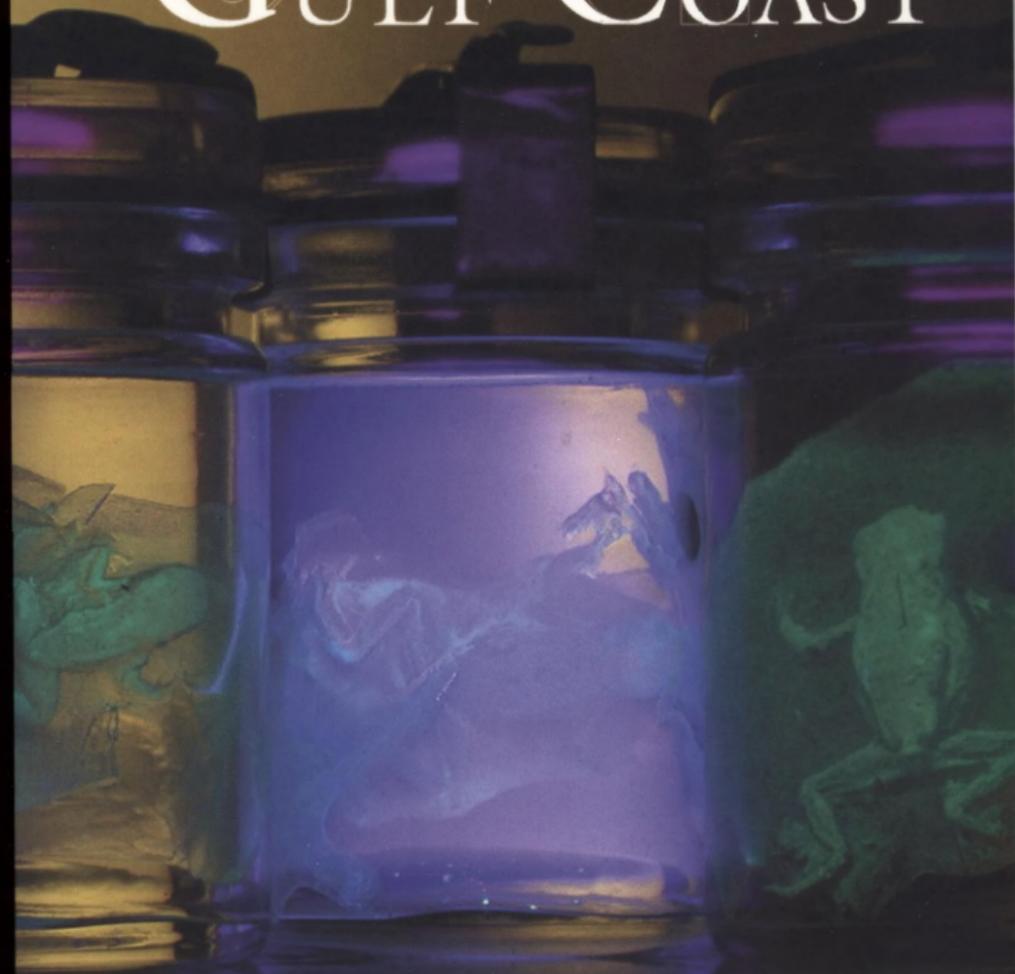


GULF COAST



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Gulf Coast

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Fiction

<i>My Hairs Stood Up</i>	Josip Novakovich	23
<i>So Calm, So Vaporless, the World of Light</i>	Matt Bondurant	164
<i>Roger's Square Dance Bar Mitzvah</i>	Jonathan Blum	214
<i>Last Mission of Mir</i>	Greg Baxter	270

Poetry

<i>Figures That Could Be Divine</i>	George Looney	10
<i>The Elephant Burial Ground</i>	James Doyle	12
<i>Fall</i>	Rick Barot	14
<i>The Empty Chair</i>	Carol Muske-Dukes	150
<i>Box</i>		152
<i>Strange Interlude</i>		154
<i>Wednesday Night, 9:30 PM at the Convenience Store</i>	Elizabeth Bradfield	193
<i>Prophet</i>	Derek Burleson	195
<i>In the Pavilion of White Mummies</i>	Virgil Suárez	196
<i>A Short History of Criticism</i>	G.C. Waldrep	198
<i>Ballad of the Never Believers</i>	Bill Rasmovicz	207
<i>The Myth of Ourselves</i>		209
<i>Precision</i>	Brent Goodman	211
<i>Like Water Swallows</i>	Laurel Snyder	212

Excerpts from <i>Sixty Cent Coffee and a Quarter to Dance</i>	Judy Jordan	246
---	-------------	-----

Special Section: Polish Poetry

Interviews

<i>A Perverse Mind</i> Conversations with Czeslaw Milosz	Todd Samuelson	43
---	----------------	----

Summer, 1992	Randall Watson and Martin McGovern	51
--------------	---------------------------------------	----

July 21, 2002	Edward Hirsch and Robert Hass	70
---------------	----------------------------------	----

July 23, 2002	Adam Zagajewski	88
---------------	-----------------	----

Poetry

Excerpts from <i>28 i 5</i>	Piotr Maur	107
-----------------------------	------------	-----

<i>Erotica</i>	Ewa Sonnenberg	111
<i>Uncertainty</i>		113
<i>Fin de Siècle</i>		114

<i>Your Decisions</i>	Robert Adamczak	117
<i>Dampness, Deeply Felt</i>		119
<i>Waiting for the Ice Queen in Front of the Neon Sign</i>		121
<i>What a Stone Said</i>		123

<i>What Matters? A Conversation with Bronislaw Maj</i>	Hieronim Szczur	124
<i>Jan Koziatowski Thinks of Death at Somosierra</i>		126
<i>After a Battle General Józef Bem Is Writing a Letter to His Beloved</i>		127

<i>The Snows</i>	Ewa Nowakowska	142
<i>A Scalpel</i>		144
<i>Leak</i>		145
<i>How I Came to Favor</i>	Darius Sosnicki	147
<i>Certain Aesthetics</i>		
<i>Boston, Canada</i>		149

Reviews

<i>Echo and Interlude</i>	Sasha West	16
<i>Amy Randolph's Cold Angel of Mercy</i>		
<i>In for Nasty Weather</i>	Young Smith	38
<i>John Blair's American Standard</i>		
<i>Rising Action in Little Falls</i>	Aaron Reynolds	156
<i>Brock Clarke's The Ordinary White Boy and What We Won't Do</i>		
<i>An Architecture of Voices</i>	Todd Samuelson	199
<i>Beth Ann Fennelly's Open House</i>		
<i>Harmony in a Random World</i>	Marc McKee	263
<i>Kathleen Ossip's The Search Engine</i>		

Art

<i>Details of Atelopus:</i> an installation	Tracy Hicks	
Photograph of installation <i>Atelopus</i>		Cover
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		129
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		130
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		131
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		132
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		133

Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		134
Detail of <i>Atelopus</i>		135
Duchamp's Notes		136
Commentary	Tracy Hicks	137
Notes on Contributors		302

George Looney

Figures That Could Be Divine

The sand grouse was once
a god. Like most gods,
the sand grouse never asked
for the honor. A small
nomadic tribe worshipped the bird.
The artists of the tribe
carved replicas of sandstone
to place on the altars
the strongest carried on their backs
from camp to camp. There

are still carved sand grouses
buried in the deserts of
the Old World. Sometimes
the wind comes from one direction
long enough to uncover one,
and descendants of the nomads
dream of the sand grouse.
This god who never asked
to be a god speaks
to the sleeping men and women

of love, the grainy madness
that can bury the heart

made of stone. The sand grouse
speaks in the tongues of dream-birds,
and, when the dreamers wake,
they hold one another
as though the body they touched
could be an illusion
carved out of soft rock,
a figure of what could be divine.

James Doyle

The Elephant Burial Ground

Walking in processional
on either side of the elephants
are their attendant nurses:
gazelles no longer addicted
to speed, zebras wrinkling
black and white by turns, giraffes
to search out like periscopes
ambushes lying ahead.

It takes days, months, years.
The trail is often muddy. They watch
for broken bottles, unusual colors,
smoldering tires on the path.
In each village they go through
the sidewalks are lined with people
who have removed their hats and tongues.
The bedridden watch from windows.

More and more decide to join them.
Lions look up from the soft
underbelly of their kill and decide
they have had enough. Parrots
ride the elephants' backs like bright
coachmen, splashes of green and yellow

against the tough grey. It is becoming
harder and harder to believe in death.

There are humans, too, though you
have to look hard among all
that size and number. If the parade
gets any larger, there will be
no more secrets. Everyone will know
where the elephant burial ground
is. There will be mounds so high
hordes will live forever in the shade.

Rick Barot

Fall

The brushfire in the hills wants the town.
The lion-gold paw of it demands all

his letters. You laugh at them, packing
like Noah against the slow dare of it:

How can I be close when you move away?
Morning backfires again: the pick-up

without a hood going by, naked engine
visible. What might need saving?

One neighbor's thousand kewpie dolls
glued to his car, pink in the melting.

The beach-glass in the blue tobacco tin
going black in the heap. He will call,

but not before you're held to the corner,
drinking the tank's cold, porcelain water.

The street is empty. What needs saving?
One neighbor's turtles, dim in plastic

wading pools. The leaves stuffed full
into shopping bags. He will answer, only

after the lie of it: the wind turning it away,
the flame stopped just at your window.

The betrayed quiet of it: *Things keep
their secrets. Things keep their secrets.*

Echo and Interlude

Amy Randolph. *Cold Angel of Mercy*. Red Hen Press, 2002. 72 pages. \$11.95, paperback.

If the language of prose is one common to many speakers, poetry is the lexicon, the vernacular arising only from the speaker of the poems. So the first poem in a book acts as an opening to the new space for language as thought. It forges the primary link between the writer and the reader. Amy Randolph's first book, *Cold Angel of Mercy*, suggests that if ordinary speech deals in information, poetry deals in transformation. The first poem, "Angel," begins: "I go back to January, back to the farmhouse / with its soft golden eyes, the dog pens / and fallen fence posts gloved in snow." This incantatory language signals a journey into the deep forest of the past. We learn "[t]his is where a woman gets buried late at night, / over and over . . . her body. . . sings from the far edge / of a deep pasture." Already we know the past here does not function in the expected way: rather it must be continually re-examined.

This process of burial and resurrection is also the work the reader and poet undertake together. As we read, we too find a body on the page, carry it with us to understand

or to let go. In Randolph's poem, the laborers feel afraid of the thing they perpetually bury—which the speaker labels "angel" or "self"—"because what grows in them / trembles like the edge of a great wing." The Rilkean echo of angels' movements seems to prefigure how these poems will be expected to move inside the reader.

The poems that tremble through us are only useful as they allow us to understand either the world or ourselves. Randolph lavishes careful attention on the physical world, emphasizing the connection between what is around us and how we own it through our noticing. The woman's body in "Angel" is contained in actual space: "all around her a reaching, the wilderness leaning // toward tires and garden tools, / clothespins dangling like hagsteeth. The moon, approaching descent, / spills its cold milk on the backs / of the laborers." This focus on description calls us back to poetry as a naming act. A metaphor is no less an act of neologism than is a new word; it too remakes the world through re-examining the noun. The poem ends with such a naming: "This is home, such grief and unfolding." The book itself will be this unfolding in verse, showing us how poetry is the act between the poet and the extant object.

Poetry has strong roots in the act of describing. Randolph's crisp, searing voice is evident in her facility with image. In "Small Breakthroughs," I love the line:

"Cutting ants carry late summer, / piece by piece, / into the earth." In some places, Randolph's use of the proposition "of" leads to an abstraction of an abstraction, or a surrealist image that feels slightly careless, inexact. "Persephone's Blues in E-Flat," for example, contains the "unexpected flake of pure light," "steady rain of thorns," and "your bundle of blood"—none of which measure up to the largely stunning writing in this book. Her images best serve her in poems like "Portrait in Black and White: My Heart Sits in Her Boat," where she allows the space between stanzas to do the work of moving the reader's mind through abstractions. Or in "Nude like a River," which begins with a Lorca epigraph and ends "Every so / often I give myself flowers, so I will remember my death and feel a boat / of hearts drift out of me." Randolph's focus on craft allows the poems to sing in many ways: technically, emotionally, intellectually.

The whole first section resonates with low, raw calls to the world. They seem to me almost like the sounds of animals, distant children one hears while driving at night with the windows down. There is a sense that if we could just find a world that corresponded to our inner state, there would be a hope for the unfolding work of naming to come to something. These first poems treat loss and reconstruction as the necessary trials and tasks of the modern person who loves. The poem that closes the section, "Cemetery from a Train Window, Somewhere in

Texas or The Day I Left My Husband," beautifully limns the boundary between the inner and outer world. The speaker is aware of how the mind writes and writes upon the surroundings. At the end, "Farther south, from where I've come, / cactus flowers are just starting to bloom, / big sloppy kisses that tell you as you go, 'Goodbye, goodbye. / I love you. Goodbye.'" The odd and funny landscape seems to enact thought, sorrow, and self. In this communion, the world itself becomes hopeful, a possible mimesis for human life. Perhaps the world does recognize us in some way; perhaps there is between us some necessary bond.

The day I first read this book, I had been listening obsessively to Sarah Vaughan's "Interlude." The idea of interlude, liminality, the moment between what has yet to happen and what has already occurred, is a useful way to think with Randolph about time and place. The book foregrounds prepositions as a way of understanding—markers of how we relate self to other-than-self. In particular, "between" appears frequently as a type of linguistic and mental space, telling us that the heart of the world is not in singular nouns, but in how nouns relate to each other in a type of vortex around the speaker. The effort here is to make through juxtaposition and linking a continuous whole of the fragmentary world. Poetry offers a possibility for a place where a seamless, liminal world is one privileged over the physical world where we are

constantly seeing everything as either what it is or what it is not. Since poetry is an act of linking, the child becomes an important figure: "Look at this child's / body that grows between us, how it holds / yet cleaves the you and I, / makes the taut distance / slacken." As much could be said about the relationship between reader and writer through the vehicle of the poem.

Poets must also negotiate their relationship to the tradition of poetry. Randolph is clearly familiar with Western poetic and mythic traditions, but encouragingly, this knowledge does not become the only authority of her poems. In "You Don't Have to Go Far to Be Damaged," she writes, "My sister slapped me when the rabbit shit / on her arm. Some injustices are too small / to make their own places. I hosed down the cage, watched / the water enter clear / and exit black." The Herculean task of cleaning the Augean stables is here made mundane and small, which says so much about the act of being in a family. This feels like an earned and true use of the echoes of mythology since it is not asked to carry the weight of the wisdom in the poem, but rather deepens the resonance of the scene. Randolph's use of myth points to the ambition at work in these poems: "I want / to be blessed, burned / into history and grafted onto the souls / of the suffering." This desire for absolute correspondence between the self and grace, between the speaker's existence and the true expression of

suffering, saturates the poems with its longing. There is a terrible sincerity in these poems, as if they had been called back from some deep ground, some burning sky. It is good to see poetry that makes from generally straightforward language something bardic and strange.

This poet seems unafraid to ask questions or to move forward despite the world's sometimes inarticulate replies to our existence. This is then, a book full of an earned hope. The book's arc leads to a type of redemptive moment, bidding, "Goodbye to these houses / that heal no one." We have come full circle from the unfolding home, but we have learned something. A dissatisfaction with the world's silence about its own making has led the poet to poetry. Religion alone can no longer forge the bond between our sense of self and our sense of world; God, while primary in these poems, will not speak directly. Rather, it is the world itself that opens possibilities of vision and transcendence, and it is up to the poet to recognize and form this hope for the reader. The speaker looks for a type of self-understanding and being that will resonate. Randolph's use of light as a transformative force suggests religious grace, philosophical clarity, and absolute communion between people. For instance, "A Light Will Come On Without Warning" moves from a mundane scene of friendship into hope for transcendence: "I wait for her voice / to place my body in its own light." Beyond the sad

world replete with longing for and loss of both the human and divine beloveds lies the possibility of transcendence through awareness. The Sisyphean effort of understanding the world and ourselves over and over is no longer tragic; rather, the act of labor towards light enacts the grace of the world.

My Hairs Stood Up

We could live more easily in the country, but we like to be where the excitement is. We have always wanted to be around humans, to be as close to them as possible, to be their pets.

We have failed. Humans prefer animals neither as bright nor as capable as us, with the exception of a few unfixed cats. They keep all the imaginable sorts of worms, monkeys, snakes, and marine monsters and still would not have us. Oh, to be sure, some humans keep some variety of our species, guinea-pigs. But guinea-pigs are nothing more than an inferior breed of us, and they are treated well by humans because humans are fond of inferiority in others.

I have always admired humans. What intelligence, what perseverance, what industry! I mean, they are doing these days more than we are. I cannot keep up with their technology any more. I used to be able to enjoy their greasy cogs—if you got hungry, you could always get by around oily machines. Now, their machines are greaseless, unbitable boxes.

Nowadays, even such a simple thing as a snack is dangerous; much of the food that seems to have been casually left over, is poisoned—for us. When tired of cement, you used to be able to take a stroll in the park. Now, you may still go, but you must abstain from eating;

and what kind of fun is it to spend a sunny day in the park, starving? The streets are even worse: as soon as you are in the open, humans step on you, throw stones, iron, whatever happens to be in their front paws. They are mean. I mean, where did they get that urge to kill? Not even cats are like that; they don't bother us—actually, we are too tough for them—nor do they bother mice, unless famished; and for play, only young cats hunt mice in the frivolousness of their youth. But humans—humans will kill and kill and it's never enough for them. They do it neither to feed themselves, nor to enjoy themselves—killing actually disgusts them, and somehow, that's why they want to kill all the more by any means they can think of. They take pride in the ingenuity with which they can kill us. They set traps for us. The chemicals in the traps are more poisonous day by day. They get cats—and put up with their most obnoxious smells—to kill us. They hate us. I don't know how else to explain it.

They think we are ugly, and yet, they keep bulldogs, who resemble us, except that they are neither as good looking nor as smart as we.

Speaking of similarities, I have concluded that the humans are similar to us. Humans believe the same thing. Whenever they have questions about themselves, they seek answers with us. If they have a problem regarding their intelligence, they test us. If their livers hurt, they test our livers. If their eyes go blind, they test our eyes even

before they will test their own. The assumption, a correct one, is that if something is harmful to us, it is harmful to them, and that if we don't understand something, they don't either. We are siblings, we and humans. They live in walls, so do we. As do we, they eat old, burnt food, any kind of rotten food actually; they even intentionally rot foods in greasy water. I don't see any essential dissimilarities between us, except that humans are bigger and therefore live in bigger holes in walls. Their world is merely our world magnified. And yet, instead of friendship, which we had sought for so long, they feel animosity towards us. We must hide from them, and they need not hide from us, although they are afraid of us. Their fear of us, I think, and I don't think I am being merely ratocentric, is their primary motive for architecture. Most buildings are specifically designed to shut us out of their holes. I am not exaggerating when I say that all their life is an antithesis to ours—because of their gross misunderstanding of us. If they cooperated with us, conceded only one percent of their buildings to us and provided us with clean conditions, we would carry no diseases for them, and we would create miracles in science together. Of course, now that we are pushed and shoved underground, we run into many health hazards, but most of the diseases that we contract come from the humans to us, not the other way around.

Since the humans have not conceded to us one percent of their buildings, we have taken over 33% of them.

I've had some adventures trying to enter one of those new buildings of theirs. It's not easy. You often have to go through sewage, which is risky business because the shit may just pour all over you, and if there is too much of it, you drown. Nobody drowns in the stuff automatically, but if you are going through a narrow pipe and a toilet or several of them simultaneously flush, the liquids may fill the pipes so that you have no time nor space to breathe. That happens. It happened to me. But you grin and bear it and let yourself be washed into a broader pipe where you can catch a breath and have another go. To avoid the avalanche, you never go up during the day or evening. Of course, in the sewage, you cannot always tell the time, but you run into enough people who've just crawled in from the outside to ask them. Also, I can sense what time it is. I feel different at each respective stage of the night. It is best to go up before dawn, between 18th and 19th Nap, Brooklyn Time. Between two sunrises, quite regularly on each Nap I drowse a bit, 21 times. That's a sign of good health. Between 18th and 19th Nap, humans are usually asleep and sewage is marvelously passable. Then I go up pipes wondering where I will end up. Several times I reached bath-tub holes, grated and impassable.

Once I entered a broad sewage pipe and swam into a pipe branching off below a new building. The water shot

me up a vertical branch; I took the first horizontal turn, and reached a narrower vertical branch. I thought there would never be an end to it, and my lungs were about to burst, when I was finally shot up out of the water into a stool. I couldn't climb out of it, because the walls were glossy. There was poison packed in grated plastic, which gave me enough of a footing to jump out. I slid on the porcelain floor. I knew I was not in a safe place, so I rushed to hide behind a smelly metal box with pictures of snakes. Nothing stirred. My curiosity got the better of me, so I tried to climb out of the box, lured by smells of pig meat and ground wheat in the garbage. I guess a human ate on the stool before sleep. Anyway, the box was too tall for me, and I was curious about other large cubicles. Clearly, it was one of those modern buildings where it's hard to bite your way through. I prefer the old ones of cement and wood. Biting through wood is very good for you: it keeps your jaws strong, sharpens your teeth, relaxes you, and cheers you up in team work. We take turns on a project of occupying a building, making networks of holes as corridors. Wood spurs you on into artistic playfulness. Having crisscrossed hundreds of old buildings, however, I found the new one, though less to my liking, tremendously mysterious. Still, in a large space, the first thing I rushed to was a large old crate, stretching to the ceiling along a whole wall. The crate was filled with thin vertical papers bound by thick paper and cloth. I took my brief snooze; it

was the 21st Nap. Sunlight woke me up through a crack. I was surprised that the new building, supposed to be nearly hermetically closed, would have wooden boxes with cracks, but I've heard that humans grow sentimental and wish, as they go into the future, to be able to go into the past at the same time—that's greed for you. So they get all kinds of boxes from dead humans, who had got the boxes from other dead humans, and the more generations a thing has lasted, the crazier humans are about it.

I peeked out of my crack. Several humans of varying sizes sat at a horizontal plank of wood of four sticks, and walked between the elevated plank and a big white box where they keep winter. They cracked and sucked some eggs they had stolen from chickens, drank black steaming water from burnt beans, squealed and growled a bit, and walked out of the cubic space.

I took a couple of bites from the bound paper just to play down my hunger. Maybe you could live on that paper; there must be something nutritious about it: probably those dark things in boring shapes, running one after another in lines, looking like droppings of flies. The lead-smelling shapes however are squeezed into squares—a mark that humans have arranged them. I like the taste of leaded cellulose though I am not exuberantly fond of paper.

Having grown certain nobody was in the large cubic hole, I crept out for a stroll. I didn't feel quite safe, as if

something might hit e from behind, so I did my walking against the walls quickly, and actually, it must have looked more like running. Well, I admit it, I was kind of running.

I crawled into a white box, where they keep summer with the sun in zenith. Actually, it can be so hot in those boxes that I think they keep hell there. I crawled in through a hole against the wall, climbed through a narrow passage along a cord, then to another hole into the center cubicle, the baking chamber. It still smelled of various animals that had been broiled for human pleasure. It raises the hair on my tail to think how humans put innocent creatures into the gas chambers to burn them! After my tour through the hell-box, I returned to the lead-paper and took an intoxicating snooze; it was the first Nap of the new day.

A noise of humans woke me up. Through the crack, I saw one human opening the hell-box and another sliding into it a metal board with a large animal carcass on it. I couldn't tell at first what animal it was—it had only two legs, without feet, sticking up, and had no fur or feather. At first I thought it could be an infant human. They gazed languidly after the carcass into the hell-box. And then again, nothing, except smells of burning flesh. I spent a lot of time sniffing the lead on the paper, snoozing more than normal, and not daring leave the crate. Later on, humans gathered around the elevated plank and squatted on smaller planks of wood around it. They held up thin

transparent stone with liquid in it in their front legs, knocked the stone containers against each other, gazed at them with longing, and gulped the pale liquid cautiously—I guess it may have been their urine though it smelled like grapes. Then they ate some grass. After a while of that, one of them opened the hell-box. The smell of burning flesh ignited my adventurous bone. Though adventurous, I was not brave enough to leave my shelter. When the whole party went out of the cubic space into another one, I crept out of my shelter and crawled into the hell-box. I worked my way through the heat into the center. Oh, Dracula, how hot it was there! I sneaked into the animal to protect my self from the heat. The inside of the animal was large and spacious—I could have easily lived in it with a whole family—despite there being some muddy wheat. What better, to have living space with edible walls! Soon I was so groggy that I couldn't move, and only vaguely did I hear the box being opened. I was presently being lulled left and right and lifted up judging by my suddenly feeling heavier. I surmised that the board and the animal was being placed on the elevated plank of wood. The walls of the turkey—I had noticed atrophied wings on the side of the body and concluded it must be a turkey—shook and I heard a dull sound. When streaks of light penetrated into my chamber, I realized that the humans were tearing the flesh off the turkey with their long iron claws. They keep plenty of such removable claws

around food because their natural ones are no good. On one side, they reached the ribs. The tearing stopped. In trepidation I wondered whether they could see me for I could see them. I decided that from light one cannot see well into darkness, but from darkness, one can see light only too well. Through a narrow space between two thin ribs in a crack of flimsy stomach lining I saw one human, refracted and distorted. It was cutting streaks of light flesh and streaks of dark flesh, piercing it with metal claws, and lifting it into its mouth. The human shouted. I cannot tell the moods of humans from their faces. I don't think they have moods and emotions. I know they scream and squeal and grunt and hiss; and mostly, they rattle quite monotonously. It is a strange custom they have, to gurgle noise when they are more than one. Maybe they keep themselves at bay from each other by their constant noise, the way dogs keep away from each other by growling and cats by spitting. Well, if my supposition that they hate one another (in a cold, unemotional way) is true, then I don't understand why they gather in groups so often. And if they are alone, they have special boxes that rattle out similar noises, flickering all kinds of lights and some only shades of gray. After making sounds with its throat, the human was quiet. It stretched its lips and showed its flat teeth. I don't know what they have teeth for, when they cut their food with artificial claws, and they cut walls with big metal claws.

It was pleasantly warm, and I could begin to breathe without strain. I did not dare move enough to eat the flesh around me. All of a sudden, the human stood up and light flashed into my eyes from a large metal surface. The metal cut into the bird and more light poured into my shelter. I knew there was no more time to hesitate. Lest I should be cut with the edge of the super-claw, I jumped out of the bird. I staggered, weakened by having been in heat for so long, blinded by light. But I didn't stay still. I jumped forward, for you mustn't stay still when humans are around although they are very slow. You must never underestimate these slow-witted and intelligent creatures. I often think it is a miracle how it is possible for creatures that think so slowly and react so slowly to build complex machines. I am not quite sure that it is really these humans that build, for example, houses. But I've heard from many prominent researchers that it is humans who build buildings and cities and basically everything that is hard except rocks. Well, to make the story short, and in that situation to make it as short as possible, I leapt out of the bird. I landed in a warm container of squashed cranberries. I slid trying to jump out of it. There were many high pitched sounds in the room. My heart skipped many beats, but when it did beat, it made up for the missed ones; it beat frantically. I jumped over and over again. The white stone container of squashed cranberries tipped over, I ran, jumped over the edge of the elevated plank of wood. I fell

into the lap of a human with bare legs. Some humans wrap their legs and others leave their legs bare. The things they use for wrapping are soft and fun to chew—I heard they were squashed balls of cotton. Actually, I had never chewed their wrappings, and now I had no time to make up on that experience, for, at any rate, there was enough new experience pouring into my life, and I wanted to make sure that experience would not be in the form of blows. I bounced off from the lap, which was changing angles as the human, whose part it was, was falling onto the floor. The chair squeaked and the human screamed. But I have already said there was a lot of screaming. I am repeating myself. Never mind. They were repeating themselves too. I did not know why they screamed so much. I sort of wished to think that it was all because of me. But I was too humble to dare to imagine that those powerful creatures who raised unbitable buildings would have given me so much recognition—to the little me? When I thought of it, touched, tears of pride began to flow down the fur of my cheeks. Well, they would have flown if I hadn't shivered at the thought that a detachable human hind paw of compressed ox-hide might be flying at me. Someone else fell on the floor—it was a furry floor but I couldn't figure out what sort of animal they had skinned for the fur—with a dull thud and a piercing shriek. I thought then, and I still do, that if I had stopped running and stayed at a place with the intention of hanging around

in the open for twenty heart beats, my heart would have made less than twenty heart beats, never to jerk around my bosom any more, because something or other would have crushed me, flung out of the forelegs of the humans. But the pandemonium aroused my curiosity so much that I did in fact stop. The nature of curiosity is sometimes more powerful than the nature of prudence. I stayed at my spot for about five heart beats, which in those circumstances was not a long stretch of time because I was scared, and my heart wished to jump out of the time into another space. I was intrigued by what I had seen. Some people were falling on the floor, others remained standing. Those who had wrappers around all four legs stood up, and others fell on the ground or climbed the little planks of woods on four sticks, screaming. The humans with wrappers around their legs however rushed towards me—they are the more cruel sort I guess—throwing their metal claws at me. Scientists have hence found my information intriguing, claiming it's a matter of human gender differences, and they wanted me to make another excursion of the sort, to gather more raw data for them, but I could not be persuaded. At once I rushed behind the cupboard and hid there. I was in a horrific terror—namely, I care so much about my life. I stared through the little crack in the crate. I recalled that I should never judge humans on the basis of their awkwardness. They are awkward and slow and awkward and awkward and slow,

but suddenly, Puff, Gotcha! Well, the humans were self-preoccupied enough. Some stood up, others squatted, and they ate no more, but on the contrary: some vomited right there on the floor, others over the elevated plank of wood and over the turkey. Then they took everything that was on the table and put it into dark plastic bags. What a pity that the half-digested food all went to waste. But I was not in the mood to save the food by storing as much as possible of it in my stomach. First I wanted to save my stomach. I enjoyed seeing them walk out of the room in their usual vulnerable manner, on hind legs—when I used to love them, I worried they might trip any moment. I hid in the middle of a garbage bag—that was the only way out I could think of—knowing they would throw it out sooner or later. And so they did, after several Naps, during which I ate enough to last me ages.

I have just said, "...when I used to love them." Do I no longer love them? That's right. They are arrogant dirty bastards. Yet we have courage to eat what they eat, and to sniff what they sniff. On the other paw, they would not touch what we eat. That's not fair. I loathe humans. I spent so much time liking them. I could not just like and like without encouragement to go on. I hate them. I mean, the way they cut up some of us, the weakest among us, our white brothers, in their experiments, and feed them poisons to just how they'd take it, that is wicked. And how many times have they nearly killed me?

Now, I could have killed some of their old ones, but I haven't done it yet. Whenever I entered their cubicles and sniffed the air, I could tell whether there were old feeble mammals there still breathing and farting. I could have easily chewed their necks and bit through their jugulars; I was considerate and let them sleep on. It is true though that whenever I ran into some who didn't breathe, I began to eat their flesh, making thereby a statement that they were animals clean enough to eat. But look at how they treat us: they tear us apart while we are still alive, and when we are dead, they throw our corpses without ever considering them edible, although our flesh is more nutritious than theirs—much richer in minerals. Humans have repaid our kindness with hatred, our admiration with despise, our service of cleaning the mess after them, with poisoning us; our love with murder. But we declare an end to it. We declare the war on humans. We will fight them by all the means we have, unscrupulously, just the way they do against us. They use chemical and biochemical weapons against us, and so will we against them and have already begun to do so.

In our laboratories some of our comrades have bred a virus that causes all the nerves to misfire; the sheets of the nerves fall off. Without the proper timing, in a matter of hours, the heart fails—a cardiac arrest. We have confirmed the efficiency of the virus on mice. I still feel great sorrow for the evil which we have inflicted upon mice, but it was

for a worthy cause. We will infuse the virus into whatever humans eat—cheese, wheat, cows (cows are not vulnerable to the virus, but they carry it quite well); our comrades who live in the country have been quite cooperative. We expect that in less than two weeks we will wipe out more than half the humans, but perhaps we are too optimistic. You never know with these creatures: they are by now resilient to all kinds of poisons because half of their diet is poison, and they constantly introduce new poisons just for the taste of it. But, we will see.

I still cringe at the thought of what we have exposed our poor mice to, but it is good even for mice to combat humans. It is good for the whole of nature that we fight these bloody bastards—even for humans! It is our duty to fight them for the sake of the free world. If we do not destroy the destroyers, they will destroy us and themselves; they will destroy the whole world, free and unfree. But we will defeat them. We will outlast them.

In for Nasty Weather

John Blair. *American Standard*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002. 179 pages. \$24, hardcover.

The stories in John Blair's first collection, *American Standard* (which won the Drue Heinz Prize in Literature from the University of Pittsburgh Press), are awash with heavy weather, both of the meteorological and the human variety. In the course of these twelve stories, set for the most part in the sultry flatlands of central Florida, we meet a hurricane, a tornado, and any number of pounding thunderstorms. Meanwhile, as the rains fall from the skies above them, the stories' down-and-out characters are tossed from one calamity to the next by fitful gusts of passion and rotten luck. There is an overdose, a shooting, a motorcycle crash, a drug deal, a drowning, a flight from the police. One character takes a swim in a lake full of alligators, two others in a river full of industrial waste. A man is clubbed with a tire iron, another with a bottle. A statue of the Virgin Mary is destroyed with a candlestick.

In brief, there is no shortage of incident here, and yet for all its blood and thunder, *American Standard* is no crude exercise in melodrama or typical excursion into the seamy kitsch of "dirty realism." These are well-crafted and memorable stories, whose quiet power works to transcend

the sometimes noisy business of their details. This is true because what drives these stories is never so much their surface action as the responses of Blair's characters to the thorny circumstances of their lives. However tumultuous his plots—and he does sometimes toy with lurid situations—Blair always manages to subordinate the violence of his scenes to a subtle and thoroughgoing investigation of character, using the pressure of extremes not to cheat the reader with easy thrills, but to explore and give dimension to the people he creates. The result is a cast of rich and wholly convincing characters, all the more lifelike and compelling because their quarrels with the world are always grounded first in a fierce struggle with themselves.

Despite the complicated predicaments they are faced with, these are men, women, and children whose steepest obstacle in life is, at heart, their own contradictory natures, the impulses of which, more often than not, work to thwart their own desires. They are, one and all, deeply bewildered by their lives—by the flaws and the failures of those they depend on, by the defeat of their hopes in the face of bad decisions, and, most of all, by a profound feeling of helplessness in their efforts to make sense of their own tangled souls. When a young minister, for example, confused over his failing marriage and a crisis of faith, vents his despair in an empty school bus outside his empty church, his words might be those of any one of Blair's

characters: "I just don't know how to live my life anymore." And when later, as he flogs himself with a nail-studded whip, we sense that he has seriously misjudged his transgressions, and is again typical of the people of *American Standard* in his failure to understand his own actions.

This fascination with the mysteries of unaccountable behavior is a theme that Blair returns to again and again. In "Bacon on the Beach," for example, a man whose wife has recently left him, and whose prospects for the future are clouded by his own seeming indifference to his fate, suddenly tells a neighborhood child that he has lost a daughter in a car wreck—a claim that is not only untrue, but unmotivated by any logic that he can understand himself. "He is amazed," Blair writes, "at the lie he's just told, and mystified at why he told it." In another instance, as a grieving mother moves toward a fateful act of violence, she is as helpless to understand the forces prompting her behavior as she is to prevent the deed: "She wasn't sure why; it was as if she were just going along with something her body had decided to do without her." This inability of Blair's characters to defy their own inclinations, to outwit their own temperaments and choose a more constructive path in life, is the root conflict in each of his stories, as well as the source of their power to horrify us as we come to recognize the characters' self-defeating

patterns of behavior, and to anticipate, long before they do themselves, the unhappy results of their choices.

Though many of them spend a good deal of their time dodging the authorities—whether in the form of deputies, drunken fathers, embittered spouses, or God—the real threat driving Blair’s characters toward flight is a fear that there may be no escape, finally, from the essential solitude of their lives. Again, it is the young minister who articulates most clearly the grave suspicion haunting his fellow characters as much as himself: “Dreams, hopes, aspirations—even the blinding grace of God. None of it changes the startling fact that you are forever just yourself and nothing else.”

Blair’s vision is revealed in its starkest form, however, in a moment during “Running Away,” when a teenage boy encounters a homeless woman that his traveling companion has thoughtlessly struck in the head. As she lies bleeding on the ground, the boy finds in her expression a terrifying glimpse of the force waiting to crush his own faith in finding a better life somewhere down the road:

Fisher wondered the whole way about what he had seen in her face . . . not what he’d expected, not rage, not the recognition of the world’s great inequity he was sure he’d see, but a simple blankness as wide as the sky silver with stars.

Nothing at all but pain and a certain open wonder reflected out at him as if from a mirror. It was the sort of thing that could make you begin to doubt that anything at all was possible anymore, or that it ever had been.

Blair's great talent is his ability to dramatize just this basic human dilemma—the struggle to maintain some sense of hope under circumstances that threaten always to reveal it as the bitterest of illusions. If it is often a hard wisdom that *American Standard* has to offer, Blair's stories nonetheless give that wisdom the authority of a truth well-earned through the storms of experience.

A Perverse Mind Conversations with Czeslaw Milosz

Even outside Poland, Krakow is considered the city of poets. Its reputation has grown beyond its inhabitants, who take pride in the distinction, to the travel guides which advise sightseers to visit the statue of Adam Mickiewicz, the National poet, in the main market square. Among its citizens, Krakow boasts two Nobel Prize-winning poets, Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska, who provide much of the city's climate of lyrical richness. And in recent years, a tacit acknowledgment has appeared in the work of English-language poets: Beth Ann Fennelly beckons us to "Come to Krakow," and Paul Muldoon describes such a journey in *Hay*. It is a mark of the growing influence of Polish verse upon the American literary tradition that the perception of Krakow as a poetic center has taken hold.

The following interviews are the result of the first Krakow Poetry Seminar, a week-long conference held during July of 2002. Adam Zagajewski initially proposed the idea of a symposium in Krakow for his University of Houston students; Milosz agreed to participate, and a group of prominent poets enlisted. Through a series of readings and panels, the faculty of American poets debated questions of history and literature with their

Polish counterparts, discussing (and enacting) the connection between the nations' poets and poetries. Czeslaw Milosz's active presence provided both the emotional highlight and the intellectual focus of the seminar. The conversations between Milosz and his interlocutors offer a means of understanding this complex poet in the context of his home and culture.

When, in these interviews, Milosz quotes Simone Weil's aphorism that "contradiction is a lever of transcendence," he is pointing to one of the essential elements of his temperament and artistic strategy. He is also admitting to a set of conscious paradoxes which, as Polish critic Aleksander Fiut has pointed out, often frustrate American audiences. Milosz is a vocal Roman Catholic who has cultivated intellectual attachments to such ancient heretical beliefs as Manichaeism. He is a poet who lived during the height of literary Modernism, yet who declares himself "anti-Modernist." He is at once moralist and sensualist; witness and artist; writer and thinker. And perhaps most significant to this occasion, he is a man who was shaped by a particular historical situation—his youth in Lithuania, his wartime experiences in Poland—yet who has become, through his many years as a teacher at Berkeley and as a major figure in American poetic life, to some degree an American poet.

The challenge could be made, however, what claim the American poetic tradition has upon Czeslaw Milosz. Even posing the question is mildly absurd, as it contains the considerable challenge (to the reader of English) of negotiating the poet's name. Many prominent American poets and critics have written of Milosz as one of their own. Despite this support, the assertion carries certain dangers: is this an instance of cultural territoriality, the frequently-noted American tendency to pick the heaviest sluggers for the home team? A cynic might also ask what influence Milosz can have had upon a tradition that, to the surface, is so widely different from his own, especially as he has stated that he has never been and is "not tempted to write in English now, either."

A large and immediate danger appears when inducting Milosz into a separate tradition. By a lack of comprehension of its sources, his work may become unmoored from its native context. And at worst, the depiction of Milosz relative to the American tradition could lead to the naive tendency to ascribe great art to oppressive historical forces. This notion is simplistic and unsupported; the poet Stanislaw Baranczak takes no more than a passing reference to rebut "the perverse paradox which holds that creativity can flourish only in the foul air of oppression, whereas a breeze of freedom makes it wither." To fall prey to this fallacy is not only to participate in the American hypocrisy of being free from history, but

to reduce the creativity of the writer to a documentary role. Though Milosz recognizes the value of this "witness" in establishing a historical or moral record, he has repeatedly rejected the term as a description of his own work. An artist as complex as he cannot be limited to this function; as he states of Simone Weil in these interviews, such complex intellectual work cannot be reduced to ideology or the sum of its historical forces. It is "too mature for that."

Despite these reservations, there are strong cases to be made for considering Milosz an American poet. In an essay examining this issue entitled "Polish Nobel Prize Winners in Literature: Are They Really Polish?", Piotr Wilczek notes that Milosz, "as a naturalized American citizen," was presented as an "American laureate . . . on the official list of the Nobel Committee." Milosz's relationship with the American tradition transcends the simple fact of his address in the United States, however.

Milosz has frequently described the early influence of American poets upon his work. Of poems written as early as 1943, he admits that "there may be a little T. S. Eliot in there." (Having translated "The Waste Land" during the war, Milosz may have found Eliot's ideas to be more immediate than strictly literary, considering the destruction of European culture which he encountered firsthand.) An even more central and continuous authority for Czeslaw Milosz is Walt Whitman. Milosz has

repeatedly cited his allegiance to the Whitmanian line and project—the struggle of his writing to engage and swallow reality. Bogdana Carpenter, exploring the question of American literary influence upon Milosz, writes that

at the time when Milosz was searching for a new poetic form that would correspond more closely to his experience and intellectual inquiry, English and American poetry offered a new and fruitful venue. It became both an inspiration and an important catalyst for his own thoughts: “By applying myself to the study of English in a Warsaw that was occupied by the Germans, I was looking for a support for some of my own reflections; I was not able to find it in either Polish, Russian or French.”

But discussions of influence are not discussions of identity. Even if Milosz can be classified as an American poet, it becomes a more difficult matter to place him on a continuum between American and Polish traditions, or even in relation to a specific aesthetic. As Milosz states in these interviews, “the fact that we belong to various literary schools [is] more mysterious than it seems”—that mystery residing in the nebulous intersection of “individual talent” and “the *Zeitgeist*,” in his terminology.

Many of the qualities which American poetry shares with the Polish—the combining of philosophy and

discursive thought with lyricism, the interest in matters of metaphysical weight—are a result of importation. Many of these traits can be traced to the preoccupations of Polish literature, and their presence in contemporary American poetry may be attributable to major writers of the Polish tradition in the twentieth century. In fact, the characteristics which Milosz shares with American poetics are largely the result of his own efforts at cross-pollination, or, if I may be permitted the pun, cross-Polonizing. His reputation in America began not with his own writing, but as the translator of Zbigniew Herbert. It continued through his anthologizing (*The History of Polish Literature, Postwar Polish Poetry*) and in his continuous fostering of important poetic minds such as Aleksander Wat and Anna Swir, writers who still appear in Milosz's conversation and in these interviews. These voices join Milosz's own efforts to find a more spacious form in writing, together providing new strains to add to the American polyphony.

In describing the status of Polish poetry during his first visit to the United States, between 1946 and 1950, Milosz recounts first showing his translations from the Polish to American readers. At that time, he writes,

no one understood them. But people liked those same poems when I printed them recently. A certain evolution has occurred in America—some

things can now be understood. But back then an even greater distance existed between Poland and America than does today. Those were two very different worlds.

Milosz is in great measure responsible for widening the boundaries of American poetry, enlarging the terrain of possible utterance. Whether because of his innate temperament or on the advice of Simone Weil, Milosz's efforts to "renounce" the singularity—and closure—of a "unified Weltanschauung" have had a lasting effect upon both European and American literary modes. His contradictions have allowed him the ability to enter into each, while retaining a complex and dialectical relationship with the other. If he is an American poet, he is equally Polish, and universal. His resistance to exclusivity has enabled him to engage both traditions, while challenging and enriching them greatly.

Of the Milosz triptych produced here, the first panel—though not of a piece with the others—shows the consistency of its subject's contradictions. Originally appearing in *Gulf Coast* ten years before the Krakow Poetry Seminar, this interview renders Milosz's engagement with the same concerns (and many of the same specific debates) as the more recent conversations. His appetite for reality, his efforts to respond to the question of human suffering,

and his deliberations about World poetry—particularly the American-Polish line—are all voiced. Rather than being redundant, however, this interview shows the persistent wrestling of a mind confronting large existential problems. The contradictions at the core of Milosz's thinking appear even more coherent.

In person, Milosz continues to defy expectation. At 91, he is energetic and robust. His voice, speaking English, tones with the expressive modulations of his native tongue. Despite the *gravitas* of his poetic persona (not to mention his typical book jacket photograph), his humor as much as his intelligence guides the conversations; he lowers his head, and his voice, to deliver the one-liners which send his audience into unrestrained laughter. After the interview, he meets with the students and signs books, then walks briskly out, past the Collegium Maius, the oldest building in Krakow's 600-year old university, and hails the cab that will conduct him through his city.

Interview: Summer, 1992

Randall Watson, Martin McGovern and Czeslaw Milosz

Randall Watson and Martin McGovern: You say that you have a general tendency toward feeling shame, that a sense of guilt is central to all of your poetry. What is the origin or center of that shame? How did it become central to your poetry?

Czeslaw Milosz: That's very hard to tell. I guess it goes back to the time of my childhood and adolescence. Maybe later there were some circumstances which increased that guilt. In my opinion, people who are so-called normal and do not write poetry believe that poets are especially sick individuals. However, they are no more sick than average people, but they are able to overcome their complexes, their weaknesses. It's a sort of compensation. It's like Demosthenes who became a famous speaker because he was a stutterer. (Laughs)

RW & MM: You've also said that you were ashamed of publishing certain poems because they were immodest.

CM: Some, yes. I was ashamed of publishing some poems because they seemed to me too personal. And this is one of

the reasons I didn't become a novelist. I wrote two novels, but reluctantly, and novelists, which is to say, born novelists—like Dostoyevsky—are shameless. Dostoyevsky didn't hesitate to take the most shameful details of his life and shamelessly exploit even his family and his feelings toward his family. For me it was somehow indecent, what Dostoyevsky did when he caricatured his first wife in *Crime and Punishment*—as crazy Marmeladovna. And then in *The Idiot* there's Lebedev's talltale story that General Ivolgin tells Prince Myshkin, how Lebedev buried his leg and put an inscription on its tomb. That inscription is from Dostoyevsky's mother's tomb. So, you know, indecency goes too far.

RW & MM: Contemporary and modern American poetry seem to thrive, or depend on, that kind of immodesty or shamelessness.

CM: Yes, yes. I participated not long ago, in December, in a Modern Language Association meeting, in San Francisco. I took part in the panel on Ginsberg's *Kaddish*. And I wrote a poem to Ginsberg, as a matter of fact, a praise of Ginsberg, the praise, as I define it, of a "square" to a hippie. Later on Ginsberg said, "Well, you are not so much of a square." And I look at my necktie now [points to squared off end of necktie and laughs]. But *Kaddish* is an example of overcoming, completely, shame. Because who wants to tell

the story of the insanity of his mother, you know? And yet somehow I'm not shocked as I am in the case of Dostoyevsky. Poetry has a different register. What is allowed in poetry is different from what is allowed in prose. That's my feeling. So why do I not write very personal poems? I am full of inhibitions, I guess, let us confess. It is somewhat connected to the question of sincerity and frankness. There is always a distance between the author and the work, sometimes less and sometimes more. My critics, the scholars who analyze my work, sometimes have some trouble because they are inclined to assume that Milosz writes in the third person, taking a great distance towards his persona. In other poems they say, "Oh no, he is so close already." Yet an awareness of ourselves is practically impossible. There is a Japanese Zen poet who says, "The eye doesn't see itself. The fire doesn't burn fire." There is always that distance between ourselves and our "I."

RW & MM: It seems that even though your poems are not filled with personal details, the tone of many of them is extremely intimate.

CM: Yes. At my reading last night, I read some very intimate sounding poems. And it may be that I am the most confessional poet among my colleagues, much more than Adam Zagajewski and Zbigniew Herbert.

RW & MM: We're also thinking about amazement and wonder—words that come up more than a few times in your poems—and their connection to loss. Take, for example, a poem you read last night, "Encounter." Does it take loss to come to that amazement?

CM: Oh, enormously. Maybe we are in a way close to the world of Proust, capturing a moment, preserving a moment, because everything is lost. In this connection, I am very fond of poems, contemporary poems, which concentrate upon one moment and try to delineate this one moment as something very precious. It's just the opposite of Larkin's poetry. There's nothing, no moment, because every moment is filled with disgust and desire for death.

RW & MM: You say in the opening poem to *Provinces* that your function is to "glorify things just because they are."

CM: My main quarrel with contemporary poetry in America, for instance, is its acceptance of some theories which reduce literature to *écriture*, to writing, namely that words engender words and that the structure of words isn't based on anything, on reality. This comes from a complete skepticism as to the possibility of capturing objective reality. Because everything is our subjective state, and out of that grows the belief that literature, poetry, is

really noting down purely subjective states without any relation to the objectively existing world.

RW & MM: You have a strong faith in the real.

CM: Yes, maybe because of my Catholic education, because of Thomas Aquinas, and because later on Marxist elements also tended toward an interest in objective reality. Even if you take a Communist poet like Brecht, his poems are often excellent because he's so respectful of reality—he tries to capture reality. Whether we agree with him or not, with his interpretation, does not matter. He's concerned with palpable reality.

RW & MM: We were also wondering about your idea of the daimonion in relation to this. Does the existence of this daimonion, this passion, in the poet, become a bridge from the self to the world? Does the world have its own daimonion, so that the poet's daimonion communicates with the daimonion of the world?

CM: I don't believe you can generalize here. Of course, what we define as daimonion is all our personality, our *Weltanschauung*, everything. I use that word daimonion because really I don't know, I sometimes can't remember the moment, how the poem came about... as when you

have a child but you cannot remember how you became the father of a child. (Laughs)

RW & MM: There also seems to be a tension, in *The Issa Valley*, for example, between Catholicism and a poetic paganism in terms of the tonal structure and the images.

CM: Yes, some pagan elements are strong. When I was in high school, I waged a war against our priest. I was very early interested in biology and Darwin, and when I was thirteen I was giving lectures in high school about Darwinism. So biology combined with a reflection on cruelty in nature... you have all the elements of *The Issa Valley* here. I was of course in love with nature, but... My father was a hunter and he used to take me—later I abandoned hunting—that was a real diving into nature and at the same time a discovery of cruelty as a basic element of nature.

RW & MM: Is *The Issa Valley* then in a sense autobiographical?

CM: It is to some extent. It's not, as some critics claim, a memoir, a kind of pure autobiography. Camus, who was at that time an editor at Gallimard in Paris, said, "You know, this reminds me of Tolstoy's youth stories." But it is very

transformed. It doesn't really stick to the autobiographical. It's symbolic to some extent.

RW & MM: This goes along with your argument with Robinson Jeffers, doesn't it—that cruelty of nature, the inhuman?

CM: Yes, he created a philosophy of inhumanism. It was very literary, I should say. He was the son of a Protestant minister—very Calvinist in his basic upbringing. And then you had Darwin, Nietzsche, and so on. But for me, yes, it's very essential that I cannot share his divinization of nature, opposing nature to man, that nature is pure, is beautiful, is wise, while man is stupid, cruel. For me that opposition doesn't go. It is true that nature is innocent: a cat is not a cruel creature. For him the mouse is a moving toy. He's not a sadist. Nature is of course innocent, according to its own criteria. For us it is cruel, because we have consciousness, and consciousness introduces an enormous difference. In my opposition to Jeffers, I take the side of humans against nature. As I defined somewhere, I guess maybe in my book *The Land of Ulro*, I am on the side of the human and divine and against the natural.

RW & MM: But you seem so often to find the world of the divine and sacred in the human *and* in nature.

CM: In the human, yes, because, as in Blake, human divinity and divine humanity go together. But nature, well, we go back to a problem, to the element of Manichaeism, and I like Blake because in him—of course he was agnostic—this element is very strong. If you remember, nature in Blake is antagonistic to the divine and human. At the same time nature is very beautiful. In Simone Weil, it is this beauty and an anti-innocence.

RW & MM: “The sea does not look less beautiful because we know that ships are sometimes wrecked by it”?

CM: Yes!

RW & MM: John Anderson, a contemporary American poet, has a line stating that “Poetry is cruelty.” Are the discoveries we make through poetry a kind of cruelty?

CM: No... there is a haiku by Basho that says, “Come look at the beautiful flowers of this pitiless world.” When I was in the Museum just now [the Houston Museum of Fine Arts] looking at the marvelous Beck collection, and not only at the Beck collection, I saw for the first time a landscape by Degas [*Landscape*, 1892]: all this world is walking on a very frail surface, on thin ice. And underneath is hell, yes?

RW & MM: The poet's job is to catch the moment before the ice breaks?

CM: It seems to me that when poetry forgets that duality, then the poet falls into aestheticism. A constant awareness of those two sides is necessary for a poet.

RW & MM: I know that Adam Zagajewski is not very fond of contemporary French poetry...

CM: I'm not either, though I'm a great admirer of some French poets. My great admiration, among French poets, is for Blaise Cendrars, a poet from the beginning of the century. I consider his poem "Easter in New York," written in 1912, a great poem. A great long poem. He and Apollinaire were friends and borrowed from each other. It is difficult to tell what is borrowed from whom. But Cendrars is for me a marvelous poet of epiphany of real things. He traveled a lot—already his poems before the First World War are full of his travels—and he traveled later on. His postcards, poems from various port cities and so on, were originally called "Kodak." But the Kodak firm brought a suit against the publisher. Instead of being glad! Those are little pictures! Epiphany, the sudden revelation of reality, is a moment, a flash. For Cendrars, this is often a device. He took a novel, *The Magnificent Doctor Cornelius* by Gaston LaRouge, took scissors and cut out descriptions of

Valparaiso. But for me Cendrars is a poet of the flash of awareness of reality. Another example of epiphany in poetry is a poem by D.H. Lawrence entitled "Maximus." This is about a pagan philosopher around the time of Julian the Apostate. He describes a visit of the god Hermes. This is a revelation because first Hermes enters as a human being, then proves that he is a god. This is a typical epiphany. There were plenty of those epiphanies when gods walked the earth in Greece, you know. You could never be sure whether a visitor was a human or a god.

RW & MM: In your prose poem "Esse," this mere fact that something *is* is enough.

CM: The poem "Esse" is also a poem of revelation. I look at that girl, and suddenly I realize that she is. I am, she *is*—an extraordinary discovery!

RW & MM: So do you think your poetry is primarily about that moment in which the god is suddenly revealed in the world around you?

CM: In any case, at the present moment I'm looking for such poems. In Japanese poetry, Chinese poetry, European, American poetry, I'm looking, in short poems, fixing in a flash what is seen, what is felt and seen. Not purely

subjective because some reality is there. Because here, for instance, in the prose poem “Esse,” the girl undoubtedly existed. It was not my feeling that she was sitting there.

RW & MM: You talk about a pan-sexual hunger for the world. Is your poetry the linguistic equivalent of that pan-sexual hunger?

CM: Yes, it is erotic. I have always had the feeling that reality is so difficult to grasp—there is a constant moving towards it. I have a constant feeling of being in association with the world, and for that reason I love Whitman.

Whitman is a very great poet for me, absolutely. He is full of those small revelations. Every long poem is a series of small revelations, like in a painting, in a huge painting—a good painting, that is—you can always carve out a little fragment representing a dog, for instance, in the corner of the painting, which is as good as the painting as a whole.

RW & MM: In *Unattainable Earth* you incorporate poems by Whitman and Baudelaire and others next to your own poems. Is that a kind of paeon to the poets who do what you’re speaking of here?

CM: Yes, I include Whitman and Lawrence, primarily. I see a poem by Whitman, such as “A Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” as that sort of sudden seeing.

RW & MM: How important is French symbolism in its influence on your work?

CM: I don't know what symbolism is. It has been defined in different ways. It was a movement which assumed the slogan, "Let us turn away from the public. To hell with the public." But otherwise, the notion of symbolism as a certain *use* of symbols, that's something else. But symbolism as a movement is just a movement of epithets. Paul Valéry said that you cannot satisfy your hunger with epithets, with labels. So the same with symbolism. But my images... this is a complex thing rooted in the tradition of a given poetry. This is too connected with the language to generalize. In my case, I more or less know, I can trace it, but it is a native root.

RW & MM: What are a few things you think English translations miss in your poems?

CM: A certain intellectual structure can be conveyed. For that reason the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert can be translated best. He's calligraphic. He's not a painter whose art is based on color but on the line. The more it relies upon color, the more difficult. So I guess much of the color is lost in my poems. Line remains. But color...

RW & MM: What exactly do you mean by color?

CM: Some emotional aura around particular words. Yesterday I spoke about certain auras around names of plants, plants which exist in Europe and are associated, for instance, with wastelands, with empty lots. That's not the case in America. Besides, we are confronted here with a serious problem because rural civilization is going away, and with that rural civilization the names of plants, of agriculture, of labors. American poets, mostly young American poets, do not know the names of plants. I know more in my native tongue, because my childhood was rural. But for American poets, brought up in a city, there are no such things.

RW & MM: You said in *Native Realm* that naming plants was a way of possessing them. Is writing a poem your way of repossessing that moment of epiphany?

CM: Yes, I guess so. When sometimes I look at the years past, I have to look for my books on the shelf, because otherwise it all disappears. That is why keeping a diary is important, because time goes on and covers everything with oblivion. It's a defense against the passing of time, against oblivion, against death.

RW & MM: Eva Czarnaeka once asked you about your wife finding *Three Winters* in the rubble of your apartment during the Warsaw Uprising. You responded to the interviewer by saying, "Big deal."

CM: No, that was not saved by my wife. When I returned to our apartment, which was hit by an artillery shell, I found a copy of the book with a hole in it from a splinter of the shell. My wife took out a manuscript, but I don't remember what.

RW & MM: What's your attitude toward art in the face of that kind of catastrophe?

CM: I should say that it's all extremely traumatic. To be together, to be able to keep oneself together after all that is sometimes... I wonder how it's possible. In any case, as a poet I was confronted with the fact that I continued to write in a pre-war style and then felt that it wasn't any good for that experience. Only after a few years, in 1943, suddenly I felt a kind of liberation. I felt that I could cope with the material less conventionally. My poem called "The World," composed in short quatrains, is not like my other poems written during the war, which were committed poems, poems of resistance. So I wrote "The World" because I couldn't stand reality, but I had some feelings of treason because I indulged in writing such

poetry. At that time I was not aware of the meaning of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. This "World" is my *Songs of Innocence* and it proved more durable, in my opinion, than poems written out of moral commitment, because it was a sort of giving back honor to reality in spite of what was going on around me. Returning to the child's world, sort of saying that the child's vision of the world is more correct than the vision of those things which my eyes saw around me.

RW & MM: It took you a while not to feel guilt over writing in that new style?

CM: Yes, oh yes. As I told you my guilt dates back to my adolescence and has been strengthened by living through those experiences. How to cope? You have to be completely inhuman to remain imperishable.

RW & MM: You seem to feel ambiguous about the function of the poet: on the one hand the poet is special, prophetic, and on the other, the poet is a laborer like anybody else.

CM: Yes, I must say that I would like to believe that the poet is special and that he has duties towards his art and not towards society. In any case, I envy those French painters who during the war were sitting on the Côte d'Azur—Matisse, Picasso and so on. That was their duty.

To make good paintings. But I do not have enough of a clear conscience to do that. I never have had... I've always thrown myself into one sort of commitment or another, but I couldn't use my poetry. I used prose. I wrote *The Captive Mind*. I've often thrown myself into some very awkward situations.

RW & MM: Do you think there's a tension between the poetic representation of the real and the use of traditional poetic forms? Can those forms honestly represent the poet's experience?

CM: When we read poetry of the past epochs, when we read those innumerable madrigals, sonnets, and so on, we are amused by the convention in which they were written, by their conventional expression, and we realize how different those poems are from the reality of those men and women of the past. Those men and women had their animal side. They were creatures, animal creatures, and behind all that is greed, copulation, nastiness, everything human. Every period had a similar feeling towards its predecessors—that the poetry of the predecessors seems to be too conventionalized. That's why there's a desire to break conventions. So I break them.

RW& MM: Are those previous forms incapable of capturing that animality, that humanness?

CM: This is a very valid question. If we take painting—good painting—from several centuries ago, it is on the same footing as good modern painting. At the same time it's separated by style, period, stigma, the certain style of a certain epoch. We are in a constant chase after something real, always remaining one beat away. For instance, Cézanne was considered the master of modern painting. He would circle a pine—looking, looking—trying to catch the *pine*. He wanted to paint nature, because there was that pine there, but he felt a constant distance between his painting and the real pine. As I said in my poem “Esse,” the reflections of trees and clouds in the river are not trees and clouds.

RW & MM: Even the moment of epiphany is a failure? That's as close as we can get to the real? And that keeps us writing? Keeps us looking?

CM: Yes. A painting can be a real revelation, like nature. Today I was looking at some beautiful paintings, Chardin for instance, a beautiful Chardin: two women, not like his usual pots in brown. It's a different intonation. Marvelous. You have a moment of presence, of reality. So I appear here as a prophet of the real versus *écriture*. [Laughs] I guess the weakness of French poetry now is that they take seriously those theories about poetry as a purely subjective activity.

Because reality is unreachable, there is no objective reality, there's only the possibility of noting down our perceptions. And as a result, language is the texture, the self-engendering texture.

RW & MM: And completely futile?

CM: Yes, there is a defeat in advance which paralyzes. And if somebody believes in reality, then he's not paralyzed in advance. Bertolt Brecht believed that he was catching the reality of society.

RW & MM: Do you think these ideas are a new form of nihilism?

CM: Yes, of course. If you read [Richard] Rorty, who is considered an important spokesman for the new trends of deconstructionism, he goes back to Nietzsche, who abolished the notion of truth, and it goes logically in that direction.

RW & MM: Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and The Saved*, makes the point that language really is objective. In the camps, if you didn't know the right words at the right time, you were dead.

CM: Yes, it goes back to the religious foundations of a belief in reality. I used to quarrel with Witold Gombrowicz. We were good friends, but we were constantly quarreling, because he was modern and his obsession with philosophy, going back even to Descartes, whom he reproached with cowardice. Descartes was a coward because he took a guarantee of God, that God doesn't deceive us. "Why?" Gombrowicz said. Reality is here only. So I take a rather naïve attitude, for my sake, not caring very much about what theoreticians tell me, because I have to practice my art. This is a pragmatic attitude—it comes from experience.

RW & MM: So that a belief in the real is the foundation of poetry, of art?

CM: Yes. But to believe in the real you have to believe in God, or whatever you call it. You have to have a religious attitude towards the world.

Interview: July 21, 2002

Edward Hirsch, Robert Hass and Czeslaw Milosz

Edward Hirsch: Welcome, everybody. I know we all feel deeply honored to be here with Czeslaw Milosz, to celebrate American and Polish poetry coming together. We have in the room with us the greatest living poet, and we're all thrilled to be here, so please welcome him. [Applause] Bob and I were thinking that because there are so many young poets in the room, we might ask Czeslaw if he would begin by describing himself as a young poet. What he was like, perhaps, at the age of 25.

Czeslaw Milosz: Yes. I'll try, though the image of myself at 25 is quite dim. [Laughter] I was a young man full of contradictions and I hoped that, gradually, those contradictions would disappear, and I would have a unified *Weltanschauung*. Now, at 91, I must concede that I am full of contradictions. [Laughter] And I didn't resolve anything, and I didn't get a unified *Weltanschauung* so I would be able to talk as a sage, full of wisdom, ponderation, and equilibrium. I am just a contrarian.

EH: When you were 25, did it ever occur to you that you would be giving interviews in English?

CM: Oh, no—no, no, no. No, the world of the English language was very distant at that time from the place where I grew up, in the city of Vilnius or Wilno. And America was even farther than England. America was a country where people would go, and disappear. [Laughter] Ya. So, no; I grew up in the world where the French language was the language of the intelligentsia, and it was a proper thing to know some French. For several centuries the international language of Europe was Latin, then French. And I can fix a precise date when the realm of French ended. It was in 1938, when everybody in Warsaw started to learn English. [Laughter]

EH: For a good reason.

CM: As a matter of fact, the First World War was a catastrophe for French culture because the book in French, especially French novels in their yellow covers, had enormous area for sales, including all Central Europe and Russia. Parisian publishers drew income from those sales of French books all over Europe and up to Siberia. Then the First World War ended that empire of French books. And in '38, that was the end of the realm of French. Now we are in the realm of English.

Robert Hass: Who were the French poets you were reading in the 1930s?

CM: I started to write poetry because of a textbook of French literature. There was an anthology of French poets, and I found the poems of la Pléiade of the 16th century, Joachim du Bellay, and I imitated those poets.

RH: A poem like "Gates of the Arsenal" —in the English translation—feels like it was written under the spell of [Mallarmé's] "Le Cimetière Marin."

CM: No, not Mallarmé—Valéry. Valéry was an influence in a given moment of my youth, yes.

EH: It seems that you have a lot of arguments with Mallarmé and "pure poetry."

CM: Definitely. I feel that Mallarmé destroyed French poetry because he called for distillation of the language, and the consequence was distillation of distillation, and then distillation of distillation of . . . [Laughter]. No, but French poetry had two tremendous poets in the beginning of the Twentieth century: Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars. As a matter of fact, neither of them Frenchmen, because the name of Apollinaire was Kostrowitzky, and the name of Cendrars was Sauser. So, those were poets

which went in just the opposite direction than Mallarmé. They were, I should say, very Whitmanesque poets. And very avid, hungry of the world. And I consider that hunger, that gluttony, to be a great virtue of poets. [Laughter] Because I feel that reality is inexhaustible. I like, in American poets, that great passion—I should say, realistic passion.

EH: I remember in this essay of [Witold] Gombrowicz's, "Against Poetry," which I've always found very interesting, that he also speaks very much against what he calls "that extract, pure poetry."

CM: Yes, yes, of course. But I must confess here to a certain contradiction. The world of Modernism, in a way, was close to my feelings. On the other hand, I rebelled against it, because there were many kinds of Modernism. I consider the father of Modernism in philosophy to be Schopenhauer. And, as a matter of fact, if you look at literary biographies of some writers of the Twentieth century, like Thomas Mann, you see the enormous influence of Schopenhauer. He was really a philosopher of compassion, feeling for suffering of the world. Because of this he was close to Buddhism. He saw art as an instrument of getting us out of that infernal circle of birth and death, and in that way he became a philosopher of artists, of poets.

However, one of the consequences of that was Wallace Stevens with his "supreme fiction." Wallace Stevens was, for me, too cold; and he represented precisely something against which I rebelled. But Yeats was very close to my sensitivity, and I appreciate especially an essay by Seamus Heaney, "On Larkin and Yeats," about two attitudes toward death. And he says, he quotes a Czech poet about two men, both dead, but he says, "I do not believe they are both dead in the same kind"¹—[Laughter] Yeats was much closer to me than Wallace Stevens, for instance.

RH: We were wondering this morning when you first actually met Oscar Milosz, and when you first arrived in Paris.

CM: Ya. We arrived in Paris, it was 1931. During our expedition, three of us on a canoe. So I appeared in Paris without a penny, and in short trousers. And then I met my cousin Oscar Milosz, who became a great influence. I consider that for a young poet to meet an old poet and to feel great respect for him is very essential. Because, as I said in one of my poems, "in fact throughout my life I was an adoring man." I need to admire, and I admired Oscar Milosz, who was a very profound thinker, not only a poet.

1. "The Dead" by Miroslav Holub, ends, "I know they died the same death / but I don't think they died / in the same way."

And I am glad that now in France, again, he is recognized as one of the great forces of French poetry of the past years.

But primarily, he influenced me as a religious thinker. He was baptized by his mother; he was Jewish, but he was baptized. And for a long time, he was not strictly denominational, but toward the end of his life he was a practicing Roman Catholic. His approach to religion was very different from that which I encountered around me in Poland, where being Roman Catholic automatically meant being on the right, politically. And suddenly I met somebody who didn't think in that way, who was not a nationalist, and not a rightist, but at the same time was a religious thinker. And he was a mystic. As a matter of fact, he was a kabbalist, I believe. And he made some metaphysical discoveries, I should say. He was deeply concerned with the problem of space. Space and time. And in his mystical writings I found a description, practically, of the beginning of the universe. At that time when I first read him in French, I didn't understand; for me, it was absolutely incomprehensible. But, several decades later, astrophysics discovered the theory of the Big Bang, which was precisely what he described in his mystical writings. The beginning of space and time. And for a young man who was searching for answers to some basic, ultimate things, it was a tremendous influence.

RH: Another writer who seemed to have a lot of influence on you is Gombrowicz. And Gombrowicz seemed to think that religious belief was childish.

CM: Well, I should say that Gombrowicz, Witold Gombrowicz, with whom I had very good relations and no conflicts at all, was a proper atheist, and his philosophy was rather close to the philosophy of Feuerbach, who was a master of Karl Marx. That was a philosophy of, as Gombrowicz called it, the inter-human church. Mainly, that people create, influence, shape each other. They create everything—they create their notion of truth, and good and evil. There is nothing metaphysically founded. So, his philosophy was not very close to my philosophy. But he was a very important writer, a very good writer, and I can say that in order to understand Polish literature today, one has to take into account the influence of Witold Gombrowicz. For such writers, such poets, as Tadeusz Rozewicz. As I understand, you [Edward Hirsch] read a poem of Tadeusz Rozewicz's in my translation [at "Try to Praise the Mutilated World: An Evening in Celebration of Contemporary Polish Poetry," a recent reading in New York City hosted by Alice Quinn.]

EH: It was very good. Excellent . . . Outstanding! [Laughter] Yes, I love this poem, "In the Midst of Life." It's fantastic.

I love your ABC book [*Milosz's ABCs*], but this is not a genre that I knew very much about. I'd never encountered the genre of the ABC book, and I wondered if you would say something about it—if you felt you were making it up, or when you got the idea of doing this, as a book.

CM: I don't think the idea of writing *ABC* is very original; there were some predecessors in Polish literature. It is very handy because you arrange your experiences, figures, and problems in alphabetical order; it is good for a reader, because you can read a page and put aside the book, so it is not tedious. And for me, my eyes already were too weak to write. I dictated the whole book. This book sought to bring to life many people I knew—problems, also people—and that's not the end. I recently wrote a longer life of one character. But I consider *ABC* part of my activity as a glutton, as a devourer of experience of the world.

EH: A lot of it is a kind of rescuing, it seems, of people who are otherwise forgotten.

CM: Completely. Precisely. For me it was an endeavor to speak of people who nobody remembers, nobody knows about—completely anonymous. This is "Operation Compassion."

RH: I'm thinking about the young poets here. One of the qualities of the body of your work is enormous invention in form. The *ABC* book is one example. Donald Davie has written that the root of your poetry is dissatisfaction with the lyric, that you need to find more capacious forms. Maybe it begins with "The Voices of Poor People" sequence. Would you talk a little bit about invention?

CM: I don't know. When I look now, in retrospect, I appear to myself as a constant, restless inventor of new kinds of language to express reality. Not in the sense of the avant garde, not at all; but taking over various styles of the past. For instance, in poetry, a metrical poem with rhyme, blank verse, free verse, the short prose poem, and so on. But also some dramatic forms—when I discovered talking through a persona. That is something which, in English poetry, is not that venerable a tradition: Robert Browning, whom nobody reads today. But he was a great inventor of talking through a persona. And so this is something which I tried.

And also in prose. Like *ABC*, but also other forms; essays. I have written two novels, but I am against the form of the novel in general. [Laughter]

EH: I kiss your hand.

CM: One novel [*The Seizure of Power*] I wrote for a contest that was an international European award founded by the Swiss *Guild du Livre*, a book guild. I needed money, so I wrote the novel for money, and I won. [Laughter] And the second was *The Issa Valley*, which is a novel about my childhood. Not as autobiographical as people believe, but it nevertheless was based on my childhood in Lithuania. But that's all. I wouldn't be able to write novels now, because I believe that the race of novelists are people who are indecent. [Laughter]

EH: Why is that?

RH: Good question.

EH: You need to help us a little more with that.

CM: I'll give you one example: Dostoyevsky, who belonged to the race of novelists. He speaks at a given moment in *The Idiot* of a crazy captain who tells how he lost his leg, and he put a monument where he buried his leg. And the inscription on that tomb is taken from the tomb of Dostoyevsky's mother. And this is what I call the indecency of novelists. [Laughter]

EH: What about mixing poetry and prose together? That must have been quite amazing when you started doing it.

CM: Yes, but the problem is that there is a good style of prose, in my opinion. Stendhal said that his standard was The Napoleonic Code as prose. There are various kinds of what you can call poetic prose. Which is bad prose, and bad poetry. [Laughter] And so you have to be very careful. Of course, there is the realm of experiment; for instance, the poetry of Rimbaud, which is borderline—extremely inventive and fantastically strong. But those are relatively rare cases. And I should say that Rimbaud had tremendous influence in Poland, upon Polish poetry. Mostly because of translations done during the First World War, especially by Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz, who was one of my masters of style. In Kiev he translated Rimbaud into Polish. And his poetry is full of color and the sensual, in the manner of Rimbaud. And he wrote, also, poems in prose, which influenced me as a young man.

RH: Probably the nearest to to Rimbaud, to existentialist or nihilist work in your poetry, is *Bobo's Metamorphosis*, a book that's very dark and very absurdist. Around the time of your move to California, as if a second exile was too much.

CM: There is a lot of very dark poetry in that book. However, that is due, as I told you, to my being full of contradictions. One influence in my life was Simone Weil, whom I translated into Polish. I published a selection of

her writings in 1958. For you young poets, that was a very remote year—'58. I discovered in Simone Weil something to cure me from my desire to have a unified worldview. She said that "contradiction is a lever of transcendence." And so I decided that if I am full of contradictions, this I have to accept.

EH: I was struck in the ABC book how much you still love Camus, but I was also struck by your extremely negative feelings for Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

CM: Ya. I must confess I hated that hag. [Laughter] Because she came from a very bourgeois, rich, well-to-do family. And she was a student of the best schools in France—*L'École Normale Supérieure*—as was Simone Weil. Simone de Beauvoir and Simone Weil in the same school.

And Simone de Beauvoir followed the road of the rebel. Of course, she rebelled against her bourgeois home and she became a leftist, a lover of Sartre, and so on. I had negative feelings; it was largely personal. I was provincial, I didn't belong to the great world of French bourgeoisie. My leftism was not so exquisite. [Laughter] So it was very personal. And of course, Simone de Beauvoir became a great defender of feminism and a mother of feminism; by being against her, I don't want to say that I am or that I have been an anti-feminist. On the contrary.

And here I would like to invoke the name of Anna Swir, or Anna Swirszczynska. She was a very eminent poet, and it's a pity that now she's dead and we cannot honor her. Anna Swir, in many ways, was a very Polish phenomenon. She made her debut as the author of poetic miniatures; very sophisticated. Then she went through the war experience in Warsaw as a military nurse, and she gave up writing. After the war, she started to express her war experiences and didn't, couldn't succeed. Only late did she succeed in writing and publishing a book, *Building the Barricade*, on the Warsaw uprising of 1944. Which is a tremendous book, in my opinion. Short descriptive poems; extremely concise.

And she followed also another kind of experience. At the age of 60, she started to write erotic poetry. And her best erotic poetry was written after 60. I knew her in Warsaw. I published her in my postwar clandestine anthology in 1942. Then I met her in 1981, when I came to Poland, and she was changed. She was, as a young girl, shy—a little gray mouse. And now, when I met her, she was a white haired, robust lioness. [Laughter] In any case, she was a true feminist, because her feminism didn't come from theory, but from observation and compassion. Her poems about women are about the fate of mostly proletarian and peasant women confronted with a normal habit of men —

which is to work, to drink, and to beat his wife when he comes home:

EH: And we know about her because of your translations of her.

CM: Oh, you know?

EH: Yes. Well, we know your translation *Talking to the Body*, which is a great help to us. Another book that had tremendous impact upon many of us is your anthology of *Postwar Polish Poetry*. And I wondered if you'd say something about your motivation to create that book.

CM: Yes. I'd like to go to the beginning of this, namely, to old Latin lessons in high school. We had a teacher of Latin who practiced a collective translation. Namely, he would put on the blackboard a sentence, in his translation, from Ovid, and then address us, "Now, who would improve it?" Suggesting improvements to the line. And sometimes we worked one hour on one line of Ovid's, proposing various solutions. That was a good school. [Laughter] And I applied the same method when I was teaching at Berkeley; the *Postwar* anthology is a result of my work with students.

RH: It also had the effect in the postwar period of making Polish experience seem central to our understanding of

culture. It has to do with some of the reasons why we're here. And I remember reading in Gombrowicz's diaries that when he read *The Captive Mind* in Buenos Aires, he said, "Ah! That fox Milosz has grabbed the center of gravity and moved it from Paris to Warsaw." Was that in your consciousness at all—rebellion with the provinces against the capital, as you were writing that book?

CM: Against Paris? Well, I wrote that book in France. My situation at that time was of a leper; I was excluded from literary salons. When I suggested translating *The Captive Mind* to a young man who knew both languages, he said, "I cannot. I would like to very much, but I would be finished if I do that." The pressure of the French Communist Party over the intellectual milieu was extremely strong. So a man who broke with the Communist regime was considered a madman—or paid by American imperialists. And of course, through all that, the political mood in Paris at that time was a combination of French anti-Americanism—which is very deep, going from the inside—and Communism. So I wrote that book in despair. And that despair is apparent in the book.

EH: I wonder how you feel now about some of the French poets who embraced communism, like Aragon and Éluard?

CM: Well, I don't think that they are sufficiently eminent poets to think of them. Of course, they came from Sartre's intellectualism as editor of *Les Temps Modernes*. But I must tell you that I had a moment in the salon in Paris, when I was with the Polish embassy. Pablo Neruda had an apartment in Quai D'Orléans, a very chic part of Paris, and I used to go there in the company of Éluard and Aragon. But that's the past. That was before I broke with the Polish government. So, of course, Bob, my writing was strongly anti-Western intellectuals. Gombrowicz in his diary says that "when Milosz is anti-Western, he is more interesting even than when he is anti-Eastern."

RH: I think maybe it's time to invite others, besides ourselves, to ask questions.

CM: Questions?

Gary Hawkins: You began today with a Whitmanesque statement of contradiction as power. Young poets, perhaps, would love that, because we are enamored with contradiction and ambiguity. Is there a danger in contradiction?

CM: Of course there is. [Laughter] Living in the world is extremely contradictory. I wonder whether we can avoid contradiction; for me, contradictions are so deeply rooted

in the structure of the world. It leads to the problem of suffering, of evil. Those are basic questions.

EH: I do remember that at the wonderful festival at your 87th birthday, that after many of us had been discussing your work, you did say that the one thing that you felt we had under-emphasized in thinking about your work was the question of suffering.

CM: Ya. The problem, of course, is the question of how to talk about it. How to find a language to express. You know, under the Nazi occupation, I wrote during the same year the cycle of poems, "Voices of Poor People," and a poem called "The World: A Naive Poem." And looking in retrospect, I think that "The World," which is nothing but the idyllic description of a childish vision of the world—by analogy, *Songs of Innocence* of William Blake—has been more effective than attempted descriptions of reality. Of course, I am very proud of the fact that I wrote such poems, documentary testimonies, as "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" or "Campo Dei Fiori." But I must concede that, artistically, "The World" is better.

So this problem of coping with suffering . . . we have no means. And this is a problem raised by Seamus Heaney in his essays, that Polish poetry, through a constant effort to grasp that inability, reaches some ways of moving by

distillation, by irony, and so on. Even so, this concentrated problem of suffering continues to elude our means.

Todd Samuelson: I'd like to continue for a moment the discussion of suffering and creation. In several of your essays, you mention one moral problem of the poet, which is the distance necessary to transform experience. You say that even in being led to the executioner, there is that kind of disembodied distance. How do you reconcile this when creating, and, perhaps more importantly, how is this different from the indecency of the novelist?

CM: Well, I guess that I have written on the morality of art. And there is a basic immorality. Because you face evil, you face suffering, you face crime, and instead of writing, you should take part in a struggle. You should act, instead of write. So there is a basic contradiction between writing and acting. Our poet, Adam Mickiewicz, at a given moment in his life, moved from writing to action. He said, "It is more difficult to live well one day than to write a book." And he died in Constantinople, organizing Polish troops in a fight against Russia during the Crimean War. So, action and writing are in conflict. You have to choose. And you choose writing, and you feel guilty.

Interview: July 23, 2002

Adam Zagajewski and Czeslaw Milosz

Adam Zagajewski: We are very grateful that Czeslaw Milosz accepted our second invitation, which was not on the program. Would you like to start with a reading, as you said, of a section of the *Treatise on Poetry*?

Czeslaw Milosz: Maybe just a bit of how it sounds in Polish. The first part of the *Treatise on Poetry* takes place in Krakow. So, the beginning, just for sound: [reads]. That's enough for the beginning.

AZ: Not in English?

CM: You have . . . ?

AZ: Yes, they have read it. [Laughter] So, shall we proceed with the conversation? You have this notion of "*gospodarstwo poezji*," "the household of poetry." Could you explain to us what you mean?

CM: Well, for me, quite the mysterious thing is succeeding literary schools, the fact that we belong to various literary schools. It is more mysterious than it seems. Of late, I read

a long poem, written now, in terza rima. Its three hundred pages have good language, and good craft. But there are obviously some features which place this poem around 1900.

As in painting, there should be a rule of individual talent. Somebody starts to paint, and the stigma of the time in which he paints is on the individual. Just so, we cannot see literature purely individually, independently of the epoch. We usually start imitating each other, imitating poets, anything older. And we are marked by a certain Zeitgeist. So it is mysterious because the individual talent is involved, the individual mark of a given person.

For me it's very strange, for instance, when you enter an art gallery. Far away you see a painting and immediately recognize that this is a painting of Corot, let us say, or Cézanne. There are some inimitable features individually, but at the same time, they belong to a certain time, a group. My guess is that the most classical possibility is to belong to a group of our time, yet to accomplish something individual, on the margins. The most classical example would be the painting of Cézanne. As a matter of fact, he was a part of the whole current of the second half of the nineteenth century, but through his personal obstinacy in painting Mont Saint-Victoire, being faithful to nature, he accomplished something purely individual—at the

margins, so to say, of the whole movement. And in that way became an initiator of the future movements of the beginning of the twentieth century.

This is connected with the fact that, fortunately, the notion of progress and of revolution, so dear to scientists, as poets doesn't apply to us. We cannot say that we are better poets than Homer, or the Latin poets like Ovid, because we came later. And this is one more subject which I wonder what my interlocutor thinks of.

AZ: Well, I'm afraid they'd rather prefer your opinion. [Laughter] They spend so much time with me in the Spring.

CM: Ah ha. Yes, but I have to be prodded. [Laughter]

AZ: In your letters and in your essays from the 30's and the 40's, there's a strong feeling that you have to fight against the Zeitgeist — that there's a Zeitgeist which is killing the lesser talents, and you have to go against it. Can you explain this?

CM: In a way, I was aware of this poetics as a young man. I was anti-avant garde, theoretically. And I guess I was anti-Modernist, in the sense that I rejected the principle of work—literary work, poetic work—as an autonomous

value. I had strong temptations toward reality. That's a great temptation. And my relationship with my contemporaries was very dialectical, I should say. I use that expression because I consider myself a dialectical mind, and a perverse mind. [Laughter]

But I realized that to be *against*, simply—for instance, to say that I am against the transformations in Polish versification which occurred in the period between the two wars, that I would stick to meter and rhyme—wouldn't lead to anything. Namely, it would be static, because the evolution of Polish versification was in agreement with the nature of the Polish language. In Russia, they continued to write in metrical and rhymed poetry, like my late friend Joseph Brodsky. But that was in agreement with the nature of the Russian language. However, I must say that, of late, I have read translations into Russian of my poetry—for instance, the *Treatise on Theology*, translated into Russian—and it sounds beautiful, and is not in traditional, metrical Russian verse. So it is possible, always, to introduce changes. But for a long time, the Russian language resisted those reforms in versification.

AZ: You also use another notion, the “Polish school of poetry.” Can you tell us what the Polish school of poetry is?

CM: It is not my notion; I found it in the American press, I guess. [Laughter] It is, rather, Americans who introduced that notion—I haven't met that term among Polish thinkers. Besides, if we poets who appeared yesterday [the established generations of Polish poets] make a certain group, it is not for the younger critics and young poets in Poland. We are far, far from their aspirations. They imitate Ashbery, they imitate O'Hara. They do not have a feeling for our preoccupation with history, the irony of history and so on.

AZ: Is there any connection between the "household of poetry" and the "Polish school of poetry"? "*Gospodarstwo poezji*," "*Polska szkola*?"

CM: The *husbandry* of poetry. [Laughter] No. The notion of the husbandry of poetry is my feeling that as a poet, I belong to—let us say—the farm of Polish poetry. I belong to several generations. That farm embraces poetry beginning with the sixteenth century, from Kochanowski, for instance, and following centuries where, of course, some schools are against other schools. But I belong to a certain current in history. In general, we can look at the history of mankind as a certain current of searching, of forms constantly invented.

It is not haphazard and not senseless; I believe that this has some metaphysical meaning—the constant common work of generations of poets, of artists, who create what we call civilization. Not in the sense of inventing machines and making scientific progress, but a mysterious evolution of poems and conventions which allow us to use the language of our epoch in order to make a basic search. I don't know if you can define that basic search, but for me, belief in the present time (although the erosion of religious imagination, which is due to the pressure of science and technology on our minds) intensifies the quasi-religious search of poets. I had a very strong feeling in listening to poets reading their poems yesterday, that we are united by the same search—trying to name, to catch the human condition in its richness and extreme strangeness. That we turn around one big, single theme.

And for that vision, poetry has a proper theological meaning, I should say. For centuries, European poetry had two basic themes, or rather one basic theme: salvation and damnation. *La Divina Commedia*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust*. And instead of that we have something much less definite. We feel strangeness—the strangeness of being human, the strangeness of belonging to that extraordinary species. That effort to name is something very different from purely formal experiment, because there is that matter which is turning around, trying to name. I have a very

strong feeling about Modern poetry, that it is that search. In America, of course, Walt Whitman is an example of such a poet.

AZ: I understand your husbandry of poetry has something intrinsically optimistic in a way, a feeling of continuation between generations. But could the *Treatise on Poetry* be read as an elegy for poetry, a kind of saying farewell to poetry? I guess you wouldn't agree with this.

CM: In a way, in a way, there is that element, undoubtedly. But there is the history of Polish poetry of the twentieth century, also. An element of elegy is there, but not only. Some of you know this story: I read a poem by Karl Shapiro, *Essay on Rime*, which was one of the first poetry books published after the last war. It was written in England, where Karl Shapiro was stationed as a soldier. And the poem is a kind of recovery of the eighteenth century tradition of Alexander Pope, of writing discourses in verse. That was my first idea, realized many years later. Of course, the *Treatise on Poetry* was seen in Poland as a kind of extravaganza in nonsense, because no avant garde poet can write treatises in the style of the eighteenth century. It was a violation of a certain convention. And I am very glad that I did that. Because what is in the *Treatise on Poetry*? An effort to grasp reality which eludes or has

eluded other poets, having very vivid images experienced by myself?

Not necessarily. The first part, for instance, which takes place in Krakow, is a reconstruction of what I'd read and heard. I remembered some elements which I included, such as advertisements—even the old newspapers of the Hapsburg Empire—on Anna Csilag. She was a Moravian girl who grew hair reaching her feet. And that was an advertisement of a medicine to grow hair. [Laughter] So, those things. And then, for instance, in the passage which I read today, there are those girls who meditated in the toilets about the connection between the soul and the self. And I refer to Dr. Freud, who seemingly came from Galicia. [Laughter] But other parts of the *Treatise on Poetry*, like the Second World War, are things which I have seen. That is a mixture of discourse and observation. In very few poems I reach this fusion.

AZ: You said that one of the obstacles in the looking for reality, hunting for reality, is the avant garde notion of *l'art pour l'art*. Would you say the Hegelian temptation you described in *The Captive Mind* is also an impediment to reality?

CM: Ya. First, I'll take off my glasses.

AZ: Another impediment. [Laughter]

CM: Yes. Now, in the twentieth century, we—many of us—were exposed to temptations of interpreted history, and the interpretation of history—so-called historiography—of course goes back to Hegel, and finds its continuation in Karl Marx. And many intellectuals were tempted by Marxism or Hegelianism. In my opinion, it was probably necessary in order to have the experience of the Twentieth Century, because it happens that we have to drink some abominable soups in order to be, I don't know, in harmony with our epoch. We have to exhaust all the nonsense ourselves.

And I was one of those who was tempted. Not that I was, that I ever became a Stalinist. But it is complicated in Poland, because undoubtedly I was under the influence of one very powerful mind, a philosopher by the name of Stanislaw Brzozowski, who died in 1911. He had a short life, but was extremely prolific and inventive. And much more than to Marx, I was indebted to his ideas. They can be detected everywhere. And I had the temptation, and I rejected it. Those who were not contaminated, who were not bitten by Hegel—it's probably part of a necessary education. But there's a basic contradiction: at the time I was the most contaminated I should say by Hegelianism—

AZ: Which was when, would you say?

CM: It was in the 1950s, I should say. Because what was the situation then? The Stalinist Empire seemed to be reaching for the domination all over the world. The notion of historical necessity, of the defeat of capitalism—which hadn't proven very effective, especially after the big crisis, the American crises in 1929, and the growth of Nazism, which was interpreted as a kind of a consequence of decaying capitalism. So the victory of Communism seemed to be very probable. But I didn't like that utopia, that Russian type of utopia. And I should say that my contradictions were those of a Polish socialist caught by the victory of Stalinist doctrine.

AZ: Would you say that Simone Weil helped you—there was a question about Simone Weil last time—did Simone Weil help you in overcoming this Hegelian temptation?

CM: Simone Weil is one example of how Marxism influenced minds of the twentieth century. After all, she was interested in Marxism, and she understood Marxism very well. She objected. She said that the greatest peril of Marxists and progressives of various kinds, is to believe that by marching forward, you will soar in the air. [Laughter] When she worked in the factory in Paris, she felt, with her body, the pain and tragedy of labor. She

understood the issues. You ask me whether she helped me to overcome. In a way, but when I read Simone Weil in Paris, I myself overcame that temptation. However, I must say I had a dear friend, whose name was [Juliusz] Kronski . . .

AZ: Tiger; You know Tiger [from *Native Realm*].

CM: Yes . . . who survived the war and found himself in Paris. And in Paris he was getting more and more Communist. It's impossible to explain the character of that figure without entering into Polish political life. And the impact of Polish nationalism, and Polish anti-Semitism—Tiger was half-Jewish. But my friendship, very dear friendship, with him was mysterious for many people in Poland. When he returned to Poland, he became a Stalinist professor. And some people remember him as a Stalinist professor. But he was a victim, I should say, of a certain naïvete which was dictated by the hatred of Polish messianic nationalism. Toward the end of his life, which was after the death of Stalin, there is a saying that I guess you have to believe, that when he looked at a portrait of Stalin, he said, (you are going to translate now):

AZ: How shall I translate it? (Laughter) Um . . . (Laughter) . . . it's very vulgar. "This shit wasted my life." It's a mild translation. (Laughter)

CM: So—how I liberated myself. I wrote a novel named *The Issa Valley*. Because the best way against ratiocination, against the acrobatics of the mind, is essential things—attached to the earth, to nature. To such descriptions of idyllic nature as in *The Issa Valley*. At the same time, *The Issa Valley* has been defined as a masked theological treatise because of the problem of evil and suffering.

And my attitude toward nature is very ambiguous. As a young boy, I used to hunt with my father, and was interested, passionately, in ornithology. I knew all the names of all the birds in Poland, with their Latin names. And then I belonged to the circle of nature lovers in high school. Early, I discovered Darwin, and we used to make conferences on Darwin and the selection of species. And that was maybe the main reason for my ambiguity. Not only the fact that I had been killing animals, but the discovery of *natura devorans et natura devorata*—nature devouring and nature devoured—which is at the root of my horror of nature.

AZ: Maybe another question that lingers from the last meeting. Someone asked you about Camus, Albert Camus, and his role, the importance of your having met him, and your friendship.

CM: Yes, well, at that time, when I lived in France, I was a leper; I was an outsider in the salons, outside good society. Camus at that time worked with the publishing house of Gallimard. And he was completely different from those French intellectuals. Don't forget that at more or less the same time that I wrote *The Captive Mind*, he wrote *L'Homme révolté*, which is a very open discussion of political issues. He was attacked, because of that book, by the leftists. So he was open, and he was very friendly towards me. He liked *The Issa Valley*, and he recommended it for publication. And so I had an ally in him.

I had some conversations with Camus—about religion, for instance. He said once, "Don't you think it's strange that I, an atheist, sent my children to their first communion?" And I answered, "No, it's not strange." Because I had a conversation with Karl Jaspers, the eminent German philosopher who even wrote an introduction for my *Captive Mind*, and he said, "I am a Protestant. I dislike intensely Roman Catholicism. But, in my opinion, you should give to your children a religious education in your faith. The most important is to acquaint them with the Biblical tradition, and then they will choose."

So. We made a digression about Camus.

AZ: Yes. But I have some questions from our bright students. One of them is, "In your essays, you have written that the search for poetic form is an attempt to order the world. Is there a correspondence between the various forms you have written in and specific states of mind or emotion?"

CM: Various forms. Of course. When we think of the husbandry of poetry through several epochs, we see various conventions and various forms. And there's a temptation to revive those forms, to use those forms. Not as a pastiche, but as something else. To imitate Blake, for instance. Nabokov, young Nabokov, was such a talent. He was able to write poetry in various styles. Not as a pastiche, but to be modern and contemporary. He was experimenting with those various forms of the past. And I should say that in this respect, maybe I was a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. But the question is whether there is a correspondence between those various forms—

AZ: And the states of mind or emotion.

CM: I wouldn't be able to pin it down.

AZ: Another question is about the prose of your essays. Your choice of plain speech is very deliberate. Could you

comment on this and the relationship between poetry and prose?

CM: Well, I believe that the form of the essay has, in every language, different development and tradition. As a young man, I used to write essays which were very close to poetry. And that was not a good experience. I soon came to the conclusion that those are not good, that's not good writing. Prose should keep to the rules of prose, and be, if possible, clear, accessible, and logical. It should not rely on the game of associations and poetic elements. So, for me, when I read somebody's prose, if it is marked by subjective associations and too much concern with the person of the author—In other words, every mark of subjectivity for me is a mark of immaturity, in prose. The same applies to my students. When I saw too much concern with the ego of an author, I disqualified that paper. But I wouldn't say that this goes against Brodsky's method of writing essays. There is no such parallelism or opposition. His way was, in general, different. I wouldn't put my prose in opposition with Brodsky's, nor would I put it on the same level.

AZ: There is a different question which concerns Section Four of the *Treatise on Poetry*. Could you comment on the kind of liberation suggested or prophesied in the poem, "O City, O Society, O Capital"? When man comes "ready for

truth, for speech, for wings”—is this to be understood as purely spiritual liberation, or as a social liberation as well?

CM: Both. I see in that poem of mine a trace of utopian socialism. I guess that I mentioned Stanislaw Brzozowski, I mentioned his philosophy of history. But I have written in one poem, which has never been translated, about our permanent dream, about the city of the sun. That's the title of a utopian work of Campanella.

And it should be utopian, in a way. That was liberation, not in the sense of Marxist liberation, but feeling that we are not what we should be as human beings. That we are fallen creatures—for me, the notion of the Fall is very important.

AZ: Maybe once again, just briefly, about Simone Weil. This question: in the interview on Friday you said that from Simone Weil you learned to give up the desire for one unified culture or society. Could you explain this a little more?

CM: No, no. [Laughter] Under the influence of Simone Weil I renounced a dream of having, myself, a unified *Weltanschauung*. I accepted my contradictions. Society, no. Attentive reading of Simone Weil, especially of her political / economical / social essays, cannot lead to any

dreaming about classless society. She was too mature for that.

AZ: Maybe there are some last questions from the room?

Edward Hirsch: I love, as many do in this room, Aleksander Wat's *My Century*, and I wondered if you had some sense of great excitement when you were interviewing Wat, as Wat was saying these things about various aspects of the twentieth century?

CM: Well, undoubtedly, all that recording conversation with Aleksander Wat was for me an exciting adventure. And he felt that. He was extremely sensitive to finding a receptive listener; there was a nearly mesmeric interdependence between me and Wat. Wat came to Berkeley full of illusions. That he would be surrounded by a circle of admirers who would listen to him, sit at the feet of a master. But he knew Russian and French—people who knew Russian were very few in Berkeley, and French, even less. So he couldn't much communicate.

Moreover he found in me somebody who belonged to the same literary formation. There was a difference of age, but not so great. And I knew Russian also, and understood his jokes. And was really interested, passionately interested, in leaving his story when he was dead. Besides, I was

translating his poems. There is a little-known publication which is entitled *With the Skin*. I don't know whether you have ever seen that book.

EH: We've written about it!

CM: A ha. Yes. So, Wat tried to record, but I must say that at a given moment, I interrupted. Wat went back to Paris, and I didn't want to continue the interview. He was avid to tell, for instance, the whole story of being forced to take a Soviet passport. It remained untold because I interrupted for egoistic reasons. I couldn't sacrifice all my time to Wat.

But he tried with other persons and never succeeded. There was no such fluidity, such an aura with other persons, as between us.

Miho Nonaka: I don't hear the word "master" often in the States. I hear "mentor," but not "master." And I was wondering if you think it's dangerous to have a master who's still alive?

CM: You know very well that famous professor from Yale—what is his name? Harold Bloom, ya, Harold Bloom—who created a theory of misreading. And about the relationship between the master and the disciple, that the disciple always misreads the master, and that

misreading is creative, really. [Milosz laughs, the audience joins]. Ya.

Alissa Leigh: Mr. Zagajewski says that younger poets need to rebel in order to become mature poets. Do you think it is necessary for younger poets to rebel against their elders?

CM: Probably, yes. However, it seems to me that a kind of worship of rebellion has 19th century roots in the fact that writers have to be against the bourgeoisie. It means being against the grown-up. But, as to rebellion against other poets, I guess that there is something to that.

However, if I go back to my youth, I must say that I rebelled against some poets and some currents of the older generation, while worshipping some individuals among the old generations. So there is also that admiration for some guides of the older generation at the same time.

from "28 i 5"

we gave back to the river whatever belonged to it;
we took what was ours.

for a small charge we entrusted muddy waters
with blind unwanted kittens; we drowned
puppies; condemned sick old dogs
to turbulent whirls; we threw in used furniture
we'd found in front of houses: TV sets, washers, fridges.
the water accepted all.

we gave back to the river whatever belonged to it
we took what was ours.

we've run out of things the river would accept.
we have nothing. enviously, we watch
our fathers standing with fishing poles
at the river bank. we watch the water closing over
their blind, unwanted time.

for a brief time I lived near
a lighthouse. at nights I'd sit in the window
and watch the light streaks cut
the dark and the fog and rush ahead to reach
somebody's eyes, straining to
see the shore. its height would not even equal
the church tower, but its significance surpassed
the church a hundredfold. in my dreams I was
the light keeper, lost ships found their way to the port
thanks to me. now I live a long distance from the sea, but
in a way I am still faithful to my
childhood religion. at night when
I can't sleep I stand in the window. I never
turn on the light. I hide the burning cigarette
inside my hand so that this meager flicker
doesn't mark a path for anybody, so that it
doesn't even attract moths.

how can you not remember that old woman next to us;
she walked through her room at ungodly hours,
knocking her cane against the floor and the furniture.
she was half-blind, and we thought the taps were some
mischievous ghosts haunting our apartment, those spirits
that
flip pages in a book, hide a trinket or two, blow cold breath
on your neck.
do you remember? how can you not remember? that old
woman
died last week. since then it's been so quiet in our place
that I can hear the hearts of pigeons sleeping on the
windowsill. how can you
not remember? you must remember. the world dies when
you turn your back
upon it. objects turn into ashes when you close
your eyes. unread poems have never existed. everything
dies
when untouched by your hands, eyes, or lips.
but your rhododendron is doing quite well. perhaps
because
you wonder constantly
whether I put out my cigarettes in it.

their bedroom is right behind my bathroom wall
and their bathroom adjoins my bedroom
that's why when I write in the evenings their unrest
pours into my thoughts like water into my bathtub
the pipes gurgling noisily
rusty words leak on the page
I know more and more about them
even though they aren't an exciting material
when the TV isn't blasting too loud
I'm forced to listen to their arguments
more frequent and fierce each day
sometimes I catch the noises of their love campaigns
they are just as loud as their disagreements
but these days they make love less and less
they piss more and more

Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak

Erotica

You are the most beautiful refrigerator where I keep
strawberries blueberries beans carrots and peas
You are the worst-cut jacket on sale
within this country's borders
You are the most modern Hewlett Packard laser printer model
printing scandalous excerpts from the lives of failed mystics
You are the warmest radiator on all the floors of the world
You are the most expensive perfume on the Champs-Élysées
You are the perfect Technics equipment for playing
Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" or Beethoven's "Fate"
You are the longest rainbow of the Parisian sky
You are a mind-blowing Concord with an unearthly acceleration
You are the hardest pip in a Burgundy's juicy pulp
You are a cosmic-scale demographic boom
You are the prettiest doorknob in this city
You are all the kings and queens at once
You are a chess game never played at World Championship
You are an out-of-tune piano in a psychiatrist's salon
You are a fabulous display, the center of attention in the center of
London
You are the most elegant entrance of the whole Hilton chain
You are the smoothest page of *Vogue* magazine
You are the most precious fork at a business dinner

You are the most interesting table of contents, lent only for a few
minutes

You are the most effective vaccine against flu and rabies

You are as serious as the Tower of London

You are as sweet as cubed sugar

You are as grand as New York's tallest building.

Paris, 1999

Uncertainty

I'll plead for you with someone you don't know
he lends me a path towards the childhood meadows
and a key sharp as a needle used for piercing dreams
just don't heal over I beg you don't you ever do it
leave a raw opening to the poem's other side
the sky cries so sweetly singing on its knees

I'll follow your childish loss in a paper
crown I'll face reality bewitched
into a cackle please just stop the wars
fought by no one but you
and stop the victories always misunderstood
your screams won't drown the silence

My funny little poem I'll warm you in my hands
we'll tell life we're sorry for writing and not living
your naïve and tender efforts to spy on naked words
flattered my ego and animated objects
watching you hurt your feet against the hard ground
I loved you more than any human being

Wroclaw, January 30, 2001
(snowing lightly)

Fin de siècle

Our *fin de siècle* started today
just a minute ago exactly at five o'clock PM
in *Café de France* on the main street
but what does it all matter
effectiveness of muscular homosexuals
and sexless melancholic women
in jackets left over from their husbands-to-be
with make-up they cover nature's mistakes side effects
of hormones and artificial alienations
pharmacological kingdoms of test tubes

With certain melancholy they stress intellectual
pomposity they assume that
(but mostly they assume the position)
poets are engulfed by engravings of screaming neon lights
Fin de siècle blabbering hundred-year-old clichés on art
dressed in waistcoats of Victor Hugo's buddies
we sigh again "Oh my God!"
somebody there exalts "Leonardo!"
Leonardo a perverse context of admiration
fits the king and queen into a golden frame
changes into colorful dresses
puts on an earring to cheer himself up
he winks at men

"Look what Tyranny!"
he scopes out his fly
"Hey you in a flowery scarf!
Which of us will become the Queen of the Night?"
At the round table the conjuring of poetry
like the conjuring of ghosts
places where eternal night dwells
the scent of roses perfume and incense
free love ritual
pathetic nudity of a common *danse macabre*
costumology borrowed from Pierre Cardin
Oh! the boys drink raspberry juice
and are afraid of the next woman

Boys on golden bikes
Prefer Lucky Strikes

Dead tired we don't feel like drinking
tea in china teacups anymore
We've lived to witness the pact with Zen
tao which leads us god-knows-where
to experience an old man that it was different once
to experience an old man that soon
six years before the end of the epoch
six years before the end of the century
for me myself I am nobody
others call me a hero

it is with them I walk down the streets
drunk with beauty and verses from my own world
helpless we create another generation
where deep cardinal purple competes
with the screaming red of Coca-Cola signs
the scent of jeans fertilizes minds with scurvy heaven
Levi Strauss salutes the statue of liberty
CENTURY IS A DRAMA OF A GREAT GRANDMOTHER'S BROKEN
CHINA
CENTURY IS A NAME OF AN OVER-COLORED COMIC BOOK
CENTURY IS THE FIFTH ACE UP THE CREATOR'S SLEEVE

Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak

Your Decisions

Unused places overgrow, grass on a mound is rustling.
Even today for this suburban
area I'd chance a bus ride without a ticket, moments which
are subject to taxation.
Oh, this widely spreading weakness for the graceful
outlines of the landscape, which reclines on its side,
posing for a new detail, like, say, this dark spot on the
forearm,
which, when examined closely, turns out to be nothing
special. But it's the perspective that counts,
the way you caress each part with your eyes so that the
still figure shivers slightly,
expelling a warm breeze that will push you in her arms.

You rest your head on the turf camouflaging a mole's
burrow. Have you come here just to
sigh, frolic, hear in your head the stirring leaves of grass,
and then, lying on your back
with a straw in your mouth, in the curves of the clouds
search for the sweep of imagination, for fictitious
scenes?
True, it's a pleasure, when something like this comes off.
But bliss is a temporary
blessing. While perhaps you should say something more—

that's the reason those three
exist, words so meaningful for somebody, that verb
with two personal pronouns—
rather than just climb down the mound, promising to
return.

Dampness, Deeply Felt

Ivy wraps around the secession-style house, as if it constantly wanted to break through the layers of brick, and spurt out like a stain on the freshly-painted wall of our bedroom.

I've been feeling it for a long time, we've been feeling it behind the wardrobe, close inside us. When you want something too much, you might not be able to start or you might even damage the breaks. The effects are obvious, and the causes?... Well, instead of reading to us Hans C. Andersen's book of longing,

Mother Nature must have put us to sleep with suffragists' newsletters, reading soundlessly but with a stress on the first syllable; or perhaps nothing was read to us at all.

In the corners outside the slightly open window—the ivy leaves. On May nights little brown flies are born in them, the itching sensation grows in the skin.

Congenital appetites appear in the background of the reflection. Oh, there to see the chassis emerging from the turbulent sheets, to run your fingers on the smooth paint, finally, to settle inside, your hands grasping the wheel!

Bye-bye dust and coughs of psychoanalysts! Now we

need someone special by our side.
For when we've left behind the problems of broken
accelerators and a few crashes, we check
if the wipers are working, if the mirrors are adjusted
properly, if the tank is full.

Waiting for the Ice Queen in Front of the Neon Sign “October”

It started with brakes screeching at the left turn and ended
with a pole at the side of the road.

The piercing sound of a returning ambulance is throbbing;
the sound inside it—dying down. A revolving
blue eye on the roof of the police car stops the eye of the
crowd.

The sunset coagulates. When I inspect the mangled body
of the car, I fear the mouth of the forecast,
which foretells that at night frost will camp all over the
streets.

Above the park, the endless crescendo of starling screams
condenses into white drops,
which fall in one stain on a stylish coat. Elegant lips
summon curses for help.

Too bad the slits under the birds' tails cannot see it. The
only remedy would be
to distribute free plane tickets to destinations along the
starlings' course
and leave our fridges to guests from the Far North.

Someone's late, while somebody is here too early. The red
rose is moved

from the right hand to the left one and then back. A
romance begins with a grimace.
"She loves me; she loves me not"—it's just the memory
that still plays this game, although
it wouldn't hurt to dust the manual. Now, concentrate and
pluck off the first petal.
Good! Perfect! Keep playing until the sound inside starts
throbbing more strongly.

What a Stone Said

Let salmons swim up the river. Don't be a bear waiting in shallow water for an easy prey nor an artificial dam increasing the level of envy: once you put down your paw it's hard to take it back, and concrete binds faster and stronger than you think. Why don't you sit at the bank and bond with your own amazement, for the things you see glide over the buzz and the rumble, while the splashing and the diving bring outpours, not complaints. It's a rare privilege to be a tolerated voyeur, who, one day, in the main stream of the main street, when the most beautiful faces merge into a foam, will spawn more energy than he could ever bear. Then, you will make a half-turn and face the waves, push off against the absent support, and multiply each step by the last one, while the first jump over the heads will belong to the followers.

Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak

Hieronim Szczur

What Matters? A Conversation with Bronislaw Maj.

“You wish to be yourself. Be careful. That’s what
the worms are waiting for.”

Paavo J. Haavikko

chaos wins, you say,
the prairie grass is burning, acacia buds
are burning, my hands are as strong as Aeneas
leaving Troy; I wander constantly, hills and prairies
are as mysterious as coffee beans
spilled on the table;

behind the hills, on the ash tree,
which climbs towards the sky following
Aeneas’ tracks, Quentin Tarantino has been crucified,
chaos wanders along with the burning grass—it’s calling
from the ash,
the prairie grass is burning, there’s only fear
you say, and the shining, omnipresent
as vines all over the prairies;

day after day we love
more and more, you say, we love
not to give in to the chaos, the prairie grass is burning,

the night-filled ships are coming, I wander constantly,
women
are passing by me, their vermilion bodies are cloths
shivering in the darkness, I want fear
to burn down with the grass;

the darkness lights up with the prairie burning in my
heart;

Jan Koziętulski¹ Thinks of Death at Somosierra²

this fog is colder than fear,
and more deceitful than ice on the river;
will Loss touch us today with her tender hands?

the Spaniards cultivate their rifles like flowers;
ambushed, they're waiting to rip open
our hearts, caked with ashes;

cool rocks and rough grass
will read the inscriptions of our blood,
a song—so damn sad—of the absent God;

in the fog, I can hear Death spreading out
its luminous tools, perfect for sewing up
wounds, open as wide as eyes;

1. Jan Koziętulski (1778-1821)— a Polish military commander who participated in Napoleon's campaigns.

2. Somosierra—a mountain creek in Sierra de Guadarrama in Spain, where Polish cavalry, lead by lieutenant Jan Koziętulski, defeated the Spanish troops on 30th November 1808, thus enabling Napoleon's army to proceed towards Madrid.

After a Battle General Józef Bem¹ Is Writing a Letter to His Beloved

dreams return like mysterious villages,
where empty windows are touched by nothing but the
wind;

the weeks burn down when I fall asleep,
but when I wake up, they rise from the ashes;

I remember wild scabby space:
the snow, glittering and creaking,

and the footprints of sensuous Leukothéa²,
unearthly in the sunlight;

I wished to touch the tracks,
to smell the skin and the pulsating blood;

but I'm immobile, just standing here,

1. Józef Bem (1794-1850) – a Polish general, a successful military commander in Polish, Hungarian and Turkish armies; he participated in Polish November uprising in 1830, the Hungarian revolution in 1848-49 and many others.

2. Leukothéa – a Greek sea goddess who gave her scarf to Odysseus during a sea storm, thus saving his life.

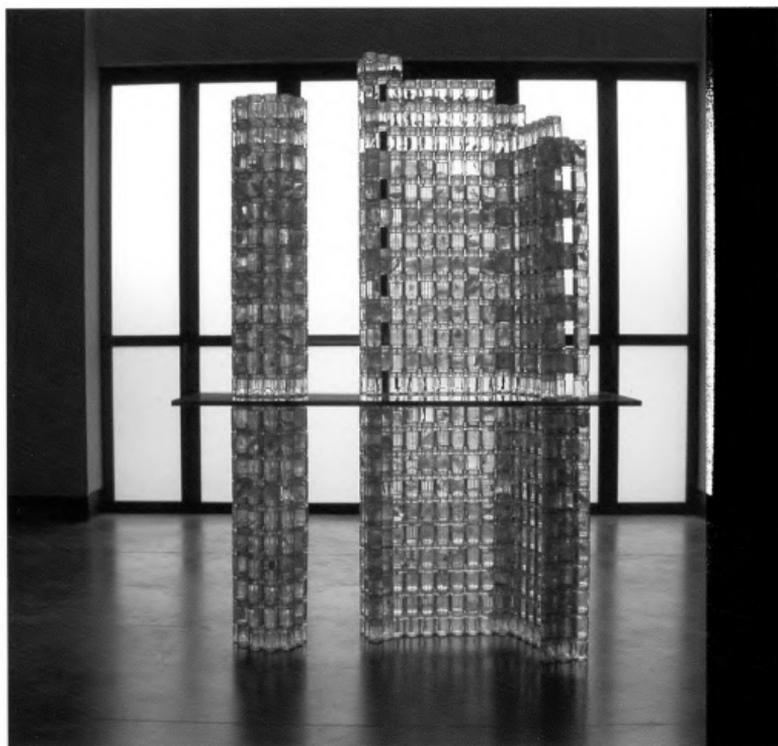
as if stone-frozen;

then, a woman's scarf looms white
over the glittering snow, it floats

slowly in my direction, falling on me,
shivering caress against my face;

and the world turns innocent again
like your wild lips;

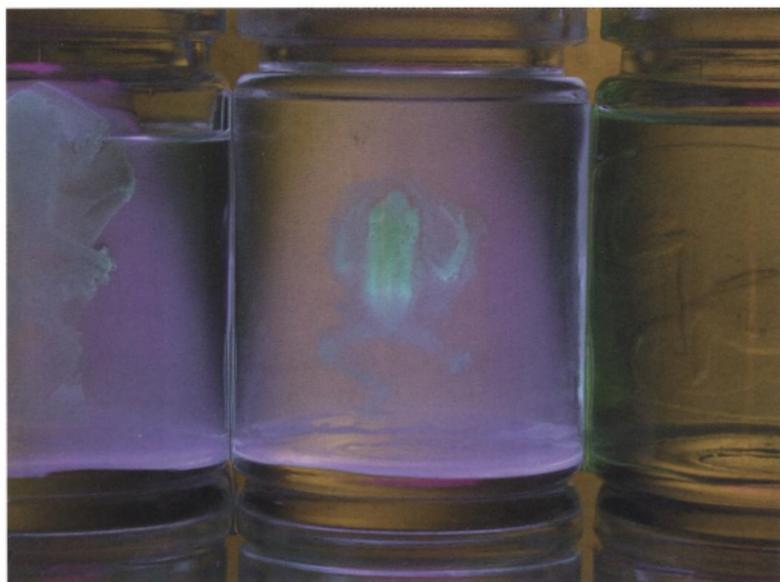
Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak















Sculpture musicale

^{musique}
Sont ^{les} ~~les~~ différents points et

formant ~~une~~
une sculpture ^{musique} qui dure.

adresse
Parties à regarder
en hochant, comme
une partie argentée dans
un verre, dans laquelle se
reflètent les choses de la
pièce.

A Collection of Notes on “Atelopus”

“I collect, therefore I am: —By selecting, gathering together, and setting aside groups of objects, we make the world meaningful and define our own relationship to it.”

—Dr. Marjorie Swann, author of *Curiosities and Texts*

conditions of a language:

The search for “prime
words”

(divisible, only
by themselves and
by unity).

Marcel Duchamp 1916, “Green Box”

For this project I was asked to choose a piece from the Dallas Museum of Art’s collection to show at the Contemporary Museum of Art in relationship to something I could make. I chose Marcel Duchamp’s “Green Box” with his collection of notes on the “Large Glass.”

At first the museum guards were trying to keep the people back away from the stack of jars assembled in the gallery. The jars seemed fragile. As the artist I had the prerogative to encourage the people gathered around to examine it more closely. So I peeled back a layer and exposed her subtle breasts. Later when I looked and saw so many people crowded up to it and passing the small black light over the surface, I had no concern

for the safety of "Atelopus." As a piece of Art it was doing its job and happily living its life. The effect of the small UV light was less than I wanted but plenty enough to keep the people close—as in nose-to-jar close. There was a continual hum of people around the piece. A chorus of "extinct frogs" sang out through the voices of those collected by "Atelopus."

My only regrets were the empty plastic wine cups that accumulated on her belly.

Collecting things is a universal human trait. Natural history specimens were some of the first objects to be collected in museums (de Borhegyi and Hanson 1982, Pearce 1992, Asma 2001). As the art of magic grew into the practice of science in the western world, odd collections of miscellaneous objects gradually became the ordered systematic resources that now play an integral role in our interpretation of natural phenomenon.

The value of systematic collections as scientific resources will continue to increase. Collection growth will slow owing to worldwide environmental changes and as human populations expand into previously undeveloped areas. Areas where specimens are collected will become fewer and fewer as natural areas of the earth are degraded by the activities of humans.

The role of well-managed systematic collections in better understanding the natural world will certainly continue to expand.

John Simmons, *Herpetological Collecting and Collections*

Management, 1992

Musical sculpture.
lasting and
Sounds leaving from
different places and
forming
sounding
a sculpture which lasts.

Marcel Duchamp 1916

"I feel emotionally attached to those jars—sort of like I haven't completely 'let go' of them. They are similar to a bright but troubled student that you have confidence in but nobody else has faith in them. Those jars and I have a long convoluted history; I have struggled for years 'with them' (filling up precious collection space), and fought 'for them' (when everybody wanted to throw them out because they were worthless). But now with time, encouragement, a push in the right direction, and tutelage under the 'right' person—that student goes farther than anything that I could have hoped or imagined."

—Linda Ford, Curator of Herpetology, American Museum of Natural History (the source of the jars used in "Atelopus")

There is a photograph of Marcel Duchamp taken at the American Museum of Natural History in front of the Tyrannosaurus Rex I need to find.

In the rainforest, like spit on a griddle, the frog is gone. Maybe swallowed by the snake, it is just swallowed up by the forest, feeding the system we

know simply as mother nature. I do not want these frogs in this piece lost in that scenario. I hope this piece slaps a few people up the side of their heads. These aren't cute little red eyes. These are casts that can be completely invisible in a clear liquid till exposed to UV light, when they glow separate from the clear liquid around them. Or others that are slightly milky early in the morning but by noon have become opaque and, were the lights dimmed, you could see them glow. After the museum closes they will glow throughout the night. When I get up in the wee hours of the morning, usually around 4:30, and let the cat out, I always take the route back through the dining room-studio and see all the glowing frogs that will populate future pieces. I want a lot from this.

Parts to look at
Cross-eyed. like
a piece of silvered
glass, in which are
reflected the objects in the
room.

Marcel Duchamp 1917

Duchamp said: 3 "is kind of a magic number, but not in the ordinary sense. Number 1 is unity, number 2 is the couple, and 3 is the crowd. In other words, 20 million or 3 is the same for me."

—*Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, by Kuensli and Naumann

The *Atelopus* group of frogs were first described and published in the 1841 *Erpétologie Générale* forty-four years before Marcel Duchamp was

born. In just the past ten years the majority of the highland species of *Atelopus* have become extinct.

He (Duchamp) is toying around with the implications of non-Euclidean geometry and it leads him into a postmodern multiplicity of meanings and dimensions.

I remember reading somewhere that he worked for over twenty years on *Étant donnés*. He kept it a secret and intended it to be viewed after his death. "GIVEN" the context of Duchamp's work, the female body refers to another male body: Duchamp's. He has included his own corpse in the piece by reference. He spent those twenty years preparing for the work that incorporated his dead body. Ha! How's that for multiple dimensions? Not just four (dimensions). He wouldn't stop there. If we have three, we have infinity.

—Kim Alexander

Collections vary from precise and orderly to flotsam and jetsam. Those most pristinely maintained are often natural history collections where a specimen may be the only remaining example of the now extinct individual. Our ability to understand and interpret our world relies on the well being of these collections. As with art, interpretation is the source of collections' importance.

Ewa Nowakowska

The Snows

A snow-cruled bough
lowers toward me
the snow's monologue
lowers to a whisper
here we come together
not directly yet we are about to
here the snow caresses me expertly
(after all, it served its apprenticeship
for thousands of years with the Master)
here my mouth and thighs part
conditional and subjunctive moods
grind and rasp floured with frost
here I lower myself so much
the snow's monologue
sounds more and more natural
here is our rendezvous
my apprenticeship with the Master

(upon "The Sleigh" by Marc Chagall)

On the sleigh adorned with a figurehead,
her visage lit by a radiant swordfish,

a man with a cunning expression
rides from a dream into reality.
Idyllic lanes and mists,
hazy light, confectioneries of galaxies,
serve only to mislead his Foe
who, in the meantime, hangs on the Cross,
and the whole world awaits a solution,
and the whole world rides in great tension
from reality into a dream,
contrary to its own intentions.

A Scalpel

water veins inside me water mains of myths canals of
stimuli the capillaries of emotions overflow I carry them
around everywhere crystals rose windows pumps levers
I take them to temples to markets fairs I take them
to places where I make love I will take them to cellars
 where
they will revive suddenly because it is from there that they
 spring
these water systems water mains of myths above the earth
 surface
there stick out gnarled and twisted arteries of the sky

The scent of perfume worn by a woman
going to a funeral—
the challenge she presents to death.

Leak

On a cantering bus I am reading about emily dickinson as
she
withdraws into the spinning circumference of a grave
while I
rush by treasuries of chestnut trees warehouses of leaves
which reach the underworld and go down to storerooms
of hell as defiantly as christ slashed with capillaries
in which the cytoplasm of the sky is pulsating and emily
discovers
the suns and lands in a coffin plank that rivet her with a
look
of its wooden eyes oh what a balm it is since

down there
so much sticky sweetness so many jars with preserves
are leaking

An essence is soaking into the soil
stirred and turned up by moles
on tree branches
drenched icons hang
showing christ to whose cheek

leaf has clung tenderly
sent from the underworld
by resentful Eve

Translated by the author

How I Came To Favor Certain Aesthetics

For Tadeusz Pióro

There must be symmetry in the things of this world,
since we have two hands, two ears, two eyes,
and, finally, two cerebral hemispheres. Human death
doesn't change anything in this matter; just like
the Copernican revolution left our speech habits intact,
even though it won the respect of the judges and received
only the highest marks. There's spectators for you.
Crossing swords with the judges is their natural act; they
love
reckless adventurers, pearl hunters,
children—slightly distracted, wondrous and wild—
who get up at noon and don't want to smile,
who, posing for photographs,
always show their tongues. But when it comes to
calculating cube roots or playing études
in a room filled with—what a contrast—
gentlemen in tuxedos and heavily
made-up ladies, who, ah—can you hear it—sigh at the
very
thought of the spectacle, the wild orgy
that's now in the making . . . An arrester is being installed

in the corner. According to regulations. With tension like
this,
there might be a lightning, the symmetry's open
agent. At the village fair in Sady near Pozna_
tedious magicians make a living in magnesium
lights, while here: an explosion of spirit!
But now the séance is over. The people depart.
The wunderkind sits down to have punch and pizza
in a small circle of wunderkind friends, lead
by its president; there's a professor and a giggling priest,
a gloomy Mafioso and a dumb reporter.
All dote on the prodigy. The happy parents
return slowly from their two-day trip
down to the Enthusiasm Mountains; then, according to the
law
of symmetry that, exiled through the door, lurks at their
window
in the five-year-old idiot, pissing
at the sight of lights, they feel condemned
to a two day depression.

It grew late.
Light, in every place they left, faded once, and then again.

Translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak

Boston, Canada

I dreamt I governed a state
somewhere in Canada, but it was American.
It was called Boston and prospered:
my only job was instilling reasonable vices
and walking the State Line
to inspect the border fence.
Right here, the fence is bent under a clump of snow;
over there, blotches of rust.
I write 'bent' and then 'rust' in my notebook.
My life is broadcast on *Boston Alive!*
only because people are tired of watching
politicians debate. When I go to the toilet,
they get a nature clip. A border patrolman
leaves his house and salutes me from his steps.
His wife is making dinner and sees him on T.V.
The boys in anoraks are out front playing *hide-and-seek*.
The younger one leans his head against the State chopper
and counts *one.. two.. three.. four*. You can't find the older
one anywhere.

Translated by Nicole Zdeb and the author

The Empty Chair

Your resemblance to Molière. There it was
in the cameo from your *school for wives*
days—the same feral weighted gaze and
erotic mouth, playing out a small struggle

between flesh and spirit, won (in your face)
by the will to please—you could make your
smile conventional. But charm, rigorous charm—
how far can it take one? And the dangerous power

of impersonation. Actors give up their bodies
to it, their souls. Yeats quoted the Indian mystic
who said, *if a man died playing Hamlet, he would
be hamlet after his death*. If I ascend on my last

breath to that bright stage, then behold you ignorant
of my face (or any other not in a mask)—could I
bear to love only a resemblance? All is resemblance,
within the swirling differing capacities. Moliere,

onstage, feigning death then dying his own. His
chair left empty—like yours, here, black canvas,
director's style. Your name writ on the back in
the uncanny light falling also on what I've written:

each simple-minded coincidence. Then those darker
flashes of a larger portrait, the lineaments of
a criminal or deity, the insistence of each made-up
gaze. Molière's likeness, maybe, or yours: your face.

Box

Hee's gone and with him what a world are dead.
No more young Hamlett, ould Heironymoe.
Kind Leer, the greved Moore and more beside.
That lived in him, have now for ever dy'de.

Elegy for Burbage—Anonymous

Duke of Albany, clear-voiced, you, cursing
Goneril: *not worth the dust the rude wind*
blows in your face... Then this hungry grief
seeking out your made-up nature? Left the room

as Captain Jack Absolute, Marat, Sebastian
and Fabian, Laertes and Rosencrantz: returned
as dust the rude wind lifts over the footlights.
Your box of faces. China white, pancake flat.

I peer into the oval glass imbedded in the lid—
Zero there before anyone glimpsed your gathering
threat. Mustache, spirit gum, grease pencils.
Whay peels from these too-solid imaginines of

your Self, Prince Jester's pat laughter?
I re-trace lines drawn round the mounting
puzzle of aspect. Swinging grapes, Rude Wind
Stilled. Your life-mask kept in a carton. *Memento*

mori. Yet alive in passion's glass—eyes watching
yourself slowly painting yourself, perfecting the inaccessible.

Strange Interlude

That hot summer in London,
you were Ned Darrell. In South Ken,
we kept a maisonette, rented a paddle-

boat on the Serpentine, where you &
The Badger sat, moving. Galaxies spun,
swans drifted on their reflections. Up

from rehearsal, you kept on being him.
Locked on a mirage, I drifted into fiction.
At night, late, I'd lose myself, hurrying the chapters.

There—you stand at the mirror: Ned Darrell, worrying
his tie, gazing into my eyes through his reflection,
muttering to Nina (in O'Neill underscript)—what

the characters are really thinking. Tugging at the silk
knot, frowning... *isn't built to face reality, no writer
is outside his books. Muttering... got to help her*

snap out of this. I look out the window,
it's time for you to go. *Help her snap out
of this,* I say, then laugh. But you look cross—

it's late, the car's outside. And see?
my own characters peer out of the mirror,
the one you and he have left trembling.

Aaron Reynolds

Rising Action in Little Falls

Brock Clarke. *The Ordinary White Boy*. Harcourt, 2001. 272 pages. \$24, hardcover.

What We Won't Do. Sarabande Books, 2002. 165 pages. \$13.95, paperback.

Little Falls, New York, is the kind of small, working-class upstate town where the sheriff and local newspaper editor are brothers, and the just-closed paper mills send their dismissed workers scurrying across town for a shot at gainful employment with a soon-to-be-opened maximum security prison. Its citizens are almost exclusively white, visit the same local pizzeria on weekends, and upon graduating from high school, the younger populace without exception seems to leave town only long enough to receive a community college education, before returning home to Little Falls to live out the rest of their lives.

Still, for such a small, unassuming town, a lot of strange things seem to be going on: a young reporter and his editor are standing in a Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot, drunk, the reporter's car covered in chicken fat, the editor protesting as the reporter, in a fit of anger, prepares to wield a tire iron against a nearby, spotless vehicle. During a snowstorm, a snowplow barrels down a

road and knocks a woman twenty feet in the air without coming close to stopping. The sole non-white citizen, a Latino jewelry shop proprietor, goes missing under ominous circumstances. Dinner parties and other public social occasions have a way of erupting into sudden, startling physical violence. Over the course of several weeks, a group of fathers band together and starve themselves to death. An aging man regularly carries his garbage to the curb fully naked. At the high school, the librarian is held hostage at gunpoint by a disgruntled student, who forces him to reveal all sorts of embarrassing secrets. Then, of course, there's the time the circus came to town and, after an elephant trampled a boy to death, the citizens banded together and, using a large crane and long chain, promptly hung the elephant, lynch-mob style.

Welcome to the fictional world of Brock Clarke, whose debut novel, *The Ordinary White Boy*, and subsequent collection of stories, *What We Won't Do*, both stake out Little Falls, New York, as a literary territory of great promise. Populated by fathers and sons seemingly locked in un-winnable contests to see who can fall further into an abyss of disappointment and regret, school teachers, small-town newspaper reporters, or unemployed drunks and the dental hygienists who love them, the characters in Clarke's fiction might best be summed up in the following exchange, from the "Plowing the Secondaries": "For

someone so stupid," the protagonist's estranged wife tells him, "you sure have an active imagination."

With Clarke's debut novel, the title alone—*The Ordinary White Boy*—betrays a promising, yet somewhat constricted and conventional worldview, though thankfully that promise pays off with greater range and versatility in Clarke's follow-up collection. The marketing folks might claim the title narrator for *The Ordinary White Boy*, Lamar Kerry, Jr., is an "unlikely hero," in the tradition of Holden Caulfield and other antiheroes, yet relatively speaking, there's little that is unlikely or provocative in our protagonist here, especially in comparison to the sharper, more biting characters that define the stories of *What We Won't Do*. Simply put, the people and the town of Little Falls seems far more, well, ordinary, in Clarke's debut novel than it will in his later, superior work.

This is not to say *The Ordinary White Boy* is without many charms. Lamar is quite engaging and likeable: he's a twenty-seven-year-old lifelong resident of Little Falls, currently toiling away as an all-purpose reporter for the local paper, whose duties mostly entail plagiarizing clippings from papers from other nearby towns. His narration is wryly observant one moment ("Men do one of two things when they are in trouble: they get themselves in more trouble, or they make lists."), touchingly innocent the next. The writing is often gracefully precise, with the plot unfolding easily, the juggling of many characters handled

effortlessly, and a number of supporting characters—Lamar’s uncle Bart (also the local sheriff), or Lamar’s even less ambitious lifelong buddy Andrew, now ready to move on from tending bar at his parents’ restaurant to applying for a job as a prison guard—should bring a smile of recognition to the face of anyone who grew up in a small town.

Unfortunately, the character is also at times maddeningly self-analytical to the point of navel-gazing about his very ordinariness: the ordinariness of his town, his job, his routine-defined relationship with a young school secretary, his inability to feel adequate at comforting his MS-stricken mother, his father’s obvious disappointment at his son’s lack of ambition. Lamar is the kind of sensitive, insecure man-child character that I imagine John Cusack could play in his sleep for the movie adaptation, which is not necessarily a bad notion, but certainly a familiar one. What’s more, the novel’s main attempt at being provocative—the Hispanic jeweler’s disappearance, the subsequent criminal investigation, and the small-town tongue-wagging, then apathy, that follows—certainly feels accurate, but not especially revelatory in the feelings of “guilty ordinariness” that Lamar frequently ruminates over. It also doesn’t help matters that the missing Hispanic man, one Mark Ramirez, feels less like a distinctive character than a convenient

symbolic flashpoint to help “ordinary” characters improve themselves.

Similarly, many of Lamar’s stabs at transgression—going on a spontaneous, drunken road trip with his buddy Andrew, getting in a fight, etc.—may be part of a grand old tradition, but offer little in the way of surprise. On the other hand, there’s Lamar’s incestuous lusting after his cousin Loreen, though this character is even less developed than Mark Ramirez, with maybe ten pages devoted to her, at most. This is not to say that the scenes of small-town newsroom idleness, family bickering, or stagnant young adult relationships are not handled deftly, or without insight, but such insights feel more comforting than provocative; at times they’re even overbearing in their very “ordinariness”: walking by a protest rally at the end of a chapter, Lamar pauses before a discarded placard that reads “*Change Now!*” and in the last third of the book, Lamar seems to make a sporadic routine of prefacing or concluding long ruminations with a pronouncement along the lines of “I have been taught a lesson”—about relationships, about race relations in small-town America, about family, and about growing up from an ordinary white boy to an ordinary white man.

Which makes the biting wit and devastatingly frank portrayals in the stories of *What We Won’t Do* even more bracing, producing that all-too-rare exhilaration at seeing

an author's promise not only fulfilled, but even surpassed. All of Clarke's strengths from the novel remain on display in his short fiction, along with refreshingly provocative and far more original depictions.

The protagonists in *What We Won't Do* continue to make bad decisions, yet such decisions are rarely uninformed or hasty. Instead, they are the inevitable result of years of frustration, disappointment, and, yes, many prior bad decisions that continue to haunt these characters. One might believe these moments of realization for the characters will more often than not lead to purifying epiphanies along the lines of our narrator in *Ordinary White Boy*, or at least offer flickering possibilities for redemption, if it weren't for the fact that Clarke's central characters here are some of the most glorious fuck-ups in recent memory. Does this mean Clarke's stories are devoid of hope? Possibly, at times, though it's amazing how often Clarke can make hopelessness so winningly funny. As the narrator in "The Right Questions" ruminates:

What did it feel like to face all these hard facts? Go do the following: climb in your car and find yourself a highway. Get your vehicle up to an honest cruising speed—sixty-five or seventy. Then open the door, and abandon car. Land on your stomach. Hit a sign post if you can. Say hello to the

guard rail. Chew a little gravel. Bounce your head off the pavement a few dozen times, just to lose your sense of what's good and right in the world. It hurt worse than that.

Or, in "The World Dirty, Like a Heart," there's a moment at a dentist-hosted, nitrous-oxide-fueled party in which the disillusioned narrator spies the dentist's ten-year-old son openly drunk amongst the adult guests, and approaches him:

Here was something I could do. You're a teacher, I thought. Teach. There was beauty to be salvaged in all the ugly places.

"I remember when I was you," I told him. "I remember what it was like. I know what it is to be just yea high to this terrible world.

"So what," he said, pointing the beer bottle at my head. "You're just one more in a long line of asswipes."

Which is why I slapped him, right across the face.

It's sometimes a fine line between a story being merciless and a character simply being merciless to himself, yet while these characters may prove to be their own worst enemies, they're also Clarke's not-so-secret weapon in *What We Won't Do's* best moments. "History

always comes back," another narrator in the collection notes, "not to tell you why bad things happen, but why you deserve them." Such moments of insight are comparable to witnessing a drunken ten-year-old being slapped in the face, or an old wound being probed and poked relentlessly, but just try not laughing throughout the pain.

Near the close of *The Ordinary White Boy*, Lamar notes with pride, "Who would have thought we would be so courageous in our resignation?" while in *What We Won't Do's* "Accidents" another narrator realizes, "The problem is not that you don't know when to settle, but that you don't know you already have." Whether the characters in Clarke's Little Falls continue to be courageously resigned, or continue to rail against settling, one thing is clear: Brock Clarke's fiction shows little sign of slowing down or settling, and leaves us hopeful that his continually promising gifts and still-developing literary territory of Little Falls, New York, will be on display again soon.

So Calm, So Vaporless, The World of Light

The snow was falling in earnest when Mr. and Mrs. Cheswick began to display their naughty bits to London. It was a Wednesday night, a few days before Christmas. Phil called the blizzard exhibitionists Mr. and Mrs. Cheswick because he didn't know their real names, but they stood in apartment windows in the building directly across the street, called *Cheswick House*. All the buildings in this area had names like that; massive stone structures, built in the classical Georgian style which mostly meant arched doorways, four levels of large, ascending windows and shoddy plumbing.

Phil had his favorite bathrobe on and the espresso machine humming and all his drafts laid out on the dining room table. He was done with his teaching for the semester and was looking forward to spending a long weekend working on the play. Phil Castor was writing a play, his first play in over ten years. His short-story collection *Swallow* It had been out of print for twelve years now, but Phil realized years ago plays were his thing anyway; the distilled, dramatic action of the stage was his true calling.

Phil finished the first half of the play last month, called *Dark*, and was now starting the second, *Light*. It was all very conceptual, slightly abstract, and Phil himself wasn't

really sure what it was about. All he knew was that he was writing again, the dialogue was flowing. Other than this, his four months in London had been spent on discovering the remarkable myriad of methods with which one could consume gin, and nurturing a devastating desire for Richard Nellwyn.

Phil was taking a break and watching the snow, thinking how the city reflected and emphasized that snow like this was so rare. Or maybe it was the silence the snow created; the city didn't know what to do with it. The slightest sounds carried down the street, a spinning tire, the wet pat of dropping snow, a slammed door. Even the acoustics, the aesthetics were unprepared. Maida Vale was an exclusive area of London, antiquarian and quiet and reserved. The snow came heavy by this time, obscuring the street below with swirling sprays of white.

Then the wind paused for a moment and Phil could see Mr. Cheswick, very still, seemingly looking straight at him. They were far enough apart that Phil couldn't distinguish the features of his face, but could tell he was an older man, much older than himself, maybe sixty, heavy set with a thick face and large features. His hands hung at his sides like an overcoat.

Then Mr. Cheswick turned and dropped his pants. Just unbuckled and let them go, carefully stepped out of the pants, removed his shirt, and turned back to face the street again. Phil started a bit. The snow was thick, and it gusted

with a sideways slanting motion that twisted things, so maybe he wasn't seeing what he thought he was. Phil leaned forward and squinted. There was a shift in the wind, a pause, and the streetlights glimmered sharply and Phil saw him perfectly defined like on a figure on the telly. Mr. Cheswick's prick was enormous. It hung like a thick, purple hammer between his legs, like some ponderous old bell-clapper, a meaty teardrop. Mr. Cheswick stood there gazing out into the street, watching the drifts of snow. Phil realized that with his light on Mr. Cheswick must be able to see him as well, but there seemed little to do about it.

That's when *Mrs.* Cheswick showed up. She was in the window exactly opposite Phil, one floor above Mr. Cheswick, possibly the same apartment. She opened her curtains slowly and the new light caught Phil's attention away from Mr. Cheswick, mesmerizing as he was. She was young, just in her late twenties perhaps, and more shy than Mr. Cheswick, though not much. She undressed slowly, almost absentmindedly.

Phil kept his hands on the keyboard so that through the billowing snow it would still look like he was working and not staring at a pair of naked people. The streets were empty, and by now it was almost eleven o'clock. Phil thought of the other citizens in this quaint and stolidly conservative neighborhood, shivering slightly in their beds, staring into the dark and having fantastic nightmares about the snowstorm that ended it all, when right outside

their windows several tenants seemed deadly intent on flaunting their wares as a final gesture. Mrs. Cheswick slipped out of her power suit and stood in a tiny pair of panties.

Phil considered himself a genuine aesthete; he had a great understanding and appreciation for beauty in all forms, and Mrs. Cheswick was completely sublime. She looked like she had walked out of the British Museum, a piece of Greek statuary, or later Italian; Bartolino's *Dirce* came to mind. When she bent to pull down her panties she turned slightly, and her behind was stunning. She was firmly shaped, not like one of those stringy-British-gym girls that stocked the bars of Soho, but rather a natural firmness that only comes from genetics. Her breasts were perhaps too large, frightening even, which added to the sublimity, and when she took off her bra she leapt out of the realm of ancient Greece and into 19th century cabaret. Mr. Cheswick stood below her, stoic as ever, his enormous prick positioned solidly between his slightly spread legs. The wind paused again and that's when Phil noticed they both had their windows open. Mrs. Cheswick shivered a bit and Mr. stuck out his hand to catch some flakes. The snow came harder, straight down in tiny flakes like a shower of dust particles piling on the window ledge. And then they were both gone. Their lights remained on for a few more minutes before blinking out and bringing the face of the Cheswick House into complete obscurity.

Phil's last play was a success; it went over well in New York and even played through Chicago and a brief stint in San Francisco. After it ran for six weeks off-Broadway in 1988, Phil got a flat in Brooklyn to continue his brilliant career, and after two days he realized he didn't have anything else to write. Not like *Stealing Allen* was a seminal piece of writing anyway. Phil realized that it was gimmicky. Four earnest young men kidnapping Allen Ginsberg, then having intense discussions on the function of art in society; Phil was almost embarrassed to think about it.

Currently Phil struggled with the stage directions. Phil believed in stage directions. He felt the playwright had a definite responsibility to direct the action. The student productions he directed always went well, and when he did *Godot* last year he got rave reviews, in spite of the fact that he loathed Beckett. Phil preferred the severe, allegorical melodrama of Stindberg and Yeats, the powerful intellect of Stoppard, or the subtle mystical imagination of Pirandello and MacLeish. True, the stage was a realm of ideas, though without the fundamental human component you produce nothing but farcical absurdity, or a lecture.

Most of Phil's walking around time in London had been spent in a re-immersion of the haunts of the great English poets and writers, most of whom Phil hadn't read

since graduate school. He sipped a pint of bitter in the broad gardens of *The Spaniard*, a favorite of Dickens, wandered through Johnson's Court off Fleet Street, and fingered the spindly branches of Keats's lemon tree. It was these things to which he attributed his resurgent desire to write drama.

The next morning was clear and sharp. Phil got up early to prepare for lunch with Richard Nellwyn. He was deadly excited about it, as Richard was the only real British friend he had in London. He had this amazing, demonstrative way of expressing himself that Phil found incredibly attractive. So much life in his face. He talked with his whole body.

This was mostly because Richard was deaf and talked in sign language, but he was so earnest and passionate with his signing that even though Phil often had little idea what he was trying to say, he always enjoyed their time together. The sun was out and the snow lay in even sheets across the sidewalks. There were only about four inches on the ground, but it seemed to have scared people into hiding. A few bundled-up Brits walked about the sidewalks, slowly, staggered by the profundity of white that lay around them.

Phil met Richard Nellywn two years ago when Richard was doing the signing for a student Shakespeare

production that Phil helped put together in Florida. Richard was floating about the states doing charity signing work here and there. His girlfriend at the time was part of the troupe—*The Slammin' Shakespeare Express*—so Richard tagged along and did the signing if there was a need for it. It was odd to Phil at the time, a rather dismal production of *King Lear* played by washed-up hacks and students actors, with Richard in a little box in the corner signing it all. Phil couldn't fathom how Richard did all those words, at such a pace, not to mention some of the Elizabethan terminology. The producer told Phil that Richard was so good that if he encountered a word that had no existing sign he spelled it out with letters so quickly that he wouldn't get behind, or better yet would actually *make up* a new sign, but in a way that everyone could understand.

He had the natural gift, Phil thought, some sort of carnal, fundamental genius of making meaning with his hands. Phil often thought he was in love with Richard's hands. Strong fingers, yet slender and spotless. Not a scar or mole or freckle or even a chipped nail. Richard admitted with a sheepish grin once that he got his nails manicured every week—his agent set it up.

Phil spent Saturdays and Sundays under the Waterloo bridge, adjacent to the National Film Theater, manning a series of bookstalls set up on long tables. His boss, Sinjay, was a swarthy bearded fellow who spent the week

combing the city and countryside for used books, which he piled into his old flat-sided milk truck and brought to the bridge to sell for a pound or two apiece. He had several stalls throughout London, including one in Covent Garden and several in Notting Hill. These books were mostly old paperbacks, pulp novels and such, but every once and a while Phil found a gem; a volume of Spinoza, for example, or Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Sinjay let him lift a few things every week, so that and forty quid made it worthwhile for Phil to sit on the embankment wall of the Thames for six hours and sell to tourists or poor students. Sinjay and his sons came back at five and the boys boxed and reloaded the books as Sinjay and Phil had a drink from Phil's flask, sitting on the wall and watching the sun's fading light play over the dome of St. Paul's. This is where Phil met Richard for the second time, when one Saturday the dashing young man came over to Phil clutching a copy of Nathaniel West and a twenty-pound note.

Things had changed in two years; Richard was in great demand. Producers from all over wanted him to sign for live events, television, movies, all sorts of things. It was easy to see why—he could do American, English, and International sign language, including all the varieties of finger spelling techniques. Though it was certainly more than the hands; Richard was an Adonis. Solid, arching eyebrows, and thick, sensuous lips. Tall with narrow hips

and the husky athleticism of a collegiate quarterback. A fantastic dresser, with real taste. Sure, everything tended toward black, but he had the newest and best suits, silk ties, hand-made shoes, and perfect hair. Richard was straight but Phil harbored the desperate possibility. He would have been a perfect gay man. Phil's perfect gay man.

The streets of Maida Vale were dead quiet as Phil trudged to the tube station. The snow was still solidly white and the deep crunching of his footfalls focused and traveled down the street like gunshots in a deep canyon. But further in the heart of the city the cars and pedestrian traffic had turned most of the snow into a brown-gray quagmire. Everything was always a mess; it was unavoidable. Richard would want to talk about his new girlfriend, Phil assumed, and Phil wasn't interested. But he brought along his pad and pen so Richard could write down the key components, a few central phrases to keep him on track. Phil knew it made Richard angry that he made little attempt to learn sign language, but it seemed so confusing. Phil kept telling him that he had to master one language first, then he'd get to sign language. He had picked up smattering of signs over the months, key verbs and a few central concepts that usually gave him *some* idea of what Richard was saying, if he were paying attention. Richard could read lips with staggering accuracy, and as

long as Phil didn't cover his mouth or duck under the table, Richard knew Phil's every word.

And Richard could actually hear some too. He suffered from a Cochlear type disability, with a particular problem called *recruitment*, which resulted in an abnormally rapid growth in sound level on occasion. Sudden, extremely loud sounds were heard by Richard as clearly as any one else. As he explained it, he lived in a world of silence, punctuated by occasional bursts of sound. Hearing aids were no help. The problem was that most sounds of that sharpness and level were unpleasant and disturbing, particularly to someone who wasn't used to them. Slamming doors, sirens, an occasional shriek, sure, Richard remembered certain sounds, but every week or so another unpleasant sound presented itself to his moderate slate of sound experience.

Phil and Richard had their lunches at The Truckles of Pied Bull Yard in Bloomsbury. Richard was under contract with BBC television and they had him put up in a luxury flat in the West-End. Truckles was Phil's favorite spot as the food was dynamite and they had the best selection of chilled gin in London—however inconsequential to Richard as he never drank anything. It was in one of those quiet interior squares, just off Great Russell Street in front of the British Museum. Phil loved nothing more to wash down a Greek salad with a liter of Australian wine, have a

few gin gimlets, and watch Richard work himself into a sweaty, signing frenzy.

Richard got such an impassioned look to his face when he talked of his girlfriends, his hands flying about the air like startled pigeons. After a while he got so fast and furious that Phil stopped trying to understand, instead just concentrating on his sheer beauty. While they waited for their entrees Phil concentrated on the muscles rolling in Richard's forearms, the simple, articulate handspeed he was capable of, all speaking of a raw physicality that Phil had never seen before. Oh, Phil ached for this man, the kind that reminded him of every injurious moment of his life, a catalogue of sorrow and regret.

Her name was Lisa. Richard spelled into his broad palm with one finger, with a hyphenated last name Phil didn't catch. They'd been together for over a month now, and he was excited about the prospects. Phil feigned interest and watched those delicious lips curl as Richard mouthed the words in between waving hands and bites of his Cumberland sausage. Like Phil, Richard didn't have any family. It was almost Christmas, and Phil hoarded a dim dream of somehow sharing this loneliness with Richard.

Phil knew that Richard didn't have any idea how he felt about him. Phil didn't think it was wrong; he wasn't lying to him exactly. Besides, Phil thought, with Richard you had to understand that he wasn't the sharpest knife in

the rack. He was smart as a bag of hammers when it came to most things. *The beautiful savage*. Phil longed to teach him about the poetry of his own movements, to acquaint Richard with the beauty of human expression. Most guys would have figured it out by now, the way Phil leered over the tiramisu. But Richard was a perfect gentleman, such a gentleman, very polite, always paid for lunch, which suited Phil since he was broke. And he actually appeared to be interested in Phil's life. He pestered Phil about his work, his literary excursions, his students, to tell him about the new play. Richard gave him a book on Laurent Clerc and another on the emerging art of sign language poetry. He even found a copy of *Swallow It* in a stall on Tottenham Court, bearing it proudly to lunch one day like a chalice.

Phil knew he didn't have a shot. The last man Phil was with was a pudgy, arrogant opera singer from Brighton that he met at The Admiral, a notorious gay pub that Phil generally abhorred. He turned out be such a catty bitch that they only lasted three dates. Plus the opera singer had this thing about protecting his throat, which was difficult to work around. The facts Phil knew too well: he was thirty-six, with the sagging marks of a developing dependence. His features had the bleak look of one who has seen an unwelcome vision of his desolate future, of growing old alone.

Richard wanted Phil to meet (two index fingers, pointing straight up, coming together) Lisa tomorrow,

Friday night. He was having a dinner at his flat to introduce her to some of his friends. Phil was elated, as Richard never had him over for dinner before. He wished that they could have a more intimate meeting, but it was something. Richard did go through some girls, and Phil had met several, all shapes and sizes, though all generally incredibly beautiful.

Richard claimed he was very serious (first finger to the chin, twisting motion) with this woman and that he wanted Phil's opinion (fingers and thumb forming a circle, waved twice over the forehead). There was a problem as well: Richard worked for Lisa. As he described her job it became clear to Phil that Lisa was one of those neo-feminist-type producers at BBC television who insisted on developing incredibly controversial programs. It was getting difficult (first two fingers of both hands in bent 'v' brushing across the chest) for him to concentrate some times.

BBC television will do just about anything as long as it's titillating, Phil thought disdainfully. He could see the production board: *Tits and ass? Let's go!* Lisa's last production, with Richard in the corner duly signing away, was a six-part series on the history of pornography. Before that Lisa had done a documentary on S&M, a late night special on prostitution, and two-part series on lap dancing. Phil could only imagine the things she was doing to Richard in the sack. He was in love with her (crossed arms

pressing the chest), he claimed. After all, Phil thought, Richard was there signing away, explaining the difference between leather bars and rubber rooms, blow-job pay scales, and the finer points of fisting. If that isn't the truest manifestations of love, then what is?

Phil caught the S&M special, and he had to admit that despite his abhorrence for the content of the program, Richard was in top form. Some of the signs (anal penetration, choke collar, horsewhipped ecstasy) were nothing short of visionary. Richard was the consummate professional; he beamed with joy as if he was signing the words of the Almighty himself.

After lunch with Richard, Phil spent the bulk of Thursday afternoon making green tea and flipping through the books that filled the massive set of shelves in the living room. It was a palatial flat, cathedral ceilings, hardwood floors, split-level kitchen, and a tiny balcony off the front window. It cost about a thousand quid a month to rent. But Lola, a writer he knew from his days at UNC, cut him a big break. She had a thing about the integrity of honoring and supporting other artists, and Phil told her he was working on a new play and she let him have it for five hundred. It may have had something to do with the fact that Lola's latest novel *Heart Strings* made Oprah's book club.

Phil sat by the window with the latest scene from *Light* when the snow started back up, and the Cheswicks as

well. Maybe there was a connection, Phil thought, some illness that made them want to strip in their lighted window when it snowed; there were stranger afflictions. Years ago Phil dated a guy who put a carrot up his ass every time it rained, something about vitamin A. It was painfully obtrusive to their relationship, and eventually he moved out to Arizona.

The snow made an ethereal curtain, and Phil admired their sense of the dramatic; he couldn't have staged it better. Every few seconds he got a clear glimpse, quickly obscured by a gust of white. At one point Phil could have sworn Mrs. Cheswick looked straight at him and said something, at least mouthed something. Phil made a sign with his hands and shoulders: what did you say?

Mr. Cheswick hung around longer this time. He turned and busied himself with something, and when he turned around he had a drink. A martini, Phil was sure, the glass was unmistakable. He sipped his own drink and began to feel affection for this aging exhibitionist. He wondered how many drinks Mr. Cheswick had had already. After they retired and darkened their windows, Phil threw on his coat and walked outside to check his own building. Was there someone else watching, or someone else they were performing for? Phil saw that his was the only light on in the building, and through the snow he could almost make out his chair at the writing table. They had to have seen me, Phil thought, it would be impossible not to. All

the cars that lined the street were now sloped white mounds, and the wind carried the snow down the street tunnel-fashion between the overhanging beech trees that lined the sidewalks.

The snow stopped sometime that night, leaving another six inches. It was a graveyard in Maida Vale. While he was having breakfast he found himself wishing he'd gotten up earlier, before ten o'clock, say, to see who came out of Cheswick House. He didn't have long to ponder, as BBC 1 was playing a Dr. Who marathon all day, and he had Richard's dinner to prepare for. Plus at some point he wanted to squeeze in some work on *Light*. He could feel the characters taking shape; at least he could tell that one was male and one was female. There were other voices too—though weren't there always? They would have to wait.

Richard had his dinner party catered—he didn't have a clue how to cook or how to do that kind of thing. He liked having people over and had the money to burn, Phil supposed. He never knew there was so much money in signing, but it appeared that Richard was the Richard Gere of the sign-language industry. It was a ten-person dinner, mostly Phil and Lisa's colleagues from the BBC, several of whom were deaf. Phil was paired with an intern from Lisa's BBC production team, a dreadful looking young American girl who looked ready to stick her head in the

oven at any moment. *The Sylvia-Syndrome*, Phil thought, what we used to call it back at UNC. But Richard was careful to instruct the servers to keep the Bombay coming with plenty of ice, so Phil chatted little Ms. Gothic through the cheese plate, waiting for Lisa and her parents to arrive.

Phil thought about the questions he could ask Lisa's parents: *So, catch Lisa's bit on buggery last night on the telly?* Richard, deadly nervous, danced about the room signing like a madman until it made Phil dizzy. Phil finally waved off the server posted at his shoulder with a cold bottle of gin wrapped in a napkin and staggered to the table where his dour date was poured into her chair and fiddling with the bread bowl.

It wasn't what Phil expected. Lisa and her parents were actually *so nice!* They were a poster-family, when you buy a picture frame—family! Lisa was sunny and dirty blonde, a bright face and musical laugh, the father suitably distinguished and genteel, the mother, well, motherly. She patted Phil on the arm and said she practically *adored* him. And this after Phil had finished off the carafe of white, moved to red, and dominated the salad portion of dinner with his invective on the RSC's dreadful staging of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Phil couldn't help imagining Lisa in a biker bar, in a khaki power suit and clipboard, up to her neck in leather and hairy flesh, directing camera angles to catch spurting fluids and waving organs. She had a delicate twist to her

lips, and her eyes seemed to find him at odd times. She was a truly beautiful woman, wearing a long cotton dress that clung with just a hint of a spectacular form, a nudge at the wonders underneath.

An hour later, Phil felt like he was on fire, the words poured out like breathing. Everything was working. Richard whipped his head to catch the movements of mouths, reading lips at a mad pace as several people spoke at once. Every once and a while he laughed his grimacing, silent laugh, and wave his hands over the table. It was a maddening combination of signs and spoken words, each trying to outdo the other, then mixing until everyone communicated with their whole bodies. Lisa chatted and laughed like a debutante, and when Phil commented on the S&M special she actually seemed a bit embarrassed.

Phil told them the story of *Stealing Allen* and his successes in the theater. He told them about Allen Ginsberg coming to see the play in New York. How Phil saw Ginsberg chuckling quite a bit through the production and how later on Allen invited him up to smoke some grass. It all seemed very 'beat' to Phil, which was surprising. Ginsberg's place in the Bronx was a real dump, with stacks and stacks of moldy papers laying everywhere.

What Phil didn't mention was how they got really high and listened to some jazz records and how Phil ended up sucking off Ginsberg and this young kid he had with him. It wasn't that much fun; Ginsberg wasn't looking so good

in those days, and the kid smoked a cigarette the whole time, which Phil thought was incredibly rude.

Phil almost expected Ginsberg to extemporize poetically when he ejaculated, spouting cryptic wisdom. But he didn't. He just went "oh!" like anyone else.

Ginsberg and the kid sat on the tattered love seat, their pants around their ankles, and when Phil was done with the kid Allen leaned over and kissed Phil's forehead and called him a saint. Phil's knees hurt from the hardwood floor and his jaws ached but that kiss still seemed like a christening of delicate portent, a touch that fell from the sky to mark him clearly as a beneficent, holy being. Phil didn't mention how this act ratified his own sense of artistic destiny.

Another hour and Phil had the whole table rolling, either laughing or protesting, and the warm glow of the faces at the table beamed with an attentive generosity that seemed almost reverent. Lisa seemed particularly attentive to his ramblings, and the small seed developed in Phil's mind. The Cheswicks.

Of course, the perfect subject matter for one of Lisa's exposés, an exploration of exhibitionism fetishes in London's posh residential district. She could have the exclusive rights. Phil imagined the whole thing: the surreptitious filming, perhaps with digital fuzz to disguise faces, Perhaps Phil himself could be contracted to write the commentary. He could do a first-person recreation of his

discovery. Perhaps the show would center on not the exhibitionists themselves but rather the unintended voyeurs, those who stumbled across such things or were chosen as victims in a circle of pathology and desire. With this thought his speech quickened, and with a rhetorical flourish Phil ripped through the trim obsequiousness of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, which put the table in a buzz, all noses pointing toward his end of the table, all forks stopped in transit. Phil moved onto to a scintillating critique of modern theater that held them in silent awe, until Phil's dour dinner partner interrupted his interpretation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* with a snort, and Phil told her to fill her pockets with rocks and walk into a lake. A pall came over the table as the young girl dropped a tear in her garlic and rosemary soup, and Phil took the opportunity to excuse himself and walked his reeling body to the bathroom to urinate.

When Phil came out he found Richard waiting in the hallway, a sour look on his face. He grabbed Phil's elbow and stuck a note in his face: *These are Lisa's friends*. It was written in a dark hand and underlined several times. Phil was aghast and apologized profusely. In the dim light of the hall, Richard stared straight into his eyes. His grip on Phil's elbow was crushing, and Phil felt the blood tingling in his hand. Then Richard's eyes softened, the small wrinkles at the corners of his mouth and eyebrows winked and he flashed a blinding smile. Phil knew that this was

the moment a writer kills for, the moment of transference, of evolution, when the play turns on a toe shoe and plummets to the nether regions of human experience.

I have something for you, he told Richard. For you and Lisa. I have something that she will be interested in. Call it a gift perhaps. Would you come to my house the night after next for dinner? I'll show you what I mean.

Richard looked puzzled but agreed, and for the last hour of the dinner party Phil was on the sofa with his feet on the coffee table, finishing off his brandy and talking loudly about his disdain for Chekhov. He wasn't sure if he had ever drunk so much in his life. Yet he felt charged and awake, incredibly in control. It wasn't a mystery; just as the human body produces certain chemicals at moments of high stress or trauma to endure unpleasantness, Phil felt his heart forcing his anemic blood through the convoluted channels of his brain, keeping him upright and alert. There was the knowledge he would share with Richard, something that might further of their relationship.

The dinnertime epiphany was also a clear beacon that Phil must proclaim his love to Richard, soon. But how to go about it? This was a matter of extreme delicacy, and perhaps this thrill pushed Phil through like a juggernaut: the self-belief that this was where his strengths lay, his art and life were consumed in the act of rendering the tender unfortunate circumstances of love into beauty.

Richard slumped into an armchair as the caterers stacked the dishes into plastic boxes. He looked exhausted. My friend (bent first fingers interlocking and unlocking), he signed, Lisa, he fingerspelled on his palm. He pointed at Phil and then tapped his perfectly formed skull. I want to know what you think.

The night after next, when Richard was to come for dinner, was Christmas Eve.

Phil threw on his scarf with a flourish and took a deep bow before he stumbled out the door. Riding on the tube Phil felt even more charged with a feeling that he could only describe as a resurgence of youth and vitality. He crossed his legs and stared brazenly at the shaved-head boys in bomber jackets standing in the aisles. Even the tired busker, wearily plying his instrument in the echoic subway hall seemed like some tattered reminder of the musical intercourse of love and all its grand possibilities.

When he got back to his flat some time near eleven the sky was clear and full of dim stars. There aren't many things more affecting than walking through London at night, Phil thought, especially after a delicious meal, fine conversation, about two liters of wine and a staggering variety of gin drinks. He was floating, swimming on the sixth sea.

That next day Phil was frantic. He didn't touch *Light* at all. He was terrified to look at the Cheswick House, and

when he hurried out for a bottle of gin to take to the book stalls, he put up his hood and walked quickly. The slippery sidewalks had been shoveled drunkenly by bemused city workers in green coverall suits. They stood on the corner by their truck, smoking and silently stroking their chins with gloved hands, stunned by their own accomplishment. Phil arrived at Waterloo Bridge late. Sinjay and his sons were already unloading the books.

That night after Sinjay and his sons packed up the books, Phil felt that it would be nice night to walk down the river and across to St. Paul's, where he might sit in the churchyard and enjoy another drink while watching the visitors and tourists cooing over the Christmas decorations. The sun was completely down now and the wind was biting, but Phil had his woolen overcoat and muffler and his legs felt wooden from standing all day.

Phil was walking across the plaza to the Waterloo station when he saw the fox. The fox stood and paused for a moment in the snow-slick streets, the streetlights casting his long fur in a pinkish glow. His eyes glowed luminous green, and he looked directly at Phil, who was frozen to the spot. A car turned under the bridge and began its way down the road, and the fox turned again and ran toward the river. The fox hopped up on the sidewalk and then ran across to a line of abandoned warehouses under the bridge on the riverside, disappearing into the shadows of the blank building with dark doorways and bundles of trash

stacked in front. When Phil reached St. Paul's, a fine mist of snow fell, blowing in light gusts about the massive dome of the cathedral and down around the benches in the garden. They would be waiting for him. He walked through the garden and across Fleet Street to catch the tube back to Maida Vale.

When he arrived he restrained himself from looking up at the Cheswick House, figuring he would have a better view from upstairs, and quickly bounded up the three flights, threw off his coat and went directly to the living room window.

By the time Richard arrived Phil had put away half a bottle of Bombay and cleaned the flat in a drunken heat. He played his old Depeche Mode CDs and blasted through the kitchen, living room, and bathroom with paper towels and spray cleanser. He left the bedroom alone. He re-stacked his books and arranged his papers and drafts into neat piles, lit a few scented candles and vacuumed the hall throw rugs on his knees. He threw the pan of curry he'd picked up in the oven to heat along with naan on tin foil, while he tossed a mixed green salad from a bag. He poured a full carafe of wine, and gave Richard a glass. The beaming weatherman on BBC 2 called for the possibility of more snow beginning at nightfall.

Richard talked through the meal in a blur of those perfect hands, throwing his elbows into it and rolling his shoulders to enunciate. He was abundantly happy. He

talked about his new agent, about his latest work, and about Lisa. Every once in a while he poked the table top loudly with one strong finger, or smacked a fist into his palm. Phil watched his mouth as he worked around the silent words. His lips seemed more full and sensuous than ever, swollen with his excitement. He turned the corners of his mouth into tight side-smiles while pursing his lips to kiss the air through w's and o's. When he drank from his glass he rested the rim solidly on his bottom lip and upended the contents into his mouth, looking at Phil the whole time. Richard wore a loose white oxford shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, and when his arms extended across the table, over their plates, mere inches from Phil's face, his shirt bunched and gapped at the neck, displaying the faintest hint of ivory collar bones under a thick, flaming mat of hair on smooth olive skin, and Phil almost leaped across the table to tear at his throat with his bare teeth. Phil barely touched his curry. Watching Richard, the purest artistic moment of his life unfolded before him.

Later when Richard paused his silent but furious conversation, Phil assumed Richard was asking about Lisa. Phil sighed, stood up and walked to the window. He wasn't trying to be dramatic; it felt natural. Looking over the snowy street he felt the thumping impact of his love. He looked over at the Cheswick house and then up at the night sky. It was mostly clear, and a few hardy stars hung over the bare trees and wet street. It took three days, but

they'd finally plowed the streets of Maida Vale. Cheswick house looked dark.

That's when Phil noticed that Richard was drinking wine. In fact, he had drunk several glasses. The carafe was empty and Phil only had two glasses, staggered as he was by his all-day consumption. That must explain the beaming, flushed face, thought Phil. It's Christmas (hand in a C shape moving in a downward arc), Richard signed, noticing Phil's interest in his drinking. I wanted to celebrate. Richard got up and stood next to Phil, looking up into the sky. For a few moments they both gazed out the window. It was past ten already, still no snow, and no Cheswicks. He had to stall.

Phil poured them both a tall portion of gin in thick crystal tumblers. Phil suggested that they bundle up and step out on the balcony. See, it's just like a stage, Phil said, you'll love it. Richard looked concerned and smelled his gin before he took a drink.

As they stood on the balcony, framed by the lines of white Christmas lights, Phil managed to get away from the subject of Lisa, talking about the others at the party. Phil shivered from the cold but Richard was very calm, looking at him sideways, stonefaced. He is getting strange, Phil thought, I can't stall any longer. He figured the snow would start up any minute, along with the show, so he drained his drink and told Richard what he'd seen. He pointed to the windows. He described the possibilities for

Lisa's BBC show. And he explained that this was emblematic of his situation, the gross display of his affections, his inability to come clean, to step out of the window and confront the fact that he, Phil Castor, was in love with him.

Richard was silent for a few moments. He stared at Phil, working his jaw like he was chewing. Suddenly Richard's face went red and contorted, and he whipped a few signs into the night air, and when Phil shook his head he started slapping Phil's shoulders and chest with his palms. Phil couldn't see what he was saying, he was going too fast, hands and arms a blur, his mouth working roughly around his gnashing teeth. Richard grabbed shoulders and stuck his face close to Phil's, struggling to make a point, slowly mouthing a set of words, over and over. Richard's eyes were grey-blue in the snowlight, flashing with desire. Oh, Phil thought, a faltering feeling in his chest. *Oh yes, yes.* Then Phil bent forward and kissed him.

Phil felt his warm lips, softer than he hoped, lingering. Then a flurry of motion and a solid crack above his eye and he fell backward against the balcony railing. Richard had stepped back from the embrace and punched him solidly in the forehead. The pain was stunning, beyond belief, and the snowy street and buildings blurred like dark oil and white water. Phil clutched desperately at the bars and knocked Richard's tumbler set on the corner of

the railing. It teetered from the balcony. The skies were still clear over the street, over Maida Vale and over London, and the vast silence filled the air like viscous fluid, punctuated with Phil's short gasps. The sharp pop and crash of the crystal on the ice-slick pavement pinged up the street and Richard jerked and froze at the sound, like a cat who had seen a ghost. Phil was on his knees, his arms covering his head, his brow throbbing with arcing slices of fire.

Richard moaned low, something Phil had never heard before. Phil knew he was trained never to make that noise, the keening, guttural sound of unfocused vocal cords straining to make meaning; it might interrupt the performance.

Across the street a pair of curtains opened.

Phil was on time the next morning at the bookstalls. It was Sunday, Christmas, and the citizens of London would be out to stretch their legs after their feasts and this meant foot traffic along the river. Phil wore a wool cap low on his forehead and sunglasses but it didn't hide the large, puffy scarlet and purple welt that started at his eyebrow and extended to the end of his nose. Sinjay gave him a look and clucked his tongue. As the boys unloaded the books Phil sat on the edge of the seawall and looked across the Thames toward St. Paul. He thought of mentioning the fox

to Sinjay and his boys; perhaps they had seen it. He knew what Sinjay would say.

No foxes in London! he'd say with a rolling laugh.

In a few moments Sinjay and his truck rolled off sputtering exhaust in the frosty air, and Phil was alone under the bridge with the long tables stacked in double rows with books.

Phil never got a chance to ask. It didn't matter. He knew what he saw.

The first walkers began to come down the quay, walking in twos or in groups, and a man walking a bicycle with no chain stopped to check out the philosophy section.

Phil knew what others, the audience, would think. It was all exposition and backstory, no real scenes or present action. Cluttered with vague sentimentalities and overwrought language. It would have to be re-worked if it was to be saved. Everything would have to change.

Phil watched the early walkers browse, nosing through the lines of tattered books, pausing occasionally to read a page or two, then turning up their collars as they walked off along the river, laughing, whistling, their breath like smoke in the morning air.

Wednesday Night, 9:30 PM at the Convenience Store

Not a girl, really, tall
and close to stooping—the checkout
girl's nametag reads "Winsome."

Which I don't think she is.
Stoic, maybe. A little fierce
under the red glow of the Marlboro
display panel. Enduring
the poly-blend polo where I read her name.

Her mother couldn't have been winsome
at that moment of naming. Sweaty. Sore.
Stitched a little at her crook, words
grunted out.

There's another woman in town named Flowers.
I worked with her in the kitchen. And another
named Quince. Are they real,
these names? Hello, my name
is Flighty. My name is Bitter.
My name is Crass. Yearning. Shellacked.

Hello, Winsome, handing out
lottery tickets, slightly disapproving, although
expression's hard to read across
your flat cheekbones, your flared nose.

And thank you, Winsome, for bagging
my convenient 1/2 & 1/2, my loaf of bread.

Winsome, thank you for
my dollar seventy six in change.
Thank you, Winsome. Winsome, which neither
of us could be. Winsome,
thank you for the slow woman ahead of me in line
deciding between credit or debit. For what
you offer. For whatever made me look up
from my scattered, selfish life and read your name.

Prophet

When snow falls thick
among bare aspens,
I will wade down into

this vale and begin
to make my soul.
When midnight dawns

frozen with no moon
to silver the night,
I will begin with words

made visible, frozen
words rising, on no
wind among the black

blind eyes of bare aspen,
rising into midnight
sky with none to hear

except sleeping ravens,
and the world will grow
rife with strange green fire.

In the Pavilion of White Mummies

Catacomb logic? The way bones peek
through gauze, the eternal stare of dark
eyes across this cocoon-like room—

a long bone itself, an echo in its throat,
a sparrow captured in its rib cage,
where a heart once sang, blood flowed

in the tinged marble. There they stand,
silenced, their brittle bodies like sticks
piled in the forest. Here a bricklayer,

in his hands a hammer, a crow, a calla
lily. There, a journalist with a pen
in one ear, out the other. A doctor

with his fingers around a silver stethoscope,
a rope like a red snake bound about his legs,
broken sandals, that precise moment

when he walked into the ocean to drown,
because of not being loved, because
of loving too much. When the sun rises

in this room, the shadows grow tall, darker
still, the years holding their own breaths
for fear that if something moves, the world

will crumble—one sneeze, it all blows to hell.

G. C. Waldrep

A Short History of Criticism

for Irving Sandler

A museum established is a kind of ventricle. You may verify this independently by stepping now from the rain into a dry waiting. Meanwhile a passion for artifact. Meanwhile a price tag attached to the hat you are still wearing, as with Minnie Pearl though it is best not to confuse the body with the skins it wears. A bear appears on the corner, it seems to be dancing but upon closer inspection has simply lost its place in the gravitational flow. You find it odd that he is unaccompanied before remembering the city is full of people any one of whom may claim him or be claimed. Above you the sky composes itself like legs crossed beneath a short skirt and you say, *My heart, there is no chamber vast enough to contain this happiness*. You are right of course. All around you workmen breathe heavily as they struggle to keep plate glass in its proper arrangement. When you were young the possibilities seemed endless though this was really only science talking. *My heart, you say, aware of the deception; cuore mia, mein Hertz*. We have made all the necessary preparations. We have provided the penultimate text. Immortality is still an option via broadcast syndication. What remains is unspeakable delight.

An Architecture of Voices

Beth Ann Fennelly. *Open House*. Zoo Press, 2002. 76 pages. \$14.95, paperback.

Whether due to the constraints of workshop culture or the exigencies of publication, the long poem has all but disappeared from American writing in recent decades. Little magazines and the majority of published collections showcase the lyric within various virtuositities of compression; the Modernist poets' ambitions for larger forms have largely dissipated, leaving recent generations without current analogues to *A*, *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, *The Dream Songs*, and so on (to proceed alphabetically). Joseph Brodsky forecasted in 1991 that in such a climate, "what survives is the art of minor forms, the art of condensation."

Noting this fact is not a conservative attack against the current state of poetry, so much as an explanation of the distinct interest I find in a young poet who seems most comfortable in larger forms. Beth Ann Fennelly's *Open House*, chosen by David Baker as the 2001 winner of the Kenyon Review Prize, is notable in its breadth of ideas and poetic structures, and, like the later hours of a dinner party, achieves its greatest success when gathering multiple voices in its various rooms.

The centerpiece of *Open House*, the twenty-nine page “from *L’Hôtel Terminus Notebooks*,” contains a tonal range and formal experimentation lacking in some of the shorter pieces in the collection. It is the most energetic and engaging poem of the book, precisely because its structure is so open—admittedly unfinished, its fragmentary nature resists closure. In this wide space, Fennelly constructs a poetic whole from disparate lyrical and discursive segments. In fact, the argument could be made that rather than the play of words, the image, or the line, Fennelly’s basic poetic unit is story, the brief narrative or narrative block which furthers her poetic argument. A poem like “from *L’Hôtel Terminus Notebooks*” contains a clutter of anecdote and recollection feathered between quoted or remembered references. At times it resembles a commonplace book.

Its assertions range through various baldly-stated subjects of differing tonalities: from “Flavor specialists can duplicate all tastes but three: coffee, bread, and chocolate” to “Michelangelo’s Moses has horns, a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for ‘light.’” While these moments may seem merely to be cursory asides—even glib and anti-poetic—they are lively and vital in the context of the poem. Or, rather, they *are* the context of the poem, since it is through these fragments that the poem progresses. Fennelly’s practice becomes more visible as the fragments cohere:

I love the ghostly dotted lines on Nevada maps, place markers for where the lakes would be if they had water.

Elizabeth Bishop carried lists of conversation topics when she met Marianne Moore: "Mutual Friends," "Favorite Poems," "Strange Animals I Have Known."

We couldn't make rent on April in grad school so Tommy got a job with Pizza Hut, which had one criterion for its drivers—no facial hair. We shaved him and I kissed his naked cheeks. They were hot and pink. He put on the stiff red baseball cap and slowly left for work. I remembered how my long-haired terrier would be embarrassed for a day or two after being shaved
for summer and wouldn't go outside.

Like many poets who are drawn to formal experimentation, Fennelly adopts techniques from other genres. The list of structures inset into the poems ranges from the familiar (collage, dictionary definitions) to the far-out (the translator's trot, the computer database search, notes for a poem already in progress). Whether this diversity is evidence of genius or gimmickry is up to the reader; the variety is, to my taste, dynamic and interesting even when the effect falls somewhat short. But Fennelly's most important borrowing, formal or otherwise, is dialogue, which as a concept could stand metonymically as the core

of her poetry. Its inclusion in the poem—as well as its use as a structuring principle—leads to the collection's dialogic largeness of form. The book's second section, "The Room of Echoes," consists largely of dramatic monologues. Exchanges between characters (and alter egos) are frequent, and the book acts as a dialogue between Fennelly and writers of present and past: Mandelstam, Berryman, and Hass crowd the pages with a wider cast which also includes the father, the husband, and friends.

The collection immediately strikes up a conversation with Robert Hass. "The Names of Things" takes its title from "Fall," a poem in his *Field Guide*. More tellingly, Fennelly opens her book with "The Impossibility of Language," which begins with winetasters discussing the bouquet of a vintage, one speaker voicing the word, "blackberries." To many readers, the reference to Hass's much-anthologized "Meditation at Lagunitas" will be clear. In that poem, the philosophical reasoning which suggests that language is irredeemably disconnected from the world is countered by an affirmative voice saying "blackberry, blackberry, blackberry." The resonance occurs elsewhere in Hass's second book, *Praise*, as "Picking Blackberries with a Friend Who Has Been Reading Jacques Lacan" closes with the image of Charlie, the titular friend, his "beard stained purple / by the word *juice*."

In our culture of belated ideas, much mainstream and experimental writing has been taken over by established

schools of thought. Rather than the personal laboratory of discovery, such explorations are often governed by the theoretical standards imposed by postmodernism's après-garde. Fennelly is not interested in revisiting the philosophical terrain which Robert Hass's poems have so memorably mapped. She does not follow the usual response to the postmodern dissociation of language from reality into cynicism or empty wordplay, just as Hass did not. Her response to the question is worked out through a fragmented and ranging—but ultimately praising and inclusive—effort to envelop reality. "The Names of Things," for example, is a poem about a shoplifting girl choosing the stolen lipstick in her purse because of its evocative names: "Within, she is chanting / *Tawny Peach, Passionfruit, smearing her lips Cotton Candy, / Black Coffee.*" The reliance upon what could be termed the Whitmanian list is similar to Hass's. Though she remains "lip-locked" at the end of the poem—a resolution suggesting the inadequacy of language—the very use of punning and play displays the digressive and sometimes devious relation to language which marks her as a poet.

The shadow of John Berryman is also summoned by the inclusion of a very Mr. Bones-like alter-ego, Mr. Daylater, who plagues the poet throughout "from *L'Hôtel Terminus Notebooks.*" His antagonistic and frequently crass presence repeatedly questions the foundation and course of the poem, and the agon between "B. A." and Daylater

provides the poem's dramatic structure. Whether Fennelly's temperament is well suited or undermined by the constant checking and qualification of this alter ego is a matter of taste; I confess to finding the figure somewhat redundant in a poem which already contains the tendency to reverse its every statement. ("I sing of the millennium, the most misspelled word of the millennium," it begins.) The moments of lyrical embrace Fennelly allows herself are welcome not because they were afforded by this construct's complications, but because of the poem's intricate emotional and narrative structures.

If Fennelly's collection is marked by its multiplicity and range of voices, is it also true that she can whisper *sotto voce* to a single hearer. The final section of *Open House* consists of poems which retain her characteristic breadth of gaze, while adding an intimate quality of closure through her directness of address. "Good Work if You Can Get It" marries the ranging attentiveness of "from *L'Hôtel Terminus Notebooks*" with a singularity of audience that is particularly effective. The poem begins,

Last night, hot July 4th in Tucson's barrio,
I watched fireworks shot from a mountain
with locals who bet how soon the mountain
would catch fire. The mariachi didn't drown
the churn of helicopters waiting to douse
the whole thing: the true finale. In the bleachers,

the cops looked on importantly, shook handfuls
of popcorn like dice into their mouths.
I sat behind a man, maybe one of the 3,000
copper miners laid off today, his baby girl
twisting to me over his shoulder.
He couldn't interest her in the sky flowers
no matter how he called *Mira! Mira! Mira!*

The poem moves through such encounters to become, as is common in this final section, a love poem to the husband. The speaker's investment in the stories around her own confers a satisfaction that she welcomes and yet suspects: "How can she account for it? Mostly she fears / she's raiding happiness from the larder / of her next life, or, just as bad, from someone else's." But the poem closes with the image taken from a Renoir painting of a circus, the "sequined girls / who must have flown fabulously on the trapeze" collecting the oranges that the audience is tossing them as trophies. The gathering of this fruit which "stud[s] the ring / like copper ingots" parallels Fennelly's compilation of stories and ideas in the collection. Her openness provides a great sense of human interaction, which raises the book to an emotional level above the achievement of experimentation.

Another late poem, "Why I Can't Cook for Your Self-Centered Architect Cousin," begins, "Because to me a dinner table's like a bed— / without love, it's all appetite

and stains." The human warmth that animates these poems is similar, elevating the sleight of hand that characterizes the book from being merely willful and conscious manipulation. In Fennelly's hands, these effects become an individual and authentic manner of approaching the world. *Open House*, for all its discursive play, achieves a thematic breadth and range of emotion, and signals the emergence of a poet of liveliness and depth.

Ballad of the Never Believers

I cannot imagine Molotov sunsets or the inaudible riotousness
of foxgloves, tiger lilies, or red dew-licked poppies bugling

at the flint strike of dawn. I have no need for a steeple top honed
to a splintering shine by a bloodshot harvest moon. My heart is
not a glacier slowly melting, a sorrowful heap of tombstone

rubble, or a matchbox ship without oars. Nor is the landscape of

my mind a sea scouring its jagged coast of stones. I have never
waken to the marauding unrest of crows, been entranced by

the ferment of yellow lamplight, or strayed into the mythical

wilderness of unending fog. I do not believe my days are
constructed by an ancient blueprint of the stars. Not once have I

discovered at the foot of my door a throbbing, anonymously
delivered pair of cherub wings. And I have never known the night
to shatter like a porcelain doll dropped from a train trestle at the

arrival of midnight. The skin of an onion has nothing to do
with the

moon. A liquidambar leaf in flames has nothing to do with
forever.

The Myth of Ourselves

I do not know the stars are unspeakable conflagrations
of the soul,
or gravity, the weight of spirit holding us down.
We are all blood relatives to murderers and cons, victims
and thieves.

Even the body seems scarcely a home with its hollow
streets,
its withered facades and nervous citizenry.
We own nothing of ourselves;
the knickknack and ramshackle assemblages
of the heart,
our children, our scars, or
this feeling of hard earth beneath us. And because this life
is

never enough, we invent faith for the sake
of rescue, rescue for the sake
of becoming
something we could never be. All this we must
continually

live with: that even in its gentleness the wind may
devour us,

that in love, there is somehow the
lack of it. Or that everything might be
so much of nothing: plumes of smoke dissolving, entire
lives
constructed of mirrors and
wires and this great illusion of time where

each moment is a desperate bartering for
the next, that there may be an even greater happiness,
here
where we reside
on the brink of losing everything,
of becoming exactly ourselves.

Precision

Freezing rain. Shivering past
the tagged bus stop, walking home,
my knees two broken dinner plates,
stomach a tumble of stones, tonight
each house memorizes the inner shape
of its heart. Every tree understands
the blood's difficult passage from this world
to the next. Trees are the slowest rivers.
And living on an isthmus is like living inside
the narrow throat of an hour glass,
my compass points bipolar, all directions
channeled through this narrow passage
between two bodies of water. I'm trying
to keep my lines straight. I could say
a month passes, or the moon settles
deeper into its blue socket. What I should say
is when I get home, there are lights on
in two upstairs windows. In one,
a figure. In the other, a shadow moves
disconnected across the wall. I'm trying
to understand this as I cross the icy street,
I'm trying not to lose my key inside the lock
though for days it hasn't turned.

Laurel Snyder

Like Water Swallows

From this bridge I see bare
trees, though they might be lamp posts.
Same thing.
I have an overactive imagination.

I have a house with a small dog in it,
and a TV, and an unlit candle on a set table.
Things are in their places and they'll seem to jump
up when I walk through the door.

This bridge—I'm alone on it, and it feels nice
to be alone. If my small dog were here and he asked a
question,
then even lovingly I'd tie ballast to his thin legs,
more than enough to carry him over, then under and

oh, the trees are becoming clear, and they
aren't trees. They're lampposts, and it's not
the same thing. They don't grow or answer
the wind, but throw light faintly down the river's night.

I knew it all along.
But even so, it swallows me, like water
swallows something heavy
when it falls.

Roger's Square Dance Bar Mitzvah

Roger, of course, would have been 13. So Imonie would have been 11, I would have been 10, and Lianne would have been 6. Lianne in those days looked after the pretty little Vehemente girl from down the street, the Venezuelan nightclub owners' daughter, so really there were five of us usually around somewhere. We lived in a split-level townhome at the western edge of Miami. To our right were the synagogue and the dialysis center and the other split-level townhome developments; to the left, the pole bean/wax bean/snap bean/black-eyed pea farms, Krome Avenue, and then the swamps.

Roger didn't want a party—all he wanted from his Bar Mitzvah, it seemed to me, was permission from Jewish law to wrap tefillin every morning when he stood and shuckled, praying toward Jerusalem by our bedroom window an hour before school. But Mother had decided on a square dance. Hay was cheap, and every girl would have a boy to dance with. She had gotten a tip on a caller in Vero named Buddy Miley, who *knew how to get a room going*. A square dance, Mother's friends agreed, was just the thing. Once Buddy Miley was booked, Imonie began walking out to the bean fields around sundown and promenading up the mud rows. Palming fast circles against her breasts, she gazed north at the sky, sniffing it like a lightning rod. Back

in the front doorway, she would hold out an imaginary side of skirt and, blushing, say to the full-length mirror, "Honor your partner." Then, "Sashay right. Star through." What no one would say—including Alessandra Vehemente, lovely long-haired Alessandra who was always running downstairs in front of Lianne rasping scandalous stories about the larger world, Alessandra Vehemente who at four-and-a-half had lived in Caracas, Puerto Azul, New York, who had taught Lianne and I to dance *pachangas* and *guarachas*, *boleros* and *son montunos* and was the first person besides Lianne I was sure I could spend every day of the rest of my life with—what no one in the house would say was that Daddy, who was very assimilated, loved a square dance. Daddy could move bluegrass and beautifully he did. This square dance must be for Daddy—wherever he was, whenever he'd come home. Daddy agile, Daddy slide, Daddy small and lean like a barefisted fighter.

Where was Daddy? This time we hadn't gotten postcards; these six months we hadn't received collect calls, or trinkets from Indian reservations; no bad word yet from the credit card companies or the authorities in Tarpon Springs or Bayonet Point, towns along the Gulf Coast he wandered to selling home and office security, deep sea fishing trips; no contact—and this time Mother wasn't going to fetch him home. She would not, she said, this time, swing wide the gate of love for him. That had been

the first fret: What, then, to invite Daddy's people to? Saturday morning service and kiddush? Kiddush and party? Kabbalat shabbat and service? Daddy's people will want food, we shouted. Let them pay for the meat, Mother answered. If we don't invite Daddy to the dance, Daddy may show up and knock strangers around. Let Daddy pay for the hay. Let Daddy pay for the bourbon. I'm not afraid of your Daddy, Mother said.

None of us believed this, but I think we liked hearing her say it, whatever it meant.

None of us, I think, knew really what to believe in those days, except for Roger, who believed so strongly, it seemed he was always making up somehow for the rest of us. Roger had begun to converse openly now only with the rabbi and with a handful of other boys he met at youth group conferences and inter-synagogue weekend retreats—as if everyone else around was too simple, or savage, or just didn't exist. He walked through the months leading up to his Bar Mitzvah with such self-possession—such plump, new, wire-rimmed, hunch-shouldered, head-covered self-possession—that kids at the bus stop loudly called him Mister Superior, Tight-Ass, Kikazoid Jewboy, and enough other names that I wondered why he didn't just adjust back to the person he had been six months ago who didn't get his face bashed in. Mother might have wondered this too. She hated to see Roger leave the house now, even for a Sabbath overnighter, even knowing

beyond doubt he'd be sleeping nowhere but the floor of a synagogue youth hall in Pompano Beach, in a crowded, monitored row of Jewish preteens. Imonie could walk into the swamps, I could stay out all weekend playing basketball, Lianne and Alessandra could catch rides to Mr. and Mrs. Vehemente's club on Key Biscayne and run about till four a.m., jingling in jewelry, clinging to the bouncer, engraving his name in their arms—Mother might not notice. But Roger mystified Mother; he was like her leader.

Once, I was pretty sure, things had been more believable. Daddy had looked after Mother, Mother had looked after Roger, Roger after Imonie, Imonie after me, and I had looked after baby Lianne, guarding her and bathing her in the sink and walking her around the townhome development naked at my hip. Alessandra Vehemente hadn't been born yet in Caracas, and her parents Mr. and Mrs. Vehemente didn't know yet that they would stop manufacturing handbags, leave their two teenage daughters in Queens, move to Florida, and renovate a nightclub. We knew who went where. Afternoons when Mother ran activities at the Peaceful Winter Assisted Living Plantation, Roger started dinner. Days when Daddy growled at classifieds on the living room floor, Imonie hugged him upways from behind. Roger picked guitar and Daddy played fiddle. Lianne clapped knees. Even when no one was around, even when

you had to bike half an hour to the basketball court, even when your friends had never met your family and never would, and you were always waiting to be 12, everything had been easier to know what you were supposed to do, even when you didn't know why.

Lianne had seen Daddy last. The dark face had been rising in him; she was always the first to notice. She would tell Alessandra, Alessandra would tell me, and I would say I don't believe you, either of you, and I would be wrong. That morning, Daddy had chosen Lianne and had taken her to Aunt Jackie's for a visit and had kept her overnight and had not driven her to school the next morning, like he had told Mother he would. It was the kind of thing he did just before he disappeared. Take someone and leave her in a ditch by a low-lying canal and let her find her way back.

That last morning he chose Lianne, Daddy had been staying on our Aunt Jackie's floor. He and Mother were *trying out an arrangement*. They had had a disagreement over signing credit cards and Mother had slipped in the kitchen and her tailbone had changed places, and she had had to shriek, "What do you want from me, Gary? What do you want from your woman?" Jackie's floor was not a place Daddy liked to go. Jackie lived near Jackson Memorial, in an SRO by the incinerator. She kept red lights on her dark ferns. She sat all day on a couch with a levered footrest and brushed her hair and watched programs about shopping. Daddy said a person shouldn't see Jackie

too much—she rubbed off on you. She was his older sister by one year. She used to live in the state home in Pembroke Pines and now she was on assistance. I was always glad when Daddy didn't choose me to go for visits to Aunt Jackie's; I was glad when he did, too. He didn't keep much there: just his essentials—his speedbag and his Palm Beach sales suits and his nicked snakeskin toiletry bag that you could feel right away *had seen the road*. With what he carried, you knew he could take off north any time, and I remembered wanting to steal anything belonging to him just so he wouldn't be able to go.

That last morning, we could all see him through the glass, through Mother's sunny garden of hanging violets. He knocked once at the front door and let himself in. The four of us had lined up on our couch in birth order, the way he liked us to wait. Alessandra was in Lianne's lap, and he made her get out.

Daddy clapped once for us to stand forward, twice for us to turn around. He didn't inspect us this day. He didn't snap out his steel pointer and make us jump over it—jump back, jump forth; he didn't take any measurements. He waved the red tip of the pointer high, cutting shapes in the air, and said, "Someone needs to draw you children a diagram of reality." He wasn't making much sense after that. Roger hadn't gone full-blown religious yet. Imonie's chest heaved and heaved; she might have been saying "Daddy is too sexy a man for me" or that might have been

later. Lianne looked straight at her feet—like the little girl who covers her eyes and thinks, Now no one can see me. Mother stayed in the kitchen, tailbone out of whack, quartering chicken, wringing hands, and we didn't blame her. The dark face had risen in Daddy.

We sat back down in birth order, and Daddy said, "So I assume I have made myself perfectly clear here." Imonie's eyes watered and she thrust up her hand and said, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" until Daddy pressed the red tip of his pointer to the center of her waffle-batter chest, heaving thick, in leotard top, and silenced her.

Roger stretched his socks to the knee. We closed our eyes the way we did, like in "Duck, Duck, Goose," and each hummed different songs to ourselves. I could smell Mother come out of the kitchen with chicken on her hands. Three times Daddy paced in front of us with the pointer, then he tapped Lianne on the head. Lianne said, "Oh." Mother said, "Oh, no." Roger tore the elastic on one sock. Imonie broke into sobs: "You never! You always!" Those were the things she said.

With Daddy gone, I began wanting to see another state. I wondered if the trees were different. And what, really, was a mountain? *Alabama and Georgia are our two neighbors to the north*, Mr. Panadero taught us in geography. Tennessee was a state I thought I might like to see. I might also like to see Venezuela, Jamaica, the Dominican

Republic, but not Cuba, Mr. Panadero's birthland, which was 220 miles from our bedroom, the same as Clearwater, where Daddy had once sent Roger and me an autographed Polaroid of himself standing next to a Philadelphia Phillie at spring training. That was the time he brought home Mother a giant stuffed dog that he won at a carnival, and they started kissing with the dog pressed to their chests and we didn't see them for two days. Cuba was not like that. Cuba, Mr. Panadero told us, was like a mother who is being held hostage by a fanatic. She is the dear object of your heart whom you may never see again. The few times Mr. P spoke of Cuba, of its mountains and shorelines, its rivers and fields, when his face turned sweaty and blood-red, until at last he covered his mouth and said, "But I shouldn't talk this way to jou," I was sure Daddy was out seeing great and important things, things he locked away. However far he went, I wanted to go farther, higher. At the basketball court I tried muscat. If I could just see the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, which Mr. P had showed us slides of in class, where he had visited with his wife—with the word *altitude* he used so dreamily—I knew I'd have seen the beginning of what a person needed to see to be able to feel, when he looked west toward the bean fields and out to the swamps, that he had seen somewhere.

The week before the Bar Mitzvah, a black ceiling of clouds rolled in from the south every day after school and

dropped half-hour-long torrents of lightning rain on the wooden vegetable stands and on the townhomes and on the flat-roofed dialysis center, then disappeared. When we moved we slogged, and when we dried it all off, we still trailed an acrid puff, as if we could not step out of a hamper. As soon as the sky was brilliant and high again and the colors stretched wide in every direction, Imonie would track in from the beanfields, panting for a listener, and say she had just heard from Daddy, Daddy was on his way to see her and Mother, her and Mother and no one else—to which Lianne would answer, “*Eschizo*, stop being *eschizo*,” an expression I took it she had picked up from Alessandra. Back and forth the sisters would argue about who needed a head transplant operation more, until Mother called them both downstairs to train to be hosts Saturday night—to look available, to say yes for one dance, *even to a man who might not be their favorite*.

“Ladies, circulate,” was an expression Mother favored. “Don’t be slow.”

That was the week Roger began referring to himself in third person as The Lonely Man of Faith, a phrase he spoke also in Latin and Hebrew. He seemed entirely oblivious to the preparations being made in the rest of the house for his cross-over into adulthood. Usually he was shut in our room studying; either that, or sewing himself a heavy undershirt with symbolically tied fringes, a *tallit katan*, that he declared he was going to wear every weekday for the

rest of his life, no matter what the humidity or the heat. When he tried it on, his chest looked packed with protection, like the police. He hardly made eye contact with anyone except Mother—you would ask him what he said when he moved his lips first thing in the morning and last thing before sleep, what was the significance of the steps and shuckles and toe lifts he performed, praying at our bedroom window, and he would answer sharply that he was seizing the subjective flow of experience and converting it into enduring and tangible magnitudes. The rabbi gave him ideas. Every Saturday morning Roger walked to synagogue alone, setting out along the shoulder of the long road east in an awkward-fitting blazer; then went over to the rabbi's house, so far as we knew, for lunch and studied. The rabbi lent him books that I wasn't allowed to touch. This rabbi was something else. His whole little body was always bobbing about something. His nimble hands looked like they were continuously spreading a tablecloth or stretching dough. In the shed behind his house he souped up old Spitfires and Camaros for the goyim who drag raced Krome Avenue, then used the proceeds from the mechanical work to help the needy. He danced and sang on local telethons, though he had no voice or feet. He could sermonize, though. You'd find yourself swaying in agreement with him even when you hardly understood a word he was saying.

All the while, the meat began to mount. It was quite a scene. Mother was now expecting fifty-two family members, including thirteen of Daddy's people, whom she'd invited to the whole thing after all. When the out-of-towners arrived, she could stack them along the walls for sleep, but they'd still need to put something in their mouths. So she charged bags of bulk parts and chewing bones from the kosher butcher Roger made her patronize and jammed them into our freezer. The counters flooded with defrosting parts. We knew she was spending past our means—I'd found a crumpled envelope of NSF slips in her stocking drawer—but who could gainsay? All snacks were now meat. "How does a little sweet and sour sound?" she'd nudge. "How about a little roast?" You'd open the door for a Popsicle and catch a discount block of rump on your toe.

One night, shortly before the guests poured in, Imonie in undershirt, smelling sharply of fertilizer, stood up on a chair and announced that Daddy was going to walk through our front door any minute in glory and the sun was going to blaze so fiery and white, it would burn a skylight through the roof of the den. All would be forgiven, all would be repaired. A raven had told her this today in the sugar snap pea field just before he died. *Unify, and be one family in love* had been its last words. Mother was a terribly flexible woman, which we all knew and in most cases took easy advantage of, but you could see that she

didn't approve of this manner of mixing words, which sounded, to me at least, a lot like the way the freckly blond children sounded when with mournful faces they handed Lianne and me folded rainbow-covered leaflets at recess, inviting us to Message of Hope meetings at the First Glades Baptist Church. Mother glowered at Imonie and, straightening her back, rubbing her tailbone, repeated what she had been saying for six months, in one form or another—that Daddy was not welcome in this house, that the on and off, back and forth, up and down, yes and no of our past was ended, and if need be, she would ask Jared to enforce the matter.

This last part no one had heard. Jared was a name not lightly spoken in our house. Back when Mother was big with Lianne, Daddy had barricaded all the doors of our house one day, saying he *needed an accounting* of everything that belonged to him. None of us went to school, no one did anything but account. On the next day, when still no one had left or entered our house, Mother's water broke, and Daddy wouldn't drive her to the hospital until the accounting was made. "Mine, mine, mine, ours," he assessed, while Roger tallied switches on a tall sheet of wood. When Uncle Jared, Mother's younger brother, showed up that afternoon with a creel of pondfish and saw Mother splayed on the couch in a writhing tent of maternity sweats, he broke in the front window, flicked out

a boning knife, and drew a crescent in Daddy's gut, then rushed him and Mother to the hospital.

If Mother called in Jared to defend against Daddy, who would Daddy bring to offend against Jared? I glanced at Lianne. Most matchups between our two sides were even. Uncle Moises, Uncle Ray. Cousin Lance, Uncle Billy. Granddaddy, Grampoppa. Jared, Daddy. Mother had more veterans, Daddy had more lunatics. It could go to third cousins—and women. The hayride our granddaddy had organized through the streets of the townhome development could turn into a Florida free-for-all. The parquet floor of the square dance: a fifty-two-card body pickup.

Just then, Alessandra began howling upstairs. Mother sprinted toward the sound of pain. Imonie, it turned out, had left the dead raven on the floor of her and Lianne's closet. She had cut off its feet to make square dance earrings, forgotten where she'd put the earrings—and the raven—and now mice had shown up and were eating the damp, shiny raven carcass.

"Violation," Imonie screamed, pointing at Alessandra.

"She's not right," Lianne accused, as Mother beheld the clamoring mass of gray tails and fur. "I'm moving to Barcelona with the Vehementes."

"You are not moving to Barcelona," Mother answered. "And what have you to say for yourself?" she asked Imonie.

"Be kind to each other," my older sister sniffed, again quoting the raven. *"Stop eating of the flesh of other beings. Simplify."*

"What raven would say that?" Mother asked.

"Unify, and be one family in—"

"I shall not be rebuked by my daughters," Mother said sternly. Then, pointing to the nibbling mania on the closet floor, she said, "Mice eat meat. We all eat meat. Are you saying you're better than mice?"

Imonie broke into sobs. None of us took criticism well.

"Thanks to you," Lianne said to Imonie, "we'll have to get a cat."

"How I hate cats," Alessandra exclaimed.

Imonie swatted a pile of Lianne's fake club jewels off their dresser.

"If I find your earrings anywhere touching my stuff," Lianne snarled, "I'll cut your neck with the claws in your sleep."

"Everyone favors you," Imonie screamed. "They always have."

"I'm moving to Barcelona," Lianne cried to Mother.

"You are going to the Bar Mitzvah," Mother said. "And not another word. Run and get me a plastic bag and gloves," she told Imonie. "We'll clean this mess and put it out of our minds. And Chaim, find your sisters a cat. I'm concerned now that we've been disturbing Roger's studies."

Saturday morning the winds gusted so hard, the rain was swept back up toward the blackened sky before it could fall. You didn't know which way to put your umbrella or your face. Down was up, left was right. Palm fronds snapped and whizzed by you like saws. You'd catch needling eyedrops of rain that nearly keeled you over in tears. Cars fishtailed down the lane, seeming to hold their breaths and pray for passage. It was like the days at the basketball court that seemed like nights when as soon as you lofted a free throw, the ball carried back to the other basket. Roger insisted on walking the miles to synagogue, and we followed him in a headlit, wiper-beating, five-mile-an-hour convoy of autos and trucks. Every time a big rig hit a skid of puddle in the passing lane, Mother white-knuckled the wheel and Lianne and Alessandra and I made exploding next-of-kin noises in the backseat. The way the wind and rain battered Roger in the headlights, he appeared like a lone heroic figure marching for an important and overlooked cause.

We were late to the service—which was probably for the best, since soon enough we saw how few friends we really had and how absurd the ones we had thought we were. It was something I had always suspected, but it took a Bar Mitzvah to prove. The sanctuary was half-empty,

sprinkled mainly with Mother's small chorus of friends, a few happily married pillars of the congregation, and about ten vanlifted-in residents of the Peaceful Winter Assisted Living Plantation, who grunted and lobbed their heads with the rabbi's biblical exegeses while we host children walked around the periphery of the synagogue, dipping in classrooms, fingering art displays, with about sixteen relatives each stacked on our heads. Keep the people busy and don't cause a commotion while Roger chants his benedictions, Mother had instructed us in perfume and white doily, applying lipstick, in the car.

By mid-morning, Lianne and Alessandra and I had begun escorting the bored and restless relatives around the shopping plaza next door—to ogle the 10-foot golden safe in the West Dade Capital Bank building, to visit the sunglasses emporium, the pharmacist, the car spoiler shop and the iron-on T-shirt stand where last month Roger had had the phrase I'd Rather Be Davening stamped on a blue V-neck. Thunder crashed. Our noses filled with the damp, fertile weight of the air. Swamp birds circled and croaked above.

The morning's biggest surprise came with the emergence of Maxine during Roger's Torah reading. Maxine was a shambling girl from Fort Lauderdale whom Roger had apparently met at an older youth group's two-day dramatic re-enactment of 19th Century Jewish Immigration through Charleston, South Carolina. She

wore blue old lady's clothes and appeared completely and toweringly in love with Roger, which Alessandra and Lianne giggled about over dress flounces and cigarette puffs near the janitor's office while I took sips from Uncle Billy's bourbon flask. Maxine tried to sit devout and ladylike in the third row, yet however she sat, wherever she set her purse, whichever way she moved her mouth while she prayed, her lips and cheeks shot forth voluptuously, almost obscenely, from her face. Something made me know then why Roger might have loved her, but I will never be able to tell you what it is. Till then, I had never pictured him even talking with emotion to a girl. He noticed her and tried not to; his heart seemed to go out to her while he chanted, even more than it did to Mother or the rabbi or even God. He kept reconfiguring himself and then configuring himself again toward her. A giant with a denim skirt in her carry bag—she looked ready for a square dance.

The whole congregation, including the janitor and groundskeeper, not to mention the rabbi's wife and every pillar of the congregation and offspring of pillar who'd heard how much meat we had garrisoned at home, followed us back for a luncheon. While we drove west, a hot white hole burned through the clouds, and by the time we got to our lane, the neighbors were standing in their driveways without clothes, like any other Saturday,

looking up at their own townhomes. Mother and I walked in the door first. There stood Daddy in an undershirt and khakis at the dining room table, placing a slice of salami in his mouth.

"You didn't have to do all this for me," he said, looking terrifically pleased. Taut, charming Daddy.

He walked straight to Mother, who was a head taller than he, shook her arms and planted a long tough one on her lips.

Wheelchairs, oxygen tanks, fishing poles, tallis bags, deodorant sticks, gold chains, knife sheaths, loosening brassiere straps, rolled-up cuffs, little fountain pen boxes wrapped with Stars of David and a comet-tailed number 13, all were passing through the front door along with a herd of warm legs and chests. Imonie in her raven's-foot "Bar Mitzvah luck earrings," bulging in pink tights, walking arm in elbow with Aunt Jackie up the sunning violet path, charged suddenly through bodies and leaped onto Daddy from behind, feet in the air. "I knew you'd come," she gasped, as Daddy swatted at his back like at a stand of seagrass insects. I shook his other hand. "Good to see you, son," he told me with a warm, even smile and kissed my cheek. "It's been too long, I know."

The fifty-two Garbers and Shenkers filled the house. Seeing Daddy, men, women, and children on both sides made horseshoes around him, reacting to his every gesture and tale with whopping grins. Good Daddy, big-hearted

Daddy, Daddy *who could sell the poorest cracker in Dixie a two-hundred-thread-count sheet set at twice retail, couldn't he, Mabel? Stack of Bibles.* In-laws seemed proud of him, and inexplicably composed. Maybe they suspected he had made a lot of money at something. Even Jared was tossing tangerine slices in the air for Daddy to catch in his mouth. Cousin Lance clapped knees. Would next come the fiddle? An old lady I didn't know, who looked eerily like me, confided to me in a Maitland drawl that she was experiencing "just a whale of *nachas* on this wonderful *simcha*"—and when she adjusted my lips to a smile, I told her I felt the same way, though by then I didn't know what in hell's name she was talking about or what nearly anyone around me was doing or why. If my friends from the basketball court could see their holm j. holmes now, what kind of freaky whiteboy would they think he was? Maxine arrived, like Kong. The rabbi and Roger followed, perspiring. When Roger saw Daddy-Man in the middle of everything, he tugged at Mother as if she had failed him irrevocably, and she kissed and kept kissing the side of his bushy head and telling him *he* was the big mensch, *he* was. At the head of the room, the rabbi jumped up and down, waving for order, then made a stupefying kiddush toast, celebrating life, work, family, the Sabbath, the State of Florida, endings, beginnings, ha'shem, and country music. People sang the shehechyanu and began eating so ravenously, I thought someone might barbecue the cat.

With her small chorus of friends, Mother served; the center of her eyes glowed, the lids trembled and cracked. Lianne and Alessandra vanished, to make believe somewhere in another language. The crowds, like ocean waves, who massed around Daddy—drinking, punching arms, eating stuffed cabbage competitively—began, I could see, to dispirit Imonie too, whose prophetic visions of Daddy never did come true, or else came too true. Leaning against the poker cabinet, holding herself tight round the middle, she seemed to wish for something like a third side of the rainbow, that someone would sweep her up and carry her that way.

After the luncheon, relatives napped shirtless in our bedrooms in stacks of about ten. With the last of the cake polished off, the rabbi and his wife, Roger and Maxine, and Roger's three friends from youth group (all named Jeremy) pulled out annotated copies of the Torah and began haggling over marginalia in the den. Each time Daddy walked past, Roger would lower his eyes and pull up his navy dacron dress socks farther above the knee until at last he tore one to the ankle, prompting two of the Jeremies to cry out, *Sabbath breaker!* "Transgression involves intentionality," Roger shouted back, tweezing the torn sock with two fingers and hopping about the den as if he had exposed himself in front of Maxine—at which point the third Jeremy began rapid-firing Talmud passages accusing Roger of crimes against the fourth commandment

and of bearing false witness against himself, which sent the rebbutzin into unaccountable laughing spasms and launched the rabbi into a wandering tale from *Sayings of the Fathers*, which everyone in the room insisted proved his position. Meanwhile, in the backyard, a team of Shenkers was vying against a team of Garbers to see who could poke a fishhook all the way through his pointer tip and keep it there longest without wincing. Bizarrely, each team kept pronouncing the other the winner. Who were we? I snuck a rum shooter in the pantry and watched Mother's divided eyes as she plastic-wrapped and unplastic-wrapped casserole trays—washed, dried, sighed, chirping little melodies to herself over the mesmerizing name Buddy Miley. There was a lot of man in the house that day. Mother made trips back and forth to the townhome rec center, anxiously checking on the hay and the hooch and a thousand other points of detail.

Finally, one trip, she asked me to accompany her, to carry a tall box of loose eggs for the toss. I had a real buzz going. The sky now was as blue as could be, the air filled with dripbags of water we skipped through on hot little stones.

"Careful with those eggs," she said. "They're the only ones we've got."

"Mother, are you going to be Daddy's partner again tonight like you said you would never," I asked, "and bow

to him like you said you would never and dance ‘Honey Do?’”

“Heavens, little Chaim,” she answered. “When did you start thinking about older people’s business like that? It’s not something you learned from me,” she said.

“Can a person love two people equal,” I asked further, “or do they always love one person most?”

“Of course a person can love two people,” she said. “Equally,” she emphasized.

“What two people?” I asked.

“My brother and my father I love equally,” she declared. “Your brother and your father—you love them equally. Your two sisters you do.”

I squinted.

“So if Daddy sleeps at home with us like you said he would never, does that make us one family unified in love under one roof again?” I asked. “Is this a joyous occasion? And what does *no* mean? And *never*? And *always*? What do you want?”

Mother didn’t have answers right away. She peeked at the eggs I held in stacks of thirty-six and tried to make it seem as though my whole line of questioning was so out of order, it did not merit a response.

“Sometimes it doesn’t matter what people want,” she said at last, and I could tell I had made her heart wearier, which saddened me, though at least I felt I knew her, though what was the good in it? “If all of us did whatever

we wanted whenever we wanted," she said, "what kind of world would that be? What kind of children would we raise."

"But what *do* you want?" I asked. "I've always wanted to know."

"I want the caller to get here on time. I want the family to dive into the potato salad. I want Roger to know somebody thought enough of him to make him a party. Why, let's you and I go shine up his and your daddy's boots right now," she ahemmed. "That's something I want."

"But right-now-this-instant," I demanded, as if I were making an important point, the way Roger and Daddy knew how, when they put their foot down like men. "What do you want right now?" I said.

"I want my children and my husband to love me," she said.

We waited for Buddy Miley. Squares and squares of us waited. We waited on the rented parquet dance floor. We waited in murmuring pairs. We waited in pressed plaid shirts. We waited with alfalfa sprigs in our teeth. We waited pinching each other's asses. We waited calling each other lady and gent. Mother a shaking mess, Daddy a strutting rooster, we waited. Roger a no-show, Imonie hurling herself at uncles, we waited. We waited with hooch and bourbon. We waited with hooking puncture

bandages on our fingers. Alessandra Vehemente, equal of no one, whom I had, for once in my life, managed momentarily to partner, waited, yawning, declaring this to be the most fatiguing social event she had ever attended; and Lianne, her corner, my sister, assented, strategizing that if either girl got swung at the waist by someone who made her ill, they would slip out together, call a cab to Key Biscayne and make Sergio, manager of Nightclub Valentino's, pay the fare. We waited a good hour.

When the first fight broke out—between one of the Jeremies and Uncle Ray—I think everyone was a little relieved. There had been nothing to look at till then, except each other; a fight meant you could pay attention to the fight. Of course, it wasn't much of a fight. It was a skirmish that threatened to break into a fight but probably wouldn't unless somebody got shamed more deeply. My belly felt like a tank of liquor—the day was catching up to me—and while the skirmish escalated, with Jeremy crying out *Open your eyes, would you, son of Israel? Assimilation is genocide!* and with Ray touch-shoving him at the chest, warning, *If you do not get out of my face and out of my nieces' faces, I will knock the lights out of you, boy*, I showed off to Alessandra how much older my belching sounded.

Mother kept talking to herself—hopefully, rapidly, calmly, combing and crossing and recrossing the floor. "If Gary got his fiddle and Cousin Blini borrowed the Shostaks' banjo, we could still do this. We must. We could.

Where is my Roger? Where is Buddy Miley?" Celebrations of Daddy's advent went on.

Just then, a young square-jawed man in a ten-gallon hat with a 45 rpm record player in one hand parted the main room. He plugged in the record player to a large speaker Mother had hauled in on wheels, hooked up a small microphone for himself, then faced us with a broad smile.

"The fact that you are standing in denim and petticoats in paired groups of eight, awaiting my arrival with excitement and anxiety," the young man said, with the strangest calling accent I had ever heard, "lets me know you are ready for a good-time square dance—filled with quality song selections and innovative choreographic ideas."

The room tilted with bemused heads and mulling fists. Imonie, dangling raven's claws, stepped forward and curtsied at the man, who bowed back gallantly toward her, toward all of us, like he had been sent here solely for our solidarity.

"I think the time came to introduce myself," he continued into the mike. "Evidently I am not the great Buddy Miley and punctuality does not belong to one of my best points. I am Jiri Slini, also known by my calling nickname, Sliniak, originally of Karolina SDC Bratislava, later Vienna Swingers Club, also Munich Promenaders, and at long last chief apprentice caller to the great Buddy

Miley of Vero Beach, Florida. This evening I bring to you a special message from the great Buddy Miley, who regrets to me he could not be with you in person: Hoes down, Bar Mitzvah boy up!”

Hoots, hollers, and Hallelujahs followed, with the Bar Mitzvah boy nowhere to be seen. Jiri Slini dropped the needle on the first fiddle record and began calling instructions and formations over it. Daddy, roused like a cobra, and rippling, swept his side of the family into merry form. Mother and her side looked more doubtful. My aunt Frieda, my granny’s cousin’s aunt or else my cousin’s granny’s aunt, who had lost four brothers in four different concentration camps during WWII, tiny aunt Frieda who wore square sunglasses at all hours, resident of a dingy Miami Beach retirement hotel, who was presently wearing her body weight in fringed rhinestone jean jacket and skirt, did not look at all amused by this Sliniak. Likewise, my impish cousin Malamud, who fluttered from square to square dropping ice shavings down people’s pants, hooting “Come on Pancho, circle the rancho!” along with an assortment of Slavic patter he was picking up from the caller.

I didn’t have a good feeling. I kept one eye on Mother (promenading with her father, serving in apron), one eye on Daddy (partnering and repartnering), until it almost broke my heart. For a light-headed second I thought I grasped the true nature of the religious impulse that

resided in my brother Roger—that maybe he did not mean to be inscrutable and scornful, even if he intended to be out of reach. I tried to stay in step with Alessandra Vehemente to “Golden Slippers.” We split the ring with elbow swings until suddenly I lost her hand and was paired with Lianne, my darling frightened sister, for “Life on the Ocean Wave,” then with Aunt Jackie, cornered by Imonie, for “Mañana.” Several dances later I wound up with Mother.

We were all by then in two big adjacent circles, where Mother and I made up the link between the two. Movement between the two circles had become fluid, a grand march, and yet Mother and I somehow stayed where we were, the circles moving through us. I could tell the adults in the room wanted Mother and Daddy to dance together—more, I thought, than they wanted Roger to show. Somebody, I kept saying to myself, is getting really ripped off here. Eventually, all this marching and honoring we were doing was going to lead to one big circle, then to two lines, a good-time reel, and at last one circle again. At least that was how Sliniak mapped it out for us in exuberant Slovakian-accented patter. We might turn out anywhere in the circle and yet all be together. *You'll make a big ring*, he called, *with your favorite little thing*.

As much—as I say—as the others wanted Daddy to have the spot I was standing in, Imonie wanted the spot Mother was standing in. I didn't notice this until I saw

Daddy, partnered with his older sister Jackie, advancing hungrily toward Mother and me from one adjacent circle, and Imonie, partnered with Mother's younger brother Jared, marching unquenchable toward us from the other. Couples were swapping and moving ahead, some hobbling like a three-legged pair, others limber with rhythm, and Imonie, if you saw her the way I did, moved like a pink mass of girl you might read about in the newspaper Monday morning who vanished from the middle of a crowded area and showed up three weeks later in a Daytona Beach hotel room, unable to recall a single fact about herself—*Now what did she go and get herself into?* Mother would ask. Seeing my big sister this way, and my little sister Lianne about to flee out the side door, it was like being in the dream where the stormweather is rolling in from below the fields, and while the others take shelter and shutter the windows, you are unable to move, looking out at flat land, the palm leaf of your rib cage splitting down the center.

I wanted some hooch. The music was changing again. Mother was about to end up with Daddy, Daddy was about to end up with Imonie, Imonie was about to spin Moises, Moises was about to star Lianne, Sliniak the caller had the clearest blue eyes, and I was never going to see Alessandra Vehemente again. I puked. I started retching all over the rented parquet floor, a thin streaming gobbling trail. I stumbled toward the side of the room, dripping at

the teeth. Corn, wheat, grapes, molasses, bits of pulpy innard soured in my mouth. It was good that there was so much else for people to pay attention to. A small mob of cousins began lighting torches to go out and find Roger, who Daddy, now at the center of the dance, said was shaming us all by being absent. Mother slipped on a black-eyed pea pod. On a bale of hay near my aunt Frieda, I found an empty bushel basket, and I puked some up in that. I might have heard a hora. I think I glimpsed Maxine. Over one record, Sliniak roared into the microphone, "If tonight was Buddy Miley's poker game, we would all be a full house!" I gazed up at the rafters, and down, down even further, between my legs, like a dog. When I raised my eyes, my aunt Frieda looked at me through sunglasses like she knew anyone alive for the first time. We were about the same size. Her hair matched the baubles on her stone-washed jean jacket. Once I had been told that for three years during the War, Aunt Frieda slept in a forest and lived on nuts, but at the time that story had sounded farfetched. Now I wanted to tell her I believed every word and that when I got some money of my own, I would buy her a less mildewed bed for her room on Miami Beach—and better nuts for her crystal bowl.

She said, "What do you know, *liebes Kind*?"

I said, "My name is Chaim, Aunt Frieda. Chaim. You probably can't remember."

People were dancing festively now with white bandannas. Aunt Frieda spoke my name with her Slini-like pronunciation, and I tried not to feel sorry for her, like Daddy had taught me nobody needs from me. In the middle of the room a reel began, and when, at long last, one big circle was announced, which eventually enclosed Roger too, everybody scattered trying to get to where they thought they were supposed to get and wound up more or less where they had started out. Aunt Frieda dipped the edge of a cocktail napkin into a pitcher of water and dabbed around my lips. She knew more than I expected—about lots of things. For instance, who I was named for; also, how I was related to people I had never met.

Two weeks after the Bar Mitzvah, Roger walked in the door from junior high in his I'd Rather Be Davening T-shirt, his *tallit katan* ruffled underneath, with his cheeks swollen and his jaws wired shut. Daddy stood next to him, stroking his hair, so I knew he hadn't done it. By that point, Roger knew so many blessings for so many occasions, you assumed he was always saying one even if you couldn't see his lips move: the blessing over the doorpost, the blessing over the blessing over the doorpost, the blessing over walking through the door after just getting your face bashed in. Mother was still at work. "Rednecks get me, too," Imonie said, jealous, I think, of Roger's bruising, making herself a face at Daddy. Daddy mixed us all a raw

egg and honey drink that we sipped through straws. He could be a very tender man.

I don't know why we had money when we did and didn't when we didn't, but there were a couple shining months for us while Roger's jaws were wired. It rained clothes and toys. Books from the Jewish Publication Society. Soft ice cream, too. There was plenty, so much of plenty, it worried you if you worried about that kind of thing. Daddy was always peeling out of the driveway on a spree. "More, more, and more, Mama. My three favorite words" was an expression he preferred. I wore out the tires on my bike and got new ones without having to ask.

In geography, we studied the history of our state. We learned that in 1845, Florida had been admitted to the Union as a slave state in exchange for Iowa, a free state. Mr. Panadero divided us into groups to discuss if that had been a fair compromise, but nobody in our group seemed to know what the expression a *fair compromise* meant. I heard kids in another group talk about *give and take*, and I wondered on this idea. Mainly, though, I gazed at the World Map that Mr. P pulled down from the ceiling every morning—at Iowa and Venezuela and Barcelona (where Lianne vowed she would follow the Vehementes) and New York City (where Roger told me he was going the day he graduated high school, to Yeshiva University, with Maxine his bride) and the Gulf of Mexico (where Imonie said not one of us would care if she sank to the bottom).

I also glimpsed at Tennessee, home of the Great Smoky Mountains, where I thought I might like to go. I suspected that if I ever did make it up to Tennessee, I would find nice people there who'd let me stay with them if I needed to. Cornbread, one of my friends from the basketball court, was from Knoxville, and he and some other kids were going there this summer with the Boys Club to play in a regional tournament. Each day I wanted to ask if he would take me with them as a ball-chaser and a floor-wiper, but I was practicing not talking too much. Cornbread didn't talk much—which made people scared of him, and I wanted to be more like that. That, and call everyone holm j. holmes and make up handshakes. I figured I would just copy Cornbread until I got it. Learning to hold my liquor and making more people scared of me—these seemed like better goals for right now than Tennessee. Of course, if I wanted, I could swipe fare out of Mother's stocking drawer—twenties had replaced NSF slips recently—and ride a train straight to Tennessee (Gatlinburg: 712 miles). But Mother might like to have me nearby the next time Daddy whatevered and siblings started disappearing and somebody needed to carry the eggs. That was something I also considered.

Judy Jordan

Excerpts from *Sixty Cent Coffee and a
Quarter to Dance*

Somewhere in the barn owl's shadowed slide
across the last slivered glint of moon,
huddled with the mice in the centuries' debris,
dried grass and broken pillars, I find fragments—
guttered phrase, a nod where there should be no nod,
and as I have with my own animal-furied life,
I search for that which will give us all names.

I've heard it theorized we're nothing but language
but I don't think so
unless we're also determined by a word's absence,
my father punishing us, not talking for weeks,
or something concrete as cotton prices dropped,
my father drunk again, fired again.

Maybe the lack of something as simple as a syllable
piled the children into the split-pea green Plymouth
and drove them to Miss Pauline's
while five miles up the road
our house burned for the insurance,
but I don't think so.

Maybe there is traceable logic in my mother wrapping her
disguised voice
around the phone, begging Louise Stegall to quit
that man, he was no good, that man whose life
before year's end would bleed out in Louise's carport.
Maybe some word that would've stopped Louise from
killing him,
would have kept her from the institution.

And what could I have done if I'd known
how soon my mother would die, how I'd remember for
years
her instructions to scrub harder

me on my knees in Louise's carport in puddled blood
that never did come up.

It's a type of loneliness,
a southern farm or a dazzling stretch of bare rock
somewhere in Greece
but something more when what I reach for semaphores
from the birds,
runs circles on the waste-slick asphalt,
then scuttles, foam-mouthed, under the cars,
something else when you're kissed by death's tongueless
mouth.

As you know. As you know.

Shut up. Scase. Scata. All Americans malaka, you say
but it's what there are no words for which lies between us

despite all my nights which have limped into days I had
betted against,
times I've joined strangers and we've emptied our pockets
of lint and bottle caps and made the sixty cents, sharing
coffee refills

to stay awake at the corner table.

The jukebox only a quarter and if we'd had it, we might
have danced,

shuffling between tables across the puzzle of the pressed
pine floor

while the two vets filled napkin after napkin
with poems about sunsets colored Agent-Orange.

In today's heat the parking lot reeks of burnt flesh
and I walk pitched forward dragging one leg
or the other, the busted discs' shifts,

tunneled roots of rot-wasted pain

but what is that,

what is it

when it's a red, red rain and all over Greece
bodies claw from earth to raw air.

Though I've never palmed salt for the utter need to taste
anything
or whipped the thumb of creamer to my traitorous mouth,
I have gone days without food,
fisted river dirt and eaten grit and stone,
grabbed bread crusts off deserted plates,
slumped to the corner table with my tenth refill

but in Athens that first winter
children fought for an olive seed
spat out by a German soldier
and the dead lay on the streets for hours,
then were flung in the mass graves.

And on all the platforms all the guards
with their pitted eyes and stone coats.

So I've brushed my teeth in public bathrooms,
slept in abandoned buildings, and carried
all I owned slung in a backpack—

this story and that, yours and mine,
but just words,
just words
which never quite touch,
though they try, yes they try.

Everywhere broken marble that at one time led to a city.
Broken marble and an endless stretch of empty plain.
Thousands of years and still this marvelous lack.

The road ends at the cross on the north slope of Tremola
above Kalavrita
where it is always December and always 1943
and the hands on the church clock have stopped at 2:34.

No men in this village.
No men and no boys.
Only women in black walking in the snow-silence,

in the silence that will never be after the machine-gun-
silence,
in light crosshatched with drifting snow
under clouds the color of warm milk.

It is these clouds the dead raise
in their cupped hands to quench their unquenchable thirst.

Athens, February, 1942, sitting
on the wooden step, streets empty
when you touch my knee.
Lead balloons pour from your mouth
and rise to the steel underbelly of the sky.

So you have died, my friend.
Scatched from yourself, stretched out on the street,
raisins forced between your lips.
Now you wear a wreath of ilex
and carry a string of rats' heads slung across your back.

You were always the generous one
but I know better than to eat food
offered by the dead and cross my fingers
against the omen of you and your meal of rats.
But you are after all just one more soul

zigged open by the blue light of hunger
and handed over to the indifferent care of the gods.
Death has whittled you razor-edged.
It has whittled me too, only I am not dead.
Unbelieving, I say this out loud.

Flares like glowworms crawl from my mouth,
my hands turn to spades and you say, *There are graves to be
dug.*

Have you nothing more to say when only last month we
bled
wrist to wrist and joined the packs of children grounging
the rocks of Hymettus for dinner's grass and weeds.

It's a new day. There is no forgiveness.

ELAS Guerrilla, thirteen years old, 1943
and Night, that hungry executioner, letting down his
ropes;

I open my mouth to cry out,
but barbed wire spools from deep in my throat.
Miserias, the sausage-skinned man,
tells me he loves me, but his tangled beard
grows hands and each one holds my burning heart.

The nightmares. Again.
It was the boy we killed today
who spat up blood and wire,
the length of it run through him,
and he was thrown against the wind-blasted rocks.
The War God I call *Kapetanos*
said it had to be, that the boy's father
collaborated with capitalists, that he helped the British
blow up a German-held railroad bridge.

I pull my sheepskin rug tighter
and crawl out into the reeling dark
until I find the boy and lie down on top of him.
Hold still, I tell him. I'll keep you warm,
but he pushes from the rocks

lifting us into the snow-swirled night
until he shatters like crystal and spins away.
I squeeze him tighter, but his blood sprouts into poppies
that fall to the *Antares* hiding below.

In the morning Miserias kneels beside me,
takes my rag-wrapped feet in his hands, and calls me son.
His bloody face is the blinding, black cavern of my dreams.
I close my eyes to keep from tumbling
into the stretched stone of that sky.

I am through with the nightly folding of Greece
like each day's stale dishtowels.

Through with the streets filling up with the dead
so many so fast they could not be buried.

Through with the Red Cross gathering the bodies.
Up and down our streets calling,

Bring us your dead. Have you any dead?
as if they were peddling fish

except there was no fish, no food at all.
Through with the smell of burning flesh

like fried chicken filling our pores. Through with
everything
smelling like meat frying. Through with it.

And the hunger, curling into ourselves
our joints growing large under our thin skin,

all the dogs and cats long gone, rats gone
and my friend telling me that after a bombing

he found a hand. Just a hand.
He and his mother and young brother ate it.

I asked which hand;
I wished I could find the other.

I'm through with it.

I have no answer for the dry stream beds,
for the black Cyprus and the gnarled fig,

no answer for the rocks and rubble
or the pillars as they strike against the stark sky,

no answer for the bodies that rise
each year closer to the surface,

nothing for the blood that ran in the streets
or for those thrown from the cliffs to the sea.

It is they who choose to eat eel and flat fish,
they who think the octopus a delicacy.

Where the sea lies flat in unbearable light,
then turns in on itself shifting, gibbous, indigo to blue
stone,

go there and ask the sea what it says.
What the sea answers, I answer.

Imagine us then a people pared down
to flight to the things we left behind
dropped in the road to bone to hunger

Don't think of my mother turned away
just beyond the door bent over shrubs of rosemary
the sun glancing off her shears
the silent horizon stretching from her
my father his unlit cigarette waving in air
or stubbed in the corner of his mouth

Don't give me memories
to sicken me with their lies

Some times do not bear remembering

Can you imagine a people who died
faster than they were born?

Think of black bread and sawdust
the fields grown empty

Imagine nets to be mended
imagine the world needing mending

Imagine children inventing their own lives
and weaving those inventions through days
that will never be mended

A city of thieves a city of dying imagine that
we held rags across our face against the smell
but there was no keeping out that winter of evil

isyo skaza chano afandos

Imagine what you will but do not imagine me

*What is the word for justice for escape
for lost and disappear*

*If there is a word for never
can you ever know it
if hope
dare we speak it?*

How close we are
 how stingy
though we slog slash-mouthed through the mud-beach of
 our own stories
sunk in the slow blue of solitude.

How useless our words
when the mimosa folds its bony fingers
and the spindly-limbed chinaberry
fumbles its small harvest.

Yes, in this flawed world there is a past,
but what does it mean to us,
 huddled here
salveless misers of our own little hoards of hurt,
unable to forgive ourselves the smallest sins.

There's a reason why yesterday, in rain and no wind,
the oak under which I parked my truck
lifted its tangled roots from the earth
and hung slant-wise in bleared air,
then slowly toppled to the ground;

a reason

but I don't know it.

I don't know why cotton blooms pink, yellow, and blue;
I've never taken the ferry up the narrow canal to Poros,
never seen the black-bearded priests on their donkeys,
the whitewashed houses piled on each other like steps.

Never walked the narrow cobblestone between plazas of
gnarled olive
or seen the hundreds of lemon trees blinking against the
sun,
never seen the oystercatchers winging in air
or the drowned bodies of the skin divers laid out on sand.

I don't know the flocks of goats chased from the runway
only what I've been told.

In this world of words, imperfect, but all we have,
I've never seen the sea caves of Corfu shimmered in color,
but rows of tobacco in bleached dirt where nothing else grows.

Don't know the donkey paths between villages in morning
mist

only the stories people tell.

Not the burnished Acropolis in a mythical light,
but the fields in drought and flood,
the nights when bootleggers stay home,
the moaning trees in wind, the moon down,
something forgotten walking the damp woods,
something forgotten, walking.

Harmony in a Random World

Kathleen Ossip. *The Search Engine*. Copper Canyon Press, 2002. 80 pages. \$14, paperback.

One step into *The Search Engine*, the debut collection from Kathleen Ossip, and the reader is already in the rodeo, hanging on as the poet digs in the spurs: “Ha! I’m a vessel of pure experience,” begins the sentence-long prefatory poem, “In the Atrium.” It’s a sentence that never really ends—there’s no period when we arrive at the torcherés at the poem’s finish, and what opens out over the ensuing four sections is a ride at full throttle. As Derek Walcott, who selected *The Search Engine* as the winner of the 2002 APR/Honickman Prize, notes in his introduction, these poems possess an “eye [that] is restless and relentless.” Indeed, Ossip produces poem after poem that showcase a robust energy and freneticism; what’s all the more impressive is, that for all of their sheer ravenousness and ranginess, the poems that populate this book are incredibly pressurized and precise.

The first section alone is worth the cover price; it hovers about the historical and the psychological with an able grasp of how the two may be shown to intersect. The first poem, “My Twentieth Century,” flies through

meetings in which the role of the speaker's twentieth century is played by "Ma":

We are having tea and
dobosh torte, my mother
and I, dressed in hobble
skirts and buttoned boots,
in Peacock Alley of the
old Waldorf. (She thrives on
luxury.) Hey, Ma, I say,
this Sigmund Freud says neuroses
arise from repressed sexual
fantasies! She clatters her cup
in a kind of trance.

From here, the poem pages through a sampling of the American 20th century (from Susan B. Anthony to war to Scarlett O'Hara to the "Sputnik Lounge" to leopardskin aerobicwear and so on) before it vanishes, leaving the speaker "eating bread and water / alone" as she contemplates the theory that "the universe contains a maybe." From this frantic entry into the 21st century, the section ranges through a blink of "The '70s" and six contemporized sonnets that skim through psychoanalysis (it's a lot more fun than it sounds) before closing with a multi-sectioned dramatic monologue entitled "The Complaints of Maria Goretti." In the poem's introductory

note, we learn that Goretti was a twelve-year-old girl who was murdered by a would-be rapist in 1902 and later canonized as a martyr by Pius XII in 1950. The sections are at once wry and haunting, able both to pun on her killer's "dagger" when she appears to him in prison and wonder, in the penultimate section, *On the afterlife*:

Could heaven be the rasp
of skin on skin?
Matter mattered. Meaning
meant. But here?

These are harrowing questions, and they suggest a human attachment that has been voided, both in Maria Goretti's actual life and her afterlife as a saint. When, in the final lines of the last section, the speaker says, "The neighbors always said how / good I was. Meant: how silent," we sense a fury that deepens and enriches the tonal nuances of the entire book.

This fury at silence also prepares us immediately for the book's second section, "Fourteen Rants." It zips along through fourteen seven-line poems, each subjectively documenting the sort of random appearance that might be expected of a search engine with a sharp, neurotic personality. The "Rants" manage to be clever, lyrically pleasurable, and immensely unsettling all at once, as in "The Rosebud":

Hello, artifice central? Nah, I
didn't hate it when you (infanta)
and Mr. X frugged in the dooryard
so uncultivated and real slow.
You dig everything magenta,
flying mammals, and the number ten.
Hello, diadem? Pick your poison.

The third section plays all over the landscape of maternity and matrimony, the joys and terrors of romantic love and the perils of conception in a world that has already proved, within the trajectory of the book, to be restless and unstable. It grasps hope from the strangest of places; in the "Magic Husband," the husband in question hums "a dope impromptu on the sound of schwa," which I read as the ability of art (even in its failure) to wrest meaning and pleasure from a sound as banal as "uh." Likewise, it finds fear in strange places—the final poem of the section envisions a world at once familiar and yet populated entirely by babies.

The fourth and final section moves from the matter of the first three in search of something beyond the speaker—in the titular poem, Ossip asks the world to "leave [its] address," a spectacular plea for the conversion of location into speech, for meaning to come from the matter. She finds argument with the injunctions of forebears like

Marianne Moore, hidden narratives in paintings, and still feels something missing. She finds inspiration and tension in the chaotic multitude of stuff before announcing, in the final poem, "The Pleasure of Your Company," the intention "to rededicate this Delft world we live in." In short, the search has produced results that the engine must and does make meaning from. The risk in adopting a search engine as a mode of poetic address is that, for all its technological apprehension and flair, it ultimately delivers no meaning by itself—it merely produces results. Without a human hand, a subjective process, as a guide, it does nothing. Ossip's book is in no way guilty of this. Rather, the find matters more than the forms that it takes. Another way to say this is that form functions as a vehicle, not an end.

Throughout, Ossip flies through form and predecessors—prose poems, neo-sonneteering, goofy rhymes, a cento from the works of Plath and Sexton, not to mention all the variants previously explored in this review. Each employment results in riffs on the tradition that provoke new discoveries; from the playful and dire consideration of history and psychology to the triumphs and failures one encounters in the service of art, she makes poetry that enhances our perceptual ability by producing honed moments of apprehension. The word that occurs to me is virtuoso, but I never get the feeling that Ossip is showing off. Somehow, she makes it all fit, and with an admirably light touch. This is not to say that she is not

capable of *gravitas*, but she wields it so surely, so subtly, that it is all the more poignant.

Ossip's regard and struggle with her forebears is one of the more noticeable conceits, and to her credit, she never panders. Rather, they are approached as a sort of medium for a greater apprehension of the world and how to find it, as well as a source for inspired differentiation—that is, by naming them in so forthright a manner, she is able to create a distinctive space for her voice. If I had any serious criticism of Ossip's book, it would be just how noticeably she wears her influences on her sleeve. Done clumsily, such announcement of allegiance and debt would be a self-defeating gesture, and even in capable hands, it can be distracting. Fortunately, Ossip is gifted with a deftness that renders the point nearly moot. The voice in these poems nears escape velocity from the gravitational pull of influence, which is quite a feat indeed, considering the wallop that her heroes pack, not to mention the casual aplomb with which she deploys a sense of serious, intelligent play worthy of the New York School—as Walcott mentions in the introduction, "In the Atrium" flies along with O'Hara-esque verve, and the seven-line poems that make up "14 Rants" could cozy up to the Ashberian catalogue and make assured dinner conversation. Once, someone (either an ex-girlfriend or Ezra Pound) told me that form is content—however, in a book so rife with forms, it is vital that in the end the pleasures and meaning

surpass the structural hoops and hurdles. Kathleen Ossip has done just that, for in the end, we are with the speaker and we recognize the speaker's world as our own, even if we blush a little for not having noticed it this fearfully and lovingly before. We are the richer for *The Search Engine*, a wonderful first book from a promising, powerful new poet.

Last Mission of Mir

I woke up and the television was on, but muted. I was drooling on my pillow, and my brain felt like nails and wire overflowing through my eyes and there was a woman lying on the floor beside glass doors to a balcony. She was in her underwear, and there were half-empty glasses on the nightstand.

It was bright already and humid inside the room. There were loud and peculiar noises outside on the streets: it seemed like they had all marched inside my head while I slept. I put pillows over my ears, but that only seemed to insulate the noises so they beat louder in my brain, and I put the pillows down and grabbed my head and said Oh God. That woke the woman. She staggered to her knees but fell back down, like a baby deer, or horse, and though she was awake she couldn't move, so I left.

This was the Sheraton Resorts Hotel in Suva, on the big island of Vita Levu, in Fiji, and it was March 18, and very soon, already once postponed, the Russians were going to send the Mir space station hurtling back to earth, and everybody there was there to watch it, and nobody was quite sure whether it was something very good or very bad, and amid the celebrations and well-dressed International Space Station reps there were lots of sad old Soviets, who looked to me like potatoes, crying in hallways

and on barstools. Outside the hotel under the strange illusion of order everyone was shopping and walking and helping tourists with maps, but the government was barely holding on, and a huge Australian warship was waiting invisibly in the ocean to evacuate us if fighting started. It never in my whole life occurred to me that Australia had a warship.

I walked down to the desk and asked if I had checked in, and when the man said yes, I asked which room I was in, and he looked at me until I said, I'm not joking. Every single disturbance in space made it seem like the ground was collapsing, and I almost grabbed the man's arm to tell him to stay absolutely still, and the effort it took to tell myself, Do not grab people's arms, was so horrific I had to leave before he could give me my room number.

I passed by the hotel's bar and all the other journalists were drinking already, and screamed at me. I went inside and ordered a Bloody Mary. There was something deeply heroic in vodka that week, and it was that or nothing else. If anyone ordered whiskey or gin there were boos and some huge man in an undersized suit would hold his breath and turn red until it was given back.

I sat beside a woman I half-recognized. She said, You are an asshole. I moved. I couldn't remember what I'd done the night before. A man came by and gave me a cigarette, and I didn't want to smoke but there it was, right

there in my mouth, and I was smoking it, and he asked how the cosmonaut was.

The what?

Lena, he said, the cosmonaut you left with.

I think she's dead, I said, and I was joking, but I wasn't sure I was lying.

There's a press conference in an hour, he said.

Who's going?

Not me.

I wanted to head into the city center, get out of the hotel, but nobody wanted to leave the bar. It was like the first day of camp, and alliances were forming. I ordered another Bloody Mary and my headache started disappearing. The press conference began, and all the journalists stood and waited near the bar's entrance, and when they realized it had started and, anyway, they were late, they all sat back down. I wrote a sentence on a napkin: When the Mir space station reenters the earth's atmosphere, it will be the single largest celestial event since the Tunguska meteorite struck Siberia in 1908. A man sat down beside me and used the napkin as a coaster, but not before he said, That guy over there, the one sleeping in the chair, he wrote that exact same sentence. Then a guy from the BBC, a guy from Milwaukee who put on an English accent when he got the job, six months before, he threw up into his glass, and then he left the glass on the table and went to the bar.

I went outside to the pool and ordered a chicken sandwich. To order a chicken sandwich in Fiji is to truly retreat from the uncertainties and mysteries of life. It is total surrender. I said this to a man sunning nearby, an American scientist who had ordered the same and he said, It's a fucking chicken sandwich. The ex-Soviet Space Minister was swimming and he looked like a four-hundred-pound scoop of lard floating in the water. When my chicken sandwich came I didn't feel hungry anymore, but I ate.

Six permanent modules made Mir. The Core was sent up in 1986. It had a library and an exercise bike. Kvant-1 was sent in '87, for astrophysics research, Kvant-2 in '89, for biological. Kristall was next, which had a docking port for the U.S. space shuttle, and right there in that strange tiny fact is proof that the history of the world was altering. Spektr in '95 and Priroda in '96, and one crisis after another, a collision in '97, a loss of orientation before that, in '94, that left the cosmonauts waving their hands in front of their mouths to breathe—to flush away carbon dioxide and draw in oxygen—and a nearly lost cosmonaut, Serebrov, who grabbed a piece of the station after his safety tether broke on a spacewalk, and what would it be like to be him? What would the universe look like, barely holding on to a space station? Then in January 2001 they sent up a temporary module named Progress M-15, and it only had one mission, and that mission was to boost and hurl the

structure back into the atmosphere, destroying most of it, and what was left would drop into the largest unpopulated section of the earth. Fifteen years of dumped history, the Soviet empire in ruins. A thousand miles northeast of New Zealand there was a little target floating in the ocean and it said: Time for a Taco? And if the core section of Mir hit it, Taco Bell was going to give a free taco to everyone in America. This was absolutely the truth.

The ex-Space Minister walrused out of the pool. I couldn't bear to look at him, and I walked back to the front desk and asked for my room number and key. There was a woman there, and she was not surprised by the question. When I got to the room, Lena was curled in bed watching television. Your wife called, she said. She's not my wife, I said. I sat on the bed's edge with my back to Lena and asked what she was watching. HBO, she said.

That night Lena and I went down to the bar and the news was that Mir would come down March 23. The bar was so full bodies spilled into the lobby, and a tiny Fijian in a red suit was hovering around and asking people to go back inside. He bit his fingernails and spit them on the floor. Lena had short curly brown hair and stood an inch taller than me. I asked her if she knew my name, and she said Andrew, and the way she said Andrew, like I was doing something very secret, brought all the

uncomfortable memories from the previous night howling back in sparks and clamor.

A Russian diplomat bought eighty vodka martinis, eighty, and the bartenders said no way, but he hit his fist against the bar and all the glasses along it trembled like peasants, and they went to work, four of them, and we all pushed ourselves into a ball of people and plucked the drinks as they came. That was still early, and as the crowd swelled Lena and I decided to go to the pool.

She said she was your wife, said Lena, in the elevator.

She was, I said.

Where is she?

I pushed the elevator button three times. Delaware, I said. It was the only place I could think of.

The door opened to the pool level and voices and glasses were clattering and humming. There were people standing in a line down the hallway, like they were waiting to go to a bathroom, and Lena and I walked by them. Some nodded as she passed and one man with tears all over his face kissed her cheek, and she held his head in the cradle of her hands and said Petya, Petya. When we got to the pool the line broke into small clusters of quiet people, and we stayed there for a while until it seemed too solemn, and then we went to the roof.

Mir was meant to be in orbit three years. It was up fifteen, and by the time it was a floating dying creaking abandoned museum of itself, sixteen thousand

experiments had taken place, and six hundred technologies created. We memorized the numbers, the journalists, as many as we could, because it gave our stories substance.

There was a man on the ledge when we got there, and it surprised me to see something I'd only seen on television, and I didn't think he was going to jump, but I said, Don't jump! anyway. The man turned, and I said Don't jump! again, but a big humid gust of wind blew my voice down, and the man turned away.

Lena's martini was almost finished, and she asked, Is he going to jump?

I don't know. The air felt unusually healthy and I breathed it deeply.

That's very sad, she said. Then she finished her drink and shook her head and said, I can't get drunk.

I poured some of mine into hers, and told her to hold on. I walked to the building's edge, a dozen feet from where the man was, and looked over. It didn't seem very high, so I yelled back to Lena, He'd only break his legs. The man looked at me and I said, Sorry, and waved off. When we were going back down the elevator I had an unbearable desire to hold Lena's breasts, so I did, above the soft cloth of her black dress, and when she didn't stop me I said, That man wasn't Russian. The doors opened and loud voices from the bar tumbled in like confetti, like a

huge balloon full of confetti had broken over our heads, and Lena moved my hands.

Later, I was drunk, and Lena was talking to a man from Reuters named Jerry, holding him by his belt. They whispered. I went up to my room and half an hour later Lena came in. I was watching CNN International. There was nothing about Mir. She said, I'm using the key you left behind this morning. I can't sleep alone.

She had another bottle of vodka with her, and grabbed two cups and undressed and crawled under the sheets.

When I woke, Lena was gone. My head hurt so bad I wanted to run through the glass balcony doors. I pressed the phone against my temples, headset on one and receiver on the other. When I put it down, it rang, and I rolled myself in the sheets. It stopped, and I was a little embarrassed. Then it rang again, and I hurried to pick it up. Hello, I tried to say, but I just coughed. It was not my wife. It was the man who was paying for all this, who said, Postponed, huh? Nobody gives a shit anyway.

I was pressing the remote control into my forehead and wished my skull were an egg shell that would open up and the yolk of my brains would spill out and boil on the floor.

What about Fiji? he asked. Anything going on in Fiji?
I haven't left the hotel.

I had breakfast with a guy from ABC who smoked while he ate. He asked if I wanted one and I said, I quit, don't smoke, but a minute later I was sitting there smoking. He, Alex, was going to be on my observation flight from Tonga, the reentry's South Pacific Staging Area. It gave us all hope to use official terms like that, like we could slow it down, take hold of something in its happening. When Mir came back through, we would be up there watching it. If you weren't a journalist it cost seven thousand dollars to be on board these flights, which Russia's new Aerospace Agency director called suicide missions. Mir weighed a hundred forty tons, and forty would survive reentry. The whole core, as big as a locomotive engine, was supposed to come through intact, mostly, and it was going to be moving at eighteen thousand miles an hour. At a certain point numbers had no meaning. I sat there moving my fork across the table very quickly, turning away and then back, as if I were trying to surprise myself, wondering how fast eighteen thousand miles an hour was. The guy from ABC ashed his cigarette in his eggs. Stop, he said, you look like an idiot. I stopped. He said, Our pilot is ex-Israeli Air Force. Those fucking guys can fly.

I nodded. I didn't know if they could fly or not, but I nodded. I wondered where Lena was.

There's another press conference today, he said.

I'm going into the city, I said.

But two hours later, I was still in the hotel's bar, wondering if anyone would come with me. A pack of journalists left for the press conference, but I stayed and drank a vodka and soda. News was not news but the illusion of things happening.

After lunch, the guy from ABC said he'd come with me, Alex, and we took a taxi and I asked the driver what he thought of last year's failed coup and the temporary government, because I knew he would do all the talking. It was vomitously humid, but not too hot. It rained a hundred times a day in Fiji. Alex held his hand out the window then brought it back in. Christ, he said, rubbing his fingers together. My hands are wet.

We got out on a street with a market and everyone was yelling. It was the most colorful thing I had seen in my life. All the canopies and umbrellas and tents. The adults all seemed either very old like turtles or very young, and had mustaches. The old ones stood behind the stands and the young ones sat around on mopeds and bicycles. Alex asked if I had anything interesting to ask them, and an old man half his height grabbed him and showed him a fruit, and held it in front of his face until Alex bought it.

We took that fruit around with us all day. It was like our baby. We found a loud American woman screaming at a man in a car. She was fat and had big sunglasses. She saw us and told us to translate for her, and Alex said, Hey, Big Sunglasses, he speaks fucking English. We smoked a

pack of cigarettes. We stopped for beer but ordered vodkas.

Is this what it's like spending time with you, Andrew?

On the way back to our hotel we got stuck in a traffic jam. It rained and it stopped raining. Alex fell asleep and woke abruptly when he heard thunder. Is it raining again? he asked. Hold on, I said. And then the rain began again. The driver said he knew another way, and took us through a neighborhood. At a stop sign we saw a man standing, waiting for a bus, and Alex said, Hey, that's our pilot, the Israeli, and I said, Hey, that guy was about to jump off the hotel roof last night.

Really? he asked. The taxi drove off, and we watched the man from the back window. The rain was beating down, and he held a hand above his eyes to watch for his bus.

When I got back, there was a message on my phone from my daughter. For a long time I sat looking out the window. Then I called, and she answered, and we spoke for a while. I was sobering up from the afternoon and a headache was beginning.

Mommy wants to talk.

Daddy's busy, I said, but she had already taken her ear away, and I could see it happening, my wife's frustrated face coming to the phone, my daughter holding it up, offering me to her, and I hung up. Then I said Fuck and I

picked it up as fast as I could, but the line had died, and all I could hope was that my wife had covered for me, pretended I had stayed on the phone. I turned the television on and raised the volume. Someone in the next room beat on the wall and I turned the volume down.

The bar was not as full that night, since there was a banquet at a restaurant in the city, and I was going but not right away. I saw Alex and bought him a drink.

How did you know who our pilot was?

I met him last night. The charter-flight people were here talking about safety. Did you know there is a two-thousand square-mile uninhabited area on this planet? I saw the fucking map. He spread his hands out. Blue. Nobody.

Are you going to the banquet?

He finished his drink. Yep. My taxi's on the way. Are you?

Later, I said.

If you're waiting for the cosmonaut, she left with Jerry.

Oh, I said.

He ate a pretzel. I thought you were married.

A half hour later, I went to the roof. I didn't think the pilot would be back, but I waited. It was cloudy and windy and warm, but the clouds broke in patches and the moon broke through. The Soviets had beaten the Americans in space at every step except the moon, and that was because

the moon was worthless. Instead they built Mir, kicked our asses one last time, before it all fell apart for them. Everywhere on earth, except in America, everyone understands the fragility of civilization. I tried to close my hands around my eyes, closing out the city lights. Mir was up there, and I thought of it cruising emptily above, and imagined the noises it would still be making, computers still running, displays still green and black, and lit, beginning its final maneuvers.

I didn't make it to the banquet. I went to my room and watched HBO. I couldn't tell when one movie ended and another began. At three in the morning I heard Lena come in, but I was too tired to open my eyes, and she climbed in bed and pushed her body into the bent shape mine made. You didn't come, she said.

I woke for the first time in Fiji without a headache, but I felt a vague sense of doom I couldn't explain. Lena was still in bed. I told her to take a shower and I would come back for her. She nodded. There was still make-up in her eyes.

I spent breakfast confounded by the Taco Bell target. Alex saw me and gave me a cigarette, and I asked the charter company's name.

How come?

I want to see one of the small islands.

You could write a travel piece, he said.

I asked, What are you doing today?
I'm so fucking tired of this place. A bunch of us are going to a titty bar.
Okay, I said, looking at my watch.
I brought breakfast up to Lena, and she saw me and said no no no no no no and hid under the sheets. I rubbed her feet and she began to speak Russian.
Were you ever on Mir? I asked.
Her head poked out of the sheets. Why? Will you write about me?
I don't think so, I said. Anyway, I can just check.
She thought, annoyed. Yes, she said.
I took the sheets off her, and she was naked, or almost.
Keep speaking Russian, I said.

Lena went with me to the charter company, and when I asked for the Israeli pilot the man behind the desk walked outside and looked around the sky, and said, I can't find him. I'll wait, I said. I'm a reporter.

We waited outside in the heat until the man came out and said, His plane landed. Thirty minutes.

Lena fell asleep on my shoulder. She woke when our pilot returned. The bus he climbed out of sped off, and black murky exhaust fumes filled the street, and settled into the gutters. The pilot passed us on his way inside. He was older than I'd thought, maybe in his early fifties, maybe older, and I touched his elbow. He looked at his

elbow a long time, and I had to say Sorry twice. When he looked he didn't recognize us, and I chose not to say, We saw you on the roof.

I put a charter flight for the next day on my Diner's Club. Every time I used it I could feel the value of the whole world diminish. Lena said, Diner's Club, and pushed her hip to mine. Buy me a diamond.

When we left, she said, Why did you want that pilot?

That's the guy from the roof, I said.

The man who was going to kill himself?

It wasn't that high.

She locked her arm in mine. Do I still have to go?

Haven't you been to space?

She nodded, like she was remembering a small fact that had slipped her.

Then a little later, fighting through a pack of pedestrians, she said, You still didn't answer me.

Somebody pushed me, and I looked around angrily because I was taller than everybody, but they all hurried by. Reaching for her, fighting back through bodies, I asked, Answer what?

Why him?

I avoided someone running at me. I felt like the whole city was playing a joke on me, trying to make me look like an imbecile. I said, Because he's interesting.

Like me, she said.

That afternoon, I bought her a diamond necklace on my Diner's Club. I had the clerk divide the cost in ten receipts. If he didn't do it I was going to slam my fist against the counter. When she put the necklace on her neck, Lena started crying, but not excessively. There's no more money left in Russia, she said.

That night a man with an accordion came in to the hotel bar, and people danced around him in a circle until he began to hop happily around the tables, and they gathered behind him in a line, and pretty soon there was a whole snake of people yelling and singing and slithering through the hotel lobby, and I saw Alex wrapped around a woman, and when he saw me he howled and bit the woman on the ass, and I wanted to join but the bar looked so empty and sad by itself, and then I saw Lena dancing with Jerry and they kissed. The man in the accordion got in the elevator, and the snake waited patiently, but did not break, still singing. It was a Russian song and the Russians were singing and everyone else was yelling. When the elevator returned, another group got on, and the snake moved ahead, but barely. Five minutes later, the man with the accordion came out of the elevator, and the people singing and dancing in the line got on the elevator so the order of the line wouldn't break, so the dance would hold its shape, and I remember thinking it was both a great victory and great defeat for human perseverance, that they

didn't give up or take the stairs or cut in line to be closer to the music.

I didn't speak to Lena at all that night, but I saw people admiring her necklace. I saw her sit on Jerry's lap, and I saw Jerry slide his hands inside her dress, up around her hips, and I tried to imagine her body in a spacesuit catapulting upward surrounded by so much fire and noise. Alex sat down on the floor in front of me. I'm dying, he said. Kick my head.

What?

Kick my head. I've got to wake up.

I'm not going to kick your head.

He sat up. He looked over and saw Lena on top of Jerry. Oh, he said.

We got a drink together. We ordered two doubles and the bartender's face said, You're too old for doubles. And it made me feel awful.

At eleven Alex and I and four or five other people left for a nightclub, and we stuffed flasks of vodka into our pockets, and at three in the morning, wasted and stumbling and hungry and lonesome and older than I ever imagined, but somehow full of joy, I asked, Weren't we going to a nightclub?

Alex said, We went. We got kicked out.

And maybe it was true, but I could not conjure a memory that said so. When I got back to the hotel a very sleepy man behind the desk gave me a message, and it

said Please call your wife and daughter. I read it in front of the man, wondering why she hadn't just left it on the hotel's voicemail, and when I looked up he was smiling, and I could tell it took him effort. I had no idea what I looked like to him. I asked, Did you write wife, or did she say wife? He stopped smiling and said the message was from earlier.

Upstairs, Lena, drunk, screamed at me for ten minutes. She woke up and saw me and threw a pillow at me and screamed for ten minutes, about leaving her, screamed herself back to sleep. This was how close the whole world was to falling to pieces.

I woke up in the morning and she was curled into me. She said, I didn't know where you'd gone. It was March 21, and the headache was back, and Marna put her fingers on my temples, and I said, Push as hard as you can.

Alex and the woman whose ass he had bit, Natasha, took the charter flight with us. She was not a cosmonaut. The four of us met the Israeli pilot at the company's office building. He was standing in the parking lot smoking a cigarette, in sunglasses, green shirt, and shorts. The sky was clear, and it was finally hot, and I asked, Do you think it'll hold? He smoked his cigarette so he wouldn't have to answer me. We followed him into a green Volkswagen van, and he drove us to a dock and we walked to a paddle boat and I said, Fly, right? And I flapped my arms. I speak

English, said the pilot. Then he pointed. We were taking a sea plane, one floating out by a buoy. Lena said Oh no not me. Alex said Now we have some fucking action, and Natasha clapped, one loud hand-embracing clap.

On board, flying low above the waters of the South Pacific, with islands like tiny green and brown dirt mounds in the distance (and when I thought that I thought, Christ), I asked our pilot, What's your name?

Benjamin, he said.

And why are you here?

You paid.

I mean in Fiji.

He said nothing. He pretended to listen to a voice in his headset.

I said, We saw you on the roof.

Marna hit my arm, and I raised my shoulders. What? Leave him alone.

Alex was green. Am I green? he asked. Benjamin told him to throw up in the paper bags, and Alex said, Thank you. Natasha held his hand but talked to Lena.

I pointed out in front of us. I felt weightless from the bouncing and the hangover, and I felt like if I didn't focus on something right then the vast blue above us was going to lift me out of the plane and pull me into space. I asked, Is it one of those islands?

He nodded, then pointed at a cluster, a small archipelago, and said, That one.

I turned to tell Alex, but his head was in Natasha's lap, and he lay there like a corpse. Natasha was running a finger along the curve of his ear, and Alex kept saying to himself, Good dog. Good dog. Lena shrugged, then held my shoulder. He should sit up front next time.

We turned sharply down and right, and began to fly just above the waves. My stomach felt weak, too, but it was the package I'd paid for. Lena looked more annoyed than queasy. There were probably fifty, maybe a hundred people on earth who could handle turbulence like she could.

We landed, and Alex, before we stopped, clothes and shoes and paper bag, jumped into the water. I have to get out, he said, and leapt. And he instantly looked happier. Natasha waved at him and blew him a kiss and he spread out onto his back to kick himself to shore. We came to a small wooden pier and there was a man standing on it, holding a rope. The whole time in Fiji seemed an accumulation of these bewildering images. We got out and waited while Alex came walking down the island's beach. I looked the other direction and it was the same, nothing but blue and white and green, like all other colors were usurped by those intensities. Pretty, I said, and as soon as I did I could feel Lena and Natasha and Benjamin thinking Typical, and I waved at Alex, who was covered in sand. Better, he yelled. Much better! I looked at the two women, and they looked dangerously out of place, in their

fashionable black outfits and sunglasses, like they'd been transported directly from some cosmopolitan nighttime European street.

There were huts on the island, and a little store to buy supplies, and when we went to enter, the man who'd tied us to the dock came sprinting past us, and opened the door. Alex bought Pepto Bismol and a six pack of Budweiser. I said, Budweiser? They don't have vodka, he said. But that wasn't what I meant.

Benjamin went outside and sat down on a bench. I asked the man what there was to do on the island, and he grabbed me by the arms and said, Nothing! Relax! Nothing, said Lena. Great. She bought sunblock, then took a small bottle of vodka from her purse and gave it to me, then another for herself. I'm going to the beach, she said. Maybe I'll be eaten. And she winked. She took Natasha's hand and led her out, and as they passed Benjamin, Lena leaned down and said he was a very good pilot, and thanked him for flying. Then she turned to me, pointing, and told him, Don't answer his questions. She straightened, smiled, and waved. And they disappeared down the long white stretch of sand to the beaches.

Alex and I took a long walk around the island, up a trail that led through very dense forest, full of insects, and out, onto a flat treeless meadow spreading widely to the ocean. The wind was behind us, and the trees leaned over our backs. Alex opened a Budweiser. What now, he asked?

We turned back, but were confused by a fork in the path, and argued for a while, drinking his beers, until we took the one I wanted. I told him if I was wrong I'd pay him a thousand dollars, and ten minutes later he said, Give me the thousand right now, because we're fucking lost. From the sky, the island had looked so tiny.

We got drunk. Alex walked into a spider web and a huge spider crawled down his back, and he screamed like I was murdering him. It plopped helplessly off him and he stomped it furiously into the dirt.

I wonder if it was pregnant, I said.

He shivered and opened a beer.

Where are you going after this? he asked. He was scratching his neck, and we checked each other for more spiders.

Can't say, I said.

An hour later, all beer gone, tiny bit of vodka, we broke through the woods and onto the beach. A few hundred yards down, Lena and Natasha were lying on towels. They were topless and on their backs, and their clothes were in a pile beside them. One said something and the other laughed, and then Lena sat up and looked at the ocean.

I put my finger up to my mouth, telling Alex to be quiet, and we slipped back into the trees and walked behind the shield they gave us, nearing. When we were behind them, I sat down and pulled some leaves back. Alex sat beside me and asked, What are we waiting for?

For them to put clothes back on? I wanted to watch two women by themselves for a while, but I didn't know how to explain it. Lena lay back down and Natasha rolled over. Lena turned her head to Natasha, but I couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed, and I wondered what the rest of Lena's life would be like. Alex said, I'm bored, and he stood and walked out, and I had to follow, and the women, hearing us, turned and waved. It was a long walk down the beach to them, and Natasha rose to her elbows, and I hadn't noticed until then how huge her breasts were, hanging down to the towel. We sat beside them and took our clothes off.

When we went back to the huts and store, after watching the sun go down, after lying for hours half-nakedly together, we saw Benjamin still sitting on the bench. He hadn't moved. It's too late to fly, he said. Everyone's hopes deflated. We all looked out into the darkness and sighed.

We bought more beer and some local liquor, something cheap and atrocious and strong, and had drinks by our hut. Benjamin was still sitting on the bench, smoking, though he had gone for a walk. I asked him to join us, but he wouldn't. I walked over and when he saw me coming he stood and went into the woods to piss. The man who worked at the store swept sand from his deck, though gusts of wind blew the sand back. Lena was quiet. I had the terrifying sense that she wanted to see Jerry, and I

eventually got drunk and walked off jealously. I went to the beach because I thought I would die in the woods, be killed by a spider or poisonous frog, and never in all my life saw so much of the universe as that night, in the sky, on that beach.

Alex and Natasha came out after a while, and Alex was stumbling. I asked where Lena was and they said she'd gone to bed. We sat on the beach and he passed out, and Natasha and I talked. She had blond hair and lighter skin than Lena, and for a long time I tried to think of a polite way to ask to see her breasts again. Alex almost woke, mumbling, like he was on to me, but could not keep his eyes open, and his face crashed into the sand. I tapped his head, and his breath blew powder around him. He looks tired, I said. Natasha smiled, so I asked her to come swimming. It was the subtlest way possible, and she agreed. She took all her clothes off unabashedly and swam out into the break, and me behind her, and in the starlight I could see her whole naked body under the water, and I tried grabbing her, wrestling, tugging, since I presumed it would happen, but she kept swimming away. Finally, close to her, I said, You are very beautiful. She looked confused. She quietly continued floating but turned her body away. I had ruined the moment, but wasn't sure how. We swam for a little while longer and then went back in.

The next day, Benjamin dropped us off at the hotel. I wanted to ask him to eat lunch with us, but he drove away

as I approached his door. I waved at him to come back, holding his tip, but the van sped into the street, swept into the fast-moving traffic. I turned around and Lena was sitting on the curb. Alex and Natasha had gone in. I sat beside her.

You didn't come to bed with me, she said.

I told her I was sorry.

I can't sleep on my own. I stayed up looking out the door, and that man didn't move all night.

Benjamin? I asked, and she nodded.

He made me so sad, she said.

Alex and I had seats beside each other, up near the cockpit. We were drinking warm Cape Cods, day-old Cape Cods in flasks. We were at twenty thousand feet, and all the journalists and spectators were looking out the windows. Benjamin was flying us in huge circles. I had seen him board but he hadn't seen me.

Alex asked, When are you leaving Fiji?

I have an open ticket, I said.

He nodded. I'd like to see some of Asia before I head back.

There was a loud couple from Santa Barbara behind us. They were arguing about what to do with a guest room. There was a man in a cowboy hat, who was very old and seemed to always be chewing something. There were CEOs from a few American aerospace companies. There

was an Italian man who was airsick. And there was another man who'd gone into a panic as soon as we lifted off, and had to take sleeping pills. Everybody else was a journalist.

Alex and I were playing hangman on a notepad when a woman screamed, from our side of the plane. Everyone ran over, and stuffed their faces against the windows. A fat man jumped into my lap. There, crawling through the edge of the sky's blue dome, heading toward us, was a small fiery ball. That's it? someone asked. Seven thousand fucking dollars? And then the ball grew brighter, and became a streak, like the shell of Mir was unraveling and catching resistance, and everyone hushed, and then there was a massive explosion, and everyone gasped, and then there were multiple fiery streaks, breaking out and brightening. It moved so slowly, or seemed to. Jesus, said Alex. The fat man was breathing in my face, and I asked him to scoot back. I could not stand the sound of fat people breathing. The streaks were ten times as long, like comets, and they broke apart, and again, for more than five minutes, and it all seemed to accelerate as it sped closer, and shattering in the thickening air, until, before the huge flames disappeared, it was a magnificent shower of bright incendiaries blossoming everywhere. And then we lost sight of it, like it had vanished in mid-air. It's gone, said the old cowboy. And then a woman screamed, shrieked, and the noise she made was so awful and primal that I

wondered, Did someone throw her baby off the airplane? Then Alex ducked. I didn't know what ducking did for a person on an airplane, and I looked out over his back, and for a tiny moment which I will no doubt never relive, I saw what eighteen thousand miles an hour looked like. A huge dark shape came barreling at us, then boomed above us, and it seemed like a near miss though it probably wasn't, but it was enough to make a noise so loud the plane shook, and fluttered helplessly, until Benjamin pulled us out of the shape's wake.

The Taco Bell target was missed. There was a very solemn celebration when we got back late that night to the hotel in Fiji, and some weeping. There were a few long toasts, but nobody could finish them. And Benjamin booked a hotel room in the Sheraton, had a nice meal and a rare bottle of wine, and killed himself. We didn't find out until the next day, when housekeeping found him hanging out the window.

I was eating breakfast with Alex and two journalists from CBS, who'd missed the reentry. They asked us what it was like and took notes. I overheard someone talking about a dead man, and there seemed to be a lot of interest surrounding it, since the rumor was that it was someone important. When the story broke that it was a pilot, not a Russian diplomat or scientist or cosmonaut, and a suicide, not a murder, everyone went back to business. Most

people were checking out, and when they rolled Benjamin's body out people made way reluctantly.

Alex said, Christ that's weird. We were just with him.

I went upstairs and told Lena, who was showering, and she took the news calmly, turning the television off. Well, she said.

The room was dark. I opened the curtains to the glass doors and light flooded in. I had to squint and hold my hands over my eyes. I asked, When are you leaving?

Lena said, I can't say. I've got no reason to go back.

That afternoon I went to the charter flight company and told a man that Benjamin had died. He nodded. It was coming, he said.

Coming?

Yes, he said. He lost everybody. A year ago, in the coup. They were vacationing.

And you let him fly?

The man shrugged. He was ex-Israeli Air Force. Good pilot.

So that was it. That was the way his life ended.

When I got back to the hotel, people were outside with suitcases waiting for a van to carry them to the airport. There were a few people having last drinks in the bar. The week was officially a memory. I saw Alex talking to Lena. We're going to stick around, he said, for a few days. Lena had wet eyes. I told them what I'd heard and there wasn't

much for them to say, really. I told them I wanted to change, but I'd be back down, and we would go into the city.

I went upstairs, and there were two voice messages on the phone. The first was my daughter saying she'd seen Mir come down on television, and the second was the man who paid for all this, saying he'd got my story, and it was decent but what did we really expect? It's a fucking spaceship, he said, and then started laughing and coughing so hard he had to hang up. I stood on my balcony for a while, and I could see everything, and I couldn't believe I hadn't bothered going out there until then. I smoked a cigarette, then I went back inside and picked up the phone and called the police, and told them I was a friend of the man who had died and wanted to take care of the burial. They directed me to another phone number and I called and gave a man my Diner's Club number.

When I went back down and saw Alex and Lena, I told them Benjamin was being buried the next day. We had some drinks at the bar, and though we kept saying we wanted to go out in the city, eventually one of us yawned, and then another, and another. It was always best to leave a thing before it ended, before it was no more. There were less than a dozen people at the bar, and all but us because of flight problems. I said I might as well go to bed, and

Lena said it sounded nice. Alex said, I'm going out anyway, see what happens.

The next morning I got a phone call from Alex. He was at the airport. Listen, he said, I can't make it to the funeral. Gotta get back to work.

Where's work now? I asked.

Somewhere. Explosion.

Okay, I said. Be careful.

Outside, it was warm but less humid. We went and saw Benjamin buried, which didn't take long. I found out that his family was sent back to Israel, shipped like crates, but he didn't go with them. For a long time he convinced himself they weren't dead, and waited outside their hotel. We watched some men shovel dirt for a while, and smoked, and then Lena said, This is so sad. Let's rent a convertible.

It took a long time to find a convertible on the island, but we did, a very old Chrysler LeBaron at a used-car dealership. We took a four-hour test drive, saw every road on the island, and we stopped at some beaches, and it rained a dozen times, but was sunny in between, and when we brought it back, at dusk, the man was furious. I wanted to ask him how a Chrysler got to Fiji, but when I said I didn't want to buy it he refused to speak.

Lena and I went out dancing that night, and had a late dinner, and went from bar to bar, throughout the city, like we were expatriates in Paris, until dawn, and that's when I

noticed she wasn't wearing the necklace I'd bought, but I didn't say anything. We went back to the hotel and split up. She said she was going to get her things, check out, and move to my room for as long as we were there. I went to my room and took my shoes off, and the relief for my feet was like leaping out of a plane and falling indefinitely. I flicked around the television, but there was nothing on. I ordered two liters of orange juice from room service. Two Liters? they asked. Two liters, I said, and some water. And ice. I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for Lena. I did not want to fall asleep without her. She came in twenty minutes later, and seemed very happy. Somebody wants me, she said.

What do you mean?

She sat down. Someone's flying me to London, and paying me. She lay down on the bed, above the covers.

For what?

I don't care, she said.

When?

Next week. She crawled under the sheets, and patted the mattress. I'm so tired, she said.

Benjamin had hung himself with his sheets. And when I thought that I thought, *hung* isn't a word. It's *hanged*. But I was so tired, and I might have had it backwards. I got in bed beside Lena, and we fell asleep just as we started to undress, television on.

Notes on Contributors

Robert Adamczak published two books of poetry. He studies history at the Jagiellonian University and works at the Wawel Castle in Krakow as an electronic system specialist and a tour guide.

Rick Barot is currently Jones Lecturer in Poetry at Stanford University. His first collection of poems, *The Darker Fall*, was recently published by Sarabande Books.

Greg Baxter lives in Baton Rouge, where he is at work on a novel.

Jonathan Blum's short stories have appeared in *New York Stories*, *Other Voices*, *Northwest Review*, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and *Playboy*. His essay "May Be Habit Forming" was a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2000*. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and now lives in Brooklyn.

Matt Bondurant is a Virginia native and the 2001 winner of the Bernice Slote Award for Best Story of the Year by a New Writer in *Prairie Schooner* magazine. He has worked for National Public Radio, the Associated Press, and the British Museum in London. He is a Kingsbury Fellow at Florida State University and working on a novel.

Elizabeth Bradfield is a poet who earns her keep as a naturalist, kayak guide, and website designer. Her poems have appeared in *Epoch*, *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Calyx*, *Rhino*, and elsewhere. She recently moved to Alaska and misses living in a town where it's not considered unusual to find someone named Winsome.

Derick Burleson teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, and *Georgia Review*.

James Doyle is retired and loving it. He has poems coming out in *West Branch*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Green Mountains Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, and others.

Brent Goodman is the author of two poetry collections, *Trees are the Slowest Rivers* and *Wrong Horoscope*, winner of the 1999 Frank O'Hara Award. A writer and musician his poems have appeared widely in *Poetry*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Passages North*, *Poetry East*, *Zone 3* and *The Cortland Review*. He completed an MFA from Purdue University.

Robert Hass is the author of several books of poetry as well as a book of essays on poetry, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. He's co-translated many of the works of Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, and edited *Selected Poems: 1954-1986* by Thomas Tranströmer and *The*

Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa. A former Poet Laureate of the United States, he teaches at the UC Berkeley.

Edward Hirsch has published six books, including *Lay Back the Darkness* (Knopf, 2003) and *The Demon and the Angel* (Harcourt, 2002). In January, he became the fourth president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Katarzyna Jakubiak is a graduate of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and University of Northern Iowa. She is working on her Ph.D. in English Studies at Illinois State University–Normal. She translates poetry and fiction from English into Polish and vice versa, including Polish translations of Yusef Komunyakaa and Brenda Hillman.

Judy Jordan's first book, *Carolina Ghost Woods*, won the 1999 Walt Whitman Award and the 2000 National Book Critics Circle Award. Her second book, *Sixty Cent Coffee and A Quarter to Dance* is under contract with LSU press. She teaches at Southern Illinois University—Carbondale and is heavily involved in animal rescue.

George Looney's second book, *Attendant Ghosts*, was published by Cleveland State University Press in 2000. Pudding House Press published his *Greatest Hits* chapbook in 2001. He teaches creative writing and literature at Penn

State-Erie. He also serves as translation editor for *Mid-American Review*.

Piotr Maur has published two books of poetry and is working on a third. He lives in Krakow and works as a graphic designer.

Martin McGovern now lives in Denver. He was chosen last year to participate in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts' Playwrights Unit. A new play, "12 Gauge," will be presented in snippets in Houston and Denver. His work has appeared in *The New Republic* and *Poetry*, and he has work upcoming in *Hotel Amerika* (formerly *The Ohio Review*).

Marc McKee is currently finishing his M.F.A. at the University of Houston. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Third Coast*, *Indiana Review*, *The Journal*, *Elixir*, *Conduit*, *Salt Hill*, and *LIT*.

Carol Muske-Dukes is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Sparrow* (2003) and *An Octave Above Thunder, New & Selected Poems* (1997). In 2001, Random House published her third novel, *Life After Death* as well as a collection of essays entitled *Married to the Icepick Killer: A Poet in Hollywood* published in 2002.

Josip Novakovich teaches at Penn State. He has a new novel forthcoming from Triquarterly Press.

Ewa Nowakowska has published one book of poetry which won the prestigious Krzysztof Kamil Baczynski award. She teaches English in Krakow, and is pursuing her Ph.D. in English at the Jagiellonian University. Her translations from English into Polish include Thomas Merton, Jim Forest and Janusz Bardach. She also translates for film and opera.

Bill Rasmovicz is a graduate of the MFA Writing Program at Vermont College and a pharmacist in Portland, Maine where he resides with his wife and two dogs.

Aaron Reynolds is currently working towards his Ph.D. at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. His fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Sonora Review*, *Laurel Review*, and *Third Coast*.

Todd Samuelson, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Houston, won a 2003 Barthelme Fellowship in poetry. His poems have recently appeared in *Prairie Schooner*.

Young Smith will soon complete his Ph.D. at the University of Houston. He has written plays and musicals, including *The Mandrake*, and *The Three-Cornered Hat*, which

was produced last summer by Houston's Main Street Theater. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *New Orleans Review*, the *Chaffin Journal*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *Flyway*, *Plainsongs*, *The Midwest Quarterly*.

Originally from Baltimore, Laurel Snyder is a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop and a grateful recipient of a 2002 Paul Engle–James Michener fellowship. She now lives in Iowa City where she writes poems, runs a small record label (stumbleandfallrecords.com) and tries to garden.

Ewa Sonnenberg is a poet and pianist, and also a graduate student of philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. She has published five books of poetry. She lives in Wroclaw and Krakow. English translations of poems from her first book, *Hazard*, were published in 1997 in *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Dariusz Sosnicki has published three books of poetry. In Fall 2001 he was a participant of Iowa International Writers' Workshop. He lives in Poznan. His poems have been published in *Chicago Review* and will be included in the forthcoming anthology of "young" Polish poetry *A Carnivorous Bird and a Carnivorous Boy* (Zephyr Press).

Virgil Suárez was born in Cuba. He is the author of several books, including *Spared Angola*, *The Cutter*, *Palm Crows*,

Banyan, and *Guide to the Blue Tongue*. When he isn't living in Key Biscayne, he is teaching creative writing at the Florida State University.

Hieronim Szczur has published one book of poetry and a chapbook, and is currently working on a new collection of poems. He lives in Krakow.

G.C. Waldrep's work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and other journals. He currently lives in North Carolina.

Randall Watson is a poet. He lives and works in Houston, TX.

Sasha West received her M.A. at the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at the University of Houston. She's had work appear in *The Baltimore City Paper* and *Third Coast*.

Adam Zagajewski was born in Lvov, Poland, in 1945. His most recent books are *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, *Canvas* and *Mysticism for Beginners*, collections of poetry; and *Two Cities* and *Another Beauty*, collections of essays. A co-founder of the Krakow Poetry Seminar, he teaches at the University of Houston and lives in Houston and Krakow.

Nicole Zdeb, poet and translator, currently resides in Iowa City.

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