writers with comic tendencies, whether profane or gentle, get called "humorists." I remember Will Rogers being described as "the humorist Will Rogers." And when I finally got around to listening to humorist Will Rogers, I thought, "So, that's what a humorist is." And I also thought, "God, please do not let me grow up to be a humorist."

SA: Critics tend to regard any trace of mirth as evidence of an essential frivolity. But critics don't have a lot of sex, so you have to forgive them for getting confused.

SL: The whole category of "humorist," well, it's not even a ghetto; it's just a desolate crater. I've always loved that Barthelme bit Brock mentioned. It reminds me of a

Harry Crews line [...] where he said something about only being interested in the "crushing of human hearts." His novels are some of the funniest and wildest, but also tuned in to the sadness of it all. It's all about knowing that the funny and the tragic are the same thing.

There's that part of Beckett's *Watt* about the three kinds of laughter: the bitter, the hollow, and the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good—it's the ethical laugh. Hollow is the intellectual laugh—it laughs at that which is not true. But it's the mirthless laugh that is the pure laugh. It laughs at that which is unhappy. It recognizes the terror that humans endure, but it's also a laughter streaked with some cruelty, even some self-congratulation. [...]

"In terms of our literature, I see a real renaissance of comedic writing, mostly aimed at capturing our individual sorrows. As Americans grow lonelier and more confused and needy, they turn to humorists because we're the ones who are able to confront these tragic feelings without being swallowed by them."

But this doesn't address the question about popular perception. People don't know how much work anything of value takes, but it's especially true with writing. And especially with writing that might be funny [...] Since we all use language, we all talk, some people have the sense they could take the weekend off and write something amazing and hilarious and meaningful. Many of them probably could for a few pages. But what the real work is about is learning how to sustain it and shape it and weave it all together over and over again with the same consistently excellent results. And also never giving the sense that you've worked at it, that's it's been an effort. One must toil mightily for that effect.

JM: Actually, it doesn't bother me if someone thinks it took me only an afternoon to write a short story that they laughed at. In fact, I would feel insulted if they finished the story and thought, "Holy Christ, that read like it took six years to write." I just don't ever want to be called "wacky." Fucking wacky, that's the worst. If my name becomes synonymous with wacky, I'll take up juggling cats [...] Some of the writers I find the funniest are probably considered to be the least funny among the general population. I laugh while reading Melville. I laugh while reading Richard Yates, although I'm also crying while reading Richard Yates.

Now would probably be a good time to confess that my own influences aren't literary at all. I hadn't really realized this until I was at a job interview at MLA some years ago, and someone asked me who my influences were. Instead of letting me answer, they began suggesting writers: T. C. Boyle? Was he an influence? What about John Irving? And that's when it came to me, right there, and I said, "No, actually, Abbott and Costello. And Cheech and Chong. And George Carlin." [...] I spent the first eighteen years of my life memorizing vaudeville routines like "Who's on First" or listening to Cheech and Chong albums or studying the cadence of Carlin's "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." That was the language—and the humor—I absorbed.

SL: I memorized all the Steve Martin records.

JM: Yeah, Steve Martin's records were seminal for me. I was a shy, overweight kid in grade school, but I signed up for the eighth-grade talent show, wore an arrow through my head, and performed (plagiarized, really) Steve Martin routines. Won second place and got a standing ovation, which boosted my confidence. First place went to disco dancers.

EA: Stand-up comedians are a useful touchstone, a famously miserable, tortured lot after all. It takes a relatively dark perspective to get up in front of a bunch of people and point out how fucked up and ridiculous life is. If you think this existence thing is swell, consistently meaningful, mostly fulfilling, and that your fellow humans are a more or less righteous lot... well, Godspeed. "There is a crack, a crack in everything," sings Leonard Cohen. "That's how the light gets in."

DOU: I love Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up*, and I recommend it to practically everybody I meet. The life of the stand-up must be grim. Only crazy people would do that. I love Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast. He interviews a lot of stand-ups baring their souls, going on about how disappointed they are or angry or in love. Now that's narrative! "Come on, folks," I want to say sometimes to fiction writers. "Look alive out there!" It's the excess that I love, the piling on. [...]

EA: About a year ago, I was sitting around a dinner table full of writers, drinking too much wine. Sarah Silverman came up, and I started raving about *The Bedwetter*: its clarity of voice, its confidence, its honesty, its fearlessness. No one much cared. I'd had, as I mentioned, a little too much wine, so I got all invested in convincing my companions that Silverman might have something to teach them. In the process of trying to recreate one of the book's funnier moments, I wound up making myself laugh too hard to speak. I can still see the face of the much-admired, lovely writer man opposite me that night, who was not drinking, his eyebrows arched, giggling once in surprise as I completely lost it. That dinner was lame because no one was interested in laughing. By which I mean no one was interested in being vulnerable.

I come back and back to the idea that we're writing books for ourselves—the books we most yearn to read. We have to will them into being because who else can articulate these singular perspectives, this idiosyncratic humor? You risk being mocked when you bare your perspective, your warped self, your weird, ugly, asymmetrical humor. You risk being flayed (or worse, overlooked) by tough crowds. But that's okay. The alternative is trying to give the people what they want. Then you might avoid being mocked or reviled, but you're just a straight-up, juggling fool. Obviously, craft is key. But craft with no heart? Barf. I'll take heart without craft any old day.

JM: When I was a kid, I wanted to be a stand-up. I probably still want to be a stand-up. But whenever I read Charles Portis's novels—especially *Masters of Atlantis*, my favorite, and *The Dog of the South*—I think, no, no, *this* is what I want to do: write books about the desperate and the desperately sad people that make readers laugh and want to read every sentence aloud to the person nearest them, which is what I do every time I read *Masters of Atlantis.*

SL: I think a lot of writers feel like thwarted stand-ups. I do sometimes. Marc Maron is brilliant at it. I've seen Maron do amazing things in clubs, really going out there into painful territory, losing the audience, turning them against him in profound ways, and then getting them back. It can be thrilling. I think it's the performative aspect that intrigues writers. Even as we are home safe writing,

even if nobody's watching, we sense that somebody could be watching or will be watching if we publish it.

SA: Yeah, so here's what I see happening: there's a general feeling of dread, a death instinct, misting the air. There're two responses in the mass media. The first is a balls-to-the-wall, paranoid, Rapture-sucking freak-out. And the second is us dorks in the clown car. As in any truly dysfunctional democracy—paging Aristophanes!—humorists have become the moral backstop. Which is terrifying. Because, anytime the fool is the only one who can speak truthfully to the King, it's not going to end well.

In terms of our literature, I see a real renaissance of comedic writing, mostly aimed at capturing our individual sorrows. As Americans grow lonelier and more confused and needy, they turn to humorists because we're the ones who are able to confront these tragic feelings without being swallowed by them. [...]

BC: I was talking with my students recently about how to make a joke more than a joke in fiction, and mentioned the movie *The Aristocrats*, which I basically found underwhelming except for Martin Mull's version of the joke, and Sarah Silverman's. In both cases, I realized, the joke became a narrative. It was as much about revealing something about the narrator [...] as it was about telling the joke. [...]

ZM: All of you have works in which the humor is immediately apparent, even central to the narrative. At what point in the writing process does that humor work its way in? Do you find yourself drawn to what's funny about a story or a scene from the start—is it the thing that attracts you to the story in the first place—or is it something that comes as you compose and revise?

EA: I start from a place of outrage and sadness. I try to make sense of it—this outrage and sadness—and, then, in order to entertain myself, to not get lost in the outrage, and to not be completely miserable all the time, I get a little silly or misanthropic or unafraid. So everything remains essentially sad and infuriating, but now at least I'm having some fun with it, saying "fuck" a lot, fulfilling my own

twisted worldview. If nobody likes it, I'm no more cosmically alone than I was before I started. In fact, if nobody likes it, I'm even freer. The alternative is being suicidal, which is no good. [...]

SA: I don't see humor as "working its way in." I see it more like this: human beings adapted to having this big self-critical, doom-generating brain by developing a means of forgiveness. That's what a sense of humor is: a mechanism that generates forgiveness for the senseless cruelty that any examined life reveals. So what happens is you push yourself or your characters into some wretched spot and this unconscious mechanism (the sense of humor) kicks in. I suppose I'm vaguely conscious of it, but it's just how people like us do business. There are examples of comedy where cruelty is central. The Three Stooges, for instance. But the best work is doing what Elisa suggests—providing a path away from the outrage and sadness. It's impossible for me to separate what's "funny" about a story from what's sad. It's the same stuff.

> "There's really not much more to the Three Stooges than physical abuse and funny noises. In fact, the genius of the Stooges was whoever did the sound effects. Take away the sound effects, and you cut the humor by about seventy-five percent."

There's a wonderful riff in Sam's new book, *The Ask*, in which his hero talks about having "the old brain" and how he's basically fucked because young people think differently than him. It's about feeling that the world has passed you by. He's able to face this feeling by turning it into an occasion for laughter. And the reader laughs because he or she has these same unbearable feelings, and it's such a huge relief to know we're not alone in our abject humiliation. There's also a great line in the book in which Sam refers to a colleague of his hero as a crack baby, "one of the baking soda vanguards" (I think that's the line). And what I love about that line is its fearlessness. The comic impulse is all about transgression, saying the forbidden thing, liberating the rest of us from our false pieties.

I could go through everyone's books and pull out these examples. Sam's the only one who agreed to blow me.

SL: Steve, the deal is annulled now that you've announced it.

Yes, humor is definitely not a lacquer you apply or some kind of ingredient you knead into the prose [...] When I write something for the first time, I'm trying to discover things, trying to surprise myself. I find out by pushing on the things that frighten me. I think the horror and the comedy do reveal themselves together there. Some writers are drawn to both, they want to play with the whole spectrum, and others, to their detriment, perhaps, reduce their work to either cheap laughs or solemn self-importance. Ultimately, it may be simple juxtaposition that moves us because it resonates with our own struggles to understand our lives, our lives which, to quote Mellencamp, "Hurt so good." So that treating the grave, awful thing with euphemism-bashing comedy and the quotidian act with heroic verse might help us sort through the mess, even if we never solve it. Hey, I laughed, I cried. But just as meaningful can be the work that doesn't really try to reach out but is just funny and honest and terrifying in its vision, is unremittingly bleak. Because the commiseration is in its creation, not in its purported message.

JM: I agree with Sam about world view. I never set out to write a book with humor. And I'm not laughing while I'm writing or thinking about where to put the next laugh. I just write and then see what I have. The things I'm drawn to in daily life—the things I take note of—are either the really dark things or the absurd things. That's my filter when I write, too. As for Steve's comment about the Three Stooges, I could wax philosophic about the Stooges as representations of the Everyman, about the backdrop of the Great Depression that informs most of their early movies, about violence as rising action, about class war as subtext, about the Stooges as id, ego, and super-ego... but I digress. I'll just have to poke Steve in the eyes the next time I see him.

SA: So as to avoid the eye-ripping wrath of the Three Stooges army, let me add (probably unnecessarily) that everyone has their own comic sensibility. And nobody's "right" about what's funny [...] The Stooges do physical humor, and there is something transgressive in their blithe use of violence. They play out our childhood fantasies of mayhem. I'm probably oversimplifying what they do. In other words, it's just not my thing. Or perhaps I'm just bitter that Curly was supplanted by Shemp.

BC: I'm usually, and initially, attracted to the bizarre, the ridiculous. A friend of mine once told me a story about a time he and his father parked their car outside KFC, right underneath an exhaust fan, and when they came out, their car was covered with chicken fat. And immediately I thought, "I wish that were my story." And so I stole it. But just as often, more often in fact, I give up on that which initially attracted me because it leads to nothing more serious or disturbing. If the goofy premise doesn't look to something beyond the premise, I don't have a lot of use for it. I'm only talking about fiction, of course. I'm not looking for the Three Stooges to do anything but abuse each other and make funny noises.

JM: I was just flipping Steve some good-natured shit. There's really not much more to the Three Stooges than physical abuse and funny noises. In fact, the genius of the Stooges was whoever did the sound effects. Take away the sound effects, and you cut the humor by about seventy-five percent.

But getting back to fiction and what Brock said. I'm thinking of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," particularly when the Misfit says about the grandmother: "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Here we have a line that, in and of itself, is a hilarious and brilliant insight into the character of the grandmother. Yet the context of that line creates one of the darkest, most disturbing moments in fiction. For me, that is why O'Connor is a writer who uses humor to its best effect: she lures you in with humor, but the humor almost always mutates into something darker, or, as with the Misfit's line, something that serves as a double-edged sword.

> "I think humor makes the reader vulnerable. The reader relaxes. The reader lunges ahead without bracing himself. That's when the writer can pick the reader's pocket or yank the rug out from under him or turn the lights out and spin the reader around a few times."

DOU: I recall being a bit taken aback when people would laugh at this or that story of mine. I was just trying to get the thing down as accurately as I could, the thoughts in my head, the inconvenient facts, etc., and that meant allowing the

common strangenesses in. I'm not being cute when I say that. I recall one story in particular, titled "Deb Olin Unferth," which is basically a list of all the people on earth who have ever lived or will live who do not think Deb Olin Unferth is a fuck-up. It was a story I wrote to comfort myself in times of woe. I found it weird when friends read it and laughed. But then it occurred to me, "Oh yeah, I guess that is pretty ridiculous." It was a realization for me or a growth-moment (if you're into growth-moments, which I am). [...]

ZM: We've been talking about humor in fiction as a way for the author to cope or as a natural outgrowth of the author's worldview, but I'm wondering about how it works for the reader. It's not uncommon for fiction that employs humor to make a final turn toward pathos. One function of the humor in such narratives seems to be to lower the reader's defenses for other emotions. Is that a fair characterization? Earlier in our conversation, Steve mentioned the ways in which humor helps "get to the truth quicker." To what extent is humor a means to an end in fiction?

JM: I think humor makes the reader vulnerable. The reader relaxes. The reader lunges ahead without bracing himself. That's when the writer can pick the reader's pocket or yank the rug out from under him or turn the lights out and spin the reader around a few times. In more serious, less funny work, the reader might be suspicious of the author's motives, just as we are more suspicious of the stern-faced boss who calls you into his office. The motives are less transparent when humor is involved.

SA: Yeah, the reader relaxes. I tend to see that relaxation as a moment of mutual forgiveness, or existential relief, but either way, everyone involved chills out, and the writer is then able to be more honest. So I guess that makes humor a "means to an end." But I'm leery about how ulterior that sounds. If anything, humor is a means to an end *in life.* It's what allows us to cop to all the fucked up shit inside and around us. It's what allows someone like Kurt Vonnegut—an overlooked youngest child in a cold and troubled family—to have a voice at the dinner table.

In the best cases, humor isn't a tool that the writer consciously employs to make the reader laugh, but a sensibility that enables everyone involved to go places

(usually forbidden places) they couldn't get to otherwise. Sometimes those places are the dark caves of human revelation. Other times they're just these joyously, infantile feeling-states we never actually get rid of. I think of the famous Lenny Bruce bit where he talks about pissing on people in the audience. So yeah, the Fool gets to speak truth to King Lear just because he's just the Fool and his shenanigans disarm Lear. But his motive isn't to make Lear laugh. It's to force Lear, and the Lear in all of us, to recognize our own destructive impulses and actions, to save the kingdom from ruin. It doesn't work in the play, just as Stephen Colbert couldn't get Dubya impeached. But history keeps a record not just of the money and power, but of the jokes and what they mean.

BC: John and Steve make sense here. But I do wonder how much of this is a matter of taste. I hate when these smart discussions get reduced to something as arbitrary-seeming as taste. But I was thinking of this when John said that in reading serious (meaning sober) fiction, a reader is more suspicious than he is reading something funny. That's certainly true for me. But I can think of lots of readers, and writers, for whom the opposite is true. And these same readers—to use John's analogy—would be suspicious of the joke-cracking boss because they'd think the boss is insincere, superficial, or they'd be afraid that the joke would be turned on them. [...]

> "No one likes to be told what to do, right? So humor's this reflex we develop to wheedle the reader into coming over to our side, our perspective."

DOU: Maybe the role of the reader depends in part on the type of humor employed. I've been rereading *Catch-22*. (I'm in love all over again—every single sentence is funny, the descriptions of hair are funny, the taglines are funny.) It feels as though the purpose of the humor is as a form of protest in which the reader is encouraged to participate. On the other hand, some humor feels as if the intention is to make us readers uncomfortable or, as Brock mentioned, that the joke may be turned on us. Of course, we all secretly know that we deserve to have the joke turned on us.

EA: Maybe it is a means to an end, the end being "please be a slightly better, more honest human being when you walk away from this piece of writing." I am one of those saps who thinks that art makes us better people. [...]

I was talking about Woody Allen last night with my friends. We recalled his loathing of the pedantic figure: the architect guy in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, the Marshall McLuhan douchebag in *Annie Hall* ("You know nothing of my work!"), and on and on. I love humor that's used to topple bullshit, to call out hypocrisy. A worthy means to a worthy end. So maybe when you walk away from it, you're less willing to accept real-life condescension, less willing to buy other people's bullshit.

No one likes to be told what to do, right? So humor's this reflex we develop to wheedle the reader into coming over to our side, our perspective. If you've ever been on the New York City subway, you know the funny homeless people get a lot more change.

SL: There is also the reader as collaborator, which is to say that part of the "end" is out of our control. We build the wacky-mode heartbreaker, the humor-and-pathos thingamabob, but even among the readers already partial to these sorts of things, each reading will produce such vastly different sorts of associative sparks. It's hard to be that precise about a reader's experience. One hopes this process is causing less collateral damage and more collateral delight, but once the book is published, it's really not ours anymore, as many writers have pointed out.

I guess the upshot for me is that humor is not some device, it's just in the DNA of a lot of what I write, along with other elements. Your style, your stories, your characters, even the things one might research that have no relation to your personal facts, it's all you in the end. It's hard to alter the sequencing by yourself, but science will save us soon.

Hunger Strike

We went on a hunger strike after we heard that Professor Guidry got fired for downloading porn on his office computer. We were a little drunk that night, wrestling each other on a mat we'd installed in the common area of our suite, the four of us shirtless and alcohol-sour and choking the air out of each other's lungs. This was how we spent our Friday nights, so unpopular and our prospects so dim that we had begun to consider dropping out of college and joining the army or going to clown school or becoming gay and dating each other.

We were freshmen, new to living on our own, our grades already much worse than they had been in high school, still too scared to talk to girls. One of the few things we had to enjoy was Professor Guidry's class, American Studies 202: Pop Culture in the Late 20th Century. He had comic books on his syllabus, and that alone was enough to make us love him. Our hands were perpetually raised in his class, eager to discuss the evolution of the summer blockbuster or the popularity of baseball trading cards. He made us feel like the things we cared about, which were stupid and juvenile, were still important, that we could find a place in the world that appreciated us. And then he went and ruined it over something as ridiculous as internet porn.

"It wasn't even porn, really," Jonas said, his skin red and angry, his air returning to him in ragged breaths. "They were just some videos of naked women playing paintball." Mikey was putting his shirt back on and, as he poked his head through the opening of the t-shirt, said, "But weren't there, like, a thousand videos on his computer?"

Jonas shook his head. "It could be a million videos. It's still just a bunch of women playing paintball."

"Naked women playing paintball," I said.

"A whole bunch of naked women playing paintball," Terrell said.

"It doesn't matter," Jonas said, growing irritated with us, realizing that, out of all of us, he had the best chance to leave this life behind and find better friends. He

had run track in high school. He had gone to prom. "If no one is having sex," he said, pounding his fist onto the mat, "then it isn't porn."

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That morning, we had arrived for Professor Guidry's class and had found him replaced by a grad student who wore a carnation in the lapel of his suit. Guidry had worn t-shirts with Darth Vader on them and a pair of busted up Chuck Taylors. Already we were not liking this new guy. Then he'd changed the syllabus so that we'd be focusing on photojournalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He shuttered through a slideshow of dead Confederate soldiers and we knew that things were never going to be good again, that we had missed out on the one thing that made us happy. We heard some students after class talking about the rumors already passing through campus, about Guidry and the computer and the porn and the firing. "This is stupid," Terrell said, holding the collection of comic books that we were supposed to have discussed that day. "It's an outrage," Jonas said, "and we have to do something about it." We couldn't think of anything to do and so we paid a homeless guy to buy us a case of beer and then we went to our suite and wrestled each other until we felt tired and sore and just the slightest bit aroused. And then we got the idea to stop eating.

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"A hunger strike," Jonas said. "We'll stop eating in protest of Guidry getting fired. It's a valid form of non-violent protest."

"But does it work?" Mikey asked.

"Sometimes," Jonas said. We could live with sometimes. We were used to never and sometimes felt like a great improvement, even if the outcome led only to starvation.

"So how much food can we eat each day?" Terrell asked.

"None," Jonas said.

"What about multivitamins?" I asked.

"That's fine, I guess," Jonas said. "Just water and multivitamins."

"Milkshakes?" Mikey asked.

"No," Jonas said.

"We should be able to put lemon in the water," Terrell said and we all agreed with this.

"Fine," Jonas said. "Just water and lemon and multivitamins." We shook hands and agreed that we would not eat anything until Guidry was back in the classroom, teaching us about animated Christmas specials and showing nearly imperceptible signs of being high. We were so excited about our resistance to the status quo, however small, that we stripped down to our underwear again and wrestled each other until we fell asleep in a pile, our bodies twitching softly, our stomachs unaware of the future.

We woke up around four in the morning to find Mikey eating handfuls of Rice Krispies from the box. "Mikey," Jonas said, "this is not good." Mikey seemed genuinely confused. "It's Rice Krispies," he said, crumbs spilling out of his mouth while he spoke. "Rice Krispies aren't food." Terrell took the box from Mikey and inspected the nutritional chart.

"They are food, Mikey," I said.

"No," he replied. "It's just air. It's a thin shell of rice filled with air. It's like eating nothing."

We took a vote and it was decided by three to one that Rice Krispies were food.

"Well, fuck," Mikey said. "This is going to be difficult."

"Exactly," Jonas said. "It's going to be very difficult and we'll lose a lot of weight and some of our teeth might fall out from malnutrition and all we'll want to do is sleep, but if it doesn't get bad, then the administration won't feel pressure to accept our demand."

"We need to tell the administration, right?" I asked.

Jonas paused, confused. "Yes," he finally said. "We should tell someone about what we're doing."

"Maybe we shouldn't start the hunger strike until we write a letter or something," Mikey said. He was salivating.

While Mikey fried some eggs and bacon, the rest of us typed out a letter to the

editor of the school newspaper. It read, *To the Administration: We, the undersigned, have begun a hunger strike in protest of the unfair dismissal of Professor Carl Guidry. We will not eat until Professor Guidry is reinstated and we encourage other students to take part in this non-violent protest. We understand that there are serious risks associated with not eating for an extended period of time, but we are prepared to accept the consequences because of our admiration for Professor Guidry and our belief that he did nothing to deserve his untimely firing. We will eat no more forever. Jonas Smith, Michael Prospect, Terrell Jones, and Clayton Abernathy.*

We sent the e-mail to the newspaper and then ate the eggs and bacon slowly, savoring each bite, the last thing we would taste for some time. And then Terrell said, "The paper doesn't come out until Tuesday. That's three days of no eating without anyone knowing about it." We all turned to Jonas and he sat there, silent, and then pushed away from the table, grabbed a bag of potato chips from the counter, and dumped them out on the table. We sat there, without speaking, the sun now coming up, and ate the chips until they were gone.

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On Tuesday morning, we sat around the table and drank a glass of water, then a second, and went about our day. The student newspaper had published the letter and we were sure that it wouldn't take more than a few days before Guidry was rehired. By the end of the day, I was light-headed, filled with water, and I skipped my last class so I could go to the grocery store and buy a bag of lemons. That night, all of us back in the common room, I sliced one lemon into tiny sections and squeezed them into the four glasses of water. It felt like a suicide pact, the quiet way we sat in a circle and brought the glasses slowly to our lips. Once we were done, we looked at coupons from a pizza place downtown and then Terrell told us that he had messed up. "I ate a hamburger," he said. "Jesus Christ, Terrell," Jonas said. "Wait," Mikey said, "can we eat hamburgers?"

"No," Jonas said, rubbing his eyes. "Hamburgers are food. We are on a hunger strike. No food. No hamburgers. Should we write this down on a card so you can keep it in your wallet?"

"I know," Terrell said. "We drank that water this morning and then the day was going fine and then I went to the dining hall and got another glass of water. And after I'd sat down, I got back up and went to ask them for a slice of lemon and then, for some reason, I just forgot about it and got a hamburger instead. And then I realized what I'd done and I tried to make myself throw it up, but I couldn't do it."

We took a vote and we decided that Terrell was still part of the hunger strike, but he would have to skip the lemon for the next three days. "We're on a hunger strike," Jonas said. "It's on record now. We can't walk into the dining hall and eat a hamburger. Someone will notice and then our position will be weakened."

"But no one knows who we are," Mikey said.

"They will," Jonas said. "When our ribs start showing and we have to be pushed around in wheelchairs and we can't talk, they'll know who we are."

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Two days later, people still didn't know who we were. So we went to the screen shop and had T-shirts made that said, *No Justice, No Food. Rehire Professor Guidry.* We only wanted four of them but the owner said we had to order at least fifty. I used the ATM card my parents gave me for emergencies and we had our shirts. "We can sell the other shirts and pay back your parents," Jonas said, though, even dazed from lack of food, I knew this was not plausible.

That night, we sat around the table in our new T-shirts and used a spoon to eat our water as if it was soup. We pretended that we were survivors of a plane crash and we were existing only on a thin soup we made from tree bark. We pretended that soon someone would discover us and we would feast on giant turkey legs and bowls of shredded cheese. We pretended that we were considering eating each other if it went on much longer.

On Friday we went to Guidry's former class and looked at photos of really, really poor people in the American South in the 1920s and tried to ignore the headaches we were experiencing constantly. "I like your shirts," one guy said after class. "Guidry was cool and who cares if he was whacking off in his office?"

"Wait," Mikey said. "Was he whacking off in his office?"

"I think so," the guy said.

Mikey looked at Jonas. "That seems like grounds for termination."

"He wasn't whacking off in his office," I said. "That's just a rumor. He just had a bunch of porn on his computer."

"Why would he have a bunch of porn on his computer and not whack off to it?" Terrell asked and I admitted that I had no idea, that I had not considered it until just that very moment.

"The point is, and by the way it wasn't porn," Jonas said, "that Professor Guidry was a good teacher and he shouldn't have been fired for some minor indiscretion."

We took a vote and decided unanimously that, regardless of what Professor Guidry actually did, the hunger strike would continue. That night, we drank our water and then watched TV huddled together under one blanket, as if our hunger would be lessened if we held onto each other tightly enough.

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The following week, we started going to the dining hall during lunch and ordering large quantities of food, filling our tray with sandwiches and pizza and French fries. Then we sat in the middle of the cafeteria and did not eat, hovering over our trays for thirty minutes, after which we took our uneaten food to the tray return and threw it away. Jonas had called the student newspaper and someone took a picture to run in next week's edition. A few times, some other students joined us and we felt like we were accomplishing something, though we were so dizzy from not eating that we might have been imagining the other people. And then we met Birdie.

Birdie was a senior and she had heard about our hunger strike and wanted to be a part of it. "At first, I thought you guys weren't serious, but then I saw that you had T-shirts and I realized you were for real," she said. She had organized a sit-in during her sophomore year that had forced the administration to extend winter break for three extra days and she sensed that we possessed the same ideals as her. She wanted to be a part of our group.

There was concern amongst us that Birdie was simply addicted to protest, that what she needed was to be against something, anything, and that we simply met

her criteria. Did we need someone who wasn't personally involved in Guidry's mistreatment by the school officials? Could she weaken our position? Would she split us up, one by one, until she was the only one left to fight for Guidry? What we eventually realized, no need to even put it to a vote, was that we needed other people, that numbers would keep us focused, keep us strong as our lack of food made us weaker. Also, if we were talking about ideals and integrity, we did not want to admit to ourselves or to Birdie that we would have killed someone in exchange for a baked potato at this point. Instead, we simply smiled and nodded at Birdie and tried to imagine a future where she was legally married to all four of us.

Birdie was tall and skinny, with short blonde hair and pale skin and bright blue eyes. She wore men's clothes, thrift store dress shirts and slacks and an oversized pea coat even though the weather wasn't very cold. To us, she was beautiful and strange and now she was moving into our suite so that the five of us would remain committed to the mission. That night, all of us in our underwear, we drank our water and listened to a Phil Ochs CD that Birdie had brought with her. She showed us a tattoo on her left arm of a hammer. Beneath the hammer, it read *Fuck the World* though it had been misspelled and read *Fuck the Word.* "The tattoo guy made a mistake so he didn't charge me and I actually think it works just as well this way," she said. We agreed and wished we had tattoos. We slept on the mat, Birdie in the middle, and prayed that we could go months without eating to make this last.

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Three days later, now skipping our classes because we were too weak to think, we found a burrito wrapper and a banana peel in the trash can. Everyone was a suspect. Terrell said, "I feel like it could have been me, but I honestly don't remember eating anything." Mikey also admitted that, though he had no recollection of eating food, it seemed like something he'd do under extreme duress. "I feel like there have been several moments during this hunger strike that I've eaten something," he said. I had a vague memory of eating a calzone in the alley behind the pizza place but I could not understand if this was a dream or reality. Birdie revealed that she had eaten a handful of grass and leaves the day before.

Jonas alone was without guilt. "I'm going to die," he said, "and you guys will still be alive and the hunger strike will be a failure." We felt ashamed and immediately vowed to do better.

Birdie drove us across the state line to a guy who did tattoos out of his home. Perhaps she sensed that we were losing our focus on the objective of this protest. Perhaps she realized that maybe we weren't as dedicated as she was to all forms of injustice. Perhaps she simply wanted us to be marked by our experiences so we would never forget them. All five of us got a skull tattooed on our arms with the words, *No Food*, underneath. We held a piece of plastic wrap against our arms, which were bleeding and sore, and hoped that this action would give us strength. When we got back to the dorm, Birdie took each one of us into the bathroom and showed us how to keep the tattoo from getting infected and then she kissed us on the mouth, one by one. For a brief moment, it seemed that we might all start making out, possibly more, but instead we walked into the hallway and inhaled the scent of Jiffy Pop from a suite two doors down.

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We had been leaving messages on Guidry's home phone but he never called us back. Someone had told us that he had checked himself into a mental hospital or had joined the Peace Corps, but these were only rumors. Some nights we would drive past his apartment and his car would be in the parking lot, his lights dim but on. We were afraid to knock on his door but we wanted him to know that we still cared for him, that we wanted so badly for things to be the way that they had been. Or we wanted for things to be the way that they had been and also better. Birdie said that, though she had never taken a class with Guidry or even met him, she felt like they would get married when all of this was over. And the rest of us believed, strangely, that the two of them would then adopt us and we would live together in his apartment and never again know what it was like to be hungry.

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Four weeks had passed and since we were not dead, we began to realize that we were probably, somehow, eating food. "This is not possible," Jonas said. "We're not doing it right." We were failing all of our classes and our bodies ached and our skin was turning yellow. The administration was ignoring us and the rest of the students on campus had forgotten about the hunger strike. Guidry would not return our calls. Mikey had actually gained three pounds. "My metabolism is weird," he said. We wondered why we did not remember eating food and why, if we were eating food, we were still so hungry. Birdie suggested that we all start eating a tablespoon of sawdust each day and that would cause us to throw up whatever it was that we might also be eating. We went to three stores to find sawdust but no one had any. We were going crazy, losing our minds, and we understood that, when we were older, we would remember this time with great embarrassment or pretend that it had never happened.

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Birdie and I stole a mounted deer's head from the library. We had been standing in the stairwell, staring at the items in the snack machine, daydreaming, and then Birdie said, "This isn't going to work." I asked her what she meant and she said, "The administration isn't taking us seriously. They don't care about us. We have to be aggressive. We have to do something stupid and hope it works out." I could feel her enthusiasm for the hunger strike not exactly waning, but rather vibrating with the unfamiliar and uncertain understanding that protest doesn't always overcome the thing that is so clearly wrong. If we were to be responsible for Birdie's harsh realization about the unfairness of organized protest, I did not want to let it happen without exhausting all the stupid possibilities that existed in this world. I timidly suggested that we make a bomb threat against the admissions office, but she shook her head. "That's not stupid enough," she said, and I instantly felt myself out of ideas, the hunger strike itself having been perhaps our one beautiful and stupid gift to the world.

She took out a lighter and started coaxing a flame from it, looking around for inspiration. We walked through the stacks of books until we saw the deer's head,

hanging above a sofa in one of the reading rooms. The animal's eyes were black and empty, and it was so clear that its soul was somewhere far, far away from this library. "Is that stupid enough?" I asked, pointing at the deer. She smiled and then squeezed my hand. "Yes," she said. "Oh yes."

We grabbed the deer's head and sprinted out of the library, no one interested enough to give chase. We took it back to the suite and found Mikey in the kitchen, his hands covered in marshmallow crème. "This looks bad," he said, "I know," but we didn't care. We called Terrell and Jonas into the room and explained our plan. We took a vote and it passed without opposition and we waited until nightfall. We painted our faces with shoe polish and drank a tall glass of water and then carried the deer's head, wrapped in a bed sheet, outside into the night air.

When we got to the Vice-Chancellor's house, a huge mansion of stone, we unwrapped the deer's head and stared through the window at the Vice-Chancellor and his wife, eating a bar of chocolate the size of a street sign. "Look at that candy bar," Jonas said. "It's obscene." Mikey suggested that it had to be a commemorative candy bar. "They wouldn't make a candy bar that big without a reason," he said. The sight of it made us vibrate with anger. We hoisted the deer's head and, with great effort, tossed it through the window, shattering glass and a dull thud. We heard the Vice Chancellor's wife scream and then we ran, separating and coming together, putting every bit of strength that we had left into not getting caught. We ran right past our dorm, past the student union building, off campus, towards Professor Guidry's apartment. We needed safe haven, somewhere to lie low, and he would have to accept us, could not refuse people who had created such a mess in his name.

Guidry let us in without a word. He reeked of hoisin and his eyes were bloodshot. In the living room, a video game was paused, a Sno-cone machine humming on the coffee table, and professional wrestling magazines covering the floor. There was a life-sized cardboard cutout of Dolly Parton in the corner of the room. It was the apartment of someone who was retarded but allowed to live on his own. Guidry sat down on the sofa and began to piece together a thin joint. The five of us stood in the hallway, our faces streaked with shoe polish, our stomachs growling, wanting desperately to rub against each other with so much force that we'd explode.

"You guy's still aren't eating?" Guidry asked, looking up from the rolling paper he was forming into a cigarette. "More or less," Jonas said, "not until you get your job back." The professor lit up the joint and inhaled, holding it in his lungs before saying, "I don't want my job back." I stepped into the living room, my hands twitching. "Yes you do," I said. "No," he replied, shaking his head, "I don't. I fucked up and they fired me and I just have to accept that and move on." There was a plate of Korean ribs on the sofa and he motioned to them. "Are you sure you don't want to eat?" he asked. "There's this Korean barbecue that delivers. It's incredible and really cheap." We shook our heads. We felt like beating him to death with a giant rock. We had wasted our time on this guy, gone without food, in theory at least, for over a month, and he seemed embarrassed about the whole affair.

"But you're such an incredible teacher," Birdie said, "or so I've heard." She had her sleeves pulled up to her shoulders so you could see both of her tattoos. "That's true," Guidry said, "but I'm kind of an awful person. The college where I taught before this one, I got fired for giving a student a good grade in exchange for a blowjob. I think higher education creates an atmosphere where semi-intelligent people do really fucked up things. It's best if I leave that behind."

"We really cared about you," Terrell said to Guidry. "We were prepared to starve to death to get your job back." Guidry grimaced. "I appreciate it, I guess," he said, "but you shouldn't have done that. I kept meaning to call you guys and tell you to stop, but I just felt too embarrassed to do it. But, seriously, you need to stop." He crushed the finished joint into an ashtray and sank into the cushions of the sofa. "I'm thinking about joining the army," he said, but we were already filing out the door, our hearts broken.

If we could see into the future, and we had gone so long without food that sometimes we imagined that we could, we believed that Guidry would get a few minimum wage jobs in the area and then get arrested for having sex in a public place with someone who was dangerously inappropriate. We imagined that he would move to Florida and become a treasure hunter and mysteriously disappear in the Atlantic Ocean. We imagined that nothing would end well for him and this did not make us as sad as we had suspected.

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We stepped into a twenty-four hour all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet and sat down in a booth and ordered. Then we walked like zombies to the rows of food, glowing underneath the heat lamps, and it was so difficult for us to recognize any of the items, nothing looked like the food that we remembered, that we simply piled our plates high with whatever we could find, a little of everything. We ate slowly, understanding that, no matter what we did, this would make us sick. We tasted the salt soaking into our tongues, the pain in our jaws from the effort of chewing. We felt the miracle of food passing into our stomach, filling us up, turning into something like a bright light inside of us. We ate in silence and when our plates were empty, we got more.

We looked into the future and realized that we had fucked up. We had very little time left in the semester and we would have to beg and plead and work without stopping for days to avoid flunking out of school. We would no longer have time for wrestling, for the sensation of our skin against each other, and we would hold each other responsible for the mess that we had made of our young lives. Birdie, though we all wanted to marry her, would disappear from our lives and we would spend years trying to meet someone like her and it would never happen. We would grow old in unspectacular ways and we would be amazed that somehow we had found a way to keep living. Nevertheless, there would be something like an absence that existed in the place that might be our souls, that we had deprived ourselves of something important, for however brief a time, and it would never be full again.

Sitting there in the restaurant, we admitted that we were prepared for whatever unhappiness would follow, that we would learn to live with less than what was available. We felt that perhaps this was useful, that we could be stronger people if we understood that the world tried to ruin you by promising so many things that it could never, under any circumstances, actually deliver.

Diane Barber

Back and Forth in Time: On the Work of Allison Hunter

Early cave paintings include elaborate scenes illustrating how intertwined man and beast were at a time when humans depended upon animals for sustenance, mobility, protection from the elements, and work. But that relationship has changed. In his essay "Why Look at Animals?," John Berger posits that the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a major shift in the human/animal relationship. Advances in technology and the arrival of zoos relocated beasts from the center of our world to marginal spaces such as laboratories, factories, homes, and circuses.

Houston-based artist Allison Hunter upends that dynamic with mysterious and powerful depictions of captive animals once again assuming a position at the center of our attention. In so doing, she asks us to consider how and why we control, display, and interact with nature in modern society and what that portends for the future of our world. Hunter, whose artwork spans photography, video, installation, and now painting, does not approach her subject matter with a heavy hand. Instead, she forges an intimacy with her subjects, one in which they return her gaze with a directness and calm that is all but impossible to capture in natural habitats. From the initial encounter registered with her camera, Hunter strips the scene to its essence, removing all of the "noise" from the frame. Nowhere do we see the bars of cages, the fixed perimeters of zoo environments, or the encroaching line of strollers and people filing past in anticipation of the next wild encounter. The animals in Hunter's work occupy the center of the universe—hers and ours—providing us with insight into and awareness of these mysterious creatures that inhabit the planet alongside us. The resulting works are delicate, poetic, and undeniably beautiful.

Hunter's practice is rooted in research but the outcome is not intended to be a dissertation based in scientific fact. Instead, she remains true to the art of it all, deftly blending science with a sort of visual poetry that quietly prods her audience toward a higher consciousness. In her video installation *Zoosphere*, presented at DiverseWorks (Houston) in 2010, Hunter maximized the impact of the artwork/

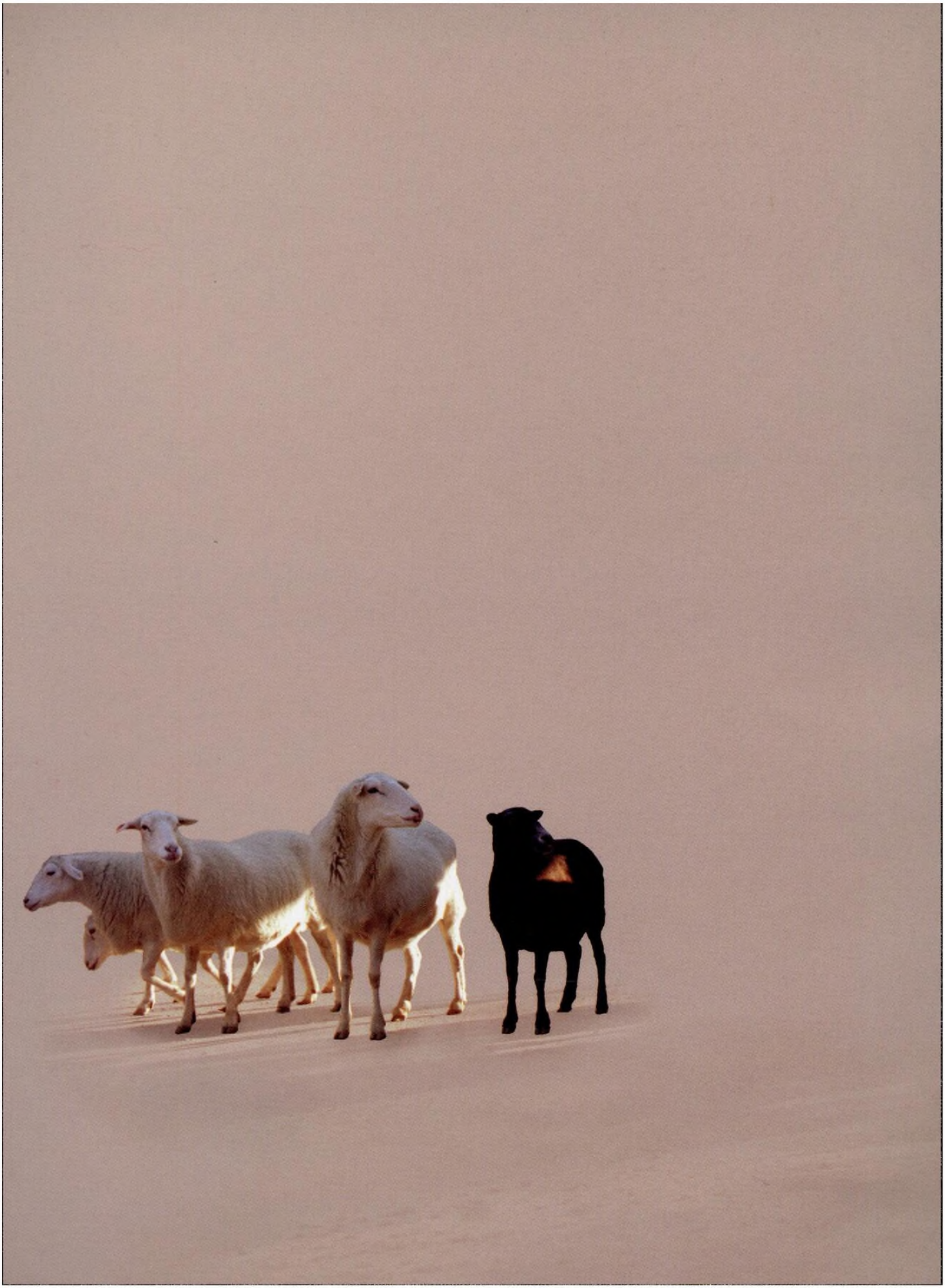
audience encounter using scale, sound, and a disarming balance of sensory overload and deprivation. The gallery environment was completely dark. Every inch of the wall space that was not occupied by a video projection was painted black, effectively removing all sense of the outside world. People moved through the space beckoned by sounds of trumpeting elephants, splashing sea lions, and chittering frogs, and lured by mammoth and minute projections of living creatures strategically positioned on the floor, around corners, and in the narrow recesses and hollows of the room. The space was truly alive, the encounters with the animals active, dynamic, and oddly personal in a way that even the best zoos struggle to provide.

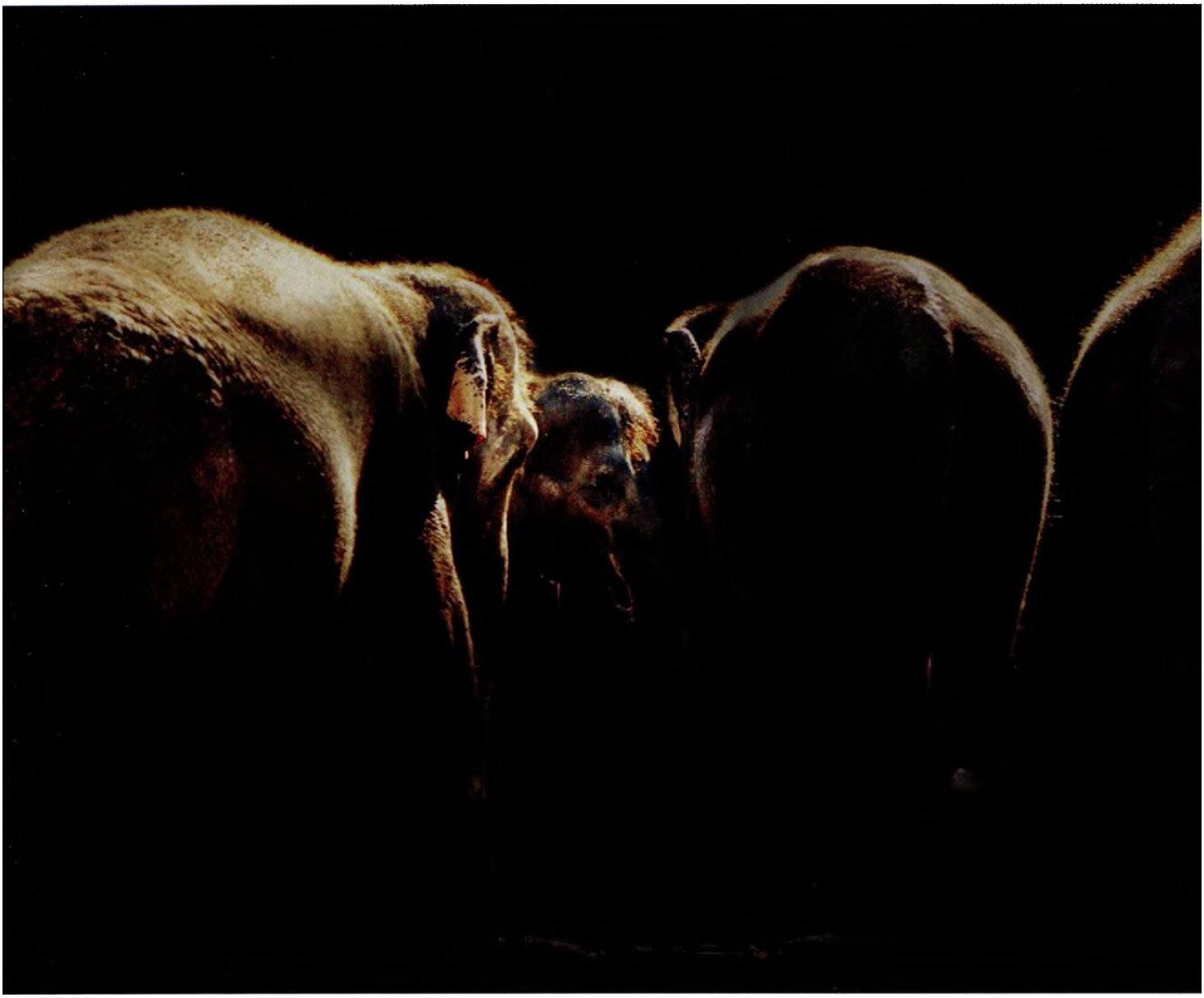
When Hunter speaks of the exhibition at DiverseWorks, it becomes clear that her move from photography to installation in this ongoing investigation of the animal kingdom was a watershed moment in her creative practice. While her photographs remain places of quiet contemplation of the world around us, her installations prompt a more visceral response. We are catapulted back in time and place, reconnecting with the primal world we all once knew so well as inhabitants of this earth. How is it that as we have evolved as a species, in an era where we have more access to information than ever before, our sense of *connection* to the things that surround us is more and more in question? Perhaps this is what makes Allison Hunter's work so magical. Somehow she manages to bridge a divide, to reconstitute a long-neglected relationship with the natural world. In doing so, Hunter reminds us all of how magnificent the world truly is if we can actually manage to see beyond all of the clutter.

FROM *NEW ANIMALS* BY ALLISON HUNTER

***Untitled #5*, 2005 (detail)** | digital c-print, 30" x 50"
***Untitled #8*, 2006** | digital c-print, 30" x 50"
***Untitled #10*, 2006** | digital c-print, 30" x 50"
***Untitled (elephants 1)*, 2007** | digital c-print, 32" x 89"
***Untitled (zebu and others)*, 2008** | digital c-print, 44" x 92"

All images courtesy of the artist.





G.C. Waldrep

Tea Ceremony

The sick queen crochets bees
from pockets palsied stevedores
serrate, then ties with string the cineplex
to suburbs swabbed in pollen.
The poet speaks precisely so we hear
the "b" in "lamb," the "p" and "t"
of "slept," the double "s" of "thrusts"
while just outside
the mad persist in solitary
telethons. I misperceive nativity
for one more language I can't learn,
se-quench of tongue (re)versed
and versioned in the barrel chests
of ocean liners. The sick queen coughs
a scratchy patch of plexiglass
on which some doctor's
dank prescription branches as a scrawl.
The poet fell from recompense
to music, skint her shin on hardware
battened to this beescape.
No defendant pleads.
There is forgiveness here
I want to say, but trains plunge south
like Polaroids from basements
where the whistling armies, locked
in spite, perfect their burrows. *Cheese*,
they say, and darkness

smiles: the withered queen declines
into a ribbon cities wear.
In such constraints banks often close.
I, in the air, reflect the waves
Orion twists from matter's flank,
redemptive seiche—thin arrows
that disturb the bees'
concise matriculations. Some queens
demand Scriabin in the spring;
some lay aside their gowns
when chemistry inflects their careful
apercus. It's true, elections fly
too close to furnaces
we cannot see. *Break this vase*
compunction says—now use one shard
to fletch the wound, this orchard's
urban vantage strained
from wax. Chyme decorates
the analects with noxious dust. I claim:
a theft, a hex, a wing.
All queens and poets shape alike
the same deserted algorithm.
We entertain the mad. They whisper
songs no traveler dares sing.

—for Oni Buchanan

Joseph

There are conversations that can change a person's life. I'm sure of it. I mean, I'd like to believe it. I'm sitting in a café with a producer. He's not exactly a producer, he never produced anything, but he wants to. He has an idea for a film and he wants me to write the screenplay. I explain that I don't write for films and he accepts that and calls the waitress over. I'm sure he wants to ask for the check, but he orders himself another espresso instead. The waitress asks me if I want something else and I order a glass of water. The wannabe-producer's name is Yossef, but he introduces himself as Joseph. "No one," he says, "is really called Yossef. It's always Sefi or Yossi or Yoss, so I went for Joseph." He's sharp, that Joseph. Reads me like a book. "You're busy, right?" he says when he sees me glance at my watch, and immediately adds, "Very busy. Traveling, working, writing emails." There's nothing malicious or sarcastic in the way he says it. It's a statement of fact, or at the most, an expression of sympathy. I nod. "Not being busy scares you?" he asks. I nod again. "Me too," he says and gives me a yellow-toothed smile. "There must be something down there. Something frightening. If not, we wouldn't be grinding our time so thin on all kinds of projects. And you know what scares me most?" he asks. I hesitate for a second, thinking about what to answer, but Joseph doesn't wait. "Myself," he continues, "what I am. You know that nothingness that fills you up a second after you come? Not with someone you love, just with some girl, or when you jerk off. You know it? That's what scares me, looking into myself and finding nothing there. Not your average nothingness, but the kind that totally bums you out, I don't know exactly what to call it...."

Now he's quiet. I feel uncomfortable with his silence. If we were closer, maybe I could be silent with him. But not at our first meeting. Not after a comment like that. "Sometimes," I try to return his frankness, "life seems like a trap to me. Something you walk into unsuspectingly and then it snaps closed around you. And when you're inside, inside life I mean, there's no escape, except maybe suicide, which isn't really an escape, it's more like surrender. You know what I mean?"

"It's fuck-all," Joseph says. "It's just fuck-all that you won't write the screenplay." There's something very weird about the way he talks. He doesn't even curse like other people. I don't know what to say after that, so I keep quiet. "Never mind," he says after a minute. "Your saying no just gives me the chance to meet with other people, drink more coffee. And that's the best part of this business. I don't think the actual producing is for me." I must have nodded because he reacts to it. "You think I don't have it, right? That I'm not really a producer, that I'm just some guy with a little money from his parents who talks a lot." I must still be nodding, unintentionally, from the pressure, because now he's laughing. "You're right," he says, "or maybe not, maybe I'll surprise you. Maybe I'll surprise myself."

Joseph asks for the check and insists on paying. "What about our waitress?" he asks while we wait for his credit card to be swiped, "You figure she's trying to escape too? From herself, I mean?" I shrug. "And that guy who just walked in, with the coat? Look how he's sweating. He's definitely running away from something. Maybe we'll form a start-up. Instead of the film—a program that finds people who are trying to run away from themselves, who are afraid of what they might find out. It could be a hit." I look at the sweaty guy in the coat. It's the first time in my life I see a suicide bomber. Afterwards, in the hospital, foreign journalists will ask me to describe him and I'll say I don't remember. Because I'll think it's something kind of personal, something I should keep between me and him. Joseph will survive the blast too. But not so the waitress. Not that there's any culpability on her part. In terrorist attacks, character is not a factor. In the end, it's all a matter of angle and distance. "That guy who just came in is definitely running away from something," Joseph says and laughs, rummaging around in his pockets for some change for the tip. "Maybe he'll agree to write the screenplay for me or at least meet for coffee." Our waitress, laminated menu in hand, dances her way over to the sweaty guy in the coat.

The Wine-Dark Sea

I am trying
to be simple as ink.

But the horns
line my spine.

I talk to you
sometimes
in the daylight.

At night
I try not to
suspend.

I hope it does not
distract you.

Celan said this
to Liana Shmueli:

Through you I translate you over to me.

There is so much
I can't form
that is true.

Bradley Harrison

The Impossible Boy Returns

As a wolf after a decade or more in the wild hunting.
Field mice and barn cats not quite.
Dawn when he came to the tree line.

Looking down at the house still rattling.
In woodsong in trembling.
Fog blossoms breathing on the wind faded.

Morning flooded lawn with rolled up sleeves.
His body a sheath as he stood there.
For hours stalking and watching the windows catch light.

And throw it back out he was looking for his mother.
To remember her smallness her.
Temple of calm she was gone and he won't know.

But to see the strange girl spitting stones at the machine.
Shed he could taste her in his nostrils.
Face down as he chewed on his paw lying prostrate.

In leaf sounds waiting for something to break.
Open the sky the girl's father.
On the porch with his rotten gums.

In a claustrophobic bottle he puffed on his pipe as he lifted.
His rifle and the boy could see only.
Shadows then the quavering ground.

Wright Park

There must be drugs in the backpack
lying on the grass. One cop is leading away
the bicycle, while the other cops stand around
the man handcuffed on the ground,
not moving but clearly not hurt, waiting
like everyone else for what will happen next.
It's just one faggot on a bicycle,
says the old man standing near me,
why so many cops?
The park is beautiful
at dusk. The sky a blue-gray dome.
The lawns like billiard tables. The hundred
trees exhaling a good, cold air.
The statue of Ibsen looks over
the pond's mallards, the dog-walkers
and the smoking teenagers, the men beginning
to gather among the trees.
I don't know about violence, but what I see
is an old man in a blue ski jacket
on a summer evening, his cane thin and white
as a toothpick,
not stick enough
to beat back the faggots riding into the park
on their bicycles, the faggots in the flower beds,
the faggots that are the blue cops,
the faggots in the trees and bushes,
the faggots splashing into the pond of ducks
and carp, the faggots on the swings,
the faggots, the faggots everywhere, the faggots.

Brown Refrigerator

You don't have to understand it
but you will carry it anyway.
A couple whose baby died,
when they had to move
to another state, took the baby
from the years-long ground
and brought her with them.
They did this again a second
time, their memory always
tied to its embodiment,
new burials for an old grief.
In a short film I once saw,
ants lifted away the silver
and gold confetti from a party,
making a trail of suns
and moons on the floor.
The filmmaker must have put
something sweet on the circles,
like a painter dabbing
little points of white paint
to give highlights to an eyeball.
Some of the recipes that
a friend keeps making
go so far back in her family
the recipes are like snapshots
of villages and forests,
mountains and falling snow.
Apples and trout rise up

into the night's constellations,
a dark without yellow stars.
What I remember of childhood
sometimes comes down
to the brown refrigerator
in our house. Its chrome
handle was always angry
with static, so that now when
I reach for the doorknob
or the gas pump, the sharp
charge on my fingers is
childhood calling its child back.

Mark Neely

[a woman in Dior]

a woman in Dior
lifts a speckled gourd
from a basket on the table

and turns it in the candlelight
even on the vine a gourd looks
dead I always think of them

as magical they have no
television show no aisle
in the bookstore when I

almost drowned I waved
one arm the other
clung to a hunk of ship

at first I could only take
a little water the wine I wished for
all those days made me wretch

survivors bend
down to the sand
like giant trees

it's hard for them
to leave things as they are
the town looks strangely

like a field of violets drunk
boys strutting their stems
in shiny jeans for months

I went around smelling of mothballs
I was a knight in rusty clothes
my own beloved

enemy I rode on empty
plains I could not name
the source of anything

the snapper sleeping
on its bed of greens
the lemon necklace

or silver watch the silk
scarf around my neck
I was a woman in Dior

and made obnoxious
toasts and detected in the
wine a hint of cherry

I clapped the waiter over
to our table to please
clear away this pile of bodies

Amy Lee Scott

Convergence

Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.
—Michel de Montaigne

All, like diamond,
is carbon first, then light.
—José Martí

I did not see the woman jump, nor did I see her fall, but I can somehow hear the faint swish of her skirt as she leaped over the rooftop's brick rim, sailed through the cloaked London sky, and landed with a crack on the sidewalk where bystanders gaped, shrieked, turned their heads, gripped their knees, heaving.

My arms, I remember, were filled with something solid—books, maybe, or a package to mail. In my head, I keep seeing myself alight from the South Kensington metro escalator, caught in the static just before I crossed the street towards Tesco, where I had meant to buy dinner rolls, where, instead, the woman's body hit the sidewalk and crumpled.

Later there would be sirens, police tape, photographs of her troubled angles. But right then, there was nothing. Not the slightest line to cordon the shock. No protocol. I held my books against my chest and felt my ribs expanding without me.

▪ ▪ ▪

Virginia Woolf spent her childhood on the top floor of 22 Hyde Park Gate, a few blocks from my flat, devouring her father's books. I imagine that she curled up in her chair, *like a bird sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf*, surrounded by shelves and tapestries. From time to time she glances up from her book and out the leaded window. She sees treetops and shadows. A few passing clouds.

Hidden from view, perhaps she felt like the bird she would later describe in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the bird that *starts at the crack of a dry twig*, as young Italian Rezia laments, *surrounded by the enormous trees, vast clouds of an indifferent world, exposed.*

▪ ▪ ▪

My favorite family photo has all nine of us standing in front of our brick fireplace. It is late 1991, just a few months before my mother will die. We children wear floral dresses and pleated slacks. Hair combed and curled. Our parents grin at some inside joke. My mother's pale face is rouged and luminous. She wears a floppy blue hat to hide her shorn head. In the corner of the frame, there is a glimpse of a red and white checked rocking chair.

Looking at that patch of fabric, I can suddenly smell the exact dusty odor of the carpet behind the chair. I can see the tall tree in the wicker basket that shaded the corner. I can feel the cool ceramic glaze of the Aunt Jemima vase that sat on the side table. The side table's curved legs and beautiful claw feet. The honey glaze of the entire room.

The checkered chair later became a pale blue La-Z-Boy that reclined. Its cushions were so deep you could get lost in them for days. The footrest flipped out from under its belly. After my mother died, our Rubenesque nanny, Marlena, sat in that chair for hours watching soap operas and *Dances with Wolves* on repeat. I stopped hanging out behind the couch and locked myself in my room to read or cry.

▪ ▪ ▪

I used to walk by Virginia's house on my way to the park. Now it's a pretty place, white and columned, priced at 1.5 million pounds. But in Virginia's day, the narrow, five-story house must have felt oppressive, especially with its thick Victorian curtains and claw-footed tables.

In this dreary "cage" Virginia's nephew, Quentin Bell, wrote that she could "create an atmosphere of thunderous and oppressive gloom." In response, her siblings Vanessa and Thoby had "some technique" (still unknown) that could summon the most explosive paroxysms from Virginia, causing her to turn, as Nessa said, "the most lovely flaming red."

▪ ▪ ▪

In January 2011, Greg Butcher, director of bird conservation at the National Audubon Society, said, "The structures that seem to cause the most bird deaths are very tall and constantly lit."

He was trying to explain why 5,000 Red-Winged Blackbirds fell dead from the Arkansas sky on New Year's Eve.

"On foggy nights," Butcher elaborated, "birds that should probably normally be paying attention to the stars get disoriented, and circle around the structures until they collapse," falling to the sidewalk in a cascade of feather and bone.

▪ ▪ ▪

The woman jumped at half past six, when night was beginning to fold into day, casting scant shadows across the pavement. It was April, Virginia's "sad always" time, as "it brought back memories." Above Tesco, apartment windows glowed. Through their open frames came music and the bright sound of glasses.

Inside, it seemed that no one noticed the missing woman. Though it was still early, I heard that they were all sauced, arms flung around each others' waists and shoulders, celebrating something—a promotion or an engagement—waiting for dinner to be served. Perhaps the woman had excused herself to freshen up and smoke a cigarette, which was how she found herself on her rooftop, peering down.

• • •

However sensitive Virginia was, she was also a great charmer. At age six, for instance, she wrote a letter to her godfather, James Russell Lowell. "My dear godpapa," it begins:

> Have you been to the Adirondacks and have you seen lots of wild beasts and a lot of birds in their nests you are a naughty man not to come here good bye your affect—Virginia.

Won over by little Virginia, Lowell always gave her a sixpence when he visited the family (where the other children only received threepenny bits). And once, in an extravagant reference to her letter, he gave her a "real live bird in a cage" to keep in the nursery.

• • •

When I was little, I spent my afternoons hiding behind the family room couch. Cocooned in a blanket, I inhaled stacks of books, one right after the other, until I had to set the dinner table. By age six, I had been reading chapter books for almost a year and rarely spoke a word. Slouched against the couch, I read each book as quickly as possible in order to drown out the chaos around me. With each passing page, I transformed into an intrepid girl detective. I rode in covered wagons and lived in dark sod houses. I met rich granddads and babysat loads of kids. In my books, I was outspoken, witty, darling. I did not fear a thing.

But when I peeked over the couch, I could see my mother's newly shaved head bobbing as she rocked in the checkered chair watching *I Love Lucy* reruns. She clutched a Diet Coke in one hand and used the other to fidget with the tail of her drooping headscarf. Her arms poked out from her bathrobe sleeves, jaundiced twigs laced with track marks from that week's chemotherapy session. They reminded me of fledglings, her arms, studded with pinfeathers trying to become wings.

▪ ▪ ▪

Virginia's early preoccupation with birds resurfaces in her writing, where birds hop on branches, roost in eaves, and speak in Greek. Thoughts fall "from branch to branch, like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough." Even light glows "like some bird that has flown in."

But most often, birds personify her characters. Clarissa Dalloway has "a touch of the bird about her." Italian Rezia flutters nervously about her suicidal husband, Septimus, who later perches like a bird just before he flings himself off the windowsill "vigorously, violently down onto Mrs. Filmer's area railings."

▪ ▪ ▪

According to Eugene Buechel and Paul Manhard, compilers of the 2002 *Lakota Dictionary*, the Lakota call Red-Winged Blackbirds *wabloša*, or "wings of red." Their songs keen across the Great Plains, filling the air with mourning.

When I lived in Iowa, I used to wake to this sound. My dirty windowpanes filtered light, reforming bright mornings into a dull pulse. Once, the quaking bird notes blended with a tornado siren. Combined, the despair stretched the tinny air, pulling it thinner and thinner with each haunting wail.

I was not surprised to read that the Lakota transcribe the Red-Winged Blackbirds' songs as *tȯke, mat'ā nī*—

> "Oh! that I might die."

▪ ▪ ▪

On the sidewalk four stories below, the woman probably saw the usual weekday scenes: waiters setting café tables, businessmen hurrying towards the Underground,

couples sizing up bistro menus. She may have watched customers entering Tesco and leaving with bags full of wine, cheese wrapped in wax paper, stuffed olives.

As usual, the auctioneer locked his storefront, as did the florist. The woman watched everyone bustling to and fro. She thought of everything, "mixing," as Virginia's compatriot T.S. Eliot wrote, "memory and desire," until nothing felt real, not her fingers holding the cigarette, nor the sooty brick, nor the sound of traffic, nothing. She felt the weight of her body but it did not feel like hers. It was elsewhere, displaced.

▪ ▪ ▪

Virginia spent the summer of 1910 in a private nursing home, recovering from a nervous breakdown. Unhappy and alone, she confided in her sister, Vanessa: "To be 29 and unmarried—to be a failure—childless—insane too, no writer."

She wrote the letter, I imagine, while sitting by a broad window. In the quiet afternoon, with London's clatter muted, she must have felt strange, suspended. Nothing but birdsong broke the clean air. Her strained nerves.

"I shall soon have to jump out of a window," she either joked or confessed a few lines later.

She might have blotted the letter then. Glancing out the window, perhaps she could see Septimus perched on the ledge. His hazy form seemed to grow clearer and clearer, until his character's sloped shoulders and wrinkled trousers solidified. He nodded at Virginia—he seemed to recognize her—then leaped into the exquisite blue.

▪ ▪ ▪

My mother had wanted scads of children. She wanted all the tap shoes and footballs, the family dinners and theatric holidays. Newlywed at twenty-four, she could already see her future children's friends flinging themselves onto couches and ransacking the pantry. She imagined scores of PTA meetings, galleries of children's

art. She needed something to muffle the pins of anxiety that shot through her everyday—*not good enough, not smart enough, not enough at all.*

"Waiting for another child has been the hardest thing I have ever had to endure," she wrote in her journal, lamenting her inability to produce children as quickly as she hoped. She stared wistfully at her friends' babies, toddlers, school kids. Envied their unkempt lawns and laundry piles.

She was ecstatic to become pregnant with her second child in 1978, two years after her firstborn, my sister Jana. She recorded her joy in a letter to her family: "I wish this baby knew how much I already loved it. I have waited it seems years to have another child, and I think about this new life in me each day."

She was equally delighted with the adoption of her third (me), fourth, and fifth children from South Korea. She was tired but pleased with the birth of her sixth baby. But when she learned she was pregnant with her seventh child, she could not mask her horror. "I have been so depressed because I am pregnant," she wrote in her journal. "This isn't what I wanted out of my life." She could not keep up with the dirty clothes and screwy schedules. There were too many orthodontist appointments, too many dinners to make.

Three days before she gave birth to an eight-pound, four-ounce baby girl, she discovered a lump in her right breast. *This is more than I can bear*, she thought, before locking herself in a bathroom to weep silently and alone.

▪ ▪ ▪

No newspaper that I read reported the woman's jump but rumors blazed around the neighborhood all week. *She was high*, almost everyone said, *she was depressed and lost her job.* Then why had she invited all those people to her flat for dinner?

In hindsight, nothing about the woman is clear. Sometimes I see her from above, as a formless mound. Other times I see nothing but a fabric swatch—the Swiss dot of her dress, for instance—so close that I cannot be sure of what I am seeing. From such proximity, the fabric could very well be a snowdrift, or a dividing cell. Steam.

There are times when I think that the woman did not ever jump, that I did not emerge from the Underground, did not want dinner rolls. Without the clarity of facts and newsprint, I doubt everything.

▪ ▪ ▪

Of her first memories, Virginia wrote:

> If I were a painter, I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers ... I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline.

To achieve this, Virginia would have needed to glaze her paintings, a technique that swipes thin layers of complementary colors over a base coat. The resulting color levels make a finished piece shimmer—think of the opalescent blue turban in Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring"—creating a depth and dynamism that single-color brush strokes lack.

My memory, on the other hand, is rendered in impasto strokes, thick hazy abstractions of reality. Van Gogh preferred this technique, used his mixing knife and coarse paintbrushes to make his canvas surfaces appear whipped, like heavy cream.

▪ ▪ ▪

In 1890, Van Gogh painted the dreamy landscape "Cypresses and Two Women." Virginia would have been eight, still young enough to sit on her Uncle Lowell's knee, still ecstatic about the summer vacations to their cottage at St. Ives where she situated her first memory, the one with the glowing light and her mother's lap.

The painting, arrayed in Van Gogh's signature swirls, sends the cypress trees' green plumage soaring towards the sky. They look like flames, these leaves, strong and contorted. The trees' commanding presence nearly engulfs the two women. You could miss them, but for their white frocks.

The women have their arms about each other. They are so close they appear to be conjoined. With blank faces, they walk away from the trees. But they have an air of intimacy. Their heads bent in congenial conversation. They are unconcerned. Though the trees and bushes threaten to envelop them, they keep walking. In the background, a quaint cottage waits. Beyond the trees' grasp, meringue clouds idle in the tapering blue.

The two women could be anyone. An image from Van Gogh's dreams. A mirage. But there's something about the way they hold themselves. The woman closest to the viewer tilts her narrow chin in such a way that her hair seems to fall over her brow, just as Virginia's does in that famous photo from her youth. The other woman, the one with the rust-colored bodice, holds herself in mid-stride. She looks able and fierce. In her stance I see Vanessa. Sisters bound together by immeasurable loss and two vagabond hearts.

▪ ▪ ▪

Like Virginia, my mother died when I was young. I was left with vague sketches that linked me to her fading memory. I can hardly remember what she looks like, except when I see my sister. They have the same bleach blonde hair. The same arched brows. I catch a flicker of my mother's smile when my sister laughs, a

glimpse of her face when she turns. Virginia saw her mother in her sister, too. Vanessa's beauty matched Julia's, as did her constancy.

Virginia writes beautifully of her first memory, linked to her mother. Later, she remembers her mother's "three rings: a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring." In *Moments of Being* she writes, "My eyes used to fix themselves upon the lights in the opal as it moved across the page of the lesson book when [my mother] taught us, and I was glad that she left it to me." My engagement ring is made from one of the rings my mother wore everyday. I look at it and can somehow see it glinting on her hand as she guided mine across lined paper, teaching me how to write.

There's a part of me that believes that, once upon a time, Virginia befriended me, or perhaps it was the other way around. Though it's impossible, I keep remembering a moment where we passed on the street and nodded in recognition. How is it that I can live my life completely as myself but feel like I've also lived as many others? How can I see all of my memories transposed through the mind of Virginia? The same yellow blind. Waves lapping at the shore. St. Ives or Zuma, the beach of my youth. A golden ring. Loss does strange things. Makes one thing appear as another.

▪ ▪ ▪

In Leonardo da Vinci's time, people did not understand migration. They believed that birds turned into stone mid-flight and dropped from the sky. These granite birds plummeted into lakes, where they would wait for spring nestled on the mossy floors.

But Leonardo knew about wings. He dreamed about them, sketched them in notebook margins, detailed their fine bones and feathers banking on the wind.

Despite his thorough observations, Leonardo's first flying machine did not have wings. Instead, he designed a square pyramid base surrounded by linen—the first

prototype of a parachute. Thrilled with his discovery, he wrote that now, thanks to the parachute, *man can jump from any great height without injury.*

▪ ▪ ▪

Virginia's erratic flights between sanity and insanity unhinged her, left her diminished and insecure. Later she explained another migration that she, like many people, made between states of being and non-being.

"A great part of every day is not lived consciously," she explained. "One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mamel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding."

This "cotton wool" acts as a buffer to reality, the "instances of shock, discovery or revelation"—Virginia's rare moments of being. She wrote in her diary about one of these moments, an awful memory from a childhood vacation in St. Ives:

> Some people called Valpy had been staying at St Ives, and had left. We were waiting at dinner one night, when somehow I overheard my father or my mother say that Mr Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark—it was a moonlit night—in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed.

▪ ▪ ▪

Responding to a theory that the flock of Red-Winged Blackbirds was poisoned, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission ornithologist Karen Rowe said, "It's important to understand that a sick bird can't fly."

Septimus certainly couldn't. Nor Rezia. "To love makes one solitary," she said, looking at her husband across the uncharted gulf between them.

Virginia, to stop her own manic flights of fancy—her Greek-tongued birds—weighted her pockets with stones and walked into a river.

▪ ▪ ▪

The doctors began carving things out of my mother the day after she gave birth to her last child. She had not wanted chemicals to interfere with the baby. She grew lighter and lighter with every surgery. The chemotherapy and radiation raided her body too, made her vomit for days. She was stripped of her clothes, her hair, her breasts, until all that remained was a husk of a body. Skin like cicada wings.

▪ ▪ ▪

In "Codex on the Flight of Birds," Leonardo said, "Write of swimming under water and you will have the flight of birds through the air."

Leonardo proposed to establish a "science of the winds ... by means of the movements of water." Following the same analogy, swimming might lead to the discovery of the secrets of flight.

▪ ▪ ▪

I did not know that Virginia failed the first time. That she returned home dripping wet, explaining that she had somehow lost her balance. I imagine her nodding hello to her relieved husband, Leonard, as she stepped out of her sodden boots. Hanging her coat to dry, she stealthily examined its pockets, tugging at the seams. She nodded again, satisfied. She would use heavier stones next time.

"Her [walking] stick and footprints were found by the edge of the river," wrote Clive Bell in a letter to Frances Partridge. "We hoped against hope that she wandered crazily away and might be discovered in a barn or a village shop."

But Leonard knew better. He could not forget Virginia's soaked form standing in the doorway just a few weeks before. In his autobiography, he recounted that he "felt sure that she had gone down to the river."

Three weeks later, children found her body floating in the river. It was April.

▪ ▪ ▪

Stone birds. How else would you explain the absence of wings in December? In the evening, coming in from the cold, you might see flocks trumpeting through the air. You might hear the splash of water when they landed nearby, hear their bickering and flurried chatter.

But, upon waking, there would be silence. Glassy air. Instead of birds, you would see a few feathers. The lake's staid face. You might imagine that the birds were sleeping under the water, waiting out the winter for spring to sweeten the lake and release them from their granite slumber. The birds, once awakened, would clamor up from the watery depths and greet the sun with shining wings, fill the quiet with song.

▪ ▪ ▪

In her last days, my mother seemed to float in and out of herself. She saw her husband and her seven children as if from very far away, a bird's-eye view. She remembered the first time she flew with her husband, then a newly minted pilot. The wheels of their small passenger plane skimmed the asphalt and then lifted as though they were nothing, a feather, a broken law of physics where not even gravity could contain her flight. Before her, the sky looked like a mirror, endless and blue.

Looking down at the landscape shrunk to doll-house proportions, she could not have known about all her future children. Even though she had told her mother several times and even written in her journal that she felt sure that she would die young, she could not have foreseen the cancer that would take her life at forty-one. Instead, she was a newlywed, at the cusp of everything, soaring thousands of miles above the earth. She threw her head back and whooped. She flew for hours that day, the wind whistling in her ears.

▪ ▪ ▪

What did Virginia see, standing on the banks of the Ouse River, her pockets still light, the stones yet unturned?

▪ ▪ ▪

I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890.

I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.

▪ ▪ ▪

In my head, the woman wears a thin dress fit for spring, which was just beginning to blossom in South Kensington's dogwoods. Before landing, the woman floats, her dark hair in waves behind her like water. I've somehow recast her as Ophelia—wan and lovely, dim circles beneath her eyes. She floats longer than a falling mass should, smiles abstractly as she scans the crowd, her lithe arms outstretched, body in pirouette.

"Man is a wing," poet José Martí wrote, born of protein, pinion and light. This woman, did she feel the gravity of her fall, the jerk of her body against pavement? Or did she soar like she does in my memory, free for that slice of time when she was airborne, her weight null as feathers sprouted from her sides, buoying her thin body aloft?

Notes

All quoted and italicized portions were taken from the following sources.

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Joy Katz

A Round Porcelain Jam Pot, Again

A porcelain jam pot, dimpled all over, painted orange, with a porcelain stem. No one will mistake this for an orange. Count on china for cheer, not verisimilitude. Italians save the true-to-life for fresco swaddling, holy frescoed infants.

In our hotel dining room, a nicked, twelfth-century table that resembles the distressed "Tuscan" furniture in mail order catalogues.

Travel is fun and this is how it looks: tourists solemnly buttering rolls and reading about the Duomo (too ornate and huge to evoke a personal religious fervor) or eating ham and talking about Pitti Palace, whose walls look like marble and are more valuable than marble in a country where marble is plentiful and people come to study the art of carving it. An almost perfect imitation of the real thing,

those cardboard buildings painted to look like stone for Hitler's visit to Rome. He was wowed. We are neither hardened nor saddened

by the morning television news. The war is new, the museums free of crowds.

Women in Chinese factories use hammers and awls to make new tables look old. They are told to invent stories about the furniture so their nicks and scrapes make sense, i.e., a long time ago lived squid fishermen = a faint blue stain, a low spot from fifty years of inky nets.

When I was twelve I wore a faithfully "rotted" apple-core necklace on a raw leather cord. The apple was wood, made to look gnawed. My best friend (in her Catholic school uniform) chose the alternate version: a pure white apple core, smooth as a doll crotch, on a silver chain. More practical, she said.

Italian medieval armor was lustrous and shaped with elegance, but tragically flimsy. "In war the Italians themselves preferred German armor, which was ugly but practical. It was safer."

Unemployed German men can earn cash by flying to China and posing at factory openings. White men in suits, say the Chinese, make their products appealing to Chinese, who buy more shares. That, in turn, makes the company appealing to German investors.

Back home no one will ask whether we fought on our Italian tour. Weren't we silly with love, honeymooners owning the very airplane air? We will show them our new leather gloves.

I look beautiful when I cry, the woman at Piazza Gheberti says. I look beautiful crying, in Italian.

The walls of our hotel, in morning sun, are that yellow I have read about all my life! I recognize it like the face of a friend. "Tuscan Yellow": a paint color that almost captures this very minute—sun on a yellow wall in spring, in Florence.

Rescue Song

—What Do People Do All Day, *Richard Scarry*

FIRE! I read in my modern jazz radio
deejay voice. A cat mother screams,

her iron set the house aflame,
her cat-son plays, upstairs, alone—

My son has lived to be 4 and each morning asks for this story.
Keep reading, Mama. SAVE MY BOY!

I make the uppercase of emergency
gentle as the scent of laundry detergent.

A ladder claws the boy-cat's sill, I purr.
Purr the burning playroom door, the ax that chops it down.

Disaster solved. Wake/kiss/stir eggs: good morning love
At 9 a.m.

Tell me again!
I was in yoga when

people held hands and fell out of burning buildings downtown.
Commuters caught them on the small screens of their phones

tucked them into breast pockets and walked home.
Om.

What's happening, Mama? A nuclear accident (don't react)
being narrated on the radio, in Japanese.

A woman's voice like one of those paper flowers that blooms in water.
TRAPPED! the hashy simultaneous translation drowns her

elegant hush hush hush fatality onrush.
Morning brings fire, fire brings hoses full of cream.

When the EMTs do come—I wake up and can't move
wake up can't see wake up dead

he will kiss my knee and go to school. All's well.
Location of precinct. Location of alarm bell. Location of hydrant.

Location: our street in Brooklyn where, having dropped him
(as a baby) under a cab, I pray the driver will run over me too.

He will, he is a father, he understands—
Keep breathing.

The ambulance dazzles like a cocktail ring.
My boy leaps into the net on page 23.

Jason Myers

America Mix-Tape, Track 51

When my turn came, I was ashamed.
The water was so cold, it was a kind of forgiveness, a kind of giving.
Oh ridiculous perfumes of May, you make me lovely & wind-wept.

I walked like it was my mission, my feet preachers,
the woods a sweet sanctuary.

Here is a sermon: Vermont in August, green deeper than dusk,
love slighter than touch.

Here is a sermon: sorrow will not end. It will lichen on the rocks of your dumb heart.

Here is a sermon: America wakes up and peels potatoes, smells the coffee. Prisons open. Bars close. You walk past the one you are meant to love. You love the past.

Here is a sermon: Give. Give. Give. Give. Give. Give. Give.

Here is a sermon: You are a lucky little kid. The woods don't know your name.

Wolf Cento

Under somber firs two wolves mingled
their blood, fell into the dense growth,
rustling the submarine foliage of language.

The syllables unearthed, traveling
through flesh into green waves
& all that we touch phosphoresces:

a cloud seeded with a green sun,
transforms into part of your anatomy,
out of reach of all mythology.

I feel an itchiness begin slowly.
The emptiness that swells
by being empty, like desire

in the upper leaves; the silence
of a postponed sentence.
Beyond my anxiety, beyond

my mouth & its words,
the peach glows reddish among leaves
under the sun's semaphore

& dark deciphering of bird flight,
its acid, secret symmetry.
A wasp sonata slips through the house.

There's a kind of restlessness
like a hissing that runs under my skin,
a star in its syllable socket.

I want to tremble, to shudder,
to split apart, to go on.
I cut the last leaf; you were gone.

Sources: Georg Trakl, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Nazim Hikmet, Joao Cabral de Melo Neto, Jorge Luis Borges, Sándor Csoóri, Rosario Castellanos, Agnes Nemes Nagy, Odysseus Elytis, Gabriela Mistral, Kamau Brathwaite, and Yannis Ritsos.

Wolf Cento

With flowers in their lapels, nine
howling wolves come hungering.
A surge of wet syllables
dangles from their mouths.
Children trace their liquid howl
built out of alien words like seeds
in black earth. A woman's lock
of hair brushes their lips.
Their jaws open—coral
in the darkness. I do not know
who has opened the window.
They sing with their mouths full of earth.
The light is putting on gloves.
No blood is flowing. Just red birds.

Sources: Pier Pasolini, Leo Tolstoy, Octavio Paz, Coral Bracho, Andre Frenaud, Miklos Radnoti, Vladimir Holan, Wislawa Szymborska, Federico García Lorca, Anna Akhmatova, Tristan Tzara, and Miroslav Holub.

Thomas Cooper

Kat Daddy

I often wish my son would disappear. Of course I don't want Dennis dead. Only out of sight and mind, somewhere else. I've lost count how many times I've given my boy money for a Greyhound ticket, told him to get the hell out of town before someone kills him or before I strangle him myself. "This is the last time," I say, shoving a wad of bills into his hand like a dirty bribe. But it's always the last time with Dennis. The last day, the last dollar, the last chance.

Quiet little street like mine, no one wants trouble, which is why my neighbors treat my son like the town leper. They came to Metairie to escape the bacchanal of New Orleans, the aftermath of Katrina. They're decent blue-collar folks, the kind of people who still leave casseroles on your doorstep, believe it or not, when they've heard your wife has died.

Like they did a year ago when Rita passed.

"Promise me you'll look after Dennis," she said to me on her last night in the hospital. We were alone, one son dead and the other on a rendezvous somewhere with his crack pipe. Part of me blamed him for what happened to Rita. If she hadn't been so heartbroken, if she hadn't spent so much time worrying about Dennis, maybe she would have lived a year or two longer. A sixty-seven-year-old woman with multiple sclerosis has no business crutching through crack houses after her son.

I didn't want to lie to my wife, so I stood silently over her bed and held her crabbed hand, the bones as frail as wicker. Sick as she was, she seared me with a determined look. Life in the woman yet. "I won't stop waiting until you promise," she said. "We can dither here until Christmas."

Goddamn it, I thought. But I said, "Yes, Rita. I promise."

She must have been waiting for me to say that, because she passed away the next afternoon.

The only good thing to come out of Rita's death was that it bought me a little more sympathy and patience from the neighbors about Dennis. A little more time before they went after him with torches and pitchforks.

This period of good will came to an abrupt end a month ago, when the robberies on our street started. Several houses down, the Sanfords returned from vacation and found their Waterford crystal missing. A week after that, the widow across the street had her jewelry and lawn mower stolen. And then, just yesterday, the head of the neighborhood watch association discovered his blue-ribbon Macaw vanished from his back porch, cage and all.

Though no one has come up to me and outright accused Dennis, their impugning looks say everything. Who else could it be? Every time you turn around, there's Dennis on a street corner or pissing in your rosebushes, Dennis with his crack face and crack beard and raggedy crack clothes.

My son, the scourge.

▪ ▪ ▪

When my wife was still alive, whole blessed hours passed when no thought of my son crossed my mind. My job as a refinery lab tech kept me busy and Rita made sure Dennis didn't burn down the house when I was gone. Now that I'm retired and my wife's passed, all I do is wait and worry. Hard not to when your son looks like Black Death and lives like a squatter in your backyard.

Today as I set cat food on the back porch Dennis watches from inside his tent. The instant the strays hear the clatter of the dish on the brick, six or seven slink from under the house and nose in for a turn. "Katrina cats" they call them around here, orphans from the storm: tabbies, orange Bengals, a Maine coon or two.

"Don't eat this cat food," I tell my son.

"Why would I eat cat food?" he says, lighting a cigarette.

"Okay, Dennis, I didn't see you yesterday."

He shakes his head and puffs out smoke.

It's a cloudless April morning, a fitful sultry breeze rumoring a short spring and long summer. Bees drone in the oleanders against the picket fence and the crepe myrtles are bright with new leaves. A mockingbird lands on the rim of the birdbath and pecks the water before flitting off again.

I sit on a wrought iron porch chair and watch the cats hiss and nip at one another for a turn. A small Russian blue hangs back timidly and watches the other cats. They lick the plate clean and finally slink away to plunder elsewhere.

I go inside and come back with another dish for the Russian blue. For a minute he stares from under the house, leery eyes catching the light. Then he crawls out and sneaks up to the plate. He sniffs, licks tentatively, and then begins to wolf down the food in famished swallows. A heart-shaped metal tag hangs from a collar so tight that the cat's neck is chafed furless. I crouch and hold out my hand, but he only pauses and stares at me askance.

"I've tried," Dennis says. "No luck."

My son has come out of his tent and stands beside me, puffing professorially on his green glass pipe. The small rock in the bowl looks like a chalky turd.

"What's that you're smoking?" I ask.

"Crack," he says.

"Yes, I know. But why? When I told you a million times not to in my yard?"

As if pointing out the obvious to a dimwitted child, he says, "Because it's good."

"Put it out," I say.

He goes on puffing, turning his face and blowing smoke. "What's with the cameras?" Dennis asks, shading his eyes and peering up at the roof. "You filming me?"

Another one of my son's paranoid accusations. There are no cameras or film. I've learned to let them pass, these squalls of nonsense.

"You steal Chris Lavender's parrot, Dennis?" I ask.

He squints. "Lavender parrot?"

"Tell me you didn't steal the parrot," I say.

"You having a stroke?"

"Promise me."

"Search my tent. I dare you to find a parrot."

We watch the blue-gray cat in silence. The plate is already clean and he sniffs around it for errant crumbs.

"He's suicidal," Dennis says.

"Animals aren't suicidal," I tell him. "It's against their nature."

"Suicidal," Dennis says. "Most cats wait until after a car passes to cross the

road, but this one waits until just before. Guy plowed his pickup into a mailbox the other day. Nearly shat a gold brick. His face was like, Oh gosh! Oh mercy me! Funniest thing ever."

He smiles a smile the color of rancid butter but his face for a moment is boyish and soft. There's a small part of him, buried in the wreckage of his forty-year-old body and shrinking by the day, that's still a child.

The cat gives the plate a last half-hearted lick and then sneaks back under the house.

I rise and reach into my pocket. "Need money?" I ask. Horrible as it is, I'd rather this than my son truncheon some poor old lady over the head.

He scratches his neck and stares at the ground, kicks a pebble. "I could use some, yeah."

I press a twenty into his grimy palm, though I'd rather punch him in the face for all he put his mother through. Then I go back inside, deadbolt the door, and turn on the alarm.

• • •

From the moment he was born, Dennis was an unholy terror. Even doctors marveled at his tantrums, the demonic cycles of weeping and screaming. They ran tests and x-rays but were left stymied. He'll grow out of it, was their standard refrain. He didn't. If anything, Dennis got worse. Rita and I were at a loss and finally visited a specialist in New Orleans. He prescribed a medicinal foam titty filled with milk and tranquilizer and we hung it over Dennis's crib. Not the brightest idea, drugging a baby, I realize in retrospect.

Not that it mattered in the end because within a day Dennis ripped the titty to shreds.

Dennis's brother Arnold was born two years later. An exemplary student, captain of the swim team, winner of three state science fairs in a row. While Dennis had turned out runty and sullen, Arnold was a lanky charmer with blue eyes and a dimpled smile that the girls adored. And to our surprise, Dennis and Arnold got along. More than that: they were buddies. They loved the same movies and rock

bands, the same comic books and jokes. What other people couldn't stand about Dennis—his temper, his twisted humor, his lack of social grace—Arnold found endearing. "That's just Dennis being Dennis," Arnold would say.

Maybe all he needed was a brother, Rita and I thought.

Maybe everything will turn out all right, we dared to think.

On a July 7, 1992, the boys were drunk and driving home from the French Quarter. To this day Dennis insists that he knew his limit, that he could have made his way back to the house blindfolded. But then an old woman in a Lincoln Towncar switched lanes without hitting her blinker and Dennis cut the wheel. A tire blew and the car bucked like a runaway bull, breaking through a guardrail and pitching into a drainage canal.

Dennis had his window open and swam out. Arnold wasn't so lucky. Dennis dove down into the dark roaring water again and again, plunging and reaching and coming up empty.

Ten minutes later the cops and paramedics arrived.

I prefer to think Arnold stayed asleep and never knew what happened, that part of him would always remain on his way home.

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Next morning, I find Dennis sitting on the back porch in the wrought iron chair, the blue-gray cat curled in his lap. The collar with the heart-shaped tag lay on the little garden table. How many weeks have I been feeding this Judas? And now here he is, fixing me with a pissed yellow stare, his neck raw and scabbed.

Then I notice the boyish flush in Dennis's face, the tremor of a guarded smirk. There it is, the small unspoiled part of him that keeps me foolishly hoping.

"His name is Kat Daddy," Dennis says. "Cat with a K."

"Seriously?"

Dennis nods, scratching the cat's back.

"You may have found your talent," I say. "You have the knack."

I step closer and Kat Daddy twitches his tail, unsure what to make of me. When I reach down, the cat opens his mouth and clamps down on the flap of skin

between my thumb and forefinger. There's a quick flare of pain as air hits blood. Then Kat Daddy leaps off Dennis's lap and shoots under the house.

"You little shit," I say.

Dennis cackles. "Kat Daddy," he says, "you're a gentleman and a scholar."

My son's still laughing when I pick up the collar and go inside. In the bathroom I hold my hand under warm water and stick on a butterfly bandage. Then I call the number on the tag.

A woman answers hello. A tired voice fraying into middle age. I ask her if the name Kat Daddy rings a bell.

"Kat Daddy," she says. The way her voice turns guarded and stiff, I can tell that that it does. She asks what I want.

"Want? Only thing I wanted was to tell you I found him in my backyard."

"Kat Daddy died," she says.

"Gray cat? Russian blues I think they call them? His tag has your number on it."

"No, no," the woman tells me. "That can't be Kat Daddy."

"Ma'am? It was wearing a tag. With your number."

"You asking for a reward?"

Her reaction catches me off guard and for a moment I'm unsure what to say. "I just thought you'd want to know," I tell her.

"I'm sorry, but that's not Kat Daddy," she says.

I'm about to say more, thinking I've been misunderstood, but the woman's already gone and the dead line buzzes like a wasp in my ear.

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Thursday afternoon, the old dreadlocked retired saxophone instructor who lives at the end of the cul-de-sac, Ernie Gibbs, knocks on my door. Ernie's always treated me fairly enough, but today he stands glumly on my porch in his Saints T-shirt and safari shorts, looking vaguely accusing before he's said a word. "I think we have a problem," he begins. No hello, nothing. He tells me one of his altos was stolen from his sunroom.

We both know damn well whom he suspects.

"Did you see him do it?" I ask.

He scratches one-fingered at the side of his nose. "Honestly? No."

"But you think he did."

He glances down at his alligator-skin sandals and nods.

"Maybe you're right," I admit.

For a moment we only blink at one another.

"Your only boy?" he asks.

Yes, I tell him, thinking about Arnold.

"Got three," he says. "Genuine son of a bitches. Love them anyway. Got no choice. You know how it is."

"Yes," I say. "Yes I do, unfortunately."

Something stirs in his face and his eyes go softer. I know the look: pity, the kind only a parent of a fuck up can feel toward the parent of another fuck up.

"Hell, I got no problems with you, Eli," Ernie says. "Always got along, you and me. Only saying, he comes around my house, I'm going to do what I have to do. You know what that means, right? Maybe you can pass the word onto your son. Not threatening. Just being courteous. I got grandsons, granddaughters."

I promise the man that I'm going to have a serious talk with my son and then shake his hand, even though what he said sounds very much to me like a threat.

Later I watch Dennis through the kitchen window as he dunks his boxer shorts in the backyard birdbath. He twists the cloth and wrings out water, and then he drapes the underwear over my gardenia shrub. I shake my head, anger and disgust and sadness knotting together in my chest.

By afternoon Dennis is passed out like a boxcar drunk against the backyard lemon tree. An idea strikes me, and at first I dismiss it as crazy. I even shake my head and say, "Crazy." But the next minute I'm rummaging in the garage for mooring rope and then I bring it to the backyard and tie Dennis to the tree trunk Inquisition-style. Three, five, and then ten times around his torso like a spider spinning silk around a beetle, a hard five-turn clench knot at the end.

Dennis doesn't stir.

I drag the garden hose across the lawn through the grass and then I blast water in my son's face.

Don't believe for a moment that this doesn't break my heart.

Don't believe for a moment that it doesn't kill me, what Rita would think.

Startled and sun-blind, Dennis blinks and shakes his head, mouth snarled like a dog's. His eyes begin to roll back as if he's about to fall back asleep.

I blast the hose again.

Dennis jerks awake and looks down at his chest. "You have me tied to the tree?" he says.

"Yes," I say.

"Why do you have me tied to the tree?" he asks.

"I can't live this way anymore, Dennis."

"I'll scream. I'll keep on screaming."

"No you won't."

"I'll fucking kill you."

"No you won't."

"Tying up a person is against the law. This is on tape. Recorded. You're fucked."

"No tape. No cameras. Your brain's full of holes."

"Go ahead and search my tent. I'll never touch another drug again if you find a parrot."

"Tell me about the saxophone, Dennis," I say. "Tell me the truth."

"You're out of your mind. Parrots, saxophones." His nose is still dripping.

"You know who just came over? The guy down the block. Told me he'll blow your skull to pieces if he ever sees you around his house again."

Dennis scoffs through his teeth and squints against the sun, his hair a sopping cowlicked mess. "Can I have a cigarette at least?" he asks.

"No," I say.

For a second he looks like he's about to spit. "I swear, I didn't steal anything," he says. "You can't just tie a person to a tree. You can't leave me like this."

I say nothing.

"Dad," he says.

I can count on one hand how many times he's said this word in the last decade. Dad. It digs into me and stirs loose a desolate feeling. Mourning, I suppose.

Mourning not for what my son turned out to be, but mourning for who Dennis never was and would never be.

He must realize the word's effect on me, because he says it again.

I turn and start toward the house. I leave my son tied to the tree and close the door on his pleading voice.

▪ ▪ ▪

You'd expect Dennis to straighten out after his brother died, but no. He went on unrepentantly with his bad habits. When he was seventeen, he was expelled from school for snorting cocaine in the cafeteria. Then he started working in a car wash where his boss could care less if he was high and drunk as long as he could hold a sponge. Around this time Rita and I came across the jointstubs, the animal tranquilizers, the small glassine bags chalked with powder residue. Money disappeared from my wallet, only fives and tens at first, but after a while Dennis grew brasher and started filching twenties and fifties.

"This is no way to live," I would tell Rita.

"We lost a son," she said with the limitless patience of a martyr, "but he lost a brother. Remember that."

I was beginning to resent her unconditional love, her capacity to forgive Dennis no matter how unpardonable his behavior. That kind of love wasn't helping. If anything, it was pulling us under.

I suggested that a little jail time might do our son some good.

Never, Rita said. Out of the question.

"What's the limit?" I asked. "He'll slit our throats in our sleep. Burn down the house. I'm not going to put up with it."

Her voice hard as stone, she said, "Yes you are."

One night Dennis hotwired a neighbor's Camaro and was so fuck-faced drunk that he ended up tearing donuts on the green of a country club golf course. Grand theft auto. The judge was a hard-nosed Evangelical and gave us two choices: juvie or mandatory rehabilitation. Rita and I sent Dennis away to a treatment center in Jamaica that we'd heard about from one of her co-workers. The only way I got

Dennis on the plane was by showing him the colorful pamphlet, which made the place look like a tropical resort where kids got their shit straightened out between volleyball and kayaking.

Dennis was only seventeen and signed his rights away. He was gone for six months. When he returned he lunged for my throat in the airport baggage claim. He probably would have strangled me dead right then if Rita and the security guys hadn't been there to stop him.

My son gave me the silent treatment, but piece-by-piece Rita coaxed from Dennis the story of what happened. How he shared a room with thirty other juvenile delinquents, many of them going through the dementia of withdrawal. How they were forced to sleep on thin verminous blankets on a cement floor. How all thirty of these boys shared one filthy toilet and shower, and how they were bussed away every morning to clean hotel rooms while armed guards threatened them like slaves. Soon after Dennis returned home it was all over the news, a horror story, and the Jamaican government closed the place down.

"I'm sorry, Dennis," I would tell my son. "I didn't know."

"You knew," he said.

"I did not," I said. "Dennis, look at me. I didn't. It was just a bad idea."

"That's it? A bad idea?"

I stood there with my head hung like a supplicant.

"What if Hitler said that? It was a bad idea?"

"I'm not Hitler," I said. "I'm a man who made a mistake."

Dennis went right back to the drinking and drugging, sometimes right in the house, sometimes right at the dinner table. I would tell Rita that we needed to send him away again, but she insisted that it wasn't the time, that our son would sooner go to prison than another facility. So it went on for years, surreally, incredibly, as Rita and I lived our lives like a penance.

▪ ▪ ▪

By evening, a thunderstorm drops out of nowhere and wracks the neighborhood, one almighty crack after another. Fat rain smacks the windows and the front

yard palm trees thrash as if with St. Vitus dance. Even with all the ruckus, I can hear the cats yowling under the house. And I can hear my son chanting hysterically in the backyard.

"Dad, dad, dad, dad, dad."

No doubt he's trying to break me down.

After the evening news, I wash the dishes and see the cat collar sitting on the kitchen overpass. I call the woman again.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," I begin.

"Mister," she says. "I'll call the cops."

"Cops?"

"You're harassing me."

"You want me to leave you alone, I will," I say. "I just figured you'd want to know about your cat."

I wait.

"This is some sick joke," she says.

Through the kitchen window I watch Dennis writhing against the tree. Behind sheets of rain, backlit by the neighbors' floodlights, he's a flailing silhouette, a scarecrow in a tempest. "Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad," he calls. If the neighbors called the cops, what would I tell them?

"It's not a joke," I tell the woman. "I'm sixty-nine years old and have other things to do."

"What's that noise?" she asks. "That da-da-da-da?"

"TV," I say.

"You say this is in Metairie," she says, her voice lighter now, curious. "I don't see how that's possible."

"I don't know what to tell you. There's a bunch that ended up here."

"Do whatever you want with him," she says. "I don't care. I hate that animal."

The woman hangs up on me for the second time and I'm left with the hum of an empty line. I give the phone the finger and slam it down.

"Dad, dad, dad, dad, dad," I hear.

I sit in my recliner and turn on the television and try to drown out my son. Still I hear his voice over the news program and the gusting rain. I think of my promise to Rita, of the mauled rubber titty, of Jamaica.

I go to the kitchen and get a big carving knife and then I step outside, rain pelting my face as hard as bbs. I lean over Dennis and he looks up pleadingly, thin lips shivering against chattery teeth, eyes wide in his gaunt face.

"You tied me to a tree," he says.

"You do anything inside besides dry off and sleep, I swear I'll call the cops."

He nods and I cut through the rope.

Dennis scrambles to his tent and climbs inside. I go back into the house and watch from the kitchen window as he blows little puffs like smoke signals out the flap of his tent. I set out clothes and a towel on the desk chair of his old bedroom. The room remains exactly as it was more than twenty years ago when he was in high school: punk rock and horror movie magazines filling the bookshelf, a lamp with a painted drum head for a shade, Frank Frazetta posters.

Later in my bed I hear Dennis shuffling down the hallway. The shadows of his legs appear under the door and for a moment I'm certain he's going to break in and kill me for what I've done.

But what he says is, "Thanks."

"Don't steal anything," I say.

An hour later I check on him. He's curled in the bed above the covers, hands tucked between his clamped knees the same way he slept when he was a boy. I'm surprised I'm still capable of feeling any tenderness toward my son, but I do. This man was once a boy who loved his mother and brother. A boy who watched from his high chair as I cried over my dead mother and shyly offered a lima bean with his chubby fingers. I tell myself this boy is dead but he isn't.

Then I remember how he disappeared for days at a stretch during his binges, worrying poor Rita to death. I remember all the things stolen for drug money. I remember the last few months of Rita's life when Dennis stole her morphine pills while she suffered so much pain. I was about to call the police, but Rita refused and said she'd make do without. "He needs them more than I do," she told me, but we both knew damned well he didn't.

▪ ▪ ▪

In the morning, Dennis is gone. Days pass without out any sign and after a week I drive around town in my Suburban and search. I pass the public library, where I've found him three or four times passed out under the mammoth live oak, but he isn't there. And he isn't loitering in the public park or rooting through the garbage bins behind the Vietnamese bakery. So many times I coast by the lime-green shotgun that's my son's crack house of choice that a white guy in baggy black clothes and a red bandana steps onto the porch and leers. He lifts his shirt and shows me the gun stuck in his waistband. His name is written in Gothic script across his stomach: COWBOY DAN. I wonder if the man remembers the time I paid him two hundred dollars so he wouldn't sell any more drugs to my son. I'm not sure, because I don't look in the review mirror and I don't come back.

▪ ▪ ▪

Friday is full of apologies, the first from Kat Daddy's owner. When she calls she tells me that I caught her off guard and that her ex-husband had been harassing her over the phone. She explains that she'd thought I was one of his creepy friends. She'd like to see the cat tonight, if possible. I tell her yes.

A few hours later, Ernie Gibbs is at the door again. At first I want to tell the man where to shove his horn, but then I see his face, somber and contrite, which worries me more than another accusation.

"I'm sorry," he begins. "It wasn't your son."

Part of me can't believe my son's innocent of anything. "Are you sure?" I ask.

"It was Bernbaum's son. Coffeehouse-poet dickhead with the beret?"

I know the kid. A brooding, gawky boy, always in a black leather long coat like some Gothic riverboat gambler, always scuffing around the neighborhood with his headphones on and giving everybody the stink eye.

"Caught the little bastard myself," Ernie continues. "Heroin addict."

"It's fine, Ernie. I would have thought the same thing."

"I hope your son lives and gets his life back on track. I really do."

"Lives?" I say.

"Oh, God," says Ernie. "Oh, Jesus. Oh, man." He swipes his hand over his face so hard that his skin pulls. "Your son, there was an accident."

I stand there clutching the door.

Ernie tells me that Dennis was hit by a delivery van outside the neighborhood this morning and that my son was helicoptered to the hospital. He says he assumed I already knew, that the proper channels would have been in touch.

My legs feel like gelatin. I tell Ernie that I must go. I call the hospital and jam the buttons on the telephone until I'm transferred to a receptionist. I tell the woman that I'm the father of a man named Dennis Rabalais. Then I remember: they don't have my boy's name. I describe Dennis and what happened and after an ominous pause the woman tells me that I ought to come as soon as I can.

"Is he dead?" I ask.

"You ought to come, sir," she says.

There's almost no traffic as I drive to East Jefferson General. The day has turned out boggy from last night's rain, a briny tang in the air. Summer roused early. It's mid afternoon and the kids are already shooting hoops and riding skateboards in a school yard. I pass five or six pretty college girls playing Frisbee golf in the park, Loyola or Tulane students with tawny ponytails and spring tans. On the shoulder of the road, a man sells shrimp from Styrofoam coolers stacked in his truck bed. "OIL FREE!" his painted sign says.

Sons don't die on a day like this.

The doctor is young, maybe around the same age Arnold would be if he were living now. He has slicked black hair and winsome eyes and a gold crucifix around his neck. He introduces himself as Dr. McSomething. A local Catholic, probably. Then he apologizes, and in that instant I know.

He sees my face and he takes my shoulder. A good boy, this doctor, like Arnold would be if he were around. He tells me about the internal bleeding in Dennis's brain and heart and lungs.

"I'm so sorry," the doctor says. "Why don't you sit, sir?"

"It's all right, it's okay," I tell the doctor, swallowing back what feels like hot sand in my throat. Something in my voice makes the nurses look. I excuse myself from the lounge and go to the restroom and splash water over my face. I try to remember what the last thing I ever said to my son might have been. I can't remember, but I imagine it wasn't good.

▪ ▪ ▪

The woman from New Orleans calls in the evening and asks if she can pick up Kat Daddy. I've forgotten our conversation this morning, but I say yes despite all that's happened, perhaps because of it. An hour later she's at my door. I imagined someone with hair like a scarewig and bitter lines carved around her mouth, but this woman is slender and tan with olive-green eyes and a black ponytail. She's dressed in jogging pants and a t-shirt, workout clothes, and you can tell she protects what little remains of her youth—or youthfulness—fiercely.

Her name is Trish and she apologizes first thing. "I just thought you were another one of those creeps," she says with Louisiana in her mouth. A native. "You can never be too sure these days. Whole damned city's crazy."

I nod and try not to think about how Dennis once fit this description.

Outside the evening sun is already sunk below the rooftops, the western sky a swath of rose and gold light. Trish glances at the tent, the scraggly little camp littered with beer cans and chip bags and cigarette butts. A glass bong sits in the birdbath, its silhouette like a prairie dog with an erection. I hope Trish thinks it's a hummingbird feeder.

She lifts her eyebrows questioningly.

"Nephews," I explain with a what-can-you-do shrug. "College kids."

Trish lets it go at that. We crouch in the grass and I beam a flashlight into the dark clutter under the house, the paint cans and mulch bags and wooden pallets. Cats stir and slink, eyes flaring like strange jewels.

"Kat Daddy," Trish calls. "Come here, Kat Daddy."

And goddamn, here he comes trotting out of the shadows, the gray cat that bit me.

"That's him," Trish says. "I can't believe it. That's Kat Daddy."

He sniffs inquisitively, knocking his head against her knees, and then he climbs into her lap.

"You idiot," she says, stroking his back. "You asshole."

I ask Trish why she was so certain he was dead.

Her face sags with some dark thought or memory. A long moment passes before she says, "My son died trying to save this stupid cat."

I don't know what to say.

"He was a dumb boy, chasing him into the storm."

I look into her face. Anger. Grief. Regret. They're all there, mixed up, a disconsolate emotion with no name but which I know intimately.

"It was a mess," I say.

For a second there's wet light in her eyes and I think she's going to cry, but then she lifts her chin and sets her lips. "There I am, slogging through the streets, screaming for Anthony. That was my boy, Anthony. Water everywhere, no electricity, dark as hell. Cop came up to me with water up to his waist, gun in his hand. Thought he was going to shoot me, he looked so crazy and scared. Get out, lady, he yells. We'll find your son, but you get out before you die. You ain't going to do your son any good dead. I was afraid he was going to shoot me if I said no. That's how crazy things were."

Would Dennis have risked his life for a cat? For me? I feel ashamed for thinking this so soon, but some thoughts go running away before you can hold them down.

There are precious few things I've learned in my lifetime. First, that most things happen for no reason. Nothing good comes from losing a son. No wisdom, no lesson, no saving grace. The second, that not all creatures are created equal. A cat does not equal a person. Hell, some people don't equal people.

But I say, "Noble boy." Because that's what you do when someone tells you something as awful as what this woman has.

"Nothing noble about it," she says. "He tried to save an old nasty cat." Her mouth sets stiffly, but she continues petting the purring animal. "My son is dead. And this thing, this old nasty thing, has the nerve to still be alive."

▪ ▪ ▪

Out of loneliness, and out of fear of the long night stretched in front of me like a treacherous gorge, I invite Trish to stay for dinner. She stands by the door with Kat Daddy in her arms and shakes her head.

"No trouble," I say. "Plenty of stuff in the fridge. You like chicken? I'm a whiz with chicken. Shrimp your thing?" I hear the edge in my voice, the raw burr of neediness, and I'm ashamed.

The little halting steps she takes toward the door, her body angled, you can tell I'm scaring her away.

My son died too, I want to say. *Actually, two sons. One died today. The other, a sweet boy, long ago. And my wife, last year.*

"Thank you, Eli," Trish tells me. "You've been kind."

Then she's out the door and I watch on the porch as she gets into her car. It's full twilight now, a moon so low and swollen in the sky you can make out the rabbit. Trish backs her shiny champagne Renault out the drive, Kat Daddy perched on the passenger headrest, and she lifts her fingers off the steering wheel in a little wave. I hold up my hand and then her tail lights trail down the street.

Inside I turn on the television for noise, but the ruddy-faced men arguing on the news about Ghadafi aren't loud enough to drown out the last thing Trish told me. You've been kind, Eli.

I know if I do nothing with myself the night will never end, so I start cleaning. I scrub the dishes and pick up newspapers and vacuum every room. I even get on my old balky knees and wipe the baseboards with a bleach-soaked rag. Then I find myself in Dennis's room, taking out the clothes in the closet and checking the pockets for needles and crack rocks before bagging them for Goodwill. I strip the sheets off the bed and stuff them in the wash.

It's already midnight and my arms and legs are sore and my head's reeling, but I know what's outside and what I must do. In the backyard I kick at the metal pegs until the tent falls in a billow of canvas. Cat eyes watch from under the house as I pick up beer cans and chip bags and rake up broken glass. I'm so caught up in my work that when I look up I notice I've left the back door ajar. Cats sit on the windowsills and watch me from inside. I leave them be and go on cleaning, hoping to have everything in order by daylight.

America (Train)

America, by the time I got to the box elder, the cricket
was already dead. I had found it in the closet, chirping
between two shoes, & trapped it in a tumbler, holding a postcard
across the rim. But its legs were too strong, or its fear,
&, in a matter of moments, it destroyed itself, propelling itself
again & again against the glass. Let us tell ourselves
it was merely stunned by the collision, that it revived later,
coming to as a sparrow might, exactly where I left it
in the grass. Let me say I was merely trying to do the right thing.
I keep thinking of the Chinese proverb: *You have to catch*
your own luck. Last week in Longmont, Colorado,
just down the street from where my brother lives, a girl—
eighteen, a college freshman—lost both her legs trying to catch
a freight train with two friends just for kicks. And I think
of my uncle, hungry, broke, hopping across the early thirties
until he could land a job with my father, working
the custodial nightshift at Greystone, mopping floors
as the mad, insomniac women pounded their heads
against the bars. Three economic analysts report the dawn
of a new reality: America, neither I nor any of this exists.
There is only *the Plutonomy*. And *the rest* is merely, as they say,
the rest. And yet the tracks still run beside the white monumental
chicken-processing plant at the end on Main Street—
it's an old redbrick cowboy town—& the train slows right there
as it intersects the road. I've sat mesmerized—O, the immensity
of the West—in a rental car at the crossing, watching it pass
& pass. I don't remember ever thinking I was invincible—
though I must have thought you were—though we say now
that that's what all kids think. You are our world-
body, you, who taught us each thing wants only to be more.

Thibault Raoult

Enthusiasm As Inheritance

Locomotive stitch.
Rose abstract.

What herbs do at all night.
How sounds deliver a social message.

    's bye,
Hygiene's clueless.

What with Senate kazooin'—
BETWEEN HELPINGS—

I cannot crannog read.

Torch Song: Hickory

History began with an apology

Andrew Jackson staring up at me

from the twenty my father is missing

saying sorry men about tomorrow

I was thinking an apology like that

▪ ▪ ▪

My sisters peeled spud after spud

for a meal we couldn't stomach

The paring knife was deft beneath

their fingers *don't worry* they cooed

to each other *it was nobody's fault*

Torch Song: Stagger Lee

Fast this life passes mother

groans fast like your girls

Boy of mine young man bones

finish her as fast as the word

The word that isn't hunger

• • •

Not a question of shame why

she holds her hands in her lap

like a woman folding a flag

in a country where everyone

scrambled to have the last say

Latent Print: Pale Suits

Cuffs rolled to the elbow & beneath
the white linen, a collarless tee, Miami

pink & . My father's friends '86
chic in tweed loafers, combed Sellecks

or fine stubble. Slung low on the belt
the badge & gun stuffed in the waist, off-

duty, lost down the leg, *Thud*,—
& the restaurant chokes on *amour-propre*

so bow & pick up your weapon. Flash
your gilted hip, servant. As you straighten,

they'll turn back to their meals & forgive
you. Someone will think, *If Christ came back*

today he'd wear white linen with soft
lapels, & you fall in love with the calm

voices laced with static on the dispatch
& when waking to the blue flickering

light, you can't know if it's the television
or a joyride in a squad car or the hottest

part of the flame. No one is safe. My father's
friends steal toilets off the lawns of domestics—

& leave them in each others' yards, full
of hot pink petunias. *They're real cards,*

they're animals. They eat greasy at Nikki's
on Cherokee Blvd. They grab the night

by the collar. *Anything you say can & will*
be used against you— I've forgotten

I speak. If we don't believe
in these things, they are not true. The handcuffs

fall like silver ribbons , the black
uniform rips on a nail. Bow & pick up

your weapon. Now anything blunt will do.

A Recent Transformation Tries To Climb the Stairs

One segment of a worm ago I was a swan,
I stank of the surface of lake just the surface
and I was a sight on the water. Why is it always
the swans, why is it never the stilts who turn
human, the stilts who would know how to walk
at least? I lift my webfoot for once and for all
and I try to climb one step, but a blubbery force-
field surrounds me now and I learn why human
women bounce: they're deeply encased in pink
rubber, so sad. The smell
of it, erasing! Erasing a picture
of what? Pink Pearl is written everywhere!
A bite mark on one end, a mouth of incisors
and molars and canines—out of nowhere I know
the proper terms, I suddenly want to know every-
thing else, and whenever I felt that way on the lake
I simply ate a fish-head, but fish-heads won't fill
me now. Your attention is a fish-head,
so throw it back into my new body, back
into the body climbing the stairs. For ten years
writers loved phantom hands and wrote with
and about them nonstop, this particular writer
wrote, I quote,
"She lifted her phantom hand and she threw it
to the swans," but where are all the writers who
had extra hands sewed on? Which hand should
get the pen? The one that never wrote a word

or the one that knows what to do? Is there one
that knows what to do, is this it? A grown girl
swan is called a what, the tips of my fingers
can almost touch it! You'll look it up when you
get home—a recent transformation has no way
of knowing which wordplays are mostly
exhausted. My hair blows out behind me, where
my hair is attached to my head
I can feel a rushing
hot pivot, like where the wind changes direction.
I think that's where I begin to be dead, the best
part of this new body—better to be in one cell
of a swan! When I finally feel where these new
legs end,
I'll take two at a time to the top
of the stairs and two at a time back down,
and I'll walk to the lake and climb in a swanboat
and ride as a gizzard inside it.

When the World Was Ten Years Old He Fell Deep in Love with Egypt

Just as he fell in love with the dinosaurs,
just as he would fall in love with the moon—
no women in the world yet, he was only ten
years old. A ten-year-old is made of time,
the world had forever to learn about Egypt.
He entered encyclopedias and looted every
fact of them and when he had looted every
        fact he opened up the Bible. He snuck
into his mother's room and drew thick lines
around his eyes and those were the borders
of Egypt. He carefully wrote in stiff small
birds, he carefully wrote in coiled snakes,
he carefully wrote in flat-footed humans.
The ten-year-old world needed so much
privacy, he learned to draw the door-bolt
        glyph and learned to make the sound
        it made. I am an old white British man,
decided the ten-year-old world, I wear a round
lens on my right eye, the Day, and see only a blur
with my left eye, the Night. When the sun shone
on him it shone on Egypt, all the dark for a while
        was the dark in the Pyramids, the left lung
of his body was the shape of Africa
        and one single square breath in it Egypt.
They never found all the tombs, he *knew*. Anyone

might be buried in Egypt, thought the ten-year-old
world in love with it, I will send my wind down
into my valley, and my wind will uncover the doors
to the tombs, and I will go down myself inside them,
and shine light on all the faces, and light on the rooms
full of gold, and light on even the littlest pets, on the mice
and the beetles of the ten-year-old kings, and shine light
on even their littlest names.

Between Menus

When the waitress finally toddled back to our table, she looked really funny: all the hard edges of her features (and believe me, they could've cut glass) had melted down in the time that she'd been gone, like a candle—and she wasn't bending her knees when she walked, but was she ever smiling. *Brrr.* She set down some more beers. "How's everything over here?" she asked without moving her lips. "We ordered an hour ago and all you've done is bring us beers we never asked for." Suddenly my ears were flooded with the sound of bees, and I understood without being told of some nebulous troubles in the kitchen, troubles that I—a corporate lawyer who had never worked in the service industry—could never understand, which made me feel ashamed, but not enough to change my order. "Am I being stubborn or vindictive?" I asked the bees. They didn't answer my question, but revealed inside my eyes a million more words for what I was being.

Jehanne Dubrow

Still Life

After, you see chipped plaster
and know the mark that
knuckles make. Observe the
chair on its side, like a body
kicked. A chain dangling
from the front door. This is
how to tell a story. This is how
to reconstruct the scene: and
here is where he made her
sit, and here is where she bit
the fleshy edge of his hand.
They waited hours here, still
life with daisies, spittle of
blood. The room, a dark idea
of rooms. And then the day,
a gleaming penknife drawn
across the floor.

"I came from a tussle with the sea"

J.P. O'Malley interviews Michael Ondaatje

It's ten a.m. on an overcast Monday morning at the Gore Hotel in west London. Just yards from the Royal Albert Hall, Michael Ondaatje waits alone in a room lined with volumes of leather-bound books. Wearing a cardigan and sporting a gray beard, Ondaatje looks and sits like an accomplished writer.

Before we go any further, I want to make clear that Ondaatje isn't a writer who likes to keep things simple.

First-time readers of his work may be put off by his ambiguity, ambivalence, and often scattered style of prose that fits together like a jigsaw puzzle. Others—a strong percentage of literary fiction fans and critics alike—find his work invigoratingly challenging and rewarding. In a 1992 review of *The English Patient*, which appeared in *The Independent* (UK), Edmund White aptly describes the style of Ondaatje's prose:

> Like coral, Ondaatje's narrative is built up slowly into towers and branches and hidden chambers, fashioning a delicate grisaille of memory and passion. The form isn't stridently avant-garde but rather radically experimental in the way that Bonnard, the chronicler of bourgeois bliss, is experimental—skewing dimension, masking figures, proceeding from icon to icon. Typically, Ondaatje ends a chapter not with an event but with a memory, an odor, a picture.

Novel writing for Ondaatje works almost like painting. He uses only a few small strokes at a time; little fragments that eventually form into a complete work over a period of a several years. Most of his novels start with a single image, and the rest works itself out from there.

Michael Ondaatje: I usually start with very little when I begin writing a novel, perhaps one image: a patient in a bed talking to a nurse, perhaps. I don't know who the patient is; I don't know who the nurse is; or a boy walking across a field eating a stalk of celery—something as simple as that. Then I have a time period, and I have this image, and that's how my books begin. I don't have this great scheme of a plot or an intent or an idea for the novel. I kind of investigate this little keyhole of an image, and then the book grows out of that. I start asking myself: who is the nurse, who is the patient, why is he burnt? And so the book starts building up from this, almost backwards, trying to find out the context of these people, what's the room like, what's outside the room, etc., and that's how a novel gets built for me.

For Ondaatje, guesswork, as well as having faith in your characters—believing in them—are the two most important things involved in the process of writing novels.

MO: All fiction is taking a guess, in a way. What tends to happen when you are writing a novel, and you have a fictional character [is that] after about twenty or thirty pages, you start believing in that character fully. If that's Caravaggio in *The English Patient*, or whoever, after a while, when you've been with that character for such a long time, you start to invent, as convincingly as possible, both his perceptions and his beliefs.

Ondaatje's latest novel, *The Cat's Table*—his first in four years—is set in the 1950s. It tells the tale of an eleven-year-old boy who boards a huge ship, the Oronsay, from Sri Lanka to England. On board the ship, the young boy, coincidentally also named Michael, becomes friends with two other boys of the same age: tough guy Cassius and the timid, philosophical Ramadhin. Throughout the twenty-one day voyage, the three boys encounter many different characters and events, including a murder on the ship, mostly seen from the "cat's table," the lowest form of travel class obtainable on such a ship.

The Cat's Table explores the journey from childhood to the adult world, as well as a passage from the homeland to another country, a similar sojourn Ondaatje

himself took as a young boy. Ondaatje assures the reader, in the author's note at the end of the novel, "The book is entirely a work of fiction, and while there was a ship in fact called the Oronsay, the ship in the novel is an imagined rendering."

Writing about an experience that happened fifty years ago made Ondaatje recall the events as best he could, and, after that, he let his imagination take over.

MO: I did make a trip from Sri Lanka to England when I was eleven-years-old. I was shoved on the boat and given someone to supposedly look after me, so that element is fact. But that happened over fifty years ago, so quite honestly, I don't remember it at all. I was curious to write about it, so I kind of had to invent it, create the adventure in a way, so all those characters in the new book are inventions. It's like Henry James says, you are given a little anecdote. And then I just invented the hell out of it. Then, about halfway through, I thought I'd have the nerve to call the young boy Michael, which was a bit risky, and probably led to more problems, because the readers think, well, this could be him. It's like putting on the mask in a Greek play. [After you put it on,] your movements follow the type [of mask] you've been given.

Readers of Ondaatje's novels will know that he has a passion for language and an incredible ability to tease out sentences in a very sensual way. Suggestion is the key component in the evocative passages he writes, backed up by layers of rich images.

In *The Cat's Table*, the prose is direct and lucid, with sixty-two chapters in total. The book isn't given the same amount of space or time to indulge in language as is the norm in most of his work. This was partially due to the age of the narrator in the book, rather than a conscious decision to make the style more straightforward.

MO: It wasn't so much that I decided to write a simpler book; it was the fact that I was trying to write from the point of view of an eleven-year-old. So that insisted on a less convoluted style. I also wanted to bring in the adult writer, [but] I had to keep the simple perception [of a child] who really didn't understand what was going on. Simultaneously, I also wanted this sadder narrator who can go into the

interior mind. But you also want to go into the interior mind of the eleven-year-old as well. He's got to be scared, joyous, crazy, funny, and all that stuff, but with the kind of language of an adult because I didn't want it to be monosyllabic.

This latest novel could be considered Ondaatje's most accessible work. Unlike his previous novels, because of the nature of this story, he had a framework to build on from the beginning on as he was writing.

MO: *The Cat's Table* is a little bit different from my other novels because I knew it was going to be about a journey that was twenty-one days long. I suppose it was like I had a glass container where I could see everything inside, whereas with something like *The English Patient*, I didn't know what was going to occur. With this book, I knew the barriers and the parameters. From my very early work, in books like *Coming Through Slaughter*, I would write these very small passages, and then from these very small passages, it's almost like putting little pieces of glass together to create a picture. The first draft is usually where you are trying to find where the plot is, what the story is. For me, the process of editing is really crucial, to the point where you are re-writing the book as an editor.

The landscapes of Ondaatje's novels often tend to sift through different time zones and continents as the complicated plot unfolds. For example, *The Cat's Table* moves from the Suez Canal in the 1950s to Vancouver fifty years later, while *The English Patient* skips around various destinations in the Second World War, most notably England, Italy, and Egypt.

Ondaatje's prose seems to never want to settle in one place, something which may come from his own uncertainty about what country he really belongs to. Although the notion of an unfixed identity is something that Ondaatje is grappling with in his novels, he shies away from talking about nationhood in any great detail when I ask him about it.

MO: Well, I should have belonged to the family I was born into, and that didn't happen, so I guess I'm interested in what the alternative is. In any formal situation,

I'm always looking at the alternative. There is a great scene in *The Tin Drum* [where] Gunter Grass [writes] that whenever he's at a political meeting on a platform, he always walks behind, and I think that's what interests me. I'm somebody who was born in Sri Lanka, so I'm always asked about Sri Lanka and the situation there. I kind of avoid it because I'm not the representative; I'm somebody that lives 4,000 miles away, so I can't be a representative. I think, as a writer, I'm an unofficial voice.

Ondaatje started his writing career as a poet. His first collection, *The Dainty Monsters*, was published in 1967; it wasn't until 1976 that his first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, was published. Although he is now more well-known for his novels, the ratio of poetry collections to novels now stands at 2:1, with twelve poetry collections and six novels to his name.

MO: For the last few years I have been writing prose more. I sort of miss poetry, and I hope I'm going to write more in the future. But I like the landscape of a novel, so that rather than building a big room, you are building a big house, whereas, in poetry, it is one voice or one intimate whisper. I love that element in poetry, but I [also] try to bring some of that element into my fiction.

Ondaatje believes that it is harder to write one good lyric in your life than it is to write a novel. Just like William Carlos Williams, Ondaatje wants his poetry to say things in the least number of words, and maintains that poetry should "suggest bigger things than the words that you said in the poem."

Just recently in the UK, Ondaatje's publisher, Jonathan Cape, has reissued the poetry collection, *Handwriting*, which was originally published in 1998. The collection is a group of incredibly crafted poems which touch upon various subjects, including love, landscape, ceremony, and myth, all written upon a return visit to Ondaatje's native Sri Lanka.

After finishing *The English Patient*, which was complicated, layered and difficult, Ondaatje wanted to return to a more simplistic style in his poetry. The book also laid the seed for his next novel, *Anil's Ghost*.

MO: What happened with *Handwriting* was that I hadn't been back to Sri Lanka for some time, and I became friends with an archaeologist, so he and I travelled around the country a lot. Duing this trip, I got a great sense of the archaeology of Sri Lanka: excavations of statues and so on. But at the same time, I was also thinking of the war in Sri Lanka, before that time, where bodies were buried and so forth. So, suddenly, there was a kind of connection between the excavation of the real bodies and [the excavation] of statues and religious objects. *Handwriting* was an interesting book because I wrote it before I wrote *Anil's Ghost*, which is about the real bodies and the real war. So, it became a kind of metaphor for that, but [written] in poetry. It was also about going back to Sri Lanka as an adult, having not visited there for a long time. I always see those books as a kind of pair.

Before going our separate ways, I ask about the reference to Joseph Conrad's *Youth* in the epigram of *The Cat's Table*, which reads as follows:

> And this is how I see the East. I see it always from a small boat—not a light, not a stir, not a sound. We converse in low whispers, as if afraid to wake up the land. It is all in that moment when I opened up my young eyes in it. I came from a tussle with the sea.

Ondaatje says, with a hint of irony, that he thought he would send Conrad's boat back to the England from the East.

As we sip coffee, before the small talk starts to creep in and the Dictaphone gets turned off, I ask him if he discovered any truths that were left hidden from a period of his life that happened more than half a century ago, as he explored his eleven-year-old self in his memory.

MO: I think there is just as much truth in fiction as there is in nonfiction, and that's a feeling I have in a book like this. I'm not saying that because it's fiction it's not true, but there is a truth discovered by me in this book.

Katia Zavistovski

Matrix, Mystery, and Meaning: M-theory and Angelbert Metoyer:

In the mid-1990s, physicist Edward Witten proposed the concept of M-theory. To summarize the theory in terms that are comprehensible to those of us who are not versed in theoretical physics, M-theory is an attempt to unify different versions of string theory — a speculative mathematical model that describes the basic building blocks out of which the universe is composed, and the forces through which these constituent parts interact. Witten didn't specify what the "M" stood for when he coined the term. Appropriate considering the complex nature of the theory (and the universe that it attempts to explain), Witten has since stated that the ambiguous initial is multivalent. Depending on the context and one's perspective, it can mean "matrix," "mystery," "magic," "myth," or "mother theory."

Much like M-theory, Angelbert Metoyer's artistic practice is profoundly multidimensional. The artist's painting, sculpture, video, sound art, and performance presents viewers with a palimpsest of materials, images, and themes. He examines the scientific and the spiritual through an array of subjects including quantum physics, psychoanalysis, memory, music, astronomy, and the primordial. Though Metoyer's methods and sources of inspiration are wide-ranging, they are nevertheless inextricably intertwined. Rather than portraying a visual world that is expressive of disconnection and confusion, Metoyer manages to elucidate the complicated concepts with which he is engaged, deftly weaving together intricate threads in order to make meaning out of the mysterious.

Metoyer's *M-Window* series demonstrates the layering and synthesis that is at the core of his formal and conceptual process. *Guangzhou Memory* (2010) and *Self Portrait (gold in the sky)* (2010) are composed of several panes of etched glass evenly spaced in front of a mirror or aluminum ground, which provides depth within the compositional frame. As one moves in front of the work, numbers, words, and hermetic markings shift in and out of focus, visible from one vantage point and fading into the background from another. This visual slippage invites a

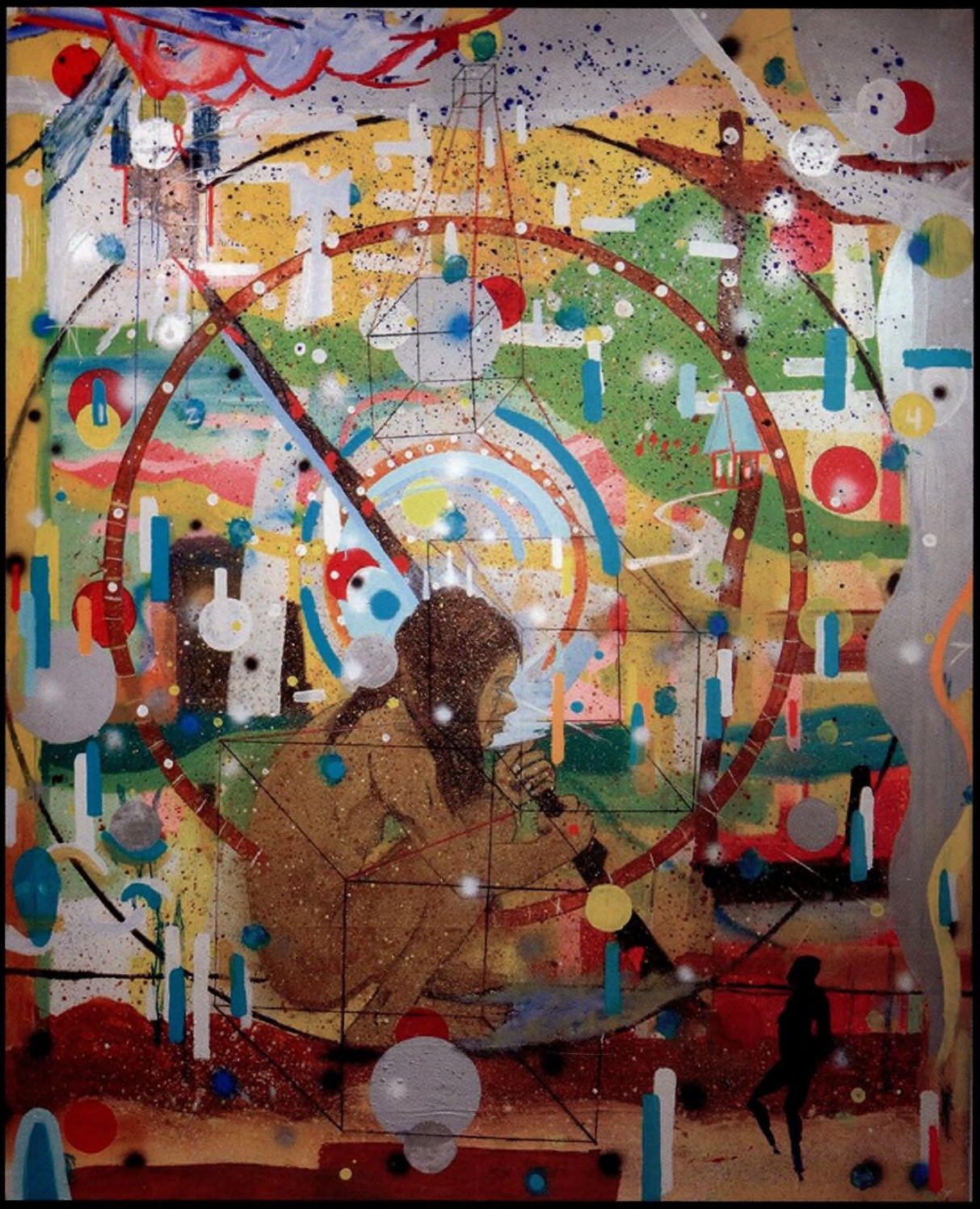
closer and more participatory engagement with the work. Despite its comparative flatness, Metoyer's work on paper and canvas is equally expansive. As in many of the *M-Windows*, a constellation of paint, dirt, and specks of gold flickers over *She Gave Light as I Past Through* (2007) and *My Last Vision in Memphis (When Dirt turns to Gold)* (2010-11), endowing the paintings with a celestial atmosphere. Through his depiction of geometric diagrams, esoteric equations, and archetypal forms, Metoyer references modern science and ancient mythologies, both of which address essential questions concerning the origin and structure of the universe.

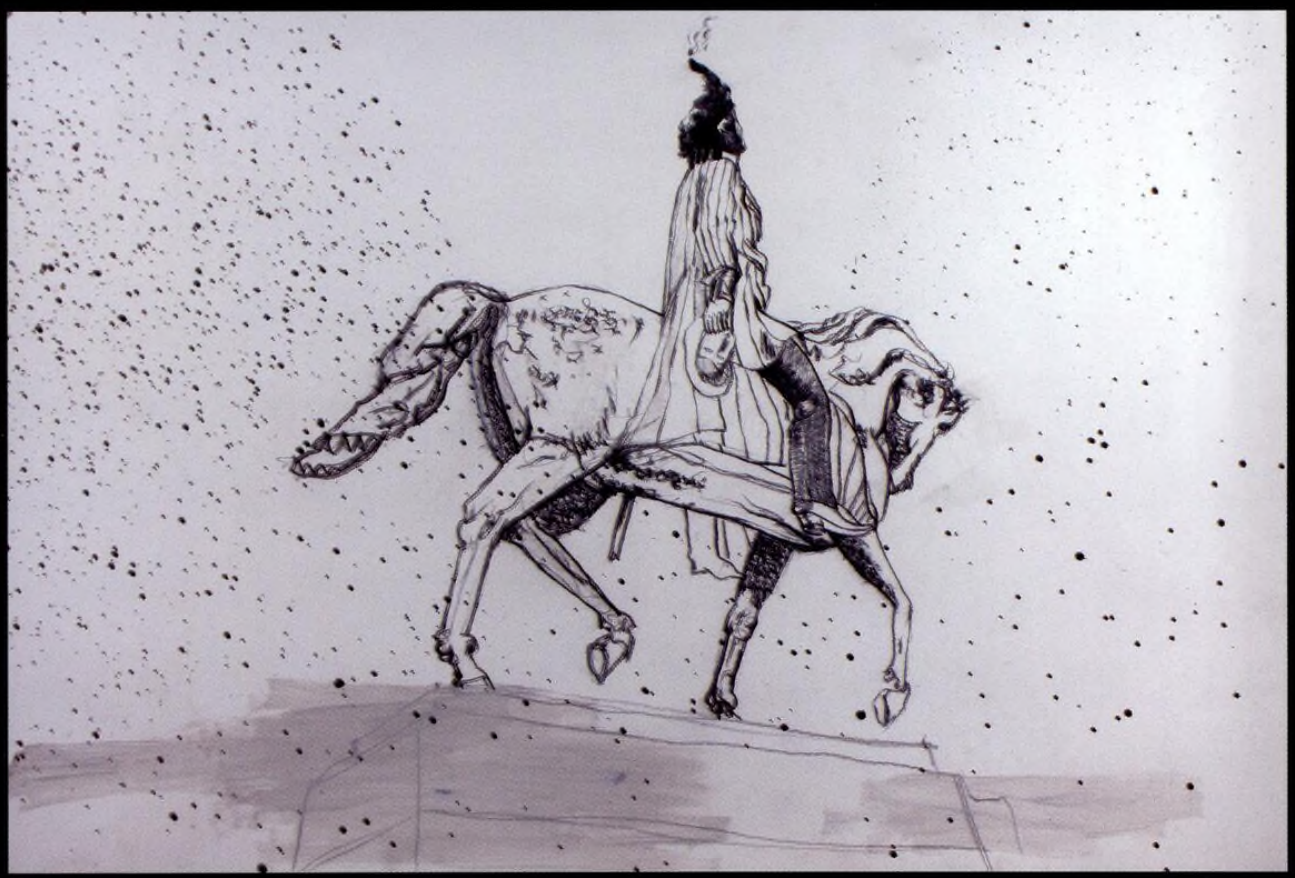
Although such cosmological symbolism is universal in subject matter, Metoyer's work is also deeply intuitive and portrays an enduring dimension of subjectivity. For example, titles such as *Self Portrait* and *My Last Vision* speak to his own personal experiences, preoccupations, and memories. The *Song Keeper* series is based on his interest in music and pop culture, and much of his complex imagery stems from lore passed down from his Creole ancestors. In addition, the handprint motif that recurs throughout Metoyer's body of work provides a literal stamp of his individuality. However, in keeping with M-theory, Metoyer's artistic practice is associative, relational, and interactive. Confronted with materials like mirrors, aluminum, and glass, one's own visage is reflected in the multi-layered surfaces of his work, encouraging a dialogue between the artist, the viewer, and the cosmos.

ARTWORKS BY ANGELBERT METOYER

***Guangzhou Memory*, 2010** | oil paint, gold dust on mirror (3 planes of etched glass), 62" x 40"
***Mirror of All (Golden Wood)*, 2010** | (2 planes of etched glass), 60" x 48"
***Self Portrait (Gold in the Sky)*, 2010** | oil paint, earth, gold dust on aluminum (3 planes of etched glass), 60" x 48.8"
***The Mother of Mars*, 2010** | oil paint, gold dust on mirror (3 planes of etched glass), 13" x 7"
***My Last Vision in Memphis (When Dirt Turns to Gold)*, 2010-2011** | Earth, gold dust, oil paint, and acrylic on canvas, 115" x 94"
***Song Keeper F (Green Dots)*, 2007** | mixed media, 38" x 25"
***When We Saw All*, 2010** | oil paint, earth, and gold dust on mirror (4 panes of etched glass), 60" x 48"
***Icon 12*, 2010** | charcoal on paper, 27" x 42"

All images courtesy of Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston.





Josip Novakovich

A View from Pulkovo

David, an American Fulbright exchange scholar, was staying in an apartment on the Embankment of Canal Griboyedova. His third morning, almost noon, while he was recovering from a hangover, jetlag, and strange impressions of having seen a corpse nobody would touch for hours in the streets, his landlady stopped by and informed him that a potential buyer from Moscow wanted to visit the apartment.

Ah, what filth! she said as soon as she walked in. She took off her fur coat composed of a forestful worth of foxes, and panted as though she had climbed the stairs to the fifth floor, although David had heard her slamming the elevator door before coming to his apartment. I am so disappointed in you, she said. And you come from the civilized West? Before you, a Swiss ambassador, who had just retired, stayed here and he loved it, and when he left, the place was cleaner than before.

Don't worry, I will wash the floors.

You don't have to do that, but hire a cleaning lady. You could have told me.

How much are you selling it for?

One hundred and fifty thousand euro. I would charge twice as much if the apartment was renovated. You want to buy it? One-hundred and fifty-one thousand just for you.

But that's more than the other guy is paying.

That's the point. I can already get that much.

Without the fur, the landlady was a classic babushka, with a scarf, short and chubby.

I see, you have bottled water here. No wonder you can't afford to buy apartments; you throw away your money even on water. What next? You will be buying thin air?

I read the warnings not to drink tap water here. And if I could buy clean air, I would.

There's nothing wrong with our water. We have excellent filtering systems, she said, walked to the faucet, and drank a glassful. Refreshing!

Giardia, lead, mercury, E. coli (why e-, is it an internet virus?)... that's what I've heard.

That was years ago. And that is foreign propaganda. Why does the world hate us?

The world loves Russia, perhaps a little too much.

Do you know why my fingers are so knotty?

Lead poisoning?

During the Siege, only ten years old, I dug with my fingers into the iced snow—that's how we got our drinking water. We put the snow in pots. I get a little pension as a survivor of the siege. Do you know who visited me in this apartment? Comrade Stalin. He came after the war to talk with a few survivors of the siege.

How strange. I read that since he hated the city he deliberately left it to Germans to torture and enjoyed listening to the statistics about how many people died each day.

Where did you read nonsense like that? In America?

In *The New York Times* archives. David actually didn't remember where he'd read it, but *The New York Times* should sound convincing.

You can't believe newspapers!

What was he like?

He told me many *shutky*. Here's one. Communism was victorious in many countries, and Lenin toured them. Wherever he went, there were huge posters of Lenin, but none in Poland. And he told the Polish communist party leaders, What is this? No portrait of Lenin? Next time I come to Poland, I want to see an image of Lenin in Poland. Lenin in Poland, remember that. And a year later he came, and saw paintings of Trotsky fucking Lenin's wife. Tovarishi, what is that? he said. I told you, I want pictures of Lenin in Poland. Yes, comrade, that is what it is. Lenin is in Poland!

And do you know who died on the stairway here?

How would I? Lenin's wife?

A German officer. It is a sad story.

Why sad? I'd imagine that after the siege you'd want him to die. Why not want all the Germans to die?

He was tall and handsome, and he loved Sankt Peterburg to death. When he enlisted he asked to be sent here.

See, so it was his fault. He volunteered to bomb the city.

He had read about the city—all of the works of Dostoyevski, Beli, history books. He collected postcards from here as a little boy and dreamed of visiting Hermitage and Petropavlovsk. During the siege he dreamed of deserting so he could come over into the city, but he knew he'd be killed either by his side or ours.

And he still did it?

Every day he stood guard on the Pulkovo hills watching through his binoculars—the spires of the Admiralty and Petropavlovks and the golden dome of St. Paul's cathedral and the blue dome of the Trinity Cathedral and the green dome... And he skuchival, longed, to be here.

But instead sent a few missiles in every day to blow you up? Sounds like twisted and perverted love.

What would you know about that? And then after the war he was a POW, again within viewing distance, and he kept gazing this way. He was so handsome that when he worked in a truck factory—part of his prison work—he fathered many children with several Russian women.

Now Natasha wept. She took out a variegated cloth handkerchief and dabbed her eyes with it.

David wanted to ask her whether she was one of them.

In a nasally wetted voice, she continued: After he was released from prison, he was shipped straight back to Berlin, and it took him twenty more years before he could get a visa to come here, and he finally came in 1971. He was so excited and the day was so miserably cold, minus twenty, that his heart gave out. He had just entered the door and stepped on the stairs and had a massive heart attack and dropped dead. Down there, on the stairs next to the elevator entrance.

I knew that atrium was creepy. Did it always house black cats?

He was coming to see me.

Natasha was now wailing.

Oh, I shouldn't have told you the story.

No, thank you, it's a pretty story, *ochen*.

Here, I have a picture of him. He had sent me one in his letter before he came here, and I got him the visa. For me it was easy, as my husband was an influential nuclear engineer. He too died of heart attack, right outside of the building. You know, when the cold wind hits men, it stresses their hearts.

She stood up, filled a glass with tapwater, drank it, cleared her throat loudly, and walked out.

Carand Burnet

Axis

Within a thick fur of trees, a single sharp black dart punctures the gray sky. A hollow shot sounds throughout fields and mountains, echoes as if from an oil drum's bottom. A minute dot busy scuffing clouds abruptly snaps and falls like ice breaking branches. This frosted morning the pigeons no longer made a sound. In 1918, Martha, the last passenger pigeon, died. It took a hundred years to kill millions of birds.

In Manchester, New Hampshire, the lean clouds like a sheet of water envelopes the cityscape. The wind picks up rain and tosses it into perpendicular directions, writing its water language. Overhead, pigeons stoop on the parking garage's dense cement. They cluster like bits of currants, leaning low and expanding their feathers. They stay, somehow knowing that the sun still hovers over the clouds.

One pigeon flew over 7,200 miles to his home in Saigon after being transplanted in France.[1] During both World Wars, a carrier pigeon would need a week to acquaint itself to a new area. Even after the birds were relocated inside windowless carriers, they inexplicably returned to home base. Pigeons are constantly within their centers and inner declination. Each pigeon is a magnet toward the center of the earth and the center of their birth.

I blame my urge to explore. Beneath myself, I could feel how headlights arouse dormant poles and signs somewhere miles away. At night, the headlights glow on. Two false suns drinking up dark. Through blackness it hunted me, hungering for an observer and documenter for itself—the world. I began walking farther down local roads each day. Beneath a sun-setting cloud, the electric steeple pole crackled the flecked house lights. I searched deeper into the charcoal pigmented night. Then the humid sun rose and blushed bright distilled colors, and fogged trees masked out building corners. Here, I knew it was time to leave.

On October 4th, 1918, the American war pigeon, Cher Ami, flew a message over formidable territory. Germans cornered an American division, the *Lost*

1. Henry Morton Robinson, "Fly Away Home," The Rotarian, Jan 1939: 27-30.

Battalion, with no operating equipment. By that time another American division had attacked the Germans and unknowingly began killing the *Lost Battalion*. Their last chance was to send their messenger pigeon, Cher Ami, out into the chaos. Cher Ami burst out of his cage—each pant devoured the air, gripping the grave message within an aluminum tube strapped onto his foot. He took high into the air and watched the metallic pulses near the ground. Finally, disrupting the bitter smell, German bullets struck his feathers. Cher Ami continued twenty-five miles over France, transporting the container as it clung to what remained of his sheared muscle. Cher Ami watched the distance out of one eye; the other was bloody and blind. He saved the 194 men of the *77th Infantry Division*.[2]

Underneath the shifting sun, he stares with unquestionable understanding and reads a face while sifting through food. With a tilt of his head he confronts me. Tangerine-ringed eyes like Cher Ami's question his disposal, a new placement in an adjusting future. I follow his tracks in the snow. Delicate perpendiculars cross lightly through the whiteness like soft twigs attempting to mark some silence. *How did I happen upon this park under tumbling cold?* Five years ago I battled against boiling southern heat, snow rarely visited. Lumbering evergreens replace palmetto trees; thin accents of bleached albino birch substitute the thick oak bark that I used to trace with my eyes. I no longer seem familiar with this landscape, yet occasionally a rush calls back. It emerges beneath an ember tinted sun on a drowning, humid afternoon.

Babbette, sent by an American spy, infiltrated German lines because her white feathers were painted black.[3] Camouflaged like a crow, she escaped past nipping bullets. The paint loosened and grayed while her wings knifed the air. As the black shell continually chipped, the danger of a German's accurate aim increased. She continued, unable to differentiate between natural clouds or clouds created by warfare gas. Every second, her wings wandered over dense, ripped trees, scattered

2. "Cher Ami: The Carrier Pigeon Who Saved 200 Men," The Home of Heroes, N.p., 2007, 6 October 2009 <http://www.homeofheroes.com/wings/part1/3b_cherami.html>.

3. "They Winged Their Way Through Skies of Steel," The American Legion Weekly 29 Aug. 1919: 16-19. 6 October 2009 <http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/pdf/WW_I_Carrier_Pigeon.pdf>.

buildings, and open farmland. Her message stopped a surprise German attack on the Meuse River during World War I.

My father rushed to the front porch talking on the phone. He reached out his arm in a remark. I rushed inside, and fear dispatched throughout. My sister, unable to talk, struggled on the couch. A metal dinner fork had slipped and caught inside her throat. She resisted coughing with feral and bloodshot eyes. The ambulance was coming. My sister was placed quickly, yet gently, in the stretcher as she choked, close to death. As she laid on the stretcher reaching the ambulance, several pigeons projected overhead and nicked their brooding patterns into the sky. Their evening shadows etched into her thin figure and accentuated her bones. After seeing the pattern, her limp thinness, I knew she was marked.

On September 19, 1944, William of Orange flew more than 250 miles over an explosive landscape to transport information. Caustic powder buried deep into his feathers from the sooted air. He sliced harder and higher to avoid miles of cut-open earth. Below him, men's throaty yells pushed him farther, as other calls were suffocated from bombs and silvery, agitated ammunition. As a pigeon of the British Secret Service, he delivered a message that saved nearly two thousand solders at the Battle of Arnhem.[4]

The clouds now tighten. Ranges of sunsets shorten like a child's breath, then chill. The pigeons firmly close together, no longer pushing at each other and cooing; the cold has cut short their brief invisible territory marks. Soon many will leave during the day, travel for food, then return unnoticed in evening. They sleep through frostbitten temperatures that nudge near their home. The pigeons darken along with night and temporarily vanish within concealed buildings.

The carrier pigeon Mary of Exeter was wounded three times during World War II.[5] While in service she was shot, partially gutted by a hawk, and severely injured by shrapnel. Like the land exposed to war, each time her reopened body

4. Henry Morton Robinson, "Fly Away Home," The Rotarian Jan. 1939: 27-30.

5. Freddy Thienpont, "Pigeons in the War," Wings West, 2008, 6 October 2009 <http://www.wingswest.net/pigeons/Warpigeons/warpigeons.html>.

bled from exhaustion. She recovered willingly and thoughtfully; stitched again, she was born to new missions. Her cage opened hundreds of times, and continually she darted, reaching into the chaos, disregarding old injuries, persistent and intent on delivering her messages home.

When I return home, particular roads and houses unclothe themselves and present my overlooked world. What have I misremembered? Does the turn on the road's fork still hold the pothole, is the brick house still veiled by ivy? A hundred years ago, each passenger pigeon traveled over roads that leaned toward the navel opening of their life. Like pigeons, we leave and return to home, or what may be considered like it: entering into a house where you stretched short child arms in the warming sunlight, where you first carved strange letters to form a name, where you heard the branches of arguments crack, or remembered the place to return to after exploring the woods. I memorized every road located nine hundred miles south. Each narrow turn etched a veined blueprint into my memory. People are haunted by the displacement between their home and a new settling. It lies buried in some evasive memory, a remembrance of home that tilts slightly from the other thoughts—an axis.

Near the stretched lights that hit building surfaces, pigeons of sundry sizes span the sidewalks. In New York City, they hover over curbstones and gather like Russian dolls closing in on themselves. There are many patterned variables of pigeons—spots, pooling oil in a florescent mica glow, and albinos with burning ember eyes. Each pattern contains a different degree, a thumb print, for each one was born in a different location. Above, the pigeons emerge, born in slanted nests off of roofs, under deteriorating branches, and inside pipes. Pigeons are orphans. They only spend the first two months of their lives with their eternally mated parents. Possibly that memory haunts them and forces the return to their birthplace. So the location of their birth becomes their stability. A few swoop down like pilots in the pitches of high altitudes, and their wind disturbs my blonde hair.

Passing through any evening, ambulances wailed by. My ear chased after the sound, and pigeons shot up from the pavement and settled deep into a skeletal radio tower. Their silhouettes mimicked construction paper cutouts that I once sliced in childhood. Abruptly, I felt the entire landscape twisted toward and out; I

watched myself. I saw from the pigeon's eyes my own face concussed against the fastening wind. My face thinned. It attempted to withhold wrinkles, beckoned, and longed to forget.

The same memories that magnetize me towards home sincerely repel: certain events of lint-rolling funeral clothes, the hollowing of a mouth to yell, and coughing in the wet heat. These remembrances sway me away from certain objects, rooms, or seasons because they remind me of loss and how it endures. Then there are specifics that rewind these thoughts: my grandmother's once distinct laugh, the clamoring of dishes at six o'clock, the endless woods surrounding every imagination, the want to one day leave and spit out at the world. Somehow, it is here where, like the pigeon, my axis is located. Its determinism irregularly surfaces, carrying a message, and forces my return.

In Central Park, through layered, fogged breath I see my sister once again. She emerges slowly because of her wan gauntness, with skin nearing her marrow. Avoiding my gestures she walks onto the sidewalk and doesn't return my calling. The pigeons pace back and forth beneath my feet and dispatch as I turn towards a taxi. Angles and compositions evolve as a bird coos on a level light pole while others scurry and peek within shrubbery; most are thin, manipulated from harsh conditions—some are weary, stumbling, with others missing feet or eyes. However, the pigeon, devoted, never leaves.

Twenty-eight-hundred racing pigeons were released over the levels of burnished flat fields. As each one sped through the Ohio landscape, through trees, darting harvesting equipment, over small crushed farm houses, they became further intent on arriving and ratcheted their wings harder. Suddenly, a bright sound burned inside their heads. A solar flare had hit. The pigeons, disoriented, dove into branches. Not a single one returned.

Kyle McCord

The Soft Machinery of the Dark

Honesty is a blind dog wandering the chicken coops. You let it in
because you have no wife, no children. Flirtations with the neighborhood women,
the coat of an old stationmaster, and the long, snowy acre of your art. You sell
clothes to women with names without grace or assonance—Michelle,
Campbell—women who know nothing of cinema. How in *The White Ribbon*
it's the viewer who perhaps knowingly tortures the baron's son.
You connect the dots with Schrödinger's thoughts on felines and the inadvertent
destruction of love. A tear that you cover, but you keep it to yourself,
push her plaid skirt to her ankles. And you do wonder about the dog.
Teaching him tricks like interrogate-the-suspect and how-to-beat-a-polygraph
won't keep him forever. Every day his bark a little fuller, photoreceptors signaling,
allowing greater light. Soon he may remember enough to know who it was who
    put him here.
You said this was what you wanted, said Sarah. Now, without others, you've become
    tangled up
in yourself. You clean lobster pots alone with your dog, polish your gun.

Dumb Girl

Do you want this precious baby? It can't grow
because it's a rock! It can't mitigate sand
with its slender fronds or ghost blooms because
it's a rock.

And now, I will tell you my secret. Nothing
and it eats rocks. It makes my fat hurt when I think
about it. Of course I'm fat I've got craft project
deformities and wet foam brain coral arranging
solar systems and nudity into topiaries.

This baby is a rock. Look, I'll sit it here on the grass
and it will fall over. That and the neighborhood dogs
painted like food onto the paper trees of every
life and pet the wall of neighbors I think with their
funny hats.

You move weird through here like a sticky root
of organized void you grew in incubators
where it learned to laugh, speak and remember things
about incubators and how to grow things
from rocks like perfect trees or planetary dogs.

Ballooning ether, kidneys, cartilage and babies
in the grass with their rhizome shape
and shiny object of the riot

and look! I can make animals out of my very own
gourds! I think my baby likes you. Where are you going?
Where is he going? I don't have what's in his head.
Me and the baby don't have what's in his head.

Yoga I

From 2007-2009, I did a lot of yoga.
I was in graduate school and full of hope.
I believed in literature and love.
Well, maybe I was a little bit cynical.
It's hard to remember.
I fell in love with someone
named Craig Wesley Freeman.
Recently, he has told me things that
I can't recall from the beginning
of our courtship. "This car
smells like semen and wine,"
he said I said back then.
He told me that we were both passed
out at a Waffle House and when
we woke up in the red booth he couldn't
remember where I lived and I couldn't either
so we drove around Tallahassee, FL
for four hours asking people where
Sandra Simonds lives and everyone
gave us directions to a different
Waffle House which is so inconvenient
and shitty. When we finally got home,
I wanted to sit in the backyard alone
and look at the pecan tree even though
it was 5 a.m. Now I remember staring
at a bright celestial body and asking
"Jesus H. Christ, is that the sun
or the moon?" and for a split second
I was so freaked out it made me think

that everyone in my life had died at once
  and I was left alone and that the feeling
of being abandoned was equivalent
  to the feeling of emptiness that
    would make me want to slit
  the throat of a soft pig.

Yoga was incredibly boring.
  My mom called it "stretching."
Over the phone she would ask,
  "Are you going to your
stretching class?" How did
  she get so cynical? The women
who taught yoga were mostly
  beautiful and had Barbie-long arms,
legs, plastic vaginas without holes, and wore
    outfits with suns and moons on them.
They made ordinary looking
  women with soft folds
of fat flesh around the abdomen
  and neck feel bad about themselves so
  what's the deal anyway?
  This too is a kind of cruelty.
They always told us
  about the charity yoga workshops
they taught and "Couldn't we spare
  something, even a smile" to help them?

I resent beautiful women who are flexible
and talk about Deepak Chopra
like they're fucking him.
I resent other things too.
I resent it when people tell me to
"Be like the Buddha."
Hey, fuck you.
I'll be like the Buddha if I want to.

Erin Lyndal Martin

Colony Collapse: The Colony Has Collapsed Before

You can tell me the bees are dying. I am sleepy. Let me pull up that blanket—you know the one. Its maker named it *wine*. It's just like one my friend had, only mine has more little pills that get stuck all over me. I dreamed I had a metal plate in my face. It got dented. My mother said, "Oh, no, again?" and rummaged for office supplies she'd lost before we went to the hospital. Every crisis is boring to someone, especially if you've been through it before. Think of your first traffic accident, the excitement of it, how some details were so sharp (the guy you hit with your car had a Miles Davis CD on the seat) and some were gone before they existed (but what song was on the radio and what were you wearing?) What were you wearing: the standard question the police ask after a rape. In my case, the officer apologized for having to ask. I said pajamas. He said what color? Pink, I said, and looked at him. Or black or blue or red. Whichever one is new. I want to be the first girl raped in green pajamas.

To Cora Goldman, My Exorcist

In the woods behind
my junior high, I heard
the first voice ringing through
my bell-brain. I skipped
school in the rain, alone,
stared at the names scratched into
an old shack. I heard
the faintest answer to
my questions: What is
this place?

Displaced. Why
am I here? *Mirror.*

My hand wouldn't go through
the walls, and I
pushed my voice so far
away I thought
I could speak to Kurt Cobain.

• • •

The song inside my head:

O holy nest, O halo net
of Barbies,
heretic meteor hope
for swing sets.

Crack the gibbous sky, crackers in the yard
shooting birds from sun-baked
ditches, dust that brackets
the pleading grackles,

phantoms surging
from rock, frothy rabid
dogs at my throat, jinxed tree-
gutted filthy firmament.

Help me search the thunder for clean hands.

▪ ▪ ▪

You spiraled my hair around
your fingers and
made a fist: "the devil's
favorite," you whispered, as if
he were my biology teacher, and I baked him
muffins. You might have been
smooth-faced—features small and even, eyes
chlorinated, brown strands of
hair licked with ash. And when you cupped
my face, looked into my eyes,
a lover who demanded an answer,
you wouldn't let go. You said demons
swam beneath the water where each
tree, each lake, each mother
I had loved, split into its double, then
began to speak.

▪ ▪ ▪

I stood in the kitchen and screamed
like an animal. Broken bottle
aimed at the refrigerator, drunk
and raging. I screamed for Joan
of Arc, for my family, too-young brides scratching
riddles into my wrists, which I scraped each
night with my stepfather's
hunting knife. I hid
under the kitchen table from
the fluttering ducks. Azaleas
from my mother's garden desired the apocalypse:
Breathe now tectonic
plates, jolt free the
sod-wings latched to your backs!

▪ ▪ ▪

Jesus conjurer, girl crusher, hummingbird vest,
Leviathan: You are the pond
riddled with monsters. Hair feathered and lavender
scented: You are the glaucoma sky.
Dust breather, girl eater:
you dragged me from the hammock where I
fanned myself with hymnals. You drew
oil crosses on my body.

▪ ▪ ▪

Everyone is afraid of me.
I rebuke thee.
Crossed with oil and ash
In the name of Jesus
I'm thrown backwards
I rebuke thee.
Into my father's arms.
In the name of Jesus
You say, they won't go.
I rebuke thee.
Cora, do you want to know why
In the name of Jesus
they won't go?
I rebuke thee.
I'm the eye-full thing,
the insect-thing, thorax,
venom, mandible, web.

Arriving at School in My Underwear, My Exorcist is the Principal

Before I met Cora, I dreamt
that my dead siblings grew like cucumbers
in a field, and as I wandered towards
the tree of life, I noticed my penis,
which was a blurry flap of skin
between my legs. Owls perched
on my shoulders. Post-
exorcism, Cora brings high school
into my dreams. Instead of a field,
there is a baseball diamond. She yells,
Forget time's rings—dance in Rubik's
Cubes. Crow the tree's knobby breasts.
She pitches 111 mph, and the crowd boos me
as I swing and miss. She chants over the PA,
Aleph, the grey sky. Aleph, the sea-
green fugue. Release your enemies.
I've got a crew cut; my chest is the flat, white
pearl in her gut, a gift that poisons
as she says, *Go back*
to the field. There is a string
to cut: a bell a body rings.

Liam Callanan

Listen

My father spent a good portion of his career with a tape deck slung over his shoulder, a slender, stubby microphone nosing into his pocket like a dog looking for a treat. Walking along, driving along, there was no telling when he'd stop, look up, not at anything specific, and then slowly turn the microphone on and press record. Horns, airplanes, footsteps, tires beating through wet leaves, the breathing of someone hiking in snow, trombone lessons from a block away, a hot air balloon when the flame is first lit. And voices: one, two, male, female, three on a street corner, twenty in a small room, hundreds in a theater. And crying and laughing and cursing and shouting, and screams. My father was really good at screams.

It was a good thing to be good at. Footsteps in snow might come and go, but there was a steady market for screams. You're shooting a war film, a horror film, a romantic film. There's a plane crash, a bomb explodes, someone jumps out of a cake. In the background, you hear a scream—or screams, if the director's a big spender. Those aren't always the screams of actors. You know what it costs to have an actor make a sound? Extras are so much cheaper when they're silent. No, those screams in the background—and sometimes, even the screams seemingly coming out of a star's mouth—those screams were often my father's. He collected, marketed and rented them, singly and by the dozen, for decades. Just last year he sold his archive to a competitor, and though he complained that the lump sum was hardly equal to the years of future royalties he was giving up, he made out just fine. In fact, the amount he got was surprisingly large, given that a lot of his screams had aged. It wasn't that the sound quality was poor, more that the discerning ear could tell they were of a different era. Smokers, for example. There's not as much call for a smoker's scream as there once was. Or a man with a hat. My father always said a man with a hat screamed differently than a fellow without, but that was my father.

He tried to demonstrate once when I was home from college. He gave a little scream—more of a yelp, really—and then told me to pay attention. He picked up a hat, an old fedora from the closet that I'd never seen him wear. He put it on and yelped again.

"See?" he said, though he was asking if I'd heard.

"No," I said. "Sounds the same."

He took off the hat, yelped again, then put it on, yelped once more. "See?" My father's demeanor always veered between mad scientist and elementary school teacher, frenzied genius alternating with patronizing patience.

I shook my head again. I'd long learned the best way to annoy my father was to limit myself to soundless gestures.

"Well," he said, upset, and took the hat off and on again a few times, yelping all the while, more to himself as he went on. Finally it came to him: "No, of course it doesn't sound different," he said. "*I* don't sound like a man with a hat screaming, because I don't wear hats. Doesn't matter if I just stick one on. Still sound like a bareheaded man." He went to put the hat away.

"Did my mother wear a hat?" I said.

"No," he said, not turning around.

"Do you think her scream would sound differently if she had?" I asked.

Now he turned. "No," he said quietly, balancing the brim of the hat in his hands.

▪ ▪ ▪

I never knew my mother. I don't even remember the day my father told me that she had died, long ago. It was never something I learned; her absence simply was, and always had been. Did I miss her? As I grew older, yes, but back then I didn't know what a mother was, not really. I knew other kids had one, but I didn't. But then, other kids had pets, which I didn't, and I envied no one their dog.

I never knew my mother, but one strange night before leaving for college, I came to know her scream. And then the world did. It was an unusual sequence of events, but then my mother's scream was unusual for many reasons, the biggest being that, late in his career, it became my father's biggest seller. It wasn't a classic scream; it didn't start with that aural punch, hold the note and then fade like a train heading off a bridge. No, hers came in three syllables: *ha-HA-huh.* There's no way you're going to figure out what it sounds like, but make the *A* sound like the one in hat, not paw, bite the last piece off too soon, make it the least bit musical, a

little breathless, like you've been socked, and be thinking that the next sound out of your mouth is going to be a laugh.

Exactly. It makes no sense, especially the laugh, but trust me, it's all there. I've heard it a hundred, maybe a thousand times. It's called the Brenda, by the way, not my mother's name, not anyone's, far as I know. There were years when I'd hear it pop up in a film and I'd nudge my date and tell her about it later, but the results were always disastrous. I was slow to realize that admitting I was related to that scream was like admitting I was related to someone who'd been executed, something horrific that became unspeakable as soon as it became personal.

Because it was a horrible scream. It was short, but it was scary—and the hint of a laugh made it even scarier. You'd think it would get lost in the background, but it never did. You're thinking it's just because I knew it that I always heard it, but you could have asked anyone who was in the theater a night my mother screamed. You left a little shaken, even if you didn't know why. It was a background scream, but it was better as a background scream. Front and center, it was too much; I've seen it dubbed into one or two actresses' mouths and it is awful—disturbing *and* unbelievable. Better to have it happen offstage, in the distance, a sound you sometimes didn't know you were hearing, a sound you never really heard until you yourself were walking alone one night down some dark, wet, deserted street, when suddenly the street light shudders out, and from a hidden doorway, moving as fast as if he's falling—

Did you gasp? Just a little? All right, then: that sound? That's part of it.

▪ ▪ ▪

People paid my father for his screams, and he, in turn, paid people (much less) for theirs. In his early years, he relied mostly on drama students from NYU or some of the private acting schools around Manhattan. Students would scream until they were hoarse, again and again, as my father pressed them for something they could never quite give him—"an ounce of real," is what he called it. The closest he ever came with a student was when she screamed at him on the way out. He'd given her ten dollars for a half-hour of operatic shrieking, and she was almost in tears.

Not because of the money, nor because her voice was almost gone, but because of the noise, the noise, the noise. She felt as if she were going mad, and she screamed. As the door to the studio shut soundlessly behind her, my father raced back to see if the tape was still rolling. It was. Then he ran after her to give her another five dollars, but she wouldn't take it. She screamed again ("Not as good, if you want to know the truth," my father would later observe) and fled. That scream became the Sally, and my father made decent money off it. It was a solid, workhorse scream, the kind you reach for when the person is off-screen getting murdered, but they're so past being afraid.

It was after her that my father turned to "civilians," as he called them, for his screams. Now, he didn't do "live" screams, that is, he never recorded someone who was actually in trouble. You couldn't count on that kind of luck anyway, he said. No, he'd put an ad in the paper—something like I'll *pay to hear your voice!*, plus a time and address—and then wait to see who showed up. He toyed with ideas of how he would get good screams out of people—should he scare them somehow? Show them horrible pictures? Movie clips?

But the truth is my father didn't have it in him to scare people. He was always *listening* for a new sound, and when he wasn't listening, he was taping. The result was that he spoke, and emoted, very little. Like every boy, I have a Little League story. Except mine isn't of a father yelling, or even getting in the way of the action with his camera. When I rounded third after my home run, I saw my father in the stands, absolutely still, his back to me, his hand holding a microphone to the crowd.

So when those first civilians showed up for taping, my father did nothing more than simply ask them to scream. Among the ones who stayed, a pattern emerged. First scream, they giggled, second scream, their voice gave out too soon—takes more air than you think—and the third scream? You started making money as soon as they opened their mouths. Fourth, fifth, sixth until they couldn't anymore: the worst of the lot was ten times better than the best drama student.

My father had theories. At a certain point, he thought, the brain stops second-guessing what's being asked of the vocal cords: if I'm screaming, there must be a reason, the mind figures, and then the person just surrenders to it. Now a good actor, a great actor, might be able to will such emotion into being. But for variety, and price,

you couldn't beat the strangers my father found. Their screams became the Tommy, the Bertie, the Carol, the Betty-Ann—hell, Lou, Francis, Frances, Johnny, Cindy, Todd, the Mr. Tambs, and Margot—sweet Jesus, I hope I never hear another Margot. There were dozens. I once asked him where he got the names, and why he used the names of people: why not use numbers? He then looked at me as though I had.

"Would you buy a Corvette if it was named the 84-79-08?" he asked, shaking his head.

I was only nine at the time. Too young to buy a Corvette, and too young to know that my father was shaking his head not because I'd asked the question but because he thought I was the type who would, in fact, buy a car that had a number for a name. (And I did, as it happens, a Mazda 626, but that does not prove my father's point.)

I'd say a third to half of my childhood conversations with my father ended this way, with him shaking his head and looking at me sadly. Another variation: him shaking his head and saying, "You sound just like your mother, God rest her soul." It was in this way that my mother lived with us, through these daily apologetic benedictions, those photographs, and, of course, on tape.

Not her scream, not that tape, not yet. Just the tapes of everyday sound, of her, of them, at home doing whatever they did before I came along.

Sometimes, it seemed like he'd simply left the tape recorder on for an entire afternoon or evening. You could hear a vacuum going, or birds outside singing, maybe a radio in another room, the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. Then, steps.

"That's your mother," my father would always say. I would sometimes want to ask a question, but he would shush me, and close his eyes. He always considered listening, even at the movies, to be too important a task to let vision distract you.

So I would close my eyes, too. They had lived where we lived, in an old row house at the base of Grimes Hill, not far from the Staten Island Ferry. A wonderful place for sound, my father said. Hardwood floors throughout. Steam heat. Rickety stairs. And out back, on the other side of the alley, a Chinese cemetery that every animal on the island visited each night, yipping and snarling while they devoured the meals relatives left for the deceased.

Owls, radiators, ferries, animals keening in cemeteries: to think about it now, it's amazing that I could have heard my mother at all above the din. But there she

was, walking to and fro across the invisible room, before an invisible microphone, placed there by my invisible father. Step, step, step, step. God, those steps, that sound! That is childhood to me, the way others hold as their touchstones the color of the ocean in a particular picture book, the smell of a Christmas tree, the taste of sunflower seeds.

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Those tapes, like the fact of my mother's death, always were. I don't remember when my father started playing them, how he first introduced them, how I first reacted.

I do remember when he stopped playing them for me. I was fourteen, and had a friend over. I had told him about the tapes and he wanted to hear them. I wanted him to hear them, too. I had reached an age where I wanted everyone to meet my mother, meet her the way I had.

My father was horrified. My friend didn't know that, but I knew his silences' various grades, and I knew he was displeased. It wasn't until later that evening, when the shrugging friend had wandered home alone, that my father sat me down and explained: we could never play the tapes to anyone, not friends, not even family (and we had little that passed for family; an aunt on my father's side who sent unsigned Christmas cards, no one on my mother's side). They were private, he said. Moreover, people wouldn't understand.

I didn't realize it until right then, and maybe not fully until years later: of course they wouldn't understand. A widower and his only son, listening to tapes of the departed wife and mother? But what really bothered him—this is what took me a little longer to realize—was that the tapes themselves were odd. Because for all the normal household noise my mother made, she never spoke.

Not a word. Sometimes, when she was in the kitchen (you could triangulate locations by sound: dishes + water + faraway footsteps), you could hear humming, but only very faintly. And occasionally, a voice, but that would turn out to be a scrap of a radio program that she was listening to.

Like I said, this didn't seem odd to me until my father said other people wouldn't understand. It wasn't that I'd never wondered about this before. In fact, it was another of those facts that had always existed. My mother never spoke because my father was taping. He was a sound engineer, after all. She wasn't about to spoil his tape. When he left that tape recording going for hours at a stretch at home, he was trying to collect the background sounds of a home, he once explained. You couldn't have people speaking in that background, because that would make the tape less attractive to a movie director. Footsteps were fine. Anonymous, for the most part. But if a director wanted voices, he'd prefer to add them himself—men, women, kids, his top-billed star or some character actor. He didn't want to have my father's wife chattering in the background. Or screaming.

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Blurry photographs. Muffled tapes. Believe it or not—and thinking back, I sometimes don't—it took me until I was through with high school to decide that my father was making my mother up, that the image, indistinct though it was, was as complete a fiction as the movies my father contributed to.

But why? That's almost too big a question for me now; it certainly was too much for me then. It was bad enough to be missing a mother, bad enough to have a father whose own reserve exacerbated her absence, but also to be the victim of a grotesque hoax? It was beyond consideration. But I had to know—or, I had to let him know what I didn't know, which I did not by confronting him directly (I wasn't that brave, and I wasn't that sure I wanted to know the truth) but by picking at him with question after question. Why did he have only her footsteps, not her voice on tape? Why didn't we have more photographs? Why did the ones we did have all look so indistinct, so different? Where was mom buried? Why didn't we visit?

Why wasn't there anyone else I could ask these questions of?

I'd come to my own conclusion, a romantic one, which is that I was adopted, that my father had no idea who my mother was, that my father, a single man, had adopted me because he was lonely, only to realize his loneliness was indelible and made more so by his adopting an orphan.

No wonder, then, he specialized in screams.

My father parried these questions as he had done for years, with much the same answers he'd always given, though I was gratified to see my renewed, vindictive teenaged persistence winnow away his humor and patience. We both knew that he would crack, soon; I assumed that he'd tell me before I left for college, for good. This turned out to be correct.

It was my last night at home. We'd gone out to dinner, an uncharacteristic event, and he'd had three glasses of wine, also uncharacteristic (but promising, I thought). When we returned home, he got out the tape deck and set it up at the little dining room table, the microphone aimed at me. Then, to my weary dismay, he went to fetch the "memory master." This was a reel onto which my father had dubbed my life up until that point—my early babblings, toddler rantings, a snippet or two of a spelling bee I'd lost, the crowd after that home run, my name announced at graduation. This was also the reel on which were preserved some of my "mother's" ghostly footsteps and the rest of her silent life. I'd long before come to think the tape extremely corny, but my father placed a great value on it, keeping it under lock and key, which I cynically assumed was meant to impress me, though it no longer did.

Once he'd threaded the tape through the reel and cued it—the ceremony mattered to him; he would never have survived in this digital world, where recording can begin with nothing more than a finger's soundless tap—he told me to say a few things about what was going on, how I felt about going to college, what I was hoping to do, what I was going to do after I graduated. I complied as listlessly as I could.

Maybe it was my disregard for the occasion, maybe it was niggling assault I'd previously subjected him to, maybe it was the wine—or maybe it was something he'd planned all along. But after I finished, he pressed stop and looked at the machine.

"You've been asking about your mother a lot," he said.

Here was the moment at last, and I could say nothing, nothing in reply.

"You—you don't believe what you've heard," he went on, an odd way to put it, perhaps, but exactly the way my dad would.

"There's—there's something I've never played for you," he said now, rewinding the tape. "It's—well, it's just—there's no real way to introduce this," he said, and fell silent as we both watched the tape diminish on one reel and grow on the other. Finally, the tape ran clear; we'd reached the lead, and he hit stop.

"This is your mother," he said, very quietly, and stared at me. I stared at the tape.

My mother was crying. And because I was a professional's son, my first thought was that she was doing an awful job of it, snorkeling her way through a kind of oily blubbering. Then I looked over and saw my father and saw him crying, inaudibly, which made me tear up, and then, grow angry. Angry at my mother for making my father cry, angry at myself for doubting him all this time. Because this was not an ounce of reality, but the full weight of it: this was no actress, no stranger, but my mother. The crying was that off-key, that intimate, that consuming. It was a tiny sound, but it filled the room, and it was time, past time, to turn it off. He was shaking his head now; I reached out to press "stop."

Then came the scream.

It was my mother's scream, the whole, eerie, penetrating tear of it, anguished and weary and even foolish, and then it was quiet. Not blank tape, just taped silence. My father looked up, drew a breath, and then I stopped the tape.

He stared at the tape machine for a minute, a full and quiet minute, and during that time I stared at him. He was white, and sweating, and for the first time, I realized he was old.

"Your mother—" he started to say, but I cut him off.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I kept asking."

He looked at me with mild surprise, and then exhaled, soft and low and controlled.

Finally, I said, "Why—why was she crying? And what was that scream?"

He shook his head, slowly—at me, or at her memory, I wasn't sure—and then began, "When I met your mother, she was just starting out, an actress."

And he didn't need to say another word. That is, he was ready to, but I didn't want him to, I didn't want to hear another sound. Not from him, not from the tape, not from my mother. Because I could see what had happened. He'd had her into the studio, he'd had her cry, scream. They'd fallen in love—maybe that was the source of that almost-laugh at the end of the scream, maybe they were already falling in love, right then, astounded at the ridiculous circumstances.

And then what? Then me, of course, but after that, she died? How? When? At that instant, I did not want to know. This was a perfect moment, and all I wanted

to do—all I knew how to do—was to extend it, make it last. Another word from my dad, another sound, would ruin it. So with a grace and calm that I thought extremely mature at the time but now find distinctly childlike, I silently led my father from the room. He seemed a bit dumbfounded, but also grateful. I went straight to bed. I didn't sleep, of course, and didn't plan to, but must have closed my eyes near dawn and opened them not long after, when the morning calls of the birds outside entered my dreams. Their voices briefly became my mother's, which was enough to wrench me awake.

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My father was not a whistler—on principle: he thought it the essence of audio amateurism—but if he had been, he would have been that morning. He greeted me with a full breakfast, delighted in making a small ritual of serving me my first cup of coffee—"Welcome to adulthood!"—and nattered away about preparations for my trip.

I thought it was his way of avoiding talking about the night before, but he brought it up himself once we were in the car on the way to the train. He hadn't had a chance to tell me about the circumstances of the tape, he said, and was worried that I would worry—which I should not. Now, then: my mother was an actress, but they'd met outside the studio, and he'd been happy to keep her outside the studio. He thought there'd be no way he'd get a useful scream out of someone he knew so well, even if she were a professional.

This rankled her, of course, and that's why she went ahead and made her own tape. Gave it to him one day when he came home, a kind of audition. She wanted to be one of his sounds; she was jealous that he recorded perfect strangers and that they were the ones who ended up in the movies, while she seemed to be trapped doing shows farther and farther off-Broadway.

The tape, of course, was awful; poignant, and cute, perhaps—but that was why it was awful. They'd had a laugh about it, he said, because the whole thing was a lark, and that's how it sounded. That strange smile at the end of the scream was evidence enough, a wink between two lovers.

He drew a deep breath. We'd reached the station and parked. He was still staring out the window, hands on the wheel. He never played the tape, he said, because it made him too sad. The fake tears, the giggle-scream. He should have played it for me earlier, he said, and apologized. It was just that he'd been waiting. Because to understand it, to understand the whole crazy thing, I had to be old enough. But now, now that he'd played it, maybe he'd do something with it. He'd always meant to do something with the tape, some kind of private memorial to her, but that was kind of foolish, he knew. The crying and the scream were just so plain bad, for one.

"They're not that bad," I broke in. "The crying is—well, the crying is bad," I said. My father winced, and I waited a moment before going on. What was I going to say? I didn't really know how to speak to my father about my mother, about love, about anything. But technique, the business of sound: I became aware that could be a refuge, a place for us to meet, and my relief was so profound it was audible.

"She sounds like a fat man crying," I said, laughing a professional little laugh. "But the scream—is really different. Unique. I bet you could do something with it." The challenge now was how to use such shop talk to help my father out of (or into) his emotional well. He seemed to know I was attempting some sort of verbal sleight-of-hand and looked at me, both afraid and eager. So I went on. "Wouldn't *that* be a better memorial," I asked, "to get her, finally, in the movies where she wanted to be?" My father's eyes glazed with tears; he started to smile. When it finally came time to run for the train, he pulled me back in a kind of clutch, or hug.

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An irony of my exposure to my father's work is that "real" screams always sound artificial to me. I was once at a hockey game, right down next to the ice, when a player had his Achilles tendon torn in two. There could not have been anything more authentic than his screams, and the crowd went silent before them. But all I could hear was all its imperfections—he wasn't taking big enough breaths, the scream was petering out too quickly, changing tone. Nothing wrong with an unusual scream (my mother's was proof of that) but the hockey player just sounded like an amateur.

So, too, my father, the last time I saw him. Actually, I heard him before I saw him, which says something. More than what I said to the doctor in the hospice

hallway. "You may be too late," the doctor said—not unkindly, no one there was unkind—and I shook my head.

"I'm definitely too late," I said, and went inside.

The noise I'd heard had been so soft, so high, so thin and weak, that I'd taken it for female, but when I reached his bedside, I saw it was my father. His mouth was open and I had the sudden sense I could see the sound.

And I saw that he had always seen this.

"Dad," I said. His eyes were closed, he made no reply. Machines all around sucked and beeped and clicked. "Can you hear me?" I said.

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The sounds that dated fastest, my father claimed, were office sounds. And what with the ever-present demand for corporate videos and presentations, there was a lively trade in such sound effects. But you had to go out almost every year, if not every month, and collect new ones: the skittering hard drive, the scanner that whined as if it were shaving the document instead of scanning it, the bored trill of digital phone systems, the constant surf of modern ventilation.

But to capture my father's office at home after he died, you could have fished out his oldest office tape and met every need. My father didn't have a computer; his phone signaled calls with a light, not a bell. So the tape with the sound of a letter-opener (ivory, wooden or metal, my father had all three sounds), the unfolding of a letter (20-LB. text or 100% cotton), and the tinkling of a key as it fell to a desk (a house key, a safe-deposit key, a skate key) would be all one would need to recreate my experience the day I discovered the envelope he'd left for me.

But there's no tape that could capture what I heard next, or rather, there's only the one, the memory master, whose case the letter led me to and the key permitted me to unlock.

I heard my pre-collegiate self talk about dreams, I heard earlier me's talk about teachers, about toys, about babbled subjects I could no longer interpret. And at the beginning of the tape, I heard, as before, my mother's crying, and then that scream, which made me smile and cry at the same time. That was signal enough for me to

stop, but before my finger reached the button, the silence finished, and the crying started again, and then, a voice.

I'd write a letter, but you don't read, you only listen, listen, listen. Well, can you hear the crying now? Can you hear the baby crying? Has he stopped crying since he was born? Have I? Well, I stopped long enough to ask Mrs. Carlson to come over and watch him for a while, until nine o'clock, when you said you'd be home. I won't be. I'll be gone by then. I'm going. What kind of gal leaves her husband? Leaves her baby? A monster. A monster does. But that's what I've become. That's all I am now. Can't you hear it, can't you? In my voice? I was an actress once, do you remember? Do you? Well, not was, but am. I am an actress, and that's where I'm going, what I'm doing.

Don't come after me. Don't find me. Don't. If you try, I'll run again. Let me just be dead—and I thought about that too, but I don't have the guts. Let me just be dead to you, and to the baby. Don't send me pictures. Don't send me locks of his hair. Don't call, send a telegram, or, I don't know, with the friends you have—don't send out some broadcast. Because I don't want to hear from you, from anyone. I don't want to know about you, about him. I don't want him to know me. If you need to tell him something someday, tell him that I died. Tell him something that won't make him come after me. Maybe he won't even live that long, long enough to want to look. He has some of me in him, after all. I just hope it's not this part—

And this was followed by another scream, enough like the first that it was clear they were from the same person. Otherwise, they were completely different. The second scream was brief, ragged, broken, almost silent.

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How much pain did I inflict when I told my father to share my mother's scream with the world? Or how much joy? And was his doing so an act of vengeance, or of love, a way of broadcasting a message—*remember, remember*, the word's three syllables equal to the scream's—on a special frequency that only my mother could hear? Would such a beacon, echoing everywhere, from movies to television and back, one year to the next, warn or attract?

Warn, says my imagination, says any member of any audience who has ever heard my mother's scream. *Attract*, said the phone message left on my desk at work, the day after my father's obituary ran.

A home, a row house, daytime. The refrigerator purring to itself. A clock, electric, ticking. A car driving, slowly, down a street, urban, residential. Children playing in a distant yard. An engine settling, stopping. A door opening, closing. Keys. Footsteps—on grass, on a sidewalk, on a stoop. A panel truck passes, followed by a pick-up. A plane. The wind. The ferry. A bird. Two. A knock. Another. Nothing, then walking away.

Then it was quiet for an hour. Then it was just me here, remembering, typing. Then it was just me.

But now, footsteps. But now, another knock.

Another.

Now, I listen.

Ciaran Berry

Sideshow

I: Tom Thumb

As they sweep through midnight and spring rain,
they seem to step straight out of a vision or a pantomime
in which three stoned stage hands join into parody
their awkward limbs beneath a fabric cut and sewn into a skin.
I mean the gray-brown elephants linked trunk to tail
and stepping one by one out of a tunnel on the East River
that have me thinking again of you, Tom Thumb,
transfigured and pushed out into the light as, "Ladies
and gentlemen, the man in miniature, presented
so we might consider the dimensions of our race."
Or, conversely, our need for diversion—a boy of five
taught to take wine, to puff on cheap cigars
and, later, dressed up as Napoleon, his size explained
by way of maternal impression, a mother's grief
over a dog that drowned. And so what is it we're supposed
to learn, the audience chuckling into our popcorn
as your horse farts and you raise your bicorn hat,
or standing damp and sullen behind police barricades
as the troop lumbers, trunks lolling, across town,
towards the circus ring they'll circle into June?
Something about want, which is the eye, its pupil black
and wild, insatiable for whatever it hasn't had before?
Something about the girl twirling a baton,
who goes before the elephants, leading them on?

II: The Hilton Sisters

Because you found a better end than drowning
or being given up to the state, your biographer warns me
away from my need to pity the pair of you
put on display like that rough copy of Stone Age man
and wife in their diorama in a midtown museum,
staring through glass eyes at the crowd rushing
between the dinosaurs and the planetarium. Not there nor later
in your dank dressing room as you apply your eyeliners,
your rouges, your powders, should I dare sympathize.
Not, as on those battered saxophones, you practice
the screech and drone of your "St. Louis Blues."
Outside, men stamp boot soles off the floor of a theater
that will erupt soon into catcalls, applause, laughter,
then near silence as you step from your final sleek garment
and stand before us, twin bodies, naked, exposed, fused
at the sacrum to help us understand how "you" can be
both plural and singular. The two and the one
and you know nothing yet about the word "alone,"
and will go on knowing nothing until the great striptease
that waits beyond this one, where whatever moves
the body sheds its cheap dress, and one sister bears
the empty heft of the other from room to room,
feeling something like frost enter her own heart, her lungs,
a space that wasn't there before suddenly opening.

III: Johnny Eck

What the punters are about to see is quite extraordinary—
the body cut in half but raised from death, the torso
running on its hands after its own two legs. What they've missed
already was your twin raising his arm that split second
before the call went out for volunteers while, in the wings,
a dwarf, who'd rather play the part of Lear, pulled
past his waist a pair of tweed trousers, holes cut
into the crotch so he can see. He will stand in
for your brother's lower limbs while you stand in for his chest,
his head, his arms, for the night's last act, this box & blade
routine that will draw gasps, the odd B movie scream,
that will lodge itself like carnal knowledge in the memory
of the boy in the front row, whose body will feel hard
and then hollow as the seats round him snap back toward empty.
But none of this has happened yet. You're in the box
which, yes, of course reminds me of a coffin. You're waiting
for the saw's blunt teeth to cut through the cheap pine,
and I like to think you're thinking of Saint Jerome
as Leonardo would have him—half-starved as he looks heavenwards
and seems to ask "How do I live like this, my Lord, severed
from you and all I wish to know?" A broken doll
the nurse called you when you slipped shocked out
of your mother's womb. A broken doll without the legs to kick
at the cold air, like all the rest of us, cleaved, cleaving.

IV: Zip, What Is It?

In a gray suit, I step this afternoon, into an alcove with mirrors
on all sides, where the tailor smoothes the shoulders,
chalks the thighs of this outfit I will decide not to buy,
while in the picture I'm making up of you a pigtailed girl
stands on tiptoe before the cage in which you've stood
for years to whisper "What is it?" into her father's ear.
It is summer there at the tail end of another century.
A crowd gathers just out of shot to aim and fire,
and take home the goldfish in its squat bowl of water.
And because they want, they want to disappear into the space
where you're Barnum's "missing link," and not a man
sweating in a gorilla suit. "All eyes on you," the tailor says,
smiling, his mouth a pink pincushion, as he kneels
to mark the adjustments which, as it turns out, will never
be made. All eyes on you, the son of freed slaves
who settled in the garden state to grow sweet potatoes
and, in a glass house, plantains. And I wonder in this light,
sequestered here, if you were named for the concealed zipper
that sealed your body into that costume of horsehair
and bear fur, into the fissure between truth and tall story—
a gap that grows wider as the girl squeezes one hand tighter
round her father's palm and, with the other, reaches
between the bars to offer you the remains of her candy apple,
the tart and sweetness of its tooth-marked core.

Ben Merriman

Making Fine

In the winter of 1216 Robert Arsic of Kent buys his way out of an English prison. He promises to pay one hundred marks, and pledges that he and three of his relatives will ride as knights in the King's service. He is the first person to "make fine" with the newly crowned Henry III, as recorded in the fine rolls, Henry's lengthy record of patronage and financial punishment.

Robert Arsic offers unnamed hostages as assurance of his fidelity.

Ranulf le Breton is given two weeks to leave England forever and, if he should be found there, is to be committed to the King's prisons. His gardens are to be uprooted and his houses may be pillaged by the canons of Missenden. If the canons do not find them desirable, the houses are to be burned. Later Ranulf dies in the midst of a dice game.

David, son of Simon, pays half a mark to buy pardon of the King for swearing a false oath, and for subsequently fleeing the King's justice.

Jews from Norwich are accused of circumcising a Christian. King Henry commands the speedy delivery of these Jews to the Tower of London.

The sons of Isaac the Jew, who was hanged, pay Henry twenty marks to recover Issac's property. Henry held the property because his father, John, had seized all property belonging to the Bristol Jewry.

The personal goods of Pinch' the Jew, hanged, are given to Sheriff Henry, son of Nicholas, for ten marks.

The land of John de Pyro, hanged, is transferred to Warin de Munchesney.

Gunilda Blund, wife of the disgraced and hanged John Blund, may remain in her house for a year, and hold one mark of John's property.

For delivering a felon from hanging, the men of Gloucester give one hundred marks for Henry's pardon.

The bailiffs of Gloucester give the King a tun of wine to initiate legal proceedings: the bailiffs of Worcester are hindering river traffic on the Severn.

A ship wrecks on the Suffolk coast. Henry orders that the salvage be sold off, and the monies remitted to the Exchequer.

The Sheriff of Lincolnshire sends Henry several pieces of a whale, but finding these parts badly preserved, Henry sends them back.

The barons of the Cinque Ports are ordered to send a flotilla to the islands of Guernsey, where enemies of Henry have been planning ambushes.

The rebellious Falkes of Bréauté is deprived of his foodstuffs. That pork which is well-preserved will remain in the King's possession. That pork which is rotten will be given to lepers out of charity.

Lepers in St. Leonard are given gratis use of the King's brushwood.

All windfallen wood belongs to King Henry.

King Henry designates a 260-acre forest plot where the monks of Flaxley may collect firewood.

King Henry gives Ralph de Trubleville an oak tree that a cross might be fashioned in memory of Ralph's dead son. King Henry gives twenty oaks to the priory of Worksop to aid in church construction.

Hubert de Rumilly pays Henry a hawk for the right to hold a fair. The Earl of Derby and his wife receive land from the King, for which they must pay in either hawks or shillings. Ida de Clerbec, in exchange for land rights, agrees to pay ten marks and one Norwegian hawk, a debt that she is given two years and two months to discharge. Ralph of Earlham gives King Henry an Estonian hawk.

William of Harcourt's grandfather owed the crown ten hawks and two warhorses. William is permitted to render payment in money, namely twenty marks.

For ten marks and one hawk, King Henry pardons Simon de Pinu for accidentally killing Thomas, a horsegroom.

Robert Owein and Henry, the son of Simeon, are accused of killing several scholars at Oxford. They pay Henry eighty pounds so that they will not be outlawed. They are ordered not to return to Oxford or environs, on pain of imprisonment.

William Ernawiei slew Roger Clerk upon finding Roger in bed with his wife. Later William's house burns down, destroying the letter of pardon he had received from Henry II. William pays Henry III ten marks for a new copy of this pardon.

Ralph of Williton is deprived of all his lands for homicide, arson, and poaching on the king's lands. The poached meat in question was stored at an unnamed house, and Ralph is said to have killed the master of that house, then burned it.

Roger of Dauntsey agrees to pay the King sixty marks' fine for having taken his greyhounds into the King's forest for the purpose of hunting the King's game. This payment will be spread over several years.

Following the death of the Bishop of Exeter, Henry requests the return of a flagon and two bowls that had been given to the bishop by his father, King John.

Henry sells the hay of the Bishopric of Worcester for half its market price.

Thomas of Moulton is commanded to tend the King's lawn at Sebergham.

Ernald de Berneval is owed twelve cart-loads of lead from Robert Cofferer and gives over four of these carts to the King for initiating the legal proceedings that resulted in payment of this debt. Adam Blund gives the King two marks for resolving a dispute over two hundred lumps of tin.

A cart full of dye overturns, crushing an unnamed girl. Aymer French promises Henry that he will see to the matter.

William de Weston breaks into the house of William of Weald and abducts his daughter, Agnes. William of Weald pays twenty marks to the King to initiate legal proceedings.

Jordan de St. Martin dies, leaving behind his wife, Joan, and his presumptive heirs, Christiana Wake and Roger Martel. Christiana and Roger pay one mark to have the King's men establish whether or not Joan had fallen pregnant at the time of Jordan's death.

Robert of Snargate is beaten in prison by his own jurors. These jurors pay the King two hundred marks, both for the beating and for illegally judging Robert's case, which concerned a duel.

In November of 1272 several citizens of Leicestershire pay a half-mark to obtain an assize. This is the last fine of Henry III's long and troubled reign. The reign of his son Edward would be more troubled still.

Staking a Claim

It seems that a certain fear underlies everything.
If I were to tell you something profound
it would be useless, as every single thing I know
is not timeless. I am particularly risk averse.

I choose someone else over me every time,
as I'm sure they'll finish the task at hand,
which is to say that whatever is in front of us
will get done if I'm not in charge of it.

There is a limit to the number of times
I can practice every single kind of mortification
(of the flesh?). I can turn toward you and say *yes,*
it was you in the poem. But when we met,

you were actually wearing a shirt, and the poem
wasn't about you or your indecipherable tattoo.
The poem is always about me, but that one time,
I was in love with the memory of my twenties

so I was, for a moment, in love with you
because you remind me of an approaching
subway brushing hair off my face with
its hot breath. Darkness. And then light,

the exact goldness of dawn fingering
that brick wall out my bedroom window
on Smith Street mornings when I'd wake
next to godknowswho but always someone

who wasn't a mistake, because what kind
of mistakes are that twitchy and joyful
even if they're woven with a particular
thread of regret: the guy who used

my toothbrush without asking,
I walked to the end of a pier with him,
would have walked off anywhere with him
until one day we both landed in California

when I was still young, and going West
meant taking a laptop and some clothes
in a hatchback and learning about produce.
I can turn toward you, whoever you are,

and say you are my lover simply because
I say you are, and that is, I realize,
a tautology, but this is my poem. I claim
nothing other than what I write, and even that,

I'd leave by the wayside, since the only thing
to pack would be the candlesticks, and
even those are burned through, thoroughly
replaceable. Who am I kidding? I don't

own anything worth packing into anything.
We are cardboard boxes, you and I, stacked
nowhere near each other and humming
different tunes. It is too late to be writing this.

I am writing this to tell you something less
than neutral, which is to say I'm sorry. It was
never you. It was always you. I am announcing
your unutterable name, this growl in my throat.

Robby Nadler

a field guide to pronouncing vegetable

i'm jealous of life's elision that goes on without me
dusk as a short finger that only functions to wear the gaudy ring of night for one
like how the human eye blinks when you tell it to
and in its own power accuses itself of autonomous mandate to spite you
imagine keeping a pet rattlesnake
if you're afraid to put your hand in anything
this means there's potential in prisons
even though i meant to write prisms
where black is defined by not being a color
it's in fact many people's favorite color for cats and underwear
normally the cropped comfort of a bunched coat for a pillow works for me
today the banks of the bitterroot are leaning to suggest fluency
tinder and musk are ways to avoid controversy
in yelling the human ear can defract tones
which is why angry doesn't sound like a train though both yell in the night
what's missing is defined as a variable
which is to say that there's an attempt toward solution
and to be proven water or oil or kerosene as x
all parts are acknowledged in ecumenical practicalities
thus individuals are solved in any given
i take sleep as the time of day when things i need to happen will
i trust in the bargain of life that reduced us chained by the unconscious blood
it isn't to say i'm vengeful when i raise doubts about sacrifice
what i mean to do is pronounce death as it's taken

Marilyn Martin

The Treachery of Trees

"When trees have fallen there is grief"
—A. E. Housman

I first realized trees moved in the fifth grade. My teacher, Mr. Del Vecchio, placed a bonsai tree, a tiny gingko, by the window.

"Class," he said, "watch what happens!"

A couple of days later, I was blown away, when the gingko's branches turned and shifted until its fan-shaped leaves faced the window. For months afterward, I repeatedly rotated my mother's miniature lemon tree and watched its single greenish fruit make a painstaking journey back towards the light.

Mr. Del Vecchio picked up a piece of chalk and wrote on the blackboard:

ALL LIVING THINGS MOVE.

And underneath in lowercase:

Trees move towards the light.

▪ ▪ ▪

Not long ago I read a newspaper article about a baby who was killed when a branch snapped, fell thirty feet and landed on the mother who was holding the child while they posed underneath. The mother survived, but the child did not. Through the tiny window of his camera, the father captured an image of his wife and daughter burnished in the June light.

The following day, arborists could find nothing wrong with the Central Park tree. It fell, free of blight, on a perfect afternoon. No wind stirred; no lightening stuck. I imagine the baby's parents comforting each other and speculating: *If only we'd stayed at home. Or stood under a different branch.* Perhaps for them, resting in the shade will always feel like returning to the scene of a crime.

But then life is more random than most of us are comfortable with, and we try to make sense of life's unpredictability by making meaning. We assign labels with the same urgency that trees move towards light. A city official describes the child's death as a freak accident. A minister calls it an act of God. Others mention fate, bad luck, serendipity.

Yet some events defy explanation. Parenthood requires never-ending vigilance, and we fool ourselves into believing it's possible to foresee every danger. Death by falling tree branches undermines our certainty, and we realize it's impossible to provide an unassailable sanctuary.

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Twenty years ago, my husband, two children and I lived in Oak Park, one of those suburbs named for the beeches, maples, and oaks that grace the parkways. When you consider all the Maplewoods, Elmhursts and Chestnut Ridges on the map, perhaps it's a miracle only 5,000 people a year are killed by falling trees.

The night before my seventeen-month old's eye surgery, I'm consumed with worry. Seated on a metal folding chair giving Johnny a bottle, I remember thinking, "What if this is his last meal?"

Johnny gagged a little, not used to the rubber nipple. A couple of weeks ago, I'd weaned him from the breast after I found out he couldn't eat anything on the morning of the operation. I figured it would be easier to deny him a bottle than a part of myself.

Yesterday, I'd strapped the two kids into their car seats and driven over to Foster's, the upscale toy store by the el tracks. Once inside, I parked Johnny's stroller by the miniature train display so my three-year old daughter, Sara, and I could ransack the toy truck section. After we picked out an expensive metal fire engine, a pulley-operated crane, and a canary colored digger, we sneaked up to the cash register while Johnny sat mesmerized by miniature train cars disappearing into tunnels. Then while I ran the packages across the street to the car, Sara entertained him with an off-key rendition of "The Wheels on the Bus." Tomorrow's plan was to present Johnny with a new truck every fifteen minutes, while my

husband, Josh, raced us down the expressway towards the hospital. A kind of bait and switch arrangement: trucks instead of breakfast. If all went well, Johnny would be so excited with his vehicular windfall that he'd forget all about his stomach.

Over a year ago, the pediatrician had noticed how Johnny's eyes drifted like unmoored boats, and the specialist to whom he sent us said only an operation could rope them in.

"Routine surgery for strabismus," the doctor recommended, "and the sooner the better."

Yet for months, I'd put it off, waiting for Johnny to stop believing in magic. For example, right now he's certain he can fit down the bathtub drain, and when I leave a room, he isn't always sure I'm coming back. Tomorrow, there'll be a moment when my husband will be holding him in front of the "Medical Personnel Only" sign. The hydraulic doors will swing open, and a blue-gowned man will reach out his arms. Then, as if we're on a fire brigade line, Josh will give Johnny to me, and I'll hand the baby to the doctor who'll say, "Don't worry." The instant Johnny leaves my arms, he'll start to cry, and after the doors close, his cries will defy the laws of nature, reverberating louder and louder as he disappears further and further away. On our side of the doors, a nurse will remind us babies don't remember much.

▪ ▪ ▪

Shortly after I learned that trees move, it became clear that Mr. Del Vecchio wasn't giving us the whole story. Sure the world's sycamores, penguins, amoebas, seaweed, dolphins and hummingbirds will keep dancing, twisting, drifting, swimming, and flying for as long as they can, but eventually they'll all stop. Or to put it more simply: all living things die. I prayed, *please, God, let me be the first person to live forever.* My mother told me not to worry. That when my time came, I'd be so old and tired I wouldn't care.

I didn't believe her. The worst thing about death, I decided, was its ticking bomb quality. Like the Central Park couple, you never know when it's coming. And this is particularly true for trees. On the one hand, scientists remind us trees have an astonishing capacity for survival. Imagine living as long as a 9,550 year-old

Swedish Spruce or a 4,000-year-old American Bristle Cone Pine. Yet trees don't have a fixed lifespan like we do. Without a nervous system, a tree's sap and roots, leaves and bark all operate independently. A limb can wither and the rest carries on unfazed. Without memories, trees die in pieces, thoughtlessly shedding a branch here, a chunk of bark there. By maturity most of a tree's matter is already dead.

▪ ▪ ▪

The day of Johnny's surgery, I awoke to a world of leaves. Through the window, the remnants of a thunderstorm. A jumble of twigs and branches on the front lawn. Across the street, a downed beech. Next door, a redbud split down the middle. Inside, the clocks blinked 12:00, and the cats huddled under the couch, their eyes glowing in the dim morning light. Already we're running late, betrayed by a power outage and a flashing alarm clock.

I had choreographed that morning like a ballet. And in doing so I'd hoped to leave nothing to chance. We'd sleep in our clothes. At precisely 7:00, Sara would race downstairs singing "Ten Little Monkeys." Then she'd proceed with a granola bar and a juice box towards the back door. At the same instant, Josh would begin loading the truck-laden shopping bags into the car, and I'd run upstairs and grab the baby. What's going on, Johnny's eyes might seem to say. But he wouldn't feel in danger. He wouldn't feel betrayed.

When I opened the baby's door, where in my million imaginings of that day had I ever envisaged a tree? Yet here was Johnny's room looking like a "Jack and the Beanstalk" illustration, and my child, himself a tiny Jack, lying in his crib swaddled in branch and leaf. Our only oak must have fallen in the night, and now this tree was sprawled across the roof, its branches hammering against my baby's window inches from his crib. How long, I wonder, has my valiant Jack laid below this severed beanstalk? And did he cry out while I slept through thunder, lightning, and crashing trees?

Kay Cosgrove

"We're sad in our own country"

David Dodd Lee, *The Nervous Filaments.*
Four Way Books, 2010. Paperback, 90 pp, $15.95.

and those aren't real horses

something peeled
down to speechless wood

duck after duck moving across the sealed windows

it happens even
while she's washing your hair...
(from "Heart-Shaped Recovery Poem")

So we are thrown into the world of David Dodd Lee's *The Nervous Filaments.* This collection reads very much like a memory of some long forgotten, nonexistent place that we so desperately want to (re)discover. It is a melancholic remembering, an evolutionary ache, that unexplainable and universal feeling we wake up with each morning.

Lee plays on our collective emotions in *The Nervous Filaments*, evoking in us a sense of something we knew in a previous life, always bringing us back to this mysterious, and often eerie, "she" who haunts the entire collection. "She" is washing your hair, "and then she's under you, / smelling of sheetrock, stained by antibiotics" ("The Seventies"), until suddenly "she" is searching your palm for a lifeline ("Tachycardia"). Whoever "she" is, she moves from poem to poem, graceful and terrifying. Her placement within the collection helps ground the reader in Lee's world because "she" acts as the guide, leading us through the anxious verse that would be completely unknowable without her. Strangely, "she" herself is unknow-

able, a series of contradictions, the sometimes-lover, the sometimes-monster, the constant ghost at our side: in her we find a piece of ourselves. We become her, if only for a line or two, and thus we become part of the story, no longer mere readers but actors in this strange and nervous world.

Even when "she" is not directly mentioned in a poem, her presence is felt nonetheless. Take, for instance, the title poem, "Nervous Filaments." The "she" is nowhere to be found in this poem, but there is the feeling of her between the lines and Lee can't seem to escape her enigmatic influence:

> slight successive modifications
> you put on the blood.

"She" can be savage, even grotesque, an evil kind of ghost that pushes you to the dark side. Yet later, "she" is pure romance, hiding between the sheets in a room where "there was sun shining all over the bed that beautiful morning."

Many of the most remarkable moments in *The Nervous Filaments* occur in the silence on the page, the white space left so carefully between the lines. Lee never writes more than three lines without a stanza break, but most often, each line remains on its own, carrying a tremendous amount of significance:

> trees film over with ice in the middle of summer
> her hair keeps flying out of her open mouth
> an owl dies on its branch
>
> (from "Who But I, O Reckless Death")

Here again is Lee's mysterious "she," with hair flying unnaturally out of her mouth. Without pausing to explain, Lee moves on, taking a moment of silence before announcing the owl's death. It is difficult to conceive of any real narrative in this collection, and such peculiar, juxtaposed lines separated by breaks lead the reader to wonder what strange land we are traversing.

From line to line, it feels as though we have traveled miles and are surprised by what we discover next, an unanticipated moment that somehow feels familiar,

as in déjà vu, or a dream. In the silence between each line, the reader is forced to pause for an extraordinary amount of time, considering the weight of the line and where Lee might take us next. Perhaps sometimes overly dramatic, the effect is nonetheless memorable and speaks to the reader provocatively. Lee whispers to us about his anxiety, his terror, his love—in short, his human condition: "It's a secret, / the blackness" ("Who But I, O Reckless Death"), a secret each of us keeps.

Lee's sparse use of punctuation instructs the reader how to read the poems: quickly, breathlessly, each line ending in a pause more final than a period. It makes the lines read simultaneously fast *and* slow, so that the reader is rushing to the end of a line only to be halted abruptly. Lee is again using absence to make a statement. What's more, the lack of punctuation—or very little punctuation—is well suited to Lee's controlled hysteria, a prevalent theme throughout the book. In the first poem, we are introduced to the narrator's mood:

> I could see the ambulance spelled
> backwards
> I could see the eels spilling out of the horse's head
> (from "Loveless, The Gravel")

The anxiety here is not overt. The narrator calmly tells us about the ambulance, the eels. Upon rereading these lines, however, the controlled voice reveals itself to be dangerously on edge. The imagery employed—ambulance, eels, horse's head—create a scene bordering on horror. And what's truly horrifying about these poems is their acceptance of this state of being. Arguably, Lee is reflecting the post-9/11 anxiety hidden in all of us, that collective moment that keeps repeating itself in our subconscious,

> the doors keep
> accumulating...
>
> we're sad in our own country.
> (from "Porcelain")

Adding to our growing feeling of anxiety is Lee's use of water as a motif throughout the collection. Like a wave crashing over you again and again, Lee uses water in all its varied forms—rain, snow, ice, fog—to thrust the reader underwater with him, not only as an audience but also as part of the drowning. Lee pulls us through this watery, anxiety-filled landscape, and there is no dry land for the weary. "The room bright in deep water" ("The Seventies"), we are amongst clouds, "two boats, two boys" ("Who But I, O Reckless Death"), snow and rain and a "daydream of water" where "the drought finally never came" ("Contract Pleasure").

Such repetitive imagery casts the reader fully into the collection. We are oriented by the disorientation, realizing that we are fully part of Lee's anxious world whether we want to be or not. It's always snowing again in his poems, always raining softly. In this underwater world, everything is murky, including the narrator's own understanding of himself. We find ourselves in a place as strange as it is familiar, so much like the terror-fueled world in which we wake up daily, performing our routines of controlled chaos. Indeed, "who wouldn't have a nervous breakdown" ("The Pyramids")?

Thomas Calder

"The Sound Track to Your Next Teenage Riot"

Will Boast, *Power Ballads.*
University of Iowa Press, 2011. Paperback, 184 pp, $16.

There are two types of ballads explained in the title story of Will Boast's collection, *Power Ballads.* There is the power ballad itself, which is "tough and theatrical," and the jazz ballad, which is "all restraint." The former contains that hundred-to-one chance of connecting with an audience, while the latter is more self-reflective: "You work, you study to be older, wiser, so that you can play it from a distance, thirty years at least. Jazz knows that experience trumps all, that you take the blows as they come." Throughout the collection's ten stories, Boast's characters are drawn to and torn between such conflicting emotional states. Through music, interwoven in each story, Boast explores connection and disconnection between his characters; the desire for security verses the monotony of stability; the possibility of starting anew juxtaposed with the weight of an uncompromising past.

The opening story, "Sitting In," introduces the reader to Tim, a recurring character who appears in a majority of the stories. "Sitting In" is a recollection of Tim's childhood experience playing live music with a polka band, the Thirty-Pointers, at the local dive, Wenzel's, in his small Wisconsin town. "My mother had died a couple years back," Tim explains, "and Dad still didn't know what to do with me." Music fills the void between Tim and his father. It allows them to be together in a room without the burden of conversation.

At twelve years old, Tim occasionally sits in for Ertold, the polka band's tuba player. "When Dad and I walked through the door, it was always Ertold's eyes I met first—he'd started watching for me, as well—and the look in them was not welcoming." Tension escalates throughout the piece between the boy and the man, although the threat that Tim represents as a replacement does not cross his young

mind. It is the desire to play that consumes Tim. And it is this desire that gradually wears on Ertold, who retaliates by the story's end with an act that unintentionally destroys the Thirty-Pointers and ruins the Sunday night gigs at Wenzel's. Near the story's conclusion, Tim reflects: "It would've taken something I didn't possess at that age to see how much all this meant to sad old Ertold, how badly he needed to be up there playing. Anyway, I didn't have it. I couldn't see."

This lack of insight, and more specifically insight within moments of one's life, carries on throughout the collection. In the title story, "Power Ballads," Tim recounts his time with the band, Soldier, to his girlfriend Kate. Soldier, "a last-gasp eighties band that had lingered into the nineties like a stubborn stain before being erased by grunge and 'alternative'" is intent on a reunion tour ("a counterattack against aging gracefully"). They hire Tim as their replacement drummer. Tim repeats throughout the story how he wants to leave the band, and how he is "ashamed to be seen" in the city with the monstrosity of his new drum kit. Yet Tim stays and bears witness to the band's failed attempt to recreate their former, brief stint with fame. As Carlos, Soldiers' guitarist, explains to Tim: Billy, the lead singer, "wants it to be like it was; acts like he's happy playing these bars, but hell, he's having his mid-life crisis, like we all are." Carlos, perhaps the sole voice of reason in this story, goes on to say, "'But what else you gonna do when the cars are paid off, the kids are in school, and you've redecorated the house five times already? I mean, why the fuck not, right?'" Lines like these, so devastating in their depiction of aging, both pain and invigorate the reader.

In all ten stories in *Power Ballads*, with writing that is at once humorous and heartbreaking, Boast touches on the issues of half-truths, failures to communicate, and the pain involved in self-reflection. In "Mr. Fern, Freestyle," readers experience the generation gap between the church music teacher, Mr. Fern, and three of his students whom Mr. Fern has agreed to help with the recording of their rap album. A similar age gap is explored in "Dead Weight," when the reader again encounters Tim, now a little older and in a new role as the replacement drummer for the up-and-coming metal band, VD3. As opposed to Mr. Fern's use of equipment that is "'older than old school,'" VD3's album "thanks to some sophisticated recording software ... sounded glossy and crunchy, slick and jagged, sensitive and angry all at once. The sound track to your next teenage riot [that] grandma could still buy for

you for Christmas." And while Boast's critique of the modern day music industry provides the reader with some of the collection's more humorous lines, it is in these very lines that Boast himself seems very much like some of his older, more nostalgic characters—characters who are unable and unwilling to let go of their past.

Beyond the music industry, Boast's collection also delivers a healthy dose of social critique. In one story, modern day fame is attacked:

> Thirty years ago, people bragged about their sisters or uncle or brother-in-law ... now everyone wants to be lauded on their own merits, adored if possible ... does getting by no longer constitute life ... now you despise yourself for missing the chance at something better, something that might have gotten you featured in a magazine. Fame is never out of reach.

In another story, the standard etiquette for a one night stand is explored:

> At a certain point, we moved the conversation to my hotel room, both of us making it clear we regarded the whole thing from the proper ironic distance. And generally it was as it should be: two adults screwing toward oblivion, then adding each other on MySpace afterward.

In these critiques, Boast pokes fun at the modern age and new technologies, but also manages to underline the loneliness and disconnection that effects a majority of the characters throughout *Power Ballads*.

Like a good album, each story in Boast's collection builds off the next; no individual story steals the spotlight. *Power Ballads* is a fresh take on the various sides of the music industry, and an exploration of the reality of what it means to be a musician. It would be a disservice, nevertheless, to view this collection as merely a story about musicians. Boast's style is rhythmic. His ability to delve into the darkness of failure, alienation, heartbreak, and love, while maintaining a steady balance of humor, provides the reader with a healthy dose of sadness and hilarity—a collection that by its end will leave readers with their reading lamps held high over their heads, ready for an encore.

Kimberly Bruss

To Know Something is to Kill It

Colin Cheney, *Here Be Monsters.*
University of Georgia Press, 2010. Paperback, 80 pp, $16.95.

Reading Colin Cheney's collection of poems, selected by David Wojahn for the National Poetry Series in 2009, is akin to being trapped in a coop of wild birds. You breathe in feathers, dirt, amber fluids, and, for a moment, you are certain you are close to death. But Cheney saves us from impending destruction by informing his reader, through imaginative leaps and tightly-packed poems, that in order to escape destruction, we must live through it.

If the title wasn't enough to entice the reader, the collection's epigraph is positively mouthwatering:

> Uncharted or treacherous waters on ancient maps of the sea are believed to have been inscribed with the phrase "Here Be Monsters." However, no surviving map seems to bear such an inscription.

What follows is an eerie, beautiful unfolding of doubt and mystery. German Shepherds are confused with coyotes, water guns seem just as threatening as metal and bullets, and the water is always hiding something. The disappearance of the inscription "Here Be Monsters" on those ancient maps has lulled us into false security; Cheney's collection reminds us that we are not safe.

Mixing Biblical and Greek mythology, Darwinism, and ekphrastic musings into a modern, though not necessarily urban, landscape, Cheney creates a world where the only action one is capable of is reaction. In "Watson and the Shark," we see the human subject's inability to navigate around death, quite literally because a dead whale has entered the mouth of a canal and gotten stuck:

> Maybe they wait for the canal, in thunderstorm,
> to reverse course & return the corpse
> to sea on its acres of rain.
> Or haul him up Red Hook's
> shore, by the grain elevator, to be butchered
> & driven to the fields of Fresh Kills
> to sleep, unable to decay, in the leachate & graves.

There is doubt, hesitation, trepidation, and no answer, no way to circumvent the gigantic model of death blocking the waterway. Again and again, Cheney shows his reader that death and destruction are inevitable: a young girl inadvertently drinks poison, nettles and thistles pop up in unconventional and inconvenient places, an unconvinced soldier shoots a dead man for good measure. And yet, like Jonah, a figure that Cheney returns to repeatedly, we must not only weather this storm, we must let it inhabit us. Jonah enters the belly of the fish and, in doing so, becomes a part of that which should destroy him, which is precisely what saves him. Cheney's speaker, in the final poem of the series, finds inside himself the water that has been a source of fear and destruction throughout the collection:

> On the train south, the salt marshes
> wake me whenever we cross water,
> saying we are fucking inside you,
> so caught up in light we can hardly bear it.

But the most pervasive image throughout the collection is that of birds. The cover of *Here Be Monsters* is a photograph entitled "Mattie with a Northern Red-Shafted Flicker, Laverty Ranch, Idaho, 2005." It displays a young woman holding an ornate bird by its wings; it is unclear whether she is holding the bird together or about to rip it apart. This cover, unlike many gracing the covers of contemporary poetry collections, is no abstraction. It is a promise. Cheney's pages are filled with birds and the myths that accompany them. In "How We Were Spared," birds serve as models, sources of hope for humans:

Pheonix, reports Pliny, build nests of cinnamon

& frankincense, so maybe we'll be alright.
Let's agree that oysters have no senses

& that the air was safe to breathe.
Hawks don't eat hearts of other birds

& we take care of our own.

The positions that nature and birds inhabit over the course of the collection change with every poem. At times, birds are sources of pleasure and beauty. Other times, they bring with them contamination and disease. Again Cheney illustrates that nothing—including nature—is to be trusted.

Cheney's poetry is not an easy read, however. Readers looking for some sort of over-arching narrative will not only be disappointed, they will be frustrated by Cheney's wild leaps and associations. Take, for example, this excerpt from "Half Ourselves and Half Not":

If you sleep the night inside someone, her cells,
saltwater stained, fuse with yours like the blood of twins.

Apes in Mauritania grow stronger, Galileo tells us,
influenced by the sphere of angels.

Here, then—thumbnail sketches
for zoning changes along the riparian bank

of the species boundary, for chimera.

While not completely unfounded, these leaps in time, scene, and diction could perplex the reader, leaving him ungrounded and alone. And while Cheney

bridges these gaps with music—the unexpected alliteration of "saltwater stained," the metrical balance of "thumbnail sketches"—there will be readers who are not willing to follow Cheney along.

Formally, the poems attempt to explore the possibilities of the page, but Cheney seems most comfortable when writing in tightly-regimented stanzas, single-stanza poems, or the couplet. Poems that diverge from these forms, such as portions of "Watson and the Shark" and "Stabat Mater (Marie Curie's Pitchblende)," seem less confident than pieces like "Ars Poetica with Vulture," which is composed of tercets with a closing couplet. The restraint offered in the forms Cheney uses most often is necessary in order to balance the wildness of his images—the poems that lack this structure have less grounding them.

Someone once told me they didn't like poetry because poets always seem to think they know more than their audience. There may be some poets like that out there, but Colin Cheney doesn't want to be one of them. Though his poems are at times puzzling and difficult, Cheney's speaker in *Here Be Monsters* seems comfortable only in the act of not knowing. The collection is a striking and, at times, disturbing evaluation of a contemporary mind. Myth, history, science, religion, and nature mingle helter-skelter throughout the collection if only to prove that nothing can be trusted. In *Here Be Monsters*, the reader is promised only one thing—that truth is dangerous and certainty is merely a legend.

Lauren Genovesi

Miniature/Grand

Kjersti A. Skomsvold, translated by Kerri A. Pierce, *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am.* Dalkey Archive Press, 2011. Hardcover, 112 pp, $17.95.

Kjersti A. Skomsvold's first novel, *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am*, is the absurdly gloomy story of Mathea Martinsen, a nearly one-hundred-year-old woman who is forced to reconsider the terms of her life and encroaching death when her husband Epsilon dies. Shrunken by social anxiety that prevents her from even basic interactions, Mathea is well aware of her insignificance. But her ego is delightfully elastic. Large and contradictory, it often inflates to unexpected proportions in the most ridiculous and heart-warming ways. The novel's scale, too, can seem at turns both miniature and grand. Skomsvold manages—by a precise and original register, a self-assured authorial voice, and a merciless sense of humor—to sketch Mathea's little world like a diorama that feels to the reader who enters it like an amphitheater.

The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am does not have much of a narrative plot. Instead, Mathea's emotional arc is drawn by small, inconspicuous scenes that rarely take her out of her apartment, which incidentally has grass colored wall-to-wall carpeting and a ceiling that would have been painted blue if Mathea had her way. Symbolically, this setting is an effective statement that both contains Mathea's agoraphobia and expresses her desire to transcend it. When she does get out of the house, her greatest accomplishment is asking a stranger for the time, a feat that spurs her to perform a series of small acts of courage. She dons Epsilon's watch to encourage strangers to ask her for the time (which they don't), buries a time capsule in her yard (which is dug up to make room for a flagpole), uses the dreaded telephone to dial directory assistance (to request her own number), and finally, attends a raffle for seniors (where her own sweater is mistakenly auctioned off).

The impact of these non-events is dramatic and affecting, as the reader's sympathies for Mathea are expertly generated and provoked. One way Skomsvold

achieves this is by her manipulation of tense. Mathea narrates between present action in present tense and past action in past tense, but her and the novel's conception of time is greatly complicated by the fact that Epsilon, her dead husband, is a player in both realms. It may be several chapters before the reader sees through Mathea's delusions and realizes that her life-long partner has died before the novel starts. When she mentions in the midst of present action that "Epsilon always buys in bulk," or that he "is always careful to keep the watch wound," a moving pathos echoes from her scattered, old-lady mutterings, speaking volumes about her loneliness. This is Skomsvold's shorthand for communicating that Epsilon himself, not his ghost, still lives in Mathea's flat like a child's imaginary friend. As a result, Mathea's infrequent acknowledgements of her husband's death are all the more poignant:

> The bookshelf can't hold much more than Epsilon's books. He has every issue of the Statistical Yearbook ever published.... They're arranged in order and I don't have the heart to take them down.

This moment in the novel represents one of several turns by which Mathea surprises with her self-awareness. Another is the wisdom as well as the delivery in the following insight: "I could have been an alcoholic. If I'd gotten out more, I definitely would have been." That the novel makes space for such disclosures speaks to the layers of complexity of both it and its main character. For example, at one moment during a contemplation of her extreme isolation, she states, "I wish I were under house arrest. Trapped in my home like Aung San Suu Kyi." It's strange but notable that Mathea doesn't kid herself into simplifying her desire. Most social isolates would probably wish, say, for less difficulty in getting outside. But such a wish is also the wish to be a different person, and that is not what Mathea wants. Rather, she wants to be justified in desiring what she desires, and she wishes the justification—in this case, justification of her containment—to be on a grand scale.

It is this contradiction that is the most prominent and interesting of Mathea's traits—her desire to be both big and small at the same time. It is summed up several times, but perhaps most succinctly in this observation about a man she

watches on the news "who thinks our goal in life should be to leave no trace ... and I think I could be an honored member of that movement." She is the best nobody that ever existed, and Skomsvold makes this point again and again. That she goes to the trouble of making and burying a time capsule of her own possessions is another example of her skewed sense of her own importance. But that she only ends up putting one item inside of it—not to mention her barely surprised reaction when the box is unearthed to make room for a flagpole—proves that she has a very solid sense of her insignificance. Mathea lives, mysteriously, in this contradiction. Situated solidly in the north pole of insignificance and invisibility, her ego still throbs every so often, asserting itself in a childlike, and yet one-hundred-year-old, self-centeredness:

> I've knitted myself a hat, it's plum red with an appealing lace pattern ... I put it on and feel like a cranberry in the snow, and I wonder if they can see me from the moon. Me and the great wall.

Mathea's childishness is certainly at the center of her character. She is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to produce in her monologue quaint and simple rhymes, which are inevitably followed up to humorous effect by the refrain, "That rhymes." As is the case in this instance, she is rarely privy to the humor that arises from her thoughts and sparse interactions. At one point, she narrates a conversation she had earlier in her life with a neighbor woman, about the man who lives across the hall: "'Did you know he's schizophrenic?' [Mathea asks] 'No, he's not,' [the neighbor] said. 'Oh, but he is,' I said. 'I've heard several voices coming from his apartment.'" There is no indication, even after all these years, that Mathea understands her misinterpretation of the sounds she hears. As Skomsvold reveals Mathea's blind spots, the humor is presented for the reader's sake, behind Mathea's back. And yet, if at times it is merciless, it is never cruel.

However much this original, affecting novel is about Mathea Martinsen, it is much more than a character study. Rather, it is an arresting meditation on life and death by a very talented young author. The work's beauty is most evident in the cracks between Mathea's naïveté and the author's wisdom, conveyed in often

perfect pitch. It is evident, even in translation, that Skomsvold's mastery of tone is the source of her wisdom, and her power:

> I wonder what will happen to all our things, they'll probably be thrown out and our memories with them. And I wonder what the deepest lake in the world is.

Elisa Albert is the author of a novel, *The Book of Dahlia*, and a collection of short stories, *How This Night is Different.* She was born and raised in Los Angeles and now lives with her family in upstate New York, where she is at work on a novel, a translation project, and some real-life stuff too.

Jeff Alessandrelli lives in Lincoln, NE, where he co-curates the latest incarnation of The Clean Part Reading Series. He is the author of the little book *Erik Satie Watusies His Way Into Sound* (Ravenna Press, 2011) and the chapbook *Don't Let Me Forget To Feed the Sharks* (Poor Claudia, 2012). The name of his dog is Beckett Long Snout.

Steve Almond is the author of seven books, most recently the story collection *God Bless America.*

Diane Barber is an Independent Curator based in Houston, Texas. Her projects include major exhibitions with an international roster of artists. Prior to working independently, Barber served as Co-Director/Visual Arts Curator for DiverseWorks ArtSpace and Exhibitions/Publications Coordinator for FotoFest International. She is past board president of the National Association of Artist Organizations and a founding member of the Independent Arts Collaborative, a Houston-based organization working to develop a multi-tenant arts complex in Houston's urban core.

Rick Barot has published two books of poetry with Sarabande Books: *The Darker Fall* (2002), and *Want* (2008), which was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and won the 2009 Grub Street Book Prize. His poems and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The Threepenny Review*. He lives in Tacoma, WA, and teaches at Pacific Lutheran University, and in the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

For two years **Alan Barstow** taught English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Namibia, but he learned much more than he taught. Six months after Tomas completed his homestead, Alan met a woman whom he would later marry. They've been together for seven years, and she supported him while he earned an MFA in creative nonfiction at the University of Wyoming. Alan's work has appeared in *The Sun*, *American Literary Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *10,000 Tons of Black Ink.*

Ciaran Berry's first full-length collection, *The Sphere of Birds*, was published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2008. His work has appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, and Pushcart anthologies as well as a number of journals. He teaches at Trinity College in Hartford, CT.

Jason Bredle is the author of three books and three chapbooks, most recently *Smiles of the Unstoppable* and *The Book of Evil.* His fourth book, *Carnival*, will be available from the University of Akron Press in 2012. He lives in Chicago.

Kimberly Bruss is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Carand Burnet is a writer and mixed media artist. Her poems have been featured in *Omphalos Journal*, *The Arsenic Lobster*, *ken*again Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. "Axis" is her first published nonfiction essay. Currently, she lives in western Massachusetts and is a contributor to *Art New England Magazine.*

Thomas Calder is a fiction student at the University of Houston, working toward his MFA. He received his BA in English at the University of Florida. Currently, he is writing a novel.

Liam Callanan is the author of the novels *The Cloud Atlas* and *All Saints*, both from Dial, and the creator of the Poetry Everywhere film series. He chairs the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and lives down the street from school. He's also on the web at liamcallanan.com, which has, among other things, a variety of audio links but no screams.

Lisa Cattrone received her BA in philosophy and MFA in poetry from Saint Mary's College of California where she also studied dance and drama. She taught for six years in a high school for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and/or learning disabilities. She has work in various magazines and forthcoming in *VOLT* and *The Denver Quarterly*. She has two small children.

Victoria Chang's second book of poems, *Salvinia Molesta*, was published in 2008 by the University of Georgia Press as part of the VQR Poetry Series. Her first book, *Circle*, won the Crab Orchard Review Open Competition Prize in Poetry and was published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 2005. She also edited an anthology titled *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, published by The University of Illinois Press (2004). She lives in Southern California and works as a business writer.

Brock Clarke is the author of five books of fiction, most recently the novels *Exley* and *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*. His short fiction, essays, reviews, and columns have appeared in a number of magazines, journals, and newspapers. He lives in Portland, ME, and teaches at Bowdoin College.

Thomas Cooper's recent fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Oxford American*, *Boulevard*, and *Sonora Review*, among many other places. He lives in New Orleans and is finishing a novel called *Barataria*.

Kay Cosgrove's work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *Zone 3*, *Lumina*, and *Moon Milk Review*, among others. She is a first-year doctoral candidate in the University of Houston's Literature and Creative Writing Program.

Jehanne Dubrow is the author of three poetry collections, including most recently *Stateside*. In 2012, Northwestern University Press will publish her fourth book of poems, *Red Army Red*. Her work has appeared in *Southern Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Ploughshares*. She is the Interim Director of the Rose O'Neill Literary House and an assistant professor in creative writing at Washington College.

Lauren Genovesi is a doctoral candidate at University of Houston. Her work has appeared in *American Literary Review*, *Poet Lore*, and other magazines.

Brandi George's work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Cimarron Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *CutBank*, *Best New Poets* 2010, and elsewhere. She currently resides in Tallahassee, where she teaches writing.

Lisa Glatt is the author of the novel *A Girl Becomes a Comma Like That* and the short story collection *The Apple's Bruise*. Her fiction has appeared in *Zoetrope*, *Mississippi Review*, *Columbia*, *Indiana Review*,

Pearl, and *The Sun*. With her colleague and friend, Suzanne Greenberg, Lisa has published two children's novels, *Abigail Iris: The One and Only* and *Abigail Iris: The Pet Project*. Lisa teaches at California State University, Long Beach, and is married to writer David Hernandez.

Kathleen Graber's second collection of poems, *The Eternal City* (Princeton University Press, 2010), was a finalist for The National Book Award, The National Book Critics Circle Award, and The William Carlos Williams Award. It was the winner of The Library of Virginia Literary Award for Poetry. She is an assistant professor of English in the Creative Writing Program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Bradley Harrison grew up in small-town Iowa and is a graduate of Truman State University. Currently a Michener Fellow at the University of Texas in Austin, he studies both poetry and fiction and is an editor for *Bat City Review*. His work can be found in past, current, or forthcoming issues of *CutBank*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Nimrod*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *The Offending Adam*, *Memorious*, and other journals. His dog not-so-recently ate his glasses.

Allison Hunter is a visual artist who over the past twenty years has worked in photography, video, drawing, sculpture, and installation. Hunter earned MFAs at the Cantonal Art School of Lausanne, Switzerland and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. Her photographs are collected by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the University Art Museum at SUNY, the Albany Institute of History and Art, and the Center for Photography at Woodstock. More information is available at allisonhunter.com.

Joy Katz is the author of three poetry collections: *The Garden Room* (Tupelo), *Fabulae* (Southern Illinois), and a still-untitled volume to be published by Four Way in 2013. Recent poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Blackbird*, and elsewhere. Her honors include a 2011 fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Pushcart residency at Jentel. She teaches in the graduate writing program at Chatham University and lives in Pittsburgh.

Etgar Keret was born in Tel Aviv in 1967. His writing has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *Zoetrope*. His feature film *Wristcutters* (2006) won several international awards, and *$9.99*, based on a number of his short stories, was released to critical acclaim in 2009. Keret lectures at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He has received the Book Publishers Association's Platinum Prize several times, the Prime Minister's Prize, the Ministry of Culture's Cinema Prize, the Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize (UK, 2008) and the St Petersburg Public Library's Foreign Favorite Award (2010). In 2007, Keret and Shira Gefen won the Cannes Film Festival's "Camera d'Or" Award for their movie *Jellyfish*, and Best Director Award of the French Artists and Writers' Guild. In 2010, Keret was honored in France with the decoration of *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. His books have been published abroad in 31 languages in 35 countries.

Jennifer L. Knox's new book of poems, *The Mystery of the Hidden Driveway*, is available from Bloof Books. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, and four volumes of the *Best American Poetry* series. She is at work on her first novel, *Captain Cook Returns*.

Tom Lake is the pen name of a writer who lives in central Pennsylvania, but sometimes misses homes he has known near Spruce Knob and Brushy Fork in West Virginia. He teaches composition and business

writing at a university, but sometimes wonders what it would be like to teach caving and stream ecology again. His essays are forthcoming in *Indiana Review*.

A 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, **Sam Lipsyte** is the author of the story collection *Venus Drive* and three novels: *The Ask*, a New York Times Notable book for 2010, *The Subject Steve* and *Home Land*, a New York Times Notable Book and winner of the first annual Believer Book Award. Lipsyte's fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *The Quarterly*, *Tin House*, *Noon*, and *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, among other places. He lives in New York and teaches at Columbia University's School of the Arts.

Patricia Lockwood's first book, *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black*, is forthcoming from Octopus Books in 2012. Recent poems have appeared or soon will appear in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

Marni Ludwig holds degrees from Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and Washington University in St. Louis, where she is the Third Year Poetry Fellow and teaches an undergraduate poetry workshop. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Assembly*, *Boulevard*, *High Chair*, *JERRY*, and *Western Humanities Review*. Her chapbook, *Little Box of Cotton and Lightning*, was selected by Susan Howe for a 2011 PSA Chapbook Fellowship. She lives in St. Louis, MO, and Brooklyn, NY.

Matthew Mahaney was born in one place, grew up in another, and has since lived in several more. He currently lives in Tuscaloosa, where he is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama. Other writing appears or is forthcoming in *GlitterPony*, *Indiana Review*, *Jellyfish*, *NANO Fiction*, *PANK*, and *Redivider*, among others.

Sarah Manguso is the author of the book-length essay *The Guardians*, the memoir *The Two Kinds of Decay*, the short-story collection *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, and the poetry collections *Siste Viator* and *The Captain Lands in Paradise*. Her work has been published in the *Guardian*, the *London Review of Books*, *McSweeney's*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Magazine*, three volumes of the *Best American Poetry* series, and elsewhere. Honors for her writing include a Hodder Fellowship and the Rome Prize.

Erin Lyndal Martin is the associate fiction editor for *H_ngm_n*. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Guernica*, *Pank*, and *InDigest*. She also contributes music journalism to *The Rumpus*, *The Quietus*, *PopMatters*, and her own site, Euterpe's Notebook.

Marilyn Martin received her MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. She is the author of a book about her experience parenting a child with a nonverbal learning disability, and her essays have appeared in the *Southern Indiana Review*, *Front Porch Journal*, and *The MacGuffin*.

Zachary Martin is a graduate of the Creative Writing Program at Florida State University. His fiction, nonfiction, and humor have appeared in places such as *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Washington Square*, and *Fourth Genre*. He is an assistant fiction editor for *Gulf Coast*.

Adrian Matejka is the author of *The Devil's Garden* (Alice James Books, 2003), *Mixology* (Penguin USA, 2009), and *The Big Smoke* (Penguin USA, forthcoming in 2013). He teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Kyle McCord is the author of two books of poetry. *Galley of the Beloved in Torment* was the winner of the 2008 Orphic Prize. His second book, co-written with poet Jeannie Hoag, is a book of epistolary poems entitled *Informal Invitations to a Traveler.* His work is featured in or forthcoming from *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Boston Review*, *Columbia Poetry Journal*, *Third Coast*, *Volt*, and elsewhere. He co-edits *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry.*

Shane McCrae is the author of *Mule* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2011), and two chapbooks, *One Neither One* (Octopus Books, 2009) and *In Canaan* (Rescue Press, 2010). His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *The Best American Poetry 2010*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, *Agni*, and others. In 2011, he received a Whiting Writer's Award.

John McNally is author of three novels and two story collections, most recently *Ghosts of Chicago* and *After the Workshop*. He's also author of *The Creative Writer's Survival Guide: Advice from an Unrepentant Novelist*. His fiction has appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Open City*, and *New England Review*, among other magazines. He lives in North Carolina.

Erika Meitner is the author of *Ideal Cities* (HarperCollins, 2010), which was a 2009 National Poetry Series winner, and *Makeshift Instructions for Vigilant Girls* (Anhinga, 2011). Her work has appeared most recently in *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Tin House*, and on Slate.com. She is currently an assistant professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she teaches in the MFA program.

Recent work by **Ben Merriman** has appeared in the *Threepenny Review*, *Minnesota Review*, *Portland Review*, *Quick Fiction*, and *The Lifted Brow* (Australia). Read more at benmerriman.tumblr.com.

The nomadic New Orleans-born artist **Angelbert Metoyer** is one of the most imaginative creatives working today. He is interested in what he refers to as the "hidden language of religion" and across all of the mediums he works in: painting, sculpture, performance, video art and sound art. His explorations act as a powerful conduit to ancestral memory and what the radical psychoanalyst Carl C Jung would describe as the essential a priori archetypes that define what it means to be human. He is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Williamsburg Museum of 21st Century Art, NY, and the African American Museum of Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX.

Simone Muench is the author of four poetry books, recently *Orange Crush* (Sarabande, 2010) and *Disappearing Address* (BlazeVOX, 2010), co-written with Philip Jenks. She is at work on a manuscript in collaboration with pre-existing texts called *The Wolf Centos.*

Jason Myers grew up in the Cumberland Valley of Maryland. A graduate of Bennington College, he received his MFA from NYU. His work has appeared in *Agni*, *American Poet*, *Ecotone*, *Indiana Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. He lives in Atlanta, where he is a Master of Divinity student at Emory and a minister at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Robby Nadler is normally a baker for Le Petit Outré in Missoula, Montana, but he is currently on sabbatical in Israel. Included among his writing accomplishments is that he once received a default rejection from *The Paris Review*, and, like the girl who got punched in the face by Regina George in *Mean Girls* said, it was awesome.

Mark Neely's first book, *Beasts of the Hill*, won the 2011 FIELD Poetry Prize. His chapbook, *Four of a Kind*, won the Concrete Wolf chapbook prize. He directs the Creative Writing Program at Ball State University and is the editor of *The Broken Plate*. His website is markneely.com.

Josip Novakovich's new collection of essays, *Shopping for a Better Country*, will be out from Dzanc books in February. He has published four books of fiction in several languages, and has won American Book Award, Guggenheim, Ingram Merrill Award, and other recognitions. This is his third appearance in *Gulf Coast*.

JP O'Malley is a freelance journalist based in London. His work has appeared in various publications, including *The Economist*, *The Newstatesman*, *The Sunday Times*, *The American Interest*, and *The Irish Examiner*.

Erica Olsen's stories and essays have appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *High Country News*, and other magazines. Her collection of short fiction, *Recapture* (which includes "Grand Canyon II"), will be published by Torrey House Press in fall 2012. She has an MFA from the University of Montana, and she lives and works in the Four Corners area, doing contract archives and curation work for archaeology museums.

Michael Ondaatje's most recent novel is *The Cat's Table* (2011). He was born in Sri Lanka in 1943. He moved to England in 1954, and in 1962 moved to Canada where he has lived ever since. He is the author of six novels, including *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Anil's Ghost* (2000), and *The English Patient* (1992), which was a winner of the Booker Prize for Fiction and was made into an Academy Award-winning film in 1996. His collections of poetry include *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), which won the Canadian Governor General's Award in 1971; *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* (1989); and *Handwriting: Poems* (1998). Ondaatje lives in Toronto with his wife, Linda Spalding, with whom he edits the literary journal *Brick*.

Allyson Paty is the author of the chapbook *The Further Away* ([sic] 2012). Her poems have appeared in *Tin House*, *DIAGRAM*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *InDigest*, and elsewhere. Her collaborations with poet Danniel Schoonebeek have appeared on *The Awl*, *HTMLGIANT*, and *Underwater New York*, and are forthcoming in *Colorado Review*. She is from New York.

Emilia Phillips is the Levis Fellow for the Coordination of the Levis Reading Prize at Virginia Commonwealth University and the associate editor emeritus of *Blackbird*. Her poetry appears in or is forthcoming from *Copper Nickel*, *Sycamore Review*, *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere.

Thibault Raoult, born in Pithiviers, France, and raised in Rochester, NY, holds an MFA in Literary Arts from Brown University. *Person Hour*, his first book of poems, was published in 2011. Thi lives in Boulder, CO, teaches in Denver, and sings in DA SO DO DA.

Matt Rasmussen's poetry has been published in *Cimarron Review*, *Water~Stone Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Paper Darts*, *MARGIE*, *New York Quarterly*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Dislocate*, among others. He was a 2009 Bush Artist Fellow for Literature and has received awards, grants, and residencies from The Minnesota State Arts Board, The Corporation of Yaddo, The Loft Literary Center, The Jerome Foundation, Intermedia Arts, and The Anderson Center in Red Wing, MN. He currently teaches at Gustavus Adolphus College. His chapbook, *Fingergun*, was published in 2006 by Kitchen Press and he's a founding co-editor of Birds, LLC, a small, independent poetry press.

Matthew Rohrer is the author of seven books of poems, most recently *Destroyer and Preserver*, published by Wave Books. One of his tattoos has been featured in two different books of literary tattoos. He lives in Brooklyn.

Danniel Schoonebeek's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Boston Review*, *Tin House*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Kenyon Review*, *La Petite Zine*, *The Rumpus*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Collagist*, and elsewhere. He was born in the Catskills.

Amy Lee Scott received an MFA from the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program. Her writing has appeared in, or is forthcoming in, *New Letters*, *Sycamore Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Best of the Web 2010*, *Brevity*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *The Iron Horse Literary Review*. Another essay received notable mention in *The Best American Essays 2009*.

Sondra Silverston is a native New Yorker who has lived in Israel since 1970. Among her published translations are works by Israeli authors Amos Oz, Eshkol Nevo, Savyon Liebrecht, and Aharon Megged.

Sandra Simonds is the author of *Warsaw Bikini* (Bloof Books, 2009) and *Mother Was a Tragic Girl* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, forthcoming). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Fence*, *The Believer*, *Black Warrior Review*, *American Poetry Review*, and others.

Mathias Svalina is the author of one book of poetry, *Destruction Myth* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center), and one book of prose, *I Am A Very Productive Entrepreneur* (Mud Luscious Press). With Alisa Heinzman and Zachary Schomburg, he co-edits Octopus Books.

Deb Olin Unferth is the author of the memoir *Revolution*, the story collection *Minor Robberies*, and the novel *Vacation*, a New York Times Critics' Choice and winner of the Cabell First Novel Award. Her work has been published in *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The Believer*, the *Boston Review*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. She has received two Pushcart Prizes and a Creative Capital Grant for Innovative Literature.

Sonja Vitow is a second-year MFA candidate at Emerson College in Boston, MA. This is her first publication.

G.C. Waldrep's recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Boulevard*, *Verse*, *New American Writing*, *Boston Review*, and other journals. His fourth collection, *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts* (in collaboration with John Gallaher), was released by BOA Editions in 2011. He lives in Lewisburg, PA, where he teaches at Bucknell University, edits the journal *West Branch*, and serves as editor-at-large for *The Kenyon Review*.

Fritz Ward's poems have appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Blackbird*, *Salt Hill*, *Hotel Amerika*, and other fine journals. He is a recipient of the Cecil Hemley Memorial Prize from the Poetry Society of America, and his manuscript, *Letters from the Handmade Dark*, was recently a semi-finalist for the Academy of American Poets Walt Whitman Award and a finalist for both the National Poetry Series Competition and Four Way Books' Levis Prize. He currently lives in Philadelphia and works at Swarthmore College.

Kevin Wilson is the author of the collection *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth* (Ecco/Harper Perennial, 2009), which received an Alex Award from the American Library Association and the Shirley Jackson Award, and a novel, *The Family Fang* (Ecco, 2011). He lives in Sewanee, TN.

Paul Zaic is from Dumfries, Virginia and is an MFA candidate at George Mason University. This is his first publication.

Katia Zavistovski is a PhD student in art history at Rice University, and the John & Dominique de Menil Curatorial Fellow at the Menil Collection, Houston. She is a regular contributor to *Arts + Culture* Magazine. She organized the exhibition *InVisible: Art at the Edge of Perception* (2010) for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and is currently organizing an exhibition for the Lawndale Art Center, Houston.

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