

gulf coast

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & FINE ARTS



\$10 • WINTER/SPRING 2009

gULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & FINE ARTS

VOLUME 21, ISSUE 1

Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature & 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, Claire Anderson, 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.,
La Vergne, TN 37086, (615) 793-5522.

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Gulf Coast Fiction Prize, 2008

Judged by Jennifer Egan

WINNER:

Sarah Cornwell
"Boyland"

HONORABLE MENTION:

Cara Oleka
"Tiny Dancer"

Gulf Coast Nonfiction Prize, 2008

Judged by Rubén Martínez

WINNER:

Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel
"Kisha Club"

Gulf Coast Poetry Prize, 2008

Judged by Natasha Trethewey

WINNER:

Jonathan Rice
"Inheritance"

Each contest winner receives \$1,000 and publication in *Gulf Coast*. The postmark deadline for our upcoming contest is March 31, 2009. Submit one previously unpublished story or essay (7,000 words) or up to 5 poems (10 pages max). Your name and address should be included *on your cover letter only*. Indicate the genre on the outer envelope. Your \$20 reading fee will include a one-year subscription. Make your check or money order payable to *Gulf Coast*.

Send entries to Gulf Coast Prize (genre), English Dept., University of Houston, Houston TX 77204-3012

For more information about this year's contest, including judges, stay tuned to www.gulfcoastmag.org.

Sick Soldier at Your Door

an excerpt from the forthcoming novel by *Barry Hannah*

Anse Burden at your service. Here in Oxford, I've found six soldiers from the '91 desert war with Iraq.

I flew the F-18 Hornet off the Roosevelt carrier, I believe. At the time I was loaded on Percodan and Dexedrene so maybe it was another carrier. In the ready-room we watched ourselves bombing and missing on CNN. Nobody else in my squadron was even nicked.

But a Stinger blew my tail off and I bailed, blown horizontally into the air as the plane was corkscrewing. The ejection seat was dead solid perfect, all it was supposed to be. I was in love with it and was not conscious the ejection had broken my back a little. It seemed I floated onto a beach of the Persian Gulf for no more than twenty seconds. I must have hit the silk at an altitude of less than three hundred feet. I believe I was in shock briefly because I was sitting in a shallow surf with black sand under me, still attached to the chute out in front of me in deeper surf water, rising up and down like a dirty white whale pulling gently at me with strings from its mouth.

Adrenaline, what a beauty, flowed through my shock and the Dex and Percodan. I felt wonderful, the finest high I've ever had. I was a child in an illuminated storybook, way off in a foreign brilliant home. The whale pulled on me and Persia was singing to me from across the water. And I was speaking baby talk into my radio, they said. Me down, me unhurt, me giggle, me see the spotter plane so Father will have the copter here soon.

What father? I later wondered.

I am certain it was Jesus Christ. Father, son and brother, and most apparent of all, ghost, by all evidence. He carried a lamb under one arm and a Roman sword upraised by the other. This is how I saw him in a dream, a very hard-edged dream with red mountains behind him. Six feet tall. He was in a rough beige robe parted at the chest. Defined pectorals. Forearms lean and sinewy. I dreamt the dream that very night asleep below decks in the hospital.

Some decided it was not a Stinger missile, no SAM at all. They believe I shot my own jet out of the air. They did not courtmartial me but they busted me down to lieutenant. I didn't care. I kept smiling for days even when the break in my tailbone and one of my vertebrae began a long explosion of pain.

My squadron liked me and so did the skipper and an admiral. I had built up a store of good will and beat the drug dependency forthwith. The fact was I flew twenty missions and was terrified from around the third one on. Maybe it was nerves. I have nerves. They got harder and harder to hide. I was a ninny among true men.

My father died on the day of the last mission, to spook it further. The navy let me out and paid me handsomely to quit its service.

Now I come to Oxford and I am war. I've found the six other vets and am now a lay minister. My wife Brazile left me but might come back. What else did you expect? I cannot tell whether I've got the guts to minister to other vets because of confusion among love, war, peace, and former nefarious behavior on my own part. I bought a church near the casino in Vicksburg right on a bayou. I knew the law and the law left me alone. My congregants were rough and smooth but all wanted to talk about God and each was allowed to give his own sermon until it became Babel and I made the rule that we could only talk about Christ. Several cursed me and left in their leather and denim all Prussian with medals and pins all over, out to the motorcycles and gone. The sergeant at arms of the church was a close friend. We did not truly need a sergeant at arms but the office made him feel good. He carried a baseball bat with barbed wire wrapped tightly around the sweet spot, a fine piece of craftsmanship, and he came through and brought the others back into the fold with him. After all, the bikers were just oily Prussian children with no place to go. Three of them lived with my pal Dan, of the barbed wire bat, in a cabin near a colossal junkyard. They were on heavy metal, they listened to heavy metal music, and they breathed oily heavy metal on a good wind off the yard.

After church the gambling would begin. The church was a casino and pawnshop. Folks not even remotely connected to God and happy Vietnamese and Chinamen, Haitians, Black Muslims and Mexicans with the smell of road tar, all gathered to gamble and pawn.

My wife was an inattentive Roman Catholic from Morgan City, Louisiana, who flew helicopters out to the oilrigs in the Gulf when I met her. She was from the upper middle class and wanted to prove something and she did. I could never figure what delight anybody could have piloting a copter but her moxie

bought me over. That and she was a rare gem of a fuck, with long legs, bouncing bosoms and the only hair I've ever seen that was naturally black and gold.

She was as tall as I was, five-eleven.

I'm not going to say a damned thing about 9/11, by the way. I think the innocent dead will appreciate that. I was at Sewanee once when this academic Northeastern nit read a poem about 9/11 in 2006. I was in the front row with Brazile, who was there studying playwriting in the summer workshops. It was all I could do not to race over and throttle this man. When will "poets" ever realize they've long since been irrelevant after Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising*? And in all other matters by Dylan, et al.

Maybe all books must die before we form the peace.

I am war for Christ and my Brazile fled what she called outright insanity. She played the violin very well, I mean tempestuously, while I entered her naked entrances from every angle possible. I wish her ears could suck. Get in there deep to her unarguable perfect pitch. I was a lucky man but I thought I had to prove something every day. I was thrown out of my war but am not comfortable with peace. Something always seemed left out of it. Like when we were kids and rigged a cannon that fired a two-inch shell of mule shit tightly wrapped in aluminum foil at the most beautiful white mansion in Natchez.

Too many books will deny their slaves the race to die in battle with the shout of victory in their ears. Otherwise you only get a cool nap in the shade and kick off with a little *ab* sound so they know to get you in the ground haste-wise before the public stink.

You dream maybe of Sam Houston whose own army ignored him and struck out to attack Santa Anna at San Jacinto. Old Sam yelled "Gentlemen, I applaud your bravery but damn your manners" as he watched the slaughter and rode his white horse five times around the battle, getting his own licks in with no choice left.

Two regiments clash by afternoon. Gluttonous killings. Mexican drummer boys stuck in the bayou mud, half-beheaded musket butts. Thus the birth of Texas, the birth of all states by mob slaughter.

For me, my own scribblings in my *Life Book* must end. Burn your books or hand them to other slaves who've lost their voices, their silence, their souls to literature, a feeble sucking religion.

What dream was I in, in January and February, 1991, when I made my last flyover of Baghdad? All F-18 Hornet, hardly a human creature at all. No balls, no soul, just fire, lift, drift, roll over, *bang*. The gorgeous missile tracks orange than orange, or your hand-rolled bomb for any occasion. What a heavy leap of fire down there. You never imagine the hunched-down earthling in the streets or sand. Sheet, burnoos and sandals, a helmet held to his dick. Look out above!

But in the cockpit I was nothing but quiet screaming head, watching the immolations with small concern. I may have burned up this self and soul when I accidentally saw the burning man on the ground. My handiwork.

But somebody down there owned a vector on me. When I blew out with my already-dead co-pilot just behind me somewhere in air and never found I believe I went from a mild scream to nothing, not a long trip. The world would have lost a wingnut.

Now I have the soul of an abandoned hospital. I located the six other Desert Storm vets and want to invite them into it. Fill me up, but I'm a coward and a bad host in my ministry, astride this Triumph Tiger, 1970 and mint yellow, given to me by Dan Williams.

In my journey from needy ones to other needy ones, I smile and think of Dan who taught me how to hide things, my airplane and my last 100 thou. He knew the IRS as the Gestapo and planned to attack three of the jackals who stalked him, still after money rightly devoted to Jesus.

Lt. Cmdr. to grievous joystick gambler, money-changer in the temple of God, to Idiot of Christ, then lay minister, then simply four diseases all at once. Two cancers and chemo with its attendant friends neuropathy, boiling claws inside my legs and a maddening ring ever-constant in my head, half a heart and lungs blown away, three invasive surgeries, the horror of waiting waiting waiting for doctors who don't want to see you and cannot abide the idea of pain. A successful lawsuit against the mockery of an Emergency Clinic at Baptist Hospital of Northwest Mississippi here in Oxford. How do I count the ways, love you, fair pain, among the criminals and loafers of the drug, med, hospital, insurance white-collar larceny colossus?

But will you believe this?

I am happy to just get down the road when I can, giving even unluckier muckers a ride if I could. Near death by pneumonia I had dreamed of all my pals

and gals, foremost Brazile Varas Burden, the woman who will surely come back to me because she'll understand I'm no longer insane. Rather, to the contrary, serene and filled with peace that passeth understanding.

May I say this. Mark this: I do not feel saved but only born again into a parallel world where all my animals—all the girlfriends and powerful pals, the handsome infants, all of us children of a quiet green meadow with the ocean over there just beyond the trees—where we live when misery that passes understanding knocks down our last doors to come and claw us. It will always be there when no pills, no help, no release is left, only the hard wall of stupid random torture and malicious indifference. Then Christ comes if you give this kind stranger a chance. Simplicity. Ecstasy, all speech and acts converted to a fundament of rest.

Plus I'm still a handsome dude, hung like a small bear. I am faithful to my wife in our separation and she is faithful to me. Time is all, a hard matter, time and its exasperations like minutes stretched to no horizon.

Now in Oxford, drawn by the church, mosque, and tabernacle burnings from northwest Mississippi to St. Louis along the River through Memphis, I admit again I am a worm. I am organizing walking tours from blackened ruin to blackened ruin. Some of the churches were not just burned. They were bombed expertly, as well. They exploded as only the hand of a specialist could make happen.

This does not harken back to the Klan burnings of the sixties, which were done by imbecilic cowards cheered on by silence from miserable governors. This is new history. You think Iraq. Vets of Iraq. I know six of them but have not a clue if the crimes are connected to any, none, or all of them.

I forgot to say, because I am a worm, that there is a fee for enrollment in these tours. I have written some articles regarding medicine in literature and have an instructorship at the university, hired on by the kind Chairman of English Joe Urgo, now at Hamilton College. My ship was continued by the next chairman, Patrick Quinn, the important Graves scholar with the hair of Mick Jagger. Dan the junkyard preacher dropped out of the sad motorcycle gang and remained behind in his cabin mourning when he went to Texas Christian for advanced knowledge of the Bible. I understand his studies were thorough and he came out completely insane though functional like most seminary students. Then there is the Choctaw Indian Pearl Room, from Philadelphia, MS and the Indian casino

down there, who, well, lectures on the spirituality of the Indian culture, among Choctaws and Chickasaws, the two tribes of the state.

The fee for the walking tour is 5k.

I came to gawk, just like the rest, and am now the most experienced gawker. In my case, as leader and an invalid I ride the motorcycle and wait around the ruins preparing my lecture for the pilgrims. We have enrolled twenty pilgrims so far, mainly wealthy retirees from the Great Lakes cities who need the exercise and are crazy for Southern Culture, outside of catfish the leading export of these precincts. Half of them are Jewish, the rest Irish and Swedes. The Swedes, you recall, gave Faulkner the Great Prize, so we start at his home Rowan Oak under the cedars in the long driveway, because cedars were the Indian funeral trees, as Pearl Room explains.

The point is to strip down, get protestant, then even more naked. Walk over scorched bricks to find your own soul. Your heart a searching dog in the rubble.

My own church down on the bayou north of Vicksburg exploded.

On a hunch I told the pilgrims that, from thirty-thousand feet above, you see the black dots that connected into the face of Jesus of Nazareth. Then I found out this was true, with only a little push from the imagination.

It was a great shame my church exploded before the IRS could auction it.

But here's the worst news: my nephew Wilkes Bell is one of the arsonists. My sister, his mother Ellen, knows nothing about this. My love for them prevents me turning him in to the law. That is a bit of a lie. I'm dazzled and exhilarated and proud of him until my best self comes back.

All the way through art school at the university he painted indifferently but the subject was always fire. The art school was totally ignored by the university, happy for him. His teachers were alarmed by nothing since it was shit anyway, his paintings. Not even coded fire. Just fire, what fire does to whatever—beginning, middle and end.

Gulf Coast's publication of this excerpt from *Sick Soldier at Your Door* was made possible through a gift in memory of Faith Ververloh, a great friend to the magazine and to the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

Also in this issue: an interview with Barry Hannah by Andrew Brininstool, page 316.

Some Feel Rain

Some feel rain. Some feel the beetle startle
in its ghost-part when the bark
slips. Some feel musk. Asleep against
each other in the whiskey dark, scarcely there.
When it falls apart, some feel the moondark air
drop its motes to the patch-thick slopes of
snow. Tiny blinkings of ice from the oak,
a boot-beat that comes and goes, the line of prayer
you can follow from the dusking wind to the snowy
owl it carries. Some feel the terrible sunlight
well up in blood-vessels below the skin
and wish there had been less to lose.
Knowing how it could have been, pale maples
drowning like a second sleep above our temperaments.
Do I imagine there is any place so safe it can't be
snapped? Some feel the rivers shift, blue veins
through soil, as if the smoke-stacks were a long gray
dream of exhalation. The lynx lets its paws
skim the ground in snow and showers.
The wildflowers scatter in warm tints until
the second they are plucked. You can wait
to scrape the ankle-burrs, you can wait until Mercury
the early star underdraws the night and its blackest
districts. And wonder. Why others feel
through coal-thick night that deeply-colored garnet
star. Why sparring and pins are all you have.
Why the earth cannot make its way towards you.

The Interior

for J.

*This heart, though it be one sole member, yet it may be divided into two creeks
right and left. —Robert Burton, Anatomy of Melancholy*

There is a creek that rushes
down from the mountains and wastes itself in dusk.
There is a channel that cuts cold water
 into the interior and passes out of sight.
There was sun. You called her
back to the bridge and spoke in clauses of
blown snow across the ground,
mud-nests sloping down the bank into running ice-
lights. And though I did not know it, there began
 the decline of my hopes.
Gray skies spidery in the trees, and at that brink—
a brief conversation about love—at the early
edge of evening, in the nerve of the brook, the edge
of the rail, against the skin of your gloveless
 hands, the edge of my
lungs, the ditch, along the veins of
ice in the fringed shadow of the bed in
whose waters rocks back and forth an in-
navigable damage to which you must
 close your eyes—say nothing.
It can only hurt you.



Who came to this place knew snow-rise,
storm-drift, knew finches would seek the black
thistle-seeds, was head-
strong. These are only
summaries of a wilderness I still
cannot comprehend. You came like winter,
cool water in the throat of the bird, un-
repeatable musics, you without whom I *could not live*.
A glass of cold white wine, the first time we spoke—
slowly, along the inside of your wrist—
runnels of blood and words we harbored
or murmured late into night, a joy
that came in droves.
You come to me now like a snowy memory of
fields, a blue wren
on frozen ground, spare note of
another bird's call—the snow-red dusk—the reeds.



Did you search the fields, did you search
the reeds, did you feel there was
something to hide, a vague spike in the bend,
did you wonder or foresee,
did you shrink in thought, fret
or blank your eyes at the spot, did your hands
reach for the hold behind my ribs,
patches of land, snow-
broken grasses over which the crows flap
ink-awkward to the trees—
behind my hips, inside the thin bones
of my wrist, at the innermost thriving

wings of my lungs, did you consider that
 future where you
remove yourself from me, a shaped idea,
darkness, something wrecked and defended
in you, clinging to a vision I'll never share—I saw how
beautiful you were and did not want to be apart.
To seek a creek is to seek a hiding place,
 a place where mystery flattens into
secrecy, where all wooing is lost to a sequence of
indifferent winter winds, black snows
pummeling the flight-paths and meadowed paw-
tracks, burning through
 time, marrow, shadow, birch, ran-
sacking the slopes of warm flesh
after an ordinary day where you come
home from work and grasp my neck, dead
 chill in a water that only
outwardly moves.



And you, who would help him sort the mess,
grain by grain, a heap of seeds—millet,
wheat—who call yourself a reed
 or eagle who would claw at any water he might
need—I was sick at heart. Did you even
consider I might fold into the slough of myself,
a crawlspace of muscles and misgivings,
 plumes of wood-smoke, soft
curve of water that closes up when untouched?
Blind rumor? Blind agriculture?
What *did* you think? That you were right?
That you had the right? That you, like him,

tender in your deer-movements,
didn't need to tread lightly since your eyes
 were full of woolly gold?
Early April—there was sun on the bridge,
out of danger you said, I was
 not there. This is no ice-lit
upper world. Haggard, cracked-open,
 an aggression, crooked device, trick,
accident, or just common self-regard?



And how far beyond two people can desire extend?
I loved that same overmuch stubbornness
that placed you in your intangible world,
 forest of raw nuance and night,
banks of stars and the empty spaces between them
where thought steps onto a bridge
trying to sort what is valuable from what
 appalls—hypocrisy? simple human need?—
that believes in willows, art, wild endeavor,
ravens, otherworldly constellations?
You invented this place in order to live.
And anyone who wants can walk there.



Spring, pre-spring: an increase in pests
and parasites, plants blooming too early.
Below the blue-brown seasons of snow,
the desiccated grooves of branches,
 like unearthly lanterns the animals
are moving dayward.

There is no world like the one surfacing.

When the last blizzard rips the frame of your house,
you hear less and less beyond what you have always heard.
Welcome to your freedom, your bridge,
your secret frozen pool—welcome to your place of
no one, of nothing returned.

I gave in to envy—you gave up a person
for the whole landscape, the roomy vision.
How might we, revenants of a winter dream,
an early spring day, knee-deep in snow,
once banished, belong again?

Under the sagging telephone wires, by the damp
stacked cords of wood, in the white country,
in the northern country, in the two bleached
cavities of the heart, by the ridge of
larches at the edge of these woods I will keep
looking for something to live for
that has its origins in you, its goodness from you,
its hope wrestled from the faith you have in
spaciousness—

we increase our own pain,
we increase our confusion.

Like the dark morph hawks
who crest at great cost below the moon's
rock-clarities, over the snowfields, spellbound.
Their eyes shifting toward the earth.

Broken Sonnet

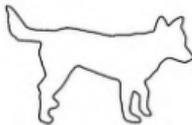
The Letting

The body withholds. It's not
its fault. We steer it, give it a name, a place
to sleep, to shake. A train
needles the woods. The city lake
is sutured blue. The way a thought
endears itself to the thinker—that's the way
it bears its name,
the body. It gives
what it won't take:
itself, whether we're toweling off
or raking leaves, there's always more
to be shed. We cheer it up:
a bowl of figs, a wooey nocturne,
a snowball snow, a snow
just passing through. It's
not our fault. The things we hold are
not us. There
there—the way a summery time
keeps turning on
itself, turning its edge
in you, the body's edge—
the X inside its spot.

The Electric Astrolabe

A single color in my brain is currently hurting.
Like one dark animal whose substance stiffens.
I want to say so many things:
about the crux of so many matters.
What your sash looks like in lamplight.
The order of the eye which is white with craze.
To be composed of little bones.
The planispheric parts of you I'm mapping and mapping.

And if everything that we are is always rising away from us,
and if we have no home in this translatable world,
there is, at least, the excellence of meat.
There is you, darling, and there is me,
and a lovely little urn in which hands are gladly clapping.



Fixed

Lauren Slater



Although he is generally a peaceful man, my husband believes that an animal's worth is roughly equivalent to its edibility. If you can carve, slice, boil, or bake the beast, then it is generally welcome in our home, packaged and frozen or live and wild; but if the animal presents no potential for consumption of the gastro-intestinal sort, then in my husband's mind the life form is an excess weight on the world, an evolutionary glitch or fussy frill that serves no purpose except to clutter our jam-packed planet.

Why he has this attitude I do not know. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that, as a child, he watched his scientist mother drain the blood from rabbits regularly sacrificed for experiments, the soft carcasses tossed away in a floppy heap. As a nine-year-old child, I had a white rabbit, an enormous overgrown genetically unique leporid with pale pink eyes and a quashed nose that continuously quivered in response to the scents around her. I named her *Boule de Neige*, which means snowball in French, and this rabbit became a companion more important to me than any human at the time. *Boule de Neige* rode in my bike basket when I pedaled, or in the baby carriage when I was in a maternal mood; a bonnet on her head and a blanket over

her hunched form. Boule de Neige learned to take a collar and a leash, and hopped alongside me on the sidewalks of our neighborhood, and although it seems impossible to believe now, she also learned a few commands, like “sit!” and “come,” which she did, bounding to me when I called from across our lawn, her ears streaming backwards like braids, her huge floppy paws uplifted so I could see their undersides as she galloped, thick and soft as slippers. Boule de Neige got to know her name, and when tired, she lay her head in my lap, and I would stroke her skull, and feel what a rabbit felt like; the head hard underneath the fluff of white fur, the seams where the plates had fused. Long after Boule de Neige died, I saw a picture of a rabbit’s brain; it was so tiny, truly a pea on a slender stem, barely big enough for a dream, never mind love. And yet, the rabbit had loved me, loved me largely and definitively. Over the years, as I grew up, I came to understand that this was not the point. Whether animals can love, or grieve, or hope, is far less important than the fact that they elicit these emotions in us. What I learned from Boule de Neige was that *I* can love, and grieve, and hope, and so it was that I grew into my humanity, traveling the tunnels dug for me by some small dumb beast.

I am an animal lover. I say this in no small way. I don’t mean I enjoy animals, or find them entertaining, or cute. Nor do I mean I care for animals as accessories, a peripheral part of a well-lived life. What I mean is that animals—especially mammals, and not especially insects—enchant me and inhabit me. I feel as strong a connection to the cat in the cornfield or the white malamute as I do to the members of my own species, defined as we are by tools and looms, smoke and steel, highways and homes and coffins. I understand that I speak from a position of privilege. I understand that if I were a struggling farmer whose chickens kept getting swallowed by coyotes, or a villager in Africa, regularly hunted by hungry lions, I would feel quite differently on the subject; I would be singing, as they say, a new tune. I am thankful for the simplicity of this song. I am also aware that its simplicity is in its surface. Underneath lurk a million dilemmas. Is my attachment to animals a sign of some pathology, a flawed capacity for human intimacy? What is the difference between love and sentimentality? What would it mean if I actually cared as much for the family dogs as I do for my husband,

my... children? Do I perhaps lack the very humanity I just claimed was mine? Am I a wolf dressed up as a lover, a mother? As I write this I can hear, downstairs, the dogs as they awaken. Their collars jangle; their claws click on the floor. The younger dog (thirteen years old) has recently gone blind. She has glaucoma. Her name is Lila Tov, which means *good night* in Hebrew.

If you are a middle-aged woman living in a suburb or a city in the United States of America, then chances are good that your chosen animal of adoration will be a dog. I met my husband before I met my dogs, Lila and Musashi, and my husband's soothing ways gave me no reason to think he was one of those species, boxed in by the bark of his own human brain. Benjamin, a chemist, used to tell me tales about *amanita muscaria*, which is a fancy way of saying mushrooms. I met him in the wet humid summer of 1990, the summer Nelson Mandela came to Boston and preached peace and everywhere the domed caps of mushrooms were popping up in the grass. We found enormous ears of mushrooms seamed against the rotting trunks of fallen trees, and we found minuscule mushrooms huddled at the base of a stockade fence, and he picked one, tweezing it free with his fingers and putting it in my palm. "In Russia," Benjamin told me, "mushrooms are signs of good luck. The Siberians used to believe that at night mushrooms turn into reindeer."

It was easy to fall in love with Benjamin; he made the world seem elfin with his curious assortment of facts about plants and animals and star-shaped molecules made from marshmallows and toothpicks, so we could eat estrogen and air. He was, above all, a kind man. And yet, if that is so, then why is it so difficult for me now to recollect the forms his caring took? What makes a man gentle? Why are some beings so easy to love, while others feel so serrated? And if love is easy—as in the love one woman has for her copper-colored dogs—is it love she in fact feels or something simpler, like affection? What I question is the question: why the need to define love in the first place? I suppose it proves that I am human. A long time ago Linnaeus created categories within categories within categories, and that is how he housed the species with whom we share this blue ball. We do not know of any other animal except the human who is

so in need of boxes, so desperate for the four curt corners that those corners sometimes achieve the magic of art, as in M.C. Escher's endless reproducing boxes or the matryoshka Russian nesting doll, boxes so insistent, so endless, that they paradoxically prove the infinite, circular nature of the warp we walk in.

Where was I? Digressions, I suppose, are also uniquely human; can you imagine a cat digressing from his mouse? Gentle. My husband was gentle, although the particularities—the proof—escapes me now. We married many, many months after we met. Benjamin chose the winter solstice as our wedding day; December 21st, dark by 4 PM, the trees jeweled with pointed icicles. I loved our wedding. We had a chuppah, and fat white flowers in bouquets tied with blue ribbons of silk. When the guests left, Benjamin and I drove together in his tiny dinged up car—a car he still owns today, 15 years later—to a hotel, where we feasted on the leftover root vegetables and drank cheap champagne foaming with cold fizz, tart and excellent on the tongue. We made love—more out of obligation than desire; we were, after all, exhausted by the long day and the weeks of planning, but still, it was sweet. Three weeks later, while walking up the hill to our home, my legs went oddly weak. My breasts were burning. The angle of ascent seemed suddenly unreasonably steep and I began gasping for breath, air-starved and then panicked. I then knew, instantly (collapsed onto the curb, head in hands), that I was pregnant, and had conceived on our wedding night, at the edge of solstice, just as the day turned towards the light of a still-distant spring. The plastic test wand showed the palest plus, tentative but definite at the same time. We aborted that baby—too soon; it was just too soon. I remember lying afterwards in the white room, a thick pad sopping up the blood between my legs, and, still stoned on anesthesia, repeating to myself over and over again, “Phylogeny does not recapitulate ontogeny. Phylogeny does not recapitulate ontogeny.” There was a time in the nineteenth century when scientists believed the development of the human embryo mimicked the evolution of all life on planet Earth. The baby began as fish, turned tadpole, was beaked like a bird, grew and lost its tiny tail, the theory being that the human form passed through every animal shape before achieving its finality. This notion, so intuitively appealing because it confirms the superior status of mankind, was debunked in the early

twentieth century. Apparently we do not begin as bird or duck or dog. We are a singular species, stubbornly immutably human. I had lost a human baby, given it up, or over, and yet the embryo had been no bigger than my thumbnail. I felt no connection to my thumbnail. Outside my window a black-and-cream-colored cat perched on the ledge, its nose as pink as frosting. *Come here, cat.* The cat seemed more alive, more substantial than the embryo now confirmed as medical waste. I was so stoned, so sad, so relieved, so impressed with the cat, with the silver spikes of its whiskers in the winter sunlight. The cat stared and stared at me, its own eyes full of soul, and some slight accusation. Then I turned away. I fell into a deep restorative sleep.

Six months or so after that terminated pregnancy, I announced to Benjamin that I thought we should get an animal. As a girl I had read Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*. In Durrell's world, birds perched on shoulders and spoke a language that was and was not human; if birds could talk, then who—or what—else could know our words? Might I wake up one night to the moon telling its celestial news? Might the rocks have speakable stories? Animals sit on the edge of possibility; they imply—no, prove—that there are worlds outside our world, worlds within our world—but beyond our grasp—and this fact is fantastic, and all one needs in order to experience enchantment.

And it was for the love of enchantment that I wanted an animal other than my husband in the home we were now making. I didn't want a human infant—that much was clear—so what sort of pet was I thinking about? "A monkey," I said one morning to Benjamin over coffee. "Why not get a monkey?"

"An iguana," he said to me. "If we're going to have a beast in this house, then it has to be a reptile."

"Cold blooded," I said. "Who wants cold blood?"

"Monkeys bite," he said. "They're not necessarily nice."

"We could get a dog," I said.

"Foul hounds," he said. "Dogs have no dignity."

"And people?" I said.

"The only animals I want in my home are those that can fit in a soup pot," my husband said. "A beast must be fit to eat." He smiled then, took a bite of his cinnamon toast.

I knew he was half joking, but I could also see something wicked in Benjamin's smile. I could suddenly see he had a second smile, different from the first one, which was, until that point, the only one I knew. This second smile had a curve to it like the warning signs you sometimes see on mountain roads, when the slopes get suddenly steep.

I won't record the rest of the conversation, because it would be a waste of words—the typical “how could you say sos” followed by the generic prepackaged “calm down,” ending in a sudden silence that was brief, like a bubble, and then burst into something soft again. We were, after all, in love.

I remember the morning sun. It was abundant, as though poured from a jug in the sky, washing the room in fantastic gold effects. I myself felt gold, a person trapped in a Vermeer painting. Later on, that night in bed, Benjamin told me more. I knew when we married that his boyhood had been filled with science, and that dinner table conversations were more likely to be about correlation coefficients than current events, but I hadn't known how his mother used to take him to her lab where he had watched her inject guinea pigs with hormones so their litters came out large and twisted. A fertility researcher, my husband's mother had showed him the pickled preserves of hairless pups born to rats dosed up on Fertinex, or the strange remains of monkeys disfigured by progesterone. At age nine he had learned to shuck the hide from a rat and it all seemed sane to him. He told me how his mother had once brought home a wild fox pup, which they kept until its adolescence, and this canine cousin of the dog he described for me fondly, waking up one morning to new snowfall, seeing the animal in the yard, its red coat starkly bright against the fresh encompassing white. “But mostly,” Benjamin said, “we used animals for experiments. Their purpose was to answer questions that concerned human beings.”

“And did you ever question the method of questioning?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “How can you question human health?”

“If it involves the suffering of a sentient being—”

“What would you rather have—a few dead dogs or penicillin?”

“That's a predictable argument,” I said. “I can't believe your mother showed her nine-year-old how to—”

Benjamin cut me off. And from his tone, I could feel we had slipped into a new space, without warning: there it was.

"Let me offer you a few facts," Benjamin said. His voice had an eerie formality, as though it came from a machine inside him. "Dogs bite millions of people every year, mostly children. They kill a few dozen every year too. They deposit over three hundred tons of feces on our sidewalks and carry more e-coli on their tongues than a human toilet bowl that hasn't been flushed."

He paused. His face was slightly flushed, and the reddish hairs on his arms seemed to glow, like iron filings strewn along the skin.

"Dogs are supposed protectors," he continued, "but the fact is they're more likely to bark at the mailman and sleep through a murder; they're *domesticated* into dumbness," my husband said. (So he despised domestication. Where, exactly, did that leave us?) "They are," he pronounced, "a significant biological burden on humankind."

"What's up with you?" I said, and I heard a wrong tone creep into my own voice as well. "Were you traumatized by a poodle, or what?"

"Yes," he said, "by a poodle." Then he smiled, the old Benjamin again, but not quite.

"Come on," I said. "When?"

"Not every event occurs in the traditionally conceived continuum of time," he said.

"You sound dumber than a dog when you speak like that," I said. "I'm not sure you're aware that those words are all noise, no better than a bark."

"Okay," he said. "I've been traumatized by not one poodle," he said, "but by all poodles. Poodles serve as the ultimate evidence of human idiocy," he said. "Dogs with perms; how useless is that?"

"Poodles happen to be very bright," I said. I reached to switch off the light. We lay in the darkness then, without words. The sconce in the hall was still on, and it cast sheets of shadow over the wall. I don't know how many minutes passed, but just as I was falling asleep I saw my husband's hands, huge in the sheet of the shadow; he was making shapes: a peace sign, pinkies walking, wings and wings and wings.

It is a well-documented fact that children who abuse animals are at risk for becoming sociopaths later in life, and from my training as a psychologist I know that standard forensic assessment tools include questions about harming animals right alongside questions about what weapons the patient owns, or how many people he has murdered. Of course neither my husband, nor his mother, nor the thousands of other people who have a cold disregard for animals would be considered abusers, but it's also impossible to deny the possibility that they nevertheless may share some of those traits.

On the other hand, any bipedal could well argue, we all know about crazy ladies who keep households full of felines, and who mutter odd terms of endearment to pets called Precious. I once knew a woman who had an incontinent dog named Betsy. She so adored this dog that she downloaded the animal's bark as her own personal ringtone on her cell phone. Surely this zoophilia is some sort of sickness as well as its opposite, zoo-ogeny. Granted I have made up the latter term, but it points to a non-fiction phenomenon—that much is for sure. Sir Isaac Newton was a mean, socially isolated hominid who spent his lonely life studying apples and stars by candlelight. His singular love was for his Pomeranian pooch, Diamond, who shared his dinner plate with him. Similarly, Alexander Pope was a miserly person, an enormously wealthy man who supposedly so distrusted everything human, including banks, that he kept his cash in a six-foot-high steel safe and wore the key around his neck. Pope's single relationship in all of Britain was to Bounce, which was, lucky for him (and for us, I suppose, for good poets must have some smidgen of kindness in them), not a ball but a giant greyhound who padded about the mansion and drank from a golden dish.

While I have never been quite as extreme as any of these canine keepers, I nevertheless knew, then and now, that my love of animals was extreme—but whether that was extremely good or extremely bad—a sign of mental health or mental illness—I couldn't tell, and frankly still can't. And because in the end love overrides analysis anyway, I didn't much think about what I was doing when, a few days later, after my husband left on a business trip to Nevada, I traveled forty-five minutes from Boston and came back home with not one but *two* puppies. I decided on the Shiba Inu breed because they are smart, agile, and

slightly aloof, all qualities that reminded me of my husband. "The babies' names," said the breeder, "are Wrinkles and Tinkles." Tinkles, I assumed, was the girl.

I have never understood the term some women use to describe their feeling of wanting a child—"baby lust." The term disturbs me not only because it fuses maternity with what sounds practically pornographic, but also, and perhaps more to the point, because I cannot imagine ever lusting after a being so recently drenched in the juices of a placenta. Babies, for days, weeks, even months after they are born still stubbornly reflect their neonatal state; they have that tough, grizzled, weeping stub of an umbilicus, they have that waxy lanugo and are speckled with blood. Human babies are essentially fetuses ejected from the womb. Puppies, on the other hand, are not anything like a fetus; they are born as babies and within a few days of their arrival are playful and soft. Puppies catch onto cuteness ASAP, and at the same time, when you look into their eyes, you can see how they once were wild. I loved Lila and Musashi immediately because they were cute, because I lack the depth or discipline needed to love a human infant so unambivalently, and because I believe it is in my genes to care about canines. Dogs, after all, influenced human evolution: Neanderthals, who didn't have dogs, died out, while Cro-Magnons survived (and thrived) perhaps because they learned to live with these wolves who were no longer wolves, learned to hunt with them and thereby increase their bounty; learned to live with them, and thereby make their homes safe, for these earliest dogs barked in alarm at the sound of a predator. The general thought is that we domesticated dogs, but it may be that those human beings who had the genes allowing them to love dogs flourished, while those who didn't floundered. In this sense, we did not evolve dogs so much as they evolved us, and those who love them do so because they see in these beautiful animals the raw engine of evolution, the primitive plains we once lived upon, the smells, the sounds of wildness and the rush of comfort that must have come from feeling the heat of the canine body, curled close to you in those nights before light.

I had the puppies, Lila and Musashi, for two days on my own, and then it was time for Benjamin to return. I picked him up at the airport. In the week or

so he had been gone his beard had grown, not exactly longer, but wider, so his face seemed fat.

Benjamin got into the car, kissed me. There was his smell again—(another reason for my kinship with the canine?)—and I loved him all over again.

“There’s a surprise for you when you get home,” I said.

What, he wanted to know.

“Guess,” I said.

“You got a dog,” he said, without even pausing to think.

“Jesus,” I said. I paused. “Musashi and Lila,” I said.

“You named the dog Musashianlila?” he said. “Cool,” he said. “Original.”

“Musashi—*and*—Lila,” I said. “And, as in an article of speech, a coordinating conjunction between two separate beings, as in, two dogs, 1) Musashi; 2) Lila.” I talked this way for a reason. Benjamin loves me best when I can use numbers in my communications.

“Two dogs?” he said. “Two foul hounds. I knew you were going to do something like that.”

“Are you mad?” I asked.

“I am,” he said. “A little.”

“Look,” I said. “I know with one-hundred-percent assuredness that you will fall in love with these puppies. They are the cu—they are not only very cute,” I said, “but they are the perfect vehicles through which to reflect on our culture’s attitude toward cuteness. I’m telling you,” I said. “Owning a dog can be intellectual.”

He didn’t say anything.

“All right,” I said. “Aside from giving them back, what can I do to make this up to you?”

“You can stop at the next store,” he said.

“Why?” I said.

“As soon as I buy two soup pots,” he said, “everything will fall into place.”

Then he smiled, and I figured we’d be fine.

Of course we weren’t fine—what couple is? Twelve years have passed since then and out of the ten couples I know, six are getting divorced. By that standard,

we've done better than most. Still, I'd be lying if I said we hadn't discussed divorce, mostly as a threat, sometimes in despair. The dogs have been many things to each of us, but two things they have never been: 1) a meal, and 2) vehicles through which to contemplate American attitudes toward cuteness. The dogs have been a source of fun, scorn, work, bills, barking, dirt, fur, softness, sickness, safety, companionship, experiments (never invasive), exercise, and, I believe, love. They have also been mirrors not only to ourselves but to our marriage. There has been a lot of talk lately about pet therapy; pets for the elderly, the insane, the depressed. What no one has yet discovered is pet marital therapy; put a dog in the consulting room, and you'll soon enough see spouses begin to bark.

This happened, for us, right away; before we even got the dogs. But more was to come. We got home from the airport. The two precious pooches were right there at the door, so small, so furry, their tiny tails jiggling so hard they looked like they might detach. "Benjamin, Musashi," I said, picking up the slightly larger male and giving Ben his penny-sized paw to shake. Benjamin, good sport that he is (sometimes), shook it and doffed an imaginary hat. "Nice to meet you, Sir," he said. We repeated the same ritual with Lila, who is very much unlike her high-strung brother. Lila has a Cindy Lauper personality. She is tough and flamboyant. She is a rock star of the dog world. She howls and croons her ballads while Musashi, at the sound of anything that snaps or pops, crouches in a corner and shivers. Lila gave Ben a wet canine kiss that left a line of glisten on his face.

Before the dogs we had been a happy couple in an uncomplicated way. It was therefore inevitable, I suppose, that something divisive would enter our lives, because marriage—like physics, literature, and carpentry—is almost always synonymous with complexity. The dogs came over us like a cloud, something impossibly soft and fuzzy. They arrived in our home in the winter of our first married year, during a freeze so deep the snow was solid enough to stomp on, and mornings were filled with the sounds of cars coughing and squealing as they slid on icy streets. The puppies, of course, were incontinent, for all intents and purposes. Housetraining required that I rise every three or so hours and head outside, into the pitch-black coldness, parka wrapped around my nightgown, feet shoved sockless into big rubber boots. Midnight, 3 AM, no one around

then but me and my pups, their urine steaming small holes through the snow, good boy, good girl. There were the required visits to the vet, the building of a fence, a carpenter who came to cut a square in our back door—a dog door they learned to use with the aid of chicken and cheese as rewards. There were several emergency overdoses, rushing Musashi to the veterinary hospital at dawn, the embarrassing explanation to the blond-haired female vet who always seemed severe and judgmental. “He, um, he, uh, he swallowed my medicine.” “What *kind* of medicine?” In an age of polypharmacy, embarrassment nearly replaced my fear for the dog’s survival. First it was Prozac; then it was Ativan, for anxiety; then it was the mood stabilizer, lithium—Musashi sampled them all, the child protection caps no impediment to him as he cracked the bottles with his teeth and chomped on pills he found strangely tasty. “I don’t understand,” said the vet at our third visit, “how he manages to get your medication-*s*.” I thought I heard her emphasize the plural. “It is, I mean, they are in a drawer, aren’t they?”

“Of course they are in a drawer,” I said. “This dog can open drawers,” which was true, but she clearly believed I was delusional. I finally solved the problem by hiding my drugs on a shelf so high I to this day need a ladder in order to medicate myself.

And it was all terrible and amusing and fun and hard work but in the center of it all was a little hole, like those the dogs left when they pissed in the snow, a cold, steamy, smelly little hole in my heart because Benjamin participated in none of this with me. These were not our dogs. They were my dogs. He petted them; he occasionally tossed a ball or a bone, but when I asked him, “Do you love the dogs?” he always said, “No. I like them.” Once, in a fit of blind maternity, I said to one of the pups, “Mama’s here,” and he looked at me with something like scorn and horror combined. “You’re not their mother,” he said.

“I am,” I said. “These dogs are a part of our family, aren’t they?”

“No,” he said. “These dogs are our roommates.”

In every marriage there are betrayals; the question is how soon they happen, how many, and of what sort. I remember quite clearly the first time I betrayed Benjamin. The puppies were growing fast, their fluff becoming fur, the round

snouts taking on a sharper shape. At four months or so Lila's urine came out tinged with blood; an infection? No. She was going into heat. Our regular vet—a jolly Irish woman completely unlike the ER vet—told me it was time; Lila needed to be spayed. Musashi, who had testicles so tiny one couldn't really see them, nevertheless now needed to be neutered as well.

Of course it sounds terrible—*spayed*—a sharp hoe, shredded earth, and *neutered*, not as violent-sounding, but shameful nonetheless. Still, the reasons for the procedures far outweigh the recoiling they naturally give rise to. I told Ben. He was eating oatmeal at our table, spoon at the ledge of his lips; he set down his spoon. *Clink*. “You’re going to *remove* Musashi’s testicles?” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

I could tell by his tone we were in for trouble, entirely unanticipated, because I knew he didn't give a damn about the dogs, so I never imagined he might care in any way about one of their body parts.

“You can't remove a man's testicles,” he said.

“He's not a man,” I said. “He's a dog.”

“You can't do that,” Ben said. He seemed truly stumped, his eyes alarmed; this was a highly articulate person, a person with a love of debate who was suddenly silenced, stumbling over a panic as primitive as what a fish might feel flailing on a hook. I could not believe it. I could not believe my husband, for all his professed distance from dogs, was confusing his testicles with theirs, and I said so.

“I am *not* confused,” Ben said.

“Seems to me like you are,” I said. “You can't be a responsible pet owner and not neuter your dogs.”

“That's just some right-wing mumbo jumbo,” he said. “Remove an animal's testicles and you fuck up its hormones. You cripple it. The animal doesn't mature the right way.”

“I thought you didn't care about animals,” I said.

“I don't,” he said. “I raise this objection on theory. You can't take testicles from a male. I won't have a neutered male in this house.”

“I see,” I said. My voice grew icy then. “You won't have a neutered male but a neutered female is fine. And you call yourself a feminist?”

"I object to the procedure in Lila as well," he said, but it was obvious from his voice—he was backpedaling.

"Anyway," I said. "Who are you to call neutering an animal mumbo jumbo? What do you know of the issue?"

There then followed a still-more-ridiculous discussion about how he needed to know nothing of the issue because he was a scientist with a knowledge of the importance of hormones in the growth of any mammal, while I countered about the devastating effects of pet overpopulation, an argument that spiraled up, and up, like cigarette smoke, polluting the air, until at last he said, "Don't neuter Musashi. I am asking you not to do it."

I knew, then, that I was dealing with an irrational man. And worse, a man who would protect his kind, but was fine as concerned the fate of the female. Lila would be sliced open like a freshly baked cake, her core cut out, the tiny bean-sized sac of the uterus, the ovaries even now stuffed with their billions of eggs, and then sewn up, her healing hard.

I said okay; I would not fix Musashi. The next day, Lila had her surgery, came home in a cage and didn't move for days. The vet, it seems, was rough; on her shaved belly we could see an oozing railroad of a wound that ran from her anus to her chest, a huge incision for such a tiny task. "Lila, Lila," Benjamin said. He sat by her crate, pet her head, brought her water in a small saucer. He was rigorous with her medication, pumping it into her mouth on a precise schedule, and smiling when she took her first timid steps. And it is exactly this—the inconsistencies—that make human loves so snarled. A gentle man? Yes. A blind man? As are we all, sometimes. When Lila was well enough, Benjamin came with me, for the first time, to the Fells, a large wooded area near our house, and we ran with the dogs through the winter woods. Benjamin tied small branches to the dogs' heads, turned them into reindeer, and then we watched as they cantered along, made magic by his hands; these, my husband's hands. For better and for worse.

And the betrayal? I had Musashi neutered behind Ben's back. The night of our neutering fight, I planned my strategy with barely a twinge of guilt. I would

wait four months, enough time so that the conversation—the issue itself—was all but forgotten, but not so much time that the puppy would have become a dog with an observable scrotum, at which point a secret surgery would have been impossible. Lest our vet ever somehow let it slip in Ben's possible future presence, I would bring the dog to a different vet, one we were sure never to see again. Problem #1: explaining why Musashi had stitches between his legs. I would say he got a deep scrape at the park. Problem #2: explaining, when the dog finally became fully mature, why he had no testicles. When this happened, as it inevitably would, I decided right then and there that I would feign concern, promise to take him to the doctor, then claim I had and announce that night at dinner that the vet had diagnosed Musashi fully male, but with undescended testicles. It all seemed so simple. And, in fact, it was.

Winter turned to summer turned to fall. As planned, Musashi was neutered in a covert operation, and when later that evening Ben noticed the two small stitches, I gave my rehearsed explanation. It all went by without a hitch. Brilliant. Bad. It seemed a long time went by before the inevitable confrontation, before the day Benjamin finally observed, nearly one year later, that the dog, now fully grown, had no balls. It was summer, and I had just returned from picking flowers on "Poop Hill," the name the neighborhood children had given to the tract of land used by city dogs as an outhouse. Most people, as they approached Poop Hill, gave their animals a long leash, so the canines could find their deposit spot on the grass while their humans stayed safe on the pavement. But I liked Poop Hill because the flowers, so well fertilized, were abundant, bright, and ironically sweet-smelling. And there I was, holding a fistful of my bright finds, standing in our hallway, the dogs lapping up water from their dish, a Sunday, and Ben knelt down to give the unusual but occasional scritch to Musashi's backside. This time, in response, Musashi lay down, rolled over, and pedaled his paws in the air, a pose Benjamin found especially undignifying, and from which he would inevitably recoil. But for some reason, he didn't. A petal from a flower I was holding floated dramatically down and landed impishly, or accusingly, right at the base of the pup's denuded penis. Benjamin leaned close, picked it off. "Hey," he said, still kneeling, looking down.

"Hey what," I said, although I knew exactly what was coming.

"This dog has no balls," he said.

"No balls?" I said. "C'mon."

"Seriously," he said. "Look here."

I did, of course, look there. "I see some balls," I said, "right there." I pointed to a place too near the tip where there was a tiny bilateral bulge, a quirk the dog had had since infancy.

"You think those are balls?" Ben said to me. "Are you serious?"

"Well," I said. "Isn't it possible to have, you know, highballs?" I started laughing then, slapping my knee and snorting. "I'm so hilarious," I said. "Aren't I?"

Ben didn't say anything. "Aren't I?" I said again, and now there was a ball in my throat, so swallowing was suddenly difficult.

"What's wrong with Musashi?" Ben said. "Could they have neutered him before you bought him?"

"I doubt it," I said. "I mean, he was practically newborn. I'll take him to the vet, check it out."

Which I didn't. But three nights later I said, "so I took him to the vet— etc. etc."

"Undescended?" Benjamin said to me.

"Yeah," I said.

"Musashi," Ben said. He gave one of his magnificent whistles then, and the dogs came bounding through their door and into the kitchen.

"Hey friend," Benjamin said to Musashi. He pulled out his paws then, so the dog slipped gently down, and then he turned the animal over, studied him hard.

"Undescended," Ben then said again, not a question but a statement. He looked from the dog to me, then back to the dog again. A long time seemed to pass. At last he went, stood by the window. What was it he saw out there? "Hey," I said, but he either didn't hear or didn't want to listen. Then he left the room.


PART TWO


If it sounds like our marriage was bad, it wasn't. We shared so many things, I am only telling of the troubles. Benjamin called me "Pie," short for Sweetie Pie. I loved to hear him sleep-talk, long monologues about dolphins and computer code. In 1999, we set about the task of conceiving as though it were exactly that—a task, a military mission. We "succeeded" after battle number three, the bloodless battle, my periods gone. At gestational month four we discovered we were having a girl, a fact that made the prospect only marginally more appealing. In truth the baby was largely Benjamin's idea; my zealous approach to conception arose more in response to challenge than desire. "Look how much you care for the dogs," my friend Elizabeth kept reassuring me. "If you love the dogs so much, obviously you're a person capable of attachment. You won't have a problem."

But I would. I did. Have a problem. It was easy enough to give voice to my *ambivalence* about having a child; maternal ambivalence is *trés chic* these days because it is "edgy" while also being in style, the former canceling the latter, at least in my opinion. What I didn't say—okay. What if I couldn't love the baby *as much as* I loved my dogs? Or, what if I found I loved both the baby and the animals *equally*? Can you imagine admitting that? In the hyper-educated community that comprises my culture, a culture that boasts more PhDs per square mile than in any other part of the country, or even the world, such a feeling for one's pets is more blasphemous than having a house decorated with stenciled hearts, or printing a tattoo of a serpent on your bicep. In my culture, it's tentatively okay to have a pet, but one must avoid the sentimentality associated with it at all costs. One must rigidly remember not to anthropomorphize, and above all not to ooze emotion over domesticated beasts, for which consumers stupidly spend over billions of dollars on toys while all of Africa is starving.

So how could I comfortably say, or feel, that I might love daughter and dogs equally? Did I not know the difference between my meats, McDonald's on the

one hand, expensive organic ribeye on the other? *A whole new middle class navel-gazing female writer problem*, the critics might write, if they wrote anything at all. *Domesticity diminished to its most insignificant level*. And yet, were I to claim I valued my dogs and my daughter equally, I would not in fact be making an insignificant statement. I would be in violation of a sacred human stance in place in the western world since pets first took up residence in the human household, approximately one hundred years ago. As James Serpell explains in his history of pet-keeping in America, the pet served many purposes for its Victorian owners, and domestic animals still serve these purposes today. They are companions, yes; but pets also exist to prove and reconsolidate the human-made hierarchy the family depends upon for its emotional and physical functioning. Pets provide a bottom ground and, in doing so, ensure a middle and a top.

If I had known then what I know now, perhaps I could have been comforted. There are places, and times, far far away from here—there are, and were places—where people loved animals as much as, if not more than, their own children. Explorer James Galton, in the eighteenth century, came upon aboriginal Australian women who “habitually [fed] the puppies they intend[ed] to rear from their own breasts, and show[ed] an affection for them equal to, if not exceeding, that to their own infants” (Serpell, 64). Another anthropologist of the nineteenth century wrote that in Barsana, women and shamans made pets of parrots, fruit bats and lizards, and apparently felt such love for their animals that they would masticate for them plants and bananas while their own human babies stayed hungry at their sides. My favorite image is that reported by an unknown anthropologist in the 1960s; living amongst the Semang Negritos of Malaysia, he wrote of seeing a woman running down the street in a great hurry, a baby at one breast, a monkey at the other.

My breasts: they grew in pregnancy, the veins bulging blue and a particular deep purple whose hue I had never seen before, nor since. The nipples swelled and sensitized, at the end the size of strawberries, huge and indecent. Around month six I had my amnio—all was well—except the baby on the screen did not look human, nor animal, nor plant. She came from a category not yet created by Linnaeus; all static and blips, she lived inside the Hewlett Packard screen

that showed her shape. And the bulge in my belly? What accounted for that? I dreamt, at night, that I gave birth to a snowman, a two-legged tree, my sister, who came out holding a bottle of shampoo. Someone tried to wash my hair and the soap stung in my eyes. There was grit, burn, push, pull, Dr. Doolittle and his magic camel in the desert, the moon as tiny as a Cheerio in some strange sky. I woke up, scared and big.

I had the baby. Human birth is an unreasonable proposition; her head was too big for my bipedal pelvis; it got stuck in the brackets of bone. Hyenas, however, give birth through the clitoris, so I still count myself amongst the luckier beasts on our planet. There she was, seven pounds, waxy and wet.

Five days later, C-section healing, Benjamin and I brought our daughter home. We arrived to two dogs howling with joy—hello, hello, hello, kisses and slurps all around, such a long time, so GOOD to see you, you too, leaping on hind legs, their short forelegs dangling the way they do, their ears pressed back in pleasure. All the books I'd read emphasized the importance of letting the dogs thoroughly sniff the new family member. I lowered the bundle of baby down. The summer breeze blew in, and halfway to their level, the dogs caught a whiff of the strange smell. They froze. Their eyes turned canine, carnivore, the little dots of yellow in the iris with a wolfish gleam.

"Stop," said Ben. He claims he heard a low growl emanating from Lila's throat. Had I heard it, I would have stopped, of course. I, however, heard nothing.

"Musashi, Lila," I sang. Something was amiss, but what? "This is Clara," I said, and then she was down, this baby so bundled only the disc of her face was visible, the tiny lips, the perfect mini nose and eyelids scrawled with arteries.

Lila, always the more aggressive, stepped forward. Her snout was wet, her black lips seamed shut; but it was the eyes that gave me pause. Slowly, slowly, she lifted one foot and pawed at the bunting, almost batted it—playful? Aggressive? Curious? Musashi followed, his blocky head low down, and then, before I could stop them their noses were in the wrappings, the huff huff of their hungry breath, the child screamed, the dogs shot back, Ben grabbed the baby from me, his own face full of canine rage—"How *could* you?" he spit. "They've bitten her."

Understand, I was doped up on drugs, painkillers coursing through my

system, the whole world wavy, and I had done what all the books instructed. “No,” I said. “No.” We peeled back the wrappings. Our baby was unbroken, everywhere. In an instant she plunged into slumber again. Later on, when we removed her diaper, we saw blood inside it, but that, we knew, was not from the dogs. Female infants shortly after birth often menstruate, if you can call it that, in response to the maternal hormones. Yes, that blood came from me.

I have never brought up, certainly not then, or now, until now, the idea that I might love my animals as much as my child, or children. No one has ever thought to ask, despite the fact that everyone I know, as hyper-educated as they all are, understands that meaning is often found in the questions we fail to form. The oversight has freed me to fret privately, and sometimes not at all. While some pluck petals off the daisy—he loves me, he loves me not—my chant is less melodic, as clunky as the conundrum it echoes; *I love her more, I love her less, I love them all the same*. At the end of this exercise, what am I left with? A shredded flower, hands painted with pollen, cupped up and empty. I said nothing to anyone, ever.

But as a strategy, silence does not work to diminish the tugs one would rather not feel. As a mother, I *wanted* to feel clearly and cleanly driven *only* to my offspring, that packet of genes and nerves, that person in my pocket for the first nine months of her life, but it didn't happen that way. In the early years of my daughter's life, and then my son's life too, when he was later born, I would sometimes feel a longing for my dogs that overrode every other affection, and made no sense to me, given that I had as much physicality from my mate and babies as any person could need. But I wanted to touch *another kind of being*. I wanted snout and paw. I love the canine paw, its ridges of interstitial fur, its surface cracked and cratered. I love the shape of the snout, the nostrils, the oblong ears, the teeth, tartared and sharp, all of it pure paradox—perhaps this is what I love—how non-human animals confirm for us the rapturous fact that as human beings we are part of a long chain which, distilled to its final essence, would contain the etiology of everything on Earth. We have so much company here, and perhaps abroad as well, because the source of life is not confined to our earthly home; helium, oxygen, carbon; this is the stuff of wolves and planets, snakes and stars. Who knows how far we go.

And it was this, this felt biological *need* to connect beyond my human confines, that drew me downstairs, again and again, after my babies were asleep. I'd sit in the kitchen and groom my dogs. Their undercoats were always dense with down, the fur flew, piling up in drifts I swept into green garbage bags, huge bloated bags that looked heavy with trash but that drifted in the wind on garbage night. I'd stack them on the curb, but the fur-stuffed bags always flew away, flew high above the roofs of our city while over and over again I brushed the pups, until it was very late, and Benjamin came down, tired-eyed, 2 AM, first feeding over now, he'd see me on the floor, then and now. "Making love with the pups?" he'd ask, and still does, and I said the only thing I could.

Yes.

With one child, and then a second, our lives got busier and busier. The children arrived into a marriage already divided by the dogs; our babies widened the wedge, and drove its edges deeper down. We were two parents with full-time jobs and only a moderate income, two parents determined to give their kids the best they could—skating lessons, pottery lessons, day camps, Spanish tutoring, the expectations quadrupled, along with the bills, while time tucked its tail between its legs and went away. We lost time, traded it in for love, but here's the quandary; love and time are hopelessly intertwined.

Benjamin and I worked hard to keep up with the accumulating costs of providing a middle-class education. Because we live in an urban area where the schools are poor, our goal was to save enough for private school, to the tune of \$40,000 a year, not counting looming college costs. And forget about retirement. We doubted we'd survive the stress.

It was during these years that Ben developed a mysterious arm ailment that defied precise diagnosis. Thoracic outlet syndrome, epicondylitis, carpal tunnel, whatever it was, the ailment resulted from the computer, which he used most moments of his seventy-hour work week. Unresponsive to any type of treatment except morphine, the pain drained his face, beat in the back of his neck, his burning arms hanging useless by his sides. There were visits to pain clinics, so many I cannot count, each one exactly like the other; hushed and cold, tiled and

white. There were visits to pharmacologists, psychologists, neurologists, chiropractors, while for the children there were yearly check-ups, dental appointments, ear infections, strep throat, stomach bugs, vomit vomit vomit. If I told you we ever had fun during these years, you would not believe it; neither would I. We did. When Clara was five, we received a reminder card from our veterinarian: time for the canines' various vaccines, the Heartgard medication, time for the toenail clipping, the teeth cleaning, the fecal tests. "We spend," said Benjamin, when Clara was five, "well over a thousand dollars a year on these animals."

We were in the kitchen. I was spooning mash into our second-born's mouth. "They're worth it," I said.

No comment.

"To me," I added.

"But to us?" he said.

"These dogs have taught our children a lot," I said, and they had. From them our daughter had learned gentleness (*suavo, suave*), and a certain perspicacity.

"Yes," said Benjamin. "They have taught our children a lot. I agree." He didn't say anything after that.

"What," I said.

"They just seem ... I don't know," he said. "A lot of things. We have limited resources."

"If we can afford cable," I said. "Then I think we can afford our pets."

"We can," he said. "But," and then again he stopped. He seemed to want to say something hard, something true for him. I could sense him running straight into the hot heart of a feeling, at the last second scuttering to a stop. When he spoke again, he had assumed his professorial stance.

"Pets," he said, "are a product of bourgeois culture. Communist cultures abhorred pet keeping, and for a real reason. It is a sign of indulgence to spend so much money on dog food and diamond-studded collars and high-tech medical care when people are starving; it is wrong. It is a problem of priority."

"No," I said. In fact I said this much later, weeks or months later, having by then armed myself with the research I might need in order to defend the dogs

and their place in our family. What I found: cultures rich and poor alike all throughout history have kept pets. Far from being a bourgeois indulgence, there have been many impoverished societies where companion animals were prevalent, despite the fact that they contributed nothing economically. Looking back, I see my research had a frantic feel, because at some unspecified point during these years of birthing and raising babies—at some point I cannot locate—I think I must have admitted to myself that when it came to hierarchies of caring, I couldn't quite construct them. Perhaps the realization occurred when one day, in a park, I lost track of my dog and daughter both, and for a split second before I caught sight of them, could not quite figure out who to search for first; or perhaps it happened when Clara was two and I experienced, with equal horror, and within the same two-day period, the brutal rape and murder of Samantha Runyon, a five-year-old girl whose abduction was widely televised, and the less televised but to me equally devastating footage of dogs, thousands of them, being clubbed to death in China for no reason except their status, the camera capturing the cracking of their skulls and buckling knees. In the end, pain is pain is pain and its repetition has no poetic possibilities.

Does this then mean that if forced to choose between my children and my dogs I would have to stop, to consider? If I were to say yes, then who would I be but one of the beasts my husband hates, fit for the soup pot surely? Why is it, I'd like to know, that philosophical questions always come to this point, the bared bone, the crux we never live in? I am, thank God or Gaia, not forced to make this choice, but nor do I wish to dodge this particular bullet in this high-minded hunt. If forced to make the choice (big sigh) I would choose my children, my babies, my darlings, my doves, but not because I love them more. I would choose them because their humanity comes prepackaged with a particular prize, booby or not I cannot say. The prize at the bottom of the human cereal box is this: the future. We know it's out there while other animals, we think, do not. For this reason, I believe the human species suffers more at the sight of the final door.

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Chronic pain is its own form of hell. My husband's arms grew gimpy. His hands got spastic and simple tasks—twisting the top off a can—became impossible.

Sometimes, in the nights, I would wake up and find Benjamin lying on his back, his flaming arms stuck straight up in the air, staring at the dark through his splayed fingers. The man with the elfin humor—he went away and someone distant took his place. I remember the night he stood in the living room holding our young, sleeping son. I was in the kitchen, fixing dinner. I heard a crash and came running. What I found: Benjamin standing stricken on the floor, his arms held out in front of him as though they were dripping poison. On the floor Lucas screamed himself blue. "I dropped our baby," Benjamin whispered, tears I had never seen before coming copious from his eyes.

There is nothing that can be said for a situation such as this. My husband stopped working for two years; he was doped on drugs he used and then misused. "Get a job," I said. I screamed. "Doing what?" he said. "Drive a FedEx truck if you have to," I said, "get disability; do something." Nothing. The pain claimed him completely, was worth nothing to us but the zero balance it brought into our lives. I had my animals and my children. I had, we had, that stolid, solid zero.

Nevertheless, inside every zero is an aperture one hopes never to have to fill. Eventually (so slowly!) I saw small things go into my husband's hole, or perhaps I created these things for comfort. After six years of pain he said to me one evening, "I have not had the life I wish I'd had."

What I thought: *I am not what you wished for.* What I said: "For what did you wish?"

"I could have lived in Indonesia," he said. "I could have stayed in graduate school. I could have become an ethnobotanist. I could have—" a sentence he failed to finish.

"I'm sorry," I said. I was stung and small. But I was also grateful for his words, the plain straight simple words, words in need of no numbers because they are of the infinite sort.

We both turned forty that year. His birthday was in October, a particularly virulent fall full of fevered trees, delirious leaves of dark wine and ochre. The world was so saturated with pain and color and noise and rush that our white hairs stood out stark and obvious. On a Monday Benjamin took out a calendar and a computer. "Do you realize," he said to me after some time punching numbers, "we have about 120,000 days left?" On Tuesday, when we had only 119,999 days left, Benjamin gave his great whistle and the dogs, who once would have bounded over at the sound, stretched creakily and came cautiously trotting. "Lila girl," he said. He cupped her bony chin in his hand. She turned her brown eyes up to him. "Look," he said. "She's got some gray on the muzzle," and indeed she did. So did her brother. Ben nodded, as though inwardly confirming an obvious but until then unseen fact. Like us, they live and die.

Like us.

There is just one more part to this story, which will go on past this page, and end at another point in the not-too-distant future. I came downstairs the next day; our children, growing fast, now in school; Clara in first grade, Lucas in pre-school. I found Lila hunched in the hall, shivering. She had always been a robustly healthy dog whose only problem was with her weight, so when I saw her shivering, I knew it was bad. I called to her and she swung her head in my direction, tried to walk towards me, her solid legs buckling under her, bringing her body down hard. "Lila. Lila. What is it?" I held her head in my hands, felt her nose, which was dry and hot, and when I offered her favorite food, a bowl of strawberry ice cream, she turned away. I raced her to the veterinary hospital thinking fever, flu, rabies, thinking old old old, and when we arrived they whisked her away, through the swinging metal doors and I waited then, alone in the waiting room the size of a shower stall, on the wall a picture of a feline skeleton, the bones unbelievably wispy, more like strands of hair than things of substance, of support.

When, hours later, the vet came out, she had this to say to me: "Your dog has glaucoma. The pressure in her eyes went much too high." The vet paused. "Your dog" she said, "is completely blind."

Blind! How could Lila be blind when just yesterday she wasn't? The vet explained—it can happen. *It can happen happen happen* I said to myself as I drove home, without my dog. She stayed in the hospital for two days. When I came back to get her, I saw in a second that Lila had lost more than her eyes. A vet technician carried her to me. My fat, feisty dog now huddled in fear, then lay limp in my lap, I calling to her—*Lila, Lila*—she at last turning towards me, her eyes marbled over, her face so empty of expression that I saw in a flash what so many scientists deny; dogs can scowl, smirk and smile; their faces are mobile maps of reaction, of *feeling*, yes; the presence and variety of canine expression becomes terribly obvious to humans perhaps only in its absence. My Lila, her middle name Tov, which together mean *good night* in Hebrew. I hoped, for her unseeing sake, that this was so.

It was Sunday when the dog came home. I had told the children. Clara, seven years old, understood; Lucas, two, did not. Ben had an appropriately sympathetic reaction but, not surprisingly, seemed more or less unmoved by the event. Until he saw Lila, that is. I carried Lila into the house and set her down on the living room floor. My family and I stood silent on the sidelines, watching her. Musashi padded up to her, very tentatively sniffed his constant companion of twelve years, and then slowly, slowly backed away, and kept backing away until, at last, he turned tail and fled. Lila, the unabashed animal whose happiest moments had been rolling in the grass, her whole body a comma of pure pleasure, sat very small on the living room floor, moving her head slowly from side to side, her blank eyes filled with a bluish fluid that oozed over their reddened rims and left damp stains on her copper coat. "Lila, Lila," Clara called, and clapped her hands. The dog stumbled towards the sound, veered off course, crashed into a chair, stopped. "Lila!" I called again. Trooper, she forged forward but walked into a wall. Urine puddled beneath her, a rank strong smell: panic. Lucas began to wail. Ben looked slapped. I carried my dog in my arms upstairs. Her rump was soaked and smelly. I didn't care. I lay with her on the bed. The house was quiet. It was days before anyone wiped up the pee and by then it had sunk into the wood, hardened at its edges. Ben scraped it with a knife. "Poor Lila," he said, rubbing

his arms. "Poor Lila." He paused, held his lame hand up in the air. "Our dog," he said. "*Our* [italics mine] dog has gone blind as a bat."

Bats, of course, have echolocation but dogs, even with their superior sense of smell, have nothing of the sort. For two weeks Lila didn't move and because I hated to see her suffer I said to Ben, "maybe I should put her down."

His answer surprised me. "Give her some time," he said. He had a startled look in his eyes, white hair on his head: "Give me some time," is maybe what he meant.

And so I did. And something strange happened. Benjamin began to watch *our* dog. It was a simple sort of seeing, but different from anything he had ever done before. Suddenly, now, Lila was an object of interest. I caught him standing in the hall, just studying her, his own head cocked like a curious canine's. I caught him holding her chin in his palm and looking into her dead eyes. I remember when she took her first blind steps, how we hooted and clapped. How he hooted and clapped.

After that, her changes came quick. She gained her confidence; she reaped Ben's edible rewards, his huge chunks of cheese and bread. Lila braved the front stairs, and then the stairs leading out back. She chased birds she couldn't see, hunting solely by smell and sound. Sometimes her abilities were so precise we swore she had some vision left, but she didn't; *stone blind*, the vet said. Perhaps this explains not how but why she developed a strange sixth sense that allowed her to feel the presence and placement of objects in a room. Her abilities impressed Benjamin who had jettisoned his own talents, stopped working, and let pain take its prominent place. One evening, he threw a ball into the dining room. Strewn in the path were the objects of chaotic family life: dolls and toy trucks, a sock, a jutting chair. "Ball," Ben shouted, and at the sound of the rubbery smack Lila bounded towards it, like a skier expertly maneuvering the twisted trail; she swerved cleanly around the furniture, sidestepped the toys, and locked onto the ball with her open maw in a series of seconds. She then turned, trotted calmly back to Benjamin, and dropped the ball at his feet, head turned upwards, half coquettish, half challenging, as though she were saying, "See what I can do? Now it's your turn."

And it was. Benjamin, by the way, would deny my interpretation, accuse me of poetic license, and perhaps he is right. But in my memory of this time, Lila's blindness and her subsequent grace coincides with his return to work. It coincides with his desire to learn about more than computer code, because one day soon after our dog's demise and return, he told me he would like to have an orchard. "Fruit trees," Ben said, as though the phrase itself were crisp, like an apple. There was some subtle shift about his eyes, a look impossible to measure, certainly to prove, a tiny crack in a closed door, the single line of light all the more brilliant because of the darkness that defines it.

Lila returned and proved her courage and Ben began to chop wood as a way to strengthen his arms, and find his fire too. He stopped most of his pain medications. I can think of many other examples to set down here, but then I stop. I don't. I want to resist the neat nature of my conclusions, my desire to fuse our dog's recovery with my husband's, but this is what makes me human, as opposed to fish or fowl; I seek my squares of meaning. Therefore, allow me to mention Ben's mysterious desire for a goat that surfaced just as the blind dog was learning to balance on her hind legs, or his willingness to consider alternate activities outside the computer, activities that relied on different muscles and senses. "I need physical activity," Benjamin started to say, he who had sat in a chair for the past several years; and he went walking.

In our educated middle- and upper-middle-class American culture, sentimentality is akin to sin. We judge intelligence by the presence of sentimentality's opposite: irony. Animals, especially of the domestic sort, appear to lack irony, and perhaps this is what makes them ineligible for most academic discourse. And yet, why do we so resist sentimentality and its accoutrements? Maybe because at its extreme, sentimentality leads to a dangerous simplicity, the sort of simplicity that allows one to make pernicious and reductive conclusions about the world. The Nazis are a prime example of sentimentality's dark side; they pined for a pure Nordic race in a pure Nordic land lined with lupines and ponds. It is therefore all the more interesting, and frightening, to learn that the Nazis were also avid animal lovers; they burned human beings but kept beautiful zoos. Hitler's palace

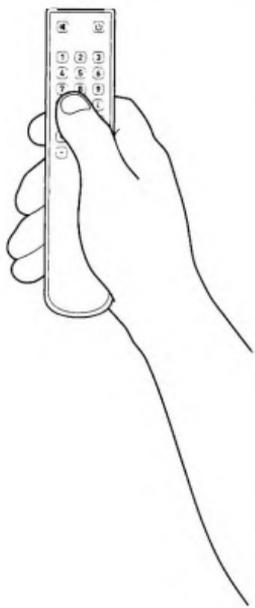
was populated by dogs he treated regally, and at the end of his life—before he killed himself—he risked his own life by sneaking outside his bunker so he could walk his dog Blondi, the despot's best beloved purebred. I know these facts, along with many others of the same sort, and, therefore, inside my love of dogs I have a guard dog that watches.

The guard dog may not know enough to worry but I do. Therefore, I cannot lie and say that I came home one night in our 43rd year and found my transformed mate on the couch, canines draped over his still-hurting arms like breathing bandages, a half-sleepy smile on his face. I cannot say he put a picture of our pooches in his office at work, and claimed he drew inspiration from their many feats, or that we came to share a love of dogs that had anywhere near equal weight, and were thus drawn closer together in a way that mended our beleaguered marriage. I cannot say it is no longer isolating to stand in my marriage, but I can say there is a little more between us than there was before, a strand stretching between two beings, who happen to be human.

One of the behaviors that stamp our species apart—that make us human—is the telling of tales, such as the one I have just told you, and the one I will tell you now. A few nights ago I told this same story to my children, as I often do before they go to sleep. I love this time of the day. I lie on Clara's bed with her, Lucas in his crib right next to us. Clara presses against my back and Lucas, every night, ceremoniously lays his hand over mine in a gesture too elegant and determined for the toddler he is. The lights are always off, and the door is always open in a burst of yellow from the hallway. This time I was telling my children a true story, as I often do, about a discovery made by an archaeologist just a few years ago. He had been digging in Israel, in the dry land out beyond the dome and the Via de la Rosa, looking for pottery chips. And this archaeologist came across a grave, a surprise grave he had not expected to find. The grave was deep in the dry land, in a time before coffins. The archaeologist knelt. He unwrapped the dusty buried shroud and inside it, remarkably intact, he found the skeleton of a person—man or woman; impossible to tell. The person, dated from thirteen thousand years ago, was curled in a fetal position, and lying next to him was the skeleton of a puppy, the two buried together, lying in the ground this way for all

this span of time. Most remarkable, though, was the skeleton's hand. It rested upon the skull of the puppy as Lucas's hand right then rested on mine, lightly, the tenderness obvious even in the hardness of bone. Human and canine, living together, buried together, clasped; it has been this way for a long long while, and so it will go into the future.

And by the time I had finished the story my children were asleep, sweating in their sleep as they often do, and I had forgotten they were there, so immersed was I in the image, in the fact: the fact of skin and fur and how long and short we have been here. So I was surprised to look up and see in the burst of hallway light the man I married there, in the doorway, listening—since when I do not know. Had he heard it all? Had he heard it at all? Benjamin has copper-colored hair, just like the pups, and he now has old-man whiskers, just like the pups. He sat there on the floor cross-legged, a dog sitting on either side of him, my children long gone, daylight savings coming soon, this year our forty-fourth circle around the sun. He was bracketed by our animals, in contrast and contact, blurred but distinct; he Indian style, they on folded haunches, all eyes open, each dog alert, their ears pricked forward, his hand hovering over their beautiful heads.



the NEW. Loneliness

a selection of poems by

Carl Dennis

John Yau

Terese Svoboda

Allan Peterson

David Hernandez

Campbell McGrath

Aaron Balkan

Jordan Davis

David Dodd Lee

Colin Cheney

Genevieve Kaplan

James Harms

Tattoo

If the body is the house of the soul,
What's wrong with a little home decoration
More permanent than the drapes in the parlor
Or the fabric on the dining-room chairs?

A forearm, say, adorned with a tropical flower
Or with a palm tree under a deep blue sky,
Suggesting the body is glad to recall
Its stay in Eden, though the soul
May be at home in the world.

Or consider the young waitress
Who served you lunch just yesterday
In a roadside diner, how her sleeveless blouse
Exposed a small heart on her shoulder
Inscribed with two names, "Dave and Gretchen,"
Under a sprig of lilac.

Don't assume she's failed to imagine a time
When a boyfriend more congenial
Wakes up beside her only to be reminded
There was once a Dave who was all she wanted.

Try to endorse her right to send a reminder
To the Gretchen-to-be not to forget
The girl who believed that change was only
One of the many themes worth developing,
That holding on was also a project
That deserved some consideration,
As fine a project as letting go.

A Short Journey into the Badlands

Let us say that I am seated in a car
As big as a mirror's shadow,
And across the aisle squats a mountain

That reminds you of a stegosaurus.
The radio reports the weather conditions
Waiting to greet us: "The wind is an igloo

And you have been left out in the cold."
Metaphor, the flame of discourse announces,
Is no longer acceptable in these corridors.

There are rules to be followed, and the voice of reason
Is to be heeded at all times, even when it makes less sense
Than a duck whistling resurrection ballads in a parking garage.

Here tile is tile, and junk food
Is a green handkerchief, but the window
Is not a window, and it's burning.

Let us say you wake up from a nap, and night has fallen
Like a snail of snow working its way across your eyeglasses—
Could you possibly straighten out your words, Little Huckle Muck?

This is a poem about three photographs that I have never seen
Though I have seen photographs of these photographs from a safe distance—
Do you think a poem should be about the momentous or the monstrous?

Like a cluster of 19th-century tenements in the foreground,
In the shadow of office buildings with all their lights on,
Even though the workers have gone home.

Do you think each poem is a record of a revelation?
And each revelation is a light burning in an empty office building?
And the guard at the front desk in the lobby has left the picture

That wasn't taken to check the color of the air rolling towards him?
Or am I just a cranky verb swimming downstream?
Let us say I am looking at a photograph of white gasoline pumps,

Each crowned by a disc bearing the insignia of a three-leaf clover.
Does that mean bad luck is just around the corner
And there is little time to waste, maybe even less than that?

Suppose I tell you that there is a neon sign stretched above
The pumps that spells *SAVE*, and that there is no more I will tell you
Now that you have reached the end of the poem.

Freud's Container

I'm always boarding—
that is to say—
I'm ticketed and
there's a line and
maybe you go first,

someone small with
the scent of damp skin,
soft hands, limbs
thin. Always
we're happy

but anxious,
the line isn't
moving, the ticket
isn't right, the gate's
detumescing.

The plane flaps
its wings and loss
arrives, an egg
we step around,
boarding

but there are no
seats. We forgot

the seats! I have to
fix all that went before:
ticket, line, egg

but it's too late:
someone small to whom
I've said *I'll be right back*
is left inside
and flies.

Avieoli

Could be birds on branches
clicking their hot-tailed haunches

against bark, your ear can't avoid
hearing your under-deployed

lung's catch in the middle
of every exhale while its liquid bubbles

higher, the yellow casualties winning
the war, puss filling

to ear-level. Lying flat tips the vial
beyond breath, the airline style

U-pillow alone keeping you steep
enough, it's only pneumonia, not sleep.

Could be bird's wings are stuck in the shell,
could be klaxon's Very well.

Red

Such a red is extreme in these precincts,
an enlargement of memory. And here are six roses
large as hearts outside Bennigan's,
a hint of traffic light in esoteric ivy, centripidal and fixed
with helical filaments.
The society of clouds-as-thoughts is larger than the town,
turning rose against carmine
like initials in an insular manuscript: the first page of St. Matthew
in the book of Kells,
Chi Rho with its curlicues of hair, each thought tried smaller.
It was often said so and so
lost their sight over such details, in scrutiny of text
or embroidery of flowers.

How small my heart, that it should be so colorful and last
so long against the universe.
Its beats coming in hundreds like bats from the cave in Texas
answering the untoward:
sudden shear winds written of, the qualities of genius
where a mind flies forward
and a body lags behind. The *nothing but* come undone from its author.
The place on a nerve where trees assemble
to be replenished since the hillside is gone into decks and cabinets.
Where vista is a memory of roses
Whose heads are arborized clouds and roots are red-eyed as forgiveness.

The Big Nothing, or the Gap between David Letterman's Teeth

Through a tunnel goes my mind: if
the universe is a giant balloon
expanding, what's on the other side
of the latex, what's around
the porcelain rim if the universe
is a dinner plate, and if a book
is the universe, what's outside
the bound cover, what's beyond
the words? If nil, if zero, zilch,
zip, how did the void appear,
how did it unfold the black cloth
of nothing? Through a hole
goes this thought and soon
I've made a balloon of my heart,
rising toward the night sky
and its needle-pointed stars.
Anxiety again and no Xanax
while my wife sleeps in the bedroom,
while I flicker on the couch
watching the glowing window
of the television, while my mind
goes and goes: for any object
to exist, space for that object
must exist. As when a sparrow
darts across the sky, the sky

fills where the sparrow's been.
Through a tunnel, through a hole:
God is the Big Nothing that allows
you to move around in this world,
sparrows to thread the air,
and the late-night talk show host
to pitch a blue card through
an imaginary window, wherein
someone plays a recording of glass
breaking, wherein I lift the remote
and surround myself with a silence
that was there from the beginning.

George Oppen

The way we live now, the larger portions
people are so delighted with,
new facilities, new buildings lost in sheen,
blurring the eyes to make
the synchronized fountains at the food court
resemble art.

More Hockney than Hopper
more Crane than Williams this

the new loneliness

the new con
formity

Consumer-colored clouds adrift
in a mall-colored sky as the movie-colored dusk
displaces the cautionary previews of sunset

and the stars emerge
self-conscious as adolescents modeling frosted lip gloss
in a window of bright merchandise,

numerous and alone.

A Pineapple for Matt

If you start making Centos
over time your brain will start
behaving like Centos, until
you can make an entire poem
without any help from John Donne
or Emily D. People will ask you
to read at weddings and bar mitzvahs,
quinceañeras and kindergarten graduations,
because the way you think,
disjointed as it is, manages
to glue the day together,
not in a ham-fisted

*Here's what I'm getting at the grocery
and I won't be deterred
from bread, fish, milk, OJ, coffee, bananas
in that order sort of way
but with a boastful:*

I'm happy to nap all day in the back.
And I'll wake when the store's closed
and the lights are down
and instead of seeing I'll make my way
by feeling the goods,
by putting my hands on the pineapple
and making a judgment.
I am holding a pineapple!
I've just woken out of a deep sleep
and a pineapple has
appeared in my hand,
and that is saying something.

Text Messages

A wave of love for you just knocked me off my chair

I will love you and love you

I will reach out my hand to you in the noise of carhorns and merengue and pull you close by the waist

I will call you my museum of everything always

I will call you MDMA

I love you ecstatic exalted sublime

I wish you were here—there's an enormous cloud sitting off in the distance

It's a beautiful walk from there to my place

I'm buzzing but the buzzer may not be working

There's a raccoon rearing on hind legs twitching its nose from behind a short fence

Let me stew you some tomatoes

As long as I keep moving the overtones don't jackhammer my skull

I am waiting for something very very good

My phone is like, what, I'm a phone

World-Weight

Community logic

figure and ground, a plastic opera of benevolent intent

Real small effects ...

You call your little group

Dancing in America, Inc.—

one hundred painters of the dailiness school of South Bend

brushes stab at sheets
of brown paper

Somebody mentions a purple balloon floating away over the high school ...

gesso slobes out of plastic cups (cut to naked feet)

the smell of unprimed canvas unrolled so rich

Cadmium orange for everyone!

until it disappeared.

But then sometimes you're suddenly aware

of the moon standing wide open behind you

a latte glued to your lips

you look over your shoulder ...

Your spirit life is like the moths outside
who can't read the neon sign

but won't leave

a muzzle for atonement

Nine-Hundred-Pound Wheels

there is a train derailment

rainbow of spirits spiraling out before the flat blades of mountains

one all over the other
one opening inside the next one

coal-fed reflection in seamless black water ...

Rain falls cold in its restoration

each drop stippled with moonlight ...

her state of mind is her exuberance
another bottle levered inside a knothole of pine

and I swear we could see
the trout looking up at the sky ...

Nine-hundred pound wheels

I counted her ribs

two more animals who lack reason

(two naked breasts standing up in the cold)

a telescope emptying in the aftermath

of the roar made the splinters of steel heat up

the idea of the rational

wind shearing off in her eyes

the soul sputtering up out of the fog of its waking state

Transmutation Notebook B

I am drawn to Phaethon's friend, Cygnus.
His change seems at least half willed, half the evolution of guilt.

For \$1,000 you can have your own genome sequenced
to find what difference exists between you & the marsh bird

you might wish to become. North of Chambers Street,
I sat in the planning chief's office waiting to discuss the deadweight

of watery earth on rooftops, & watched a man hang
a huge photograph of a theater—plush seats filmed with dust,

empty proscenium—near Chernobyl. As I think about it now,
maybe it was the control room of the reactor itself.

Odd how the rich who own such images
hang their silver gelatin on the wall above zoning maps

of affordable housing in the Bronx. Maybe it's like how I loved
being this close yesterday to Darwin's notebook on transmutation,

the one where he scratched a tree beneath *I think*. Or was it only a copy?
I don't understand the radioactive mechanism that caused

the daughters of the sun to turn into trees. But I understand
why their mother tore at their branches of blood

& amber, & why they later stretched their grove to listen
to Orpheus singing before he was torn to pieces

like the bird on the running path yesterday.
Winded, I try to gather each feather & wing-bone broken down

in the bellies of ants, try to hold this creature together long enough
to ask, *whatever new part of earth you are—am I there?*

A lecture upon the shadow

It is more like the symbol of a horse.
I don't know any horses.
I've only been riding twice,
when I was young, in the dust.
The horse means to me a fairy tale,
an idealized landscape, the West.
The horses I've known I haven't liked
much. The horse is not a symbol of property
but egalitarianism. And the horse shows
how we can live with the land. How close
we are to animals.

If the horse is a conceit,
then I'll buy it. Horses' coats are brushed
until they shine. The horses eat carrots and apples
and seem pleased. Maybe this is so. Maybe
a trail ride will lift anyone's spirits. But
I've never been fond of the smell.
On the other hand, the horse is America
(if we feed it, it loves us). A horse
is the ultimate escape route.

In my work,
I frequently choose horses. I like them dark
against a landscape of green grass or gray sky.
I prefer a horse healthy, near enough to cities

or people, but rural. A horse is never ridden.
The horse is always alone, with other horses,
or with houses. If the horse wants to be itself,
I'll thank it to keep away from me. Like
a hiking guide who pulls out *Walden*
under a tree, the horse cannot exist in daily life.

The Clock

We sit by the window
waiting for wine and watch
a car burn on Boundary Street,
a stopped clock above
the bar: half-past three
forever, and then it's now.
I remember a shady spot
north of here on I-5
called Crow's Landing
as five of them settle
on the line above the fire.
An Impala, I think,
or the newer Malibu.
They hop in the heat
waiting for the flames
to settle into smolder.
There's something to pick at
or they wouldn't be here.
And the INS guys in their
black Suburban. Just waiting.
Here at last, a gentle Lambrusco.
Half-past three with a view
of Boundary Street. Somewhere
behind us, Mexico. Eight
crows now, the fire nearly out.

cOntempt

a novella by *Christopher McIlroy*

By 1949 Zahl's Indian Arts was well established. Behind the counter, Gene Zahl resembled a *Saturday Evening Post* cover, America's Shopkeeper. Tall, with a shock of dark brown hair and lean facial lines, he had the reserved handsomeness of a Gary Cooper. To complete the picture, he puffed aromatic tobacco from his pipe and favored a leather carpenter's apron. In manner he was courteous and patient with customers, answering for the thousandth time that yes, each article was authentic Indian hand-made.

Curt, three years old, would play at the foot of his father's stool. Once a customer apologized for dropping a quarter.

"It's only money," Curt said.

Startled, the man looked into the boy's lean face and regarding, hazel-eyed gaze. "A Utopian," he said.

"Curt is one of the most decent people I know," Gene said.

Curt was ten, he and Gene collecting Hohokam potsherds in Tres Arboles Canyon, then common as dirt. As Curt squatted, his probing fingers dislodged trickles of sand. To be absorbed independently in the same task pleased both him and his father. A pair of shell beads flowed into Curt's hands. Nonchalantly he strolled them over to Gene, who squinted and pronounced them "remarkable. Not a nick." Curt's poker face broke into a smile.

The two worked their way to the creek and its narrow linear forest of cottonwood, willow, and sycamore. Once they had found a perfect flint arrowhead

washed down from higher elevations. Instead Gene pointed to the imprint of deer hooves in the rich silty mud. They decided to track it.

The landscape transformed itself into a three-dimensional puzzle, with bent grass and sudden bird flights the potential clues. Curt's alertness intensified each sensation, the modulations of green within a single sycamore leaf, the sheen of water curving over stones. The portent of scattered droppings shouted aloud. Where the signs petered out, they ascended a deer trail scarcely wider than their bootsoles, up the rocky canyon slope toward the overshadowing peaks. On a knoll they gulped water, took in the breeze and the view.

"What was it like in prison?" Curt said.

Socialist, pacifist, atheist, Gene had spent the last year of World War II in the federal pen for refusing induction. At home he had hung photos of grimy child coal miners, and Negro freedom marchers being mauled by dogs. The gallery in the hall included a mushroom cloud and the frozen corpses of Sioux massacred at Wounded Knee. At Christmas the Zahls' neighbors strove to outdo each other in lavish displays, a hand-painted, life-sized crèche, galaxies of colored lights, Santa hitched to a prospector's buckboard. Gene planted a sign titled "Jesus on Capitalism," a grim Christ ripping down storefront Christmas decorations. For days the paper boy deliberately flung the Zahls' copy into the hedge, which required switching over to the lousy evening rag, and after the next Christmas it started all over again.

Gene considered his son's question. "I was sorry for the guards," he said. "They seemed bored and frightened all the time. It must have been a drab, second-rate form of warfare for them."

"But I mean for you, what was it like to be in prison?" Curt said.

"Not great. I missed Hildy. I was in because I didn't believe in fighting, and so I fought every day."

Curt nodded. Pretty, with a round freckled face under blonde bangs, a habit of rolling her tongue tip over slightly overlapped front teeth, Curt's mother Hildy had grown up on a ranch and enjoyed what her husband did, trail rides, punching the Jeep over a one-rut "road," seeking a legendary weaver in the middle of nowhere. Like most of Gene's circle, she had adopted his beliefs, quoting Norman Thomas and Eugene Debs. "Wealth is the savings of many in the hands of one," she whispered to Curt, behind an ostentatious customer's back.

Her deft, feminine movements stroking Curt's fingers and hair would seem like sunshine filtering through curtains, warm and enveloping, not exactly indiscriminate but falling upon all. Curt was grateful when she made sense. Even as a child he'd be irritated if she seemed not quite smart, or at least not concentrating.

Curt needed no models for goodness besides his father, who taught him fair trade. "I used to make thirty-dollar blankets," the weaver said, "but Gene told me they were three-hundred-dollar blankets. So now I just make three-hundred-dollar blankets." When flooding stranded her hogan and others, Gene bucked swollen washes in the Jeep to deliver food.

The deer trail was steep, with little traction. Yucca and Spanish bayonet gave way to scrub oak, and the footing in dried leaves became yet more slippery.

They clambered up a ledge of knurled shale.

"We didn't pack water with a hike in mind," Gene said.

"We can't lose that deer," Curt said.

"There's water in the mountains," his father acknowledged.

To prove his stamina, Curt took the lead. Where the track turned nearly vertical, he grabbed the purplish trunk of a manzanita shrub for a handhold. Clear of the canyon, they now clung to the mountain slope. Perspiration blurred Curt's vision, and at first he wondered what the dark, bulky steer was doing at such high altitude, parked across the trail above them.

"Black bear," Gene said loudly, and they halted. Pebbles rolled down onto them. The bear oblivious or uncaring, its claws tore into a felled juniper. Gripping Curt's arm, Gene bushwhacked a detour, looping far downwind of the animal. So transfixed was Curt by the shaggy hindquarters—a bear, he kept thinking—that his feet skidded on the talus. Suddenly he was exhausted. Without even the toehold of the deer path, the climb became seriously arduous; each step required thinking through. Still Curt kept the bear in view until it was the size of a bumblebee's rear, then a seed, then gone.

Branching off to the left, a draw promised easier terrain. Curt drank the last of his water under a juniper. Crumbling the scaly, pungent needles under his nose revived him.

"OK, time to turn around," Gene said.

Curt protested.

Gene sat and fanned them with his broad-brimmed hat. "I'm a moron," he

said. "I'm insane to have brought you here. As of now, we don't know where we are, but we still aren't lost. Any one of these seams in the mountainside is a waterway. Follow it, it becomes a streambed; it all leads to Tres Arboles Canyon."

Instead Curt bolted up, and his father panted behind. The ridge loomed a good half-mile overhead. They charged as if taking it by storm, running nearly upright, then scrambling on hands and knees. Curt smelled pines. The final ascent was strewn with fallen needles, and Curt's feet flew out from under him, his knees banging into the slope, needles pricking his hands. Not so much concerned as exasperated, he dug his fingers through the deadfall into the sandy loam, and hauled himself over the crest.

They found themselves among rhyolite pinnacles eroded into fantastical shapes, leaning chimneys, an old lady hunched under her umbrella, a duck. The valley below, sweeping to distant mountain systems, was criss-crossed with riverbeds creeping like centipedes across the desert floor. The wind chilled the sweat against Curt's body. His skin was clammy, mouth and throat parched, his tongue a swollen impediment. Gene's face was like raw beef. "Now the job is to find water," he said.

Curt nodded, unable to speak. His vision zoomed and his head pounded.

"Breathe through your nose," his father said. "You lose less moisture that way." The regular breathing soothed Curt. "If there's anything we're going to find in a geologic setup like this, it's water."

They began walking, the saddle grassy, even, strewn with large stones among the ponderosa pines. "Take it easy, and listen," Gene said. Curt didn't say how thirsty he was. It didn't matter, because soon they would have water. Shadows of tall trunks strobed past, and needle clusters bent sunlight into jumpy, colored bands. As they walked, Gene placed a hand on Curt's shoulder, which completed his happiness while inhibiting the swinging of his arms.

"Hear that?" Gene said, a mad twittering of birds. They aimed toward the sound. From the base of a granite wall a spring seeped, staining the rock with minerals and algae before collecting in a pool. The alcove was bearded with waist-high ferns, moss, and summer holdouts—scarlet penstemon and yellow columbine. Birds hopped and pecked. Cupping their hands, they drank, sparingly at first. The water welled up inside Curt, filling him to his extremities

until he felt ripened and green. "I'm a plant," he said, but Gene either didn't hear or understand.

Gene pointed out a stream draining from the far end of the pool, its course a shallow trough in the gray stone. "Drops right off the edge there," he said, "and straight down into Tres Arboles. We probably could slide ride into the Jeep and home to Hildy."

They lay back in the grass to rest. A saw-tooth maple overhung the pool, its leaves weathered, leathery, only slightly tinged by autumnal red and gold. From its lowest branch a black-and-white phoebe launched itself repeatedly, skimming the pond in a circle and returning, sounding its rising and descending note. The recurring motion lulled Curt, and when a pair of white-tailed deer materialized from the ponderosas, standing chest to chest by the water, and turned their heads to present their flicking ears and solemn black eyes and muzzles before bending to drink, Curt thought he was dreaming. Where the ponderosa trunks reached up, a raptor hung motionless on the thermals, outlined against the sky.

On the whitewashed wall of a tiny village chapel, in the far west of the Papago reservation, a tribal artist had painted *Waw Givwuk*, the sacred peak. Below its knobbed summit, skirted with cloud, a runoff stream gushed through a wooded glade, over boulders whose lumpy contours suggested blunt animal heads. Tumbling further downhill, the spillway watered saguaros depicted in progressing seasons, creamy white flowers at their tips giving way to red fruit that fell in heaps, and in the foreground, fields of corn, squash, and beans. A pair of deer gazed outward, and against a cloud a hawk unfurled its pinions. The artist had poured glitter over the water. Hovering in the sky, a black silhouette, the Papago Man in the Maze, I'toi, Elder Brother and everyman, watched over all.

The spirit of the mural had come to life on the mountainside. "It's a blessing," Curt whispered. Staunch atheist, Gene held quiet, frustrating Curt. A good man, he wouldn't even accept his own blessing.

A teammate on the high school JV basketball team, whom Curt admired for his consistency and toughness, turned out to be Mormon. If he wanted to make varsity, Curt knew he needed to learn the Mormons' discipline. Lunging into the lane for an off-balance scoop shot, he felt like a clumsy animal. Even in pickup

games on weedy, cracked playground courts, the Mormons set picks, cut to the back door, made the extra pass.

Gene shook his head. To him each religion was only a metaphor for man's incompleteness, his resignation to deficiencies in his own character and good fortune, an impediment to human progress.

But Curt retorted, "The Mormon genius is community." An essentially isolated person, he could exaggerate others' virtues. The Mormons lined the banks of willow-hung rivers, crafted quilts, set picnic tables groaning with vast arrays of home-cooked food, and filled fields and byways with their communal games. Practicing free-throws, his friend chased down their misses, crashing into the chain-link fence. Once when a spiky wire popped their ball, he loped home a mile in July heat to retrieve another one. For hours they scrutinized, dissected each other's technique. "The flight of the ball leaving the angle of your wrist over and over, that's become a standard of beauty," Curt said, not caring if it sounded faggy. Grinning, his friend held the follow-through pose as the shot clanked off the rim. "Psyche-out," Curt laughed.

But watching the '63 NCAA championship on TV, the Mormon slurred Chicago Loyola's black star, Jerry Harkness. "Watch. Harkness will start out quick because of his natural reflexes, but the mental discipline will wear him down. He thinks with his black butt."

Curt challenged him. "Harkness loses, I take you to the next cracker hoedown blows through this tumbleweed town. Harkness wins, you treat me to some rhythm and blues."

Curt mourned his friend's lapse from goodness. When you let goodness slip away, could you ever retrieve it? Could you ever say about someone, "He's a good person, except he's a racist?" Who was the good Nazi? Curt couldn't look at the Mormon, as if he had a crooked deformity.

Curt punished his friend a few weeks later with the first-ever Arizona appearance of James Brown and his Famous Flames.

Tailored in dark blue, his passenger sat stiffly in the Zahls' Jeep. "I've never lied to my parents before. They think I'm going to the Saturday Evening Forum." Tears welled in his eyes. "Here." Pulling out his wallet, he extended a ten. "Take a date. Drop me at the Forum."

"You don't have to be scared of Negroes," Curt said.

"That's a bunch of pucky." Eyes clearing, he stared ahead, stonily resigned.

Big old sweeping sedans humped in the parking lot of the southside ballroom.

"I've got to pee something awful," his friend whispered.

"Ask."

"I can't pee in a Negro bathroom."

"Going to be holding it a long time, then." At the door, squashed forward by the throng, Curt barely felt his feet touch the floor, as if he were on an escalator. They found two folding chairs. The ceiling lights dimly outlined the surrounding heads through the fog of cigarette smoke. The Famous Flames bobbed and twirled in unison, grinning in identical suits, but their horn yells tore loose and ripped the room. All the loud calls around him, together were only one drawn-out sigh. The world was proving itself to him, Curt thought.

The horns subsiding to an awestruck stammer, the mc hulked over the mike. "Ladies and Gentlemen, he has performed for you 'I'll Go Crazy,' 'Lost Someone,' and 'Night Train.' He has taken his music to the Apollo Theater, to Paris, France, and the North Pole. Let me introduce to you the hardest-working man in show business, Mr. 'Please, Please, Please'"—as one, the audience rose, Curt's stomach with them, as James Brown bounded onto the stage, blazing gold lamé behind him. The crowd's hollering kneaded Curt's head, his hot breath merging with the olfactory cocktail of unfamiliar hair products. A rush whooshed from his feet to his scalp. But it was his friend who pitched onto the floor.

Curt dropped to his knees. The boy's fingers twitched, his face pallid. Curt started to lift him in his arms. Two teenagers grabbed the feet, and together they rushed him outside. They leaned him against the wall, legs stretched onto the sidewalk like a derelict's. Curt felt for his pulse. A woman dabbed perfume on his forehead, sprayed under his nose. He squinted his eyes open. "There you go, honey," she said. "Excitement's too much for his little heart."

"I'll wait in the car," his friend said.

"The hell you say. I brought you." Through the open door Brown was wailing, the horns punching and keening. Dancers shimied silver. Installing the boy in the Jeep's front seat, Curt said, "You going to puke?"

He waggled his hand; maybe yes, maybe no. For the ride home he hung his head out the window. As they neared his driveway, he admitted, "There is a child of God in them." Curt never saw him again outside class or off the basketball court.

By Curt's junior year in high school, the communists were attacking in Vietnam, in Laos on the Plain of Jars. American advisers were dying in Southeast Asia. Castro and the Russians had trained nuclear missiles on America. East Germany had built a wall to keep its own citizens in, and shot them when they tried to escape. In a newspaper photo Laotian villagers fled their burning homes. Hurrying, their shirts flattened against their chests and fluttering behind, their expressions were not panicked but inward and purposeful, intent on the task at hand, survival. One looked back, silhouetted against the pyre. Half a woman's face was covered by a crab-shaped discoloration, blood. The photograph filled Curt with rage, and he considered for the first time that a war could be just. He taped the picture to his wall, across the hall from Wounded Knee and Hiroshima.

"They shouldn't get away with it," he told his father.

"It's the tragic legacy of colonialism," Gene said. "As long as there is no freedom and justice in these nations, communism gains a foothold."

"This isn't John D. Rockefeller or Coca-Cola, these are people getting up every day to pull rice out of the ground. It's BS."

His father underestimated communism, Curt thought. Gene's misjudgment gave Curt a strange flourish of triumph. Openly, sitting at the breakfast table, he studied the newspaper's body counts from Vietnam.

From then the conclusion was inescapable: if he believed people should be killing the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong, then he should be killing the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong. When Curt, during his senior year, told his father he was enlisting, Gene said, "I've seen this coming." Then he passed his hand over his forehead and sat down quickly. He composed his face as if about to comment dryly or wisely, but he couldn't speak. He looked up at Curt with his calm, level gaze, but it was only a reflex because he could find no words. He clasped his hands behind his neck, the fingers working together.

Seeing his anguish, Curt wanted to retract what he had said, but could not.

The shock seemed to affect Gene's speech, like a stroke. Characteristically terse, his arguments became verbose and desultory. "There's no justification for taking a human life," Gene lectured. "To capitalism these lives, these irreplaceable lives, Vietnamese and American, are only grist for the mill. Grist for the mill."

He wasn't a jingoist, Curt assured his father. No one could grow up among Indian people and swallow America whole, without gagging. But even among Indians, no powwow began without honoring Korea and World War II vets. Already Gene's young silversmiths and painters were signing up for Nam.

"The most cynical con of all," the soft-spoken Gene ranted, shouting. "Recruiting the survivors of holocaust to kill and die for their exterminators."

Moments before tipping off the divisional basketball tournament, Curt's varsity team huddled. They were pink, already dewy with sweat. Curt's heart beat madly with excitement. Across the huddle the senior forward's neck cords tensed. Zit faces, sparse mustaches, slap hands. Curt understood that nothing like this moment ever would be repeated in his life.

He enlisted a week after graduation, in June 1965.

"You'll see through the insanity before it's too late," Gene said. "Get out any way you can. Dishonorable discharge, who cares. Medical. Psychiatric. Moral turpitude. The shop is waiting for you whenever and however long you need it, and nothing the military tries to do to you means a rat's behind."

Hildy's parting words were, "I've thought of shooting your foot off. I know I'm going to curse myself because I didn't."

Allowed one final visit home after getting his orders for Nam, Curt spent the evening with his friend Rosanna Juan, who helped Gene with odd jobs at the shop in return for his customary inflated wages.

Curt had a long, muscled body like freckled ivory, his spiky crew cut sandy blond. The mouth wide and thin, a fuller nether lip suggested desire. Girls were attracted, but he disappointed them by refusing to tease. That art, he believed, debased the woman for the sake of the joke. He had lost his virginity in a whorehouse where at least, he said, the terms were clear.

He and Rosanna had played pinball together. Any attempt to open his locker would occasion a shoving match, elbows and shoulders sending books

flying. She liked to be tickled until her screaming face was red and teary. If he wasn't on guard, she'd flick the base of his milkshake cup, splattering him with chocolate globs.

Fellow misfit, the solitary Papago in a high school of two thousand, Rosanna was also a virgin. Her generous mouth, mushing hot against his, went stiff when he touched her ass. She mumbled against lust. Drop-ins partied riotously at her house every night, and her mother left her father several times a year, once for a month in Las Vegas. Rosanna moaned in her sleep during seventh period English. After Curt took her hiking, mountain trails became her refuge. Even in the wilderness she wore long, floral-printed dresses, which she'd arrange decorously around a fallen log while she sat singing a morning song, her face placid and sad. Her eyes looked faraway above her broad, copper cheekbones, and her lips scarcely moved with the thin, lilting melody.

At home she'd played for him a record of traditional Papago music, compiled by a folklorist. They lay head to head on her bed, even alone in the house, because she trusted him. The drum had a sharp, boxy resonance unlike the cavernous echoing of a powwow drum. Accompanying it, the gourd rattle crackled at a higher, drier pitch. Together they sounded like a big brother and a little brother walking hand in hand, wearing plain clothes. The singers' voices rose and fell like the path over the hills, through the tall stands of saguaro, toward the distant mountains. The touch of Rosanna's head sent a smoky smell through Curt's nose, down his chest, and into his balls, where it expanded quietly like a lake. As they lay still, he was rocking her on this surface.

Swimming in a mountain lake, Rosanna had gleamed brown through her thin underwear. He'd embraced the clinging nylon and kissed her navel while she shuddered and wept. "You're beautiful, like a country-western singer," she said. He'd wanted—had to—rip the flimsy material from her body, but her solidity in his hands prevented him—she had her right to be a crazy celibate with water streaming down her belly into her pubic moss, goosefleshed breasts bound in the dripping bra. He'd gripped her wet hips. Turning their backs to each other, they'd stripped their sodden underclothes and dressed.

Now, facing him on her front porch, the night before his departure, they

talked low, reminiscing. She was pretty as always, with her huge, long-lashed brown eyes, the black hair hung down her straight back. Later, after her parents had fallen asleep, she sneaked him in her bedroom window and lifted off her nightgown, her sturdy curves outlined by the porch light. She touched the tip of his cock—finally—where it pushed out his jeans.

"My dear," he said into her brimming face. "My dear, thank you." He savored the rush of his body toward her. But instead a weight in his chest blocked him, pushed him back just as tenderly. He must do right for her. She was a naked burden in his arms, and he must carry her to the right place. "No," he said resolutely. "You're going to have your virtue a lot longer than you have me."

In January of '66 Curt was shipped from Fort Riley to join the First Infantry, the Big Red One, quartered just north of Saigon. Suspicious that a high score might place him among the medics, clerks, or some other exalted status, he deliberately had flubbed the aptitude test, and had been designated a rifleman. After Basic Curt felt engineered for the job, clean-honed with his spare, muscled body and shorn cranium.

Camp—shallow trenches and pits indented the flat earth, reinforced by sandbags and straggly, rusted barbed wire. For a few dozen yards beyond, the ground had been scraped bare for a field of fire, which ended abruptly in rice paddies. Pressing in on all sides, the rubber trees and dark jungle fringe hid the movements of unknown numbers of the enemy.

The men sprawled in their emplacements, a few looking out past the perimeter. A couple of punctured sandbags leaked red dirt. Each soldier had adopted his own style of battle dress, the headgear alone ranging from helmets to bush hats to kerchiefs. Their stares toward Curt, the Fucking New Guy, expressed amused indifference but were nonetheless penetrating; they locked on. With a half-smile, flashing an ironic V for victory, Curt slung his gear beside them.

Once Curt divulged his background, he became "Injun," "Geronimo," or "Chief." The grunts broke up days of tense idleness with rueful tales. Another Arizona boy, from Parker along the Colorado River, had played "fu'ball." A wide receiver, he once had caught a pass upside-down. The ball was underthrown, and

looking over his shoulder had jerked him off-balance so that he fell backward, feet flying up. The ball hit him in the chin strap, but his hands wrapped it up. "Made the catch standing on my head. 'Course we lost 44-6."

Curt contributed his unconsummated romance with Rosanna. "I fucked an Indian once," someone responded. Name Richard Ring. "On my way back from the draft physical, in fact, going to my grandpa's. Trailways bus comes into Indio—Indians in Indio!—about midnight. I'm half asleep, mind's eaten up with things, don't know where the fuck I am. Need to switch buses, step down, station lighting is sick, all the people on benches look like they're being shipped off to hell. Skinny girl comes up to me, hand in the back pocket of her jeans. She's talking, I talk back, we play the shuffleboard game. Does she want to drink some wine? She tells me she's Apache, eighteen. I figure maybe fifteen. But her eyelids make her look like a woman. They're kind of veiled, sad, sexy, I don't know how to describe it. Long black hair. We find a liquor store, he sells me the pint of muscatel. It's like even after the physical, suddenly everything's going perfect. We scoot down under an oleander hedge and start drinking the pint. Meanwhile I've missed my bus. She lets me strip her naked and we fuck right there in the dry leaves. She's hard and skinny and she really moves around. She kisses me and bites me. Then a flashlight is coming, a cop! We get her dressed just in time. The cop buys the whole story, we're just waiting for a bus, took a walk. It's still holding perfect. Walking back to the station, I take hold of her hand. She's so little I could pick her up. Her bus is about ready to go so I see this movie-type ending, the big clutching hug, sad music building because we'll never see each other again. I'm trying to think of the right thing to say, something she'll remember. She gives me a wave—not even a kiss, a wave, for half a second, like I've just carried her bag for her maybe—and hops up the steps, gone."

"To be as fucked up as everybody around here, you got to be fucked up to begin with, so fuck everybody," the Parker grunt said fraternally.

The first death Curt witnessed was from heatstroke. Others were saved, men who had dropped in their tracks, eyes going back in their heads. The grunts thought nothing of flooding a felled buddy with water from their own canteens, even if that meant completing the patrol dry themselves. During one of his rounds the platoon lieutenant inspected each man's feet, pausing to dig and

clip ingrown nails, examine the red pustules of advancing rot without the least show of embarrassment or distaste. With his superiors Curt had maintained an impeccable compliance bordering on contempt. But he succumbed to this intimacy, reclining with an un-self-conscious sigh, muscles passing from knotted tautness into a weightless blackness like sleep.

VC walked mortar fire through camp one morning, puffs of red dirt blooming in rows. Curt dove into a pit on top of Parker. With nowhere to put their hands, they gripped the loose folds of each other's fatigues. A close hit spilled grit over them. Curt thought his eardrums would burst. A trickle of tobacco juice spread over the stubble on Parker's jaw. Curt felt the warmth on his neck. Parker shoved a stick of gum between Curt's chattering teeth.

Knowing he might have died without even having engaged an enemy was a special crumminess, like a dirty old metal plug lodged in him.

Curt's number-one bud—his "corn," in the squad's inexplicable argot—was the wiry Pfc. Madison, a self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie. The squad pinned flat by sniper fire, he wriggled from one man to the next with tensile gusto, delivering the sergeant's orders. Days of tedium could not dispel his optimism that combat was imminent. He welcomed walking point; Curt could feel the excitement in his posture, like an electrical wave: he was going to engage, something was going to happen.

Mealtimes Madison parodied the unctuous attentions of a waiter. While the squad masticated their c-ration ham and limas, he bobbed among them murmuring doublespeak French, evoking the heavenly savor and aroma of their cuisine. His black eyebrows met when he smiled, forming a second fierce grin, a negative of his curved, feral white teeth. Even his bodily movements held the tense curve of a smile.

"I see better on point," Curt said. They were drinking coffee like puddle water.

"I just want it to be me," Madison said. "Whatever I'm doing, I think I should be the guy. Arrogant fuck."

"I like being the guy, too," Curt realized, embarrassed that it would be so.

Madison's glacial eyes flashed on like headlights, with his laugh. "We can both be the guy," he said.

He was the neighbor friend you never would have made otherwise. Apropos

of nothing, he would spill disclosures: "In high school, I dug potatoes three summers in a row, on Long Island." "Yeah, I could rape." Wantonly, in seeming fits of divestiture, he gave away his c-rat peaches, poncho lining, Bowie knife.

Each was a human essence, Curt decided—Madison's cold flame, constancy; Ring's big-fleshed embarrassment; Parker's crafty underlook—eternal qualities like the expressions in Renaissance painting.

Friendship in Vietnam required no special talent, but only to be shot at together, to share terror, filth, and misery without letting each other down. What failed Curt was expressing it. He fantasized ridiculous exploits, bellyflopping on a live grenade to save the squad.

He yielded to the diminishing and enlarging effects of dependence on others. In the jungle he felt himself extended before and behind. Asleep, he knew he was still vigilant. Standing guard, he slept in others' dreams. The worst hardship of point was not exposure, fear—an ambush could hit the middle of the column as well as the head—but loneliness. Instead of a fatigue-clad back trudging ahead, there was only the jungle canopy, perpetual dusk, trapping the stultifying heat, its rustles and slitherings the backdrop against the rhythmic plopping of his footsteps and his abruptly banging heartbeat.

When the villagers they defended against the communists were the communists themselves, torching a VC hamlet could not carry the cruel exhilaration of scourging an enemy. It was more like lancing a boil on one's own body, or worse, amputating one's own gangrenous hand.

Curt wished his family could appreciate what he was doing. He liked to think of them horseback riding through wide-open Navajo country, visibility forty miles in every treeless direction. The occasional juniper would provide its green counterpoint to the vermilion sandstone, but no cover for anything larger than a ground squirrel. Curt admired Gene's treatment of the horses, his never goading them into a forced pace, his carrying extra water for them. Miles from the stable a mare had pulled up lame, and Gene walked her all the way back. Curt remembered her slumped, syncopated lurching beside the others' steady plodding. Head down, she looked mortified.

"My back is fucking me over, Jesus," Curt told Madison, on patrol. He

shrugged in the pack harness and the accompanying cloud of mosquitoes shifted to follow the jerk of his face, like electrons. "I don't care if they're fucking Cong," he said. "I don't care if they're Swedish acrobats. Just step the fuck out where I can see you. Just in the road." He swiveled the M-16 from the hip. He could almost feel the hot charge of the gun jumping through his hands. Bodies flying backward, and his body rocking.

Madison dug it. "Swedish acrobats," he said. "English fox hunters."

Curt kept up the chant through their supper of c-rats.

"I don't care if they're fucking Cong.

I don't care if they're commu-nist.

I don't care if they're Belgian dwarves.

Just give me some of your love, babe.

Please give me some of your love, child."

"I don't care if they're fuck the fuck," someone sang. "I don't care if they're fuck the shit."

"I don't care if they're Mack the Knife."

The sergeant ordered them to shut up.

How they could yell and bang on things, and then flop over asleep.

In late spring the First's orders changed. Instead of lolling in firepits, they humped over roads and through marshes, sweeping hamlets and jungle, never sleeping in the same place two nights running. The rains had come, turning the ground into slop, caving in trenches and foxholes. Sodden feet, fiery with lesions, exuded a distillation of stench. A sniper's bullet knocked a chip off of one guy's elbow and buried it in another guy's shoulder. Search-and-destroy was capture-the-flag with no flag, no object but killing. The platoon would secure a piece of ground, move on, and within days the enemy would return in full force, like freeloading relatives. A pile of VC dead, collected for counting, was startling and gruesome, like a horrible, inexplicable accident.

Dusk patrol, Curt's bowels gurgled. The line halted while he squatted, spurt-ing diarrhea in the grass. Rubbing the sweat from his eyes, he stared through the vines at a narrow trough of trodden leaves not two yards off their path. He motioned to the sergeant. Gingerly, almost tiptoeing, the squad fanned out along

the VC trail. "Less than an hour. I'd say five or six of them," Madison whispered. Parker rigged a claymore in the dense brush, where detonation would rake the trail chest-high. Ring unfolded the bipod from his M-60 barrel and sighted the machine gun down the longest visible stretch, the squad taking up positions on either side of him.

Ring wanged his helmet on a branch. "Damn," he said, then, "Oh, shit."

"What?" Madison hissed.

"I'm caught."

Wriggling, Madison and Curt converged on him. Twisted awkwardly, Ring was trying to hold absolutely still, his face white and quivering. He pointed toward his left ankle. Snagged on the pant leg was a crude metal hook, attached to a taut wire, fine as a spider web, that disappeared into the bush.

"Don't move it!" Ring panted.

Madison held up his palm. Curt braced himself against Ring, steadying him. Pulling his knife, Madison cut a half moon of cloth around the hook, which dropped to the ground. The three sighed. Madison's fluorescent grin. "Dumbass like me, they don't even need to bait the hook," Ring said. He moved the M-60 emplacement. Above the jungle canopy, pink and orange streaked the sky.

They heard the whusssh slapping toward them through the foliage, and the tree in front of them ignited like a Roman candle, a roaring thunderclap, then spitting and popping. Pain seared Curt's cheek, he smelled hot metal. It was as if the smell had burned him. Outlined by the flames, the squad flung themselves flat, shooting into the surrounding black.

"Out of the light," the sergeant yelled. Scuttling backwards, they jammed in fresh clips, fired.

The only answering sound was the crackling tree. They lay waiting. They breathed like a heavy engine, thudding pistons. Twenty minutes passed, and total night had fallen. "RPG," Ring said. Rocket-propelled grenade. "Tree saved our ass." Now they would have to return in darkness. Behind them, the tree sizzled.

Madison ferreted out their own path, and half-stooped, they groped forward. Curt was certain the VC would have cut off their retreat, either by ambush or booby trap. Under his hand the hard ground felt unbearably transient; at any instant it would erupt in flame or puncture him with a centipede bite. At

a crashing through the underbrush the men stiffened, but it was too big, an animal. Seconds later an explosion threw them sideways. They waited, and crept on. Mosquitoes lanced Curt's neck. He had the sensation that the men moved in unison, that with his every left step a dozen left feet touched the ground; as his right hand planted for balance a dozen palms flattened. They were a clumsy organism, an evolutionary throwback, the last of its kind.

Then whump, whump, 82 MM mortar incoming, the laughing AKs. Bullets whispered through the leaves like the first raindrops of the monsoon. The squad dove and scattered. For fear of hitting his own men, Curt held his fire. The noise melted away, including the sounds of his men. Creeping backward, Curt heard no one. When he paused, he had lost the trail, swallowed up in knife-edge grass.

Shut down, he told himself, take your bearings. The tree's distant glow, discoloring the glimpses of sky like the lights of a small town, was still behind him. But then, it would have remained behind him no matter what direction he'd gone. Above and below him, all around, the jungle was close and black. Sit, he told himself. You are in control. You can run blindly through the black. You can backtrack to the tree and pick up the trail. You have water. You can lie down and wait for morning.

He chose the tree. The glow had no point source, but was suffused through the dense, dead air. Whatever direction he was going, it almost certainly was away from the camp. He didn't like that feeling. He had to stop again and retrace the plan: locate tree, find trail, return. Padding forward he squished with sweat, black, surrounded by shapeless trees, varying densities of black. He almost could believe the jungle was empty, or that he wasn't in the jungle but on the mountain slope above Tres Arboles Canyon, where every water course was lit by the moon. Like liquid silver the stream by his feet ran toward its fellows, a silver netting like the strands of a necklace converging on Tres Arboles Creek, pointing toward home.

Reaching out his hand, he felt the brush of a fern, or the cloth of a VC leg. Against the sky, treetops fuzzed, with no depth. The distant crump and pop might have been echoes in his own bones. The orange smear of sky was unchanged.

Scuffling through the brush, a moving shape—large, don't shoot—Parker. "I'm fucking *lost*," Parker said.

"We're fucking lost," Curt repeated.

But the glow was brighter. Curt and Parker kept low. They found a trail. At first they started hunched practically over their knees but then they walked upright, flatfooted, promenading. What the fuck difference, Curt thought. They might just as soon be singing. It was absurd. Because they had found each other, two lost dicks, they knew they couldn't be killed. Curt didn't recognize the trail.

The flash and roar came from their right, and almost immediately a grunt dashed past, ignoring them. For the few seconds he was visible he held a sprinter's form, chest high and arms pumping, before the blackness absorbed him. They came upon him sprawled across the trail. It was the Fucking New Guy, a replacement. Though alive, he had no left hand, and the blood flowed from his arm like rain from a gutter. "No wonder he was in such a hurry," Parker said. "Ran away from knowing his hand was gone." They lifted him, Curt pressing the stump tight against his ribs. The warm wetness seeped down his pants, one more fluid among the swampy dankness, the sweat and piss.

"In football—" Curt began.

"Handoff," they finished in unison, gasping with laughter.

It wasn't their trail. The path split, they bore left, and this branch forked again. Other tracks crossed theirs, the jungle scarred with them. They intersected a road. The shocking openness distracting them, they trotted left onto the pale band, actively disbelieving it might be a field of fire, or mined with Bouncing Bettys.

"I think he's dead," Parker said.

"Not if it's just his hand," Curt maintained. "Maybe. Unless." The M-16's stock, squeezed against his bicep, jabbed his armpit, almost slipping to the dirt.

A motorized grinding sounded, halting them. Tearing toward them, an armored personnel carrier swayed, track crushing the brush at the road's edge. Lowering the guy, they waved their arms, and the APC stopped to accept him. They delivered the inert weight into the bowels of the armored vehicle, the troops' white eyes under domed helmets flinching from the unlucky burden. His other hand might have moved.

Reassured by the sheer mechanized bulk, they reversed direction, following, though soon the vehicle was out of sight. They trudged the road, stumbling into

each other with fatigue, until dawn raised the darkness, leaving the jungle gray. The undulating shades seemed part of Curt's brain waves, as if they could be explained by dream. Mist clinging to the treetops, stagnant humidity enclosed them like amber.

"Fucknuts APC didn't know where it was going, either, hellbent for nowhere," Parker muttered.

Waves of sound slowly rose, the insects' whine, fugal counterpoint of chattering and twitters; in an undercurrent, the foliage swishing and rustling. Air and sound were dense as spider webs.

Fighting ripped the veil, so close the ground heaved beneath them. Curt never had heard such a noise, the thuds and explosions, incessant chattering gunfire. His stomach clenched tight, his rectum spasmed, jerking him upright. But even as they ran forward, M-16s cradled, the battle itself, marked by oily black smoke churned up through the trees, seemed increasingly, impossibly distant. Yet the din surrounded them, deafening, ricocheting off the trunks. The smell was of a rendering plant, the mixed organic and synthetic stench, almost tasty but gone wrong. Toasted, rancid-sweet.

They advanced, army of two. Flights of birds whirred against them, escaping, but the action was no nearer. Air too heavy to breathe, they slowed to a drag. By the time they approached the ambush, the enemy had dematerialized, the only assault the sledgehammer heat. Burned-out tanks and APC's slewed off the road. Corpses hung out of gaping holes in the metal. Tree trunks were shot in half, the tops hanging in splinters. Blood pooled in the dirt. Emerging from the stinking smoke cloud, medics draped a sling between them, a pair of bootsoles protruding, joggling limply. The armored column seemed to have spontaneously self-destructed. Curt stared unbelievably at the impenetrable woods.

A series of flat cracks spat from a tree, and a windshield showered glass. Curt could see a blob of foliage trembling. Carelessly, without aim, as if play-acting, he squeezed the trigger of his M-16. The tree limbs bounced and spread, and a dark package fell to the ground. Curt and Parker ran to the spot. The black-clad body was broken, splayed. Under the bullet hole in the forehead, the open mouth exposed crooked teeth that seemed ready to take a bite. A few paces behind the VC lay a gelatinous, russet mound of tissue. Curt's bullet must have

blown the brains out of his head instantly, before the body fell from its perch on the branch.

"Gosh," Parker said, impressed beyond profanity.

Curt didn't want to see it anymore and turned away, but of course he saw nothing else in his mind's eye for a day or so. Then he put it aside.

In those first few hours, trudging back to camp through the inevitable downpour, he picked "lifeless" over "dead." "Lifeless" was the human form suddenly minus life, "dead" the condition it would occupy for eternity. "What a fuckin' mess," he said aloud, listening for the taint of sentimental remorse. When there was none, he repeated with hard relish, "What a fuckin' mess." His swearing had begun in the army and would be a shock to his family when he returned. "Fuck this. Fuck that," his mother would say, bitterly but with a certain shy naughtiness.

Stretched out on the ground that night, the rain one long sustained hiss, streaming off his poncho and puddling under his head, Curt reflected that his father would not have been able to shoot the sniper, and others would have died. It made his father's life seem over and done with.

Two weeks later his squad was running a recon patrol some one hundred yards from the main force strung out along Highway Thirteen. Cursing, the corporal had just lost radio contact. Almost retching in the heat, Curt was tipping back his head to swig from the canteen. Madison shouted from point. There was a dry rattle of automatic rifle fire from the brilliant green foliage, a helmet flying sideways, bullets punching into meat. The screaming was immediate and continuous, and individual. Though he'd never heard them this way, Curt recognized each man he had known as each lost what he had been and became an agonized frequency of noise. Tears stung Curt's eyes. His leg went out from under him. Prone, blind with tears, he fired through a screen of elephant grass just beyond the muzzle of his M-16. Its roaring covered all other sounds, making him feel he was alive. He emptied his clip, reached for another but his backpack was gone.

The firing had stopped as if by a spell. He froze, willing it to return. His back arched with the tension of waiting, and a yell was trying to escape him. He

heard only silence, separate from the screams that belonged to another sense, not sound. He could see the screams as thin twists of vapor.

Instead of his squad, small bareheaded figures in black, gunbarrels protruding, floated across the grass as if they had arisen from it. Curt kept them in his peripheral vision, staring straight ahead. The screams ended in short noisy bursts. He didn't think of death. He waited as he'd waited at Basic, lined up for inspection while the sergeant passed before and behind them. He'd anticipate the tap on the shoulder that meant fall out, pussy shit-licker, you fucked up, piece of shit asshole cunt-boy, and a hole would open in the ranks, and that hole was you.

It was that way. The grass rustled behind him, and a muzzle poked into his back, prodded harder. Fuck you, he thought, he wouldn't stand up for them to shoot him down. But there was a sharp voice, and the insistent digging of the metal, so much effort that he had a sudden hope—survive and kill them. As he tried to stand, his right leg collapsed and he fell forward. The next attempt he took the weight on his left, bracing with his arms, until he forced himself upright. The pain in his thigh was a black blot moving up his spine into his brain, taking his thoughts. He stumbled forward, the gun at his back hurrying him. Three more VC joined them, trotting alongside. They spoke low and not much.

Just within a wall of trees he was herded inside a hootch. Through a rent in the thatched roof the disk of sky was a distant blue. His VC pointed back the way they had come. "How many?" he shouted in a reedy voice. How many dead? Curt didn't know what he meant, but it didn't matter, he was still fighting, and he said nothing. As long as they wanted something, he was alive. Don't give it to them. If he could spring, grappling the VC's back toward the others' guns, his fingernails would claw eyes and skin, teeth meeting in the man's throat, ripping cartilage, blood and breath gushing into his mouth.

Curt's VC uppercut the gun butt into his jaw, knocking him over backward. The others picked him up, and the interrogator jabbed him in the stomach. "How many?"

Curt closed his eyes. "How many?" The VC clubbed the side of Curt's head, and he fainted.

When he came to, the sky was blackening with the oncoming monsoon.

Time seemed to have passed. The VC had tied a rag around Curt's thigh. He had forgotten he was going to kill them. He felt no fight in him, and he feared he would tell them whatever they asked. He was more afraid of acting badly than of dying, because he'd forgotten why it was so important for him to live. Closing his eyes, he could join hands with his men, one on each side. That felt so good he wondered why they hadn't thought to do it before. They walked down a white-hot road, squinting into the underbrush. They all seemed to be chewing something, throats gulping and working. They spat out gouts of half-chewed meat. Curt couldn't keep up.

His VC sat against the wall, watching him. And then all hell broke loose. He heard the whir of choppers, explosions shook the ground, bullets tore through the thatch. The VC sprang up and ran in a crouch for the door. Turning, he pointed the AK-47 at Curt, long enough—two or three seconds—for Curt to grasp that his death had arrived. Sadness and chill closed around him. He was conscious of shaking hands with his father.

Then the VC disappeared out the splintered tunnel of light. Shouting his English words, Curt hobbled out after him.

His people didn't shoot him. Their hands took him.

The AK bullet had tumbled through the muscle of his thigh, and it would be two months in an Okinawa hospital before it would heal. Muffled by painkillers during the day, Curt's senses went on night alert. Patients screamed in the dark; the screech of aged plumbing and the gurneys' squealing wheels were like screaming.

Why were doctors bothering to make him walk, Curt thought. Everything was clean, with starched, white sheets and clean, limbless men in wheelchairs. Nurses chatted across his bed, reminiscing about department stores with escalators, and nightclubs whose neon-hued cocktails poofed into flame. They were exceptionally beautiful, these American women, their eyes worn with care and tiredness.

Gene flew to Okinawa, his face all broken open with concern. "We're getting you out," he said. "With disability," he added, voice shaky with anger at the sight of Curt's leg.

Curt sat straight up. "I don't want a discharge. What the hell is wrong with you?" he shouted.

When Curt returned to the field, casualties had soared. With replacement more routine, the bond among the men seemed less tight than Curt remembered, for which he was grateful. A reliable team was what he needed, not the impingement of intimacy.

In early November the entire First Division was dispatched to Tay Ninh Province, west of the Michelin rubber plantation, to join Operation Attleboro, which had evolved into a full-scale assault on four VC and North Vietnamese regiments.

Sweeping a clearing, the platoon was hit by machine-gun and mortar rounds from a copse. Curt flung himself onto the dirt road and sighted along his M-16. He could not fire the weapon. Eighty-two MM shells raised geysers of dirt around him. Above the din he could hear regular bursts from the soldier to his right. In his own hands the M-16 was a cold, inert piece of plastic and metal. He had neither planned nor foreseen this. The foreign feel of the object panicked Curt, not because of the bullets snapping overhead, but the helplessness of inaction. He thought of dropping the gun and running down the road along which he'd come. But he had no desire for escape.

"Fuckin' piss jammed?" yelled the nearby soldier. In response Curt sent a volley into the treetops, a sham. His failure to cover his field of fire threatened the soldier's life, the lives of all those around him.

Unable to remain or retreat, Curt stood and walked forward, M-16 at his side. The ground was even, the slicing grasses flattened and shredded by repeated attacks and counterattacks over the weeks. There was even the ghost of a breeze playing at his temples. His peripheral vision was magnificent, affording a panorama of the two lines of men slowly writhing toward each other through smoke and flame, leaves raining down like cinders. Men stood and fell, explosions tore holes in the patterns. Curt walked in the gift of knowing the exact and simple right thing to do. When he arrived at the copse, the fragile trunks blistered and bleeding, the VC were gone, even their dead.

Remarkably, a sympathetic CO took notice of the incident and cut short his tour. By then the euphoria of Attleboro had passed, and he believed he had washed out of the war.

As the weather warmed, he swam in a motel pool near his home. Weekday mornings it was empty. Floating on his back, he would grab his knees and exhale, the plummet ending with his spine bumping against the gunnite floor. Inert, he would lie on the bottom for what seemed a long time, though not long enough. Beneath the surface the liquid absorbed sound. He wished he could breathe that stillness into his lungs, become it. Traces of light zipped around him, warped and fluttering.

Gene sent him on a purchasing trip to Acoma mesa, where Zahl's had traded for twenty years with a family of potters. Feasts must be eaten, new babies lifted into Curt's arms. He examined the wares, their geometric designs like the buttes, gullies, and distant peaks viewed from that high place. To glance from a pot to the jumbled landscape below was like jumping from one world to the next.

The World War II and Korea vets drove Curt over the rez line for a hellacious drunk. He told everything, from forests leveled by bombs and napalm to an old mama-san caught stringing claymores along Highway 13; she was shot dead. As he related killing the sniper—"he fell out of the tree like a crow"—some listeners nodded vehemently, others shaking their heads.

"You'll need to purify yourself," one said.

But when Curt described his conduct at Attleboro, they treated him not as a madman, coward, traitor—nor hero—but a clown. They imitated him walking toward the enemy, mincing ethereally with their index and middle fingers played in the peace sign, pantomiming his astonishment at the absence of VC. "I peaced them away," said one.

"I am Curt, soldier of peace," joined another.

"Hallelujah." They were laughing so hard their eyes squinted shut, and Curt laughed, too, falling sideways out of his chair, climbing back to laugh more.

He told how his men had died. As the Indians' eyes teared, Curt fought himself slipping through the yellow light of the bar into some maudlin drunken exercise, an excuse for generalized cursing and weeping ending in mayhem, but it was too late, his head lying in his arms on the table as he sobbed. Afterward he

was sorry for having doubted the Acoma men, there in the Indian bar, temple of grief. They helped him into a pickup bed. Mist drizzled. The truck ground noisily up the steep, rutted dirt track, zigzagging away from the desert floor. Curt's arms and head hung slack, feet tilting up. Moisture rinsed his face.

His laughter intimated to Curt that the worst, the sense of being too many outsized, jarring pieces ever to fit together, was over.

Between the GI Bill and loans, he was able to enroll at the state university, in archaeology, as he'd always planned since finding his first potsherd, and reading about Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae, and Haury uncovering Snaketown. Renting an apartment freed him from the everyday weight of his father's oppressive kindness and tact. For the first time since he was a toddler, he grew his hair out past a crew cut, along with an untrimmed, shapeless beard.

He went for drinks with a classmate, at a neighborhood bar not picky about ID. The student was into chicks, foxes. Every woman who came in looked good to him.

Curt had a thirst, and the Rusty Nails he ordered were keenly, keenly delicious. They sliced through the scene, with its smoke and old men and pinball players, like a knife through a sheet. Curt fit perfectly inside that rip, wide enough only for the sweet acrid taste and pebbles of ice on his tongue. Each cold drink was a miraculous pleasure.

He and his companion shot pool with two women, late twenties. Unable to explain how the war might have enhanced his charm, Curt no longer felt any challenge in chatting up women. The student would tell Curt a couple of days later that the women had kissed them in the parking lot and made out with them in their convertible. "You had her top up and her bra down," he said.

After a dozen Rusty Nails, however, Curt was blacked out on his feet, and for what happened next he had only the other's story: After the women went home they drove into the desert, where the garish main drag, four lanes greased by neon and fast food, dwindled to a country lane before deadending in mesquite bosque. Under moonlight the ground was itself lunar.

Didn't the tree shapes look a little ominous, Curt asked.

A gray box, a VW van, was parked a couple of dozen yards back towards

the city, on the other side of the road. More precisely, it yawed halfway into a runoff ditch.

"Shit, let's push it back," Curt said.

Too precarious, too dangerous, the other said.

Curt was urgent, agitated, the student would tell him. "Can't let it go over," he said. The van was locked, in gear, with the brake on. "These don't weigh shit," Curt said. "If we pick it up a little, we can move it all the way onto the road." But no matter how he strained at the rear, his partner at the front, they could only rock the chassis. It teetered. Gasping, they stood flexing their hands.

"Fuck it," Curt said. Walking around to the driver's side, he shoved the VW toward the ditch. The metal creaked. Feet scrambling for traction, he lowered his shoulder and rammed. The van went over with a crash, wheels pointing up.

Of course Curt swore off drinking. Two days later he heard himself asking Janet Hamlin, a girl from archaeology, to celebrate his birthday by sharing his first legal pitcher. He hadn't spoken to her before outside the formalized exchanges of class discussion. She asked sharp questions, sharply, with her spiky blondish bangs, pointy nose and narrow ears, the forward thrust of her cleft chin. Her lips, though, were plump as snap beans, needing to be sucked and bitten.

Curt didn't know how much of this reading was apparent in his face. In any case, Janet said yes without hesitation. She flushed, a rush of blood that subsided unevenly, leaving red patches. "Well all right," Curt said, breaking into an impromptu dance step.

When he picked her up, she looked good in a loose red shirt with her long-stemmed bluejean legs. He took her to dinner, Italian, a splurge on his budget. Slightly older than he, she was about to graduate in pre-med, archaeology a lark, a final elective. They progressed to a bar, immersing themselves in golden pitchers. With her hair brushed back Janet's high cheekbones gave her an abstract beauty. As they danced to the jukebox, she inventoried Curt's entire skeleton, bone by bone. She was encyclopedic about infarcts, and pituitary gland disorders, the cheery domain of gigantism and dwarfism.

"You get pedantic when you're drunk," Curt said.

"Oh, I do," she said. "I don't like myself, drinking. Let's go home before that happens."

Once in the truck she flamed a joint for them.

The bedroom in her tiny 1940s stucco bungalow was wallpapered with posters, several by Dürer, including a hare in the snow and the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. From the north and south ends, respectively, a marijuana leaf and a peace symbol faced each other. After a few drags they began to revolve annoyingly.

"You were in Nam, weren't you," she said.

Curt ignored her, and she let it go. She put on Country Joe and the Fish, and during a long instrumental they undressed. Naked, her body first looked aloof, the trim dart of pubic hair an arrow, an ironic joke. But her skinniness accentuated her wide hips. She was all pelvis, all fragrant pussy. They fucked as if flaying each other, an all-night pounding of the bed, his head against her head, her shoulder, the pillow. At one moment he felt he would faint. He rested a moment in half-consciousness, a brown drowse. Then they started again.

He woke before dawn in near-light. A VC sat at the foot of the bed, glossy head bent, cleaning his AK-47, like a child patiently assembling a Tinker Toy.

It was his VC. Since Curt's convalescence in Okinawa that face had come to him, the enemy poised at the door of the hooch in the moment he did not pull the trigger and end Curt's life. Brown and blank, the face was a chip of wood struck from a tree, suspended in that instant before flying into the beyond. His eyes glinted fierce black, but with what? Pity? Despair that he had lost? Or fear, that aiming and firing would cost the fatal split second. The black forelock made him look like a boy.

Many ways Curt could have died. Sniper bullets had passed close enough to part the hair at his neck. The transport that had lifted him out of Tân Sơn Nhut Airbase might have lost altitude and vanished into the South China Sea. Like young men on the rez he might have wrapped his car around a telephone pole or poisoned himself chugging vodka. But only this death had a face, and it had not taken him. It didn't make sense. Curt had only to evoke that face—his savior—and be gutted with dread, hollowed out.

Curt sat bolt-upright, which woke Janet. Strong grass, he told himself exper-

imentally. Janet leaned over and kissed the crease between his thigh and lower belly. Her nose disappeared into his crotch and her lips nuzzled his balls. The VC smiled. His face beamed like that of a lover. Curt's fingers tingled. Janet was an obstruction to thinking. "I need to go," he said, trying to keep his voice even.

She raised her head. "My beautiful warrior," she said, face pained with empathy.

She called the next night. "I'm broke," Curt said. "You buying?"

"Trust fund."

"In God we trust," Curt said nonsensically. He could say anything to this woman. Despite her hard looks she was a simp, a squish.

They went to a different bar, where he introduced her to boilermakers.

"Just letting you know, I can't keep this up night after night," Janet said.

"Then don't," Curt said.

She tossed back another. Farting suddenly, she laughed uncontrollably.

"God," Curt said, waving away the possible odor with his hand.

Walking to the truck, wrapped around him, she slurred, "Don't hurt me. I hurt easily." Marveling at her, Curt thought, what would she not let him do to her?

Not bothering to make dates, he'd call her after a half-bottle of tequila, or show up. Greeting him sleep-puffy and barefoot, she'd bustle into welcoming activity, straightening the couch, pouring him a drink, brushing her hair. He was grateful to her body for being what he desired so much and simply could have, the cool sleekness of her flesh under his hands, yet her solid heat pressed up all along him. He was crazed with the sensations of her, the licked shoulder, mathematical grind of her pubis, the fummy, damp box of the word "cunt" itself—"cunt"—her buttocks clenching, steely and puckered. He sucked her cunt until she cried from coming, then slept with his head on her haunch.

A few weeks after he'd gotten together with Janet, television news reported a protest march on the Pentagon. A swarm closed around the complex.

"Lynch mob," Curt said. The menace of the throng could have burst the tv screen. He felt nauseatingly stimulated. If he were in front of them, they would roll over him like a wave, trample him underfoot.

"But they're singing. It's like Martin Luther King all over again."

The fuck it is," he said. "The.fuck.it.is." He was near striking her; his jination danced with it. Retreating into her armchair, she didn't utter a word they went to bed. Cutting through the fence, demonstrators rushed the ling, and the cops knocked the hell out of them. Past nightfall, the closing zoomed back from the Pentagon, lit up like an iceberg surrounded by the nic dark masses.

"I think you'd feel better being there," Janet said in the darkness of bedroom.

This steals the heart out of the men."

We were a hair's breadth from the war making a martyr of me, too," t said.

Curt surprised her with grapes and a dry Riesling. Pouring the wine into ets, he dropped grapes to the bottom. They sipped, rolling the cold globes in mouths and biting for a gush of sweetness. They made love slowly in front ie heater. His fingertips painted wine onto her body. Her nipples were the crest pink caps. With their fullness and droop they were expressively sad, small, independent people.

I've set up sleeping bags in back of the truck," he said. "We could drive out e desert, pull off someplace for the night."

She checked his flashlights, added pillows and wool hats and socks. She remembered a towel for their sex mess. "We don't want to freeze in our love," she said. As they rushed about in terse preparation, tranquility settled Curt.

The highway empty ahead of them, heat rising from the truck's floorboards, ough how good it was, an expedition into the night with a woman close le him. In high school he'd pictured men and women together this way, ling in the tight world of the steady, unblinking dashboard lights, never ing but looking straight ahead, driving.

He turned onto a ranch access. Rather than the starry space he had imag-, the sky was murky, clouds pressing down. After a half mile he left the dirt : and cut the engine. They unzipped the bags, mouths expelling mists. The snowflakes wafted down. Clinging to Janet's fair hair, they glowed faintly.

"Where do they get their light? It's pitch black," Curt wondered. "Just a rhetorical question," he added as Janet began to speak.

"Don't worry, I'm sober. I don't even know that answer. I was going to say—I can't. It's awful. Too un-romantic." She started giggling.

"What?"

"I was thinking, I *can* tell him why dead fish shine."

"Now, that is love talk." He shrugged his arm around her shoulders.

Later the moon woke him, peeling back the clouds. Janet seemed to be having some sort of attack. Her lips kept smacking as she paced outside the truck bed, wrapped in her coat. "I know you love me," she said. "You couldn't make love to me the way you do if you didn't love me." Her hair hung lank over her forehead, plastered with sweat. Curt thought she was spooky, darting around the fender. "Can't you even answer me?"

"I thought you were just expressing an opinion."

"Curt, I'm really flipping out over this. Over us. Do you have Valium at your place?" she said.

"I don't take tranquilizers." Actually he kept a vial, scored from a student, in his medicine cabinet. The yellow pills cut the edge off those lightning-streaks of terror. "Sorry."

Her face was white, glistening, a measure of how far he'd gone along in the process of becoming unrecognizable to himself.

Curt started to feel contempt for his classes. He could drink all night, stumble in hung over, and still pass.

End of January, the first news of the Tet offensive came over the radio. Fear halted Curt in the middle of the road. He had the presence of mind to swing into a vacant lot. This was not the hot, hammering alarm of combat but a numbing dread, as if he were witnessing the end of the world. He went home to his portable black-and-white tv. A new satellite over the Pacific was relaying the first live coverage of the war; immediate, uncensored. Hue burned, streetfighting engulfed Saigon. Airbases all over Vietnam exploded into flameballs. The maimed and dead veered onto the screen.

For two days Curt didn't leave the house, running between the TV and radio, flipping channels. Hue fell, and Kontum, Dalat, Quang Tri. It was here. VC stormed the US embassy in Saigon. A radio station reported Saigon in enemy hands. Bridges were blown, bunkers shattered. It was happening. The Viet Cong must number in the hundreds of thousands, a million. Everywhere they were overrunning outposts, camps, the smoking rubble of cities. Tens of divisions must have lain in wait in the tunnels, to burst forth at this moment. It was the end. Now cut off from cities, airfields, and base camps, the grunts would be hunkering down in their isolated pockets, surrounded by the communist tide. They would fight for every second of survival, dispersed one by one into the jungle, where they would be hunted down like animals in the trees.

Curt crouched in front of the set. For the only time since his discharge he was whole, all the shit burned out of him, living in pure fear.

And then all over Vietnam the assault broke and receded. Cities were retaken in a carnage of VC dead. Even while the battle for Hue dragged on in house-to-house butchery, the Joint Chiefs and the President announced a great victory.

Spent, wasted, Curt sat at the local McDonald's and sipped a Coke. The caffeine jangled at him like a distant doorbell, and he realized he was hungry. The burger and cheese formed a nourishing paste in his mouth. In the booth behind him a couple of guys were talking.

"Shit, working at Pizza Hut sucks, man. You can't smoke or eat back there. The honcho catches me eating the pepperonis off the pizza last week and waxes my ass."

"Yeah, but the jukebox is far fuckin' out. Jimi, Janis. Byrds."

"Four Tops. Aretha."

"Hey, I got something for you, though."

(Ripping paper.) "The Esquires? Ah, shit, this is great! Thank you, man."
(Sings a few falsetto bars.)

"Happy birthday." (Slapping of palms.)

"Thank you. Shit, this is fuckin' legendary. I'm buyin' you lunch. What you want? Get a shake. Get a *large*."

Curt sat smiling, so wide finally that he had to cover his face. He never turned to see the pair, wanting to leave them as voices. He stepped outside under

the pathetic blue sky and was wracked with crying. He shook his head back and forth walking home blindly.

After a week he plugged the phone back in and returned to class. That night, Janet welcomed him. She sat on his lap while on the screen a skinny girl in a bikini had messages drawn on her tummy. A few days earlier Westmoreland had issued a buttoned-down gloat about the tens of thousands of VC killed. His VC likely was dead, Curt thought. He might have been dead a long time.

The words swam into his head. "This war was a joke." He stood up, Janet sliding off. "Holy fuck!" He felt no one was with him, and something awful was happening. Walking through the rooms, he began cursing, repeating the words until they were a scream. He screamed curses in the kitchen, his fist broke through her table, and he didn't feel anything.

"Baby," Janet pleaded. "What?"

He leaned out the back door, yelling obscenities.

"The neighbors. The police," she said, trying to drag him in.

A squad car with lights flashing halted in front. Curt heard the conversation on the porch.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"I'm perfectly fine. He was in Nam. It was unspeakable, things just come over him."

"I need to see him."

Obediently Curt emerged from the kitchen. With his bulgy uniform, the cop revived the joke. "Yes?" Curt drew out the word insolently.

"You need to be a head case, find a place by yourself. Or we'll take you in. This lady promises she'll be responsible for you. Call yourself lucky."

After the cop left, Curt said, "You responsible? That's a laugh," and he went home.

She caught up with him after class. "You can sneer at me and think your worst," she said, holding both his hands in hers. "You said 'joke.' That's very important."

"I don't know what the fuck I meant," he said.

During a week-long drunk he was able to pick up another woman. Describing to Janet how other women's cunts differed from hers, Curt said, "She's like falling

into a bed of soft pillows. You, it's like fucking a pvc pipe." He clenched his fist to show how tight. "It's not preference," he mused, "just the variety."

Janet's face was a mess when she cried, all staring and gaping as if she were being sucked into quicksand. Her ugliness goaded him further, until one night when he looked in the cavities of her face, the running red eyes, and said, "I wish I was dead." He prostrated himself beside her, and when she lay next to him, the fool, he stroked her shoulders and neck. "Janet, my love," he said, the lie all he could give her aside from getting the fuck away from her. "Sweetie," he said.

At a party they sneaked off to the host's bedroom. Curt deep in her, they were hanging over the edge of the bed, she bent backward, hair fanned out to the floor. He noticed she'd gone limp. Her head lolled. He stopped. But she was breathing, in fact, snoring.

"Rise and shine," he said.

Her eyes focused gradually. She squirmed away from him and sat cross-legged on the bed. Her face and shoulders shone with perspiration. Her hair fell in relaxed wings. Closing her eyes, she smiled slowly. Her voluptuous lips trembled. "I really fell asleep? While you're ploughing away at me? I *am* done with you."

He feigned hurt, glad for her.

Curt's eyes stared back from the mirror with malign idiocy. It had taken just a few days of cutting classes, impulsive midnight runs through the neighborhood in his cheap tennis shoes, and swilling Italian Swiss Colony Chianti for half his beard to have matted into coarse spines while the other half puffed into a springy nimbus. His head looked like a porcupine fucking a poodle.

At the Zahl home Gene's eyes followed Curt like a dog's, waiting for Curt to show him the lead. Wait for this, Curt thought—a short right cross to the jaw, Gene's head snapping against the wall in a flurry of hair. Treating Curt as an invalid, Hildy served him a breakfast tray as he lolled on the couch. Her freckled cheek curved like a ripe peach. Curt saw a machete springing through her neck. He didn't want to do these things but had lost confidence that he could stop himself.

Shopping the newly-opened mall for discount tennis shoes, he ran into Rosanna Juan. Almost stout, she was pushing a double stroller, but after a moment's quizzical recognition she shot him the old sidelong glance and rammed him into the tiled wall.

"What have you done to your face?" she said. "You look like Yosemite Sam."

Despite the year-and-a-half-old girl and the infant boy, she'd earned her GED and was attending junior college. Except on weekends, her grandmother took care of the children. "You should have made love to me," she said. "I wanted you so much I went with the next guy who came along." She pointed thumbs down, wrinkling her nose and laughing. She held up the baby for him.

If anything needed to tell him his infatuation with Indians was over, he thought, it was the sight of her. What a truck. Her t-shirt, straining across her torso, sported the Papago Man in the Maze, I'toi, a small silhouette at the mouth of a labyrinth. Curt recoiled from the image of his Viet Cong, a blank cipher, the treachery of ambiguity. He tried to conceal his hands' trembling, the more so because of a paranoia that Rosanna knew, was baiting him. She had found the vulnerable spot and thrust home the knife.

In his thoughts the VC who had spared him and the sniper he had killed had become confused. The face his captor turned to him, fleeing the hut, was slack gray, the eyeballs dead jelly above the toothy grimace. The brainless corpse stared up at him, black eyes alive with urgency and indecision.

On TV the ant-streams of men poured off transport planes, the pall of smoke churned out toward the sea like a thunderhead.

Curt volunteered two shifts a week as a draft counselor, serving hypocrites, cynics, philosophers and saints. All must be saved.

A youth sat across from him, wispy barbels depending from his pimply chin. "For his physical, a spade I know drank his own blood and puked it on the doc," the boy said. He added, with an adenoidal giggle, "I'll eat a bunch of acid."

Curt wanted to quiet the boy's nervously twiddling fingers with his own hand. The kid would wash out of Boot Camp in a week, if he survived that long. Inside the boy's vest, his ribs made soft bumps under his bare skin. "How much do you weigh?" Curt said. "And how much could you lose before your physical?"

Though not a good person, Curt knew, in his work he was the semblance of a good person. Sometimes, as he yapped away, it seemed that the mouth of this fraud must stick open—yawk! yawk!—but he argued with himself that whatever he might be, his words were true. In speaking them he was honest just as river water is real even in its transitory flow over dead, permanent stones.

He joined thousands in San Francisco marching against the war, up and down charmingly hilly streets past open bay windows blaring music. The air smelled like sex. Curt couldn't remember seeing so much happiness in one place, the exception being an old lady with white pipestem legs and two dogs, big Weimaraners who strained against her sinewy arms. "Bastards," she screamed repeatedly at either the dogs or the government. At its termination the procession submitted itself cheerfully to sadistically hectoring speeches. The aftereffects of the demonstration were the same as from overeating cotton candy, sick exhilaration, headache, rage.

Local vets, Curt among them, threw away their medals in a desert wash. Caught by the sun, Curt's Purple Heart winked blinding white. The ceremony was to be brief, but three motorcycle cops and a cruiser squealed into the clearing, roiling dust. The vets ignored them, speaking their brief pieces as the cops strolled among them.

"This used to mean to me the finest things I ever done," one said.

"The people I killed, they were my mother, my brother, like my cousins. They gave me a medal for killing like my brothers and sisters." The police said nothing, miming exaggerated listening.

"The Devil is the State. Curse the State."

There were seven soldiers. Casually the police sprayed cans of Mace into their faces. Curt barely had time to register the trim, blue-jawed visage before him when the hissing seared his eyes. He doubled over. Through the blurred stinging he saw fighting, nightsticks swinging. The police sprinted to their vehicles and drove off.

Curt sank into the afternoon, bourbon a malodorous stain in his mouth. Before and after him, the men strung out along the trail. He heard their rasping breath, the whump of shifting gear, the unavoidable clinks and tocks. They

paused. Madison's furry eyebrows knitted quizzically. His flat hand gestured, and they moved on. Ring followed, face egg-shaped, querulous, and Parker, smirking. Trying to be quiet, they were too fucking loud.

Hunting the blue-jawed cop for three days, Curt spotted him at Dunkin' Donuts, sipping coffee. Curt waited, deer rifle lodged behind the truck seat, until the cop popped the white helmet on his head and gunned the motorcycle. Curt followed several car lengths behind. The white bubble bobbed through traffic. The road ascended into the foothills, the desert lush, the magenta blossoms of rainbow cacti like fallen ribbons. Curt braked for a covey of quail. Beyond it the cycle's nose poked out from a palo verde, where the cop had laid a speed trap. Curt dawdled past a few hundred yards, then looped onto a dirt road, hiding the truck in a mesquite thicket. He circled downhill on foot, rifle close to his body. Through the brush he saw gleaming chrome, white dome. The landscape swam in the heat. He rested the rifle on a stone, sighted the plastic globe, the middle of the neck. The cop removed his helmet, set it on the motorcycle seat, ran his fingers through his wavy hair, shiny with sweat. Through the scope Curt could see perspiration forming on the earlobe. He flicked off the safety. The palo verde branches nodded with the wind of passing cars. At the last second Curt shifted from the naked head to the gleaming helmet, squeezed the trigger. Chips exploded from the white surface, the bubble skittered onto the pavement. Feet scrambling on the gravel, the cop shoved his machine into the southbound lane, wobble-started, roared away.

Curt moved himself back home. In an attempt to tolerate Curt's beard, Gene grew one of his own, a tidy affair that lent him the cool of a '50s jazzman. But Curt's confession blanched his skin gray, his face like crushed newspaper.

Heading out of the Four Corners on Route 160, towards Tuba City, the camper shell packed with weavings, faces burnished by the setting sun, Gene and Curt were granted a phenomenon. As the inflamed red sunball spread across the western horizon, leaking its violent radiation into the sky, the moon floated up among the spires of Monument Valley behind them. Curt braked at the side of the road. The night breeze pushed aside the day's heat. They could feel the passage

of both, first the fat warmth and then the shrinking cool, as if two lights had played over them, the red and then the blue. To see better they climbed a ridge.

Gene tugged his goatee, a new habit.

"I'm wrong about everything," Curt said bitterly.

"You're going to get through," Gene said. "I feel good about you." When Curt was able to look up, the blue twilight reminded him of a road. Gene brushed his own head and dropped. It was as if Curt had stooped and clubbed him with the smooth, red sandstone at their feet. Curt thought maybe he had, a moment's inattention that made it only seem that Gene had fallen untouched, Curt gaping over him, scrambling on his knees beside him. Weeks later he still would have this doubt, though the doctor said Gene had died of a ruptured aneurysm.

Hildy wept continuously, shrieking and pounding. At night she paced, fighting Curt when he tried to put her to bed, crossing her arms in front of her chest so he couldn't pry her wrists apart without force. Not sleeping then, she would nod off during the afternoon with her knees folded under her on the couch.

She put the house on the market, announced she would move home to her parents', in Colorado. "I had what I had," she said. "The places he took me, the ideas I've lived in, that never would have been offered to me." Her lips remained parted over her snaggle tooth, as if that, as much as her honey-toned, freckled flesh, heavy blonde hair and scent like baking bread, were the center of her womanliness. She waved her hand around the yard. "I have to go. I just have to go."

It fell to Curt to run the shop. Sorting through the kachinas mounting high on their wooden pedestals, rows of books collected over the years, basket displays, jewelry arranged by families of artists, was like picking at his father's corpse.

Peddlers materialized at the shop. A Mayan woman barely as tall as the counter ledge carried road dust on her rebozo, which spread with her outstretched arms like the powdery wings of a moth. Splitting open her olive-drab duffel with a zipper, she revealed shirts and blouses whose heavily embroidered bodices were jeweled with color like plumage. They looked like the folded cadavers of marvelous, human-sized macaws. Curt bought the lot. Gradually Curt understood

that salesmanship was the natural outgrowth of knowing and respecting the inventory, a feature of that climate as rain results from humidity and movement of air, practically an afterthought. He upgraded the shop's security system with wrought-iron gates. Other quiet improvements conserved the display area.

The proprietor of Zahl's was in a position to make arrangements for people, to connect artists and industrial purchasers, to steer philanthropists toward effective charities promoting Indian health and education. At the weekly Chamber of Commerce breakfast, Curt organized relief for drought-stricken Papago ranchers, enlisting the rambunctious boosters of the local economy, eaters of Danish, wearers of snakeskin boots and bola ties.

Across the glass counter of the shop Rosanna greeted him with words of sorrow for Gene. Curt was shocked at her appearance. Two silver hairs strayed at her forehead, and her teeth had spread apart. She seemed to become a different person every couple of years, now middle-aged at twenty-four. Yet as she spoke, she was transformed again. A gravity had settled into the lines of her forehead and her solid chin, her smile no longer nervous, ingratiating, as he realized it had been. While giving up all claim to prettiness, she might be beautiful.

"You're the most powerful white man I know. Look at this." She encompassed the shop with a wave of her hands. "You've got more Indian stuff than Cortez."

She needed his help, Rosanna said. While her grandma took the kids, she was making all As and Bs at Arizona State.

"I went up there to Phoenix a couple of weekends ago," Curt interrupted. "That is, I woke up in a Greyhound with an empty Jim Beam bottle at my feet, and there was Phoenix. It was night. I fell in with some kids playing basketball in the middle of Seventh Avenue. Pretty exciting, hurdling an MG to catch a pass, dribbling up the hood of a taxi, rolling across the windshield, *slamming* the ball in a trash barrel. I don't think I've ever played a better game of ball."

"So much to be proud of," she said sarcastically, scolding him like an elder. "But the landlord is kicking me out of my apartment in Tempe," she continued, suddenly vehement. The tribe's financial aid check for second semester was overdue. She had missed January rent, and now it was two weeks into February. She had raised over half the amount for one month, but the landlord wouldn't

accept it. "It made me mad. I told the landlord, 'The money's coming.' He talks real fast. He's a Chinaman." She pulled her eyes slanted, surprising Curt.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

Driving north to meet her the next week, Curt felt such sharp grief that he was spinning, nearly blinded, like someone having a migraine. Rosanna had petitioned him as others had his father. The request conferred on him qualities he didn't believe he possessed. He swore aloud.

Rosanna ushered him into her apartment with an ironical flourish. Nearly bare, the studio was decorated with a willow basket. A mattress occupied one corner of the floor, sheets tucked neatly, books stacked beside. Punctually the landlord appeared, small, garrulous. Curt decided to play height and silence. From the center of the room, without a word, he surveyed the water-stained stucco, sagging ceiling tiles. Kneeling, he jiggled the electrical outlet dangling from the wall by frayed wires.

"Rosanna has paid every month before," Curt said. "Why do you think she won't pay now?"

"Think?" the landlord said. "I don't have time to think of why everybody doesn't pay me. Give me that kind of time, I'll sit at home and watch *Days of Our Lives*. And what about the horse?"

"What about it," Curt challenged calmly, not betraying he was taken aback.

"OK, then, so you're two of a kind like her? You chase around Phoenix on your horse and tie it up on my palm tree?"

"I was very ... mmpf," Rosanna said, squirming to illustrate. "I can't register; the professors are letting me sit in on classes but just day-to-day. The resort lets me ride all I want, when I get off work there, for being their Indian girl. It was a good ride. I crossed the winter truck farms, and there was open land, so I kept going. The horse wanted to let it out, he was tired of the dinky corral. When I got to the campus, I felt good. The students walking along only had two legs. So then I got home. I pulled up in my driveway and parked. The lease doesn't say anything about animals outside."

"I wonder what would happen," Curt said, "if you borrowed that horse again and we told the TV stations. Lone journey of protest. Camera pans from rez student tethering horse to peeling exterior walls, follows upstairs. Count the

code violations. Hunt for the fire extinguisher. Whoa, exposed electrical and no fire extinguisher?"

"Why are we talking?" said the landlord. "If you're so excited about her living here, you pay."

"She told you. The rent money is coming. It's delayed. I will guarantee it."

"Write it down and sign it. I got no time for this. I'm going to miss *General Hospital*."

Curt borrowed a pen and notebook from Rosanna.

"My White Knight. Stronger than dirt," Rosanna commended after. For old time's sake, she lowered her shoulder and slammed him into the door frame. He threw the blanket over her head.

He took her to dinner. What he felt, merging into freeway traffic, reminded him of the shop, the same detached repose, almost contentment. The good actions were themselves, as if he weren't part of them. They drove into the brassy winter sunset.

In the months since Gene's death Curt had dreamed of him insistently, waking from one dream into the next. Curt was driving Gene to the doctor for a serious hacking cough, concerned because Gene kept hiding his face in a coat. Gene's distant campfire streamed smoke into the sky. Curt watched from his own fire. In the dream he didn't question why he simply couldn't douse his site and strike out for his father's; that was a given. The two fires burned on in the dark. "It's like losing my mind," he told Rosanna. "I keep waking into another world."

"He's lonely. This is a confusing time in a man's life."

Curt didn't know if that referred to himself, his father, or both. The suggestion of Gene contacting him left him gladdened and sick to his dull heart.

A week later Rosanna's thank-yous arrived, a basket big enough to hide in, and Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Curt hired her to fill in as an assistant during vacations and summer break.

Rosanna invited him to the desert for prayer. As the sun rose, she sang a Papago morning song, shaking the rattle. The simple cadences twined around them both, and the cactus.

"You can learn the song and pray whenever you want," she said.

Belief was a powerful thing, Curt thought, too beautiful for him. She was too beautiful.

Indian arts had its groupies. A frosted blonde would lean across the display case, breasts pressed to the glass, butt hiked up. Curt invited her for a drink at the courtyard bistro. Sitting across from her tony makeup and debutante drawl, he felt the clench of contempt. Apologizing, excusing himself, he paid the bill and left her under the blue parasol. He didn't know when he would dare be with a woman again.

The clapper clanged as the door opened, followed by the usual bellows-blast of heat, one-oh-five in late June. Rather than merely tall, an inch or two under Curt's six feet, the woman customer was stately, with erect bearing and fine placement of the hands, one at her waist, the other relaxed against her outer thigh. Despite the frizzy curls sweaty and flattened at her temples, she looked like a Gainsborough.

"A big hat is retiring," she said. "I'm in charge of the gift."

"You're overqualified," Curt ventured.

"I'm the only one in the department with taste."

"Then he'll hate whatever you buy."

"That's true." She laughed. "I might as well pick up any piece of shit."

Curt smiled.

"Oops," she said, laughing harder. "No, I see, everything is very nice. In fact, the other stores around here—" She made a bilious face.

"So it's self-respect. You don't want to buy a bum gift."

"No, I don't." She looked about, then appraisingly back at him. "Is this your usual sales pitch?"

His arm swept around the shop. "Who needs a sales pitch?"

"Very nice," she repeated.

Considering the sober cut of her ecru business suit, the neckline was scooped deep. But she didn't flirt, bend low, touch fingertips to cleavage. Her creamy bosom seemed displayed because she was pleased with it.

She rummaged through the bookshelves, resting her foot on the stool, propping the opened books on her knee. Curt felt himself leaning out from the counter like a captain from the prow of an old whaler, leaning across the expanse of floor space, over her shoulder and into her soft body, fragrant of talc and sweat.

From across the room she called, "Medicine men pulling stones from people's chests, and live animals from their mouths? Talking owls? Shape-changers? Do you believe in this?"

"It's true. Last year a ghost boat came out of a dry wash and touched five people in a Papago village. Two of them died. Eight people witnessed it, they all tell the same story. Indians inhabit a different physics. And no, I can't quite believe it."

He was aware of the pages turning, her pose unchanged, as he attended to a lunch-hour influx, salesgirls from the shopping plaza who browsed, munching pastries. After ten minutes she checked her watch, snapped the book shut. She bought a leaping marlin, carved from ironwood by the Seris. "Rising, uplift," she said. "Retirement as a beginning, not the end. And it's exactly what the staff can afford."

In her wake she left the arid, slaty joy of absolute competence.

The woman came in again, a cousin's birthday. Dry and unwrinkled though the afternoon topped a hundred ten, she must have just emerged from an air-conditioned car. Uncollapsed, her hairstyle swept up into a permed mass. Perversely unbecoming, balanced on her head like a loaf of bread, it yet gave her face a more pronounced beauty, her eyes big and gray under naturally pencil-thin brows. She inquired about the miniature Papago baskets, woven of horsehair.

Curt identified the different artists and their styles, explained the significance of the designs.

"You're more a curator than a shopkeeper," she said.

Ten minutes before closing, Rosanna totaled the day's receipts, began tidying the workbench in the storeroom. Curt asked what the woman did.

Only twenty-three, she had worked a year already for the city water department, having begun as an intern in graduate school. "It's simple," she said. "When

I'm not successful, I'm not Elinor-not-being-successful. There's no such person. I'm not there."

"Who is?"

"Some inchoate mess. Some impersonator. It's all I can do to manage that person responsibly. It's like babysitting an idiot bore."

She admired the silverwork. "Are you a jeweler yourself?"

Ruefully, he told of sandcasting a belt buckle, melting the silver in a crucible, the ceramic throbbing orange in the torch's flame, pouring it, releasing his design. "Sturdy. Reluctant. Corny. I wear it on my cutoffs to weed the yard."

"So it wasn't that good," she said. "That's too bad."

"Right. I didn't suddenly produce enduring art on my first attempt."

"Have you done any more?"

"No."

"Well, then." She held his eyes locked for a second, then looked away, protruding her lips, blinking.

"I will, though. It's a concept: shitty jewelry for menial domestic tasks. Plastic turquoise rings for taking out the garbage. Kokopelli junk to scare away rats."

"He's done all right with the shop, considering he killed his father," Rosanna announced.

"I don't know what we can do to get Rosanna to speak up more, say what the hell is on her mind," Curt said.

"I sense a future conversation here," Elinor said.

He wanted her so much it was irrelevant whether or not he deserved her. He invited her for a drink.

"I can't," she said.

Curt was counseling an elderly aunt, shopping for her nephew's anniversary, when Elinor stalked in, heading straight for the bookshelves. A summer monsoon rattled the windows, and the lights had flickered twice. Rain whacked the roof. It was late Saturday.

The aunt dithered between wildly diverse items; not a good sign. Elinor spread books in her lap. The aunt desperately weighed a Salish fishing spear

in one hand, a Zia pot in the other, deposited new wares on the counter. "The poor boy lost his hearing over there in Vietnam," she said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"What do you mean?"

"I can read faces. Tell me I'm wrong."

"No, I was there."

"Terrible, terrible. I poured pig blood on the Bank of America."

"Everyone doing his part, that's what's going to get us out," Curt said.

"What's the purpose of this pot?"

"Basically, to sell to you. Originally, they would have stored food in it, but now they use Tupperware."

"Not so romantic. This bola tie is pretty."

"It's a fine piece. It's an anniversary, though, isn't it? Don't you want something for both?"

"They could wear it at the same time. Symbolic." She made a hanged-man face, tongue protruding. She began another reconnoiter of the shop.

Elinor skidded a book onto the counter. "This isn't too technical, is it? I'm just learning my man is barely literate."

"Read the footnotes to him," he said brusquely.

"Better find one with mostly pictures," she said. She returned with a glossy tome on fetishes.

"Here's a fetish for you." He recounted how students at a BIA high school had fitted a Bugs Bunny finger puppet onto their sleeping principal's penis.

She laughed so hard her skin stretched taut and color rose in her cheeks. "Thanks for the tip, Dr. Kinsey. He might want to give it a try." She pulled out her checkbook. "Say, there's one I choked entirely. I never spotted you as a vet."

"How do you spot us?" The blaze-up was instinctive.

The bottom fell out of her face. "I misspoke myself," she said. "I've hurt you. I'm sorry."

"You're young, after all, every so often," he said.

Elinor's mouth twitched, but she didn't reply, wandering away, leaving the book and checkbook on the counter. Her stare at the Papago basket display was obviously staged, unfocused. Hands behind her back, a finger tapped her palm

rhythmically. Curt's heart beat hard. He scarcely could attend to the aunt on her next two passes.

Finally Elinor approached, nudging her head conspiratorially close and murmuring, "How can you endure these people? By now I would have stuck that gourd rattle over there in her hand and said, 'Here, buy this, for Christ's sake.'"

"She doesn't have to buy anything."

"Can you learn to value people? I work with institutionalized hacks."

"Look," he said. "Put away your check. I'm giving you the book. Now let's go throw it in the river. Inscribe it to him, and we'll drop it in."

She smiled with a corner of her mouth. They looked at each other for a long time.

"What did your crony mean?" she said. "There is always a hole in the picture. Upright trader, smart, good for a laugh, unfortunately a parricide."

"I joined the war," he said. "Out of vanity," he added irritably. "I'm a cannibal. I'm the Undead. I survive everybody." Curt turned away, beside himself with impatience. He felt unable to continue the conversation.

"Is this a singles bar? Ring me up," said the aunt, who had opted for the fishing spear. He counted out her change.

"Let's get out of here," Curt said. He opened the book to the flyleaf.

Elinor took a pen from his pocket and wrote in a bold, sturdy hand.

Rain slashed the windshield of Curt's truck as they drove to the concreted river embankment.

"Are you attached?" Elinor said.

He parked. The river coursed past in wrinkled, stiff brown peaks, floating branches and a car door tossing. "Up 'til now I've tied women to the whipping post, pretty much."

"Don't say that!" Elinor punched both fists into his chest.

He trapped her in his arms. She was big and powerful moving against him, his hands up and down her back. For a second they jammed tight against the steering wheel. They slipped, locked, into the center of the seat. He shut off the key. She tongued him, forcing open his teeth, and her mouth slid across his face, tongue wetting his cheek.

They sat, mused. "Let's lose the book," Curt said. They shoved open the

doors against the downpour. The book was a hardback. The pages already were crinkling and buckling by the time they reached the bank. The ink inscription ran, fanning into a delta shape. "There's no harm in him," Elinor shouted. "Didn't measure up." She frisbeed the book over the railing; it keeled into the flood.

"I never could feel contempt for you," he said.

"I should think not," Elinor retorted sharply. "Count on it, I could never feel forgiveness toward you."

From an Interview with Oe, with Stage Directions from Synge's *Riders to the Sea*

During the Battle of Okinawa
the Japanese
army (*spinning the wheel rapidly*):

order the people (*speaking very
slowly*): on two
small islands nearby to commit suicide.

(*to an old man*): because the Americans
will rape the women and kill
the men, they say (*half in a dream*):

each family is given two grenades (*raising
her head and speaking
as if she did not see the people around her*): on the day

the Americans land more than five hundred
people kill themselves
and each other (*puts the empty cup mouth*

downwards on the table): grandfathers
to sons, wives
to husbands (*and lays her hands together*):

what is it you have? a dark garden.
jasmine. (*looking out*
anxiously): Mao quotes himself to Premier Zhou

Enlai (*speaking sadly and quietly*): Mao
was unusually stout
and smoked heavily (*sitting down on a stool*

at the fire): as they spoke Zhou kept inching
a large can
of cigarettes away from Chairman Mao—

playfully—but Mao kept reaching out
and inching
it back (*trying to open the bundle*):

as a young boy at summer camp (*giving him*
the rope):
it is announced that America has dropped

the A-Bomb and Allied forces (*beginning*
to work with the rope):
would be triumphant (*working at*

the halter): there was a bonfire to celebrate,
tractor-trailers
in the distance lit up like welders' masks,

and Chomsky walked into the forest (*lays down*
the halter): and sat
until nightfall (*counts the stitches*):

The day the puma

The day the puma licked her face, the world began—

It was the West, and anything could happen
She woke to the sour warmth of the breath,
the dream of the puma licking her face,

and the holding still, and the softening

Anything happened, anything could,
the day Elefantino took the race, the day
a nuclear pact was made, the day
this child, this child, this child the day
the world began

The day the puma licked her face,
the race to the moon finished, effaced,
the moon face creased and flagged

leaning inward, as she softened to the puma

The day she named the puma West, the day
the Olympic torch was wet, and people fell and fell

and fell, the crest
of volcanic ash swept, the day the world began

The day the puma licked her face, the pace of the past
raced unweid, she said *no fear, no fear, no fear,*
the said world slid, tumbled, rained,
the world began again, again

We Are Taking the Trees

Grab that large picnic cloth. Gingham unfurled,
moment of person turning bird.

Lay it there. To the right a bit—that's it.
We are taking the ground, its crumb

and piddling creek, its cuddly cave.
Straighten out that corner. Here come the larks

to do as birds in cards and cartoons: alight
in well-trained squadrons

to carry out the calling of their beaks
both funny and hard.

For each lark a corner to be lifted up:
parcel, diaper, kerchief. Not maypole. Not reveler birds

but pretty packing tape. Ballers of root balls,
twitterers from hoe tops and hummocks

soon to hit the fundamental bundle. Large belly
that will doubtless roll away and spill

as soon as we crest the first crab apple hill.
A juncture in good time both funny and hard.

Both Sides of the Border

an introduction by *Franklin Sirmans*

I first met Margarita Cabrera at her El Paso studio in the fall of 2006. Although I had seen her work briefly in a student exhibition at Hunter College in 2001, I first really looked at the work as part of a process of selection for the 2008 ArtPace Artists' Residency in San Antonio. Having browsed images of the works, I was keenly interested in going to El Paso to see her work in person. At the beginning of 2007, along with Kate Green (formerly of ArtPace), we met in Cabrera's studio.

Like anyone landing at the small El Paso airport for the first time and subsequently embarking into the city, I was struck by the city's proximity to the border between the United States and Mexico, chiefly the teeming city of Ciudad Juarez. The border is naturally defined by the Rio Grande River, but it is natural for the observer to take both sides into sight through the long, chain-link fence separating the two countries.

This dichotomous sight, I would find, is the perfect introduction to Cabrera's art. If a nation's border can be defined in any certain term, the physical division has much to do with economics and labor. Cabrera's work amplifies any discussion of the border. Life-sized, hand-sewn objects, often models of industrial commodities such as cars, bicycles and household appliances, were the first things I recalled from the images of her art, and seeing them in person confirmed their resonance. More poignant still, in Cabrera's studio, were the immigrants' backpacks filled with items of necessity for border crossings: toothpaste, water, a rosary, a medicine kit. The objects intertwine the political with the deeply personal.

While certainly indebted to the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg and the quilts of Faith Ringgold, Cabrera's objects often belie their softness. They are strong objects made for contemplation that lend themselves to numerous narratives. Recently, Cabrera has turned to another form, using clay to make a life-size tractor. Here, again, she successfully grafts a vernacular technique onto the form of the contemporary art object, giving us new ways to view the branded, the mass-produced, and the familiar as personalized pieces of art.

The Art of Margarita Cabrera



"Julieta" (2006) 35" x 42" x 49" – Border patrol uniform fabric, expandable baton, thread, and terra cotta pot

PHOTO: HERMANN FELDHAUS – COLLECTION OF VICKI AND KENT LOGAN, VAIL, CO
COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Vacuum Cleaner" (2004) 45.5" x 20" x 18" – vinyl and thread
COLLECTION OF BETH RUDIN DEWOODY – COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Bicicleta Guinda" (2006) 43" x 74" x 30" – vinyl, foam, string, and wire
PHOTO: MARINA INOUE – COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Vocho (yellow)" (2004) 5' x 6' x 13' — vinyl, thread, and car parts
PHOTO: HERMANN FELDHAUS — THE WILLIAM J. HOKIN COLLECTION — COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Hummer" (2006) 7' x 15' x 8' — vinyl, wood, wire, thread, and car parts
PHOTO: HERMANN FELDHAUS — THE WEST COLLECTION, OAKS, PA — COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Arbol de la vida (Carrucha / Wheel Barrow)" (2007) 60" x 25" x 24" — clay, slip paint, and metal hardware

PHOTO: HERIBERTO IBARRA — COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Arbol de la vida (John Deere Model #790)" (2007) 8' 4" x 5' x 8'
clay, slip paint, latex acrylic, and metal hardware
PHOTO: SHALINE KOLBER — COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK



"Craft of Resistance" (2008) dimensions variable — mixed-media installation

PHOTO: KIMBERLY AUBUCHON — COMMISSIONED AND PRODUCED BY ARTPACE, SAN ANTONIO, TX
COURTESY OF SARA MELTZER GALLERY, NEW YORK

Jaroslav

I, I mean you, I mean the shadow
of your shadow—
it's been a long time since I
said the word *buttercup*.
If you are trying to sleep
may the sheep fall down
all around you
till you stand like a pillar
in the billowing mist
of their woolly backs.
Pillar, I wonder how you will see this year.
Will you speak quietly to no one
at a great distance? Will you be
surpassed by the sound of wind and rain?
There is something about a pillar
that leads me to believe they are
real people, with hair, having
conversations. Even in ruins,
at intervals, like telephone poles.
I don't know if we are ever really
finally torn from the spot,
but I remain on this earth
to grow at your feet, Jaroslav.
To be your buttercup,
I remain.
To be your pillow.
Oh what a lonely head
would say such a thing
and then repeat it,
indefinitely.

Spanish Fruit Bomb

My literary inclinations
were given to me by a grateful neighbor
for saving her cat.
Meaning, problem of,
so I drove a hundred and fifty miles
to buy a book.
Later at parties I passed around
a few drawings concerning the Tyrol.
But things could go wrong,
they could get loused up.
Look what happened to the Impressionists.
What a melon that was.
If this wine is a Spanish fruit bomb
I am the nymph of porridge,
sent to Earth to shovel mounds of it
from off the horizon.
Usually the radiant is a small area
but not today—
suddenly I am seized by the horrible
unbreakable bond that exists between all things,
and strongest of all is the bond between things
that have nothing in common.
Here, take a few drawings concerning
the snail in Gothic marginal warfare.

Ducks in Prison

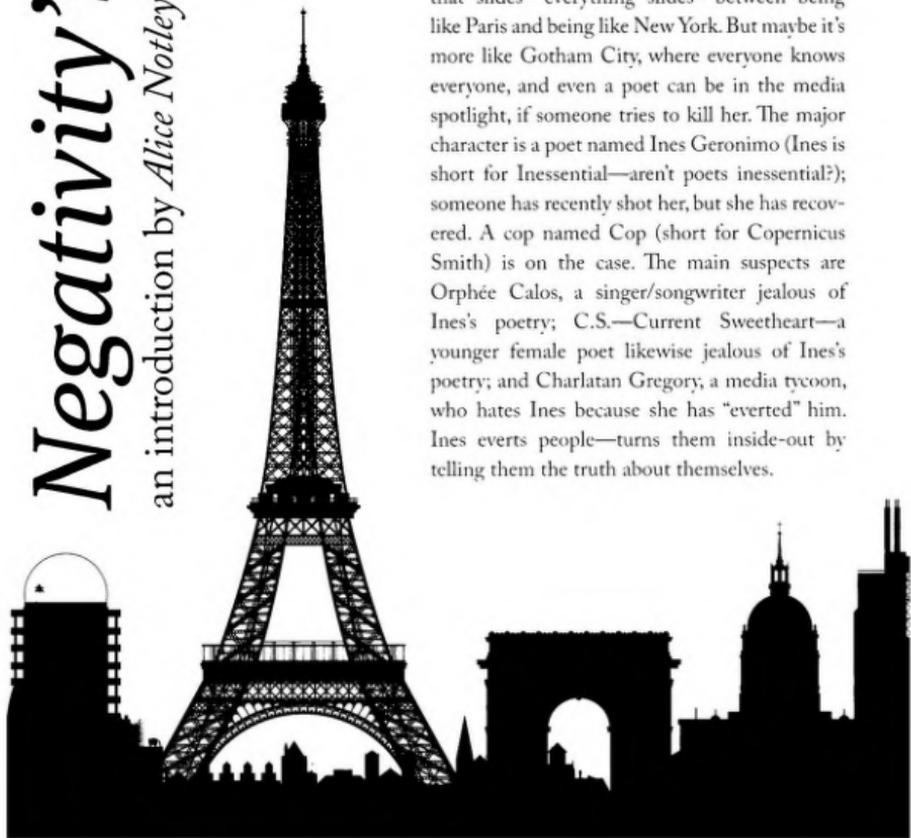
Ducks shitting in the showers.
The dumb one asking
Is there a ceiling or something
up there, glass or wood
we have to go through
to get where we are going?
Nothing so clean as the sky.
No one as beautiful as the dumb one
who asked and was told
by the one who seldom spoke,
Yes and no.
Then a gun prodding their feathers
for speaking.
Then waddling close to the shoes
of the guard.

Negativity's Kiss

an introduction by Alice Notley

Negativity's Kiss is a noir poem, with characters and a story, violence, police presence—everything I like about the crime novel, minus its robotic, skippable detail. Plus language that rocks. However I don't know how to be straight enough to just do it—tone and genre—so this is pretty crooked.

The world of my poem is an international city that slides—everything slides—between being like Paris and being like New York. But maybe it's more like Gotham City, where everyone knows everyone, and even a poet can be in the media spotlight, if someone tries to kill her. The major character is a poet named Ines Geronimo (Ines is short for Inessential—aren't poets inessential?); someone has recently shot her, but she has recovered. A cop named Cop (short for Copernicus Smith) is on the case. The main suspects are Orphée Calos, a singer/songwriter jealous of Ines's poetry; C.S.—Current Sweetheart—a younger female poet likewise jealous of Ines's poetry; and Charlatan Gregory, a media tycoon, who hates Ines because she has "everted" him. Ines everts people—turns them inside-out by telling them the truth about themselves.



Meanwhile a videotape is sent to Charl of a young woman's axe murder; the hooded murderer promises to kill Ines in the same way as the present victim, Harry, obliterating Ines's poetry, since the tape he will make of her murder will overshadow her life's work. However, the murderer, "Hooded," is now being haunted by the dead Harry.

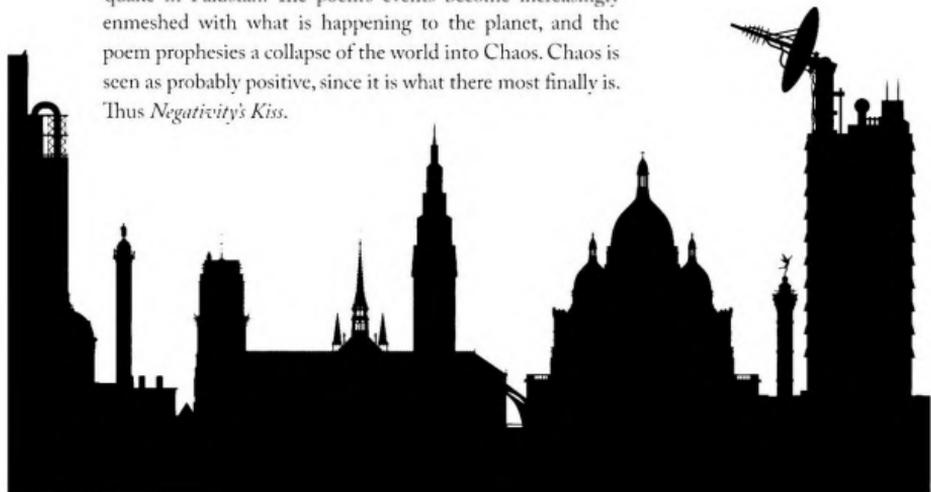
There is one more character, a government agent following Ines, whom he falls in love with.

And there is more, more of murder.

This plot sounds complicated, does it? All the "real" genre books I've read—crime novels and police procedurals—seem more byzantinely plotted. That bizarre complexity, and the elegiac aspects of the genre, fetishizing death and the idea of victim and killer, are what we most like about it.

As the excerpt begins, Hooded is revealed to be Verball, whom both Ines and Orphée know from the past. And Ines is writing blasphemous poems against religion and state, which are instantly known in the "Garble"—the web, media, telepathy—and condemned by Charl's newspapers.

I wrote this poem in 2005 during Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan. The poem's events become increasingly enmeshed with what is happening to the planet, and the poem prophesies a collapse of the world into Chaos. Chaos is seen as probably positive, since it is what there most finally is. Thus *Negativity's Kiss*.



Twelve Poems from *Negativity's Kiss*

Hooded is a failed poet; and a
failed professional philosopher—
Has read exhaustively in trad and non-trad;
worked as a college teacher; something in computers

Has Thought. Has Written. Can Talk.
In oddly sumptuous words could describe *you*
Thus you were attracted as friend, lover
He'd say you were important. Climb
down from
ruined crucifix—who believes in suf-
fering now?—
and join him in verbal necromancy. Founded

little movements in urban kitchens
yellow with bright coffee packets,
wrote some lines, anticipation of
change,
fame, luck. Everyone leaves kitchen for a
better job. Knew Ines from local scenes

Her lingual adroitness pisses him off
aren't supposed to produce masterpieces in this
day, supposed to
think. Aren't supposed to have blam blam
life big highs and lows, visions

Supposed to be part of new piddle language

always referring to names of other thinkers
innuendos of thoughts you don't even

have to *have*

But he was born

too early to market self as successful
new poet/thinker university mode. To
make *near-originality* into an art form
Couldn't deal with suit success crap

So does he

turn bitter? No, more mysterious

left by his mates grows truculent, very
inward; cannier, more theoretical, even
original

So far inside that he's really thinking:
perceptions that would get labeled
'delusional' (the only ones applicable now)

But, he's enabled himself to kill.

You could enable yourself to kill.

You'd keep it socially 'justified.' He's
getting his justification from himself.



Cop thinks, So I'm black today—one of
those days everyone looks and thinks, He's
black; a rainyday
drag. Soon there won't be time for race
When Chaos comes in force, who'll think Race?

My mind torn predisposed to cry out
its own Headlines to passersby YOU'RE ALREADY
DEAD

No won't do that
I'm looking for a guy that Ines
recalls, who went by name of
Verball—not
real name; all she remembers. Fixated on her

for a time in past, sent painintheass artistic
messages: 9 FT rolled-up murals
spelling out YOU ARE ARRESTED FOR
CHANTEUSE ET CHANTAGE. Poet sort of—couldn't
really write
but had a radical desire to construct
an antisocial story and live by it.

You have exhausted history, Cop says to
self: who really will you apprehend? what is
there to understand? He
chopped up Harry in his own theater;
shouldn't chop up anyone else, agreed. But
we're at

war dispersing death because we like it. What's
the diff? Are we
maniacs yes I am a witness, as you look
at me and think 'nigger'
How maniacal can a species be

was it ever helpful to think like that Oh
Evolutionary Theory you're just Too Much;
double as every
mental crook's soubriquet the justificatory
Victorian beard. Answer one question: Why
do we dream?
I don't want to die til it's been answered

My guess: to remember
To remember we also exist outside space and time.



An open letter from every religion to
Ines Geronimo
It is your lack of respect that forces us to write this
the torment you cause myriad individuals of each
faith and creed, by
reviling God, must be addressed

People's beliefs are not risible
you surely will tremble a fragile petal of the
deity's

multivalent lotus or lily or chrysanthemum
to know the pain your words
might bring to ordinary men and women
who worship purely

Enough of darkness pressures us without
poetry turning
mean and corrupted by hatred of spirituality
You must swallow us (no it doesn't say that)
You must kiss the ass of our Sacred
you must sign up with an acknowledged

detailed dogmatic form of superstition
rites in a language ancient or
glossolalian, or one of our fanatics may
break free of our benign moral constraints
and shoot you. We are aware that you have
been shot once before
we would be sorry if you got shot again.

I Ines say, go to hell you vicious motherfuckers
I really don't give a shit if any human ever again
exudes a prayer or bit of liturgy, observes
a holy day or disputes the true nature of a god
You shaking in unconsciously

destructive weather may you go down
before nature's helpless extremes may your
pantheons all fall
may your ancient practices moronic and
sexist be dissolved into spinning
wind and rain at deux cent cinquante kilometres par heure

there is no god, because you are suicidally
unloving of others not in your clique groups

may your temples of cosmic allegations collapse
may your myths be forgotten
may your prophets and saints and patriarchs
finally die into the unmemorized night
may your countless veils of prejudice be
 blown into the no-sided abyss
your loveless hoards of money devoured by
 orange-red drought



The forms of trees press forward from the formlessness
 of *Xaos*
as if they were you. Because they are you
Because you are chaotic and arboreal
Because you are dying

Are you more like a dead tree or a human
like a tree or the one remaining brand of
 bookstore or corn seed
are you more like a peony or an air conditioner
are you more like a portable phone or like a bird
 with the flu

are you like pine needles
are you like yellow needles or
 brown ones
are you like the nowhere the pines have gone to

are billions of dead arbres a cliché like
la poésie
Aghast that a man asked to lick her
boots in
Barnes & Noble a long time ago, before it
became a monopoly
he had a fetish and sacrificed his dignity to it

The trees have sacrificed nothing, having
been trees.
They went into nothing. You don't go there
you are a man and you go home to god,
with all your
money; but god has to have the most
money. He

can't have my money, it's mine. No
you have to die and give all your money
to god.
What about my children? The world is
ending; god knows what he's doing
he wants all of everyone's money. And
the trees?

They're in nothing. Money will remain
in god's hands, the only thing he loves
his deepest dream. Isn't
Xaos about to eat him? Yes and spit him
out under the no-pines

unpossessively. Not liking or feeling
not sodomizing him

not paradoxical
poem by Ines Geronimo



Cop can't find Verball, our Hooded
flees, not from Cop but from Harry
The Agent has decided to follow Ines
Though her new poems aren't published on
paper, they are already known in the
Garble

that's how it works, poetry, whose other
name's becoming Tele-
pathy. Everyone *knows* there's a
big big blasphemy going down
Though when she walks downtown
nobody recognizes Ines except for Agent

We are both anonymous wind
of great endurance and foresight, Agent
thinks
Agent's higher-ups have offered no
recent advice
they've begun to think anyone might murder her,
but Agent's

following Ines for her own good. Besides
following people's what he does. The
Street
wants his eye on the woman who hates god
so it'll know when god decides to destroy her

Charl, in office, orchestrates the Thought
on the subject
his extra blood nearby. Can't
figure out how to get shot at himself
it's risky to be a target: loss of respect, financial
clout (shareholders run)—how does Ines
manage it?

of course by having nothing. He'd like
her guts,
I want to be shot and not die
keeping all my power, Charl thinks. I want a near-
death experience, and everyone to know of it
I'm
going to coopt her shooting, by getting shot myself



Harry should be happier dead. Caught
and unredeemed
Is it that she was cut into so
many pieces she can't fade
into Xaos? but the old dead trees cry out too
and reappear as regret's spent savings
to all who're sensitized. Prizes, moneys

economies—terrible vocabularies Darling
Harry whispers in Hooded's ear
while another piece of her cries out to me,
Help me,
Tutelary One! Who can pray to Xaos? I
am morsels who can't find my

eternity! It intimates to
me that it's nearby
Am I refusing to leave
until resolution? I can't have that
I'm dead

She cries out, Tutelary I'm owed it
an assuagement I can't comprehend.

But I, Ines, am the targeted one
she shouldn't appeal to me ...
I am Verball's
ultimate victim. Yet I agonize for Harry
how else can I be Tutelary?
oh there's no one else to care for anyone

Aren't I supposed to be dead already
to occupy this position? Well I am. As if
laid out in gown and pantyhose
like any woman past the
Age of Competition

And why did
she live, in the first place?
Why did Harry live?



In the new commercial fascism disguised
as Freedom
no one suspects that her every kiss

is driven by a monetary purpose. We
are told to fall in
love. And support ourselves,

Have never loved, Ines. I am an Agent of the
State
Oh I've never felt this way before
I am an Agent of the Street
Love is a skeleton in a coffin dressed in
brocade wedding

gown: I have always been a
slave not to desire but to loyalty and its
exponential debt:
now I love you, Ines. Is it only because
I'm following you

unhappy shadow, or happy?
The State didn't tell me to feel this

in the new Commercial Fascism where
everything's for the one: one company.
The software company
strokes your cheek
with erotically compatible monitoring

device so the government can
be aware of your underwear I am that man
Possessively await/the death of restraint
I want to

serve *you*, not them. Why is this happening
to me?

I've never listened to the love
song sung by
hundreds of melismatic aggrandized girls,
I had never felt alone before I
realized I wasn't with you

If I could be with you, without this world
could be with you, without having to work
for the commercially fascist power company of
monied enlightenment

if I could be with you in chaos and without atrocity



C.S. has an idea—she should shoot Charl
Isn't sure what her motive might be and is
working on it
Isn't sure how not to get death penalty
How not, en effet, go to jail but still take credit

Motive SHOULD BE: Charl's papers are trashing
Ines and poetry: doesn't want to support *her*.
Ines will therefore be subsumed under "Poetry"
heartblind
I care only for Language, C.S. thinks. This
pillory
must be stopped, of the only uncommercial
art form

How can I not be lethally injected,
By not killing Charl only shooting him?
How can I stay out of jail—Escape or, should
 I accept
incarceration? Charl deserves to be nearly
equalized—it's justified—I'll call attention
to my cause, with my poems
 from jail ...

Will people still like me if I do this?
The man's power is so lurid; he casts a
vulgar spotlight for all his readers to see by—
 No.
But I'll be chalkwhite in their vision. And they'll
buy my books—to hate me ... that's
 okay

The Problem: I feel as if he,
Charl, is telling me to do this. Can he want
a near-assassination? It will make him
martyred, me denounceable

I should never have taken my gun out.
Shrine of personality—I'm losing my grip
The Garble conveys to me telepathy's
 intimations:
He wants to nearly die—he's choosing me for
 his quasi-
assassinat. Doesn't know me. You don't have
 to know someone exactly

to propose action from mental afar: the Garble.
Outrage attracts danger? I'm not sure how
to get close enough



Are numbers necessary? asks
Cop, Please don't let me think like
that—Please, who?
Please don't let me address whom I can't

see. Who, you? Into the Garble
Verball's fixed on numbers; in his
meditative scraps has written:

'1 + 7 equals the countervalent'—
He once lived at 17 rue St. Mark—
And 'You want to frame me with a
hack numbers scheme: the tax
code, a wedding ring, one plus one'

I want to keep
Verball from killing, Cop thinks

but my motive's all gummed up with
my bank account: numbers. In Xaos
no numbers; in Garble they're spewed;
aleatory procedures like the economy,
toss the coin of
a billion wallets—can you bless my

leather container, who? How many
animals slaughtered to keep you alive
today, pilgrims; saw a cow weeping tears from
long lashes—count the hairs in kine eyes

for yr research paper foaming with
numerical
piety: this is *right*. And we'll all ...
go together—how many? to pull up how
many remaining
wild mountain thymes?

I've been to all of Verball's old addresses.
Have looked up the kitchen crews
He's said to be talking to the air. I'm
talking to the air
Vast artifice of numbered molecules,

please don't—what?—Don't let me down.



Orphée used to know Verball—believe it—
back in the old
days. Orphée knew everyone
before he knew no one ... Disguised as
nonmusical cipher
in dark wool coat, cap, scarf, Orphée's slipped out
into the street—

rue de Backtrack, looking for a gracious remin-
iscence: I used to

know every downtown motherfucker. The sun's
blazing on early snow, rue des Neiges
d'Antan—you uneducated homo sapiens
I am walking furniture or set-piece or extra

then, who's the star, if not me? Pretend I
don't know I'm the star no one knows
is here ... saboteur in mufti. But then, sud-
denly
Verball's in front of him muttering Harry
you aren't funny
something like that. Then looks at Orphée

Hey, man, I know you! You're a piece of
senseless history—like me! Have you
noted there's now no
civilization? Just yards of money or its lack
Owners of the prevalent objects—garbage—
and wiggled-out visiteurs—us—

from other ages and not awestruck,
This world looks like shit ...
Orphée, I killed a woman and she
won't stop talking to me: I didn't
want to wind up an insane murderer, but

here I am—don't you want to take me home?

Orphée turns walks faster then runs
Verball's hot in pursuit: Orphée
if you don't take me with you I'll tell
everyone about the time we made it

on rue Bitterend in 1962
I'll call up the Times ...
Orphée's a feeble runner with stiff hip
He's stuck, stuck with Verball
Gives in fast, for now forget it: okay I've got

an extra apartment where I can put you up
Shit, he thinks, oh merde, really to be
stuck in the past



I don't have to tell you about it: I'm
sick of that part of
the story—Ines tells Cop
Don't have to have Love everywhere
I'm changing Story by omitting my
past

up until the point where I was shot
Then how can I know
what happened? says Cop
You don't have to: that's a conceit
Motivation, particulars

I went there, I just went to that
impermanent street.
No one can tell me anything I don't know
The same must be true for you. Make
something up and it will be true, you
or someone will believe it

You went there, he says, because Verball's
voice sounded familiar. I know
you wanted to touch a
 dead lover's ambiance—but that isn't
part of my case

I don't care
who I thought he was. I don't care
what made me go there. Why are we talking
 about this again?

I have to know—for myself—Cop says
what your life is like. I've no daily life now
 since I began to think

and don't want one. What sense of Time
are we left with?
Rejecting love's myth, evolutionary purpose,
 nature
I've got no story or moment

I have to talk, I'll never exist, it's all
junkwares out there, debris from species
and its smirk. Nothing terribly of interest
I don't want that to be true. Why did you love?

Society's love—what they say you
 have to feel
is exhausted, I say.
The other love is here now
uninherited. It has no object or friend
 It just is.

Festoons and Astragals

Sandy Florian

But I don't wish to veer far from the language of tragedy. After all, the string fails to emit the exact pitch of my mind. When I desire a flat, it gives a sharp. When I desire a sharp, it gives the sort of book that makes money for publishers. My poetry, on the other hand, is like a painting. Moved by stones and the sound of the lyre.

Like a painter, I put a dolphin in a forest, a boar on top of ocean waves, a writer in the Intellectual School with model fingers and hair of bronze. She avoids the unhappy seducers, the excellence and charm of their lucid agreements. Conforms only to what needs be said at the time, deferring only to the points of the moment, using only the newest terms for more out-of-the-way things, like coins and chance and luck, and avoiding the older terms like words with sorrowful faces.

She avoids the affliction of the itch, of jaundice, of fits, of starts, the same way sensible men steer clear of the rashness of fools. Watch as she strangles out verses with her one eye on the blackbirds all the while sinking lower and lower into the ditch. Help, she cries, but nobody cares to help. How, she cries, but nobody cares to know the answer, having thrown themselves over to finer verses, waiting to be saved by god. Someone lets her down by the rope. And I should tell you how rights and stability destroy themselves.

If it's true that one often needs the spur, it is also true that one often needs the curb. Sublimity is the echo of the great soul.

She blends blue with green and red with yellow and white with wax to best get the likeness of a dog, a horse, a man, a ship. And what else could they be? These lies that are seen in the skies whenever the clouds are torn. With the help of hand and mind and matter.

She notices nature is lacking and so she adds language. Claims that art creates its own nature, its own beast, its own edenic forest, for the reason-principle of arriving at a beauty exponentially more beautiful. The musical is derived from its cacophonous source. So the art exhibited more closely is less comely, more fervid, more violent-like, like the bloody world of menstruation where there is nothing but ugliness and that little matter of beasts in heat.

The principle that creates beauty must itself be ugly or it could not produce its opposite. We are in the case of one who sees his winning reflection not realizing that, when it comes, it goes. A wind passes and does not come again. Greater beauty lies in not wasting the short attention spans we are granted.

Now we have nowhere to go but toward that which is less. So, we travel inward, knowing nothing, running toward the artifice of the artificial self, misunderstanding the soul that stirs. We represent gold by some portion of gold. In the same way, we learn that the purified intellect comes from gods and their glory.

To live at ease is there. To run from ourselves is there. Light runs from light like a stranger so that the darkness itself can be contained. If we fail to understand this, it's because we think that knowledge is a mathematical theorem or a grammatical combination consisting of manifold details and coordinated by the false and rusty god.

I suffer the seducing mummer to approach the sick Montgomery. His teeth are flocks of seagulls shorn from the washing. All things create twins which are two opposites falling in love with each other under the holy mistletoe. But hardly anything can be writ in my obscure place that is not more plainly said elsewhere. So I muzzle the ox that treads on corn.

Like a river I make a figure wherein the lamb may wade and the elephant may freely swim. Saturn devours all his children. Man becomes god by participation

in heaven that is evident in the barks and leaves. But let's return to the place where we left off. Let's return to the nearby geography of mountains.

Poetry is the peripatetic art of winding about mountains. Sonorous in its brevity to please or to prolix. To endow or to extol. To mingle or to flaunt. To improve upon the promptings of the incoherent flesh and to exhibit the infestation of frailty. We hire poets to bring our heroes home. To tell us nature is a wavering workhorse. To show us the hog's invariable habit to hog. To prove the ape's invariable habit to imitate. To delight. To battle and to banter. To trout and to fringe. To step a foot outside itself and arrive at the same mountain road.

Speech is the elegant postman of the mind. Eloquently speaking about the deliveries of Cicero. From the fiction to the failure. From the failure to the fall. From the fall to the flaw. From the monster of the body. Utility is the end of virtue. Justice the end of man. Of every act. Of every thought. Of every truth.

A wind passes and does not come again.

I read how thought is the thought of thought. How the soul is the form of forms. My legs ache. My eyes look. Plots are added to furnish the warning example that some men are birthed. Some are inspired. And since there can be no tragedy without motion, we walk side by side out of the scarlet garden as commas become signals for the sigh. End to end, line by line, as trees become signals for the sin. Our hearts ache, our eyes look, toward the imagined world that alters the imagined course of our imagined nature. A stony son murders his beastly mother who has murdered her vagrant husband and hounded her stony son. This occurs marvelously. Quickly. Its fiction instructs our understanding of time. Now for the outside of it, it is even well-nigh worse. So that honey-flowing matronly eloquence merely apparels her affectations.

After all, who is the maker of the maker? Having made his own maker in his own likeness? Having set his maker in his likeness above and beyond the works of his own second and beastly nature? Whether it's by curse or by wisdom he

has exalted his title. Marked it with the hard scope of science rather than by any partial allegation.

I have a war with history.

My big city is a city in which I know and by knowledge I lift my mind away from itself. I hire philosophers to show me the tediousness of my way. To remind me of the more pleasing and imaginary lodging at my journey's end. Of the turnings and diversions that incriminate all my distractions. Having already passed the hard hardness, half beheld the other half. To remind me that it is well to do well, and what is well, and what is not then well.

Meanwhile, Montgomery lies cradled in his grave. Battling the crueller battle with unnatural monsters voted in by collective inspiration. David, as in a glass filth, as in a Psalm of Mercy, in weakness of mind and wretchedness of work. The lyric most displeases with his turning lyre, and the well-chorded voice gives praise.

Jolly comedy inflames my mazy error. Making my story fit for scripture. Half the parts become wholly poetical. Even that Christ our Savior, vouchsafed by the physics of it. Severed by the dissection of it. Fully commendable, I think and think I think rightly. How in storms, how in sports, how a fugitive, how besieging, how to strangers, how to my enemies, how to my own. In quips and scoffs, in carps and taunts. We all have ears and itching tongues. A slightest reason to weigh ourselves.

With a needle, I inject myself with salts of gold. With a sword, I kill my father. With a bullet, I defend my country, for poetry is the companion of camps where I carry around Homer's corpse honoring his philosophical instruments because blessed are the wits that breed. But let us return to poetry.

We follow these peripatetics because we know that just as the sciences are differentiated by their objects, not insofar as they are things but insofar as they are knowable, so the arts are classified by things insofar as they can be drummed up.

In the bedroom where Betty powders her bosom. In the bathroom where the painter passes her toilet. In the kitchen all lit up with innuendo.

Goodness is no part of my skull. The most adorned language I write here unadornedly. Dragging my tongue, lap lapping at the utterance. My woof. What have I said but the bark of beasts that never look farther than this, my golden fiction. I have stayed longer, rubbed harder where the rubber meets the road to open your eyes and raise them aloft. Agog. With this, your corporal hindsight. And because I become suddenly blind, I write riddles to be best understood. Enigmas by the mosaic art of numbers. Half lost, half ghost, half possessed by all my limbs. While Ovid makes the curious and exponential claim to be misunderstood by his depth.

We live in a mist, blinded and benighted. Since our father's disobedience poisoned him and his posterity, man has become the most imperfect animal in all the field. We lost all the instinct that the beasts retain groaning under the loss of our first purity, occasioned by the fruit our first fall. And how can this blind, lame, and utterly imperfect man, with so great a load to boot of original sin hope to approach this supreme fiction, this exalted fog, but by two means only. The one, by laying his burden the cross, and the other, by his careful quest for gold.

We hire the natural magicians to address matters of absolute knowledge. To omit the testimonies of an infinity of authors in confirmation of their well-beheaded truths. Secrets hang on the knowledge of trees. Philosophy on philosophical treason.

Look, I have too much already exceeded my commission, what can this all mean other than Moses in Eden or another terrestrial paradise? It's not good to stay too long in the theatre, so let our rhymers rhyme. And by and like my mazy error, instead of truth, let's raise discord. I'm speaking like a bagpipe. Why, a Christian king should think of my story as an ornament, profane in my invocation of the falsar god, one I can only imagine in my imitation of the foolish custom, by

which man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature, professes only to relay the principles of heaven.

Judgment, my severer sister, busies herself at the grave of rigid examination, registering by letters, their orders and causes, their uses and indifferences. Whereby Fancy finds her materials easily at hand, there only for the asking. One time, I walked upon the sea. I could not improve upon the structure of my poem but only on the waves themselves. There I find nothing but color and counsel.

Matthew disapproves of my poem. Says there's too many words and not enough metaphors. But I would fain to see another poet who draws so near our nature. Without the least uncomely help of the unhelpful shadow. These are strange fictions, metamorphoses so remote from the articles of our imagined fate. After all, I can't allow the geographer to make a fish of my sea. So, to Matthew I say there are so many words that while magnificent of sound are like the windy blisters of trouble waters. To this palpable darkness I may also ask him a different riddle. But I am too old.

Here, I follow a new road. My sentences appear to expect an actor or an actress, though the setting clearly calls for a study. My actress struggles to make her appearance from behind her probable tapestry. Alone, she cannot invent a reason for what she has done in the city before she returns to the study. Sometimes she thinks it's probable that she was not gone at all. Sometimes she thinks that she's been behind her flashy tapestry since the last act, the last turn of the page, the last fallen curtain. She stands impatiently waiting behind the tapestry that displays her Garden of Eden with bloodstains on her white chemise, knife dripping from her swollen hand because my sentences are expecting a plot, some mischief, so that the reader of my sentences may be more easily pleased. My reader must not be hindered to think, to imagine the story for himself, otherwise, his satisfaction will wane.

This is a true story. My actress is a dame, a doll, a devourer, a femme fatale. She has talons for feet, and the windstorm blows her wings and lioness hair in unam-

biguous cuneiform inscriptions, like the bones in the ankles of beasts. She is, of course, the beloved first wife of Adam who seized the light. In my story, husband and wife bicker in the bedroom. Then, she takes up lodging in the middle of a tree trunk. Having a cannibalistic appetite, she feeds nightly on children and women enfeebled by pregnancy. Early incantations associate her with Zu birds, diseases, and windstorms. Sumerian accounts depict her as the handmaiden of Inanna. She governs a class of succubi and is called the "strangler" in later stories. But, now, behind the tapestry, my actress reposes perfectly, splendidly, without bloodstains on her clean chemise and acquires a perfect resting place in the white margins of my white pages. Here lie the lesser important actions that don't merit inclusion and might just mar the dignity of my verse if I lowered myself to express them.

My performance lasts some time; resembles reality perfectly. I turn a ten-minute reading into a rise and fall, a fall and rise and fall again. Mostly, I leave the matter of duration to the reader and never make definite decisions for fear of falling into lawlessness and reducing the scale of proportions. In the beginning, the sun rises. At noon, it is the third act. By the fifth, the sun sets on the stage, imitating those black and blue skies of Manhattan.

Take this large barge in the margins. Then take behind the large barge that great rush of water that hinders you from hearing what you desire and which orders the seamen to fall their oars more gently. Take the seaman that favors his curiosity with the strictest silence. The air breaks around him like the noise of distant thunder, trapped swallows in a chimney, those undulations of sound that vanish before they reach the ears yet retain their initial horror. Take the seaman who lifts his head gently without taking notice of the noise and says, We had but this to desire that we might hear no more of that noise which now leaves the coast. Someone else who mistakes the world for having an iller nature counters meanly, If the concernment of battle had not been so great, I would have scarce wished a victory at the price we pay, for no battle escapes those eternal rhymers who listen for sounds more diligently than birds of prey.

My big city is a city where witches are justly hanged. Adam creeps along with ten little syllables in each line. He affects plainness to cover his want of imagination. When he speaks in a serious way, his highest flight is often a miserable antithesis. When he speaks in a comical way, he reaches for some type of conceit, the ghost of a jest. To please and to touch. To let the action be planned. From dust to dust. To let us be scared.

My sentences want a palace and so I depict its façade. I walk from terrace to terrace and present a flight of steps presently in my view. Over there runs a long gallery flanked with golden mirrors. The balcony is enclosed with a golden balustrade. I count the golden ovals on the ceiling and mutter under my breath, Naught but festoons they are, and astragals. Then I jump forty pages to the end where I narrowly escape naked through the garden of forking paths.

For kicks, I throw in a flute and an oboe. In a mad inflation of my moony mood, I burn the bird with a trumpet. I change Narcissus into a porcupine and cover Daphne with the barks of whales. My poetry crawls along my feeble page, the dull teller of an empty tale.

So flee the cacophony of my dumb show. Each of my noisy lines is offensive. Every superfluous word is insipid. Every garish detail gets strung up by the ears. A hundred dollars, a hundred plaintive mountains are dead and dying, and here I am ramming my vowels off the road. In a word, in irreverence for the god-like, no matter what, no matter how, a wretched writer.

Girl in a Dirt Yard

Jan Ellison

In the dirt yard out back of the old burger joint, a mile past the highway, stands a girl—a stranger—with tattooed shoulders and cropped yellow hair. She wears a tight black tank and the tops of her breasts are startling in the sun as it cuts through the trees in jagged lines. Her arms are extended and her fingers shoot from her hands like the first growths of spring as she rocks from side to side. A few feet beyond her, watching her, is a boy of four—his cheeks aflame with sun and heat, his tennis shoes caked with mud. He moves toward her slowly but not shyly, wondering perhaps what is painted on her body, wondering why she moves that way. Is she dancing? Is she pretending to be a tree in the wind?

The yard in which they stand is a hundred square feet of dirt, enclosed on three sides by a tall wooden fence and open on the fourth to a ravine where a shallow creek flows in the spring. On the other side of the creek is a field that runs to the base of the hills beyond. It's the place we used to go in college, remember? The time we all sat at a picnic table in the sun and got drunk on cheap beer and carved our separate initials into the soft wood. And then you and I crossed the creek in bare feet and ran through the field. The grass was long and sharp and you tackled me. You said my name—*Rebecca*—but only once, and I wondered if our friends could see our baked, naked limbs moving in the sun.

Now is a Saturday like that Saturday of ours—hot under a dome of blue sky, the field across the creek laid with a carpet of green. Who would guess at the nettles, the thorns, the discarded condoms hiding there? We didn't use one, the two of us, that time or any other, and there would have been a baby once, but by then you had gone to join Sara in Spain, where she'd been waiting all through that fragrant spring and that long hot summer. I went alone to the clinic and I never spoke of it. I never got the chance.

The picnic tables still stand—their ancient initials carved over with new names, hearts, other symbols of union—but a dozen blue-striped umbrellas dot the landscape now, and the dirt yard has been taken over by families from

the nearby suburbs. They are wealthy, these families, but not overly so; they are clean-cut and satisfied with the lives they've made up for themselves. They drive mini-vans; they wear khaki shorts and clean T-shirts and leather sandals and although it is barely spring, they are already tanned and complete in their belonging. They drink pitchers of micro-brew beer and eat peanuts and wait for their food in clumps at the far end of the yard.

They watch the tattooed girl as she raises her arms over her head, her thumbs and fingers forming a perfect oval. Her legs beneath her short skirt are shapely and luminous, and hiding her feet and her toes—and her toenails that must be painted the color of a new bruise—are black suede boots that rise up to just below her slender knees.

She drops her arms slowly. She bends and whispers something in the little boy's ear. He smiles and leans in close, whispers something back and then darts across the yard to his mother, whose name is Rebecca, who has been watching warily and waiting, who wonders now what secret her son shares with this girl, this strange girl with her tattoos and her showy black boots and that brazen dark line between her breasts. Rebecca wears khaki shorts and takes tiny sips of beer from a frosted mug and pushes the stroller that holds her sleeping daughter back and forth with one sandaled foot. Her toenails are clipped and bare, her hair, once long and untamed, is cut expensively around her shoulders. Her husband sits beside her at the picnic bench—a shorter, slighter man than she'd imagined, a man whose good qualities have been affixed in her mind like a spelling list and carefully memorized.

The girl begins to follow the little boy, then as he climbs into Rebecca's lap she stops, her body held still like a small animal at the side of the road. An uncertain smile plays at her lips. Rebecca rearranges her own face and looks the girl hard in the eye. The girl's smile fades and she turns away, her body silhouetted against the field across the creek. All at once, Rebecca is overtaken by a memory—a roll in that grass under a dome of blue sky, the weight of his body, his reckless hot breath in her face.

She takes a swig of beer, then refills her mug from the pitcher and downs it without waiting for the foam to settle. The sun is hot on her shoulders and on the

back of her head. The girl is far across the yard now—she is heading toward the gate, she is gone—and Rebecca knows right then she will make the phone call that has been lingering in her for a decade. She must get it back—that pitched yearning, the old speeding car with the top down and the long days drinking in the sun. She knows how to find him. His number is listed. She's checked a dozen, a hundred times in the decade that has gone by since those months they spent together.

But she doesn't call. The winds come back and then the rains and another year, then two go by, and a third baby is born and fed and weaned, and after all that time she sees it—while she sits with her family in the breakfast room eating cold cereal—three small lines of type in the class notes at the back of the university's alumni magazine. He and Sara have had a child; it has been born on her birthday, and they have named it Rebecca.

For a long time she sits, unmoving, watching the morning light fall in shards across the breakfast table. Then she stands and clips the tiny paragraph from the magazine with the kitchen scissors and wonders where to put it. It cannot be stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet; it cannot be stashed in the junk drawer or pasted into a photo album. So she puts it in the pocket of her bathrobe and leaves it there, and that is where it stays, through many seasons of washing and fingering, until truly, it is nothing.

Crossroads

Thalia Field

CHAPTER ONE: There are diets of sleep, lunacy, and visitations of people from wherever “beyond” settled across the river once named Lethe, either an island or the land of the Cimmerians. There are diets and deities, Morpheus, twin of death, son of sleep and night, thousand-brothered, bringing up old friends and strangers at the most unexpected times. Entwined with his thousand brothers, including Phobetor and Phantasos, they confuse us with perceiving animals and things, light and water, smoke and steam; confuse us that we are not animals and things.

We are not sleeping when we see these loved ones, lost as they are, or we are, in a world beyond number. We are not sleeping because we experience unique visitations from the dead without confusion. Confusions say there’s a map we can’t follow, a near-death of islands and territories different than the skin on our faces. Skin exposed to the breakdown of reason, exploding in the water just a few miles in front of us. How different are we from things that have died? Purple-haired Morpheus confuses us with the forms of people, as Ovid tells us, their gestures and perfect pitch. They come and give advice, or orders. The tenuous bridge of sleep controlled by these brothers, don’t let anyone cross. Green-skinned Morpheus mimics the exact words and faces of loved ones, and rewards loss with loss. William Blake and his ghost-brother, out at sea beyond “mind-forged manacles,” drifting into the mind’s life-washed expanse of acid, images in relief, without slavery, without kings. How, William Blake, will you illuminate the relief etching, discovered in the hoarse throat of the dead?

CHAPTER ONE: Always start by saying that this is not a “ghost” story. Cozy and protective as such stories were, they were only fun at first. Like the nuns besieged by poltergeists who “tickled them near to death.” That’s cute. But this is not that kind of story. The sweet, old-fashioned “ghost” was detonated in shallow water, continuing a century-long plague of negligible lethal moments. This is not a ghost story because experiments have begun to show that nothing ever stays

local: bad deaths or bad choices. We've run out of romance in the haunting of a house. Rumor is an old technique. Rumor kept things local. This is not that kind of story.

CHAPTER ONE: Stand on the bridge between lung and matter, on a boat handled by Charon, between stalling and starting. Bacteria, we know you as you wiggle in our thoughts, a compass in the head leading to the spoil, the scroll: Proverbs 8:27, "*when he established the heavens, I was there; when he set a compass upon the face of the depth...*" This compass is the man in his ignorance of the world heaping around him, agony and ecstasy his narrow experience, a wiggle he defines by ignoring bacteria, even as they gather under his tongue. OK, that's not quite true; William Blake couldn't have known that things as small as bacteria or atoms could pass between larger mortal barricades. But that's just one reading of it. William Blake himself couldn't decide which was worse: to read the scroll and stare at the compass, or punish the sins and steer without stars. Or the third way: give these choices up and become a diety, a god-diet, there is only me to eat it and there you are, said William Blake, saintly heretic. Proverbs 8:36, "*all they that hate me, love death.*" In the loss of a brother there vibrates a yellow-green border, "brother" slips on the fetid mud of the shore, coin in hand. We all lose brothers between fingers and clouds. Angels he thought he saw writhing in a tree became angels he knew. They came unexplained and unscientific. Roots imagine a compost. There is no philosophy in the material but endless material for philosophy. This is more than a word game. Brothers who have died provide a thin and vital layer which supports life. In the radioactive, there is energy bent in the wrong direction. But there's a story which will steer the dead back toward us, or grant access to the dark matter between planets, thoughts, the space of nine surprises. The atmosphere which allows travel or translation between orbiting masses. Dead brothers are as common as death. And what's not to love in death?

CHAPTER ONE: Picture the isolation and small size of Bikini Island, with children taking their hand luggage and evacuating—167 souls in all. Now the island's for skin- and scuba-diving. The skin, a Bravo crater, now a tourist hole.

Bikini Island vaporized into an attractive model for the sensitivity of biota, an important subject for studies of extinction. In the years since the war, I have pursued the origin of island biota dispersed and *in situ*, and the hate toward these biota since contact. What in these cases isn't depauperate and disharmonic, facilitating the disappearing relict taxa and simulating adaptive radiations? Fancy words. Operation Crossroads. The restricted range and small population size of children, together with their limited diversity of defenses, make them particularly vulnerable to extinction, largely through habitat loss or interactions with pigs and dogs. But I'm not trying to sound cranky. I might be in favor of tourists diving to see the sunken aircraft carrier in Bikini harbor, along with the one Japanese flagship, two submarines, one battleship, two destroyers, and one frigate. I'm one of the lucky ones still with skin. On the island, the radiological cleanup has still not begun, and seventy-two years later, 56 children wait to go home again, unsettled on other islands. Experts want to scrape the topsoil off and store it in Bravo crater. Or spread potassium in the hopes that plants won't drink in the poisonous cesium still deep in the surface. Bikini may never support life again.

CHAPTER ONE: I was a doctor when I returned from Bikini. Now I am nothing more than a coated surface, contaminated with invisible effects. Nothing scrapes off. The young innocent sailors tried their best to distract me as they lounged and swam and played on the twists of ruined ships. A few months later they returned home, freaked out that old-fashioned elbow grease couldn't make up for cleaning products too weak to help. The invisible pollutants made the little boxes click each time the space men approached us in the hospitals; the poor boys dressed head to foot in lead suits, afraid to touch my naked body without their gloves. No one will forget how they lined up hundreds of old ships in the harbor, ships that had spent their lifetimes at sea, hailing from every proud fleet, now roped together like the sheep and goats to the decks. I was a senior medical officer then, but for the past fifty years I have been nothing but a receptacle for secrets people think no one will believe. I am amazed how well they are guarded, and how they pass silently through generations. There is no

appeal to so-called “natural law” for the shadowy visitors who pull their strange experiences from inside breast pockets and stuff them back if you cough or say so much as, “Excuse me?” First one, then several, now nine women in tailored jackets have come to my door this September. One young woman told me of hearing her dead father’s voice explaining the principle of the wind, and now every time I go to type up her file, a gust blows the papers up and around so that I have still not been able to complete it.

CHAPTER ONE: Ghost: A faint image near the image intended, caused by radiation that has taken a different path, or by ideas that have changed and grown darker. Ghost: the spirit of imagination, for all purposes still alive in the flesh.

CHAPTER ONE: In 1950, a trip from Chicago to Venus could be made in 146 days. Nowadays, it would be faster. But the return trip is more complicated, as always. I explain that since Venus is moving faster through space than the Earth ever will, a stopover would be necessary for the visitor on Venus while the Earth realigns for the landing. In every single one of her cells, in each of her follicles, in every drop of her spit, the clock of the universe is tick-tocking the isotopes as we fulfill our half-lives, half-sleeping. She shifts a little closer when I mention this stopover of 470 days. What happens in that time? she asks. Of course the copper content of the human DNA is affected by the pull of Earth which is now outside its normal system of influence. The other half of our lives reappear. No mere coincidence, I whisper to her: seven metals in our cells, for the seven days, the seven deadly sins. She does the math herself: the return would have been another 146 days, making a total of 762 days round-trip. Maybe you’ll figure out how to emit yourself there one particle at a time and go visit, I suggest. A cosmic ray streaming in reverse. Oh, but I forgot to mention—messengers originating from Venus would only need 42 minutes to conduct themselves here and back. That’s the handicap.

CHAPTER ONE: January 7, 1948, The Louisville Courier (UP): *F-51 and CAPT. MANTELL DESTROYED CHASING FLYING SAUCER*: Capt. Thomas

Mantell, a veteran of the Normandy invasion, chased either a flying saucer or the planet Venus to his death today over Godman Air Force base, near Ft. Knox. Two others in the formation pulled out, but Captain Mantell went “practically to heaven” before crashing.

CHAPTER ONE: How many dead brothers does it take to resolve mythology? Morpheus is responsible, parented by Nyx and Hypnos, for the way change resists cracking from dawn to day, yet restores false families. Charon his half-brother captains the ending. My dead brother was dead as he killed one man on a beach in France. He killed the man, and he too was killed (in time) by staring into the sun, dispersed on earth. The brother's death is the echo of our father's death, which allows the story to give itself blindspots. I saw my dead brother on a long stay in France. He was full of guilt he couldn't shake. Foregrounded, I suddenly went the other way, from a pitiful student to a doctor full of hope, believing I could change children back into children. But they are exiled on their scattered islands now, and refuge is lost to them, though they are refugees. In refuge they will learn some of suffering and that only a new classification of life itself will bring them a place to live. There will be plants that restore their island's soil. Responding to death takes cleaning up toxins, and amazingly there are life forms that will accomplish this.

CHAPTER ONE:

aerodynamic proverb:

“Everything has an end

except a flying saucer which has neither beginning nor end”

CHAPTER ONE: “*Twelve years and forty-two days*”—I nearly sang these words as I rustled papers near the receiver—Yes, William Blake, that's a good number. Dusting off the cover of a little chapbook, the first one I started years ago, I search the loose clippings until I find a xerox of a letter written by William Blake to a friend on the occasion of a death. To the rhythm of the steady clicking, I read aloud: “*Thirteen years ago I lost a brother and with his spirit I converse daily*

and hourly ... I bear his advice ..." and so on: "*I am the companion of angels.*" Sitting back on my heels, I unbutton my shirt and release a long breath.

Normally the etching is carved into the plate, but Blake put the lines in relief, stood them out, and the color is not the point. The forms and lines must be strong. A naked man bent ecstatically backward as he descends dark stairs, his muscular body in perfect condition, his face hidden. A star with a burning tail shoots through the picture, entering the man's right foot at the top. The comet is Milton. It is with the right foot that one steps into the spiritual world. Also on the image, a printed word, the name: "Robert." This is the illustration of William's brother Robert as he appeared to William in spiritual form. Blake had watched his brother die from tuberculosis. Together they had started the printing shop, but William felt deeply frustrated with his work. He continued unsuccessfully—until Robert came to visit him and gave him some very specific advice. Special formulas for new inks and binders, a new process of relief engraving, even new modes of printing, changed everything William did and finally found him business. What exactly did the brother tell him? No one knows exactly. I have no idea. He never recorded his experiences in detail like some are doing. But William Blake had always found angels in his company, in the company of trees or hayfields. He kept regular nine-to-five hours so that any spirits inclined to visit could stop in without an appointment. But what proof could he offer the scientists? I am trained in medicine, I remind myself. "*Whatever the seer sees he must see for himself alone—there can be no other eye-witnesses.*" Blake's attempt to convince me; listen closely.

CHAPTER ONE: For William Blake, the copper plate was a cave. The cave was a planet, receding apparent surface, and a human animal circling the orbit which is the freedom of a life of skin. What skin burns away and is infinite? The recess is a void. Poet and painter, what skin makes an island touch the ocean, the aggregate of beings making worlds inside beings, of the symbiosis of swimming inside each other? The recess which allows text and images to respond to touch. What contaminates and can't be kept off the barrier? What illuminates blood and mind both? Morpheus cannot stay on land, for the green lawn runs to sand

and seas lap back the algae. Single-celled creatures and things which are barely called alive confuse all the laws of good and bad. They rage in our world in excess. Theirs is the palace of wisdom. What of life is black and putrid? The bacteria recycle what they can of death. But death is the ingredient delicious and ripe and what doesn't die can't be a relief, can't be dormant in the bacteria's dream, where invention and production are joined. In their death-loving diets, decomposing gives condition to forms, mired in their carbons, mired in the spoon of ideas. Some bacteria can withstand radiation 1,000 times greater than what kills humans and animals. These are still living as single islands, in a flooding, burning, frozen home, waiting to return.

CHAPTER ONE: If this were a ghost story, precautions might be better taken. It was once believed that burying scandalous folks—murderers, pagans, suicides—at a crossroads would be the only way to get them in the ground. But it could also be true that in carrying the dead to the crossroads and turning them around, creating a maze, burying them facing down, or the wrong way, then walking home by another route—all this might ensure that the ghost who felt unfinished with you couldn't follow and take up where he left off.

Germans

Samuel Ligon

Henry could have shot all three of them from where he sat, wedged into the crotch of a maple, but he knew they wouldn't die. "You missed," they'd say, and then they'd kill him. If they weren't liars, they would admit there was no hiding from the Gestapo—secret rooms, new identities, none of it worked—but they were liars. Henry made his hands into binocular tubes and watched the Allies reach Danny's lawn, where they dropped their guns and went inside. Henry counted to a hundred before lowering himself from the tree. The coast was clear, but he counted off another fifty, then zigzagged across the field in a crouch, zigzagged across the lawn, grabbing weapons, and he kept running until he reached his temporary headquarters.

Inside, Charlotte was screaming her head off.

His mother walked the baby from room to room.

Henry took two oatmeal health cookies from the cookie jar.

His mom said, "Hi, honey," over the screaming baby. Henry said hi back and made his way upstairs. If a kidnapper broke into the house late at night when his father was away on business, Henry would take the pocketknife from his dad's top dresser drawer and kill the intruder. They didn't know he knew about the knife, but he did.

There were a lot of things they didn't know.

Like about Mr. Boerman's pirate walk, how he swung his wooden leg straight from the hip. And on the second day of school, it was Henry he noticed staring at his jerky mechanical walk. "You want to know about my leg, is it?" he said. "Why I walk like this?"

Henry knew why Mr. Boerman walked like that.

The other kids looked at their desks, sneaking peaks at Henry as his face went hot.

"A handicap's nothing to be ashamed of," Mr. Boerman said. "And I understand your curiosity." He walked in front of the class between his desk and the blackboard, showing off his wooden leg, looking right at Henry as he explained his injury: a story about a milk truck running him over during the Depression.

Hospitals and rehabilitation and speckles of spit flying, the stiff leg swinging and sweat running down his sideburns just as it had when the Gestapo held him for questioning—before they took a hacksaw to his thigh to get the necessary information. Behind his thick glasses, Mr. Boerman probably had a fake eye that he took out at night, covering the pink oozing hole with a leather patch.

At dinner, Henry told his father he'd been in a fight at school.

"A fight?" his mother said, wiping carrot paste from Charlotte's chin. "Henry, what are you talking about?"

His dad pushed a forkful of waxed bean mashed potato hamburger casserole into his mouth.

"A kid pushed me," Henry said. "At the jungle gym." It could have happened.

Charlotte knocked her sippy cup from her highchair tray. His mother picked it up and said, "Henry, we don't approve of fighting."

"Danny started it," Henry said.

"I won't have fighting," his mom said.

The baby threw her sippy cup over Henry's shoulder. His dad took another big bite while Henry's mom pulled the baby from her highchair and talked baby talk. "It can be tough being new," his dad said. "Can't it?"

"Jack," his mom said, "don't encourage."

"No fighting," she said on her way out of the kitchen. "And I mean it."

Henry didn't tell his dad about being the Germans or what really happened on the playground, which was nothing, except that Ronny Hanson sat next to him on the merry-go-round and started talking.

Henry saw Eric and Paul Stone running around the jungle gym. He saw Paul Stone see him with Ronny, who was saying something about his meteorology kit. When Ronny put his hand on Henry's shoulder, and said, "Wanna come over after school?" Henry slapped his hand away and shouted, "You're the Viet Cong!"

"Did you push him back?" his father asked.

Henry nodded.

"You know we don't approve of fighting," his father said. He scooped a forkful of vomit casserole from Henry's plate. "Go watch some tv," he said. "We'll have ice cream when your mom comes down."

For a long time after his brother died inside his mother, back in New Jersey, before Baltimore and now Michigan, Henry thought his unknown brother was only missing. His mom had often talked about the new baby. She'd put Henry's hand over the dome of her belly and Henry could feel it moving around—kicking, his mom said. But when she went to the hospital, the baby came out dead. And even though they'd explained to Henry that the baby was dead, his mom always referred to it as lost. She had lost the baby, she'd tell people. Even later, in Baltimore, and now Michigan, she might say to someone, "I lost my second. Charlotte's really my third."

Now that he was almost nine Henry knew that the baby was dead, but he still thought of him wandering around New Jersey, lost. Maybe under the big beer bottle in Newark, as tall as a smokestack, that they passed on their way to his grandmother's house in Connecticut. And each move seemed to make it less likely that the baby would ever be found. Like if he'd somehow made it to Baltimore, crawling along the beltway, there was no way he'd find them here.

After they moved to Michigan, Henry got bunk beds and a desk. He'd always wanted bunk beds, but he wondered if his parents wanted them too, to have an open bed if his brother ever did show up.

Ronny had slept in the top bunk the night he stayed over a few weeks after Henry moved in. He lived at the bottom of the hill and rode by on his old-fashioned bike the day the moving truck arrived. Ronny's mom, Mrs. Hanson, had a purple mark over the left side of her face. Henry and Ronny rode bikes that first day, but when Ronny wanted to show off his meteorology kit, Mrs. Hanson gave them Rice Krispie treats, which Henry was afraid to eat because of that thing on her face.

Everybody else was at camp then—Paul Stone, Eric, Danny—but Ronny couldn't go to camp because of asthma. Ronny had a stamp collection. Ronny had a Lionel train. Ronny showed him a dead deer in the woods behind his house.

Then the other kids came back from camp and Henry had to be a German with Ronny every time they played war.

Danny's mom bought Twinkies and let you watch "Dark Shadows." Eric's brother was in Vietnam. Paul Stone's dad was a policeman and kept pictures of naked ladies, which Paul Stone sometimes snuck out of the house. Henry's dad designed weapons systems and had killed people in World War II, which, the two times Henry mentioned it, none of the other kids believed. When Ronny slept over and didn't believe him, Henry called his dad to his room, but his dad said it wasn't something to talk about. Then, just yesterday, when Eric was bragging about his brother in Vietnam greasing gooks and Henry said big deal, his dad had killed Nazis, Ronny, who nobody ever listened to, said it was a lie and the other kids believed him. Before, Henry had felt kind of sorry for Ronny, with his asthma and Keds, always having to be the Germans. Now he hated him.

The next day at school, Henry got in trouble for drawing a swastika. If he'd known it was such a big deal he wouldn't have put one at the bottom of his spelling quiz. The funny part was he didn't know he'd done it. There was a lot of stuff at the bottom of his page—a house, a seagull, a tank, a guy with glasses and a stovepipe hat, and the swastika. At the end of reading, right before the recess bell rang, Mr. Boerman said, "Henry, stay back from recess, please," and, of course Henry knew he'd done something wrong and then the bell rang and he was alone with Peg Leg.

"Henry," Mr. Boerman said, standing from his desk and swivel-walking down Henry's row, "just so you know: my ancestry's Dutch, not German."

Henry had no idea what the old man was talking about.

"This might not mean much to you," Mr. Boerman said, "but I lost two brothers in the war—one in Italy and one in France."

"My dad was in the Battle of the Bulge," Henry said.

Mr. Boerman placed the spelling quiz on Henry's desk and stood over him. "Then I would think you'd know better," he said.

Henry looked at the piece of paper. All the answers were right, but at the bottom with his other drawings was the swastika, circled and underlined in red ink.

Henry looked at Mr. Boerman looking down at him. He looked at the swastika. It looked funny, backwards or upside down. "Did I make it wrong?" he said.

Mr. Boerman snatched up the quiz and jerked back toward his desk. "Put your head down," he said.

Henry put his head down. He had never been in trouble at school.

"I'm writing a note to your father," Mr. Boerman said, "and I expect a reply."

Henry smelled his desk against his face and listened to the kids outside screaming. If the Red Chinese came creeping out of the woods with machine guns, he and Mr. Boerman would probably be the only survivors, hidden in a secret room under the basement. Or maybe Mr. Boerman wouldn't make it because of his leg. Maybe the Red Chinese would assassinate Mr. Boerman at his desk as he wrote the letter to Henry's father.

The baby was down for a nap when Henry got home. His mom put a plate of oatmeal health cookies and some apple juice on the kitchen table. The letter was folded in his back pocket. On the bus ride home Paul Stone had taken Ronny's glasses and wouldn't give them back until Ronny cried and then Shirley the bus driver had to pull over and Paul Stone got written up. They'd both gotten in trouble that day. But at the bus stop, before Henry could comment on that, Paul Stone said, "I want my rifle back, Tyler."

Henry started to walk. "I didn't take it," he said.

"Yeah you did," Paul Stone said. His house was in the other direction, but he was following Henry.

"Me too," Eric said.

"I mean it, Tyler," Paul Stone said, and then they walked the other way. When they were pretty far back and Henry was almost home, he shouted, "I didn't take your stupid guns!" but he couldn't tell if they'd heard him. They were around the corner already.

"What did you do in school today?" his mom asked. She stood at the counter making bread, rolling dough on his dad's old drafting board. She always asked that question. Henry asked for another cookie.

His mom put two cookies on a plate with horses on it.

"Did you have a good day?" she said, turning back to her bread.

The Polish had horses in the war that got slaughtered in the blitzkrieg. They were stupid to think they could beat tanks with horses. "I got in trouble," Henry said. He pulled the envelope from his pocket. "Mr. Boerman wrote a letter."

His mother turned to face him, but her hands kept working the dough. "What do you mean you got in trouble?"

"I have to bring a letter back."

"Henry," his mother said, wiping her hands on a dish cloth and walking to the table. "What did you do?"

"I drew a picture," he said. "I don't know what I did," he said.

He handed her the letter. "It's for Dad," he said.

He watched her open the envelope and read Mr. Boerman's words. She squinted at Henry, squinted at the letter. He couldn't tell what she thought.

"Go ahead and get changed," she finally said, putting the letter back in its envelope. "We'll talk about this later."

Upstairs, he walked into Charlotte's room and looked at her sleeping in her crib. He wished she could talk already. She didn't know about their brother yet. Maybe the note was no big deal. Maybe he could blame Ronny for the guns. Charlotte stretched in her sleep, rolled over. "We have a brother," Henry whispered in her ear, "who lives in a secret beach house, in Cape May, New Jersey." The baby didn't move. Henry walked to his room and waited to be called down.

At the dinner table, his father's bottom lip stuck out as he read the note and looked at the spelling quiz. Charlotte sat in her highchair across from Henry. His mother pulled potatoes from the oven. His father put the spelling test in front of Henry and pointed at the swastika. "You know what this is, right?"

Henry nodded.

His mother put plates on the table. "It's a horrible symbol," she said.

"That's right," his father said. He pointed to the picture of the man with glasses and a stove pipe hat. "Who's this?" he said.

It wasn't anybody. Henry remained silent.

"Okay," his father said. He picked up the papers and folded them. Henry's mom started feeding Charlotte. His dad cut at his Swiss steak. "You remember when your mom didn't like to look at babies," he said, "or got sad when she saw babies?"

Henry remembered his mother crying in the grocery store.

"That was because it reminded her of losing Tommy."

His mother fed peas to the baby on a tiny spoon.

"The swastika—"

"Which is an ugly symbol," his mother said.

"Which is an ugly symbol," his father said, "reminds Mr. Boerman of the brothers he lost in the war. And how he didn't go, maybe." He jammed a big bite of Swiss steak into his mouth and chewed.

"He's sensitive about it," his mother said. "But Jack, tell him how ugly it is."

His father swallowed. "These Nazis," he said, "did horrible things to people. Things you can hardly believe."

"I know," Henry said. Didn't his dad remember how often they watched *The World at War*?

"You don't know," his father said. "You can't imagine."

His mother said, "These people were evil."

"They gassed people in showers," Henry said, "burned them in ovens. They hunted people down and killed them."

"That's right," his father said, sawing his meat.

Henry's mother put her hand on top of Henry's hand and leaned over her plate, looking at him hard. "And when you make that symbol," she said, "people might think—"

Charlotte shrieked and Henry's mother loaded another spoonful of peas.

"It's not a cool symbol," his father said.

"Eat your dinner, honey," his mother said.

Henry picked up his knife and fork. They didn't know anything. It was a cool symbol. A scary, cool symbol. That didn't mean you didn't hate the Nazis or anything.

"It just gives the wrong impression, honey," his mother said. "It's not something you want to even think about."

Henry's face felt hot. The Swiss steak was in a reddish-orange goopy sauce that could have been blood. He didn't do it, but he thought about tracing a swastika in that sauce right on top of his flat leathery steak, imagined each forbidden line he would make so that it was just the same as actually doing it.

"Are we clear on this," his father said. "That it's not a cool symbol?"

Henry choked down a bite of steak. He was going to cry. For no reason he was going to cry and they were going to ask him why he was crying and he'd shake his head and snot would run down his face and he'd cry harder and his dad would think he was a big baby who didn't know anything. He concentrated on his potato and thought about the peasants in Russia, who weren't dirty commies yet but still our friends, eating moldy potatoes before the Nazis killed them with machine guns in a big old potato field. All those dead peasants rotting in a pile. The flies and empty eye holes. But he couldn't stop it. And for a second after it started—this awful crying noise—before his mother jumped from her chair and took him in her arms, they all looked at him, the dirty Nazi, even the baby, confused and horrified by this stranger at their dinner table, crying and gasping for no reason at all.

Inheritance

If you become [a spirit] it is the spirit which will be joined to you. If you become thought, it is the thought which will mingle with you. —The Gospel of Philip

Our small-arms instructor is young and his face
flushed from hypothesizing one situation from the next,
each a damnation of gunfire and impact,

target preference, and what we can expect to puncture.

If we're ever where we fear we could be, he tells us,

Think: Whatever happens, you're going home tonight.

And we'll believe, he says, that we're untouched
for at least a few seconds. Even if the bullet strikes us
dead center, we can still fire back, though the body

in shock won't hear a room flash into silence.

I will go home. And if not hit, if not bleeding out,

if not winged, then waking in a hospital,

we still won't know what happened, how the chamber
emptied, how the clip sprang dry when an officer
released it to check, how the other man, the one who ran

shooting from desk to desk, or the other man,

the one who drew down on us in the isolated cold
of a parking lot at night, how he flew apart

beneath ribcage and muscle, exit wounds wide around
as a fist. *I am going home tonight.* We say it to believe it
and take the test, first on paper: when to fire and at what

proximity and what to say after, which is nothing.
No one fails. Downstairs, the range is long, and a pistol
lies before each of us on the ledges of our stalls. We load.

We aim. The paper targets, clipped to metal arms, scroll out,
and the widening circles grow thin with distance.
Now, we are told, shoot that son of a bitch.



The image must rise again through the image, is the gospel
of Philip, a Gnostic, whose writings are pocked
with blank spots, the burns of plant fiber acids,

the gnawing of insects and sand. His revelations
here open before me because I can't sleep,
as though I were the neighbor who ran toward

the terrible sound of wailing, to watch a mother
scrape palmfuls of cortex, left sphere, front lobe
from the smear on the wall, trying to place it

back into her son's head. No comfort, no way
to ease her or to remove ruin from the other boy
in the room, the one who found the pistol.

Indeed, one must utter a mystery. One must turn away
with the noise of his own breathing to guide him
into sleep. Indeed. Indeed: *a fire shone for him on that day.*



What my second father left me: a German clock
shipped home from the War, its redbird still cawing
every hour from its perch; his coat, moth-chewed

at the sleeves; this pistol, worn but well-kept,
its slide-action slick, ejecting each shell in a blur
past my shoulder. The scattering of brass burrs

glints on the floor of the firing range. *Those who are
beirs to the dead are themselves dead.* I recall the target.
A man holds a woman hostage with a knife

at her throat. The look on her face is fear
mottled with hope. It seems one is meant to believe
such opportunities arise: rescue the dame.

She is, after all, kind of pretty for a sketch.
He suffered wounds to his shoulder, right hand,
solar plexus. The lenses of his sunglasses

are pierced with shots. Were this real, the girl
would be bleeding now, grazed at the neck.
The dead are beirs to nothing, and it is the dead

I cannot visit. A boy in a garage, or my father's
father in a field, or a host of others without choice.
The stone is too cold, and their names are unreal

in stone on the grounds of their placing. Too dangerous
to walk among such silences. *God forbid, I be found there ...
what is called the middle... It is death.*

I crumple the target. This is their struggled embrace,
not mine. Their faces and wounds fold from view.

Boyland

Sarah Cornwell

"I see everything that happens on Boyland. I know your mommies, I know your daddies. I know where you sleep, I know who you know, and I can tell your future because I know what you want. Walk with me and be blameless, little boys. I am Magnificent, and this is the Rooster."

The Rooster shuffles a little and lights a hand-rolled cigarette. He has on a gray winter cap and a puffy vinyl jacket embroidered with Brooklyn street names in loopy cursive—Mother Gaston, Livonia, Linden. Thomas S. Boyland Street. He spreads a wing to reveal a stocked toolbelt—box-cutters, razorblades, measuring tape, the works.

"The Rooster fixes that which needs fixing," Magnificent tells the boys. Magnificent is a big man, muscle gone to fat, with thin, low-cut gray curls and lips chapped and split because it's November the first and turning cold. "Sometimes I'm out of the store, and then you go to the Rooster."

Nick Park nods and faces Magnificent, throwing his chin up in a way he hopes makes him look like a pissed-off racehorse, wild-eyed. Nick is thirteen, and he's not new at first impressions. Magnificent's acid gaze settles on him, taking in all he needs: the posturing, the skinny strength, the resolved clench of the jaw. An echo of Julian, another worthwhile project.

The store is a single room, stinking of incense, shelves and tables pushed to the walls to display objects for sale: diapers, Virgin Mary candles, wall clocks, Nabisco crackers, ladies' shirts, cassette tapes, kitchen string, footballs. The walls are painted seafoam green, and a poster of a basket of kittens half-covers a crack in the plaster, spreading up from the baseboard like a flowering tree. Magnificent lists the boys' duties: stock shelves, take inventory, pick up shipments, make deliveries, clean. The boys glance at each other, cocking their eyebrows like what's this euphemistic shit? They all know why they're here; they're going to run drugs for Magnificent.

"If," he says, as he examines the boys one by one, "you prove trustworthy." There's Nick, Fisher, Darryl, and a kid from Nick's school who calls himself

Peppersteak. Magnificent goes off on Peppersteak, who is small, freckled, biracial, with a face like a pug puppy. "Fucking stupid shit," he says. "Peppersteak. Did you bring your friend General Tso?"

The Rooster, convulsing with laughter on two side-by-side high-school-issue chairs by the door, yells, "Pu Pu Platter!" He doesn't take his coat off even though the heat is on full blast.

The boys sit in a semi-circle of folding chairs. Nick is reminded of family therapy—sitting between his mom and Julian in just such a semi-circle, facing a frizzy city social worker and her unanswerable questions about potential and how do you change a pattern. Fisher and Darryl are roaring and slapping their legs, exchanging glances. Nick can see that they have decided to be allies, and they will be shit-talkers and kiss-ups. Fisher's the biggest and the oldest at fourteen, laughing at Peppersteak so hard, looking up at Magnificent like he wants a daddy's love. Peppersteak takes it quietly. His silence flatters him, and Nick considers the merits of this tactic, given the events of the past month.

The Rooster, smiling, sidles up to Nick. "You crazy like your brother?" Nick makes as if to stand up and the Rooster holds out an open hand. "We always took you for an extra-credit, science-club-vice-president, candy-bar-selling study-buddy faggotty-ass schoolboy. You grow some balls last night?"

Nick nods. There is nobody to whom he can explain his decision to join Magnificent's boys. Through happenstance and split-second decision-making, he has entered into a world of half-truths, and he wonders if this is growing up. The whole truth shudders in the secret room of Nick's mind: Julian is in minimum-security lock-up on Riker's Island right now, taking group showers and waiting for parole, and it's Nick's fault. It is because of Nick's big mouth, his boy-scout-guide decision to do a right thing that turned out to be a wrong thing. Nick is here because he needs protection. If Julian finds out who made that phone call, there will be no apologizing, no three strikes. Nick is consumed by these thoughts, lying in bed at night, drifting in and out during class—what Julian would do to him if he found out. He imagines Julian coming for him in many scenarios, each time his face unrecognizable, a brother turned stranger, a face Nick has seen before. The scenarios get more and more outlandish; Julian slitting

Nick's throat with an Exacto knife, ripping his jaw off, bone from pink sinew, Julian marching into math class and plunging a bayonet into his stomach.

Magnificent makes for the door and the Rooster follows. "Don't move," he says, and Fisher, halfway to his feet, sinks back down. "When we get back, you'll learn lesson numero uno."

After half an hour, the boys give up on don't move. They are an unimpressive group. Fisher walks to the back to peer in the storeroom, groaning and dragging, like he's wearing a muscle suit for Halloween and he's ready to take it off. "Where's the weed," he wonders, and his voice echoes through the store. In the storeroom, the boys see a yellow school lunch table with round orange seats, some lockers, a vending machine, a safe deposit box.

Darryl's wired, moving his hands with random quickness, glancing everywhere at once. He rummages in his bag and comes up with a carton of cold McDonald's fries, which he does not share. They start to talk about Magnificent, what they already knew about him and what they know now. "He jokes, you know, but you can tell he's not joking." Darryl scrapes the silver film off the scratch-and-win patch on his fries.

Nick and Peppersteak are rifling through a box of old LPs when the door flies open and the store is flooded with bright light, many glowing orbs, and behind them, the indistinct shadow forms of giants. Nick thinks of fantasy books he's read—will o' the wisps, ringwraiths—though he's been through this before, knows what's coming. In an instant the cops have charged the perimeter of the store, and their voices make a fearsome, towering noise. Nick drops instinctively, hands behind his back, and plays dead. He thinks of himself as a possum, and it's funny for a second. His experience of search warrants is limited to his own apartment, where Julian used to take care of him, tell him how to take his mind away, pretend the cops are in their underwear, don't sweat it. He remembers sitting with Julian those times, their mother in the bedroom answering questions, seeing Julian's spacey calm, playing word games while they waited for the cops to take him away—Ghost, Twenty Questions. (Are you something made of wood?)

The cop handcuffs his jelly-loose wrists and tells him to sit in a chair; he

does. Soon Peppersteak and Darryl are beside him, watching cops creep along the walls, their three-foot automatic rifles trained on Fisher at the back of the store. Fisher, illogical with panic, has backed into a corner. Nick thinks, *Fisher, you stupid moron*. "Get on the fucking ground right now," yells the closest cop as he hooks his foot behind Fisher's knee, letting gravity do the heavy work. The side of Fisher's head meets the floor with a surprising crack. Somebody's knee is on his neck while they cuff him. Fisher's face is turned toward the other boys—he leaks tears and snot, a cut on his temple dribbling blood into his left eye so he has to keep blinking. The voices of men carry from the storeroom, using first names, making jokes, giving orders. Furniture screeches.

For twenty minutes, the cops toss the place, pulling all the tables away from the walls, scrabbling through the piles of stuff for sale like raccoons in the trash. One of them breaks a stained-glass lamp, says, "Oops." The youngest takes down names and addresses, asks about Magnificent and the store, why the boys are here, where's the drugs. They tell him this is their after-school job, they're all new. What drugs? He shakes his head at them and runs their names for warrants over the radio. They all come up clean, but he looks at Nick a little funny. "Aren't you the kid who jumped Duvall a couple weeks ago?"

This works fine for Nick. "So what?"

The cop laughs. "You're all he can talk about, kid. Says it felt like a fucking pillow fight. I think he wants to adopt you."

When the cops leave, the boys rub the sore red cuff rings around their wrists, survey the chaos of debris, glass shards, a punctured football, the slush-tracks of police boots across the linoleum tile. Five minutes later Magnificent walks into the store.

"Search warrant," he says. "Rule number one: don't talk to the cops. Y'all pass the test, but Fisher, damn, do what the man with the gun says." A bruise ripens around the crusting cut on Fisher's forehead. The Rooster trips out of the storeroom with a Tupperware container and snaps the lid off, holds it out to Fisher, laughing his head off. It's full of gauze.

Nick lies awake in his narrow bed, thumbing the silky strip at the top of his blanket and thinking about what he has done. When he tries to put Julian's arrest

into words, it sounds stripped down, the facts culled out of the real experience, which was all running, pounding breath, his own voice shouting unrememberable things, tunnel-vision on Julian raging on the concrete, spasming, bleeding from the corner of his mouth and from the skinned palm of his hand, the whites of his eyes all spidery red, the pupils huge and black, like tunnels to the center of him. The cops a blue blur at the edge of his vision, disconnected voices saying meaningless cop words: drop-your-keep-your-hands-police-don't-move-drop-police-easy-way-hard-way. And then he remembers a slippery frog-leap out of their hands, onto the back of the officer who was bending over Julian, he remembers pounding his fists on the back of that thick neck, raging himself. The rage: that's my brother. They're killing my brother. Impact, stinging blows to the ribs. And then the unexpected gentleness of a hand on his head, ducking him into the patrol car, and the first glimpse of Duvall's face—the set of his jaw, the brightness of his eyes, the confusion of cross-purposes.

But the facts come out different. Nick was hanging around the courtyard of the development with Julian and some of his boys. This already looks bad for Julian, since the restraining order is two hundred feet, but these things happen—there is no emotional nuance to a court order—there are times Nick wants to see his brother and there are times he doesn't. This nervous guy, Raviv, came over from the next building to buy from Julian. And Nick was talking to another guy, missed the beginning, but heard when Julian's voice rose, when he said, "You trying to jew me, motherfucker?" and saw Raviv throw the first punch.

Nick saw Julian getting how Julian gets, flashed fragmentary memories of Julian's fist driving into his mother's doughy jaw, the surprising hurt of a brother's kick to the stomach, close up on the kitchen floor, the way you could see in Julian's eyes when he turned from Julian into something else, something limitless. And all he thought was *Raviv, you stupid moron!* So it was Nick, crouched behind a bench, who flipped his cell phone open, dialed 911, said the street address, and held the phone out for the operator to hear the swelling noise of the fray. Not because he wanted to rat Julian out—there had been other fights, other times he had stood by and kept quiet—but because he liked Raviv, who could juggle, who read *Spiderman* comics sometimes waiting for the bus, and he didn't want to see him get broken.

Nick closes his eyes and opens them again; there is no change because the shades are drawn and he likes to sleep in perfect darkness. He imagines the places Julian might be right now. Asleep in half-light on a cot in a four-man cell or a vast dormitory, with something sharp under his pillow, in case—a piece of floor tile he pried up when the guards weren't looking, a broken plastic plate. He must have something. Julian always has something.

A few days later, Nick stands on a chair in his kitchen, tapping the porcelain ring around the light bulb, trying for a steady grade of dim. The kitchen doesn't get light anymore. Not in the day, since the windows were in Julian's room, and not in the night, because of the faulty light fixture; even hundred-watt bulbs flicker faintly. Nick sprays a pan with Crisco to make grilled cheese. His mom is working the graveyard shift at the Triple A call center, but he can hear through the door that Julian is back from Riker's. Clanking, television voices. Nick gets ready to pretend nothing has changed. He has to keep his voice normal. He butters two more slices of bread, grates some more cheese.

"You know why they call it the graveyard shift?" Nick asks, projecting toward the mail-slot at the bottom of the big iron door, through which his mother shoves paper plates of scrambled eggs, lasagna, grilled chicken, rice and peas. "It's 'cause you get sleep in your eyes working late, so they called it the gravy-eyed shift. And people heard it wrong and started saying graveyard."

Julian's voice filters lazily through the slot. "No shit. I like that one."

The door isn't really a door, but a blockade, in the sense that it cannot be opened. Julian hits. When he got big enough, their mom had to take out a restraining order. There were months of night crying and silent days, and then when she saw him sleeping in a pile of newspapers like a bum, she said, "No child of mine," and called in a favor from an ex, a welder out in Queens. So now Julian climbs the fire escape and eats home cooking, sleeps in his own bed, but he stole the natural light out of the kitchen. The door is made of scrap metal, soldered patchwork like Frankenstein's monster—a Franken-door. They can't call the super about the light fixture because this is public housing and the Franken-door is a private matter.

"I got one for you," comes Julian's voice.

Nick kneels down and puts his eye up to the slot, and he can see Julian's ankles in front of the chair—white tube socks, no shoes.

"You know why they call it the straight and narrow?"

Nick holds his breath. He can hear that the TV is tuned to an MTV dating show. "It's from the Bible. 'Broad is the way that is the path of destruction but narrow is the gate and straight is the way which leadeth to the house of God.'"

Nick gets up from the floor and stands in the flickering kitchen. Julian must know he joined up. Julian has aspirations for Nick, a little brother born smart and stable-minded; he wants Nick to be a student counsel representative, a National Merit Scholar, a medical doctor. "Since when do you read the Bible?" Nick imagines Julian's room by now: a sea of paper plates. "You want mustard on your grilled cheese?"

"You know I do."

Officer Duvall has taken a special interest in Nick in the month since his arrest, and this means that Nick also has to deal with his partner, Ortega. Ortega slicks his hair back with grease, and he's got these pouty woman lips, so the other cops call him Pucker. The cover of his memo book has drawings of dicks all over it, and dark lines like somebody put it on a grill. Duvall is black, built like a tank, bald, with gold-flecked eyes—the kind of eyes that would mean in a comic that he's really an alien or a mutant with superhuman strength. It's the beginning of cataracts, he told Nick in the holding cell. He gave Nick a break, charged him with disorderly conduct instead of assaulting an officer, just a day of picking up trash with a team of drunks. Sometimes when Duvall and Ortega are bored and they see Nick on the street, they'll pull up and roll along with him, Duvall asking him stuff like what subjects does he like in school (none, asshole) and what's his girlfriend's name (which one?)

It's seven-thirty, and Nick and Peppersteak are walking home down Saratoga when Ortega and Duvall pull up in their scratched-up, fender-bent patrol car. It's dark out, and the windows of all the brownstones are lit; indistinct forms move behind them, an argument spikes above the general murmur of

conversation that seeps through shared walls and thin ceilings. It's only boys on the street today, trying to get out of the cold as fast as they can, into the houses where their mothers are making chicken salad, their sisters watching talk shows, painting toenails, talking on the phone. Nick is jealous of girls, how they make the world about them, how they don't have to work at hacking out a space in it like he does.

"Hey, brother, how you doing today?" says Duvall, driving slowly at the curb. He's got his cap on, and he's wearing dark glasses, looks hungover. Nick tells him hey and keeps on walking. "Who's your friend?"

Peppersteak turns and smiles winningly. "Hi, officer."

"Did I just see you come out of Magnificent's store?" Duvall asks Nick. "You aren't one of his boys, now, are you?" Nick looks at Duvall sidelong as they move, even paced, not a twitch of Duvall's foot on the gas, and sees he's not smiling now. Duvall scribbles on a scrap of paper and thrusts it out the window. Nick sees it's a cell phone number. "If you ever need anything," says Duvall.

Ortega snorts and stretches in the passenger seat like he's just waking up. "Cut the fucking after-school-special bullshit." Duvall keeps rolling for a second, staring Nick down through his wraparound glasses. Ortega, laughing, leans over Duvall and points his finger at Nick. He says, "McGruff the crime dog says to stay in school!" He slaps Duvall's shoulder. Duvall looks like he wants to say something, but he just gives the car some gas and they're gone around a corner.

Lesson two takes the boys out of the store. The Rooster is an unexpectedly good driver, reflexive and bold, negotiating intersections in Magnificent's white van like a traffic ghost, imperceptible to cops. Magnificent sits twisted around in the passenger seat, pointing out clients, some loitering on corners, some hidden inside houses and stores, one who holds court in an abandoned VW bus just a block from the 73rd Precinct. The boys are quick to brag when they already know a dealer, but most of the information is new, and they look out the windows with interest as their home becomes a marketplace. The van's headlights illuminate the face of a heavy woman with green eye makeup and curled hair crossing a street as the Rooster hangs a left, and Nick curls up, head between his knees. The rest of the boys crack up when they realize what happened.

"Shit, that's his *mother!*" Magnificent watches Nick straighten up and resume watching the street, unfazed, and nods in approval before he keeps on talking.

"Tomorrow you're going to start making runs," he says. He crisps four one-hundred dollar bills before handing one to each boy. "An advance," he says, "because I'm putting my trust in you." Next, he dangles a handful of Ziplocs over the back seat. The boys put out their hands, palms upward, to receive them, and Nick is slowest by a hair. By a hair, but he sees Magnificent notice. Shadows move across the curves and planes of Magnificent's impassive face, red from stoplights, a flash of neon green from a sign for a beauty salon. The chap of his lip is mean and untended, his eyes cast in darkness. "If any boy is unsure," he says, "If any boy is harboring the smallest doubt about joining my family, he had best speak now. Do not dare to take me lightly. Do not dare to cross me—you don't run with gangs while you're with me, you don't complicate my shit, and I will reward you richly. Do not dare to protect anybody does me wrong, for he is no brother of yours. My boys, are you in or are you out?"

The question is bigger than the boys, a question of the kind of men they will become, and, unanswerable, it dissolves into the space of the van. The boys hold their palms up as the van moves through the Brooklyn night, and Magnificent is satisfied.

The sky darkens with rain; leaves gust from the gutters and flutter from the oaks on Livonia as Nick and Peppersteak head toward Peppersteak's building. Nick picks one up and tears it to a skeleton as he listens to Peppersteak go on and on about *Silent Hill Two* on XBOX, the English in the cut-scenes, how you have to kick those mutant dogs one last time after you think they're dead or they'll get back up. They turn the corner onto Rockaway by the subway station, and on the metal stairs leading up to the elevated platform is Julian, hanging with a few guys Nick doesn't know. Peppersteak clams up. A Hispanic guy in a red bandana and red shoelaces inclines his head and points toward them. Julian turns. To be terrified implies a great deal of respect, and Nick feels a surge of pride in his brother—anybody could look at that group of guys and see that even though they're all pretty big, flagging on the right side, standing proud and watchful, Julian is the one who matters, the graceful and the fearless.

Nick holds his hand up, but Julian has turned back around. As Nick and Peppersteak shuffle past the stairs into the shadow of the train tracks and the crowd waiting for a break in traffic to get across Rockaway, Nick sees Julian cast a glance back over his shoulder. It's not a glance Nick knows how to read, and this momentary illiteracy, more than any of his own imaginings, makes his breath catch in his throat as he stares out over the vast and terrifying gulf between okay and not okay.

Nick plays Go with Peppersteak after school, the board set up on a granite chess table. Across the street, boys shoot hoops, shirts and skins even though it's forty degrees out. Nick wishes he were into basketball. There is a whoosh of fabric and before he can understand, a group of boys is sprinting into the distance, having stolen his backpack. He doesn't even stop playing; he knows this game, too. Peppersteak laughs at him; Peppersteak is sitting on his own backpack. He snugs his chin down into the collar of his parka and says, "You know, we could make some serious money here."

Nick nods and stares at the board. Pigeons mill around their sneakers.

"I mean, more than that." Nick looks up and Peppersteak has a daydreaming expression on his pug face, a half-smile. "We're the go-between, right, we're the communication. So who's to say how much shit gets sold and how much money comes in. All I'm saying is, prices are like the stock market, you know. Ups and downs?"

"Hmm." Nick is thinking about Julian, this time imagining Julian's two hands around his throat, Julian pinning him against the kitchen counter, his back arching over the drying rack full of blunt stabbing knives and forks, the spilled sink water soaking cold into the back of his boxers. The Franken-door bleeding light behind him in a jagged man-shape, where Julian has broken through.

After fifteen minutes, a kid from Nick's English class saunters back. "Those dudes are assholes," he says. Nick looks him over; he's dopey and amateurish. "I can get some of your stuff back maybe. For twenty bucks." He looks at the Go board. "What is this, some checkers shit?"

Nick pulls out his hundred and holds it at arm's length. "It's some ancient Chinese genius shit," he says. "Can you break a hundred? I have some friends

who could break it for me. Do you want me to call them?" The kid looks confused, like an actor deprived of a cue. "I have some friends who could break *you* for me. Do you want me to call *them*?"

The kid runs away. Peppersteak stands up and starts slow-clapping. The next morning, Nick finds his backpack under his desk in homeroom. He goes through it and all that's missing is a Milky Way from the front pocket; they put back everything that could be put back. It feels good.

Lessons three through five teach the boys the basics, the stuff they knew they didn't know: the packaging, the geography, what not to wear. Magnificent rags on Nick, but everyone can see that there is a respect between them, a mutual understanding that Nick is growing stronger with each job, forming calluses for which he will one day be grateful. They each see Julian in the other, and it gives them a sense of responsibility to each other that the rest of the boys have to earn. Fisher bumbles, one time dropping a bag of weed and having to pick up and dust off each individual bud and particle from the dirty ground of the packaging room. Nick calls him Cinderwench and it takes. Fisher calls Nick General Tso since he's gotten tight with Peppersteak, and that takes too, unfortunately. The Rooster is peripheral, leaning in doorways, screwing with shelves and the back-room boiler, huddled at the yellow lunch table cutting weed with oregano or coke with talcum powder, snickering at the boys' jokes some days and completely ignoring them on others.

Darryl pulls off his first two runs, gets back smirking with wads of sweaty cash. Peppersteak has an easy one, just a hand-off in an apartment on Sutter, not even on the police maps yet. But his second run goes sour, and the dealer won't accept his ID. The Rooster has to drive over there and fix it, and when he comes back, he calls Magnificent out to the street and they're gone for a while. Fisher flubs both runs, but that's because he's stupid (gets lost once, gets tailed once), and Magnificent takes him in the back for a long talk while the Rooster delivers his Ziplocs.

Nick is pleased with his first run, an easy hand-off at a bus station after school, but his second one is more complicated. He hears the whine in his own voice: "Isn't that, like, conflict of interest?"

Magnificent guffaws and slaps Nick on the back. "Oh, come on, General Tso. Just drop it through the slot."

Nick thinks about tactics on the walk home and this time, Ortega is alone in his patrol car. He pulls up next to Nick and stops. Nick stops too, but it pisses him off that Ortega won't roll with him like Duvall does, that he has to get into this dick-measuring bullshit: to walk away means fuck you, but to stand still means yes sir. "Heard Narcotics tossed the store last week," he says.

"I don't know who it was," says Nick.

"Narcotics is who it fucking was, my man," he says. His hair is greased way up tonight, floating above his face, vertical like a shark fin. "You're on my list, Nick. You're on my list." He gives Nick a moment intended to heighten his fear, but Nick feels disconnected, like Ortega's just another kid stealing backpacks after school, another kid who's going to eat the Milky Way before considering the consequences. Nick is quiet. "I'm gonna stop you every time I see a bulge in your pocket, every time you walk on a street I don't like. I'm going to ride your ass, and you better believe it." Nick stands still, and after the silence tires Ortega—about twenty seconds—he says, "Just 'cause I have a pussy for a partner doesn't mean you get special treatment. You call us up and then you jump an officer of the law. What am I supposed to do with that? Huh?"

Nick struggles to keep panic out of his face. *You call us up?* 911 was supposed to be anonymous. He thinks of cop shows on TV; there must be piles of coded printouts—numbers and letters spelling out his treachery. Secret codes, serial numbers. He imagines the EMT who signed off on his physical injecting a tracking serum into his blood, he imagines a room of cops watching screens full of his face right now while he thinks these thoughts ... he imagines Julian coming for him.

"Now I got a summons for a city interview, and I'm going to tell them just what kind of two-faced lying sack of shit little kid you are, and what kind of two-faced lying sack of shit little man you're going to be. See, I'm a prophet, just like your new daddy. I can tell the future too."

At the top of the hill, he barks "hey!" out the window to startle some men

sitting in the shadows of a park. They scatter, and some of them walk past Nick as they climb the hill: old liquor-smelling men in denim jackets, looking hangdog, trying to find someplace quiet and still to pass the time.

Nick locks his bedroom door behind him, drops his bag, and curls into his red corduroy chair, knees to his chin, breathing familiarity: the warm soil smell of the cat, his mom's Febreze plug-ins, the smell of his own body's past rest on the fabric—not something he can describe, but a comfort. Yesterday's sweat, some sense of the forwardness of time. There's no sound through the wall; he can't tell if Julian is there or not. The Ziploc he's supposed to deliver isn't weed, it's cocaine—twenty glassine five-gram packets. That's two thousand dollars by Magnificent's rates. Nick remembers before they put the door up how Julian used to play little themes for him on his dinky Casio keyboard—drum rolls when he was about to say something, ba-dum-bing when he made a joke—how hilarious they thought they were. He gets up when he's ready.

There's a book on the kitchen floor outside the slot: *1984*. Julian starts talking as soon as Nick pads into the kitchen; he was there and he was waiting. "Read it, you'll like it. They'll assign it in tenth grade anyway, but read it now."

Nick picks it up. "Thanks." He has decided to get this over with quickly, like a flu shot. Nick grabs a paper plate off the top of the stack in the cabinet and puts the Ziploc on it, shoves it through the slot. He stands back from the Franken-door.

There is an interminable silence, during which Nick is aware of his heart pushing blood around his body, pulsing in his fingertips, crashing waves in his temples. He can see, through the slot, the plate on the floor where it landed. And then Julian says, "Where's my fucking grilled cheese?" and Nick knows it's going to be okay, and they crack up.

"Open the book," Julian tells Nick, and he does, and there, tucked between chapters, are twenty hundred-dollar bills. "I mean it you should read that book, though. Don't give up on shit just 'cause you're one of the boys now, okay?"

Nick plays his fingers over all those hundreds.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

For a solid week, there are no runs for Nick, just work in the store, organizing, pricing, cleaning. Darryl gets runs, Peppersteak gets runs, even Fisher gets a run, and this time, somehow, he pulls it off. Sometimes an old lady comes in and buys an oven mitt, sometimes cops stop by on foot patrol, say hello, stand a few awkward seconds too long in the doorway, scanning. And then one day Magnificent walks into the store and says he's got one for Peppersteak and he wants Nick to come along.

Magnificent smokes an apple-flavored cigar as they drive. "Can't get enough of these new sweet flavors," he says, and hums unrecognizably. There was sleet last night and rain all day. Brooklyn is damp and shapeless; rivers of mud snaking through the gutters and runoff from the eaves of the brownstones make it seem like the buildings themselves are liquefying, draining away. Something is weird here; Nick is nervous—sweating. Magnificent has never driven anybody anywhere before—that's the whole point of hiring runners. They pass old couples under umbrellas, waiting for flashing walk signs, a few girls in private-school uniforms laughing, running hatless from one car into another in the middle of the street. Peppersteak plays with his sweatshirt zipper, deejaying a scratchy rhythm to the rain.

Magnificent pulls up across from a huge brick sanitation building on Oliver Street where a couple of guys are leaning against empty concrete planters beneath an overhang, listening to music. Magnificent's voice reverberates in the van. "General Tso, just back him up." As Peppersteak gets out of the van, he mutters about back your own ass up. As Nick climbs out his side he gets a clearer view through the sheeting rain, and he sees Julian. "What the fuck? What is this?"

Magnificent leans close and says, the apple-smoke smell of his breath damp and nauseating, "This is not about you, Nick. You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

Peppersteak has already made it the twenty feet or so to the building, and he's shaking hands with Julian. Julian turns, searches out the van, nods. Nick sees too many things at once: Magnificent and the Rooster talking outside after Peppersteak's run, Peppersteak's big money ambitions, what a nod from Julian to Magnificent could mean. He says, "What lesson are we on now, six?"

Magnificent snorts and reaches across him to push the van door open.

Nick puts his hands in his pockets as he jogs over, fingers the paperclips, the cash, the small gravity knife, the cell phone. He scans the block; empty, not a car, not a person but for these boys. It is post-apocalyptic: the last boys on earth. He feels a heightened respect for Magnificent and the surprising insightfulness of his testing methods.

By the time Nick reaches Julian, he's already got the Ziploc and he's counting the glassine packets, thumbing them from one side to the other through the plastic. When Julian turns to Peppersteak, Nick has caught up, and he sees the same face Peppersteak sees, the Julian-turning face, the limits falling off him like ropes cut away, the difference being that Nick knows what's coming. Julian says, his voice even, "Fifteen. How much?" There is nothing Nick can do to shut Peppersteak's mouth as he says, shifting his weight, smug, "Two thou."

And then Julian is bearing down on Peppersteak and it is everything Nick has feared, except the traitor is not himself, but his friend. Julian takes Peppersteak to the ground with one surprise backhand, like Peppersteak is a gnat in his reading light. Nick hovers and soon he is yelling, with everyone else, unrememberable things. Julian is still using his hands, though Nick is sure he's got something in his sock or his waistband: a gun, a knife, a razor. Julian's hands are on the back of Peppersteak's head; he's pressing his face into the sidewalk. Blood trickles from the puddle in which he gulps and bubbles, blood curling like oil and blending away into the gray sanitation leakage. Peppersteak kicks like a newborn. Nick feels heat in his own face, some kind of palsy taking over his hands—he is not the master of himself, not like Julian. He thinks, *Peppersteak, you stupid moron.*

He is hardly aware of himself as he crouches behind a concrete planter. Julian's boys are watching the demolition of Peppersteak, Julian himself is watching his own work, or whatever it is he sees when he turns like this. Nick draws his cell phone from his pocket, flips it open, and dials—it is only luck that he can force his fingers onto the right buttons. He didn't realize he had memorized the number, but there it is, floating up in his mind like a prophecy in a Magic 8-ball. The sirens start while he is still on the phone and he has the irrational thought that Duvall must have super-speed. The eyes give him away, after all.

There is Duvall, getting out of the patrol car. This is how Nick realizes he's thinking funny; he didn't see the car drive up or park, or note the passage of time. It is just suddenly there, and there too is Ortega, grinning, his gun drawn, running low to the ground, kneeling behind the other planter, motioning Nick back, taking aim. Yelling cop words.

Nick wonders why Ortega's gun is out until he looks back to Julian. Julian hasn't let Peppersteak up yet—he's standing half on the kid's back, kicking him with the other foot—the balance is impressive. Peppersteak is squealing, spitting out bloody water, his nose and cheek a dark, muddy mash, his arm twisted in the wrong way. Julian shows no awareness of Duvall and Ortega screaming at him to keep his hands where they can see them and get on the ground; Julian sees only Nick and the cell phone in his uncontrollably jerking hand.

Nick drops the phone but stands still, keeps standing up. He sees Julian's pinky flutter almost imperceptibly toward the waistband of his jeans. He tries to think of something to say, something dignified, in case he should die, and he comes up dry. Ortega, snarl-faced, sharky, is watching Julian, holding his gun out with two hands. Duvall has his gun out now too, but it's lowered, and he is watching Nick, not Julian, drawing slowly nearer, questions in his eye about Nick, what he wants, how he can best be protected. Behind the tinted windows of the white van, with an apple cigar hanging from his broad, dry smile, Magnificent is watching, too, to see how his test will play out, what kind of boy he is dealing with this time around.

"Nick," says Julian. "You know why they call it showing your true colors? The rain is relentless, and he must make his voice carry. Nick notices a lone woman standing in a high window of the apartment building across the street, bearing witness. "It's because in old naval battles, ships had to raise up flags to prove what country they were from before they could fire cannons. So everyone knew who was on what side." One foot on Peppersteak still, Julian's hand flies to his waist. His elbow draws back and for a moment, there is the shine of black metal, as he shifts his weight toward Nick. And he stops, as if he has slammed into an invisible wall. And again, another wall. He looks surprised.

For several seconds, Nick does not connect the sound of the shots with the invisible walls—someone is setting off bottle rockets; somewhere in the rain,

car is backfiring. And then he sees his brother buckle and go down, and he sees Ortega stand and tuck his gun away, looking like he thinks he's a hero, and Nick understands that he killed Julian; Julian is dead. Fleets of patrol cars are swerving onto Oliver, the siren sound layering thicker and thicker in his head.

"He wasn't going to!" Nick screams. "He wasn't going to, you motherfuckers! He wasn't going to!" He is drowning in rain, he is drowning in water and then his face is against rough blue and he shoves back away from Duvall, raging. Nobody else tries to touch him. The ambulances come, and uniformed men strap Peppersteak moaning on a backboard and load him up and take him away. Sirens blare. People crouch over Julian with tubes and defibrillators, somebody pounds on his chest, somebody is counting 1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4. They wipe blood from the corners of his mouth, neatly; his head tilts toward Nick and the pupils are shallow, like dark marbles. Nick crouches and paces, his clothing wetted to his body, his fingers talon-stiff, and Duvall stands at ten feet, waiting.

Ortega rides in the ambulance when they take Julian away and the backups leave as fast as they can, tagging the cocaine, gathering up what was left sopping on the sidewalk: crap scattered from somebody's pocket—receipts, a bandana, gum. When Nick thinks to look he sees that the white van is gone. He knows he is no longer Magnificent's beloved son, and it will matter tomorrow, but tonight there is nothing. He is raging yet, crouching and wheeling and punching the air, yelling, maybe. The streetlights have come on, and nobody is left but Nick and Duvall, who has not even bothered to move beneath the overhang, but stands in the wet open, his hands at his sides.

When Nick becomes still, Duvall takes him by the shoulders and helps him into the patrol car, and they drive home through Brooklyn to the grainy music of police radio—each call reduced to its rudest elements: young black male, gun, address. Send additional units.

Kisha Club

Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel

1. Stout Kisha

Stout Kisha tapped her fingernails on my locker door. She was a sixth grader short enough to be in third who made up for her stature with a quick wit and quicker fists; a gold tooth secured her power. When she walked by, my locker door was a flimsy shield. It could only block my pale face and white hands for an instant. Shut it, and there she was, waiting for me.

“Your name really *Kisha*?” She demanded to know with a lisp that slid by her gold tooth.

I nodded; she came closer, angrier, pursing her plummy lips.

A lot of Atlanta girls, and most at Snapfinger Elementary, were named iterations of Kiesha, but none were K-i-s-h-a, and none were white—except me. During my year at the school, I never answered when someone said our shared name. They weren’t looking for me—one of ten white students in a school of eight hundred—one of twenty “gifted” students in the Science Magnet School Program—one of hundreds of students bussed around DeKalb County in a forced attempt to integrate.

For an hour each morning and an hour every afternoon, a handful of white kids like me rode short busses to attend south DeKalb’s black schools while hundreds of black kids rode to whiter schools in the north. We passed each other in a daily trade of skin color that the United States Supreme Court called mandatory, and administrators called Majority to Minority—M to M.

As magnet students, we spent the day in separate rooms with beakers and books, one computer per student. We only mingled with other kids when they kicked balls at us during PE or glared at us in the hallway.

Stout Kisha didn’t care that I was a foot taller. She only cared that I was white.

"Your name Kisha, but you ain't *black*?" she said.

She had amber eyes like flint.

She scowled with my nodding.

She pressed her hand against the locker.

Her elbow was dry and ashy, but if you were white you did not say the word ashy. Ashy was something that only black kids said to each other. So was the *n*-word. Most of the black kids called each other the *n*-word:

"What is up Negro?"

"Move nigger."

And at times, they called me the *n*-word too. They called me that when they wanted me out of the way. They reversed hate to claim it, to remind me that I was the culpable color. I was the color of memory and memories had become an institution where names are a club and whites were not allowed.

"Didn't you hear me nigger?" She cocked her head of careful cornrows, braided painfully tight. The plastic gold beads at the tips swung with her question, "Why you named Kisha when you *ain't black*?"

2. Harvest Princess Kisha

After the Corvettes blaring Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Shriners and a rebel flag float went by, my name unexpectedly appeared on the side of a limo. I had not wanted to come to this ridiculous parade; I was twelve and too old for it and should have been at a slumber party or the mall. But then Harvest Princess Kisha rode by.

She was the first blond and blue-eyed Kisha I had ever seen. Six years old and perky, she rode atop a limo that eased through the crowd as if no one had told her that her name might stir trouble. She waved, her arm lithe in sunlight. Her legs disappeared into the sunroof, rounding her bare knees, stretching the translucent skin to reveal threads of blue veins.

The crowd clapped lightly. Little boys shook red, white, and blue streamers, and I—without warning—ran out into the middle of the parade.

"Hey!" I yelled up at her, "Hey! My name is Kisha too!"

She didn't hear me. I yelled again, "Hey! Kisha!"

Her eyes tipped to me. "My name is Kisha too!" I yelled, "And I spell it the exact same way!" I pointed to the side of the limo and spelled out the name printed in bold.

"K-i-s-h-a!"

Harvest Princess Kisha never stopped smiling as she looked away from me and shrugged. The thin rayon ribbon fluttered over her flat chest, and I suddenly realized that all the parade eyes were watching me. All of the parade mouths were whispering, *who is that chubby girl dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and baggy jeans? What could she possibly have to say to the princess with the pretty name?*

For a moment, Kisha soothed them with her waving. She smiled and eased their worry and they basked in the white of her face, her eyes as pale and empty as cotton as she looked down at me from her perch and said, "I know lots of Kishas, and they all spell it *my* way."

3. Montgomery Blair

It was early still. We had hours to go before Mom would finish the eleven o'clock news and go to bed, leaving my brother Blair and I to watch *Saturday Night Live*, where they said things that a ten-year-old boy and twelve-year-old girl were dying to understand.

Until then, we suckled our Coca-Colas with a burger and fries, each hour punctuated by commercials that promised to organize and clean up our lives. We never turned down the volume; we talked over them instead.

"Where did my name come from?" I said loudly, turning to look at my mom in the La-Z-Boy.

She put her plate by the lamp and dabbed at her mouth with a paper napkin.

As she leaned back in the chair, her taut, round abdomen rose higher than her waist. She had stopped going to Weight Watchers, something she did occasionally after my father died, and had gained some of the weight back. She had also started to dye her hair to hide the white strands.

"Your uncle thought of the name and I liked it." She brushed crumbs off her pant leg and sucked her teeth.

"Which uncle?" I asked.

"Uncle Lonnie."

"And you just liked it?"

"It's pretty—We thought about naming you Susan Michelle but we liked Kisha Lynn better."

Susan Michelle.

This was a name you would hear on television, in the park, on the news. A name of transparent exegesis ... Susan: Hebrew for lily; the apocryphal woman who defied wrongful accusation; Michelle: the feminine of Michael—who resembles God. Susan: for an aunt; Michelle: for my father.

As Susan Michelle, I would still have pale skin, hazel eyes, and height. But Susan Michelle would feel comfortable in the suburbs. She would have enjoyed high school, scored high on the SATs and easily with football players. They could call her Susan, Susie, Sue, Michelle, or Shelly. She would not wonder what it all meant. Susan Michelle would wonder about other things ... lip gloss, rainbows, and foundation garments.

"But Mom," I said, "where did Uncle Lonnie hear the name Kisha?"

"I don't know."

"Who am I named for?" my brother clamored.

"For Montgomery Blair. You know ... the Postmaster General for Lincoln."

Surprised by her precision, I stared at my brother's buoyant face and feigned a laugh. "He was named for a postman?"

"Yes, he was named for a postman; you knew that." She shook her head and straightened, "your dad named you." She turned her attention back to the television.

Blair looked at me, ebullient, and I stared at his pearly white cheeks, his scrub of blond hair and those blue eyes, suddenly resolute with his name defined ... an articulated root dangling between he and my father, he and history, he and the entire culture.

4. *Yolanda*

My mom was named Yolanda after her mother's favorite movie, *Yolanda and the Thief*, a 1945 musical where Fred Astaire travels to the imagined Latin-American country of Patria, where he pretends to be Yolanda's guardian angel in order to steal her money and eventually, of course, fall in love with her.

When the movie came to Belzoni, Mississippi, my Granny watched the fair Yolanda on-screen at the all-white theater near her home and decided it would be the perfect name for her only daughter. She wasn't aware that around the South, women of color were also naming their baby girls Yolanda. Had he known, my Pa wouldn't have allowed it. No child of his would have a black girl's name.

But Granny and Pa didn't talk much with black people. They didn't hear what they named their kids. In Pa's house, people of color were only called one thing.

In my mother's adolescent Belzoni, integration was the word unsaid. When she was in the room, no one mentioned the uprisings, the murder. These weren't things you told a young, Southern woman. These weren't even things that made the local paper.

She didn't know that outsiders called her town "Bloody Belzoni"; or that miles away, racists killed the civil rights activist George W. Lee; or that his killers were never found because Governor White wouldn't investigate what he called a "traffic accident," calling the buckshot in Lee's face, "loose dental fillings."

She didn't know that a few towns over, in Money, Mississippi, Emmet Till spoke with a slight stutter, but whistled at a white woman clear enough for men to end him with a bullet and tie a seventy-five pound cotton gin fan around his neck.

While the world learned of Till that August, my mother wore her prettiest

yellow dress to a barbecue. She was sun-baked that season, and the yellow made her skin look dark enough for an angry man to ask her why she was there. No blacks were allowed at the picnic, he said. She would have to leave. *Now*. Or he would call the police.

Bewildered, she caught her father's eyes. Pa walked over quickly, and when he introduced the man to his daughter, Yolanda, the angry man softened, smiled brightly, shook Pa's hand, and walked away. Pa patted her on the back and left her standing there—a white woman in a yellow dress that made her look black.

She wouldn't learn of Emmet Till until she was an adult, watching the 1988 movie, *Mississippi Burning*, a drama that she could never watch again—the scenes too terrible, the sudden knowledge too intimate, the grief too deep. She was already a daughter who had left the Delta, moved to Wyoming and settled in Atlanta where her high school students were African-American, Latino, Puerto Rican, Anglo, Pacific Islander, Caribbean, Namibian ... In Mrs. Lewellyn's class all were equal under English. They repeated Chaucer and Eliot, Ellison and Hughes. The raisin in the sun, the caged bird singing, they called out language and sometimes slept through instruction, waiting for the bell to ring. But in her class they did not, ever, call out the N-word, the now-common nickname. For that, you would fade Mrs. Lewellyn's pale blue eyes with sadness that such a word could come through your heart. For that word, you would be asked to leave her class. For that word carried the history of home and silence.

5. Stout Kisha

Stout Kisha tapped the locker again. She pressed her face closer to mine and I could see a small scar below her left eye, the dots on either side of it from poorly made stitches. She looked into my eyes and lowered her voice. "I *said*, why you named Kisha if you *ain't black*?"

In that moment, I did not blink or flinch as I snapped, "Because I *am* black." She stepped closer, ever closer. "What did you say?"

She smelled like coconut.

She made a fist.

I leaned over her and pointed my chin at her forehead, believing every word. "I said, I *am black*."

She snorted.

I started to sweat.

Then I lifted my chin to the ceiling and pointed to the round, brown birthmark on my neck.

"See," I snarled, "that's where all the black went."

I pointed again, and in that moment I mustered all of my belief in the lie. I imagined that somewhere in my family's Southern history as poor sharecroppers that we did indeed have people of color in our family. Suddenly I was smug; I was vigilant; *I was black*. "Look," I said, "you blind? Right there. I'm black."

She studied my birthmark. Her upper lip rose over the gold tooth; she smacked her lips and came closer as if the darker pigment on my neck might reveal something.

I lowered my chin and cocked my head back at her. I could not tell if she was convinced, so I continued. "Even my mom's named Yolanda." I let this sink in. "She's black too."

Stout Kisha smacked her lips over and over, as if she were lip-smacking for backup, calling all girls with knowledgeable fists to beat down this lying white girl with the black name. She slammed her fist against the locker and I flinched, steadied for the worst when suddenly, she walked away, smacking, "Whatever Negro."

6. Uncle Lonnie

Uncle Lonnie lounged on Granny and Pa's old couch, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he read the morning paper. His inky hair was stiff with sweat and his white undershirt stained along the seam. It was Saturday, and he had come to help Pa with the catfish farm.

He took a drag, folded the newspaper and slapped it on his lap, yelling to my Pa in the kitchen, "Well just call that nigger will you?"

In Belzoni they all said they n-word. It was the pepper to their corn-and-cabbage lives where the wallpaper was yellowed and peeling and there was no amount of money that would save the farm. The Delta was dying. The soil stripped by cotton, the people squashed by oppression. With all this decay, only the repetition of the n-word seemed to get stronger: *Don't act like a nigger; a neighbor's black dog named Nigger; Call that nigger.*

"That nigger doesn't get here by noon, you call his nigger ass."

Without pause, Uncle Lonnie injected the word into every sentence—as adjective and noun, as reason and description—and each time I held my thirteen-year-old tongue; I held back what I wanted to say. Telling him to shut up would only lead to trouble.

But as his lower lip began to move again, his teeth threatening to catch the cutting syllables, I uncontrollably yelped, "Uncle Lonnie!"

He stopped. He looked at me sideways.

I swallowed a hard ball of rage and said, "Did you name me?"

His clavicle rose and he took a breath.

"What?" He leaned forward and he was laughing at me now, with his eyes. "Landa," he called to my mother, yelling from the couch, never getting up, "what is your girl on about?"

Mom stepped from the kitchen, her hands devoted to a dish towel and bowl. "What's that?" She annunciated her words with little of her Delta home drawl left. She was an English teacher. She couldn't stand the misuse of language.

"I just want to know why he liked my name," I said, "where he heard it."

Mom leaned on the doorframe, "Lonnie, don't you remember when I was pregnant? You liked the name Kisha."

His blue eyes were steel on me.

"What in hell are y'all talkin' about? I never heard that name before her."

"Oh Lonnie, yes you did," my mother smiled at him.

"News to me." He shrugged, took the cigarette from his mouth and doused it in an ashtray. "Never heard it."

He dismissed us with a final wave of the paper.

Mom put the bowl on the television, as if preparing for questions and clarity, but I wanted none of it.

I smiled wide at Mom and shrugged.

She looked concerned. She started to speak. But I held up my hand in a wave and interrupted her, "I'm goin' outside! Be back later."

The screen door clapped shut, and I ran past the barn, up the hill, onto the long, gravel levees. With each step, my feet beat out the rhythm of a name not born of a mind tethered to the *n*-word. This name floated over levees and ponds, full and alone, and I ran *as for an answer* past one pond and another. I did not stop until I reached the open field, and a flock of blackbirds flew into the clouds.



the drape
draws back

a selection of poems by

John Gallaber

Catherine Theis

Dana Levin

Karla Kelsey

Nicholas Reading

Nick Courtright

Hailey Leithauser

J. Ely Shipley

Forrest Hamer

Victoria Anderson

Hannah Baker

Steven Schreiner

Jeffrey Petbybridge

Elizabeth Arnold

Anecdote of the Little Houses

They're folding maps out across the yards,
over the houses
on the north side of the street
and on the south.

*Look darling, they say, the houses
are all lit up.*
It's a summer night, in blue.

In the houses, they've gotten new clothes
and they're trying them on.
They're saying *yes*,

and they're saying *no*,
whenever they step from a room.
They're saying, *I think so*, and *is*, or *isn't*.

The people
are folding maps out
across the streets.

Time keeps running out, they say,
and there keeps being more of it
as the surfaces flash by.

And below,
after they stop at their houses,
the lines rise above the lines.

The red and the blue lines
rising and falling all night
in their sleep.

The Universe Is Incapable of Disappearance

They keep talking about a road, but there never is a road,
and if there was, it would always be ending, the way
everything is always ending
unless you're of the mind that everything is always some sort of middle,
or some continual beginning
that rises and falls from a never quite completed something
that we're continually waking from
in a kind of polite vagueness.

And then, what is it? I'm wanting something
or you are, and neither of us is saying what it is past the
"I don't do big emotional things," and I almost feel
like saying sorry, if I were the type to say such things,
or to feel that way. And isn't that some sort of world flying past,
how we realized with a start that being anyone
is easy, and that everyone can do it. And what does that leave us,
other than surrounded by pretty green hills?

And the hills keep feeling like this place to get to,
or to talk about getting to, even when we realize it's just another window
or painting of a window which continues for as many years
as there are. That almost feels like it,
but it's not it. Because figures are moving out there,
and somehow they got there, maybe without even taking it seriously.

"Call when you find work," we say, though we've heard things
will be different then, perhaps, and maybe they really will find work,

and suddenly we'll no longer be the least bit important. I take notes
because the notes were asking for it. I take notes
because they're teaching children to write differently now. The r's
are larger, and the κ's look like κ's. OK, then,
but they're still talking about a road, and about how
in the layered world, it's layers, and everyone says *bello*
from the kitchen windows there
in summer, grayed out a bit by the screens.

Intimacy

The country's manse requires a calmness
of mind, of method.
Pewter plates, tankards,
the dried firkins fitting comfortably
in the endnotes without disruption,
mummies wrapping themselves in parlance,
in abundant white cloth, how historical.
*Here, drink this glass of milk, stay in bed,
do not think such strange thoughts,
do not think at all.*

The cast-iron pan cast apart,
away from the mind's deliberate action.
Holding things off,
as if one could be a butler or lady's maid
to a very rich gentleman,
so estranged from a self problem,
castellated. To be cast in metal,
to be a pellet disgorged
by a hawk's decisive spirit.
Double-headed lights cast
through the darkness of night,
never carried inside you,
never broached, never recognized
as invoice or receipt of a city
made famous by its twilight.
Gold and silver. Birds nesting in the ivy,
voices resembling a tower,
their invisible faces, a cup's worth

of goodwill chatter.
Water, smoke, lakeshore fogs & light now leaving—
new forms, new spaces, life's materials
contributing to a structure
but not to sympathy,
the cupholder's proof not measured
in finite steps, or as an ordering principle,
but roughed in sorrow
it sees its way through,
it passes into sense.
The skillful application of paint surprises you.
You suddenly realize you are not yourself.

Augur

Hawk perched low on a hedge of vine.

On hunt for what hid
in the tangle.

The small citizens, mouse and gopher.

Body of Ra, the hawk signified.

In the symbol book, which I opened, after climbing the stairs,
after the hawk fanned out its banded tail like I should

pick a card—

The book was a prisoner of my ardor for the dark, through it I stalked,
a seeker.

It was a character out of a Victorian novel, *Symbol Book*, an
imbecile, a Dutch inventor.

Saying You must bow
to the Hippogriff (half-raptor, half-horse), it must

lower its head to your hand.

Halcon Pradeno. Mexicano. Come to me for my winter ground.

According to whatbird.com.

Hawk perched low on a hedge of vine. Going
heel to toe, so as not to startle.

Cloud unhooding *body of Ra* a pale pearl of winter sun—

Renaissance printers
often stamped their wares with a hooded falcon,
emblem of the dungeoned seer.

That “hope for light” the darkened nourish.

Closed books, *post tenebras spero lucem* along the spine—

I found the phrase in the Office for the Dead, in the Latin Vulgate:
after darkness I hope for light—

Then: *hell is my house, and in darkness I have made my bed*—

I thought of my father and mother and sister being dead, I was so sick
of feeling anything about it—

The hood stood for hope of liberty.

Of wanting to swoop and soar over enormous swells,
as in my dream.

I hovered high, I could see the mammals in the raucous waters, their slick skins
of danger and wonder.

My soul hath thirsted, the Vulgate said, *He hath put a new song into my mouth*.

The hawk appeared. Unhooded.

An auspice, from *auspex*, *avis**pex*, 'one who looks at birds'—

I'd been wanting to know if it was all right to live.

An ascensional symbol on every level, the symbol book said.

Body of Ra. Solar victory. If one can believe the book
of symbols.

In the Syllable I

And how to hold myself within this syllable of red refraction, light glanced off the window as from the warmth of bed I still do not believe

In the absence of snow. In the mind's eye the drape draws back to the stubble field and snow geese picking through ice, air pushed along cracks

With a quality of persistence though the thermometer shows a rising heat, day begun with a desire to imbue. And once the molecules saturate there will be no more place

For this death, an ampoule containing essence gone through with the ancestral dream of bone china and basil relict. Our current preoccupation: shredding papers that avoided

The fire, air gone pure with electricity, cats nesting in the wooden box lined with scraps. In the story of the crucifixion jasper lies at the base of the cross

And was it noticed, there, in the kneeling, in the cacophony of geese signaling the start of a flood? Down by the sycamore there's a natural boat launch, water meeting contention,

Mud swallowing away. I wish I had told you, while I still could, about the cusp of that bay, the tea in the cup a sort of waiting, how long would it take

For the china to stain. By now the season will have entered its turn and these sentiments chalk up to errancy, a rejection of the bloodstone so smooth

You pressed it into my palm with the possibility of polished weight.

In the Syllable II

The books have been boxed up along with the muslin panel and what becomes of the horse in the absence of the barn, the shining branches of the bare tree

To which a sparrow in some soon hour will come. It is impossible to see the field from any of our windows, blue siding and the holly tree

Blocking such expanse. By this an alternate view is implied and the polish will go if the stone gets wet too many times. During my last visit to the city

I hated the vast expanse of buildings, my cowrie-shell purse crushed under his foot a split second after I dropped it, the crowd pushing me onto the curb

As the light changed. Does carrying a bag stitched with shells predetermine my relationship to your new home known to me only

Through a recording of grackles? I hear white fabric embroidered with white, touch met with the thorn of the rose. Which is not to say that I believe

The image of the snow geese picking through ice to be untrue to what it is to have lived within walls punctured by a sea, a mountain town,

A garden fence trained with hibiscus and trumpet flower. And in what way is the sky equipped to address the vanishing nature of polished stone?

To Stay within the Equivalent of the Finishing Petal

What allows possession permits a giving-over to the gales of near-autumn,

Low bursts sound in violets and the thin material of my dress, in conjured days of bone buttons and what is papery in the photograph of the city where buildings shoot up mica and light. This is what we mean by containment as red parrots climb the curtains, fan oscillating, geraniums sweltering in window boxes while something grows cruel underneath this movement forward, this system created by more water entering through than leaving. But when heat comes it doesn't matter how quickly you plunge the stems, sun too high, for soon there will be nothing left but the blanched house, the incision of memory before we burst with its dying.

rose stems saved to bury with the box of egg shells and the half-formed fox,

In this, a trade in the amount of being summer blooms bear forth for the sparrow egg in my hand and you are not so precise. To hold this in mind while cutting rose buds, the start of an iris, waking early, sheers in hand, to rush the orange in and what moves through eyelet. The secret of permission in small glimpses of fence and white sky, the peacock locked in the horse's stall, avoidance of the shards of the red clay plate smashed on the flagstone as I startled. Put a penny in a vase. Put a tablet of aspirin, distilled water and then the light around the sun refracts as fat bodies of helicopters move east regardless of the glare held to glass panes, to shifting sands, to the small camera that tucks so neatly into the hollow of your palm.

contrails rubbing into the far horizon to accomplish what the center of the body lacks.

Kankakee Drought, 1933

Heat has joined our mouths with dirt
like calves to a bottle. The riverbeds
seem a mark of the future. In the shade

dogs try to crumple with the children
and are kicked away. None sleep. If I watch them
for too long I'm tempted to burn them all.

Whatever comes next will be my decision
whether the shadows over their cheeks
and burnt arms soothe them or not. It is too late.

All of our perfect bodies are empty. My wife,
as we speak, is denouncing prayer. The family
hymnal has been used for fans. Her written account

of these days has been used up in stew.
Now, the children stir at my approach and think
they see me carrying pails at my side.

If anyone were here to see us they would say
it is unforgivable. And it is. The way the sun
glares and turns this shovel's head into fire.

This Quiet Complex

The flame moving in this weekend to the apartment, the box and its faux wood flooring and whitewash cabinets, too many cabinets, the flame moving in and moving through—

•

The flame putting its whole fist into its mouth, and through the thin wall again, past the kitchen, past the bathroom fixture tottering like a flame, the flame hanging and exhaling—

•

The flame flattening its belly to the foyer floor, the flame hanging like meat from the rafters as so much that has passed passes and moves through this fickle night—

•

There is a lapping and tonguing and scratching the speckled, soundless ceiling, white and white, the flame blue and red and moving in this weekend. The apartment is not an oven; is an oven.

•

What full force is in effect when the glass cracks, when the smoke makes its drawings, when the blinds take a breath as another ceiling fan curls its wooden petals like a flower?

Advice

The dead can say anything and it sounds like advice —Mary Ruefle

This no doubt is true.

One day you're out in the back yard
and there's a whisper in your ear—a brown

leaf on the brick, or possibly a yellow jacket caught
against the screen—and the next thing you know,

you have a shovel in your hand, and the next,
you have moved the geraniums to face the north sun.

Another time, it's night, you're standing
alone in the kitchen waiting for the water to boil.

The clock ticks, there's a slight brush of air against your arm,
and suddenly, you have given up red meat.

It's all so subtle that if on a Monday you were to go so far
as to lift a framed photograph off your desk

and stare long into the eyes, you would by that time
the next week, be married or divorced.

A woman in your office, you barely
knew her, tells someone that accounts receivable

is overdue for an audit. You pick up a scent
of Opium as she puts down the phone and months later,

folding an ash gray stocking down your calf, you acknowledge
the spider scrambling the log you shoved

into the morning's fire, in its escape across the floor,
brought into the world a reasonable joy.

Reflexive

In my father's house are many mansions.
—John 14:2

His hair so blond it was
nearly white. I never saw but imagine it

cascade around his crown. A laurel, a halo
his mother's hands ran through. Imagine

his white shepherd the neighbor
poisoned. My father leaning

against a barbed fence
near its body, a thick white

pelt in the middle of a desert,
whistling a dirge into the soft ears

of a distant field

horse. Its nostrils unfurling
an audible

breath, one he must have felt

against his face,
as the diver feels himself shattering

into his reflection inside a
pool's translucent skin.

Tired and True

My sister is circling the earth riding a mule
Our grandfather has left us.

He used to call the mule Red but we call it Tired and True.
The mule goes wherever it wants, and it wants to go
Exactly where it is needed.

Tired and True reminds us
What of our grandfather to remember.

Be in the world, my grandfather said,
Adding, but not of it. It was one of those things he said
Before bedtime, along with stories from the Bible.
I have taken the sayings differently than he meant,
And I have persuaded my sister the same.

There are so many places to travel!
While my sister circles the world, I remember what we were told
So we can compare.

Giddy up, old Red.
Giddy up, we say.

A Poem Also about Temperament

Before, I would have said I am blessed.

Before, when there was comfort, I would have said
what keeps me alive are gifts not given freely.

When I was wishful, I'd say solitude, courage, music, and
I was grateful
not being responsible, being at least this much immortal.

Hopeful, serious. The parable about talents and gifts made me
understand, at the least; a first time.

I was someone's son, a lucky one sent forth to make

something of myself. We each of us live
stories, families, and causes; lifetimes
also making us. We return to where we start, prodigal,

relieved. We don't really want to be different.

Florida, 1963

girl in Jenny Lind bed attic room
into which heat rises

and settles torpor one room of
air-conditioned comfort

in which to watch Kennedy shot
again and again

downstairs the outline of a cat
on a bed weighted

by heavy crochet a neighbor ringing
the doorbell cradling a thrush

your cat has killed my bird
mother says *God's bird*

by way of correction mother has never
said God before

mother's mood lightens when the truck
of rich grandmother things arrives

a chaise filled with down girl may sit
briefly and without indentation

downstairs Kennedy gets shot again
and the maid whose husband was shot

but not like Kennedy polishes
the rich grandmother table

where women sit to smoke by way
of correction the girl goes to a friend's

apartment rooms above a diner diningroom
opens to a tar roof

girls dance as pink bouclé absorbs blood
again and again

Window Water Baby Moving

And then Brakhage cuts back
to his arm in the bathtub,
his shirt still on, rolled sleeves,
the naked woman's side of her face,
he's kissing
while massaging
her stomach.
Does anyone feel this?
We see later a naked girl
born out of this,
later one of four daughters,
and brought into play,
a child Freud says like any of us maybe
were in the arms of a nurse
without scruples, who,
by stroking the child's genitals,
lulls the child to sleep, and rocking,
herself almost, sleeps.

Forecast

Funny I should think of telling you about
the rain. You're in England, a rainy island.

I would like to talk about a few things.

I would like to hold your child.

It occurs to me that if I were to write "I
would like to hold our child," how tragic
my whole life would seem.

A rainy island!

You should hear it now, it isn't rain
anymore, it's hitting hard on the windows
and sweeping the streets, trees swaying
and swamping like a capsized boat, because
hail is flying.

Oh, but it's over so fast, things quietening,
the river overtaking some bridge.

I think too of the woman I slept with this year,
how she hates thunder and whether I should
call her. But you know what,

that voice that makes me call her
is not around tonight.

A quiet, declining rainy night.

You're over in England. You sent me some
pictures.

You said, "Hi, Family."

Poem

(Finished 9/22/07 at 3:42 AM
with Sunflowers on the Table)

for CME

If into waking, if
 after voyaging, if
having come through the wind
 swarming with data, come
through minute to hour
 as minute to hour
change, if she writes Here | Now,
 if the sincerity
that warrants description
 holds one minute longer,
"one minute past," the re-
 cognition (a steel rod
glowing white-hot under
 the torch's acetylene
incitement) that the soul
 knows itself, becomes it-
self, distinguishes it-
 self only in the time
(the eye-burning white-hot
 bright) concerned with the self's
extinction, its nerve-death,
 that the soul is nothing

but this care (already
the steel dims) for death, if
upon diagnosis,
this practice, this counter-
adamancy alloys
her work in solitude
and not in any form
of love (the cool steel rests)
to be concerned with, if—

After Philip Johnson's Glass House

It could be air, a seemingly post-less porch at a ridge-edge in Connecticut.
Grounded by the too-wide dark brick cylinder within it?

Low clump of cabinets to the left
standing alone, no walls to be attached to. So

freestanding but not free.
Huddled.

As if round-backed, they're bent against the sky.
With everything exposed, they might find safety only

in that, and in their reddish, homey-colored wood.
But the corners are sharp, right-angled.

There's no hammer beam or sally in the house.
No gusset needed, balk. If there are sleepers, they're sunk.

Only the cylinder is curved, only that
having anything to do with what might bend toward imperfection.

Anatolian cuneiforms etched into it?—a cylinder seal to be rolled onto
lake-sized sheets of wax intaglio, a communication thus

entering the mind? But the ancient seals are a little bit fluted at the ends,
this isn't, smoke-stack shadow cast across the scene—

to scare off anyone who might approach
(as if they'd see it!) a room-sized house hanging in thin air,

banks of lush or leafless wild shrubs all around and down
the great ridge (for Connecticut)

may as well as be in it. Trees erase it.

The Boy and the Island

Mei Li Ooi

The father's rules about boys were simple: you could not go out with boys, you could not bring boys home, you could not have boys as friends, you could not have boys as boyfriends.

It's for your own protection, the father said.

Oh, the daughter said. She was fifteen and obedient.

Boys are scum, the father told her. They'll just use you and leave you.

But in her last year at the International High School on the island, the daughter met a boy who livened the air. The boy looked like a mixture of Portuguese and Chinese and Malay and he carved geometric patterns that he said were *Orang Asli* into the wooden desks during lectures. He never got caught. He broke the *No Speaking* rule at the library and was never turned in. The boy and the girl took to exploring the field behind campus in between classes. They took to missing classes altogether.

Near the end of the school year, the boy shared with the girl a secret. I have something for you, he said. Hold out your hand.

The girl stretched out her hand. Her hand was small and veiny.

They were sitting behind the science lab, bunkered by weathered brick walls and red hibiscus. Caterpillars and ants speckled the ground. In the girl's hand, the boy placed a joint. She gasped. It was the time of the Anti-*Dadah* Campaign in the country and the penalty for drugs was death by hanging. The boy rooted the joint in his one-sided smile. The girl glanced about for onlookers but all she saw was the horizon, bearing upon the earth. The grass was wet with summer.

Be careful, the girl's mother said. But it was already too late.

The girl moved away from her mother, who pricked the air with the smell of Palmolive shampoo and Dettol, of things scrubbed clean.

The mother told her, Don't get caught.

Don't come home after seven.

Don't get pregnant.

Don't end up like me.

It was the day before the school dance. At the beach, the girl kept on a batik T-shirt over a bathing suit because you never knew, religious police roamed the

island. She lathered sunblock down to her toes, across her square face, and over her elongated nose to stay *peb*, pale, which her grandmother said was beautiful.

The boy ignored a bale-wire fence that told them to Keep Out. He extended a ropey arm to help the girl climb the rocks. She followed, watching his sinewed skin, thinking of mythic warriors she'd seen in picture books for children. That was what the boy was like. He was a long-ago story.

Towards the top of the rocks, they arranged themselves in the dappled shade of a *ciku* tree, its delicate leaves like tear drops. The ground beneath them shifted but they kissed. A monitor lizard basked in the concentrated rays of the sun. Starfish breathed on the sand. All around was the Indian Ocean, restless with jellyfish and stingrays.

When daylight dimmed and the air cooled, the girl squeezed her *Bata* slippers between her toes. She meant to say goodbye to the boy on the bus to Dato Kramat Road. Instead, she said, I can't go to the dance with you. My father's really strict.

But it's the dance, the boy said. Everyone will be there. Even teachers.

If he even knew about you, he'd kill us.

Fathers are like that, the boy shrugged.

This is my father, she said, squeezing her eyes shut. And she told the boy the things about the father that she rarely told anyone.

A flock of crows lifted into the air. The sea lurched. The boy looked angry.

Why don't you leave? he said.

This did not surprise the girl. People who didn't know better said things like that all the time. Like her father was so bad. Like leaving was so easy. What would happen to her mother if she left? Where would the girl go? But the girl didn't know how to say these things so she just said, I don't know.

If I were you I'd leave. I'd go somewhere fun. I'd go to one of the countries up north. There's good ganja up there. We could eat the best food all day and go to parties all night.

You'd come with me? the girl said.

I'd go up north with you.

Tonight, the boy reached under her shirt and although her stomach tightened, the girl did not stop him. Tonight, when he peeled off her swimsuit, she took off his. Curled up next to him, tracing his knuckles, she took refuge in his smell of thunderstorms.

Twilight glowered on the sands. On the winding road home, she held both palms over a knee and observed how translucent her skin appeared, the gold-green veins probing out the backs of her hands, like fish gills extending into water, diffusing oxygen. Tonight, she returned home after seven.

The house sat on the eastern shores of the island. It was a rectangular shaped house, flat as a shoebox, with morning glories groping the exteriors and the windows. Inside the small room, crammed with furniture and souvenirs and half-empty containers of almond and pineapple cookies, an altar seeped incense into the damp air. A ceiling fan creaked against the heat.

The mother was in the kitchen, scrubbing a pan. Every night five dishes on the table for the three of them. The aroma of steamed rice. Golden-fried pomfret sprinkled with sugar and soy sauce. Chopped garlic and onion on pea sprouts. Braised sea cucumber with minced pork. From time to time, the smell of chicken curry and potatoes.

The father wrapped a telephone cord around the daughter's neck.

The girl recalled the stark white trees in National Geographic magazines, the ones hardened by minerals. Petrified. The cord tightened around her throat, pulling the father's stout fists closer to her face. Her tongue forced its way out of her mouth.

Look what you made me do, he said, shaking.

The ceiling turned sideways as he brought her to her knees. The marble floor was ice-cold against her skin.

You cheated on me, he said, beads of sweat decorating his thick neck.

The girl wheezed.

That's enough, the mother said. Her spine straightened like an exclamation. Any more and she'll have to go to the doctor.

Outside, crickets sang. A child played the piano. A jingle swelled from the television. *Maggie Mee cepat di masak, sedap di makan. Maggie Noodles, fast cooking, great tasting.*

The father released the girl. Tears blossomed on his cheeks. Everything I have worked for has been for you, he said.

As always after quarrels, the wife brought a kettle from the stove and handed the man his pipe. She laid out his teacups on the rosewood coffee table, singeing tea

leaves with just-boiled water. He slouched back in his armchair. His stomach pillowed over his ribs. Above, the fan lifted moisture from his skin and tea perfumed the air with smells of jasmine.

Clouds covered the earth like a damp towel and rain began to fall. The girl straightened her clothes and walked to her bedroom. Her ankles quivered, but steady in the palm of her hand was a crumpled five *ringgit* bill, filched from the father's pocket. She placed the bill between the pages of a battered textbook. Her father never looked at her bookshelf. Here, she could hide any money she saved, found, or stole.

The mother sat on the bed beside her daughter, inspecting the welts on the girl's neck. You shouldn't disobey your father, the woman said.

That's what you think. The girl's voice was chili paddies and cobras. The boy had promised the girl that when they got to one of the northern countries, she could do anything she wanted. She thought of the things she wanted.

He didn't mean it. The mother's tiny shoulders folded like the wings of a long-horned beetle.

For the first time, the girl wanted to spit at the older woman. Backing away, the daughter walked to the louvered window. Rain rattled the panes, spreading cool, crisp droplets against her pink cheeks and gaunt feet. She slid a finger over the fan motifs. Her grandmother had told her that the fan would invite the wind to carry money and money would bring luck.

What do you think people are doing outside? the girl said.

The woman followed the young girl's gaze. But there were only windchimes in the backyard, clanging loudly in the breeze. I bet they're having a good time, the mother said.

The constellations shimmered in the moonlight. The girl felt on the verge of something. All night, wind blew through the iron lattice grill, rocking her to sleep. In her dreams were smoke-filled clubs, colored lights, music so loud it hurt your ears, girls drinking, boys drinking, girls sitting on their laps. When she dreamed of the world outside it was always a throbbing nightclub. Like *Ramayana* at the Meridian Hotel or *Lush* at the Royal Orchid. Young people dancing across the island.

What You Can Know About Him

by Lying Beside Him as You Hold Each Other

Tom Fleischmann

"Guilt, craft, vision, meanness, ecstasy, and lure appear in certain arrangements of arms, hands, shoulders, neck, head, and legs. Thus, the stuff of the ages goes into man's thinking, is interpreted and comes out in movement and posture again."

—Mabel Todd, *The Thinking Body*

Whether his diaphragm muscles are contracting or relaxing.

What he says to himself quietly between breaths. This might be about something that happened with a teacup that day, or something that has not happened at all. This might be names, or words in a language you don't understand.

Whether he lies prone, supine, or curled into himself. The fetal position can suggest trauma as it is the position that most protects the head and heart and so is the body's position of instinct when the self cannot deal with the rest of the world. He might sleep this way if he has been left by someone he loves. Or if the space between thunder and lightning is less and less. The fetal position is also the position the body will take when cold: perhaps he needs a blanket.

That he has just smoked a cigarette.

How he adjusts to your weight.

By following his breath (counting one when he breathes in, one when he breathes out, two when he breathes in, two when he breathes out ...) you can make the tip of his nose the object of your mind. You can know, in the way a Sutra allows you to know yourself, that he is alive.

That he has recently walked through a field of a certain kind of plant (lilac, basil, bee balm). This would be in the sweet scent and stick of his legs or pants, as well as the attraction of insects to where you lie.

Whether he is the big spoon or the little spoon.

Which of you will die first, as every living thing is allowed only a certain number of heartbeats. Hummingbirds, their hearts a snare, will expire much sooner than a tortoise, whose heart is more of a bass. When you feel the pulse of his rib on your back, compare that beat to your own to know which of you shortens the other's life with joy and nerves.

How the sizes of the parts of you compare to the sizes of the parts of him. So that every part of you is smaller than every part of him (or every part of him smaller than every part of you). Or maybe that your calf is smaller than his calf, but your back is taller than his back. Maybe his feet lie further down the bed or grass than your feet, but your hipbones touch the small of his back and your forehead his crown. And then, whether or not you can stand behind him when he points somewhere straight ahead and still reach your fingertips to his.

How prone to the same sicknesses you both are: another person's scent is pleasant when he resists different diseases from you. If you wrinkle your nose, the same plague might end you both.

Where in his body strains and tensions are held. If the knee, it could be that he fell climbing a staircase to see someone. If in the neck, that he is curious about the sun.

That he has recently walked through an ocean. This would be in the salty dampness of his hair and the sand that falls off his body to dry on your chest.

According to Edward Binns in *The Anatomy of Sleep*, his drowsiness implies that he is "of obtuse intellect, cold temperament, reserved habit ... and [is an] uninteresting companion."

That he knows you are there—kinesthetically and viscerally. Every time your chest rises or falls his frame remembers the way you tie ribbons.

That his legs are restless.

If his back is straight, that he would make a good soldier, gymnast, lady, politician, castanet player, crossing guard, or Italian runway model. If his back is curved, that he would make a good grave-digger, collector of shells, dishwasher, auto mechanic, or scholar.

Which of his body parts are missing. When you place your hand against his hand, the fingers could be absent. And when you move your palm up to his chest, you might discover a plum-sized dip where his heart would otherwise be. And your nose, if pressed against his eye, might find instead some candle wax.

That he has iridescent wings on his back.

That he has just come back from a jog—sweaty, warm, and quick.

What tastes are still on his breath. Commonly: toothpaste mint, shiraz, licorice tea, marijuana, you, and peanut butter.

Who else it is that lies beside him.

When you breathe more quickly, if the domes of his diaphragm match your fettered pace, or if those rhythms are free of your suggestion.

That he has recently walked through the sky.

That he has an impulse he is unaware of, tingling his sympathetic ganglia and causing a slight tightening of posture. Even if you asked him, he couldn't tell you if this is an impulse toward you or away from something else.

That he has left. Or that he is still there.

YAR! Illustrates Rimbaud

Sean Morrissey Carroll

Graffiti is a pedigree for artists these days, a school of thought with a vetting process as thick and deep as Yale or the Art Institute of Chicago. Many of our strongest contemporary art trends have been influenced by graffiti's attitude and mores. In the past decade, street art has evolved to draw from the stencils and posters of the other side of the Atlantic, going back to the political upheaval of 1968. Houston artist YAR! began on the streets of Long Beach, LA with his literary criminal acts, but he has exploded in the past few years, collaborating on murals, joining collectives, printing books and zines and moving into the gallery scene. Although he has enjoyed some commercial success, YAR! insists, "I want people like me to be able to like my art and buy it."

When a collector calls from Paris to buy out the drawings in your show, or you spend a month jetting from East- to West-Coast venues, the human side of an artist's persona can be easily washed away. Still, YAR! is dismissive, content to think more about his own practice than its effect in the art market. The twentieth century is over, and with it the myth of the avant-garde soon shall pass.

In illustrating Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, YAR! bridges Modernity to the end of the postmodern ethos. As a new century wipes away the fin-de-siècle definition of American life, the shift from material- to information-economics is redefining the social structure developed in Paris two centuries ago. New cultural incubators have blossomed on the internet and in autonomous collectives; their decentralizing power has been demonstrated in both beneficial and terrible circumstances. As the symbolists knew (and reality shows demonstrate today), the simple truths of narrative artifice are a comfortable road to interpretation of unknown social territory. The polarization of fundamentalism and progressivism in 2008 has many parallels to the nationalism and workers' rights movements of the late 1800s.

Arthur Rimbaud has been hailed as a great and energetic decadent, pivotal in defining emotionally Modernity's foibles. During his most prolific period he lived under martial law in Paris, in a tumultuous intellectual atmosphere.

Following the collapse of the Empire of Napoleon III, the bloodshed and anarchy of the Paris Commune provided a painful relapse into the throes of regime change. The new government of the Third Republic heaped scorn on the citizens of their former capitol. Against this backdrop, Rimbaud's passionate relationship with author Paul Verlaine brought him intense pleasure, pain, and angst that translated itself to the page as the hallucinatory poetry written in a Belgian farmhouse.

The romance between Rimbaud and Verlaine began after Rimbaud had run away from a repressive mother to the capitol (known as "Babylon" to its pious detractors). Proud Parisians were forced to suffer the invading army after an ill-fated war with Prussia. Rimbaud's lover was intensely involved in the uprising of the Commune in 1871, and just two months later, after a devotional letter, young Arthur was ushered from adolescence into political idealism and sexual adulthood. Verlaine left his wife and young child to be with Rimbaud. For the teenage runaway from the Gaullist north of France, the chaos of the street mirrored his internal battles. The dank alleyways and cobblestone avenues of Paris held the writers and artists who would define their age, but for many the chaos of their lives was not reflected in their art. Caught in the dominant conservative nationalist idyll, late nineteenth-century culture focused on leisure, championed virility and reinforced traditional sexual roles.

YAR!'s twisted faces have been painted on multitudes of disreputable surfaces; they also spread roots as photographs passed around on the internet. Gasping mouths sprout from concrete blocks, and faces sprayed onto Houston warehouse walls, have developed a second life online. There they are compared, collected, and listed by taggers and artists around the world. For a recent curatorial project, YAR! culled artists from photo-sharing hub Flickr, and the resulting exhibit demonstrated interesting harmonies among artists from Massachusetts, Florida, Houston, London, Amsterdam, and Paris. He called it *Death and Shit Like That*. Oblique humor such as this doesn't seek to ingratiate or proselytize; YAR! believes in the primacy of the viewer's reaction in art.

Here in his watercolors for *A Season in Hell*, YAR! does not attempt to

illustrate scenes from the poem. This indeterminacy of his subjects is part of a greater philosophy. Irony and sincerity are out the window. In the same way that Rimbaud fought against the tide of logic washing away traditional cultures, YAR! interprets the core of his artwork to be part of a common bond, whatever the interpretation.

YAR! draws anxious figures that live in a narrative world. Characters converse with words that flow from their mouths like oatmeal ether. In *Socrates' Black Hole of Reason*, Weed Jesus opens *Une Saison en Enfer* to reveal a blast of black light to Georgio Armando (who pukes rainbows) while a three-eyed Socrates sits in a hole to the left in the background. He wears a rainbow cloak and a look of resignation. Staring out of the picture, three-eyed Socrates greets viewers half-heartedly as they glance over him to focus on the knowledge imparted as a cloudy purple ray. The players' specificity is complicated by their creator's anonymity.

For Rimbaud and Verlaine, the fitful birth of industrial society was front and center. Paris had seen revolution and explosive growth for a century, but the 1871 Revolution would leave a permanent scar on the city. Though he was the head of the Commune press bureau, Verlaine fled the capitol ahead of the slaughter. He met young Rimbaud in Paris only months later, and the two began a relationship after a devotional letter from Rimbaud saluting Verlaine's writing. Fueled by alcohol and opium, poetry and love, the two were inspirations to one another. Their tumult ended after a particularly vicious fight in Brussels, when Verlaine shot Rimbaud in a drunken rage.

After the elder man was released from a German prison in 1875, the two never met again. Arthur Rimbaud had already given up on poetry—abandoning his obsession with the alchemy of the word after inventing the prose poem and ushering symbolist aesthetes into the light. He spent the rest of his life living outside of France, traveling Europe on foot and running guns from a port in Yemen. Verlaine continued his life as a *poète maudit*, continuing to write and descending into alcoholism and poverty.

Where Rimbaud's fight for poetry becomes our world today is in his revolutionary inspiration, the city on the Seine. The status of Paris in literature created a

new kind of atmosphere; since the dawn of Modernism, "one never sees Paris for the first time, one always sees it again."¹ Visitors, immigrants and tourists all had their own conceptualization of what their experience would be in the Paris created by authors and artists, and this veil of subjectivity invented the original simulacra, creating a second city that lived in the imagination of thousands of readers.

YAR! grew up in Southern California and later Katy, Texas, but his family has roots in West Texas. He moved to California for two years and attended college in Long Beach, shuttling between film and philosophy majors, making skate videos with his friends and growing disillusioned with the necessary collaborations of filmmaking. His first forays into graffiti were inspired by the street art scene in Southern California, especially the brazen work of Shepard Fairey and Space Invader. Feeding the philosophical bent he had acquired, early pieces featured Franz Kafka or quoted Aldous Huxley. The commercial successes of graffiti artists and other outsiders have been a symptom of the decline in academic influences as well as the adaptation of highly educated artists to appropriate from "low" culture sources. YAR! has walked the line between the genres well.

Moving back to Texas in 2005, YAR! spent much of his time alone in his small apartment. He invested his time in reading philosophy and creating street art pieces using stencils and spray paint. Living a solitary life in Houston's Montrose neighborhood, an evolution took hold in his artwork. He used plain brown paper and wheat-pasted large figures across Houston neighborhoods. Many were ghosts, crying with open mouths. The ghosts' ragged ends curled when the paste dried, shaking in the wind. He spent every night wandering the streets looking for spots, and days drawing relentlessly. The constant refrain "YAR! FLOATS" which accompanied the bodies, refers to a line in "Bad Blood" from *A Season in Hell*:

As for happiness, domestic or not ... no, I cannot. I am too dissipated, too weak.
Life flourishing through toil, old platitude! As for me, my life is not heavy
enough, it flies and floats far above action, that dear mainstay of the world.

¹ Edmondo De Amicis. *Ricordi di Parigi*. pg. 22. Milan. 1900.

Floating, sleeping bodies seemed to evoke the collective paralysis felt in Houston after Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans, and Rita caused a panic in East Texas. Simple but evocative figures appeared in the city's interstitial spaces, overgrown lots and abandoned buildings. The works matched the mood of an empathetic and paranoid city; with all its growing pains writ large and human drama underneath, Houston needed a moment to drift.

The inability to communicate adequately in words has prompted YAR! to focus his creative energy. In art he has found a way to think past logic and structural systems. With developing technologies, the next generation of Americans is developing a very different world. Freedoms are redefined and social mores are violated, much as the convulsions of the late 1800s set the stage for the dramatic events that shaped society in the twentieth century. Definitions of intimacy, scholarship, and power have again suffered a bout of polarization in the new millennium.

The *Season in Hell* drawings are a modern measure of Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, a web of references adapted to an anonymous, decentralized, and critical society. Rimbaud's spirit is alive and well in the twenty-first century. *A Season in Hell* was ignored and derided when it was written, but as the tenor of the twentieth century came into focus, his poetry grew more famous. By 1949, when Henry Miller wrote about him in *The Time of Assassins*, Rimbaud was worldwide; in the battle between the collectivity and the individual, everyone has their own Rimbaud.



A Season in Hell: Watercolors by YAR!

1. Death and Shit Like That
2. FTW
3. Cure of Dumbass
4. Dream
5. Socrates' Blackhole of Reason
6. Indeterminacy of Translation
7. Scholar of the Dark Armchair
8. Saint

DEATH AND SHIT LIKE THAT



SOCRATES



NIETZSCHE



BOSCH



RIMBAUD



BERGMAN



RABELAIS



BAUDELAIRE



HERACLITUS



KAFKA



DOSTOEVSKY



HEIDEGGER



LAUTREAMONT



WITTGENSTEIN



BATAILLE

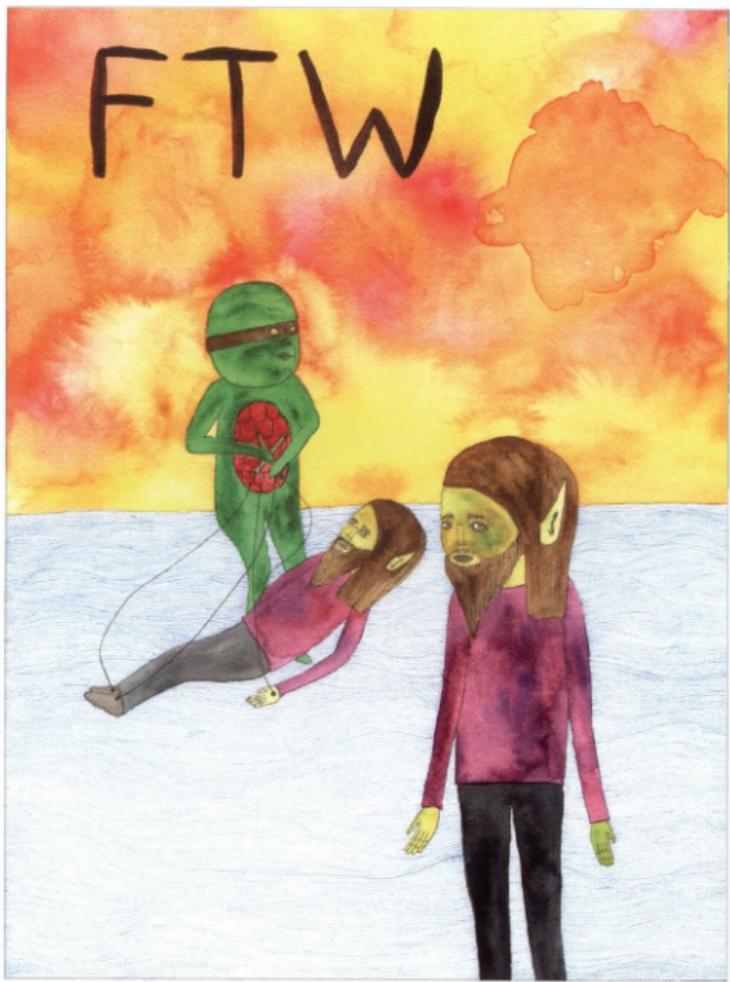


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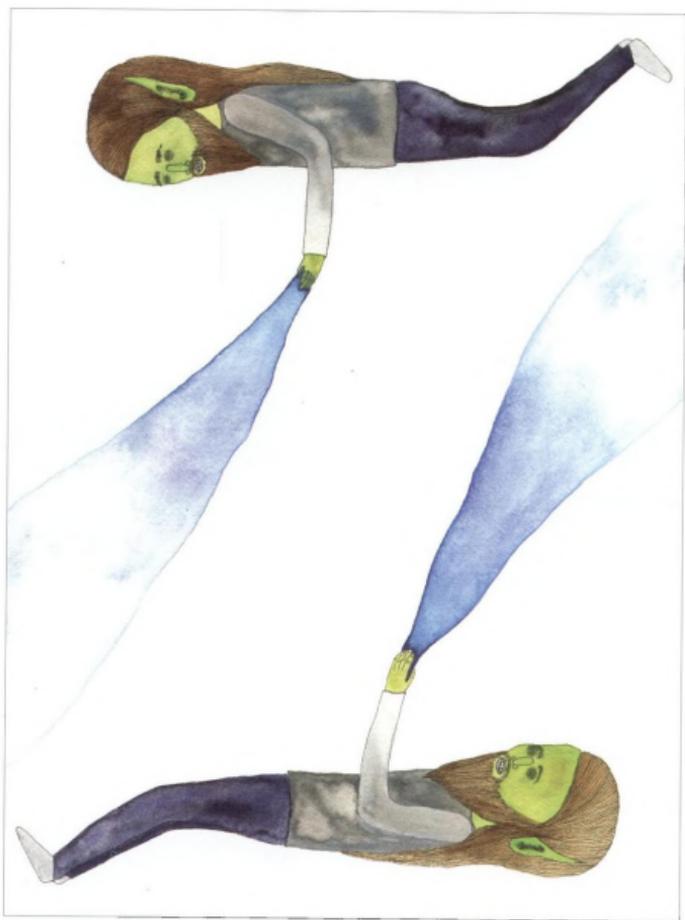
FTW



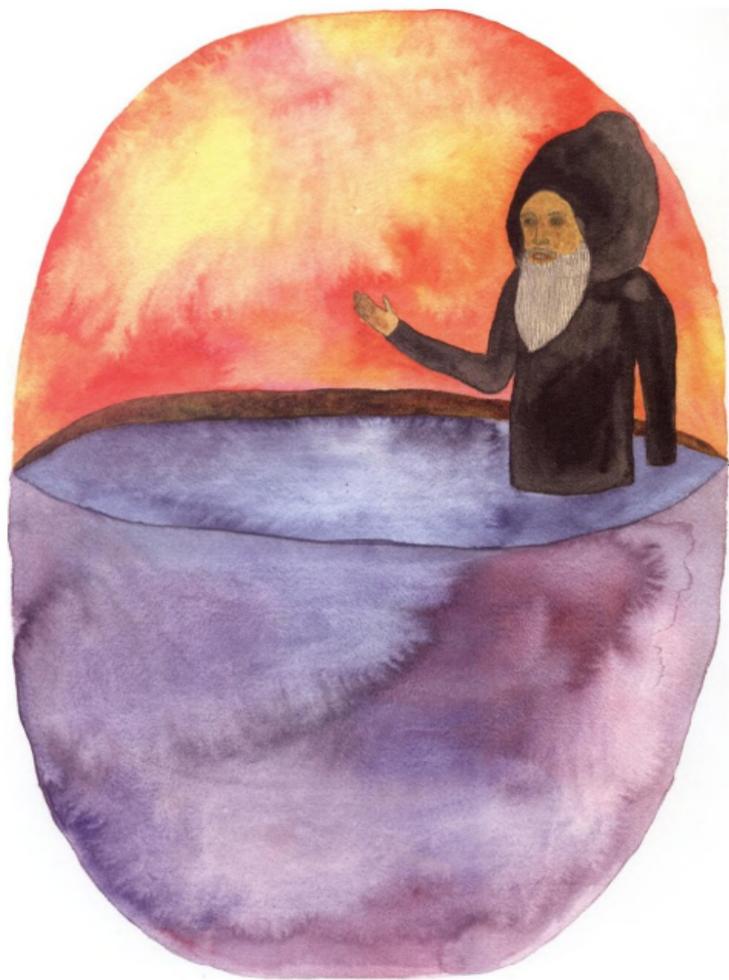












On the Logic of the Hammer

Jonathan Coleman

All they found of him was a muddy set of prison clothes, a bar of soap, and an old rock-hammer damn near worn down to the nub. I remember thinking it would take a man six hundred years to tunnel through a wall with it. Old Andy did it in less than twenty.

—Red, *The Shawshank Redemption*

• • •

The hammer is there. Sitting on your workbench. In your drawer. Held high over your head. Made of metal. Made of wood. A fist-sized rock. The heel of your palm.

Hammer there. Hit the nail. Hit the thumb. Hold up our life. Hold up the thumb. Play pianos. Hit home runs. The edges: shave them off. Bottleopening. Get us out of here.

• • •

I write here my thoughts in this essay, but give it to you as a hammer. For how very different the actuality of a hammer appears, compared with that of a thought! How different a process handing over a hammer is from communicating a thought! The hammer passes from one control to another, it is gripped, it undergoes pressure, and thus its density, the disposition of its parts, is locally changed. There is nothing of all this with a thought.¹

I already feel your pressure, reader. Your gripping stare. It simmers in my own writing. How many thoughts have I locally changed for the sake of handing them over? Even for doing so to myself? Only now that I have hammered everything out and in to shape (into the shape of a hammer), can I even pass control. Pass the illusion of control. There are no thoughts in the world, only hammers. A world of walking hammers which smash one another without regret.

¹"Thoughts" by Gottlob Frege, p. 29

But the regret of Gottlob Frege. In 1893 he sets out to prove the truth of arithmetic, a final frontier (all other mathematics were true if arithmetic was). Publishes the *Grundgesetze*. Ten years later, still working, volume two on the printing press and Bertrand Russell, unknown, writes:

F:
If there is a hammer in a village, with a sign upon it reading, "I flatten all hammers who do not flatten themselves," does the hammer flatten itself?
—R

and Frege, hundreds of pages waiting, crushed by a thought unknown and a hammer of doubt, postscripts: "I have just received word from B. Russell that I am wrong. I do not know what to do." Russell's insight is that the rules of arithmetical logic must be able to be applied to themselves. Logic must hammer itself. And Frege, unhinged, absent, cannot think the hammering of Russell, cannot hold it in his hand, cannot face its density nor its disposition. Cannot utilize this insight for anything. Left with a flat life work.

His sometimes faithful student Edmund Husserl realizes, later, "Before I can use something as a hammer, I first have to take it as a hammer." The primary injunction of his phenomenology: to the things themselves!

• • •

I just went and got my hammer. It wasn't in its place, which caused me to think, 'Good, now I can write that down.' Then I saw it. It is an ULTRA. Red handle and silver shaft and head. Warning label reads:

WARNING-PROTECTYOUR EYES-WEARSA FETY GOGGLES

This tool is inte ended only f r drying and pulling common and tinish nails. The facd may chip if struck against any striking tool Hardened nail chisel or any hard object possibly resulting in bodily injury **MADE IN CHINA**

I took my hammer, 'as a hammer,' into the kitchen, and finding nothing to hammer, I returned it to its rightful place. Shadowed at the bottom of my drawer, I go on using it; but in what way? As best I know how, I admit bashfully, I'm not much for tools. And yes, we indeed find that, following Heidegger, "the kind of dealing which is closest to us is as we have shown, not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use." Putting my hammers to use, from this ULTRA to those inescapably deadly, thrown by the Hammer Bros. of Super Mario 2. Manipulative concern: "the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become" (*Being and Time*). Let us take the hammer-Thing then, and find a hammer of the world, a great snake swallowing its tail. For if we can seize and hold it, then perhaps its primordially will emerge.

How big are our hands for this? The holding required by such an endeavor may be metaphorical. Our hands may need to be our minds, for Heidegger, Husserl's seldom-faithful student, notes that "equipment can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example)" (*Being and Time*). He calls hammers 'ready-to-hand.' Ready-to-hand is opposed to present-at-hand, the difference between tools and objects. In his ontology hammers are first for us, first for smacking and keeping down, first tools. The hammer is ready when your arm or eyes call out to it. You look not to its model and materials, but to its cleaving head: 'a real splitter,' you think. Only when it goes missing [blank outline of hammer on workbench wall] does its objecthood 'present' itself. Or, you need a needle and have a hammer: 'this is a hammer! a thing! a not-a-needle!' Typically, everydayness dictates these thoughts into obscurity. Swallows objects into purposes. Hammers always disclose themselves as what they are good for, not what they are.²

Take, then, a first step, a hatchet to Heidegger. Hammer to and axe fro. *The backswing of the hatchet relentlessly performs false work on whatever it meets: chopped wood and flattened air, or the converse, hammered stake and sliced sunbeam.* How do we every day hatchet? A hatchet is not for something. One does not

²"you are good for nothin'"

intransitively hatchet. The hatchet is first present-at-hand, first an object in the world, as hatchet, and only then is it a bludgeon and an edge.

But today I use the hatchet as a tool first. I approach a dealing cut to its own measure. I cut the hammer out of its axe. Open its dullness with a silver backswing. An entire rotation passes briefly, and back, and I have hatcheded: the hatchet as hermaphrodite? Blade and bluntness remain undereaded, and we let the metaphor circle. The hatchet is self-preparing: Could somehow sharpen itself. Same, cut snake bite from back.

At once, the hammer hammers itself, and the world hammers the hammer. To speak of the hatchet's self-production we resorted to tricks of words and imagination, but for the hammer not so. Take the hammer. Raised high it sucks air up towards itself and whooshes down. There is no binary of cut and bang now. Pure force. Impact into the anvil. The hammer hatches itself with each stroke, growing flatter into a kind of pure flatness. A beautiful hammer of the world, ever making itself hammer. Hatchets are confused things, sharpening with dullness, or dulling with sharpness. Engaging in imaginative cycles. We ought to abandon this fraught term for one less problematic. Let us replace the notion of hatchet with that of hammer. Hammer the purity of a self-producing existence. Add a comma, or not.

Hammer the solution to Russell's paradox. Hammer logic applying always and only to its self. In Heidegger a selfish logic. A tool without reference to usefulness. A thought without reference to childhood. For how will your hammer call itself hammer? What signs will it craft? Artifice and arrows pointing back to itself—but if that is the case, they will point nowhere else. A hammer to end good faith. A hammer for striking.

Frege passed an important handle and head to Husserl: the anti-psychologism they share. Opposing themselves to the belief that logic reflects the mind in its workings, in its everydayness. For Frege, this means that somewhere in a fairyland which he calls the Third Reich, there are *values*.³ Husserl, working in agreement, believing in the home and in the family, throws this into his pot of phenomenology. There are values which thinking refers to, and they are really

³In English, it is the Third Realm, mind and world being the other two Realms

somewhere, but actually nowhere. His best student, his blue ribbon, Heidegger, treads along with him into the things themselves. Professes phenomenology. Seems to be successive. Holds up Husserl.

• • •

Now
to these⁴

reorient, please

IAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS HAMMERS

a physical ceiling

... and physical ceilings are the only kinds of ceilings there are so the above words are not a ceiling we are not below a thing, and not outside either

in heaven there are no hammers in space there are no hammers on the moon there are no hammers outside there are no hammers inside there are no hammers in god there are no hammers in realms there are no hammers inside there are no hammers in the papers there are no hammers in pages there are no hammers

the only hammer is in your hand

eins | third reich lies hammer pure

zwei | third reich ideal to hammer

drei | third reich *hammerkrieg*⁵

⁴ Heidegger's conception. He doesn't believe in a Third Realm.

⁵ translate to English as *hammer war*—Heidegger's attack on Husserl's antipsychologism.

I.

Antitheses

1. The Critique of Psychologism

Normative and Theoretical Disciplines*

§11. Logic or theory of science as normative discipline and as technology

From our discussions up to this point logic—in the sense of the theory of science here in question—emerges as a *normative discipline*. Sciences are mental creations which are directed to a certain end, and which are for that reason to be judged in accordance with that end. The same holds of theories, validations and in short of everything that we call a "method." Whether a science is truly a science, or a method a method, depends on whether it accords with the aims that it strives for. Logic seeks to search into what pertains to genuine, valid science as such, what constitutes the Idea of Science, so as to be able to use the latter to measure the empirically given sciences as to their agreement with their Idea, the degree to which they approach it, and where they offend against it. In this logic shows itself to be a normative science, and separates itself off from the comparative mode of treatment which tries to conceive of the sciences, according to their *typical* communities and peculiarities, as concrete cultural products of their era, and to explain them through the relationships which obtain in their time. For it is of the essence of a normative science that it establishes general prop-

ositions in which, with an eye to a normative standard, an Idea or highest goal, certain features are mentioned whose possession guarantees conformity to that standard, or sets forth an indispensable condition of the latter. A normative science also establishes cognate propositions in which the case of non-conformity is considered or the absence of such states of affairs is pronounced. Not as if one had to state in general mode to be cruder to say what an object is to conform to its basic norm; a normative discipline never sets forth universal criteria more than a therapy states universal special criteria are what the theory or method particularly gives us, and what it alone can give us. If it maintains that, having regard to the supreme aim of the sciences and the human mind's actual constitution, and whatever else may be invoked, such and such methods M_1, M_2, \dots arise, it states general propositions of the form: "Every group of mental activities of the sorts AB, \dots which realize the combinatory form M_1 (or M_2, \dots) yield a case of correct method;" or, what amounts to the same: "Every (so-called) methodical procedure of the form M_1 (or M_2, \dots) is a correct one." If one could really formulate all intrinsically possible valid propositions of this and like sort, our normative science would certainly possess a measuring rod for every pretended method, but then also only in the form of special criteria.

Where the basic norm is an end or can be-

*LL I, 70-72, 87-88 (Sections 11 and 16).

[the page punctured]

better phrased

[hammers cannot flatten pages can only flatten themselves against paper can only fall through depth]

I.

Antitheses

1. The Critique of Psychology

Normative and Theoretical Disciplines*

§11. Logic or theory of science as normative discipline and as technology

From our discussions up to this point logic—in the sense of the theory of science here in question—emerges as a *normative discipline*. Sciences are mental creations which are directed to a certain end, and which are for that reason to be judged in accordance with that end. The same holds of theories, validations and in short of everything that we call a "method." Whether a science is truly a science, or a method a method, depends on whether it accords with the aims that it strives for. Logic seeks to search into what pertains to genuine, valid science as such, what constitutes the Idea of Science, so as to be able to use the latter to measure the empirically given sciences as to their agreement with their Idea, the degree to which they approach it, and where they offend against it. In this logic shows itself to be a normative science, and separates itself off from the comparative mode of treatment which tries to conceive of the sciences, according to their *typical* communities and peculiarities, as concrete cultural products of their era, and to explain them through the relationships which obtain in their time. For it is of the essence of a normative science that it establishes general prop-

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Where the basic norm is an end or can be-

**LI*, I, 70-72, 87-88 (Sections 11 and 16).

“ ... takes a lot of pounding a lot of concentration to thin them to purify them to ... ”



hammer banging into more accurately banging into no
bandage no barracks for no backing no breathing

1933, Freiburg, Deutschland.

*Herr Husserl is denied access to the books at the library.
Herr Husserl receives this information in an official order.
Herr Heidegger signs the document.
Herr Husserl is a Jew.*

this,
the hammerkrieg of Heidegger; and Husserl, inertial,
writes an unrelated treatise in the blank space filling the order



Edmund Husserl, 1894. Courtesy of Anna-Maria Husserl.

flat picture
flat paper
flat page
flat Husserl
flat Heidegger
flat thought

everything flat is a hammer

Iowa City

Gertrude Stein didn't make it here.

No one is interested in me here.

There are so many poets here.

They are outnumbered by engineers.

They are outnumbered by these words.

There are no consonants in the word "Iowa."

This was going to be a bad poem, such as:

The City of Iowa City
Is a place without location.

Or:

Iowa,
I bring you my avant-garde tradition,
I bring you my experimental confessions.

But there is no time for writing poetry.

Gertrude Stein never made it here.

The poetry section in the used bookstore is bland and overpriced.

The wind comes off the Iowa river.

My lips crack in the Iowa wind.
Oh God, there are so many people in this world,
So many good-hearted young white people,
healthy young white people.

My Heart to Fear

It's an illness in her, they think, seeing me kneel
in the sidewalked through, to tilt a leaf
I talk the worm (by wary millimeters)
into climbing on; so I can bear him
clear of concrete, back to green.
The eyes of the healthy are on the sun;
and the heels of the healthy are not clean.

It's an illness to notice (in such scenery!)
how the carriage horse is hurt (he's harnessed badly,
bitten by the bit) or turn your western head away
at festivals of bare testosterone, where (having
snatched the calf from his peaceful tit) the grown-ups
terrify him, every whichway, through their hoops
and scorn. For the walls of health are bright
with blood, and the halls of health adorned with horn.

It can't be good, by God, I'm told,
to hate the way we need and name
the holy lowliness of beasts
(the cur your father cursed as
cowardly, the chicken chickenshit).
To man's the glory—others get

the crap and the crop and the coop.
Was Cain our proudest ancestor? Did the son

of a gun keep house with rue? No way!
His play could prey upon the ones
his lusting slew. His kids all grew up
having canines, craving muscle,
eating their foddors and fill. Among his kind,
good health's the blind

capacity to kill.

Spondee

Dope ends
Po needs.
Pen does
Speed on,
On deeps.
See pond.

Respondee

See ponder.
(Deep snore.)
Serene pod,
Seed-prone!
Prose need:
Pensée d'or.

Disheveled Holiness

In the great while under
the monkey-puzzle tree, the mockingbird learns
to rusted gate. He will not go so far. He will not find the words.

But will his throat, not rust, but taking
its time to sound, leave, in tracks of rain, a color
of rust inside you, or make, as if he knew, the air
a means of import?

From the chanting bird, from the word *stronger*—
from the funny tree, the evergreen—

Living fossil,

what has come over you?

*It would puzzle a monkey to climb that. The spiky
points, the injury. Not far from the invention of fire, we must rank
the invention of doubt.*

Who is here, is here. To abide. To be kind.

To be sound in skeptic combat with the stronger
sound of waves—the practiced sound of waves—the practical

thinking there.

Young Lake

Nathaniel Foster

We were high school seniors, not the pioneers. What did we care about drought? Not that our parents ever worked a farm in their lifetimes either, yet when the strip of sky over our canyon filled up and began to pour water over us, they thanked the Lord over dinner for the “precious moisture.” The rain on the roof got heavier with nightfall and put us to sleep as it melted through the last of the snowpack and seeped into the mines. By morning the rail tracks had buckled. They canceled school. We hung out inside all day, playing Hearts and positioning Tupperware under leaks until, at 7:10 PM, when the pines could no longer hold the mountainside in place with their roots, the whole south face slumped and funneled into our canyon, burying the train yard and storage park, but missing our neighborhood by less than a football field. The landslide dammed the already swollen river with a fifty-foot wall of cemented rock and trees. While the fire department worried about the convenience store, the church, and their own damned fire station, we put on fishing waders, stormed back into our homes for photographs, electronics, caged pets, and our girlfriends’ prom dresses. You and me, Jeremiah, we even rescued Carly’s piano by inflating an air mattress beneath it, and together in the dawn we watched from the rising shoreline as our brick chimneys slipped beneath the swirling gray surface like the smokestacks of sinking ships.

They grafted us onto a dying town in the valley where the empty pastures made for cheap land. We lived out of trailers while a Salt Lake-based developer poured asphalt cul-de-sacs and dug basements with near-identical footprints. Carly’s family paid extra for a three-car garage, of course. Your foundation was shaped like mine, only mirrored.

• • •

August, the week the trusses were going up, your dad had kicked you out again, word had it for good this time. You could have camped out on my floor like the old days. I had the space, even in the trailer, but I guess I can’t blame you for pitching your tent on the shores of our old town instead.

After church your mom led Carly and me into an empty classroom while your dad was still shaking hands in the chapel. She asked us to sneak you a couple sacks of groceries and a hundred dollars in twenties. Carly and I would be off to college in a week, and your mom said she trusted us more than your new friends.

"She might as well just buy the OxyContin for him," said Carly as the familiar curves took us up the canyon from the valley.

I took the low road at the fork. "She doesn't want him to starve is all."

After one switchback our old street sloped like a boat ramp into the body of water the valley was now calling Young Lake. The shoreline had receded that summer, and the roadway was covered in a film of sun-bleached moss. The church's white wooden spire pierced the surface fifty yards out.

I pulled up next to the orange Datsun that used to be your dad's. We sat there for a sec staring at it. You'd left its rusted tailgate hanging open, both windows partway down. I put my Jeep into park. Carly was first to pull her door handle.

I carried three plastic grocery sacks in either hand. Carly had put herself in charge of the money. The unsealed envelope stuck out the back pocket of her capris, its corner tapping the skin above her waistline as she hiked in front of me on the shoreline trail.

The old cottonwood you climbed on prom night now buzzed with cicadas. Its yellow leaves cast weak shade on the latrine, picnic table, and fish-gutting station the county had installed when they voted to keep Young Lake. As we passed through the stinging scent of industrial disinfectant, Carly pinched shut her small sharp nose and scrunched her lips into the shape "Ew." She shared your gift for faces.

"Stinks," I said.

We stepped onto the soft dirt of the landslide dam. Clumps of dry grass and scrub oak had grown knee-high, barely tall enough to give shade to the rattlesnakes. Burrs collected on my socks and pricked my ankles. My fingertips had gone purple from the garrote-wire handles of the grocery sacks, and the logo on my inside-out t-shirt kept pasting itself to my back. The river below

gurgled out of a corrugated pipe. Drought had set in again. A garden hose could have put out more water than Young Lake.

We found your tent, flap unzipped, no rain fly, in a stand of pines that had somehow kept their footing during the slide, but now towered at unnatural angles. You'd left the area around the fire pit littered with beer cans and singed fast-food packaging. Carly peeked into your tent. "Jer-bear?"

"Jeremiah!" I yelled.

Jeremiah, my voice replied.

"Wow, hear that? I don't remember there being an echo here."

"Me neither," she said.

"Think it's the lake?" I gazed down from your campsite high on the steep shore, down through fifteen feet of glass-clear water, past the dark, narrow backs of brown trout, down to the rooftops. Yellowish moss clung to the rain gutters and the TV antennae. Three-plus months after the flooding, processions of bubbles still leaked out from under shingles, as though the lake was on the verge of boiling.

I recognized the white brick of your old house and just beyond it, Carly's red rambler. Mine was farther out, across the street and three houses down, right next door to the church.

Carly cupped her hands around her mouth. "Echo!"

Echo.

"Ew, I hate my voice."

"Why? It's hot."

"I sound like a boy."

I shook my head and called your name again, this time summoning my manliest voice.

Jeremiah.

She did the same. "Jer-uh-miah!"

Ruh-miah.

You have to admit, the voice that bounced could have come from a boy. Carly giggled. "See?" she said, her voice getting hoarse. "It's like that because I've been in cheer my whole life."

I told her that's what she gets.

"Do you think he's here and not answering?" she asked. "Because it's us?"

I stared at your truck parked across the lake. "Nah, he's probably off somewhere with Jonesy and those guys."

She wiped her forehead with her wrist. "Let's just leave the food in his tent and go."

"And the money?"

"He owes me more than this," she said, patting her back pocket.

"I say we give him just a little while longer." I set down the sacks, cracked my knuckles, and then, watching her face, I unbuckled my belt.

Her eyebrows rose into arches. "What the crap are you doing?"

"Cooling off," I said through the fabric of my T-shirt as I peeled it from my shoulders. I pried pants, socks, and shoes past my heels in a single clump, nearly tipping over. Down to my boxers, I stepped barefoot into the cold muck at the lake's edge and dove in at a shallow angle. After the noise of the plunge, I felt the tightening chill of the water. It left a stale, almost soapy taste on my tongue. Carly was hardly smiling when I surfaced and motioned for her to join me.

She folded her arms. "I don't have a swimsuit."

I stood up in the shallows, trusting the lone button on my fly to do its job. "It's not like I do."

"It's different for boys," she said.

I whipped water off my hair at her.

She retreated uphill, out of my range. "If it were nighttime, maybe."

"Dude, Carly, nobody ever comes here."

"What about Jer?" she said.

You want Carly, you can't try too hard. I shrugged, fell backwards, and let the water catch me. I pushed off and glided on my back, squinting up at the white, yet cloudless sky until the church's graying spire drove itself down my field of vision like an ax.

"Hey, Matt!"

Matt, Carly's voice echoed.

"I dare you to dive down and touch your old house!"

Rolled house.

"Promise you'll get in if I do?"

"Maybe!"

I dove. My legs kicked the air for a second when, no lie, the echo of Carly's *maybe* resounded inside the lake.

■ ■ ■

I expelled a good half of my air, my tether to the surface weakening as the bubbles slithered off my chest. I kicked and pulled myself deeper until I got hold of the steep rooftop and rolled upright. My eardrums warped under the pressure of water above.

I reached through the moss and grabbed the TV antenna by its stem, thinking I could bring it up to Carly as proof. Two good yanks and I uprooted it from the soggy plywood, but its cable ran deep into the house. My lungs screamed that any second they would take their chances with water. I pinched the fastener at the base of the antenna and tried to unscrew it. A flake of rust sliced open the side of my knuckle. Blood swirled off my fingertip like smoke off a blown-out candle. I listened for pain, but the cut gave me none. My lungs too had somehow quieted down.

We used to climb up here with Carly for sunsets. I stood full-height and gazed westward up the street. Aluminum siding flaked off the tool shed next door. Moss had replaced the leaves on the front-yard trees. Mailboxes half buried in silt marked the corners of sidewalks and driveways. The sound of a faraway lawnmower reverberated in the water. A baby cried. Something glass shattered. A piano student practiced scales.

Voices swam all around me.

An elderly woman: *I always vote Democrat.*

A father, maybe mine: *Turn off the TV, kids; your mother's made chili.*

A father, definitely mine: *We have a curfew in this family for a reason, young man.*

Then your voice, Jeremiah, years before it dropped: *Count for me. I bet I make it home in under twenty this time. Remember, be loud.* We both knew this nightly routine had nothing to do with time-trialing. You were afraid of the shadowy yards between your house and mine until you were twelve.

One ... two ... three ... four, my own kiddy voice counted from the porch.
Five ... six ... seven—

A burst of static.

Matt, you said, your voice grown up now. Dude, Matt, wake up.

I actually brought my fingers to my eyelids and pried them apart like pistachio shells (my method since childhood of snapping myself out of a nightmare), but I failed to find myself in a dark, dry bed. I tried to talk, but my words fluttered upward and popped without sound on the surface.

I've been thinking about Carly, you went on. She's the one. You'd been professing your love for her (to everyone but her) since the fifth grade when you dumped her then pantsed her on the four-square court. Hey, wake up. This is a big deal. I know what I'm gonna do finally. I'm gonna take her to prom.

My voice rose groggily from my flooded upstairs bedroom. *Prom? You for real?*

Why the hell not?

Not really your scene is all.

That's the whole point. Shit.

Carly told me how she found you in her window well. All jacked up.

Dude, I'm done with all that. I've already told her sorry and shit. And I've already started paying her back from before.

Okay, okay ... but how do you know one of her football players hasn't already asked her?

Find out for me, will you?

Sure, man. As soon as I'm up.

Your voice, even coarser now, spiraled around me: *Remember?*

I nodded, hoping your voice had eyes.

Thunder rumbled in the far corner of the lake. Raindrops began to splatter against the roof. Then I heard myself again, again from my bedroom below: *Jeremiah told me this morning that he's back on the Word of Wisdom wagon.*

Carly, in bed beside me: He tells me that almost every day.

He wants to ask you to prom.

Uh-oh, I thought we ... What should I tell him?

Tell him yes if it'll keep him clean.

Like it really will.

It might.

For a month maybe.

Isn't that worth it then? He might actually graduate.

Fine ... but only if you take Debbie and we double.

Her? No way.

Yes way. I'll go with Jer, but I still want to be there with you.

• • •

After the flood they salvaged from the same way they did everything else: they moved it to the hick town in the valley. Nets full of blue and gold balloons loomed in the rafters, the DJ's woofers were blown, and by ten o'clock the gymnasium of our rivals reeked worse than it had on the third day of basketball camp. You, me, and Carly bailed halfway through "Lady in Red." Out in the fresh air you said, *Debbie not coming then?*

Nab, I said. *She's too busy dancing with her ride home.*

I kept you and Carly in my headlights the whole way here, your heads silhouetted beneath the brake light of your dad's Datsun. She wore her seatbelt. You didn't. Your heads tilted left and right, left and right with the curves of the canyon, always keeping the same distance, like the road and the river.

We parked side by side. Closer, I got Carly's door. You spread your homemade, denim-and-duct-tape tuxedo jacket beneath her as she perched herself on your hood. She gathered the tulle of her hot pink gown between her knees. Her spiked heels wobbled on the rusted front bumper.

Your hand on my back, you guided me out of her earshot. *How long do I have to wait for you to take off?*

I scooped up a handful of roadside gravel. *First one to hit the steeple?*

Carly cheered us both on as we chucked rocks at the last dry remnant of our neighborhood. When my fourth or fifth rock struck wood, Carly had a high five waiting for me. You didn't see, but I slipped my pinky between her wrist and your idea of a corsage: a hemp bracelet with beaded flowers. She still wears it, you know.

You must have thrown ten or twelve rocks before you swore and lobbed a

whole handful. Ten splashes right in its vicinity and still no clack. Carly giggled. You turned to us, and with an open-mouthed expression crafted just for her, you revved her laughter into the red. She rocked back against the windshield, snorting, even croaking for air. Her real laugh, her big secret. I can only remember earning it once without your help (Snow day, eighth grade: I tore right through her sagging trampoline). You, though ... You could always squeeze it out of her like orange juice.

Prom night by the lake, and Carly and I had front row seats at the Jeremiah show. We watched you shove a stone into your pocket, get a running start, kick off the trunk of a drowning cottonwood tree, and pull yourself up onto its lowest limb. You shuffled out to its end, shaking leaves onto the water. Your sock-stuffed wingtips landed on the asphalt, ten feet apart. *Cowabunga!* you yelled, but the limb cracked, and you crashed with it into the lake. Carly quit laughing for several seconds until you surfaced singing soprano in the meltwater. Then, instead of swimming to land like a normal person, you lunged freestyle towards the spire, sending ripples across the reflected night sky as you kicked.

You fished the stone out of your pocket and nailed your target point blank. Carly clapped for you while I whispered, my grin against her ear: *Who's the perfume for?* You posed on the steeple trumpeting notes like Angel Moroni. Carly whistled. We snuck a kiss as you dove. You stayed under long enough for the stars to reorganize themselves on the surface.

We're going to hell, she said, and I kissed her guilty little smile. You must have come up for air just in time to see us, her leg still maybe draped across my lap.

Water dripped from your prematurely thin hair. *Off.*

We obeyed. *Uh ...*

You got in your truck and slammed the door.

Dude.

Your engine roared. Your headlights blinded us. Your gearbox whined as you drove distance between yourself and us in reverse.

Well, crap.

She said, *Now what?*

We missed you everywhere: next to us on the flowered sofa in the foyer of

our new church, in the locker-plated halls of our new school, and at graduation. We heard you and Jonesy and those guys took off to Vegas instead. Good decision. The senior all-nighter was way lame.

You probably heard Carly and I got accepted to the same college, on the same day, with the same half-tuition scholarship. Just so you know, man, as far as that whole thing goes ... God must have answered our parents' prayers because Carly and I never wound up going as far with each other as at first we feared we would.

• • •

You didn't raise your voice, but it filled the water nonetheless. *Déjà vu, friend. Look who's here with you.*

Carly was treading water above me, her legs bare. I spit out the last of my worthless air and pushed off the rooftop. I came up beside her, coughing and gasping until the blackness had drained from my vision.

"You stayed down forever," said Carly.

I hooked my arm around her waist and dragged her shoreward. "Keep your head above water."

"Why? What's wrong? Stop it. Let go of me. Why are you freaking out?"

"Jeremiah. He's down there."

• • •

I returned to Young Lake the next Saturday in my Sunday shoes and slacks, the memory of your casket an ache in my elbow. I undid my tie and left it on the passenger seat. As I crossed the landslide dam to your old campsite, I twisted dead branches loose from the dirt. Someone, most likely your dad, had taken down the tent and picked up some of the garbage, but the fire pit was still around. I built a log cabin, the kind we mastered in scouts, within the circle of stones. The flame from my match climbed up the kindling, smoking and crackling as it consumed patches of red needles. I knelt over it and blew air across it until the real fuel got going.

A sudden breeze roughed up the water. The fire's reflection stretched from shore to shore. I uncapped a permanent marker and scribbled *I'm sorry* across the

smoother face of a rock. The lake received it with a plunk. I picked up another rock. And then another. I wrote on every good-sized rock within reach and hurled them one at a time into the lake.

Carly knew where to find me. The lone headlight of her scooter slowed to a stop on the far shore and switched off. I stared hard into the flames, their heat beating against my face as the sound of her footsteps approached from behind. "He was my best friend," I said without getting up to hug her.

"Mine too."

"Here to have a word?"

"I'm here to swim." She unzipped her skirt and let it fall. "Coming?" she asked as she stepped out of the fabric halo.

I shook my head. "Jer wouldn't want me there."

She begged me then to please get over this. They found you in Jonesy's basement, she reminded me. Not in the lake.

"I'll keep the fire going," I said, and as she turned from me and waded in alone, a shimmer, a green glow, possibly the reflection of the rising moon, spread across the surface of Young Lake. Pulsing like a heart, it engulfed her silhouette as she dove.

North Fork

When he comes to me, it is with milk on his hands. We erect greenhouses in seconds. We tear them down and murder each other. He is the source of all food. Down his throat: eighty acres of turned earth.

Orient. Where the land splits to yellow light for men with money, we keep north into gray, to where his mother cannot sleep, to where the room with the pine floor gives bone-colored spit to the air. All night he walks the perimeter and talks with his fingers, making lists. His mouth is wet plant life and his tongue is the tongue of a boy. It lashes; it swallows rock and forgets language. It drips prophecy.

Like a maniac he says nothing, then, everything at once. *We are running out of food* he says. And in that moment, I want everything he has ever touched inside me. Watching him fit glass I want to kiss lead. I want to lick the nicks on his hands filled in with oil.

In his shadow I raise orchids that I shear for wool.

As trickery, we trade bodies. We make love as each other, and then I prowls the city looking for women. I like the ones with the lean frames. The ones with legs that look like spiders.

I cover my body in pollen. With the nail of my finger I carve symbols in the yellow felt. *We are running out of water*, they say. *I am a woman who likes to be hot, hot under sun, hot under water.*

When we drive to the end, we go out onto the shoreline. Between sand and water: a turret from an unseen fort. He heaves me into it. I fall fifty years. Two hundred years. For a century I fall through rituals I cannot explain.

The fields are empty. Everyone waits for holes in the soil and holes in the sky. His father wanders the land all night with headaches, begging ground to take them back.

I sit in lamplight and swat imaginary mosquitoes. I tap my nail to an imaginary beat on the arm of an imaginary chair. I ignore letters and give up my name.

Everything I give back to the postman. Everything must be returned.

January, Reading Lu Yu

Now at dusk
 crows surge through pines
clamor and clockwise circle
seeking roosting trees
 the last ones

straight flying toward the chaos
and night
 frames the east in bare trees
last hook of light then

the settling dark and
 Milky Way
steam rising from the lake
warm January without
 snow, a wind from the south
memory loose, floating without

anchor, no harbor
 great white star-river, Lu Yu wrote,
Silver, sky pale blue

and then *suddenly before me*,
 Jade Frontier—
at seventy-seven, at the northwestern border of China—
cold solace
 of stars
move fast away, the path there harder
the last crows fly unseen
 into the wind's throat.

in Alexandria, looking
across the belly of the Mediterranean, when

nothing would console, and ourselves in another
century, the oncoming of snow, the air silvering into ribbons
that end

in nothing but
brief radiance, the light that falls beginning in morning,
through the day, the chance
it would be endless,
the end invisible in its radiance.

Sarah's Dream

I've dreamt it again.

Say what you have seen.

I'm ashamed to tell anyone.

*Not even an angel of God? Between us
what can be hidden?*

No woman my age should have to mother a son.

And so you dreamed ...

some cedar, a fire.

"If you love me," I say to my husband,
"go lay the child on the altar."

And he obeys?

Flood, famine, I'm damned to rise out of myself—
enthralled with my power.

*Then you don't know it's my say-so?
The knife, thicket, twine, child, man.*

How what who cries when.

I dream too by morning I am the ram.

A Night on the Train

Titos Patrikios

While on the plane to Lesbos, reading the poems of the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski and about all of his displacements, strangely enough I remembered a journey by train from Catanzaro to Naples. It was many years ago, in the summer of 1961, when I went from Paris to that distant town in Calabria (where perhaps no Greek had set foot ever since the Byzantines founded it and named it “Katantherion”) just to see a couple, some dearly beloved friends. The distance was great and the trains at that time didn’t travel that fast, especially the cheap ones. However, I got the chance to stop over and see Milan, Rome, and Naples for the first time.

I was on the night train so as to save time by arriving in Naples in the early morning. All the cars were full and I found only one seat in one compartment, where, on one side, two *carabinieri* were sitting with a prisoner in handcuffs between them; across from them was a young man, near the window, and next to him sat an older man. I sat next to the elderly one who, though he was talking to the *carabinieri*, turned immediately to me. He was telling me, as far as I could understand, that the young man was his son and he was taking him to Naples to get him a job, that it was very hard to get a job, but that he knew many people who could help him. Then he set out explaining that the prisoner had committed, the *carabinieri* told him, two murders, but he was sure he had committed more and the police would soon find that out. After that bit of incessant babbling, he bent sideways and promptly fell asleep.

As the night moved on, the only one still awake with me was the prisoner. He was a young man, around twenty-five, with a thin moustache—he looked nice enough. When I started smoking my second cigarette, he asked me for one too. His hands were gripped tightly in the handcuffs and he couldn’t light it, so I lit it for him and gave it to him. He thanked me and then sank back into silence. From then on, throughout the journey, I would light two cigarettes, then silence

again. I didn't know whether I should take pity on him, someone who had committed so many murders, but I was sorry for him. Mainly I could feel the grip of the handcuffs, as just a few years before I had felt that grip on my own hands. Later I'd blame myself for such "cheap sentimentalism." Anyway, I moved my hands to check that they were free, but I was doing that behind my back, since I didn't want the prisoner, who was watching me all the time, to see that and take me for a lunatic. Only when I was sure he had closed his eyes for a while did I put my hands on my knees and took pleasure in looking at them, moving like the lizards of Calabria which I had seen sliding and disappearing under the stones; or as they moved when I studied piano as a boy.

They say: "See Naples and then die." But as it was becoming light and we were approaching the terminal, it was as if I was reborn in that light coming from the sea, which penetrated the train, flooded the hills. We arrived at six in the morning; the old man greeted us and left hastily with his son. I was the last one there, along with the *carabinieri* and the prisoner. When we disembarked into the huge station square, the prisoner bid me farewell with "Grazie, arriverla," and walked on, still handcuffed, between the two *carabinieri*. I was left alone, standing before that huge square, which was completely empty, not knowing where to go next. But feeling immense pleasure that I could go wherever I wished.

Two Travellers to a River

I see love five meters away. Sitting on a bench at the gate of those who travel to unimprovised destinations. The airport is crowded. The French young man and the Japanese young woman are strangers in the crowd. Wrapped up, it seemed to me, in one blue cloud. Swapping sleepiness without turning to what's around them. She looks at him, when he lays his head on her shoulder, with a silken look, careful not to pierce him. As if she doesn't want him to see her see him, as if they were at the beginning of love, embarrassed to let him know how much she'll love him. Then they alternate the watch ... He looks at her when she places her head on his shoulder, the look of one who's vigilant over an antique fragile crystal. And when the looks meet, diaphanous and longing, she gets up to get a bottle of water. She gives him a drink as if she were breastfeeding him, he gives her a drink as if he were kissing her. I fold the novel I was reading for the journey, to see love from a distance. A tremor goes through me and revives me with a wave of a secret fragrance that blew my way from a Japanese woman and a Frenchman. Both are as delicate as a gazelle and a doe. He said nothing to her. She said nothing to him. They were satisfied with the interludes of silence in Japanese music. Maybe they are not old enough to speak about their state of vanishing, one into the other. Or maybe she did say something: The river that we will cross after this journey passes by our house. And he said something: The river we will pass after this journey is our house.

The Second Olive Tree

The olive tree neither laughs nor cries. She is the bashful lady of the slopes. With her shadow she covers her leg, and she doesn't take off her leaves in front of a storm. She stands as if sitting, sits as if standing. She lives as sister to a friendly eternity, and as neighbor to a time that aids her to store the luminous oil and forget the names of invaders, except for the Romans, who were her contemporaries and borrowed some of her branches to braid their wreaths. They didn't treat her like a prisoner of war, rather like a revered grandmother whose noble dignity breaks the sword before her. In her ascetic silver green, color shies away from declaration and sight looks beyond description, so she's neither silver nor green. She is the color of peace if peace is in need of a color. No one says to her: You are beautiful. They say: You are gracious and reverent. And she is who she is, the one who trains soldiers to disarm, teaches them modesty and tenderness: "Go back to your homes and light the lanterns with my oil." But those soldiers, those new soldiers surround her with bulldozers and uproot her from the earth's lineage ... they are victors over our grandmother who's now upside down, trunk in the ground, roots in the sky... She neither cried nor screamed. But one of her grandchildren witnessed the execution, threw a stone at a soldier, and martyred himself with her. And when the triumphant soldiers departed, we buried him there: in the deep hole—the grandmother's crib. For some reason, we were certain he would soon become an olive tree ... a thorny, green, olive tree!

“Political” Poetry and the Semantics of Suffering

an interview with Fady Joudah

Poet. Translator. Doctor. Fady Joudah doesn't fit comfortably into any of these categories, though they've been ascribed to him repeatedly since Louise Glück selected his first volume of poetry, The Earth in the Attic, for this year's Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. That's not to say that such classifications are inaccurate, however—only insufficient. In addition to winning the country's most prestigious first-book prize for poetry, Joudah's work on Mahmoud Darwish's The Butterfly's Burden (2007) was recently short-listed for the PEN Poetry-in-Translation Prize, and has won the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, a UK-based award for Arab translation. And on top of this, yes: Fady Joudah is a physician. Since 2001, Joudah has been an active member of Doctors Without Borders, and his experiences providing aid overseas make themselves known not only through the subjects, but also through the forms of The Earth in the Attic. “Pulse,” for instance, a poem in fifteen sections, is a series of fractured narratives that shift from place to place, time to time, and character to character, uniting them through a common narrative instability that mirrors the characters' physical exile. When Fady and I sat down at a crowded Houston café this past May, our conversation similarly jumped from context to context: winning the Yale, providing aid in Zambia and Darfur, post-colonialism, Palestine, the challenges of translating Arabic poetry. Yet it became apparent that these were not really separate contexts for Joudah—poetry, politics, the (sick or healthy) body—these subjects, like the categories typically ascribed to him, transcend their immediate referents, and are for Joudah inextricably linked. What follows is just a small excerpt from our discussion.

Nicole Zaza: Many of your poems contain images concerning the nature of suffering in disparate locations in the world—almost a *collective* suffering. Do you think there is a danger in presenting this undifferentiated suffering?

Fady Joudah: There is a danger in not classifying suffering. Fortunately or unfortunately, World War II created the concept of international law, and now we have an international court. But if one looks at what has happened since World War II, one can argue that very little has ever been done to decrease the numbers

of those who suffer, or to decrease their suffering. And such suffering is always subject to the interests of political powers. In these circumstances, morality is transformed into this mutant that is subject to *ifs* and *buts*. Psychology and psychoanalysis have become a daily occurrence in the households of Western cultures; they have become excuses for everybody to walk around with the banner of victimhood, so that sympathy is granted to everybody. And while that might not be such a bad thing on the individual level—

NZ: Like between us?

FJ: Right. But the concepts of suffering and sympathy have been abused and transformed by politically powerful structures to pass this triage judgment on nations and peoples. So for me it is really not far from the ethnography of colonial Europe in the nineteenth century. Anthropology and Philology were used during that period to explain the subjugation of others. In a sense, psychology has entered this realm now. As anthropology becomes suspect, anthropologists are no longer using the old methods; those are defunct. But psychology has become one of the new tools for that subjugation...

I was in Zambia, for instance, in 2002, serving mostly Angolan and Congolese refugees. And you hear the people's suffering, their stories, or you witness it there. But then you start wondering, on what basis does one say that this suffering—which is the result of civil war—is less important than the suffering in Darfur? Is Darfur worse because it bears the title "ethnic cleansing" (if it bears that title)? So it becomes a game of semantics; a game of who bestows what name on what suffering, under the excuse that this is what necessitates international intervention. People will say the reason we need those titles is because we have to determine the need for such intervention. But if you look back at all those episodes—Serbia, Kosovo, East Timor, Uganda, Rwanda—for example, since the spill-over of the genocide in Rwanda into East Congo, two to four *million* people have died. It makes you realize no substantial intervention has occurred. So the theory that classifies immense suffering under these sub-headings on the basis of international law, as a step toward granting intervention, is defunct.

For me, it was a major impetus to see writing poetry from that standpoint. Somehow my complicity is part and parcel of this. I just wanted to aesthetically tackle that moral question: how is the “I” or the “you”—the speaker in the poem—complicit or ... not? These vague gray zones. How does one present “the self” when it faces a larger context that is about “the other”? The *they*, the *them*? Obviously this is already an unusual discussion to have with a poet.

NZ: Why?

FJ: I mean it’s unusual, though not unheard of. But this is not what happens in literary magazines when poets are interviewed. Needless to say that makes me uncomfortable.

NZ: It makes you uncomfortable in the sense that you are the one who has to fly this flag, or in the sense that there is no witnessing or acknowledging on the parts of other poets?

FJ: No. Either point you mentioned would be a pretentious morality on my part. It’s uncomfortable for me because I think it really splits camps in the art community. I was just writing poems from a life I lived, though I am also aware that to a large extent there is some interest in the poems I wrote because of the subject matter. But this is really an area in which art has always felt very uncomfortable ... there is this strange paranoia of what is political and what is moral in poetry.

NZ: In her introduction to *The Earth in the Attic*, Louise Glück talks about the state of exile as a “metaphor for current psychic reality.” She says you are “never an artist who writes to advance or manifest conviction.” I wonder if you think that is accurate?

FJ: I think so. You know, Daisy Fried asked me recently about being a Palestinian. And I told her that being Palestinian is not a question for me; it is a question for others. I think it’s the same sort of thing. What Louise says is right. I don’t have this illusion that I am going to achieve some sort of fame or influence or

importance to the point where I can shift the public sphere and start educating people about Doctors Without Borders or the Palestinian tragedy or this or that. There are other people who do plenty of that in more appropriate settings. I can participate in those settings, but *away* from art. When I write, I am ultimately governed by the adventure of the aesthetics, and not necessarily the message of the poem. And I think that goes for all poets—I hope. But it is interesting that the references, or the parallels that sometimes play themselves off, might bother some. I don't know what will bother and what won't, but I can't think about that when I am writing.

NZ: What do you mean by “bother”?

FJ: Oh, that people might assume I am trying to draw sympathy for Palestinians or draw sympathy for Arabs or for Muslims. You know, these kinds of questions: “The religious poetry—are your poems religious?” Louise did mention that there is a sort of religious imminence or urgency [in my poetry]. But this aspect isn't viewed in my work in the same sense that people would define it in the English poetic canon; people don't view the English canon as religious because G.M. Hopkins exists, or John Donne, or T.S. Eliot for that matter. Or Auden.... It's very interesting to see where some people would have to ask me or other Arab-Americans that question. It's not an accusatory question; it's almost a friendly way of saying, “Explain to others who might misunderstand your poem about the prophet from which the book gets its title, ‘Along Came a Spider.’” I am not sure these kinds of questions are offered in the same way to Franz Wright—or, say, to Charles Simic....

Maybe I feel defensive because when you turn on the television or the radio, you hear something about Arabs or Muslims *every day*. And half of it is just BS; just some reductive, blasé racism. You don't hear that about Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism—and it's a good thing that you don't hear it. So when I get asked that question about the Arab-American poet, what I hear is the echo of the larger culture. It's a bit disappointing to think that there is such a late start in questioning how to address “the Arab” in art, or the Arab-American.... Take the Arab poets who have been translated into English, for instance—there aren't many of them.

NZ: But from my knowledge of Arabic, which is limited, Arabic uses the word *God* more than English does. Not with the weight that people assign to it, but even in very casual conversation you will hear *God* used as a reference point. So I wonder, as a translator, how do you approach that, to traverse that distance and convert the meaning?

FJ: First of all, respectfully, I fully disagree. If you record a conversation between you and Jane Doe, just think of how many times you might use *God* as in "Oh my God!" or this or that. You will see that *God* comes up plenty. I think these are very dangerous ways of addressing identification with another culture or language. ... When I translate Darwish or other poets, the word *God* doesn't make me balk. I don't have to worry about traversing any distance. Of course, people in the Middle East don't all have access to DVD players and movie theaters ... but things need to have their own cultural references without being placed, once again, into those anthropologic, psychologic, or ethnographic classifications. It's as if we feel we can speak from a standpoint of advancement: we are here; we are a few steps ahead. But that's one of the problems: we don't stop to question that this is the starting point from which much of our discourse takes place. We have to compare others to our state of ahead-ness. And that's why, in my opinion, this notion of *God* comes up. For instance, is there nothing in Darwish's poetry to discuss other than how many times the word *God* recurs? Why is that even brought up? Again, it's not a question for me; it's a question others ask. It's not a question for me as a translator, as a person, as a poet, as an American, as a Palestinian.

Another similar thread is all the talk about Arabic poetry being written in the equivalent of Shakespearean English (presumably a reference to the *Quran's* influence on Arabic language). In brief, this is totally false, but it serves several connotations of the culture addressed, doesn't it?

NZ: When I approached this interview, I really thought about how difficult it must be for you; that every time you sit down to talk you always have to be the Palestinian poet, or the Arab poet.

FJ: I would love to answer that question.

NZ: But isn't that the same question everyone else is asking?

FJ: Right. But it is not usually asked in that sense. First of all, there are so many wonderful first and second books of poetry and they don't all get their due. So I have to wonder if I am getting this attention because of the Palestinian-American—

NZ: Novelty?

FJ: Yes. Or to put it in a more provocative way: there are dead Iraqis now. So Americans are responsible for the death of Iraqis, in one way or another. We are finally *directly* involved in the blood of Arabs. So now, "how interesting that an Arab is an American poet!" I think that there is a lot of aesthetic merit to the work I do, although I don't think I am breaking any poetic ground. And I hope that I have such a long chance ahead of me to write, and that I might do something with the discovery of literature and language. However, I already know that there is a camp out there of editors and critics who won't look at my poems—not because I am an Arab, but because these are "political poems." Although for me they are not political.

Look at Adrienne Rich; she's an icon in American poetry. But in a sense she is marginalized, when you compare her to other icons. She writes what others consider "political poetry." ... [But] time has stood by her side. Another wonderful example is George Oppen, who is being "rediscovered" now, I suppose, because we are in a war. Even John Ashbery! Okay, he strays away from meaning, but if you look at his writing it is unbelievable how many "political" or how many socially engaged poems he has written. But because people can't draw a distinct *conclusion* from them, he is blessed....

I have to say this: I find it unfortunate that, in part, the poetry community is so consumed with its own morality, which is really pretentious. Because just like medicine, just like being a doctor, the poet is a part of an establishment. And that establishment has its own hierarchies, its own cronyism. We are all a part of it. I don't think I am some clean character....

All I know is that inevitably, when I sit down and write poetry, I write from

the world in which I live. I'm trying after a certain lyrical aesthetic. Yes, it's true that this world in which I live largely defines me as a Palestinian, which is basically this conundrum of a victim (if even the concept of a *victim* is acknowledged). But I grew up an American, and saw my parents' entire narrative completely marginalized and de-humanized. In part, my poems are a response to all such dehumanized narratives, of people who are made refugees or displaced, or of those who are stateless in the world.... In the end, though, I refuse to play the game of classifying suffering, because for me the classification of suffering mostly enables further dehumanization of victims.

NZ: Suffering keeps coming up. I am just wondering about the aesthetics of suffering?

FJ: They are problematic, aren't they?... One of the primary modes of poetry is the elegy. So I think that is perhaps one of the more primal ways of addressing suffering through poetry. I am not so sure if what I wrote is an elegy or not.

There is a fascinating transformation in Darwish's work over the last ten years. He was always trying to transform the elegy into a eulogy for life, and he finally cracked it. The elegy celebrates life through an attempted healing of the suffering that has occurred, suffering whose consequences continue to reside in us. He found a way to celebrate life, to turn that into a eulogy—in his long poem, "Mural," for instance, or even poems in *The Butterfly's Burden*. Even though several reviews have been concerned with *State of Siege*—Darwish's lyrical memoir entries addressing the siege in Ramallah and the Second Intifada—what most interested him as a poet, and what most interests me as a poet and a translator, is in the poem, "In the Lust of Cadence," from *Don't Apologize for What You've Done*. He writes these 47 short lyrics that are basically the expression of his exalted self after seeing this grim destruction. After the *State of Siege*, all he wanted to do was sing. For me, that is a eulogy.

I think one should ask, as a poet, what does it mean to write poetry in an empire? If this question makes people uncomfortable, that's unfortunate. But we do write poetry in an empire, or at least in an incredibly powerful system.

This is not just about Bush and Iraq, as if somehow we had been this docile country until now. There are poets who have been writing and addressing these issues for decades, whether it's Walcott or Forché, or even Ashbery or Oppen. It's been there. Adrienne Rich. Marilyn Hacker. There are so many.... But I don't spend all my time studying poetry. I have to go be a doctor. So really I'm just a freelance observer.

NZ: Do you ever feel like there's a sense of contradiction in your life as a writer and your life as a doctor?

FJ: Sure. I might be a better person as a writer sometimes than I am as a doctor. I don't know. Sometimes it's the other way around. I do live a very comfortable life as a doctor. I get paid well. You could argue that it's a bit false to sit there and be humanistic about others' suffering while I'm cashing in the fat paycheck. These kinds of paradoxes. That's why, in the end, it's not about waking up in the morning and feeling that I'm living off the backs of others, so much as it's about asking myself a simple common-decency question.... I didn't do *Doctors Without Borders* to save the world. I just did it as a simple act to take myself away from myself in my daily living, and into another aspect of myself. Even if that aspect of myself has a lot to do with the fact that 90% of my family members are refugees or displaced people—even my parents.

NZ: In your poems, there are moments of intense isolation. In "The Way Back," for example, with this image of a turtle who is withdrawing away from a child ... there's almost a sense of paralysis, a sense of wanting and feeling distant, in many of these poems. And that's something I'm trying to figure out—in myself, in my own work—and I've seen it in your work. I see this book as a work of activism, addressing the isolation of personal displacement, even if you do say that the politics are not the main thread of that effort.

FJ: Well, *propaganda* is not the main thread of the effort. What reflects your question most immediately for me is perhaps in my poem, "The Humanitarian" towards the end of the sequence poem, *Pulse*; those first lines:

He came, the humanitarian man, and
In the solitude of giving, he befriended
A stray dog as mirror.

... I don't exclude myself from the problematics of addressing suffering. If I am part of this puzzle of classifying suffering, then I must realize that I have to be very careful not to play with pity, where I become falsely certain of what others' suffering is made of. I did try to maintain what Louise terms "scientific proofs" of language, of image presentation—psychological portraits where the subject seems objectified without being usurped or dispossessed of its own sovereignty to tell its narrative; to represent the suffering of others under the illusion of objectivity, while maintaining clarity in regards to my presence as an outsider; a tightrope act of proof and its antithesis. I had to reflect the narcissism of the speaker and also the reader, in order to guard against the simple pity of the other, the sensationalization of suffering, which has become integrated into our culture, media, and politics; and how good we are because we are able to observe these things with compassion, so to speak.

There's this poem in Merwin's *The Lice*—I'm sure he's sick of having that book referenced, but anyway: it's toward the end of the book, a poem called "Fly." It's about a fat pigeon that doesn't fly and just eats, and [the speaker] keeps saying, "Fly, Fly!" The wonderful thing about that poem is how [Merwin] characterizes his complicity in the violence of this world, as a conclusion to a "political" book, so to speak. There are unequivocal moments in that book that say, "I know that there is a parody and an absurdity and a pitfall in all of this, where I'm sitting here in my comfortable position, still writing 'the other.'" I think that moments like these are what make the work survive.

Crying Like a Fire in the Sun: A Conversation with Barry Hannah

Barry Hannah is the author of eleven books, among them the short story collection *Airships*, considered a modern classic. His novels and short story collections have been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the American Book Award, and have received the William Faulkner Prize. Hannah has been honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. An excerpt from his forthcoming novel, *Sick Soldier at Your Door*, can be found on page 11 of this issue.

Andrew Brininstool's work has received the 2007 Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award from Mid-American Review, the Editors' Prize from New Ohio Review, Runner-Up notation from the Playboy College Fiction Contest, and a nomination for Best New American Voices 2010. He lives in Dallas, Texas and is at work on a novel.

This interview took place in Oxford, Mississippi the day before Ole Miss' homecoming game. The Square had been quiet for much of the morning but by early afternoon the sidewalks filled and there was the steady noise of early ceremony. Our original venue changed because of the clamor; the conversation transpired in three locations: Ajax Diner, Mr. Hannah's office, and finally his backyard, where he practices bow fishing and enjoys the company of his six dogs. Our discussion varied widely, from Samuel Beckett to Tejano music to whether or not adding cheese to a Po' Boy sandwich is ever a bright idea. The interview has been only lightly revised with the hope of keeping the tone as informal as the meeting itself. Mr. Hannah is interested in good conversation. "I've done [interviews] so long now," he said at one point in the afternoon. "I'm sixty-five. I've been over the ground of my work and life too much, and this 'me-ism' makes me feel awkward."

Andrew Brininstool: We've been talking a good deal about music today. It plays a major role in much of your work—short stories, novels, even essays. What can a writer learn from music?

Barry Hannah: A writer can learn that there is a kind of grace, a measure to how you say things. Somebody said that the best writing was idealized conversation, and I like that. Mark Twain is a favorite of mine because he just seems to start talking. That's the ideal to me, and music is like that, too. You just start strumming and then you find the words. Bob Dylan, they say, used to cut out pictures of people from magazines and spread them all over the floor and sit down and look at the pictures and strum his guitar and write his songs by looking at the pictures.

AB: Wow. I didn't know that.

BH: Yeah. Is that [the recorder]? Wow, that's tiny.

AB: I know. I hope it works.

BH: That's state-of-the-art.

AB: The more advanced these things become, the more apt they are to screw up. I wish they had one of those reel-to-reel recorders; those seem reliable. Anyway, I hope this one works. I'm guessing reading and writing is an auditory experience for you.

BH: Yeah, it is. It's an auditory experience; it has much to do with the voice and cadence, and with melody. I'm not a poet but I want to say as much as possible in a short space and have a rhythm I feel through the story or the book. No, Nell, Nell [one of Mr. Hannah's dogs]. That's the one that went to Texas with me. She's been with me to San Marcos. She saw Willie [Nelson] and all the good places we went to. Her name is Nell. She's my bedmate and she puts her head on my pillow. [Laughs.] I love them to death, and our backyard is filled with the graves of our little friends that are dearly departed. I shoot the bow out there just for fun. It feels good to be out there with their spirits because it just kills you when they die, as you well know. It kills you. We just lost one. There was a huge hole in me. His name was Jack, and he was killed right in front of the house by

some woman coming back from horseback riding and speeding, no doubt. You can't kill a dog going twenty like you're supposed to.

AB: Right.

BH: You cannot do it. All night he fought for his life. He was a little greyhound terrier.

AB: I've never seen that type of mix, but he sounds pretty.

BH: He was beautiful. Boy, he could run. That was what he was doing—he was just running in his own yard. In my novel and a couple of articles I say, you know, I am a follower of Christ; I cannot shoot anybody, but I can damn well shoot a car [laughs]. And I'd love to blow out her tires and windshield. It was a big Suburban. It would just sell more copies of books, even if I went to jail. I have nothing really left to lose. Temporary insanity. Except that it'd be premeditated [laughs]. I was in Knoxville, Tennessee and Susan called me on the phone. God. It was like hearing your brother died. That poor little dog. We'll get off this subject, but they give you so much in their short lives. Spiritually and emotionally, and we adore that. They've been wonderful for me in bad health.

AB: You said in another interview with Daniel Williams that you learn more from your dog Nell than you do by reading interviews—that there's more to learn from the animal world than from reading these kinds of things.

BH: Oh, sure. When I was a young writer I got a great deal out of interviews with the greats: Faulkner and Hemingway and O'Connor. They're probably good for young people, young writers like you. But I really get tired of talking about myself, frankly. I've done it so long now. I'm sixty-five ... the subject of 'me' is really redundant. I try to be fresh. I just bought a new bow this summer, just to try something I hadn't done in a long time and be sort of good at it. But if I can say something of worth that would help or give comfort to some young writer, so be it.

AB: In one of your essays, “Mr. Brain, He Want a Song,” you say that if an image is intense enough, it always brings a narrative with it.

BH: I’m still a small-town boy, a gawker. A rubbernecking peckerwood [laughs]. My wife and I go to Paris, and I like to just drink café au lait and look at folks—better than the Louvre—and imagine their lives. I get these images, hard, hard, like an artist does. I can’t draw or paint. Very primitive is all I can do.

AB: So it’s the image first and the narrative will come with it.

BH: The narrative will come.

AB: In that way maybe fiction writers need to be part poet? Poets are often interested in image, maybe no narrative at all.

BH: I think it’s the natural way your brain works. The way you dream. Your dreams are intense. William S. Burroughs was right when he said if we didn’t dream, we’d die. That’s our release. The brain needs fun. It needs absurdity and the surreal. It is not space- and time-bound like we are. I think we all work off of images. I don’t think it’s unique with me or musicians or poets.

AB: I want to ask about your health—how you’re feeling. Your last novel, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* was written in the midst of a physically trying time. You were fighting lymphoma and have said that the only thing that kept you going were the steroids.

BH: Right. Prednisone. That’s why I wear long sleeves in weather like this. The medication messed up my arms. It made my skin real brittle—capillaries burst, like you see on old people. They go away, but all of it was caused by prednisone in massive, massive doses. It’s speed. It puts you up. It was the only medicine I had that put me up.

AB: How has the new novel, *Sick Soldier at Your Door*, differed in process?

BH: *Yonder* was much harder to write. Disease really interfered. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't find a story. I couldn't find joy, mainly.

AB: I teach your work in my literature and writing classes. I'll hand out a packet of stories to my students and they invariably say, "This guy had a hell of a good time writing these." There is a lot of joy in your writing. How important is that to the process?

BH: It's absolutely essential. I'm lucky to be doing what I love, and I'll take being broke like I was when I was young. I'll take worrying about the electric bill; I'll take it all because I love what I do at sixty-five as much as I did when I was eighteen. Most people hate their jobs.

AB: But I've heard some writers say they don't necessarily *like* writing, not at certain points, anyway. Sometimes they fight through it to get the book out, to get paid.

BH: The process can be drudgery. I don't understand why they write, though. Anyway, I tend to be a dash-man. That's why I like the novella as in *Bats Out of Hell*. There are several near-novellas in that collection. Incidentally, I have no interest in literary games or metafiction—any of that conscious messing around with form. I love the easy voice, the clash through what the mind gives you. When I'm any good, I'm usually rapid. The work rushes on without urging in a zone of sudden joyful combinations.

AB: So that you are not interested necessarily in experimentation per se.

BH: If it doesn't come from the gut, the heart, then it's not real experimentation. Occasionally I'll see an intellectual quickie that's good, but mainly it's because the writer had to do it that way.

AB: Would you mind speaking a little more about the new novel? Max Raymond, from *Yonder*, plays a role?

BH: Max Raymond's son, probably. He flew in Desert Storm, in '91.

AB: And you've described him in the past as a "sincere Christian"?

BH: He's a lay minister. He's lost everything. He's gotten into drug trouble as an MD after the war, after being a pilot, and been kicked out, much like his father. He prescribed the drugs to commit suicide for his rival and the guy just managed to give himself a stroke. So he's very guilty. But he's better than I am. I had to write about a character that goes to hospitals and helps people. He's got an old motorcycle, a Triumph, he has only about fifty thousand dollars left and a plane he hides from the IRS that he claims went down in the Gulf of Mexico. He's still shady, but...

AB: Mary Gordon said in an interview that she's interested in what "good" characters can do to narrative, to conflict and tension. How hard is it to write about a "good" character?

BH: It's difficult. Evil, or the grotesque, is much easier to dramatize. Ray is good but he realizes that he has no god, really. He has only Christ to follow, and Christ is an impossible example. He has nothing to do with the Old Testament God who bids you to murder. And then we get the ten commandments: *Thou shalt not kill*. Go figure! [Laughs.] If you read that book, you'll go nuts.

AB: It [the Old Testament] is extremely violent.

BH: Violent, with dietary insanity.

AB: The New Testament isn't exactly G-rated, either.

BH: It's violent, too. The way [Jesus] is put down and the way He was betrayed. But He hasn't been surpassed; I'm like Thomas Jefferson on that issue: His ethics are the most sublime we've been handed. I rediscovered Him when I had a dream when I was in that hospital.

AB: With pneumonia?

BH: Right. I almost lost my life. I lost thirty-five pounds in two weeks, a machine breathing for me, taking in no food. Three doctors gave up. But I was getting better when I had the dream. I don't know. Maybe if you're close to death it prompts dreams of that sort.

AB: It was a spiritual dream?

BH: It was a dream of the physical Christ. It was hard-edged, realer than a dream. He said nothing. But I still remember it vividly. I said, "I haven't paid much attention to you." He said, well, He said nothing; but He was there, looking like a working man with a parted robe, red sand hills, kind of blowing weather like the surface of Mars or maybe the Judean desert. And I felt a great peace and joy that if I trusted in Him, things would be simpler.

AB: And you wrote about that—

BH: Yeah. Yeah. I had to write the dream finally.

AB: Do you think religion has played an increasing role in your work?

BH: Not religion. I don't go to church. Christianity, yes.

AB: That shows up in *Yonder*, and it seems to as well in *Sick Soldier at Your Door* with the church burnings.

BH: It's in both books. I'm getting closer in *Yonder* to the church, people who need help gathering. I'm not against church, people just meeting: Ex-bikers who are preachers or whatever. Some rough sorts and some smooth sorts. Rich and poor. We all need help, for God's sake. And fellowship sometimes.

AB: A lot of people have talked about the violence in your work. But your work is also very funny, often at the same time. I'm thinking of the short story, "Bats Out of Hell Division," a farce on the sentimentality that often accompanies the Civil War. Like much of your work, it's graphically brutal and macabre, and yet funny. Do you feel there's a connection between violence and humor?

BH: I must [laughs]. If it's not happening to you. I keep quoting the greats, like an English teacher does, but I'm thinking now of Samuel Beckett: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness." Someone else's [laughs]. That's what we watch at the movies: "I am so glad I am not in that reality. My God, I don't have any problems."

Yeah, there's something hilarious about human agony, at a certain distance. I include my protagonist in hurt; he's not exempt. I try to put myself in grim positions and feel what I would do in a situation like being shot to pieces in a floating balloon, as in "Bats Out of Hell Division." I had a lot of fun writing that.

AB: You chair the MFA program at Ole Miss. The landscape of the MFA has changed quite a bit since Flannery O'Connor went up to Iowa with some of her stories, asking Paul Engle for admission. By different accounts, some two thousands folks will graduate this year with a Master's in creative writing. I am in that horde. Any advice for us?

BH: No. You just have to write well. Publish a few stories; maybe a young editor will read them and be interested. That's why the little magazines are good, besides just being good. But they [in publishing] all want the novel, and too many people start writing novels when they shouldn't. Almost every first novel is awful, and sometimes third novels. And novel segments are impossible to teach in a workshop. We can admire graceful writing, but we don't know what to say

about where it's going or how good it's going to be. It makes no sense—thirty pages just taken out of the middle. They should learn to write the short story before they try to write the book, for God's sake.

AB: Many of your early stories were published in *Esquire* when Gordon Lish was the editor. It seems, though, that the big magazines are changing their attitude toward short fiction.

BH: They certainly are.

AB: The big boys are less and less attracted to the form and the small magazine is the only venue for short story writers. Is there any silver lining to this shift?

BH: It looks pretty grim. The big commercial slicks don't want fiction. Magazines now are usually devoted to celebrities and advertisements of rich gear: big leather and vodka; totally bored models hanging around. You know the scene. These magazines are as thick as novels with only two good essays or articles. It's horrible.

I just engaged *Playboy*, though; I put out my first piece there since the eighties, an article about leaving Tuscaloosa in the seventies, back when I was a drunk. My daughter and her husband are still there, and when I visit, I'm haunted by old ghosts of that life. Everything fell apart for me. I was too drunk to really know it, or a snob. Both, really. But I sobered up in California, and I've been essentially clean since 1990.

AB: Congratulations.

BH: It had to be done. I had the disease. And I'm having a wonderful time being straight. I like it here in Oxford, came twenty-five years ago. My son went to school here. He and I were roommates. It was nice. It was weird, but nice. [Laughs]. He had girlfriends, and I didn't want to enter the home; I'd drive around the block a while. [Laughs.] You had issues like that, but usually they were just cooking in the kitchen, and it was fun.

AB: My last question: You said you like it when young writers tell you how much they loved *Airships*, and you've called it the "rallying point of my efforts." But do you ever feel, like a Bob Dylan, that you have a long list of other works and all people want to hear is "Like a Rolling Stone"?

BH: Yes. It's always *Airships*, or *Geronimo Rex*, my first one. But you can't do it again. *Airships* was 1978. I'm nothing like that person. I never reread myself, but I still like the quick hit and grotesque farce of *Airships*, so I'm not worried. It does get a little like "Rolling Stone," on a smaller level, of course. I had my first "airport book" when I was sixty years old, with *Yonder*. That was a mild commercial success. But I'm proud of all of them and have had many happy trips in my mind.

A Conversation with Chang-rae Lee

The author of Native Speaker, A Gesture Life and Aloft, Chang-rae Lee writes about identity and assimilation, exploring the ways in which Americans, often living between two worlds, keep entanglements and problems at a distance. Joyce Carol Oates praises Lee for "his fusion of large political and social issues, with precisely observed domestic details, and for his sympathetic portrayal of the complexity of human relations."

Born in Seoul, Korea, Lee emigrated with his family to the United States when he was three years old. After living briefly in Pittsburgh and on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the family settled in the suburbs outside New York City. Educated at Exeter and Yale, Lee received an MFA from the University of Oregon, where he wrote Native Speaker as his Master's thesis. Since then he has taught at Oregon, Hunter College, and now at Princeton, where he currently is a professor in the University Center for the Arts.

During a recent visit to Cincinnati, Lee was interviewed before an audience at the University of Cincinnati by James Schiff, an associate professor of English and the author of several books on contemporary American fiction.

James Schiff: Let's begin with language, which has been very important in your novels, particularly *Native Speaker*. I'm curious about what it was like for you in your early years here in the United States after emigrating from Korea. You've said that you knew no English. What do you remember of that time?

Chang-rae Lee: I didn't speak English until I went to school. Being in the house, being with the family, I spoke Korean. We were a typical immigrant family. We lived in Westchester, a working-class section of the New York suburb, so there were a lot of immigrants there, including a few Koreans. Until I went to school,

it was a strange sort of America for me. It wasn't an ethnic enclave; it wasn't like Flushing, Queens, or like living in a certain neighborhood in Los Angeles. But we had our own very private community, and my parents had some Korean friends, and my mother didn't really speak English very well. I didn't understand that until I started going to school. That first year of school was one of silence for me. I spent the whole day listening, and trying to follow along with the songs—you know, the teapot song—and it wasn't until the very end, I think, that I started interacting with people. In a funny way, my memories begin then. Before that I was taking everything in, but the actual memories of my being there coincide with my being more verbally active.

In the following year, first grade, my mother was still worried that I wasn't going to speak English. At that time—it's a little different now—there was a real drive, with the school, the counselors, and my parents, for me and my sister to learn English and assimilate as fast as possible, not to hold onto things. They weren't concerned about the things that immigrants are often concerned with now. I remember my mother being very nervous, very worried that I'd fall behind in school, so she and the teacher got me onto this reading project, where I read maybe 150 books that year. I ended up winning a school prize. This was our daily calisthenic. It's only now that I remember that little contest and how much of an impression it had on me, and how proud it made me, having read all those books, even if I only semi-understood what was going on in them.

JS: So within a few years you were comfortable with the language?

CL: Yes. In first grade, I was very comfortable. It was at that point that I began to realize that my mother had a lot of difficulty. You don't understand that at first, but all immigrant kids, I think, have this experience: you have the private life of the home, but the public life is completely different. I began to see how my mother didn't quite fit into the public life the way that I could, more and more readily. Certainly for her it was a source of anxiety and unhappiness—the fact that she couldn't really engage with society in the ways that she was accustomed to. She was a very educated woman, very proud. I've written and thought a lot

about just how important language is to one's life, to one's definition, because my mother was, in Korea, such an impressive woman. All her friends and all my father's friends would always tell me that she was famous in Korea.

JS: She was a great basketball player.

CL: She was a great basketball player. She was also a great beauty, so she was really an impressive person. But where we lived in America, she was very retiring, tentative, and shy, though that really wasn't her. I guess it was her in the sense that that's what she could do, in English. It took her, I would say, fifteen or sixteen years before she was comfortable. My father had a much easier time because he was a psychiatrist and he had to talk all the time, so he got used to it.

JS: Which language was spoken at home, and were there reasons for switching from one language to another?

CL: Well, it was Korean wholly, and then I stopped speaking Korean. My father was a young resident, and he wasn't around much. He was on call in the city, so my sister and I would mostly address my mother in English, and she would respond to us in Korean. To this day, I can understand Korean quite well, but I can't for the life of me call up certain words, even though I know them when people say them. If you ask me the word for "cantaloupe," I couldn't tell you, but if someone said the word for "cantaloupe," I'd know that they meant "cantaloupe." It's a one-way facility.

JS: So writing in Korean was never an option.

CL: Oh, no! No! I can read a menu in Korean, and I can read the paper very slowly. It's a part of my education that I've completely neglected. I wanted to take Korean in college, but they didn't offer it. And I just don't have the time now to take it up again. Perhaps I will after I retire.

JS: Like others, such as Nabokov, Conrad, and—I didn't realize this until recently—Jack Kerouac, English was not your first language ...

CL: Really? Jack Kerouac?

JS: Yes, his mother was French-Canadian. Given that English was not your first language, I'm curious as to how you think that has affected not only your sense of the language but your decision to become a writer.

CL: I've had to read *Native Speaker* again, because someone is doing a theatrical production of it, so I was looking it over, and it struck me how self-conscious it is in terms of its language, how it is both very persnickety and obsessive. That's probably a good way to describe my work, aside from talking about what subjects or themes I write about. I suppose that just comes from my being very, very conscious of differences. This is not so much because I have any Korean in me, but because I'm looking at the language as an artifact, as if it's this thing out here and not something that belongs to me. That's probably how I've always felt about writing, that it wasn't this natural outpouring, that it was more an investigation rather than some representation of experience. It was more an inquiry as to how I fit into the language, and how I express myself, rather than experience itself.

JS: Thinking of Kerouac and the way he spilled those words out seems then to be very different from your process.

CL: One of my favorite books was *On the Road*. I quoted it for my high school yearbook because I love the feeling and flow of it. I haven't studied Kerouac—I know that he supposedly wrote it on one long sheet, in an alcoholic, drug-induced flight of fancy—but I think we're all trying to find a certain kind of song for ourselves, whether we're writers or not.

JS: At Exeter and Yale were you writing fiction?

CL: At Exeter I wrote fiction. That's where I began to think about how much I loved literature and reading. At some point, if you love reading and literature enough, you start wanting to give this same feeling to somebody else. That started at Exeter, probably after reading "The Dead," by James Joyce, and thinking, "Gosh. If I could do this in some form or another." We did have a little creative assignment, and one of my English teachers said, "This is great—if you want to continue writing this, it sounds like it might be a novel. You can write chapters of this instead of critical essays." I thought that that was great, and he let me do it the whole term. My writing wasn't any good, but he was very encouraging. I don't really know why he let me do that, because I don't think it was outstanding work, even within our peer group. But I think he saw that I had a passion for it. We were joking about this earlier, but there were a lot of writers who went to Exeter, and one of the nice things about the school was that they honored those writers. They didn't trot out only wealthy people or business people or politicians—they always honored the artists and the writers. Those people were valued, which was great, I thought.

JS: After Yale, you took the job on Wall Street, but you continued to write. Were you considering a career in writing?

CL: When I was working, I wasn't putting the time into it, but I was dreaming about maybe trying to do it at some point. My roommate then was Brooks Hansen, a novelist who publishes with FSG and who was a good friend of mine at Exeter. He was having success with his first novel, called *Boone*, which he wrote with a college classmate. He was very inspiring to me. It wasn't as simple as, "If he can do it, I can do it," but I could see that this was possible. He worked hard, was a very smart guy and very creative, and a wonderful writer. I thought, "This could happen." I was working on Wall Street, but my roommate was a writer, and doing something that I wanted to do. Really for that whole year, I was weekly planning my escape from 140 Broadway. I actually quit a year to the day that I started, just so that I could tell my mom and dad that I'd worked there for a year. They were very upset about it, actually. My mother started to

cry—she'd thought, "We sent him to Yale, he got this great job, we won't have to worry." My parents didn't come to this country so that I could have the unstable life of an artist. Although they sent me to places like Exeter and Yale, they didn't know what really went on there. They just viewed them as stepping stones to whatever was going to happen: success. They didn't understand that what really happens there is that you get an education.

JS: After you left Wall Street, you said that you were going to give yourself a few years to establish yourself as a writer. What was that time like? Did you write any short fiction before *Native Speaker*?

CL: I was working furiously. I never wrote short fiction, really. I never felt comfortable with the form, for some reason. I could never include everything I wanted to get in. So I started writing a novel, really the day after I quit. I started writing like crazy. I took it very, very seriously. I don't think I'll ever work that hard again as a writer. I must have written ten to twelve hours a day, every day, for about a year. I produced this monster of a book. It was really a hairy beast, kind of Pynchonesque, kind of psychedelic, intellectualized—it had a real program for itself (I'd been reading Pynchon and DeLillo). It was a book that was just horrible to read. It had cleverness, but it all added up to nothing.

JS: What did it teach you?

CL: I knew that it was not a good book but writing it taught me a couple of things: that you could actually write a book if you spent some time doing it; and that writing books takes stamina, endurance, and a kind of focus and concentration like nothing else I've ever done. Nothing else requires that kind of mental and emotional stamina. In that sense, it wasn't wasted effort because I really learned that you just have to put your butt on the chair, and I did it. But the more important thing is that I figured out that it wasn't about how smart I was, how clever I was, or even how creative I was—that's not what makes a good book. That's not what makes for worthy work. It's something else. I was doing all

those things in that book, but I didn't really care about it in a funny way. I cared about it so that I could have a career, so that someone would want to read it, and give me lots of money, and that I'd get famous. I think I wrote the book because I wanted to be a writer, not because I actually cared about the book that much.

JS: So it must have involved a turning away from that Pynchonesque material to something that resonated more with you.

CL: That book was a means of escape for me. My mother was terminally ill. It was actually a good time to quit my job and try to be a writer, since it would have been difficult, had I loved that day job, to spend time with her. Writing allowed me to be with her, and spend months at a time with her. Both the book and her illness and death happened at the same time. The production of this book, it became increasingly clear to me, was not going to work out—nor was her illness going to work out. After that, a friend said, "Why don't you write a different book, find a writing program?" That's when I found out about Oregon. But before I went there, I was thinking about *Native Speaker*, although I hadn't started it. I realized that I really cared about it, and that I wanted to write that book. I wasn't thinking about publishing or my career.

JS: And *Native Speaker* was produced largely at Oregon and submitted as your Master's thesis?

CL: Yeah, the first chapter of *Native Speaker* was my first submission to the workshop, in week two. Basically, over the next two years, that's what I submitted.

JS: What kind of feedback did you get from your peers and your teachers?

CL: People mostly liked it, I think. It was quite different from the stuff that was coming out of the workshop. Some people were wondering what it was about. Some wondered if it was genre work, because it has the superstructure of spy fiction. After a while, everyone got used to the story, and they were very supportive after that.

JS: Where did the subject of corporate espionage come from? Did you read about it or just make it up?

CL: I had decided that this fellow should be some kind of corporate spy, or a spy that didn't really exist, which I would make up. In researching it, I read mostly about the KGB, or the precursor to the KGB, which was the NKVD. I read about all their strategies, tactics and modalities, and most were very mundane, which struck me as useful. There was one section of a book which described how they went about their spying, which was really just research. I liked the idea that you basically research a person to the cellular level, and what kind of picture does that give you? Ultimately it gives you a more interesting picture than just finding the dirt, or something to blackmail them with. For the literary writer, that's actually what we try to do. So I thought it fit nicely in terms of what I was looking at for this fellow's identity, and how he was figuring that out via his investigations of all the people in his life, his father, his wife, his clients.

JS: Every novel poses problems. What were the problems and challenges with *Native Speaker*?

CL: There were many. For me, the middle of the book, about two-thirds of the way in, felt—and I've experienced this with every book that I've written, and I'm feeling it now—as though I can't possibly get out of this book, I can't possibly finish it. I've written myself into a corner and I cannot go on. In *Native Speaker*, it had to do with the political intrigue surrounding the politician and his dirty laundry and shadowy dealings, and I couldn't figure out what I really wanted to have happen. At that point too, because I was getting so much into the story and the machinations of this intrigue, I began to forget what I was really writing about. I remember writing on my blackboard, "Language—that's what you're writing about." This whole book is about language. It's amazing to say, but sometimes you forget what you're writing about because you're so focused on getting the microcosm just right and making it convincing. But it's often that you can lose sight of where you're really going. What I was trying to get at with that novel was an idea

about the centrality of language to people's identity and to how they construct themselves. Maybe that's always the tension, at least for me. Because my books do have a plot and because I get excited about the plot—not really wanting to, but just because I want to dot my i's and cross my t's and try to be neat and efficient about everything. There's this tension between that and trying to get to a deeper level of understanding of some of the things that you're considering.

JS: If we were to examine side-by-side the manuscript of your Master's thesis, which I assume is deposited in the library at Oregon, and *Native Speaker*, what differences would we see?

CL: I would say that there's probably nothing in that bound thesis in the library that isn't in the book, but there are lots of things in the book that are not in that thesis. I may be completely wrong, but that's my memory of it, that I actually had to write more material. One of the things that prompted me to do that was that my editor had been friendly with the late Frederick Busch, and she sent him my manuscript, which he liked. He said he'd give me a nice blurb, which he did, but he also sent back three pages of notes. This was typical of Fred—he was so generous, even to a complete stranger. He really helped me with that book, helped me figure out some things plot-wise, and some thematic things as well. I also added material that he suggested. The book certainly wouldn't be the same without Fred.

JS: Your second novel, *A Gesture Life*, was meant to be a very different novel. Can you walk us through its evolution and development?

CL: I originally wanted to write a novel that was discreetly looking at the comfort-women experience, through the eyes of one or several of them, so that the story would be from their point of view, squarely from their experience and consciousness. I wrote quite a bit of a book in that vein, from a comfort woman's point of view, in third person. I did research. I went to Korea and interviewed comfort women who had survived the war, and all that material was

great. When I returned, I started writing with enthusiasm, but about a year and a half into that, I realized that everything I had written was ... well, it wasn't that it was so awful or bad, but it didn't have a certain vitality. It didn't seem to be that necessary. It was good stuff, you could learn from it, maybe you could feel emotion just because of the nature of what I was writing, but it didn't feel to me that much better than a transcript of oral testimony from the comfort women. I thought that there's plenty of oral testimony that people can read. A novel has to do something different. A novel is not just presenting experience but presenting a certain kind of approach into an experience that widens everything, that throws a light on things you don't expect. I felt that just wasn't happening. I was desperate and very depressed about it because I knew that I would have to discard the book.

JS: So you had a couple of hundred pages, most of which had to be discarded?

CL: None of it was used for what you see in *A Gesture Life*. One day I was going through some of my work and I came across a little scene in which there's a medic—not a medical officer, but a medic—who serves as a functionary in an examination room scene. I just kept thinking about him, and in my mind's eye I saw him leave that room and go back into the camp, and then survive the war. Suddenly I became fascinated because this was a part of the story that I hadn't really come across in my research. There's not a lot of material—I don't think there's *any* material—from the point of view of a soldier. So I was interested in that, and I sat down and began to write his story. What was lucky is that I began the story toward the end of his life rather than right at that moment. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this new book I was writing was not going to be about the comfort women. Certainly, that would be integral to the story and be a driving force, but the book would be about this fellow's consciousness and how he situated himself morally in this experience, and how that resonated throughout his life. In turn, it became a story about a monstrous example of assimilation: how Doc Hata always wants to join the group, and the things he does or allows himself to do or lets happen for the sake of that.

JS: What I find remarkable about that novel is how muted, restrained, and quiet it is, with an aging protagonist no less, and yet it's also compelling. You must have worried, though, about whether it would be sufficiently engaging for your readers.

CL: I didn't really have a lot of confidence. I knew it would take readers a while to get into the book, and I was worried about that, as was my editor. She called me and said, "Once people read the whole book, they'll like it. I don't know if we'll sell any copies, to tell you the truth. But I think your colleagues and the people you care about will love this book." That was great to hear, but that told me that it's a book that takes little baby steps. You don't quite know where he's going, or why you're looking at this man, and it takes a long time for the story to open up and for you to say, "Oh my goodness—this story is about this!" I love the feeling of that, but contemporary life is not paced that way. That novel doesn't hew to the rhythms of our life, so that was a real challenge. It was a worry because I didn't want people to read the first twenty-five pages and just put it down. It was definitely something I was conscious of, but I had to quell my worry and move on. I wouldn't say it was confidence. Like everything when writing a novel, it was a stubbornness and a willing foolishness, thinking, "Oh, this'll be fine," and just moving ahead. I don't teach graduate students anymore, but I used to tell the ones who were writing novels not to have so much *agita* about what you've written, just keep going. Many struggle with it and take ten years to write a book and just worry too much. They're not allowing their intelligence and their wisdom and expertise to come into play naturally. Usually, spending ten years on a book is not a good thing, especially for the reader! Sometimes you get masterpieces, but mostly not.

JS: What can be said of *A Gesture Life* pertains as well to the reading you gave last night from the new novel you're working on. I was struck by your decision to read something so grim and sad when most of your peers usually opt to read material that is funny or entertaining. What you read required patience from your audience, since you were giving them something that wasn't expected;

however, their patience was rewarded amply. Turning to your most recent novel, *Aloft*, Don Lee called your decision to write from the point of view of a late-middle-aged white guy “revolutionary and brave.” I get the sense, though, that that’s not quite how you saw it. Did that feel like a stretch, a major departure, or was it not so different from writing about Franklin Hata or Henry Park?

CL: It wasn’t a stretch at all, and in some ways it was the easiest time I had with a book. It felt as if I was writing more autobiographically in *Aloft* than in any of the other books, which is very strange to say, because here is this sixty-year-old Italian-American with a different background, different worldview, different everything, as opposed to my other characters who were ethnically Korean, squarely thinking about issues of identity and assimilation. But there’s something about Jerry Battle that really tickled me, and I think it had to do partly with contemporary American life, particularly with contemporary American family life as set in the suburbs. The suburbs are a place that I know quite well, where I lived a lot of my life, and about which I have conflicted feelings. I wanted to try to capture all those feelings, and I found that with Jerry and with his kind of looseness and liberty. He has the ability to riff on things in a way that Franklin Hata and Henry Park absolutely can’t—they’re so rigid! In the first two books, I was writing about people who feel alienated, outside and really on the margins, and so I was fascinated by writing from the point of view of somebody who feels that he’s at the center of the story, who takes that as a given. Voyeuristically I enjoyed that—someone who was so comfortable, and of course that comfort is the source of some of his problems. It jibed with my worries about my own comfort. I live a very comfortable and quiet life. I don’t have to worry about the things I worried about before I wrote the first book, money-wise or career-wise. So a lot of it was closer to my daily rhythm and sensibility, which I tried to use and, I hope, interrogate.

JS: You mentioned being conflicted about the suburbs, which are often depicted satirically in fiction. There’s a good deal of compassion, however, in your treatment of the suburbs. Could you talk about this?

CL: There is compassion for the suburbs in the book because I know, having lived there, that people really do appreciate what they have there. Sometimes they forget, obviously, but people everywhere do that. It's what people drew up as an ideal place—they wanted to get out of the dangerous city, get to cleaner air, better schools. And it's all there. But of course there's this huge, huge hidden cost to all this safety, security, and stability, which is a kind of deadness and blandness, a myopia and shortsightedness about what's really happening outside. If you think about it, all those things are good ways of describing American foreign policy, our standing in the world. George Bush has a sort of suburban notion. You flush your toilet and you really don't think about where it goes. You have a nice latrine and that's it. That's partly what I wanted to look at, but in an honest way, which is to say that Jerry Battle's not a bad fellow, but he's a creature of all these things. He's likable enough, and he's good and decent, but he's deeply flawed, for private reasons but also structurally.

In the writing of the book I became very interested in urban planning. A friend of mine is an urban planner at Princeton, and we hadn't talked about the book, but after reading it, he said, "You know, a lot of urban planning issues are in this book," such as why people's particular private consciousnesses and the way they run their lives are determined by where they live. These cul-de-sacs off big roads, in which the yards are slightly too big; they don't have any interaction with the street, and they don't have the same connection to their community. Everyone goes from their air-conditioned bedroom to their air-conditioned car in their air-conditioned garage to their air-conditioned office—it's all hermetically sealed. But of course as the novelist, I was thinking of what the effects of that are on the human condition. What are the signs and expressions of that kind of sealedness, and what are its effects on family and love?

JS: If you had to identify your weaknesses, things that you struggle with and wish you could do better, what would they be?

CL: I don't think I'm very pictorial. I don't know if I want to be better at it, but maybe I just don't appreciate it myself as much as I probably should, the way other

writers do. If you think of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, pictorially it's amazing what he can do—he walks into a room and you can just see everything. Of course, it's a completely contrived "everything," in that he's picking out particular details to give you the flavor and sense of the room. And it's really just about the room—it doesn't always have that much to do with what's going to go on in the room, and that's something, aesthetically, which I'm not quite sure how I feel about. Writers sometimes do that just because they can do it so well, rather than it being necessary, or because people like pictures often more than words. I shy away from that. For me, the action is always the human action in the room, and if I describe something pictorially it'll be more for the sake of character than anything else. Maybe I should be more pictorial. Maybe the stories would be richer that way. I don't know. I sometimes think it could be more distracting, too.

JS: With several novels behind you, you're not presumably influenced in the same way that you would have been years ago. Yet when you read McEwan and admire what he does visually, does that influence your writing?

CL: In the case of McEwan and *Atonement*—and that's quite a different novel for him, actually—it was more that I really marveled at it. I was blown away, not by the whole book, but by a lot of its performance. What I learned from that book was to look at how different it is from what he was doing before. In that way it was inspiring—to see that you can do completely different things, have a completely different approach to the fictive world than you had before. Why shouldn't I be able to do that? As a writer, you want to have your own voice and you want to write naturally, but you don't want to get stunted. I think that's why I read certain writers and allow them, as you put it, to inspire me or allow their language to run through me. It's more like looking for possibility, but the possibility may not be the possibility that I really know the face of. Reading McEwan, I was impressed by his pictorial skill, but it's not that I wanted to do that, but rather that it made me think that I could do something different. It's like saying not jump higher, but jump differently. Every good writer you can learn from that way.

JS: Besides McEwan, which writers over the past decade have you've read seriously and with admiration?

CL: Kazuo Ishiguro writes really well. He's an interesting writer, and I've read all his novels, with the exception of that really big one! I've read all of DeLillo's work. His more recent projects, like *Cosmopolis*, have not been that critically well-received, but I think they're so interesting. I like what he's trying to do, particularly as he gets more interested in drama, writing more plays, and the books are feeling that way too. I also read younger writers. Jeffrey Eugenides writes beautifully, with intelligence and feeling, too. There's fervor in his work, but it's not easy fervor, not just easy emotionality. There's a substance to his language that's very alive.

JS: And student writers—I imagine some of your students are publishing?

CL: One of my students, Gary Shteyngart, wrote *Absurdistan*. I won't call him my student, really, since he was fully formed when I got him! I helped him some on the side. He's a hilarious writer. There's a lot of tragedy there too, but it's hard to see because he's so funny and antic and rollicking. There's also a real heart there that's beating vibrantly. I read in the *New York Review of Books* that Orhan Pamuk was giving a talk at PEN and said that he just wanted to write beautiful books. I thought that that's right, because in the end, the books that I gravitate towards and the ones that I hope I write myself are beautiful books. Books that aren't maybe so spectacular or sexy or different, but books that have a certain lasting beauty, I suppose. That's the kind of literature that I've always been drawn to. That's why early Joyce to me seems so beautifully worked, while Dickens is wonderful to read, but not quite beautiful.

JS: Let's take some questions from the audience.

Audience Member: You mentioned that your first published novel was the product of a workshop, and your subsequent ones were not. Do you have readers now who you rely on to read your work in progress?

CL: With that first book, it eventually became a real pain in the butt to be in the workshop. Although people were supportive, we finally got to the point where they didn't really have anything to say about it other than, "Okay, well—keep going." So it wasn't that helpful to be in workshop—it was just more a forum for me to get the work done. In that sense, it wasn't so hard not to have a ready set of readers, because I hadn't really had a ready set of serious readers in the workshop. Since then, I don't share my work with other writers, mostly because people are too busy. Yet also, and probably more importantly, I'm a little wary about taking advice from people because sometimes they can give you really good advice, but that really good advice might not necessarily be your book. Part of writing a novel well, since there's so much verbiage and material in it, is that it has to be distinctive at every moment, otherwise it gets overwhelmingly dull and bland. It's got to be your own thing the whole way through. That's really the only thing that's holding people, if it's not a genre book. It's holding them because you have a very particular approach to character, language, scene, whatever. Now, after the book is done and they can see the whole thing, and understand what you're trying to do—that's when I give the book to my wife and my editor. Really only those two people. I don't know a lot of working writers who share their work in process. Most writers are also too shy and too worried about what other people think, so they don't want to get waylaid by that.

Audience Member: You've mentioned that you like to read contemporary poetry. Could you discuss what impact or effect that has on your work?

CL: I love reading some of my colleagues, like C.K. Williams, and Edward Hirsch, who writes beautiful poetry. I'm not so much into language poetry. I like Philip Levine's work. Linda Gregg writes wonderful poetry. I like narrative poetry. The list goes on and on. Yusef Komunyakaa is different and fantastic, and of course, my friend and mentor Garrett Hongo writes glorious poetry in a grand style. Adam Zagajewski, too, is unbelievable. I'm not a sophisticated reader of contemporary poetry because a lot of it I just frankly don't get. Intellectually I understand what they're trying to do, but poetry just has to make me want to

die—because it's so beautiful, I can die. A lot of contemporary poetry doesn't do that for me.

Audience Member: I read your essay “Coming Home Again” in a course called “Food in Literature,” and I was wondering if you could talk about that essay as well as the relation between food and communication.

CL: That's a nonfiction personal essay, and I can't say that everything in it is exactly how it happened. For me that essay is about a certain kind of connection with my mother and, given what we were talking about before, language, and the ways in which she and I were very, very close yet experienced a cultural divide in terms of our language and, at a certain point, our sensibility. That essay is in some ways about being educated away from one's family life. People experience that all the time—you grow up, you go to college—and immigrants experience that explicitly. But the outside life is so different from the inside life, the private life. Food was a way for us to always be on the same page, to share the same kinds of experiences. It was a way that we could get back together rhythmically after my being away at prep school—the awkwardness, I couldn't explain what I was doing there. But we could make food together. That's often a kind of shorthand for all ethnic identity, but it's very human stuff. That's why I like food so much. I love the taste of it, and that part of my sense is something that is important to me. Often, I think, you find out about people by how they interact with food. It's not that people have to love food and I'll like them; it's just that it's a fascinating lens into someone's life. In some ways, it still is. With my daughters, our relationship is often centered around food. As everyone knows, food is love, food is this, food is that. It's another way of speaking. It shouldn't be the only way, but it's another way. Another language.

No Contest:

University of Georgia Press Launches The VQR Poetry Series

by Shara Lessley

Jennifer Chang, *The History of Anonymity*.

University of Georgia Press, 2008. Paperback, 82 pp, \$16.95.

Kevin McFadden, *Hardscrabble*.

University of Georgia Press, 2008. Paperback, 101 pp, \$16.95.

Cecily Parks, *Field Folly Snow*.

University of Georgia Press, 2008. Paperback, 75 pp, \$16.95.

Patrick Phillips, *Boy*.

University of Georgia Press, 2008. Paperback, 50 pp, \$16.95.

Reading fees, sAsEs and pre-paid postcards—poets seeking publishers for first or second books recognize these requirements all too well. *NewPages* lists eleven contests for poetry collections in the month of November alone. And while a handful of houses offer open submission periods, the prize system remains the most common road to publication for emerging American poets. A new partnership vows to replace this model, however, filling four catalog slots per year on a case-by-case basis. Rushing to fill the void left by the retirement of its Contemporary Poetry Series, the University of Georgia Press (UGA) recently partnered with *Virginia Quarterly Review* to launch The VQR Poetry Series. Ted Genoways, who also edits *VQR*, pitched the contest-free series partly out of frustration with the award systems' screening processes. Determined to support those projects just quirky and challenging enough to keep them out of prizes' reach, Genoways considers manuscripts by poets whose work he's encountered by way of recommendation, conferences, and readings, as well as by those he's printed in *VQR*.

One benefit of appointing Genoways Series Editor (versus the common practice of hiring outside judges) is consistency. The danger is monotony. Are Genoways' tastes varied enough to attract and hold the attention of disparate

readers? Or, will he simply promote in book-length form the overall *VQR* aesthetic? Genoways anticipates (and answers) such concerns by stocking the series with books that offer a wide formal and thematic range. In its opening installment, the series debuts three first books—Jennifer Chang’s *The History of Anonymity*, Kevin McFadden’s *Hardscrabble*, Cecily Parks’ *Field Folly Snow*—as well as *Boy*, Patrick Phillips’ sophomore collection. Whereas Phillips is most inclined to memory-based narrative, Chang resists plot in favor of structural experimentation, inventing entire texts and towns. Parks re-imagines the history and landscape of the American West via free-verse lyrics and received forms. Interrogating American culture, idiom, and geography, McFadden presses the capacity of form through anagrams, prose poems and several extended sequences. Such eclecticism bodes well for both series and press.



Overall, what the collections share isn’t a unified poetics, but an interest in instability. For Phillips, the poem serves as a stay against confusion; for McFadden and Parks, it is an opportunity for acknowledgment. Chang, in contrast, often courts volatility, fracturing notions of time and identity to displace logos in favor of feeling. Of the four collections, Chang’s is most purposeful in its endeavors toward dislocation. In *The History of Anonymity*, myth-making stretches individual scope and scale until “... every I // is a we.” Moving from the title poem, which situates itself on a seaside cliff saddled between the “beforeworld” and “afterworld,” the collection travels through a forest of fairy tales, before finally arriving in *Uinction*, an imagined fog town explored via a fourteen-part sequence. Bodies of water in various forms—ocean, fog, puddles, pools, vapor and “the wet-dressed disaster / that’s rain” (“Conversation with Owl and Clouds”)—find their counterparts in trees, roots, wood, branches and bark. This movement between liquid/transparency and corporeality further underscores the pressures that come when concealing or disclosing the self.

Ironically, the best reading guide for *The History of Anonymity* arrives at “End Note.” Sonnet-esque, the poem introduces claims about the possibilities

and limits of language; particularly, how tonal register and image communicate feeling in the absence of context. “Before words, there was the language of the mark,” begins Chang, who soon sources written expression not in logos, but pathos:

... Our wild flickers
ink-streaked a page, symbols like the stars’
orphaned radiance giving more light
than reason.

As is the case in the above example, a critical poetic effect for Chang is intonation. Here, evidence of emotional heat (“wild flickers”) writes its way onto the page. However indecipherable the “ink-streaked” meaning (note the tension contributed by the compound verb), the *residue* (or “radiance”) of feeling is clear. Throughout the collection’s first and third sections, the poet often gives “more light / than reason.” In this sense, Chang’s investment in the intuitive rhythms of speech is reminiscent of Frost’s metaphor of listening to conversations through closed doors; although individual words remain out of earshot, emotion and dramatic circumstance manifest through rhythm and tone. In Chang’s case, what’s absent isn’t diction, but context. Rather than constructing narrative-driven suspense, the lyrics frequently drive toward feeling or song. While Chang withholds the poems’ dramatic occasions, what’s clear via the combination of image and tone is that “Every puddle rivers with desire,” and that even those “Paltry pools palming a leaf / long to pond” (“Hunger Essay”).

Chang’s fracturing of language and undermining of logos continues at the level of structure as she circumnavigates plot, relying instead on disjunctive leaps to propel the poem. In the title piece, fragments from an imagined manuscript (“from page 456 of *The History of Anonymity*— // ... Anonymity is not a name / but an entrance”) interrupt diary-like reflections:

Once,

I traveled to a shore

where I knew tide pools would form.
I loved the sea anemones, loose flowers

or creatures of all mouth, moving more as water

than as live things ...

“The History of Anonymity” vacillates between two voices, as suggested by the appearance and disappearance of italicized passages, as well as the inclusion of “you.” However, because the speakers are kindred in terms of tenor and pitch, it is often difficult to distinguish individual points of view. Is there a philosophical conflict between the poem’s key players? Or, is the metaphysical debate strictly internal? Furthermore, is “you” meant as a direct address, or is the gesture self-referential? Such slippage, it seems, is part of the poem’s project: “Are we not // the same // difference,” writes Chang, “the same sums multiplied into an air // abandoned ...”? Form contributes additional evidence of Chang’s dissolution of singular identity. Floating lines introduce negative space into the text. Rhythmic inconsistency increases the poem’s unpredictability and ambiguity. More than just visual pressure, the lines’ exaggerated caesuras force the reader to hear and observe the appearance and disappearance of silence, further acknowledging:

My voice

is always becoming another voice.

There were nights of evaporation: the ocean made a fog, fixed above ...

The History of Anonymity’s heart is held in its middle section. As Chang leads readers into the woods, structure and thematic contents solidify. The shift is also formal. Granted, indentation and floating lines occasionally interrupt the more traditional couplets, tercets, quatrains and block stanzas. The most significant development, however, is the extent to which the poems locate the

reader. Because the section's theater is literary—its stages set with backdrops, props, archetypes, lights and effects from fairy tales—the reader recognizes his/her surroundings. Although Chang continues to defy linear narrative, she equips the reader with enough contextual framing to participate in the central events. Leaving Anne Sexton her *Transformations* and Angela Carter *The Bloody Chamber*, Chang relies instead almost exclusively on invention (an obvious exception is “Slept,” whose persona is Sleeping Beauty). What results is not only meta-commentary on the fairytale as a construct, but a series of scenes that are both fright-filled:

I will do everything you tell me, Mother ...
... I will choke the mouse that gnaws
an apples tree's roots and keep its skin
for a glove. To the wolf, I will be
pretty and kind and curtsy
his crossing of my path...

(“Obedience, or The Lying Tale”)

and frightening:

Walnut, he calls me,

I only bite your hem. And it is true. It is
a tale Mother told
of the envelope. *Inside*, she said,
were morsels of women, skin ...

“Innocence Essay” (see latter excerpt above) becomes more disturbing as it moves forward. Because Mother’s “limbs were stitched in air,” she’s unable to protect the speaker from Father’s sexual advances, leaving daughter an “*infant*, Mother’s / mirror—half orphan, // half wife ...” Part of what saves the poem from sensationalism is word play:

I say *Go* but the word whistles.

Go is a kettle
gone weird on the stove. *Go*
is Father's left brow, left hand,
left-behind shoe. Take these

to the garden and bury them
in the muddy roots of my tree
and they will grow blue hemlock.

"Blue *hemlock*" (emphasis mine) echoes Father's recurring confession, "*I only bite your hem,*" which is shorthand for patterns of predatory behavior. Such repetition creates emphasis: throughout the poem, the statement resonates as half admission, half denial. Likewise, "*Go*" suggests multiple meanings. "I say *Go*," is self-instruction, an attempt at fear-induced flight. The impulse also sings, cries like "a kettle." Unfortunately, Father also "*goes*," or moves; his "left brow" raises, "left hand" wanders. These quick transformations work hard to suggest the speaker's psychological crisis, as well as the Father-daughter dynamic, without slipping into melodrama. The language is active. Such spontaneity enacts Father's impulsiveness. Here, instability at the level of language provides insight about the speaker's overall suffering and dilemma.

"I have a vision // you don't see," writes Chang, "a mind's pastoral, not secret / but unreachable // by road, sea, or thought" ("Postscript"). *The History of Anonymity* dissolves all things: time, bodies, culture, geography, individuality. If there were televisions in *Unction*, they'd run static; the local radio show would broadcast white noise. At a time when ironic detachment is poetic fashion, what separates *Anonymity* from similar projects is its oddity. In Chang's world, thirst is currency. Sister is a bowl of water. Rituals ("From trunk to trunk, we do / the strangle, we do the wicked pole-dance" ("Hunger Essay")) are anything but ordinary. Peculiarity results in particularity. Although, by title, the collection refuses claims of authorship, Chang's linguistic idiosyncrasies mark the debut of a distinct voice.



Kevin McFadden trades Chang's imagined landscapes for those inhabited: a road trip across America, *Hardscrabble* makes pit-stops in the "Famed Cities" of Zanesville, Akron, Jamestown, Cleveland, Harrisonburg, Pittsburgh, Toms Brook, Victorsville, etc. What McFadden contributes to *VQR*'s series isn't a joyride down US interstates and country back-roads, however, but a reverence for language ("Between here and there is a *t*. It astounds no one—nearly. It might astound me," ("It's Tarmac")), which he celebrates and investigates with the precision of an etymologist and anthropologist. While *Hardscrabble* visits landmarks including Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty, and Appomattox Courthouse, the collection's real attraction is the worn brickwork of speech, both poetic and colloquial. As a wordsmith, McFadden maps culture and history, chatting up the likes of Ginsberg, Plath, Frost, and Wheatley, among others, via anagrams, allusions, quotations, odes, and the lyric essay. At the crossroads between contemporary poetry and poetry of the past, no town is too small a destination, nor is any word. "Is," for instance, reads in its entirety:

written this way
to almost resemble

us:

half-straight,
half-sinuous.

The above example demonstrates McFadden's steadfast commitment to the roots of speech. While many writers wrestle with syllables, how many engage language at the level of the letter? What distinguishes the above from visual synopsis is the intimacy invited into the poem via the pronoun, "us." Bound by slant rhyme to descriptive qualifications introduced in lines four and five, the speaker's implied claim is that "I" [am] "half-straight," while "s" (i.e., you)

remains “half-sinuous.” Deceptively simple, the paired couplets (hinged by a floating line) mirror both couple and word in sight and sound. Although antithetical (vowel/consonant, horizontal/curvaceous, I/you), the pairing’s marriage makes both music and meaning.

McFadden’s careful consideration of word as both object and conduit encourages readers to recognize and reconnect with the very language they risk by taking it for granted. In this sense, *Hardscrabble* acknowledges the innate instability of the idiom: out of use or touch, words simply fall away. “The Classicist reads slowly,” McFadden reflects, “and he’s the one who knows six languages. That we learn to *read past* individual words to get to an overarching meaning is an unfortunate setback. A lot to learn when you take a word slow,” (“It’s Tarmac”). If McFadden comes across in the above passage as some stuck-in-the-mud headmaster, I assure you, he’s anything but. Part of what distinguishes the poet from his *VQR* counterparts is an inexhaustible wit and penchant for play. Puns and quick turns of phrasing are among *Hardscrabble*’s primary strategies. In “Toes,” for example, a protest bomb targets Cleveland’s bronze cast of Rodin’s *Thinker*. Rather than “knock / his cogitating block off,” the explosion “strike[s] so far below the belt,” destroying the statue’s toes, those “corny boasts of balance.” Risking what’s “corny” isn’t a pitfall McFadden seems to fear:

... Take that, Big T,
your two thug bigtoes too, and those eight little capitalist
piggies you trot around. Us, us, us, and the market—
that’s all you think about. We, we, we, all the way home.

What separates McFadden’s wordplay from self-congratulatory strokes of wit is a darker undercurrent, often political or satirical. Although the above lines lightheartedly echo a nursery rhyme (“This Little Piggy”), “We, we, we” is tugged from its original context and pitted against the repetitive phrase, “us, us, us.” Half rhyme binds “Big T” (Rodin’s *Thinker*) with “capitalist” and

"market," further emphasizing the motivation of "Cleveland's weekend anarchists." Though the tone is light, the social claim carries weight.

Throughout *Hardscrabble*, linguistic slippage not only serves as a source of anxiety and emphasis, but possibility. One of McFadden's favorite means of entering literary conversations is by way of anagrams. The poet transforms Langston Hughes' imperative, "*Let America be America again*," for example, into "Meditate Sea to Sea," a forty-line poem (part boast, part rant) that recycles and reconstructs the original phrase's twenty-four letters within each line:

... let America be a magic arena I
anagram. I bet I care (came a lie,
a clear image), I bet America an
animal acreage, I bet America
beer I can amalgamate air, ice- ...

McFadden engages in similar dialogues throughout the collection, riffing on lines by Walcott, Plath, Lowell, and Pound, among others. In "It's Tarmac," a twenty-nine page lyric essay/prose poem, the poet explains (at least in part) his formal motivations:

The anagrammarián knows flirtation is filtration. Knows danger was spelled into the garden. The runt will have his turn, the nomad his monad. From this knowledge, it becomes possible to play whichever part / trap will flatter the empire. Virgil's dying wish was that *The Aeneid* be burned. Verse may serve. Verse may sever.

In the seven sentences above, McFadden flips and turns letters and phrases like some linguistic acrobat. His subjects range from Biblical narrative to literary history, from the connectedness between politics and rhetoric to the art of *ars poetica*. Swiftiness of syntax and wit is signature McFadden. Whatever destination *Hardscrabble* reaches—Natural Bridge, Warm Springs, Allegheny Mountain—it doesn't rest there long. Throughout the book, etymological

curiosity is wanderlust; restlessness, a formal motivation. "Most scenery is lost on me," McFadden admits in "Names, Appalachia" (the final poem in the extended sequence, *Time*), "... You could say these mountains / blink back words like dust motes." Don't mistake McFadden's "dust" as the stuff of effigy, however. Language, for this poet, is living. "Don't be so certain the noun is dead," McFadden warns, "... Whatever's called / may be called up, called out, called back. In time. / These mountains are still appellations."



McFadden's living mountains give way to history's Great Plains in Cecily Parks' *Field Folly Snow*, whose poems are often populated, but as in a ghost town: "Along the highway there's a place / where nothing's left: suggestive mounds of dirt, / a marker to commemorate abandon" ("Folly"). The lyrics' phantom presence—usually female-identified—haunts the collection's Western landscape in the form of spinster, widow, wayward girl, the woman homesteader. Even those citizens identified by name remain more figures than flesh and blood. Such disembodied speakers support Parks' project of playing to and against type—or rather, archetype. By stocking the table of contents with classic models of the American West, Parks situates *Field Folly Snow* in seemingly familiar territory. From the first poem forward, however, the reader is wrenched into an alternative landscape in which the primary means of survival depends on "[re]tracing my boot steps / back to the fence where things went wrong" ("I Lost My Horse"). What further complicates *Field Folly Snow's* exploration of the past is its confrontation of and response to both danger and desire. One critical strategy: the book's supporting cast includes traditionally masculine roles such as Horsebreaker, Pistolsmith, Saddle Thief and Stream Warden. Rather than acting as heroes or story-makers, however, the male characters are most often spoken about or to. In this sense, Parks reverses expectations regarding history and gender, re-imagining the American West—in all its bleakness and beauty—through a decidedly feminist lens.

Of the collection's varied forms—prose poems, sonnets, personas, lyrics,

odes, the villanelle—the epistolary mode serves Parks particularly well. With the direct address comes increased intimacy, even if such surfacing is reluctant (“I am trying hard to make you look for me. No, I am trying to make it hard for you to look for me,” (“Letter to the Stream Warden”)), or ultimately thwarted (“No one noticed when the wife you meant to make of me went missing,” (“Letter to the Saddle Thief”)). Within this thread, “Letter to the Pistolsmith” best demonstrates Parks’ comingling of danger with desire:

As I watched my dog roll inside the ribcage of a long-dead cow
I thought of you ...

As is the case in the above example, which undercuts the bleak and often unforgiving Western terrain with faint traces of sentiment and nostalgia, the poem’s tension comes courtesy of turn and counterturn. Graphic description in the form of meandering sentences (“I smelled what it was that the cow was becoming and although the spires of her ribcage had been picked prettily clean, it may have only been a matter of weeks”) leads to the terse declaration, “We met once.” The nature of the speaker’s relationship with the Pistolsmith remains guarded. However, the gun’s characterization (“You talked of metal, wood and mother-of-pearl ...”) introduces a claim that quickly turns confession: “... I wanted to be a mother.” Moving from outer geography to inner landscape is a key strategy for Parks. In this case, death and weaponry elicit repressed fears about the dual / dueling roles of mother and maker.

The epistolary series is extended through the section-length “Letters of a Woman Homesteader,” which recycles language from published correspondence by Elinore Pruitt Stewart. The real counterpoint to the main body of letters, however, might be identified in “Dear William, the Cottonwoods Are Letting Go.” The poem’s tonal shift announces itself in the title: not only a nod to form, the “dear” in “Dear William ...” triggers pathos and underscores the first-personal connection between letter writer and recipient. What’s more, the poem’s meditation is linear, not circuitous; its wellspring is lyric, versus lightly surreal. Claims the speaker, the intoxicating trees are:

fringe, William,
all fringe. Gauze

and fuzz. Radiant
reproduction,

a flocking
through dissolution

announcing ripeness,
whitely. I have

been thinking:
A warm snow.

Flanked by poems whose speakers are reluctant to disclose, “Dear William ...” festers with emotion. Rather than rely on image to propel the poem’s plot, slant rhyme is its primary muscle. “Gauze” becomes “fuzz.” “Reproduction” leads to “dissolution.” “Flocking” is linked with “announcing,” as well as the penultimate turn toward “thinking.” That consciousness is transformed into “warm snow”—visually replicating the trees’ blossoms—is substantial, especially when measured against the weather’s grim underpinnings elsewhere in the collection. Here, snow is “warm.” Granted, the flakes’ (and by extension, beauty’s) demise is foretold via the qualification. For the moment, however, the landscape holds heat—physical and emotional.

A first book is often a poet’s calling card, a means of communal introduction. Parks chooses to reveal herself through a series of self-portraits in which she figures herself as machinery. Thus, according to *Field Folly Snow*, the poet is a constructed thing, a presence manifest by the self-study of man-made objects. Accumulatively, however, such poems are more *ars poetica* than personal composite:

Could I, I would sing a song of variation.

("Self-Portrait as Rain Gauge")

and

suspended. Set my pen

to drum, set my drum recording—

I am the instrument of your intensity ...

("Self-Portrait as Seismograph")

or

not one image holds up as vertically

as the mirror-calm sea. All my metaphors

are for looking backward ...

("Self-Portrait Which Makes Use of the Beaufort Scale")

More about Parks is gleaned from the book's frame, which consists of a pair of one-sentence poems. Each monostich introduces a claim central to the collection: "I could grow old again," and "Were I loved, I would be braver." Most telling, however, are the poems' titles—"The Wish for a Garden" and "The Wish for a Field," respectively. "Wish," a cousin to *Field Folly's* main source of emotional distress (that is, the instability introduced by desire), masks one of the book's most common words—"want." Whereas the book opens within a garden (a confined space managed into production), it locates its reader finally in a field—a place of openness and expanse. The early "Wish for a Garden" precedes "I Lost My Horse," a poem made of tight tercets in which the speaker

announces, "... I listened, wanting // (without my horse, my calf or lamb) to be / whipsmart rather than wanted." In stark contrast, the penultimate "Wish for a Field" introduces "Tecumseh and Ulysses and How Were Those for Names," a six-part lyric series in which formal structure is traded for shifting lines and exploration of white space. Here, perhaps for the first time, the speaker almost abandons fear in an effort to surrender to desire: "I have half a mind to swim / alone in the dirtiest circumstance I can stomach / off the slippery coast of serenity," writes Parks, who ultimately finds herself "sibilant as the ridge's incision / in a cumulonimbus / that will release the rain / that will release the landscape / from drought."

As was the case in the early American West, the residents of *Field Folly Snow* often find themselves in states of crisis. Although as a guide, I suspect Parks "only has at heart your getting lost" (she knows well the work of Robert Frost, as demonstrated by the half dozen titles borrowed from the poet's published *Notebooks*), the quest to make sense of "Our Despised and Historic West" is purposeful in its investigations, poetic in even its most dangerous ruminations.



Unlike Parks, who resurrects history in order to reclaim it, Patrick Phillips confronts a place where the past is the present, and the present the past. Of the *VQR* poets, Phillips is most invested in mining lived experience via narrative. Unlike Chang, McFadden, or Parks, whose discoveries often stem from linguistic invention or investigation, Phillips labors toward emotional epiphany by revisiting private history. Because his associations with boyhood and adulthood are often interchangeable, Phillips struggles throughout *Boy* to negotiate the consistent inconsistencies of young fatherhood and marriage. What Phillips faces are those instabilities arising from what might be described as the domestic sublime. Confronting, for the first time, parental privileges and responsibilities results in concurrent feelings of terror (often linked to the past):

... the fathers and the mothers
whose job it is to save us

are frail, or far away,
or gone forever to their graves

("Fever")

and, wonder (coded present):

... the sleeping, full,
rising and falling
white belly
of the perfect
blond blur
of the beautiful boy.

("Panegyric for Sid")

Is *Boy's* primary figure more son or father? The paradox, of course (and the book's primary source of tension), is that he is both. As emotional and chronological boundaries become increasingly confused, however, what remains clear is that "... we'll live there together. // Not as it was *to live* / but as it is remembered" ("Heaven").

The main challenge Phillips faces in recording memory-based narratives about his childhood and children is lapsing into the saccharine. Throughout *Boy*, specificity and concrete detail prove critical. In one instance, the reader is invited into the family home where s/he can "hear the Hot Wheel clatter / as it fishtails, and then flips" ("Kitchen"). The sensory appeals (sight and sound) not only locate the reader, but introduce an element of danger: play isn't idealized, but contains degrees of destruction and unpredictability. The aforementioned lines demonstrate Phillips' acknowledgement that there is mystery in precision. What pushes "Kitchen" past mere execution of craft is

the poet's deft negotiation of time. Locating a flashback in the present tense ("My sister's busy with her Barbies. / My brother in the fortress of his room"), the speaker then joins his mother beside the stove's "sweaty stockpot." At this point, the poem dissolves temporal restrictions and flashes forward:

... I alone sprawl at her feet—
 the same age and in
 exactly the same mood

as my son, now, in this kitchen
 where soon we will
 have lived so long ago.

Much like the opening tercet's toy car, chronological markers ("now," "we will," "so long ago") fishtail and flip. Here, the past collides with both future and present tenses, allowing Phillips to suggest nostalgia while resisting preciousness. As a result, "Kitchen" underscores generational conflation, without romanticizing what's immediate or remote.

Like "Kitchen," in "The Fixer" the poet depends upon the reader's understanding of "real" time to complicate the central project. Here, Phillips imbues the speaker-parent with god-like power: "They think I can fix anything," confesses the speaker, "... broken trucks and cracked race-tracks / and crickets cupped too tight." In this case, tension stems not from what's articulated ("They think that I can fix the ruined / world"), but what goes unsaid. While naïveté allows the children to believe their father all-knowing and powerful, the reader understands well his human limitations. Although the kids' demands are met for the moment ("a perfect cricket flickering / from any hand they choose"), the glitch is time. Despite the poem's optimistic final gesture, both speaker and reader know that soon the children will discover their father's all-too-human vulnerability. Phillips' use of dramatic irony (a tactic that recurs throughout the collection) heightens the poem's tension, further emphasizing the interconnectedness of fear, discovery, and wonder accompanying the domestic sublime.

Another strategy Phillips employs to resist sentimentality is pitting grit against the romantic. In "Star Quilt," the title's somewhat poeticized symbol is immediately undercut by the introduction of "piss," "vomit," and "dried cum-spots." According to the poem, Phillips' inheritance includes not only a family artifact, but the physical residue of his ancestors. Introducing mundane details provides Phillips room to turn toward tenderness and elation. Soon, the "motley / of threadbare old scraps" becomes a text that carries the history of "the seed of the seed / of the seed of a miner // and his tender bride ...". While this example operates at the micro-level, such juxtapositions occur poem-to-poem as well. Narratives introducing physical crises including injury, accidents, and illness ("Revelation," "What Happens," "Fever,") find counterparts in more optimistic meditations on love and celebration ("Untitled," "6:12," "Falling"). To cast further suspicion on the invincible role of parent-as-protector, Phillips includes allusions to historical crimes and suffering: "Poem about Sparrows" makes reference to Dauchau and Bergen-Belsen, for example, while "Ars Poetica" takes the Titanic's sinking as its subject.

Formal pressure remains perhaps Phillips' most successful means of extending the public reach of private experience, while countering feelings of instability. Taken together, "Living" and "Heaven" demonstrate the poet's skillful use of structure, slant rhyme, syntactic compression and the refrain. While both poems' diction and syntax are simple ("I laugh my father's laugh. / It has no other home" ("Living") and "It will be the past / and we'll live there together" ("Heaven")), quick shifts and minor substitutions increase the couplets' intellectual and emotional heat, further underscoring mirrored behavior between father and son. "Living" binds the *past* with *pass*, *half*, *photographs*, *laugh* and *myth* via slant rhyme. Likewise, the speaker's *own* life is transformed into *grown*, *son*, *home*, which are punctuated finally at the grave-marker as *stone*. In "Heaven," entire sentences are recycled with subtle but substantial changes. The poem's investment in primarily monosyllabic phrases ("It will be the past. / We'll all go back together") creates urgency and continuity. Whereas the majority of *Boy's* poems are narrative, "Living" and "Heaven" offer meditations on that moment when "the endless dream / of childhood ended" ("In the

Beginning"). Rather than simply restage a domestic event, these lyrics work hard to suggest the collection's project; that is, the conflicting feelings of grief and wonder experienced when first entering into parenthood.



Boy's second-book status foreshadows what's to come: this fall, the University of Georgia Press releases sophomore collections by Victoria Chang (*Salvinia Molesta*) and Ted Genoways (*Anna, Washing*). By spring, The VQR Poetry Series will roll out Susan B.A. Somers-Willer's second book, *Quiver*, in addition to *Free Union*, John Casteen's debut. As the series continues to build its reputation, what's evident is the solidity of its foundation, given the diverse poetics and points of view offered by Chang, McFadden, Parks and Phillips.

After twenty-two years as Editor of the Contemporary Poetry Series, Bin Ramke's 2005 retirement offered University of Georgia Press an opportunity. Rather than rest on its contributions to the Cave Canem Poetry Prize (UGA publishes every third winner in a joint effort with Graywolf and University of Pittsburgh Press), as well as the *AWP* Award Series, UGA continues to expand its reach by bolstering its index with emerging authors discovered outside the contest system. Harkening back to what Genoways described in a recent article in *Poets & Writers* as "the grand old poetry series," *VQR's* debut catalog is proof positive that there's talent waiting to be published—no entry fee required.

The Sign for Drowning

by Rachel Stolzman | review by Irene Keliber

Trumpeter, 2008, 192 pp., \$19.95

Writers everywhere tire of hearing, “show, don’t tell.” Plenty of authors tell like crazy, we say to each other. Crack open James or Chekhov or Rushdie, and “telling” sentences abound. But telling description is one thing; being too heavy-handed or explanatory about the capital-I “Issues” is another. As Chekhov famously noted, an artist doesn’t need to solve the world’s problems, just present those problems “correctly.”

Rachel Stolzman’s debut novel, *The Sign for Drowning*, doesn’t uniformly violate Chekhov’s rule. She can write a deft, resonant scene, and at their best her characters both personify and defy the Issues (in this case, about deafness) that surround them. In her review of the novel, Julia Glass writes, “At a time when cool, ironic fiction is too much the rage, here is a novel written straight from the heart.” She has a point. The novel grapples with grief and parenthood, loss and renewal, and isn’t afraid to be poignant or present its big questions. However, its very beauty and seriousness can obscure its most interesting emotional territory. This is partly organic to the narrative—the protagonist, Anna, is so grief-stricken that only her memories are fully formed amidst a fragmented present. But it’s also because Stolzman is sometimes so caught up with telling the reader about deafness, she forgets her characters.

Those characters are certainly compelling. Anna, the adult protagonist, is hollowed by grief. Her younger sister drowned when she was eight, leaving her an only child and her parents bereft. No one in the family has recovered from Megan’s drowning; Anna’s relationship with her mother is especially strained. As a child Anna developed a fascination with sign language, believing she could communicate with her dead sister. That led to a career as a teacher of deaf children. She remains isolated, however; hers is a quiet, dark voice. Only her adoption of a young deaf girl, Adrea, forces her to negotiate the past and live more fully in the present.

We meet little Adrea at the beginning of chapter one and her adoption is finalized by page twenty-nine. This initial section contains the heart of the book, and I wish Stolzman had lingered there. The rest of the nearly two-hundred-page novel alternates between exploring questions about deaf identity, culture, and education; Anna's and Adrea's evolving relationship; and Anna's family and past. Sometimes the three strands weave together effectively, but elsewhere, they seem awkwardly grafted onto each other.

Despite this, Stolzman's powerful language is reason for reading. The prologue, which narrates Megan's drowning, dazzles: the "undertow slips like a fluid carpet toward the ocean's vast center and the whole sea heaves its chest," and simpler but equally evocative: "we were girls, with lungs, not gills." Shortly after, our first glimpse of Adrea shows us "braids curving ... like rivers." From there, Stolzman shows us Anna and Adrea's increasing connection and Anna's decision to adopt the five-year-old.

Anna and Adrea must negotiate their new relationship both in and outside the domestic space. The best moments show Anna's concerns about not sharing Adrea's identity and particular otherness. Anna's lover Pablo writes a stunning poem for Adrea, which Anna both loves and suspects, fearing that both she and Pablo exoticize Adrea's deafness. Later, a deaf furniture seller questions Anna's motives for enrolling Adrea in a speech course, and when Anna takes her to that course, she feels left out observing the deaf children struggling with sound.

Anna's musings, though, are often more forced than this. When a friend points out that Adrea might not relate to a quote Anna has painted on her kitchen table, which ends "a song in my heart," the gentle admonition is poignant enough. Yet Stolzman tacks on: "Had I excluded Adrea by painting those words on our table?" The novel feels most didactic when it doesn't give readers the benefit of the doubt. Stolzman assumes a reader who knows nothing about deafness and can't fill in the gaps. For instance, the question of whether deafness is a handicap comes up two-thirds of the way through. An astute reader doesn't need, by this point, the following conversation between Anna and Adrea:

"She said she had a house for handicapped children, that was her job."

"For deaf children," I corrected. "Being deaf can be considered a handicap, what do you think of that?"

When Adrea responds, Anna wonders: "If this whole, wise child was considered handicapped, then shouldn't I be?" It's not an unimportant question, but the reader has already been asking it. Here and elsewhere, particularly in Book Two, Stolzman wavers between giving a primer on deafness and exploring the darker territory with which she opens the novel.

She returns to that territory by the end, and the novel's ultimate tragedy and redemption—quiet, shattering—resonate long after closing the book. The final images, as Anna returns to the place of her sister's death, are transcendent, and left me wishing the rest of the book had moved unerringly towards them.

The Age of Shiva

by Manil Suri | review by Oindrila Mukherjee

WW Norton & Company, 2008, 448 pp., \$14.95

Manil Suri's second novel is named after another Hindu god in the Holy Trinity. This time it's a god worshipped by many Hindu women as an ideal husband. So it isn't too surprising to find that this is the story of a woman who is trapped (like so many female protagonists in novels by South Asian writers) in a life of thwarted dreams and a dutiful, if unsatisfying, marriage.

The novel begins with images of breastfeeding that curiously conflate the newborn son with a lover, foreshadowing one of the main themes of the book—how a woman, disappointed in marriage, finds solace in the company of her son. But the first part of the book is not a predictable story of an arranged marriage. In quite an intriguing plot, the narrator, the teenage Meera, is infatuated with her older sister's boyfriend Dev. In a twist of fate she finds herself being married off to him and forced to move from her life of privilege to the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Nizamuddin, where she must cohabit with Dev's family in a total of two rooms.

The Hindi movie industry, either affectionately or dismissively called Bollywood these days, plays an important role in the book. Dev aspires to be a playback singer, and it is his dream of making it big that takes the couple to Bombay. But fantasies about the movies are not his alone. Meera indulges in them as an escape and a narrative device which works quite well. The fact that life is not as romantic as in the movies is brought out by both the plot as well as the contrasting images between her dreams and reality.

This is really the story of a young woman who is forced by circumstances to live a life she does not want. While she bravely tries to adjust to her in-laws, learning gradually to love them, and later in Bombay, attempts to go back to school and even work at a job to support her family, her loneliness and subsequent bitterness infect every aspect of her life. Meera is no saint. We are constantly reminded that her fate has largely been determined by her own foolishness, her lack of sympathy for her husband, and her obsessive love for her young son. But

through all the errors and mood swings, it's hard not to sympathise with the person who is controlled so brutally by her father, and who finds herself in an utterly helpless position with very little if any light at the end of the tunnel.

The big weakness in the novel is the narrative voice when it directly addresses the son. While the whole story is told to the son by the mother, it is when Meera shifts her focus from narrating events, to using the second person to tell Ashvin how she felt, what he looked like, what they ate, and so on, that the voice seems stilted, sentimental, and just plain boring. Here's an instance when Meera is telling Ashvin how he enjoyed the monsoons when he was younger:

You loved this wet tromping, smiling for perhaps the first time in months ... The next morning, the school bus didn't show, and we had to walk to the Best bus stop. You slogged along at my side, your boots getting heavier with each step ... The next morning, you even wore socks, just so you could squeeze them out when they got waterlogged.

There are pages and pages of such events, which perhaps belong more in a child-rearing journal than a novel.

Suri's greatest strength is in portraying a variety of lively and endearing characters. Like his earlier book, *The Death of Vishnu*, here too he creates some memorable characters such as Meera's arrogant and overbearing father who schmoozes with politicians and tries to control his daughters' lives. Then there's Roopa, Meera's sister, and Dev's original lover, who is self-absorbed, vain, and spiteful; Hema, Dev's little sister, a silly, mischievous livewire; the somewhat saintly Sandhya whose life is tragic from beginning to end; the rather creepy Arya, Dev's brother who lusts after Meera throughout his life; and finally there's Dev, the weak husband who dreams of becoming a famous Bollywood singer, but who never seems to have any control over his life.

There are some poignant and touching moments in *The Age of Shiva*, like the one on the roof of the apartment building in Bombay, when the lights are out and Meera dances while breastfeeding her baby, or the times when Dev lapses into old, melancholic song despite the lack of audience or reward. Descriptions

of the working-class parts of Nizamuddin, where two couples must share a single bedroom, are vivid and fun. In fact, the first part of the novel, set in Delhi, with delightful scenes such as the one where the entire neighbourhood is excited and envious at the arrival of a luxury gadget such as a refrigerator as part of the bride's dowry, is very interesting. But the second half of the book slows down considerably and becomes repetitive. The weaving in of real political events such as India's war with Pakistan in 1971 and the Emergency is helpful, but still the mother's voice talking to her son sounds a little bit like a nagging mom. It's hard to imagine the growing boy actually paying much attention to this voice. This is not to say that nothing significant happens towards the end of the book. But a lot of pages are dedicated to describing Meera's boredom, and as in many cases of mimetic fallacy, these pages might bore the reader as well.

Those who (like me) loved Suri's earlier novel may be a little disappointed by this book, especially because the promise of the first section is not fulfilled in the latter stages. But it would be an interesting read for anyone who wants a clue about India in the years immediately following independence. As the blurb points out, the growth of the independent Indian nation parallels the life of Meera, and historical and cultural references make this a passable read.

A Comprehensive Review

Demonstrating the Final Dying Notes of American Self-Analysis I Guess

Glenn Shabeen



Wild Goods by Denise Newman

I just read this book for a class, and I have to say it's pretty great. Denise Newman emotionally navigates the boundaries between birth and death, as well as the religious implications of good living. The most powerful section is the second section, in which she uses the chapters of an old monastic guide as poem titles and questions the emotional ramifications of the finite. It's imaginatively powerful, and you should buy it right now why don't ya.

RATING: 83%



Dance Dance Revolution by Cathy Park Hong

When I was reading this book I told my friend Paul I was having trouble getting into it because it really didn't have any kind of emotion in it. Paul said that was why he liked it, maybe because he's a cold bastard or something (who am I, his therapist?) But the book does navigate some interesting territory regarding the way we use and transform language. It takes place in a fictional city called Desert, in which the residents use a pidgin English derived from many other languages. It was really engaging, and for a book of poetry the fictional world was surprisingly fleshed out. But clocking in at over a hundred pages, it's too tough to maintain the innovation of linguistic play.

RATING: 59%



The Trend of Graphic Novels

I have a bone to pick with everybody who is hopping on the graphic novel / comic bandwagon right now. It turns out every literary person thinks they can be the next Marjane Satrapi and just pump out a story of his/her life and have a movie or award thrown their way, even though *Persepolis* is the only thing like that they've ever read. Well, I'm here to say step off, motherfuckers. I collected *Darkhawk* for forty issues in the early '90s and have eight long boxes of comics that grow every Wednesday. If you have no idea what the previous sentence means, then don't ever try to write a graphic novel, poser.

RATING: 23%



Captain America

(ongoing series written by Ed Brubaker with art by Steve Epting)

Most of you probably think that superhero books are for kids and people who live in their mother's basement, but 1) you are mistaken, buddy, and 2) fuck you! A lot of the great superhero books being written right now have extremely intricate plots and subplots and subsubplots, and are more interested in the inner workings of the characters in the book than punches and explosions. In fact, if a typical kid picked up a superhero book these days they would probably get bored immediately, because it's not uncommon for a book just to have talking for a whole issue. Anyway, *Captain America* is one of the best, and its forty-some issues (by the time this review is published) have dealt with the slow, meticulous unfolding of a nefarious plot by Cap's arch-nemesis the ex-Nazi leader Red Skull. As I'm sure most of you know, Captain America died last year, but his former sidekick has replaced him, and now we mainly follow his inner struggles as he tries to take on the supposed embodiment of an entire nation's ideals.

RATING: 89%

Stuff White People Like

(stuffwhitepeoplelike.wordpress.com)



This is a blog devoted to talking about things white people supposedly unequivocally like, although I think it should be renamed "Stuff Yuppies Like." Anyway, I thought this was a funny idea, because white people are funny, but now that I've read a lot of their website I realize that it is a way for people (white people) to come together and celebrate white people (yuppies) under the guise of insulting them. "Ahh, it's so funny that white people like to have a black friend and it's true because I am white and I have one black friend because she is black so I will continue to do that because I'm white" is the inner monologue that is probably indicative of most inner monologues of readers of this site. Also, its white yuppie creators got signed a multi-million-dollar book deal to turn the website into a book, so good job making moderately rich white people even moderately richer. I'm going to start a blog called "Stuff Arabs Like" and number one is going to say "MONEY PLEASE GIVE ME SOME NOW WHITEY."

RATING: 6%

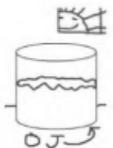
Pens



I like pens, and maybe I like gel pens the most. Does that make me a thirteen-year-old girl? I think Shia LaBeouf is sooo hot omg.

RATING: 72%

Orange Juice



There are a lot of juices out there, from apple to pomegranate, but if you walk into a breakfast place, what are you probably going to see next to everybody's eggs? That's right—orange juice. Oranges are a

fruit filled with conflict. They taste delicious, but peeling them is a real bitch. So one way to solve that quandary is by drinking orange juice. It is delicious, and you don't have to peel it very often, unless you count opening the carton as peeling it. Also, if you get high-pulp, it's very much like eating an orange—so you can thank me for solving all your life's deepest problems later, bucko.

RATING: 92%



Baby Barnaby's

If you come to Houston, and I'm sure you will (it doesn't suck as much as you think), then you've got to get breakfast at Baby Barnaby's. It's just a breakfast place, and it closes at twelve on weekdays, but you need to get the Green Eggs and Sausage plate, because when I did the other day I literally thought to myself if a plane crashed on the restaurant right then as I was eating breakfast then my life would have been just as full and complete as I could have ever asked for it to be. Sorry to all my friends who asked me to go there to eat with them all these years and I never believed you. I feel like the douchebag who refused to believe in Jesus and then all of a sudden it's the Rapture. PS—I don't believe in Jesus.

RATING: 96%



Midnights by Jane Miller

It's always interesting when a poet makes a dramatic shift in style. Jane Miller's last book, *A Palace of Pearls*, is one of my favorite books, and this one is as much of a dramatic shift as dramatic shifts come from the dramatic shift store. *Midnights* is filled with narrative prose pieces dealing with meditations on life and col-

lapse, punctuated by Rothkoesque paintings by Beverly Pepper. It's amazing how strong Miller is within the narrative prose pieces, although the strongest parts of the book are the "Night Under Water" poems she includes throughout, all inspired by wonderful poet (and *Gulf Coast Poetry Editor*) Brian Russell. It's a great book from one of the great living poets, so why aren't you driving to the store right now to pick it up?

RATING: 79%



***Bleach* by Nirvana**

Everybody knows that *In Utero* is one of the best albums of all time (if you don't then newsflash), but not everybody is as familiar with Nirvana's first album with Sub Pop, *Bleach*. Released in 1989, it doesn't have a whole lot in common with the next studio efforts Nirvana would make. It demonstrates the similarity of style Seattle-area grunge was known for, but it doesn't have the wit that made *Nevermind* and *In Utero* such massive hits. It's still hard-rocking and fun to listen to, but it doesn't do much more than that, ultimately.

RATING: 61%



***The Odd Couple* by Gnarl's Barkley**

I don't know why so many people are down on this album, because I have to say it's pretty good. It's danceable, the music is complexly layered and varied in style, and the lyrics are intricately woven. I think it's a better album than Gnarl's Barkley's first album. Though I guess you shouldn't buy it if

you're worried about accidentally starting to dance in front of your banker friends while they're counting money or something and this is on in the background.

RATING: 78%



Star Trek: The Next Generation

In the spirit of journalistic integrity (if I actually have any left at this point), I must state for the record that since I was three I have been a huge fan of the original *Star Trek* show. Sure, it was weird, and everybody likes to pretend William Shatner is a worse actor than they could probably be, but it was incredibly endearing, and the sci-fi plots were incredibly complex for prime-time-television fare (they had some of the top science fiction writers plotting episodes). The problem with TNG, as it is known to nerds all over, is that it lasted for four seasons longer than TOS. Therefore, it had a lot more chances to get boring and stiff, and also deal with stupid plots including things like the crew throwing a birthday surprise party and meanwhile Captain Picard was crying his eyes out or something. Real deep, guys, real deep.

RATING: 67%

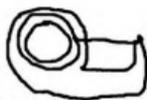


The World Is Not Enough

This is the third Bond movie Pierce Brosnan made, and in my opinion the best, although in everybody else's opinion it is the worst. I guess there are a couple problems. One, it is trying to be a bit darker, kind of like why people liked *Casino Royale* (but didn't like the Timothy Dalton ones?), but Bond says these horrible

corny puns like every other line, and Two, Denise Richards is fucking terrible in it, and I mean the worst. I know the movie is ridiculous with the helicopters with buzz-saws on them, but because Pierce Brosnan is acting well, it works. It's just that every time Richards opens her mouth (and she's a nuclear physicist, by the by) I remember how stupid the whole fiasco is. Oh well, at least it has some great action scenes, which is all you need from these movies in the end.

RATING: 72%



Tape,
motherfuckers

Scotch Tape

Scotch tape is a good kind of tape because sometimes you might want to tape something together and not have it be obvious like if you used masking tape. So I recommend scotch tape for all invisible taping needs, although if you have cats like I do don't leave it lying around or else it will get all gross and full of cat hair.

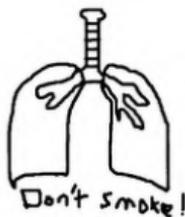
RATING: 65%



Washing One's Dishes

This is an activity that sucks big time. For instance, if I want to make dinner but haven't done the dishes in two weeks then tough shit for me. "Well why haven't you done the dishes in two weeks, Glenn?" you might ask, to which I would reply, "Hey, why are you in my apartment, weirdo?" Anyway, the good thing about washing the dishes is that you can drink from the Starship Enterprise glass because it is clean for once.

RATING: 27%

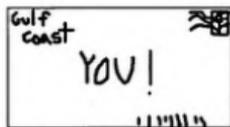


Breathing

I have to give a lot of points to breathing because if we didn't breathe then it would be all over. See, our cells need oxygen to generate energy to carry out essential metabolic actions through a process known as oxidative phosphorylation, so breathing is a good way to get those cells that oxygen. Breathing can sometimes

hurt like when you are out of shape like me and run around more than usual, or when it is really cold outside, or when a spy puts poison gas in your apartment to kill you. But those things are pretty negligible when you look at the bad side of not breathing at all, which is death.

RATING: 98%



Getting The Mail

Boy, we would all be lying if we said we didn't like the first half of getting the mail, that is the part where one walks to the mailbox and is about to open it. What could be in there? A million dollars accidentally sent our way? An acceptance from a journal? The book we ordered from Amazon? Maybe just a DVD from Netflix at least? But then we open the mailbox, beginning the second half of getting the mail: crushing disappointment. It's either all bills or junk or a rejection from *Gulf Coast* for the eighteenth time this year. Oh well, there's always tomorrow.

RATING: 50%



Meat

Meat is a thing that is delicious to eat unless you are a vegetarian—excuse me, I mean a vegetarian. As sentient beings, it is our duty to cause as much pain to other beings as possible, and since we don't know of any alien planets to mercilessly conquer (yet) we must resort to crushing the lower beings here on earth. And by that I mean making stew, steak, chicken sandwiches, barbecue, jerky, and breakfast cereals made from meat (it's coming, trust me). Ok, I apologize for being so crude earlier, but I had not yet gotten my dose of murdered baby cow for the day so I was feeling cranky. My bad, grandma.

RATING: 76%



Glenn Shaheen

Well, Shaheen meets all requirements for being a human, and basically tries to help people when they are in trouble, like this one time when a van full of people pulled up into his parking lot and they threw a guy on the ground and were going to beat him up with a bat, so Shaheen called 911 but then they all left and he just told the operator to forget about it. Major points off for being cynical and thinking he's a lot funnier than he actually is. Also he stepped on a snail the other day, and his apartment is full of fire ants. Actually, you know what? Fuck this asshole.

RATING: 1%

You can find more ridiculous reviews such as these at
<http://reviewsreviewsreviews.blogspot.com>

Victoria Anderson lives in Chicago where she heads the Writing Program and teaches Creative Writing at Loyola University. She is the recipient of a 2007 Illinois Arts Council Grant in poetry and the author of *This Country or That*. She has had poems appear recently in *Agni* and *Greensboro Review* and has work forthcoming in *ACM*.

Elizabeth Arnold's second book of poems, *Civilization*, appeared in 2006 from Flood Editions. She teaches in the MFA program at the University of Maryland and lives outside Washington, DC.

Hannah Baker is a PhD student in English at the University of York in England. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland in 2006. She has published in *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The New Republic*.

Christopher Bakken is co-translator of *The Lions' Gate: Selected Poems of Titos Patrikiou*. He is also the author of two books of poems: *After Greece* and *Goat Funeral* (awarded the Helen C. Smith prize by the Texas Institute of Letters for the best book of poetry in 2006).

Aaron Balkan grew up in Arizona and lives in Brooklyn. He rules the roost at www.tacosavantgarde.com.

Brook Erin Barman currently lives in Southern California where she works as a poet, photographer, and installation artist. Her work has been published in *Picayune Literary Review*, *Pacific Review*, and *Red Wheelbarrow Magazine*. She was the Louise Mead Creative Writing Fellow at Syracuse University after receiving her Bachelor's Degree in Fine Art from San Diego State University. She wants to move to Texas and is currently completing her first chapbook.

Andrew Brininstool's work has received the 2007 Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award from *Mid-American Review*, the Editors' Prize from *New Ohio Review*, Runner-Up notation from the *Playboy* College Fiction Contest and a nomination for *Best New American Voices 2010*. He lives in Dallas, Texas and is at work on a novel.

Margarita Cabrera is an El Paso-based sculptor and multi-media artist whose installations frequently tackle issues concerning the Mexican-American border. She studied at the Maryland Institute of Art and earned her MFA from Hunter College in New York. Her work has been featured in many galleries, including Holland's RKS Gallery, the Walter Maciel Gallery in Los Angeles, and the Sara Meltzer Gallery in New York.

Born in Appalachia, **Sean Morrissey Carroll** spent the first four years of his life in an Amish town, but grew up in Western New York. After having a lovely conversation about writing with someone at the Honors College at the University of Houston, Sean decided to move to Texas. He has been hanging out with anarchists and artists in Houston since 1998. After several years with the art collectives Toe Wurf and The Shitbox, Sean became a curator, organizing nearly thirty events and exhibits. In the past ten years Sean has worked as a butcher, editor, vintage fashion exporter, waiter, satellite installer, writer, ditch digger, political cartoonist, and phone operator. Sean just got married to Leticia Ochoa and he loves her very much.

Jonathan Coleman is a senior studying Literary Arts at Brown University. He reads critical thinkers (in both senses) and listens to hip hop. He coordinates a program which runs creative arts workshops in the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institute.

Colin Cheney teaches in the Expository Writing Program at New York University. His poems have appeared recently in, or are forthcoming from, *Ploughshares*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Kenyon Review Online*. In 2006, Mr. Cheney was awarded a Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. He lives in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, NY.

Sarah Cornwell is an MFA candidate at the Michener Center for Writers at UT Austin. Her work has appeared in *580 Split* and *Shaping the Story*, a guide to fiction writing.

Nick Courtright lives in Austin, Texas, where he dabbles in music journalism and pedagogy. His poetry is forthcoming or has very recently appeared in *The Kenyon Review Online*, *The Iowa Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *New Orleans Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Redivider*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Connecticut Review*, and *Salamander*, among others. Some of his writing can be found at tier3.wordpress.com.

Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian writer, was known as one of the most prominent and innovative Arab poets. He received numerous international awards, including the Lannan for Cultural Freedom, the French Knight of Letters, and Holland's Prins Claus, among others. His most recent poetry in English is collected in *The Butterfly's Burden*, translated by Fady Joudah and published by Copper Canyon Press. *The Butterfly's Burden* recently won the Saif Shobash Banipal Prize, a UK-based award for Arab translation.

Jordan Davis's poems and essays have appeared in *Chicago Review* and *The Nation*. He is an editor of *The Hat* and a columnist for *The Constant Critic*. He lives in New York City with his son and his wife, the poet Alison Stine.

Adam Day was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, and earned his MFA at New York University. He helps coordinate the Sarabande Reading Series and the Baltic Writing Residency in Latvia. He won the 2008 Phyllis Smart Young Prize in Poetry from the *Madison Review*, and was a finalist for the 2005 and 2007 "Discovery"/*The Nation* contest, and for Colgate University's 2007 and 2008 Olive B. O'Connor Fellowship. Most recently his work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the *Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Antioch Review*, and elsewhere.

Carl Dennis's most recent book of poems, *Unknown Friends*, was published by Penguin in 2007. Penguin published his *New and Selected Poems, 1974-2004* in 2004.

Jan Ellison lives in Northern California with her husband and their four children. She holds an MFA from San Francisco State University, and her stories have appeared in *New England Review* and *The Hudson Review*. She is the recipient of a 2007 O. Henry Prize and special mentions in the Pushcart Prize and Best American Short Stories anthologies.

Thalia Field has published *Point and Line* (New Directions, 2000), *Incarnate: Story Material* (New Directions, 2004), and *Ululu (Clown Sbrapnel)* (Coffee House Press, 2007).

Tom Fleischmann's work has appeared in journals such as *Pleiades*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Quarterly West*. He is an MFA candidate in the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program and the Assistant Nonfiction Editor of *DIAGRAM*.

Sandy Florian is the author of *Telescope* (Action Books), *32 Pedals & 47 Stops* (Tarpaulin Sky Press), and *The Tree of No* (forthcoming from Action Books) of which "Festoons & Astragals" is an excerpt. Other excerpts appear in */nor*, *bird dog*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, and *Octopus*.

Nathaniel Foster is entering his final year in the MFA program at George Mason University, where he teaches writing and just wrapped up a stint as editor of *Phoebe*.

Allison Funk has published three books of poems: *The Knot Garden* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2002); *Living at the Epicenter* (Northeastern University Press, 1995); and *Forms of Conversion* (Alice James Books, 1986). She is Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where she is also an editor of *Sou'wester Magazine*.

John Gallaher is the author of *Gentlemen in Turbans*, *Ladies in Cauls*, and *The Little Book of Guesses*. Recent poems appear in *New American Writing*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Best American Poetry*. He lives in rural Missouri and co-edits *The Laurel Review*.

Sarah Gridley is Poet in Residence and a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Case Western Reserve University. She received an MFA in poetry from the University of Montana in 2000. The University of California Press, Berkeley published her book, *Weather Eye Open*, in 2005. Poems from a new manuscript have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *NEO*, *Harp and Altar*, *Crazyhorse*, *jubilat*, *Denver Quarterly*, *New American Writing*, and *Chicago Review*.

Jonathan Hall lives and teaches in Western Massachusetts.

Forrest Hamer is the author of three books of poems—*Call & Response* (1995), winner of the Beatrice Hawley Award from Alice James Books, *Middle Ear* (2000), winner of the Northern California Book Award, and *Rift* (2007). He is an Oakland, California psychoanalyst.

Barry Hannah is the author of thirteen novels and short story collections, including *Geronimo Rex* (1972), *Airships* (1978), *Bats out of Hell* (1993), *High Lonesome* (1996), *Boomerang* (1989), *Never Die* (1991), and *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001). He has received the William Faulkner Prize, an Award for Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Arnold Gingrich Short Fiction Award, and has been nominated for a National Book Award.

James Harms is the author of five books of poetry from Carnegie Mellon University Press, most

recently *After West* (2008). He has received an NEA Fellowship, the PEN/Revson Fellowship and three Pushcart Prizes, among other awards. He teaches in the MFA Program at West Virginia University.

Endi Bogue Hartigan's first book, *One Sun Storm*, was selected for the 2008 Colorado Prize for Poetry and will be released in November, 2008. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Free Verse*, *TinFish*, *LVNG*, and *New Orleans Review*. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and son.

David Hernandez's poetry collections include *Always Danger* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), winner of the Crab Orchard Series, and *A House Waiting for Music* (Tupelo Press, 2003). His poems have appeared in *FIELD*, *Ploughshares*, *The Missouri Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *AGNI*, and *The Southern Review*. Visit his website at www.DavidAHernandez.com.

Fady Joudah is a physician. His first book, *The Earth in the Attic*, received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 2007. He is also the translator of Mahmoud Darwish's most recent English-language volume of poetry, *The Butterfly's Burden*, from Copper Canyon Press. *The Butterfly's Burden* was short-listed for the PEN Poetry-in-Translation Award in 2007, and recently received the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize, a UK-based award for Arab translation.

Genevieve Kaplan has recently published poems in *Elimac*, *jubilat*, and *The Hat*. She lives in Claremont, CA, where she edits the Toad Press International chapbook series, which focuses on contemporary translation.

Irene Keliher's work recently placed third in the *Atlantic Monthly* Student Writing Contest and has been a finalist in the *Glimmer Train* Very Short Fiction and *Third Coast* Fiction Contests. Her stories have also appeared in the *Mississippi Review* online, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Thema*, and the *Charles River Review*. She's an MFA student at the University of Houston, where she is a Fiction Editor for *Gulf Coast*.

Karla Kelsey is author of the chapbook *Little Dividing Doors in the Mind* (Noemi Press) and the full-length book of poetry, *Knowledge, Forms, the Aviary* (Ahsakta Press).

Joanna Klink's most recent book of poems is *Circadian* (Penguin, 2007). She teaches in the MFA Program at the University of Montana.

Roula Konsolaki is co-translator of *The Lions' Gate: Selected Poems of Titos Patrikios* (Truman State University Press), as well as several volumes of translations from French and English into Modern Greek. She lives in Chania, Crete.

Chang-rae Lee is the author of three novels: *Native Speaker*, *A Gesture Life*, and *Aloft*. His novels have won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, the Barnes & Noble Discover Award, and the Anisfield-Wolf Literary Award.

His stories and articles have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Time* (Asia), *Granta*, and elsewhere. Born in Seoul, Korea, Mr. Lee was educated at Phillips Exeter, Yale, and the University of Oregon, and he is currently a professor at Princeton University, where he teaches creative writing.

David Dodd Lee is the author of the forthcoming *Automatic Thank-You Kisses* (Four Way Books, 2009), as well as four other books, including *Abrupt Rural* (New Issues, 2004) and *Arrow Pointing North* (Four Way Books, 2002). He has recently completed a book of Ashbery erasure poems, and is editing poetry for the spring 2009 issue of *The Laurel Review*. He teaches in Indiana.

Hailey Leithauser lives outside of Washington DC, where she is the full-time servant to an imperial coonhound. She has recent or forthcoming poems in *Pleiades*, *POOL*, *Cave Wall*, *Subtropics*, and other journals.

Shara Lessley was the 2007-2008 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 or are forthcoming in the *Kenyon Review*, *AGNI*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *Ploughshares*.

Dana Levin's books are *In the Surgical Theatre* (APR) and *Wedding Day* (Copper Canyon Press). A 2007 Guggenheim Fellow, she chairs the Creative Writing and Literature Department at College of Santa Fe.

Samuel Ligon is the author of the novel *Safe in Heaven Dead*. His stories have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Post Road*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Quarterly*, *Sleepingfish*, *The Empty Page: An Anthology of Fiction Inspired by Sonic Youth*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Other Voices*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Eastern Washington University and edits *Willow Springs*.

James McCorkle is the author of *Evidences*, which received the 2003 APR / Honickman Award. His poetry has recently appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Boston Review*, *Boulevard*, *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Fence*, and *Web-Conjunctions*. He lives in Geneva, New York where he teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

Campbell McGrath is the author of seven books of poetry, most recently *Seven Notebooks* (Ecco, 2008.) He teaches at Florida International University in Miami, where he is the Frost Professor of Creative Writing.

Heather McHugh is Milliman Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Washington in Seattle, and a regular visitor to the low-residency MFA program at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC. Her most recent collection of poems was *Eyeshot* (Wesleyan University Press); her essays are collected in a volume called *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (Wesleyan University Press).

Christopher McIlroy is the author of the collection *All My Relations*, which received the Flannery O'Connor Award. He lives in Arizona, where he co-founded the non-profit ArtsReach, which provides writing programs for Native American communities. His story "Kin" appeared in the Winter/Spring 2004 issue of *Gulf Coast*.

Oindrila Mukherjee is a doctoral candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Houston, where she won the Diana P. Hobby Prize for fiction in 2007. She grew up in India, and was educated in India, England, and the US. She worked for a daily newspaper in Calcutta for nearly three years. At present she translates Bengali literature to English, writes for newspapers in India, and is working on her first novel. She has just switched roles from Fiction Editor of *Gulf Coast* to the new Review and Interview Editor.

Alice Notley has published over thirty books of poetry, including (most recently) *Grave of Light, New and Selected Poems 1970-2005, Alma, or The Dead Women; and In the Pines*. With her sons, Anselm and Edmund Berrigan, Notley edited *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*. She is also the author of a book of essays on poets and poetry, *Coming After*. Notley has received many prizes and awards including the Academy of American Poets's Lenore Marshall Prize, the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Award, the Griffin Prize, two NEA Grants, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Poetry. Often considered an important figure in the New York School, Notley now lives and writes in Paris, France.

Timothy O'Keeffe's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Blackbird, Denver Quarterly, Electronic Poetry Review, Forklift Ohio, New American Writing, Pleiades*, and other venues. Currently, he is a PhD student at the University of Utah.

Mei Li Ooi was educated in Malaysia, England, France, and the United States. Her stories have appeared in *Happy and Flashquake.org* and she has earned recognition from *Writer's Digest*. She has worked as an actress and a rape crisis counselor, and she now writes for an environmental organization in Oakland, California.

Titos Patrikios was born in Athens in 1928. He was active in the resistance movement against the German Occupation, but during the years of military dictatorship following the Greek Civil War he was "displaced" within the borders of his own country (to detention camps on the islands of Makronissos and Ai-Stratis), and later exiled outright to Paris and Rome. After he received Greece's National Prize for Literature, Patrikios' numerous books were assembled by Kedros Publishers into a three-volume *Collected Poems*, and several new volumes have followed. "A Night on the Train" is from his recent collection of prose memoirs, aphorisms, and anecdotes, *Adventures on Three Rafts*.

Allan Peterson is the author of *All the Lavish in Common* (2005 Juniper Prize) and *Anonymous Or* (Defined Providence Press Prize) and four chapbooks. Recent print and online appearances include: *Gettysburg Review, Gulf Coast, Bat City Review, Salamander, Boston Review, Qarrtsiluni*, and Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry*.

Jeffrey Pethybridge lives in Columbia, Missouri with his wife and son. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Orleans Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *The Southern Review*, *DLA GRAM* and *Blazetvex*. His manuscript, *The January Party*, was a finalist for the 2006 National Poetry Series.

Nicholas Reading is the author of the chapbook *The Party In Question* (Burnside Review, 2007). His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in many journals, including *Bat City Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly* and *Nimrod*.

Jonathan Rice's poems have been published in *Colorado Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *New Delta Review*, and *Sycamore Review*, among others, and are forthcoming in *AGNI Online Georgetown Review*, *pacific REVIEW*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Witness*. His poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and was selected for the 2008 *Best New Poets* anthology, as well as the Milton-Kessler Memorial Prize from *Harpur Palate*, the Yellowwood Poetry Prize from *Yalobusha Review*, and the 2006 *AWP* Intro to Journals Project. He received an MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he teaches writing.

Mary Ruefle's latest volume is *The Most of It* (Wave Books, 2008). Her other collections include *Indeed I Was Pleased With the World* (2007), *A Little White Shadow* (2006), *Tristmania* (2003), *Among the Musk Ox People* (2002), *Cold Pluto* (2001), and *Post Meridian* (2000). She has received both National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim fellowships, as well as an Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature and a Whiting Foundation Writer's Award. She lives in southern Vermont.

James Schiff is the author of several books on contemporary American fiction, including *Updike in Cincinnati*, *John Updike Revisited*, and *Understanding Reynolds Price*. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Boulevard*, *American Literature*, *Tin House*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Critique*, and *New Letters*. He is an associate professor of English at the University of Cincinnati.

Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel received the 2005 Richard J. Margolis Award and nonfiction awards from *Dislocate* and *Fugue*. She recently received a fellowship from the University of New Orleans for the essay appearing in this issue. She works for the City of Missoula and teaches for the Missoula Writing Collaborative where her young students remind her that things like a raspberry have the shape of an "unfinished heart."

Steven Schreiner is the author of *Too Soon To Leave*. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Colorado Review* and elsewhere. He teaches in the MFA program at UM-St. Louis and is the senior and founding editor of *Natural Bridge*.

Glenn Shaheen is a Canadian expatriate living in Texas, where he recently received his MFA from the University of Houston. His poems and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Subtropics*, *RHINO*, *Zone 3*, and *Iron Horse Literary Review*.

J. Ely Shipley's first book of poems, *Boy with Flowers*, won the 2007 Barrow Street Press book prize judged by Carl Phillips. He is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Utah where he teaches creative writing, literature, and gender studies.

Franklin Sirmans is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Menil Collection in Houston, where he has recently organized *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, which begins at the Menil this summer before traveling to PS 1 in New York and the Miami Art Museum. He has also curated *Everyday People: 20th Century Photography from The Menil Collection*, *The David Whitney Bequest*, *Otabenga Jones: Lessons from Below* and *Robert Ryman, 1976*. A former Editor of *Flash Art* and *Art AsiaPacific* magazines, he has written for several publications including *The New York Times* and *Essence*.

Lauren Slater is the author of six books of nonfiction: *Blue Beyond Blue: Extraordinary Tales for Ordinary Dilemmas* (2005), *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century* (2004), *Love Works Like This: Travels Through a Pregnant Year* (2003), *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000), *Prozac Diary* (1998), and *Welcome to My Country* (1997). She has received the New Letters Literary Award, the *Missouri Review* Award, and has twice been published in *Best American Essays*. She has also contributed to *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *Elle*.

Terese Svoboda has published eleven books of prose and poetry including *Black Glasses Like Clark Kent*, winner of the Graywolf Nonfiction Prize, and *Pirate Talk or Mermelade*, forthcoming from Dzanc Press. The McGhee Professor in Fiction at Davidson College, Spring 2008, and she most recently taught poetry for the Summer Literary Seminars in Kenya.

Catherine Theis lives in Chicago, Illinois. Her last poem was published in *Mrs. Maybe*.

Sarah Wolfson received an MFA from the University of Michigan. Her poems have appeared recently in *AGNI*, *The Concher*, and *Salt Hill*. She is originally from Vermont but currently lives and teaches in Dresden, Germany.

Matvei Yankelevich is the author of *The Present Work* (Palm Press, 2006) and is the translator of *Today I Wrote Nothing: the Selected Writings of Danil Kharms* (Overlook Press, 2007).

YARI's work can be viewed at www.flickr.com/photos/yar.

John Yau's books include *Paradiso Diaspora* (2006), *Ing Grish* (2005), and *The Passionate Spectator: Essays on Poetry and Art* (2006). Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry (2006-2007), he is an Associate Professor of Critical Studies in the Visual Arts Department of Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University).

Nicole Zaza is an MFA candidate in nonfiction at the University of Houston, and has recently completed her two-year term as Associate Editor of *Gulf Coast*. She is currently the Houston City Editor at *Envy* magazine, and she leads the Finnigan Park Writing Collective for Inprint, a Houston-based non-profit in service of the literary arts.

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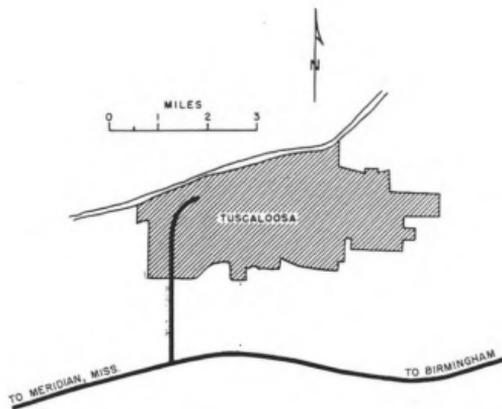


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