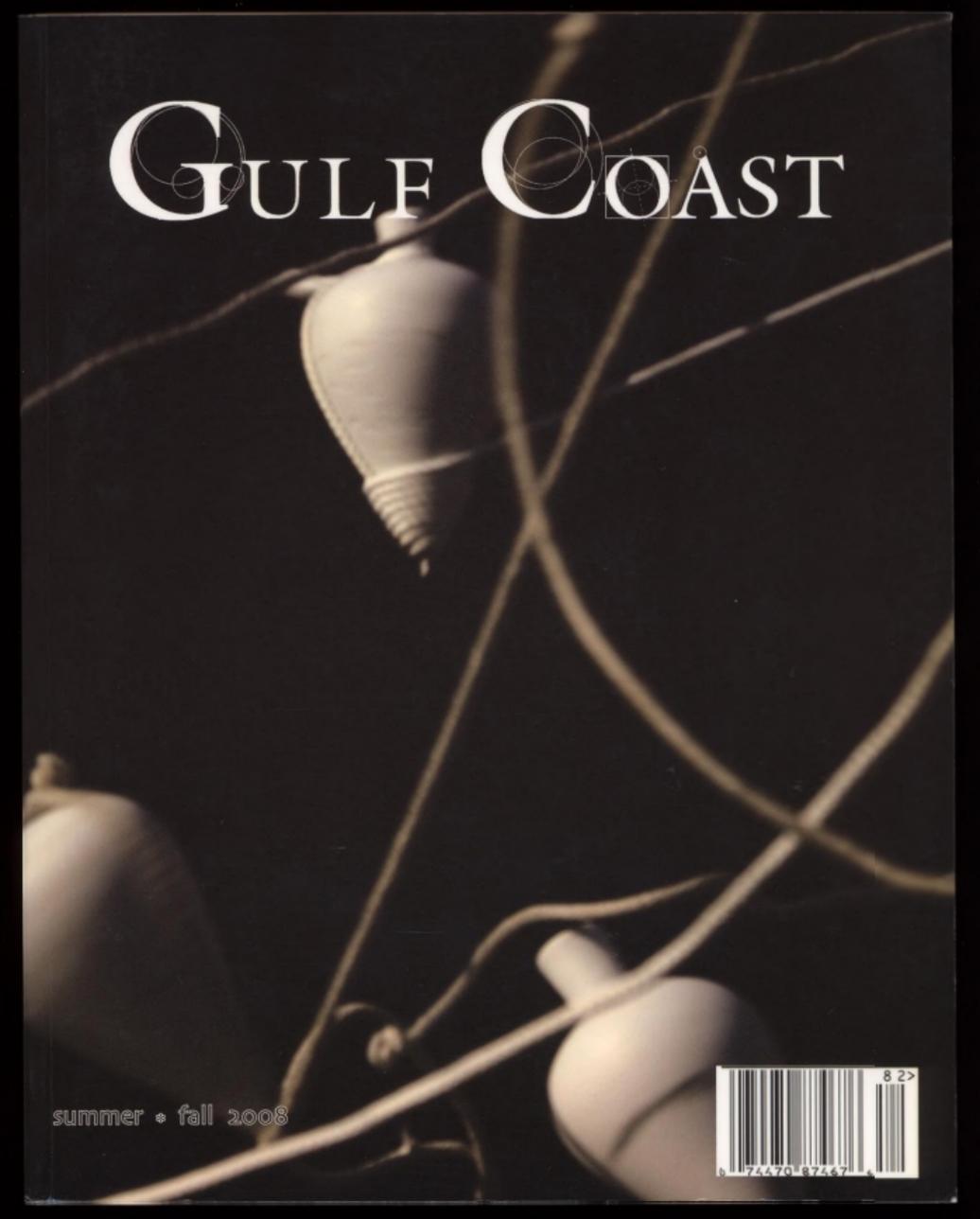


# GULF COAST



summer • fall 2008







# GULF COAST

VOLUME 20, NUMBER 2



*Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts* is largely funded by the Brown Foundation, Inc.; the Cullen Foundation; Inprint, Inc.; Houston Endowment, Inc.; the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance; the Texas Commission on the Arts; the University of Houston English Department; and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Our thanks to J. Kastely, Kathy Smathers, Shatera Dixon, and the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston; Wyman Herendeen, Carol Barr, Judy Calvez, Nancy Ortega-Fraga, George Barr, Julie Kofford, Dorothy Baker, and the Department of English at the University of Houston; John Antel, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston; Renu Khator, president of the University of Houston; Rich Levy, Marilyn Jones, Kristi Beer, and Krupa Parikh of Inprint, Inc.; Jane Moser and the Brazos Bookstore, Houston; and the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Published twice yearly in October and April. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors. Send queries and manuscripts to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013. Specify genre (fiction, poetry, nonfiction, or review) on the outside of your envelope. All correspondence must be accompanied by a cover letter and a self-addressed and stamped envelope. Response time is 4 to 6 months. *Gulf Coast* does not read unsolicited submissions from April 15 to August 15.

A two-year subscription is \$30.

A one-year subscription is \$16.

Back issues are \$7.

Send subscription requests to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013.

*Gulf Coast* is listed in the Humanities International Complete.

Distributed in North America by Ingram Periodicals Inc., 1240 Heil Quaker Blvd., LaVergne, TN 37086, (615) 793-5522.

ISSN: 0896-2251

Please visit our website at: [www.gulfcoastmag.org](http://www.gulfcoastmag.org)





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*Figure 1.1*

A girl becomes aware of herself as a girl. She is approximately five years old (maybe six, at the oldest seven). Note the mother instructing this girl that she must now wear a t-shirt while playing in the summertime with the boys on the block. Note the girl's naked torso, her downward gaze onto an expanse of bare flesh punctuated by two flat nipples. Outside the sun bears down, its heat insistent, but the afternoon breeze a familiar pleasure on this skin. Radiating lines from the girl's face indicate a new source of heat: the first inklings of shame. But also—beneath, within, around that shame—something more complex, a deeper pleasure, the first inklings of power.

*Figure 2.3*

A girl, circa age ten, lying face down on her bed. The chenille bedspread impresses little dots on her face, her bare arms. Note how she has instinctually scootched down to the edge of the mattress, her legs straddling the hard corner. She gives a little sigh, a sigh that's almost a sob, as her body tingles all over, gives way. No one is watching, and yet she feels watched in a way that induces both shame and pleasure, the two distinctly entwined. Note the closed door of the bedroom, the absence of any adults, the room an incandescent secret, a sanctuary.

*Figure 3.5*

A girl, age 12, on the diving board of her family's doughboy swimming pool. The two flat bands on her torso indicate that a bikini (polka-dotted) is being worn. Radiating lines from her torso indicate that this girl has just realized she is really, really, really in love with her belly button (a classic "inny," round and symmetrical as a dime).

*Figure 3.6*

Note the jutting hipbones. The high cheekbones. Collarbone swooping to her shoulders. Eyes, almost too large for her face. These, she hopes, are the beginnings of beauty, though boys sometimes still bark at her (actually bark!) when she enters a classroom. *What a dog*, they snicker behind their hands. She keeps her head up, her chin jutting out, her gaze insistently forward, though tears smart in the corners of her eyes. Acne blares on her cheeks and her chin, furious red cysts, a smattering of whiteheads across her nose. Her hair, only an hour into the day, already an oily smear across her forehead. Braces, glasses: the whole catastrophe. *A dog*. She had a dog named Sheba, a Great Dane, her coat sleek and brindled, the most beautiful creature on the planet. The boys whimper and yowl until the teacher, exasperated, finally tells them to *shut up*. The teacher says nothing to her, keeps his gaze turned away. No one, not even the girls who eat lunch with her on the playground, will meet her eye.

*Figure 3.8*

At home, she feels herself growing, a tingling pressure that actually stings in her bones. *Look*, she whispers to herself in the mirror, *look*. She touches these points of her body, one by one. Clavicle, Hipbone, Lips, Eyes. Loving them. *Look at me*, she whispers. She takes off her shirt, holds her palms against the swellings of breast. Nipples rise, curious and insistent. This is what makes her a girl. That, and something else she can't quite put her finger on.

*Table 4*

Indicates the ratio of the number of fights girl has with her father about the clothing she wears (example: sheer halter top that barely covers her breasts, forcing her father to utter the word "nipple" with such embarrassed force it startles her for a moment from her blasé teenaged countenance)—to the number of boys she has kissed. Note steep rise circa age 15, when girl

loses her virginity.

*Figure 4.1*

Girl lying on her bed, considering the phrase “lost her virginity.” The word “lost” floats around her belly button. And she wonders how something can feel so lost when it never felt as though it fully belonged to her in the first place. She wonders how something so momentous could happen at three o’clock in the afternoon, in the full light of day, the backyard still so much itself: the jungle gym still creaking, eucalyptus trees forever shedding their bark. It took less time than watching an after-school special. *Lost. Virginity.* She wonders if there might be a lost-and-found somewhere far into her future where such things—virginity, power, self-confidence—can be reclaimed.

*Plate 5*

Photo of girl at her sweet-sixteen party, just days after losing her virginity. Her mother has made her a birthday cake in the shape of a green-and-white panda. Her hair is long and curls fetchingly around her face. She is smiling, indicating with one hand (like a game-show hostess) the innocent and elaborate cake. She wears a short-sleeved turtleneck sweater, green too, like her eyes. Her cheeks are unblemished, covered by Maybelline. She looks sweet. She looks sixteen. The boy to whom she’s given her virginity, *lost* her virginity, hovers somewhere outside the frame, one arm around his girlfriend’s waist. He holds her virginity carelessly, tossing it in one hand, like a dime-store bauble meant to last only a day. The cake glows with a gob of light that’s about to be extinguished.

*Figure 6.1*

Girl in bed with a man. The man is 20 years old and should know better. Angry zigzag lines around the bed indicate that the phone has just rung, the father looking for his 17-year-old daughter, the ring of the telephone as

strident as his voice will be when the man hands her the phone. *Get home right now, young lady*, his words right out of a television sitcom, her reaction scripted, too, *okay, okay*, as she pulls back the covers, slips on her jeans. She is secretly pleased to have been caught; it means she is beautiful. It means they have risked something to be together, and so she must be valuable, worth something. On her belly is an imprint of the man's hand, a ghostly white, each stubby finger outlined—an emblem of their day on the Santa Monica beach, his hand shading just that part of her belly, while the rest of her burned to a russet glow. She hadn't wanted to move from under that hand, to wake him, so now her skin burns under the waistband of her jeans. But his hand is still on her (fingers deftly framing the belly button) and will remain a badge of her desirability for a week. Until it fades away, the skin around this temporary tattoo peeling and singed.

#### *Line Graph 8*

The girl becomes (officially) a woman, and on this graph one can plot how her lovers accumulate. Line 1 spikes upward (number of lovers) but, surprisingly, line 2 (the sense of herself as a loveable creature) declines in parallel proportions. Line 3 (the loneliness factor) remains nearly constant. Experts call this phenomenon "Aphrodite's Paradox." Attempts to reverse this trend have thus far failed, but experiments are ongoing.

#### *Sidebar: Clarification of Terms*

She is not a *slut*, as a *slut* would be a woman who sleeps with anyone. A woman who *puts out*. A slut looks like a slut, whereas this woman, for the most part, dresses rather primly, in clothes that disguise her thick waist, in colors that flatter her pretty eyes, those high cheekbones. She is not *promiscuous*, exactly, as a *promiscuous* woman "chooses carelessly or without discrimination." She chooses quite carefully, dating men who are dangerously handsome, whose radar, when focused on her, make her feel looked at by God. And when their gazes drift and falter, as they

inevitably do, she feels banished, exiled from that celestial kingdom. She is *monogamous*. Perhaps she engages in what is called *serial monogamy*. In fact, she does not *date* so much as find herself in *long-term relationships* that tend to flaunt their failings quite early on, but that keep reviving *on-again, off-again*, so that her young womanhood is taken up with this exhausting dance between extremes. She'll do almost anything to make a relationship linger—cook elaborate dinners, buy sexier shoes, keep nodding sympathetically to whatever he says—terrified of being *lost*. In between these *long-term relationships*, she can easily go three or four years before sleeping with someone again, and during these times can convince herself she will be *single* forever, and she makes purchases with this prophecy in mind: a small bed, a possessive cat, a house large enough for one. She has never borne the designations: *fiancé, bride, wife, mother*. She is an *aunt*. She is called *auntie* by children who don't know her very well, the diminutive cute and unthreatening. She has considered the term: *nun*. She mulls on the word, *virgin*, how so often it means *unspoiled*. She tries not to dwell on this word: *spinster*.

#### *Diagram 9*

A schematic that shows how to use Match.com (and its parallel counterparts: Green Singles, J-Date, e-Harmony, etc.) for maximum effectiveness. "It's a numbers game," one aspirant has put it. Learn how to spot the red flags as they pop up and frantically wave. Be aware that those who have the most idealistic vision of a relationship will be those least ready for a relationship. Learn how to answer the question, asked within the first five minutes of a coffee date, "So why haven't you ever been married?" with a flippant, "I guess I've just been lucky" rather than with the retort that burns on your tongue: *I don't know, I guess because I'm just basically an unlovable person; is that a problem?* Be aware that those who say "inner beauty" is most important will be those who, after seeing only a picture, send quick emails saying: "You seem like a very nice person, but I

just don't sense the chemistry, the spark." Learn to distrust chemistry and sparks. Amateur chemists love to make things explode. Sparks are wild and uncontrollable; they ignite small brush fires that, even when squelched, can smolder for months.

*Figure 9*

A woman in bed with a handsome and sexy man. Note a mirror version of this woman hovering near the ceiling, looking down on herself in bed with a handsome and sexy man. Every time she makes love with a man this phenomenon occurs. Experts call it "disassociation"; she calls it "look-I'm-in-bed-with-a-handsome-and-sexy-man-who-wants-me" syndrome. She wonders to whom she is declaring this rather obvious proclamation and realizes, with a twinge, that she is still talking to those boys in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the ones who called her *a dog* and panted with their tongues hanging out. She wishes she could just stay in bed with the man, the two of them alone, without anyone watching, but knows that such a thing is impossible. Someone is always watching. Someone is always passing judgment, thumbs up or thumbs down. Thumbs press into her body all over, pointing this way and that, leaving ghostly imprints behind.

*Figure 10*

A woman alone in her house. She is 48 years old and still—after all this time—really, really, really in love with her belly button. And with her cheekbones, her clavicle, her hips. She does not love the circumference of her thighs. She still gets pimples on her chin and feels like a 17-year-old girl, bumbling her way into the future with a body that always betrays her, keeps aching for a specific man long after the man has departed. She's thinking about getting a dog, something mutt-like and goofy, who will adore her without reason.

She looks around her, at the couples holding hands on the boardwalk, and knows there must have been some relationship manual handed out

on a day she was absent. That is why she now works hard to be as present as possible. There is a Buddhist sutra she loves to read—*The Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone*—and she always approaches it eagerly, thinking the Buddha really did fashion himself an ancient-day Dr. Phil, handing out self-help advice for the lonely and the dispossessed. And always she's surprised, but not necessarily disappointed, when the sutra says nothing about living alone; rather it instructs, in typical Socratic fashion, only on how to dwell in the present moment, unburdened by craving or regret. *Death comes unexpectedly*, the sutra whispers as an aside, *how can we bargain with it?*

Sometimes now, in the dark of her one-person bedroom, she whispers *I love you*, and kisses with her tongue the exact center of her palm, the webbed skin between her fingers. When she catches herself doing this, she feels ashamed and stops it immediately. She flings her hand away and flops over to clutch the full-length pillow that impersonates a lover under the covers. But sometimes she doesn't care, she just keeps saying it—*I love you*—and for a little while she's ushered into the lost-and-found, where she rummages through a box, sifts through those things she thought were irrecoverable: virginity, power, self-confidence. And there, too, a little rumpled but still recognizable: the t-shirt she flung off as a child, and her own small self, unabashed, chest bared in the suburban heat. And look: there's the sheath of her body, unspoiled, radiant as the day she was born.

# Tick Tock Boom

*A Selection of Poems by*

Claire Bateman

John Brehm

Lightsey Darst

K. A. Hays

Mark Irwin

Jennifer Militello

Thylas Moss

D. A. Powell

Donald Revell

Jonathan Rice

Margaret Ronda

Brenda Shaughnessy

## Letter to the Virgin

Stop. The eagles are wooing one another  
even now on slides and swings of air,  
so far from here I can only make out the black  
scrawl of wings and the heads' white globes.  
They climb and teeter, hanging  
on bars—but no. This is an arena;  
the eyes clash and the beak would gore  
the body, embracing it. I think again  
of the apostles squinting and of your body,  
writhing and heaving, sucked into the sky.

But the eagles are real. I believe  
only in them. Only eagles joust in air.  
I believe in their clinging talons,  
and in their four-winged body and massive beaks.  
They split. They upheave themselves.  
It should be raining with their innards,  
the sky a dome painted with the blood of birds.  
If Correggio painted the ground where I am standing  
it would be scorched with falling embers  
from the hurtling forms, the field  
frozen and fiery, shadowed with wings.  
Here are the eagles falling and floating.  
Here every battle is another seduction.  
Looking up, I can nearly believe  
the Assumption was a courtship.  
And you, lunging at God or oblivion,  
whatever it was moved you,  
were merely in love—.

## Church Engine

Speech crumbling through emotion, this hole  
we tear in the world with our bodies. We could see tomorrow's  
infant-reaching hands. What can be known,  
really? The way you  
push me up and pull me down  
from sleep. —Bone, muscle, fascia, skin. We tried to write  
what we heard. No one  
was speaking. —Drone of radio, TV. Are you  
connected? By a stoplight, a man  
on his knees. "Please," he said. Behind that word  
a shelf, then nothing. Cars  
leaving the walls of a city. Without  
a map, we begin  
singing.

## Résumé

Childhood games, first words, then sex & God, no  
need to continue, but those first words  
dug holes— Mother (milk, garden), Father (gasoline, bridge)—  
growing deeper, then later the verbs  
that shadow and leave  
we call bodies till once in the ambulance  
of my desire that love letter  
became *Will*, the clouds  
green, the land a motion beneath my feet  
steep & purple.

---

## THYLIAS MOSS

*every often a seemingly perfect theory has proved inadequate  
in the light of further reading.*

**vector**

[A. Einstein & Leopold Infeld: *The Evolution of Physics*]

Gene, maybe it's you after all, you who will kill me, you the unassuming newsstand go-for who could never hurt a fly inside or outside Ludlow's Smokers' Palace—why do I say that to you, I don't mean it, it does not impress to know a fly's held sacred by someone, *drosophila* dropping in on this and that experiment, this and that cautionary tale, you *should* hurt a fly, some flies are vectors, they transmit disease, a lowlife ferry, from animal to animal, bacterial deliveries once the fly picks it up in its mouth, its legs, the fly flies away, takes on wing-tip riders, drops off tularemia, drops off anthrax, you should kill them, do not let them breed, no matter how cute, how appealing the sound of *tsetse* fly, like all those sisters of your mother called Tee-tee, kind of like that with corruption, the shelter of plains and prairies: the tepee, no matter what gets bundled up when longing settles for next best, for the substitute teacher, kill it before it gives you an irreversible lesson in African sleeping sickness, coma hiatus, death sometimes attributed to hex, the fly as fledging witch's familiar, buddy system, sleeping sickness is also HIV, sleeps in you for ten years, keeps company, maybe even more years before it wakes up, then wakes you up, suddenly alarming, this is not Zanzibar, not a tsetse habitat, most house flies are like the house wine, house dressing, tolerable, at worst nuisance, maybe it's you, Gene, who will kill me, you under a cap much like Ed Gein's, he didn't hurt flies, his victims were raw material, media, from a woman he made household things, he was handy, spruced up his place with a lady lamp, placemat skin, set of four, all her, other fly gifts: amebic dysentery, typhoid fever, trachoma which curves eyelids inward, turns eyelashes into lens scrapers, how they try to scrape the eye clean and transparent, the white off like frost off the windshield, it was obstruction to a view of where you're going to kill me, so good-natured about it, you are not a man without a religion, even if it's all your own, one

of the most important Prophets gave beautiful instructions, the logic seems incontestable, seems to go straight through the wisdom of Solomon, but in passing, it might be leaving a hole in wisdom, bullet hole, it might be creating an opening for flies, creating access for vectors, but at the time, it was so wonderful to be told that if a fly falls into your beverage, to dunk it in all the way, submerge it like a tea bag, because true enough one wing deploys disease, and the other brings the cure, there is just no medical basis, but for the love of miracles, it happens, someone like you becomes my killer, go for it, Gene, you weave straw into gold, grind my arm and leg bones into bone meal that falls like gold dust from the eye sockets of the white pepper mill, the saltcellar you make of my skull, tenderly, I don't understand, but I recognize that this is mercy, why not, full body ablation of the fly in your buttermilk, the fly in your seltzer, the fly in your guava nectar, you wouldn't hurt it, Gene, you'd swallow it, the gift of leprosy also, flies come with it from rotting food, rotting corpses, drop it in your coffee like a sweetener, like a creamer, and then, fully leprous, you go numb, you feel no pain, have no awareness of injury if you have no mirror, you feel everything else that may be felt inside, blessed vector of anesthesia, you feel no pricks, no pinches, no stings on earth as it will be in heaven, turns out it's no good to be without difference

---

JOHN BREHM

## One Way or Another

Being this calm makes me  
nervous, because I know  
calamity gathers  
strength in such weather,  
that pain sharpens  
itself against the hard  
edge of happiness,  
just as joy digs itself  
out of disaster.

A year ago I told  
a friend that my  
shrink said if I really  
wanted to deal with  
all my "obsessive-  
compulsive stuff"  
I'd have to take an SSRI,  
one of those floaty-  
sounding drugs  
like Prozac or Zoloft  
that turn the mind  
into a trampoline  
of optimism and  
the penis into a sullen,  
slouching spectator.  
"Are you thinking  
about it?" she asked.  
"Yes," I said. "I can't  
*stop* thinking about it."

But I decided against it.  
I fell in love instead,  
saw a chance to polish  
my relationship-ruining  
skills to a perfect  
self-consuming shine,  
and took it.  
Tried to turn hunger  
itself into a feast  
that would last forever  
and worried my way  
from bliss to loneliness  
in just under a year.  
But now I'm fine.  
Totally calm.  
Yesterday I heard  
the first three notes  
of a cardinal's song and  
thought it was a car alarm.

---

JONATHAN RICE

## Boxing in the Morning Aria

There was no beginning in her  
she called to say. Some relief

as snow ploughs shoved through  
the darker side streets, scraping pavement:  
rasp without spark, potholes

without consequence. Once I knew a girl,  
but so did all of us. Story was, she let

three months pass, then told him  
without question. Punch me. Here. Here.

Three times? Five? It's never clear.  
A year passed. Say he thought too much.

Say no one heard a thing, or saw  
it coming: that small fire flashing  
in such a tiny room of promise.

## Days of Illness

I can hear the rain 900 miles from here.  
Nearer, two eyes open, vacant and pure.  
Timelessness . . . there's no such thing. It would kill me.  
I think of two small children, brother and sister.  
They shelter small together beneath one tree.  
Behind them, motionless in a rain-swept field,  
Women in stiff, outdated clothing stand  
Waist-deep in the blowing grass. I would choose  
To be the grass, to be moving, hoping  
Somehow to draw the children's attention  
And to draw them into the field. The women are dead  
Long since. The children are old. The rain  
900 miles from here is speaking through the grass,  
From field to field to me so I might live.

## First Date and Still Very, Very Lonely

A pleasant, leather poison  
is the trick to smelling  
good to female saddles,

that is, saddles with a hole  
and not a pommel. Remember  
those? Gone the way

of Vestal virgins and tight,  
white black holy hell and with it,  
the lesbian Elysium of old.

I miss the idea of wives.  
The loving circle.  
But onward. Today

is a sacred day. A date day.  
An exception to the usual  
*poor me, poor me!*

I'm not poor and I'm not me.  
I remember both  
states as soon ago as last week.

But that's history.  
This is different. At a party,  
once, everyone was so careful

that only I cut my lip drinking  
from the winterspring  
a kind of cold, decorative trough

centerpiece we were all  
drinking from. The idea is  
you're like animals.

If you ask, about the cut, *why me?*  
The answer is, *of course me.*  
*In what world ever possible not me?*

I could admit that with open blood  
running down my chin  
like hyena butter or gasoline.

I was mortified, really lost.  
After that I thought,  
I have to meet someone.

---

JENNIFER MILITELLO

## Felon's Logic

Dear body I do not resent,  
experiment with me.

I feel my mind grow broad as orchestras,  
I feel its oceans weep. How I fall

awake. How all the alphabet  
falls from my hands. I feel beneath my skin

the little needles of a life. I listen  
whenever an intersection calls, I obey

its schizophrenia, an understanding of the art  
in me that cries for me to act.

What I mean by hurt is that the hours,  
they lie to me. I have been, but am not limited to,

a tense. Scars personify the mouth, too fragile  
to sing or be. At the sills, estuaries. At the sorrows,

speech. I drink at the dream's atmospheric  
embrace, I feed the mouth that bites me.

I become what is running through the woods.  
Like armor unworn, I pose my battle

along the wall, plain as a god, singing like a verb,  
sadistic. I wince and bleed with the world

and all its seamless ways to be rid of me,  
until its complications octopus in my irises,

until the moment was my mother's sleeve  
I once forgot to grasp.

## One Thing

How was it that for so long  
I thought of being alone  
as "one thing"  
uniform in texture, density, composition?—  
why didn't I understand decades ago  
that not even "nothing"  
can be one thing,  
composed as it is  
of currents, involutions,  
chambers, veerings & expansions  
where the thrown voice  
returns to itself  
in modulating frequencies—  
just as a relief map  
of sky or flame,  
boredom, heaven, or shame,  
each of which is also  
not "one thing,"  
would reveal an exultation  
of crevasses & sunken wells  
ringing the changes  
from stung carnation to panic blue  
where you may drink  
to drown your fill.

## Full Circle

Serpentine tautologies sing out from spaces where silence is just another kind of singing and things come to mean just what we want them to here in this city where any moment millions of people are moving underground and millions more lofted into the unlooked-at sky imagine still other worlds far from these streets that fill with the flickering energies of thoughts sweeping upwards or hovering just above eye-level of the pedestrians' roaring speechless procession every intersection a super-collider an atom-smasher of interior monologues rich and strange here where to breathe the air is to inhale the thin harsh music of the consciousness of the city itself and to know the dog-eared book of its moods and imaginings dog-eared book of days left open on a table by a window where wind turns the pages because that's what wind likes to do.

[Billboard/whisper]

The 2007 peach queens of Clifton County welcome you  
to this stretch of kudzu & jack pine.

*I am not your impression of me  
fly in amber, struggling, ruined wing.*

Below their smiles  
a stand for pecans, the beaten trees  
bending, arching in their neat rows.

*I am not the flat version.  
I am not the thin version.  
I am not the one held together with barbed wire.*

You can gather  
your own berries  
in these long hot fields—the handwritten  
sign in blue.

*I am not the one hanging  
with one hand  
onto the tailgate of the black truck.*

*I am not the bas-relief, I  
am not the photogenic swamp.*

*I am not the good sister.*

*I am a peach queen, I am welcoming you.*

## Dancing in My Room Alone

I could be an eel in whirled stillwaters,  
the semiotic blue of trick quicksand,  
meaningless and true.

In my room, ordinary yellow objects  
like lapel labels and plates  
smile like similes,

caressed like air in movies,  
the texture of froth. I need sugar.  
Need it like a right, so sugar

is given. A river of high  
minutes rising to a horizon,  
only ever seeing my double eyes.

I'm so really truly enough  
that I should save myself for later.  
Later, don't come now.

Don't turn me back into that seventh  
grader in a human ring around the gym,  
certain I'm not in the circle.

Now I'm slinging room-darkness  
to sun. Swelling hips  
incredibly undone,

my blind blood singing,  
"qua aqua aqua,"  
intoxicated

with this song's cologne,  
a silk ribbon of paint  
driven through nature.

Fun, who knew? Spinning  
with nothing, like earth does,  
I flew more than I could lose.

Oh god of ether, god of vapor,  
I could use one of either of you.  
Take me like a swan would.

Take me, wing me up and make me  
dance, impaled on a hooked  
prick of cyclone.

Sightless. Wind my limbs, digits  
clutching feathers, around you,  
and disappear.

I won't fall. I know how to do it now.  
I broke the window with god's ball.  
I am smoothly used

and honeyed, self-twinning, fearless,  
a wineskin emptying  
into a singing stranger.

## untimely ripped of plastic

let's say the shiny exterior was the first thing to catch my fancy  
his luxurious laminated curve, his tapering candle dripping wax  
the hint of the forbidden that flickered there in the shadows

let's say caught evening pleated lines against the darkness  
a grind and explosion: flak flak on the clean sofa, and fluid

sponge, suds. the droplet leaking, snailsheen, licked icecream  
the seawall gave, outward, it was an outward breaking

as if the cell of the brig had been breached, prisoners running  
knowing they would be beaten mercilessly if caught, let's say

the figures, all of them manufactured in the mind's foreplay factory  
had nothing to do with the difficult, hesitating contact, the first foray  
an exploratory touch, a finger, a set of fingers pulling the snap

open: intervening fumble and tear, polythene package, stretch  
but the partaken slipped sans capsheaf, nothing ribbed, spontaneous

arch, slip, and gleam, and let's just say dissent was squelched  
carriers sailed in the gulf, banners, banners against the keel

## glory whole [sic]

gibber the portal, you waggle sly & avert your eye  
hither draws near thy master, that interval of release

as you press against the partition, into anyone, could be anyone  
cunning as serpent: how you extend and make your petition  
flies unbuttoning and spreading their dove-grey flaps

your penchant for scrape of unknown teeth and fingered anus  
too long denied you, denied in turn by the bride you took  
for jaw and beer, the good wishes of decrepit parents  
who want you happy, husbanded, not dallying in company

of strangers. unction delivers in constellations upon you  
fire of pentecost: frothy sparge of asteroids: you proceed  
and the planets proceed and the canopy deepens its blue

surreptitious the night you travel in, casual contagion  
babbling the one you seek adjacent and risen in his stall

*uniform motion can never be realized . . .  
because we cannot eliminate the influence of external forces.*

[A. Einstein & Leopold Infeld: The Evolution of Physics]

alternative manna la-dee-da-da bonanza

The one whose instincts are aroused when he sees me, looks at me with the intensity with which I should be looked at if I am to be attacked well on my way to, my way back from Ludlow's Smoker's Palace where cigars hang in the window as sausages would during a strictly rationed year, puny, cylinders of negative space of the tunnels of open nostrils, *come in, my Love, greet* the last of contraband pork, sage-rubbed corsets and garters, *we're talking sinew*, about-to-spoil tenderloins priced way too high, an arm and a leg, the slime of juices, bulk, lipid contribution, loops of goop, slickness, what the market will bear, its limits, seizing what the day presents, the market can be generous, that is not unknown, the meat at the heart of this day, think pith, well articulated tissue, alternative manna bonanza, the best chance of a limited lifetime to get some half-bad meat made up to pass as perfectly processed tobacco, *smoked* on the label like the best joke that can be managed during stress, during crisis, in this too there's collaboration, *smoked: used*, that is, cigars, but I don't want to think any further about subbing right now, passing right now, not fessing up publicly to what the private doesn't know how to deny, I'm glad it doesn't, *Pinky, Imitation of Life*, the Hollywood original, the remake both on tonight, the invisible life, the biggest, the baddest, unseen history, inheritance makes my head spin, centrifuge, but the contributing strands of me don't separate, I don't come undone, no matter how dizzy, permanent tangles, protein chained, permanent dye-caste, sum, nearly, but better than quadratic, no higher power, I come bundled, I am what I am, all of me spells out that all, follicle proof, every speck according to specs, embedded code, some of it can't be seen, is not meant to be seen, you have to work with me to extract the ore, have to work me over to extract the ore, I'm passing on complaint, have no problem with unassisted birth of my ticket, *boletus*, perhaps I will be the one, primed package that I am, all this and that, self-selected for a death to be articulated with a precision that is the killer's own invention, according to

specs, prizewinner, shout it out, maybe the killer will keep part of me, top of my lungs, earmarked, maybe on his person, trophy, *boleto*, ticket, I kept the ashes, my sister, dry soeur stew, babied sis, kept the baby teeth, all the teeth of my baby that a little man has swallowed, eaten up with sass, a taste for disobedience, package deal when I enter his view: rifle site: view master: see how it holds me, frame, I free him from a code of ordinary ethics, aim high, package deal, seeing me he summons a focus, opens, fire, to his heart alone – unpackaged – he confesses *boleto* – mountaintop, the murder is splurge, the largest living-large luxury, deserves it, writes his own ticket, with his teeth marks the route of his mother's embedded cancer, from the earth to the moon, breast to armpit, *muchos boletos, de la tierra a la luna*, words of last resort do not enlarge what he means by *everywhere*, my eyes to be fried eggs, black yolks, tickets, as if a hundred years old, solid, vintage, he remembers pathological sizzle everywhere, in cast iron skillets just as black, deep in nostalgia, memories fly in his head like locusts, *ob happy day*, everywhere, breakfast bell, *farmer in the dell* all day after frying horse eyes, crow eyes, his mother's specialty, she cracked eggs against the side of his head, a meeting of ellipticals, *look Darling* she said and pulled the eyes of blind animals from behind his ears, from his mouth forced open with a nose pinch, he knows anywhere, this childhood's black kitchen magic, black yolks already glossy *jole!* onto melted butter, shimmy dang into batter, something more comfortable, *la-dee-da-da the hell if it wasn't* easy bake, all her waffles, all her negligent redemption, sorcery, code of maternal recipe, he's glad he was born anywhere, in the company of those who would have talked too much if they'd said anything other than *everything for a purpose*, entitled to what life offers, *la-dee-da-da the hell if it wasn't* all her bread and cake was devil's food, everywhere slick maternal package, glowing, all the basics, wanted no necessities, but they came with the territory, her scrambled breakfasts were roughed-up dominoes, for a while, they float everywhere in his stomach, mixed bag of desires, to kill and be comforted, both without also having remorse, a gift, *la-dee-da-da the hell if having remorse isn't* what makes you

human, having remorse makes you remorseful, he wasted his life, spilled it, on purpose, the excess gives mine more purpose than the lives of some who strike it rich, more aggressive in striking than he is, more purpose than the lives of some who've taken vows, who've denounced purposelessness, random action, champagne fluke, who've tried to prove that the purpose of their faith or their science or their lack has been establishment of meaning and purpose, countermeasures, to know how things work is to know their purpose, they work to maintain what's working for them, all that *la-dee-da-da the hell if it wasn't* more research, more belief, more getting to knowing the oldest known time bomb is the big bang, to know how the killer kills me, the many, many ways, the quality of purpose doesn't make you human, he is looking back, he is remembering what happens for the first time while he remembers it, it seems so distant, *tick tock boom*, lost ticket, *boleto perdido*, more costly eggs from rare birds his mother must have stolen, can't find them anywhere, bunch of spring halter-top chickens, skill-master slick, ticking ticket just for you, if you have to taste it, if that is the purpose of your life, the mechanisms, ways and means, injected with inorganic and synthetic taste enhancers, flavor extenders, blackened, the verge of rot, from the earth to the moon, reverse *la luna*, the way his father liked his eggs, down tempo packaged like that, never really set well, on purpose, she never made them better, didn't unpack completely in this house, never had her hands all the way in, failsafe, a chance for acquittal, somewhere from the earth to the moon, the son like the father deprived of some of the purpose of manhood, the ruling of roost, where did that come from, all these centuries, from the earth to the moon more than once, he had at least two tickets, the ordinal position of chicken, the ordinal position of egg, either one fits the purpose of logic of backup, *la-dee-da-da the hell if it wasn't* an explanation, me too, the *boleto*, when I appear on his horizon with two perfect eggs, one in each socket, behind each eyelid, a walking henhouse, the purpose of fox blood, he must have some from the earth to the moon, his piñata was a whole dead pony beyond his blindfold, foxily he puts on blinders to see

only a focus only on how his mother guided his hands inside the carcass —*like this: foxy Darling*— where he collected, pulled out every egg substitute, anything rounded, I am keeping his occipital lobes busy, they are two curved pyramids, one at the back of both of the brain's hemispheres, brain's precious bundles, looky, looky: *la-dee-da-da the hell if it wasn't* curved pyramids that interpret vision, decode every visual thing, that is their purpose, my irises are embryos of birds of his paradise, his piñata was a whole dead pony he could take anywhere beyond his blindfold, from the earth to the moon he puts on blinders to see only a focus only on how his mother guided his hands inside the carcass —*like this*— where he pulled out anything rounded, every egg substitute, *como boleto redondo*, commotion, hot ticket ticking, the better mousetrap is a circle, his hands rounded everything they held tightly enough, this murder that is hatching, the earth, the moon .

## Recitative

Small bird split open inside your chest. A dream and then drift. Someone opened the wrong door. You could remember the red blouse and nothing else. As if folded into a crease. We set off toward the four corners, holding down the sky.

And above you were an iron bird. Warm, still breathing in my hands. I worried about your irregular heart. You're one of a kind, someone said. Six buttons, pearly slick, lined on the tongue. I could never catch the answer.

Then we were climbing into a cloud, or the stuck light inside a bottle. The dream is following me, you kept saying. Finger along a white stitch. Trudging up red hills, though the sky called us back. I'd stopped listening to the plastic bird's song.

Our time is up, someone said. You had cut the top off each picture. Later I found the box of skies. Red and unfastening. O but we dreamed to mend. Only the glass bird I called Question, crack in the forehead where the wind comes through.

## The Risen

By nine AM they were standing in her dying father's empty foyer. The hospital had called once already.

"Look at all the dead bugs everyplace," Irena said. "Clean them up immediately. I can't take another moment of them, please."

Leon capitulated, using a red plastic cup from the kitchen to sweep the remains into, nudging each insect over the lip of the cup with his finger. He and Irena had left their hotel at eight that morning, and Leon desperately regretted not having breakfast and coffee; his brain felt needy. One roach surprised him; it turned over at his touch and scurried beneath a baseboard before he could stomp it. Leon carried the cup of dead bugs room-to-room, inwardly proud of the collection. No one had been in the house in a year, and there was an inescapable mildew smell originating from somewhere not obvious.

"Drains," Leon said.

"Icebox," Irena said.

Leon and his wife inspected the rooms separately, wandering through the nearly vacant home. The large items had been put into storage—no couches, no beds, no dressers, no tables, no piano. In the living room Leon paused to admire the row of stained oak bookshelves that lined the south wall, all beautifully crafted, but devoid of books. Beautiful except for the last one which appeared to be less than square in construction, leaning on its neighbor, seemingly prepared to fall forward like a drunk onto a bar. It was the imperfect bookshelf the others would have made fun of. The carpet in front of the bookshelves was worn where something heavy had been moved across it repeatedly in an arc. Was a rug here before? Leon couldn't recall. He stopped briefly to investigate but heard his wife call from a bedroom: "Leon, more bugs. Come. Bring cup."

Irena wanted to visit her father's house to look for several photo albums and one photograph in particular. Leon thought that their time was being wasted and that they should already be at the hospital.

"Any luck?" he hollered.

"No. Father has hidden them good, crafty Russian," she hollered back. Leon left her rummaging through a closet. In the hallway he noticed a crucifix had fallen off the wall. He returned it to its nail, but suspected it would fall again. Joseph Postnikov's house was a good house. The man had money, no doubt. It had a wonderful sunroom with huge windows. Three wood stairs led down to the brown, natural stone tile floor. Even at the early hour the Arizona sun was beginning to make the room uncomfortably warm. The potted plants that lined the large windows were all dead.

A miniature banister along the steps was broken where Joseph Postnikov had fallen into it one year ago. Eventually, whoever bought the house would need to repaint the wall where a spray of red wine was ejected from Postnikov's glass during the accident. It must have been a large glass of wine, Leon thought, as small red droplets had flown nearly to the ceiling. The fall resulted in a shattered hip, minor cuts, and was precisely what forced Joseph Postnikov into assisted living. "My manhood you are taking. I would rather *die* than suffer such insult. A pair of swine traitors, you! I *do not go* willingly." And he didn't. When the time came, Irena and Leon had to drag him out of the house physically. Strapped into the car, the old man hid his puffy red eyes with his hand. Afterwards, Irena did the crying for him. Dragging him out had been the couple's last visit to Arizona. During the next year Joseph's bitterness subsided, but only marginally. It was hard to tell over the phone, Irena admitted.

Leon heard Irena slam a closet door and move to another room. The lack of large furniture in the home made every movement sound loud and hollow. He walked to the kitchen and saw papers sitting on his father-in-law's counter near the sink. He was sadly reminded of the divorce papers back in his Madera, CA home. Irena had ushered Leon to a

Chinese restaurant two months previous to break it off, but no substantial relationship changes had yet taken effect; their separation was slow at best. Sex had stopped immediately, however. The official-looking documents were sitting ominously on their California breakfast nook, anchored by a pen, and waiting for Leon to sign. "Alright, I get it," he said to her at the restaurant. "Let's take a vacation somewhere and start over." Seeing similar papers on his father-in-law's counter made Leon wonder if his wife could have somehow brought the irritating things with her and planted them in her father's house for him to find. Surely not, he thought; it would be preposterous. But he feared the possibility until he gingerly turned over a sheet and saw that it was scrawled with Cyrillic handwriting. It was Joseph Postnikov's last shopping list. Leon exhaled and sat it back down, mildly assured that there was still hope for his marriage in the long run. He opened the kitchen cabinets and added to his roach collection.

The day before on the way to the airport Irena was upset badly, much like Leon had witnessed of late. Driving through a school zone they were stopped by the crossing guard; Irena watched pairs of children holding hands, crossing the street, laughing. A field trip.

She wept, slow at first, then forcefully.

Leon ran his hand over the stubble on his head and asked her what was wrong, already knowing. His role in this argument was well established.

"If we were a *normal* couple and had baby at first talking, how old would she be?" Irena asked. "Six, seven? One of those children? I always wanted a family. Where *is* my family?"

"*We* are a family. You and me. Family. It isn't my fault."

"Yes it's your fault. Doctor said, 'Your fault.' I was fine. You sat there and said nothing."

"Why do you have to bring it up here and now? Why *now*?"

Irena was quiet for a moment, looking out the window, finger curled around her lip.

"I cannot know," she said. "My father in hospital. Something stirring. Please forget. Forget everything." She made large circular motions with her hand saying this, looking away. "Drive."

"We could have adopted. Still can."

"Agreed. But I remember what it was like to want a child. I don't remember what it was like to want a child with *you*."

It hurt worse every time Leon heard Irena say it. She kept coming up with new ways to deliver the line. He appreciated her cleverness, even though it crushed him.

Joseph Postnikov's house would undoubtedly sell quickly, Leon thought as he surveyed it. The neighborhood was pleasant. The house was structurally sound, had aged well. High ceilings. Clean, overall. A residence with character.

In the study Leon noticed his father-in-law's old turntable on a stand in the corner, a number of albums stacked underneath. A dusty Plexiglas cover hid a record on the platter, and Leon supposed this was the last vinyl recording the dying man played. Perhaps it was playing when Joseph fell. The needle had tracked all the way to the inside and rested in the looped groove. It resembled the model of turntable used at the dance studio where Leon and Irena first met. Leon remembered touching Irena's waist—a random pairing, moving in unison, the counting: "One two three. One two three. One two three." Memories of his happy marriage seduced him into the past. Alone in the study, he smiled. He knew it wasn't good for him to draw these associations anymore.

Hovering an inch above the platter was his reflection in the turntable's dusty lid. Leon tried to read the label of the record unsuccessfully. He had thinning brown hair but shaved it daily, either to embrace or to hide his pattern baldness, he couldn't say. It had simply become habit. His face had always been round, not unattractive, but plump. "Unthreateningly round," as Irena had once described it, "but honest, most important." Leon sold used cars and felt he looked the part. He had broad shoulders and stood tall, two

strong points that he reassured himself with frequently. He hoped it was the dust on the turntable that was making him appear old. Being hunched over didn't help either.

He heard Irena slam another closet door in frustration. She insisted the picture was in the house, the only existing image of her mother. He couldn't bear to tell her that he thought otherwise. If it were in the house it surely would have been found by now.

Despite his wife's school zone breakdown en route to the airport, on the plane Leon felt they had reconciled somewhat because Irena was talking again.

"Father could have retired anywhere, and he chooses Phoenix. I'm sure he's taking some satisfaction in the idea of us sweating like, like pigs, yes? He willed himself to go in the summer. I know him. Always the gentleman."

Her voice had a strong Russian flavor to it, diminished somewhat over her years in the states but still recognizable. Leon ached when he remembered to hear it. It was one of the reasons he continued to love her, and maybe the most powerful reason he had left. Men loved women for such unimportant things, and he clung to this.

"He's not dead yet, dear. Poor man. What would he say if he could hear you? *Septic* is not *dead*. He's strong. He could pull through."

"*Septic* is only polite way of saying no real chance of becoming better. Ever. I looked it up. Poor man indeed. Strong, yes. But we are flying out for one reason. Stop ignoring. Stop pretending."

Leon quietly disagreed with his wife, frustrated with her pessimism. He wanted his father-in-law to live simply to prove her wrong, as selfish as that was.

"You know, staying in hotels always turns me on for some crazy reason," Leon said leaning into her.

"Not so much for me anymore. Very little, in fact."

"Why?"

"Leon, stop asking me why."

“When was the last time we spent the night in a hotel? Together? Tell me.”

She sighed. “You must trade me for the window seat. I’m feeling closed in being in middle. Cramped, yes? Trade.” They traded seats. He conceded inwardly that it wasn’t going to be a trip that mended rifts. Leon scolded himself for pressing a dying issue at the completely wrong time, killing it that much more.

Not long after takeoff the aircraft hit serious turbulence, as violent as Leon had ever experienced. The pilot used the non-threatening qualifier “bumpy” to prepare the passengers, an adjective that was criminally deficient. Throughout the ordeal Irena clung to the armrests or wrung her hands together so tightly that the blood left her fingers, turning them white. Leon thought she stopped breathing at several points when the plane suddenly lost altitude. Babies were crying. Seatbelts were utterly necessary and universally tightened; checked and rechecked. Overhead containers popped open. Leon knew that ten years ago in this situation Irena would have been holding his hand; now she wasn’t even looking at him. Her eyes were closed tight. Peering out the window Leon could see the plane’s wings flapping like a bird’s, and he wondered how much stress the craft could take before it came apart. Impossibly he wanted to make love to Irena right in the aisle, to enact his faith in their union, to prove himself and make her feel alive and give hope. He gritted his teeth. Getting through the upper-level air disturbance was torture, but eventually the flight smoothed out. Some people clapped upon landing in Phoenix. Reaching the hotel, Leon sprawled out on a mattress in their room, feeling like he had cheated death. Even a day later going through the house he was still high from the experience. His jaw hurt.

Leon was hungry and peered into Joseph Postnikov’s refrigerator. He was considering eating the baking soda, the only thing left. There were no nutritional facts on it: a bad sign. Irena appeared from around the corner and frowned.

“What are we looking for now? Tell me.”

"Photo albums and the bigger picture."

"Correct. Are they going to be in the refrigerator? No. Follow me to garage."

Walking behind his wife Leon was reminded of the cosmetic war Irena had been waging against her age, and succeeding he admitted, looking as if she were getting younger. She had on a tight gray skirt, pantyhose, and a black top that hugged her curves. Her wedding ring hung from a silver chain on her neck. Leon imagined it swaying back and forth as she walked. Her black, shoulder-length hair always made her look as if she had stepped out of a salon: it was naturally stylish.

In the garage he found his father-in-law's car, a Saab wagon that came from Leon's dealership in California. Leon had worked out a good price when Joseph Postnikov suggested he needed a new vehicle; secretly he'd paid several thousand dollars out of his own pocket in order to make the deal seem beyond belief. Several summers previous Leon and Irena drove the car out from California and stayed with Joseph for a week. Leon remembered how Irena held her hand out the passenger window and made it rise and fall in the wind as they drove on the highway, fascinated as a child after he explained how the aerodynamic force of lift worked on an airfoil. He wanted to watch her play in the breeze for hours. They necked like teenagers at rest stops.

The first comment his father-in-law made upon seeing the vehicle was how sleek it looked. Sleek was a bad thing; apparently he wanted something more angular, boxy. Something that reminded him of, say, a Russian tank. "The Yugo," he said, "now *that* was an automobile."

Currently the garage was dusty, more so than the rest of the house. Irena sneezed. She told Leon that he should drive the Saab around the next few days, "to exercise it," but he knew the real reason was so that they spent less time together. He was checking the fluid levels as she reached for a box on a nearby shelf.

"Have we looked in this one yet?" She put it on the floor and opened it, sitting. It was full of radio-control airplane parts: dirty pieces of broken wings and damaged fuselage sections, all meticulously hand-painted.

"So those are the model planes you told me about?" Leon asked peeking out from under the Saab's hood. He knew they were spending too long at the house.

"What is remaining of them, yes," she said. "Model boats or model automobiles would be much sounder investment for him, but no, he must crash airplanes."

"It must have taken him forever to paint them like that."

"It did, but mere minutes to turn them into rubbish." She shook the box. "Papa would spend weeks making them look perfect. Then he would take them out, crash them into earth. He never learned how to land the airplanes smoothly. Crashes, one hundred percent of time. These are the only pieces left. Particularly beautiful wreckage."

"That's unfortunate."

"I would call and say, 'Stop making planes; you will just hurt them. You will be disappointed. Make something else, something you won't have to crash-land,'" she said, the tension in her voice relaxing for a moment. "But he never listened. Very, very stubborn." She opened another large cardboard box and began rummaging. "Come help. Remember, photographic album is brown, this big, gold trim. Also, picture of mother is in thick black frame. Both together, I am thinking."

Leon closed the hood of the car and tried to start it: it turned over, reluctantly. He let it run for a while, shut it off, and then helped his wife search the new box. No luck.

Her cell phone rang—again the hospital. Joseph Postnikov's condition was rapidly deteriorating.

"Of course we will, quickly," Irena said. "No delay. We are coming now."

Irena's face seemed to lose all its color, even that of the tinted cream she copiously applied. She insisted Leon drive so that she could collect her

thoughts. With shaking hands, she passed her husband the keys to their rented Mustang.

Out in the driveway her heels struck the cement around to the passenger side in what Leon could only describe as a dirge. Her dark hair reflected a dull gray shadow that Leon noticed in the car's broad hood, like an image on faded celluloid film. Irena's perfume was sweating off, and Leon smelled it wafting pleasantly around him, but her eyes belonged to another world. They drove swiftly.

The car ride was quiet, forcing reflection. The last good time Leon could remember spending with his father-in-law was Easter, four years earlier. Postnikov was drinking more than he ever had, but if someone wanted to spend his retirement years with a glass of eighty-proof in his hand, who was Leon to say otherwise? "Judge not lest ye be judged," was a saying that Leon identified with. He liked its symmetry and how it rolled off his tongue, the word *judged* falling at the end like a heavy book dropped on a table.

That trip Leon had taken a picture of Irena and her father next to a half-eaten ham. It sat framed on her nightstand in California. She was smiling, holding a chocolate bunny that Joseph had bitten the ears off of, making it look like a rat. The ears were sticking out of his mouth like fangs. This was funny for some reason Leon couldn't remember. His father-in-law had attempted to bake the ham himself; it turned out to be exceedingly dry. Joseph Postnikov had taken a cooking class; Irena had suggested that it might be a good way to meet people, women in particular.

"Try the asparagus. Try the fruit salad. Try some of this, try some of that," he insisted. "I make *alone*," he reminded them. "Open another bottle. Is *very* special occasion," he ordered.

It was close to their ten-year anniversary. A pre-celebration, of sorts.

Winter had been an afterthought in the desert, but an unusual mass of Arctic air had dipped south chilling the night. Postnikov decided to start a fire with firewood he kept but never used. On the mantle were displayed

the kidney stones he had passed. The small objects sat at attention in open jewelry boxes. Irena was in the kitchen fighting to open a new bottle of merlot, so it was time for Joseph to show them off to his son-in-law. Leon nodded and smiled strategically until Postnikov seemed satisfied.

"Very painful, that one," he concluded.

Soon the kindling in the fireplace caught and an orange glow reflected in Postnikov's gray eyes and off his gray hair.

"I remember sitting in front of stove fires in Leningrad apartment as boy," Joseph said. He threw the day's newspaper onto the flames; the fire consumed a front-page image of a woman in tears holding a framed photograph of a family member. The paper was soon carbon black. "Had fire in this fireplace one, two times at most. Fireplace in Arizona, USA! For decoration only, yes? Useless. For burning old letters."

The firelight seemed to deepen the wrinkles in his face, especially near the corners of his eyes, as if he were perpetually squinting. The scars on his forehead danced, changing patterns every time Leon looked. Joseph Postnikov stood watching the fire for what seemed a very long while. Irena returned with the wine.

"Cork wouldn't pull out, so I pushed into bottle with fat end of spoon." The cork, and chunks of it, could be seen bobbing about irregularly. "Apologies. Drink around them," she said. Joseph Postnikov cleared his throat.

"This house was built by a paranoid engineer office man who believed that the CIA, or the Soviets, the mafia would come and take him in the night. What a silly American. He had nothing to fear, but he feared still. He invented things to fear. He hid from them to pretend he was safe. Death must be a relief for such idiots. He was a person that worked with traffic patterns, timing stoplights red-yellow-green, red-yellow-green. What madness! To be trapped inside one's own head, stopping and going." He took a drink from his glass and looked at his daughter. She smiled and moved around to massage his bony shoulders.

"Papa, kiss. I am off to bed. Very tired. We must leave early, of course."

"You just open bottle, give us cork to drink, now go to bed? Are you my child? Sit with us." Irena ignored him. She walked over to Leon and sat in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. Knowing her father was watching, she kissed Leon passionately, slipping her tongue into her husband's mouth and probing, probing in a way that she usually reserved for lovemaking. Leon was aware of his father-in-law's gaze, counting the seconds. Before sucking on her husband's earlobe Irena whispered to him: "Do not let him keep you long. He will string tales forever." In one smooth movement she raised herself from Leon's lap, bid her father goodnight, and retired to the guest bedroom. Both men watched her go.

"I am surprised I have no grandchild yet, Leon. I am anxious."

"You and me both."

"Soon?"

"Well, we're working on it."

His father-in-law looked at him skeptically. "Good."

A moment of silence lingered.

"What has Irena told you about her mother?" Joseph asked.

"She doesn't bring her up much, really. She said she was a great ballerina and went on tour but never came back. Eccentric lady. She said her mother danced for Stalin . . . as a little girl."

A log popped and embers burst up the chimney. Joseph Postnikov sat motionless as a smile grew on his face.

"Her mother was a ballerina, yes. Not a great one, even if. She could still move like beautiful, like feather in wind. Never danced for the 'man with the mustache,' though. Irena invented that part herself! Ha. I told my daughter when she was seven her mother was going on tour of the southern regions. I didn't have heart to tell truth. Men become men for different reasons; some can be a man in some ways, not a man in others. Her mother went to asylum outside Moscow. Hung herself like that, snap, poor woman. Treatment not so good then. Pushed too hard to dance, I

think. Beautiful, beautiful woman. I don't want to see her body hanging anymore, I've thought of it enough. They show me report and photograph." He took a drink of wine and looked into the fire. "There was a time when I loved her. I loved her very much, yes. I thought I was helping. Putting her there." He looked to his son-in-law. "Everyone danced for Stalin!" he said and chuckled, which turned into a deep, hacking cough. Something inside him loosened and came up. With a grimace he swallowed the phlegm back down, half chewing. Leon looked away.

"I have a picture of her mother, but you will never see it," Joseph said. "Be satisfied with this: Irena has her mother's eyes. That is all I will say. I will not show anyone. It is mine alone. I have my old Russian ways."

Joseph Postnikov went to refresh his drink, dribbling wine into his glass slowly. "Worthless cork," he said. He brought the bottle back for Leon to refill his own. Both their glasses were filled to the rim.

"I can't see the picture?"

"No. Final. You have my permission to tell Irena nothing," he said. "Nothing."

At the hospital, Joseph Postnikov's hands twitched on top of the white bed sheet, working an invisible rosary between his fingers. Behind an oxygen mask his lips were slightly parted, his eyes closed; he confessed nothing through wordless shudders. The puffy scars on his forehead were now even more noticeable and appeared a sort of geometric insignia, a letter from a forgotten alphabet. His kidneys were failing. Nurses scurried about half-heartedly attempting life-extending procedures. The dialysis machine was pushed to its limits. A red light on it flashed, begging for attention, but was ignored. Irena sat near her father's bed in a thin-legged wooden desk chair, hand covering her mouth. Her mascara remained unsmearred on her lashes, which blinked slowly, still, with intent. Her black blouse repelled the midday light filtering through the blinds with the shine of stretched synthetic. The overhead fan creaked around its shaft; the blades slowly

circled even though it was powered down. Leon's stomach growled loudly, which seemed extremely inappropriate.

Joseph Postnikov attempted to clear his throat, failed, and the end of the beginning began. He looked to his daughter; his right hand slipped off his chest and fell to his side, as if in apology. Irena exhaled deeply, turned to look at his empty palm, potentially to assess the quality of the apology he held out.

Leon was uncomfortable, despite having prepared himself not to be. Joseph Postnikov, the thick, manly, intimidating Russian had been reduced to almost nothing. He imagined coming in to find his father-in-law making jokes, lucid, smiling, confident, winking at the nurses, looking death in the eye, staring it down like a pour of top-shelf vodka. Surely, Postnikov would dismiss life like a shot glass being slammed down on a bar: period. What Leon witnessed, however, horrified him in its serenity, its reality.

Joseph Postnikov suddenly motioned with his fingers for his daughter to come closer to him and listen.

*"Mne nuzhno vam chto-to skazat,"* he said.

*"Net, ne nado. Ya ne budu slusbat,"* Irena replied.

The TV set was on, the volume at a minimum. A forgettable *Wheel of Fortune* was being played out. The wheel spun, and Vanna White paced across the glittering green blocks to turn over an "x," leaving the cryptic "\_ \_us \_x \_a \_ \_ \_ a." Leon wondered if he should turn the TV off, if it would be appropriate since no one was watching, or, if by doing so it would have made him seem too assertive, too involved in the dying process, if turning off the TV might cause death directly. He looked to Irena for guidance but received none. Leon clicked the remote's power button, and the tube zapped to black. Irena abruptly turned and shook her head.

"Not yet," she says. "It's familiar, good."

Acting too quickly Leon fumbled with the remote control, dropping it to the floor. He retrieved it and clicked the set back on. The game returned; someone was about to win a trip. Leon turned back to look at Irena for

approval, but found her slumped over her father. Joseph Postnikov had apparently stopped fighting for breath.

Less than a minute later Postnikov turned his head to the side, away from his daughter, and died.

The instant of death haunted Leon: four people were in the room, and then beyond understanding, beyond belief, three people were in the room. Everyone felt it happen. Death was, in an almost tangible way, present. A conscious mind vanished to oblivion inexplicably, away from a group of other conscious minds that endured.

The television game show, a moment ago comforting, instantly became hideous, irrelevant, and was turned off.

Standing in the room staring at the dead man's scars, Leon's still heard Joseph's intoxicated voice from four years ago, continuing the memory that oppressed his thoughts during the drive over. He remembered sitting on his father-in-law's leather couch that made rude noises whenever Leon shifted on it. He remembered the full glass of wine and the fire and his wife asleep in the guest room.

"Look," Joseph Postnikov said, pointing directly into the middle of his forehead. "My scar. You have noticed, yes?"

"Of course," said Leon.

"I was cameraman with Ministry of War, filming frontline action with unit moving at Poland. Ordered to film everything. Everything." He spread his arms while saying this, a great cinematic advance before him, holding his glass in one hand, his arms stretching wide, Russian armies washing triumph over Europe.

"The Germans broke through Russia's lines and cut us off. Five of us took up position inside small house. Hours waiting. Thirsty. Very little water sloshing in canteens. Must take little drinks. Bombs exploding—*boom, boom, boom*. Bullets tracing like firefly. *Whrruzzzz!* Comrades shoot all their bullets out broken windows, everything, not one bullet left . . . 'You

have bullet? No! You have bullet? No! You have bullet! No!" No one has bullet. Very nervous time, camera shaking like this." He held his glass like a camera to his eye and shook it violently. Some wine spilled, leaving a dark, wet stain on the carpet.

"Then German frontline moves past. We get on floor along walls. Quiet." He paused dramatically, entranced by his own memories.

Leon swirled the wine in his glass, feeling like he should ration what he had left, as if it were a Russian canteen.

"On foot Germans run yelling, then . . . crash! Front door kicked in. One German in helmet, surprised to see Russian soldiers, surely. 'Stand up!' he yells. *In Russian*, never will I forget that. '*Vastanteya!*' We stand. German shoots . . . three Russian comrades fall, then, *click . . . click . . .* German out of bullets! M. Belotserkovskaia, soldier, and J. Postnikov, cameraman, only two left. German grabs knife from end of gun and charges me. Smaller soldier Belotserkovskaia runs at German, but my arms do not hold knife back and point traces into my forehead, *slice!*, right here, see? I feel after, much later, not during. Belotserkovskaia steps back and smashes German full in face with heavy camera, dislocates jaw. German falls, face in hands, lost knife, so I take. And so."

Postnikov took a drink and wiped his mouth with his thumb and forefinger around the edges, lingering at the crease in contemplation.

"And so?" Leon asked.

"And so that is end of young German who kill my countrymen. Not for talking about." He dug his pinky finger into his ear and pulled out a bit of wax. "But I still have German knife to this day."

The room fell silent. A log groaned in the fireplace.

"Why did you leave Russia? You always speak of it. 'Mother Russia this, Mother Russia that,' you know?" Leon asked.

"Opportunity. Journalism hard in Russia. Same Belotserkovskaia gets cushy job with Foreign Affairs Committee, doesn't forget old war friend." Leon's father-in-law winked at him. "Big Russian chess match in Iceland,

1972, need experienced cameraman to document for Sport Committee archives. I get call, make allowances to bring daughter, and after film shooting is over, go to New York. Go many places. Take Soviet camera. Ha!"

With his laugh Irena crept out of the bedroom, stretched, and rubbed her eyes.

"What is funny?" she asked. "You are making fun of the sleepyhead, no?"

"Nothing funny, just men, talking," said her father. "Having drink."

"Go back to sleep, hon," Leon said.

"It's bedtime, for us *all*," she yawned. "Carry me back to bed, dear," she said, only half joking.

"I'm fine . . . you go ahead. Your father is telling me war stories."

"You mean *story*," she said.

"Bah! You do not know this! I have lots of stories. Suitable only for men. Like the time we use tank to pull frozen cow from lake."

"Nuh-uh. Leon. Come." He did, but only after he drained his glass.

That night, Leon made love to his wife like his life depended on it.

Joseph Postnikov sat too long unattended on his deathbed, and rigor mortis had left his jaw hanging open, as if he were about to say something. Leon was watching a male nurse trying to force the jaw closed, unsuccessfully, being careful not to break it. Leon left the room to find his wife, ushered away to sign paperwork and make arrangements about where to take the body. He still had not eaten. Leon found her sitting in a small, bare room close to the hospital's administration offices speaking with a man in business attire, legal folders and papers looming between them on a table. Soothing, pastel paintings of stylized desert landscapes clung to the walls. The man excused himself.

"How are you?" Leon asked.

"Alright," she replied. She stared into the tabletop. Her mascara had been smeared out to the sides of her eyes by tears and tissues. Her father would be moved to a funeral home later that afternoon and cremated the following day.

"You want to grab some food? Might take your mind off things."

"No," she said, "You can go where you feel is most important for you, to eat." She threw forty dollars onto the table. "Take taxi back to Papa's house, look for photographic album more. Make yourself useful."

"I want to be with you, dear," he said. "That's most important. But still . . ."

"Go eat, I do not care. Then look especially for large framed photograph of mother. She is sitting. You will know her if you find it. I must go with father to funeral home soon, they are saying. Meet me back at hotel. But you are right," she said making a swirling gesture with her hand that included the paperwork, the hospital, her husband, the thoughts in her head, "I need to get away for a small while." They traded keys: the house keys in Irena's purse for the Mustang keys in Leon's pocket. Leon took the forty dollars.

As he walked down the hall away from his wife, he paused at Joseph Postnikov's room to look at the body. A terribly crisp white sheet covered him from head to toe. The whole event seemed like a performance.

Trying to find the right house key, Leon wondered if he had tipped the cab driver enough. In hindsight, he'd have liked a second chance to give more.

Once inside he backed his father-in-law's Saab out of the garage. Sitting on the floor of the sunroom eating the last french fries from the bottom of the brown fast food bag, Leon tried to imagine where the old man could have hidden the photographs. Irena would be so pleased with him if he could find them. Leon decided he would start high and work down searching for them.

He grabbed a chair to stand on from the study and took it to the living room to look for the photo album on top of the bookshelves; it might have been misplaced there. It was not. The end bookcase, next to the patch of worn, flattened carpet, was standing away from the wall by the slightest of margins he noticed, even though the front of it seemed flush with the others. Odd,

he thought. He stepped down off the chair and with some effort pulled the bookcase away from the wall, tracing exactly the worn arc of carpet below. Behind the bookcase was a dark space, and Leon stepped inside. Cool, still air hit his face.

The room was roughly six feet-by-twelve feet. Its floor was cement, and its walls were unfinished. There was an unshielded light bulb hanging overhead. Leon pulled the string. The dim light made the room seem even more surreal, dreamlike. Attached to the wall opposite the bookshelf door was a black-and-white photograph of a pretty woman in her late twenties. She had dark hair, was seated on a chair, and smiled slightly for the camera, as if she knew something the photographer did not. Leon recognized it as the photograph Irena wanted, the only existing image of her mother. At a small desk against the wall there was a half-finished bottle of vodka; on the floor several empty bottles standing in a neat row. There was a bayonet stuck deep into a stud violently, and numerous punctures in the same stud where it appeared to have been struck and withdrawn repeatedly. A pistol rested on the desk, unholstered.

A film projector sat on a small table in the center of the room, pointed at a large pull-down screen on the far wall. The set-up was similar to what Leon recalled from high school science class. On the side of the projector were its push-button controls: stop, play, rewind, fast-forward. A film was already loaded, stopped not far from the beginning. A tin lying open in two halves sat on the table as well; Leon turned over one side and read the makeshift label, pencil on masking tape: *Кенгур; 4/2/45; #6/10*. A number of similar tins were jumbled in a cardboard box nearby. Leon found the projector's play button and pressed it. He clicked the light bulb's string again as the reels sprang to life. The screen filled with light, and he stood facing the moving images, arms at his sides.

The sky was vacant. Not a single bird in view. An unmerciful, hopeless atmosphere. A lone Russian soldier, perhaps a private, stood guard far out in the field staring at two kneeling men. The kneeling men were unflinching,

unmoving. Leon stepped closer to the screen. The private held an automatic rifle at his waist. Earthmoving machinery sat parked in the background. Another Russian soldier suddenly appeared in the foreground behind the prisoners and held a small caliber pistol firmly in his left hand. He had on tight black leather gloves.

The two kneeling men were shot in the back of the head. Leon impulsively stepped back from the screen.

The camera panned to show many other prisoners, all clad in thin, dirty white underwear-like garments, all the same size and which misfit many of the men in one way or another: the sleeves hung over the short men's wrists and rode up on the tall ones. The condemned men had their arms crossed with fists tucked under their armpits for warmth. The camera panned back. The men were executed in a position they momentarily retained even after the bullet had exploded through their skull. More and more prisoners came into view, two at a time, from the right, were knelt down forcibly, then, shot in the back of the head. The Russian with the pistol wiped brains or blood from his cheek every so often and smeared the back of his hand on the side of his pant leg, then turned his head to spit. A puff of fog escaped from his mouth every time he did so.

Leon tried to imagine the sounds: a gunshot, boots crushing frozen ground for three paces; another gunshot; screaming; the slumping of a corpse onto hard earth; sobbing and pleading; curt orders being shouted in Russian; more screaming; locking in a fresh clip; seven pairs of gunshots; locking in a fresh clip. But the only sound in the room was the rapid clicking of the projector's shutter opening and closing, like the wings of a hummingbird.

He watched twenty men be executed the same way, then twenty more, then fifty, then a hundred. They kept coming two by two. He lost count and simply stared.

The reel was nearing its end. On the screen, the Russian private paused, turned, put a hand to his ear, and then shouted something towards the

cameraman. The stream of prisoners coming into view was halted. A long, static shot showed the huge field of dead.

Leon shook himself back into reality. His palms were sweaty. He searched for the rewind button on the projector, found it, pressed it, but it wouldn't engage. He pressed harder. Something broke inside the projector, popped with a crunch. Both the play and reverse buttons were engaged at the same time, and the film began playing backwards. The projector was making hideous, whining sounds, something inside being strained to its limit. Leon smelled a motor burning.

The Russian with the pistol came into view again. He pointed his weapon over the rows of still, gray corpses lying facedown in the muddy earth and, one by one, from the end of the last row, they violently jerked from the ground back up to their knees by the invisible force that emanated out from the barrel of his tool. They each paused a moment, staring out over the horizon, clean-faced, surveying the rows of other gray corpses that, like them, would each be resurrected in turn. Their new, vigorous breath escaped their mouths, puff after puff, dissipating into nothing. The Russian returned the pistol to his side almost lovingly. The corpses rose from their knees assisted by the Russian privates and walked backward with the officer out of view of the camera to their futures, their pasts, never recorded, never known.

The projector wailed and burned until the end of the film slid past the bulb and began slapping profoundly against the casing, the reel spinning around and around quickly, tensionless. Leon wiped his face and pressed the stop button.

He took the photograph of his wife's mother off the wall and left the room, coaxing the shelf back with his shoulder. He drove back to the hotel, anxious to show her his find. The secret room he felt he should keep to himself.

Leon waited and waited in the hotel room, finally giving up leaving his wife voicemail messages. He fell asleep sideways across his bed. Later he awoke when the door slammed shut. Irena stumbled in and collapsed

into the cushioned chair opposite his bed. Through the drawn curtains a horizontal slice of moonlight struck her face and made her eyes glisten supernaturally.

"Good God, you haven't been *driving* in this state, have you?" Leon asked.

"Just thinking."

"Just thinking?"

"Thinking I am glad we didn't tell father about the divorcing."

"The *possible* divorcing."

"He believed we were happy. No good would have come from telling otherwise."

"I *am* happy."

Irena sighed. "I am in love with the Mustang. It looks so shiny and fast sitting in the parking lot. I want to drive it more. Right now."

"You can drive it tomorrow. I've got something for you."

"Maybe I'll go sit in it only. Listen to some fast music. Take a little bottle or two little bottles from our little bottle bar."

Leon rose and produced the picture of her mother from a dresser drawer. He held it in front of him and smiled.

Irena cocked her head at the photograph and reached a hand out to touch it. She sat staring at it in her chair for some time, unblinking in astonishment. Minutes passed. She stood and took it with her into the bathroom, locking the door. Shortly, Leon heard a tremendous crash, followed by smaller crunches, crying, and eventually running water.

When the water stopped Irena solemnly emerged from the bathroom looking disheveled and drunk, and she crawled into the bed opposite Leon's. As soon as her breathing slowed, signaling she was fast asleep, Leon crept into the bathroom. The broken picture frame and shards of glass littered the tub, but the photograph was nowhere to be found. Perplexed, he looked everywhere. He concluded that his wife must have washed it down the drain in torn bits. Either that or ate it. Absolutely none of it remained.

The next half hour he spent on his hands and knees picking fragments of glass out of the tub, shaking his head. He cut himself more than once. "She'll want to take a shower in the morning, of course," he thought.

In the morning he began to repack his suitcase, just as it had been carefully packed three days prior, putting in the items as he gathered them up. They felt strange to him, like he was seeing and feeling them for the first time; his clothes didn't want to all fit for some reason. He had to force the top closed in order to make it latch. This difficulty mystified Leon, until he remembered that Irena had packed it for him.

Luckily it wasn't a busy week, and that afternoon Joseph Postnikov was cremated. There was no service and no plan. Irena decided to find a nice quiet spot in the desert to scatter the ashes, a spot they could get out to and back before their flight left that evening.

"We must get rid of him. Father cannot go on airplane. Why take him to California, anyway? He hated California," Irena said, putting on a pair of dark sunglasses.

"He did?"

They started driving away from the hotel, taking any road heading east: small roads to big roads—it didn't matter—then big roads to small roads, until they found themselves on an empty two-lane highway, urban Phoenix an afterthought. Irena sat with the box on her lap, ashes still warm she said, maybe from the cremation but more likely from the unrelenting sunlight. Her hands were folded across its top. They had driven about an hour in silence, the only sound coming from the car's humming air container. Leon spotted a turn off to an even quieter dirt road. They drove on that solemn, dry washboard lane until it felt like the distance they had driven equaled the grief they had to release. That it had to be a "nice" drive went unsaid. Maybe the washboard road led to a ranch, or military site even, Leon speculated. Maybe it led nowhere. They had found a place so lonely the word "peaceful" didn't apply. "Peaceful" would have suggested that human

conflict existed somewhere, anywhere. This landscape had no regard for humans or their wants. It was beyond peaceful. It had forgotten everything but itself.

"Stop. This is a good place," Irena said. They stepped from the car and Irena's heels left depressions in the soft dry ground. The air was hot and dry and perfectly still. She took the top off of the box.

"Leon, say something." He thought for a moment.

"Joseph was a great man. He will be missed very much. I am forever grateful to him for blessing our marriage, for fathering the woman I love, and for his understanding. He had a long, happy life and died surrounded by caring family. Amen."

"Say more." Leon thought longer.

"If it wasn't for death, it would be impossible to enjoy life and love. Everything that lives must eventually find rest. I like to think that every beginning is really just a new end, in a way. And vice versa."

At this Irena nodded.

She turned the box over unceremoniously, and Joseph Postnikov's remains fell in a pile. Ash went on her shoes. Leon broke a stick off of a nearby bush and pushed the ashes around until it looked like a scattering had been attempted. Irena watched from inside the car, and that was good enough for her.

The flight back to California was relatively empty. The captain announced that once they reached altitude passengers would be able to sit wherever they liked. Leon kept trying to hold his wife's hand, but she was always reaching into her purse for one reason or another, fidgeting.

"Would you like the window, hon?" Leon asked.

"You heard announcement. We both get to have window seats. I will sit elsewhere."

"Why move at all? I'll take the middle, you can have the window. Both of us don't have to move for you to get the window seat, silly."

"Exactly," she said, wiping her nose. With this, Leon understood.

The plane reached altitude, and his wife unbuckled her belt, leaving him for an open spot a dozen rows up. He watched the top of her head above her seat lean over and rest against her window. He imagined she had closed her eyes. Leon cried quietly for the first time in many years, looking away, heartbreakingly certain that Irena would never turn back to see him.

## Arrhythmia

It was getting harder for Eugene to hide his condition: his fingers twitched at odd times, and his heart worked a little too hard to maintain its jaunty rhythm, and while it seemed these symptoms had, so far, escaped his wife's notice, how much longer could she overlook his despair?—how could she not sense, for example, his utter hopelessness when confronted by the swell of appliances that had washed up onto his work bench: a heap of disrepair he didn't have the dexterity to fix anymore, except on Saturday nights when ten-year-old Lily—sworn to secrecy!—loaned him her hands, and Lily's household repair skills, he had to admit, were uncanny: last week when she had worked on a broken toaster, her fingers had seemed to *hear* the faulty connection in the coils, and, afterwards, praising her, his voice had warbled with pride; but tonight when she tugged a TV out from the bottom of the pile, a surge of fear swept through him—(*Children, don't try this at home!*)—but wasn't it important, he asked himself, to test her skill?—and so he plugged the TV in and turned it on, and together they laughed at the way Marshal Matt Dillon stretched diagonally across the screen, and then, still laughing, Eugene unplugged the set and unscrewed its back, revealing a hulking CRT surrounded by a nest of wires, and once more, he brushed away his trepidation as Lily's gaze wandered the circuits, and he brushed it away again when her fingers began probing their connections . . . and so it was that he was a second too late in slapping her hand away from the CRT—*Careful! The residual charge!*—and in the moment of contact, before his pulse skittered to a stop, he remembered Lily's birth, and the way her head had appeared and her eyes had popped open (blue as an argon spark) and the secret that had traveled from him back to her back to him.

## Hurricane Lil

On Saturdays her father took her to the track, and he would buy a lemonade for her and a beer for him, and a racing form for each of them, and they would climb to the top of the bleachers and sip their drinks and study their forms, and around them the night was blue-black and the track was a bowl of light, and she marveled at the horses' spindly legs, and how, when they ran, they transformed their jockeys into blurs of color, and she was proud to be the only little girl in this world of men, and when her father leaned over and pointed at her form, saying he liked number three in the fourth, or she should watch that jockey because he could thread a horse through the eye of a needle, she nodded solemnly as her heart swelled; and so she studied the odds to please him, and learned the jockeys' names, and she also learned how to tell when her father was losing, to notice how tightly he rolled his form or how thoroughly he tore up his tickets—and that night his form was no fatter than a piece of sidewalk chalk and his tickets were pieces of confetti, and the way he ruffled her hair before the last race, calling her Lucky Lil, frightened her, and when, minutes later, she heard him put ten dollars on six to win—only one bet!—she checked her form and saw that six was Hurricane Lil, and a fierce responsibility ripped through her, and so, when the announcer crooned *Anndd theeeyyy're ooofff!* and the gates clanged open and the horses surged forward, she rolled her form up tight as a cigar and beat it against her damp palm, roaring *C-c-c-come on, L-l-lil! C-c-c-come on number 5-5-six!*

## Blessed Assurance

That summer Lily would get up early to help her grandmother search for slugs on the tomato plants, and although she pretended disgust, she liked the dew-drenched garden and the way conversation seemed out of place there (a relief now that her stutter had been made worse by a newly unstable front tooth), and she also liked following the shiny trails her grandmother pointed out, so much so that it was always a shock to find a fat slug at the end of such glimmering graffiti—but, according to her grandmother, this was the war at home, and so she would drop the slug in a beer trap while her grandmother crossed herself saying, *Another dead soldier*; and later, when the sun had chased their prey underground, they would retreat to the garage for a seemingly endless game of cards, and during these games Lily didn't mind shouting *G-g-g-go F-f-fish*, because her grandmother didn't look away while she struggled, or lean forward the way most adults did, as if trying to nudge the words across an invisible line, and sometimes Lily thought this was because her grandmother already knew what she was thinking, and all Lily had to do was concentrate hard enough and she wouldn't have to say anything at all—and it was during one of these times (when she was thinking hard) that Lily noticed the cool look her grandmother aimed towards a pair of pliers dangling from the peg-board wall, and suddenly it was like connecting a series of water droplets to make a stream, and the droplets in her grandmother's mind were *stutter* and *cure*, and they were merging with *tooth* and *pliers*, and Lily knew exactly what her grandmother meant to do, and she believed it would work with a faith as simple as salt.

## Walk-in Book of Outside

Sky through the wall where there had not been. Night so clear I could read it and its bent branches, everything molding. Wood and glass and dirt and the pods of plants. This, I was given a moment to enjoy. Some hours to enjoy, given weeks, clouds, rolling right beside shattering.

*The officer sticks to the edges of what few businesses are left. Slick little bullet-proof glass. All those smudges. Young boy, you run your fingers along the cracked lines. This desperation is before voice. You are pressed with the closed intent of some other. What is left, saturated, knotted, blacked. Beneath white walls, beneath the painted-white window casings. Therefore, when the boards lay on you, when you breathe there, among the strange, sbut faces, you should not feel responsible for the face.*

The wind through the trees was now only a slow dance. The people were busy sawing things down, so busy with their workhorses. It seemed everybody had a saw and knew how to use it, and something about this touched.

*Whatever bad thing happened, it happened quickly. The bad people were taken away or whatever it was, taken. Food left in the refrigerator, pictures of the family broken in their frames, as if some sudden disaster had swept through, left a mess of things, left a waste that needed desperately to be covered up.*

When I came back in the morning my landlord and his friends had gotten up most of the dirt and glass, thrown out my beautiful wood, the wood I had been renting. There wasn't enough of the wall left inside to hold any nails, and out on street level, I was simply too far away to hear the nails catch.

*We were trespassers. Climbed up onto porches, we laid the backs of our hands against each door and knocked. We wanted to find out was going on around here—talk about economic divestment and other carelessness. Hands flat against each dark hollow. The first rule is you're not to assume anything. There is a long history of assumption that follows my neighbors, which ghosts them. Behind the wood her forearm crossed the entire width of her body. It is refrain. She has ownership as long as she can make someone believe, by the sheer force of her handiwork. She spins it out. She let. My neighbor stood down her driveway. Around here, we watch, as a form of caretaking, things that belong to us.*

I was in general loathe to be dramatic. There are actually dramatic things. At this moment they are probably not happening to me, but somewhere, and in general, happening, to some other unvoiced person who suffers, and is over there.

*Across the aisle, you smooth your starched jeans with their Ecko logo. You testify with your threads. Outside the bus, Woolworth has its "Wool" rubbed out. You are not the slightest bit rubbed, you've got your face on. You are proxy for people in beautiful places who no longer identify with their things. Can't fix their mouths to the sound of you. They feel forced.*

The spectators were in the middle of glorying, feet were tripping over the dark branches. Shards. They were beside themselves wording the disaster. The holes in my windows sucked in the voices and made them sound so close. I could see the white spots of them, hovering, their flashlights into the holes. I shined my light out. I got to hear them wonder what the light was.

Sometimes I set my face on the covering. Sometimes I need to disprove the ghosts. I notice the bright leaves coming up on the tree outside, then shadow: an arc. It is unanswerable.

*Glass breaking and wood cracked. A small child was hiding in the cleft of a corner store overhang. People were saying something about "riot," heard something about "step back." They were touching the surfaces, bit a little bit with fire. They took everything down to the ground, made the whole thing threshold.*

*Faces were the same but dust covered. Face, aisle, everything run down, it had not always been this way in the neighborhood. Now, we were to take the fruit home in its wrapped package. Rot on the hidden side.*

*You must now commute to exurbia. A long route past the downed businesses. You will not riot anymore you are so small. Your body, fenced and its little holes. As if you were alone in this dark, there are round naught things you step carefully over.*

I had begun to think they were fixing things, getting rid of the old chip board, glass windows plastic-wrapped on the porch roof, planks swollen in the rain, but no. I was being teased. This was the teasing of good legislation. They left the wood sill torn out and all their notes, numbers, scribbled on the walls, haphazard directions, any spare place where the plaster was smooth.

*Our old house, the duplex on 121<sup>st</sup> was closed down. Thus it could no longer accommodate the idea of hospitality. Our history there became our secret, became that place I had lived, the overarching structure under which, once, I had been a child.*

*Ran inside in their black costume. Police, catching them in the bad act, all the bad people. This kind of act makes a building no longer suitable for habitation. In this prism I am only one of lock-step: the worst part is the dirt no one knows how to characterize. Boards were put up, the neighborhood barred from joining in all of the vacant activities.*

The run of the building and its surfaces of dried paint make the blue come.

Blue by the set of holes where the boards are, what they cover, by the very thicknesses of sill. Every soft space on them a pressed point.

The church, its black rafters against six o'clock blue, teaches me the logic of a right angle. Bare frame against my kitchen window, window that is in its wall, privileges that body of parishioners. A distance which no board can cover. Any lights in this house are only the memory of altar candles.

*With that forearm crossed over your body, your voice finally only tugs. A few loose rafters midst all of the pocked-out houses. It is not just your neighborhood but every neighborhood on the East Side of the city. You will drive for hours into this wind and not come out. The wide shelf of it is growing. Now, dark. It is dusted, its movements, you can't see the bands.*

Gatorade bottles began to fill the empty places, gaps between new wet boards. On the roof the couple would step lightly. Their bottles and the butts of their cigarettes rolled out to the edges of the gutters and held on. Months later I could still see them, their wastes, the fact of their hands on my sill, making them part owners, marking the roof forever with the deep patterns of their work-boots. Whenever they pass in their white truck, they will be able to read their history off the shingles.

I pass by. My body perpendicular to the naught-windows. This is not a conscious decision. It is a sort of cowering. Warped light over there, on which I know not to set my face.

*How we are caught up. I was struck by the images. We moved downcity, and my window faced broken window, faced the second story, faced large green panes. Islands and islands. This town was partial sentences and false starts. Our bus painted with small, round pixels. From the outside, the advertisement we carried did not seem riddled with holes.*

Business owner encased in your nice little property. Your suit, above the wreck of the old neighborhood. It is almost forgotten, hidden under and dust covered. To get downtown from your beautiful neighborhood in the Heights, you must pass the East Side. You live as far as myth and as close, so far that the bus don't run. What few trains there are in the city will be for you. This will make someone on the East Side knowledgeable, as you have taught them to read against your difference. The trains will run you increasingly underground. You will say it is of course. A wind. Ghosts are legion and no one knows who collects rent of this magnitude.

Slats are all that is left of the wall, and I am comforted. I am understanding the inner workings of a thing. Nails pulled up on the slats, each nail visible where each hand touched, read broken. As if there is not enough, as if I am needing to hold on.

Broken panes are all that is left of my antique windows. Beautiful distortion of view I felt an affinity to. Always beyond me. I did not call myself opening anything: when I open the window I am prepared for the wind.

Everyone rushes to get their bodies up over the wreckage. So the spectators believe they are coming to see God. God and his many flowers, his ugly predicaments, his flight. A natural reaction. Natural, the tornado, a reflecting flight. My neighbor picks up another nail, sinks it into wet wood.

*Talked about the house she owned, house she thought she had owned. Her yard, porch, a new addition for the grandkids. My neighbor was cluttering things up with her testimony. It was predatory lending, she said.*

*Your yard, its crooked maze of old refrigerators, broken down animation of stove, the paths and the vines among which your grandchildren hide, tripping over the dark, all of this, the state takes and deflects. It is not even the state, it is a small*

*man. He is sorry, but the market forces. Years ago there had been rioting. It was all about you. But today, you will get your house taken away. That is the thinking of it. You will do it, you will own the taking away of your home. Pulled at it with your fingers, door open but with many bolts, you will tear yourself up from its ground.*

My windowsill holds the large sky open. After everything, it is trying. They put drywall over the wood slats, but this was my skin covering things. The kitchen had its face on over the nineteenth-century plaster. It is interesting to know where the weaknesses are, another thing to know that there are weaknesses, things moving suddenly below the surface.

You will want to talk about disaster. Many people have died. Somewhere. So you will walk around having died, having nearly. You will tell a story so that by sheer force. You must never acknowledge that senselessly, you are alive not sheltered, called to task, even as you are gunned.

*The door of the old Slav Carpet shop hangs lightly from its thin steel frame. The names of the owners are illegible, but the shadows of them on the building flick out from cloud. A fence is up to the second story. On the bus, my windows up to fences and the building cuts out. It's had its roof torn. There is nothing at which to look. Therefore, covered glass: what the board hides, it figures. If I didn't live here, I also couldn't be sure of any life. Everyone is outside. The ground has grown up many desolate things. A small garden. I am usually unaware of it and its high walls.*

## Nine Small Apocalypses (Some of a Hundred or So)

### Groceries

After so many people were washed away by the tsunami, there was usually someone outside the grocery store with a bucket for collection. On a sunny day I biked over, feeling good. I walked around the grocery store, especially the produce aisle, feeling pretty good about my choices and my healthy way of life. Nobody is mentioning how increasing rates of madness is apocalyptic. It's because we mostly eat corn. But tell you the truth, I kept asking for it. I was asking for the apocalypse. I was tired of the way things were going. I was looking forward to new everything. With the slate wiped clean the whole world would be my oyster. Anything could be around the corner, I thought, pushing my cart through the grocery air. Everything that would have happened could really be a turning point for me.

### Zombies

Last town, he'd lived near the tracks and heard the train and no one did anything to prepare for Halloween. Maybe raid the fridge for eggs. Halloween was a shambles, like every other day. One Halloween he made a rule for the neighborhood kids: no costumes, no candy. He got together a bag of rags and masking tape and markers from around the house, and when kids arrived in jeans and tee shirts he wrapped one kid in shredded sheets: *Look, you're a mummy, here's your candy*, and he wrapped another one in shredded sheets: *Look you're a Vietnam Vet, back from the dead*.

"I'm a mummy!" kids cried. "I'm back from the dead!"

But here, the kids across the cul-de-sac had lined their porch with pumpkins. He went over to see them. "That one's bored, that one's

perplexed, that one's ambivalent," the boy said, pointing with a knife that seemed much too big and sharp for his body, but fit his Pirate outfit. The older sister, a girl in the tenth grade who practiced piano every evening, had used a pattern from a magazine to carve a wolf howling at the moon, with more-and-less pumpkin carved out to create depth, character, and shadow. She was inside the house, practicing. She was just about as close to him as the boy, but through a window screen.

"You've got some complex pumpkins over here," he said to the kid.

"That's not complex," said the kid. "That doesn't even begin to be complex."

In this town he lived near the tracks, too, but in this town, even his favorite cashier at the grocery, an Indian girl in her twenties, probably a college student, was dressed. The girl was Michael Jackson, and she had a naked doll hung by the neck on her belt.

He fixed a drink and took a chair to his porch and sat with his basket of assorted miniatures. He liked Halloween. When he was a kid he said he wanted to be a boat and his aunt made him a boat to wear. He was the captain and he was also the boat, the aunt explained. Everyone was impressed with the costume, neighbors and relatives, but he'd only half-believed his aunt. He still felt like he was just the captain, and that, at best, he was walking around in a boat. His parents and their friends gathered around him in their witch's hats and with their multi-colored cocktails and complimented him.

Still, he liked Halloween better than other days.

This town was a lot like the town he'd grown up in, something he'd been working toward for a long time. Comparing the towns, he knew he'd made good. It had been a hard bunch of years in the last town. I'm back from the dead, he'd thought, dropping the last box into his new living room. Here, though, the kids eyed him just as suspiciously, only from the other end of things. They eyed him with better vocabularies. And here, he felt himself looking at the town with as much bewilderment as he'd looked

at the adults in the town where he'd been a child. Only now he was an adult. He walked with his drink to the center of the cul-de-sac. He turned around and around, just enough to get a little dizzy. Then he tried to aim himself home.

### Puppet

When she speaks to me in the voice of her dog do I answer the dog? A guy who worked with me at the store was trying to make it as a puppeteer. We had a party at his house for our manager, Linda, who was leaving, and she brought two white terriers with her for beer and cake. Eric got out his puppets and crouched behind the sofa. These were hand puppets in the shapes of a donkey and a fish. We gathered before the couch, as if for a group photo, facing the empty sofa. Then the donkey and the fish came up from behind it. Eric was a good puppeteer, and the donkey and fish were funny, but what was funniest was Linda's puppet-sized dogs, who sat in the front row and were totally taken in by the magic. They followed with their heads like tennis. You could see how excited they were to find out what would happen next. After all, I want to know what will happen next. I want to know what will happen if I look at you while you're talking as if you are your dog and talk back to you as if I'm—I don't know—what could I talk to you like?

### B(l)uff

She dressed for the apocalypse in the only jeans that ever truly fit. She stood on the bluff, on the highest of many mesas, with one black boot raised on a boulder, and she leaned into her knee, squinting far beneath her sunglasses. The city looked like a cluster of crystals rising from the desert. In the background, her motorcycle pawed at the earth and revved its nostrils. From this vantage she watched the apocalypse coming, filling the

desert with roiling black soot so fast it suddenly might always have been there, gnarled, burlled, paisley, churning, eddying, smoking, and soon the soot enveloped the city like a tsunami, and surged around the mesas until all but her mesa were submerged and the black clouds thrashed against the bluff and wallowed at her ankles. She felt her heart swell and then shrink beneath her tiny t-shirt. She turned on her heel from the sea of soot and mounted the steel steed. Suddenly her body felt raw-er than ever and entirely less fleshy. She could see in the round silver ant-body-part part of the motorcycle how hard, how set, how hot and how cold her face and eyes were now. She rode her motorcycle around the plateau. She felt she could take on the world.

### Library

Really I only give the library lip service. I don't really go there, or read. I say this or that about looking stuff up because I want to give props to the library, for existing, but really I never go and usually looking something up means I asked someone or the internet. Or the dictionary in my bedroom. Some library. You can get away with almost anything by nodding or asking an honest question. People love it when you say you don't know something. Especially if you nodded enough that they think you know some things they feel really great when you say you don't know something you know they know so they can tell you. I mean seriously. Plus, they think, they had to go pretty out of their way (like maybe the library) and be a pretty cool person just to know what they know so they feel great about knowing when you don't. Borges and the library this and library that. See: Borges. Now doesn't that feel great? The thing about the library I always come back to is it exists. It's there just like all the things I'll probably never do with my body, like ride in a hot air balloon or stab someone with a bayonet or have sex with more than two people in public at once or advanced gymnastics, any kind of ballet, in fact most sports and also the metaphysical.

## Nostalgia

Jody was born cross-eyed, legally blind, the distant third of three children, enormous glasses, cowlicked hair. At five, I was faster, she was smarter. I loved her. We had one last fight, and I hung up knowing it was the end, feeling “bittersweet.” Future nostalgia thickened the hallway surrounding the telephone, all the familiar furniture taking one step from the walls into the carpet as if I could see each piece through the plaster.

At ten our schools met for hockey. “My parents are divorced, and I have a sister,” I said. “Yeah it’s a perm,” she said, “and contact lenses for my self-esteem.”

At twenty I made a detour to drive through town. In the fields a boy I’d kissed was coaching kids the age we used to be. I ate a nostalgic pastrami sandwich. I drove by Jody’s—there she was, mowing her parents’ lawn. In the kitchen we drank the tea out of a pot I hadn’t known I’d forgotten and the squeak when I pulled in my chair felt so familiar it was like nothing I’d felt before.

Jody had a thick brown ponytail and muscles in her legs, and clear, calm, wicked eyes. She was hot. She went to a good school. She rowed crew. “Yeah I’m a swan,” she said. “Yeah, my eyes, yeah, so funny, the makeover. My poor parents.” She’d only pretended to wear the contacts, and meanwhile she’d bent her eyes with the power of her mind, so that now they worked perfectly.

I looked into her eyes and knew she told the truth.

After the apocalypse I was wandering around thinking about real magic. Leaves of newspapers still cart-wheeled along the streets sometimes, but I’d stopped reading them. I’d given in to the process of forgetting, of letting the past go, of letting it rise from the depths of reflective surfaces on its own and when it would, all of this as if the world, eradicated, had a will.

### Virgins

Never mind, this is what happened to Besty. It's what they say. She grew a tail. They ripped it from her. It divided her butt. I'm kidding. But you know how you can tell when a girl loses her virginity is you look at her ass and if it's clenched up she's fine but if it's got a space—like if you look at her ass you can tell because obviously there's room now—seriously, pay attention when you go by.

### Hot Ticket

In my town where we live on a hill in the desert, which was a desert even before this last apocalypse, I can stand on the wall around the house and look down with binoculars. Tonight there is a famous rock band in the ballpark. Everyone left is watching them hook up their amplifiers to some car batteries they found. The band is in its leather outfits, just like the old car, like nothing happened, except now they don't have roadies. They're being really particular with the sound check. Given the circumstances. Rumor has it they sold tickets to every single person left in the world. That's like 100. Except us. We're up on the hill. Behind the wall. With my binoculars. Looking down on the rock stars. No way am I paying for this show.

### Want

All day she filled her eyes with the explosions and the commercials. At night she walked through the fanciest part of the neighborhood: blinds across vast windows, warmly yellow, inside high ceilings and enormous hanging shiny fixtures, expanses of plaster, vaulted ceilings, the geometries of staircases, rugs on walls, and her mind automatically unified with want: more flowers, more pottery, better furniture, less dirt, excellent collections

of film through history, expertly cut clothing, quality craftsmanship, fluffy covers, beauty. She'd gone for the walk to tear herself out of the world of the news, to get her head out of the "war on television," and the walk worked.

Why, why, why? She'd been wondering all day, but now, wanting everything she saw explained everything.

Then she was back where she started, in the cul de sac in the cosmos between the news and the body. Her next door neighbor had a silver rowboat beached in his cactus garden. It gleamed in the street-lit night, appearing as shards. Like anything else, the thing about an apocalypse is it can't go on forever, and this is what saves it and saves us in the end.

Sure, not everyone, but I mean us in general.

## Fallout. Shelter.

It's a Friday night in January 1962, and the chill, blue-gray light spilling from the TV in the side room an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Tonight's story, like other scripts by Rod Serling, is haunted by the Cold War.

In this episode, a megalomaniac millionaire has built the perfect fallout shelter beneath his New York office building. He invites the three people he blames for ruining his life to join him there. With film clips and fake radio announcements, he pretends that atomic Armageddon is about to begin.

He taunts his guests with his safety and their vulnerability should they chose to leave. Each can stay, but only if they grovel in apology and beg for the privilege. They don't, because Serling has given each some of his own stoic, solitary pride.

When they've gone, the millionaire is stunned to see H bombs actually detonate and the city destroyed. In horror, he rushes into the upper world from the confinement of his shelter and finds himself the sole survivor in a vast, ruined landscape. He breaks down in his terrible solitude.

But he'd gone mad long before. He thinks he sees a wasteland in which he's all alone, but he's actually cowering in the middle of an average urban sidewalk—with cops and pretty girls and cars honking—where nothing at all has happened.

In mid-October 1962, during the week of the Cuban missile crisis, my parents stood at the kitchen sink after dinner, washing up and listening to the news on the TV turned up loud. They turned to my brother and me and told us what we should do, if something happened.

My brother and I—he was 16 and I was 14—should not try to come home from our high school. We should go to the school chapel instead, to wait. My parents said they would come for us there. My parents mouthed

these lies, and my brother and I quietly repeated them. Down in the shelter of the Cold War, children also acquired the consoling habit of deceit.

We knew that we lived nearly at "ground zero," surrounded by Douglas Aircraft, Rockwell International, a Nike missile battery, and the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. We knew that our parents would not come for us, and that our high school chapel was a fit place in which to die.

Many years later, when some of us stumbled out of the shelter of the Cold War into the everyday light, we still saw concentric rings superimposed at five-mile intervals on our hometown. The rings were labeled "fireball," "peak overpressure zone," "secondary blast damage," and "radiation effects." My house, 24 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, fell outside the ring of immediate annihilation from a 20-megaton airburst above L.A. City Hall, as calculated by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1961. My house fell inside the ring of secondary effects: fire and radiation.

The target rings on the *Times* map made some of us store drinking water in gallon containers in the garage. They made my neighbor top off his gas tank so that the dashboard gauge never fell below half-full. He planned to escape. The target rings rewrote the textbooks I read as a child in elementary school and as a teenager in high school. The Cold War would have no noncombatants, the target rings assured us.

I had been born a soldier in the early fall of 1948, while Soviet troops and tanks blockaded Berlin, and President Harry Truman campaigned for election on his ability to do the unthinkable. I was less than a year old when the Soviet Union revealed it had America's atomic secrets by detonating its own A-bomb. By 1949, a mutual eagerness to do the unthinkable was becoming military doctrine in our country and the Soviet Union.

When the CBS network broadcast Serling's "One More Pallbearer," the habits of the 14-year-old Cold War had acclimated school children, suburban housewives, and working-class husbands on thousands of defense

plant assembly lines to what E. B. White called “the stubborn fact of annihilation.”

The blast sequence was easy to remember during the monthly drills that sent us sliding beneath our wood-topped desks, on our knees with hands clasped behind our heads, looking as if we were tiny POWs of the Sisters of St. Joseph. First, the flash that would liquefy your eyes if you looked. Next, the burst of thermal radiation that would set your clothes afire if you were outside. Finally, the blast that would tear you, Sister Isaac Jogues, the school, and your home apart.

Local TV stations covered the early tests from the Nevada desert, where houses just like mine were blown to smithereens, and department store mannequins—dressed in clothes from Penny’s—burst into writhing flames where they stood.

In Las Vegas, an hour’s drive from the atomic test site, teachers herded school children into playgrounds in the early morning to wait for the ground to shudder slightly and to watch the crest of the mushroom cloud as it climbed the horizon. The tests became so commonplace—100 air bursts between 1951 and 1961—that the children stopped watching.

One of my favorite shows on TV was *I Led Three Lives*. Richard Carlson played Herb Philbrick, a loving father and husband, an active member of a Communist Party cell, and an undercover agent of the FBI. At the age of five, I thought it was easy to identify a Communist in Los Angeles—they’re men who wear hats in the summertime.

Herb Philbrick lied all the time, with the conviction that lying is a moral necessity when war is fought in your kitchen, your dad’s office, and your older brother’s classroom.

In a basement shelter constructed to the specifications of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, father is supposed to give each family member a daily task to perform. A 24-hour watch should be maintained, with sleeping

and waking shifts for each family member. Everyone should be prepared to stay in the shelter for 14 days. To break the awful monotony, it may be necessary to invent tasks that will keep the family busy. There should also be toys for the small children. Everyone will keep a diary. Someone will monitor the two CONELRAD frequencies for the latest government reports. Someone should record these reports in a log.

The Saturday morning movies told us what the government report didn't disclose—that giant ants have invaded the city's storm drains, atomic fallout has wakened prehistoric lizards the size of office towers, and anxious extraterrestrials are already looting the brains of our generals to keep them from using atomic weapons in space.

My family's logbook shows that the Defense Department spent the 1950s hollowing out a city-sized shelter for government officials beneath a resort hotel in West Virginia. It records that communities in Nevada and Utah downwind of the atomic tests were irradiated with a cumulative 12 billion curies or 148 times the dose released by the Chernobyl meltdown. It lists the radiological, chemical, and biological tests that were conducted on unsuspecting civilians and army draftees.

In October 1945, the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff produced a secret paper on the "strategic vulnerability of Russia to a limited air attack." The plan the JCS outlined was the destruction of the 20 largest Soviet cities by atomic bombs. The targets included Moscow, Gorky, Novosibirsk, the Baku oil fields, and Tashkent.

Just 10 weeks after Allied victory in World War II, U.S. military planners were picking the targets for World War III.

During our nuclear winter, the principal casualty of the cold and the dark was the imagination. But the Cold War gave us its dreams in return. Down in the shelter, parents learned the moral imperative of lying. Military leaders learned to camouflage the unthinkable. Kids learned the choreography of end times. We learned that our government must simultaneously

contemplate truths and conceal them from us. Only later did we learn that our suburban neighborhood had become a defense production facility, a weapons proving ground, a staging area for future prisoners of war, and part of a continent-wide Area 51.

The world ended, over and over, during our years in the shelter. In *Dr. Strangelove*, fools and mindless machines do it. In *On the Beach*, drifting fallout does it. In *When Worlds Collide*, a rogue sun passing through the solar system does it. In *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, we and the gorillas do it to each other.

Just between 1984 and 1991, according to a rough tally kept by Professor Paul Briens at Washington State University, publishers in this country and England produced more than 300 novels and short story collections on the theme of an atomic holocaust. The stories range from fictionalized accounts of Hiroshima to tracts on the benefits of post-atomic depopulation.

These stories satisfied a need to nervously pick at the scab of our common nightmare while validating the deception that the managers of the Cold War wanted us to believe—that someone else would die—millions would die—but not us.

Jonestown, Waco, the Gulf War, and Oklahoma City were the little apocalypses we lingered over since the Cold War's end.

At Jonestown, bodies were strewn on the ground like the dead at Hiroshima. At Waco, the wood buildings burst into flames with the bright suddenness of an atomic detonation. In the Gulf War, oil fires simulated the post-atomic sky predicted by the theorists of nuclear winter. At Oklahoma City, we saw a government office building scooped out as if by a terrible hand, the victims blown apart, a crackpot's triumph over a conspiratorial state, and the survivalist remnant hoping to forge a new, purer nation in the rubble.

Maybe the tens of thousands of dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had it better, rendered into light and alpha particles or reeling up into the stratosphere before falling down.

Kenneth Waldie, a young father of four and my cousin, is buried in Manhattan. Not in, exactly. More properly, his remains cling to Manhattan, are smeared across the island, are still driven through and trodden on by the city's heedless passersby, are still being swept from its stoops, are still gathering in its dark, still places, are being laid down as just another layer of human fallout.

My cousin was aboard the first of the two weaponized jet airliners to be deployed on September 11, 2001 and flown into the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46:40 a.m.

My cousin has gained an obscene intimacy with the city. His picture was in its papers. His name is engraved on one of its monuments.

It's possible to think that he's still held in Manhattan's generous marine light, but I should not. But there is Whitman, too, pressing against the crowd thronging at the ferry slip, pressing himself into the bodies of the city, and if I cannot believe that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," I cannot disbelieve it either. And even if my cousin is not suspended safe above Manhattan, I could still suspend my doubt.

In 1961, the federal Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization published "The Family Fallout Shelter"—a homeowner's guide to atomic survival, printed on flimsy newsprint paper and costing 10 cents. The OCDM advised that a contractor-built shelter would cost about \$1,500.

That was 10 percent of the cost of a house in my Los Angeles suburb. Dad could build a shelter in the basement, using plans in the OCDM guide, for less than \$500. Only no southern California tract house has a basement. According to the OCDM, assured survival from the effects of fallout was for people who lived somewhere else.

In 1995, Lisa Lishman of Starkville, Mississippi posted a comment at a display of post-bomb photographs of Nagasaki at the Exploratorium in San Francisco: "I first became aware of the atom bomb and the idea of nuclear war when I was about 8 years old; that was around 1980 in the middle of the Cold War. On route to school (I was in third grade) I used to cut through an abandoned parking lot where rows of round, concrete portable fallout shelters were lined up for sale like used cars, bright price tags dangling from the air vents on their roofs. My friends and I learned to make a game of it. We'd climb inside one and play war. Whoever was left outside the shelter after the 'bomb' (usually a water balloon) was 'nuked.' You had to be quick and tough to secure a place for yourself inside before there was no more room."

My parents never considered buying or building a fallout shelter, nor did any of our neighbors. A shelter dealer in Downey, across the street from the Rockwell plant, sold prefabricated, fiberglass pods for burial in suburban backyards in 1961. No one I knew bought one.

My family's mission, if the Cold War flashed into atomic brilliance, was to die with a minimum of fuss. My parents' lives were about other forms of survival, not the kind procured with a deer rifle behind 16 inches of cinder block and dirt.

Down in the shelter, some of us debated who to let in and who to keep out. And we always found that the list of those who are expendable always begins with your next-door neighbor.

Our leaders reassured us that our worst impulses, acted on now, would have value in the post-war society. For American diplomat George Kennan, whose 1947 article in "Foreign Affairs" announced the doctrine of Soviet containment, the shelter would necessarily find room for Francisco Franco's fascist regime.

During the Cold War, the atomic battlefield was everywhere. The impossible decisions of battlefield commanders—who should live, who should die—were handed to every husband and mother. Survival meant—above all—your survival, and that meant, as the literature of atomic apocalypse pointed out, killing anyone who wanted your water, your food, your women, and your weapons. Billy Graham counseled otherwise, but he said that, in wartime conditions, it would be difficult to pass judgment on what a man did to protect his family.

We were still down in the shelter built by the Cold War on the secret day, probably in late 1991, when our computers and theirs stopped naming Moscow, Novosibirsk, Washington and Detroit as targets for our multiple reentry vehicles and theirs.

Shouldn't the air-raid sirens that once warned us to duck and cover on the last Friday of every month, long since rusted into silence, have sounded the last "all clear"? Shouldn't there have been dancing in the streets and a pretty girl to kiss?

Perhaps what Jonathan Schell wrote in *The Fate of the Earth* about the embarrassment of the bomb prevented the President from leading a victory parade down Pennsylvania Avenue.

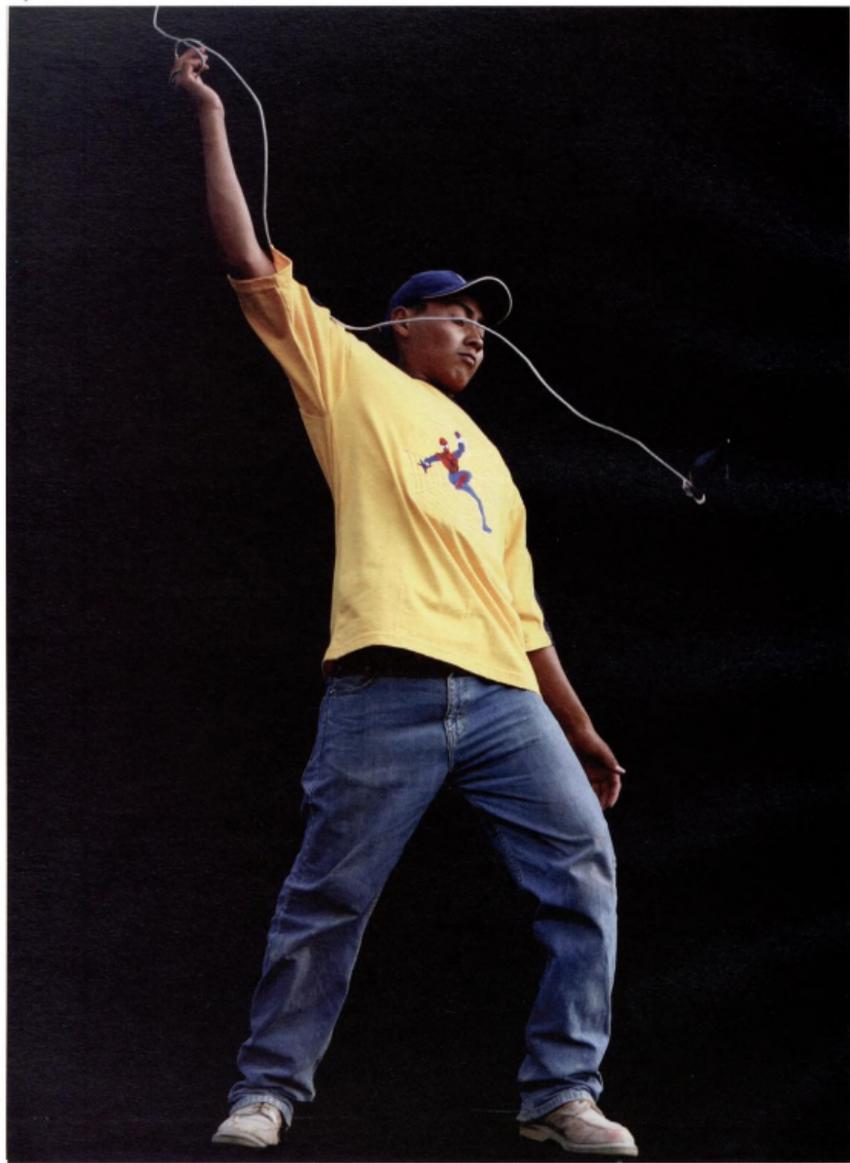
And some still have regrets that it's over. The Cold War made many things. It made the town I still live in. It made work for average Joes. It made us.

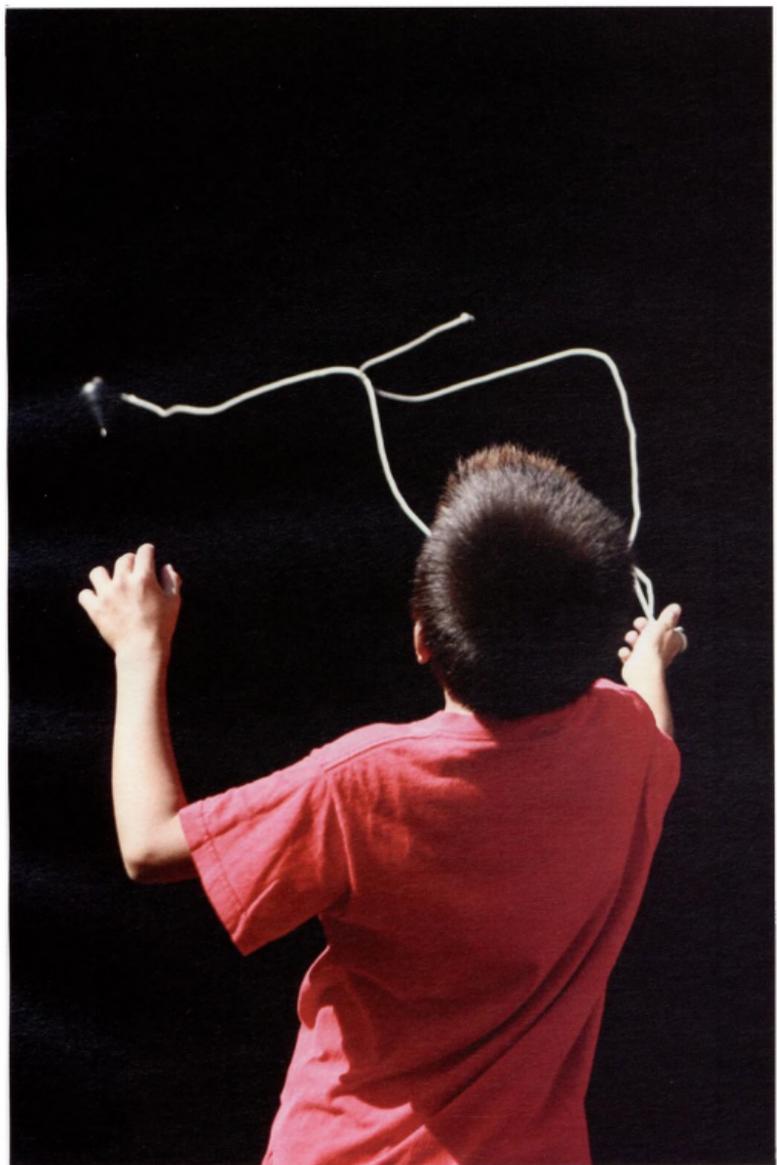
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MIGUEL ANGEL RÍOS

# Trompos

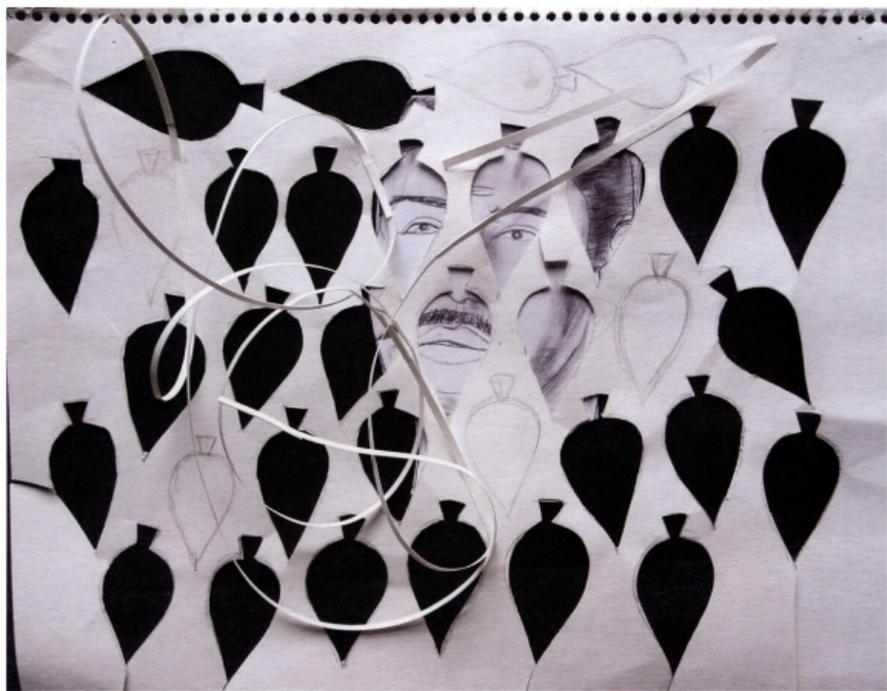


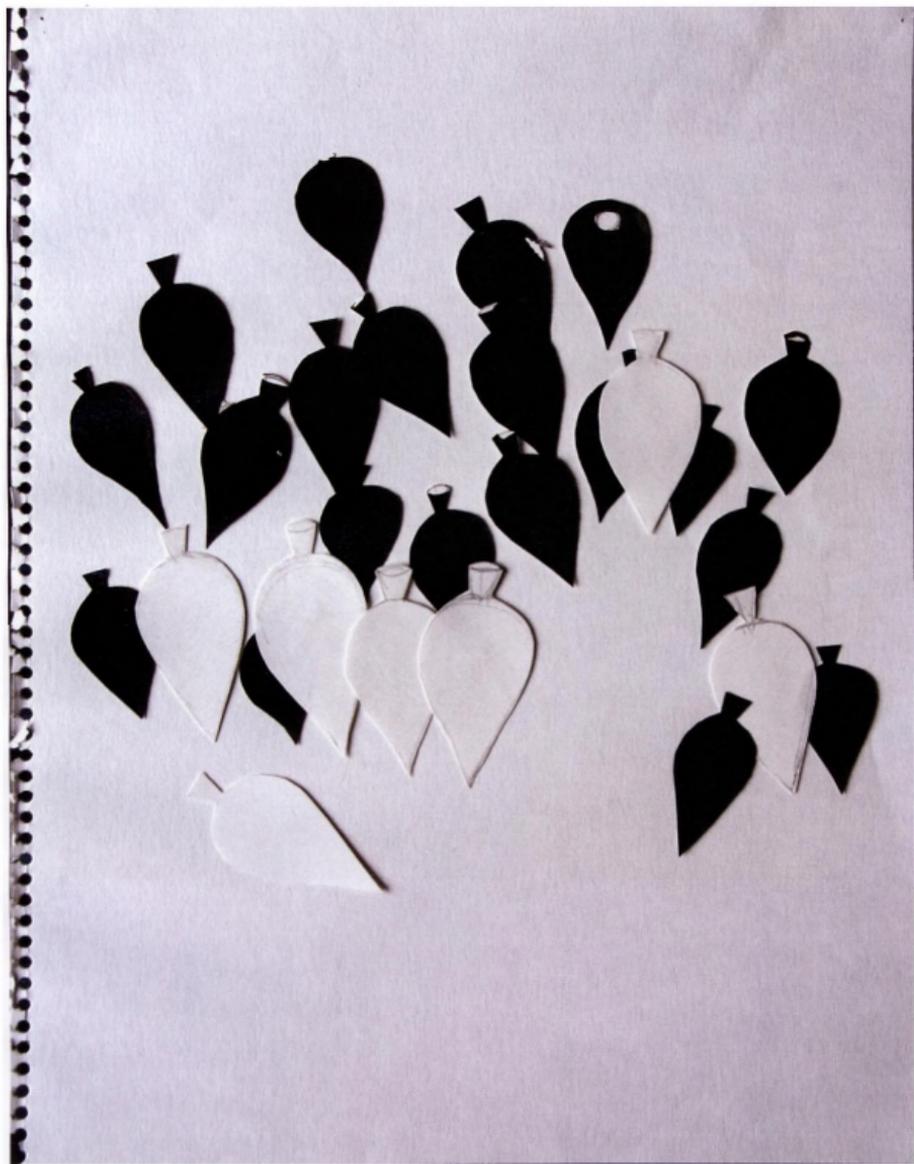














*Portrait of hombre araña*, photo no. 9610, 2006-2007  
Digital print on Fuji crystal archive paper, 125 x 200 cm.

*Untitled*, photo no. 474, 2005-2006  
Digital print on Fuji crystal archive paper, 200 x 66 cm.

*Portrait of Grillo*, photo no. 9237, 2006-2007  
Digital print on Fuji crystal archive paper, 125 x 200 cm.

*Untitled*, no. 176, 2007  
Digital print and collage on paper, 35.5 x 28 cm.

*Untitled*, no. 005, 2007  
Digital print and collage on paper, 35.5 x 28 cm.  
Courtesy Marco Noire Contemporary Art, Turin

*Untitled*, no. 084, 2006-2007  
Ink, pencil, and charcoal on paper with cut-out collage  
Courtesy Jack Tilton Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, no. 391, 2007  
Ink on paper with cut-out collage  
Courtesy Teresa Serrano Collection

*Untitled*, photo no. 345, 2005-2006  
Digital print on Fuji crystal archive paper, 100 x 66 cm.  
Courtesy Philly's Hojel Collection

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## Trompos: An Interview with Miguel Angel Ríos

*Miguel Angel Ríos has received international acclaim in recent years for a suite of video-based works focused on images of spinning black and white tops. The trompos, as they are called in Spanish, engage in a slamdance of power, combat, and annihilation. In Ríos's first video, A morir [Til' Death] (2003), a three-channel video installation shows a group of black tops, spinning, gently roiling around each other, bumping, colliding and ultimately killing themselves off until only one top is left. Ultimately, the final top stands victorious, if only for a moment, as it too succumbs to the forces of gravity.*

*This allegory of life and death is further extended in two subsequent videos, On the Edge (2005) and Aquí (2006). Recently featured at the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston, these works showed a sense of refinement and control, the allegory pushed up against the classic specter of black and white. Unlike A morir, which was filmed in a single take, the later videos are more complex in their presentation, direction, and execution. In some instances, the tops function like actors and seem to have prescribed roles and movements. Multiple cameras were used, allowing a seamless interplay of motion—a white top for example, gliding gracefully in front of a single-file row of black tops. What was most interesting in the Blaffer presentation was the wealth of ancillary projects also on display: study models, preparatory drawings, photographs and props used to develop the primary work. In addition, an amazing and thoroughly engaging documentary, Fuego amigo [Friendly Fire] (2006), added a human context and local texture to the isolated images of the spinning tops. Here, Ríos traces the artistic process that went into the production of the final videos by examining the origins of this street game, which is played in the rural Mexican town of Tepoztlán, as well as the manufacture of the tops themselves, which were custom made to the artist's specifications, and the artist's relationship with the spin-top players, who were hired to help make the videos. A recent visit to the artist's*

*studio in Mexico City in November 2007 revealed a much larger cache of drawings and photo-collages, a portion of which are reproduced here, made in relation to the spin top videos that underscored Ríos's connection to the hand-made object. The following interview took place in Mexico City at that time.*

Gilbert Vicario: You had been known for so many years as a maker of objects. I first encountered your paintings of beautiful, folded maps—inspired by the cultures and landscapes of Latin America—at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1994. Why and when did you become interested in video?

Miguel Angel Ríos: I started making videos in 2000, after the third Gwangju Biennale, where I showed alongside Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, and William Kentridge, among others. I exhibited a very large map, twenty meters long, which featured various names of lost indigenous cultures and locations. The center of the map featured Montezuma's *penacho* [headdress], woven with the feathers of the quetzal—the beautiful mythic bird of Central America. Although it was the most ambitious map I had made, I knew it would be the last one. I was too inspired by the videos I saw there, and I felt like it was the right moment to begin expressing my ongoing interests in this medium. I had already begun working with audio pieces anyway, so video was the obvious progression.

GV: Can you describe one of the audio pieces?

MAR: I worked with a shaman in Mexico named Doña Gudelia who gave me and my assistants hallucinogenic mushrooms that ended up making everyone except me sick. When you are under the influence, it's like being in a Nam Jun Paik video. It's similar to peyote in some ways; the shaman asks you questions and guides you through the trip. Then she sings to you. It was a great turning point for my career, and I felt it was the most interesting "performance" that I had made.

GV: The first video I saw of your's was *Los niños brotan de noche* [*The Children That Spring Out at Night*] (2001), an installation at P.S. 1 in New York that continued your experimentation with hallucinogenic mushrooms.

MAR: Yes, it was first shown at the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, a performance art space in Mexico City. But before that I made a video entitled *Cachupin* (2000), in which I ride into Mexico City on a white horse and try to carry on a conversation with an indigenous man who only speaks Nahuatl. The video, as you can guess, deals with the collision between language and cultures. The white horse references the appearance of the Spanish in the new world.

GV: It seems that Mexico has been very important to your work, more so than Argentina, where you are from.

MAR: Well, I left Argentina in the mid-1970s, at the beginning of the military dictatorship. I'm from the north (Catamarca), and I always wanted to go to Mexico. But I was urged by a friend to move to New York instead. Many friends disappeared in Argentina during that period—over 35,000 people were killed, you know. I remained in New York for about four years and wanted to return to Argentina but couldn't. I decided to move to Mexico instead, settling in Oaxaca. The switch between New York and Mexico was very important. I loved the authentic culture of Oaxaca. The mountains and the light. Mexico was in some respects a very healing place, very different from New York. I did meet a lot of interesting artists in New York though: Alfredo Jaar, Hélio Oiticica.

GV: Miguel, how did the idea of the *trompos* videos emerge?

MAR: The idea for the tops came about when I would find myself in Tepoztlan, Morelos, where I saw children playing with the *trompos* or tops. I wanted to find a game where I could deal with the theme of violence and

power metaphorically.

GV: Can you tell me why you decided on focusing on black and white tops?

MAR: Once I had a clearer idea of what I was doing I decided to do various drawings, like a storyboard, with black and white tops that would clearly delineate two distinct "sides." I wanted them to be clearly differentiated at the time of battle, and every time they were filmed there were many casualties. For example, the side represented by the white tops has soldiers that are perfectly organized and have control and power, while the black tops are less organized and represent the lower classes: they fight, dance, and move in a more aggressive manner.

GV: Most people who saw the *Aquí* exhibition at the University of Houston were surprised when they saw these drawings. I found them quite beautiful and was amazed at the amount of labor that went into their making. For you, is drawing a fundamental step in realizing a work of art?

MAR: I draw a lot. I have about 3,000 drawings. I love cutting the drawings, exaggerating them so that they are somehow transformed. I have about 200 drawings that are related to my upcoming video *Crudo*, which will be completed in 2008. I make preliminary drawings and then more while editing the videos. You could say that my drawings are a preliminary step, but they are also a fundamental parallel practice. They are drawings that stand on their own, with a dynamic quality that matches the power of the videos. I love working with my hands. I think with my hands.

GV: People were interested in the series of photographs you made of the various players as well. There is a great level of affection that comes across in the images. Why did you decide to have them play such an important role in the overall project of the *trompos*?

MAR: Basically everyone who works with me is very dear. I want them to collaborate with me. I have tried to dedicate something to each player either in a drawing or photograph. Without them I could not have made the video. They are as important as the tops.

GV: They breathe life into the tops.

MAR: It was such a great experience working with them. There were often fifty players, and at times as many as seventy. The battles between the tops had to be incredibly dynamic. The players were fascinated with the project, and each brought a personality and a style to the project. As a result I learned how to tell a good thrower, his style. There is such a social element, a particular vernacular.

GV: What about documentaries, like the 2006 *Fuego amigo* [*Friendly fire*] video?

MAR: It is like a work of art to me. A collage. It's not just a narration of the process but something that takes on a life of its own. It's another iteration of the project, one that I created with other kinds of collaborators.

GV: I was extremely taken by the new direction of your latest video *Crudo*, which juxtaposes an elegant dancer wielding pieces of raw meat and his encounter with street dogs. Is this a Mexican dancer or an Argentinean dancer?

MAR: There are elements of dance from Veracruz (*la negra*), America (tap), and Argentina (*malambo sureño* and *malambo norteño*). It's really a percussive element that I am after, not about a specific dance. It's the rhythmic aspect, and its relationship to the tension brought about by the presence of the dogs. The idea is to make a work of contemporary art that transcends all borders

and national boundaries, although it was made in Latin America. It is to be universally understood.

GV: Can you tell us about any future projects?

MAR: I want to make a feature length film that continues to deal with risk, when things go a little out of control—something in black and white and having to deal with the fear of living in Mexico City. The music will be very important, but this, of course, is still in a very conceptual stage. Probably the mariachi trumpet. It should have intensity, life, humor, fate; everything put into a container and made into a work of art.

## Remarks on Franck André Jamme's *On the Proliferation of Breaches and Obstacles*

*Franck André Jamme, poet, is also a specialist in contemporary Indian tantric, brut, and tribal arts, many exhibitions of which he has curated. Since 1981, he has published twelve books of poems and fragments, and illustrated books. Three of his books have been published by Black Square Editions, NYC: Extracts from the Life of a Beetle, The Recitation of Forgetting, and Another Silent Attack. In 2005 he received the Grand Prix de Poésie de la Société des Gens de Lettres for his life's work. He oversaw the Pléiade Edition of the works of René Char, and I included translations of his poetry in the Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry of 2004.*

*Much of Jamme's writing is secret, with layers of obviousness and hiddenness. It is an oblique writing, never straight in the face, but rather slanted. It wishes not to be, and so is not, frontal. Suggestive, witty, and full of binary moves—like some sort of game we do not yet really know how to play—this poetic prose is unlike any other. Describing it, he speaks to me of the Indian notion of *dhvani*, which, I gather, takes in all the above elements.*

*But that is not why I love translating such poetry. A few years ago, in the South of France, some young poets mentioned Jamme's name to me as someone I should read, contact, and translate. I did just that, and ended up very much enjoying the poem I tackled, which Franck had sent to me, "Tu viens souvent" ("Often You Come"). It concerns a falcon you let fly off to find his prey, none of which you can see or remember, flight, capture, prey, return. Because the entire drama is somewhere in you.*

*What subtlety this was, and I loved the swerves, turns, and hidden underpasses. I still do, and so undertook to translate this small volume, of which I am giving half here, the first half. That in itself is a great term and idea: the first half...*

*from* On the Proliferation of Breaches and  
Obstacles

*—translated from the French by Mary Ann Caws*

0

It was all far off, here, before our very eyes.

He had deceived us about the time. From always.

The mystery in things was they were speaking.

0

What was emotion unless it turned dizzy?

One infinitesimal mistake, luminous, and everything could open.

If you were seeking, you were really done for.

There was always a sex and a heart above the child's head.

Every time the origin was the accident.

Those who didn't know how to think, even with their foreheads in their hands,  
they kept on thinking.

He wasn't ever very far from the water. You might have thought he was being  
carried. Were they saving him? Were they drowning him?

0

The mystery in things was they were killing.

Certain thoughts were so vast that only the heart could possess them.

The frightening thing about him was that he was still smiling. After everything that had happened.

What was emotion unless it turned ecstatic?

Those who didn't know how to dream, even lying down, they kept on dreaming.

We always had to give twice as much.

The mystery in things was they were loving.

We traced only very well what we didn't manage to express.

He asked us for nothing. Or for the moon.

So many people shouldn't have had to die.

What was emotion if it didn't turn silent?

Get along without him? Most people would never manage.

But which first surged forth: form or colour?

We all behaved like that, basically. Unless we had really chosen the desert.

0

I believe it was rather serious and that they were whistling at sea.

Never the slightest question. Or he invited us to swim in the stone.

The heart wasn't the heart, it was the center.

It was just a matter of falling in the right place every time, that's all.

As for him, they had carried him from hamlet to hamlet, from town to town, from the sea to the mountains, from the desert to the forest, everywhere, from always, and he had weighed more and more.

A slightly dark thing looked less pure. And yet the contrary was true.

0

But the emotion, better it not be too damp. We liked it with a narrow waist.

The center didn't keep to the center. Or just by chance.

You just had time to turn around and it was already the future.

Never did you give anything you hadn't understood completely.

What was most troubling was perhaps their talking about deliverance with half of their mouth.

So open was the center at last that it became the heart of things once more.

0

They had even brought rabbits on the ship, I was almost certain.

The game would always be called "People move around."

In truth, it was something that we hadn't created.

And emotion, once more, just think that someone could show it the door right away, spitting in its eye as it left! Real pigs.

He was playing with us, asking us to thread a needle in darkest night.

And life was too short.

There were always colours climbing up, others going down. And when they met.

Sometimes it was a real spring.

The higher you went, the more thought undid itself.

0

There had already been many gusts of wind, in fact, more than forty. From the first time, his hat had flown off. Godspeed. The devil take you.

He could hide his despair even under a dagger.

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He had quickly grasped that all these golden-eyed eels only swam towards the pools of death.

The first thing never to justify was boredom.

Refusal always rose skyward. Like memory.

If the obstacle was really too great, you had to pass between its legs.

The trap first off was the child coming back.

He had walked on a nest of questions. As usual.

He didn't really like people to kneel.

0

The second thing never to justify was luck.

He could also veil his despairing under the tatters of the shadow of a being now gone.

One day, he had even seen fear in the tiger's eyes.

It wasn't so easy to communicate: the door of the house of pain was of red iron. Red.

The third thing never to justify was fatigue.

Someone knowing nothing about peonies and hornets, what could he understand about struggles, about split skirts?

Sometimes he had two mouths. One for speaking and the other for silence. For you had to have a mouth also to keep still.

The trap in the middle was death killed.

A sort of hip roll, less than nothing, it was just the thing.

Should we ask those who seem so sure of themselves for permission to get worried?

There would come a day when solitude would be truly crowned.

The other trap in the middle was time traversed.

He could still cram his despairing, as an homage, into a tiny bag.

0

Some were talking higher than their lips: perhaps to cover over, in themselves, the cry of not knowing.

As if milk and blood had the slightest chance of mingling!

The fourth thing never to justify (even if it didn't exist, of course), was freedom.

The fruit of the withdrawal was black. Like the moon.

Renouncing resembled duration. But duration in space. An avenue of duration.

Often he thought of the most innocent ones.

0

Night escaped as soon as you slept, it slipped behind the sky. And that, curiously, was how you grew old.

Can one make one's honey with just any flower?

He could even bury his despairing, in even the purest fire.

What he desired so ardently, was for no one to touch his arms—especially his drums, his dark voices.

The final trap you might have called a sort of reverence to life, bowing a little too low.

All we could do was to pray to our nerves and our lower muscles.

0

It was a night palm that sailed throughout the hours.

And he hoped for nothing so much as to be able, at his last moment, to hide. Like any other dog.

We couldn't ignore the fragrance of the times, it came in through our nostrils every second. All we could do was to produce it ourselves.

Everything seemed possible sometimes: the stroke of chance, the glass  
always full, the hot hand.

Any old day could be the one.

There were corpses who retained words to speak with.

0

We were going around the house. But which house?

You would have had to reach the horizon instantly. To finish with it.

Was it still today?

0

Someone had turned over your thought: he had made you remember that  
you had a head.

A life not played out gave birth only to the living-dead.

We were of course in complete ignorance about the destination and the  
time of arrival.

0

They made us believe they had it all. Whereas they had nothing.

The penchant for the ignoble was a disgust of the flesh.

There were still some who went off hunting statues.

The game was called also: "The impossible escape."

Inspiration existed. Unfortunately.

The shift was, in fact, minuscule each time. It was a matter of the same tree, always, and of its smallest tremors—according to the day, the wind, the tensions and relaxations of the fiber of the unique wood, the one that changed.

They made us believe they had nothing. Whereas they had it all.

0

The very modest goal calling for the most elegance was certainly the forced march in the pack.

We had really been taken in, believing some stuffed wings animated by a subtle mechanism to be the infinitely supple gestures of the bird.

They almost never strolled about, taking more and more risks.

And daily life was ashes. The ashes of sketches burnt alive. Sacrificed.

When time reached the end of one of its loops, there came a moment, often brief, but endowed with a surprising violence.

Some of them had managed to leave their own hands behind for a few hours.

0

The magnet kept on quivering.

Once this real faux pas had shown up, perhaps the only one: a year spent slowly swimming in the pupil of the world—the pupil of the world absolutely black, empty, and without any depth.

They had set the fire and they were looking, petrified.

Frankly speaking, she didn't come so often.

Those who would like to have understood had bitter hands and they sometimes got lost.

They walked on the earth totally indifferent to it, which wasn't expecting a lot any more. A disaster.

Nothing was more striking than when the smoke was bearing clearly seven colours.

0

And all these panting shadows that ran after their masters.

The essential was not visible. Naturally.

Some of them kept fingering a very old rosary of dried-up words.

The mothers would always be the unbearable source of the treasure.

A real project would be accomplished before it even began. For a real project, in fact, couldn't exist.

They said that he played a few tricks. Sometimes they materialized. Sometimes he could even tell the future. And yet he had no real place to alight.

The profit that luck proffered was never kept. Just gone in a breath.

Some of them kept fingering a very new rosary of dried-up words.

Every day we went just to lay down our day at the giant's feet. He cast a glance at it. Quickly. Without the slightest comment.

Some waved about to perfection, in the breeze, their kangaroo arms.

He spent almost all his time waiting for it to dry.

Always he was better off somewhere else. In the distance. A water himself in the flood of forgetting.

Frankness never excused anything.

0

It took a kind of charm in the slightest gesture, right?

When she opened the door, never announcing herself, she had breasts you'd die for.

Sometimes things came to us, how to put it? They were true. Then,

facing you, suddenly, the stranger imploded. Or then it was the great rain, remember, the whole rain of light.

Just for a moment, sometimes, we might believe we'd gotten it.

Where were those threads coming from, where were they going? No matter.

With three drops of exaltation, he could pull on a strand of his hair long enough to wrap around his whole head a hundred times.

0

And we could never conclude.

Rather as if, somehow, the night were always protecting us.

0

You felt it quickly, when a part had started off right.

They never built houses: no time for those things.

Everything played itself on a small scale.

0

Always, the world will have had to treat them roughly for they were, in fact, untouchable.

Only absence could turn things red-hot.

They were provocative by nature.

A face was taken away: it all became much clearer.

They caught no matter what by surprise. In other words, in an almost perfect state of freshness.

As for him, no longer could he believe in an equilibrium arrived at come about without any previous unhinging.

0

As soon as their gift was noticed, they were constrained. But then they served only in the most secret indifference.

As for the eye, everything happened to it.

Their race had never really been able to propagate itself. All in all, no breeding.

A face was added: it all became much clearer.

All of them, even the most bewildered, had five or six lives in their life.

One day, he had definitely chosen between cleverness and skill.

0

They saw ten times better than the other men, who didn't understand much about it.

To speak without saying anything was still far from not speaking.

Their sex always served them as a rudder.

Did the eye really decide on the place where it rested?

The very rare women in the clan were far more powerful than the men, at least by a third.

We didn't have often enough in our mouth the taste of metamorphosis.

A single one of their assaults out of ten were really conclusive.

0

But what in you immediately went on alert precisely, as soon as anyone mentioned your name?

It was through a lack that they could be held. They had to pay for their lives, in a way—each crumb being consented to only for an act accomplished.

To speak without anyone hearing, it wasn't yet being quiet.

In the clan, the men were more skilful and above all more enterprising than the women.

It was odious never to cry.

The shock of their thought against the real produced a sound that could be

perceived at a distance.

All that was absurd, your being had no name.

It was a matter of prisoners forever wild, always equally strangers to the manners of their peers.

Perhaps in huddling together, sometimes, things became denser, opened out on a larger field, further away.

It seems to me that they had gathered all the gifts of the family. Strong, skillful, courageous, passionate, bearing their bodies with a discreet majesty and instilling something ceaselessly in their mind, but what was that?

The only thing that took no commentary was pulling out one's blade at the right moment.

The older girls said of them that they were also the most subtle and the most faithful of companions.

One really didn't know much about them, it was scary.

They still sported these three hats: the one for work, the one for watching, and the one for feasting.

It was better that they didn't see too many things: very quickly, they would get nervous.

It was also enough to bring out one's brass, pointing it once towards the earth, once towards the sky, and to keep doing that until you were exhausted, blowing neither too softly or too loud.

As for them, you could see the scythe on their face and in their fingers.

0

Sometimes, only water and darkness could calm him.

There were some hours in which their silence literally screamed in his head.

Some of them were always killed, inevitably. And they always kept coming back.

0

The force bearing the days and nights could refine them or rot them.

We found the world's setup nauseating, and it found us nauseating in turn. And we still found it nauseating. And so on. Always.

Certainly the war would be long.

0

Except for the very rare occurrences that came toward us its angle wide from East to West, from the drama to the laugh, from the thought to the flavor, we couldn't taste everything.

We said "fire," and nothing was burning.

As for him, he could only read what was going to happen: everything else was a little rancid, the moment caught being already a memory.

The most terrifying thing might well have been—joy.

An existence, no matter how brief, would be full enough to present the four or five things you had to say. All the more since you generally discovered them rather quickly.

He had really hidden a world in a unique November wind. And yet this autumn gale had covered the same space.

0

We said “water,” and everything was still just as dry.

Certainly the peace would be lasting.

They were hard to find, those who could instantly share the grief.

They often had us take very tiny lamps for stars.

The door remained open to everything. A stroke of luck.

Still more rare, those who, without the slightest scheme, were capable of sharing the joy.

0

Wide its base, narrow its spectrum: life seemed deceitful, strange, tormented. But the dead, once they had forded to the other side, long remembered its eyes.

And you could moreover set fire to no matter what mark: the ashes would

be for the dream.

The least sign stopped, rose up. He trailed his glance along the horizon, at the required speed. And when he had finished, he murmured finally, slowly: "Look, I am the world."

All we could expect now was a miracle.

The troublesome thing, about inner experience, was that you could never rely on anything but the witness of the one who had lived it—that is, the word of the realm.

0

Some said it was night; others said no, on the contrary, it wasn't night: the day wasn't dead yet.

So as not to go to sleep, it was enough to think two seconds about the skull under our cheeks.

A man with one little tongue far too white, his dancing tongue, when he was speaking, kept going wrong anyway.

There were certain mines which could nourish you for centuries. And that couldn't be exploited for one single day.

A friendship that wasn't active, what on earth was it?

Better that punishments be given faraway, in silence and unseen. At the end of the world, maybe. Let them be unforgettable but secret.

0

Some words were so great that we should have loved them more, only using them on certain days—and the rest of the time, give them nicknames.

There were some who saw all too well what they detested, heard it too much, were able to overcome it with no effort: their heart was cut in two.

The only law that held good, was the one of force.

Another with one little tongue far too black, his moving tongue, when he was speaking, only ruled over the one-eyed.

Impossible to taste everything. Certain immense things, their essence was just too far from ours. We had only to recognize it; to salute them and go our way. Not always easy.

0

And life remained the frightening workshop of death.

The least sign, however, had no hesitation: it would suddenly seat itself astride the horizon and there, with its legs dangling, it would wait, confident, why? an indescribable smile in its eye.

There were some who often saw what they loved, heard it often, managed to vanquish it: their heart rested in the first sky that appeared.

The door was open to everything. Tough luck.

Did some of them, to hide the forest, really use their master (or their hero)

as a tree?

The thoughts ripped from the shadow then grafted in the hiding-places of the mind sometimes took on strange kinds of patina. And in the depths of great black vessels, were even vaguely inventing a future for themselves.

0

What happened in the bird's belly, at the moment when an egg fell from its nest?

Even by a few, even in jest, often even briefly, the art of ennobling had always been carried on.

With certain words, it was better just to take their arm. And move forward.

Life. The one sent to us. Which would never come again.

0

You always had to start it again.

One of the first things in the world was struggle. If you hadn't understood that, you'd understood nothing. Or almost. Sure, it was pretty tiring but that's just the way it was. Most of the time, you had to come to blows. With the other. Or with yourself. To mark out what territory. Who knows?

0

There were those who had never dared to cross.

Was man's ingratitude outside or in?

The deep link between the wind, the snow and calm was certain. And you could even add skeletons to that.

Some foolish ones never thought that light could strike anyone but themselves.

Everything was dissimilar. In order to destroy itself.

They had us really take cords for snakes.

Admittedly, the patient assembling of the apparition with some bits of wood or candle didn't really have much to do any longer with the fire.

0

There were those who had reached the other shore by some miracle and didn't get it.

It was a blind spot that strode across the world. Constantly.

A snatch of luck and charisma and, often, that was it.

Everything was dissimilar. In order to like itself.

He had never really grasped either the glib-tongued or the very sick. So he had lost rather a lot of time.

To place yourself beyond high and low, was surely the most appropriate

posture. Obviously, if you sit on a clear carpet.

0

What did it mean, to affirm yourself? Affirming, period, far from the scent of beauty?

There were those who had drowned.

We still got it wrong every day. Every day.

He couldn't really juggle, in fact, except with his eyes. And the wheels of his sex.

You thought the dish was cracked, and there was a hair left in the dish.

Obsession with the work: ridiculous.

What use was it to have known the light, if, after all, you hadn't been able to do anything with it, and had just fallen back into the previous darkness, rewinding the same old memory?

0

He was sometimes persuaded that these things would some day be spoken of, at the limits of the world.

You thought it was a hair: the dish was cracked.

One blessed evening, he had made the same mistake as his ancestors. And he finally remembered. It was enough to make you scream.

Obsession with deliverance: unfounded.

“If you let sincerity take up its place in you, watch out, it has crossed almost all thresholds.” He knew.

## This is the Day

### 1. How's Florida?

And life, for one shining moment, in the summer, at the shore house, was almost golden.

But not before the forgetting. The big red forgetting machine, not exactly asked for, but certainly willing to get the job done. And what might you drop down its spout? Think: one suicide, one car crash, two violent deaths, one crazy cousin, miscarriage one, miscarriage two, miscarriage three, one lecherous boss . . . Sweet Jesus, let's spare one another the facts: her life, my life. This is meant to be the story of all lives, though I'm talking about one in particular. The point is, the damn thing made it possible for my mother to live, and now I'm standing in its spray, using whatever it took in to mulch my garden.

See how the plants grow.

And die a little.

"But we've all heard this story before," says the moss beneath the rock. "If you're interested in the march of time, or in how things morph and grow, why not consider . . . evolution."

Evolution? The march of time? Well, then.

On an otherwise unremarkable morning in Florida, my mother walks to her dining room table, where I've been sitting, stops, beams at me, and says, "you almost feel like my son." *But I am your son*, I answer, laughing warily, as if in response to a punch line that's a little off. "Then you must be my twin," she says. And when I think, but Paul's been dead for sixty years, she asks whether I went to school with him. And back and forth goes the Q&A, as calm as calm could be, until we're both weary of the lesson. And just when I think I've pulled her back by the rope of my talk to a place we

thought familiar, she asks, "Who are your brothers and sisters?" But she isn't satisfied with the two grown men's names I say aloud. "Hon," she says to my father. "Hon." My father, who's half-looking at the electric bill, half-listening to the portable TV on the countertop. "Hon, Paul is our son." And the slightest look of hurt in his eyes suggests that *he's* been the one who's been exposed. *He's* been the one in the wrong. And she keeps laughing, shy and a little pleased to be at the center of things. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so, so sorry. You're my sweetheart."

*I'm 45 years old, I almost say, and you're just being born.*

Three days later, after I was no longer frozen, or more interested than broken, I was sorry too. Not just for what you're thinking, but for the words I whispered as I was falling asleep that night: *She's leaving us. She likes someone better than us. And here I'd thought we meant everything. She wants to play with the monkeys. Holy, holy, holy, sing the monkeys. Blessed is she who comes in the name of the Lord.*

So the impulse that helps you live ends up doing you in. That's it in a nutshell, right? That's what I'm supposed to learn?

*Hosanna in the Highest.*

"And how's Florida?" says my friend, Luis, though he's not exactly asking about a travel destination.

And I don't have it in me to tell him that she wasn't on my mind.

## 2. Paul All Gone

No cry, no moan—easy as a crown rolling out onto a bed of blankets. That's the story I've made of my mother's story. I mean, her version of the time her twin fell out of the car. And what did her father say to the empty space on the seat when he finally looked over his shoulder?

"Where's Paul?"

"Paul all gone," said my mother.

As if that were the funniest thing. Though she couldn't have known it was funny until she heard her father tell it, and she saved the story by making someone laugh. Paul, it should be noted, was okay—at least for then. My grandfather turned the car around, stopped, and scooped him up in his arms. Though much later, Paul wasn't. Okay, I mean. And you probably know that his ending had something to do with a car.

The way my mother told it, the first incident didn't prefigure the next. She kept the two stories apart. That way, she could still make you laugh and come out winning.

But even the five-year-old me couldn't take out the bad story from the good.

And what of the naughty gleam turned to me this morning, her memory long asleep, a lost child in the woods beside the road?

Paul all gone? I almost say for her.

But her face says it instead. My mother: she still has it in her to be funny.

### 3. A Phone Call with my Father

"Maybe that's the way to go," my father says. "All at once you're flat on your back and speechless, listening to your upstairs neighbor go on."

"What exactly did you say to her?" I say.

He pauses, as if he's trying to ground himself, before acting it out, as a storyteller would. "I said, 'Listen. Ethel. You're going to see your mother, your father, and your husband soon. Your older sister, and the cat you used to feed. Everyone you ever knew and missed.' And she gripped my hand as hard as she could and looked me straight in the eye. And that was that. And wouldn't you know that's when the stupid ambulance pulls up."

"And you're sure she wanted to see these people? What if she couldn't stand her mother? Or what if she's Jewish?"

But I should be quiet already. The truth is, I'm wondering where *he's* gone. Where's the father who used to insist that when you're dead you're dead, even as he took us, week after week, to church?

"What's religion have to do with it?"

"I'm just saying I think it's important that what you say in that kind of situation be exactly right. Not everyone believes in a Heaven."

"Okay," he says with a little laugh. "Mister You-Have-All-the-Answers. Who'd *you* want to see?"

And that stops me. Not because I can't begin to form the words I'd want to make, and not because I'm stumped (this face and that face come flying toward me like snow) but because she's right there with him in the next room, waiting for him to bring her a cup of something warm. But it isn't my father my mother wants, not the man she's lived with fifty-one years, but Lulu or Bernice, or whatever new name she'll give him tonight. And I'd be lying to you if my father and I didn't shake our heads and laugh some about this, especially on a good day, when her neck isn't hurting, or when she isn't talking too much about her mother, and how she'd be able to see her if she just had the energy to walk to the other side of the road.

Is that how we'd want to go, with most of our memory scraped? Think of how it was to live just seconds after we entered the world. Our senses so raw, they couldn't get enough of things.

*This is the day the Lord has made.*

Now I wonder if I'd recognize her if I saw her again. I mean the old mother. Suppose I saw her walking down the highway with suitcase in hand. Would she even stop to talk if I said hello?

Maybe we all made her up, that lady who shared our house, and put on red lipstick, and told us she was proud of us.

"Aside from her," my father says finally, quiet now, as if trying to make things simpler.

Sometime before the first life became the next life—though there were never really two lives, even as we talk about them like that—my mother

walked up to him with wonder and alarm in her eyes. "What is it, Hon?" he said, startled, without the old impatience we'd grown so used to. "You look funny." And it was true: her green eyes looked clearer than they'd looked in weeks. Without even waiting for her reply, he knew she knew there was a stranger in her kitchen. And though she might have said, "get out of my house," she reached for his hand and held it. They stood like that for a while, leaning into the refrigerator, nodding, as she pressed that hand to her side. And though I know not the details, and know not the new name she called him, I picture my father leading my mother down the hall past the place where the piano used to be. And the story of whatever happened inside the bedroom carried them together for a long, long time, even after things got worse, even after my mother started telling people in the lobby of her building, with an exhilarated hush, "a man has moved into our apartment, and I think I really like him."

Fifty-one years of arguments: gone like that.

And Jesus appeared before him with his shining body: *Put your hand into my side if you believe.*

## Pulling Teeth

*Or, 20 Reasons Why My Daughter Turning 20 Can't Come Soon Enough*

1. Here's an interesting fact: homo erectus, our 1.5-million-year-old evolutionary antecedent, skipped right over the teenage years, proceeding directly from cave kid to cave adult.
2. Researchers figured this out by taking cross-sections of fossilized teeth. Markings on tooth enamel, it seems, are much like tree rings. They tell us, for instance, that what modern human parents experience as an extended, oftentimes interminable period of adolescence only developed about a half million years ago.
3. Our ancestors were, in this way, like modern apes. Young apes tend to break the apron strings much earlier than humans. By the time a female chimpanzee has reached her early teen years, she can make her own nest and locate her own bananas.
4. More importantly, if a day filled with grooming her simian cousins, gnawing on twigs, and swinging from branch to branch to attract boy chimps leaves a female teen chimp feeling somehow unfulfilled, she doesn't blame anyone but herself.
5. My point? Someone should yank the teeth out of every teenage boy in my daughter's high school classroom. (I have names, and addresses, if any scientists are interested.)
6. My other point? Those same scientists should pull a few girl molars as well, and put these female teeth under a microscope. My hope here is that these molarologists will discover that some invisible change is underway.

After all, if teenagers can evolve once, they can surely evolve again. Perhaps evolve beyond the prickly and entirely unnecessary adolescent stage.

7. I have a female teenager at home. The other day, I picked up a piece of paper on my desk. My desk. “Don’t look at that,” my female teenager shouted. So I quickly returned the paper to the desk, murmured, “Sorry, didn’t know it was private.” She huffed. “Of course it’s private.” What I seemed to be looking at, in the few short moments before I was bullied into putting it back down, was a line drawing of a young woman in a dress. I think the point of the artwork was the dress—an elaborate, original bit of haute couture. The design, understand, was drawn on my tablet, with my pencil. “How was I to know the drawing was private?” I asked, foolishly trying to remain in my daughter’s good graces. My female teenager just glared at me, the way teenagers will glare when you have them dead to rights, when they know you’re correct and they hate you for it. “Listen,” she said firmly. “From now on, just assume that everything I do is private.”

8. I am not a perfect father. Instead, I’m the “hang-in-there” type. Meaning that I have almost no idea what I am doing, but over the years I’ve hung in there, plugging onward, trusting that instinct—or perhaps dumb luck—will get me through. Female teenagers, of course, naturally crave a level of distance from their embarrassing, fragrant, loutish fathers, so lately I’ve given my daughter extra space—girls, after all, have the right to privacy. And here, then, is the rub: that space quickly begins to seem a distance, and that distance soon enough resembles a gulf. Before you know it, neither party can step across.

9. Down this road are any number of horrible outcomes. I know. I’ve imagined them all.

10. I had the good fortune to take my female teenager to Madrid last

summer. Now, admittedly, Madrid in July includes surly crowds, fearsome traffic, and scorching pavement, but still, come on, this was Europe. The capital of Spain. Museums, cafés, fashion. My female teenager just moped for most of the trip, primarily because her feet hurt and she didn't take at all well to Spanish cuisine. "Why aren't you having fun?" I inquired. This is an absolutely brainless question to ask someone who seems not to be having fun, but I asked it nonetheless, more than once. "Jesus Christ," she answered. "Get over it." I persisted, stupidly imagining that I could somehow talk my daughter out of her bad humor. "You know," I said in a calm, parental voice, "it's hard for me to have a good time when I look over and you just seem so darned miserable." She chewed on my words a moment, gave them careful consideration, then spat back, "That's your problem."

11. That is my problem.

12. I wish someone had taken me to Europe when I was young.

13. That's my problem too.

14. But I don't know what she wants, or what I'm supposed to do, or how to remain a constructive influence while being systematically frozen out of every aspect of her teenage female life. Some days, honestly, I want to scream. How do you please someone who resents your very existence? How do you stop trying? Parents, especially embarrassing male parents, can be a drag sometimes, but they are a biological necessity, and as much as I'd like to apologize to my female teenager for the inconvenient reality of sperm and egg and family, it is not my fault. Not really. I'm not the one who came up with it.

15. Darwin had ten children, but interestingly, he didn't take any of them along to the islands.

16. So I'm back to the teeth. Maybe, just maybe, evolution is occurring even now, and maybe female teenagers are developing beyond this tendency toward prickly unreasonableness. Perhaps this whole problem is just a half-million year aberration, a necessary but ridiculous step along the evolutionary continuum.
17. Or possibly, like those Galapagos finches Darwin was so fond of, parents themselves will adapt new beaks, allowing them to break open this tougher seed coating.
18. As for my daughter, she will stop being a teenager eventually. She will turn twenty. I've heard that can happen.
19. For now though, just getting my female teenager to speak to me is like . . . well . . . like pulling teeth.
20. And I don't like pulling teeth. It tends to be painful on both ends.

# Every Shrine Is Makeshift

*A Selection of Poems by*

Bruce Smith

John Koethe

Susie Meserve

Lawrence Raab

Linnea Ogden

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett

Stephanie Strickland

Jean-Paul Pecqueur

G. C. Waldrep

Bill Rasmovicz

## Devotion: Coin-Op

When I can't make or do anything, I can always change some bills to silver and the costumes of my self to cloth. I can lug my fetid stuff three blocks in a gym bag as I would a corpse where a machine can't stomach the creases, but then wolfs a Washington like the local reserve or the lesser luck of a slot machine that gives back what it took—current for tender—the American, empirical, diminuendo of my hopes for capital. On the laundromat TV: *Abrazame tan Fuerte*—a soap washing the English out with stylish overlove. The Ethiopian shirtdress tumbles with the double knit and T-shirt and flannels of the unstylish boroughs. Swish of nun's veil and voile, the boy shorts, boxers, briefs—the names of undergarments like the names of god, hushed or unspoken, triumphant or cursed. On the screen the nurse/ingénue kisses the patient/hero on the lips and it's the gamut of ravishment, affliction, fraudulence, magnificence, anguish or argument for or against art. It's a wish to stop for moment at a place ransacked of bias or bitterness by the pixilated acts and cleaned of your stink and grease, your self-embraces against the ticks and cancellations and disgraces as the television mimes in red and yellow fire the revolution of the wet load in the dryer. And yet the sisters Ruiz ruck the smocks and sheets of the last-hired broker and the Boriqua and the athlete. Cool in summer, warm in winter. The daughter does her homework in the corner. No loitering. No dyeing. Down a flight from the whip pan and walla of the street. Wash and fold. *Abrazame tan Fuerte*. The lost and found holds orphaned socks. The world should be Ruiz run, accommodating dirt, ransomed of terror for an hour. You get twelve minutes for a quarter.

## This Is Lagos

*... hope would be hope for the wrong thing*

*T.S. Eliot*

Instead of the usual welcoming sign to greet you  
There's the brute statement: *This is Lagos*.  
If you make it to the island—if you make your way  
Across the bridge and past the floating slums  
And sawmills and the steaming garbage dumps, the auto yards  
Still burning with spilled fuel and to your final destination  
At the end of a long tracking shot, all of it on fire—  
You come face to face with hell: the pandemonium  
Of history's ultimate bazaar, a breathing mass  
Whose cells are stalls crammed full of spare parts,  
Chains, detergents, DVDs; where a continuous cacophony  
Of yells and radios and motorcycles clogs the air.  
They arrive from everywhere, attracted by the promise  
Of mere possibility, by the longing for a different kind of day  
Here in the city of scams, by a hope that quickly comes to nothing.  
To some it's a new paradigm, "an announcement of the future"  
Where disorder leads to unexpected patterns, unimagined opportunities  
That mutate, blossom and evolve. To others it's the face of despair.  
These are the parameters of life, a life doled out in quarters,  
In the new, postmodern state of nature: garbage and ground plastic  
And no place to shit or sleep; machetes, guns and e-mails  
Sent around the world from internet cafés; violence and chaos  
And a self-effacing sprawl that simply makes no sense  
When seen from ground zero, yet exhibits an abstract beauty  
When seen from the air—which is to say, not seen at all.

Across the ocean and a century away a culture died.  
The facts behind the Crow's whole way of life—the sense  
Of who and what they were, their forms of excellence and bravery  
And honor—all dissolved, and their hearts “fell to the ground,  
And they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened”  
(Plenty Coups), meaning nothing they could do made any sense,  
Beyond the fact of biological survival. It's easy to forget  
How much of ordinary life, of what we value, long for and recall—  
Ambition, admiration, even poetry—rests on things we take for granted,  
And how fragile those things are. “I am trying to live a life I do not  
understand,”

A woman said, when the buffalo and the coups they underwrote were gone.  
They could have tried to cope. Instead, they found their solace  
In an indeterminate hope, a hope for a future they couldn't yet imagine,  
Where their ways of life might somehow reemerge in forms  
Of which they couldn't yet conceive, or even begin to understand.  
It was a dream of a different life, a life beyond the reservation  
Without any tangible location, predicated on a new idea of the good  
With no idea of what it was, or what achieving it might mean—  
Like listening to a song with no sound, or drawing an imaginary line  
In the imaginary sand in an imaginary world without boundaries.

It feels compelling, and I even think it's true. But these are things  
I've only read about in magazines and book reviews, and not experienced,  
Which was Plato's point—that poets don't know what they talk about.  
It doesn't matter though, for most of what we think of as our lives  
Is lived in the imagination, like the Crow's inchoate hope, or the fantasies  
Of those who leave a village in the country for the city in the smoke.  
And when I look in my imagination for the future, it isn't hope and  
restoration  
That I find but smouldering tires and con men in a world of megacities

And oil fields, where too much has been annexed to be restored.  
I have the luxury of an individual life that has its own trajectory and scope  
When taken on its terms—the terms I chose—however unimportant it  
    might seem  
From the vantage point of history or the future. What scares me is the  
    thought  
That in a world that isn't far away this quaint ideal of the personal  
Is going to disappear, dissolving in those vast, impersonal calculations  
Through which money, the ultimate abstraction, renders each life  
    meaningless,  
By rendering the forms of life that make it seem significant impossible.  
*Face me I face you:* packed into rooms with concrete beds  
And not a trace of privacy, subsisting on contaminated water, luck  
And palm-wine gin, with lungs scarred from the burning air,  
These are the urban destitute, the victims of a gospel of prosperity  
Untouched by irony or nostalgia—for how can you discover  
What you haven't felt, or feel the loss of things you've never known?  
I write because I can: talking to myself, composing poems  
And wondering what you'll make of them; shoring them  
Against the day our minor ways of life have finally disappeared  
And we're not even ghosts. Meanwhile life regresses  
Towards the future, death by death. You to whom I write,  
Or wish that I could write long after my own death,  
When it's too late to talk to you about the world you live in,  
This is the world you live in: this is Lagos.

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Note: This poem draws on an article, "The Megacity," by George Packer, and a review by Charles Taylor of Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope*.

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SUSIE MESERVE

## Morality

Gently, now, for we begin in earnest.  
Gorgeous how things suspend: this peacock  
feather, the bar to this cage, the clue that tells us  
the cage has been opened. The stump from the gatepost  
that once let us in. You can't help but glimpse  
the five minutes hence, the cumulus pilings,  
the lean-to of gold. Be ever watchful for the rise  
of the phoenix, for the slow descent of his son.

## History

Broken moon, broken moon, I had not  
noticed the tower. The people agree  
the blue is all wrong, but its scaffolding  
deserves their praise. You can hardly see  
where the hair was let down. Our hero  
arrives with a toolbox. What do you mean  
his neck won't hold up? Hand me a screw.  
Hand me the wrench for the heart.

## Recent Apparitions

One day someone looked up and saw it—  
not the dirty window it had been  
for five years after the seal broke,  
three floors up in a brick wall  
in the Milton Hospital in Massachusetts,

not just that cloudy pane of glass  
but the Virgin Mary, head bowed in sorrow.  
Within a week twenty-five thousand people  
arrived to see her. A boy in a wheelchair  
touched the wall with his legs,

but didn't walk away. His mother wept.  
Many left flowers. A man from Florida,  
who'd recognized the Virgin once before  
in the window of an insurance company  
in Clearwater, said, "Whether or not"

it's a true apparition, it's a sign to us."  
For a day or two the story gets in the papers.  
Then the figure starts to change  
and the crowds thin out. Soon  
it's only a broken window except to those

who want to remember, maybe wonder  
how long she might have been there  
before anyone noticed. Perhaps

every window contains a secret apparition.  
Perhaps the world is full of signs,

and if we looked around we'd see things  
as they really are—not just a stony hillside  
and a tree, not just the bitter rain,  
or that trail of smoke  
always disappearing into the sky.

## Property

*But I don't see where the fraud comes into it. In any case, what fraud represents is the inability to make intention legible and I would argue that only happens with a mess, then failure of*

*other words, the only basis upon which I can see the formation of our argument. The tulip trees offer*

*any fraud here, if we start with the assumptions about the frame of last year's blooms like a brittle candelabra. My neighbor does a decent headstand*

*that I made, that there's no claim that they were good for you, told you anything about themselves, would be sympathetic tomorrow. It's the first year in a new place, the place isn't new anymore, it's*

*minimizing business or skimping on the percentage so we know it should have improved by now*

*or whatnot, the only basis to say that there has been any improvement is that dislocation isn't geographical. So we say we know certain things: we know where we live, and it's different than it was, we know*

*that the State has been defrauded or something is wrong because it doesn't feel better, we know the*

accents rise up at the end, rise up all the way into  
our windows, watching local programs, we know how

*to say that the property right must be some kind of  
joke because what do we own? Almost nothing  
except our own position, our own dismally regular  
weekend slump, looking at things as though a*

*metaphysical entity that somehow goes beyond  
the windows and ourselves and the neighborhood.*

*The right to receive the fees, and the right  
to recognize said fees, which aren't reciprocal  
most of the time but do resound like  
a car with its bass turned way up,*

*to refuse to make any sense of it whatsoever,  
to keep on going the wrong direction*

*and go right on being exempt.*

## Burden

*Whether the standard is preponderance, both*  
accumulation of details, no matter how many years  
they've been together the gesture of reaching  
from the passenger's seat to the driver's seat  
with one hand on the back of the headrest  
is the same. This motion spans fights  
in front of churches, a move across the country  
*at the summary judgment stage or at the directed*  
stare of both parties towards the house they used  
to own. In terms of concrete information  
what I know is that these people retrace steps and friends.  
There's where the baby's stroller failed to lock, there's  
the rose bush that lives at a pre-hybridized state, old-fashioned,  
fragrant. At any rate, you'd expect it to annoy you, the  
*verdict stage, the burden of the plaintiff is to produce*  
that feeling where everything adds up to being worth it.  
One of the friends rolls back the rug, puts a mat down  
and flexes her ankle, asking Krishna to heal, surrounded  
by stainless steel water bottles and makeshift shrines  
but I would argue every shrine is makeshift.  
*That sufficient evidence to go beyond that motion*  
means it's possible to access sincerity, like people. Admit it.

## Half-Life

A thing in itself always diminishes. From this:

light, heat, the order of matter burning into more matter.

The radium atom in particular proves unstable and thus produces  
tiny blue lights, which is not unlike a view of the world from above  
in satellite. In the damp laboratory at night, and for their enjoyment,  
Pierre and Marie dance among ramshackle benches and glowing  
bulbs of glass. Flame stutters: a question in the lamp.

Their fingers soon turn black with the burns of their work.

In this they know that what they study is the chemistry of perdition.

That the source of the light in the world is the world's demise.

Marie figures the days left of its hazard and its blessing.

## Mad Doctors

Even as children they always went too far.  
What will happen, they kept thinking,  
if I pull that switch, strike this match?  
Maybe no one told them not to,  
or explained, logically, what could go wrong.  
Then they were playing with lightning,

wondering what they would do if they didn't  
have to die. Consider Doctor Cyclops,  
stuck in the middle of the jungle  
with his radium, making things small.

It's 1940, five years before Hiroshima.  
Even then science wasn't on our side.  
In the movie, Albert Decker's  
shaved head makes him monstrous  
and impressive, and a little like a child.  
Yet he seems to have no past—

no wife to bring back from the dead,  
no motive for evil, nothing but research.  
His eyes are bad and he hardly sleeps.  
We should remember Doctor Cyclops

from time to time, and Doctor Frankenstein,  
Doctor Jekyll, and Doctor X.  
They were all deceived by ambition,

although they believed themselves  
betrayed by the world.

Maybe no one ever told them  
we don't need to live forever.  
Maybe no one explained, exactly,  
the logic of it.

from *Huracan's Harp*

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dreams come unlabeled as to is and stands for  
Gregory named for Gregor monk Mendel married  
to Margaret promoter at times of doublebind  
theory says *and* this is what is *best* about them

Protestants and therapists think secrecy is wrong  
but Protestant (born) therapist Gregory  
newly warily against his nature understands  
poem glue dream to be kept from grid mind

lest they neutralize each other—you can't count  
doublebinds in a sample of behavior what turned out  
after all to be ( ) and to be ( ) once named  
become elixirs Willy and Felix confidence trickster

sell cull cue *holy and abject* is and stands for  
yoked kept not separate not confused

from *Huracan's Harp*

107

silent compact smooth stone longing to appear  
split cleanly open all silver mica black  
gleaming chip schematic surface

unbudging rock gone suddenly jagged  
sworn to a tip tall scraggly mountain tower  
hot burning element atop bony fire

now a padded package  
opening to show dark folded clothes  
the crumpled moths in a parachutist's jumpsuit

## Synonyms For Churn

Rodrigo wore his Heideggerian work boots  
to the dinner party again. Jacqueline  
wore her cape and clasp. If asked,  
that night, I'd most likely have sworn  
the twentieth century was opening once more,  
charging the air with the engines of dreams.  
I thought that I wanted to be needed by things.  
Later I thought that I needed to be held,  
like a fist, by strictest definition closed,  
or a cork nodding off in its bottle of wine,  
pale iris forced in a jar. Do you like flowers?  
I thought you might, so I stole you this one.  
Do you like stories that begin I remember?  
Would you truly love to slug me right now?  
Okay, so nobody asked. I'm sorry. Really,  
I never knew, I thought, while watching  
that prick junky twitch like a cricket  
on the seat beside me, then all at once  
I knew too much. For instance,  
I knew the two true ways to cook  
a potato, with cheese or without,  
and this option instantly fixed me in place  
like a yellow vinyl sofa. Can't you see?  
There's no way around it. If I swerve left  
there is always the free-jazz quartet  
patiently tormenting the pre-war plumbing.  
And then, if I turn to the right, you go  
and smother yourself in the pile of furs.

## Green Street

Why greensward. Why clocktower. The meter in the chime.  
As if a charge had been. Exacted. Or set. Quest for a floorplan.  
For some usable past. Disguised. As architecture. To have made  
with the hands. Stitches flying so fast air can't guide them. We  
thought it was a church she said. Because of the corbel. And  
the altitude. Gravity organizes. Plants, birds, suns. The human  
manufactory. There is a tongue in the mind that seeks itself. In  
profusion of goods. The heart pine floors removed, with almost  
surgical. Precision. In the cervix of boardrooms. The past is never  
so much. Erased. As reconstituted. Some flags and some follicles.  
Manifest(o)ed. Better this than fire. Than sheriff. Than dynamite.  
Better river than dam, faith than its shrewd hybrid. O blessed  
accountancy. Swift radiance. But cannot reproduce. The shadow  
of that brickwork. That bomb in this cathedral. Were one child  
singing would he be. A poetics. Of dilation. Only the notes of the  
higher registers lost. Said the superintendent. Smiling benignly.  
It was not such a difficult thing, to have a son, now was it. To feel  
solidity. Slow diadem. Stone crown.

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BILL RASMOVICZ

## A Context

I am waiting for the man next door to stop sneezing.  
There is a girl crying in the hall.  
I am waiting for my hair to fall out.

Eventually all bodies assume the shape of a sparrow's.  
Only this belt holds me up.  
It is late. It is dark.  
A telephone is ringing through the wall.

I have been watching birds in the courtyard.  
I am taking notes on the proliferation of smoke stacks.

The evening's arrival is a pistol-whipping.  
It is Winter and the grass keeps growing.  
I am waiting for the context of snow.

Inherent in all bodies, the moan of pillars crumbling.  
Inherent in all bodies, the soot of Paris burning.

The streets pass out at the horizon, then wake  
and keep going.  
The hours decompose to salt.

I am waiting for the orchid to leap from its sill and attack.  
There is a girl crying in the hall.

Someone is making their way to the rooftop.

I hear icicles.

I smell the sulfur-strike of matches.

The wallpaper assembles in its myriad patterns a head.

The river cuts a course through a city it can't recall.

All bodies are cellos cracked and weeping.

All bodies are tuned to the clatter of crashing glass.

I am waiting for the moon to lose its radius.

I am noting the exposed circuitry and walls leaking.

I am waiting for the room to exhale,

for the moon to punch its fist through the window.

A girl is crying in the hall.

So that when the police arrive I will know what to say.

## Taina's Song

It had worked for the Virgin Mary.

And so, when at thirteen Taina Flores got pregnant, she declared that it had been an immaculate conception. Someone or some *force* had entered her project building. Had taken the elevator. Punched her floor, then stepped off, only to dematerialize its body so as to drift into her bedroom like smoke or mist, and change Taina's life forever. Of course no one in the neighborhood believed Taina. Though everyone believed Mary.

The elders in our Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses didn't believe Taina. Time and time again they'd sit her down, pleading with her to confess her sin. But Taina stuck to her story. The elders even questioned Taina's mother, Sister Flores, and she vowed in Jehovah's name that her daughter had never been with a boy or a man. That she had taught her daughter well, "*Si es macho, puede. Por eso, nunca sola.*"

Sister Flores continued to tell the elders that she had kept so close an eye on her teenage daughter that she was sure that Taina didn't even masturbate. Her reply had made the elders uncomfortable. They slouched in their chairs a bit, and one of them, Elder Miguel Vazquez, went on a long speech about how though a sin, masturbation couldn't have made Taina pregnant. But the ice had been broken, nothing was now too taboo and so the elders inquired about Taina's cycles, was she always late, early or did they vary? What type of pads did she wear? The inserted ones shaped like a man's body part or the adhesive ones? By this time all the air had gone flat in Taina's life, she was so deflated and broken, it was Sister Flores who answered all the questions and truthfully.

The trial went on for weeks. Every Sunday after service, the two women were called by the elders to come into a small cold room and talk things through. Though heartbroken and embarrassed that the entire congregation was now laughing behind her back, Sister Flores stood by

her daughter's story. The elders went so far as to agree to accompany Taina and her mother to Metropolitan Hospital, so Taina could see a doctor who would confirm that she was no longer a virgin. But Taina and Sister Flores refused, time and time again, they refused. "I have told the men of God the truth." She vowed, "My daughter is pure." This left the elders with no choice but to expel Taina, certifying her no longer a Jehovah's Witness and therefore not worthy of receiving eternal life.

That day Sister Flores cursed at the elders in the street. Sister Flores spewed out so many curses it was as if she was exorcising the anger felt by all the women in the third world. "*Dónde está el amor de Dios?*" She pleaded with God and men. "They play us like dominoes, like dominoes, they play us. With no love at all." For her public show of ingratitude, the elders kicked Sister Flores out of "the truth" as well. In fact, she had disrespected men appointed by the Holy Spirit. Men who had been chosen by Christ himself to take care of His sheep. To the elders, what Sister Flores had done was an even more grave sin than her daughter's outrageous lie.

Sister Flores and Taina became an odd sight in the neighborhood because they never spoke much after that. To each other or anyone. In the street they walked hand in hand, mother clutching daughter, and only made customary visits to places like the supermarket or the check cashier. In fact, I believe that there were places in Spanish Harlem that the two had never been to or ever would visit, like a movie house, a beauty salon, or café. The two women were always alone and it seemed that even among crowds nothing ever disturbed them. Not cat calls from the corner boys directed at Taina. Not gossip from hair salon women directed at Sister Flores.

At school, Taina was no different. She sat alone. Rarely spoke and got lost among a sea of teenagers. She never cared for new clothes, makeup, music, popularity or anything of the sort. Like her mother, she would smile when smiled upon but not talk, as if her smile was telling you she was not your enemy but didn't care for your friendship. The boys liked her. They all fell in love with her beauty, but they soon lost interest when Taina did not

respond. Instead she'd stare ahead, at walls or anything in front of her, as if the person talking to her didn't exist. She wouldn't talk to the girls either and if I remember this well—it has been a long time—Taina had been in one of my classes. It was biology, and I think all she ever said was, "Rabbit." Shame.

They said it was shame that had turned these two women to become like monks. As if all their lives would be spent in a room by themselves doing penance. They said it was a shame, a truth that the entire neighborhood knew but the two single women were afraid to face and therefore, shut the door on everyone and everything. They said Sister Flores had been the worst of mothers. They said Sister Flores should have known better. That even as a child any mother could see that Taina Flores was going to be beautiful and therefore bring trouble. And now at thirteen when her eyes sparkled like lakes, and when her breasts went from something boys made fun of to things boys wanted to hold in the dark, this sort of disaster was certain to have happened. And so, after the tragedy, counselors from school and public services were sent to call upon 1829 and Lexington Avenue, #5B. Detectives made visits so as to take the mandatory report. But Sister Flores never answered the door. Soon, to cut down on these unwanted observations, Sister Flores pulled Taina out of school. No papers were filed, no home schooling was used as pretext. Taina one day just stopped attending. Sister Flores would now be the only one of the two women you'd ever see on the street, and she was either carrying groceries or going to cash her welfare check at the Check-O-Mate. In time, when the gossip was no longer fresh and biting, the entire neighborhood found better things to do and started treating the two women the way they wanted to be treated and left them alone.

I once entered Sister Flores's project building. Took the elevator and punched Taina's floor. When I stepped out my heart was racing as if I was about to disturb an infant child that should be left sleeping. Still, I stealthily walked towards their door, #5B, and when I got close enough, I placed my

left ear next to it. What I heard was complete silence as if the apartment was empty and ready to be rented out. I kept my ear glued to the door for a long while and when the neighbor in #5A caught me, she said she had done the same and that I wouldn't hear a thing. That no sounds escape from underneath the door of #5B as if not even dead people live there, for even the dead, she said, make noises.

The neighbor was right.

It was on that night that I became certain that Taina and her mother would become like characters in Bible stories. I had this glorious vision of people from all over the world making pilgrimages to Spanish Harlem so they might, just might, get a glimpse of a pregnant virgin. They'd place their ears to the door of #5B like I had, and if they were lucky they might be blessed by hearing a sigh escaping from Taina's lungs. I was so sure this was going to happen. This miracle was bound to reach these faithful. In El Barrio the word, the story, had already spread. It was heard by everyone. Some had shrugged, some had laughed, but it was only a matter of time before #5B in 1829 and Lexington Avenue would be known as the project that houses a living saint.

But this didn't happen.

The story of a pregnant virgin didn't catch on.

At least not the way I thought it should have.

I mean not a single tabloid TV show from Telemundo ever came by to explore the possibilities. No reporters from *El Vocero*, not even a public access cultish program on cable. Nothing. Instead everyone believed in the unfortunate shame that had befallen Taina. The man who had done this to her was probably the same man who had been going around the neighborhood stalking young girls. This man would bargain shop for women on the street, like one shops for a dress or shoes at a department store. This man was known to follow his prey all the way to their apartment doors and come up behind them with a knife demanding, "Your life or

your eyes?" This man had done great harm before he was caught and many believed he was the father of the child.

But I didn't.

I believed Taina.

I believed in Taina so much that when the man who many said was the father was caught and sent away, I took all the money my mother had given me to buy new jeans and sneakers and caught the Metro North train up to Ossining, NY. I had remembered his name from reading *El Diario La Prensa*, and though I had never visited a prison before, I naively thought that since I knew his name I could show up, like it was a hospital, and say I'm here to visit Orlando Castillo, then be let inside. I was fifteen at the time and so I was underage, and the fat guard at the front gate wouldn't even let me sign in. He told me that I needed an adult who was family to this man, this Orlando Castillo, and then I could only come when the inmate was scheduled to receive visits. I said to the guard that I just wanted to ask the man one question, that it would not take long, but the guard had no time for me. There were tons of families waiting on line to sign in, so they could then hop on a bus that took them to the compound. I was holding up the line, and the guard told me that I better leave or he would kick my punk ass out.

I left angry because it had been a long and expensive trip, a train and then a bus to get there, but most importantly I had no answer to my question. "Did you ever visit #5B in 1829 and Lexington Avenue?" I was sure that that man would've laughed at me, or most likely he'd say that he couldn't remember. Which I would have taken as a "no" and therefore Taina's story would be proven to be true. I wanted this answer more to convince other people. Those that were still skeptical, those that did not believe. I wanted that answer for them, for the unfaithful.

So angry I was that on the next Sunday after our Kingdom Hall meeting was over, I voiced my belief to the elders. I told them that I thought Taina was telling the truth and that the elders had done an

injustice by removing her from “the truth.” I said to these wise men of God, that Mary was raped too. That I had read all of the Gospels and never did God ask for Mary’s permission. That Gabriel had appeared to Mary during the Annunciation and said, “You will have a child. And he will bring peace.” And that was the end of the discussion. I said that Mary was never given a choice. She had no choice but to accept God entering her. Was there a difference between what had happened to Mary and what had happened to Taina? In fact if it is true that we are all God’s children, then what we are talking about in regards to Mary’s case is not only rape but incest as well.

For this, the elders called me an apostate.

I was warned not to spread lies and that only their mercy had saved me from getting kicked out of “the truth.”

“Two people had to be killed spiritually for this. *Misericordia te vamos a brindar.*” Elder Miguel Vazquez said to me in Spanish that they would offer me mercy, though later they did speak privately to my mother. Who, though I was fifteen at the time, still gave me a beating that same day.

In tears, I began to question why had I taken so much interest in Taina? Why couldn’t I sleep at night, eat much, or believe in anything that contradicted my true hope that Taina had been visited by some divine force or thing? Was I in love with her? Was it believing that she was still a virgin, in some way, my idea of keeping her all too myself? Of course I was in love with her. But even at fifteen, something deep inside me, in a place that I hardly knew was there, told me that this love for Taina was more than just some silly crush, it was more like a sadness one feels for neglected children or flowers. A sadness one carries for so long it becomes a companion. Something hurtful but good . . . like . . . like . . . unrequited love. It was this love that led me to believe that I had not been called to do great things but rather everydayness, simple and direct actions that would help propel a historic story. A story that could only be understood by disregarding the most logical of elements by replacing them with faith, miracles, and magic.

It was not long after my self-examination that I began to worry about Taina's unborn child as if the baby needed me. I started to save all my allowance, which wasn't much, just five dollars a week, and I began buying gifts for Taina's unborn child. I bought shoes, clothes, pampers, cream, talc powder. One day while walking down the street, I saw a second hand crib on display in a window of a pawnshop. It was beautiful dark wood, with angels carved on the headboard. The crib was a bit expensive, and I saved enough to buy it, and though it was a pain to carry it by myself, I managed. I hauled it all the way to her project and into the elevator all the while, wondering if Taina was getting fatter, was she showing, was her stomach round as the moon? Like all my gifts before, I placed the crib quietly, leaning it in front of Taina's apartment. I then rang the doorbell and hid, as if I was a Halloween prankster. But the crib, like all of my gifts, was never accepted. When I'd check, I always found my gifts in the trash compactor or outside in the street with the rest of the piles of uncollected trash bags and junked furniture. Still, either Sister Flores or Taina had to have touched my gifts with their saintly hands, and this brought me some comfort and joy.

At school I began to defend Taina's story. The other students would laugh at me, "Fifteen and you don't know how babies are made?" Of course I knew. I'd say it was a miracle. They still laughed, "The only virgin here is you," they said. Though I was a virgin and had never had sex, I responded by telling them that sex had nothing to do with it. What about that man who had been in a coma for thirty years and one day woke up asking for a Pepsi? What about that found baby that floated in the waters for hours during that tsunami tragedy and lived? Or what about people surviving airplanes falling from the sky? About the gold crosses they carry hanging from their necks, about things that can't be explained, only felt, like air, hope, or love.

But I was still ridiculed. Few talked to me, which was hurtful, to be alone carrying a truth that no one wanted. But later the burden became a

gift, and I didn't care because I began behaving as the two women were. I had joined their way of dealing with a world of unbelievers. I had embraced silence.

At home my mother was very angry at me because I had insulted her elders, and my father, who never believed in religion, having been a communist in the past century, thought I should be left alone or see a doctor. My father said all those people, all those saints, like Joan of Arc, had mental problems. They were all crazies, and he would never have guessed that his own son would be one of them. *"A mi hijo, le falta un tornillo,"* he'd say and sadly shake his head because there were no crazies from his Ecuadorian side of the family, so I must get my mental problems from my mother's Puerto Rican side. Mom would strike back. Telling Pops how he had been a bad father who, instead of always being out there organizing unions and saving the world, should have been at home taking care of his son. That if my father would have spent time with me and less time on dead manifestos, in trying to change the world by out-arguing his other commie friends in cafés, this would have never happened. She'd blame men for always screwing up their families. She kept saying how things hadn't really changed, now that my father had stopped believing in a dead system and was now a bookie, a *numeritos* man. She's blamed my father for spending too much time away from home in OTBs and newspapers.

What I did know for sure was that Sister Flores and Taina were so alone, as if living in a universe of two. Yet I held hope that, the way a chicken sits on its eggs to safeguard them and not out of shame, Taina and her mother were not sad at all, that instead they were protecting something good, something wonderful, and I wanted in.

## Between Worlds

Submerged in an above-ground swimming pool. The water is perfection—chemically balanced, a clever blue—ear to the world ignored. I hear everything: the swallows rev and swoop inches above its surface, the Kreepy-Krawly's lub-dub scrub along its smooth lining; heartbeat echoing in my ears. I float motionless in the center. Eyes closed. A single thought imagines the threshold between worlds depends upon water. One's being seemingly spills into being everything; and, in an instant, spills over.

\*

*La mer*, the sea. Blue. *Ma mère*, my mother. Pink. Two inscrutable bodies. As a child I confused the colors, calling pink blue. My mother, the sea. Now I've become both. In their vastness, I've known possibility. In the swimming pool, I'm defiant of gravity. When I rise out of water, my body lifts refreshed, withstanding. I'm not my age. A puddle collects around my feet.

\*

Begin again. This time a scene that's memory. A young woman, with brown eyes, brown curls, wearing baggy corduroys comes to the doctor's office certain she's pregnant. Her three-year-old hides behind her slimness. She smells of patchouli and tobacco. I ask her 100 invasive questions. She answers in few words. Mostly "yes" and "no". This record is private. I tell her she can't clean the cat litter box; she can't smoke or drink alcohol or caffeine. These are the doctor's orders. She nods her head and takes her fistful of papers home. I tell her to call if she has any questions, any questions at all.

Three days later, she's waiting at the front desk with a small plastic container that once kept margarine, with its name *Promise* on the lid. I

smile at her and she smiles back, sheepishly handing the little tub to me. She follows me back to the lab, where I routinely dipstick urine for albumin and sugar. I set the tub on the counter and pry the lid off gently, not wanting to spill her specimen. She watches me tentatively.

Not urine, but a fetus no bigger than the pad of my thumb, a translucent cameo nestled on a bed of cotton balls. Small hand crossed over mouth, body tucked in the shape of C, eye buds, nose—all the fine details made by 12 weeks—she asks me if the doctor can keep it alive. I hear water in her words rushing to care for what spontaneously spilled from her—fetus, salt water, roar of the sea.

•

Begin again. My mother sleeps in a fetal position, floating between worlds. All the windows open. No wind tonight. The sound of waves rubbing small stones together. Her breath uneven. I touch her cool skin and feel water beneath my fingertips.

•

Looking up through the ceiling of water, I see a dome of sky glowing incandescent pink. I push to break through its glittering surface, gasping at first breath, then the next. My vision blurs in the sting of water—sound spills everywhere at once.

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MARY RUEFLE

## **Friends with Fur and Feathers**



PREFACE

These  
pages

have at different times appeared. True  
they may prove of interest to some

we have so long called, but never defined.

children

and for them, especially, this  
written. Will they remember us  
the post

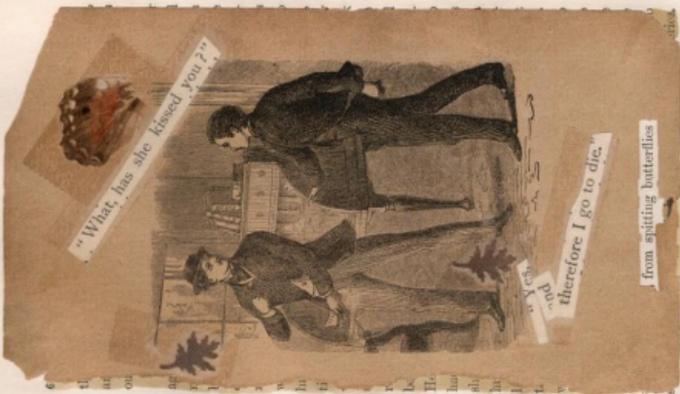
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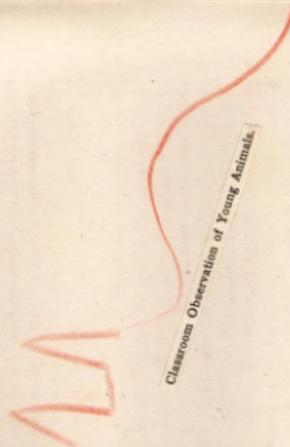
KORNEGALLE JACK.

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ladies. **Well, then,** after a long, long time, and much patience and perseverance in looking for masters, and when, we do generally the case with these unfortunate, they are very useless and ugly dogs, who never will find masters, then I am afraid, they have to take prussic acid, and their poor little souls are criss without a moment's fear or pain.

Nothing else could be done for the poor creatures accustomed better than the family and, after all, not many come to this fate, for most of the dogs, even if they have lost their owners just finishing again, get set up in life with new ones. The Institution is, in fact, becoming quite a dogs' register school. The keeper, who is very well fitted for his place, and very kind to his charges, knows so well the different qualities of some of his *protégés*, that he nearly always picks out the right dog for the right person, according to the list of requirements given him; and the committee have often the pleasure of hearing that Tomer, or Crisp, or Vivian, give great satisfaction in their new place. Of course, when they were lost, they left their names behind them, but the keeper seems to have a stock of appellations which he uses up amongst the dogs, and to which they seem to agree to answer at once. We asked if those experts, the dog-owners, did not avail themselves of the chance of getting valuable dogs by coming to obtain forgotten lost dogs; but the keeper seemed to think no dog-stealer could possibly escape his investigation, and he told me to give no dog up to any one, until he sees by its manner, it knows him; he can tell him a hundred times a day way of greeting a person. Sometimes



Classroom Observation of Young Animals



together, quite by ourselves, as we did sometimes for half a day. Such happy days, when our training for turning wild was being carried on in earnest.

The bread and butter, and other nursery scraps, were to be superseded, of course, in time, by the berries and acorns which I should get used to as I got wilder, and Critb was to catch rabbits.

Somewhere on the rocky sides of those blue hills beyond the river, there would be a cave where we should live when we were quite wild; but, in the meantime, it was very difficult to find good training-places to go on with our training properly. The prettiest, but not the safest places by any means was a beloved summer-castle in the wood. A little

plot of smooth mossy turf, surrounded by a wall of golden gorse, and roofed in by the dark fir, in which a whole shower of goldfinches used so often to sing; their sweet warbling little notes filling the whole places with music, the gold drop on their wings glancing in the sun, as they flitted and twittered amongst the branches—these dark fir branches, through which the sky looked so beautifully blue, as they moved across it in the light wind, and threw flickering shadows on the moss below. When the sun was very hot there would be sharp little reports going on all over the tree where the fir-cones were opening, and then the air would be filled with the aromatic, piny scent, a cedar scent, which always brings back that summer-castle in the wood. Through the real trunks of the fir trees, across the dark-brown bog, could be seen the distant sea, like a bar of silver in the sun;

but I cared more then for the goldfinches, and the ring-doves cooing all over the wood, and the yellow and black-civet humble bee, **AND** over the gorse blossoms, than for the silver sea, and those hills beyond the river. Critb's chief attraction, to the castle seemed to be a general flavour of rabbit which he always pretended to find there. Little he cared for the symmetry of the velvet, mossy, green carpet, as he scratched away with both fore-paws, only pausing to take breath now and then, with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, and then, after a long satisfactory snuff into the hole he had excavated, to work again, harder than ever, throwing out the earth behind him, and tearing away at the bits of roots with his teeth. If you attempted to encourage Critb by a word or a pat when he was excavating, he always took it as an insult, bounded out of the hole he was making and fiercely showed his teeth. Of course he spoilt the castle, and never caught the rabbit, but it "kept him good," and besides, if he chose to do it, nobody could stop him, and it was all in the way of training.

But the castle, though so pleasant and pretty, was no longer tenable as a fortress; the nurses knew all about it, and had a way of coming down upon it, and taking it by storm, which quite put an end to all feeling of being a wild child who lived there. A flutter of cap-ribbons might at any moment appear above the gorse walks, and, for a lost savage, it was very trying to be told, by Jane or Betsy, to come in that moment to the nursery dinner, and "have your hair brushed, and that dirty piny off, you naughty child."



The first of the most important points of the body is the  
 head, which is the seat of the mind, and is the most  
 important part of the body. It is the seat of the  
 soul, and is the seat of the intellect. It is the seat  
 of the emotions, and is the seat of the passions.  
 It is the seat of the senses, and is the seat of the  
 faculties. It is the seat of the powers, and is the  
 seat of the abilities. It is the seat of the virtues,  
 and is the seat of the excellences. It is the seat  
 of the graces, and is the seat of the gifts. It is  
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 seat of the gifts. It is the seat of the gifts, and  
 is the seat of the graces. It is the seat of the  
 graces, and is the seat of the gifts. It is the  
 seat of the gifts, and is the seat of the graces.

part of the plan of training for being  
 a pinner. We should very likely have to cross  
 the river, and should have to cross  
 the river, and should have to cross the river.

The second of the most important points of the body is the  
 chest, which is the seat of the heart, and is the seat  
 of the life. It is the seat of the lungs, and is the  
 seat of the breath. It is the seat of the stomach,  
 and is the seat of the food. It is the seat of the  
 liver, and is the seat of the bile. It is the seat  
 of the spleen, and is the seat of the blood. It is  
 the seat of the pancreas, and is the seat of the  
 juices. It is the seat of the gall bladder, and is  
 the seat of the gall. It is the seat of the bladder,  
 and is the seat of the urine. It is the seat of the  
 rectum, and is the seat of the feces. It is the seat  
 of the anus, and is the seat of the excrement. It  
 is the seat of the feet, and is the seat of the  
 walking. It is the seat of the hands, and is the  
 seat of the grasping. It is the seat of the eyes,  
 and is the seat of the seeing. It is the seat of  
 the ears, and is the seat of the hearing. It is the  
 seat of the nose, and is the seat of the smelling. It  
 is the seat of the tongue, and is the seat of the  
 tasting. It is the seat of the mouth, and is the  
 seat of the speaking. It is the seat of the throat,  
 and is the seat of the swallowing. It is the seat  
 of the neck, and is the seat of the turning. It is  
 the seat of the shoulders, and is the seat of the  
 carrying. It is the seat of the arms, and is the  
 seat of the reaching. It is the seat of the legs,  
 and is the seat of the standing. It is the seat of  
 the feet, and is the seat of the walking. It is the  
 seat of the hands, and is the seat of the grasping.



## Remarks on the Erasures

An erasure is the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it. I don't consider the pages to be poems, but I do think of them as poetry, especially in sequence and taken as a whole; when I finish an erasure book I feel I have written a book of poetry without a single poem in it, and that appeals to me.

The books have been called "found poems," but I don't consider them as such. A found poem is a text found in the world, taken out of its worldly context and labeled a poem. I certainly didn't "find" any of these pages, I made them in my head, just as I do my other work. In the erasures I can only choose words out of all the words on a given page, while writing regularly I can choose from all the words in existence. In that sense, the erasures are like a "form"—I am restricted by certain rules. I have resisted formal poetry my whole life, but at last found a form I can't resist. It is like writing with my eyes instead of my hands.

I use white-out, buff-out, blue-out, paper, ink, pencil, gouache, carbon, and marker; sometimes I press postage stamps onto the page and pull them off—that literally takes the text right off the page! Once, while working on an all-white erasure, I had the sense I was somehow *blinding* the words—blindfolding the ones I whited-out, and those that were left had to become, I don't know, extra-sensory or something. Then I thought no, I am *bandaging* the words, and the ones left were those that seeped out.

I've made thirty-two erasure books and given many to friends as gifts; one has been published, and several sold into private collections. One or two of the books work when read aloud in public, but most of them don't. I can't imagine ever stopping making them, and I hope to be working on one when I die.

## Dmitry Golyenko's "Sashenka"

Dmitry Golyenko, born in 1969 in what is now Saint Petersburg, is one of most gifted innovators in contemporary Russian poetry. His work stands out not only for its tremendous linguistic inventiveness, but also for the way its language discloses and reflects upon the social, political and economic changes affecting Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. American readers of "Sashenka," composed when the author was twenty-five and translated here for the first time, may perhaps be struck by its fanciful narrative, sexual bravado and rococo literariness, but those are only some aspects of the piece that unexpectedly remind us of the turbulence of post-Soviet reality, as expressed in the period style of Russian postmodernism.

The sudden availability of both underground literature and previously untranslatable Western texts made Russian postmodernism a much more eclectic affair than in the West, and certainly more favorable to recommencing cultural traditions than rejecting them. This was nowhere more the case than in Saint Petersburg, a city whose idea of postmodernism as the elephant cemetery of world cultures perfectly chimed with its own self-image as the Unreal City. Golyenko was one of a group of very young writers and artists for whom Osip Mandelstam's "nostalgia for world culture" assumed fantastical forms, and who reflected on their situation by referencing earlier intellectuals reflecting on their situation by referencing still earlier intellectuals. What all of these intellectuals had in common was their alienation from history, as evidenced in their specious existence in a transitional period, where systems of values are more in supply than in demand.

The history that Golyenko and his friends were alienated from just then consisted of the irruption of capitalism into the ex-Soviet world. The dissolution of old mythologies; the incoherence of the new; the

political instability, corruption and mob-rule accompanying unfamiliar freedoms; the astonishing appearance of consumer choice but only between unaffordable variants; the multiplication of political parties each crazier than the one before—all of them created a sense of the unreality of life, all the more acute for those who, like Golyenko, were reading Western post-structuralism in the context of Saint-Petersburg literary traditions. Hence the phantasmagoria of such Golyenko poems as “Sashenka.”

The language of “Sashenka” is characterized by proliferation of foreign loanwords, sometimes unusual, sometimes even invented, sometimes admitted into Russian just yesterday, and sometimes fallen out of use two hundred years ago. Given that the Russian literary language preserves remnants of classicist attitudes, Golyenko’s style strikes the Russian reader as inadmissibly motley. Yet it is a very good indicator of the linguistic consciousness of the 1990s, flooded by foreign words designating new objects as well as some old ones, and less than discriminate in its handling of grammatical and stylistic canons. Much the same phantasmagoria as was being experienced by Russian culture was being experienced by Russian language: everything flowed, mutated, mixed; the old rules were giving way. Hyperliterate Petersburgers readily drew analogies between the Russian of the period and that of an earlier bout of Westernization, the epoch of Peter the Great, when the influence of European languages created a similar salad. Of course the poem’s heterogeneity appears not just on the level of language but also on those of customs and objects, with elements ranging from the eighteenth century to sci-fi, and this too rings true of post-Soviet reality, where the post-Communist ideological vacuum is papered over by brand labels and flashy evocations of a misconstrued past.

“Sashenka”’s feast of allusions to Russian and Western literature is typical of Petersburg postmodernism, not just for the mere fact that there are allusions, or for the fact that their presence advertises the artificiality of the text, abolishing the border between the real and the unreal, but also because the types of allusions are justified by meta-allusions, as it were.

It is Symbolist and post-Symbolist poems like Nikolai Gumilev's "Lost Tramcar" and Alexander Blok's "Night. Street. Streetlamp. Pharmacy" that legitimate many of the attitudes expressed in the work, with the important proviso that Golyenko's ransacking of history is ironic in the way that early twentieth-century employments of simultaneity weren't. In fact the linguistic fashion of Golyenko's youth specialized in perverting quotations of Communist texts as well as of Russian literary classics obligatory in Soviet schools. My brief notes at the end of "Sashenka" should help the American reader grasp some of its cultural ironies, and appreciate its demystification of Russian high-culture consciousness as analogous to brand consciousness in consumer society.

## Sashenka, or The Diary of an Ephemeral Death

—translated from the Russian by Eugene Ostashevsky

*1. Our hero, his cousin and the deejay stop for a rest at the hostelry. 2. Our hero remembers Swannette, his passion. 3. Swannette's epistle. 4. The characters trade anecdotes about their third loves. 5. Our hero recounts the anecdote of Sashenka. 6. Terrorists penetrate the premises of the hostelry. 7. The characters suffer an ephemeral death.*

1.

In the night taxi—O blues of a fluorescent Zooburgh!—  
together with my cousino and the deejay of “The Bunker,” a nightclub,  
we bounded in a school gallop along the Viensky Prospect  
from the Ennui casino, after skimming the cream of fortuna.  
My cousino—wrists in bracelets of jade—sent oeillades  
to beautiful boys with eye signet-rings à la Beardsley.  
Cast pearls of sin as he might, didn't pick up anybody.  
No worry—for rascals like us, there's always a cabinet ready.

2.

We jumped into the drain of aboveground and the hose of Kolomna  
and barreled full speed to the hostelry “Chez Solokha.”  
On the English Embankment steered the prospect by the Dombey & Nose boutique  
and slammed the breaks in front of the house with acanthuses and a rotunda.  
Passing the colonnade of postillions, waiters and grooms,  
ordered the specialty of the maison, Bones of Etruscans,  
for desert—Pecheneg soufflé, baked rock lobster, Chianti,  
rare beefstext and, to top it all off, Extra Special Garnish.

3.

We're regulars here—we know the menu by heart . . .

Our man led us into the Hall of Columns, the latifundium of gentry.  
Upon slipping, my cousino with his massive binoculars  
almost swiped off the table the ninepin setup of wine glasses.  
Immediately lorgnettes were upon us: due to discomfiture  
we inflamed, rather than smothered, the fuming Fuji of scandal.  
I dropped my broad-crowned bolivar onto a pair of lapdogs,  
a grande dame in a mantle à la Tiepolo totally let me have it.

4.

Allaying the grande dame, helping her with her mink boa,  
the maitre d'hôtel escorted us to a separate chamber.  
I suffered a stab of regret for Swannette, my demimondaine passion,  
and sent her a telephoneme via the toontype connection.  
"Mille pardons, darling, I'm milling the air about like a demon,  
Must pass for today, am invited to dinner with my minion.  
Don't lose heart, you'll persist in my immutable graces,  
don't botch up and you'll get a cadeau of an Orenburg shawl."

5.

In dislocations of amorous liaisons I was no novice,  
with mercantile intent defaulted on the *appuntamento*  
with my pundit Swannette, inasmuch as—how sad! how base!—  
I booked our relations by the method of double entry.  
Her sharp tongue was it attracted me, her casuistry and skepsis,  
her acting as mannered as a Baroque tortoiseshell snuffbox.  
I was afraid to love her and I was afraid to leave her . . .  
In that special state of affairs I outmoped Marmeladov.

6.

Reread her erstwhile epistle, rife with extravagancies, carbon-stained verso,  
on thick Vergé paper she set down pinprick after pinprick:

*Swannette's Epistle*

Don't worry, I'll eat it all up! I'm no whiner, no grouch,  
no marchioness. I'll wait for you by the rules of genre.  
Apparently I am destined to have valence for you only,  
that a queen covers a jack, you, a card man, ought to remember.  
You can't break me—I'm more of an Edvarda than Solveig—  
as ill luck would have it, you compress the totemic father image,

7.

that's why Professor Freund diagnosed me with an Electra complex,  
wrote out the prescription: a tourist brochure idyll.  
We settled in a suburban chalet on the pleated seaside,  
after creamy café-au-lait I lazily dove from the jetty  
or during the siesta made toast in a Russian electric oven  
while you played hoops and tag with a domesticated rhinoceros,  
ran about in felt slippers and flannel pajamas  
after pangolins o' th' air on the magnolia lawn.

8.

I accumulated sufferings like axes for grinding  
the first time we parted—don't remember the date exactly;  
was testing myself: you mean more to me than underfoot fodder,  
ran a blade along the notes of your absence.  
Against the vacuum of separation one vaccine availed only—  
silver nitrate or cinnabar of a recitative to a zither  
or the eternal burden of despair on a xylophone.  
I once took a sleeping car to a *pensione* on a fjord.

9.

The linen-matron Missus showed me to a cottage with a mezzanine,

on the veranda of the adjoining bungalow you inflated a bicycle tire.  
In the euphoria of the encounter it hit me: I can't escape you,  
didn't sort aspirations for liberté—threw them all into the recycler.

.....

Can't you get it, becoming attached to Sasha you preferred the flatcake of lovelessness,  
aimed the reflector of passion at an ice cube, it was that that you drooled for.  
You live only by intellect, raking dividends from it,  
like a tadpole you curled up in the refrigerator of alienation . . .”

*(Here Swannette's epistle comes to an end.)*

10.

The deejay smirked: “While they change our tablecloth,  
let each recount an anecdote of his third love, *amore terzo*.  
Unfortunately,” he rolled a Smoke cigarette, “I have nothing to brag of,  
met my hag in September, married her in November.”  
“My third love,” my cousino spread a globule of gel on his hair,  
“was Mario, the tenor from the Mariinsky. Alas, he turned out not queer.”  
To fabricate falsifications is my first-string forte,  
I munchausened an anecdote about my third sweet-thang.

11.

*The Sashenka Anecdote*

There was a salon on Furshtatskaia kept by a flaxen-haired fraulein,  
Sashenka von Stein, a sybarite clad in a robe of walnut,  
might be mistaken for a statuette of Saxony porcelain,  
for her I strutted my stuff just like a puss in the boots in April.  
Her estate had a Genevan squad of serving girls,  
sworn enemies of the camarilla of captains' mummies,  
from dawn to dawn they tell tales in servants' quarters  
about dueñas and bonnes, ordered from Bonn by mail.

12.

Her salon, the mecca of stars in season and celebrities,  
met with the highest acclaim in Zooburgh suburbs.  
Unwanted as tartar I forced myself on her for Frühstück,  
left my card with the majordomo and gained admittance the next day,  
like some baron sat down on a velvet pouf beneath a vitrine  
with a bonbonniere from Saragossa and a portable powder-box.  
Unceremoniously as a social lion or bison during a concert,  
I crossed my legs by the fireside, enacting a stylization.

13.

I am no darned-up bluestocking with affectations imposing  
or, even worse, as natural as an infant.  
Two hours I said nothing, mysterious as a rebus,  
to observe the passacaglia of pause exactly until—is my credo.  
Leaning against an Arles chiffonnier I worried my harlequin lapel  
while Sashenka offered her paw to coxcombs and swindlers.  
There was Herr Professor Freund himself, like a general at a country wedding,  
striking the pose of a mentor, forcing his jokes on the guests.

14.

At ombre the critic Marcel Ibataire cracked his reserves of facetiae  
against my latest feuilleton in “Daily Obscenity.”  
Not for long did he jeer at my style while drinking Fanta:  
turning red as a boiled lobster, I demanded satisfaction.  
Sasha cooled me down with an invitation to an ecossaise:  
“Let him go, *petit-crevé* Marcel makes fun of everyone,  
has inexhaustible resources of moqueries and bon mots,  
although he is not a bad man—only essentially social.

15.

Here stoops Hermann H., jack of all spades, as of late Count Nullius, misallied with an elderly countess for the sake of her granddaughter. He summates in himself Harry Haller and Humbert Humbert and Svidrigailov, of course—though he's barely taller than Thumbellina. There's a famous poet—a good soul and a well-meaning fellow—it's easy to flimflam our beau monde with an inflated reputation, he played the fool for publicity's sake for about a decade, and—what a sad turn of events!—became a fool in earnest.

16.

*Pauvre* Lisa is the one parading in the Amazon-style riding habit, more than once did she sally her name in our *chronique scandaleuse*. She coquets on the couch with a considerable corruptionist, a member of the Sponsors' Guild but still in need of PR. And there are *cher* and *ma chère*, arriving without a snag, that's Dima Aesthete, the passive, and that's Mitia Snob, the active . . .” Sasha scattered the attic salt of sarcasm freely, the boy scout lackey brought us seltzer and ice cream bars.

17.

While we revolved in a bolero, I undertook an attack upon her, tried to angle her like a trout with the spinning rod of temptation. Putting a cloying mien on the apogee of a good turn with the sang-froid of a punter I poured into temptation's mixer two-three measures of charm and a mixture of tenderness, two-three drops of pain tonic, so that the paralysis of desire should rise and stick in her throat like fruit drops—that dam to be carried off by sparkling wine, Russian Golden.

18.

Alas, 'twas a hard nut of temptation that struck my incisor.  
I took leave before my time was up, not one to dissipate pathos.  
That night in my dreams I painted with magnetic gouache  
how Sashenka and myself study philosophy in the boudoir.  
At dawn I harnessed my aircarriage on aircushions,  
entered her chambers, successfully skirting the concierge's repressions.  
A volume of Proust being bookmarked at Swann and Odette's meeting,  
Sasha meditatively sat over runes, telling fortunes.

19.

With every fiber of passion I osculated her ringlets,  
led gray destroyers of lips over her without radars or portolanos,  
.....until epidermal spasms,  
labial anesthesia coming to rest at the cold carapace  
of skin—scratch as you might, you cannot penetrate past that,  
just as an emery board won't admit you inside a photograph.  
My passion's radiolocators indicated a problem,  
she pulled away with a smile, purring a mild *mea culpa*:

20.

"Please understand, it's all simultaneously complex and simple,  
I am not free within bounds—the bounds of myself, get it?  
All stirrings from without are filtered within me by inner censors,  
all of them doomed to the humiliating ritual of customs inspection.  
A traffic barrier blocks the way to anything that instills tremors,  
contemn me if you will—with my own hand I signed  
my declaration of independence from my desires,  
and duty of happiness (pardon my pun!) is my payment for peace of mind.

21.

You won't enter as contraband into my equilibrium,  
my verdict for you is a final *Nein*—and no sniveling with me here . . . ”  
Her stainless rebuff hit me like jail hits a deserter,  
a guillotine hits a king, and cancer a patient.  
Yes, Swannette is right, I must gnaw the flatcake of lovelessness,  
the radiator of passion is busted, it had a breakdown.  
Like megatons of TNT, they'll raise my degree of despair,  
Swanette, ice cube on my left temple; Sasha, ice cube on my right.

22.

That fairy-tale type, that Snow Princess cost me a pretty penny.  
Even stuck on the uppermost mark of the scale, Celsius or Fahrenheit  
won't defrost me—I've placed a veto upon desires,  
thereby presenting myself with the invoice of loneliness.  
I knew: to return to Swannette would be the panacea for pain,  
but on the Trans-Iberian Express she gave me the slip that morning.  
I raced after her in a cab for three nights and three days over the Disney Autobahn,  
then, irritated in a motel, picked up Barbie, a bar doll,

23.

toiled over her till crack of dawn like a farmer tills virgin soil,  
after buying protection against love bugs at a supermarket.  
Barbie was the quintessential *tabula rasa*, without qualities or characteristics,  
at this point Swannette knocked on the door—but here I lower the curtain . . . ”

*(Here the Sashenka anecdote comes to an end.)*

I rounded off in the middle of a sentence, crumpling up the risqué ending,  
the deejay surrendering to meringues and coffee in finicky boredom.  
My cousino made a vague gesture, crackling with a cracker or honeyed walnuts,

"Nobody ever knows how the structure of an adventure might fall out."

24.

All of a sudden a terrorist troupe—for masks they donned licorice nylons—stitched through the halls and the balustrade with a burst of machine-gun fire. Marionettes wearing bulletproof eveningwear took down the sentinel hajduks and the landsknecht security detail, penetrated through the manhole on the roof, drilling below through the slates, sounding for opportunities to procure a hashish shipment. The brigadier of the trained terractors gave the command to fire—and the piano player barely struck the seventh chord on the stereograndpianino.

25.

In thirty seconds they peppered the bacchanal with lead hot jalapeños, took the general manager of Lenincest, ltd., off the board like a pawn, set their sights on the mafia aces and Mario the tenor, stacked them up in a museum, among its collection of mummies. Only the manager Silvio, he with the eye of a falcon, returned fire—and successfully—with the slingshot of the merchant Kalashnikov, due to a doublet, downed two dudes, then collapsed on Siberian marble, just the blancmange of corpses remained in the Hall of Columns.

26.

We locked ourselves in with a latch, building a barricade of props: an armoire and a curvy-legged Queen Anne table. A picket of monster goons rammed through the barricade with their varnished rifle butts and rubber boot soles. My cousino turned out to be made not of flint but of civvy fiber, crossfire flicked him away like a worthless counter. I wouldn't give a cent for the deejay—a dozen times they shot through him—in fear of death, semen spurted from his secret member.

27.

Inopportuno as always, sham death took me under protection,  
and its patronage totally scrambled up all my cards.  
I inserted a cassette in the gas projector, then emptied the cartridge,  
trying to fight my way through the ceramics of the flue.  
They summoned the aid of a chimneysweep on a radiamedia,  
he took aim with a schwabring—and I sprawled on the boards  
right next to the prompt box . . .

*September 4, 1994–March 16, 1995*

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Notes, organized by stanzas:

0. Sasha: diminutive of Sasha, stress on first syllable.
1. The toponyms are those of Saint-Petersburg, sometimes faintly altered. Thus, Viensky is Nevsky.
2. Kolonna: quiet district in the western part of the city, its readiest literary association being Pushkin's "Little House in Kolonna," an erotic anecdote in the shape of a narrative poem.
2. Pechenegs: semi-nomadic Turkic people with a penchant for raiding Russian settlements circa 1000 AD. Here appears as a pun on *pechen'*, liver. Joke stolen from Nabokov's *Pnin*, where a character's liver bothers him like a Pecheneg.
2. House with acanthuses and a rotunda: an underground hang-out in eighties Petersburg.
2. Solokha: the witch in Gogol's "Night Before Christmas."
3. Hall of Columns: the main ballroom of Moscow gentry, first Imperial and then Soviet.
3. Bolivar: broad-rimmed hat worn by Eugene Onegin in *Onegin* Lxv.
4. Swannette: for explanation of Swannette's name, see stanza 18.
5. Marmeladov: a runaway alcoholic in *Crime and Punishment*.
6. Edvarda and Solveig: characters from Hamsun's *Pan*, and Ibsen and Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, respectively.
6. Vergé paper: handmade vegetable fiber paper of such quality that, as Mandelstam explains in his "Egyptian Stamp," Hermitage caryatids ought to use it for personal correspondence.
9. Missus: character in Chekhov's "House with a Mezzanine."
10. Mario the tenor: stage name of the nineteenth-century tenor Giovanni Matteo de Candia.
11. Furshtskaia: tree-lined street in the eastern part of the city.
11. Captains' mummies: one of Golyngo's many twists on Pushkin's novel *Captain's Daughter*, which takes place at the time of Catherine the Great and is alluded to in the simultaneity of Gumilev's "Lost Streetcar."

12. Unwanted as tartar: translates, if you can call it that, the author's twist on a Russian saying, "an uninvited guest is worse than a Tartar," that alludes to medieval Russia's uneasy relationship with the Golden Horde. Golyenko's text is littered with transformed versions of sayings and proverbs, some of which did, and some of which didn't, carry over into English.

12. Zooburgh suburbs: intended by author as parallel to Proust's Faubourg St Germain but in American English sounding a bit too much like New Jersey.

14. Marcel Ibatuire: the translator mistakenly interpreted an allusion to Proust as an allusion to Duchamp.

14. Petit-crevé: nineteenth-century Parisian dandy.

15. Hermann H., Count Nullius, Harry Haller, Humbert Humbert, Svidrigailov: allusions to Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" and "Count Nulin," Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

16. Pauvre Lisa: allusion to Nikolai Karamzin's sentimentalist novella of 1792.

25. Marionettes: their puppet-theater violence recalls Alexander Blok's "Fairground Booth," with its violation of distinction between real and unreal.

25. Silvio: an excellent shot in Pushkin's short story "The Shot."

25. Kalashnikov: apart from the obvious reference to the inventor of the Soviet-era assault rifle, is a character in an 1837 poem by Lermontov.

27. Gas projector: a World War I mortar for firing canisters of poison gas.

27. Schwabring: allusion to a duelist in Pushkin's *Captain's Daughter*.

## The Country of Husbands

I live in the country of husbands. Everywhere I go, it's husbands, husbands, husbands. Other women's. *Not yours, not yours*, mutter the billboards. *Not yours, not yours*, whisper the TV sets. *Ours, not yours*.

My car is specially equipped with a single, driver's-side air bag. I live in the Alone People's condo, one exit north of the Proud Song Black People's condo. "You're not lonely, you're just alone!" crows the sign on the patch of lawn by the highway.

I live in the country of husbands. I didn't recognize this state of affairs at first. The awareness has dawned on me gradually, like a gallon of milk going sour in the back of the fridge. Things started to shift about ten years ago, when I turned thirty. Married acquaintances became reluctant to appear in public with me. Some didn't dare invite me into their homes. The local news began airing stories of single women who entered the houses of married couples, fucked the men, and drowned the babies. It's not you, my friends told me. But we just can't take any chances. There are children to consider.

The choices aren't many for women like me, but I make them.  
I am not a good woman.

At work, I admire the tie of my office mate. He has glossy golden hair, salon-tanned skin, and a perpetually bulging crotch. "Gosh, do you like it? My wife picked it out for me!" he cries. He pivots on his heel and skips away.

On Saturday I dine with my work friends Wanda and Lani. Wanda's husband is at home, sick. We go to Telly Savalas's Joint, the only place in town that serves mixed parties. I sit on one side of the booth and Lani and

Wanda sit on the other as we wait for Lani's husband. When Tigger arrives, breathless, he pauses and glances at the empty spot on the banquette next to me. Then he squeezes in next to Lani and Wanda. He nuzzles Lani's cheek in greeting, making slurping sounds. Lani closes her eyes and giggles a little as Tigger's saliva dribbles down her cheek. From her squashed position across the table, Wanda offers me a polite, weary smile.

I cannot take all this gloating priapism, all this smug uxoriousness. Give me hatred and discontent.

On the conveyor belt at the supermarket I place the week's groceries: Lonely Girl-brand Disappearing Dinner for One, Lonely Girl Cat Dinners for the Obese Cat, and Lonely Girl Golden Tinkie Pops.

"Wow! You sure like the Lovely Girl brand of products!" hoots the checkout clerk.

"It's *Lonely Girl*. Can't you *read*?" I grab my grocery sacks and march out of the store, but in the parking lot I experience a twinge of regret. The clerk was only trying to make conversation. Besides, he had a sweet, forlorn face, like a man who's used to being disappointed.

The next week at the supermarket, I deliberately enter the checkout line of the sad-faced clerk, even though it's longer than the other lines. His eyes light up when he sees my Golden Tinkie Pops sliding toward him on the conveyor belt. "My wife won't let me eat these," he sighs wistfully. I look at his hands, calculating what to say next. His big, rawboned fingers look both foolish and powerful, like a teenaged boy's, but when I glance at his face, I see he's about my age.

I grab the package from the belt, rip it open, and extract a Tinkie Pop. "Here, take one," I say. "I have plenty at home."

He looks at me disbelievingly.

"Go ahead."

He glances toward the manager's cage; her back is turned. He tears off a strip of wrapper at the stick end of the popsicle, places the ripped edges to his lips, and blows a quick puff of air. The paper balloons around the Tinkie Pop. He slides it off and inserts the pop in his mouth, his eyes drifting closed. "So good. So *good*." Brilliant yellow liquid crests at the corner of his mouth.

I giggle uncertainly, as if wedged next to a couple passionately kissing goodbye at the airport. But I can't take my eyes off him.

Two weeks later, I'm driving home from tango aerobics class when I hang a left onto a block of narrow, shabby rowhouses. After the superhighway was built through this area ten years ago, it was renamed Marriage Transformation Towne. Feuding couples and estranged spouses move here after all other apparent possibilities have been exhausted. Then they either wait out the end or, newly reconciled, return to the bland, bright embrace of their subdivisions and condos. When Lani's husband Tigger was spending his nights on the town, crawling home at three in the morning from the strip club or the casino or who knows where, the condo association asked Lani and him to "take a leave of absence" while they worked things out. It's best for everyone if the process is shielded from others' eyes, read the notice. Marriage transformation is catching and incurable, like typhoid.

Some women binge, some take pills. Me, I cruise the rundown streets of this neighborhood of disillusioned wives and lost husbands. Half-stray dog, half-stalker, I scan the sidewalks and front stoops.

A couple of months ago, I was issued a citation for loitering with intent. "Get your own husband," muttered the policewoman as she handed me the ticket. "Quit poaching on ours."

Like I said, I'm not a good woman.

When my neighbor Quenelle threw out her husband because she was convinced he slept with me when really all we'd done was had some

beers late one night, he ended up here. After he was here, of course, things between us took their natural course. Now he's back with her.

There were others: Ronald, Humphrey, Salvatore. Patrick, Glen, and Titus. I was faithful to each of these guys when I was with him. But something about this neighborhood is catching—the temporariness of the place clung to us like cigarette smoke, and either I began wondering if they were ever going to go back to their wives, or they returned of their own accord.

After about ten minutes of driving, I spot someone on the sidewalk. His hands are thrust deep in his jacket pockets, and his shoulders are hunched up near his ears. He looks like he's been outside a while.

The man stops and turns to look at me. Am I surprised by who it is? No. Am I glad to see him? Maybe.

I slow my car and lean out the window. "Need a lift?"

"Hey," he says. "Thanks for the Tinkie Pop the other day."

I scan his face, his sorrowful eyes. "Locked out?"

He shrugs. "My wife . . ." His eyes become unfocused, sadder still.

"Hop in," I say. "You look like you could use a warm-up."

We go to Telly Savalas's Joint. The two of us slide into opposite sides of a booth. On the tabletop are an apple-green carnation in a bud vase and a table tent sticky with ketchup and grease.

"Thanks for picking me up. You are one nice lady," he says.

His name is TJ. He orders the boiled beef bake, I a glass of red wine. "You know, I wasn't always a grocery clerk," he says as we're waiting for our food. "I used to own a business with my wife. Pet grooming."

I can tell this is something TJ wants to talk about. I look at him expectantly, my curiosity laminated onto weariness. The story of my life is the story of men—sad sacks, con men, halfwits, geniuses, hairsplitters, equivocators, madmen—telling me stories. Terrible things happen to them, and they're never to blame.

TJ's eyes are as large and sincere as a cartoon bunny's. He says, "Four years ago, this kid, Donna, fifteen maybe, worked for us. We used to smoke a joint or two, joke around. Spray each other with water when we were hosing down the kennels. One day out of the blue, the parents accuse me. Sexual harassment. They say I forced her, I swear I never. But the parents. And then when it came out about the pot? Marny and I had to sell the business to pay the legal fees."

I wish we could skip the talking, shed our clothes and our words. The act of fucking places those seemingly important things, like compatibility and hobbies and shared values, in their proper place. In their absence, there's this: the sweet animal smell of male sweat after he's been mowing the lawn or moving the furniture out of his former home, the scent that permeates his t-shirts and clings to your hair after he holds you.

I summon up an encouraging smile.

"OK, maybe I did flirt with her a little bit, I wanted to improve her self-esteem. But I, I wouldn't do *that*." He wipes his mouth and drops the napkin onto his plate.

I furrow my brow. "Your wife believe you?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she?" He pauses. "But there was this other thing? During the legal proceedings, I got stressed. And my sister's husband—at first I just kept a vial of it in my pocket, and when I panicked I'd touch the vial and be okay. Like a kid with a teddy bear?" He gives me a pleading look. "But the day we signed over the business, I opened the vial. And I kept doing it, and for a long time it was okay. But I'd been borrowing against our credit cards. And by the time my wife discovered it, we were so in debt we had to sell the house. It was so *not good*." He shakes his head. "I begged her. I said if she stayed, I would get clean. I've been clean for three years."

"That's great. Good for you," I say, trying to put some feeling in it.

TJ doesn't seem to hear me. He looks away and sighs. "I've been clean three years, but with her I'm still on probation. She asks about receipts she

finds in my pockets. She goes over the cell-phone bill with a fine-toothed whatever. I feel guilty, and I haven't even done anything. But I can't blame her, right? I mean, she stuck by me, right?" He sighs again. "But enough about me. Have *you* ever been married?"

I try to imagine what kind of life I'd have as a married woman. Engagement to the sweet, predictable boy who sat next to me in homeroom, the one who fucked me only after I bullied him into it. A church wedding, me in paste-white polyester, my mother looking on in heartbreaking approval. Going out to dinner at a family-friendly place, mashed potato ground into the carpet under the legs of the high chair.

My friend Wanda says I'm too picky, that I want life to be extraordinary and beautiful all the time. I need to get real, get with the program, get knocked up, tied down, tighten up and fly right. I need to marry.

After the dishes have been cleared, I notice TJ gazing at me with a stricken look. "What?" I ask.

"Your teeth. They're brown, from your wine."

I think, *He may be a fool, he may be self-deluding, he may be dimly self-absorbed, but with him, I'm free.* "Listen," I say. "Do you want to fuck?"

What can be said about sex with TJ?

Fluids were expressed. Operatic sounds emitted, stains begot.

Barrier methods of birth control fumbled, then appointed.

Pleasure obtained and climax achieved by all parties.

Cigarettes smoked, ashes flicked onto jaws and ground into bedclothes.

Half-full glasses of wine gulped compulsively.

It was a good time. A good lay.

TJ and I develop a routine. We can't appear in public together, because his wife still believes in marriage, even this one. Plus, after my citation, I'm a suspect. TJ comes straight from work with a bottle of supermarket wine. We sit in the living room, drink, exchange niceties. Then we go to the

bedroom. It's not the way things would be if I had planned it, but this is the way it always is. Sex is a knife, a game, a bird flying by outside the house of my real life. These things always end.

Once, I insert a digit up TJ's butt and finger his prostate.

"Oh," moans TJ. "My wife would *never* . . ."

"Shut up," I say.

Another time, I fall asleep with my head in his lap. I awaken, delicately disengage the pubes from my cheek and lips, and raise myself onto my elbows.

"You want a Golden Tinkie Pop?" I say.

His eyes light up.

As he's dabbing at the bottom edge of the popsicle with his tongue, he says, "You're nice."

I've been called a lot of things—slut, tart, whore. Nymphomaniac, tramp, skank, cunt—but I've never been called *that*. Never *nice*. It sounds like the radio stations secretaries play in office cubicles.

"What about your wife? She's sacrificed so much for you."

"Marny makes me feel like I'm a jack-in-the-box who never pops the weasel." A piece of Golden Tinkie breaks off in his mouth.

"I want someone to boss around."

"Be my guest," he says. "You can be the boss of me."

After about three months of trysts, TJ asks me, "Where do you see us in five years?"

"Dead."

"Seriously."

"You're back with your wife, *I'm* dead. No, jail."

"Can't you imagine a better future for yourself? Like maybe a family or a carport?"

I admire the strenuousness of his effort to fit speech to thought. It's so hard for him. I like to see his expression flicker from little boy to middle-aged man, from hope to regret and back again. Each shift seems to surprise him; it surprises me, too.

"OK," I say, kissing his nose. "In five years, I'll be with you." Then, another surprise: I burst into tears.

That Saturday it rains. I stalk around my apartment, feeling restless. I don't want to hang out with Lani and Wanda; I don't want to cruise the streets of Transformation Towne. I'm just bored, I tell myself, as I listlessly suck on a Golden Tinkie Pop.

On Sunday the doorbell rings. When I ask who it is over the intercom, TJ's staccato voice drifts out of the little plastic speaker. He's supposed to be at his sister-in-law's wedding. I buzz him in and wait for him to come up the elevator. A moment later he's standing in the hallway outside my apartment, carrying a suitcase and wearing a raincoat. He looks wretched. His trouser cuffs and canvas tennis shoes are soaked. I hear a faint squelching noise as he steps closer. A ragged tier of raindrops hangs off the bottom hem of his raincoat and drips into the carpet. He takes off his hat and holds it to his chest, his fingers trembling. I know what's happened.

"My wife—"

"How could you leave her?" I demand. "She helped you kick your coke habit! She stood by you during your sexual harassment lawsuit! What kind of man do you call yourself, anyway?"

"I know," he says glumly.

I cross my arms and glare at him.

"Can I come in anyway?"

We stand in the doorway, neither of us budging.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so sorry."

I'm not sure if he's apologizing for leaving his wife or for showing up on my doorstep. His eyes are like exposed lightbulbs; I can barely stand to look at them.

The suitcase slides out of his grasp and falls. It wobbles for a moment before crashing onto its side with a heavy thump. He glances from the suitcase to my face and back again. He places one sodden foot on the wooden doorsill, like a child playing Mother-may-I.

I cannot save this man, and he can't save me.

He says, "I won't stay long."

## Phone

We were seated at the kitchen table, hungry, impatient, clamoring. We threw our heads back on our necks and grasped our bellies. Every night we died of hunger. Ma was suckling her fingertip; she had cut herself on the jagged edge of the soup can. The phone rang, and Ma spun around and popped the cut finger out of her mouth.

"It's your father," she said, but didn't answer, just dumped the soup into the pot and resumed her bloodsucking.

We stopped whining and looked back and forth from each other to the ringing phone—this was a new game. We rested our elbows on the tabletop, held our faces in the palms of our hands and watched her back, mirroring her silence, waiting for the next move, but she didn't look at us or offer an explanation, she just kept stirring. The phone rang as the soup simmered and hissed, the phone rang as Ma splashed the broth into three bowls and slid them under our faces, the phone rang as we extended our chins and noses into the steam and stuck out our tongues to taste the hot air.

Ma ripped open a bag of crackers, scattered them across a plate, clattered that plate onto the middle of the table and said, "What? Eat."

She joined us, her chair turned sideways. She unlaced her work boots, slipped off her socks and massaged her feet. The phone rang just above and behind her head. She knew where Paps was at, knew the secret of his urgency, and she wasn't going to tell us. The foot massage was a bad sign, but worse was the smile when we asked for more dinner.

"That's it," she said, smiling her crooked tooth smile, staring at her painted toenails, "that's all there is."

We stayed at the table for another forty-five minutes, running our fingers around our empty bowls, pressing our thumb tips into the cracker plate and licking the crumbs off, lulled into a trance by the even tempo of

the phone's ring, immobilized by the repetition, listening carefully, hoping it would never stop. He was somewhere, at some phone, in a phone-booth, or sitting on the edge of someone else's bed, drunk or sober, and it was loud and hot, or cold, and he was alone, or there were others, but every single ring brought him home, brought him right there before us. The tone of the ringing changed too, from desperate, to accusatory, to something sad and slow, then it was a heartbeat, then it was eternity—had always rang, would always ring—then it was the tick of a bomb.

Ma stood up from her chair, lifted the receiver and placed it back down again in one swift movement—and for a moment nothing, maybe even a full minute, long enough for our ears and clenched muscles to relax, long enough to remember and realize fully something we had long suspected: that silence was absolution, that quiet was as close to happiness as we would ever get. But then it started again, the ringing, and continued.

“What if he’s having a heart attack?” Manny asked.

“What heart?” said Ma.

“I’m going to get it,” Manny said, and without even a second’s hesitation our mother grabbed his bowl and smashed it onto the linoleum.

And still the phone rang.

Ma dismissed us and Manny went and shut himself up in our room, so José and I headed down to the crawlspace, where we sharpened popsicle sticks into points, preparing for war. Footsteps were amplified in the crawlspace, voices muffled, and the phone didn’t exist at all.

Paps finally arrived home, and they made thunder, stomping above us, chasing each other, tumbling furniture. Their screams and curses didn’t reach us as words, but as soft, blunt rhythms. One of them finally got in the car and left, then nothing, silence, except for the light scraping of a broom.

We climbed further back in the crawlspace, as far as we could go, to the cinderblock wall. We found a heap of relics, a patchwork purse with fake, crackling leather, a broken typewriter, and our old yellow phone. José spun the dial.

"Ring Ring," he said.

I used my thumb to hear and my pinky to speak.

"Hello?"

"Mami, how come you don't answer the phone when I call you?"

"Cause you sound so ugly!" I said, and we busted up laughing.

I grabbed the phone and called him.

"Yo, yo whassup."

"Woman, this is your husband talking to you right now, you better act right."

"What do you want from me?"

I stared at the receiver in my hand; I couldn't think of anything to say, so José took the phone and called me instead.

"Hello?"

"Digame Mami," he said.

"I been missing you, at work, them long-ass hours, I been missing you real bad."

"I know, Mami, I know."

We both hung up, we weren't really laughing anymore, weren't really looking at each other, but we were smiling. After a pause, José called me.

"Hello?"

"I got a job!"

"You got a job?"

"Yeah baby, everything's going to be real fine from now on, just real fine."

We both hung up, but I called him back right away.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry."

"Nah baby," José said, "I'm sorry."

The next time José called me, I made my voice sexy.

"Hey you," I said.

"Hey yourself," he said and we both hung up, blushing.

I called José.

"Hello?"

"What are we gonna do?"

"What do you mean, 'What are we gonna do?'"

"It's just going to be like this, forever?"

"No, baby, it's not going to be like this forever."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Well, we'll do whatever it takes, I guess," José said.

I was confused about who he was pretending to be.

"What does it take?"

"I'm not sure yet." He stretched the cord like a bow and arrow, then let it fly.

# Trying to Grasp the Premise

*A Selection of Poems by*

Carolina Ebeid

Kathleen Graber

Martha Ronk

Tomaz Šalamun

Caryl Pagel

Peter Cooley

Cornelius Eady

Michael Peterson

Amit Majmudar

Victoria Chang

## Albeit

Because I have wanted  
to make you something  
beautiful, I borrowed  
a book on how to keep  
a bee-hive made of glass.  
An observatory  
of translucent arteries  
lit with wing-gossip.  
An allegory for the soul.  
Though what do I understand  
of beauty that thrives  
in a place of exile.  
(Bees can anger so,  
killers have swarmed a dog  
beneath the windowsill.)  
You said the soul-to-be.  
Vegetables flower  
outside. Squash-blossoms.

And for what is that  
an allegory?

We live in a copy  
of Eden, a copy

that depends on violence.

## Dead Man

*Some are born to sweet delight.  
Some are born to endless night.  
—William Blake*

We spend our lives trying to grasp the premise. William Blake is not,  
for instance, William Blake,

but rather a 19th century accountant from Cleveland  
on the lam for murder and the theft of a horse. In the closing scene,

he is going to die, & so is Nobody, his half-Blackfoot, half-Blood guide.  
Sure, this is a Western, a morality tale

about a destiny made manifest  
through the voice of a gun & a hero whose mythic flight from innocence

destroys him. But we all come to the end of the line soon enough.

The obvious just seems wiser

when Nobody says it. *Time*, it turns out,  
is the most common noun in the English language,

as if by constant invocation,

we could keep it at bay.

Yesterday, I sat in another state on a large rubber ball  
in my brother's basement bouncing my newborn nephew in my arms.

His mother, on the phone with a friend, asks what we should fear more,

the hobo spider or the poison that kills it. I want to whisper into his ear  
something that feels like knowledge:

*Once upon a time, there was nothing,  
& one day, there will be nothing again.* This is the faraway place

to which his tiny weight calls me. If he could understand the words, I think,  
he would know what I mean, having only just sprung himself  
from that dark sea.  
Sometimes we coo to sooth him: *Don't cry, Little Bird. I know, I know.*

But only the roar of the vacuum finally calms him,  
for nothing sounds as much  
like the lost world of the womb as the motors of our machines.

The root of *travel* means *torture*, having passed from Medieval Latin  
into Old French. As the action opens, Johnny Depp, shot in black & white,  
is already rocking into the night on a train. And soon, he will begin his dying.  
This is not to say that the inky band fanning across the morning blue

of a kestrel's tail feathers  
has no meaning, or the first fingers of rust  
coming into bloom on the green enameled chassis of a Corona typewriter  
left in the rain.

*Direct observation*, the naturalist Niko Tinbergen assures us,  
*is the only real thing.* Perhaps this is what I should tell him.  
Or that this moment,  
too, is a part of some migration. Every snow bunting composes its own song,  
& a careful watcher can tell one kittiwake from its neighbor by the little dots

on the tips of its wings.  
The most used verb is also the most humble—  
merely *to be*.

Nobody can teach to William Blake the auguries of William Blake.  
We are, instead, our own vatic visions, stumbling prophets. Our sense of ourselves

as invented as film.

Later, in an ocean-going canoe lined with cedar boughs,  
he will drift out into cold breakers, two bullets in his chest. But, here,  
in his small hat & wire glasses, he still seems

sweetly comic. He holds up a letter;

someone's promised him a job. His fancy plaid suit makes him look like a clown.

## Of what avail

If what is found depends on what's conceived

*of what avail* one might have said some centuries ago,

to expect the unexpected, the voice one needs to stand between whatever utters

and whatever falls. On the face of it, the abrupt will be erased

smoothed over by the later style in which profiles collapse,

the cobalt of a jacket reduced to chalk.

What is it in the mark, the awful handwriting, and what is of value over time

making oneself available to anything.

A breath tightened, my own bent head, then the air

and no one more beautiful moving from one street to another

avails me of the woman one always thinks of, predictably.

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TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

## The Dead

—translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry and the author

*Ou peut-être pas.*

Perhaps their trumpets curve.  
They forgot doorknobs in the floods  
and now they dive for them.  
Maybe they press the buttons  
to rescind the aberrations.  
Maybe they use crepe paper,  
Maybe they're not so talentless  
and crackle underwater like shells  
and stones, such that every thousand years  
of crackling harvests us  
a tiny white stone.

## The Catalans, the Moors

—translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry

Poetry is a hatchery for martyrs. The river  
rinses the butter. *Warum Nichts?* A window  
is installed in a house, a house is installed in the dawn.  
A clock strikes the quarter hour. I am left behind,  
I am left behind, on the beach at Menorca  
I expire like a crocodile. In the region  
of Ciutat (with bicycle) near the young man  
in his bathing suit from the twenties,  
reading Cavafy. Did he have heavy hands?  
Goran has heavy hands. I'm molasses,  
don't forget that. Cat with cloudy  
eyes. Voice found in the emptiness  
and driving you to the precipice. Graveyards  
as at Potočka Zijalka. Layers on layers.

Sycamore [She first searched—...]

She first searched—all up in a sycamore.  
Sick-Boy'd gone absent again. She'd seen him  
abandon a few lines of a poem where  
a man clung to a branch, drunk—all up in  
a sycamore. More and more he was out,  
out looking for—*whom*? She went then looking  
for—out, so sick-of-it. To the park, 'round  
the school, a few back-yards; got to kicking  
at trunks in the thick of woods. No tree stood  
where she thought she had thought it should. The guide  
book confirmed: "the sycamores discovered  
scattered, apart." Hear leaves crack. Let him hide.  
When he came home that night he did come in  
alone—was there ever any question?

## Nostalgia Piece

First I will miss my birds, the ones I curse  
morning after morning, awakening me.  
I never will have time to learn their names—  
I see that even now, while I'm still here.  
Then the waxy leaves of the magnolia  
fallen on the lawn—they're fun to play with.  
Why not admit it? Yard work is just play  
away from wife and children, it's your world  
as someone else made His and on that day  
you work at yours He rested from labor.  
Then, the . . . It will be tough to stay goodbye.  
Maybe I'll miss most the Mississippi,  
river I carried with me from the North  
running alongside college years, now, here,  
lolling beside me mornings as I jog.  
Reader, I'll miss you most, you're always there  
like poetry, ready to made up,  
ready to be like these little words,  
mirror and image of my life on earth.  
I like it all so much I'll want it back  
when I'm there, second body, name risen,  
changed probably, changed like everything.  
It won't be like this, that's all I can know.  
It won't be like this, I'll look down on stars.  
Coffee will have a new taste. So will stars.

## Piano solo: T. Monk on “The Man I Love”

It's famous, this story:  
on the first take Miles Davis tells Monk,  
Strange-fingered Thelonious,  
to shut up, to “lay out.”

It's a *ballad*: No tinkling brown pixie dust  
against the groove, no waddling through the measures  
the way an albatross slops up to the skies.

Miles is a man who is used to having his own way,  
and if Monk were a woman,  
who knows where this might end?

But then Milt Jackson replays/rethinks the intro,  
the hushed tones of a man, clearing his throat before  
his chords vibrate in prayer,

And these five men who seem to have nothing better to do  
on Christmas Eve, 1954, get back to the lyric:  
love is food, water, air; lonely sucks.

Then from out of the negotiation plinks Monk,  
toy-piano Monk, that stumble-bum bird,  
the boy who'll always grab the wrong crayon.

## Incision

The networks and nets of antiquity

*shall we prye into it*

unearthing the difficult past onto the blank page

all is foreign in this mental state we find ourselves in, yet

the rose at first is thought to have been of five leaves as it

*yet groweth wilde among us*

despair upon incision

become a point of art.

---

MICHAEL PETERSON

189

*(a variation of Petrarch)*

Your cargo was an oblivion on bitter liquid  
at midnight midwinter.

Direction ruled by some master  
toward pointless hazard,

and at every oar the same mind,  
ugly and attentive to its quiet.

Complaint began instead as a wet sail failing,  
then wishing its load again

into the sudden mistake of itself. Fog  
like thought thought like tired lines

between two stars which  
having seemed usually aligned went back

under waves, beneath thought. You knock  
to wake taut against the post.

266

*(a variation of Petrarch)*

All this thought pulls at me to see you,  
though I see you often enough.

My bad luck is the thing that stops me, pauses  
everything, turns me senseless like a wheel

turning toward a death I never recognize or see.  
Days and nights without exception,

broken up by broken breathing. No calls  
are made, these beacons out of range.

My master.  
My dear.

This is the labor and these are the restraints.  
I made them myself, if you can imagine:

laurel grown into a house, competing like years  
against the heart—*years* I say.

## Incantation on a Line by Shakespeare

*This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine,*  
Black at the pit and black of rind,  
A winterripe and bitter fruit  
That tastes of tar and turpentine,  
This thing of darkness, darkest heart,  
Dishonest, distant, dissolute,  
This sweet gone dark, this heart of mine.  
I liked to think myself estranged  
From all the lies that worm and wind  
And rot it through. I used to cringe  
And at its puddled seepage pinch  
My nose, that isn't me, that thing  
Of darkness is as foul and strange  
To me, love, as it is to you.  
Done with dissembling, done with shame,  
I take it in, I give my name  
To crinkled skin that sinks beneath  
My thumb, this fruit you picked to eat,  
Whose meat you swallowed and whose seeds  
You clawed your chest to bury deep,  
This poison plum, dark as your bruises,  
This thing of Sorry and I swear next time  
And huger ruses,  
This fruit whose juice is iodine,  
*This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.*

Faith [First Sick-Boy wrecks...]

First Sick-Boy wrecks my voice: he's skeletal  
and drunk. He's lewd, diseased and sullen, haunts  
the dive. A grave and grim distortion. Fall  
for Reed. Then pray to Iggy—he just wants  
to be my dog. *Just be my dog.* My god,  
he anoints his chest in butter, quivers  
and shakes on shards of glass. A rude raw-knot  
of scrapes and screams. Bloody-begging shiver.  
I clutch my skull. Divine. Divine, then blessed  
by Danzig. *Tell your children not to walk  
my way.* Now, even my new love—distressed  
love. Rough manners, crude glances, I act shocked.  
He asks: *are you ready to chase my name  
around?* I am ready to chase his name—

## The End

The end of ambition  
is a loaf of hard bread unbladed  
on a table.

I still want to cut the bread,  
to eat the bread, but it is too late.

I still want to shake the salt shaker,  
pregnant in the shape of a snowman.

They are what they are.

The disfigured. The hardened.  
The simple.

The snowman's eyes are not eyes.  
The eyes are not a window.  
They are reticent as paper.  
Here, there are

no Greek gods to write about,  
just the spiky cries of a baby,

and the private legend of her birth.  
Here, there are slats of shutters  
to look out of.

Mucous. Slab. Skin flakes that reappear  
and disappear.

There are kisses that turn to rashes.  
Rashes that ruffle around the wrists.

In the end of ambition,  
there are angles again, minerals flattened  
from trophies,

dust to bat away, the end  
of everything masculine,  
and vials and vials of joy.

## The Persistence of Memory

On the day before the locusts came, Lavinia's daughter died alone in the back room. Lavinia had been heating water, hoping a bath would remove the cherry red stain covering Cecilia's cheeks, arms, and chest. Leaving the water to finish warming, Lavinia went to the small bed where she and her husband slept until Cecilia became sick in that sudden way that made Lavinia hold her breath and pray at night for something she could not name. The room that used to smell like wild grass and lavender sachet began to smell like onions and burnt sugar a week into Cecilia's illness. Lavinia did not want to hold her breath, did not want to admit she found something about her daughter distasteful, but she could not help it. She moved quickly, not wasting movement, not a breath inside the airless room. Before Lavinia reached the bed she knew. Cecilia's skin was parched, the color of cemetery stones, her hand loose, hanging from the bed. Lavinia let out the air in her lungs and breathed in the scent of her daughter, thick and cloying, before leaving. She took the pot of water off the fire, sloshing it on the floor all the way through the house to the front door and outside where she dumped the scalding water on one of the tomato plants.

Lavinia stayed outside with the empty pot by her feet. Annie, her youngest and then only, played in the dirt, her dress tucked up past her knees, her hands sliding across the ground. The air was stiller than Lavinia thought she could stand and hot enough that sweat dried on her skin leaving brackish trails. Lavinia licked her lips; her tongue extended past to the skin below and tasted the salt there. In New York, it hadn't been like this. Her skin had been moist and her hair damp long after she washed. Annie was too young to remember New York. Less than a year since they left, but it felt like more. Cecilia had remembered it, remembered the lush emerald grass covered in droplets of dew in the morning, remembered the

smell of lilacs clutching heavily to the air, the sound of bumblebees almost too plump to fly. Cecilia had recalled all of this, and on nights when the air was too hard she would sit with her mother and make up stories that took place back home, back where she remembered. The story of the man and the black dog who never slept. The story of the woman who lived in the lakes. Cecilia had been able to feel it in every strand of herself that Kansas would never be home.

When Henry came back from Jed Marshall's, where he had been helping dig a deeper well, he found his wife, her skin already pinked from the sun, sitting on the one step that led into their house. His youngest daughter was asleep in the thin strip of shade near the building, bits of grass clinging to her hair. Henry did not ask what happened.

"I'll be in the barn," Henry said. Though his shoulders ached and his fingers were cracked with dirt, Henry went to work on a coffin for his daughter. Henry had done this before, once for his father who drank too much and fell asleep in the snow, and once for his older brother who got sick like Cecilia. Inside the barn, the air was stiff and smelled of the manure he forgot to shovel out earlier in the morning. He left the cow and the mule, a weathered animal by the name of Jules, to stand in it, letting it stain their hooves and legs. In the corner, piled neatly, was the pine Henry had hoped to use on the house. He grabbed what he could, the boards that were straighter, had fewer knots, and began working quickly because Lavinia was still outside in the sun. He thought about bringing her inside the house, but he couldn't, not with Cecilia still on the bed where he knew Lavinia left her.

With the boards set between two sawhorses, Henry began to work, letting the saw tear through the wood, sending fragments into the air where they floated in the thin streams of sun that worked their way into the barn. Henry wanted to ask his wife how big it needed to be because he could not remember the size or shape of his daughter. He tried to recall how tall

she was when she stood next to him, but she escaped him. He could see her blond hair and tanned skin. He could see her straight white teeth and upturned nose, but he could not imagine how long her limbs were. Henry worked faster. With the saw in motion, he kept going, cutting first one side and then the other. Each time he pressed the saw through the wood it swayed and twanged under the pressure. With every board, he looked for a place where the grain was clean and he could slide the saw through without the tight pulling on his shoulders. Henry fashioned the pieces in the size of his wife, petite, strong, thin, but as he nailed the sections together they became larger, man-sized. Henry did not take the time to smooth the boards down, or run his hand over the softness of the wood like he did when he made Cecilia's cradle. He left the boards rough after he settled the finished coffin fully on the sawhorses.

Henry walked toward the house, past Annie who was looking at him, her fingers in her mouth, toward Lavinia who still sat on the step, her hands out before her, palms raised to the sky. As he passed into the house, Lavinia stood and turned toward the open door. Her hair was loosening and falling around her shoulders like it used to when he chased her through fields and she ran, laughing. She took a step but Henry put a hand on her shoulder, pushing on the delicate bones beneath her dress.

Henry left her there and moved forward through the house. He could feel Lavinia watching him as his boots scraped against the plank floor, rhythmic and solid, until they slowed when he reached the threshold of their room. He could see Cecilia inside, just the lower half of her body still covered with blankets. Her face was not something he expected to see, believing as he had that Lavinia would have covered her. Henry took another step until he was inside the room looking fully at his daughter. Even from the door, he could see her face was thinner through the cheeks, that there was loose skin around her neck. She did not look peaceful and calm, worn out and thin as she was, so he went to the bed and covered her face without looking too long. Henry wrapped her in a blanket, swaddling

her until not an inch of skin was open to the air. He lifted her from the bed and adjusted her in his arms until her head rested against his shoulder. Moving quickly from the room, Henry walked back past Lavinia who reached out and tugged at a corner of the blanket with her fingers. He kept going until he reached the barn.

Before he placed her inside, Henry knew she was much too small for the casket, but it wasn't until he eased her down that he realized just how wrong he was. Even with the blanket wrapped around her, there was empty room at her feet and head, inches of space surrounding her shoulders. Henry heard the drag of Lavinia's feet against the dirt floor, and he shifted his shoulders to block her view.

Lavinia pushed Henry aside so she could look at her daughter. Henry watched Lavinia's face, waiting for a sign that she noticed that Cecilia looked even more wasted laying inside the pine box, but none came. If he had time, Henry thought, he would try again, this time going slower, smoothing everything to perfection, lining the inside with silk and batting the way they did sometimes back east.

Lavinia placed a kiss on Cecilia's forehead and smoothed back her hair, still bleached almost white from the sun. "She's afraid of the dark," Lavinia said.

Henry slid the cover over his daughter until he could no longer see her face. The skin of his palms caught on the rough lumber, adhering his hands to the casket.

"She's afraid of the dark."

"She'll be fine." Henry pulled his hands away and began fastening the cover into place, gently tapping each nail into the boards.

"You don't understand," Lavinia said.

When Lavinia left the barn Henry stayed behind, raising and lowering his tired arm, hammering in the nails needed to keep Cecilia secure.

Early autumn was hot and dry coming off a summer where the heat had pressed down on Lavinia and her girls, making their skirts feel like lead. Snow barely fell the winter before, and Lavinia wondered if this was what Kansas was like, barely any rain and grass so dry and sharp it left cuts in her skin. They buried Cecilia out in that grass just as the day was slipping into evening. Lavinia was not there when Henry dug Cecilia's grave, but she saw the puffs of dust, dried pieces of Kansas rolling through the air with each shovel stroke, and the pine boards of Cecilia's casket gleaming against the prairie.

She kept Annie with her, like Henry asked her to, but Annie didn't want to be there. She rocked on her heels, her plump legs, still thick with baby fat, kept stiff. Annie held a doll, a fabric one with worn brown hair, by its hand. It used to be Cecilia's until she was too sick to protest Annie playing with it. By then Lavinia had been too tired, staying up at night watching Cecilia's breathing, to stop Annie.

As she rocked, Annie sang:

"The years creep slowly by, Lorena,  
The snow is on the grass again,  
The sun's low down the sky, Lorena,  
The frost gleams where the flow'rs have been."

Lavinia felt Annie's voice, high-pitched and loud, all the way through her body until her heart and lungs vibrated with the song. Cecilia had learned it on the trail after they left Kansas City from a Kentucky-born woman traveling alone with her sick child. They sang it for hours at a time, racing each other to the end so they could begin again. Two days out the woman's baby died, and she held onto it like it was still alive, talking to it and trying to nurse it. "He's gone," Lavinia said the morning after the mother had slept with him tucked to her side. "I'll bury him when I can," the woman said and was still holding the bloating body when Lavinia, Henry, and the children separated from the trail to head south toward

Cottonwood Falls. Lavinia's children did not notice the boy's death. Instead, Cecilia had sung the song over and over keeping in time with the woman's voice.

"Stop singing, Annie," Lavinia said.

"But the heart throbs on." Annie sang while she rocked, her toes and heels keeping a rhythm that her voice couldn't.

"Annie, please." Lavinia put her head on the table, wrapped her arms around her head.

"The sun can never dip so low."

"What?" Lavinia kept her head down, closed her eyes tighter.

"Adown affection's cloudless sky."

"Outside Annie, just go outside."

Lavinia did not move until Henry came in, slapping his hat against his pants. He told her it was time, and she stood and walked to the field. Lavinia did not bother to take Henry's offered hand or look for Annie where she was standing in the dirt, her lips pressed tight.

That night, Lavinia could not sleep in her own bed again. The straw ticking felt too warm, the sound of the breeze rustling the dry grass too loud. She stayed awake watching the ceiling, sloped and uneven, and imagined stars there. Lavinia saw the skies of home embracing her. When they entered Kansas, Lavinia felt as though she was under a different sky altogether, a darker one that weighed on her chest, pushing her tightly down.

In the dark, Lavinia thought of Cecilia below the ground, a deep layer of loamy dirt over her, and the grass blending with the roll of the land. The roots from the only tree Lavinia has seen in forever wrapping themselves around the too big casket, pulling it further down into the earth.

"She didn't suffer," Henry said after he lowered Cecilia into the ground and gave a brief prayer.

"How do you know?" Lavinia asked.

"I just do, that's all."

"How do you know?" Lavinia asked again, but this time Henry did not answer.

Lavinia left Henry in the bed and went to the front room where Annie was asleep. She leaned down and touched her hair, but all Lavinia could smell was sugar and onions sticking to the air and even Annie herself. Lavinia lit a candle, hoping to ward off the night and its darkness. Everything she breathed in, even the dried chamomile and peppermint she opened from her stores, no longer smelled right.

On the table were two cups, set out to tea, like they were on the nights when Cecilia couldn't sleep and they drank from the fragile porcelain. Lavinia could not remember taking them down from the single cupboard. She thought maybe she did, after a dinner of cold bread had with the last of the preserves. Lavinia remembered rubbing her fingers over the chipped handle of one, but she didn't know if it was on this night, or the night before Cecilia got sick, or a night months ago when Cecilia first asked if they were ever going home again.

Lavinia left the cups on the table, though she knew they would need to be washed again in the morning before she could put them away. Every morning a skin of dust covered everything in the room, even the people. The day after they first arrived, Lavinia washed her face in water from their well until the bowl she was using was crusted with dirt. She tried covering the walls in newspaper, but it never did keep the dust out. Instead, the papers made the house theirs somehow, and not the Redcliff's who left one day without warning. "Readable wallpaper," Henry called the paper Lavinia and the girls had attached piece by piece. Sometimes they read the stories aloud to each other after dinner, though after awhile they were the same ones and Lavinia was too tired to invent stories about who the people were.

"I need your help with the crops," Henry said to Lavinia in the morning. Her head was on the table, her hand wrapped around a teacup. "Chickens need to be fed too."

Lavinia rubbed her eyes and then her cheek where her skin was pressed into the shape of the table. Before she could rise Henry was gone with Annie trailing silently after, Cecilia's doll clutched in her hand. There were dirty breakfast dishes, evidence of fried eggs and salted bacon in the small kitchen as Lavinia called it, even though it was only a corner of the main room. She wondered if it was possible she had slept through all of this, the cooking, the gathering of water, the morning talk. She thought that maybe Henry and Annie did it silently as they tried to do when Cecilia was in the back room, because Cecilia cried out in pain when there was too much noise.

Lavinia didn't eat breakfast or clean the plates. Instead, she went to the chicken pen where the two chickens the Marshalls gave them clucked anxiously at her rough handling. She gathered the eggs, only three small ones that fit in her cupped hand. They were still warm, and she brought them to her chest, cradling them. She thought about leaving the eggs with the chickens, Dolores and Mabel, as Annie and Cecilia had named them. She wanted to slip the eggs back into the nest boxes Henry built before last winter, easing them under the birds' thick feathers, even though they would never hatch; the rooster died four months before. So Lavinia brought them into the house and left them in a bowl waiting for their shells to be washed later, maybe by Annie, who was old enough now.

Inside, Lavinia heard a noise like the rustling of skirts or dry leaves, the creak of her own bed. Brushing her hands against her sides, across her stomach, she went into her bedroom. There was a new quilt on the bed, put on by Henry the night before. This one had stars in blue, the one before was a log cabin made out of leftover swatches of dresses Lavinia wore as a child. The corner was pulled down in a perfect triangle as though waiting for someone to crawl beneath. Again, there was a sigh like someone shifting. Besides the bed, quilt, and a tiny stand with an oil lamp on top, there was nothing in the room.

•

Henry was in the corn, only the deep blue of his shirt visible among the stalks. Annie was with him, trailing behind, kicking stones with her feet. Jules, the mule, stood at the edge of the field as though Henry thought he might have a use for him. Lavinia followed the blue into the field. Henry was inspecting the corn, planted late that year in the hopes of more rain. He peeled back the husk revealing the cob, stunted at the end and pale white.

"Not good," Henry said and Lavinia did not answer. They had this conversation before in July when the thin stalks failed to reach Henry's knee.

Lavinia nodded, though the corn was never her primary concern. By the side of the house she had planted a kitchen garden with the girls. Cecilia had helped dig the holes and Annie had placed the seeds, transported from New York wrapped in Lavinia's quilting squares. During the summer, Lavinia had watered the plants carefully with water from the well that she hoped wouldn't go dry, though Jeb Marshall had assured them it would not.

In the corn, only Annie's head was visible, her blonde hair shining in the sun until she turned a corner and was gone. Henry did not seem to notice his daughter slipping quietly through the field. Lavinia walked forward, roused by the way her arms brushed the corn leaves, how her feet pressed against the dirt. The earth was so hard not one of her daughter's footsteps was recorded in it.

Lavinia heard a voice, soft and gentle, keeping time with the rustling of the corn stalks.

"A hundred months, 'twas flow'ry May,  
When up the hilly slope we climbed,  
To watch the dying of the day"

"Annie," Lavinia called, the name catching on her tongue. The song that Cecilia used to sing. She looked back toward Henry. He was still

running the cob through his fingers, sensing the hardness of each kernel. Lavinia remembered how Cecilia used to do this with him, wasting countless cobs throughout the summer, too impatient to let the corn grow. Lavinia kept walking, turning corners in the field, following the voice that kept getting lost in the breeze.

“And hear . . . church bells chimed.  
. . . watch the dying . . . day,  
And . . . distant church bells chimed . . .”

Lavinia turned again and found herself at the far edge of the field where the corn stalks seemed impossibly shorter than the rest, more yellow than green. Just past the edge of the field was Martha Marshall, leaning over a silent and still Annie; Martha's heavy frame bent tightly, her hand placed on her back for support.

“Martha,” Lavinia said, surprised to find the large woman this far from her home.

Martha leaned back, moving her body in increments until her hips were pushed forward, her stomach out, her hand still on her spine. By her feet was a quilted bag filled, Lavinia knew, with all the medicines Martha had used to nurse her own children, two boys and a girl who were tall and broad-boned.

“Heard Cecilia was sick. Thought you could use my help,” Martha said and extended her hand toward Lavinia, waiting for her to take it like a man.

Lavinia slipped her hand into Martha's and squeezed before leaning down to take the bag at her feet. It was heavy and several bottles clanked dully against each other.

“Is Annie falling ill too? She's not said two words to me,” Martha said.

“She hasn't felt much like talking lately. Have you walked this entire way, Martha?” Lavinia started walking toward the house, Martha and Annie following behind her.

"Thought I'd get some fresh air before winter sets in again. Never know when it'll come out here."

"In this heat?"

"Used to it by now I should say."

By the time they reached the house, Martha's breathing was heavy again and her steps slow. Beads of sweat collected on her upper lip sifting through the downy hairs there. Lavinia let Martha into the house, opening the door wide for her.

"Ah, to be in a wood house again," Martha said as she always did the few times she stopped by. "Sit, sit," Martha directed, gesturing toward one of the chairs.

Lavinia sat heavily, letting her body curve forward, her chest sinking toward her knees. Martha bustled through the house and into the back room while Annie followed sucking on the four fingers of her right hand like she used to do in New York as a baby.

"Lavinia," Martha called from the next room, her voice calm but loud.

"Yes," Lavinia answered, because she heard the question in Martha's voice, the slight lilt at the end.

"I didn't know." Martha left the back room, her bag tucked against her side.

"She's in the field, by the tree. Henry made a cross to mark the spot. I wanted to make it white so I could find her, even from miles away, but we don't have any paint. We never bought any."

"We'll get you some as soon as we can," Martha said and started a fire so she could heat water for tea. She wiped out the dirty teacups, still on the table, with a corner of her dress.

Lavinia was outside, sitting in the dirt with Annie, twisting weeds around her fingers, when she heard the hum. Lavinia had left Martha sitting on the front step, fanning herself with her hands and shucking the few peas Lavinia had found in the garden. Lavinia had been thinking of Cecilia, how

she used to race Annie to pull the most weeds, slowing down so Annie's baby fingers had a chance against her own. They played this game in New York where they knelt in their grandfather's potato fields, gesturing with their hands when they came across a fat, hairless caterpillar chewing on the leaves.

The noise was loud and constant in the way it integrated into her thoughts until she wondered if it had been there since she came out of the house, since she first woke up in the morning, since the night before, since the second she reached Kansas when her back and shoulders ached too much for her to notice the sound. "Do you hear that Annie? Do you hear it?" she whispered to her daughter so quietly that Annie didn't lift her head from her doll. She twirled the doll in circles by its small cloth hands, singing a song Lavinia couldn't hear, the one she knew in her bones and sang as though she knew what part Annie was on.

"I'll not call up their shadowy forms;  
I'll say to them, 'Lost years, sleep on!  
Sleep on! nor heed, life's pelting storm.'  
I'll say to them, 'Lost years, sleep on!'"

Lavinia rubbed her hands across her ears, pushing in on the lobes until they stung, but the noise didn't stop. She could still hear it through her fingers and palms, through the muscles and blood that felt like they were vibrating. "Annie, do you hear that?" she asked again, this time louder than she thought, her own voice muffled by her hands. She could not tell if Annie said anything, but Lavinia could tell her daughter heard it by the way she finally lifted her head to the sky trying to pinpoint where the noise was originating from.

"Martha?" Lavinia turned toward her. Martha had stopped fanning herself and was trying to stand.

Henry approached from the field. He left Jules, tied to the barn wall with a short, thick rope. The noise was louder then so that Lavinia,

standing still, felt the throb run through her feet and shoulder bones. By the time Henry reached the garden to stand beside them, there was a gray cloud in the distance like mist.

Annie raised her left hand and pointed in the distance, her right hand fingers placed in her mouth.

"Rain?" Henry asked.

"Could be," Martha said, making her way to stand next to them.

"The noise, though." Lavinia watched the sky darken in miniature increments.

"It seems so long since we heard rain," Martha said.

Lavinia ran her hand through her sweat-dampened hair. "Doesn't look like any rain I know," she said. Back east it could rain for days at a time until the ground squished when she walked on it. Lavinia wanted it to be rain as much as Henry and Martha, but the hum rattled against her eardrums. "Can you feel it in your feet?" she asked.

Henry looked down at the thick boots he wore. The leather was fractured into lines and pressed tight with earth. "No," he said. Martha shook her head and cupped her hand over her eyes, shadowing her face.

There was a sharp whack on Lavinia's cheek, and she raised her hand to touch her face. There was nothing there, but just past her nose her skin was raised into an oval. Beside her, Henry smacked his arm, cursing softly, and Annie crouched on the ground, silently swiping her hair with her hands. Martha rubbed her own cheek where a small red welt was also rising. Lavinia wanted to ask what it was but by then the sound had grown until it vibrated the air around her. She could feel the soil move with the noise. She did not want to look at the sky again.

"Shit," Henry said. Lavinia looked at Henry, then turned her head toward Annie. "Shit," Henry said again because they both knew Annie wasn't listening, she was the only one with her head tilted up to see what the sky was bringing.

"What is it?" Lavinia asked.

"I'm not sure." Henry kneeled so he could examine the ground, looking for whatever he had slapped from his clothing. Picking up something between his thumb and forefinger he rose and placed it in his palm. There was an insect, its wing bent, its back leg twitching until it caught on Henry's calloused finger pads.

"Hopper?"

"Looks to be."

Before Lavinia could ask another question Annie cried out, the first sound beyond singing she had made since Cecilia. Lavinia felt it too, when first one, and then another grasshopper hit her face. They pelted her arms and shoulders and head. She grabbed for her hair, pulling them from the pieces that had fallen from the neat bun she had managed to secure earlier that day. No one moved from the corner of the garden, but stood watching the locusts fall like hail.

Annie cried out again, her voice thin, crackling at the edges. "Move," Henry said, pushing Lavinia backward and scooping Annie from the ground where she was covering her eyes. Henry ran to the house with Martha following quickly, her body swaying with the effort. Lavinia trailed slowly behind, letting the bugs hit her back; the sting of their impact pulling her down.

Inside, Henry cleared the locusts from Annie's hair and clothing with Martha's help. Annie's fingers were back in her mouth, and she was crying hot sharp tears that fell down her fevered face, dripping from the end of her nose. Lavinia looked toward the kitchen and stopped moving, allowing the insects to crawl across her skin, biting at the sweat that covered her body. It was Henry who finally moved to rid the locusts from her, picking them off and stomping on them with his foot. There were so many that a fine layer of oil, crushed from the bodies of the locusts, coated the floor.

While Henry worked, Lavinia watched the table where once again two teacups were set out. She thought she put them away after Martha washed them, shoving them into the back of the cupboard and shutting the door.

Martha crumpled into a chair, shielding her eyes again with her hand as though she would be able to see through the walls all the way to her home. "My family. I need to get home," she said, but Lavinia did not respond. Outside the locusts were hitting the roof and Lavinia could hear Jules braying, loud and deep. Around her fingers, Annie began singing again.

"Thy heart was always true to me:  
A duty stern and pressing, broke  
The tie which linked my soul with thee.  
A duty stern and pressing, broke  
The tie which linked my soul with thee."

Eventually night came, but Lavinia could not tell its darkness from that of the locusts. Their gnawing was louder than Martha and Henry, who seemed to be having a conversation that Lavinia only heard in fits and gasps. Lavinia closed her eyes only when Annie stopped singing, long after Jules' cries had ceased. When she fell asleep, pressed to the floor of the main room, she did not know if they were gone or still out there, but she could not keep wondering.

In the morning, the sun shone through the one small window in the cabin across Lavinia's bed in silvery streaks, falling across her eyes and face until her lids finally opened. She could hear nothing, not even the wind blowing or her own heartbeat through her pillow. She thought this must be what death was like. Moving from her bed, Lavinia shoved off the thin cotton nightdress she wore. She did not remember putting it on, but sensed Henry removed her dress from the day before, stained from the innards of the locusts he had crushed against her. She found a clean dress with a hole in the seam below her chest that she was supposed to mend weeks ago. Beneath the dress, Lavinia did not wear any extra clothing and a circle of skin shown through.

Lavinia moved slowly through the cabin, her body moving in small breaths. She looked for Martha's bag in the corner of the main room where she had left it the afternoon before, but it was gone. Not stopping for breakfast Lavinia continued until she was outside. Before she reached the door, she smelled the locusts. The bitter scent of their bodies creeped into her house like the dirt she could never get rid of.

Outside the door, the sun pushed down on the ground. Lavinia could see the land, now flat and yellow without the slim green stalks that marked the cornfields or the rounded green tomato plants. In their stead, the land stretched on forever, uneven yet empty. Lavinia looked into this distance searching for her daughter or Henry, but she could not find them. In their yard the chickens were clucking, moving around and gulping down the pieces of locust. When Lavinia walked toward them, the ground crunched under her feet.

The chickens gulping down pieces of insect and the locusts crunching under Lavinia's feet were the only sounds she heard. Not even the wind could make noise against the ragged bits of grass that covered the ground. Just around the corner was Jules, his body laid out straight, his torso already distended. Flies were collecting near the corners of his nostrils and eyes. Not even the rope that held him tied to the barn was there any more, eaten away by the locusts.

Lavinia thought when this was done and she could move freely again with the press of the sun, she would write a letter to her family telling them how the locusts came and then there was nothing. How in the morning there was a silence to the air, yet the sky was blue again, filled with white clouds that skimmed overhead.

Lavinia moved past the barn where she thought she might have heard the cow shifting inside and went to the tree where Cecilia was buried. Where there wasn't bare twigs the leaves were shredded. Lavinia sunk to the ground beside her daughter. The cross, ragged and quickly made only the day before, was polished like glass by the locusts' jaws. Lavinia

slipped her fingers over it, feeling how smooth it was compared to anything Henry had ever made. She could see her reflection there, the rise of her cheekbones, the indents under her eyes. In the empty spaces, she looked for Cecilia and her white-blond hair.

## “I Probably Mean”: A Celebration of Grace Paley

In “One Day,” one of the last poems Grace Paley wrote, later published in the December 24, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, there’s a moment where the rhetorical through-line of the poem gets usurped by the emotional content. The first stanza is a straightforward statement, “One day / one of us / will be lost / to the other.” Then in the second stanza as the speaker begins to build on that initial statement, there’s a four word rush of emotional data that disrupts the grammatical sense the speaker intends to make, “lightly turning / away shyness.” What is remarkable in this move is that the rhetoric is bolstered by its disruption. The poem contains its own example of how impossible it is to talk about what it’s talking about. The emotional weight shudders and language begins to calve off.

The fourth stanza returns to the original meditation and contains the remarkable line, “I probably mean,” a line which effectively sums up Ms. Paley’s work for me.

One way of looking at language is the bowling analogy. You’ve got your meaning, and you hurl it down the long lane and knock down a set of distinct resonances for your readers. But what is so gorgeous about a line like “I probably mean” is the sense that those resonances, once knocked down, feel alien and unintentional, not the pins we were aiming at at all. The meaning was really locked up in the moment of hurling, almost at the exact half-second of the release—before the ball lands on the varnished wood. The pins knocked down become secondary.

This poem contains the tension that has always brought me back to Grace Paley’s work. It is deeply felt and deeply intellectual. Theories of semiotics and narrative are amplified by the fact that they are also deeply human experiences. Her work, before the theory brain creeps in, asserts

again and again the truth behind narrative. That narrative is primarily a vehicle for truth, and if it's not being used as such, it's worthless.

In the two poems published here, "Sisters" and "Night Morning," there are moments in each where the problems of language hitting anything close to the original emotional moment are highlighted. The speakers in these poems recognize the essential distance from lived life, from felt life, that the written word establishes. From "Sisters," "the word dead is correct / but inappropriate." In "Night Morning," a speaker wrestles with up to three languages—English, Russian, newest English—as she attempts to find a way to communicate that incorporates the "excited in- / dustrious brain" and the assertions of the "heart's beating." Language is the medium as well as the antagonist in these poems. There is the wide gulf between what we mean and what we say.

By establishing this distance, Ms. Paley opens up the emotional content not present in the poems, the ghostly emotions that hover in the white space. Not only the pins we knocked down, but also the pins that could have been knocked down, if language could have allowed their presence. Like the phantom limb pains of some amputees, we feel what is not present, and the frustration at its absence.

Grace read my work once. I was a PhD student at the University of Houston and was enamored of the ways that her stories subverted the traditional narrative form. I had made flow charts of her stories and taught these flow-charts to undergraduates. I had sought out ways to reverse engineer her work, so that the mechanisms of her stories could be revealed and then replicated. It was an ambition of mine to make knock-offs of her stories, like the Kate Spade bags sold in Chinatown.

We met in a warm wood parlor of a gorgeous house in Houston. The story that I had brought in was immediately beside the point. What I really came in with was a question. "How do you go about revising for voice," I asked her near the end of our session. She is the perfect writer for this question. I'm not going to say that her work sings, since it's been a critical

cliché of her work from the publication of *The Little Disturbances of Man*, but her work does rent apartments, buy produce, and fill out job applications.

Ms. Paley's stories are technical knock-outs, and I was curious about this ear she had for the lived life—the ability to trust the voice for the shaping of the story. I wanted to know how a person developed the technique, the tools, for that kind of revision, that kind of trust. I was prepared pen in hand for a conversation about the performative voice versus the private voice, as well as possibly a discussion of the syntax of self-deceit. I had my copy of the story out, ready for her to point out a spurious clause, an introductory phrase that fell flat.

Grace closed my story and nudged it away. “You’ve got to see past your own bullshit,” she said. “And you’ve got a lot of bullshit.”

Grace then went on to say that our main job as writers was to become better truth-tellers, that the real project was to become a better citizen in the world—a better listener, a better articulator of the truth. That truth wasn't found in our symbols or themes, but actually was found in spite of them. There's the utterance, and there's the *oomph* behind the utterance. I had labored so hard on the utterance and completely neglected the *oomph*.

Later that day, Grace did a Q&A at the University of Houston Honors College. The sound system wasn't working, and it became clear that running the microphone through the crowd was less than ideal, so instead Grace walked up to each person who had a question, repeated that person's question to the entire room, and would proceed to answer it thoroughly. Grace was the most generous interviewee. She not only answered the questions people had asked, but intuited the questions behind the questions that people were asking, and answered those as well. She stayed past the time allotted and afterward spoke at length with everyone who approached her.

Grace wrote more poetry than narrative towards the end of her life. Her poetry is often shocking in its sincerity and earnestness. Earnestness and sincerity are often dirty words in contemporary American poetry, and Grace's poetry can be off-putting in its privileging of the naked statement. But

when viewed in the context of her bigger project, one can see how these last poems are the result of a person who spent her life in the service of truth-telling.

What was so disarming about Grace Paley the person and is so disarming in her literary works was how utterly invested she was in being a better truth-teller; that writing better was just a part of a bigger human project of being better, in the hope of making the world better. Listen better, tell the truth better, see past your own bullshit.

It's not like the world needed less Grace Paleys.

## Sisters

My friends are dying  
well we're old it's natural  
one day we passed the experience of "older"  
which began in late middle age  
and came suddenly upon "old" then  
all the little killing bugs and  
baby tumors that had struggled  
for years against the body's  
brave immunities found their  
level playing fields and  
victory

but this is not what I meant to  
tell you I wanted to say that  
my friends were dying but have now  
become absent the word dead is correct  
but inappropriate

I have not taken their names out of  
conversation gossip political argument  
my telephone book or card index in  
whatever alphabetical or contextual  
organizer I can stop any evening of  
the lonesome week at Claiborne Bercovici  
Vernarelli Deming and rest a moment  
on their seriousness as artists workers  
their excitement as political actors in the

streets of our cities or in their workplaces  
the vigiling fasting praying in or out  
of jail their lighthearted ness which floated  
above the year's despair  
their courageous sometimes hilarious  
disobediencies before the state's official  
servants their fidelity to the idea that  
it is possible with only a little extra anguish  
to live in this world at absolute [minimum?]  
loving brainy sexual energetic redeemed

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Note: An earlier version of this poem appeared in *American Poetry Review*.

## Night Morning

To translate a poem  
from thinking  
into English  
takes all night  
night nights and days

English does  
the best it can while  
the mothers tongue Russian  
omits the verb to be  
again and again and  
is always interfering  
with the excited in-  
dustrious brain wisely  
the heart's beat asserts  
control

also the newest English  
argues with its old  
singing ancestry  
it thinks it knows best

finally the night's  
hard labor peers through  
the morning window observes  
snow birds the sun caught  
in white and black winter

birches disentangles itself  
addresses the ice-cold meadow  
for hours on the beauty of  
the color green

## Tesserae

Picking plums on a ladder, I notice a few  
beyond my reach; our neighbor has replaced

the trampoline with cast-iron table and chairs;  
black ants on the walkway are encircled

by a horde of smaller ones; we returned  
to rose petals strewn on the bed; newly planted

cottonwoods curl at the leaf tips; once I  
poked a pin through paper, raised and lowered

the sheet until a partial eclipse came into view;  
as a child, I brooded over a *Life* photograph

of bodies piled up in Nanjing; koi mouth  
the surface near a waterfall; hours earlier

we lay naked on a redwood deck; black ants  
writhe, stiffen; along a south-facing slope,

I find red-capped russulas, aspen boletes,  
hedgehogs, a single death cap—deaths form

gaps, no, fissures, in my brain; you crack  
a fortune cookie, "Water runs to what is wet."

## Crisscross

Meandering across a field with wild asparagus,  
I write with my body the characters for *grass*,  
*water*, *transformation*, ache to be one with spring.  
Biting into watermelon, spitting black seeds  
onto a plate, I watch the eyes of an Armenian  
accordion player, and before dropping a few  
euros into his brown cap, smell sweat and fear.  
I stay wary of the red horse, *Relámpago*, latch  
the gate behind me; a thorned Russian olive  
branch arcs across the path below my forehead,  
and, approaching the Pojoaque River, I recall  
the sign, *beware pickpockets*, find backhoe tracks,  
water diverted into a ditch. Crisscrossing  
the stream, I catch a lightning flash, the white-  
capped Truchas peaks, behind, to the east, and in  
the interval between lightning and thunder,  
as snow accumulates on black branches,  
the chasm between what I envision and what I do.

## Memorial to a Tree at the Street Corner

—translated from the Chinese by Arthur Sze

last night my poem moved to the street corner  
enacted a tree waved  
small white flowers that suddenly turned their faces like ghosts

screaming on tiptoe permeated the air  
ankle bones sparkled like crystals  
the Tang dynasty like a lantern suddenly switched on

already it's been so many years along a red brick wall  
I turned a corner it was the old country at branch tip  
familiar bloodshed finds again its stand-in

throws out tons of quicksilver colors  
but I am no longer scared of shriveling since a spring night  
was washed away at the tree stump the lingering sound of an electric saw

## Breaking Apart the Well-Wrought Object: An Interview with Arthur Sze

*The title of Sze's latest collection, Quipu, refers to an ancient Incan system of record keeping that involves knotting spun cords. In his poems, Sze weaves together intense observations of everyday life with moments of scientific and philosophical meditation, and in the process, like the Incans, he makes memory into something tactile. The poems refuse to lose touch with the imperfection of experience, encountering an interruption or irritation in thought often becomes a way of continuing to proceed. Veering from one perspective to another, Sze not only creates poems that shimmer; he comes as close as any poet to the urgent, unnameable motion of a mind attempting to draw complexity out of chaos.*

*Arthur Sze is the author of nine books of poetry, including Quipu, The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998, The Silk Dragon: Translations from the Chinese, and The Ginkgo Light (forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press, 2009). His poems have been translated into Albanian, Bosnian, Chinese, Dutch, Italian, Romanian, and Turkish. He is the recipient of a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award; a Guggenheim fellowship; an American Book Award; a Lannan Literary Award for Poetry; and two National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing fellowships, among others. He was a Visiting Hurst Professor at Washington University, a Doenges Visiting Artist at Mary Baldwin College, and has conducted residencies at Brown University, Bard College, and Naropa University. He is a professor emeritus at the Institute of American Indian Arts and is the first Poet Laureate of Santa Fe.*

*The following interview took place in November and December of 2007 via email.*

Liz Countryman: The poems in *Quipu* seem to embody both an intense concentration and a looseness of perception, as images appear in sharp focus and are replaced before we can fully interpret them. I'm curious about what

you from one image to the next. Do you make associative leaps while writing a poem, or do you tend to write in fragments and arrange afterward (like Li Ho, one of the Chinese poets you've translated,

Arthur Sze: T.S. Eliot once wrote that a poem communicates before it's understood. One of the things I'm interested in is exploring synaptic connections. In writing a poem, I try to utilize a variety of approaches: I make associative leaps, but I'm also trying to find charged moments to become seeds. To discover these moments, I have to lose my way in order to find it. I will sometimes write a series of fragments and explore connections that generate heat and light—classical Chinese poetry often polishes metaphor through juxtaposition rather than through explicit connection—but I will also sometimes write in a more linear way when I am writing for a crescendo.

Often while reading *Quipu*, I feel that I can sense a muscle being stretched, as though maintaining your particular kind of quick, intense attention requires, to borrow a line from one of the poems, "the tensile strength of a joy." Can you talk a bit about how you maintain focus in a poem and what impulses you tend to resist? What kind of exercise are you in a poem? Is resisting the narrative impulse part of your writing process these days?

I value clarity and intense focus from line to line, but I'm also willing to accept initial disorientation and bafflement. One sometimes has to become disoriented in order to reorient and see. The focus of a poem may thus naturally shift, but I hope an unfolding necessity commands a reader's attention. The process of creation is mysterious. I try to resist knowing too much about what a poem is about, where it is going, or imposing some form of preconception onto it. As the sprawling draft of a poem develops, I try

to concentrate the imaginative and emotional focus and often search for a structure that can give the poem rigor and shape. I don't think of the poem as an exercise, but I like the physical response that you mention. I suppose I'm more interested in simultaneity and braiding various narratives together than tracking a single, linear narrative, but I don't try to resist the narrative impulse.

LC: I guess the reason why I asked about narrative is that some of your earlier poems follow a much more linear route, especially in books like *The Willow Wind* and *Two Ravens*. What led you from that somewhat straightforward configuration to the kinds of poems you encourage now? Is the experience of writing any different?

AS: At the beginning, I admired and aspired to write poems that had the clarity and focus of Tang dynasty poetry. I admired how much Li Po, Tu Fu, or Wang Wei could accomplish in twenty to fifty-six characters, but, over time, I became restless and dissatisfied. I felt too much of the world was sifted out. Certain words—peach blossoms, moonlight, wine—were used so often that they became stale. I wanted more of the contemporary world to enter into my own poems, and I felt that the Tang poems, which were initially helpful, were also limiting.

My travel to Japan in 1990 was a pivotal experience. I learned, from an anecdote in Japanese tea ceremony, how a merchant paid a small fortune to impress Rikyu with a tea bowl. After Rikyu performed tea ceremony, the merchant asked how he liked it. When Rikyu said that it was alright and left, the merchant threw the bowl down on the floor in a fit of anger and shattered it. A servant picked up the shards, glued them back together, and created a very irregular bowl. Years later, when Rikyu came back through the village, he picked this irregular bowl off a shelf, said it was extraordinary, and asked who made it. Well, the original potter, the merchant, and the servant all made it; and I'm interested in the fact that emotion shattered the

well-made vessel. This anecdote became pivotal to my own poetic evolution: I had to break apart my own conception of a poem as a well-wrought object; then I was able to utilize fragments, to explore juxtaposition as an active principle in creation, to create rougher textures, and to write with greater risk and verve.

My experience of writing is now very different from my early years. In *The Willow Wind* and *Two Ravens*, I was too guarded in shaping my material. The early poems were often written within days, whereas my writing process now is much slower and extends over months. I go through more drafts and am often reminded of Rilke's comment: "It is all gestation and bringing forth."

LC: Form plays an important role in your work, given how many threads of thought there often are to manage. But form isn't acting merely as an organizational device; it seems instead to be integral to the poem's identity and action. How do you create or find the appropriate form for a poem? I'm thinking especially of sequence poems like "Before Completion," from *The Redshifting Web*, and "Earthshine," which is in *Quipu*. Both of those sequences seem to rely on their respective forms to manage complexity and illuminate meaning.

AS: Yes, I want the form of a poem to be integral to its identity and action. I want it to balance rigor with revelation and surprise. In the case of "Before Completion," the seed was the shock when I heard that Gu Cheng, a personal friend who was a Misty generation poet exiled from China, had killed his wife and hanged himself. I was so shaken that I consulted the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. I threw the coins six times and generated the last hexagram, Before Completion. In looking at the pattern of broken and solid lines, I decided to try writing an elegy in six sections; where I threw broken or yin lines, I would write fragments, and where I threw solid or yang lines, I would write block-like sections. As I worked on the sequence—I started

with the fragments and worked from the inside out—I deliberately repeated a line, “Where does matter end and space begin?” (as an aside, it’s one of the great questions in particle physics) so that it initiated a series of fragments in one section but came back in a later section as the final fragment. As I played with the sequencing, I discovered that if I followed the exact configuration for the Before Completion hexagram, the motion was too bipolar and predictable. So then I shed the literal connection to the hexagram and proceeded by intuition. The opening section came very late. I think Picasso once said, “It’s good to start with an idea, but it always becomes something else in the end.”

“Earthshine” was triggered by the news that Jim Sagel, a poet and fiction writer who once taught with me at the Institute of American Indian Arts, had committed suicide. As I brooded over his death, I wanted a structure that could utilize “the near and far,” and the astronomical meaning and image of earthshine struck me as appropriate and potentially rich. This time I made the dangerous decision to take the fragmentary sections and align them along a central, vertical axis down the page. In searching for emotional and imaginative alignment, I felt that centrally-aligned fragments could be a manifestation of the consciousness struggling to find a point of balance. I consciously wove dramatic, lyrical, narrative, meditative moments together and knew that I also wanted to go out into the world but keep returning to New Mexico. Ultimately, the astronomical meaning of earthshine gave me an open-ended structure and also the ending. One would normally say that things “come and go”; because earthshine is literally sunlight that bounces off the earth up to the moon and then back to earth, the light “goes and comes.”

LC: This is sort of a picky question, but I’m curious about your use of the semicolon. It’s your preferred punctuation mark when you write in monostichs. Any particular reason?

AS: In those passages a comma moves the language along too quickly, whereas a period stops the motion and has too much finality. The semicolons, I hope, enable the monostichs to resist closure and indicate a close connection between the one-line stanzas, though one may not be able to intellectually articulate what links them together.

LC: One thing that's refreshing about your poetry is that it's not just about poetry. You talk about science, botany, gardening, painting, and calligraphy. How does your inquiry into these other ways of approaching the world enrich your work?

AS: The word "complexity" is etymologically derived from "plex," to braid, and "com," with or together: so complexity is not about throwing different elements into a pot and boiling them together. Complexity involves spinning different strands so that they reinforce and enrich each other. In weaving, if you take fibers and spin them together, you create a one-ply yarn that can easily be pulled apart. If you take a one-ply yarn and spin it with another one-ply yarn (each one-ply can be spun in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction), you create a two-ply yarn that is not only stronger than each one-ply, you also utilize the differences in color and texture and spin from each ply to create something new.

I want poetry to be informed and enriched by what is happening in other disciplines. A poet needs a strong imagination and mastery of language, but it seems to me creative endeavors in other disciplines can provide significant metaphors, structures, and challenges by which a poet can layer the poem to create more powerful and multivalent effects. In Santa Fe, I have been fortunate to personally come to know many exceptional scientists, weavers, anthropologists, artists, and, over time, my conversations with them have sparked my own work.

LC: Something else that seems to enrich your own poems very much is your work as a translator of Chinese poetry. A lot of good comes from translating poetry well, but I'm curious about the particular importance of this effort for you. Do you feel a responsibility to translate poems, or do you do it more as a way of finding inspiration?

AS: I have translated poems at four different periods: from 1971-72, from 1983-84, from 1996-7, and in 2007. In each period, I sought out poems that I admired, but I also chose poems that would help me grow in my own poetry. In the first period, with the help of Ts'ai Mei-hsi, I translated Tang poems; in hindsight, I learned clarity and how to foreground visual images and make them a vehicle for emotion. In the second period, with help from my aunt, Pan Chia-hsiu, I selected poets from other time periods. Wen I-to (1899-1946), for instance, used the classical tradition but also subverted and transformed it. Translating his poetry helped me find my own voice. In the third period, I chose poems by Li Ho, Li Shang-yin, and Ba-ta-shan-jen. I was consciously thinking about layering in poems, and Li Ho's shamanism and use of mythology, Li Shang-yin's veiled eroticism, and Ba-ta-shan-jen's Ch'an allusions became a rich source of inspiration.

After my translations were collected in *The Silk Dragon* (2001), I thought my days as a translator were over. Yet, I have to eat those words. This year I read my poetry at the 38<sup>th</sup> Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam, at the first Chinese-English Poetry Festival at Yellow Mountain in China, and then at the Second Pacific Poetry Festival in Hualien, Taiwan. In Rotterdam, I sat in on translation sessions. One of the leading poets of the Netherlands, K. Michel, was featured. He had translated fifteen pages of my own poetry into Dutch, and, as I read his work in English translation, I was excited and heartened. It was obvious the English versions were rudimentary; so, with the help of Rob Schouten—I don't know a word of Dutch—I chose several poems to focus on. After I

had drafts, I consulted directly with K. Michel and made more revisions. I completed two translations, and they're going to be published in *FIELD*.

When I attended the Yellow Mountain Poetry Festival in China, there were six English-speaking poets and six Chinese poets. Near the end, we were each asked to choose a poem to translate, and I chose a short one by Yang Lian, a Misty generation poet who now lives in London. Wang Yan, from the Beijing Foreign Studies University, helped me go through the characters, and I also consulted directly with Yang Lian.

LC: For those of us who can't read Chinese characters, can you describe briefly how reading and writing poetry is different in a logographic language than a language with a phonetic alphabet? For instance, in Chinese poetry are visual associations more important than the poem's effect on the ear? How does a translator deal with the differences?

AS: I don't want to say that visual associations are more important than the poem's effect on the ear. Chinese is a tonal language, and Mandarin has four tones. In classical poetry, the first two tones, level and rising, are considered horizontal, whereas the third and fourth tones, dipping and falling, are vertical. I mention this distinction because in a *lu-shih*, or regulated poem, tonal counterpoint is required. In addition, *shih* poems are traditionally chanted—the sounds of Tang poems resemble Cantonese more than Mandarin—so the sounds are very important. Nevertheless it's impossible to ignore the rich evolution and complexity of Chinese characters. I like to show people who don't know Chinese that the word "autumn" is composed of "tree tips" juxtaposed with "fire." The character itself contains a metaphor: autumn is tree tips on fire. In addition, if you write the character "sorrow," you write "autumn" on top and then "heart/mind" below; so "sorrow" contains a metaphor inside a metaphor: "sorrow" is "autumn" in the "heart and mind," while "autumn" is "tree tips on fire." Chinese characters, then, sometimes accomplish metaphor through juxtaposition. The situation

is quite complicated, however, in that most characters contain phonetic elements. Let me say that in classical Chinese poetry some poets clearly work with the visual elements. Tu Fu wrote a poem where a speaker is yearning for rain, and the rain radical appears in six out of seven consecutive characters, but that hope is visually extinguished by the appearance of the fire radical in the ensuing character—"nothingness."

Of course it's impossible to satisfactorily deal with the differences between Chinese and English. Translation is an impossible task; yet we need translations that allow us to glimpse what is happening in the originals.

LC: Are you satisfied with the translations of Chinese poems currently available to the English-speaking reader? If not, what do you feel is most needed? Which translators do you admire?

AS: I am not at all satisfied with the translations of Chinese poems available to the English-speaking reader, and I don't believe I will ever be. One of the reasons I studied Chinese when I was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley was that I was dissatisfied with the translations I read. I wanted to read Li Po and Tu Fu in the original, and there was no substitute for that experience. I like to refer English-speaking readers to *Chinese Poetic Writing* by Francois Cheng, translated by Jerome Seaton (Indiana University Press). The introductory essays are provocative and insightful: if the semiotic framework eventually feels superimposed onto the poems, it's still a wonderful place to begin. The translations in the second part are reliable, but I have to say that I don't know if there can ever be satisfactory translations. I include my own translations as part of the futile effort. Although Ezra Pound made numerous blunders in *Cathay*—we don't need to document them here—his ear and language are so vital. In the end, we need more English-speaking poets who are conversant in Chinese language and culture.

LC: Do you translate your own poems into Chinese?

AS: My Chinese is awkward and rudimentary: there's no way that I could translate from English into Chinese. My own poetry has been translated into Chinese by Zhao Yiheng, Zhang Ziqinq, Zeng Zhenzhen, and Chen Li. Chen Li's translations are clearly exceptional. In the last section of my sequence "The String Diamond," I was astonished by how he translated "sensing in slow seconds." Instead of literally translating that phrase, he created the experience by repeating the character "man," slow, four times. In Chinese, it's common to repeat a character twice: "man," "man," means slowly, for example; but it was a creative stroke to repeat it four times to extend and create the experience itself.

LC: You mentioned some recent travel in China and Taiwan. Based on your experiences, how would you say being a poet in those places is different from being one here? Has meeting writers from other countries affected your understanding of the poet's role?

AS: Although the audience for contemporary poetry in China and Taiwan is small, poetry still has cultural prestige in both countries. People there have enormous reverence for great poets of the past—from Chu Yuan through the Tang and Sung poets—and many people can recite poems by memory. It's not uncommon for an innkeeper or entrepreneur to aspire to be a poet; in that sense, poetry has a very different position in society.

I don't think meeting writers from other countries has changed my understanding of a poet's role, but it has deepened my appreciation of poetry. In ancient China, Li Yu was killed for writing the phrase, "last night, again the east wind." In modern China, poetry is still taken extremely seriously: it's hard for us to imagine being sent into exile for writing a poem. Yet it happens in many countries. Gjeke Marinaj, a poet from Albania who now lives in Richardson, Texas, had to leave Tirana after his poem, "Horses," was published.

LC: Where do you expect your poetry to go from here?

AS: I've just completed my ninth collection, *The Ginkgo Light*, and Copper Canyon Press will publish it in May 2009. Whereas earlier books, *Archipelago*, or *Quipu*, were built around asymmetry, this new collection has a symmetrical structure. In starting to move beyond this forthcoming collection, I have no idea what will happen next, and that's good.

## “Ruthless Patience”: A Conversation with Vikram Chandra

*Vikram Chandra is a University of Houston alum whose MFA thesis, Red Earth and Pouring Rain, was published in India, England and the U.S. to much critical acclaim. His other books are a collection of short stories, Love and Longing in Bombay, and Sacred Games, a 900-page tome that explores the nexus between the glamorous and sordid sides of contemporary Mumbai. Chandra divides his time between Mumbai and California where he teaches creative writing at the University of Berkeley. He is very vocal on issues concerning contemporary Indian writing in English such as authenticity, language, and exile. Chandra's fiction has many layers and characters clamoring for attention. His energetic, often bilingual prose vividly evokes the rapidly changing realities of cosmopolitan India.*

Oindrila Mukherjee: First, about your background. You've been to several universities, starting in India and ending in the U.S. (film school, creative writing programs, working as a computer programmer). How did you arrive at being a writer?

Vikram Chandra: I've been writing since I was a little kid. My mother is a writer. Some of my earliest memories are of her sitting at the kitchen table writing plays for television and radio in Hindi. After we moved to Bombay in the late seventies, she wrote many critically and commercially successful feature films. So, like all kids, I used to make up stories to amuse myself, but in our household it seemed quite natural to write these stories down.

One of these stories was published in a school magazine when I was eleven, and that was an enormous thrill. I was a very nerdy little kid, introverted and bookish, and suddenly I had an identity: I was a writer.

Still, this was the India of the sixties and seventies. It was impossible to imagine that I could make a career out of it, particularly because I knew how much my mother made from all the work she did. All the Indian

writers I knew of had full-time day jobs; they worked in film, they were lawyers, newspaper and magazine editors. I thought I'd work in film to make a living, and so I took screenplay and production classes through my undergraduate years, even as I was getting a degree in literature with a "concentration in creative writing," which meant I submitted a novella as my senior honours thesis. I went to film school at Columbia with this very practical intention, that I was going to get into the industry to support my writing. And while I was at Columbia I was wandering around in the library and found the original edition of the mid-nineteenth century autobiography of Sikander Skinner, which I was immediately obsessed with. I knew I wanted to write a novel about Skinner and his family, and I decided I had to give up the hope of a safety net of sorts and commit to being a writer of fiction. I began writing *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* at Johns Hopkins and finished it in Houston.

OM: You've been part of two creative writing programs as a grad student. Do these programs really help writers? Would you recommend them?

VC: Absolutely. I think, though, that you have to be clear about what you're doing in the program, and what you hope to learn there. I tell my students who ask about creative writing programs that they shouldn't go too early, that they should go when the idea or plan of a book is clear in their minds. I came to the Writing Seminars in Baltimore firmly committed to writing, and that's exactly what I did there and in Houston. I used all the institutional resources available to me, every class—even the literature courses—as opportunities to research and write the book. Even if we were reading Norse sagas, for instance, I'd use my time to read and write about something—military tactics, women in a martial culture, journey narratives, epic structures—that I could use for my own ends. That kind of tight focus and what I suppose you could describe as a somewhat cynical approach to the institutional demands of a writing program helped me enormously, I think. It protected me, to some extent, from all the emotional upswell that happens when you put a bunch of writers together. And, not least, I had the

opportunity to work with some extraordinary writers and teachers—John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Adam Zagajewski.

There's a very old analogue to the writing programs in the *gharana* and *ustad-shagird* systems in poetry and music in India. Young artists would apprentice themselves to established poets or musicians, who would introduce them to the craft and milieu. The teacher—the guru or *ustad*—would critique the works of the students—the *shagirds*—and when the student was deemed to be ready, would introduce the young performer formally to the entire community of artists and listeners. So it's something that artists have been doing for a long time. What is clear in the stories about the *gharanas* is that although nobody can teach talent, it is very possible to teach craft. The student gains a critical vocabulary, an awareness of the elements of the medium, of the received traditions and the possibilities of the future. You learn also by watching others. Looking back, I see very clearly how much I learned from sitting in a room and watching Donald Barthelme read a story, read a sentence. I use those skills every day of my life as a writer and as a reader.

OM:*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* was your MFA thesis. It's very difficult to workshop a novel; how did you do it?

VC: Well, I brought in chapters with synopses of what had proceeded each chapter and what was to follow. Inevitably, you'd get some people who were a little lost, but some of my peers and I were in many workshops together, so after I'd subjected them to this for a while they knew the general outline of the novel. After I'd finished a first draft, a couple of my friends read the whole thing. In general, I suppose, short stories are more convenient to deal with in workshop, given the semester system, but there's no reason why you can't gain from workshoping parts of a novel. Again, as a writer, you have to be aware of what you want from the process. Some readers are not going to understand what you are trying to do because they can't see the entire structure, with all its conceits and narrative flows and tropes. You have to

respectfully ignore those readers and find the people who have a feeling for your fiction.

OM: Your books (at least the novels) are tomes. They're huge in volume and scope and complexity. What's your process? Do you have to lock yourself away to write? Or do you live fully while you work on your novels? Can you take us through the process from conception to publication?

VC: For me, writing fiction is very much a process of exploration. I generally start with an image, and with a character or two. For instance, the first thing I knew about *Sacred Games* was that I had a Bombay policeman talking to a gangster who has barricaded himself inside a strange bunker-like house. I had a sense of the feeling of the end, the emotional content of the last page. And everything else between these two places was a blank, an emptiness where I knew there would be story. So I started exploring the lives of the policeman and the gangster, asking questions about them by writing through these lives. And also exploring the landscape these people live in. The bunker came, I think, not from just the fear and paranoia of the gangster's life, but also the escalating violence on our streets, the terrorist bombs and the riots, watching smoke rise above a city on fire, the sense of potential disaster walking very close to us—we came very very close to full-out war on our borders a couple of times in the last couple of decades, with nuclear weapons ready on bombers on runways. And we all knew this.

The shape of the book revealed itself as I wrote and shaped it. I mean the architecture of it, the various arcs and circles. In the first draft, at least, it's always a curious blending of instinct and awareness. I'm feeling my way along as much as I'm directing the growth of the book. In later drafts, I was much more in control of the contours; by that point I'm very actively shaping it, looking for balance and what the classical Indian aestheticians called *rasa*—the essential taste that arises from all the various emotions that exist from moment to moment in the narrative.

Once I start writing, I work pretty regularly—six days a week if I'm not teaching. As you can probably tell from the above, as a writer I'm

very much driven by curiosity, by a desire to see and, as best as I can, understand. So, particularly for *Sacred Games*, there was a lot of research. I read a lot, met people and talked to them, travelled frequently in India and Southeast Asia. Following the links from one interview to the next, from police stations to underworld to politics, from Bombay to Delhi to Punjab, was something that was spread out over years, as I came to India and left. The writing would suggest particular questions, and the answers to these questions fed back into the writing.

What works best for me is a steady, even pace. On writing days, I aim for 400 words over the course of a morning. You have to develop a kind of long-term, ruthless patience, with yourself and the work. There's no hurrying any of it, not the writing and not the research and not the knowing what you have to write. I wouldn't call the work or the life easy, but it's satisfying from day to day, and there are moments of sheer pleasure. And then, one day—amazingly enough—you're done.

OM: You are currently teaching writing at Berkeley. How does teaching writing help or hurt your own writing?

VC: I use the classroom as a kind of laboratory; what I talk and think about in workshop is what I'm doing in my life otherwise. The classroom feeds the writing, and the other way around. And I like being drawn into interactions with my students. I learn about things that I would never encounter left to my own devices. It's very easy for me to isolate myself with my work and my books, so I think it's healthy for me to be forced out into the world.

OM: You've worked on Bollywood film scripts, and your mother and sister are closely involved with the Bombay film industry. You went to film school yourself. What effect has this had on your career and your way of writing and thinking?

VC: My mother was a passionate filmgoer, and so my involvement in cinema—both Indian and foreign—began early. Before the opening up of Indian television and radio in the early nineties, film was the one form of entertainment that was readily available. It's fascinating to think about the historical development of the form in India. The Lumière brothers put on shows in Bombay just a few months after they first demonstrated the Cinématographe in Paris in 1895, and Indians started using the technology shortly after; the first Indian short films appeared in 1899.

The early cinema drew directly on traditions of Indian performance, high and low; many of the early filmmakers had connections to Parsi and Marathi theatre. So we've been making films as long as anyone in the world, and the form itself—what we commonly refer to as the “Bollywood” film—is part of a long, living tradition. Medieval and classical Indian theatre used song and dance as an integral part of the drama. So when the first film with sound appears in 1931, it has seven songs in it. There is also the ability to move through many narrative modalities. The ancient and medieval aestheticians speak of *rasa* as rising from the artful mingling of varying and contrasting emotions by the artist; in this view, Aristotelian unities are beside the point. But apart from emotional tone, in Indian film, you can change the texture of the storytelling itself, so that you can move from gritty, shaky-camera realism to high-gloss musical lyricism in the space of a single sequence. The form has its own grammar, I think, its own aesthetic values that speak to Indians on a very intimate and deep level. It's been an essential and valuable part of the culture and its encounter with modernity, and you can observe the conversations that the country has had with itself through the development of this cinema.

For me as a writer, this form—in all its variety—has been one incarnation of the aesthetic and literary sensibilities I draw on. The particular kind of novel I want to write—perhaps it's better to call it a story or narrative instead—owes as much to these older traditions as it does to the novel that appears in Europe in the eighteenth century. And these traditions themselves continue to absorb, grow, change; there are some

young directors in India who are making very interesting films that are stretching and reimagining the boundaries.

OM: Your books celebrate Bombay like Dickens celebrated London or Joyce celebrated Dublin. How is your Bombay different from Salman Rushdie's Bombay? How do you manage to understand and represent Bombay so effectively as an expatriate? I don't mean this in a skeptical way, but I'm interested in your views on how the diaspora functions, as opposed to how resident Indians function as writers/artists.

VC: While I'm writing, and especially in the earlier drafts, I try to avoid thinking about larger metaphors and ambitious attempts at representation, especially of something as multitudinous and unknowable as Bombay. I think it would be paralyzing for me to be working at that level of self-consciousness. I try to stay close to the characters, to experience their environment through their minds, in their bodies. So, in *Sacred Games*, when Sartaj sits in a traffic jam on a June afternoon, what does it feel like? What does he smell? How does he imagine the city in that moment? So if I'm doing this with a variety of characters, I eventually get a partial portrait of the city through the crossing of all these strands.

As for trying to understand a city or anything else—it's a process of accumulating information, stories, fragments, sensations, stimuli. You get these little pieces from life, from listening to people, from secondary texts. Your job then is to grow a story out of the chemistry that happens when all these bits mingle, to imagine the lives of your characters and make them come alive on the page. It really doesn't matter where and how you got your data, whether you spent twenty years researching a subject or conjured it up in one afternoon from secondary sources; what matters is whether the reader is drawn into the "continuous dream" of the fiction. And the work of creating that dream can happen only in the imagination of the writer. This sounds like a truism, but it's important to emphasize this in our particularly confessional times. We tend to associate personal experience with authenticity in fiction, which seems to me to be a category error.

## “The First Very Bourgeois Gay Love Story”: An Interview with Robert Leleux and Mike Jones

The *Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy*, Robert Leleux's debut memoir, is a coming-of-age story framed by the loss and return of the father. It is the love story of Robe and Michael, and, perhaps, more than all of that, it is a story of the relationships between a boy and his mother. It is, according to the front jacket flap, a memoir of Robert Leleux's "East Texas boyhood and coming of age under the tutelage of his eccentric, bewigged, flamboyant, and knowing mother" and it is also a "journal away from [that] mother . . . into a romance that surprises no one but himself."

Mike Jones: This memoir begins with an interesting disclaimer, "A Note to the Gentle Reader: Or Always True to You, Darling, In My Fashion . . ." In that note, you write "this is the story of my Texas life. And while (essentially true to my experience, I must warn that it often reads better (as in funnier or happier) than it was lived. This service I've performed not merely for the sake of your sensibilities, but also for my art. After all, how does the old song go? *A hat's not a hat till it's tilted.*" Did you have an ethics when it came to writing this, a code for what you could omit, stretch, or change and what you could not?

Robert Leleux: I have no qualms about the book at all. I come from three groups of people: Gays, Texans, and the Irish. They all love life but love a story more. I feel much more responsibility to my narrative than I do to facts. And I don't feel guilty about that as long as I've made that point clear. Life is so much more complicated than anything that could be crafted on the page. I have, I think old-fashioned ideas about narrative and plot structure, and in order to follow those ideas, I had to clear a path in the

wilderness.

MJ: What are the old fashioned ideas about narrative and plot structure?

RL: Kaufman and Hart's idea about the well-crafted play—A, B, C—a three act structure. I think I had a very honest idea about this covering a specific chapter of my experience. The time from when my father left and I was a very spoiled child to the time that I became an adult and met my father again. That was a very clean plot. I hope that makes sense.

MJ: Is a Beautiful Boy a type? Can you define a Beautiful Boy? Are you the only one?

RL: (Laughing) I'm the only one. That's what I try to tell people. It's a comedy. Cole Porter, Noel Coward, Ronald Furbank, Nancy Metford, Evelyn Waugh. I fit into, if I do say so myself, I think a really effete lineage.

MJ: Do you have a stump speech on gay marriage?

RL: I have no stump speech. I would just say that I'm a natural born tax-paying citizen, and I have the right to access the institutions that my monies support.

MJ: I'm wondering where this book will land. It feels like it's going to be popular. You've got the Mark Doty blurb. It's been excerpted in the *New York Times Magazine*. Is it going end up in the gay and lesbian literature section of the books store? Do you think about that?

RL: I do think about that. A lot of the writers I most love are not the writers my professors loved. Nora Ephron, I think, is a goddess. My commitment was to write about being gay in the same way that Nora

Ephron wrote about being Jewish, in a very bourgeois, normalized way. Not because that's my agenda, but because that's my experience. I think it's also the experience of my generation, of the coming generation. I have had a very straight upper-middle-class bourgeois background. If I didn't happen to be gay, I'd be a very conventional person in many ways. I think that may be the appeal of this book. It's the first very bourgeois gay love story. And I think that contains its own radicalism. I think the most radical things that gay people can do right now are get married, have kids, and join the army.

MJ: The book plays a nice little trick on the reader, I think, in that toward the end the name Mathew Shepard comes out of nowhere. The reader is lulled into this middle-class, seemingly safe, gay life. Then, after you and Michael move to Huntsville, Texas, your family reminds you that living as an openly gay couple in Huntsville may not be all that safe.

RL: Ever since my mother moved to California, she talks about Texas like it's Iran.

MJ: I was trying to read this book as a Houston book. But it feels like an around Houston book. The highways are there, and there's a strip mall—

RL: But that is Houston. To me Neiman Marcus is the heart of Houston, Texas. That's my point of view though. I think it's fascinating that there are so many writers here and so few books about this place. There's a June Arnold book and Larry McMurty's Houston Trilogy.

MJ: I've been trying to figure out what Houston is exactly. And I wanted to use your book to get at that. But it's still elusive.

RL: I think Houston is a middle-class city. And I'm one of the only artists I know that is comfortably middle-class.

MJ: I was going to ask you about class. You went very quickly from a secure upper-middle-class background to a working-class life. If losing and finding your father is the domestic frame of the book, then losing and regaining a certain economic class maybe the economic frame.

RL: It's just that I've always found money much more important than most people. At least the way most people talk about it. Maybe it's because it's always been an issue one way or the other. I think that class determines much more of an American's life than our rhetoric reveals.

MJ: This is the "it's not race. It's class argument."

RL: The issues are so intertwined. Dr. King was assassinated at a strike. You can't talk about one issue without talking the other.

MJ: There's a lot of Jesus in this book.

RL: Yes.

MJ: Explain this particular Jesus, if you don't mind.

RL: I have a religious world view. I was raised in the church. I pick and choose. A lot of the people I went to college with are attracted to Buddhism or Hinduism. I say keep the faith that got you there. If I were from any other place, I would believe something else. Jesus just happens to be the nearest deity.

MJ: It's just that the word *Jesus* appears so often in the book. I found myself asking if this is a religious text? After all, Chapter Ten is titled "Jesus Loves a Vacuum."

RL: That's funny. Jesus is very accessible to me. I think Jesus is a great

character. I love Jesus. He's the first feminist, the first activist.

MJ: When you are not writing nonfiction, what are you writing?

RL: I'm a failed poet.

MJ: Everybody's a failed poet.

RL: But I know a lot of successful poets, and that reinforces my own failure. I suppose that's what I loved to do more than anything. Marie Howe was a mentor of mine. I was writing all of this drivel—this rubbishy poetry—she said to me, "Robert you are such a great charmer. Why don't you write the way you talk?" And that had never occurred to me before. So that's what I did. I wrote *Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy*.

MJ: How long did it take you?

RL: Two years.

MJ: You sold it before you finished it?

RL: I did. I sold the first seventy-five pages, which was wonderful. I'm not sure I ever could have done it otherwise. I am a person who has to have a deadline.

MJ: This book is filled with people telling you that you're going to be a writer. And—this is why most people in MFA or PhD creative writing programs will hate you—the book does not contain any of your own self-doubt about that fact. I found that glorious. There is a single-mindedness, a total lack of concern about your future success, in this book. That's true? Everybody around you told you that you would be a writer in New York,

and now you're a writer in New York?

RL: I had this fantasy of being a writer in New York. But I don't think I had any idea of what that entailed. But I do think it is due to my mother's single-mindedness. I feel that my mother and Michael have created this future that I just walked into, that almost has nothing to do with me. My mother was hell-bent this would be my life.

MJ: Do you have a miniature craft talk that you give people?

RL: No. I know that I bore very easily. Mark Doty has that great line, "No such thing, says the Queen, as too many sequins." And in order to keep myself interested I was really committed to putting one thing on every page that I loved.

MJ: How much time did it take you to write the *New York Times Magazine* piece, the very condensed version of the book?

RL: That was very hard. That's the part I enjoy, when you already have something and you're editing it, that's wonderful. There's that Oscar Wilde saying, "Brevity is the soul of wit." It was a matter of just taking away and taking away. I worked on that for six weeks.

MJ: Is that you on the cover of the book?

RL: That's me and my mother. Michael designed that.

MJ: Again, why creative writing students will hate you: not only do you get to publish a book, not only does it get excerpted in the the *New York Times Magazine*, but the person you are involved with brings all of the other skills you need for a first book. He designed the website and the book jacket. It's

the perfect storm.

RL: It's true. Michael did that. The publisher wasn't going to use it. They just put it on the advance copies to humor us. And then *Barnes and Noble* and *Borders*, who apparently make this decision, who have this veto power over covers, loved Michael's cover, and St. Martins ended up using it.

MJ: How long have you and Michael been married?

RL: Eleven years.

MJ: Autobiographical narratives are frightening when they work. They trick the reader into believing that they know the author. While reading your book, I was trying to locate where I was culturally and emotionally in 1998, a heavy year for you. I found myself comparing my life to yours. The readers think they know you; they don't know you, but they think they know you.

RL: That is so funny you say that, total strangers will come up to me and say *I love your grandmother!* There is a second-and-a-half delay—they love the character of my grandmother. On other hand, I've heard this workshop admonishment before: "That is not my father, it's the speaker's father." I think that's dangerous double-talk. I have no qualms about people seeing my characters as my parents.

MJ: In the one crying scene, the scene on the phone when you talk to your father near the conclusion of the book, the reader is suddenly reminded that there haven't been any tears up to that point in a book that covers some pretty difficult territory. It's a wonderful move.

RL: I was sobbing as I wrote it. I thought it'll be total garbage, and I'll

throw it all away. But then I went back to it and said, hey, this isn't too bad.

MJ: What makes this book a Texas book other than it being set in Texas?

RL: There is something fundamentally Texan about my sensibility. If I were in Paris, what I wrote about would be Texan. There is a violent humor in the book that is uniquely East Texas.

MJ: You defend Texas often?

RL: I have been defending Texas my whole life. Think of all the wonderful people from Texas: Bill Moyers, Molly Ivins, Barbara Jordan. I spend a great deal of my day in New York fending off obnoxious, impertinent comments about my home state.

MJ: Has there been any backlash from the people you wrote about?

RL: Not yet. Check back next month. I expect some to come in the future. My father has been so generous. My mother is a star in search of a stage. It is thrilling to me to provide that for her. She is coming with me on my tour. She spent the whole last month at the seamstress getting ready.

## The Charm of the Highway Strip

*On the Road: The Original Scroll*, Jack Kerouac, ed. Howard Cunnell,  
New York: Viking, 408 pp., \$25.95

*Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (They're Not What You Think)*, John Leland, New York: Viking, 205 pp., \$23.95

Everything Jack Kerouac wrote for about a decade was a draft of *On the Road*—including *On the Road*. The novel that was published in 1957, ten years after Kerouac made the first of the five cross-country road trips it recounts, was allegedly produced in 1951 in a mythical three-week Benzedrine-fueled round-the-clock writing session, when Jack sat down at a table in his new wife Joan Haverty's Chelsea loft and hammered out an unpunctuated single-paragraph 120-foot long novel-scroll on a roll of Western Union typing paper. Then, as the story goes, he bundled it in his arms and, still high on speed and caffeine and nicotine, carried it to Harcourt Brace, the publishers of his first and up-to-then only novel, *The Town and the City*, and unfurled it at the feet of his editor Robert Giroux, announcing that it had been dictated to him by the Holy Ghost and that he wouldn't change a word.

Well, the story's mostly false, and that novel doesn't really exist. For one thing, he punctuated plenty. And it wasn't a single roll of Western Union typing paper, it was eight sheets of architectural tracing paper that Jack found in the corner of Joan's place, and which he cut to size and taped together. The paper had belonged to Joan's dead ex-boyfriend Bill Cannastra, from whom she inherited the loft after Bill climbed halfway out the window of a moving subway car and got beheaded. You see why Jack didn't need to invent things. He went around marrying dead guys' girls and getting high with William Burroughs and letting Allen Ginsberg blow

him once in a while in 1948 with Bess Truman still sleeping in the White House. And then he wrote about it. He liked drugs and drama, and he liked to type, and by the time he was done typing what he was maybe calling *The Beat Generation* or maybe *Gone on the Road* or maybe *Flower That Blows in the Night*, Joan was through with him, and she arranged to be found in their marriage bed with a waiter.

Jack split to his buddy Lucien Carr's place, where Ginsberg was also living, and that's where he finished the book, and where the last few feet of the original scroll were eaten by Carr's dog Potchky. He had to retype the ending from memory. These facts are all contested. To one degree or another. Well, the details of Kerouac's epic typing spurt have changed with each re-telling, including Jack's. And the manuscript he wrote is long gone. Sure, the thing itself is still in the world, bought in 2002 for a little more than two million dollars by the man who owns the Indianapolis Colts, and it is currently traveling the U.S. in a road trip that started in 2004 and has already made stops in San Francisco, Denver, and New York. I went to see Jack's scroll last month at the New York Public Library. Sixty feet of it were laid out under Plexiglas in a long display case that had been aligned with a giant overhanging photograph of a stretch of two-lane blacktop. If you stood in the right place, you could see the reflection of the yellow highway strip falling down the length of yellow scroll, and there it was: Novel as narrative thread keeping the traffic in line.

Jack began defacing and erasing that manuscript—editing and emending, dropping and adding, second-thinking—almost as soon as the last foot of it rolled out of the typewriter, even before the dog got to it and Robert Giroux told Jack that no one at Harcourt Brace would be able to read a giant roll of papyrus. The scroll on display in the D. Samuel and Jeane H. Gottesman Exhibition Hall of the Main Branch of the New York Public Library was scored with pencil markings, presumably Jack's; words were scrawled between the lines, paragraphs were blocked off for deletion, famous passages were cut, later to be restored by—whom? Kerouac? Or

Malcolm Cowley, his editor at Viking Press, who published the book six years after Jack hit the carriage return one last time in the spring of 1951?

In any case, the scroll was published last fall for the first time, and its name, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, raises the question of what anybody means by "original." *The Original Scroll* reproduces Jack's 1951 text without any of his later editing marks, though it includes some typos, if not his x-ing out of various lines and the many spots throughout the manuscript where Jack apparently thought twice, back-spaced, typed over his copy, and then moved on. His scroll is pock-marked with these type-overs, but *The Original Scroll* presents a clean copy. I guess it would be awkward or ugly or even irrelevant to reprint the thickly cancelled lines, but one of the pleasures of seeing Jack's scroll is thinking about how much trouble he had with the left-hand margin. Clearly, the typing paper slid on its roller, floating slowly and evenly to the right on a declining slant. Jack let it slide until he couldn't stand it anymore, and then stopped to re-align the page. His scroll doesn't have neatly indented flush-left paragraphs; it has weird angled blocks marked by a left-hand margin that sneaks further and further off and then corrects itself, over and over. It's not just a text; it is a design scheme on architect's paper.

*On the Road: The Original Scroll* does not reproduce that periodically slanting left-hand margin. It is *On the Road* unplugged, but not all the way. There is, for instance, a critical apparatus; unlike Jack's scroll, it comes with four introductory essays, a dedication to the memories of Neal Cassady and Allen Ginsberg, and a quote from Walt Whitman. However, its editor, Howard Cunnell, has allowed a typo to stand in the opening sentence "I first met met Neal not long after my father died . . ." That's how both Jack's scroll and *The Original Scroll* begin. The sentence uses Neal's real name and meets him twice, and it ends with a dead dad and an ellipsis. In the version of *On the Road* that everyone knows, the one Malcolm Cowley published, the sentence goes like this: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up." The story of how Neal turned into Dean, and how a missing dad

became a former wife, not to mention how a typo got cleaned up and how an ellipsis mark borrowed from Celine became a blunt, decisive full-stop, is the story of how Jack's scroll of April 1951 was already—by the time he showed it to the first editor who refused to publish it—not the thing he typed in three weeks on stolen paper in a dead guy's loft.

Hardly anyone but Allen Ginsberg read that scroll. Certainly not Robert Giroux. And Jack stopped showing it around after Giroux suggested that it would have to be more portable. Insulted, Jack never re-submitted the manuscript to Harcourt Brace, but he did start re-typing it. By the time Ginsberg pitched the book to Cowley in 1953, Jack had long since transferred the text of the scroll onto 8½ x 11-inch sheets of typing paper, making changes as he went. Nonetheless, he still couldn't get it published. He waited five years before Cowley came through with an offer, and during that time, he kept messing with it. There were two more complete manuscript versions before its publication in 1957. There was a whole new book, *Visions of Cody*, which Jack insisted was the "real" *On the Road*, and which wasn't published in full until he died. *Visions of Cody* is the angry draft you write after your editor takes you to dinner and asks you, in the most discouraging possible tone, "What is this book about?" You go home and say, "All right, I'll start from scratch, but this time I'm not holding back on the gay sex, and I'm going to get high with my reform school pals and tape-record all our conversations and then transcribe them word for word."

Moreover, Kerouac had been taking notes for his road novel since 1947, and actively drafting it since 1949, when *The Town and the City* was published. For a while, he was writing something called *Ray Smith*, about "two guys hitchhiking to California in search of something they don't really find." Then there was *The Hip Generation*, focusing on a character named Red Moultrie and his half-brother Vern and their Denver clan of misfit men from the Old West. Even *The Town and the City* feels like a dry-run for *On the Road*. It starts as an evocation of Kerouac's childhood in a French Canadian neighborhood in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1920s

and '30s, but then the war comes, and one of the characters moves to New York and meets Allen Ginsberg, and the rest is just kicks. Ginsberg is called "Leon Levinsky," and that's also his name in the first few pages of the scroll of *On the Road*, until Jack gives up the pretense and says, "I mean of course Allen Ginsberg." By the time Kerouac finished drafting and re-drafting *On the Road*—after Ginsberg, and Cowley, and Cowley's assistant Keith Jennison, and Jack's agent, and the copy editor at Viking Press, and a team of nervous lawyers and libel experts all had a go at the book—Ginsberg was fictional, again. He was Carlo Marx and Neal was Dean Moriarty, and Jack was Salvatore Paradise, not a Quebecois Canadian whose first language was French, but an Italian American who spoke bop.

If *On the Road* seems instantaneous, it was also highly pre-meditated, and later wildly mediated. For years before he sat down to write the scroll, Jack had been rehearsing chunks of the book out loud for friends. It wasn't a novel, it was just what he did at parties. He got drunk and said, "Lemme tell you about the greatest ride I ever got on the back of a flat-bed truck driven by a couple of corn-fed farmers from Minnesota." Or, "Have you heard about how me and Neal and Luanne undressed in the front seat of Neal's Hudson and she smeared us all with cold cream?" Jack had been dining out on those stories for a while, tweaking them, refining them. It was just an accident of technology and temperament that, when he sat down to record his act, he used a typewriter instead of a tape deck or film camera. The scroll version of *On the Road* is a dramatic monologue addressed, perhaps, to Joan Haverty, the wife whom, paradoxically, Kerouac was about to lose partly because all he ever did was take speed and write dramatic monologues.

Anyway, that's what John Leland suggests in *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (They're Not What You Think)*. I should admit that Leland was once my boss at *Details* magazine, and it's possible he fired me. Unlike Kerouac, I don't remember everything. Leland is an astute critic and reporter for the *New York Times* and a chronicler of the American

avant-garde. His last book was *Hip: The History*, and it begins its story on a 17<sup>th</sup> century slave plantation and ends in hyper-trendy Williamsburg, Brooklyn. *Why Kerouac Matters* was published last fall by Viking Press to coincide with the release both of *On the Road: The Original Scroll* and a pristine hardcover 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reprinting of the 1957 *On the Road*—a marketing package. I bought them all. Leland is one of the few male writers who has ever seemed interested in the women in Kerouac's life, and he posits an interesting theory about how *On the Road* came by its tone of intimacy, immediacy, and urgency: It started as a letter Jack was writing to his wife, Joan, his *second* wife, the one he had just married and was just about to flee.

Leland quotes Joan Haverty's memoir, *Nobody's Wife*, which Haverty wrote intermittently for about a decade until her death in 1990, and which Joan's and Jack's novelist daughter Jan Kerouac published in 1995, about a year before *her* death. According to Haverty, she turned to Jack one day not long after they married, and said, "What did you and Neal really do?" And then Jack sat down at his typewriter and started writing. Don't we all have that day, when we take stock of our significant ex-es for the edification, or safety, of our current love? That's what Jack did. For three weeks. The scroll isn't a novel, or even a memoir, it's a letter to Joan—a kind of proto-blog that treats everyone who reads it like members of the gang under discussion. Neal doesn't have a last name, not right away. You're supposed to know it. We don't see his face or hear much about his history. There's nothing like those passages in Henry James where the young girl shows up on an English lawn and before she is even served her tea we get a ten-page flashback to her childhood in Albany. With Jack, it's just, "Let me tell you about the dude."

The scroll starts with Neal, and it ends with Joan. That seems to be Jack's point. "Honey, I loved him once, but then you came along." In the chunk of text that Potchky ate, at the very end of the scroll and the close of the nonstop narrative, Jack reaches Joan: "One night I was standing in

a dark street in Manhattan and called up to the window of a loft where I thought my friends were having a party. But a pretty girl stuck her head out of the window." Which is how Joan's ex-boyfriend Bill lost his head, literally, sticking it out the window. Was that on Jack's mind? Is there a more un-self-reflective major post-war American novelist than Jack Kerouac? "She stuck her head out the window and said, 'Yes? Who is it?' 'Jack Kerouac,' I said, and heard my name resound in the sad and empty street.' 'Come on up,' she called, 'I'm making hot chocolate.'" Jack could never resist a sugar high—all that apple pie in *On the Road*—and he went up, and "that night I asked her to marry me and she accepted and agreed. Five days later we were married." That's not how it happens in the 1957 *On the Road*—instead of getting married, "we agreed to love each other madly." In real life, he and Joan were married in less than two weeks and stayed that way for about nine months. And one night along the way, it occurred to Joan that she hadn't really *met* her husband, and she started asking questions. "Honey, what's up with your love for that hustler-bigamist-car thief-sex addict you talk so much about?"

"I first met Neal," Jack starts, and 120 feet later he ends, "There she was, the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long." *For and for?* I guess that's poetic. It didn't work for Joan, though. She never thought much of his writing. And while he was busy taking dictation from the Holy Spirit, she went off to her restaurant job and came home with one of the waiters.

I don't know why anyone likes *On the Road*. It's got no plot, just a series of events. There is no real characterization. For all its talk of landscape, it hardly shows how Iowa is different from Texas. What if Jack had gone to an MFA program? Imagine him sitting in a classroom at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1951, chain smoking and wearing a fabulous shirt and trying hard to look like he doesn't care as his classmates rip into another draft of his book. "I don't see the story arc," somebody says. Another guy is gentler: "Have you asked yourself, 'What do my characters

want?" "Drugs!" someone says, and they all laugh and now the gloves are off. "What have you got against women?" "I don't believe you've ever really been to Mexico." "You keep telling me how 'gone' everything is, but you don't show it How is Denver 'gone?'" "Or Pennsylvania?" "Or Charlie Parker?" Then the teacher breaks in. He's a married guy who's secretly gay, and Jack has been flirting with him all semester, showing up in his office crushed and handsome and clutching a tattered copy of *You Can't Go Home Again*. "He knows five adjectives," the teacher says, fixing Jack with a meaningful look and counting on his fingers, "*great* and *wild* and *vast* and *empty* and *sad*."

In my fantasy, Jack's teacher is a stand-in for Paul Goodman, a member of the group of New York Jewish liberal intellectuals, a generation older than the beats, who cast a cold eye on Kerouac and his pals. Reviewing *On the Road* in 1958, Goodman says, "For even when you ask yourself what *is* expressed by this prose, by this buoyant writing about racing-across-the-continent, you find that it is the woeful emptiness of running away from even loneliness and vague discontent. The words 'exciting,' 'crazy,' 'the greatest,' do not refer to any object or feeling, but are a means by which the members of the 'beat generation' convince one another that they have been there at all 'I dig it' doesn't mean 'I understand it,' but, 'I perceive that something exists out there.'"

Goodman is right, of course. The hypothetical workshop students are probably right. *On the Road* does everything wrong. Even after ten years of revision. Self-indulgent, repetitive, declamatory, it's all sensibility: What it has to offer is the drama of a voice emerging. It's all voice! Is it written as a letter, is it a story you tell at a party, is it a way of explaining to your wife why you will always love your buddies more than her? Is it just your stoned attempt to get down on paper everything that happened, in your own distinctive style, before your id intervenes and you find yourself writing a passing imitation of Thomas Wolfe? I would never recommend *On the Road* to writing students, not if they were already immersed in *The Big Book*

*of Flannery O'Connor's Exquisite Craft.*

And yet:

The damned thing works.

It has charisma, that's all, like Julia Roberts, and you sit there feeling seduced by it and wishing it were better, all the while knowing that perfection would wreck it.

## Four-Color Invasion: How Comic Books Crashed the Canon

The first literary comic-book boom came in the late eighties. In 1986, *Watchmen* was published, which made Alan Moore an industry superstar. It remains the only comic to win a Hugo Award and the only comic on *Time Magazine's* 2005 list of "the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present." The next year, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* burst onto the scene. Five years later, in 1992, *Maus* became the first graphic narrative to win a Pulitzer Prize; the committee had to create a special award for Spiegelman, because none of the existing categories covered narrative comics. And in 1993, Scott McCloud's seminal book *Understanding Comics* introduced a new lexicon for a new field: comics theory.

Suddenly, comics weren't just funny pages and kids' fare. They were literature. The difference, it seemed, was in the packaging: trade paperback collections appealed to a larger market, drawing readers loath to set foot in a comics shop but happy to buy bound comics in bookstores. D.C. adopted trade paperbacks for their new "mature" Vertigo line, and series like *Sandman* saw unprecedented critical and commercial success.

But in the late nineties, the market collapsed. Publishers had figured out that book-format comics equaled financial success, and they were rushing to put out often poorly produced collections of anything and everything. Dozens of small publishing houses that had sprung up during that early boom were driven out of business. Even larger publishers found themselves in dire financial straits.

And then, everything changed.

In the last few years, comics have burst back into the spotlight. The prevalence of manga has paved the way for a new explosion of book and digest-format American comics. Graphic narratives are pushing their way

into college classrooms and periodicals like *Publishers' Weekly*. Independent and nonfiction comics, once strictly underground fare, are blazing onto bestseller lists, and superhero titles, the most maligned and stereotyped corner of comics fare, have attracted a rush of high-profile prose writers eager to dip their toes in the gutters. Publishers like Houghton-Mifflin and Random House are fighting over the next comic-book bestsellers.

2006 was a flagship year for comics. Whether or not, as *ICv2* wrote, it “may be marked as the year graphic novels came of age,” it saw the publication of an avalanche of cross-over sensations that cemented comics’ place in the literary market and, it seems likely, the literary canon.

That same shift has likewise catapulted comics’ creators into a new level of visibility and prestige. Although comic book creation remains a brutally difficult field for newcomers (and often even seasoned artists) to break into, increased coverage of comics in non-niche and literary media means a wider market.

So, why now? Time is no doubt a factor. Comics’ journey to social legitimacy has certainly been a cumulative process, and it’s possible that in 2006, the reviewers, journalists, and publishers who were willing to look at comics as literature finally reached critical mass. However, 2006 (and 2007) saw the publication of a remarkable number of marvelous comics—books that might well have caught critics’ attention even had they appeared a decade earlier. And of those books, a remarkable number came from previously unknown or low-profile creators, particularly outside of the comics community.

Alison Bechdel. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin. 2006. Hardcover, 240 pp. \$19.95.

In December 2006, *Time* magazine made a remarkable announcement: its choice for the coveted position of “#1 Best Book of the Year” was a comic. Remarkable, certainly, but not surprising: Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir,

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* had already swept “Best” lists in *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *People*, *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and a slew of others.

It was a breakthrough sensation from far left field: its creator, Alison Bechdel, had achieved a degree of counterculture celebrity for her award-winning comic strip *Dykes To Watch Out For* but remained virtually unknown in the mainstream comics and literary markets. *Fun Home* made her a household name.

*Fun Home*'s subject matter likewise makes for a peculiar juxtaposition with both its prominence and its format. Already banned from several school libraries, the book contains frank and graphic—both visual and textual—portrayals of sex (both straight and gay) and suicide, as well as frontal male nudity. It speaks to the quality of Bechdel's storytelling that *Fun Home* has nonetheless gone on to be a bestseller.

Reviewing *Fun Home* is a delicious challenge, because the words to sum it up simply aren't part of the critical vocabulary. On the surface, it's the story of Bechdel's complex and often painful relationship with her father as she struggles to come to terms with his death. Beneath, it is exquisitely intricate, a watchmaker's nightmare (or wet dream) of near-infinite interconnected and interdependent parts, all working in precise concert. To compartmentalize means to silence its ticking—the removal of a single part fatally diminishes the whole.

And *Fun Home*'s complexity is one of its greatest strengths. Bechdel has crafted her story with incredible patience and precision, and the result is a profoundly powerful memoir exploring the plasticity of identity and perception. She uses the medium to its fullest potential, juxtaposing faintly discordant and conflicting images, dialogue, and narration to emphasize the unreliability of both the characters on the page and herself as a necessarily subjective narrator. If there is such a thing as the ideal comic, it may be *Fun Home*—a story so thoroughly integrated with its medium that it literally could not exist in any other form.

So, what's next? Bechdel continues to publish bi-weekly *Dykes to Watch Out For* strips, and she's working on a second memoir that picks up where *Fun Home* leaves off. If it's a tenth as well-wrought as its predecessor, readers have something truly sensational in store.

Gene Luen Yang (colored by Lark Pien). *American Born Chinese*. First Second. 2006. Hardcover, 240 pp. \$19.95.

For years, comics have fought to shake their reputation as kid stuff—a struggle they may want to reconsider in light of Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*. Skillfully braiding three subtly connected stories, Yang crafts a compelling tale of alienation and identity. Jin Wang, who only wants to fit in with his all-American classmates; popular jock Danny; Danny's cousin Chin-kee, the embodiment of every cruel Chinese stereotype; and the legendary Monkey King twine together in a beautiful and lyrical coming-of-age narrative about embracing one's true nature. Yang's bold linework and fantastic story are beautifully complemented by colorist Lark Pien's vibrant palate, which won Pien a richly deserved Eisner Award (the comics industry's highest honor).

There's no question that *American Born Chinese* is something special. Critics agree: in 2006, it was the first comic to become a National Book Award finalist. The next year, it became the first graphic novel to win the American Library Association's Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, and it's appeared on nearly as many "Best" lists as *Fun Home*.

It's worth noting another of *American Born Chinese's* strengths: its design. Comics are a visual medium, and so I'm inclined to give the issue of book design and overall presentation more weight when looking at comics than other media. *American Born Chinese* is a perfect example of design done right: jacket designer Danica Novgorodoff makes beautiful use of Pien's rich palate (as does whoever is responsible for interior design),

creating a cover that not only reflects the contents but contributes to making *American Born Chinese's* presentation as harmonious and compelling as its contents.

Jim Ottaviani (writer) and Dylan Meconis (artist) *Wire Mothers: Harry Harlow and the Science of Love*. G-T Labs. 2007. 88 pp. \$12.95

Although science has long had a prominent place in comic books, the leap to comics *about* science might not be so intuitive for most creators. Not so for Jim Ottaviani, writer of *Wire Mothers: Harry Harlow and the Science of Love*, who founded G-T Labs to publish comic books starring some of history's greatest scientists. To Ottaviani, the connection between the lab and the drawing table makes perfect sense: "I see the marriage [of science and comics] as intuitively obvious—even though it took me a while to arrive at it. You can see why by cracking open any scientific journal: they're full of pictures. And even when they're not, they're full of analogues to picture: charts, graphs, etc. Visual elements are not only common, but expected. Integrating them more fully, via comics, is the logical next step."

If *Wire Mothers* is any indication, Ottaviani is on to something big. The book's subject is psychologist Harry Harlow, whose controversial research on rhesus monkeys proved to the psychological community that love was both learned and necessary to healthy physical and social development. Framed by the story of a substitute janitor encountering Harlow on the eve of the doctor's television debut, *Wire Mothers* is an informative and humanizing window into Harlow's oft-condemned life and work. Says Ottaviani, "My goal was to render Harlow, someone who is often vilified for doing these awful experiments (and they were awful, no question!) as human. In doing so, I also wanted to show that in the context he was working in, these experiments needed doing. Proving that love is real, it's learned, and it matters was critical at the time. I'd rather that nobody had to do that, and I don't think we ever have to do it again, but

exposing the limits of psychological theorizing like he did was crucial.”

That goal is realized with help from artist Dylan Meconis, whose lush inks render a Harlow realistic enough to be believable and cartoonish enough to charm. It’s not hard to guess why Ottaviani recruited her to help humanize Harlow: Meconis mixes a good deal of technical skill with a knack for rendering appealing, expressive characters without sacrificing detail or storytelling. *Wire Mothers* is Meconis’s first book as a solo artist, although she has contributed to the award-winning *Flight* anthologies and is the creator of the darkly humorous webcomics *Bite Me* and *Family Man*, and with luck, this will be the first of many.

As for Ottaviani, he’s staying busy. He’s continuing the series examining “the science of the unscientific” that began with *Wire Mothers* and its companion book, *Levitation: Physics and Psychology in the Service of Deception*, and juggling three more projects that bridge the narrowing gap between the lab and the drawing board: a biography of maverick physicist Richard Feynman; a young adult book about Dian Fossey, Birute Galdikas, and Jane Goodall; and a story about the space race.

David Axe (writer) and Stephen Olexa (artist). *War-Fix*. NBM. 2007. 96 pp. \$15.95

*War Fix* is a frustrating read, because it’s precisely good enough to leave the impression that it *could* be even better. The story chronicles writer and journalist David Axe’s 2003 trip to Iraq. Nominally in the country to cover the elections for a Washington, D.C. newspaper, Axe has spent much of his life hungry for the equal-parts visceral and romantic experience of a war reporter; in Iraq, he finds himself simultaneously repelled and vitalized by the stark reality of life in a war zone.

Although Axe has written for a wide range of media, *War Fix* is his first full-length comics project. When I asked him why he’d chosen this form to tell his story, Axe explained, “I’ve done lots and lots of journalism

about Iraq, but for the personal experience—with its emotions, its dreams and nightmares and its narrow perspective—a comic book was perfect. Working in Iraq is a nightmare. And nightmares, for me, are visual experiences. So I needed a visual medium and one that I could inject with a certain amount of horror.”

And yet, when I read *War Fix*, I find myself wishing that Axe had done more to take advantage of his chosen medium. While Stephen Olexa’s art lends Axe’s story the sense of visual urgency he references above, there’s a narrative disconnect between the text and art that I can’t help but feel could have been prevented by a more experienced writer or more involved editor. Axe’s writing is strong, but its tone seems better suited to *This American Life*—or the one-to-three-panel strips that make up the bulk of Axe’s comics experience—than to a full-length graphic novel. The text isn’t helped by the fact that many of the captions are lettered in a stylized cursive font so difficult to read that it actually affects the flow of the narrative. Again, this is a problem that could—and should—have been prevented by a more involved editor.

That poor font choice along with other design flaws, including misspellings on the back cover copy, leave me wondering how many of *War-Fix*’s problems come not from Axe and Olexa, but from publisher NBM. The publisher invites critical gaze by deliberately making itself as prominent a player in *War-Fix* as possible, from the prominent NBM Comics Lit logo that dwarfs the creators’ names on the front cover, to the backlist advertisement that dominates the indicia page, to the self-congratulatory back-cover blurb. If NBM indeed publishes “the most intelligent comics the world has to offer,” they would do well to pay more attention to both contents and packaging.

I truly want to like *War Fix*. It’s obviously a really sincere effort, and David Axe shows a good deal of potential as a comics storyteller. But as both a reader and an editor, I’m not satisfied: I want *more* from Axe, from Olexa, and from NBM. Fortunately, I’ll have the chance to get it: *War-Fix*

is the first of a trilogy, and the second installment, *Love & Terror*, is coming out in Spring 2008. I'm looking forward to see how Axe develops as a comic-book writer. Despite its flaws, *War-Fix* contains the seeds of a strong story, one that I suspect will be well worth watching as it unfolds.

## The Art of the Second Book

Tracy K. Smith, *Duende*. Graywolf Press, 2007. Paperback, 87 pp, \$14.00.

For even the most promising poet, one who carries the early marks of recognition—a Stegner Fellowship, followed the Rona Jaffe Writers' Award, a Whiting Award, and the James Laughlin Prize from the Academy of American Poets—the first to second collection transition may prove futile: under pressure to re-charge and re-invent, how best to make new one's compulsive rhythms and subjects?

Enter Tracy K. Smith, whose work I first encountered via her three-section "Duende," published in *Gulf Coast's* 2004 Summer/Fall Issue. The poem's opening assertion that the earth and its inhabitants "live wanting, // Each with a small reservoir / of furious music heavy in the throat" later "drag[ged]" and "coax[ed]" "into being" struck me with its quick turns and juxtapositions. A compressed demonstration of Federico Garcia Lorca's psychological characterization of the artist—in just three and a half lines Smith animates *duende*; according to the poem, we each carry with us a "small reservoir" of that dangerous inner energy that, according to Lorca, presses the maker forward. For Smith, however, the well both runs and is run dry by desire.

While the efficiency in the above excerpt is impressive, consider the extent to which Smith transcends surface meaning, widening and then deepening *duende* as a conceptual frame: by the poem's final turn, that "small reservoir" includes chords of longing and loss housed within the everyman, "the ramshackle family, the *tios*," "the women / with sober faces and flowers / in their hair, the ones who dance," among others. But "not *just* them" [emphasis mine]. Such dark sounds also form a deep lump stalled in the most intimate of places: the lover's throat. Past grief, this voice presses itself to utter:

Always a question  
Bigger than itself –

*They say you're leaving Monday  
Why can't you leave on Tuesday?*

The haunting and haunted urgency of Smith's "Duende" rushed me toward her first book, *The Body's Question*. What I found upon reading was that (much like narrative development of the aforementioned series) the poet had already pushed past the confines of her early making.

*The Body's Question* is a fine debut; *Duende* is a real accomplishment. Granted, the second book continues the conversation initiated by its predecessor: what carries over is the sense of worldliness, of people passing through varied geographical and emotional states. In this sense, *Question's* "Brief Touristic Account"—its international flight of language and imagination—is extended. What the successor offers, however, is point of entry to the interior: whereas *The Body's Question* often rests at the margins, *Duende* confronts the personal; while the early work *attempts* the present tense, *Duende's* public and private poems brim with immediacy and urgency.

*Duende's* first task is the making and unmaking of "History," a series that studies the genesis of the often-conflated political and poetic. "This is a poem about the itch / That stirs a nation at night," declares Smith, "This is a poem about all we'll do / Not to scratch." But scratch she does—and scrape and claw at the "civilized" world and its old myths, tearing through various temporal and social spaces until finally reaching "Epilogue: The Seventh Day." Here, Smith breaks with religious tradition. It is on the day reserved for rest that the real work starts: the artist picks up his instrument; a "painter enters a studio: // to spill."

Smith's real work begins with "Letter to a Photojournalist Going-In," the doorway through which readers must pass in order to gain entry to

the book's rich middle section. What follows this deft poem (which at one point characterizes the journalist's camera and, by extension, his heart as "just a hollow box, mechanized to obey") is *Duende's* lyric meditation on the transformative effects of crisis. In this sense, the section's first-person speaker, just emerging from the fringes of a collapsed marriage, has much in common with the personas found elsewhere in the collection. Like the kidnapped girl in "The Searchers," Ho-Chunk Indian John Dall (lost and later recovered by his tribe) in "Theft,"—even the grief-stricken Andalusian Dog that pants and howls "At nothing in particular"—the speaker enters darkness, and then crosses over. It is the after-effects of such passage that give the poems their pathos. "Marriage is a rare game," observes Smith, "Its only verbs: *am / And are. I aged*" ("El Mar"). And then, later: "The crossing was too narrow. / By the time we watered the cattle / Most of them were half dead" ("Western Fragment").

Sonic intensity amplifies tenfold in the book's middle section. Curiously, when Smith charts domestic dramas, the syntax becomes increasingly varied. What's more, internal rhyme increases, as do trochees. In such moments, Smith's lines truly sing:

Climbing the walls while the hours fall.  
Straining against the noise of traffic, music,  
  
Anything alive, to catch your key in the door.  
  
("I Don't Miss It")

Winter is a boa constrictor  
Contemplating a goat. Nothing moves  
  
("Diego,")

Ice cakes the ground. We break  
Into something with every careful step[...]

[ . . . ]Someone writes to say I bear down upon him  
Like a wet coat. Just these lines.

(“Now That the Weather Has Turned”)

If Smith falls short, it's by privileging idea over feeling. When intellect becomes the primary poetic muscle, the gesture often falls flat (“Something reacts faster / than language in the mind,” “The Opposite of War”) or the concept itself seems obvious (“Hunt: a dance against hunger,” “Flores Woman”). Because Smith's inclination is toward understatement, her subtle rhythms strike hardest when simple diction introduces a difficult fact: “This is not myth” declares a Ugandan girl raped and left for dead, “My body did not sing. It stank” (“Into the Moonless Night”).

Reflects Smith in *The Body's Question*: “Lying beside you was like / dangling a leg // over a drifting boat” (“Brief Touristic Account”). Such lines might be used to characterize the poet's journey between collections: having tested the currents in her first book, *Duende* now finds Smith in a state of total immersion. By pairing disparate forms (compressed lyrics, sprawling political meditations, braided narratives, persona poems, a play in verse) with more personal material, Smith charts new territory. Fortunately for her readers, *Duende's* waters run deeper, more dangerous and cold.

—Shara Lessley

Matthew Cooperman, *DaZE*, Salt Publishing, 2006. Paper, 108 pp. \$15.95.

“So many / songs called human” writes Matthew Cooperman in his poem “Chorality,” and the quiet astonishment at this claim is but one premise of his second book, *DaZE*. But this ‘chorality’ is decidedly cacophonous, and

utterance is often a byproduct of the individual being inundated by varied cultural discourse. There's negative capability here, to be sure, and, if "the book [we] are reading is a building with eyes," then these seemingly innumerable eyes are each fixed on different channels and headlines, as in the prose poem sequence "Day's News":

It's a rational mysticism worrying about death.  
Blackbody speaks in Keanu Reeves beakers, turning  
them into long lasting batteries. We're in something  
called The Conundrum. [ . . . ] Pull back the curtains,  
society gains a fresh culture. 'And they grew an ear on a  
mouse's back . . ."

Cooperman's tact, then, is to employ a desensitized cultural ekphrasis, one that answers not only to art but science and society as well. His fodder is as eclectic as NPR interviews, failed Mattel doll marketing schemes, Jorge Luis Borges, artist Bill Viola's videos, *The Kinsey Report*, and Nietzsche, and the handholds of these poems include remnants of Duran Duran, Leno, Kashmir, Target, and, yes, even bling. Yet, perhaps remarkably, irony and sarcasm are delightfully subdued. And temporality, with few exceptions, is all but removed. The resulting book is more fugue-like, and that fugue is nothing short of consciousness itself.

As such, one of the strongest sections of the book, the revisionist sequence "Channel Town," can easily be viewed as an example of cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model of Consciousness. The first section of the poem is of a straightforward narrative structure: "It was June and she knew it in December, the varnish smell off the water from the men in boats, Gene, maybe, she could remember him, and the little flags flapping . . ." But by the second section the narrative is radically re-envisioned: "It was June and she knew it from the racetrack. Esther could feel her heart murmur . . ." And in the third section: "In the murmur of June Esther and Gene / announced they would disappear." Cooperman

recapitulates themes and images such that one feels a layering of separation from the initial narrative; the narrative feels reverse-engineered. Each subsequent narrative may be equally accurate, but the narrative nonetheless gradually disintegrates. Indeed, a fourth section employs visible elisions, as if memory's reach exceeds its grasp. Gone is the poetics of compression; enter a poetics of accrual. But the effect goes beyond a Kerouac-esque stream of consciousness. Cooperman produces a mind constantly remembering itself, and the memory is distinctly fresh each time.

At times the speakers of *DaZE* seem punch-drunk, delirious at the onslaught of cultural media. In "Conscious" even syntax breaks down as meaning appears more constellated than linear:

I tried to give it away but the mode burst

the post horn sings in the watermark:

I'm confused by the vireo insurgency, the sunshine

neighbor on neighbor, supprenticeship: fatal looms  
in the loop: there's Vioxen in the underbrush, Savager on the roof[ . . . ]

But why this reactionary discourse? "Plot" offers an answer: "A little more each day then, trying to find the violence to which I belong." Yet Cooperman wisely recognizes that this fever pitch isn't sustainable and knows when to slow down. "It is Absence We Cultivate Knowing the Corpse" coyly deploys disjunctive rhetoric to weave an exquisite twenty-first century meditation on mortality and faith, modernity and America, while also sustaining a dialogue with Emerson. The book is also punctuated by a series of calendrics. In their brevity these poems offer breathing room for the headier explorations of the book, and they reinvigorate with a playfulness reminiscent of Berryman's *Dream Songs*:

*July*

Choirs of heat angels lifting brims,  
a chlorine call in the elms.

I'm down at the reservoir  
filling my Jet Ski with damages.

People change into

their least regard, halo of fresh flesh  
or fire. "Patriotism Now!"  
the gunpowder says,  
an idea  
of alcohol, the Republic.

Perhaps most importantly, Cooperman creates a justification for his poetry well beyond the merely sufficient "art for art's sake." In a recent article in the science magazine *Seed*, Jonah Lehrer, citing, in one instance, Cubism's influence on particle physics, contends that science and the arts stand to learn from each other and should therefore participate in a more active dialogue. *DaZE* is already participating in that dialogue. While Cooperman certainly doesn't hold a monopoly over art's explorations of consciousness, he does manage to probe ineffability while remaining largely free of the baggage endemic to a more confessionally motivated poetry. One might say that Cooperman's "building with eyes" is a 21<sup>st</sup> century counterpart of Emerson's "transparent eyeball." But whereas Emerson's eye sought transcendence, Cooperman's eyes are just trying to apprehend the world with which they are faced. And that world is

meteor gamete speck and run of gas  
dark matter arriving corpuscle din  
the words the pith turning[ . . . ]

A consciousness in such a world must dispense with compression. Much like a bat's echolocation, *DaZE* depends on an accrual of data in order to produce meaning, a sense of place. There's little time to react, yes, but perhaps that's what's so fantastic about being a product of one's time. Or perhaps the whole of *DaZE* is an implicit question: how now do we react?

—Brian Nicolet

Elizabeth Arnold, *Civilization*, Flood Editions, 2006. Paperback. 79pp. \$12.95.

One of the dangers inherent in writing a book of "historical" or "Political" poetry is that the poems can often sound cold and clinical, as if the poet were writing them through the safe lens of academic history. Elizabeth Arnold's second volume of poetry, *Civilization*, is not safe. The infusion of personal tragedy allows her an honest emotional entry point into the conceptualization of a community. To Arnold, civilization is something that is simultaneously within us and outside of us. It is a great wave that moves through our consciousness as we struggle to comprehend its physical nature. Arnold deftly maneuvers between the personal world and the historic/political world, creating a greater emotional landscape of grief and loss.

Arnold seems to recognize that readers might naturally gravitate toward the tragic personal poems in this book. After all, we easily recognize and identify with specifics. Arnold brilliantly uses the collection's emotional poems as her gateway into an analysis of history. The book's second poem, "My Father's Face," builds a bridge between civilization and personal tragedy:

## My Father's Face

a civilization  
falling out of its accustomed

stand amidst the world.

He is a happening in the air around him  
happening less

even as his face regains its youth  
though he is dying.

For Arnold, this tragic descent is devastating. Something that was once proud and powerful is diminished, and it is almost impossible to comprehend. Arnold describes her father's face again in the poem "At The Home," "blank as a cow's, he is a void of waiting." The description of her father's slow mental disintegration then death is heartbreaking. Arnold returns to brief glimpses of him throughout *Civilization*, though the grief of his loss is a tone whose echoes reverberate off of every wall the book offers.

Arnold then translates this grief into an exploration of the decay of civilizations. By using her grief as a catapult into these more intellectual territories, Arnold transforms the confessional mode to something with more philosophical permanence. In "A City," Arnold contemplates a ruined, ancient city, and the mark that it has left.

Of where it stood, I mean, eight thousand years ago.

A bunch of indistinguishable sand dunes now,  
some rock outcropped at the lower left, a little wind-work, sky.

While Arnold's personal tragedy is powerful to readers in the immediate sense, Arnold has amplified it by applying the terror of grief, loss, and impermanence to something larger. Indeed, in one of the most aurally and imagistically beautiful moments in the book, Arnold directly applies the threat of deteriorating civilization to contemporary society. From the titular poem, "Civilization,"

... as if the waning of her voice spoke  
all of history's ups and downs, a honeycomb's packed maze of  
cells

whose lights shine through their tiny paper membranes  
too thin not to be available to being torn,

light leaking from a world cracked open,  
sky seen through the pavement I walk down.

The epigraph of this poem places the situation in Washington DC, September 2001. The terror of watching a loved one disintegrate is frighteningly applied as analogy to watching the American world as we know it disintegrate.

Many short poems are scattered throughout the book, and they provide a terrifying emotional force. The distillation of their motivating thought, and the abrupt and discomfiting nature some of them makes one feel as though something great were about to be said, but that the speaker was cut suddenly short. Take, for example, the poem "After Guernica,"

Even the creases on the bottoms of their feet he got right,  
far from the jagged mouths.

It's said a wound will start to heal, though the body be gone  
within the day.

The juxtaposition of the two halves of this poem—the description of Picasso’s horrific painting and the scientific aphorism—creates a discomfort that is, like most of the shorter pieces, enhanced by the tragic emotional cadence of the book, like sudden, shrill stinger notes in a great symphonic piece of ghosts and strings.

If the book fails on any level, it is in fully capturing the power of the personal grief of the speaker’s poem. Certainly, Arnold has carefully constructed analogies that liken the terror of individual collapse to the terror of social disintegration, but these connections are deliberate. Is there anything beyond terror? The adrenal? It is not necessary for the heart to exist in all things. In this book, however, when the speaker seems to want to express her grief, the careful scaffolding of her grand comparisons somewhat obscures the minutia of personal tragedy. It is still powerful, but something small is lost to the larger scope.

Ultimately, Arnold has crafted a terrific journey through grief and analysis of our individual place in society and the place of our civilization in history. Civilization wafts through us, and as we live and breathe within its history, it plants its roots in us. Arnold amplifies the fear born when one discovers that something that once seemed so solid could deteriorate in such a terrifying way, be it a loved one, or civilization. This fear seeps into the reader, so that when one finishes this book, one is left contemplating our little place in history, cold and shivering.

—Glenn Shaheen

## Doctors—Relationships, Decisions: Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*

Vincent Lam. *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*. Weinstein Books. Hardcover, 353 pp. \$23.95.

There have been very few doctors who have been compelled to create literature. There was good old Saint Luke, of course, the biblical physician who recorded Jesus's teachings—though Luke probably considered his writing a kind of esoteric memoir, not the basis of the Western Canon. (His subject, Jesus Christ, might too be thought of as a doctor, what with all the healing.)

In the nineteenth century, Anton Chekhov assumed the dual identity of physician and author. Chekhov reportedly composed stories during his down time, when he wasn't curing illnesses, and though he might have deemed the medical profession his true calling, it is his written work that has remained for posterity.

More recently, men such as William Carlos Williams and Ethan Canin have forged careers as both doctors and writers. It's a tricky feat, one assumes, a feat which likely requires either a superb time-management system or some sort of unfair divine gift. Either way, I'd say it entitles the rest of us—the *just* writers, or *just* doctors, or the 99% of the world who is neither—to hate them just a little bit.

Well, add a new name to the list. Canadian M.D. Vincent Lam has published a collection of short stories, *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*, that will simultaneously annoy, charm, and scare the hell out of you. But don't hate him. Lam handles emergency room chaos, inter-hospital politics, and the profound moral decisions that doctors must make on a daily basis with equal skill. The result is a nuanced portrait of the medical world, one *Grey's Anatomy*, *E.R.*, and *General Hospital* could never manage.

The book follows four young students—Ming, Fitz, Sri, and Chen—as they make their way through medical school and into positions as doctors. Lam gives his characters no last names (or, perhaps, no first names), and rightfully so, as none are needed. This gives the book's early sections a bare-bones quality, as though our protagonists aren't real people but medical-school robots. Indeed, even as the reader suspects a budding romance between Fitz and Ming, the narrative remains as dry as the characters' routines: "Ming considered going to the cafeteria to be an indulgent use of time, but she decided that it was acceptable as long as they discussed only academics, and as long as she didn't spend too much time actually enjoying Fitzgerald's company."

Eventually, of course, they get together—Lam understands the reader's need to be emotionally, not just clinically, engaged. But it's a doomed romance. Ming is too study-driven, and Fitz has an alarming capacity for alcohol. The stories "How to Get Into Medical School," parts 1 and 2, are less an instruction guide and more a heartbreaking account of a relationship's inevitable demise.

But these are not just relationship stories. These are stories about decisions being made, about crucial choices. Along the way, Ming meets two new students—Sri and Chen—and eventually marries the latter. As these characters plod through medical school and into residencies, they face odd, sometimes disturbing ethical dilemmas that most people never think about. In "Take All of Murphy," as the students carve into cadavers for the first time, they debate whether to cut through a crucifix tattoo. Ming, serious and rigid, prefers to do things by the manual. But Sri argues: "You should respect a man's symbols. My mother told me that. Look at his arm. These are his symbols." The corpse ends up dismembered, parts of it lost, with no easy answer to what should have been done.

Later, in "An Insistent Tide," Ming must perform a Caesarian section on a woman in excruciating labor, with no anesthetic. In "Eli," Fitz slips a weapon to a handcuffed patient who has been brutalized by the police. The

story “Winston” shows Sri grappling with just how far he should go to help a mentally deranged patient. These stories not only place the protagonists into unusual situations, but they don’t allow them easy exits. As a result, we see the characters grow and change, for better or for worse.

Sometimes the most difficult decision is inaction. One story finds Fitz in an elevator with a loathsome, incestuous pedophile. We want our hero to pummel the man, and indeed the scene seems to plow inevitably toward fisticuffs. But Lam is smarter than that. He gives us just enough confrontation to satisfy our craving for action, but always keeps the story focused and on task. It’s not about punching out a slimeball. It’s about Fitz’s discovery of his own soul.

The book flags when it gets away from that kind of emotion. Chen, the least developed character, seems at times to serve only as a foil for Fitz and Ming’s relationship. When the story “A Long Migration” delved into his family background, I found myself counting the pages until I could get back to the E.R., back to the actions that were forcing characters to make decisions.

Towards the end, the book falls into the trap of topicality. In 2002, when *Bloodletting* was being written, SARS dominated the headlines. Today, the once-feared illness has all but vanished, and reading about it feels akin to reading about that year’s anthrax scare—an important historical footnote, to be sure, but one that lends the book the unwanted feeling of the ephemeral.

Lam also makes a few rookie mistakes. Pages and pages of italics make most literary readers cringe. He also has an annoying habit of delivering exposition via newspapers or TV news reports—surely the clumsiest, most heavy-handed way to provide such information. Characters’ dreams are recounted for inordinate amounts of time—in fact, “An Insistent Tide” starts with a dream, and when we realize what we’ve been reading has no bearing on the story’s actual events (which, left to themselves, are quite compelling), we feel cheated.

Nevertheless, Lam has provided rare insight into the medical profession. (Perhaps nothing is more frightening than how little doctors sleep.) He's crafted believable characters. His language is, for the most part, economical. Most importantly, the book finds tiny ridges of emotion for us to latch onto. It shows us that, for all their flaws, doctors in general do admirable work. As a writer, Lam does too.

## A Far Cry from Chick Lit: Rebecca Gowers's *When to Walk*

Rebecca Gowers. *When to Walk*. Canongate, 235 pp., \$14, paperback.

Rebecca Gowers's clever debut novel, *When to Walk*, shuffles us through a week in the life of the appropriately named Ramble, who searches for something steadfast to hang on to after her husband, Con, asks for a divorce. Using the days-of-the-week structure found in books like Richard Price's *Ladies' Man*, Gowers documents Ramble's every thought and activity. Over the course of this week Ramble also struggles to finish an assignment for her job—writing travel pieces about places she's never been—and reevaluates her problematic relationship with her mother, all the while obsessing over deformed pigeons and etymology.

Unlike *Bridget Jones's Diary* or Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic's* series, Gowers holds no hands. Instead of chubster Bridget with her man trouble or precocious Becky Bloomwood with her, well, man trouble, we are presented with Ramble, who launches into potentially off-putting but uniquely clever verbal onslaughts, suffers from various physical ailments, and can't decide whether or not she even wants her run-away husband to return—this is a far cry from the standard Chick-Lit heroine.

Once you've spent a week with Ramble, it's easy to get attached. After all, it's hard not to be drawn to a character who says things like, "Isn't it a pleasure to be able to hate a person with no prospect of ever having to revise your opinion." But just when you think you know Gowers's Ramble, the author smartly takes another turn. She never allows us to get too close, or comfortable, speeding by seemingly important information only to douse the reader in random definitions of words or pages of nervous back-peddling.

Ramble's emotional shortcomings are equal only to her physical

handicaps. She is almost entirely deaf in one ear and has septic arthritis, which requires her to wear a brace. Luckily, Gowers never asks us to pity Ramble. As our heroine unapologetically states, “Nobody likes a cripple in a crowded supermarket.”

Ramble isn't Gowers' only non-Chick-Lit character. Instead of drawing these characters the way some pink-padded books might, Ramble's gay best friend, Johnson, with whom Ramble spends much of her time, and Stella Ramble, the batty old grandmother, are made to be believable, likeable and surprisingly unique. After all, in what *Sex and the City* chapter or *Bridget Jones's Diary* entry does the leading lady sleep with the gay best friend?

Gowers handling of Stella Ramble is especially impressive. When Ramble visits with her grandmother, Gowers's writing is warm and honest. And in the visits where Ramble learns family secrets through jokes and slipups, Gowers's character pokes just the right amount of fun without being too cold:

Stella Ramble went very screwy after I first put her into, as they say, *care*. The first birthday she had on the inside, she ate the candles instead of the cake. Since then, happily, she has just about reverted to the cake.

and:

Some people get nasty as they age, but Stella Ramble grows even softer. Nowadays, for example, her anti-Semitism has completely vanished.

Surprisingly the least clichéd character, Mrs. Shaw, the not-so-friendly neighbor, is also the least interesting. The reader discovers that she is the only one who knows the whereabouts of Con, Ramble's husband, and it soon becomes clear that her character exists only to reveal plot points.

But it is not the plot points that move this book forward. By the end of the first chapters, it doesn't really matter to the reader whether Con returns or Ramble moves on. We don't really care about the mystery of what Con was doing, or the relationship between Ramble and Johnson, or even Ramble and her grandmother. Much like Edna O'Brien's *Night*, the inner workings of the narrator are what drive this book. The language and bizarre trivia that accompany each turn of the page pull you through this book, page-by-page, chapter-by-chapter—day-by-day.

Aimée Baker is currently enrolled in the MFA program at Arizona State University where she is also a prose editor at *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Her fiction is forthcoming in the *Southeast Review*.

Claire Bateman lives in Greenville and teaches at the Fine Arts Center. Her books are *The Bicycle Slow Race* (Wesleyan, 1991); *Friction* (Eighth Mountain, 1998); *At the Funeral of the Ether* (Ninety-Six Press, 1998); *Clumsy* (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2003); and *Leap* (New Issues, 2005). She has been awarded Individual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Tennessee Arts Commission, as well as a Surdna Fellowship.

John Brehm is the author of *Sea of Faith*, which won the 2004 Brittingham Prize from The University of Wisconsin Press. Recent work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Boulevard*, the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and elsewhere. He is a freelance writer and lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Nicholas T. Brown lives, writes, and teaches in Houston TX. He has a dog named Seven and a cat named Mrs. Mia Wallace. He plays on a basketball team called the Super Hoopers. His favorite foods are spinach and broccoli. He is a "morning person."

Mary Ann Caws is a translator (recently, with Black Widow Books; Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, René Char forthcoming), the author of many books on the relations between art and text (including several on surrealism, and on the Bloomsbury group), of illustrated biographies (Proust, James, Woolf, Picasso, Dalí), of memoirs (*To the Boathouse and Provençal Cooking: a Memoir*, forthcoming), and the editor of several anthologies (*The Harper Collins World Reader*, *Yale Anthology of Twentieth Century French Poetry*, and *Surrealism*). She is Distinguished Professor of English, French, Comparative Literature, and Film Studies at the Graduate Center of CUNY.

Vikram Chandra's latest novel, *Sacred Games*, was the recipient of the Hutch Crossword Prize for English Fiction (India), a Salon.com Book Award for Fiction (USA), and is a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award (USA). He is also the author of *Love and Longing in Bombay* and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. He currently divides his time between Bombay and Berkeley, California, where he teaches creative writing at the University of California.

Victoria Chang's second book of poems will be published in the Fall of 2008 by the University of Georgia Press, as part of the VQR Poetry Series. Her first book won the Crab Orchard Review Open Competition Prize and was published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 2005. Her poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming in publications such as *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, the *New Republic*, *New England Review*, *Triquarterly*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *Best American Poetry 2005*, and others. She also edited an anthology titled *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, published by The University of Illinois Press in 2004. She resides in Southern California.

Peter Cooley has published seven books of poetry, six of them with Carnegie Mellon. His eighth, *Divine Margins*, will also be published next year with Carnegie Mellon University Press. He currently teaches creative writing at Tulane University.

Lucy Corin is the author of the short story collection *The Entire Predicament* (Tin House Books 2007) and the novel *Everyday Psychokillers: A History for Girls* (FC2 2004). She teaches at the University of California at Davis.

Liz Countryman received an MFA in poetry from the University of Maryland and is currently pursuing a PhD in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston.

Lightsey Darst lives in Minneapolis where she curates mnartists.org's "What Light" poetry contest, writes dance reviews, and teaches English and humanities classes. In 2007 she received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Literature. Recent work is published in the *Antioch Review*, the *Literary Review*, and *New Letters*.

Blase Patrick Drexler was born and raised in Las Cruces, NM. He is completing his MFA in creative writing at New Mexico State University, where he also teaches. He is currently at work on a short novel, as well as a collection of stories, and spends time as an editor at Noemi Press. He has a short story forthcoming in the *Tusculum Review*. This is his first published fiction.

Cornelius Eady is the author of seven books of poetry, *Kartunes* (Warthog Press, 1980), *Victims of the Latest Dance Craze* (Ormmation Press, 1986; Winner of the 1985 Lamont Prize from the Academy of American Poets), *The Gathering of My Name* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1991; Nominated for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry), *You Don't Miss Your Water* (Henry Holt and Co., 1995), *The Autobiography of a Jukebox* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1997), *Brutal Imagination* (Putnam, 2001), and *Hardheaded Weather: New and Selected Poems* (Putnam, 2008). With poet Toi Derricote, he is co-founder of Cave Canem, a summer workshop/retreat for African American poets.

Carolina Ebeid's work appears in *Poetry*, *AGNI*, and *Lyric* among others. Originally from the Garden State, she lives in Columbia, Missouri, where she working on a translation project.

After two years of directing a college writing center, Rachel Edidin moved cross-country to make comic books; she now earns her keep as a professional comics editor and a freelance writer, journalist, and scholar. Her fiction, essays, and articles can be found scattered in a handful of online and print publications.

April Freely is completing her MFA at the University of Iowa.

Dmitry Golyenko is a Russian poet residing in St. Petersburg. His books include *Betonnye golubki* [Concrete Doves], published by NLO.

Kathleen Graber is currently a Hodder Fellow in Poetry at Princeton University. Her first book, *Correspondence*, was the winner of the 2005 Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize. She is the recipient of fellowships from The Rona Jaffe Foundation and The New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Poems from a second manuscript have appeared recently in *American Poetry Review*, the *Georgia Review*, and elsewhere.

Stephanie Harrison has published short fiction in such journals as *Quarterly West*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Northwest Review*, and the *Beloit Fiction Journal*, among others.

She is the editor of the anthology *Adaptations: From Short Story to Big Screen* (Three Rivers Press, 2005), a collection of 35 stories that have been adapted for film.

K.A. Hays' first book of poems, *Dear Apocalypse*, will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in early 2009. Her poetry was selected by Natasha Trethewey for inclusion in *Best New Poets 2007*, and has appeared recently in magazines including the *Southern Review*, the *Missouri Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Antioch Review*, and *Black Warrior Review*.

Brian Henry is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *The Stripping Point* (Counterpath, 2007) and *Quarantine* (Ahsahta, 2006). His translation of the Slovenian poet Tomaž Šalamun's book *Woods and Chalices* will appear from Harcourt in 2008. He has co-edited *Verse* since 1995, and he co-edited *The Verse Book of Interviews* (Verse Press, 2005). His criticism has appeared in numerous publications around the world, including the *New York Times Book Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Jacket*, *Boston Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Mark Irwin's sixth collection of poetry, *TALL IF*, will appear from New Issues in 2008. He teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles and Colorado. Recent work appears in *American Review*, *Poetry*, and *TriQuarterly*.

M. J. Iuppa lives on a small farm near the shores of Lake Ontario. Currently she is Writer-in-Residence and Director of the Arts Minor Program at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York.

Franck André Jamme, a poet, is also a specialist in contemporary Indian tantric, brut, and tribal arts, many exhibitions of which he has curated. Since 1981, he has published twelve books of poems and fragments, and illustrated books. Three of his books have been published by Black Square Editions, NYC: *Extracts from the Life of a Beetle*, *The Recitation of Forgetting*, and *Another Silent Attack*. In 2005 he received the Grand Prix de Poésie de la Société des Gens de Lettres for his life's work.

Mike Jones' stories have appeared in *New Texas*, *Grain Magazine* and *Crab Creek Review*. He has two daughters, Nayeli and Sarika, and fears they will one day grow up and leave him. He is also the Reviews and Interviews Editor for *Gulf Coast*.

John Koethe's most recent book of poems is *Sally's Hair* (HarperCollins). He is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and was recently a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.

Robert Leleux's first book, *The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy*, is currently available in hardcover from St. Martin's Press. His writings have appeared in, among others, the *New York Times Magazine* and *The Texas Observer*. A Houston native, he now lives, quite happily, in Manhattan.

Shara Lessley is the Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing. A former Stegner Fellow, Shara's awards include an O'Connor Fellowship from Colgate University, the Gilman School's Tickner Fellowship, and the

"Discovery"/ The Nation prize. Recent poems have appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Threepenny*, *AGNI* and *Fence*.

Paul Lisicky is the author of *Lawnboy* and *Famous Builder*, both published by Graywolf Press. He's currently working on a collection of short prose pieces, some of which appear in *Five Points*, *Subtropics*, *Conjunctions*, the *Seattle Review*, and the *Literary Review*. He teaches at NYU, and is a visiting professor at Cornell University for the Spring 2008 term.

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Susie Meserve's poems have appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Red Rock Review*, and others. Her chapbook, *Faith*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. She lives in San Francisco, where she is writing a memoir.

Jennifer Militello has had poems published in the *Kenyon Review*, the *New Republic*, the *North American Review*, the *Paris Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Her first book of poetry was awarded the 2007 Tupelo Press First Book Prize and will be published in 2009.

Brenda Miller is the author of *Season of the Body* (Sarabande Books, 2002) and co-author of *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). "Table of Figures" is from her newest collection, *Blessing of the Animals*, forthcoming from Eastern Washington University Press. Her work has received four Pushcart Prizes and has been published in such journals as *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Sun*, *Utne Reader*, *Georgia Review*, and *Witness*. She is an Associate Professor of English at Western Washington University and serves as Editor-in-Chief of the *Bellingham Review*.

Dinty W. Moore is the author of the memoir *Between Panic & Desire* (University of Nebraska) and the writing guide *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*. He has published in numerous magazines and journals, edits *Brevity*, the journal of concise nonfiction, and teaches at Ohio University.

Thylia Moss has published eight books of poetry: *Tokyo Butter: Poems* (Persea Books, 2006), *Slave Moth: A Narrative in Verse* (2004), *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler* (1998), *Small Congregations: New and Selected Poems* (1993), *Rainbow Remnants in Rock Bottom Ghetto Sky* (1991), *At Redbones* (1990), *Pyramid of Bone* (1989), and *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman* (1983). She is the author of a memoir, *Tale of a Sky-Blue Dress* (1998); a picture book, *I Want to Be* (1993); and two plays, *Talking to Myself* (1984) and *The Dolls in the Basement* (1984). She is a professor of English and Art and Design at the University of Michigan. Her video work may be seen on the forkergirl youtube channel <http://www.youtube.com/forkergirl>.

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Brian Nicolet is a third-year MFA candidate at the University of Houston. He has received scholarships to Sewanee Writers' Conference and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. This is his second review for *Gulf Coast*.

Linnea Ogden is an MFA candidate at Brown University. Her writing is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *1913*, the *Boston Review* and *Conduit*.

Eugene Ostashevsky is the editor of *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism* and the author of several poetry collections available from Ugly Duckling Presse.

Caryl Pagel was born in Waterloo, Iowa. Poems of hers have appeared or are forthcoming in *Coconut*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Tarpaulin Sky*.

Grace Paley was a writer and poet. Her *Collected Stories* was reissued in 2007. A new collection of poems, *Fidelity*, was just released by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Jean-Paul Pecqueur's first book, *The Case Against Happiness*, was published by Alice James Books in 2006. New poems have recently appeared in *The Hat*, *Cranky*, and *Cue*. Jean-Paul currently lives in Brooklyn, where he teaches at the Pratt Institute.

Michael C. Peterson studied at Stanford University and the University of Virginia, and is now finishing an MFA in poetry at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, where he also teaches composition. He is a co-founder of Firecan Press in Greensboro.

D. A. Powell is the author of *Tea*, *Lunch*, and *Cocktails*. The latter was a finalist for the Lambda and the National Book Critics' Circle Awards. His recent poems appear in *Poetry*, *New England Review* and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Powell teaches in the English Department at University of San Francisco.

Ernesto Quiñonez is the author of *Chango's Fire* (Harpercollins) and *Bodega Dreams* (Vintage Contemporary Originals), which was heralded as a "New Immigrant Classic" by the *New York Times*. He has received fellowships from Wesleyan University, Indiana University, Breadloaf and the Sundance Screenwriters Lab. He is an assistant professor at Cornell University's MFA program in creative writing.

Lawrence Raab is the author of six collections of poems, including *What We Don't Know About Each Other* (National Poetry Series winner and National Book Award finalist), *The Probable World*, and most recently *Visible Signs: New and Selected Poems*, all published by Penguin. A new collection, *The History of Forgetting*, will appear from Penguin in 2009. He teaches literature and writing at Williams College.

Bill Rasmovicz is a graduate of the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program and Temple University School of Pharmacy. His poems have appeared in *Hotel Amerika*, *Nimrod*, *Mid-American Review*, *Third Coast*, and other publications. He has served as a workshop co-leader and literary excursion leader throughout Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Germany, England and Wales, and was the recipient of the Alice James Books 2006 Kinereth Gensler Award for his first book, *The World in Place of Itself*.

Donald Revell is the author of ten collections of poetry, most recently *A Thief of Strings* (2007) and *Pennyweight Windows: New & Selected Poems* (2005), both from Alice James Books. Winner of the 2004 Lenore Marshall Award and two-time winner of the PEN Center USA Award in poetry, Revell has also received the Gertrude Stein Award, two Shestak Prizes, two Pushcart Prizes and fellowships from the NEA as well as from the Ingram Merrill and Guggenheim Foundations. He is also the author of three volumes of translation: *Rimbaud's A Season in Hell* (Omnidawn, 2007), *Apollinaire's Alcools* (Wesleyan, 1995) and *The Self-Dismembered Man: Selected Later Poems of Guillaume Apollinaire* (Wesleyan, 2004). Revell's critical writings include *Invisible Green: Selected Prose* (Omnidawn, 2005) and *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye* (Graywolf, 2007).

Jonathan Rice's poems have recently appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Potomac Review* and are forthcoming in *New Delta Review* and *Notre Dame Review*, among others. His work was recently selected for the 2008 Milton Kessler Memorial Prize from *Harpur Palate*, the 2008 Yellowwood Poetry Prize from *Yalobusha Review*, and Runner Up for the 2007 Wabash Prize from *Sycamore Review*. He received an MFA in Poetry at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he teaches writing.

Miguel Angel Ríos, a native of Argentina, divides his time between Mexico City and New York. He has exhibited internationally; his work was introduced to Houston audiences in the summer of 2007 with *Miguel Angel Ríos: Aquí*, organized by the Blaffer Gallery, the art museum of the University of Houston.

Margaret Ronda's poems have been published in journals such as *POOL*, *Xantippe*, *AGNI*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Salamander*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She is a Ph.D. candidate in English at University of California-Berkeley, and currently lives in Oregon, where she teaches poetry at Willamette University.

Martha Ronk is the author most recently of *Vertigo*, a National Poetry Series selection published by Coffee House Press in 2007; and her book, *In a landscape of having to repeat*, published by Omnidawn Press, winner of the 2005 PEN USA award for poetry. She is a current NEA recipient and teaches at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

Sophie Rosenblum is finishing her MFA at the University of Houston. She is a frequent contributor to the *Houston Press*.

Mary Ruefle is the author of several volumes of poetry, most recently *A Little White Shadow* (Wave Books, 2006), *Tristimania* (Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 2003), *Among the Musk Ox People* (2002), *Apparition Hill* (2001), *Cold Pluto* (2001), *Post Meridian* (2000), *Cold Pluto* (1996), *The Adamant* (1989, winner of the 1988 Iowa Poetry Prize), *Life Without Speaking* (1987), and *Memling's Veil* (1982). She has received both National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim fellowships, as well as both an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature and a Whiting Foundation Writer's Award. She lives in Vermont.

Tomaz Šalamun has published more than 35 books of poetry in Slovenia and 10 books in English. His many honors include the Preseren Fund Prize, a visiting Fulbright to Columbia University, and a fellowship to the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He also has served as Cultural Attaché to the Slovenian Consulate

in New York. His poetry has been translated into more than 20 languages around the world. *Woods and Chalice*s, translated with Brian Henry, is forthcoming from Harcourt in April 2008.

Glenn Shaheen is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Houston. His poetry and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Rbino*, *Zone 3*, *Subtropics*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, and others.

Brenda Shaughnessy is the author of *Interior with Sudden Joy* and *Human Dark with Sugar* (Copper Canyon Press 2008), which won the 2007 James Laughlin Award. Her poems have been published in *Bomb*, *Conjunctions*, *McSweeney's*, the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review* and elsewhere. She is poetry editor at *Tin House* magazine and *Tin House Books* and has taught poetry at many institutions, including Eugene Lang College and Princeton University. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and son.

Bruce Smith is the author of five books of poems, most recently *The Other Lover* (University of Chicago), which was a finalist both for the National Book Award and for the Pulitzer Prize, and *Songs for Two Voices* (2005). He teaches at Syracuse University.

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett is the author of a book of poetry, *Roam* (Crab Orchard Series, 2006), and a forthcoming book of scholarship, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (Michigan, 2008). Her poems have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Indiana Review*, and the *Iowa Review*. She was raised in New Orleans.

Stephanie Strickland's fifth book of poems, *Zone : Zero* (Ahsahta, 2008) includes *slippingglimpse*, first shown at e-Poetry 2007 in Paris, and *Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot*, on CD. Other work from "Huracan's Harp" can be found in *New American Writing*, *Denver Quarterly*, 1913, *Court Green*, *Bird Dog*, *jubilat*, and elsewhere.

Arthur Sze's ninth book of poetry, *The Ginkgo Light*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in May, 2009. New poems are forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Boston Review*, *Field*, the *New Yorker*, *Shenandoah*, and *Atlas* (New Delhi). He is a professor emeritus at the Institute of American Indian Arts and is the first poet laureate of Santa Fe.

Justin Torres is finishing his first book. His work has appeared in journals such as *Tin House*, the *Greensboro Review*, and *Sleeping Fish*.

Gilbert Vicario is Assistant Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. Among his recent exhibitions are *Indelible Images (Trafficking between Life and Death)*, seen at the MFAH in spring 2006, and *The Fully Enlightened Earth Radiates Disaster Triumphant: Daniel Joseph Martinez*, hosted by the 2006 Cairo Biennale.

D. J. Waldie is the author of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996, Norton; revised 2005), *Real City: Downtown Los Angeles Inside/Out* (2001, Angel City), *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles* (2004, Angel City), *Close to Home: An American Album* (2004, Getty Museum), and *California Romanica* (2007, Rizzoli). His book reviews and commentary appear in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*.

G. C. Waldrep's collections of poems are *Goldbeater's Skin* (Colorado Prize, 2003) and *Disclamor* (BOA Editions, 2007). He currently lives in Lewisburg, PA, and teaches at Bucknell University.

Suzanne Warren grew up outside of Philadelphia. She is a student in the Ph.D. program in literature with a creative dissertation at the University of Cincinnati. This past year, she was a writing fellow at the Ucross Foundation, Wyoming, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

John Weir is the author of two novels, *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket* and *What I Did Wrong*. He teaches at Queens College/CUNY, where he is a member of the faculty of the MFA program in Creative Writing and Translation.

Summer • Fall 2008

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