



**THE LITERARY  
REVIEW**

AN INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
CONTEMPORARY  
WRITING

FALL 2017  
VOL. 60 / 03

# TLR

CURRENT EVENTS: EVERYTHING IS **NOW**  
SIXTY YEARS OF WRITERS RESPONDING TO THE  
WORLD AROUND THEM. FEATURES FROM THE TLR  
ARCHIVE. 1957–2017.

**THE LITERARY  
REVIEW**

AN INTERNATIONAL  
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FALL 2017  
VOL.60 / NO.3

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# TLR

CURRENT EVENTS  
THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE  
FALL 2017

WHEN I WAS FIRST IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT I WORK IN A SOCIETY WHERE AS A WRITER EVERYTHING GOES AND NOTHING MATTERS, WHILE FOR THE CZECH WRITERS I MET IN PRAGUE, NOTHING GOES AND EVERYTHING MATTERS. THIS ISN'T TO SAY I WISHED TO CHANGE PLACES.

—PHILIP ROTH

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## EDITOR'S LETTERS

CURRENT EVENTS  
THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY  
ISSUE

Time gives generously of its passage, and *The Literary Review* has been sixty long, prolific years in the making this fall. We're celebrating our birthday with a special archival issue. We have, at last count (and we *did* count), published 10,266 original pieces through the decades. Often, here in the *TLR* office, we'll look back at past issues—wondering idly whether we'd ever published Borges, for example—we have: his poetry in the Winter 1993 issue. Or, when Peter Balakian won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry last year, we looked to see when we'd first published him: Spring 1980. When Joyce Carol Oates accepted an honorary degree from our benefactor, Fairleigh Dickinson University, she went out of her way to acknowledge that little magazine, *The Literary Review*, that had published her first story—in the spring of 1962—back when she signed off as J.C. Oates, lest anyone make judgments based on her gender. We take pride in all these past issues and the marvelous array of contributors, but have never really had the chance to comprehensively plunder this rich archive, to read again with fresh eyes, and see what our history has to tell us.

This little magazine has had seven different editors-in-chief. At its inception, the first editors, Charles Angoff and Clarence Decker, thought of their mission as international in scope. World literature was an emphasis (Langston Hughes gave us a translation of Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral for that first issue), a way of recognizing and celebrating the literature of New Jersey (William Carlos Williams had several poems in that same first issue); and also as a means to return to the belletristic tradition—a tradition whose importance waxes and wanes quite separately from popular trends, and is now thriving again by way of the lyric essay. The original mission statement, in fact, begins: "*The Literary Review* is an internationally circulated medium of publication for contemporary writing in the field of belles lettres. It seeks to encourage literary excellence and its appreciation by a wider audience and to further cultural exchange among the peoples of the world." Each new editorship has honored that original mission in different ways. We've had periods that were heavy on literary criticism, others that celebrated profoundly literary writing (just to the left of the mainstream), and deep dives into the literatures of underrepresented languages and cultures. In the last ten years, we've been playing with the organizing principle of themes (I Live Here, Game Theory, Invisible Cities). We have always, though, attended to the unexpected—the debut writers, international writers, unconventional writers, the writers, perhaps, you haven't already heard of.

When we were conceptualizing this issue and how to celebrate our sixty years, we took all of these editorial values into account—as well as the more nuanced idea of how to represent the way a magazine evolves: aesthetically under its various curators,

and aesthetically as the cultural landscape shifts around it. I'm proud of what we've created here, in particular because the pieces from our archives were researched and selected in very large part by apprentice editors. Our editorial interns—Matthew College, Maiasia Grimes, Zachary Heffner, and Katrina Elwertowski—spent their 2017 spring semester poring over the complete *TLR* archives, developing and realizing the theme of “how writers respond to their world.” Each of them have contributed an editor's letter, commenting on their experience and selections. Ariana Abad, Evan Portadin, Kelly Peacock, and Anne Fillenwarth continued that massive effort this fall, suggesting additional pieces for inclusion and shepherding these unwieldy non-digitized texts into the anthology of an evolution that follows.

Our mission was to compile pieces from the archive that somehow spoke to the ways that writers navigate their sociopolitical moment. We emphasized translated work, intent on maintaining a spirit of outward-looking, a worldview. Our approach was curious, informed by two generations (I'm Generation X and my fellow editors are Millennials), part literary and part—for lack of a better word—anthropological. There's no way that our selections don't in some way reveal our combined 2017 perspective, that our curiosities are formed from parallels we can draw to our present moment, as well as, admittedly, a taste for vintage. Anticipating this editor's letter, I considered how I might characterize this very moment now, if I were trying to describe in broad strokes what the writers of 2017 were responding to, and how it might be different from 1957, or '77, or 2007 for that matter. But history at its best is subtle and today is already saturated with broad strokes. Inference might be the most graceful lens through which to read these pages; and so I'll cast comparisons to the side and recommend literature's great gift of nuance instead.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this issue to our editorial coordinator, Louise Dell-Bene Stahl, who is, perhaps, *The Literary Review's* greatest champion. Since 1992, and alongside three very different editors-in-chief, Louise has been making everything at *TLR* work with diligence, dedication, humor, and fiercely defended attention to birthdays and many small acts of kindness. For her presence, I am grateful.

*Minna Zallman Proctor*

When we (the members of the intern team) first endeavored to identify a theme for the 60th Anniversary issue, we came up with the idea of “Writers Respond”—responding to the times, their environments, major events, etc. It is a popularly held notion that all literature—and for all intents and purposes, creations in general—is a response to something else, some stimulus that provokes instincts and urges that can, for whatever reason, only be expressed through writing.

We took that idea and ran with it. The pieces we include in this volume are responsive. Whether they are caricatures of inherent societal elements, critical commentaries on absurd cultural phenomena, or meditations on the nature of existence itself, these pieces embody what we believe to be posits in a lifetime-long conversation about the human experience.

Though these pieces are by no means a representation of every single person’s perspective, the unique viewpoints they present help us to piece together a larger picture of humanity and its history—something composed of, shaped, and colored by the experiences of each individual. Contextualized by their respective times, these pieces stand out as representative of things that are transcendent of time and culture: need for stability in tumultuous times, perseverance in the face of adversity, the formation of a solid identity, the pursuit of answers to challenging questions.

As an international literary magazine, *TLR* is concerned with capturing a breadth of perspectives. We seek to accumulate so many lenses through which to see the world, we can create a kaleidoscope—an ever-changing tessellation of smaller reflections, disorienting and captivating yet simultaneously transparent.

*Katrina Elwertowski*

The dying gasp of the 1970s, and the 1980s that they ushered in, have always remained one of the most chaotic decades of the 20th century. This was a time of collapsing empire and major upheaval, not only abroad but also in America, where the country left the peanut farm behind to embrace the movie star. For my contribution to this project of “Writers Respond,” I felt it most pertinent to avoid the American-centric sphere. Initially, every last one of my selected pieces were either translated from a different language or originated overseas, and while that vision was not able to be completed in full, this theme still stands.

This time of change can be expressed by the personal to the cataclysmic. I thought it best to focus on the average person, the bystander of the time, rather than any true decision maker. When one considers places and events, it isn’t often through the lens of the civilian; in a modern view we often don’t consider the plight of the journalist or the simple file clerk but the names of leaders and events. I had hoped to subvert that with my selections.

In these poems and stories, dictators are parodied, bureaucracy is undermined, and the inevitability of mortality is questioned. In this time more than ever, I feel it is important that we as a nation keep our eyes open to the international world. These were not American decades; these were world decades with actions and consequences that affected us all. To condense the 1980s into simply the age of Reagan and Gorbachev is to do them a vast disservice; this was a time in which the world confronted its own collective troubles from the juntas in South America to the pains of the shifting Middle East and the far corners of Eastern Europe. It was my pleasure to find the entries that I felt best represented this decade, as I hope it will be your pleasure to read them.

*Matthew College*  
*Archive Years 1977–1987*

Becoming an intern at *TLR* was not initially my idea; my professor recommended that I apply, thinking that it would be a good experience for me. She saw how I responded and critiqued during workshop sessions and believed that *TLR* would be a good place for me to learn more. I have to say that I doubted her judgment of me, but I chose to apply anyway, and I am so glad that I did. Never in my life would I have expected that I would be directly involved in the creation of such a milestone edition; I couldn't be more thankful to that professor now. I also found it interesting that our central theme for this anniversary issue would be "Writer's Respond." Strange that the reason I decided to work at *TLR* also happens to be what I'm doing here. Life tends to make those weird connections.

This whole idea of response has been present in my mind as of late. Life as a college student introduces you to so many different facets of the world that you are nearly forced to react to, form an opinion on, or just confront. Even on smaller scales, classrooms allow you an area to respond in a variety of media. As a writer, I am charged with responding to the workings of other student's minds, how they think, how they create characters, how they write a particular scene. On top of that, I need to verbalize my reactions in a way that is constructive, understandable, and direct.

That mindset of concision made its way into my working on this issue. Many of the pieces I selected have very clear-cut meanings and reactions. The great thing about them is that they focus on subjects that can't be left to the imagination; they are about experiences we all know, can react to, or perhaps even respond to, in differing ways. If there is one thing I have learned from university life and my time at *TLR*, it is that experiences are shared, but that doesn't mean that everyone feels the same way about them. There is much to learn from the reaction of others, and I hope these pieces give you something to ponder.

*Zachary Heffner*

When I first began interning at *TLR* I never believed I would be given the opportunity to do more than the generic duties one would expect of the lowly, unpaid, and inexperienced. I pictured days devoted to archiving, making coffee, reading submissions, and hunting down the Twitter accounts of our more social media-minded contributors, days full of boredom or at least a sort of mind-numbing stasis, and was surprised and thrilled to be tasked with designing a whole issue in conjunction with the other interns and under the clear, if not at times quirky, guidance of Minna Zallman Proctor. The process was slow-going at first. None of us really knew what to do and, in those first weeks, we still doubted the importance of our input, the legitimacy of our responsibility to the issue. We settled on a theme to help us sort through sixty years of 240 issues, yet we redefined that theme as we went along, as the history of *TLR*, its evolution and our place within that evolution, made itself clearer to us. I suppose the whole journey of putting together this issue can be seen as an exercise in redefinition. First I, and the other interns as well, came to reimagine our roles within *TLR* and what we could offer. Then, we conceived and reconceived the issue until finally it grew into what it is today.

Each intern can describe what “Writers Respond” means to him or her in a hundred ways. For me, the act of responding necessarily implies a dialogue. The dialogue featured here can either be seen within the framework of the work’s original conception or recontextualized, redefined, to meet the needs of our modern lives. These writers make statements, ask questions, rebut arguments, and tell stories. They eschew absolutes and instead invite their readers to reply to what they have made. However, a response need not solely be understood in terms of language. Humans respond emotionally as well, and anyone who has tried their hand at writing can attest to the difficulties of bringing emotion into the imperfect world of language. With this in mind, “Writers Respond” is also a testament to the human heart. There is bravery here, and vulnerability. Humor, too, and fear. There are things we can all respond to whether it be with words or with silence.

*Maiasia Grimes*



# Robert Payne

## The Poetry of Mao Tse-Tung

In the summer of 1946 I flew from Peking to the remote valley of Yen-an, where Mao Tse-Tung had his temporary headquarters. A year before, one of the Chungking newspapers had published one of Mao's poems called "The Snow," and my principal objective was to discover more poems written by him, and perhaps through his poetry it would be possible to evaluate the strength of this man who was even then threatening to dominate the whole of China.

I remember Yen-an now as a place of exquisite beauty: the yellow tent-shaped hills, pagodas, caves on the loess slopes, a printing press surrounded by stone bodhisattvas carved in the T'ang Dynasty, and a doorstep which turned out to be the head of an ancient Prince. Though a huge clandestine army was being formed, I saw only one soldier in the two weeks I was there: he rode gaily across the valley on a small pony decked with a crimson saddlecloth. It was a strange valley, bright with the golden dust which spilled over from the Gobi desert, and curiously quiet. When I reached Yen-an there was a truce between the Communists and Kuomintang armies. When I left, the truce was already broken, and the war was on.

During long nights of discussions I would sometimes bring up the subject of the poems, but Mao was reticent. He explained that "The Snow" was published without his permission, and that he held no high opinion of his own poetry. Others, however, were less reticent. A few close friends who had seen the manuscript volume called *Feng Chien Tze* pronounced them excellent. *Feng Chien Tze* means "wind sand poems," probably referring to their fleeting and turbulent character. "The Snow," which was written during Mao's first flight in an airplane when on his

way to attend a conference in Chungking, was widely admired even by those who detested the Communist leader. There was vigor in it, and a kind of proud gaiety, and somehow Mao had succeeded in conveying a sense of the whole Chinese history in a few lines.

Occasionally I was fortunate. Two of Mao's lieutenants remembered verses he had written, and so "The sky is high . . ." and "None in the Red Army . . ." came into my possession. They said he was always writing poems during boring party meetings, and when he had finished, he would simply toss them on the floor. Usually they were picked up, but they were treasured less for the poetry—few of his lieutenants had any interest in verse—than as examples of his calligraphy. They liked his free-flowing and rather romantic calligraphy, which curiously resembled the man: very pale and soft in speech, with the air of a scholar and a dreamer. No one looking at his poems or his calligraphy would suspect the terrifying strength behind the silken mask.

He came to see me off at the airport, and when I asked him for the last time for more poems, he laughed: "They're all *ma-ma-hu-hu*—absolutely worthless. I really cannot burden you with them. You have three, and that's enough for the moment." I published the three poems in a book called *China Awake*, and thought, and still think, they give an admirable portrait of the man. His romanticism, his sense of history and a peculiar kind of honesty shone through. He wrote verse according to the ancient patterns, but he succeeded in imposing upon these outworn patterns a new strength and a new vision. They were not poems to be tossed lightly aside. He saw himself standing in the stream of history, and each of these three poems was essentially autobiographical.

Last year a collection of his poems appeared in the Peking magazine *Poetry*, and it is now possible to round out the portrait of the Communist leader as a poet of considerable accomplishment. The collection includes the three poems I had obtained, and though in an introductory note Mao speaks of enclosing eighteen poems, there are in fact only sixteen—the Chinese are notoriously not very scrupulous about numbers. Altogether there are thirteen new poems, including two, "Changsha" and "The Pavilion of the Yellow Crane," which probably date from the time when he was a young student at Changsha.

These are followed by a series of eight war poems, written during the Long March, which seem to be in chronological order. "Kunlung Mountain," the most surprising of the new poems, follows them. Written in much the same style as "The Snow," and with similar fervor, it would appear to date from that brief period

towards the end of the war when it seemed possible for China to live at peace with Europe and America, for the poet pays tribute to those distant countries which he has never seen. "The Snow" is followed by two occasional verses dedicated to the old scholar Liu Ya-tzu, who was once his teacher. "Pei Tai River" is said to have been composed during maneuvers off the Chinese coast, and "Swimming" was written shortly after he had swum across the Yangtse River last year. This new collection of poems therefore represents all the poet wants to retain of the poems written since his youth to the present day.

Mao seems to have sent his poems to the editor of *Poetry* with some misgivings. In an introductory note, he mentions that he received eight poems from the editor, who had no doubt acquired them from Mao's friends, and had delved in his memory and come up with ten more. He warned against any attempt to overvalue the poems and suggested that modern Chinese poetry should turn its back on the ancient style, which he had cultivated all his life:

I have always been reluctant to have these poems published formally, because they represent an antique style, and I am afraid they might mislead the younger generation. Also, there is a lack of sufficiently poetical flavor, and they are altogether ordinary. But since you believe they are worthy of publication, and you have offered to correct the faults of these old pieces, I will do as you wish.

*Poetry* is an excellent magazine. I hope it will grow and prosper. Poems should, of course, be principally written in the new forms. It does no harm to write a little in the old style, as long as it is not set as an example for the young. This ancient style puts fences around the imagination, and is not easy to learn. All my remarks are offered only as advice.

The mood of most of these poems is quietly meditative. Occasionally, as in the poems written during the civil war, he strikes a note of propaganda or hurls defiance at the enemy. Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* provides the necessary commentary for the geographical names mentioned in his war poems; it is unnecessary to discuss them here. What is remarkable is the use of phrases like "the Three Armies," which were the number of armies possessed by the Chou Dynasty Emperors, the traditional poetic name for the armies of the Empire. The second and third lines of the "The Long March" remain, even though Mao has written them, almost contemptuously traditional.

There are, however, advantages in writing in the tradition. There is a stark clarity and brilliance in the Chinese ideograms. Lines like the fourth line of "The Pavilion of the Yellow Crane," which would read in a literal translation: *Snake*

*tortoise grip great river*, are almost as palpable as the things they describe, but no modern Chinese poet writing in *pei-hua*, where nearly all the nouns are formed of two ideograms and therefore of two syllables, can approach that swift juxtaposition of ideas. Nor can we in English often imitate the pungency of classical Chinese. In “Changsha,” which seems to be composed of two poems, the first twelve lines written in his youth and the rest many years later, Mao characteristically denounces the ancient feudal order. Where I have translated “They despised the ancient feudal lords,” he has ideograms which can be read: *Dung ancient days ten thousand household lords*. *Dung* is here used as a verb, and could conceivably be translated “to spread dung over,” but in fact it is a term used to convey a fierce contempt. It had seemed better to use “despise,” though I am aware that the blow has been softened.

The very literalness of classical Chinese often leads to ambiguities. There are lines written by Mao which are almost impossible to translate, because so many levels of meaning are conveyed. There are deliberate ambiguities in the twelfth line of “The Snow,” where it is uncertain whether he is referring to a young girl or to the Chinese landscape under snow: all we have is the image of “redness wrapped in white.” A Chinese reading the line is immediately aware of the presence of a girl, but he is also aware that “redness wrapped in white” has innumerable other connotations. There are other ambiguities which arise from Chinese tradition. When he writes in “Kunlung Mountain” that “Men may become fish and tortoises,” he is saying that men may live forever, for the Chinese believed that fish and tortoises had immensely long lives.

Though he has occasionally used the new ideograms which have become customary in modern China, and given a modern sharpness to his verse, these are essentially the poems of a mind rooted in another age. Classical Chinese verse follows set patterns, and Mao has in each case stated the pattern he followed. So “Chang-sha” is written according to the famous pattern known as “Spring of Hsin Gardens,” and with most of the other verses the key pattern is mentioned. Nor is there anything particularly new in his romanticism. When he says: “Could I but lean on heaven and draw my precious sword . . .” he is echoing many other poets before him—a solid heaven, made of glittering blue rock, exists in the imaginations of nearly all Chinese poets, who are often tempted to compare themselves to high mountains or peaceful lakes. What is new in Mao’s poetry is the essential toughness behind the romantic images. The swords are real swords, the black dragons are seen in a modern context, and the spirit of the hills—those commonplaces of ancient Chinese poetry—are suddenly confronted in “Swimming” with modern hydroelec-

tric plants, huge dams and engineering works on the banks of the Yangtse. Yet the ancient past is visibly present, and Mao makes no attempt to hide his affection for the ancient legends. All his verse hints at a continuity which the Communist government may never be able to break.

No one would claim for these poems that they are the greatest produced in modern China. Mao himself claims that the best Chinese poems of modern times have been written by Ai Ching. For himself he claims only that he writes as best he can, attempting to fuse a modern spirit on an ancient and difficult idiom, in the twilight between a dead culture and another still unborn. We see a brilliant, romantic and penetrating mind at work, steeped in the past and fiercely aware of the present, and as we read the poems it is very easy to forget that no other man has ever ruled over so many people. The poems are here. They are all we have to enable us to enter the fastnesses of his mind. Since he rules over nearly a quarter of the population of the earth, there may be some merit in listening to his very human voice.

# Mao Tse-Tung Changsha

*Translated from Mandarin by Robert Payne*

Standing alone in the chill autumn,  
The Hsiang River flowing northward,  
On the shores of Orange Island,  
I see the ten thousand hills all crimson  
And the forests all stained with red.

The immense river is a transparent green,  
And a hundred boats are racing by.  
The eagles strike against the sky,  
The fish swim in the shallow depths.  
In the frosty air all creatures demand their freedom.

Alone in the desolate vastness,  
I ask of the ageless earth:  
“Who is the ruler of the universe?”

I remember a hundred friends coming here,  
While the fabulous years vanish away.  
I remember the faces of those students  
Gleaming with brilliance,  
All of them mad-cap scholars.

I remember how vivid they were  
As they gazed upon rivers and mountains:  
The Chinese earth gave strength to their words,  
And they despised the ancient feudal lords.

Do you remember  
How in midstream we struck out at the water  
And the high waves stood in the path of the ships?

# The Pavilion of the Yellow Crane

Nine immense rivers flow through China,  
A single deepcut railroad threads north and south.  
Smoke and rain shroud the heavens:  
Stone snakes and tortoises grip the great river.

Where have the yellow cranes flown?  
Only the haunts of the wayfarers remain.  
I lift my winecup and drink deep.  
My heart is as full as the rising river.

# Chinkan Mountain

The hills below are thick with banners.  
On the hilltop drums and horns echo.  
Ringed by a thousand enemy circles,  
We stand here and do not move.

Already we have built a strong bulwark:  
The will of the people will build a city.  
On the shores of the Yellow Sea the signal guns  
Report that the enemy fled during the night.

# Huei-Ch'ang

The dawn is beginning to break.  
Do not say you set out early.  
Wandering over green hills without growing old—  
Only the view from this side is good for the eyes!

Outside Huei-ch'ang the high mountains rise,  
Their summits reaching out to the East Ming mountains.  
Our soldiers look down towards south Kwangtung,  
Where all is luxuriant!

# New Year's Day

All space flows round me. I am transformed.  
Along the narrow pathways in the deep forest,  
And the moss slippery—where are we going?  
Ahead of us lie the Wuyi Mountains.  
So many hills lie below us.  
Red banners float in the wind like a painting.

# The Lou Pass

The west wind blows.  
The wild geese cry in the frosty morning moonlight.  
O the frosty morning moonlight!  
The horses' hooves on the pathway,  
And the sobbing of trumpets.

The high Pass is like iron,  
And we leap over mountains with three-league boots.  
O how we shall go leaping!  
The dark green mountains are like the sea,  
And the setting sun like blood.

# The Snow

In this north country in the flaming wind  
A thousand acres are enclosed in ice,  
And ten thousand acres of whirling snow.  
Behold both sides of the Great Wall—  
There is only a vast confusion left.  
On the upper and lower reaches of the Yellow River  
Only a great tumbling of waves.  
The mountains are dancing silver serpents,  
The winter plains are full of scudding elephants.  
I desire to compare my height with the skies!

O wait for the pure sky,  
Like a red-faced girl clothed in white,  
Altogether enchanting.  
Such is the charm of these rivers and mountains,  
Innumerable heroes bow themselves to the ground.  
The Emperors of Ch'in and Han were barely cultured,  
The Emperors of Tang and Sung lacked awareness.  
For a whole generation Genghis Khan was a favorite of heaven,  
But he knew only how to bend the bow at eagles.  
All these have passed away.  
Today, if we should look for the true heroes,  
We shall find them all around us!

# Another Poem for Liu Ya-Tzu

The long night ends with the coming of the red sky.  
For a hundred years the devil-monsters danced.  
There was no coming together of the clans.

The cock crows: dawn breaks over the world.  
From ten thousand places arises a swelling music.  
Never were the poets so inspired!

# Swimming

Barely have I drunk the waters of Changsha,  
Now I am eating fish in Wuchang.  
I swim across the great Yangtse River  
And see the sky of Chu unfolding before me.  
I care not whether the wind blows or rain falls  
This is better than sauntering in quiet courtyards.  
Today I enjoy my leisure.  
Confucius stood on the water, saying:  
“All things pass away.”

The masts are swaying,  
The fishes and snakes are silent,  
The great achievement rises before my eyes,  
The bridge flying north and south,  
Making a pathway over sky and waters.  
We shall change the stone walls of the West River  
And Wushan's clouds and rains.  
A smooth lake will appear over the high gorges.  
The spirit of these hills should not be startled  
How the world has changed.

# Francisco Arcellana

## The Yellow Shawl

I HAVE RECEIVED A SINGULAR WARNING, I HAVE FELT THE WIND OF THE WING OF  
MADNESS PASS OVER ME. —BAUDELAIRE

### I. THE MAN'S STORY (1953)

Pepe has a new place; but it wasn't hard to find. It is only a block away from Taft Avenue and about a hundred yards off San Andres corner. The street is not a first class street, it is practically a dirt road, but it is very quiet. You wouldn't believe it is within a stone's throw of the city's great south national highway.

The place is impressive. It is an apartment building that doesn't look like one at all. It looks more like a mansion. That is probably what it was, a rich man's home, before it was converted into a hostelry.

A wall almost a man's height surrounds it. The gate, two panels of very heavy wood with inlaid beaten brass filigree work, this afternoon was ajar—open only wide enough to admit one person at a time.

In the courtyard was a eucalyptus with liana vines, a fountain, a lot of ferns and flowering plants in huge pots, and a square lawn of thick Bermuda grass that has begun to bulge in places.

A concrete driveway leads beneath a *porte-cochere*, up beside the building, and disappears into the back.

I saw two entrances, a wider side entrance and a front one. I used the front entrance.

A flight of three concrete steps leads to an exposed square concrete landing. The door is tall, the lower third of stout oakwood, the upper two-thirds of Florentine glass and ironwork.

Inside, it was very cool. And it wasn't dim at all. Light came from the front door and the open side entrance. There was a central skylight above the system of stairs.

The paneling and the parquet flooring are all of strong rich brown oakwood. Against the wall near the foot of the first flight of steps are the letter boxes with the name cards and the black buttons with, above them, the cut-out brass letters from A to G.

The first stairs are wide and carpeted. Opening on to the first landing, also covered with a rug, are three doors—these are Apartments A, B and C.

Two narrow flights ascend from the first landing on either side of the first stairs. A long strip of rug covers all seven steps.

The second square landing ends in a tall window also of Florentine glass. Two narrow passageways, railed off from the stairwell, connect the landing with a long hall.

Four doors, two on either side, open onto this hall—Apartments D and E towards the rear and Apartments F and G forward. The hall is dominated by another window, again of Florentine glass.

Apartment F is Pepe's.

When I pushed the door in, I saw in the wall facing me, even as the door swung open, another door opening, swinging outward, toward where I stood, out in the hall before the apartment. The doors came to a standstill simultaneously. I noticed the man before the farther side of the inner door. I stood and waited. It seemed the man could sustain silence and stillness longer than I could, so I decided to call out to him. Before I did so, I stepped over the threshold. When I saw him stride through the inner door the same time I crossed the threshold, I realized it was a mirror before me, a tall wall mirror.

The vestibule was bare.

The mirror was in the front room, set in a wall section directly facing the entranceway from the vestibule into the front room.

The front room was long and rectangular. There was a wide square back room.

I went to the back room. I sat on Pepe's bed. I took off my shoes but left my feet socked. I stretched out on the bed to wait.

I hadn't had lunch and I was very tired but I wanted to be sure to be there when she arrived. I looked at my wrist watch. It was a quarter to two.

She didn't come until about three hours later. I waited, lying in Pepe's bed. The apartments were quiet. In the silence I could barely make out the hum of the traffic a block away. The afternoon was warm but it was cool in the apartment. There was a window in the front room, the only one in the apartment, but it was a tall massive window; it looked as if all of the front wall had been knocked out for it. The window

**Every time I came away from the window I would tell myself that if she weren't in the next car I would leave. But I never did.**

was completely covered by drawn blinds. There were concealed ventilators. I could sense rather than hear them but I didn't bother to find out where they were.

A hoe drummed the earth in the public garden across the street. Water was run into pails and then after a while sprinkled on earth. Children laughed and shouted in the schoolyard a block away in the direction of the church and the sea. Even the sighing of the surf in the sea, I imagined, came to me.

Every time I heard a car turning into the street I sat up in bed. As the car approached I would swing out of bed and run to the window. I would pull back the blinds and, through the gap between the side of the blinds and the window jamb, I would look into the street below. I did not leave the window until after each car left.

To and from the window, I passed the mirror every time. From the corner of my eye, I would catch a glimpse of my image as it entered, momentarily occupied, then left the silver frame.

Not many cars turned into Indiana Street that afternoon. But even so, some time during my vigil, I lost count. I decided she was probably not showing up at all. Every time I came away from the window I would tell myself that if she weren't in the next car I would leave. But I never did. I had borrowed the apartment for the afternoon and the afternoon was not over yet.

The children were not in the school grounds any more and I could hear the sea very clearly when she came.

I swung out of bed when I heard the car turning into the street. I was feeling weak and a little light-headed. I sat on the edge of the bed and held on to the thickness of the mattress to keep from keeling forward.

I rose to my feet unsteadily when I heard the car slowing down.

I was already in the front room when the sound of the tires gripping the gravel reached me.

I was striding past the mirror as the car screeched to a stop.

I reached the window, pulled back the blinds, and looked down into the street. The cab was drawn up before the gate, its engine running.

The cab door swung open.

I was leaning against the window jamb. Suddenly above the purring of the idling engine, I could hear my rasping breath.

I saw her foot as it settled upon the car door sill. It was in a yellow sandal. I caught a glimpse of the swish of the hem of a yellow dress.

The late afternoon sun was sudden, caught in her gleaming hair. Golden was the sunlight upon her yellow shawl. She was in a yellow dress but I didn't know which one.

I didn't notice when the cab drove away.

She stood on the sidewalk before the gate, hugging her handbag—it was a square reed bag—to her body and I could see her plain and whole. It was like the first time I ever saw her and I could hear my booming heart.

Then she raised her face.

I stepped back, away from the window but only far enough not to be seen. Now I could see her face clearly: I saw her brow and her fine eyes and her fine nose and mouth; I saw her very white throat: how flowerlike her face was, how like a flower-stalk her throat.

I moved to the window again when she dropped her eyes.

She slipped through the gate, her shawl barely touching either panel. She walked up the concrete driveway. She crossed the lawn and disappeared beneath the green and rust-colored canvas awning of the *porte-cochere*.

I let the blinds go: now she is going up the steps to the side entrance.

I noticed that I had fallen forward against the window sill and that the pale green slats of the blinds were almost against my face: now she is looking at the letter boxes and the name cards and the black buttons and the cut-out brass letters.

Then I felt my forehead hurting; I had leaned my head too heavily against the sharp concrete edge of the window jamb: now she has found the bell to the apartment.

I pushed myself away from the window; abstractedly I lifted my right hand and rubbed my brow where it hurt: now she is going to ring.

Something had come off my temple to my hand—gritty bits—and I was rolling the stuff absentmindedly between my thumb and fore and middle fingers; I had lifted my hand and was looking at what I was kneading there when the doorbell rang.

It wasn't really a bell: they were musical chimes. They were not meant to startle but I started at their sound. I looked at my thumb and fingers and saw the bits of stucco there: now she is going up the first flight of steps.

I didn't know, as I stood, that I was swaying until I saw the stucco in my reeling hand: now she is on the first landing, looking at the cut-out brass letters on the doors; she will stop only long enough to know how the apartments are arranged and then she will not stop again.

I reeled away from the window and started weaving up the room: now she is going up one of the two second stairs.

Between the front room and the vestibule I caught at the door jamb and held myself there with my right hand: now she is on the second landing.

My hand held me trembling to the entranceway: now she is walking up the passageway between the railing and the wall.

It was then I felt the eyes upon me, the eyes watching me; and I began to wheel around.

When I saw the seeking stricken eyes, I didn't know it was the mirror and I didn't recognize them for my own; I looked a long time at the long thin man with the wild wandering eyes and the drawn ruined face before I realized it was my own reflection.

Now she is in the hall outside the door. Now she is at the door.

I lurched into the vestibule and staggered to the apartment door. I broke my precipitate movement by left straight-arming the wall beside the door and catching at the brass door knob with my right hand.

When I pulled the door in, she was there. Now I see you face to face; now I see your small white hands: how flowerlike your face is, how small and flowerlike your hands.

She was in the yellow dress with the square neckline and the short puffed sleeves. She was smiling; her eyes were bright and shining; and she was humming to herself.

## II. THE GIRL'S STORY

He stood before me, holding the door open, his hand resting upon the door knob as if he held himself up that way. When I saw his soft hurt eyes and his pale thin face and his shock of hair, I thought that perhaps I shouldn't have come.

He looked at me a long time without saying anything as if he couldn't believe I was there. I said Hello. He didn't answer.

When he spoke, it was to say my name.

Then he stepped aside, away from the doorway. I walked into the small bare anteroom, I saw the tall wall mirror in the inner room facing the entranceway from the outer room and the apartment door.

I walked to the middle of the anteroom and stood there with my back towards him. In the mirror I saw how slowly he shut the door after me, leaned back upon it as if he was very tired, slowly lifted his right hand to rub his forehead with his palm and sweep back his uncombed hair with his fingers. I turned around and faced him when I saw his hurt unguarded hopeless eyes.

He pushed himself forward away from the door and walked towards me in the middle of the anteroom. As he passed me, he asked for my handbag and my yellow shawl. I fell in step beside him and, as we walked to the living room, I slipped the shawl off my shoulders and listened, and passed my bag and the shawl to him. We entered the living room. I saw in the looming mirror how he carried the shawl in one hand held stiffly up before him and the bag in the other which swung listless by his side.

He stopped as soon as we crossed the doorway. I walked on to the middle of the room and stood before the mirror with my back towards him. In the mirror I saw him place the bag on top of a wall table beside the doorway and then raise his arms and very carefully drape the shawl so it wouldn't rumple over the topmost arm of the coat-stand to one side of the doorway beside the wall table.

I turned around and faced him as he walked towards me in the middle of the long room. He stood before me, his eyes upon me, as if he saw me for the first time, not saying anything. Then his eyes fell away. He looked around, swept up a chair by its back, set it right behind me where I stood before the mirror, and asked me to sit down.

I sat down and told him that I couldn't stay very long.

He stood before me, behind him loomed the mirror. In the mirror above him I could see his reflection of my yellow shawl.

"Yes, of course," he said.

Then he began to speak, he walked as he talked, his words sprang from his mouth like birds. He swung his arms: they beat like wings.

He paced up and down the long room from the window to the back room door and I followed him with my eyes.

He stopped at the door into the back room and stood there; then he turned and, looking at me, said: "I can't get you out of my heart any more: I can't unlove you."

He walked down the long room and, as he crossed between me and the mirror and I saw in the mirror the reflection of the shawl spread like a wing above him, he said: "You are all the girls I have ever loved."

He stopped at the window and stood there. A breeze was blowing, the pale green blinds very near his face were beginning to stir. He walked up the long room and as he crossed between me and the mirror and I saw the shawl spread above him like a wing, he said: "Marriages are made in heaven. Marriages are made in hell. This is one marriage that shall never be, on earth, in heaven or in hell."

He stopped at the back-room door and stood there; then he turned and, looking at me, said: "Love is dead: love doesn't hear. Love is dumb; love doesn't understand. It is exactly like talking to God."

He walked down the long room and as he crossed between me and the mirror and I saw the shawl like a wing spread above him, he said: "It is like knocking on a door that shall never open. It is like storming a wall that shall never fall."

He stopped at the window and stood there. He lifted his face as if to smell the sea, as if to listen to the sea. The pale, green blinds almost against his eyes were rustling in the evening wind that was blowing from the sea laden with sea-scent and sea-sound. Then he turned and, looking at me, said: "I lost you even before I found you."

He was crossing between me and the mirror when he stopped and turned to me and stood before me, between me and the mirror.

I was looking up at him and I was looking at his reflection in the mirror too and I saw him as he was, as he stood rocking before me, and I saw him as his reflection also in the mirror that loomed large behind him when he said: "I might as well live as I might as well die."

**It is like knocking on a door that shall never open. It is like storming a wall that shall never fall.**

Then he turned away from me.

I saw his face as he turned away, I saw in the mirror the reflection of his face as he turned towards the mirror, I saw his tortured twisted face.

It was not so much his face as it was the face of loss.

I saw in the mirror the yellow shawl hovering above him, I saw the yellow wing brooding over him.

Then the wing began to beat and to churn the air.

Then the wing lifted, leaving the air clear and shaken, filled with a yellow light.

Suddenly it wasn't early evening any more but deep night. It wasn't now but nine years back. It wasn't an apartment on Indiana Street but the Japanese garrison halfway between Valencia and Garcia Hernandez.

It wasn't he who stood rocking beneath the yellow shawl before me but my father.

And the yellow shawl that beat above him like a wing was not mine any more but my mother's.

I raised my hands and jammed the heels of my palms against my ears. But I heard again and couldn't shut out my mother's screams and my father's anguished cry.

He sat on his heels before me, wavering. His hands were on my shaking shoulders. His face, suffering and startled, was very near my eyes: it was clear and blurred by turns.

I didn't know that I was crying until I heard what he was saying over and over again.

"Please don't cry," he said. "How I love you! Don't—don't cry."

But I couldn't stop crying.

### III. THE YELLOW SHAWL (1944)

The child woke up when her father lifted her from the bed. She knew it wasn't morning yet because the lights were on and they were very bright. She was already ten and she didn't like being carried any more, not even by her father. She tried to wriggle loose from her father's arms but found that she couldn't. She saw that she had been bundled up in the bedclothes. She was turning in her father's arms to ask him where they were going when she saw the many silent Japanese. She couldn't ask any more. Then she saw her mother: how pale she was, and distraught. Her father told her to go to sleep right in his arms. She tried to but couldn't. The Japanese said: Come. At the door, her mother saw the lovely vivid yellow shawl and her mother asked the Japanese if she might not take it along with her. The Japanese said: All right. Her mother wrapped the shawl about her; the night was cold, the air struck at her face where it was exposed. It got ever harder to try to get to sleep. She watched the many silent Japanese from her father's shoulder. They walked a long time; they reached a big house. The Japanese took them to a large room and left them there. In the room it was very bright; it was also very bare. There was nothing in it except a cot which was set against the wall facing the door. Her mother took the shawl off her. Her father set her down in the cot and told her to go to sleep. She tried to but

couldn't. She watched her mother walk around the enormous room. Her mother stopped beside the door and stood on tiptoe and reached up with her arms to hang the shawl from a peg high up on the wall. Then she tried looking without blinking at the big bulb hanging by a cord from the room. Her eyes hurt. She tried to sleep but couldn't. She told her father, then her mother that she couldn't sleep. They sat on the cot beside her to lull her to sleep. The light was too bright; the room was big and strange. Then the Japanese returned. Her mother stood up, stooped and kissed her, told her to be a good girl and sleep; and left with the Japanese. She looked at the shawl on the peg high up on the wall beside the shut door. Then her father told her to go to sleep. She heard her mother scream. It was so loud she thought her mother was back in the room with them. Suddenly her father was no longer beside her but was pacing up and down the middle of the room from the window to the wall. Every time her father crossed the room she saw how the shawl beat like a wing in the garish light above his head. Her mother stopped screaming and her father stopped pacing and stood still and tense, waiting. Her mother screamed again and her father fell to pacing the floor once more and every time he crossed the room he walked beneath her mother's shawl that hovered like a wing above him; her mother stopped screaming and her father stopped pacing and stood transfixed and tense, waiting. Her mother screamed again and her father, released, lurched up and down the enormous room again. The screams came and went, grew fainter and fainter, and then the child couldn't hear them any more. Her father stood beneath the shawl that brooded like a wing over him, still and tense and waiting, but the screams didn't come again. The child stared, sleepless, at her father petrified beneath the yellow shawl. She saw her father sway and rock; she saw his incredibly coherent face break and crumble. The child didn't even start at the sound of the animal cry that tore savagely through her father's body and his throat. She watched her father fold and fall. She heard him whimper. Her eyes were wide upon her father's body broken beneath the shadow of the yellow shawl when the Japanese came and carried her father's body away. She felt very wide awake, her sleepless eyes hurt and felt very dry. She blinked her wakeful eyes long and hard many times trying to make the tears come but the tears wouldn't come no matter how hard and how long she tried.

# Clarence Major The Necessity of Saints

Not to measure my height into the clouds  
And cheat in the reflected vision,  
So judge myself soberly,  
In a way a superior force has dealt with faith:

These things were told me on a sidewalk;  
Once I heard them in a pitched tent;  
The words came to me another time at dinner;  
Once I heard them in my sleep;

That in my whirling flesh and other possibilities,  
There are a number of like things,  
Each for a different agent residue;

We—so many are (they told me) one in a “faith”  
That must not be broken down to death;

Presents of unlike none-objects in “I” cloaked  
In a curious “felt-only” condition—given,  
In accord to established proportion;

All other superficial “none-objects” must wait,  
With yes-objects: No instructions, only *listen*;

And for me to “render-unto” means only with grace,  
And if I rule (in this areas-connected to my flesh)  
Do so with diligence,  
Do *give out* with no-frouds, no deep hurt,—mercy;

In a time when only infants know what evil is,  
And how it differs with “un-evil”—expectations,  
Of unabharity. Where is affection to come from?  
And hope, and patient in tribulation?

The necessity in the existence of saints,—yes;  
Any kind (deep in a dwelling of devotion  
Of long-run—ultimate—good, though surfacewise,  
Apparently-unapparently “evil”) yes; no rejoicing

In the un-goods hunger; Feed not-yourself, feed  
—Come out of your flesh (they whispered) *love*.

A superior-force taking “repay” for each no-good.  
Employ you to “empty out self love, all.”—Love!

# Tamiki Hara

## Summer Flowers

*Translated from Japanese by Richard H. Minear*

O LOVED ONES, MAY YOU ROMP AND PLAY  
LIKE THE ROE, THE FAWN,  
DEEP IN FRAGRANT MOUNTAINS.

When I went out and bought flowers, it was with the intention of visiting my wife's grave. In my pocket was a bundle of incense sticks I had taken from the *but-sudan*. August 15 would be the first *bon* since my wife's death; but I doubted that this hometown of mine would survive that long unscathed. It happened that the day was a no-electricity day; early that morning I saw no other men walking along carrying flowers. I do not know the proper name of the flowers; but with their small yellow petals, they had a nice country flavor about them, very summer-flower-like.

I splashed water on the gravestone standing exposed to the hot sun, divided the flowers into two bunches, and stuck them in the flower holders on either side. Once I had done so, the grave seemed somehow cleansed and purified, and for a moment I gazed at flowers and gravestone. Beneath this stone lay buried not only my wife's ashes, but also Father's and Mother's. After setting a match to the incense I had brought and bowing in silent respect, I took a drink of water at the well nearby. Then I walked home the roundabout way, via Nigitsu Park; that day and the next, the smell of incense clung to my pocket. It was on the third day that the atomic bomb fell.

I owe my life to the fact that I was in the privy. The morning of August 6 I got out of bed at about eight o'clock. The air raid warning had sounded twice the previous night, but there had been no air raid; so before daybreak I had taken off all my clothes, changed for the first time in a while into sleepwear of *yukata* and shorts, and gone to sleep. When I got out of bed, I had on only the shorts. Catching sight

of me, Sister complained about my having stayed in bed so long; without a word I went into the privy.

How many seconds later it happened I can't say, but all of a sudden there was a blow to my head, and everything went dark. I cried out instinctively and stood up, hand to my head. Things crashed as in a storm, and it was pitch dark; I didn't know what was going on. Grasping the handle and opening the door, I came out onto the veranda. Until that point, I was in agony: amid the hail of sound I had heard my own cry distinctly, but I couldn't see a thing. However, once out on the veranda I quickly saw, materializing in the thin light, a scene of destruction; my feelings too came into focus.

It was like something in the most horrible dream. Right from the start, when I received the blow to my head and things went black, I knew I wasn't dead. Then, thinking what an enormous inconvenience this all was, I tried to work myself up to anger. My cry sounded in my ear like someone else's voice. But as the situation around me, though still hazy, began to resolve itself, I soon felt as if I were standing on a stage that had been set for a tragedy. I had surely seen spectacles like this at the movies. Beyond the dense cloud of dust, there appeared patches of blue, and then the patches grew in number. Light came streaming in where walls had collapsed and from other unlikely directions. As I took a few tentative steps on the floorboards, from which the *tatami* had been sent flying, Sister flew toward me from across the way. "Not hurt? Not hurt? You're all right?" she cried. Then: "Your eye is bleeding; go wash it off right away," and she told me the water was running in the kitchen sink.

Realizing that I was utterly naked, I said, looking back at Sister, "Isn't there something for me to put on?" She produced some underpants from a closet that had survived the destruction. At that point someone rushed in making strange gestures. Face bloody and wearing only a shirt, he was one of the factory workers. He saw me, said over his shoulder, "You're lucky you weren't hurt," and went off busily, muttering, "Phone, phone, I must phone."

Cracks had opened everywhere; screens and *tatami* were scattered all about; bare joists and doorsills were plainly in sight; for some time a strange silence continued. The house seemed on its last legs. As I learned later, most houses in this area collapsed flat; but our second story did not fall, and the floor held firm. Probably because it was so solidly built. My father, a cautious person, had built it forty years ago.

Trampling on the jumble of *tatami* and sliding screens, I looked for something to put on. Right off I found a jacket; but as I was searching here and there for pants,

my busy eye was caught by stuff lying scattered, in a mess. The book I had been reading, half-finished last night, lay on the floor, pages curled up. Fallen from the lintel, a picture frame covered my bed, ominously. My canteen emerged out of the blue, and then I found my cap. My pants did not turn up, so I looked for something to put on my feet.

At that point K. from the office appeared on the veranda of the drawing room. On seeing me, he called in a pathetic voice, "Help! I'm hurt," and slumped to the floor. Blood was oozing from his forehead; tears glistened in his eyes.

I asked him, "Where are you hurt?" He replied, "My knee," pressing it and contorting his pale, wrinkled face. I gave him a piece of cloth that was there and pulled on two pairs of socks, one over the other.

"Look—smoke! Let's get out of here! Take me with you!" K. urged me repeatedly. Though a good deal older than I, K. was normally far more energetic; but even he was a little lost.

Surveying the scene from the veranda, I saw an expanse of rubble, the ruins of collapsed houses; except for the reinforced concrete building still standing in the middle distance, there wasn't even anything by which to get my bearings. The large maple next to the earthen wall—now toppled—of the garden had had its trunk snapped off halfway up, and the upper half of the tree had been thrown atop the outdoor washstand. Stooping over the air raid shelter, K. said, irrationally, "Shall we stick it out here? We've got water . . ."

"No," I said, "let's head for the river," and with a look of incomprehension, he cried, "River? Which way to the river, I wonder?"

As a matter of fact, even if we wished to flee, we still hadn't made any preparations for doing so. Pulling some pajamas out of a closet, I handed them to him and also tore down the veranda's blackout curtains. I picked up some cushions, too. When I turned over the *tatami* scattered on the veranda, my emergency kit came to light. Relieved, I slung it over my shoulder. Small red flames began to appear from the storehouse of the medicine factory next door. It was time to get out. The last to leave, I climbed over the wall alongside the maple tree, snapped off and broken.

That large maple had stood forever in the corner of the garden; when I was young, it had figured in my daydreams. After having been away a long time, I had returned this spring to live in my old home; I had thought it odd, since returning, that the tree no longer held its old charm. Strangely, this whole city seemed to have lost its gentle naturalness, to have become a collection of cold inorganic matter.

Each time I entered the room that looked out onto the garden, there had come floating into my mind, unbidden, the words, “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Clambering over the ruins of the house and around what was in our way, K. and I proceeded at first quite slowly. Soon our feet came to level ground, so we knew that we had come out onto the road. Then we hurried briskly down the center of the road. From the other side of a flattened building came a voice crying, “Mister, please!” We turned, and a girl whose face was bloody came walking toward us; she was crying. Looking absolutely horror-stricken, she followed us for all she was worth, calling, “Help!” We went on a while and met an old woman standing squarely in our way in the road, weeping like a child: “The house is burning! The house is burning!” Smoke was rising here and there among the ruins, but suddenly we came to a place where tongues of flame licked at us fiercely. Running, we got past that spot, and the road became level again; we had come to the foot of Sakae Bridge. Here refugees had gathered in droves. Someone on top of the bridge was being a hero: “Those of you who are up to it—form a bucket brigade!” I took the road in the direction of the bamboo grove at the Izumi Villa and at this point became separated from K.

The bamboo grove had been blown flat, but the press of people fleeing had opened a path. I looked up at the trees; most of them, too, had been snapped off partway up. This historic garden flanking the river: it too was now covered with wounds. Suddenly I noticed the face of a middle-aged woman who was squatting next to the shrubs, her fleshy body slumped over. Wholly devoid of life, her face seemed even as I watched to become infected with something. This was my first encounter with such a face. But thereafter I was to see countless faces more grotesque still.

Where the grove joined the riverbank, I came upon a bunch of schoolgirls. They had fled here from the factory, all lightly injured; they still trembled from the vividness of the event that had only just taken place before their very eyes, yet they chattered all the more spiritedly. At that point my eldest brother turned up. Wearing only a shirt and carrying a beer bottle in one hand, he seemed at first glance uninjured. On the opposite bank, too, as far as the eye could see, buildings

**Strangely, this whole city seemed to have lost its gentle naturalness, to have become a collection of cold inorganic matter.**

had collapsed, and only telephone poles still stood; the fire was already spreading. When I sat down on the narrow path on the river bank, I felt, despite everything, that I was now safe. What had hung over our heads for so long, what in time surely had to come, had come. There was nothing left to fear; I myself had survived. Before, I had given myself an even chance of dying; now, the fact that I was alive took my breath away.

I thought to myself: I must set these things down in writing. However, at that time I still had virtually no idea of the true state of things brought about by this air raid.

The fire on the opposite bank had grown in force. The heat was being reflected all the way over to our side, so we repeatedly soaked the cushions in the river, which was at high tide, and covered our heads with them. Meanwhile, someone shouted, "Air raid!" A voice said, "Those wearing white hide under the trees," and people responded by crawling, all of them, into the center of the bamboo grove. On the other side of the grove, too, with the sun pouring down, it looked as if a fire was burning. With bated breath I waited for a while, but it didn't appear that an air raid was coming; so I came out again on the river side of the grove. The fire on the opposite bank had not lessened in force. A hot wind blew over our heads, and, fanned across toward us, black smoke came as far as mid-river. Suddenly the sky overhead seemed to have turned black, and large drops of rain came pouring down, a torrent. The rain dampened the fire a bit in our vicinity, but in a while the sky turned cloudless again. The fire on the opposite bank burned on. Now, on this bank, I saw my eldest brother, Sister, and two or three acquaintances from the neighborhood; we all drew together, and each of us gave his account of the morning's events.

When the bomb fell, my brother was at the table in the office. A brilliant light flashed through the garden, and immediately thereafter he was sent flying six feet or so; trapped under the building, he struggled for a while. Noticing a gap at last and crawling out, he became aware that over at the factory the schoolgirls were screaming for help. He struggled mightily to get them out. Sister was at the entryway when she saw a brilliant flash and quickly took cover under the stairs, so she was not injured badly. Each of us had been convinced at first that only his own house had been bombed; when we did go outside, we were flabbergasted to see that the same thing had happened everywhere. We were also amazed that while everything aboveground had collapsed, there were no holes that looked like bomb craters. Sister said it had happened soon after the lifting of the preliminary alert. There had

been a brilliant flash and a soft hissing, like the sound of magnesium burning, and instantaneously everything had turned up side down . . . just like black magic, she said, trembling.

As the fire on the other bank began to die down, a voice said the trees in this garden had caught fire. A faint smoke began to be visible high in the sky over the bamboo grove behind us. The water in the river was still at full tide and gave no indication of falling. I walked along the stone wall and climbed down to the water's edge. Just at my feet, a large wooden crate came floating past, and onions that had spilled out of the crate were bobbing about. I pulled the box over, grabbed onion after onion out of it, and handed them to people on the bank. On the railway bridge upstream a freight train had derailed, and this box, thrown out, had floated down. While hauling in onions, I heard a voice crying, "Help!" A young girl was floating past in the middle of the river holding on to a piece of wood, her head sometimes above the water, sometimes under it. I picked out a big log and swam out, pushing it ahead of me. I hadn't swum in a long time, but I was able, more easily than I would have thought, to rescue her.

The fire on the opposite bank had slackened for a while but suddenly started raging again. This time dark smoke appeared in the midst of the red flames, and the black mass spread savagely; even as we watched, the temperature of the flames seemed to rise. But even that eerie blaze too gradually burned itself out; when it did, only empty shells of buildings remained to be seen. It was then that I noticed, in the sky downstream above the middle of the river, an absolutely translucent layer of air trembling and moving toward us. A tornado, I thought; at that very moment violent winds were already blowing overhead. The trees and plants all around me trembled; suddenly, I saw many trees above my head sucked up by the wind, just like that, and carried off into the sky. Dancing crazily in the air, the trees fell into the midst of the maelstrom with the force of arrows. I don't remember clearly what color the surrounding air was. But I think we must have been enveloped in the dreadfully gloomy faint green light of the medieval paintings of Buddhist hell.

Once this twister had passed, a kind of twilight obtained, and my second brother, who hadn't appeared until then, unexpectedly came to where we were. His face was streaked with gray; the back of his shirt was torn, too. The marks on his

**This time dark smoke appeared in the midst of the red flames, and the black mass spread savagely; even as we watched, the temperature of the flames seemed to rise.**

skin looked as if he had gotten sunburned at the beach; later, they developed into real burns that suppurated and required several months of treatment. But at the moment he was still pretty fit. He said he had just returned home on an errand when he spotted a small airplane high in the sky and then saw three strange flashes. He was thrown a good six feet. He rescued his wife and the maid, both of whom had been pinned under and were struggling; he entrusted the two children to the maid and sent them fleeing ahead of him; then he rescued the old man next door, which took longer than he expected.

My sister-in-law was very worried about the children from whom she had become separated, but then the maid called from the other bank. Her arms hurt, she said, and she was no longer able to carry the children; please come quickly.

The trees of the Izumi Villa were burning, a few at a time. We would be in trouble if the fire burned its way here after dark; we wanted to cross to the opposite shore while it was still light. But there was no boat to be seen. My eldest brother and his family decided to cross to the other shore via the bridge; still searching for a boat, my second brother and I went up the river. As we proceeded up the narrow stone path running along the river, I saw for the first time a group of people defying description. The rays of sunlight, already slanting, cast a wan light on the surrounding scene; there were people both on top of the bank and below it, and their shadows fell on the water. What kind of people? . . . Their faces were so swollen and crumpled that it was impossible to tell which were men and which women; their eyes were narrowed to slits; their lips were festering horribly. Baring their hideously painful arms and legs, they lay on their sides, more dead than alive. As we passed in front of them, these monstrous people called to us in thin soft voices. "Please give me a little water to drink!" or "Please help me!"—every last one appealed to us.

I was stopped by someone calling "Mister!" in a sharp, pitiful voice. In the river just there I saw the naked corpse of a boy, entirely submerged; and on the stone steps less than a yard away crouched two women. Their faces were swollen to about half again normal size, deformed and ugly, leaving only their burned and tangled hair as a sign that they were women. At first sight, rather than pity, I felt my hair stand on end. When these women saw that I had stopped, they pleaded with me: "That blanket over there by the trees is ours; won't you please bring it here?"

Over there by the trees there was indeed something that looked like a blanket. But on top of it lay a badly injured person on the point of death, and there was nothing I could do.

We found a small raft, so we untied the rope and rowed toward the other bank. By the time the raft landed on the sandy beach on the other bank, night had already fallen; but here too, it seemed, many injured were waiting. One soldier who had been crouching at the river's edge pleaded, "Give me some hot water to drink!" so I made him lean on my shoulder as we walked on. In pain, he tottered forward over the sand, and then he muttered as if in utter despair, "I'd be better off dead." I agreed sadly but said nothing. It was as if unbearable resentment against this absurdity bound us together; we needed no words. Partway there I had him wait, and looked up from the base of the stone wall to the emergency stand with its supply of hot water; it had been set up on top of the embankment. At the place on the stand from which steam rose, a large head, burned black, was grasping a teabowl and slowly drinking hot water. The huge grotesque face seemed to me made entirely of black beans. What is more, the hair on its head had been cut off in a straight line just at the ear. (Later, as I saw people with burns, hair cut off in a straight line, I came to realize that their hair had been burned off right up to the line of their caps.) I got a bowl of water and carried it back to where I had left the soldier. In the river a single soldier, seriously injured, was squatting, drinking his fill of river water.

In the dusk the sky above the Izumi Villa and the fire in our immediate vicinity loomed brilliantly; on the sandy shore some people were even burning bits of wood to cook supper. A woman had been stretched out right beside me for some time, face swollen like a spongy balloon; from her voice pleading for water I recognized her for the first time as the maid from my second brother's house. Carrying the baby, she had been about to set out from the kitchen when the flash caught her, burning her face, chest, and hands. Then, taking with her the eldest daughter and the baby, she had fled just ahead of my brother and his wife; but at the bridge she had become separated from the girl and had reached the riverbank here carrying only the baby. The hand that had been injured when she first tried to shield her face from the flash, she complained, that hand still hurt as badly now as if it were being wrenched off.

The tide was now rising, so we left the riverbed and moved toward the embankment. Night had fallen; crazed voices echoed from this side and that, crying, "Water! Water!" The clamor of those still left behind on the riverbed gradually grew more insistent. On top of the embankment a breeze stirred, and it was a little chilly for sleeping. Immediately across the way was Nigitsu Park; it too was now enclosed in darkness, only the faint outlines of broken tree trunks visible. My brother and his family were lying in a hollow in the ground; I found another

hollowed out place and crawled into it. Lying right next to me were three or four injured schoolgirls.

Someone was worried and said, “The trees across the way have caught fire; wouldn’t we be better off fleeing?” I emerged from my hollow and looked across. The flames were flashing in the trees two or three hundred yards away, but they didn’t seem about to come toward us.

“Is the fire burning our way?” an injured young girl asked me, trembling.

“No,” I told her, “we’re okay,” and she had another question: “What time is it now—not twelve yet?”

The preliminary alert sounded. Somewhere there must have been an undamaged siren, for one reverberated faintly. Downstream there was a glow, vast and hazy: the fire in the city must still be going strong.

The schoolgirls sighed: “Ah, if only morning would come!”

In soft, gentle voices they sang in chorus, “Father! Mother!”

“Is the fire burning our way?” the injured young girl asked me again.

At the riverbed could be heard the dying gasps of someone apparently quite young and strong. Echoing on all sides, his voice carried everywhere. “Water, water, water, please! . . . Oh! . . . Mother! . . . Sister! . . . Mit-chan!”: the words poured out as if he were being torn body and soul; interspersed between the words, forced out of him by the pain, were faint groans of “Ooh, ooh!” —Once when I was a child I walked along this embankment to fish from this river bank. The memory of that entire hot day still remains strangely vivid. On the sand is a large billboard for Lion toothpaste; from time to time, off in the direction of the railway bridge, I hear the roar of trains crossing. It is a scene peaceful as in a dream . . .

When dawn came, last night’s voice was stilled. Its bloodcurdling death cry seemed to linger in my ear; yet the light was full, and a morning breeze was blowing. My eldest brother and Sister went around to the charred ruins of our house, and since people said there was an aid station in the East Parade Ground, my second brother and his family set off for there. I too was about to head for the East Parade Ground when the soldier next to me asked to go along. This hefty soldier must have been pretty badly injured; leaning on my shoulder, he went forward on his own legs one hesitant step at a time, just as if carrying something fragile. What is more, ours was a terrible, ominous path: fragments and splinters and corpses, still smoldering. When we got to Tokiwa Bridge, he was tired out and told me to leave him because he couldn’t take another step. So I left him there and proceeded alone in the direc-

tion of Nigitsu Park. In some places houses were still there, as they had collapsed, spared by the flames; but the brilliant flash seemed to have left the marks of its claws everywhere. In an open space people had gathered. Water was trickling from a pipe. It was then word reached me that my niece was being cared for at the Tōshōgu disaster station.

I hurried to the precincts of Tōshōgu Shrine. Just as I got there, my niece came face to face with her mother again. Yesterday she had become separated from the maid at the bridge, then afterward had fled in the company of people from somewhere else; when she saw her mother, she burst out crying, as if suddenly she could stand it no longer. Her neck, black from burns, looked painful.

The aid station had been set up at the base of the Tōshōgu *torii*. A police officer asked for home addresses, ages, and so on. But even after the injured were given the slips of paper on which he had written down that information, they had to wait another hour and a half or so in a long line under the hot sun. Still, if you were injured and able to join this line, you were probably among the fortunate. Even now, there was a voice crying frantically, “Soldier! Soldier! Help! Soldier!” It was a girl with burns; she had collapsed at the side of the road and was rolling about. And a man wearing the uniform of the guards had lain down, his head, swollen with burns, atop a stone; just then he opened his pitch-black mouth, pleading brokenly in a weak voice: “Please help me, someone! Oh! Nurse! Doctor!” But no one paid him any attention. Police officers, doctors, nurses: all had come from other cities to help out, and there weren’t enough of them.

Accompanying the maid from my second brother’s house, I joined the line; by now she was swollen badly and could hardly stay on her feet. Presently her turn came, and she was treated; then we had to make a place where we could rest. Every spot within the shrine precincts was taken up by badly injured people lying about; we saw no tents, no shade. So for a roof we leaned some thin boards against the stone wall and crawled underneath. In this cramped space the six of us spent more than twenty-four hours.

Right beside us, too, a similar shelter had been fashioned, and a fellow was in constant motion atop its mats; he called over to me. He had neither shirt nor undershirt; only one leg of his long pants was left, and that reduced to a piece about his waist; he had burns on both hands, both feet, and face. He said he had been on the seventh floor of the Chūgoku Building when the bomb fell; he must have had enormous willpower, for despite his severe injuries he had made it this far—pleading with some people to help him, ordering others. Then a young man came wandering over,

whole body bloody and wearing the armband of a headquarters cadet. Seeing him, the man next to us reared up and almost roared, from his high horse: "Hey! Hey! Get away! My body's a mess; touch me and you'll get yours! There's plenty of room, so why pick this tiny spot? Quick, take off!" Looking dazed, the bloody young man stood up.

Perhaps ten feet from our shelter there was a cherry tree with only a few leaves, and two schoolgirls had lain down under it. Faces burned black and thin backs exposed to the hot sun, they both groaned for water. Students from the girls' vocational school, they had come to this area to dig potatoes and here had met disaster. Then another woman came, face bloated, wearing cotton work trousers; setting her handbag down, she stretched her legs out, exhausted . . . The sun was already beginning to set. Another night here? I was singularly forlorn at the thought.

Beginning just before dawn we heard voices here and there reciting the *nembutsu* over and over. People were dying one after the other. When the morning sun rose high in the sky, the students from the girls vocational school both breathed their last, too. Having checked their corpses, which lay face down in the ditch, a police officer approached the woman clad in cotton work clothes. She too had collapsed and seemed now to be dead. When the police officer checked her handbag, he found a bank book and a war-bond book. So she had been on a trip when disaster struck.

At about noon, the air raid warning sounded, and we could hear planes. We had become quite inured to the sorrow and grotesque ugliness on all sides; even so, our exhaustion and hunger gradually became severe. Both the eldest son and the youngest son of my second brother had been going to school in the city, so we still didn't know what had happened to them. People died one after the other, and the corpses simply lay there. With a sense that no help was coming, people walked about restlessly. Yet now, from over toward the parade ground, a bugle sounded, loud and clear.

Suffering from burns, the nieces cried bitterly, and the maid pleaded frequently for water. Just when we had had about all we could endure of their complaints, my eldest brother returned. Yesterday he had gone off in the direction of Hatsukaichi, to which his wife had been evacuated; today he had come back with a horse-drawn goods cart he had arranged to hire in the village of Yahata. So we climbed onto the cart and left.

Loaded with my brother's household and Sister and me, the cart left Tōshōgu and went in the direction of Nigitsu. It happened as the cart set off from Hakushima

toward the entrance of the Izumi Villa. In an open area over toward the West Parade Ground my brother happened to spot a corpse clothed in familiar yellow shorts. He got off the cart and went over. My sister-in-law and then I also left the cart and converged on the spot. In addition to the familiar shorts, the corpse wore an unmistakable belt. The body was that of my nephew Fumihiko. He had no jacket; there was a fist-sized swelling on his chest, and fluid was flowing from it. His face had turned pitch-black, and in it a white tooth or two could barely be seen. Though his arms were flung out, the fingers of both hands were tightly clenched, the nails biting into the palms. Next to him was the corpse of a junior high school student and farther off, the corpse of a young girl, both rigid just as they had died. My second brother pulled off Fumihiko's fingernails, took his belt too as a memento, attached a name tag, and left. It was an encounter beyond tears.

The wagon then went toward Kokutaiji and, crossing Sumiyoshi Bridge, toward Koi, so I was able to get a look at virtually all the ruins. In the expanse of silvery emptiness stretching out under the glaring hot sun, there were roads, there were rivers, there were bridges. And corpses, flesh swollen and raw, lay here and there. This was without doubt a new hell, brought to pass by precision craftsmanship. Here everything human had been obliterated—for example, the expressions on the faces of the corpses had been replaced by some thing model-like, automaton-like. The limbs had a sort of bewitching rhythm, as if rigor mortis had frozen them even as they thrashed about in agony. With the electric wires, jumbled and fallen, and the countless splinters and fragments, one sensed a spastic design amid the nothingness. But seeing the streetcars, overturned and burned apparently in an instant, and the horses with enormous swollen bellies lying on their sides, one might have thought one was in the world of surrealist paintings. Even the tall camphor trees of Kokutaiji had been torn up, roots and all; the gravestones too had been scattered. The Asano Library, of which only the outer shell remained, had become a morgue. The road still gave off smoke here and there and was filled with the stench of death. Each time we crossed a river, we marveled that the bridge hadn't fallen. Somehow I can capture my impressions of this area better in capital letters. So here I set down the following stanza:

BROKEN PIECES, GLITTERING  
AND GRAY-WHITE CINDERS,  
A VAST PANORAMA—  
THE STRANGE RHYTHM OF HUMAN CORPSES BURNED RED.

WAS THIS ALL REAL? COULD IT BE REAL?  
THE UNIVERSE HENCEFORTH, STRIPPED IN A FLASH OF EVERYTHING.  
THE WHEELS OF OVERTURNED STREETCARS,  
THE BELLIES OF THE HORSES, DISTENDED,  
THE SMELL OF ELECTRIC WIRES, SMOLDERING AND SIZZLING

The wagon proceeded along the road through the endless destruction. Even when we got to the suburbs, there were rows of collapsed houses; when we passed Kusatsu, things finally were green, liberated from the color of calamity. The sight of a swarm of dragonflies flying lightly and swiftly above green fields engraved itself on my eyes. Then came the long and monotonous road to Yahata. By the time we got to Yahata, night had already fallen. Next day began our wretched life in that place. The injured made little progress toward recovery, and even those who had been healthy gradually grew weak from lack of adequate food. The arm burns of the maid suppurated horribly, flies swarmed, and finally her arms became infested with maggots. No matter how we treated them, the maggots came back, again and again. After more than a month, she died.

On the fourth or fifth day after we came here, my middle school nephew turned up; he had been among the missing. On the morning of the sixth, he had gone to school in order to help clear firebreaks; the flash came just as he was in the classroom. Instantly he had thrown himself under a desk, and then the ceiling had collapsed, burying him; but he had found a hole and crawled out. Not more than four or five of the schoolchildren were able to crawl out and flee; the others had all been killed in the initial blast. With four or five others, he had fled to Hijiyama, vomiting up white fluid on the way. Then he had gone by train to the home of a friend who had fled with him, and they had taken him in. However, a week or so after he came home to us here, he too saw his hair fall out, and within a few days he became completely bald. At that time many of the victims of the bomb subscribed to the theory that if your hair fell out and your nose started to bleed, you were done for. On the twelfth or thirteenth day after his hair fell out, my nephew finally began having nosebleeds. That night the doctor declared him to be in critical condition. However, he did hold his own, his condition still critical.

On his way by train, for the first time, to a factory evacuated into the countryside, N. felt the bomb's shock at the precise moment the train entered a tunnel. On emerging from the tunnel, he looked toward Hiroshima and saw three parachutes floating

gently down. Then the train arrived at the next station, and he was astonished that the station's windows were badly splintered. By the time he got to his destination, detailed reports had already come in. Turning around on the spot, he boarded a train bound for Hiroshima. The trains he passed that came from Hiroshima were all filled with grotesquely injured people. He waited impatiently for the fire in the city to die out, then walked along at a rapid pace on asphalt that was still hot. He went first to the girls' school where his wife taught. In the ashes of the classroom, he found the bones of schoolchildren; in the ashes of the principal's office, he found a skeleton that appeared to be the principal's. But he found no skeleton that could have been his wife's. In great haste he went in the direction of their house. That was near Ujina, where houses had merely been knocked flat; they had been spared the fire. But he found no trace of his wife there either. So now, one by one, he checked the corpses lying on the road between his house and the school. Because most of the corpses were lying face down, he had to pull them into a sitting position in order to examine the faces; every last face was grossly disfigured, but none belonged to his wife. In the end, he went looking almost mindlessly, even in places in the opposite direction. In a cistern there were ten or more corpses piled one atop the other. On a ladder leaning on the riverbank, there were three corpses; rigor mortis had frozen them with their hands on the ladder. In a line waiting for the bus, corpses were standing just as they had been; they had died with their fingernails sticking into the shoulder of the person ahead of them in line. He also saw a large group of corpses—an entire unit of the labor corps mobilized from the countryside to clear firebreaks had been annihilated. Those scenes still did not equal the West Parade Ground. That was a mountain of dead soldiers. Yet nowhere did he find his wife's corpse.

Visiting in turn every aid station, N. examined the faces of the severely injured. Each face was the very picture of suffering, but none belonged to his wife. Then, having spent three days and three nights examining corpses and burn victims to the point of utter revulsion, N. started all over again, going once more to the charred ruins of the girls' school at which his wife had taught.

# Jerzy Putrament

## Holy Bullet

*Translated from Polish By Jerzy Hummel*

They cannot do anything to me, stated Bukacki when they arrived at their destination. There were seventeen men in one cell, and this statement distinguished him at once. Was it in his intention? At any rate, he spared no efforts to stress this distinction. He would not sit down, for example.

The cell was built for solitary confinement. In Polish times it happened now and then that two were sharing it. Now there were seventeen of them in there. The Germans had done something to expand the floor space: they discarded the bed, the stool and the table, but a man when seated still takes up some half square meter. Not all of them could sit at the same time. Turns to sit had been agreed upon. When told he was free to sit down, Bukacki looked at the man who spoke with a certain astonishment, then his look went to the cement floor splashed with September mud, then to his new dark grey trousers, and he lifted his shoulders.

“Leave him alone,” someone said from under the window. “Tomorrow he will ask himself.”

Bukacki almost smiled, which as likely as not meant: tomorrow I shall be back in town.

No one argued with him. He stood nearest the door, stepping heavily from one foot to the other. “They cannot do anything to me,” he would repeat to himself persistently. One night he noticed that this “nothing” was quite different than the night before, than at any time of their arrival there, than at the moment they summoned him to come along. The “nothing” kept growing. The search, arrest, locking-

up in the jail. Just the other day he believed profoundly, solemnly, that this would be impossible, that all this was “nothing.” This was the way his spirit survived.

Before the dawn, bored to death, he leaned against the door. Maybe he dozed off. A sudden vision of a bomb screaming down, a crash, a pain. He woke up on the floor, his head propped up against the iron door. Before he could come around, the door was flung open. A glimpse of light, pain again, someone kicked him once and again. He jumped aside, blinded with the light, blinking his eyes. The door slammed.

He sat down at the door, more stunned than agitated. Mechanically, he repeated his oath: “They cannot do anything to me.” And, still more quietly—as if his thoughts could be loud and quiet—he added the premise of this magical conclusion: “because I have not done anything.” The kick by the guard gave this formula a new sense. They could have him arrested, jailed, beaten up. But this was nothing in comparison to the one thing they could do him, which they just could not do him. He did not name it.

From that time on, the matters stayed as they were for a few weeks. The downfall of Bukacki, a reputed lawyer, and employee of the Gebietskommissariat, a quiet, esteemed citizen, having become from day to day, for no reason at all, a beaten and starved prisoner—much as it was sudden and profound—has still to come to a stop. Bukacki came to believe in it, as sincerely as he believed before in his absolute immunity. That was why he could tolerate the offensive smell of the cell, the dirt, the meals that stank of foot-clouts, sleeping squatted, his head resting on his knees, the kicks and pushing around by the guards. He agreed with this brutal, hungry and dirty prison life, since there was one single word in this sinister formula that had a bright and warm power: life.

The men in the cell talked. They even indulged in discussions . . . whispering, of course. There were two or three of them who mastered the art of stressing the intonation as if making speeches at meetings, even in a whisper. The primary topic of the conversations was always what was ahead of them. The smallpox-pitted, red-eyed railwayman insisted on their being doomed to be shot. The majority opposed, referring to more or less ridiculous reasons, such as: they have never done it over here; in Warsaw that’s different. The railwayman smiled gloomily. Bukacki came to hate him. He never took part in the discussion, but listened attentively. His legal mind could not grasp why nobody ever raised the point that seemed self-explanatory and unbelievable: they cannot do anything to us, because we have not done anything. He thought of the railwayman with hatred, since that man must have, of

course, had something on his conscience, and now he sat in their common cell, his guilt settling down on all those present there, like soot. The Germans are revengeful, everyone knows.

It happened one way or another that the time came when their conversations began to cease—the debaters having grown taciturn and, vice versa, Bukacki was the man who had more and more to tell them.

Several incidents occurred about that time which did not seem to be directly related to their present status and their future fate, and still, everyone sensed in them something unclear, something that began to gravitate, to grow alarmingly. Those phenomena were rather favorable, at first glance. It had been noticed, some

**Several incidents occurred about that time which did not seem to be directly related to their present status and their future fate, and still, everyone sensed in them something unclear.**

how about the middle of October, that the guards ceased storming into the cells at the slightest murmur, swearing and beating them. The railwayman had even ventured an experiment: he announced over the entire cell in a voice hoarse from long time whispering: I don't care a damn about the whole lot. All looked at the door. Bukacki gave the railwayman a raging look. He stood nearest the door and was the most frequent target for the beatings. His neighbor, a tiny accountant of the town administration, made an effort to squeeze as deeply as possible between the bodies of the fellow prisoners. But nobody came. The railwayman laughed triumphantly, and even this remained without any effect.

For reasons unknown, this laughter froze them all. Some looked up to find the look of the others, and they dropped their heads quickly. All kept quiet. After half an hour, Bukacki no longer able to withstand the stillness that seemed swollen with disturbance, challenged them with the wry question: "So, what?" Nobody answered, nobody looked at him. Even the railwayman did not have any cynically sincere reaction, which was unusual for him.

Afterwards, a couple of days later, one of them, the tiny bookkeeper as it was, was summoned. He came back, one hour later, clenching his fists, as if they were cramped, to conceal the trembling of his fingers. He squatted heavily next to Bukacki. The latter's turn for sitting had just come to the end. He also came to feel his hands were beginning to tremble. He leaned with his hands against the wall. For five minutes he tried to keep himself under control. Then he slid down heavily,

pushing his neighbors aside. He landed next to the bookkeeper. Pushing aside with his head the legs of those standing, having pressed hard from all sides, he worked his way towards him, looked him straight in the eyes. It was nearly dark there. The accountant looked at him, more quiet now and weaker.

“What happened there?”

He did not reply, only his look became reluctant, as if hurt by the tactlessness of the question. Paying no heed to this, Bukacki continued vehemently, shamelessly.

“Have they been beating you?”

The bookkeeper denied by a merely perceptible flicker of his eyelids.

“Did they investigate you?”

Again a denial, silent and offended.

“So, what is the matter with you?”

Ten minutes passed, maybe a quarter of an hour. Then, the accountant moved his head once or twice, as if thawed by this habitual stench in a freezingly crystalline terraneous air, looked around more consciously, and began to whisper.

“No one knows for what reason they have summoned me up there. They asked my name, surname, trade. Then they ordered me to wait. Then, they sent me back.”

“That’s all? So, what are you worrying about? They may discharge you. You have not done anything. Like me, like all of us.”

The bookkeeper sat there, silent as before. And again, after about a quarter of an hour he spoke.

In the yard, he had met a German—an SS man.

The SS man stood there, his legs set wide apart, holding a whip, striking his boots carelessly. The bookkeeper had to walk past him, and even crouched his head, in expectation of a flogging. But the other one did not strike.

“So what of it?”

No, he did not strike. And he did not even swear at him, he even . . .

This “even” must apparently have had deep significance for him, since he kept silent again.

“And he even smiled at me,” he gave out, finally.

“So what is the matter?” demanded Bukacki astonished. “Why do you take it to heart? Pull yourself together. You are losing your nerve. Some Kraut gave you a contemptuous and triumphant look, and that made you give everything up.”

The bookkeeper shook his head in a gesture of denial.

It had been anything but contempt. It had been sympathy and gratitude.

Bukacki pushed away from him, instinctively. There was something in this

talk, below the speculative and logical surface, like a dark current, that challenged the normal world by an alien, unconquerable logic of its own. Bukacki began to sense it. He knew that it threatened all the arguments he so stubbornly elaborated here in prison. He endeavored to defend himself, tried to dwell within the circle of normal ideas by which two plus two equals four, the day is bright, and the night dark. Laboriously, lying to himself, he said:

“Some human German. You can find such ones among them, though seldom. Even in the SS. I know it, because I worked for the Gebietskommissariat and was acquainted with quite a number of Germans.”

The bookkeeper thawed finally, looked at Bukacki, and said in a normal voice:

“Maybe you are right. But the impression it gave me was quite different. He looked at me and smiled. A warm and sympathetic smile. But no, no! You said: human. No. A man does not look at a man that way. It was . . . I don’t know how to say it. Take an old carpenter with a spell of unemployment behind him as he sees some ash logs. His first thoughts would be: saw them apart, plane, smooth, shape. And this piece of timber becomes somewhat intimate to him. He looked at me and I think that if I had asked him for something, he would have given it to me. A cigarette, or bread. He was thankful to me, just that I existed, that I am alive . . . that I am here . . .”

Bukacki lost his nerve. There it was, the threatening, absurd current, even exceedingly logical in its absurdity that set out to upset the rock of his spiritual hideout: “They cannot do anything to me.” He uttered a cry, and, frightened, continued in a hissing whisper: “Bluff. They cannot do anything to us. What have we done—have we, maybe, been fighting? Killing anyone? Blowing up trains? Setting warehouses on fire? We have not done anything and they cannot do anything to us.”

He rose heavily from the floor, looked at the others. Their heads were drooped, only two or three looked stealthily at him. They did not accept his reasoning, clever as it had been, so absolutely convincing, seemingly. He stood against the railwayman whose rejectful, gloomy face cut off his oratory. He chuckled, did not speak any longer, thought already—and switched over from the plural to the singular: “nothing . . . to me . . . because I didn’t . . .”

Ever since he has blown up, repeatedly, so a new symptom of the approaching inevitable finale came in sight. He delivered entire speeches. On the legal standards. On the principles of the forensic procedure. On the international law. On the current war and political situation. Once, having been driven to extremity by the indif-

ference of the audience, he intoned in whisper even on the German culture, going back almost to Erasmus of Rotterdam. This also failed to make an impression.

Actually, he did not expect it. He talked to himself. His absolute certainty, upset by the course of events, called for ever more support, ever stronger props. He hung on each of them.

Did it help him? In a certain measure. Although his faith in due course reduced gradually, it still enabled him for several weeks that followed to bar admittance to thoughts circling around the death that pressed upon him from all around. The others surrendered to these thoughts. Someone prayed all day long. Someone wept stealthily. Someone schemed an escape, molestingly and feverishly. The majority awaited their end, speculating on nothing, expecting nothing. The odor of death, having struck them all like a heavy, paralyzing narcotic, scarcely reached him. The stronger, on the other hand, the more violent was its impact when the final day came.

One day the cell door was opened. The guard entered, asked all to stand up. A civilian stood in the corridor, opposite the cell. He asked in a bored voice if anyone could speak German. Bukacki stepped forward willingly. The civilian looked at him coolly and uttered several words, telling him to translate them. The sense was simple: although all the prison inmates had committed heavy crimes against the German authority, still the German people would give them a chance to compensate for their sins. In this way namely, that from now on they will work for the benefit of the German nation. And anyone showing his good will may count on mercy. Anyone, on the other hand, who would show stubbornness, even in the least degree, would be exterminated.

Bukacki announced this, watching them all triumphantly. This proved now, contrary to all others, that he was right. He did not conceive that this speech smashed the most essential fragment of his argument: “me nothing . . . since I did not . . .” It was not premises that became obvious, but the conclusion. Then, labor, hard prison labor. But not . . . not what all of them had been thinking. Again, he could not call “it” by its name.

They were led out of the cell. Marched in a double file down the prison corridors. In silence. The guards, their submachine guns suspended on their bellies, running around like shepherd dogs about a flock of sheep. The doors rattled, new bunches emerged from other cells. The yard was filled with powerful trucks.

**Someone  
prayed all day  
long. Someone  
wept stealth-  
ily. Someone  
schemed an  
escape.**

It was a cool day. The cell was also cool inside, with stale, stinking coolness, rotten like green water in a puddle. They tried to escape the cold, clinging close to one another, pulling their heads into their shoulders. Here, the cold assaulted everyone unexpectedly. The clouds hung low. The mist reached down to the earth, sharp tiny drops settled on the faces unused to washing for so long. At first, they inspired freshness, but already, after five minutes, they acted freezingly, like snow. Teeth began to chatter, fingers trembled, the men boarded the trucks clumsily over the high side planks.

They were loaded to forty and more. Squeezed together like tobacco leaves they stood, waiting for the departure. Two SD men mounted the driver's cab, pointing their machine pistols against the crowd. Two others got in at the rear, pushing the prisoners a meter away from themselves with the butts of their rifles. The engine howled, the gate opened, they started.

Bukacki, still stunned by the joyful news brought by the civilian, dwelled the more intensely on the view of the town. As if after a long lasting illness, experiencing the sense of novelty, he looked at the main street, that he knew by heart, falling down in a straight asphalt lane, the small apartment houses, the Greek church, flanked by poplars, the market square. It was only here that he felt a slight shiver and turned to the right. To the left, there was a small square. He would not look in that direction. It was there that the Germans had erected a gallows.

They went past a red, pseudo-Gothic church, past a small bridge and railway tracks. The truck halted for a while, and Bukacki felt somebody striking him very slightly with his knee from behind. He attempted to turn around, but the strike came stronger, warningly this time. He heard someone whisper in his ear.

"We must run away. They are taking us to White Street." Flabbergasted, at a loss to understand, he tried to catch a glimpse of the man speaking. He saw a small pox-marked cheek from the corner of his eye. It was the railwayman. A cold shiver ran down his back—he could not say if it was being next to this man, unpleasant to him, or the unclear but sinister meaning of his words. So, what of it if they were heading for White Street?

The railwayman did not argue. He whispered once more "run away" so quietly that Bukacki felt it more than he heard it. Then, slowly, carefully, a couple of centimeters every minute, he started working his way to the side plank. The truck turned suddenly to the right, the men swayed and, in the confusion, the railwayman landed on the plank. For a minute he stood there, looking at the small cottages, cabins, leafless autumn trees. He jumped suddenly to the ground, shouting:

“Run away, they are taking you to your death!”

His cry fired the inertia of the prisoners, swollen with fear and hopes. A rattling report of automatic pistols from the front and rear of the truck flanked those that remained, separated them from the ground by an oscillated wall of fire. One prisoner, with a moustache, having postponed his decision by a second, tried to jump out and, chopped down in the flight by bullets, thumped heavily against the ground. Those first ran now, holding their heads as low as possible. To the left, there stretched a small church yard. The railwayman reached the fence in a few jumps, slipped inside. A volley from the machine gun whistled against the tombstones.

They never saw him. Maybe he survived.

Others were falling along the street, below the fences. More trucks that followed came also to a halt. Several guards jumped to the ground, busy with their machine guns. A woman looked out of a window of a small cottage at the corner. A sharp noise of broken glass—her face disappeared, lean geranium flowers crashed down.

One more managed to slip away, jumped a high fence surprisingly swiftly, and disappeared.

This took half a minute. A sharp whistle. The guards, panting, returned to the truck. They started. Several corpses were left behind in the street.

Fear reached Bukacki only now. Taken unawares by the shooting, he squatted on the floor of the truck. The machine gun volley that caught the man with the moustache went so closely past his face that it almost burned his cheeks. Once the truck moved on, he came to the understanding that he, in fact, rubbed shoulders with death. This thought made him so inert that he could not stand up. He sat on the floor, pushed about by the knees of the swaying prisoners.

His thinking system, stopped by the sudden events, ceased to function. Bukacki came to understand the fearful consequences of the deed of the railwayman. The Germans are revengeful. They may shoot the rest for this escape. They may—no—they surely will shoot them. He felt his lips freeze to ice. He raised himself heavily. The pupils of his eyes grew wide, and the grey November landscape of the street grew in his eyes full of unbelievably intensive, brightly saturated colors.

His thoughts had arrived at this simple conclusion and stopped at it. He did not think any more. He did not bear any ill will toward the railwayman. He did not consider any possibilities of survival. He stood there and watched the muddy, misty street become imprinted in his mind as something most beautiful, singular, eternal.

To the left, the cottages came to an end. The barbed wire of a fence. Inside, a steep, clay slope a couple of meters in height. An elongated, dumpy building of yellow brick. Some houses.

The truck entered the gate. The SD guard looked at them and showed his teeth. Maybe that was supposed to be a smile.

The vehicles stopped at the building. They were ordered to get off. The clay was sticky. To the side, a deep pit was excavated, the soil, removed from it, drenched with the rain, stuck heavily to the feet.

Three more trucks halted. The guards drove all the men together. The civilian he had seen before came out. He noticed Bukacki and asked him to translate.

Several criminals have attempted an escape. They met their death. It is suspected that they acted in a plot with those that remained. Actually, all of them should be exterminated. But the German Reich is full of mercy . . .

So, the others would go to work. Prior to this, they must pass the shower building (a gesture towards the squatty building). There, they will undress (a gesture towards the small buildings nailed together by boards). No nonsense, the German indulgence is not to be counted on any longer.

The guards jumped toward the crowd. A few experienced blows of the rifle butts, and they formed lengthwise into what became a kind of double file. They commanded them to move on.

Bukacki found himself near the tiny bookkeeper. He went on thoughtlessly happy. This violent swing of life and death deprived his mind of all superior stages of consciousness. All he knew was that he was alive. This return to life resulted from the tide having come up of habits that a few minutes ago were utterly forgotten. He treaded across the mud, attempting instinctively not to soil his shoes. He even felt the cold.

The shack was crowded and dirty. They had driven about a score of men inside. The others were led down the grounds. The former were ordered to undress.

The bookkeeper murmured something under his breath. The men slowly pulled off their threadbare garments soiled in the prison. The guard peeped inside the shack and barked at them to hurry up. Their shoes, not having been taken off for weeks, yielded with resistance. The men groaned. Someone started suddenly to pray in an undertone. Bukacki felt a shiver, looked at the other one. What has happened to him? Could it be? . . .

The bookkeeper had undressed first. His shoulders were lean, hunchy, his belly shapeless, wrinkled. He stepped from one foot to another, gave a hissing sound

from being cold, gooseflesh covered his body with violent spots. He looked out of the window impatiently.

And, all of a sudden, he stepped back, shouting: "That's him!"

Nobody understood the meaning of that "him." But all of them understood what the matter was. This was astonishing, monstrous: they did not shout, or cry. For a while, they stood unmovingly, staring at the bookkeeper. Then, with no word having been spoken, they bent to untie their shoe strings, pulling their underpants off laboriously, tossing their jackets away. The narcotic struck them as deadly as it had back in the cell, and the speech by the civilian, five minutes ago, has proved unnecessary. Anyone having resisted was either killed or escaped together with the railwayman. Only Bukacki, after the initial shock, could not withstand some desperate sort of curiosity and looked out of the door into the yard. Maybe, he expected it subconsciously, by the intonation of the outcry of the other one—who knows?—to see death with the scythe, the devil, some inhuman creatures, since all he felt was absurd disillusion. The yard was invaded by the guards, several military personnel, that civilian, someone wearing the SS uniform. The civilian shouted at the guards—probably because of the railwayman—threatening them with court-martial. Three of the military personnel stood in front of the pit, arguing the point of its being "sufficient." This view seemed to Bukacki common, to the limits of boredom. He turned back angrily to the bookkeeper, and started asking him questioningly, in the same aggressive tone, as back there, in the cell:

"Whom?"

The bookkeeper tried to conquer his weakness for a while longer. Then, his face took on sharp lines unusual for him. As if having decided to commit some heroic deed, he hissed through his teeth:

"That one from the prison. The one that smiled. The SS man. But I'll . . ."

Bukacki had no time to understand. The door was flung open. The guard looked inside. He gestured with his hand: come out.

They crowded together at the door, naked, dirty, cold—and sweated at the same time. One second, two—nobody wanted to go out first. Suddenly, from behind them an elderly man pushed his way forward, his breast thickly overgrown. The death that overhung them had inspired him with a peculiar sort of courage. He smiled charmingly, adding with a jolly courtesy:

"You, gentlemen, waste too much time on manners. Would you allow me to go first, on account of my age?"

He pushed past all of them and went out. They heard the shouting of the guard: run, run. The second one jumped out. Bukacki was pushed out. What he saw was a scattered, double line of guards and military personnel. This double line did not lead to the “shower room.” It led toward the pit.

The first one had preceded him several steps. Driven by shouts and blows from the truncheons, they jumped to follow him. The tiny bookkeeper ran in front of Bukacki. His legs were short and he probably had not run ten steps for the last thirty years.

Bukacki pattered in his wake, beaten most of all, and whispered angrily to him: “quicker, quicker.” The first one reached the pit, stopped for a moment, and dropped down, struck by a German. The bookkeeper accelerated his pace suddenly. He shouted: “I don’t give a damn, you . . .,” pushed the astonished guards aside and rushed outside the double line, where an SS man was walking up and down, his machine gun suspended from his neck. In one second, the bookkeeper reached the man, jumped up with ridiculous clumsiness, launching a blow against the man’s face with his fist best used to handling the abacus.

Bukacki sees the military personnel storming at the tiny one. The guards point their machine guns. He is at the pit in one single jump. The pit is immensely deep. He stops instinctively at the edge. On hearing the first shot, he jumps down. For a quarter of a mad second, the pit appears to him the only survival from death.

The bottom is covered by a thin, sticky clay. His legs sink into it above the ankles. The impact of the jump throws his body forward. He shouts with a sudden, wild pain. The tendons of his feet are strained, putting his feet out of action.

The others fall in from above. They are flying down, their limbs spread wide apart, thumping heavily into the mud, some quite flat, some on their bellies, some on their backs. Someone hits the wall at the bottom of the pit, rolling about inertly, his face cut open and bleeding.

Bukacki crawls away to the opposite corner, fearing that someone might fall onto his face. From upwards, some sharp outcry becomes audible. A sharp report of a machine gun.

Nobody jumps down any more. The civilian appears above the pit. He looks with a thrifty eye on the naked, soiled figures weaving about down there in the thin clay. He turns his head away, shouts. The SS man comes up. He is no longer quietly bored—he is furious. He sniffs—a tiny drop of blood runs down his face and stops above his upper lip.

The civilian gestures down: you are welcome, they are all yours. The civilian turns his machine gun around, releasing a volley, just like a janitor sprinkling the street from a hydrant.

Bukacki sees the one with the hairy breast jump up.

Something wet sprinkles his face. Somebody shouts, someone tosses himself.

So this is death? So simple, dirty, common. So this is death?

And he is struck by animal fear. He does not think anything at that moment. Does not imagine anything. An instinct, monstrous in its essence, none other, surely, than that of the most primitive amoeba, crustaceous animals, zoophytes, creeps over his feeble body irresistibly, commanding it, pushing it—where? How is the instinct to know—it stumps it into the clay, below the corpses of the neighbors that are already commencing to cool off.

Choked with a gluey clay, his breath withheld, he lays there with a frightened imagination, awaiting, anytime, now, a bullet . . . to penetrate his skin, work its way inside, attack the heart, and that would be the end, some cosmic disaster, impossible to be imagined in its horror. But then, a second passes, two, ten. He feels his breath leaving him. He turns his face, works his mouth out of the mud and swallows greedily, the sharp stinking air. One minute more. There are no bullets.

Is it salvation, then? His senses expand the scope of their activities. He listens. What's going on up there? The stars, thoughtlessly far away, the November clouds, suspended some hundred meters above, and the top of this pit, five meters distant—there is only one thing for him—to get up there.

Someone shouts. The face of the SS man appears against the background of the clouds, and Bukacki closes his eyes, poses dead, like the dater beetles when captured. Shouts, and someone else falls down. A new consignment comes down. One of them falls onto him. Bukacki shouts with pain—and stops halfway, lest someone notice it.

Again, a monstrous cramp of fear: they are about to shoot. He crawls into the mud, underneath the corpses, clogs his ears, begins to pray: “Holy God, Holy all-powerful, Holy immortal, Holy Mary, Holy Joseph,” not knowing whether he prays for his survival or not to hear the machine gun.

The one that dropped upon him jumps and starts to wind around in death agony, cramps, something hot drips on Bukacki's shoulder—blood. It is quiet again. Has he survived once more? He lifts his head up, not believing in his luck—the strangest in the world—maybe! So, he is still there, he is alive.

The bottom is obstructed by the corpses. Here and there, the dead are piled up on top of the others. In the corner, a dying man gives his last breath. Pink air bags emerge from his mouth and burst, two narrow streams run down the corners of his mouth.

Again, the shouts. Again they jump down. They will shoot again. Bukacki presses his ears, creeps underneath the corpses of the others that have not yet cooled off. And, as if animated by the survival that was twice bestowed upon him, he starts shouting aloud: Saint Anthony, Saint Hedvige—in order not to hear the report of the machine gun.

He didn't hear. He is saved. It happened a few times more. A thick layer of bodies lay over him. He felt their weight. It was becoming hard to breathe because of weight on his chest. It was almost safe under the wall of bodies. Then the greatest torture had to come to him.

He understood that he had been saved from the machine gun. Surely not by chance—that's certain. The bullets from the machine gun would not penetrate the bodies lying over him. The dead had saved him. Then, his thoughts, released from their animal chain, started to work.

What now?

Why hadn't he gone crazy? Why hadn't the spasms of fear turned his brain forever?

What now . . . He knew what he had to do now. It is impossible to describe the death of someone buried alive.

He suddenly saw his own future. He understood that that which he was afraid of most is his only salvation. A bullet from the machine gun.

He roused himself on his arm. He fell back crushed by the weight of the bodies, cutting him off from his salvation. He shouted: I am here, shoot!—and then he understood it was absurd. He started to dig himself out, to twist between the bodies, slippery from mud and blood. Paralyzed, but still not stiff, they allowed him to push his way through them. After a few minutes he stuck his head out and shouted.

The SS man stood over the pit. He was quiet now: his nerves, which had been so upset by the attack of the bookkeeper, were now quieted by the monotonous shootings. Hearing Bukacki's shout, he turned his head, looked at him and turned away indifferently.

A new group, a new series of volleys. The SS man changed his cartridge frame, which was handed to him by one of the convoy. He looked again at Bukacki. He

noticed that he was still alive and, with surprise and not unsympathetically, lifted his eyebrows.

That's how the game started. More and more bodies fall, more volleys from the machine guns. The SS man changed his cartridge frame and Bukacki was alive. The SS man saved him on purpose. A few more Germans came to the pit. The Germans understood what was happening and they hadn't enough praise for him.

Bukacki went crazy. Every few minutes he dug himself out of new layers of dying bodies, untouched, more alive than before. At once he understood that the SS man was playing a game. He pleaded with him. Shouted. Swore, Prayed. Now at last the crazy game became a dark cloud in his mind. His words became muddled. He shouted: give me a bullet. He prayed: St. Joseph. Send me death!

Then he started to shout in an unearthly voice: "Holy bullet! Holy bullet!" The SS man saved him for a long time. Then, impatient by the rather common phrases, surprised at his ideas and the wit of the crowd of convoy men, he looked unwillingly, and in anger shot a dozen bullets into the open mouth of Bukacki. Although he didn't do this from the humanitarian point of view, it was without doubt a favor. And it will be counted as a favor for him.

# Zofia Nałkowska By the Railway Track

*Translated from Polish by Diana Kuprel*

Yet another person now belongs to the dead: the young woman by the railway track whose escape attempt failed.

One can make her acquaintance only through the tale of a man who had witnessed the incident but is unable to understand it. She lives on only in his memory.

Those who were being transported to extermination camps in the lead-sealed boxcars of the long trains would sometimes escape en route. Not many dared such a feat. The courage required was even greater than that needed to go hopelessly, unresisting and meek, to a certain death.

Sometimes the escape would succeed. The deafening clatter of the rushing boxcars prevented those on the outside from hearing what went on inside.

The only means of escape was by ripping up the floorboards. In the cramp of the jammed-in, starved, foul-smelling, filthy people, it seemed an improbable gambit. Even to move was impossible. The beaten human mass, wriggling from the rushing rhythm of the train, reeled and rocked in the suffocating stench and gloom. Nevertheless, even those who, weak and fearful, would never dream of escaping themselves understood their obligation to help others. They'd lean back, pressing against one another, and lift their shit-covered legs in order to open a way to freedom for others.

Successfully prying open one end of the floorboard raised a glimmer of hope. A collective effort was required to tear it up. It took hours. Then there remained still the second and the third boards.

Those closest would lean over the narrow opening, then back away fearfully. Courage was called for to crawl hand and foot through the chink into the din and crash of iron, into the gale of the smoking wind below, above the gliding bases, to reach the axle and, in this catch-hold, to crawl to the spot from which jumping would guarantee the best chance at salvation. To drop somehow, some way, in between the rails or through the wheels. Then, to recover one's senses, roll down unseen from the mound and escape into the strange, temptingly dark forest.

People would often fall under the wheels and be killed on the spot, struck by a protruding beam, the edge of a bar, thrown forcefully against a signal pole or roadside rock. Or they'd break their arms and legs, and be delivered thus unto the greater cruelty of the enemy.

Those who dared to step into the roaring, crashing, yawning mouth were aware of what they risked. Just as those who remained behind were, even though there was no possibility of looking out through the sealed doors or high-set windows.

The woman lying by the track belonged to those who dared. She was the third to step through the opening in the floor. A few others rolled down after her. At that moment a volley of shots rang out over the travelers' heads—an explosion on the roof of the boxcar. Suddenly the shots fell silent. The travelers could now regard the dark place left by the ripped-up boards as though it were the opening to a grave. And they could ride on calmly, ever closer to their own death, which awaited them at the crossroads.

The smoke and rattle of the train had long since disappeared into the darkness. All that remained was the world.

The man, who can neither understand nor forget, relates his story once again.

When the new day broke, the woman was sitting on the dew-soaked grass by the side of the track. She was wounded in the knee. Some had succeeded in escaping. Further from the track, another lay motionless in the forest. A few had escaped. Two had died. She was the only one left like this, neither alive nor dead.

She was alone when he found her. But slowly people started to appear in that empty space, emerging from the brick kiln and village. Workers, women, and a boy stood fearful, watching her from a distance.

Every once in a while, a small chain of people would form. They'd cast their eyes about nervously and quickly depart. Others would approach, but wouldn't linger for long. They would whisper amongst themselves, sign, and walk away.

The situation was clear. Her curly, raven hair was obviously disheveled, her too-dark eyes overflowed the lowered lids. No one uttered a word to her. It was she who asked if the ones in the forest were alive. She learned they weren't.

The day was white. The space open onto everything as far as the eye could see. People had already learned of the incident. It was a time of terror. Those who offered assistance or shelter were marked for death.

She begged one young man, who was standing for a while longer, then started to walk away, only to turn back, and bring her some Veronal from the pharmacy. She offered him money. He refused.

She lay back for a while, her eyes shut. Then she sat up again, shifted her leg, clasped it with both hands, and brushed her skirt from her knee. Her hands were bloodied. Her shattered knee a death sentence. She lay quietly for a long time, shutting her too-black eyes against the world.

When she finally opened them again, she noticed new faces hovering around her. The young man still lingered. So she asked him to buy her some vodka and cigarettes. He rendered her this service.

The gathering beside the mound attracted attention. Someone new would latch on. She lay among people but didn't count on anyone for help. She lay like an animal that had been wounded during a hunt but which the hunters had forgotten to kill off. She proceeded to get drunk. She dozed. The power that cut her off from all the others by forming a ring of fear was unconquerable.

Time passed. An old village woman, gasping for breath, returned and, drawing near, stole a tin cup of milk and some bread from beneath her kerchief. She bent over, furtively placed them in the woman's hand, and left immediately, only to look on from a distance to check whether she would drink the mild. It was only when she noticed two policemen approaching from the village that she disappeared, drawing her scarf across her face.

The others dispersed, too. Only the slick, small-town guy who had brought her the vodka and cigarettes continued to keep her company. But she no longer wanted anything from him.

The police came to see what was going on. They quickly sized up the situation and deliberated on how to handle it. She begged them to shoot her. In a low voice, she tried to negotiate with them, provided they keep the whole thing quiet. They were undecided.

They, too, left, conferred, stopped, and walked on further. What they would finally decide was not certain. In the end, however, they did not care to carry out

her request. She noticed that the kind young man, who had lit her cigarettes with a lighter that didn't want to light, followed after. She told him that one of the two dead in the forest was her husband. That piece of news seemed to have caused him some unpleasantness.

She tried to swallow the milk but, preoccupied, set the cup down on the grass. A heavy, windy, spring day rolled over. It was cool. Beyond the empty field stood a couple of huts; at the other end, a few short, scrawny pines swept the sky with their branches. The forest, their destination, sprang up further from the tracks. This emptiness was the whole of the world she saw.

The young man returned. She swallowed some more vodka and he lit her cigarette. A light dusk brushed across the sky from the east. To the west, skeins and smudges of clouds branched up sharply.

More people, on their way home from work, turned up and were told what had happened. They spoke as though she couldn't hear them, as though she were no longer there.

"The dead one there's her husband," a woman's voice spoke up.

"They tried to escape from the train into the forest. But they shot at them with a rifle. They killed her husband, and she was left alone. Shot in the knee. She couldn't get any further . . ."

"From the forest she could easily have been taken somewhere. But here, with everyone watching, there's no way."

The old lady who had returned for her tin cup said those words. Silently she watched as the milk soaked into the grass.

So no one would intercede by removing her before nightfall, or by calling a doctor, or by taking her to the station so she could get to a hospital. Nothing of the kind would happen. She could only die, one way or another.

When she opened her eyes at dusk, there was no one around except for the two policemen who had come back and the one who would no longer go away. Again she pleaded with them to kill her, but without any expectation that they would do so. She covered her eyes with her hands so as not to see anymore.

The policemen still hesitated about what to do. One tried to talk the other into doing it. The latter retorted, "You do it yourself."

**They tried to escape from the train into the forest. But they shot at them with a rifle. They killed her husband, and she was left alone.**

Then she heard the young man's voice saying, "Well then give it to me."

Again they debated, quarreled. From beneath her lowered eyelids she watched the policeman take out his revolver and hand it to the stranger.

A small group of people standing further back watched as he bent over her. They heard the shot and turned away in disgust.

"They could at least have called in someone. Not do it like that. Like she was a dog."

When it grew dark, two people emerged from the forest to get her. They located the spot with a bit of difficulty. They assumed she was sleeping. But when one of them took her by the shoulder, he understood at once that he was dealing with a corpse.

She lay there all that night and into the morning, until just before noon, when a bailiff arrived and ordered her buried together with the other two who had died by the railway tracks.

"Why he shot her isn't clear," the narrator said. "I couldn't understand it. Maybe he felt sorry for her . . ."

# Okogbule Wonodi Ashes for Granny

She stood still at break of day,  
the palm tree, erect and slim;  
I see her still but who would say  
that such rays could dim.  
Alas! What owls hooted at me  
when the sun went to sea?

You hear me drop tears here  
where we ate, you and me,  
and she that fed us is gone  
beyond the reaches of thought.

The morning food,  
warmed in a platter of broken pot,  
the gentle slap on the back  
to warn a rascal and correct  
are forever gone.

She stood firm on her work,  
and motherlike, fed the gods  
with nocturnal shrills and dances;  
and where are the gods she called on  
night and day in sacrificial belief?

The Earthgod,  
Thunder and Sun,  
where stood they?

She's dead and none,  
not one stands to say:  
"She lived well."

And here I sprout, rootless,  
lonely and dry.

# Joyce Carol Oates Dead Actors

Palms of hands hot against our eyes  
are not enough to squash out  
dead actors  
on crackling screens.

How the reel flies!  
hot lights sear our eyes  
as a ghost with long blond wig  
makes us drink, beckoning,  
an actor long mangled in airplane rubble  
rolls his eyes at someone's joke.  
He beckons.

Shouting off-screen  
the soundtrack buckles in fear  
perhaps the actors are abandoning  
the holy script  
perhaps their fingers tear  
at the flying reel

Having paid full admission  
we hate to walk out

Dialogue clicking on the spool  
an avalanche of bodies, faces,  
the splotch of a curse  
they bid us keep our seats  
*The show is not yet over!*

Starlight turns to glittering  
nails, fingernails of a hand,  
a hand becomes a wand  
casting out the ugly who  
do not deserve to live.  
We are the ugly, unfilmed,  
who do not deserve to live.  
Dead actors gloat upon us  
like magicians they flash gestures  
of love, pain, humor  
and courage: we stare.  
Even our shrieks of terror are

amateur work, unfilmed.  
We who do not deserve to live live  
constantly.

# Václav Havel

## Monologue from a Play, *The Garden Party*

*Translated from Czechoslovakian by Vera Blackwell*

### HUGO

Me? You mean who am I? Now look here. I don't like these one-sided questions, honestly I don't. You think you can put the question in such a simplified way? No matter how one answers this kind of question, one can never encompass the whole truth, but only one of its limited parts. Man—that is something so rich, complicated, changeable, many-sided—there is no word, no sentence, no book, nothing that could describe and contain him in his whole extent. In man there is nothing fixed, eternal, absolute; man is continuous change—a change with a proud ring to it, of course! Today the time of static and unchangeable categories is past, the time when A was only A, and B always only B is gone; today we all know very well that A may be often B as well as A; that B may just as well be A; that B may be B, but equally it may be A and C; just as C may be not only C, but also A, B, and D; and in certain circumstances even F may become O, Q, Y, and perhaps also R. I'm sure you yourselves must feel that what you feel today you have not felt yesterday, you do not feel today, but might perhaps again feel tomorrow; while what you might feel the day after tomorrow you may never have felt before. Do you feel that? And it is not hard to understand that those who today understand only today are only another version of those who yesterday understood only yesterday, while, as we all know, it is necessary today somehow to try and understand also that which was yesterday, because—who knows?—it may come back again tomorrow. Truth is just as complicated and many-sided as everything else in the world—the magnet, the telephone, the poems of Branislav, the magnet—and we all are a little bit what we were yester-

day and a little bit what we are today; and also a little bit we are not. Anyway, we all are a little bit all the time and all the time we are not a little bit; some of us are more and some of us are more not; some only are, some are only, and some only are not; so that none of us completely is and at the same time each one of us is not completely; and the question is only when it is better to be more, and to not-be less, and when—on the contrary—it is better less to be and more to not-be; anyway, he who is too much may soon not be at all, and he who in a certain situation is able to a certain extent to not-be may in another situation be all the better for that. I don't know if you want more to be or more to not-be and when you want to be and when you want to not-be, but I want to be all the time and that's why all the time I must a little bit not-be. You see, man when he is from time to time a little bit not does not diminish. And if at this moment, relatively speaking, I am rather not, I assure you that soon I might much more be than I've ever been—and then we can once more talk about all this, but on a completely different platform. [*He has been vanishing during the soliloquy; now he disappears completely, singing a Czech folksong.*]

# Aziz Nesin

## Milady Monkey

*Translated from Turkish by Maxine F. Salamon*

There were far too many monkeys in the cage. Several of them were performing tricks like trapeze artists on the heavy perches. One alone, in the pose of Rodin's Thinker, sat motionless. "Just like a human being," I said to myself. "Just like a human." I was not familiar with this type of monkey which was larger than a chimpanzee. We stared at each other for a long time. Then, as I was walking away from the cage I heard, "Just a minute, there," and turned back at the invitation.

"I am speaking to you, sir. Will you listen to me for a moment?"

The monkey who had been posing just a moment ago was now speaking.

"Is it you who are speaking?" I said incredulously.

"Softly, please. Don't let the keeper see us. He won't introduce me."

"But you are speaking like a human," I said.

"Of course . . . because I am human."

"How's that? You're human? In that case what are you doing in that cage?"

"I'm not the only one who's caught in a cage," the monkey replied. "Anyone who marries is in one. Anyone who earns his living is caught too. Haven't you ever been stuck in a cage?"

"Don't look at me when you say that. I am a writer and humorist. When it comes to cages they'll need a lion's cage for me."

"Mr. Humorist," said the monkey, "may I ask a favor of you?"

"By all means, sir."

"Not sir, but madam. I'm a lady."

"I'm listening, madam monkey."

"I tell you I'm not a monkey. I'm human."

"I don't understand, what are you doing here . . ."

"I'll tell you. I've always been very fond of the movies. At one time I greatly admired Greta Garbo. I even embarked upon a mysterious way of life like hers. I let my hair hang loose on my shoulders. You should have seen me then. After that Marlene Dietrich attracted me. I tweezed my eyebrows. I copied her, looked just like her. I smeared pale, consumptive yellow powder on my face and sank my cheeks in exactly like hers. Then, after that, Sarah Leander came on the scene. I began to imitate her, to make up like her and to sing as though I were being suffocated."

"Madame, may I ask, why did you come here?"

"I'm explaining that to you. After Sarah Leander, Clara Bow was my ideal. I dyed my hair jet black. I grew heavy. I became a gay and lively type. But after I had seen Jean Harlow this flaxen-haired star became my model. I dyed my hair platinum blonde. I put on corsets to narrow my waist. I made my eyebrows very thin. What a shame that she died in a plane crash! After that happened my model was Veronica Lake. My hair covered my eye just like Veronica's did. I painted my lips full, broad, bright red just like hers."

"Please, madame, what is it that you want from me?"

"If you will listen for five minutes you'll learn what I want. Veronica's type passed quickly. Elizabeth Taylor's star began to shine. I made myself like her. I made my eyebrows bushy like hers. The locals who saw me around called me Elizabeth. But when Rita Hayworth married Agha Khan I dyed my hair red. I created freckles especially for my face. Afterwards, when Marilyn Monroe rose to stardom, I changed the form of my face and my body to resemble Marilyn. Whoever saw me called me Marilyn."

"Pardon me, madame, my work is urgent. You have a request for me."

"Now my story is finished. Would you like to do a good deed?"

"Please, tell me quickly."

"When Audrey Hepburn appeared you should have seen me. I wore my hair like a man. Everything of me became Audrey. But Gina Lollabrigida changed everything."

"I understand. You looked like Gina. Then you aped Sophia Loren."

"Yes, how did you know? It was as you said. I made myself like Grace Kelly after that. I wore dignified hats like hers and made up just like her. Until I was seized my life continued like that."

**Veronica's type passed quickly. Elizabeth Taylor's star began to shine. I made myself like her.**

“What did you say? Until you were seized?”

“Yes. One day I was walking, just walking along the street. They seized me and brought me here. I kept on shouting, ‘Don’t do this, I am human,’ but no one would listen.”

“If you had consulted a court of justice . . .”

“I did. They brought me to experts. The experts certified that I was a monkey. Now I ask of you: will you tell me who is the most famous movie star now? How is she dressed? How made up? What style hair? How are her pictures? How does she talk?”

At that moment the keeper came. He shouted at the monkey who was talking to me: “What, again? Are you still going on telling this one and that that you are not a monkey?”

He began to beat the unfortunate animal with the stick he had in his hand. But I took it from him.

“What you are doing is a violation of human rights,” I said. “How is it possible to beat a human being?”

“Sir, do you believe the words of this monkey?” the keeper asked. “I beg you, look at that face! Look at the eye, the brow! Is it better than a monkey’s? Is there anything connected with humanity in this?”

I looked carefully at the woman in the cage. Indeed, the keeper had spoken the truth.

“Yes,” I said. “A monkey.”

“Of course, a monkey . . . All the professors, the doctors, the veterinarians who examined her certified that she was a monkey . . .”

As I was walking off the lady monkey implored: “How about it, what happened? Now who’s the most successful star?”

# George Blake The Expatriate

For twenty-one years Wendell had shared with his best friend, Snieder, the miracle of their having become fathers late in life. He too, like Snieder, felt the magical spark expand to a wide warm glow as his son grew tall, until Snieder came to stand in the shadow of Wendell's toy store to tell him the news.

That evening, sensing he stood with one foot in the cold darkness through which his friend now moved, Wendell said to himself in the store's bathroom mirror, "It might've been Sammy."

"You're crazy," Wendell's wife said in response to his plan that their son should migrate to Canada.

"Why crazy?"

"Because of all he'd give up."

Outside the kitchen window the first snow of winter was falling like snow in the city, already grey before covering the roofs. "Give up? What give up?"

"Social security. Graduation."

"From working vacations with me in the store? And he can finish college in Canada. Besides, whoever heard of this Wisconsin College he goes to?"

"Please. No more."

That night Wendell got out of bed and as usual when constructing the future began to pace in a square. "The war's ten years old. How long?" Muttering the usual words to herself, his wife padded into the kitchen. Following, Wendell said, "No hot milk to make me sleep. Today, Snieder told me. His Felix is killed in the war. His only son. If they don't stop, someday it could be our Sammy."

“Don’t say such a thing.”

“Mrs. Snieder’s collapsed. She’s with her sister up-state. Spring Valley. And Snieder, you should’ve seen how he looks. I tell you, I had to look away.”

“The poor woman!”

But Wendell wasn’t listening. From the closet shelf he brought back the atlas.

“See,” he said, pointing. “Canada’s really next door.”

“Drink the milk.”

“I’ll write Sammy tonight. All right, he can leave this summer after graduation.”

“I give up with you, Mr. Impulse.”

“A pen. I brought home four ball-points two weeks ago. In a red plastic case. Four.”

“Please. Sit. Listen.”

Wendell allowed himself to be urged into his easy chair. While his wife went back to the kitchen for his milk he reached over and flicked on the TV.

“Please,” she said. “Turn it off. Listen to me.”

“Just the one o’clock news.”

“You’ll drive yourself crazy with the news. What changes?”

“All right. No noise. Just the picture.”

Sighing, she sat in the chair opposite. “Drink while it’s hot.” The monk in the yellow robe was in flames.

“Off! Enough!” She jabbed the button and stood over him.

“To burn himself up!”

“So?” she said patiently. “What good does it do to watch? Can you put out the fire?”

“Sammy’s going to Canada!”

“Myron, is it your life? Listen. He’s not even drafted.”

“They’ll get him! They’ll get him!”

“So then we’ll talk about Canada.”

Wendell watched his wife pad back into their bedroom: “I’m writing. Tonight.”

“Write, write. But be subtle.”

“Naturally. Aren’t I always?”

In pencil he wrote: *Dear Sammy*. Then he crumpled the paper and began again:

Dear Sam,

Your mother and I have been discussing your future. Have you ever thought of migrating to Canada? Since you are studying Hotel Management, you could easily get a good position in Toronto. Only yesterday I read in the paper about three big hotels going up in that city. I think in that city. Think this over.

Whether you know it or not, your mother and I have always had a liking for Canada since I went fishing there with your late uncle Joe who you know by the picture your mother has of him on her dresser.

We'll discuss all of this, of course, when you come home for the holidays in two weeks.

Love, Father

P.S. As you know, Canada has no draft and is invading nobody.

"What did you write?"

"About business prospects."

"You never wrote to anyone about business. Your toy store's a lecture hall." But her hand touched his under the covers.

Sighing, Wendell thought, A wife finally knows all. It's true, it's true.

His son appeared in the kitchen two weeks later, the same except for the beard and long hair. "You don't mind?" he asked, as always, stooping slightly. "I wonder what Momma will say."

"She's shopping. For you coming home. I told her no grapes. They're still on strike out there. Mind? No. But watch out for those Hard Hats."

"Hard Hats? But seriously, you don't mind?"

"Why should I mind? It shows you're for peace."

"What shows I'm for peace?"

"Please, no teasing. That long hair. Your magnificent beard."

"No, Poppa, you got it all wrong."

"Wrong? How wrong?"

"The beard, the hair, they mean nothing."

"Nothing? Don't fool with me, Sammy. I'm glad. Proud. By the way, you got my letter?"

"What letter? Oh, yeah, the letter."

"So?"

"So?"

"Canada, you've thought it over?"

“Why should I go to Canada?”

“But you’re against the war now. This beard, your hair.”

“Who isn’t against the war? But this beard only means beard. My hair only means hair.”

Wendell’s wife came in behind celery leaves fanning her face. “Sammy!”

“Momma!”

“Let me look at you. You grew all this since Thanksgiving!”

Wendell turned back to his son. Looking up, he said soberly, “You know Felix Snieder? Well?”

“Sure. How is he?”

“Tell him, Emma. I can’t say it again.”

“Sammy, Felix is dead.”

“No!”

“Yes,” Wendell said. “Vietnam. Cambodia. Laos, who knows where. But dead, yes.”

“My God!”

Wendell placed his hands on his son’s shoulders. “And who’s next?”

“Please,” his wife uttered, “please, Myron, don’t. You want to break my heart? Here? Now? In the kitchen?”

“No, darling. I want only that Sammy should think, consider. All right, a self-ish father, he wants to see his son marry, to bounce grandchildren on his knees. If not here in New York, then Toronto.”

“But, Poppa . . .”

“What else do Momma and I have, Sammy?” They were looking away from him. Wendell knew how he looked: frightened.

“Please, Myron, sit. Here, Sammy, make him sit. Ever since the poor Snieder boy was killed he’s been like this.”

“Yes, Poppa, come, your easy chair. There.”

“No news, Myron!”

“Yes, Poppa, turn it off.”

“You’ll consider it then? Is Canada so very far? Momma and I, we could even come too. Sell the store . . .”

“Please, Poppa. I don’t want to go to Canada. Listen, if I’m drafted, I’ll go. With my studying Hotel Management they’ll put me in quartermasters. I’ll be all right. Of course, I’m for peace, but . . .”

“Dummy! With a useful background like yours you go to the front. For years I talked politics to you. Reality. This is what comes of you never listening.”

“What do you want of me, Poppa?”

“Listen. June you graduate. In the summer you go up to Canada. Look around. Get a position. Settle yourself. If you’re not drafted, good. If you are, you’ll be ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

“To migrate.”

“Migrate?”

“What’s wrong? That’s not the right term?” Wendell pretended not to know that behind him his wife was nodding her head to their son. “See,” Wendell explained, “Nothing drastic. Just be prepared.”

“Sure, Poppa, sure!”

Wendell sighed and leaned back, then rose. “Momma, don’t bring in the soup. I’ll go out to the kitchen. We’ll go out together and sit at the table like always, all of us eating our soup. Don’t make a face, Sammy. Basically, I’m very conservative. But, please, Sammy, turn on the Huntley-Brinkley so I can hear while I eat.”

The next night while his son tended the store Wendell visited Snieder. It was like walking toward the cold darkness carrying a selfish flame.

“Landed immigrant,” Wendell continued, trimming his friend’s plastic Christmas tree. “I’ve investigated. Today, all afternoon at the library. Canada, only almost the population of the city. They’re dying for people to come.”

Snieder still said nothing. Still sitting bent forward, the weight of his globed face in both hands, he muttered, “Remember? Your Sammy used to come to my place Christmas night. My Felix wanted him to help trim the tree. We used always to have Scotch pine. I always liked a Scotch pine. Not regular. A shape of its own.”

“Please, Herman, don’t remember. Forget. All right, remember.”

“I said to your boy, ‘Being Jewish, perhaps you shouldn’t help trim,’ and Felix said, standing right there where you are now, he looked at me and said, ‘Oh, it’s all right because Mr. Wendell said they’re really agnostics.’”

“Religion you’ve got or you haven’t.”

“You read the wrong books, Myron.”

“You think a man loses God in the library? No, it simply went like my hair.”

**Please, Myron,  
don’t. You want to  
break my heart?  
Here? Now? In the  
kitchen?**

Wendell touched his bald crown tentatively.

“Don’t think I’m saying I’m religious, Myron. What am I? My Protestant god wears a business suit, has a face like a salesman who’s had his best territory taken away. No,” Snieder muttered mirthlessly, “Protestant’s only a word you write on some application, a burial permit. Sometimes, I think only the Catholics . . .” Abruptly, Snieder bent lower, his head almost touching the floor, uttering, “But where did my boy go to? Where? Oh, to never see him again. Dead. Missing in action. Where, where?” Wendell put his arm around his friend’s shoulders, the plastic shepherd dangling from his free hand. “You’ll come to my place tonight. I don’t want you here alone.”

“No, no.” Then, “Tell me, Myron, tell me.”

“What should I tell you?”

“He’s a hero, isn’t he? He died for something, didn’t he?”

Through the tree’s fringes Wendell saw out of the window the sea of apartment roofs. Over them undulated waves of grey fumes in the drizzling snow. From somewhere below on the streets a woman was screaming some words. Wendell felt Snieder lurch forward and grab his wrist.

“Tell! Tell!”

Later, going down in the elevator, Wendell wondered what he would’ve answered had not the cascade of bright trinkets dropped from the tree as Snieder grabbed his arm and to save himself from replying he had reached forth to catch them.

On the way home Wendell stopped at the store for his son who, as always, worked nights for him during the holidays. He saw his son through the filmy window, his tapering gentle face, paler because of the beard, strangely sliced by angles of dolls, match-box cars, and to one side the salesman. He could see the man’s sample case, black, gaping wide like an open jaw, on the counter.

“Ah, and this must be your father! I was just passing and thought I’d drop in. I have something absolutely special for Easter. Samples only, of course. Not in your line, not out of your line either. More in, indeed, than out! You’d never forgive me if I failed to give you the opportunity to place a large order. They will sell, my friend, in a flash!”

Wendell started to walk around the man to go behind the counter, but this proved impossible for the salesman’s stomach, in its scarlet vest, pressed aggressively against the counter. He smells of sweets, of licorice maybe, Wendell thought. But then permitting Wendell to pass, the man minced back three steps and wiped his

red hair—Wendell noticed the grey roots—with a black silk handkerchief. “Inner heat! Inner heat! I suffer from it especially in winter!”

“I haven’t seen you around before.”

“New territory. Just down from Boston. They always send me to open new territory. Now observe. No, it will take but a second.”

Wendell looked closely at the man’s face. An old man like me, he thought. Sixty-one. Sixty-five. What a long face. But when he smiles, pinched like a fist.

“Now wait. We mustn’t look till I say. There!”

Wendell said, “Is this a joke!”

“Wait. It’s really a toy of sorts. Observe.” The man placed the white plastic Christ flat on the counter. From the depths of his case he took out the plastic cross. “Observe the nails. You press him on to the cross. So. Now listen.”

From the thing came a faint, high-pitched scream.

“Out! Out!” Wendell yelled.

From the thing now came a low purring moan.

“Out! Go! Sammy, the door!”

“But you fail to perceive. It’s a toy. A religious toy, to be sure, but observe, look now, it’s smiling. Smiling for Easter.”

Wendell grabbed the sample case and heaved it into the street. “And this too!” Wendell threw the cross and its burden after the case.

“You are making a grave error. It will prove very popular.” Wendell slammed the door and yanked down the shade.

“You, you let him in to show such a thing!”

“Poppa, he came in just before you. I didn’t know.”

“Such a thing! Who would design such a thing! Who would manufacture it! Toy gas ovens next! To think that somewhere, now, tonight, men and woman sit at machines stamping them out! How? How?”

“Poppa, don’t get so excited.”

“Excited, a man should get excited! You, you,” turning and standing close to his son, looking up, “You’re not made sick by such a thing?”

“Of course, Poppa. It’s blasphemous! But such things exist in the world. Poppa, I think sometimes I’m the realist, not you.”

Wendell turned slowly away, wiping that invisible spot on the counter where the salesman’s sample had lain. “I’ll close up. You go.”

“No, Poppa, I’ll wait.”

“No, you go ahead.”

"I'm waiting. This neighborhood, you shouldn't go home alone."

Locking up, going out into the dirty white night, feeling his son close beside him, Wendell thought, And who's protecting who after all?

"They probably sell such things in Canada too, Poppa."

"What?" Now he speaks and I listen, he thought. But he said, "Everywhere. But does a man have to buy or to sell? Be bought or be sold?"

"I know what you're thinking, Poppa."

"He knows, the mind reader."

"That Felix was sold."

"You think not?"

"No. He made a choice. To accept is also a choice. To stand still, to let what comes, come."

"Please, no fancy talk."

"Poppa, you think it's easy for me?"

"Easy? What's easy?"

"I never said this before."

"Speak, speak."

"Poppa, watch out, the ice."

"I'm not falling. I'm waiting, speak."

"To have a father your age, plus . . ."

"Plus? Is a father a number? But more? Go on."

"Not even to be brought up, you know . . ."

"What do I know? Tell me."

"It's like I don't even know who I am. I'm not really Jewish. I'm not like Felix was. Sure, his father never went to church but at least Felix knew what faith he didn't practice. When I was a kid, all those Ethical Culture meetings. Why, Poppa, why?"

**Questions,  
answers.**

**Who knows?**

**Mythology.**

**Uniforms. Flags.**

**What can I say?**

Wendell felt himself slip but regained his balance. "Questions, answers. Who knows? Mythology. Uniforms. Flags. What can I say? Your momma and I, we lost both our families in Buchenwald, almost ourselves. They, those butchers had answers too. Beware of people with answers. So we came here.

New answers. Was I prepared to be a father? Was your mother prepared? We even thought we were sterile. Forty-five years old and saved from the camp and abruptly

a father! In Buchenwald I told myself, where there's peace, there's my country. Now for me, I don't care anymore. But for you, for you . . ."

"Poppa, watch out."

As Wendell slipped, he felt his son's arm catch him close, and in the act of struggling to regain his balance he saw their reflections in the bakery window: against the loaves his own thin body stretched almost horizontally to the pavement, held by the straining arc of his half kneeling son.

Wendell's son didn't come home for the Easter holidays. He wrote a short note explaining that he needed to do research in the college library. Wendell promptly replied with variations on: 'study hard, in Hotel Management you can also be scholarly,' but saying nothing about Canada. Of course, he enclosed in a separate envelope the bundle of travel folders he'd sent for from that country.

May arrived with the usual fumes from New Jersey, and for Wendell so that he would always remember: his son, cleanly shaven, hair cut, arriving at three AM in the kitchen, announcing, "Graduation was cancelled. The cops fired tear gas. Two buildings burned down. Diplomas are being mailed out, and I think I got a position with the Hilton chain in Chicago."

Snieder, whose wife had died in late March, was spending the night in Sammy's room, and he wandered into the kitchen.

"Hello, Mr. Snieder."

"Sammy. Your father tells me you're going to Canada."

"Poppa, you didn't get my last letter?"

"Where's the beard?"

"I cut it off."

"I bet Hilton owns hotels in South Africa."

"Please, Poppa, I've been on the bus thirteen hours."

"You cut your hair, too. Mr. Hilton must be pleased."

Wendell's wife said, "Perhaps a tuna fish sandwich? The best. Bumble Bee."

"I'm not hungry, Momma. They stopped once at Howard Johnsons. I ate."

"I bet Howard Johnson buys frozen lobster from South Africa."

"Poppa, can't you wait for Christsakes till I'm home five minutes!"

Wendell's wife said, as though to herself, "I'd have grapes too but somewhere they're still on strike. He won't let me put grapes on the table. Your father, the censor of foods. He has a list a life long. What I can buy, what I can't."

"Your dad's one of those real idealists, son."

Wendell said nothing. His wife said, "Oh, I forgot. A letter came for you yesterday."

Wendell watched his son read. "Well?"

"Nothing, Poppa."

"A letter that says nothing?"

"All right. The job in Chicago is off. They're not taking 1-A's."

"I know who's taking 1-A's. The U.S. Army."

"Please, Myron, not in front of Mr. Snieder."

"As I said in my letter, if they take me, I'm going. You think I want to go. But I'll go. Who knows why? Perhaps for Felix." Everyone looked away from each other. Snieder said tiredly,

"I guess I'll be going back to my place."

"No. My son will sleep in there on the couch. You shouldn't be alone."

"Alone, Myron? You want to know something funny, very strange? When my boy and my Alice were here, you know, alive, I used to want to be alone sometimes. You know, to putter around with my ship models, which for some reason, funny, I can't take an interest in lately. Now that Felix and Alice are gone, when I am alone, I'm not, I can't be. Never, never. Now isn't that remarkable, Myron? Isn't that strange?"

After Snieder had left, Wendell's son said, "I should've slept in there on the couch."

"You should've spoken up then, my son."

"Poppa, you never allow me to speak up."

"When, when did I never?"

"I'm going to bed and what I said in my letter still goes."

"They'll get you. They'll draft you."

"No, Poppa. There's nothing more to say."

"Tomorrow, we'll talk tomorrow."

"No, tonight, it's settled tonight. Now."

In bed Wendell's wife said, "Sleep, sleep. Accept."

"We should've had more sons."

"How? In that camp? Myron, you forget."

"Am I selfish? A fool?"

"Selfish, yes."

"But not only for me, for us. For him. I want him to have a long life. Not to be killed. Not to kill."

"Come. Get back in bed."

“The stars, so many. Some already dead. Red giants. White dwarfs. But their light still comes down. But those chimneys! These fumes!”

“Come. Can I sleep without you beside me?”

“Sometimes . . .”

“Please, in bed . . .”

“Sometimes I think I should’ve been a teacher. Not to spend my life selling toys. Toys in this kind of a world! And Hotel Management! What kind of a life is that?”

“Sleep. Sleep.”

“And now to maybe be sent off to some jungle. Toy guns, I never sold them. Never.”

“I know, I know.” Then, “Myron, what’s wrong!”

If he didn’t try so hard perhaps he could get back his breath. He thought, That smell? What’re they making in Jersey, licorice sticks? “Nothing,” he said, “just these fumes.” Then, “Listen. He’s up. Pacing. I’ll go to him.”

“No, Myron. It’s his life. He has to walk his own path. You said so yourself many times, ‘Who can wear another man’s shoes?’”

Back and forth Wendell heard his son pace, even in and out of his dreams.

Three weeks later Wendell’s son was ordered to report for his physical. In September he was inducted. In November, after his son had returned to camp from his boot camp furlough, his father and mother received a short note saying, “Father, I’ve been recently talking to the Jewish chaplain attached to my outfit. For the first time I’m beginning to feel at peace with myself. How can I explain? It’s like I’m getting nearer to the good place where I belong.” Also was enclosed a snapshot of their son at parade-rest in front of a tent. On the back was neatly written, “Taken at camp.”

In December, they received a note, saying, “I’m going overseas soon.” In February, the first week, Wendell came home from the store to find Snieder alone at the kitchen table.

Snieder said, rising laboriously, “Your wife’s in there lying down. She phoned me but wouldn’t let me go for you because she said you’d close up and lose business. I’ve been sitting here waiting. I don’t have the telegram. It’s in there with her.”

In April his son came home in the box. At the funeral, Wendell was presented with the flag.

Gazing at the flag spread over his knees, Wendell heard them through the door from the kitchen.

Snieder was saying, "He still won't come out?"

And he heard his wife whisper, "Since the interment, no. Since they handed him the flag, no. Since we came back from the cemetery, no. Since he walked out of this kitchen and into Sammy's bedroom, no, no." Then louder, factually, as though Snieder had asked, "He comes out to eat while I sleep."

"But he can't go on like this."

Wendell said toward the door, "When I'm ready, I'll come out."

"What does he mean, when he's ready?"

"Who can know?"

Wendell heard the silence they sat in, and thought, When I come out, then they'll know, then they'll see.

Snieder was saying, "But what does he do all the time in there?"

"Sometimes he paces. Like this. Listen." Wendell paused, one foot in the air, listening.

"I don't hear."

Wendell was trembling now, still holding one foot off the floor.

His wife said, "He's heard me. He's stopped."

"Just paces?"

Then abruptly with unrepressed fear, "And cutting too. I hear him. Late at night. The scissors, click, click."

"But what is he cutting?"

"Who knows, who knows? He has paper stuck in the keyhole. How can I see?"

After he heard Snieder leave, Wendell sat down again on the bed, took the scissors, and arranged the flag on his lap, and began again to say to himself, "One for Sammy, one for Felix. Who else? For those Jewish boys who ended up in the Mississippi. Who else? For those two Jewish students at Kent, the two others, for those at Jackson State." Then again, "One for Sammy, one for Felix . . ."

From time-to-time he would glance up to examine his new face in the dresser mirror. The beard was coming along fine.

One evening Wendell felt his friend standing outside the bedroom door, saying, "You won't know the store when you get back. I really cleaned it up. Everything's dusted. Are you there? Do you hear me?"

"I hear."

"About Easter, I ordered some things."

"Don't order."

"Nothing?"

“Nothing. There’s no need.”

“I don’t understand.”

Wendell didn’t reply.

“There’s this salesman that keeps coming around. He . . .”

“I know.”

“What do you mean, you know?”

“Fat. Red hair. Smelling of . . .”

“No. Very thin, but, yes, bright red hair. He’s been haunting the place.”

“Out! Out! Throw him out!”

“Why? He’s a real friendly sort.”

“Out! Out! Take nothing from him! No samples!”

“But he’s already left them. Toy ovens . . .”

“Don’t go back there!”

“What do you mean?”

“To the store, don’t go back!”

“You’ve got to get hold of yourself, Myron. I haven’t said it before, but almost a month or more in there! Myron, I don’t want to do it, but I’m getting a doctor for you. I told your wife, she said wait another week, but . . . Myron, what are you cutting?”

“One for John, one for Martin, one for Bobby.”

“Myron, for Christsakes!”

“One for you, one for me.” Through the click of the blades, Wendell heard the kitchen door open and his wife and Snieder whispering, and then his wife was saying, “I bought grapes for you. The pickers signed a contract somewhere with one of the growers, and fresh bread, with seeds. Please, come out. Eat. Not while I sleep. Now.”

“Soon.”

“When, Myron, when? I can’t go on.”

“Tonight. You’ll see. Be patient.”

“Please, my darling!”

“All right. But wait.” Clip, clip, he worked, saying the names. Finished, Wendell rose and glanced in the mirror which reflected beside his face a slice of the sun, cut, bleeding, almost sunken, pierced by a chimney spouting smoke. Wendell smoothed his beard, fingered his long stringy hair, through which his bald crown showed, then gripping his son’s college briefcase he opened the door to stand before them on the carpet of littered red, white, and blue stars.

“Come,” he said. “I’m packed. Come.”

At the end of June Mrs. Wendell was allowed to bring her husband home from the asylum for the weekend, and Snieder arrived on Sunday to visit him.

Wendell sat in his easy chair in front of the silent TV. Mrs. Wendell showed Snieder in, saying, “He wouldn’t let them shave his beard or cut his hair. They wanted to make him. I refused.”

Wendell sat stroking his beard. “Ah, old friend, so you’ve migrated too?”

Snieder hesitated, then answered, “Yes, me too.”

“No draft here. They’re invading nobody.”

Snieder glanced helplessly at Mrs. Wendell.

“If they do, I move on,” Wendell continued. Then he fell silent.

Out in the kitchen, before leaving, Snieder put the week’s money from the store on the table. “A very good week,” he said.

“Sh . . . Sh,” Mrs. Wendell cautioned Snieder.

“I took out my salary for working days as usual. Yes, a very good week. Here, feel the bag. It’s the salesman I hired to work nights. Whatever he’s doing, he’s doing right.”

Wendell called out, vacuously eyeing the money bag, “You understand? We represent Sammy, Felix here. We’re them in spirit. Not bought. Not sold. But free. Free. That’s us, expatriates.” Then stroking his beard, his eyes closed, searching the dark geography of his mind, he added, “Of somewhere or other.”

# Moacyr Scliar

## The Prescript

*Translated from Portuguese by Eloah F. Giacomelli*

The Director of Social Welfare took measures for the implementation of the following decree: once a month everybody had to go to a picnic held at the cemetery.

“We must get used to death,” the Director of Social Welfare declared to a newsman. “The thought of death is at the onset of all discipline.” At first people grumbled; then, since all picnic expenses were paid for by the Bank of the Nation, they ended up by liking it. On the first Sunday of every month people headed for the cemetery. They spread the checkered tablecloths between the tombs, opened the wicker baskets and took out the chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise and the thermos bottles filled with coffee. After lunch the children played soccer, using the tombstones as goal posts. Late in the afternoon, as the sparrows chirped in a melancholy way, the voice of the Director of Social Welfare could be heard through a powerful loudspeaker: “Think of death!” The Chorus of the Valkyries was the background music.

At the end of six months public opinion polls showed that the measure had brought about deep transformations in the popular mind: the number of suicides among adolescents had increased sixfold; and people who had never before thought about death would now wake up in the middle of the night feeling the weight of the damp earth upon their chests. Nevertheless, the cemetery was a beautiful spot, filled with poetry and peacefulness; and the mayonnaise sandwiches, now free, acquired a new, surprising flavor.

The first stage having been successful, the Director of Social Welfare issued a new decree: all kindergartens would hold their classes in the open air—in the

cemetery. Mothers protested feebly, but once more the Director of Social Welfare offered advantages: each child attending the cemetery regularly would receive a scholarship.

“One must start at the end,” the Director of Social Welfare explained at the Convention of Mothers. “Death directs life. The immobility of the corpses is an inspiration to immature souls.” Soon the children, sun-tanned, looked plump, healthy, and well-nourished thanks to the chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise. The rebellious children were sent to a special kindergarten, located in the cemetery for dogs. Attending the burial of the animals was part of the school curriculum.

A new stage was undertaken when the Director of Social Welfare opened the Central Prenatal Clinic at the cemetery. “Behold a truly inspiring vision for mothers-to-be,” he declared at the time. That same afternoon, a group of young pregnant women threw stones at the Social Welfare Building. From the balcony of his office, the Director of Social Welfare watched the scene, smiling phlegmatically.

“It is necessary to motivate people in order for them to understand the implications of measures taken in their own interest.”

On the following day the newspapers announced that free buses would take the pregnant women to the Central Prenatal Clinic. Free medical care as well as free distribution of vitamins would be provided at the tombs. Two days later the pregnant women stood in long lines before the gates of the cemetery.

The Director of Social Welfare had further plans for new decrees—among others, a decree ruling that all newlyweds had to spend their honeymoon in a tomb just recently opened—but he died before he could have done so.

# Ignácio de Loyola Brandão

## The Men Who Discovered Forbidden Chairs

*Translated from Portuguese by John M. Parker*

The men didn't knock, because in that city, or country, the police had long since ceased having to knock in order to gain entrance. They didn't carry official warrants, because there had long ago ceased to be any need for the existence of warrants. There was not a state of law. There was the state, but no law.

The men came in, walked across the room where the family was eating supper, peacefully until that moment.

"Routine inspection," said the man in charge of the men who had come in.

"Make yourselves at home," said the owner of the house, turning back to finish his soup, unconcerned at the sudden invasion. An unconcern which merely signified helplessness.

The men ransacked the dining room, the bedrooms, the bathroom, the children's rooms, the kitchen, the laundry, and the maid's room. Room? Those cubicles, slave quarters provided by the real estate companies.

They came back from the kitchen with a white formica chair.

"We're taking this chair. Tomorrow you must go and make a statement."

"I don't know how it got there. We had sold it."

"We're not interested. The chair was in the kitchen."

(Perhaps they brought it with them and put it there, the man thought. Thought, afraid that the other would realize what he was thinking. Thinking had been forbidden long ago, especially thoughts which might question or embarrass the men's actions.)

"Which district?"

“Ninety-eight.”

“All right. Give me the notification.”

“Which notification?”

“To say you’ve been here.”

“But we’ve not been here.”

“You’ve not? You’re still here.”

“We’re not. You’ve never seen us.”

“In that case, what reason shall I give when I show up at the district tomorrow?”

“You will go of your own accord and take the chair with you.”

“What if I don’t show up?”

“We shall come here again.”

“What then?”

“That’s to say, we shall come here, but we won’t be here. I don’t know if you understand me.”

“I understand you fine. Put it this way: I’m free, but I’m not free. Isn’t that it?”

“Exactly. If everyone was like you, our work would be much easier. We haven’t met with understanding. Do you know what a man on the floor below told me? This isn’t logical. You can’t be in a place when you are there. So I said: well I am, and yet I’m not.”

“Let’s see if I understand better. You did it, but you didn’t.”

“Right.”

“What if I were to apply the same criterion to this chair? It exists, but it doesn’t exist. Since it doesn’t exist, I’m not committing a serious offense. There is, yet isn’t a ban on the use of chairs, isn’t that so?”

“You’re trying to mix me up, but you won’t. That’s why I was chosen. I’m an educated man, I was handpicked, I was one of the best logistics experts in my college. This isn’t an easy job.”

“How does it work?”

“There really is a ban on the use of chairs. It’s the chairs that may not exist. The yes is for us, the no for you. We are the positive, the people the negative.”

“You mean I can’t claim that you’ve not been here?”

“No, because between ourselves we know that we were here. That’s what counts.”

“I’m very confused.”

“Keep it that way. We don’t want things clear.”

“How do you act in this manner?”

“We don’t.”

“You just have.”

“How could we, when we’ve not even been here?”

“Who is standing in front of me?”

“A man who doesn’t exist.”

“You’re crazy.”

“And you are a rebel. Do you know you have no right to ask more than two questions?”

“I haven’t asked a single one.”

“You have, several.”

“I have, and yet I haven’t. I have, but I got no answer. A question without an answer isn’t a question, it’s just a sentence, a meaningless phrase.”

“Enough. Tomorrow at district ninety-eight.”

“What if there is no district ninety-eight?”

# Wiesław Kazanecki

## No Smoking

*Translated from Polish by Peter Harris and Danuta Lopozyko*

The earth drenched in gasoline.  
The continents and oceans drenched in gasoline.  
Cities and highways drenched in gasoline.  
Government buildings and computers drenched in gasoline.  
Human hearts and tanks drenched in gasoline.

Dreams and statistics drenched in gasoline.  
Automobile plants and apartments drenched in gasoline.  
From the poles to the equator  
The world drenched in gasoline.

Insane Alexander the Great.  
Insane Julius Caesar.  
Insane Karol the Great.

Insane builder of the tower reaching to the feet of God.  
Insane builder of the ladder reaching to the lips of God.  
Insane ravager who burned the city so the smoke could reach the tears of God.

Insane viewers in front of the TV screen.  
Insane shoppers in front of store windows.  
Insane scholars bent over unread books.  
Insane pilots at the controls of airplanes.  
Insane mechanics in the engine rooms of submarines.  
Insane map-gazers staring at flammable rectangles, the world's cities.

# Edoardo Cacciatore

## Excessus

*Translated from Italian by Annalisa Saccà*

There is a register for the living  
a register for the dead  
History between arriving and departing  
registers also the abortionéd.

Between heaven and hell—History  
is no respecter of the weak or the strong  
The living burn in envy  
The dead burn in thought.

History loves not the overpowering  
nor those resigned to their faith  
It loves who is dead like among the living  
It loves whom it feels alive among the dead.

# Guido Ceronetti

## From *The Silence of the Body*

*Translated from Italian by Michael F. Moore*

Optimism is like carbon monoxide; it leaves a rosy imprint on the body when it kills.

As long as they have the lust to kill, won't lose the taste to procreate.

I was floating blissfully on a river of shit, my arms opened wide, until I ejaculated. (The river of shit that gives pleasure is Life; although it may appear as pure water, it is still Maya in one of her many disguises.)

It's not what you eat but what you don't eat that is good for both the body and soul.

Man is more complicated than the fly, which devours all the excrement it can find. Excrement is what the coprophagous man seeks and wants from the body, a living part of the body he craves while groping through its darkest alchemical intimacy. (A teardrop trickles from the eye, down the gutters of the face, and is collected in the lover's mouth, though he would never lap up a teardrop found on a kitchen table.) The sin is idolatry, no minor thing, and the madness analytical. A small part looks enormous, a piece of the body is devoured, the whole disintegrates, the soul is offended and cries, "Me, All!" But no mouth can swallow a whole body, and the impossibility of ingesting the whole, the ineffable *Unam*, fuels the mad love for organs, parts, secretions, and excretions, and transforms eroticism into an eternal curse. Every lover has *preferences*. There is no substantial difference between

**A minister explains to me that to improve humankind, every last person's teeth should be pulled. Dentures would be punishable by death, of course.**

someone who loves the eyes and someone who loves excrement, teardrops, or urine. The preference indicates the erotic madness; the only difference lies in the degree. The wise man renounces any possession, and dreams of the ideal integrity of the beloved.

Life yearns, in secret, to cease to exist. Sometimes it even shouts it out, but we do not hear.

Women have their doctor today the way they used to have their confessor. The modern confessors will cause no fewer disasters than the old doctors.

Maybe the Sulphur held and expelled by the intestines is why Sulphur was considered an emanation of the devil and the stench characteristic of hell.

Perfect adaptation to contemporary urban life is the sign of a serious imbalance. The only healthy people are the ones who suffer from city life. The signs of imbalance that result from this conscious suffering and incompatibility are proof of sound mental health.

The most dangerous weapon ever invented is man.

A minister explains to me that to improve humankind, every last person's teeth should be pulled. Dentures would be punishable by death, of course. With toothless mouths, humanity would become easier to educate, its harshness easier to soften, its voracity easier to tame.

Tea and Garlic are equally divine, but Tea comes from God's *Sefirah Binah* (Understanding), Garlic from his *Din-Gevurah* (Judgment-Power). Tea should be the drink of the good, the calm, the clairvoyant; but the wicked, the irascible, and the demented also drink it. One argument in favor of the moral neutrality of God. Garlic is a universal doctor, but many abhor his treatments; they refuse to be saved. Tea does not discriminate; Garlic does. Tea is delicious after eating foods with Garlic, but wine would be a fatal mistake. The bad company of wine turns Garlic

into a killer, into barroom smoke. Avoid anyone who mixes garlic and wine, because he brings disorder and corruption.

Have only superficial relations with people who reject garlic and onions, because they are weak in character, incapable of profundity.

No one contemplating suicide today would still choose sublimate—which made the gastroenteric tube howl in pain, from pharyngeal burning to profuse diarrhea, leading to death after a few days of inflamed kidneys. No one would take a lethal dose of strychnine (five centigrams) and die in the throes of hallucinatory convulsions and tetanic contractions. Barbiturates offer an easy death, a sleep unburdened, perhaps, by nightmares. Another victory for the ordinary, for the escape from pain. This way one can leave by the golden gate, but where will one end up? A serious suicide would chose the Via Dolorosa, which allows the person to atone, and immediately, for most of a deed that has displeased God.

In the fourth century, the gladiatorial games were replaced by Christian matrimony; the amphitheater was replaced by the bedroom—the bourgeois theater.

One of the most terrifying thoughts on human crowds, boundless and uncontainable nowadays, is that they are devouring mouths; one of the most discomforting is that they are intestines that do not shit. I have this philanthropic obsession . . . the urban, urbanized, enclosed, tarred, enshrouded crowds—Babelized in pod cities that have no direct contact with the earth, with the soil, with that which drops as seed and fermentation between the teeth of the ironic *Adamah*—are denied the ability to empty the intestine properly and regularly. The sitting position on the detestable hopper is inimical to reasonable evacuation. Then there is the constant pressure of schedules and commitments, anxieties, neuroses, social inhibitions (“I couldn’t, I was with them”), transfers, changes of environment, entertainment, loss of movement, work in closed spaces, and enormous greed. We coexist with robots whose waste bears no resemblance to our own (and hence are not good examples, while the sight of a horse defecating stimulates evacuation). We eat dry, phony, unslippery food, and are always on the run. The cities are immense stockyards of hardened, constipated bowels. It’s enough to prompt sympathy for cities and their people . . .

The bladder is doing no better, but it is more readily obeyed, since it is easier to satisfy than the intestine. Some people forget all about their intestine. The great master is the ass, said Luther at his table. But the universal loss of desire for either God or master also takes the form of an absurd revolt against Master Ass, who rewards proper treatment with days that are free for greater unhappiness and concentration. Tell me how many occasional constipation sufferers (the regular sufferers form a millennial knighthood), how many neo-constipants, can be counted in a modern capital and you will have the most important X-ray of society.

Coprologists consider the fecal matter of urbanites to be of poor quality. The basic treatment should thus be to be freed of shit as soon as it forms. It seems that we can reanimate this languishing function only by *worrying about it*. But straining to think about evacuation, focusing on the exoneration of the bowels—the only alternative to tisanes and suppositories—is harmful because it depletes nervous energy (or rather, Psyche's exhausted fluid) from the activities that free us from our enslavement to the bowels.

Thinking too much is exhausting, even if it makes the job go smoothly. The effort that goes into ten bowel movements could heal a couple of paralytics, communicate telepathically several dreams from Europe to America, and levitate a person in the kitchen like St. Teresa. A strict mystic would consider it thought directed away from God the Creator and focused on an unsatisfying creature, making the intestine almost a coddled creature within a creature. And we are filled with regret, robbed of all other thoughts, when we imagine how much God has been stolen from us by this snake-like, voracious, obscure creature.

WINTER 1987

# Shiraishi Kazuko

## Yellow Night

*Translated from Japanese by John Solt*

the whole world was Yellow that night  
said Ashay  
Yellow reflected on electric lights  
Yellow first entered the couple's bedroom  
at 3 in the morning unable to breathe  
couldn't open painfilled eyes, tears flowed out continuously

which direction to go?  
like this, where?

3 December 1984, midnight, Bhopal, India,  
huge gas leak at America's Union Carbide  
factory. In the slums facing the back of the  
factory, everyone dead in a few seconds.  
Probably never realized they were about to  
die. The gas traveling a mile an hour took  
three hours to reach Ashay's house.

Yellow at midnight from here it is 3 miles to the Union  
Carbide factory where the leak began licking Bhopal Station  
a half-mile away hundreds of shabbily clad people asleep  
outside the station all dead

and inside . . .

a worker calls the next station

“Stop all trains coming in this direction

ga . . . gas . . . is . . .”

while still holding the receiver

he realizes he’ll die sooner than he had expected

barely conscious

he stops all the trains on their way to Bhopal

still holding the receiver

Yellow licks life from the man’s throat

w<sub>a</sub>v<sub>i</sub>n<sub>g</sub> f<sub>l</sub>a<sub>g</sub> o<sub>f</sub> c<sub>o</sub>n  
s<sub>c</sub>i<sub>o</sub>s<sub>s</sub> n<sub>e</sub>s<sub>s</sub>

he dies

where am I going no idea where?

the Yellow becomes thick air clusters staining all the air

the Yellow doesn’t go to high mountains but to low, crowded

zones low

the Yellow Hand grabs voices before people can emit hellish

screams it silences them

is it better to go right or left?

since it is midnight can’t tell from which side

the Yellow is coming

unknowingly stepping on fallen people walking past

avoiding them

with difficulty in a hurry walking with wife and 6 month

old fetus

past people in rows squatting and fallen

then the 22 year old, beautiful, tough wife collapses

all strength drained from lower half of body

“leave me alone

leave me and escape alone!

leave me alone” she repeats

Ashay becomes King of Evil scolds her talks to her of  
future humanity in her stomach  
“you shouldn’t kill the one inside” they both stand  
for future humanity’s sake unbelievable but mustering all  
remaining strength they start to walk again

Yellow night that night the whole world turned Yellow  
on the second day hips in pain  
third day nerves numb in lower half of body  
impossible to walk tongue won’t work  
left hand left leg immobile eyes fear light  
any brightness feared and refused by two eyeballs  
tears keep streaming out  
in the Yellow night

since then day and night the Yellow seeps into Ashay’s  
eyes body nerves tongue even reaching heart stratum  
clouding the mirror of Ashay’s future cutting possibilities  
with a saw attempting to deracinate his future breath  
while all of Ashay’s cells brain willpower sense organs  
with medication desperately fight back  
one day the Yellow smiles  
another day the Yellow is pushed back  
and the future in the movie in his eyes shines a faint light

then Ashay smiles  
a year ago he and his father Dilip shot the 2 hr. 5 min. film  
*Warehouse*  
Ashay recalls “the lighting and sweat those days I was  
cameraman father and I glanced at each other  
when we won the Prix Special du jury in Paris  
while raising a toast  
I resolved to become like filmmaker Mizoguchi”  
that decisive afternoon  
the future expanded with certainty in his wife  
Rohini’s slender body 6 months, 7 months, 8 months

pregnant but the Yellow  
the Yellow now is raping the one inside  
3 months of discomfort and doubt  
the Yellow stuffed tight in there  
pulling the feet off and hurling water on all thought

from December 3 the Yellow approaches the future  
trying to shove one human being into oblivion

but the sun counters fate counters willpower counters  
March 11 at 10:21 AM  
I step on the second floor of Pune Hospital  
the voice of birth kicks out the Yellow  
and for the first time smiles visit Ashay, wife, and family  
but the Yellow

lives everywhere like dinosaur eggs  
the Yellow lives beside lakes and in the hometown  
grasses, flowers, and colorful Springs  
of the great ancient poet Valmiki  
people sing and dance  
throwing pink paint at one another  
but at today's festival  
the Yellow wordlessly permits neither sound nor smell

“Bhopal is the Hiroshima of India  
It wasn't the victim of a military war  
But of an internal war among humans”

Yellow  
it was a Yellow night hard to breathe  
opening eyes and the Yellow  
had crept in the bedroom suddenly  
at 3 AM attempted to deracinate the couple's future breath  
and for hundreds of nights thereafter assaults

and kicks the stomach of she who carries the future inside  
the Yellow encountered at dawn on December 3, 1984

the Yellow smears itself on everything  
on us around us to us through us

wiping his lenses Ashay's lenses lenses eyeballs  
creases of the heart the cells one by one lenses face  
the future baby's first cry visible consciously  
wiping lenses lenses eyeballs

# Rachel Hadas Mortalities

I

Unmake, remake the self: this means assuming  
not that the center holds  
but that there is a center.  
Ideas of the eternal harden, cool;  
lava petrifies to posture. Me  
myself I only know what brims, what spills,  
stretched, or shrinks, by pain—  
not pain exactly; knowing something's wrong.  
Triumphantly the dowser,  
however deep the treasure lies, cries *Water!*  
touching the magical, the buried fault:  
a moment ritual cannot suffice.

II

Symbols, messages the aging hand  
scribbles at midnight and no one will read.  
The story of Frau Haydn  
using her husband's music scores  
to line her pastry pans

must be apocryphal, it turns up so often,  
yet no less true for that?  
Hours fill up with absent-minded humming.  
Drafts cross the floor; a cat's paw  
slips under the door unseen.  
Everywhere the inner skeleton  
edges closer, closer to the surface.

III

Appetite's satisfaction, glut, recovery, betrayal,  
slaking of thirst, desire' peristalsis  
gone underground still pick their patterns out.  
They surface on Occasions. We go on  
putting various objects into a hole in our face  
without being surprised or bored, says Forster.  
Need creates habit; hunger seems no longer  
a need when our upholsteries change pattern  
each season: egg creams, veal chops,  
tomato pickles, all in mythic quantities  
at Sammy's Famous. But the eyes persist:  
stubbornly they outweigh the mortal belly.

IV

A world to which return is not so much  
impossible as futile: Iason, slate-eyed,  
wounded in the Korean War, drove taxis;  
his wife was crippled by a fall; their daughter  
Katerina always dressed in black,  
mourning for whom I never learned. All this  
I see too clearly still to wish for further  
intercourse with who I thought they were,  
who (a greater riddle) they thought I was.  
Who *I* thought I was I no longer care.  
Returning bottles to the deli man from Lesbos,  
I'm asked if I will teach the baby Greek.

V

News of my sister's pregnancy is keeping me awake.  
I knew it would. There is no other news  
that's really news—death isn't in the running.  
I lie awhile, flat-bellied, then get up  
and flatten myself onto the narrow strip of floor  
wedged between desk and window in my studio.

No sky to see. The pigeons  
sleep on their crud-caked sill.  
Exiguous space, light darkness.  
Well, put the toys away and think it over.  
We rush toward the lip of the abyss  
cheered by clustering in family groups.

**VI**

Eve caused the whole fucking problem  
says a man in a group in the park  
as I trudge by pushing the stroller.  
He capers, nearly dances with conviction.  
Women and children cause the world to fall.  
These mothers bending at the sandbox bars  
wear their weariness into the future,  
feed their children *mine* and *more* with milk—  
the coming generation, the old story  
Eve started. In my yellow dress, I pick  
a dandelion, hand it to the baby  
whose fallen nature blights the soft new grass.

## VII

We had no time to lay the cornerstone before  
the place was dynamited  
down to its foundations. All the data  
needed to build with symmetry, proportion  
floated away, time capsule  
light and insouciant as a balloon.  
The building on the ruined site  
was to be named for you,  
but I forget your name. You pointed up  
at all the vanishing artifacts,  
free as a balloon whose string is cut,  
and you said: Moon.

## VIII

Reading the paper these days is more than appalling;  
Berryman reminds us it's boring. There is  
a rhythm of recurrence we somehow feel as benign  
and there are terror, cruelty, suspense,  
apparently exciting, improvised:  
the jetliner highjacked on its way home,

prayer vigils sprouting, hopelessly devout . . .  
Yet this is not new either. Oh, we pay attention,  
but spring-like, birth-like, war-like, it has all  
happened before. That we live our lives  
once only might explain the powerful  
dumb passion not to die.

# Kenzaburō Ōe

## The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born

*Translated from Japanese by Yoshio Iwamoto and Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel*

I've been hoping to write a long story about the legendary "Great Women" widely known in the valley of my forest home. I laid down a plan for it long ago—in fact, so long that it seems it's been with me since birth—and actually began work on it. I haven't completed it to this day, but the thought of it has never left my mind. I'm quite certain that, as long as I continue my writing career, keeping in mind the "Great Women" whom I have met and will meet in this life, and in the lives before and after it, how to write the story will become crystal clear, like ice melting and glistening on a window pane.

The episodes to be included in the long story have been swirling around in my head as masses of words pivoting around a nucleus made up of my childhood dreams and experiences. And now I'm ready to set down one of them. An old college friend who died of leukemia once asked me after reading a just-published novel of mine, "Why did you do away with some of the episodes from the earlier version of your novel?" Now that I'm older, I realize they were painfully earnest stories, not so much comical as nostalgic. He was on his sickbed when he said this, only a few weeks before he suffered a fatal stroke. I'd begun the novel with the idea of a mythological story about the "Great Women," but fell into the trap of producing something quite different. An Argentinian scholar of Japanese literature wrote me too, after reading the part of the novel that I'd omitted from the published version, saying, "I find your earlier account more interesting. I want to edit it and publish a 'counterfeit' edition in Spanish. Then I want to translate it into Japanese and, with it, invalidate your 'orthodox' version."

What's been happening for quite some time now is this: while devising a work on the story of the "Great Women" and actually writing some of the episodes, I'd fail to bring them together, with the result that the final product would bear little resemblance to what I'd intended. Among the anecdotes I've discarded, there may have been some of major importance, but I've burned them all, believing in my youthful mind that the passages and images once conceived and put into writing would, even if fragmented, remain as if engraved on my flesh and would be easily resurrected when a truly appropriate situation presented itself. But while I'm blocked from writing what I really ought to write—at its center sits the story about the "Great Women"—I find myself faced with signs of irrevocable death, as it has claimed the lives of many dear friends. The Argentinian friend too died, of bone cancer, two years ago.

So I'm going to write an episode now, one part of my would-be novel about the "Great Women" who float in my mind's eye like flickering stars. Who can deny that this story I am about to begin might prime the pump that will cause the work of my longstanding ambition to come pouring forth. Or it might just persuade me to give it up resignedly and leave it to a successor, who might in fact be myself reborn and full of fresh vitality.

Toward the end of the war, many women from the cities returned to the village in the valley of the forest where I grew up. Among them are some who were driven out of the community within months after their arrival, some who have stayed on in the valley for close to forty years. Many of the returnees appear to be distant relatives of my mother. That, of course, means they're my relatives too, but somewhat farther removed. The women who've remained in the village are now, like my mother, over a hundred years old. They spend their twilight years in peace, continuing to throw long glances of pity and contempt at those men who have left the village and are rushing through their lives elsewhere.

Aunt Hana, a woman of around fifty whom my mother chose among all the women returnees to treat with particular kindness, is the heroine of this story. Aunt Hana was the last person to appear back in the valley but, unlike other evacuees who managed to rent only worn-out cottages and shanties, she occupied, all by herself, the storehouse attached to the main house of a family headed by one of my numerous uncles in the village. What's more, rumor had it that the old clothes she brought out of the storehouse to sell, and actually did sell from time to time, indeed belonged to her and had been stored there for her all these years. In light of gossip

**Aunt Hana appeared to me, then a grade-school child, like a woman made up of two separate persons synthesized into one.**

of this sort and the way my mother dedicated herself to serving her, Aunt Hana appeared to me, then a grade-school child, like a woman made up of two separate persons synthesized into one. It was as if two entities, while remaining independent of each other, had somehow taken the form of one person and had returned to the valley from a distant city. It seemed as though a being, transcending both time and space, had become one with a stout woman around fifty years of age, who walked leisurely through the village streets or sat in a chair reading a book in front of the storehouse. This strange impression of a double and a synthesis had something to do with the poetry of Shikibu, and because of this association, I became implicated in an incident that developed into something new which the entire village was to experience.

On an early summer day, while playing on the school grounds after school, I happened to see from a distance a woman teacher lecturing on national literature to students in the higher grades. I walked up to the window, peeked in, then, as if lured into it, did something that, I must admit, was indeed imprudent. On the blackboard, I saw about a dozen poems by, I later learned, Lady Izumi Shikibu, a poet of the tenth century—poems that I recognized as those of Shikibu my Aunt Hana had taught me. I noticed, though, that every poem had been expanded and made longer. Why, I wondered suspiciously, had the woman teacher done such a thing?

Taking advantage of her timely absence from the scene, I crawled into the classroom through a window, picked up some chalk, and crossed out with double and even triple lines everything save the parts I'd learned and recited aloud while running errands since Aunt Hana's arrival in the village at the beginning of spring. The woman teacher, who had hoped to cope with the shortage of teaching materials by saving what she had written on the blackboard for later lessons, caught me in the middle of the act. She dragged me to the office of the principal, who beat me on one cheek with his right fist while pressing the palm of his left hand against the other. What's more, the woman teacher ridiculed and discredited a legend which, although transmitted to me by Aunt Hana, was treasured by my mother and all our kin.

What interests me now is the fact that, although I read and interpreted the poetry of Lady Izumi over the years in school, I can't recall any poem in its complete form; the only passage I remember is that part which the woman teacher called the

“poetic bridge” and which I sensed, though still a mere child at the time, as the *core*, or the *sinew*, of the poem. I believe this has a great deal to do with my conviction, ever since that day of humiliation, that it was Shikibu’s poetry—what I had come to favor and what the teacher had referred to contemptuously as the “poetic bridge”—that comprised the authentic verse and Lady Izumi’s *waka* were nothing more than poems she derived by enveloping Shikibu’s with more words and putting them into the form of *tanka*.

While walking up to a garden on a hill that my mother had leased to raise wheat and vegetables, I joined her and Aunt Hana, who came to lend us a hand, in reciting, or calling out, Shikibu’s poems. We called out, as loud as might a bird, **THOUGH I HAVE NOT FALLEN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY!** Then everything that was embodied in the *core*, or the *sinew*, of the poem, “Though I have not fallen to the bottom of the valley without flowers, how deep is my thought on this spring day,” compiled in *The Collected Poems of Lady Izumi*, would fill my mind and body and would spill over onto the entire hillside. Looking back at it now, I realize that the *core*, or the *sinew*, possesses the breadth and depth that cannot be confined by words like “without flowers” or “spring.” **THOUGH I HAVE NOT FALLEN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY!**

The principal no doubt was interested in neither *The Collected Poems of Lady Izumi* nor Shikibu, whose legend my mother and Aunt Hana had revived and enjoyed. He nimbly held one of my cheeks and beat me on the other simply to discipline an obstreperous, frail-looking child. “Where on earth would we find another idiot (ZAP!) like you, who would cross out in red and white chalk what a teacher had gone to the trouble of writing on the blackboard?”

On the other hand, the woman teacher, just as her selection of Lady Izumi for study would suggest, appeared to harbor especially strong feelings for this poet, and so she questioned me thoroughly. That, however, only encouraged my mother and Aunt Hana to fire back at her more intently. They were without a doubt avid sympathizers of Shikibu, one of our relatives, but they were wise enough not to blurt out all about our relationship to her before the principal.

About the very fact that I called the poet Shikibu, the teacher rebuked, “Referring to a historically eminent figure like Lady Izumi all too familiarly as Shikibu is something only a vulgar, mean country child would do. *Waka* is made up of 5-7-5 7-7 syllables. There are some with one or two extra sounds too, but to learn only the ‘poetic bridge’ and to insist that it in itself is a poem only exposes your ignorance and shame.”

The woman teacher was particularly irate over the fact that I had crossed out all but THE RIVER OF TEARS! from “Though the river of tears flows from this very heart, it flows not to extinguish the flames of love.” This, despite my attempts to explain that it was a poem quite familiar to me because our family chanted it whenever a relative died, as on the occasion of my father’s death, and that it was an effective way of pouring out our pain and sorrow.

“But this is a love poem, don’t you see? Its main point is the ‘inextinguishable flames of Love’. You say when your father died everyone at home shouted, THE RIVER OF TEARS!? That has nothing to do with Lady Izumi, does it? How could you be so barbaric as to shout when your father lay dead? By screaming out THE RIVER OF TEARS! what were you . . .”

There was no way I could answer these questions to her satisfaction. Supposing that there is such a thing as the deity of poetry, that deity had placed in Shikibu’s heart a single phrase, THE RIVER OF TEARS! The famous Lady Izumi of bygone days simply wrapped it with other words and handed it down to later generations in the form of 5-7-5 7-7 syllables. The deity probably forgave her, knowing there was nothing that could be done about it. For offering this piece of protest, I was again beaten (ZAP!) by the principal, who expected self-recrimination from me.

“When someone dies, would you say, ‘it flows not to extinguish the flames of love’? That would only antagonize the mourners!”

Every year in mid-spring, we piled hay and dry vines in the middle of mother’s modest garden and set them on fire before sowing new seeds. That year, with my mother and Aunt Hana standing on the north side of the fire and me on the south, we chanted our song: NOT KNOWING THAT THIS LIFE WILL BE BUT ’TIL AUTUMN! the women sang out, and I followed with HOW THEY BURN AFLAME!

Another recitation scene that comes to mind concerns Shikibu’s poem, HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE!, a favorite of Aunt Hana’s. She would take out an old kimono from a chest tucked away in the back of the storehouse, wrap it in a kerchief, and, carrying it in her arms, she would walk along the streams and over the ridges, looking for someone with whom to trade the kimono for some wheat, barley, and potatoes. The costume she would spread before a farmer’s wife, with an air neither intimidating nor base but rather casual, as if she were simply settling down to mend it in her own dwelling, was indeed so old that one could well imagine it had been worn threadbare by Shikibu herself. The antiquity of the kimono would make the farmer’s wife and me laugh, but Aunt Hana would stand there composed

with her usual expression and would only smile ever so faintly as if to humor us. A quantity of grain would then be offered to her, not as a handout, but as an offering. And as if the presentation of the kimono had been merely a preliminary, Aunt Hana, who could not have been well off, would proceed to pull out paper money folded into two and tucked in her sash (not folded many times and stuffed in a coin pouch as was the practice among most valley women) and would give it to the farmer's wife. She, in turn, would accept it heedless of the amount and would say, "Thank you for showing me such a precious treasure. It was nourishment for my eyes."

On our way back, whenever we climbed over a ridge far from any hamlet and began to see homes on the opposite mountainside, Aunt Hana, moved by the sight, would sing out, HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE! And as soon as she saw a home with a tall persimmon tree in front and a garden on the side hemmed in behind trees but well-leveled from long years of careful farming, she would cry out, HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE!

Now getting back to the argument we had with the woman teacher regarding Shikibu's verse, I wondered in my youthful innocence why the poem Aunt Hana recited, HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE!, expressing both scene and sentiment, should be considered inferior to the one the woman teacher had written on the blackboard: "Hoping for smoke to rise and console my lonely heart, I burn twigs in this winter hamlet." Aunt Hana sang out Shikibu's words to reach out to the people living in homes surrounded by gardens in the depth of the woods, and no doubt her thoughts lingered on the people leading a lonesome life. But she was not so much voicing sympathy as praising the generations of people who had lived in the isolation of the woods with diligence and courage. Wouldn't it be insulting to dismiss them simply as lonely hearts? And doesn't "I burn twigs in this winter hamlet" speak to only those who live in winter hamlets and burn twigs? HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE!, on the other hand, would apply to all sorts of situations. There was one occasion, for instance, when Aunt Hana in the company of my mother gazed up at a faintly moonlit sky at dusk and shouted, HOPING FOR SMOKE TO RISE!, as if she were sending a message out into the universe.

"I hear you called my son vulgar for reciting a 'poetic bridge,' but what sort of poems and what sort of recitation would be considered refined?" asked my mother, who had arrived with Aunt Hana in order to carry out her counterattack.

"One should recite in a low voice enunciating each word clearly, like quietly singing a song," the teacher said, and immediately gave a demonstration by reciting,

“Now that I am in love, I wonder if it is my soul wandering in the darkness, fireflies by a stream.”

Both my mother and Aunt Hana were stifling a laugh, and it was Aunt Hana who spoke up next in place of my mother, who seemed to have the wind taken out of her sails.

“Shikibu simply said, I WONDER IF IT IS MY SOUL WANDERING IN THE DARKNESS! I wonder if that isn’t more refined? At least we think so. Of course the question of refinement or vulgarity is a subjective matter, but . . .”

“There’s such a thing as form in *waka*,” the teacher snapped. “You may not understand what I’m saying, but as a prominent scholar once said, the form of *waka* is more important than its meaning. If you take the 5-7-5 7-7 form apart and keep only the ‘poetic bridge,’ you’re left without a ‘form.’ That sort of thing is no longer *waka*.” Then my mother artlessly came up with a question.

“Shikibu wrote, ALTHOUGH WE MAY NEVER GROW TO BE UNITED! How did Lady Izumi turn that into a *waka*?”

“Unable to see you I long to hear from you, although we may never grow to be united,” the teacher recited slowly, deliberately stressing the difference in accent between hers and my mother’s.

“I see. I wondered sometimes what it was about, but now I understand.”

“Of course. If you don’t have the first 5-7-5, you won’t know what the whole poem means.”

“But you said that what’s important is the form and not the meaning,” challenged Aunt Hana. “As soon as we chant, ALTHOUGH WE MAY NEVER GROW TO BE UNITED! we can see the form of Shikibu’s words. Is there anyone else who can come up with a phrase like that? You said it’s the form that counts, but if 5-7-5 7-7 syllables comprise a form, then wouldn’t any type of poetry constitute a form? Shikibu’s words come together and become a form that only she can create, and when we recite those words out loud, both our minds and bodies unite as one with Shikibu’s form.”

The woman teacher was no doubt an earnest, intelligent person. It occurs to me now that she may even have studied the poetry of Lady Izumi under an authority on the subject when she was in woman teachers college. The teacher grew silent and her head began to droop, as she chased after Aunt Hana’s words. But the next moment, she lifted her face abruptly (it was early fall, and the air was still warm enough to make her unkempt hair cling to her pale sweaty forehead, narrow as the palm of a hand and bulging) and began to assail us with harsh words.

“You and all of your relatives are a disgrace! What you’ve been saying is inexcusable even for countryfolk. To call a historically prominent person like Lady Izumi in the familiar way you do—that’s sheer impertinence! Don’t you realize it’s terribly rude to call her Shikibu? And not only don’t you straighten your child out about it, you call her by that name yourselves!”

“Of course if you talk about famous people, historical figures or other wise, as if you were very close to them, you deserve to be scorned. We country folk, above all, are thoroughly aware of that. But Shikibu has been someone close to the women in our family. That’s why, though uneducated, we know Shikibu’s poems, handed down to us orally, and understand both the content and form of her words,” Aunt Hana calmly explained.

“Someone close to the women in your family, you say? What are you talking about? Even if you mean your women relatives of generations ago, they couldn’t possibly have belonged to the poet’s time. Historical records tell us that her father Ōe no Masamune lived around the year 999 by the Western calendar.”

“While we’ve been talking all along about Shikibu, you’ve been telling us about Lady Izumi, my mother cut in. We weren’t referring to anyone so great like Lady Izumi . . .”

While I sat by my mother and Aunt Hana, the principal was seated behind the woman teacher, keeping his face turned half away from us. But he stood up abruptly when the teacher remained silent for some time. I trembled and grew apprehensive, my hairs on end, afraid that he might hit my mother and Aunt Hana as he had beaten me. But he simply walked over to a corner of the room, stamping his feet in oversize shoes like soldier’s boots, and picked up a broom leaning against a wall. Aunt Hana got up promptly, and my mother, who followed suit, touched me lightly on the neck, as if to signal that we, or any one of our relatives, could not let the principal, an outsider, chase us out with a broom. Aunt Hana, my mother, and I, with a swollen face, walked out of the room and cut across the school grounds in the evening sun. When we reached the back gate, Aunt Hana turned in the direction of her storehouse, while my mother and I took the path to the center of the valley.

I can visualize now the woman teacher, her complexion, unlike a villager’s, so fair that her face wore a bluish-gray tint, and her naturally curly hair, damp from sweat, hanging over the nape of her neck and behind her ears, climbing with downcast eyes in a man’s shirt and work pants up a narrow path between an old plaster wall

and a field, on her way to a cottage belonging to the postmaster. I recall now as I approach fifty that her figure, from behind, looked like that of a woman barely thirty years of age; she is no longer the classroom tyrant backed by the authority of the principal but a bewildered victim, sent out into an arena full of strangers.

Toward the middle of the fall, delightfully titillating rumors about the woman teacher's strange conduct began to spread. Gossip had it that, on a faintly moonlit evening, the teacher half hid herself in the hollow of a giant elm tree standing by the abode of Jizō, the guardian deity of children, next to the Mishima Shrine (this roundabout expression suggested to me, still a young boy then, that she was in the nude); she danced, twisting her body and stamping her feet, with breathtaking passion, while emitting thin, shrill cries of desperation. Standing on street corners in the eventide, the adults continued to gossip about her. "She knows nothing about the customs of our valley, and yet she's been so contemptuous of us. But even she knew better than to act obscenely in the hollow of a tree on the shrine ground, and reverently came down as far as Jizō's place . . ."

Then came the day when we witnessed the woman teacher in her most decisive act, something we talked about for a long time afterward. On that day, even old folk who seldom ventured out and those who were ill stood or sat on whatever they could find under the eaves of their houses to watch the teacher. The main highway cutting through our village was lined by a crowd of people so thick that it looked as if we were once again celebrating our autumn festival put on hold since the beginning of the war. What occurred that day was clearly an unexpected event, but the anticipation of it must have saturated the valley and even its periphery, for spectators, some spending as much as half a day to get to our village, filled the roadside all the way from the Mishima Shrine, the center stage of the day, across the bridge, and up to Monkey-Shrine Mountain on the other side of the river. I noted that it was like our autumn festival, and it was in fact a fall celebration. The street the crowd lined was the very road on which the parade of the portable shrine and the Cow Monster used to take place during our autumn festival. The lonely feeling that overtook us as the excitement subsided once the event was over was also identical with the emotion we always experienced after our annual fall merrymaking.

From morning, premonitions of a happening gradually mounted among the village people. Exactly at noon, news reached us that the woman teacher, covering herself from head to toe with a bedsheet sewn into a cone-shaped gown, had secluded herself in the main hall of worship at Mishima Shrine. The priest of the shrine, a descendant of a historically renowned leader of an early-Meiji farmer's

uprising, did not know how to drive the woman teacher away and merely walked distractedly to and fro in his office. Children ran up and down the steps leading to the hall of worship, hoping for a glimpse of the woman in the white cone-cover. At three o'clock in the overcast afternoon, as a wild wind shook the evergreen trees and flapped the crimson leaves of the trees covering the surrounding mountains, turning the scene into a riot of colors, the teacher appeared and stood by the coin box for offerings, forcing the children to disperse in all directions. She proceeded across the yard, dragging the base of the triangular gown on the ground, to the top of the stone steps well over a hundred meters long. But when she stopped to peek through an opening in the gown down at the stairs, a gust of wind came up with one big upward sweep and peeled the bedsheet off her body. The white cloth flew over the valley like a gigantic white bird and disappeared into a high hill covered with evergreens. Stripped naked and diminished in size, the teacher began to descend the stairs in hurried, but firm, steps.

The spectators cheered when the woman reached the bottom of the stone stairs and began to walk straight up the main highway. I was waiting at the foot of the bridge and, when the joyful shouts came up from down the river, I echoed their cries. Soon she appeared before me, looking rushed but calm. She was followed by a herd of children and the adults in charge who tried to restrain the excited children from running ahead of her. The woman's abdomen was flat, as if devoid of intestines. It was covered by a wide band of pubic hair from around her anus almost up to her navel.

Her face, pale as if never exposed to the sun, was covered with sweat that dribbled down to her flat chest. The face bore the expression of intense concentration; only her lips moved perpetually. She walked past me, displaying pubic hair that looked like a mouse peeping out from between her thin, pointed buttocks and spread out like the wings of a bat. I stood completely stunned, my heart pounding noisily. Unable to move and join the stream of people following the teacher, I was shoved and poked by the mob until I fell into a ditch, where the clear water covered my bare feet up to my ankles.

Nearly an hour later, the procession returned in the midst of still-mounting laughter and obscene shouts of people possessed by a festive mood. The woman teacher looked thoroughly drained, but still she marched at the head of the rowdy crowd. What surprised me this time was that, her whole body covered with dried-up leaves and grass, she looked like the larva of a dragonfly camouflaged in a coat of dead insects and dust. The withered greens clinging to her body would be blown

away by a sudden gust of wind from time to time, but they would immediately be replaced by a fresh supply that people flung at her.

On the following day when the first thick fog of the fall lifted, the woman teacher, on her way back to her home in a coastal town, sat forlornly by a pile of huge logs loaded on a truck, her small bundle of belongings on her lap. Still numb from the astonishing experience of the previous day, she lifted her now-slightly-tanned face and looked over at the slate roofs bunched over the main highway.

The truck had been loaded a long time before, but the driver sat a short distance away smoking a cigarette made, very likely, of corn husks. Some of the men folk, and we children too, stood beside the truck, now smiling vaguely and now looking serious, without ever gazing straight at the teacher or speaking to her. When she tired of looking at the roofs, the woman teacher would carefully pick ants crawling on her bare feet and legs and place them on a damp log next to her.

Suddenly one of the men shouted in a voice at once irritated and indifferent, "Check the rope! If it's loose, she'll be crushed in an instant." More than a few men jumped onto the truck to make certain the logs were wedged securely.

Seeing what was happening, the driver, till then a picture of composure, sprang to his feet and, with the help of his assistant, began to drag the men down. The young fellows, idlers in the valley at this time of national emergency, had been spared the draft and fighting in the war. They were no match for the truck driver and his comrade serving the military by cutting and hauling lumber. But the teacher paid no attention to the scuffle and appeared to be gazing once again at the roofs and beyond. Taking advantage of this development, the driver got into his seat and began to drive away, leaving behind a burst of laughter. I watched the teacher's head swaying behind the huge logs and was overcome with a resounding sense of regret.

My memory tells me that the event occurred on a windy, cloudy day, and that there was another development on the following, first cold day of autumn. It's this latter part of my recollection that has become progressively more real since my childhood days. If I were to ask my mother, now eighty years old, or Aunt Hana, still living in the valley at age ninety, about it, they would simply dismiss it as a remnant of my childish dreams. But I recall that scene quite vividly even today.

Late at night after the woman teacher left the village on the logging truck, I delivered to Aunt Hana a bottle of freshly brewed sweet *sake* obtained from relatives on the edge of the valley, uncorking the bottle several times as I walked along to

let out the pressure from the fermentation. The door of the storehouse, too heavy for me alone to push, had been left open just enough for me to pass through. My mother was there too, sitting under a bare lightbulb, hovering over a shallow basket of gleamingly white beans and sorting out the good ones from the bad.

I found Aunt Hana standing on the dirt floor just inside the door and affectionately watching the woman teacher wipe her feet after washing them in a basin of water. She had walked barefoot up the long slope to the storehouse. The wisdom we valley children shared told me that there had been a reconciliation between the teacher and our village.

I've already written about how, on the afternoon of the previous day, I was pushed away from the flow of the crowd while watching the parade and fell into a ditch, its clear water reaching up to my ankles. We children were all barefoot that festival day due in part to a commodity shortage caused by the war, in part to another factor.

I need not close my eyes to call up every detail of the festival triggered by the nude woman. I can see her dust-covered feet moving forward with firm steps. Although naked, the woman teacher wore a pair of socks and straw sandals with red straps. By the time of her return, her footwear had worn out and her heels were protruding from the socks. Still she kept them on her feet. She must have known that it was taboo for her, as an outsider, to step on the forest ground barefoot.

On the other hand, I, a child of the village, stood barefoot in the clear water that covered my feet. It was spring water that came flowing down from the forest into our valley. The ditch had once been a canal, and even now the water links the village with the forest. If there was any unusual development in the woods, we would see it in the water. If the ditch dried up, for instance, we knew that it was a sign for a poor fall harvest. But the woman teacher had now walked barefoot as a matter of course and was washing her feet, at once made filthy and purified by the earth, with water from Aunt Hana's water hole situated on higher ground than the others.

**I need not close my eyes to call up every detail of the festival triggered by the nude woman.**

In the scene that follows in my memory, my mother is cooking the beans in the kitchen beyond the entrance and, twisting her body around, is nodding at Aunt Hana and the woman teacher as they talk in the drawing room. They are all drinking sweet *sake*. Uninvited into the room, I drink mine watered down, standing on

the dirt floor. Aunt Hana, bubbling with contentment, speaks with ease and calm. The woman teacher too looks relaxed under the shower of Aunt Hana's words. She is telling the woman teacher, in thanks and as assurance, that the event of the previous day has assumed a totally new meaning and that she will enjoy many happy days at her job as teacher, appreciated, not only by the villagers, but also by the beasts, fish, birds, trees, and grass of the forest for the blessing she has brought the valley. It is indeed a celebration.

The nude woman teacher walks through the highway and across the bridge toward the Monkey-Shrine Mountain that rises from a flat area of fertile farmland. This mountain, more like a high hill, has a Shinto gate and stone steps too. Halfway up the steps is the Monkey Shrine my mother manages. (During yesterday's incident, my mother and Aunt Hana remained closeted in the hall, offering up prayers.) The stairs, however, continue up to the very top of the hill, where there is the detached hall of worship belonging to the Mishima Shrine—the place to which the portable shrine used to be carried and the Cow Monster came running at festival time. Had "permission" been granted before the woman teacher began ascending the steps, an occurrence quite different from the event of the previous day would have taken place. The villagers would then remember, when they wake up the following morning, what should have happened as the authentic event has actually occurred. Thereafter the woman teacher would have nothing to fear.

In the authentic event, the teacher, lured by the voice of my mother in seclusion in the Monkey Shrine since early morning, enters the building and slips into a kimono brought from Aunt Hana's storehouse. My mother helps her in the same way she served Shikibu. When the woman teacher climbs the stairs again and reaches the detached shrine, the crowd spilling over the hill comes to the solemn realization that what is taking place is a long-lost sacred ritual, conducted in concert by deity and men in ancient times, and that the ritual has now been revived.

The woman teacher confides to Aunt Hana and my mother in a happily intoxicated voice: "Since the end of the summer, whenever the moon began to rise, I stole out of my house, sensing poems springing up within me, climbed the narrow road, and hid myself between the Mishima Shrine and Jizō's abode. I had the urge to sing them out into the hollow of the elm tree familiar to everyone in the valley since the olden days, that giant tree that stood leaning as if to envelop the entire shrine. MY BODY CANNOT FOLLOW WHAT MY HEART DESIRES! MY BODY CANNOT FOLLOW WHAT MY HEART DESIRES! Or, I DWELL IN THE LAND OF THE HEARTLESS! I DWELL IN THE LAND OF THE HEARTLESS! I trembled as I

sang. What enabled me to recite those poems, one after another, as if they came pouring out of my body?"

"You've known the reason for a long time," said Aunt Hana, her classically featured face full of smiles. My mother, also smiling amiably, echoed her words, while the woman teacher continued to ask questions like a child or even an infant.

"I appreciate Shikibu now because she's ancient and like a deity. But why is it that I used to think she had never existed? How is it possible that poems composed by a person who had never existed could be handed down to us and that we who actually exist could never think of creating verse better than hers? Were those poems written by rocks and trees and plants? And if I did think they were composed by a human being, who else could it be but Shikibu? Then how could it possibly be that I thought she had never existed? WHY DID I GRIEVE 'TIL YESTERDAY?! WHY DID I GRIEVE 'TIL YESTERDAY?!"

# Krystyna Lars

## Seven Scenes from the Life of Men

*Translated from Polish by Daniel Bourne*

### (#1) KOSCIUSZKO

Over Petersburg comes the wind. The scent of grain. At times the dawn sky is red and white, at times like the blue of a swordblade, at times it bursts forth like a burning bush. He is free to take his time, to smoke and read. The ink in its well ages like black wine. The snow-covered peaks of Switzerland glisten above the Peter-Paul Fortress. The Neva River like a looking glass. Just one step. The earth turns slowly, balanced on the edge of an officer's saber. He is free to take his time, to write. Beyond the walls, the Winter Palace. It might as well be the Himalayas. The broken ribbon of the Vistula. The Cossacks outside the window. On the table a freshly-prepared quill. Blotter, a few pencils, a piece of white paper nearby. His first words: "It is most obvious that I lost my way." The messenger—a young man from Bobrujsko—has arrived from the printer. Puffing on raw tobacco, he waits patiently, in love with his new job. This is easier, more interesting, than his time with the Russians at Modlin. Besides, just yesterday he had his first reading lesson.

Heaven opens and the spilled drawers of type fall like snow on the white steppe.

## **(#2) PRINCE JÓZEF**

Upon your wounded chest, the red-purple amaranth and gilding dazzle. A brush smoothes out the swirling river of lost memory. Your sword, freshly polished, knocked out of your hand, slowly revolves in the cold air. Its whistling flight across the water will last forever. We listen to your words. They are beautiful, so full of truth.

But it is your horse which captures our eyes. His swollen nostrils, his mane breaking out under your white gloves like a black flame, the taut glistening of his leg muscles. He is so beautiful. But we know that he is strong as well, that he will swim to the other side.

### **(#3) ORDON**

No illusions. In a moment they will strike. Already you can make out their black helmets. They are coming. Unsuspecting, they are coming. Their pink necks are cleanly shaven, their hair as yellow as steppe grass. In their pockets are their mobilization cards. They can already feel the bullets from their officer's revolver in their backs. They know that if they are careful, tomorrow they will return to the village. So they are careful. They quiet the clinking of their medals. They speed up their pace. In a moment they will be here.

You look down at your hands. You see nothing in them of shame, a mother's anger. At hand is the powder. At the rain barrel's bottom, a reflection of the sun's bald head. An ant creeps up your sleeve. It climbs to your soldier's stripes, to the insignia "for you as well as for us." The ant still has a few seconds to live. The phosphorous match does not want to light. Your only thought: will you succeed?

Then the earth changes into a white shudder. Then you watch it turn black. From the kicked-up cloud looms your mother's face. Naples and gray Vesuvius. The small village near Borodino. The red rowan in the birch trees. The crimson.

#### **(#4) WALLENROD**

Paper helmets, plumes of chicken feathers, wooden swords. The Grand Master is a boy who lives on the edge of town. His movements are certain, planned in advance. He never cries, keeps his fingernails black, enforces peace and order. They are ready to march. The army will soon cross the paved bottom of the Niemen. By noon they will have reached Lida and Berlin. Everyone stands at his post. The armored-plates of tinfoil glisten.

Only the role of the Lithuanians remains to be settled. A wooden pike lies on the sidewalk, abandoned by the redhead across the street. There he is sitting against the wall, the sweat from his fingers rubbing off as he turns the pages of a comic book. On its blue-purplish cover, you can see your iron breast. Your hands jut from steel sleeves. The great sword. Your lover Aldona is nowhere in sight. Only a white kerchief hangs from the tower.

Everyone knows that the redhead is the milkman's son, that he has trouble throwing a knife into the black back of a tree.

#### **(#5) ARK OF THE COVENANT**

The bunkers in Marienburg stand gaping, o Wallenrod. The wind kicks up through the burnt towers. Snow falls on the charcoal of stumps. Everyone knows it was Grandfather Frost and not you who did your cohorts in. In the illustrated weeklies we see your picture reproduced. The face of an inept leader (stupidly you pick your battle during winter), the drinking, the self-inflicted death by morning. Kerosene, the broken lamp, your beard bursting into flame. The fire spreads to your heavy coat, to the lake of vodka on the table.

We still think our enemy is as stupid as he is strong.

The apprehension of Halban a few days after your accident. He had on him a dirty wad of manuscripts. One cannot deny the poems were lofty. Clumsily written. Maybe it is better no one will read them.

Now Halban works on Black Street. A copyist for the Tsarist police. They keep him busy on the minutes of Traugutt's investigation. He has given up poetry. Only in the evenings will he read a little. For the most part he keeps silent and studies foreign languages.

**(#6) SLOWACKI**

The mirror fogs over. In the depths of the room a glassy shimmer. A clearing filled with snow. The emptiness birched by the whips of shadows. The red couplets of rowan berry.

In the washbowl a damp towel. The flash of the sun on a silver spoon left on the sill. At the bottom of a glass the black sludge of light. The flame gone cold in the crimson fire. The glow of spilled wine thickens.

The city sky flushed with fire. Scarlet. A cry rings out resonant as gold. Wave after wave of swallows erase and rewrite the first light of dawn. The black wreaths of cyprus tap slowly on the window. A vegetable cart in the courtyard. The chopped off heads. Wet, slippery hands. The setting in of cold and rain.

The luminous body keeps throbbing in its sky-blue bedsheets.

The fever mounts on the forehead of earth.

Page after page the sun puts the sky to the fire.

**(#7) WITKACY**

The rain plunges into the deep water of dawn.

Greenery fills the compartment. Its swollen stream like thick strands of hair filled with nightingales and will-o'-the-wisps emptying out of a large mirror. It splashes onto my hands. Beyond the window a great silver lake suddenly opens itself up to view. Like red apples, Cossack heads bob on the glassy surface amidst the metal leaves of sweet flag. The comet's tail glistens.

A heavy pistol pokes out from behind the clouds and bangs out its white corrections on the typescript of night. In the corner by the door to the compartment a black overcoat rocks without hands. We are already there. The light bursts out purple in the nickel-plating around us. The plush headrest quickly overgrows with slimy moss. Wet print runs down the side of the newspaper. A still burning stub sizzles dead inside the mirror. Giant dew-covered ferns cut through the glass and make their way inside. The sun gushes through the cracks in the forest canopy. The train cars rumble like a bomber in the fog.

A pale razorblade slips from your hands and into the water. The quick reflection. The murky startled fish vanish beneath the night skin. Slanted eyes open and close among the black rocks of the bottom. The cavalry pounds beneath the ice. The steppe rocks in the cold riverbed of darkness. The roar of tunnels.

The blade creeps about the bottom. Gropes through the twisted scarlet weeds. Glistens. Then it approaches my naked feet. The toenails' blue enamel. Near my

ankle pulses a pink gash. The upholstery on your seat puckers up like the arched spine of a frightened wave. The throb and quiver. The plunk of coins lost to view.

Steel glistens like a blue shard of mirror. Changes color as it refracts every light from the sky. While above the forest the deep purple dawn rattles its wings above the unsheathed sharp edge of blackness.

**(#8) IRONY, MY DEAR SISTER**

Irony, my dear sister . . . Black ivy crawls the high buildings. Diseased reptiles chase their tails in the elevator shafts. A charred pigeon alights on the windowsill and shakes ash from his feathers. The shadows slowly sag from the walls and onto the cracked pavement. They look like the baggy clothes of an invisible body. Black water scrubs the smelly underbellies of the stopped trams. The town looks deserted.

You are the only one around, walking the rows of shop windows. In the tinted panes you see your wreath of white roses reflected. In each glass sarcophagus there lies a paper casket stuffed with letters. The pages hand each other twigs of laurel. The lines of poetry weave themselves into garlands. They mimic the morning glories that twist through their images. Dry rivers start to gurgle. Someone's voice. Someone's crying.

This then is Fire. The fire which writes its alexandrines of breath on the tips of its own tongues. The perfectly-transparent hand which forges the white shape of each Letter.

Admit, my sister, your perspective has been wrong.

We have no higher calling than to express with our own lives the Written Word.

# Robert Cooperman Mary McCormick Talks to a Lawyer, Five Years After Being Seduced by Three Priests

You get used to it,  
learn to look at the ceiling,  
to count the cracks,  
try to remember what you did yesterday,  
what you will do when you leave,  
when, for the time being, it's over.

Worse than doing it was knowing  
they'd want you again, if not  
right away, then in a day or two,  
as if you had no life of your own.

Worse yet was having to pretend  
it was your fault if nothing happened,  
like with Father Matthews  
when he just lay there,  
and you'd have to stroke his soggy hair,  
kiss his shoulder and tell him lies,  
when all you wanted was to lie in a bath  
so hot it would burn away  
the memory of every touch,

as if you'd been reborn  
when you stepped out, water-heavy,  
but rid of the other heaviness.

You were glad when you missed your periods,  
soon the fathers would pretend there was no one  
in the world named Mary McCormick  
and that no priest had ever done to her  
what only a husband should.

They wanted you to have an abortion,  
clamored so loudly you'd think  
you had no part in it but to take  
the minutes like a secretary.  
The baby was your one rebellion;  
you were sixteen, a good girl  
who agreed with everyone  
so they'd like you.

# Mrs. Lynch Talks of Mary McCormick, the Girl Who Accused Three Priests of Seducing Her

I've known little bitches  
like her all my life,  
their noses and butts stuck  
so high in the air  
you'd think St. Peter  
himself had goosed her.

Haven't I seen her mooning  
after the fathers like a kitten  
wanting nothing but milk  
and to try its claws on something?

And me on my knees all day,  
scrubbing and praying,  
and my man dead  
these twenty years  
and no one to fill his side  
of the bed, not that he was there  
so often—lapping beer  
and the tarts like a tom cat  
gone to fornicator's heaven.

I'd have made Father Kriek  
a fine sister, I would,  
saved the breasts of the chicken,  
the prime of the roast for him,  
then sat with him, knitting  
with just one lamp on,  
to give the parlor a cozy glow  
while he read, or sipped something  
cultured, like sherry.  
Then he'd kiss my forehead  
and climb the stairs, prayer  
the last thing he did  
before closing his eyes.

Can't I see him there now,  
his hands crossed on his chest,  
not a drop of sweat on him  
on even the hottest nights,  
while I made sure  
everything was tight and snug below.

# Mrs. Miller Talks of the Priests Who Seduced Mary McCormick

Didn't I say it was about time  
Father Kriek had his prostate operation,  
*if* he was going to have one?  
the one infallible proof  
of chastity in a priest,  
the gland swelling from abstinence;  
like the sheets all bloody  
after the bride's first night—  
a fine custom, to my mind,  
one that should never have passed away  
like so many other good old things.

But those days of holiness  
are gone forever, replaced  
by this new church  
and its fornicating fathers  
who haven't the conviction  
of a squirrel, let alone  
holy men of God.

And anyway, this Father Kriek  
is a Polack; if it comes to it  
little better than Red  
in a pinch, no doubt  
sowing the seeds of communism  
while he butted away,  
telling the silly girl  
we're all equal, priest and man;  
and that's one step  
from Moscow and beet soup.

It's a sad, stupid world,  
I tell you, going to hell  
faster than those awful motorcycles;  
good God, the noise they make!  
Half the boys who ride them  
queerer than three dollar bills.

# Allen Learst

## A Sheet, a Clothesline, a Bed

AUGUST 15, 1970

What is it? I don't know. It comes nearer. My toes dig into cool sand. I'm so god-damned stoned. Earlier, at the perimeter. Black cloth hanging from barbed wire. A gook kid. You get us dinky dao? We buy from you? No sweat, GI. You number fucking one, GI. A green patch floats on the South China Sea, but looks white to me until I know it's green because Mr. Brown says so. Is white a primary color? The absence of color? The whole world gone white. White out. Flashback from Hawaiian acid I took on R and R. Yes, the absence of color. Yes. A sail from a Vietnamese fishing boat. Mr. Brown doesn't think so. "It's a fucking parachute," Homeboy says. I look at Mr. Brown and Homeboy. Now they are all colors: black silhouettes and elongated shadows streaking across the beach. I love them. I love the gook kid who brings us weed. Mr. Brown says, "Made of silk, ain't it?" Yes. Silk. Like farting through silk, my father said each payday. "Worth beaucoup dope," says Homeboy. Beaucoup: much, many. I love them beaucoup.

The chute—a sheet in the wind, the water a clothesline, a bed—nears the shore, and Homeboy says, "Wade out and get it, Mr. Brown." Floating. Rolling. Colors in Mr. Brown's brown eyes in the whites of his eyes say, "You fucking crazy, man. Sharks out there." Mr. Brown's brown eyes say sharks out there, man. Now green nylon cords spread like tentacles from a Portuguese man-of-war. Sting the shit out of you. Only cure is piss on the welts. Unraveling, untangling. Mr. Brown's brown arms pull on the nylon cords. Water laps his legs. "Something inside," Mr. Brown shouts. A fish?

. . . bloated . . . man . . . pilot. Words in the surf. The silk unmakes itself into a fighter pilot stuffed into a G-suit. American. Homeboy says, "Jesus Christ." Rubbery skin. Gray hands. Mr. Brown says: "I need help." Fat white man. Poor fat dead white man. His head a green helmet—his eyes covered by a sun visor. Homeboy says we need to turn him loose, drag that white boy up on the beach so his mama can have him back. Dead fighter pilot boy whose mama wants him back. Mr. Brown rolls that dead fighter up on the beach, pulls the silk behind, loosens the cords from his feet. In a few hours military police will remove his helmet, his visor no longer shading his dead eyes, his suit unzipped, his dog tags removed; one gleams Robert Spendlove when the MP says his name under Vietnam moonlight. Where are Mr. and Mrs. Spendlove tonight? "Holy shit," Homeboy says. "Did you see Robert's face?" Robert's face is wrinkled, and his eyes like shriveled grapes looking at Homeboy. Holy shit.

**JULY 21, 1973**

Where are we? We're with these two chicks from the neighborhood. Both good fucks. They're upstairs in my apartment. Nothing special. Cheap. I rent from Ma. She owns a pool hall downstairs. We're downstairs in Ma's Pool Hall. She sells beer and wine, sometimes hard stuff. Ma likes me and Mr. Brown. We're cool. She says, "Who you got up there?" Ma is closed, blinds drawn, lights out. Her fat hangs over the arms of her chair, droops from her face. Legs too heavy to move. Mr. Brown smiles that big white Mr. Brown smile. "Some girls," he says. Girls. Yes. "Women, Mr. Brown. Women," says Ma. Dago Girl and Peroxide, Mr. Brown calls them. Peroxide's big blue Polack eyes, cleavage. Dago Girl's nipples. Jet black hairs growing out of them. Two girls sipping Jim Beam. Two girls waiting for Mr. Brown and me.

Ma doesn't ask about the war, but she asks about Homeboy. "Prison," I say. "Jackson for busting up a white man." Bar fight. A broken white man. Too long ago. Ma only says: "Poor Homeboy." Her eyes follow Mr. Brown to the back room where she keeps her stash. "Where'd you get that name, Mr. Brown?" says Ma. From Homeboy. Mr. Brown from Detroit town. "My real name's Toby. Tobias Jones." Jim Beam and beer in Mr. Brown's brown hand. Upstairs. Yes. Peroxide says, "Mr. Brown, you one pretty brown man." A ceiling fan. Detroit heat around a pretty brown man. Dago Girl drops ice into glasses. Mr. Brown pours Jim Beam. Peroxide says, "It feels good," squeezes Mr. Brown's thigh. "All of us getting to know each

other this way.” Mr. Brown’s hand slides up a red skirt to creamy white panties. Knowing. A hard cock against Peroxide’s leg. Ice clinks in glasses. Dago Girl’s hand inside my shirt. She says, “Come in here.” Now Peroxide and Mr. Brown follow Dago Girl into the bedroom. Zippers. Undressing. A white sheet. A bed for Mr. Brown and me. Dago Girl’s perfumed hair. Mr. Brown’s sweat. White arms and brown legs unweave a tangled sheet. Where are we? The apartment. Yes. A tongue on Dago Girl’s nipple, fingers around Mr. Brown’s cock, a thigh pressed between Peroxide’s legs, Mr. Brown’s brown hand on white ass. Dago Girl says, “Touch all of me.” Breathing. Mr. Brown untwists the sheet from Peroxide’s long legs, pulls her onto the floor, sets her free of the bed. “Oh God,” she says. Laughing. She takes Mr. Brown’s brown hand, leads him to the bath, and then a shower curtain slides. Closes. Water. I’m so goddamned drunk. Oh God.

#### DECEMBER 16, 1976

Where does he go? Nowhere. What I know is this: Homeboy is put into a cell across from a man he calls One-Eyed Crane. In his third year at Jackson, Homeboy kills him. Yes. Unknowing. Kills him.

What I imagine is this: Crane lying on a bed, staring through the blackness at Homeboy. He sees everything with one blue eye, reads Homeboy’s lips; he knows when a deal goes down, shivers under his sheet. Excited. Homeboy warns him: “Motherfucker,” he says, “if your eye offends me, I’ll pluck it out.” Crane loves Homeboy’s mouth. Thick lips. Pink inside. He loves to watch it in the dark. Yes. In the night, Homeboy’s lips say, “Look brother, dope for beaucoup green.” A white face, a uniform, a nightstick. “Don’t cross me, boy,” it says. Betrayed. No reason. A deal gone wrong. Homeboy finds Crane in a prison laundry room.

“Christ,” Crane says, “the nigger’s got me.” A sheet around his head. A cord around his neck. One eye loose from its socket. Crane’s dead—Homeboy his killer. Jesus.

I know it’s close to Christmas because lights strung around a tree look white to me until she says, “I love the colors. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” Her name is Nurse; the lights in Nurse’s eyes say, “Do you like the ornaments? Can I bring you anything?” Beautiful. Ornaments. Cigarettes. I love this pretty white nurse who brings me cigarettes. Beaucoup cigarettes. Yes. She doesn’t ask about Homeboy, but shows Mr. Brown where to find me. Veteran’s hospital. Detroit. Mr. Brown works at Ford’s now. He comes to see me, tells me he methodically stacks numbered parts

with a fork lift in a warehouse called Bondage Stores. He wants to know when I'll leave the hospital. He has a pretty brown wife, a little brown boy. "Mr. Brown," I say, "just light this cigarette for me."

FALL 1990

# John Agard Limbo Dancer & the Press

The western press never took kindly  
to limbo dancer gyrations

described by one paper as deadly  
to international relations  
hazard to territorial integrity

With head perched in highlands of Guyana  
knees spread wide in Venezuela

neck arched somewhere in Argentina  
toes touching Falklands

hands cleaving chill Afghanistan air  
legs bent bowl-like across U.S.S.R.

limbs doing frenzied to & fro  
between Southern Africa & Lesotho

& when limbo dancer cried in Namibia  
a limbo of tears descended in Soweto

Cynics called this a cheap acrobatic stunt  
the western press cried Soviet propaganda

From the Kremlin there was no comment at first  
but things really got worse  
when limbo dancer rippled under  
Berlin Wall to applause of tourists

To the Soviets this was no acrobatic stunt  
this was bourgeois & decadent

No one thought of calling limbo dancer  
simply a child of the universe

WINTER 1993

# Marguerite Bouvard In Argentina

FOR JUANITA

In another country, you would be telling stories  
to your grandchildren. You would be sweeping  
your house with gusto,  
not with defiance. You want to sell

the too large house, but you would have to admit  
your son's death, the deed  
is in his name. Instead, you scrub the room  
that was his medical office.

In another country, your house would not be  
trashed by the police  
whenever you travel, or spray-painted  
*"mother of a terrorist."*

At 75, you move with the ease  
of a dancer. You prefer standing  
when you talk, to make a point.  
Your arms trace a wide arc:

There is no space large enough  
to contain your wrath. Like my great-aunt  
in Normandy, who presides over flocks,  
you are smiling and apple-cheeked.

But you lead demonstrations.  
You shake your finger at a plainclothes man,  
hissing, "Take your hands off  
that kid." In another country,

you would be a diminutive grandmother  
making preserves. In Argentina,  
you tower above the caudillos,  
the heroes, and the statues in the squares.

# Nicholas Rinaldi

## Handkerchief

The leaflets from the planes  
tell us how to surrender: hands in the air,  
no guns, wave a white flag.  
But white is forbidden. Jawad Shaul  
was shot in the head by a captain  
for keeping a white handkerchief in his pack.

When we buried him, I took the handkerchief  
and stuck it in my boot.  
My boots are never off. I sleep in them.  
I dream in them, and in my dreams  
I walk in them, finding my way back to Baiji,  
where Nazima, Jawad's sister, waits for me  
with black tea. Last summer, on a rooftop,  
we made love under a cloudy moon,  
in the unbearable heat. Now I must  
carry this news to her about Jawad.  
She will blame me. She will not forgive me  
for losing him. What can I say to her  
to explain how he died?

When the American tanks come,  
we'll not defend.  
We shall rush forward with Jawad's handkerchief,  
leaving the captain dead in the sand.

# Ghada Samman

## From *Beirut Nightmares*

*Translated from Arabic by Paula Haydar*

### NIGHTMARE 14

I see the man emerge from the heart of the darkness. I see the man put a black mask on his face. I see the man knock on the big door. I see the man meet the man (the big one). I see them conclude the deal. I see the man leave carrying the “crazy powder.” I see the man get paid. I see the man climb the mountain. I see the man throw the “crazy powder” into the spring that Beirut drinks from. I see the crazy powder touch the spring and the fire flare up in the water, and bubbles of smoldering embers overflow . . . I see the man lean over the spring and drink, his ten fingers transform into the claws of a wild animal, and his hair gets longer, and his clothes fall off of him like a dry peel, and his body emerges from it, transformed into the body of an angry gorilla. The ape reaches out with his hand, breaks off a green tree branch, and runs off with it in a fury towards the city . . . and the fire blazes from beneath his feet, an uncontrollable, beastly volcano erupts within him, a craving for blood . . . blood . . .

And the “spring of madness” flows to quench the thirst of the people in the city . . . Some drink not knowing . . . and I wake up, and I don’t know whether I was asleep or not . . . whether I drank or not . . .

## NIGHTMARE 47

The father brought his son a present on his birthday. The present was in a colorful box tied with a gold ribbon. The child opened it with joy. He found a rifle. He was silent. His father asked him, "Don't you like the rifle?"

"I wanted a bicycle so I could ride it on the rainbow's highway, and discover the multicolored lanes, one color at a time."

On his second birthday, his father brought him a present. The child opened it with expectation and found inside a small cannon . . . His father asked him, "Don't you like the cannon?"

The child said, "I wanted a kite so I could ride it and fly along with the birds . . ."

On his third birthday, his father brought him a present. The child opened it and found a gun. His father said to him, "This is the latest kind of gun. Its bullets explode like bombs. Don't you like it?"

The child said, "I wanted a guitar so I could play for the sunrise, the waves of the sea and the butterflies of love . . ."

On his fourth birthday, his father brought him a present. The child opened it and found a hand grenade. His father asked him, "Do you like it? It can kill an entire tribe."

The child's face changed. He pulled out the pin and threw the bomb at his mother and father. It exploded, and they were all killed. The house collapsed.

The neighbors did not ask what happened. They knew, because things like that happened in almost every house . . .

The few survivors who were left searched for the undertaker, whose business had been booming in the past few months . . . They were surprised they didn't find him in his shop . . . They looked for him everywhere, and finally found him sitting at the sea coast . . .

"What are you doing, Mr. Undertaker?"

"I'm waiting for the merchandise."

"And what merchandise is that, Mr. Undertaker, other than coffins?"

"I've just started a new branch, selling children's toys."

The ship arrived loaded with children's toys; the workers unloaded lots of boxes filled with revolvers, machine guns, bombs and rifles!!

## NIGHTMARE 49

The woman didn't say anything to her husband, but he got out of bed at dawn with deep sorrow in his heart . . . All these muscles, all this height and stature, this moustache—a perfect perch for a hawk, and the hair on his chest, thick and disheveled, all these outward appearances were of no use to him in his battle with . . . her body.

The young, tender woman he added to his two other wives . . . he was still unable to conquer those tender-skinned fortresses of hers. Fifteen days, and this hand that fells the heads of sheep with one blow, becomes limp before her body, as does his every limb . . . He doesn't know what has come over him . . . It is true he is forty-seven, but his father married his fifth wife when he was in his sixties . . . What makes his agony worse is the silence of the poor young girl—poorer even than he—whom he bought . . . she doesn't even say anything. She doesn't protest, doesn't explain. She doesn't complain, but he sees a look in her eyes, a dreadful, feminine look full of cruelty and mockery . . . But in the past few days he began to see her head in place of the lambs' heads, so he would go chopping them off with one blow, with an unbound appetite.

That dawn, his bitterness had turned into a volcano of physical violence, to the point where he thought about actually chopping off her head. He would accuse her of misbehavior and infidelity . . . But he couldn't do that yet, for she was still a virgin . . . Although, in this chaos, there would be no coroner to examine the corpse . . . But, then again, why doesn't he just shoot her as she is coming back from the market? The blame will be placed on some unknown assailant of course! Yes . . . it would be better to kill her on the street, where she would die as thousands have died in Beirut, without anyone caring . . . Her corpse would even remain in its place for days and rot . . . she wouldn't be among the lucky ones whose corpses fill the city morgues.

He was awakened from his thoughts by the ringing of the telephone. The big boss wants him to do him (a favor) (he knows where): "At your service, Sir. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes later they handed over five young men to him, not more than sixteen years old, and they asked him to (teach them a lesson) and then (take them away). He was very pleased with the matter. He took off his shirt. He showed his muscles. He took off his belt . . .

Three hours later five bodies were found on a side road with their heads chopped off. The victims had been subjected to inhumane torture, as the body parts clearly showed.

The butcher went home. He slept well, as though he had just made love to five virgins, one after another . . . He slept from noon that day until the next morning . . . And his young wife no longer worried him. His new job filled (his life) . . . and his pockets, too.

#### **NIGHTMARE 119**

“This overcrowding is unbearable.”

That’s what Sabir was repeating to himself as he received a new truckload of corpses.

“This overcrowding is unbearable.” The truck had just dumped new heaps of corpses out in front of him, in his capacity as City Morgue Supervisor in charge of preventing corpses, or, in other words, the guard of the “frozen grave.”

“This overcrowding is unbearable.” The mutilated corpses with severed limbs surrounded him, and he stumbled over them every which way he went . . . It is true that the crowds don’t usually bother him . . . Actually he is quite happy when the places he supervises are filled to capacity, but what can he do if the morgue only has space for 36 corpses?

When he worked at the ticket counter at the cinema, he loved it when all the seats were full, and more people would come and he would apologize to them, “Sold out. Sorry, the theatre is full.” That made him feel his work was all right, the cinema was all right, the world was all right.

But the problem was that the morgue had become full, and there were no more seats, not in the (mezzanine) or the (balcony) or the (galleries), and the corpses swarmed upon him by the hundreds, demanding and insisting on getting seats.

And when he apologizes to them, “There are no more places. The morgue is sold out, every spot is taken,” they don’t go away like moviegoers, instead they remain in heaps in front of him with their insides hanging out, insisting on getting into the morgue before they rot, screaming in his face with a voice like that of the howling wind.

What can he do when Beirut pelts him every morning with heaps of corpses, and the corpses scream at him asking to be rescued from the germs that have built up in them and threaten them with decay and decomposition, hoping at threatening for the sake of getting in to the morgue, just as a tribe of burn victims scream to be taken to the emergency room at the hospital . . .

A corpse shouted to him, "I am the nephew of the minister . . . the Sunni Muslim, and if you don't let me into the morgue, my uncle will cut off your livelihood. Another corpse yelled to him, "And I am the nephew of the minister . . . the Maronite Christian, and if you don't let me into the morgue, you will destroy the country's balance of power, and the balance between the various religious denominations. The choice of seats for the corpses in the morgue is apportioned according to sectarian distribution . . . and my uncle will cut your throat . . ."

A corpse shouted, "I'm a Shiite."

Another yelled, "And I'm a Druze . . . and my reincarnated soul will destroy your bloodline."

A third yelled, "And I am Greek Orthodox."

A fourth yelled, "And I am a Jew from Wadi Abu Jamil . . . from 'the oppressed minorities,' and I will oppress you and strike you with a guilt complex if you don't let me into the morgue, and I want a place near the synagogue!"

A fifth corpse shouted, "I am from the great tribe of . . . , and if you don't give me a place in the galleries of the morgue, my brothers and my cousins will come after you seeking revenge, and my grandchildren will come after your grandchildren for ever . . ."

A sixth corpse shouted, "My father is a member of parliament, his car has a blue license plate, get your corpses out of the way or I'll have my father's militia kill all of you over again. And you, Sabir, let me in immediately or else . . . you know what else!"

A seventh corpse shouted in a hoarse voice, "I am the famous singer . . . and if you don't let me into the morgue and preserve my velvet voice, people will say that Lebanon is not the land of enlightenment, that it oppresses talent and genius . . ."

An eighth corpse, the size of a dinosaur, yelled, "And I am the strongarm, the bodyguard of "The Leader" so and so Bey son of Bey son of Bey son of Bey son of Adam, peace be upon him. If I don't get a spot in the morgue the mafia (that looks after me) will attack your morgue and take it by force, and sell the corpse meat wholesale and retail, after plucking out the eyes and hanging them for three days out on the telephone poles that have not yet been plucked from the streets of Beirut . . ."

A ninth corpse yelled, "Let me into the morgue and I'll pay you a hefty sum!"

A tenth corpse yelled, "I am a key vote-getter. I advise you to let me in to the morgue immediately or else you will be hit by a (stray) bullet . . ." A corpse shouted, "I am an American. My (great) powerful embassy with its nuclear arsenal will demand my return . . ."

A corpse with a sad voice shouted to him, "And I am poor and have no family. Let me go . . ."

Sabir shuddered at the ferocity of the threats and began repeating to himself, "Oh no . . . Oh no . . ."

He opened the morgue. He threw out the corpses with no identities. Then he stood in front of his door shouting to the caravan of corpses that jumped before his eyes threatening, promising, "Tickets . . . Tickets, please . . . Show me your tickets (identity cards) . . . Poor ones get out of here . . . Those with no connections, get out of here . . . Those without a ticket proving his identity and roots and religion, get out of here . . . This is a government morgue, not a morgue of chaos!"

#### **NIGHTMARE 144**

Even as the flames were devouring the prison, Shadi was not afraid. He felt ecstatic, and that surprised him. He felt a frightening kind of ecstasy, close to the physical ecstasy of orgasm, when a man who had caught fire passed by him. He had the same feeling when he watched some of his prison mates being killed and falling beneath the feet of the rest of the caravan escapees . . . In fact, he almost stopped running in order to watch them die and cherish the pleasure of witnessing them on the verge of death.

He doesn't know what came over him . . .

Ever since he was imprisoned that way, unjustly and with great hostility, he felt a strong resentment and disgust towards everything . . . and he was overcome with a desire to destroy everything . . . He had agreed with the Bey's (bodyguard), who had become his companion during his imprisonment, to work with him . . . and (the Bey's bodyguard) made it known to him that his master likes to include (the intelligentsia) among his men . . .

He doesn't know what came over him . . .

Whatever he touches goes up in flames . . . whatever he tosses turns into a hand grenade . . . He is the "Lebanese Midas." The grass beneath his footsteps wilts, and women become heaps of ashes after he raped them, and children stop singing when he passes by, even the cats and dogs on the streets avoid coming near him, as if he were an evil spirit.

He decided that maybe he was imagining things. Perhaps a woman in his life could quiet this electrified madness that surrounded him, and this violent atmosphere he stirred up every which way he moved.

He remembered his sister . . . He decided to write her a letter and toss it to her through her bedroom window, in their house across the street from the “Holiday Inn.”

He knew that she was very stupid when she was in love, and very emotional, and consequently stupid most of the time . . . He loved that about her . . . to be precise: he needed it.

He wrote the letter. He crumpled it up into a ball. He tossed it toward her bedroom window at night . . .

He was shocked to see it explode like a hand grenade . . . and his sister’s body parts blasted out of the windows into the night sky.

He looked at his hands in horror . . . All he touches turns to destruction . . . Indeed he is the wretched Lebanese Midas!!

# Patricia Sarafian Ward

## The History

My father wishes he could spit poisonous words at me, that his hatred could dissolve me like acid, I see this daily in his eyes. Meanwhile the French consul is furious and the police have come by for the third time now. “Are you sure you don’t know anything more, Sayyid?” they ask him, again and again. And then, “What about your daughters, do they know something? Remember, your nephew ate a bullet, Sayyid. He has no more face.” They add this for emphasis, for the pity of it.

I listen from my bedroom, peeking down the corridor now and then. They walk back and forth in the entrée, smoking, lazily waving away my father’s protests, but in the two days since Raymond’s corpse was found, they have not insisted on speaking with me again. Maybe they think it’s just a matter of time before the consul gives up, understands that death is just a wartime mystery, and so they humor him, make the required investigation: Let’s go bang on their door, look up and down the corridors, ask a few more questions. And my father will stand between me and them if it means his death, that’s how important his name is to him. He may treat me like an animal in the confines of this house, disgust may twist his face when I cough or rub my eyes or drop some food from my fork—show any sign of being that frail thing he helped bring into existence—but to the outside world I am Lara, his daughter, worth guarding.

My little sister Lulwa has stopped talking, and the absence of her voice in this house is conspicuous, hollowing out the rooms. She braids her hair and smooths back the strands with a new exhaustion in her fingers, the gesture of a slow, middle-aged woman. Without school, which closed early for the invasion that is still on its

way, and without Raymond, without anything to do, Lulwa has finally given in. She is as empty as I have been for years.

It is a curious thing, to see who I am reflected in my sister. There is satisfaction, yes, because maybe now she and my father will know what I have been going through for years. But I know, also, that I should occupy that space, take over Lulwa's emptiness and bring her back—I am the older sister of two daughters who have no mother—and this fantasy of rescue, of Lulwa embraced by me, leaves me trembling in my bed, knees tucked to my chest, waiting. I have spent too many years conversing with mold on basement walls while the bombs disembowel me, with spiders and cockroaches and sullen neighbors. I have never been of any use. A sad sound drifts through the wall; our father who will never sing to me cooing songs to her.

In the stillness of the afternoon, as he closes Lulwa's door and his footsteps go down the corridor, I feel remorse, a burning in the center of my forehead. I recognize this, I know what it is. Through the other wall there is silence. That room is empty, and Raymond's things have been packed back into his suitcases. I know just how they stand, side by side next to the door, waiting to be picked up and carried away. I push my fists against my temples. *What were you thinking?*

My father, right when the invasion started, should have made Raymond go back to France where he belonged. I know my father: his rage is directed at himself, too, at his incompetence. He gave in to this nephew's romanticism: *Please Uncle, let me stay in my country.* And now, while the French consul curses this family for a death that no one could have prevented, least of all me, and while my father holds at bay the bored, mildly suspicious policemen who visit our home, the rest of the city waits for the invaders to break their promises, cross the limit they drew themselves. Everyone knows it is only a matter of time. *My country.* Raymond never knew what it means to have this country.

If I were to tell the consul anything, I would tell him this: From the moment he arrived, Raymond just could not stop looking at Lulwa's scars. He fell in love with those scars. Scars have astonishing effects on people, and missing body parts even more so, and little Lulwa's left side put hooks into his eyes and drew them this way and that all around the house. She is missing two fingers and has a scar like a trough on her arm. It's an old story. It happened when I was fifteen and she was nine, on the way home from the grocery. Lulwa might have died: no one would drag her off the street out of the fighting, it was too dangerous.

Never mind Lulwa's deformities, my little sister's face is beautiful as the moon. You don't need to know about the fingers or the scar to love her: Right from birth

Lulwa had to be protected from the evil eye because envy yawned across the streets and down from windows and out of passing cars. Even I had to bless her every minute to prevent my own jealousy from damaging her. When we went to the airport the day of Raymond's arrival, I noticed her again for the first time in months, maybe because she was about to fall under new eyes. She was wearing a white blouse and jeans, and through the blouse was the faint outline of her bra. I saw men's eyes

traveling across her again and again, and our father kept his hand on her shoulder, to show possession.

**Raymond wants to encounter his heritage, my uncle's letter had read. What heritage, I thought. There is no more heritage.**

Raymond disembarked in his nice suit and started to distribute French presents and candy as we drove home. He was always in motion: he looked outside, asked questions, looked again, passed around chocolates. The chocolate crumpled against my teeth, surprised me with a burst of warm strawberry syrup. I did not understand what this

French-born cousin was doing here, in our world, what he thought would be found. His skin was dark, a bit spotty, and he was nervous and hopeful. He kept adjusting his suit coat and tie. "Raymond wants to encounter his heritage," my uncle's letter had read. *What heritage*, I thought. *There is no more heritage. It has been bombed out of existence.* Lulwa leaned on the front seat, looking from our father to Raymond, pointing things out, and I saw at once our cousin's greedy, secret glances at her left hand, which rested on the driver's headrest, the stumps of her two missing fingers pinched like sausage ends.

He settled in without hesitation. He unpacked his huge suitcase and produced books on our country, a *keffiye* he had bought in Paris, and BVD underwear of many colors. We knew this, Lulwa and I, because he invited us to stay with him as he unpacked. Lulwa sat on the bed but I remained standing, back to the wall. Lulwa laughed, made promises to take him to the beach on the weekend, to take him shopping, to show him this and that. She looked older than fourteen. Besides the BVD he had silk shorts with polka dots, shorts with giraffes. "Stupid presents," he said, and then he blushed and stuffed them into the drawer. He shook out crisp white shirts, sorrowfully examining the wrinkles until Lulwa said she would iron them.

My father appeared in the doorway and smiled as he does when he becomes emotional about familial matters. "You are so welcome here," he said. "This is your home, my nephew." Raymond merely inclined his head a fraction, indicating his gratitude. He had no understanding of the rarity and magnitude of my father's love.

My father, holding the bowl of his pipe, his suspenders undone and his shoes off, looked as if he had been about to sit down and read.

The first few days, my father did not go to work, but drove Raymond here and there in his Peugeot that he never used. I did not go with them. I could not imagine being confined to the back seat while my father explained the world to Raymond, while my father made his speeches about poverty and refugees and nationalism, omitting the most important truths, those about himself and his crazy daughter Lara, the one who when she was fifteen had bitten the flesh from her own arm to prove a point. I shopped and cooked a chicken with potatoes and carrots and onions. I sat at the kitchen table with a book, my skin scented with rosewater, feet bare, and hair tied in a bun.

Raymond returned with stories of what the airport road looked like, how the villages in the mountains reminded him of France, imagine that, and how intolerable the slums were, dogs and children in the filth with adults “looking on with empty eyes,” he explained sadly.

“Now you know what poverty is,” I said, and he looked astonished, as if I had understood him.

Raymond right away wanted to learn about raising pigeons. He sat for long periods of time on the roof, watching the neighbor’s flock circle the sky. He was amazed that this happened at all, this raising of pigeons in the middle of a war. Eight or nine days after he arrived, I brought water for him, and from the top of the stairs I saw him on the ledge in the bright sun, notebook on his knees. He wanted to write some sort of history. Even from the street five stories below he looked foreign. “Cousin Lara,” he called, “You’re so sweet.” I approached him. He seized the glass and gulped water. He had gotten darker. His hairline seemed almost blonde. His hand brushed my hip and he said, “Cheer up,” then he looked away. He was talking about the skyline. On the back of his neck was a mole, black as the eye of an insect. He had just touched me, this seventeen-year old.

“Lara, what happened to Lulwa?” he asked.

I took the glass from him. “Shrapnel. It’s an old story.”

“Tell me about it?”

“Later.”

At night, after our father had retired to his room, Raymond discovered that Lulwa might have died, and he liked that too, the near death.

“You waited how long?” he asked me. Lulwa was embarrassed by his curiosity—this story of her agony and my terror has always made her blush, the way she

does about her period, or a boy she has noticed. She never wants to speak about it, but it is my story too.

I said, "Until my legs could move, until I could run to her side."

Raymond admitted, "Nothing really exciting has ever happened to me."

"Until my blood became hot again," I added. "Cooked the life back into my body, only then," and he gazed at me.

He asked Lulwa, "What did you think? Could you see?" but she would not answer, so I smiled and shrugged at him, encouraging him to bother me with his questions.

"What were you thinking?" Raymond said again, but still Lulwa would not answer, and this tantalized him, I could tell by the way he frowned. Lulwa's fingers tapped the table, and I noticed that her nails were rounded and glossy and that the maimed hand was in her lap, hidden away.

She said, "It's so long ago, it doesn't matter any more."

He made a face as if to say, *sorry*, and I started to clear the table.

"Please, Uncle, let me stay."

When I heard him say those words I just laughed and laughed. The jets were flying reconnaissance missions over us and he wanted to stay. What did Raymond know about hiding and gas lamps and the trickle of cockroach legs on your arms at dawn, when everything is quiet again? I pictured him in that darkness, writing in his notebook as always, recording history. The history of people stinking with fear in damp places, the history of inertia. I said to him, "Maybe you could go to the Commodore," which was where all the foreign journalists lived and got drunk at the bar, copying their stories from the international telex reports because they were too scared to go outside.

My father came to my room that evening. Raymond and Lulwa were working on a puzzle in the dining room. I could hear their laughter, they had become friends.

He said, "Why does he want to stay?"

At first I did not understand. He dragged my desk chair to my bed and sat down. "Why is he staying? Is it because of the fighting or something else?"

I started to fold the page of my book, to mark my place. He slapped the book off my knees. "Why does he want to stay?"

The room was dim, lit with candles and a lamp. His shadow broke the stillness of the light on the wall.

“You will no longer wear only your towel when you come from the shower,” he said.

The door to my bedroom was ajar and I imagined them listening, but my father was speaking in a whisper, leaning forward, his hands gripping each other in a fist between his knees.

He leaned closer. “Do you understand?”

I pulled myself up, back against the wall. For the first time in my life I shouted at him. “Why do we have to stay? Why is he so crazy for wanting to stay but we’re not?”

He grabbed my wrist and twisted it. “Enough, Lara. You want to bother everyone? So hysterical.” He let go. A sorrow crept over his face and I closed my eyes. His voice was quiet. “I have tried and tried,” he said. These words, familiar and terrible, locked my body into a ball, curled it into the corner as he left the room.

Raymond convinced my father, whose resilience has always depended on hate and not pleading adoration. Raymond was my father’s joy, the boy-man who bore our name. If he wanted to record the atrocities of the invaders, then he should, someone had to. In the south, people climbed into cars or onto donkeys and came north. Raymond snipped photos from the newspaper, pasted them into his notebook. He said, “I have a special angle on things, because I’m foreign-born but tied to the land by blood.”

“No one is tied to this land anymore,” I told him.

Soon after he decided to stay, Raymond came to me in the evening with his notebook. He sat in the chair next to my desk and said, “Please, Lara, take me to the Museum Crossing.”

Raymond’s world was becoming smaller, I could see he was starting to suffocate. How would he fare when we huddled on the landing, when we crept down the stairs to the hole beneath the building where gossip shuffled back and forth between groups of neighbors, where food grew cold and tasted sour? My father had stopped taking him places and would not allow him to drive on his own because it was too dangerous. I looked Raymond in the eye. “No.”

“I could interview the snipers.”

I shook my head.

Raymond whined, “Why are you being so selfish?”

I imagined being in the small car with him, smoking together, driving all over the city. I would point out everything, explain to him why I had dropped out of university. “We are all animals,” I would tell him. “What do you expect us to be with no electricity, no hope, no food? Go home.”

Raymond tapped his pen against the notebook, frowning at me. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows and he was wearing a pair of my father's suspenders. His new look, a journalistic thing. His lips started to thin, spread into that line that meant he felt wronged.

"No," I said. "You have no idea what you're doing."

I prepared the blankets and pillows and filled the gas lamps, and then I shopped for supplies with the rest of the city. I saw the neighbors as I climbed the stairs, my arms dragged down by plastic bags of goods. I had been seeing them this way for years. They nodded to me from the darkness of their apartments, the door ajar to check who was coming. Only me: sorry Lara, such a burden to her father since that first incident at the age of twelve, when she broke the living room windows and all the doors opened and people called up the stairs, "Is everything all right?" The stairwell stank of boiling lentils and onions, of the grime accumulated in corners after years of no water to wash the floors. My feet going up each step, body weighted with supplies, with Lulwa on my back a week after the accident because she was still too drained to make the last flight.

When Lulwa's school closed, she and Raymond started a new puzzle. They kneeled on the dining room chairs and leaned over the table, heads almost touching, and once I saw her hair pour out of the knot she had tied, disrupting the pieces. As she searched for the broken rubber band, Raymond said, "You're so beautiful." I heard him say that.

**Raymond recorded the contents of the garbage piled on the streets. He said it was sociological, the food would reveal a diet changed by war. But we are eating the same things.**

Raymond recorded the contents of the garbage piled on the streets. He said it was a sociological thing, that the food would reveal a diet changed by the war. But we are eating the same things that we ate from when we were born, and our refuse in the streets stinks just as it must have in the municipal dump. What secrets did he think he would uncover in the soft, rotting vegetables, the cans of imported sausage, the bones of lambs? He recorded the move-

ments of the militias through the city, the frequency with which the pigeons were released into the sky. My father confiscated his camera and Raymond sulked. I think he may have desired that danger of walking around with a camera.

"You could be shot," my father shouted, losing patience.

Lulwa said, “Baba don’t. He doesn’t understand.”

I did not care what Raymond understood or did not understand. My days were taken by the prospect of what was coming, the sound of the fighter planes, the terror of noise so loud that it carves at your insides. At night I waited for the invasion. I could not sleep. The walls of my room were so familiar, I touched my hands to them, my feet. Raymond’s world was becoming smaller but he had no idea of how it could shrink. Every night I traced the years of being in this room, as I do now. The shutters are splintered from bullets, the window has been replaced twice. There was a time when I was younger when I realized that I could be shot, by chance, at any moment, and then a time came later when I craved that coincidence, the futility of it. After I quit the university—who needs an education when there are no plans to be made, no prospects for a life of happiness?—I would stand at the window and wait to be shot. In the middle of the night I would escape from the house to walk around the city looking for my death, but I was left alone. I passed soldiers who nodded at me, they had no interest. I even spoke to them. Maybe my words would make them shoot me. I said, “What is happening? Where has the battle moved?” and they would answer politely, as if I were their sister or mother. They let me go. “She’s crazy,” I heard one whisper. During those months after quitting university, I would sleep all day until my father returned from work and pounded on my legs, “Wake up.” Lulwa always let me be. She would come home from school and settle at the dining room table, studying so that one day she could be a nurse for all the poor wounded people.

I lay awake waiting for the invasion, my eyelids straining to stay shut, pulled open again by invisible strings, as if all the nervousness of my body had accumulated there, tugging at my vision, *look, look*. I imagined Raymond’s tape recorder on the roof, dumbly memorizing the distant bombs that fell to the south, the rat-tat of anti-aircraft. Then one night I heard something. This noise was like a little scratching, or soft banging sound.

It was coming from Lulwa’s room. Maybe she was having a nightmare. I waited, but the noise continued. I tip-toed to the corridor, stood outside her room. The door was closed. I pushed the handle down slowly, opened the door a few inches.

Raymond was on top of her, they were on the floor. The noise came from her foot tapping the chest of drawers. Beneath their twisting bodies the carpet was crumpled and a pillow lay next to them. The room smelled of him, of his French clothes, his French shoes, his French aftershave, and my legs shook at the sight of

her arms loosely around his waist, barely moving, and the dull thunk of her leg against the wood. “You’re beautiful,” he said.

I went back to my room. Curled in bed, my stomach started burning and I beat it with my fists. The muted tapping continued. My body became still. Raymond had recorded the incident of Lulwa’s maiming in his history, I was certain. *What were you thinking?* I imagined the words on the page, how they would unfold. *Her sister Lara was immobilized by fear while Lulwa lay screaming on the asphalt.* Blank spaces rested between these words, the story of her recovery. History would be incomplete in Raymond’s notebook without the story of me on the floor of my bedroom praying to God, without the story of my father dragging me to Lulwa’s room to apologize, and Lulwa crying, begging him to leave me alone, her bandages changed by the same hands that gripped my shoulders, held me in place at the foot of her bed. Raymond’s notebook was filled with writing about nothing of consequence, about pigeons and car rides, miserable little maimings that happen every day to anyone, the pathetic fears and mistakes common to every war. Had she told him? “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I had wailed and my father shook me, “What did you say? I couldn’t hear you.” History would be tiresome, threadbare, without crazy Lara’s teeth tearing at her own arm, the blood all over her father’s shirt sleeves. “See!” I screamed, and Lulwa had covered her eyes, knees to chest, as my father cried, “What have you done?” and pressed tissues to the wound that would scar for only a year or so, then fade away.

The front door slams and I hear my father coming down the hallway. I close my eyes. The police should be here now, for this. I imagine them going down the stairs, the third day of pounding boots echoing through the neighbors’ apartments, feeding curiosity.

He pins my arms to the bed and shouts, his face inches from my own. “Why did you leave him?”

I do not answer. I learned long ago that my father has no use for words. His language is of hands and spit, of opening drawers and throwing to the floor, of forcing you to drink your urine to learn what it means to be a thirsty refugee. My father held us when we were small, before we knew what Doshka meant, what the beat of the letters RPG could symbolize. He held us as we cried, and as we grew he kept holding Lulwa while I snaked out of his grip, trailed by his fury.

“You slept with him, didn’t you?”

My skull cracks against the wall: an instant of sheer cold floods my head before the pain begins.

“Who did you pay?”

I do not move.

The morning after I saw Raymond and Lulwa, I found her eating alone in the kitchen. Our father had already left for work. It was late. She did not speak to me at first, even when I asked how she was feeling. The dishes had been cleaned and the towels were drying on the backs of chairs. Bowls of chopped vegetables covered the counter.

“Why are you cooking?” I asked.

“I feel like it.”

“Where’s Raymond?”

She did not look at me. “On the roof.”

She was wearing jeans and a tee shirt with the name of her basketball team across the front. I could not tell if she was wearing a bra. I turned to the counter, following the swirls in the marble, poking the vegetables. Her arms around his back, hands holding one another. Her leg.

“We need water,” she said. “But we’re supposed to stay in.”

The invaders had finally reached the outskirts, she told me. Any day now, they would enter the city.

All this had happened the night before while I had lain wide awake, listening to nothing, listening to the eventual absence of the knocking sound. I had pressed my ear to Raymond’s wall, then Lulwa’s. Dawn had filled my room with orange light. How could I have not heard the invaders? I had forgotten to listen. Lulwa picked up the knife, started chopping again. The onion fell away in transparent slices.

“You’re crying,” I said.

“Of course.”

Lulwa cried big round tears, they rolled onto the onions and onto her hands.

“Not because of the onion.” I felt awkward. I had not spoken to her, really, in years. I folded my arms. I stared down at the slight fold of fat, the way my jeans bulged a little beneath the belt.

“What’s wrong?” Raymond’s voice.

He set the tape recorder on the table, waved a tape in the air. “What a recording last night.” His hair was combed back, still damp. “Are you cooking, Lulwa?”

“Yes.”

I sat down and started to drink my tea. His arms were thick, muscled, and the skin was peeling from sunburn. He wore a silver watch that his mother, whom he called Helene as if she were a friend, had given him for his graduation from high school. Her arms around his back, loose, borne this way and that by the movements of his body. Raymond peeled a label and stuck it on the tape, started writing. Through the window I saw the *keshash hamam* on the roof across the street dragging the flag through the air, calling the pigeons home.

A young man I met during my one semester of university had taken me to a wooded section of the campus and removed my shirt. He had held my breasts in his palms and had said with faint amazement: "Like cantaloupes." A strange quivering had taken my thighs, it spread outwards and around like a spider web until my entire body was encased in strands, and I had jerked back.

"What are you cooking?" Raymond started to braid her hair. I could see how stiff her shoulders were, the hesitation before she continued slicing, still crying, wiping her eyes with her forearm. He said, "You want me to slice the onion?"

"No. I'm fine." She shook her head so that his fingers lost their hold and her hair unraveled.

He shrugged. "You seem sleepy, Lulwa."

She did not react at all, just kept chopping. I stared at his tallness, the way he slouched against the counter grinning, and then a picture came to me of my fists in his face, knees in his groin, blood pouring out of his nostrils. I could stab him so easily, he would never see it coming. She could not have wanted what he did.

I said, "Do you want to see the Museum?"

Lulwa turned around and started to smile, as if I had made a joke, but I ignored her. Raymond was an adventurer, I knew he would give in. He struggled. I watched him.

"You can't go," Lulwa said at last, and I was amazed at her courage, to say such a thing to him. But he barely paid attention to her now, now that he might see the famous Museum Crossing.

A dizziness sifted through me. "There aren't any snipers, but you can see where they were." Maybe it was true that I was mad, like everyone had always said.

Lulwa said, "Of course there are snipers." She looked from me to Raymond. "Aren't there? There are, there always are."

I said, "Make up your mind, journalist."

He nodded, "I'll go."

"Are you crazy?" Lulwa glared at me.

Raymond said, “What’s the fuss?” but when he moved to touch her cheek she jerked her head away, and his hand was left in mid-air for an instant. She started sweeping the onion slices into a bowl, and Raymond looked frustrated, as if trying to come up with something to say.

“Come on,” I said.

In the car I pictured walking with Raymond on the wide, deserted boulevard. Would we be shot? Raymond talked about the news reports and his book and the weather and the soldiers.

“Lara, what are you thinking?” he asked, and I was surprised by this.

We passed through checkpoints and Raymond was impressed by my lies, my ability to slip past the questions, charm the soldiers.

“They’re just boys,” I said, and for once it seemed he understood. He looked out the window and stopped talking, holding his notebook with both hands, his pen sticking out of his shirt pocket.

I stopped the car in the middle of the street and we got out. Barbed wire stretched across a side street, strung from barrels pocked with bullet holes. The buildings rose from the debris and garbage, their steel skeletons jutting from exploded concrete, and from a window a tattered flag hung motionless. The only sounds were of our breathing, the scrape of our shoes in the rubble, but I knew that behind the broken walls there were fighters. I glimpsed movement and lost my senses for an instant, darkness coloring my vision the way it does when you get strangled and start to lose oxygen. I turned but there was nothing. The bougainvillea bloomed in the ruins. I stared at these purple flowers, such color, so vivid. It was hot. I saw an image again and again of myself falling slowly over, dropping by the side of the road and leaning my back against a crumbling wall of white limestone, of watching the world become still through the absolute quiet of a slowing heart. Maybe I would be shot, maybe it would finally be me.

Raymond walked a few paces behind. He was taking pictures with the instamatic he had bought in secret, the camera my father did not know about. He asked why the neighborhood was so silent. “Are you sure this place is deserted?”

The click of the camera sounded odd. I could not take my eyes from him. His features were so clear to me, so precise: it is like that when you lose an object that you hardly ever paid attention to. Suddenly you crave it, you remember its shape, its smell, its presence. *Are you mad? What are you thinking?*

He moved closer to me, smiled down, and then he bumped my hip with his, as if we were on a secret romantic outing. I wanted to put my arms around him.

Her arms loose, bumping around. The stones glared white in the heat. The desolate buildings wavered around me, their cavernous bellies torn open. My head felt heavy, soft. I wanted to lie down, stop breathing. I told him, "I need to get Kleenex from the car." He started to search his pockets. "No," I said, and went quickly. I looked back. He had found a Kleenex. He was waving it at me and smiling, his hair pushed up and sweat on his shirt at the collar and armpits.

I felt remorse. A point of boiling heat and pain in the center of my forehead. That was remorse. I recognized it. I waved.

When I opened the car door, everything came to a halt. The Kleenex box on the back seat. The keys in the ignition. Raymond fiddling with his camera. Then he lifted it to his eye, gesturing at me to stand still for the picture, and I climbed in behind the wheel and reached for the Kleenex. I blew my nose. I slammed the door shut.

Across that distance, Raymond lowered the camera and squinted at me. He looked bewildered now, or maybe impatient. How do you see an expression through such sunlight? As I turned on the engine, he began to walk towards me. I spun the car around.

Before he was out of sight I looked in the rear view mirror. He just stood there. His mouth moved and I strained to hear him over the sound of the engine. I rolled down the window as my foot pushed the gas pedal. "Lara," he called. "Cousin Lara." I did not want to watch but my eyes returned to his reflection. He started to run. I was mesmerized by the sight of him growing smaller and smaller in that big, empty, dirty street with no one anywhere, everyone dead or hiding.

My father is crushing my arms, he shakes me hard. "You think I believe you? You just took him there and he disappeared?"

He thinks I paid someone, probably a starving boy-sniper he imagines I'd had sex with, paid him to kill his boy-man nephew. I am bewildered by this. After so many years of chance, of the hilarity of surprises, the incomprehensible events that took Lulwa's body and distorted it, took my mother long ago, drove me mad, he thinks that plans like this can be made, that we can govern fate, pay fate to do what we desire. This assaults me: my father lining up the gas bottles, my father fiddling with the generator that stopped working years ago, my father listening intently to the news on the radio as if he holds the key to the cipher of what is happening outside, as if he will be able to interpret information and make decisions accord-

ingly. He must sense an inherent order to things, I understand this now, and I have disrupted it.

I struggle and he does not yield.

“What are you doing?” Lulwa stands in the doorway. Her voice is unfamiliar after two days of silence. “Baba, what are you doing?”

My father releases me and stands. My room cannot contain him, he has no place here. Lulwa cries. I turn to the wall, and I know that it is almost over, no more police, no more accusations. Things can only be pursued so far during a siege. I hear my father whispering to Lulwa, their footsteps leaving me behind. I imagine a boy somewhere in the ruins, a ravenous fighter, a lover. My hands grow numb between my knees. My father’s ludicrous fantasy of me pushing money into the palms of some ruffian, that is what it might have come to: Lara sneaking through the city with money in her pocket, driven by pathetic needs, the plumpness of her body that will age without marriage. Maybe I could have hired someone, maybe he would have fired the shot out of love for me, without payment, imagine. It does not matter. Hunger will take us, subsume the investigation. Other cadavers will be found. I close my eyes to the BVDs, the shorts, the books that my father made me pack one by one so I would learn, he said, what it means to say goodbye.

# Joseph O. Legaspi Departure: July 30, 1984

We were not prepared for it—  
America, the land cut like a massive slab  
of steak. Our mother did not sit us down  
to explain, and nothing was said  
over the black coffee and rice  
soup at mealtimes. My siblings and I approached  
our inevitable leaving with numb  
acceptance, as people do under Martial Law.

Days prior to the date, things disappeared  
in the house: the display cabinet taken away by an aunt,  
the wedding gift china wares in it sold, except for the blue plates  
and swan-shaped bowls that would not survive the journey.  
The rice bin was given to a family friend; knives  
to uncle Leo; school uniforms, cousins; roosters divided  
among the men; floral fabrics for the women; dried  
mangoes and stale squid candies for the neighborhood  
children; a twin bed transported upstairs  
for my sister staying to complete college.

That late July morning, the *jeepney* arrived,  
as hired, the sun held dominion over the blinding sky,  
a zephyr funneled through the narrowing streets  
of Manila. The steady procession of  
well-wishers in our house did not halt,  
my father handing out *pesos*  
as if he was paying for our safe passage.  
Surrounded by luggage and boxes huge  
as baby elephants, we were each given  
a dollar bill, our firsts, as the *jeepney* drove off  
to take us to the airport, leaving behind a throng  
of onlookers waving violently, and a tearful, older sister  
who, years later, would reenact this disappearing act,  
this fading scene of a rooster-lined road of this  
cock-fighting, banana tree-lush town speeding away,  
lost in the kinetic gray cement and dark smoke of exhaust.

# Melita Schaum Exposure

From where they found her body, she must have been walking toward the lights of the city, trying to make her way down the mountain, shivering, probably wondering how she would explain herself, an eighteen-year-old girl wearing nothing but bra and panties in the 40-degree-and-dropping Colorado night.

I think all of us at school assembly that following Monday would always remember the detail about the bra and panties. We freshmen buzzed with it, astonished that the nuns would allow a fact so graphic to slip past the armored public announcement.

Did she find them where they'd been flung and put them back on? Had they never been fully off? And why was it so much more heartbreaking to think of this dead girl still wearing underwear? For what? Modesty? Warmth? A sense of normalcy as she tried to hike her way through the falling night toward lights and rescue?

The girl who died had thick, honey-colored hair that she used to let hang naturally. I remember once seeing her leaning against the rear quarter panel of a Jeep in the school parking lot, smoking with some other senior girls. They were wearing the plaid Woolrich flannel shirts and mountain boots fashionable that year, and she was resting her thigh easily against the car's blue flank, flicking the ash of her cigarette by tapping it lightly against the fender's edge. The way she held her body seemed so mature, contained—not self-consciously flip like some of the other girls, whose purses bulged with Coty compacts and smeared tubes of dime-store lipstick in a color we used to call Baboon-Ass Red.

We younger girls were usually gossipy and critical, mainly to hide our adoration. Whenever we saw the seniors, our gaggle came to a stop, piling into each other like Keystone Kops, one organism with eight arms and four sets of knobby, razor-nicked tomboy legs. From the cover of Sister Alphonse-Marie's Vatican-black Chevy Caprice, we watched them like bathing Dianas, greedy for pointers on how to occupy our new bodies.

But at fourteen we were none of us in serious danger of being vamps. In fact, we harbored a deep ambivalence about the changes that were already beginning to make us the object of car-horn compliments. In the summer, when we window-shopped in pairs down Colfax Street's pricey gauntlet of boutiques, we knew that we were leaning toward the display windows mainly to catch our own reflections—after all, we were the goods: tan legs, bored looks, short-shorts we rolled up until they rode our hips like underwear. Still, when we got the howls from passing cars we felt the danger of too much exposure—mentally picked up, undressed, then cast aside as soon as the light changed at Wyoming Boulevard, left to make our own way back to normalcy.

When you die of exposure, at first your body struggles hard before letting go. It's as if it separates itself from you, knowing that the choices you'll make will be the wrong ones. First it shivers, trying to generate the heat its organs need, as it senses the temperature lowering. It pulls warmth from its own extremities inward, leaving hands and toes numb but heart and lungs still functioning like good machines. As the body's core temperature drops—which it will steadily as the air cools if there are even moderate amounts of skin exposed—the shivering becomes more fierce, almost fit-like. Eventually, though, the convulsions slow down, an engine stalling. By the time they stop, the brain has begun to idle; perhaps the body considers much of that organ to be an expendable extremity as well. Thinking slows, speech slurs, you begin to believe that if you could just get some sleep you could eventually make it to that cabin light you saw dimly to the west. Or was it the east?

It's not uncommon at some point for hallucinations to set in. Some people hear music or voices they may follow for miles, or flee to the point of exhaustion. At the very end, some survivors have reported an intense flush of sensation, an almost unbearable feeling of burning up that makes some victims rip off their own clothing in an effort to find relief. It's probably the same reflex that makes hanged men get erections—a final surrender of the system as capillaries loosen and blood rushes through with oddly incongruous results: the frozen body burns, dead loins quicken. We are fragile organisms; we can only survive between rather slim extremes.

Exposed, our margin of safety is small. Still, our lives often make us feel invulnerable—armored in cars, hotels and office buildings, hiking boots and designer coats—so that we are shocked when the forest does take a hostage, closes its green

**We are all dying of exposure. Little girls grow up to be bodies, alive or dead, and the margin of survival stays small.**

jaws around a hiker, a lost tourist child, or a young girl with a rust-smear of blood down the back of her thigh trying to make it back to a safe, familiar place.

How little she must have expected her world to end on a day that began as a bronze fall morning, wind riffling the coins of aspen in the foothills, the sky shimmering as blue as cloisonné over Sepulveda Boulevard. A quiet weekend morning in the suburbs, the smell of coffee, the muted gab of television cooking shows and cartoons, a few fathers contemplating some deferred household project from behind the safety of the sports section. No one saw her get into any unfamiliar car; no one saw her speak to any stranger. And yet suddenly she was gone, as if she had simply slipped through the fingers of this world, as if through our inattention—all of ours, mine too as I imagine myself busy stage-whispering into a receiver in some interminable teenaged phone call or grumbling about another unjust Saturday chore—we all allowed this fate to circle her footprints, track her down, close in while we were occupied with our contented routines.

I think our curiosity was not a morbid interest. Those details we had we turned over and over in our minds, as a way to put ourselves in her place for a shuddering instant, trying to reenact the final moments of her life as if they were our own. It was as if by exposing ourselves to death just that much would act as a kind of inoculation, a charm, so that despite the statistics the siren would always be for someone else, the men at forensics, like archaeologists with tweezers reconstructing histories only a few hours long, would always be mining the pale terrain of someone else's remaindered flesh.

But we are all dying of exposure. Little girls grow up to be bodies, alive or dead, and the margin of survival stays small. Maybe we have some vain hope that the violation will be sated by this death or the next—until again and again we find ourselves alone, stumbling toward the mirage of a safe world shimmering in the distance, icy and brilliant and fatally out of reach.

# Leslie Ullman Calypso, Twilight

The blind stallion, having learned  
my braille of leg and hand,  
carries me without flinching  
at the wind. His back has softened,  
an extinct volcano, and my hips  
hold me there, settled  
by something I no longer  
try to name. I am past the years

for bearing. My skin  
turns to the work of wind  
and salt, as the sun shortens  
its arc above my diminished gardens.  
I have little use for the silver-  
wreathed mirror brought by a lover  
who kept finding his way back.

If a wanderer should drift  
ashore now and then, spent  
and nameless, he will still find  
in my eyes a trace of green.  
Or blue. Depths in which to rest.

He will still find in my flesh  
a firm *yes*, not padding  
or pillow, but sinew like his—  
from gathering wood for the long nights,  
from sending men back to the sea  
at first light (they swim strongest then),  
from rising alone most mornings  
to light that never lies  
and the continuous waves.

But this poet who tries to slip  
into my skin—she bathes me  
in stage light, too bright  
yet too soft, scribbling in  
her journal. She would have me say,  
*This is the dance my mothers  
and grandmothers might have learned  
had they slipped away from  
children and set themselves loose  
beneath the moon.*

I give her back her words, a wish  
blown like a kiss as the bloom  
leaves her face, and love  
leaves a jagged wake behind her.  
It would do her little good

to know that lately I slip  
like the breeze between the island's  
tall rocks. I travel without  
green or blue lining my eyes,  
without rare flowers  
from my garden, and disappear  
into rooms filled with smoke, jazz,  
the braid and flow of tongues.

I walk through the teeming streets  
without desire or dread, the way  
the old stallion accepts  
the bit and lets himself be guided  
among the last of the wild iris,  
the shrinking berries—

and sometimes my weakened eyes  
feel immense, turning me  
inside out, as a young man or woman  
appears beside me  
speaking slowly at first, as though  
cracking the door to a vault  
and is surprised at the words,  
the rush of words,  
the voice full of great birds lifting.

# From Nymph to Elder: Beyond the Viability of Seduction

“Calypso, Twilight” took shape around the time I read Robert Fagles’s recent translation of *The Odyssey*, whose leading women possessed supple waists and golden braids and seemed to linger indefinitely in the prime of life. Their power to deter the course of warriors or appease the gods seemed inextricable from their enduring beauty and sexual appeal. Even Penelope, an apparent widow for two decades, was pursued by suitors who expected her to produce heirs.

Rereading the epic thirty years later, I recalled with amusement how unquestionable all this had seemed to the high school version of me who read the Fitzgerald translation the first time around—the conventionally awkward girl whose sense of approaching adulthood was shaped by female characters offered in the pages of whatever she could get her hands on, be it required literature for English or books picked at random from library shelves. None of the heroines who accompanied me through childhood and adolescence—who served at subconscious as well as conscious levels as models in my secret life as heroine of my own quests—had gone through menopause. Now my generation was in or approaching its 50s. And although scores of books written during our adult lives have offered picaresque, sensual, powerful, and interestingly complex older women, I began to realize that for many of us, our deepest personal myths—those roots formed by our earliest and most formative reading experiences—offered few models who might beckon and maybe even tempt us towards that region beyond beauty, beyond the viability of seduction, beyond nature’s traditionally perceived use for us.

I wanted to track one of Homer's nymphs into a stage of life where he may well have had no interest in her, and probably had few models of his own to follow. To my credit, I didn't have an agenda. I was curious to know how Calypso would present herself once I entered her uncharted territory. But on the way in, I pulled out an old poem which I had ruined by having an agenda, a poem featuring an earthy and independent middle-aged woman who was trying too earnestly to celebrate her earthiness and independence. I think I originally wanted that poem to celebrate a type of woman who had fashioned a rich emotional and spiritual life without marriage and children. But I had created a voice without character; without interesting shadows, without dimension. She still had that youthful desire to sing herself into visibility. For my new purposes, she struck me as self-indulgent in her efforts to show herself as seasoned, still-sexy, and positioned rather too securely at the helm of her own myth.

I borrowed some lines from that poem, only to feel them standing with pathetic bravado between me and this figure I was trying to envision in a stage of life I actually had been afraid to think about. One day, stuck once again, I decided to use my journal as a means to let Calypso tell me, if she'd consent to it, what I was doing wrong. After a bit of warm-up and paraphrase on my part ("she is past myth, she is at peace with the woman(?) crone(?) she wakes to each day and no longer needs to be particularly visible to others or even to herself"), she presented herself directly, and with refreshing tartness: "YOU need me to affirm myself. YOU need me to be conscious of myself when that's the very thing I no longer need to be." Her reprimand sprang me loose, especially when I put it in the new poem. It helped me define more honestly the relationship between me, a woman just beginning to confront sustainable losses, and this figure who had long since accepted them and moved on. It allowed me to accommodate rather than put aside my projections, born from my lingering hold on my own youth, so that I was freer to understand the quiet freedom she had achieved—a freedom born of apparent renunciations. Now, speaking from the sidelines where at last I permitted her to be, she permitted me to see something of her life.

As a postscript—and ironically, as it turns out—the very first adult book I remember reading in its entirety was the autobiography of Sophie Tucker, the nightclub and cabaret-circuit star known as "the last of the red-hot Mamas," who began her career singing in blackface in the early 1900s. She was born to Russian Jewish immigrants while they were still en route to America, and was raised among Yiddish vaudeville players in New York City. As a young girl she was gawky and full

of sass, and even as an adolescent she belted out songs in a voluminous, unschooled voice. She also had a Jewish nose, a broad Russian face, a body that bloomed to fat as she got older, and a bawdy, in-your-face comedic talent. I was seven when I read her story, and though I remember many of the details, I must have understood very, very little their implications—certainly not the precariousness of her life lived on the subterranean, late-night margins of a culture she was new to anyway, not the “otherness” she must have experienced as a larger-than-life, aggressively sexual white Mama (read that as “Madame”) figure among the dainty Victorians, and not the more extreme sense of otherness she must have felt early in her career behind the black greasepaint. With the help of the internet, I renewed my acquaintance with her life and its images. Although they do not resemble Calypso’s at a literal level, they take me to the same compelling realm beyond domain of conventional heroines, beyond the borders within which physical appeal is prime currency. And I suspect that had I been old enough to grasp even some of the reverberations surrounding this first of my stumbled-upon heroines, I might have felt less pressed to fashion, for my own instruction, a Calypso in her “twilight” years.

# Terese Svoboda

## Learning to Translate

You learn tone first. Mom at the phone, Hello? is not Mom a minute later, Go to bed. Then you learn the important foreign foods, éclair, spaghetti, and soup de jour, the last no one orders because there's nothing today about it, it's leftovers.

I learned only acute embarrassment in my kindergarten class of French at a Sacred Heart school because my father dropped me off at the immaculate convent in his dirty old pickup. A housekeeper taught myself and two of my four sisters German. We learned one German lullaby (but not the meaning) and spent most of our sessions trying to copy her strange European script. An old man, at least forty, with long fingernails—for flamenco?—taught high school Spanish. Whenever I try to speak any foreign language now, senseless Spanish is where I begin. French and all the emotional accoutrement of my childhood reappeared in an 8:30 AM college class taught by an irate nun. D was my response. Only Latin became my true friend. A clerk in a nearby courthouse unearthed a genuine ancient spinster who tutored me. I could decline at last. The deader the better was my verdict on translation.

Fortunately, the PEN/Columbia Translation grant I received in grad school was awarded on the merits of my ability to write poetry, not translate. I felt comfortable proposing to do the songs of the Nuer, a Sudanese people, because I had them safely between the covers of E. Evans Pritchard's classic of social anthropology. The Nuer with their spears and quaint customs and cows certainly seemed remote, if not dead. The only translations—fifty years old—seemed to confirm this with its missionary elocutions. They often began: "Let us converse together."

Then, of course, a nude young man carrying a spear walked up to me and said “Let us converse together.”

I had brought along a dictionary written in the twenties, a translated Bible, and various assistants who spent their mornings smoking my tobacco and answering my inane questions, when I could phrase them. I became excellent at discerning the seriousness of a song’s intent and would sometimes insist on unraveling a certain translation, out of hours and hours of taping, only to find out that, for example, the gist of the song of the lieutenant who had borrowed a cow to stand beside in best Nuer performance style was: I want to marry you.

By the time I published my translations, I knew too much. I knew how complex the culture was, how completely different from our own, how untranslatable the emotion behind even that marriage proposal was, how my head and footnotes would never be enough. I suppose I should have begun all over again, but I also had the fevered story of how I had collected the songs, an adventure that tantalized me into attempting another feat of translation: life into fiction.

It took fifteen years before I could articulate properly in the language of fiction. I had published a book of poetry by then but the writing of fiction was exquisitely, painfully dissimilar. Poetry may be contained in fiction but fiction forces the poet to develop a new set of syntax for prolonging drama and reviewing clarity and circling resonance. It was French all over again. In addition, the import of events had to be translated from African understanding to English, characters analyzed for cultural motives, language “conversed” into intelligibly. After a few years of grappling with translating genre and culture, I began to find it unacceptable to translate—maybe filter is a better word—the thoughts or actions of Africans and, by extension, of those of the man who accompanied me. I didn’t know what they were thinking and I didn’t feel, at this stage of my fictional apprenticeship and P.C. awareness, that I could pretend to know. It wasn’t that I couldn’t do convincing, I wanted convincing and strange as well. I wanted readers to understand Africa is not just like New Jersey except. I settled for using the first person binocular, shedding light here and there, translating no one but myself.

**By the time I published my translations, I knew too much. I knew how complex the culture was, how completely different from our own, how untranslatable.**

Now my husband talks high tech. He tells me about people working in the same space as his and I know he's not talking about his cramped cubicle. He talks future-talk, how many "cycles" do I have for the PTA, and where are we going to find "fat pipes"? and why don't I "defrag" and "recompile." Acronyms form in little clusters of uppercase and become words even faster than the nouns turn into verbs. He doesn't talk about other dimensions but I can see that he's living them. Onscreen objects come "layered" with meaning. Of course there are the languages too: my husband thinking in Java when he should be considering the arcane Cobol. Where I once thought if I could just never travel and eat plain donuts and stew and apples all the rest of my life and resist trying to write essays instead of fiction or poetry, I sense it's time to face up: difference is with us.

# Samantha Hunt Between the Storm and the Window

The man who handles my call to the Department of Motor Vehicles is required to tell me that he's a convict in one of our state's prisons. Next he asks, "What can I do to help?"

"My wallet's been stolen. I need a new driver's license." The man recites my options, uncomfortable now because he's a criminal and I'm a victim and he has to help me. As he details the list of possible forms of ID I can bring to the DMV to get a duplicate copy of my license—all forms of ID I no longer have because they were in my wallet and my wallet has been stolen—I notice three or four white maggots in the carpeting of my bedroom. They are the larvae of cluster flies, a seasonal phenomenon I was once unfamiliar with because I did not grow up here. My landlady's suggested that the finest way to be rid of the cluster flies is to vacuum them up but I don't own a vacuum. I usually sever the larvae with the edge of a credit card. I no longer have any credit cards. My wallet has been stolen.

"What is it that you did?"

"Ma'am?" the convict asks. "You mean before I went inside?"

"No. What is it that you did to get put inside?"

He says the three words as though they're a scar on his chin he touches when he's lonely. "Murder. Murder. Murder." Once for the other man; once for the woman he was in love with; and once for her six-year old child. "When I work for the state my TV privileges are extended," he says. "I like to see my shows."

“You don’t have to explain it to me,” I tell him. “I’m in love with someone who can’t love me back also. Once, when he was sleeping, I held a lit cigarette over the crook of his elbow.”

The convict doesn’t say anything. Perhaps he’s afraid someone’s listening. Often I make the mistake of trying to establish similarities between myself and strangers. Usually the strangers don’t care to be anything like me. They would never hold a lit cigarette over anyone’s elbow. But I’m lonely. You should see where I live. There are no people here. I talk to strangers. I trip on purpose just to touch someone else. Let them catch me. I make it look like an accident.

The phone line sounds different. The convict has escaped and an automated voice announces, “Your call may be handled,” and then skips and repeats, “Your call may be handled.”

# Jeffery Renard Allen

## Holding Pattern

You always be seein some wacky shit on the train. Bitch slap a nigga for eyein her. Nigga piss on somebody who piss him off. Somebody get they throat slit over a gold chain. Shit like that. Like this one time, I see this nigga fall flat on his back in the aisle. His teeth start rattlin like keys, and then he start shakin down the aisle and shake all the way to the other end of the car. Another time, this bitch face bleed away. I mean she just sittin in her seat mindin her own business when this gash open in the sideah her neck. She put her palm over the gash but it keep inchin up her neck. She put her other palm over that gash but another gash start up the other sideah her neck. And these two gashes keep climbin and climbin, like they runnin a race or somethin, climbin right on up to her chin, up her face, then spread this net of blood all over her forehead. Bitch open her mouth like she fin to holler but her tongue all red and drownin in blood. She put her hands over her face, and her hands change to blood. Then her head fall right offah her neck and go bouncin and rollin down the aisle. You shouldah seen it. Everybody screamin, tryin to jump off the train wit nowhere to go. Some wacky shit.

And that ain't the least of it. The kinda shit this trippy world can put on your brain. You've heard about the jumpers, the suicides. Well, one time, I was all the way up inna first car, standin there lookin through the head window lookin down on the tracks, seein what the engineer sees. And I see this lady kneelin between the tracks, inna path of the train. Then she looks up and sees the train bearin down on her, and her eyes get all wide and bright, and she gets that look like, Oh, shit, what the fuck am I doin? So she hops up real quick and tries to squeeze her body flat against

the tunnel wall so the train will slip right by her. But inna situation like that, you jus can't slim up and disappear.

Some trippy shit. And I could tell you more. Lots more. But to spare you the trouble I'm jus gon tell you bout this one day that beat all. Why I had to stop ridin the trains all together and institute a career change.

See, I had this routine. Rise early, freshen up. In this profession it's real important to smell good. For extra protection, smear some liquid soap under yo armpits. (The department stores downtown have the best shit. That perfumey shit. Top of the line. Always fill you up a baggy full or two for later use.) I tiptoe down the fire escape. (My landlord can be a real bitch when it's that time of the month.) And make my way down to the cage for the mornin bets.

On this particular day, it's bright and early in the mornin, but niggas is already out. Standin on the sidelines around the cage, lookin through the metal fence twenty-foot-tall or higher. Lined up like a flock of birds on a telephone wire. Don't play no ball myself. Niggas is too rough, all elbows and feet and teeth. But I don't mind watchin from the sideline. Place my bets and flip some money. I got a good eye for that kind of thing.

So, I'm bout to place my bet when I see buck wild Shiheed standin to my left frownin all up inna my face. Shiheed, he one funny-lookin motherfucker. Long square breadloaf head. Eyes all slanted like bird wings. Low eyes, low, almost sittin on his nose. Nostrils big enough to drive two Mack trucks through, cargo and all. Boogers big as peanuts. And these big white wide bright teeth like bars of soap. One other thing. This nigga is skinny. You can see his bones through his clothes. Skin thin as a kite. Pea, he say, I know you ain't bout to bet on that bitch ass nigga.

I seen him play befo.

He won?

Yep.

That musta been his twin. Nigga be out here twenty-fo-seven gettin his ass toe up.

Really?

I kid you not. Look at him.

I look at him, but I can't see what I'm lookin at cause Shiheed got me all confused. So I think about it for a minute. Well, I guess you should know.

Of course. I'm out here all day.

So I bet on the other guy. We stand and wacch the game. Do I need to tell you what happened? That bitch ass nigga won.

Damn, Shiheed, why you fuck me up like that?  
What? Nigga, who you tryin to blame? I'm tryin to look out for you.  
Shit. You know how much that fucked me up?  
Stop cryin. I lost money too, but you don't see me whinin like a bitch.  
Shit.

You need to squash all that. I'm sorry. Truly. Sorry. Fuck.

Why don't you place another bet? Fuck that.

I understand. I owe you. Let me hook you up.

Man—

What can I get you ?

I'm straight.

I got that powerful shit, that Mount Everest shit. Turn you into a superhero.  
Leap buildins in a single bound.

I'm on the clock.

Make time fly.

Really. I'm straight.

I heard that. My nigga. Make that money.

That's what I came to see you about.

What?

That thing I asked you to do fo me. A week before, I'd given Shiheed some ends to flip. Would you have a return on my investment?

Shiheed, he turns towards me, he puts his eyes on me. And they fix me like lasers, burn a hole right through my fohead. All these pictures of fucked-up bodies and piles and piles of dead niggas come flyin and screamin through that hole.

Not today. Things is slow.

I'm lookin at him.

But, hey, I'm gon hook you up.

I don't say anything.

You know I'm a man of my word. Catch me tomorrow.

Okay. Whatever you say.

My nigga. Hey, walk me up the block.

I really need to bounce.

I'm just goin up to the corner sto.

I got all this business I need to—

Damn, nigga. Why you trippin? You can't walk me up the block.

**You hear all that  
corny shit about  
the shadow of  
death followin  
somebody. Things  
you hear be true  
sometimes.**

My skin shrink around my body, tight, beef jerky. Crazy motherfucker. Aw aight, I say. No problem, I say. I start to walk with Shiheed. Walk behind him.

You hear all that corny shit about the shadow of death followin somebody. Things you hear be true sometimes. Shiheed, he got one foot in prison, the other in the grave. I always walk a little behind him. Keep that shadow in the corner of my eye.

Damn, Shiheed, he say. What the fuck is wrong wit you? Can't you walk like normal people?

I'm tryin to, I say. I got this strange condition.

Fuck yo condition. Shiheed's back pockets are packed full, bulgin out like two square titties. That condition wouldn be fear?

Ah, Shiheed. You know me.

Thought I did. So, you got my back?

Of course. But, hey, I ain't down wit that gangsta shit.

Nigga, there you go again. Trippin.

All I'm sayin—

Did I ask anything from you?

Look, I can't do no time. They'll break a lil nigga like me.

What? Nigga, you better wise up. Grow some hair on yo chest.

Just then we arrive at the sto.

You don't even know what I'm gon ask you.

I know. But thanks for the offer. I'll holla. I start to walk away.

Pea, you ain't gon come in the sto wit me?

Like I told you, I got to handle—

Nigga you on some real fucked up shit. Come on in the sto. Let me buy you a double ounce of courage.

I try to laugh it off.

Then Shiheed's face loosen up and he pop into his weird laugh. Nigga, you know I'm jus fuckin wit you. We cool?

Always.

My nigga. Shiheed stroll on into the sto.

Seein that he holdin out on my money—what I'm gon do, gat the motherfucker?—figure I haf to pull me some ends befo my afternoon hustle. So I bounce up to the El platform and wait for the train. I see this other head standin on the platform, a tall skinny nigga wit this green bandanna tied round his noggin, the knotted ends curlin out from his fohead. Nigga standin way high on his toes, head

cocked back, like somebody, tryin to snatch him into the sky. He see me and nod, all silent like. I nod back. Then he go, It's a good day to make some money, if the squares don't get in yo way. He watchin me, hard, real hard. So I walk to the other end of the platform.

When the train come, I hop on nice and quick, and whip out my Tall Boy malt liquor can, papered over wit a black label wit red letters savin UPLIFT CAREER ARTS ACADEMY. I make my way from car to car, holdin up my can and askin for donations. Most people ignore me, keep readin or talkin or starin outa the window. I can say I'm disappointed, but can't say I'm surprised. That is one weak hustle. Always is. So I decide to resort to some real criminal behavior. I'm small and quick, and I can spot an expensive handbag from four car-lengths away. Caiman that is. That's the only thing I fuck wit. Don't even go after all that designer and name-brand shit. Everybody got that fake shit nowadays, so it's hard to tell. And another thing: all that fake ass jewelry. So it's either the caiman or the money, the money or the caiman. I walk from car to car, fix people in my head and eyes as I pass, lookin for an easy mark.

I snatch this big fat bitch purse and she snatch back her purse and me with it. Then she hop up from her seat and pimpslap me. Knock pain in my head. My brain hummin and vibratin like a dunked-on hoop rim. Bitch put me in this headlock and start squeezin my neck so hard that tears pop outa my eyes. Can't help but smell her underarms, right? People usually be stinkin under they arms, specially fat people. But this fat bitch bout the best thing I ever smelt. Smell like my head and face inna can fulla sweet flowers and fruits and candies. (She must know that department sto downtown.) But she don't give my nose long to appreciate. She take off her shoe and she ain't got on no stockins and I see the prettiest big toe I ever seen, no corns or nothing. Like a fine little titty. I'm watchin that titty when that fat bitch start hittin me upside the head with her hard ass heel. Then she haul off and sling me away from her, a Rollerball move, and I feel sumpin twist in my neck certain that this bitch done snapped my head off, that my head back there under her fine-smellin arm. So I touch my head to make sure it's still there, and that's when I feel what I think is blood crawlin real slow down from the topa my head. And I feel this thing inside my head, movin up and down like wings, wings flappin heavy and hard.

Fat bitch jus stand there lookin at me. She got all this white makeup on her face. Look like she dead. She be like, I'm tired of you low life niggers. Some people should never be born. Then that fat bitch kick me right in the nuts. Wit that fine ass big toe.

You can make yo best money down in the financial district at lunchtime when all the suckers spill outta their offices, hungry and loud. When you see ah sucker, stick out yo belly and put on a sad face. Then you be like, Sir (or Madame), could you spare me a quarter for sumpin to eat? You can gank a few. And you can pull a big draw if you can find a whole gang of suckers from the same office all bunched up together.

Hunger make people feel all guilty and shit. An easy hustle. You can pull some substantial loot if it ain't too many bums around. I don't believe in knockin nobody's hustle, but a bum ain't nothing but a raggedy ass scarecrow scarin all the money away.

Lucky for me I see jus these two bums. This one curled up off to himself inna space between two buildins, his face all red and shiny, set like a diamond in his grimey rags. And this other one wearin a sign round his neck sayin: INSULT ME FOR A DOLLAR. He jus sittin there on the dirty ground with his legs all folded Buddha-style, sittin there like he can't move, like his sign heavy as a concrete slab. Scarecrow.

So I try not to sweat them bums and start workin my hustle, like I always do, but, for whatever reason, suckas is cheap today. I'm talkin nickles and dimes-and pennies-cheap.

I'm like, What the fuck is this, a recession or some shit?

Got's to try another strategy.

So I see this one square, an easy mark, and I tell him that I'm wit the circus, The Man of Steel, and ask him if he wanna punch me inna stomach for a dolla. I pull up my shirt and brace myself. This square, he just look at me and shit. But that ain't all. Guess what he does next? Punk motherfucker spit on me. You heard me? Word. Yo, I'm all hot inside, hot, real hot. I'm like, Hey, money. Suck my dick. Then I run. Fast.

I use some of my draw for carfare and catch the train to my girl Juicy's crib. Juicy meet me inna hall with a kiss, all sexy and fly in this thin floating negligee, like a spider web. She be like, Hey, Pea, you sweet bitch. How you doin'?

I had better days.

Poor baby. She takes my hand, turns—she got more ass than a donkey, I ain't gon tell you bout her face—and leads me into her crib. Then she leave me standin in the middle of the room and go over and sit down on the couch in fronta the TV to watch her favorite talk show—you know this my show—all content wit her snack: root beer and potato chips wit hot sauce.

She be like, Pea, I was gon give you some. But damn, I'm sick.

What's wrong?

My throat sore. I been smokin trees all day but it don't do nothing.

Oh, I see. Kids ain't ready?

No. Ain't you hear me? I'm sick.

Sorry.

What? she say. Sorry? She frown up her face. What sorry gon do fo me? Can't you order me a pizza or sumpin? Some Chinese food. Home delivery.

I got to make them ends first. We got this nice lil business arrangement, my after-school hustle. I give her twenty-five dollars a day for the use of her sons, Crust and Hamfat. Fifteen dollars for the older one. He ten. And two dollars for the younger. He seven. Suckas like kids. On good days, I can turn a nice lil profit. On bad days, I'm lucky to break even.

Aw right. Well, you better go get them boys then.

I go into the bedroom where Crust and all Hamfat holed up wit the Nintendo game at the foot of the bed, lookin up at the TV on the stand above them. What up, yall?

What up, Pea?

What up?

Ready to make that money?

Can we finish our game first?

Yeah. I'm whoopin his ass.

You wish.

Come on, fellas. Time is money.

Ahhh.

I take them back out into the other room. Juicy look up at me from the couch. Yall ready?

Yep.

Hold up. I'll walk yall to the train. She goes in the bedroom. I take the time alone with the kids for a last minute review.

You got the wig?

Yeah.

And the dress?

Yeah.

And you practiced the rhyme?

Yeah.

Let me hear it.

Do we have to?

I don't feel like it.

Aw ight. Stop whinin. But you better not mess up.

Juicy come outta the room stylin some stupid gear. This leather top all right over her titties. These little shorts, real tight too. And some sandals, each toenail painted a different color. Aw right, yall. Let's go.

So, we bounce from her crib and head for the El, Juicy hangin all on my arm, though she taller than me, the kids holdin hands in fronta us. The hood gnats see me and start wavin their wine bottles, glass flags. They swarm over and start in wit the beggin. Look at the happy family. I got a family too. Aw yea, you a righteous brother. Can't you set me straight? Family man, let me hold a ten to run up and see my p.o. Can't you let me hold five til Thursday? I'm good for it. I'll pay you on Tuesday fo a taste today.

Hey, Juicy say, step the fuck off. What do we look like, the Red Cross or some shit? Those niggas quiet down and diasppear like roaches into dark cracks. Then Juicy turn to me. She be like, Pea, I know you don't be givin them broke niggas no money. I turn my face away. You better not. A nigga will ride yo jock worse than a bitch.

We go on a ways. What time you think yall be back?

Not too late.

Pick me up a pack of cigarettes. I'll pay you back.

I don't say nothing.

Be careful wit Ham. He got a slight cold.

Okay.

Now; yall mind Pea.

Yes, ma'm.

I don't wanna hear bout yall actin up.

We ain't. We gon be good.

Some big fat sloppy motherfucker is comin up the block towards us, hoggin the street. I curve around a lamp pole to keep from runnin into him.

Damn, Pea, Juicy says. What the fuck is wrong wit you? Ain't I told you bout splittin poles.

But that dude—

Bad luck. I can't have you cursin no bad luck on my sons.

You believe in all that?

She looks at me. Is you stupid or what?

I turn my face away. A cage is a little ways up, and as we pass by, who do I see on the other sideah the fence watch in the game? Shiheed. Shit. Shiheed and Juicy hate each other cause Juicy is mouth-dangerous and Shiheed'll slap a bitch inna minute. Shiheed looks over and catches my eye. I turn my head. Too late.

Yo, Pea. What the deal, son?

What? Oh, Shiheed.

Shiheed walks over, stands lookin at me through the diamond-shaped spaces of the fence. I keep walkin, but he follows along, right beside us, Juicy inches from him.

Nigga, what you doing up here? Shiheed don't even look at Juicy.

You know, doin my—

I know you ain't hangin now wit them project niggas.

I feel quick heat on my skin.

Got way too much pride for that. You handle that business?

Yep.

My nigga. Pea. Always doin yo thing. You still doin that thing, right?

You know me.

Yeah, I know you. Shiheed sucked his teeth.

Then Juicy says, Damn, Pea. You gon let him diss you like that?

Bitch, was anybody talkin to you?

Who you callin a bitch? Juicy stops in her tracks and stands lookin through the fence right at Shiheed.

Ain't but one bitch standin here. Maybe two.

Nigga, where yo mamma? I don't see that one-tooth bitch.

What, you gon talk bout—

Jus shut the fuck up, Juicy says. Yo breath stank.

Yo, Pea, Shiheed say. He lookin at me, big ass nostrils aimed and cocked at my face, a sawed-off shotgun. I can't talk. I can't move. Yo. You better do sumpin bout yo ugly Hee Haw-lookin bitch.

Ugly? Nigga, how many mirrors ran away from you today?

Yo, Pea, you better put yo bitch on a leash.

Why don't you do it?

I'll wreck this bitch. You know I don't give a fuck. Straight jackin.

Juicy chuckles. Nigga, you can't even jack yo own dick.

Yo, Pea. I'm tellin you. Been a long time since I put the screws to somebody.

Well, here's yo chance. Step to it. Be a man.

Nawl. Nawl. Bitch, you think I'm gon stomp you with yo kids right here in fronta you watchin'?

Crust and Ham lookin round fo weapons. Crust picks up a pop bottle and breaks it. Ham finds a piece ah coat hanger. They assume war poses.

Bitch, you caught a break this time.

Anytime. Juicy says. You know where to find me. Then she turns to the kids, fulla venom. Yall put that down. Go ahead. They do what she tells them to do. Now, let's go. We wasted enough time wit this shit. He ain't nobody. They use to punk him in jail. We all start to walk off together.

**Okay, mamma. We ain't gon cry.**

Yo, Pea, Shiheed shouts. This shit all yo fault. Is you a man or is you a mouse? Nigga, you better learn how to smack the shit outa yo bitch every now and then.

Juicy chastizes her kids. What I tell yall bout weapons?

But—

But nothing. I don't like repeatin myself.

The kids drop their heads, breathin all hard, ready to cry.

Yall better not start all that cryin. We can go on back to the house.

Okay, mamma. We ain't gon cry.

We stop at the entrance to the El station. I can't look Juicy in the face.

Aw right, she says. Don't forget my cigarettes.

I won't. I hurry off wit the kids.

The after-school hustle is set up to catch the rush hour crowd. Of course, all the heads be out there too, in close proximity of the cash. Like this Chinese nigga come walkin through the car, pullin along a lil cart behind him and screamin.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Battary Battary

One dollahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Battary Battary

One dollahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

And you also got them old school hustlers, like this one game-talkin nigga named Sinbad who dress the part in this checkered sports shirt and brown double-knit polyester slacks. Nigga pants is slack alright—floods, all high above his white socks and black square-toed kicks. He kick that shit bout sumpin he call the Action

Factor. He be like, A wise man once said, the gods weave misfortunes for men so that the generations to come will have something to sing about. But *I* say that we don't have to sing sorrow songs. You see, our boys are in the pit. We hand them the ladder to get out. We put them in school, train them, educate them, teach them that knowledge can give tongue to the winged cries of their souls. I know. I was one of those boys. But I stand before you now, a new man. Help us light the torch of wisdom. Help us rekindle the fires of manhood. Help us chart the stars.

Won't you help us, the Action Factor? Won't you reach out your hand to us, Action Factor? Please help us, the Action Factor.

He come up to me rattlin his can.

I jus look at him. Then I be like, I know you.

His eyes go scared. He hurry off.

When he leaves the car, I signal Crust and Ham. They pop up from they seats and move into the aisle.

Excuse me ladies and gentlemen. Sorry to interrupt your conversation and readin pleasures, I'm Pork and I'm Chop, and together we the Pork Chop crew. We don't snatch chains, gangbang or sling cocaine, or live in the correctional way. We jus tryin to earn an honest dollar. We gon tell you a lil story bout our grandma.

After Crust and Ham kick the introduction, I duck down inside that high-sided area right in fronta the doors where nobody can see me and I slip this old granny dress over my clothes and fit this old gray granny wig on my head.

A few grumpy ass squares start complainin and shit. They be like, Hey, I don't wanna hear all that noise. Tell you what, I'll give you a quarter if you jus sit down and shut up. But the other riders squash all that drama. Who the fuck is you? If you don't want no noise, drive yo car to work. I paid my carfare just like you and I want some entertainment.

I start granny-walkin down the aisle all bent over like I got a cane.

Got no food to eat and

My feet got no beats

My welfare check didn't come

Not even a little sum

*They stole my radio*

Hamfat and Crust, they be like, Why they do that granny?

Guess they don't love they granny no mo.

People start crackin up, bent over in they seats, slob flyin off they tongues. I make it to the end of the aisle balancin myself against the fast movin train.

It would be a big appreciation.

If you gave us a small donation.

We just tryin to earn an honest dollar. If you don't gibe this time, maybe you'll gibe next time. Crust and Ham start comin down the aisle with their baseball caps stretched out to the people on both sidesah the train. I say, And we accept pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, dollars, checks, transfers, tokens, food stamps, and Crust and Ham say, ladies' phone numbers. Everybody laugh. Good fo me. Laughter loos- en up the wallets and purses. Once the kids reach me, we turn and face everybody. Thank you ladies and gentlemen. I'm Pork. I'm Chop. And we the Pork Chop crew. Enjoy your evenin. We move on to the next car.

We start in the last car and work our way up to the front. Seven cars in all. Then we get off the train and catch one back in the opposite direction. We work it this way through rush hour. Not much money to make after that. And by then the kids start to bitch and whine bout how they tired and hungry and thirsty. So I let em share a candy bar until we make it down to Mickey D's so I can buy them a Yummy Deal.

I want my own King Mac.

He slobbered on the bun.

He put mustard on it.

Pickles is nasty.

He stole my fry.

Where the salt?

Ketchup is nasty.

He spit in the shake.

Hey, yall shut up, I say. Can't you see I'm tryin to think. I'm countin my ends in the dark space under the table, the boys positioned in fronta me fo cover on the other side. Shit. For the day, I pulled jus enough to maintain. I count it again. Shit.

I take Crust and Ham to the park to pump the swings for awhile. I sit down on the hard splintery bench and watch them go up, down, up, down, their own lil competition. Who can swing the highest? I'm thinkin the whole time. When they get tired of the swings, they starts into feedin the pigeons, pitchin potato chips hard and fast, seein who can clobber the most birds. We leave the park jus as night starts to fall.

A block from the El station, Crust yells out, You ain't buy Juicy's cigarettes. Shit. So we swing into a corner sto. I'm hopin the owner won't card me, but he jus looks me up and down, takes my money, and places the squares on the counter. He even throws in an extra book of matches.

We head for the station. I'm busy addin and subtractin as we walk. I got to pay full adult fare for me and reduced fare for the kids. By the time we make it to the station, I've come up wit this plan. I direct Crust and Ham right past the agent sittin in the glassed-in booth and right over to the large wall map. And we stand around the map. I'm studyin all the routes and lines like I don't know where we going.

I wait until I hear the train comin in to the station. I says to the kids, Okay, remember what I told you. The train grinds to a stop, the doors pop open, and people come rushin out. Go on, I tell them. Duck under.

They duck under the turnstile. Then I duck under, but soon as I pop up, I see this transit dick standin in the do of the train lookin at me. He say, What the deal, son? He reach to grab me and I take off as fast as I can, hot foot, the dick shoutin commandents behind me. Far as I can tell, Crust and Ham shoot off runnin in another direction. Either that or they already made it onto the train. I run in lil rushes of speed, curvin around iron beams, tryin to shake off the dick, I look back and see that I'm puttin some good distance between our bodies. That's when I feel my legs start to shut down, my steps get smaller, my ankles band together, like some cowboy done hooped me in a lasso. I trip and stumble face first towards the ground, but break my fall in the nick of time wit my hands.

The dick come up behind me breathin and coughin all hard. He reach down and jerk me to my feet. He keeps one hand on me, the other on his hip and stands there swaying from side to side, tryin to catch his breath. Damn, he says, grinnin and shakin his head. They make you all dumber every day. Nobody never told you how to keep yo pants up?

What? I look down and see my jeans all tangled up around my ankles. I'm standin there in my draws. People is pointin and laughin.

Those jeans got to be what, five sizes too big? You got enough room in there for an entire family.

Would you pull my pants up?

Why?

A second dick comes over with Crust and Ham. He takes one look at me and tells his partner, Pull his pants up. The dick pulls up my pants. They start to walk away wit us.

Damn, he could run.

Couldn't he.

Need to put him in the Olympics.

Jesse Owens.

They take us back into this little office. That's when I get my first good look at the two dicks. The dick who'd caught me ain't much older than myself. He got this lil lima bean head and this peach fuzz on his chin, and he keep his chin stuck way out for the world's admiration. The second dick older, a big ugly Frankenstein-lookin motherfucker. Round pigeon shoulders and muscular ears. Face all scrunched up and serious, like he bitin down on his words, snappin them in two. He shoves me into the wall.

Okay, let's see some ID.

You're lookin at it.

You don't have any ID?

I lost my wallet.

I'll go back and see if I can find it, peach fuzz says. Nawl, I lost it a long time ago.

Monster dick starts goin through my pants pockets, pullin the insides out like used banana peels. Look, I say. Mind my civils.

Be quiet, peach fuzz says. Civil rights are for citizens. You're underage.

What? Hey, I'm not—

Frankenstein shoves me into a chair. Sit there. Shut up. Then he bearhugs the kids and starts pullin them towards his face like he gon screw them into his eyes. They start bawlin. Juicy! Juicy! Juicy! Juicy!

Hey, officer, I say. Don't scare the kids.

He lets them go and points to a chair. They squeeze into it. Then he stands there lookin at me. Mr. Hero, he says.

You shouldn scare the kids.

Mr. Hero.

I jus sit there watchin him, quiet.

Mr. Hero, let me ask you something.

I know my rights.

Come on, just one question. Off the record.

I watch him. Off the record?

I would have it no other way. Aw ight then.

Where will you be in five years?

Dead.

The dick's frown burns away.

But see, we criminals never die. I'll probably come back as a pimp or serial killer in my next lifetime. Maybe even the president.

His face seals over in anger. So, you one of those smart ones.

Look, you caught me. I slipped up. Can we get on with it? No disrespect. Can you jus gon and write my summons?

Wish we could, the young dick says. But we don't handle kids. City policy.

I ain't a kid.

He grins. Okay, if you say so. But what about them? He motions to Crust and Ham.

Can't we forget about them?

Wish we could. But I'm not getting caught up in a lawsuit.

Lawsuit?

Everybody wants to sue nowadays.

Look, I jus wanna—

I already told you. We don't handle kids. You don't like that policy, take it up with the city council. The mayor.

Man, I don't believe this.

The young dick sits down at his desk and starts fillin out some forms.

What? I got to wait fo you to do yo paperwork?

That's right. Then you'll go down to the 107th Precinct.

I don't believe this.

Why don't you relax?

Frankenstein leanin against the wall beside the desk lookin at me. I eye his badge: Jason George Sams.

I be like, Hey, yall ain't even real cops. What kind of cop got three first names?

Frankenstein don't say a word.

Why don't you jus gon and call the *real* cops?

The transit dick puts his pen down and starts lookin at me. Hey, you want this to take all night? I didn't think so. Why don't you pipe down and relax? He starts back on his form.

Hey, Hero, Frankenstein says to me. You mind if I have one of your cigarettes?

What? You on the job.

Maybe I want to smoke it after I get off the job.

I'm thinkin, why is this nigga fuckin wit me? They ain't mine.

What you stole them?

How you gon play me like that? Officer, I ain't no thief. I'm a sneak.

My mistake. So, Hero, let me just take one of your cigarettes, see, and I'll tell them to let you keep the pack. Otherwise.

Okay.

He removes Juicy's pack of squares from this plastic Baggy, opens it, and pulls outa square. He taps the butt, puts the square between his teeth, and fires it up wit his own lighter.

Hey, Jason, the other dick says, pass me one of those.

Jason holds out the pack fo the young dick, and he waste no time pullin outa square and firin it up. And the two of them jus start puffin like crazy, the young dick sittin there at his desk, strings of smoke risin up to the ceiling, jerkin him this way and that like he some kinda puppet. And the other one real relaxed against the wall, blowin fats white rings and cannon balls.

Hey, I say.

They look at me.

Ain't you heard?

Heard what?

Smokin is bad for you. Make yo balls shrink.

I guess that jus pissed them off big time cause they hurry up and finish those squares mad quick, then fire up two fresh ones. They smoke on those long and good, til they see these two city dicks approachin the office, strapped with gats, nightsticks, radios, handcuffs, and mace. The transit dicks stub out the squares in a glass ashtray and shove the ashtray into a metal drawer.

This him? one cop asks.

That's him.

Workin together, the municipal dicks pull me up from the chair and start pattin me down.

We already frisked him, Frankenstein says. Here are his effects.

They continue to frisk me. Satisfied, one dick takes the plastic baggy from Frankenstein, the pack of squares inside. Paperwork?

Peach fuzz holds out a form. The dick takes the form and folds it into his breast pocket. Two other city dicks come and take Crust and Ham into they custody. Jus befo the kids step outa the room, they turn to me and throw up they sign. I nod.

I guess we're about done here. Okay, son. Let's go.

We get on the elevator and rise up to the street like smoke up a chimney. Then they shove me in the back of this paddy wagon and slam the door shut. And I jus sit there, like the last sardine in a can, dry and forgotten. Ain't gon lie, I'm scared as a motherfucker.

They hustle me into the precinct and we go in one room after another, the escortin dicks noddin to the station dicks. Seem like we walk damn near a mile. Finally, we come to this one tiny ass room wit jus one dick sittin at a desk readin a sports magazine.

Hey, Steve, look who we got for you.

The dick named Steve looks up at me from his desk. This here's—tell him your name.

I tell him my name.

Ain't he a beauty. I'm thinking I should take him home and make him my son.

Could I have him first? Steve tosses his magazine on top a pile of papers on his desk.

Only if you say please.

Please.

Okay.

The cop shoves me into the chair next to Steve's desk and hands Steve the form and my personal effects. Steve takes a quick look at the form and flips it onto his desk.

Routine, he says.

That's right. Nothing special. Never is.

Thanks guys.

The two dicks turn and head outa the room. Steve tapes the form to my personal effects bag, then tosses the bag onto the desk. Halfway out the door, one of the departin dicks stops and turns back around. Hey, Steve?

Yeah.

You should show him our resident.

This one here?

Sure.

No, I don't think so.

Go ahead. It might do him some good. He leaves.

What's all this bout some resident? I ask.

Police matters. He sittin there writin sumpin on a clipboard.

How long is this gon take?

They'll release you from juvenile after you see a judge.

What? But I ain't underaged.

They'll have to verify all of that.

What? I'm thinkin, They got all kinds ah ways to fuck with you. Officer, what's the charge?

Solicitation.

Solicitation? What? I ain't no pimp.

That's the charge.

Look, I'm jus tryin to make a livin.

It's still against the law.

Then somebody need to change the goddamn law.

The cop looks over at me. I'm sure they'll change the goddamn law for you.  
You're so wonderful. You're so essential to our long-term survival.

I snorted. Ain't this a bitch.

Could you do one thing for me? Steve says.

What?

Would you mind?

What?

Would you shut your fuckin mouth? Thank you.

So I jus sit there and shut the fuck up. What else I'm gon do?

There's something you don't realize, Steve says.

What's that, officer?

I'm givin you a fuckin break here.

A break? Is that what you call it?

Yes, that's what we call it.

Okay. You the authority. I suck my teeth.

He lookin at me. You know what, we got theft of city services. Three counts.  
Endangerment of a child. Two counts. Corruption of a minor. Two counts. Fleeing  
the scene of a crime. One count. Evading arrest. One count. And one count of  
aggravated assault.

What's the assault for?

On the train platform you stepped on some lady's toe.

I jus slid down in my seat. These niggas is a trip.

You should be thanking me.

Thanks.

Okay, that's the paperwork. He flips the clipboard down on the desk. They'll  
be takin you over to juvy.

You already told me that.

So I can't tell you again?

I ain't say shit, not one fuckin word.

Are we clear?

Yes, officer.

Okay. So, they'll be taking you over to juvy. But before they do, I want to show you something.

What?

I'll show you.

Why?

Because you're such a smart and honest and delightful and handsome sonuv-abitch.

You gon beat me or sumpin'?

You think we really do that.

I jus look at him, and keep lookin.

Follow me.

So he gets up from the desk and I gets up from the chair, and I follow him through a door into a large room wit one cell, a good twelve-feet high and wide and maybe ten deep. There's this one nigga inna cell stretched out on this one cot, his hands behin his head and his feet crossed at the ankles.

Okay, Steve says. I'll leave you to it. He walks outa the room, shuts the door, and leaves me standin befo this stretched-out nigga.

The nigga looks over and sees me, and that's when I see his face for firs time. Some old nigga. Well, maybe he ain't too old. His hair got nappy patches of gray and gray hairs curl though his goatee. But the face is smooth. He swing his legs round and props to a sittin position, bent over, lookin down at his shoes. Then he be like, So what they get you for? Talkin to his shoes.

Jumpin the turnstile.

They arrest people fo that now?

I chuckle. Nawl. They send you to college.

He looks up at me. Is that what they do? sayin it like he don't know I'm dissin his ass.

So, Pops, what you doin back here?

What it look like I'm doin?

Not much. Jus sittin there. Hey, I really think I should bounce. Why don't I let you sleep it off?

You can't sleep off what I got.

I chuckle. Pops, they takin you to the rehab? Is that where you goin, the rehab?

Why would I need to go there?

You tell me.

Are you as dumb as you look? Any fool can see I'm here workin wit you.

What? Workin wit me? Okay, Pops. Really. Why don't I let you sleep it off?

Hey, Steve.

Nigga, what's wrong? You afraid?

Afraid?

Don't stress yourself.

Afraid?

The cell locked.

Hey, Pops, I'm fin to bounce.

Nigga, you might as well relax. That door locked.

I look at the door, look at Pops, look at the door, look at Pops. Hey, what's all this about? You an officer? Aw ight, you got me. I'm scared.

Do I look like an officer?

I look him over. He wearin this kinda two-piece, a plain red shirt, no collar, and plain red sweats, and the material is all worn, with lint and loose thread. The shit look raw, like a plucked chicken. What they get you for?

You don't wanna know.

How long you been in?

Oh, about twenty-seben years.

What? Twenty-seven years?

Give or take.

I'm thinkin, okay, he's one of the crazies. One of those loons who'll sneak up behin you and shove you off the platform. Maybe I do have me a lawsuit. Got me locked up in here wit some crazy. Cruel and unusual punishment.

I work fo the city. Around the clock. I help them with some of the problem cases.

Problem cases?

That's right.

I know he a crazy, but I don't let on. So that means I've graduated.

Come again?

The dick out there called me a piece of shit. But now I graduated to a problem problem case.

Steve didn't say that.

Yes he did.

He lookin at me. What's your name?

Didn't they tell you?

Would I be askin if they did ? Well, I don't feel like sayin.  
Suit yoself. You know why they brought you back here?  
You sure in the fuck are gonna tell me. They want you to see my wings.  
Thinkin, Oh, man. I know I got me a lawsuit. You can fly?  
Most winged creatures can.

I look around the room fo a chair or somewhere to sit. Shit.  
I ain't stepped outa this cell since they arrest me. Twenty-seben years.

What bout when you haf to take a piss or a shit?  
He jus look at me. You ain't sayin nothin but what's natural.  
So, you a natural man too, huh, Pops?

No. I'm a public servant. And I'm damn good at it and I enjoy my work. I got clean comfortable board. I get my rations and my commisary. And the pay ain't bad. Though I don't spend none of my salary. Ain't spend none in these twenty-seben years. I just have them put it all in the bank. I must be richer than Rockefeller by now. Maybe someday I'll leave it all to a young buck like you.

Fuck someday. I'll settle for a loan today.

No way. I can tell by the way you dressed you ain't got no collateral.

Pops, look at you. Don't talk bout the way nobody dressed.

Granted. We both men. He cough. Will you allow me to ask you a difficult question?

Why, Pops? What you got to ask me?

You drop outa school, didn you?

Nawl, Pops. I'm in college. I got to get my law degree so I can represent broke ass motherfuckers like you.

Why you stop goin?

All they did was teach me how to curse.

You don't say? That's the same exact thing they taught me.

I get a real good laugh offa that one. Pops, you is funny. Real funny. You old niggas master them jokes. Man. So now I bet you gon tell me that you used to be like me?

I ain't never been like you. I ain't never been anything like you.

He just sittin there starin at me, eyes all glowin, and I'm thinkin, This motherfucker bout to go off. Better do somethin to calm his ass down. So, Pops, where yo wings?

You ready to see them? He starts to takin off his shirt, pullin his arms outa the sleeves.

Hey, hold up. I'm thinkin maybe I should go over and make sure the jail cell locked.

Don't worry, he says. I ain't no freak, he says.

Why don't you keep yo shit on. Jus tell me what you got to tell me.

But he pulls the shirt over his head and throws it onto the cot. He in pretty good shape fo an old man, the muscles in his arms and chest cut. He stands up. I'm hopin this nigga won't take off his pants.

Hey, Pops.

He spins his back slowly toward me, and sure nough, he got wings. Lil wings no bigger than yo hands, all folded up like paper planes or church fans.

Are those supposed to be real?

What you think?

I don't say anything.

Tell you what, why don't you touch them. Go ahead. Touch them.

Nawl, that's awright.

I step closer to the cell so that I can get a better look, a good five feet away from him, close enough to see but far enough away if I need to jump back. The wings ain't got no feathers. They all dried up and brown and crusty, like some fried chicken wings.

You gettin a good look?

My tongue won't move.

You know what?

I can't speak.

These things cause me all sorts a trouble on the outside. Let me show you sum-pinn else. He moves, and I flinch and jump back. He starts climbin the bars up one sideah the cell, like one of them circus acrobatics goin up a ladder, and then when he gets to the topah the cell, he eases around wit his hands on the bars behin him, and stretches his body forward out over the bed ten feet below, lockin his arms, stiff triangles behin him. Then he lets go of the bars.

He falls straight forward and stops midair, body horizontal, that cot a good five feet beneath him. Holy shit. What did I jus see? Those lil wings are movin up and down, up and down. Like a skydiver, he rises straight up to the topah the cell, then he starts slidin forward on the air, all the way to the end of the cell, then he turns and comes back the other way, and he goes on this way fo quite some time, flyin about the cell, makin sharp turns cause it ain't much room to manuever, flyin like this a good ten minutes befo he swoops down and sits himself on the cot.

I'm standin there lookin. His fohead and chest and neck are bright wit sweat. He takes a good look at me. Then he be like, I don't need to tell you what you jus saw.

I wish I could speak.

Don't worry, son. With one big jump the men get there.

If I could jus speak.

Well, I guess that bout does it, wouldn you say? I nod, my neck stiff.

Good. Hey, befo you leave, do me a favor, would you?

What? My voice is quiet, a scratch.

Get the keys from Steve.

I'm lookin at him.

Jus jokin.

Just then, the do swings open and Steve pops into the space. All done here?

All done. You got a towel?

Sure. Steve tosses Pops a towel and motions fo me to follow him into the other room. I do. In fact, I follow him all through the entire station, back to the precinct entry. Then he turns and looks at me. You ain't got to say a word. You free to go. The city allows you a token. He drops the transit token into my hand.

I ask no questions and step out to the street. And I wanna think bout my personal effects and Juicy's squares, wanna think bout this flyin nigga I jus seen and bout all the other trippy shit that happen to me today. I wanna think bout all that, but the minute my foot hits the pavement, it starts to rain, hard and fast, rainin punches. Shit. Now don't this beat all? I put my head down and run faster than the rain to the El station. I stand near the turnstile and check to see how dry I am. Can say I'm wet but can't say I'm soaked.

I open my hand and, you guessed it, the token gone. What the fuck else can happen? I jus stand there a minute, searchin through my pockets, and the next thing I know, I feel myself liftin into the loosenin air, my feet three inches above the ground. And I don't rise no higher than jus those three inches. I've levitated on the regular every day since. Always three inches. No lower, no higher.

# Prageeta Sharma

## Belonging as Consequence: On Poetry

It was just a momentary untruth in my way,  
bodies of the crowd blocked the big blue outside.

Now I have a stealthy cause to try and be myself,  
to further a personal idea of arrangement:

of how to use those thoughts, the ones that don't get used.  
But how to let them tick without abuse.

How to repay the debt, use the solvent,  
blast the blotched & troubled nearby—

What does everyone else caress?  
All of those etched poses neatly joined:

mastery, hierarchy, witchcraft & shamanism.  
A spike in the dander keeps me plain enough—

But to insist! To consolidate those fears—after months of uncertainty,  
couldn't cough or breathe or pilfer correctly.

Now this victorious shape, this idea moves  
through muteness, shyness, weakness—

Then it awakens:  
Becomes a nonconformist of happenstance—  
a person saddled beneath

Reaches up for a fiction,  
abundant and unrestricted ideas

poised and in front.

# Paula Delgado-Kling

## Child Soldiers

### LEONOR

I came back home to Colombia hoping to get reacquainted with my country in the most intimate of terms. The story of Leonor's life knocked the wind out of me.

"I don't even want the children we have now," she recalled her father crying out, at the news of her mother's latest pregnancy. Already there were six children in Leonor's family.

Leonor and Leo, the brother she was closest to, crouched in a corner, and Leonor saw that her parents' fighting had more sting than ever. Her father sprang from a wooden chair; one of a few pieces of their furniture besides a floppy table, rusty beds and an ancient gas stove in the corner. The family then lived in the hamlet of Puerto Guzman in one large dusty room, always either too drafty or too stuffy. Puerto Guzman, located in southern Colombia, is a botanist's paradise, lush-green, but isolated, too.

"You're a drunkard, Oliverio," her mother yelled. "You can't hold a job."

"And you're an ugly whore. Si, you're my ugly puta." He cackled, exposing his nearly bare, white gum lines. "You're my angry puta," he taunted, the alcohol making him slur.

Leonor told me, "They always did *that*. You know what I'm saying. In front of all the children."

The local Catholic priest had preached that a large family was a holy family, and her mother had sat in the front pew every Sunday. Leonor was bright-eyed and every so often, she'd find empty bleach bottles in the garbage and her mother

on her knees at the parish, pleading forgiveness, “Escusame, Señor, escusame, Todopoderoso,” and lighting white candles.

With time, Leonor learned that because in Puerto Guzman, there was nowhere to go for birth control, her mother often aborted, quietly on her own, by squirting bleach up her vagina. In the days that followed the bleaching, bleeding confirmed the baby was passing.

This time, her mother had been unable to bear self-aborting this baby. Her susurrations were like an insect’s drone, and her green green eyes crystallized and then locked Leonor’s. A cycle ago, her mother had caught this same doom in her mother’s eyes. The three of them, grandmother, mother and daughter, had emerald eyes, likely the seed of a European patron who’d come this way decades ago.

“Mamá, don’t cry,” Leo’s whisper was only for Leonor to hear. The warmth of his breath caressed his younger sister’s neck. Leonor clutched his hand. She hugged him, and holding each other, they melted the knots of fear of the rage. Their parents’ anger was enough to make them forget their empty stomachs.

Their mother then bolted to the opening in the wall that served as a window. The rain had wet the floor.

Their father released his belt from his pants. “Papá, don’t,” Leo cried out, and then his cheek stung from receiving the belt’s whip.

Their mother looked back at Leonor and Leo, her two youngest. Her hair and face were soaked. She turned around and leaped from the window. Theirs was one of a few buildings that had a second floor. Upstairs, Leonor and Leo heard her wailing, “Por el amor de Dios, ayúdame, Diosito.” She lay on the street. She had no broken bones and no visible bruises.

Leonor grew up without much parental support, and poverty-struck, without schooling and unemployed. As a teenager, trying to find her place, she joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC, a deadly cocaine-trafficking group on the US State Department’s terrorism list.

When she and I met, she’d been out of the FARC for close to two months, and she lived in Bogotá, in a home run by Don Enrique and Doña Susana, the husband-wife team who consolidated and NGO so that the government could entrust them to resettle teens after life in the bush.

She had not seen her own mother in close to two years and her social workers insisted she had to get in touch with her.

Leonor asked, “Can’t you tell them that I don’t ever want to see my mother again?”

I listened. In absence of day care, her mother had tied her and Leo to a bed post before leaving for ten-hour work days. Often, she’d lost her temper and struck her children across the face. And there was the time that Leonor, then thirteen years old and eager to learn, had informed her mother that school was starting the following week.

“Niña, how many times must I tell you the same?” her mother answered. “Mira, por Dios, niña, you’re just not meant to have the kind of life of someone who goes to school.”

Her mother had dismissed the issue with a shrug.

While living in the government’s care, once she was out of the FARC, she was being schooled via computer classes. At that point, she was seventeen years old and could read and write at a third grade level. The computer lab near the government home turned out to be a little more than an opportunity for Leonor and the others to surf the web for porn.

“I want to study, forget about the past, get a new family—mine does not love me,” she said.

The Colombian government’s policy is to return the “rehabilitated” child soldiers to their families, and although Leonor did not wish to return, it wasn’t for me to interfere. Unfortunately, what triggered many foot soldiers to voluntarily join FARC ranks will be there when they return home. Many also realize the violence skills they learned in the FARC will advanced them in other newly forming gangs also involved in drug trafficking, extortions and killings.

Her FARC adventure began three months before she and I first met, right before she turned seventeen years old, in what she considered another life. She had a friend with paprika-like freckles sprinkled on his cheeks and red hair like the head of a matchstick. When I asked her his name, she told me to call him el pelirojo, the red-head. She knew Redhead would have done *anything* for her because every time she was near him, he’d blush. He was not a boyfriend status.

“Llévame. What’s it to you? If you bring one more body, the FARC will praise you,” she said to Redhead. She knew the FARC had told him to come and join them, via a note they’d slid under his door, what the Redhead thought of as a recruiting slip, and what you and I would call a threat.

A press release from the Colombian Ombudsman’s office reported that close to ninety percent of child soldiers voluntarily joined armed groups. Of these,

thirty-three percent were attracted by guns, the uniform and the status recognition; another thirty-three percent percent joined because of poverty; sixteen percent were attracted because they had regular contact with armed groups in areas where they lived; and the last eight percent joined because they were in love with a guerrilla member or sought vengeance due to the loss of a family member. Leonor could have ticked off all these categories.

Leonor froze at the site of four FARC guards with Uzi machine guns hanging over their chests. Now that she knew where their campus was located, there was no *maybe* to this. “She’s with me,” Redhead said, his adolescent voice cracking for a moment then echoing across a stream of crystal water that reflected the brown of its mud bed.

One of the guards had a fresh scar on his neck, red with dried blood. Leonor stared at its swelling and he explained it was from shrapnel. “From fifteen days ago,” he mentioned casually. He’d been up in northern Colombia, delivering a message, and the *paracos*, the paramilitaries, had caught up to him. Fire was exchanged between them. Leonor thought about how her older brother, Milton, was a paramilitary, and how she was about to join a group that was his enemy. She hated the man Milton had turned out to be. It was because of Milton’s acquaintances that Leo was murdered. Her sweet Leo. A vine-shaped “L” for Leonor and Leo was marked on the tattoo at the base of her thumb. She shook her head and the wind unleashed her long hair.

That was when she saw him. Her heart missed a beat. He was so good looking! She had seen seen this señor somewhere else before, but she could not then recall where. He had a buzz cut, a golden tan. This must be fate, she thought. His crow-shaped eyes were like onyx almonds. Leonor could barely swallow her own saliva. He was in his mid-forties. Tall. With a centipede-like mustache, like Che Guevarra’s, and it shone like he’d varnished it.

“Soy el Comandante Tico,” he said to her. “The fifth highest commander in this front.”

About a minute of silence passed between them while Tico’s eyes followed the dents in the Leonor’s starved-skinny body. He slammed down his AK-47 to shake her cold hand. He ignored Redhead. This was Tico’s camp and he was in charge of the twenty people there, mostly women. He, like everyone else in the camp, wore camouflage. The group’s emblem was displayed prominently on everyone’s left forearm—the letters “F.A.R.C.” were embroidered over the yellow, blue and red colors of the Colombian flag. Tico’s shirt was too tight for him and his bicep stretched the material.

Leonor took after her older sister, Consuelo, and they were both boy crazy. Years ago, when Consuelo herself had raging hormones, she'd been obsessed with how on TV lovers unleashed their scripted flame for one another. Late one night, under the covers, Consuelo had told Leonor she liked a scruffy and muscular macho hombre from the tavern. You're gross, had been Leonor's reply. Consuelo had described to her little sister how she imagined it would be: Her breasts, swollen though tender. His legs, lean and defined from outdoor work. His broad back from weeding with a steel hoe. Their sweat. Stop it, Consuelo, Leonor had insisted, and Consuelo had laughed. Now it was Leonor who would stun Consuelo with her carnal tales, only Consuelo was also dead.

**You've come to stay, Tico said. The words were meant to be a question but his monotonous voice turned them into a statement.**

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The last time Leonor saw Consuelo, she'd had pins sticking out from her left eye. Her right eye was missing. Nails and pins also stuck out from under her fingernails. She was muddy. Her thighs were bruised. She'd been found murdered wearing one plastic high-heeled sandal, soiled, and its sole was loose. Prick marks and crusty blood around her ankles showed where Consuelo had been tied with barbed wire. When Leonor remembered, she had trouble breathing.

It was still unclear to Leonor which group was responsible for Consuelo's murder. She'd overheard two señoras in the town market saying how that slut who was killed was involved with men from the FARC and men from the paramilitaries.

"You've come to stay," Tico said. The words were meant to be a question but his monotonous voice turned them into a statement. With time, Leonor realized this tone was his way of sounding authoritative.

Smoke evaporated in the air pointing out the camp's belly, where two fires wrapped their blue and purple flames around a burnt black pot and a rusty kettle. Warriors lounged inside six green tents, their plastic tarp walls rustling to the beat of the wind, and under two improvised shelters, the roofs made of dry palm tree leaves held up by four evenly tall sticks.

When she and I talked, there were times that she grew distant, her gaze fixed forward, her palms tucked inside her naked thighs, and I registered how hurt she was, her bare arms and legs puckering into chicken-skin. Within minutes after Leonor had arrived in Tico's camp, two women signaled her to follow them, leading her to attend where they cornered her on the tarp floor like a dirty rat. It was hot in there and you could smell the under-arm and foot sweat.

“Take off your underwear,” she heard one of them demand.

Leonor followed the order. The two women whispered to each other but she could not hear what they were saying. They checked inside her pubic hair, parting strands in the middle to check the skin. The older one smelled Leonor’s panties. This older one had long dark hair, which hung loose and below her shoulders, the trademark of an indigenous, so straight, it was as if she’d ironed it.

The younger one then slammed Leonor’s legs open. “You have rashes? Itches?” she asked, not looking for conversation but for quick answers. She spoke rapidly, quickly rolling her r’s and melting words into each other—“picadurasrojas?” Her attitude was purposeful and unpleasant. On her engagement finger, she wore a thin ring that was rusting and dyeing her skin purple. Leonor considered this young woman nice-looking but a little too plain to be beautiful. “Actually, she was on the ugly side,”—Leonor giggled and I sensed rivalry—“mas fea.” The woman’s short black hair was tied back in a down-to-business-ponytail, and Leonor thought she was too much of a tomboy. “Ugly, ugly.”

“I’m kind of cold,” Leonor said to the two women.

But neither of them cared.

“If a girl gets a sex disease, she has to pay a fine which means doing extra strenuous work. You may have a sex disease, you look up the type. Then you give it to someone, who gives it to us, and we have to serve out the punishment,” the plain-looking, purple-fingered woman, the ugly one, said.

“Then we all have to take a course on how to prevent sex diseases,” the older one, with the seemingly ironed-out hair, added. She then injected Leonor’s left arm—without warning.

“Ouch.” She’d done it quickly but not painlessly.

“There. So no need for abortions,” the older woman concluded.

In 2000, around the time that Leonor joined the FARC, abortion (illegal in Catholic-dominated Colombia) was the number one cause of hospital visits in FARC-dominated southern Colombia. In national statistics, abortion was then the second cause of death for all women in Colombia and the third cause of hospital visits. The two women gave Leonor a birth control shot and in some way Leonor was lucky: Often, young girls in the FARC are given an IUD which can cause sterilization, especially in teenage girls whose uteruses are still growing.

That first night in the FARC, Leonor had so many questions to ask Tico. Who would they kidnap? Will she get to shoot a gun? He had a twitch in his black-crow

eyes and it intimidated her. Leonor had never been scared of a man before, except of her paramilitary brother, Milton. She was terrified of Milton.

“What’s going to happen . . .” she began asking Tico.

“Chito. Hush.”

He took off his camouflage pants and his underwear. With his callused hands, he guided her head down between his legs. She followed the cue. Silently. Tico was the commander and nobody could say no to him. He could do as he pleased. His private parts smelled like rotten pork.

That first night, her body trembled. She was afraid of his every move. Lying there, her legs spread open, her heartbeat growing fainter by the second, breath-stunted, while Tico inspected her.

At first, she did not want to be with him, but she did it because she was scared that he would be angry with her. She picked her words, “When he first forced me,” she said, and paused, “I was not in love with him.” In these words, what I heard was: *At first, he raped me. Then he raped me again, again. Again. I became his sex life.* Leonor was under the age of eighteen, and under international law, she couldn’t have given proper consent. She couldn’t leave the FARC even if she’d wanted to. The Rome Statute, which is the instrument that enacted the International Criminal Court, has jurisdiction over such acts of sexual violence—rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, enforced sterilization—all which constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. If I were to point out to Leonor, she’d tell me, Gringa, go back and recite your laws from your wood-paneled library.

Soon enough, sex between Leonor and Tico became routine: He looked for her and she complied, tight-lipped. He was the commander, more than twice her age. Under international law, this translates as Tico exercising “ownership” over Leonor. Tico would moan, groan, then fall fast asleep. Leonor caught the young woman, the purple-fingered one, spying, bitter jealous that a teenager, and a whiter one above all, had replaced her.

On the fifth night, Tico and Leonor finally conversed.

“That ghastly scar. What happened to your legs?” he asked.

“I got caught in an electrical fence.” She’d always done what Leo did: When she was eight, he dared her to jump on a horse and it bucked her off, thrusting her limbs into the zapping current. Back then, to be accepted by her brothers, she imitated what boys do it. As she grew up, she adjusted to new rules: to get men, she knew how to make them feel like she was a trophy.

Tico laughed. “What do you mean on an electrical fence?” Kissing her stom-

ach and taking in her scent. Leonor took care to wash herself in the river everyday since her arrival. Redhead escorted her, his excuse to stare. Leonor was Tico's girl for now and the others had warned el pelirojo that it was dangerous to mess with the commander's fling.

Leonor hesitated to continue telling Tico about the fence accident. She was afraid he'd somehow connect her to her family, and especially to Milton.

Tico stopped listening anyway, but Leonor used the opportunity to ask for what she wanted like she'd done with her past lovers. "You know, si quieres, you can have someone get me some shampoo for my hair, if you want. And some lotions for my body. Neiva isn't far." Leonor was poor, but she was always proud to be clean. She felt she stank, probably like the other girls, like a blend of vinegar, body fluids and sweat. Her hair was tangled and greasy from the smoke of the cooking fire. One of the chores she'd been assigned was to sit by the fire all day and boil water. "That's if you want me, Tico, to be clean. Just for you." She had cramps and expected her period in several days. She'd observed the other women giving themselves sponge baths. Yet, she couldn't bear to do that; she thought it so uncivilized, so low class. She was used to showering in the room she'd rented just weeks before, under a small drip through a rusty pipe. Running water, nonetheless. Plus, none of the women would share their sponges with her and she hadn't seen any spare ones.

It'd been five days since her arrival and Leonor was still wearing the same flowered dress. It'd once been red with yellow flowers and now it was dirty beyond pattern recognition, but it was the only clothing she had brought.

The next evening, Tico presented her with the shampoo. The night after that, he came into his tent, where she was waiting, and brought her the lotion. He'd sent the redhead boy into town to buy them. Soon, her old confidence returned. She did everything Tico wanted her to do. She perceived the other women were taking note that she'd been crowned queen and Leonor was proud of that. Those were the short hours when then-sixteen-year-old Leonor, thirsty for affection, began to fall for Tico. She thought it was the real thing and even came to call it love.

Leonor tested yes for pregnancy when she arrived at the government home. Days later, a social worker reported in her file that Leonor claimed her underwear was spotted. The runny pen on the smudged page spoke of it happening while tossing a ball around, amidst an animated game with her new friends. It'd been Tico's baby.

I was stunned by Leonor's looks—the skin on her face was tanned porcelain, neither bumps nor zits, impressive genes considering she was in full puberty bloom, living

in a musty run-down dormitory. With the right haircut and an afternoon of shopping, she had the physique to pass for whoever she chose to be.

She always leaned over to kiss me hello on both cheeks.

“Two, that’s how your people do it, right?” she asked one afternoon.

I laughed.

She wore a lime-green, low-cut, tight-fitting jacket and a matching mini-skirt, a gift from her psychiatrist who found it in a second-hand store. Leonor wore it almost every time I saw her while other girls lounged around in sweats. Sometime later, I glazed the covers of the Colombian press with the photographs of

the president’s wife in her made-to-measure fuchsia and lime green and purple suits, a Chanel synthetic flower pinned to her breast, the matching shoes, the pearl-teeth smile. It struck me that Leonor was imitating this First Lady. Looking good was important to Leonor.

**She certainly was a girly girl. It was hard for me to picture her, back in her pre-Bogotá life, with a grimy face and ragged clothes, how she said she’d grown up.**

“All I ask for is clothes,” she said. Leonor had briefly worked selling groceries in an outdoor market and waitressing in a small restaurant. “When I had a job, I was able to buy myself my things. I’m ashamed not to have proper clothes. When they legally cleared us of any wrongdoing and sent us

here, they told us they were going to give us clothes. But it’s not like how they said it would be.”

“I have to tell you something,” she added. “The other girls over there in the FARC were not girly, like you and me.”

She flipped her long hair from front to back. She’d mastered the hair flirting and I smelled her herbal shampoo. Don Enrique and Doña Susanna encouraged the teens to do their hair anyway they wanted because that was promoting their individuality, as opposed to the FARC where it was all about the collective. Leonor’s hair was beautifully highlighted and it must have taken effort to maintain it. Often, she wore it in an elaborate French bun.

“I would like to have my hair down to my hips,” she said. “I would like another shampoo—this one gives me dandruff. I already told Doña Susana but it’s been over a month. When I was in jail, before they brought me here, gringos brought me shampoo. Here, we get nothing.”

Was she asking me for Head and Shoulders?

She certainly was a girly girl. It was hard for me to picture her, back in her pre-Bogotá life, with a grimy face and ragged clothes, how she said she'd grown up. She understood she could be poor but she could also be clean, and she learned people's attitude toward her depended on how composed she was. Her beauty was her way to survival and to social mobility. In the world of high school cheerleading, Leonor would have been socially agile and conniving enough to win any popularity contest, and so in "our" setting, I found myself wanting to show off to others in the home that Leonor liked *me*.

She insinuated disgust for her mother's filth-layered fingernails, and she looked down on her parents as field-hand *campesinos*. Leonor wanted to be the type of woman featured in magazines, in *Vanidades* or *Cosmopolitan*, in hip-hugging dresses, in boob-spilling tops. In heels and mini-skirts.

Tico carried bundles of money in his pocket. Leonor had never seen so much, there were millions, maybe billions of pesos.

"Come with me. We need to collect some debts," Tico said. He uncovered a motorcycle out of the bush.

She rode behind him, and under the candescence of the noon sun, Leonor felt herself thawing. The heat of the motor warmed her ankles and the sweat of their bodies glued them to one another. She'd seen the intense glances from every girl in the camp, and by the fiery attitude in which they treated her, Leonor was proud that they envied her. Why else would they throw her food at her so it spills? She said to them, "It's not my fault that Tico worships me."

After a half an hour, Tico turned off the motor at the entrance to a campesino hut that reminded her of one of her childhood homes. A weed-thin man came out.

The campesino tipped his straw hat, a symbol of respect. "Don Tico, como está?"

"You got the stuff?"

"Si, mi patrón."

"Someone will come get it tomorrow. In the early morning."

The old man nodded, and stared at the ground. "Si, su merced." He reminded Leonor of her father, toothless and wrinkled. There was submission in his face and in his body language.

Leonor guessed Tico was in charge of drug sales, of buying coca leaves cheaply from campesino producers, like this old man, and re-selling it to the traffickers you mix it with chemicals and export it abroad. Tico and Leonor climbed back on the

motorcycle and she was thrilled to sense he was happy. It was likely Tico paid the old man about fifty-three cents per pound of coca leaves. Once processed, addicts in North America and Europe buy it for thousands of dollars. In 2000, when Leonor was with Tico riding on his motorbike, the street price of a gram of cocaine was \$161.

“Now that is capitalism,” Tico sad.

Leonor dug her knees into the motorcycle saddle. Men like Tico, with guns that say obey-or-die, take on extra meaning for girls like Leonor, who see them as the authority figures and the sought-after rich boyfriends. Tico smelled like cologne and she liked that because she thought it classy. She wrapped her arms tighter than ever around his waist. As they rode on, the wind toasted her face, bronzed her bare arms, and set her long hair free. The worn-in handle of Tico’s machine gun poked into her stomach, its barrel faced upward, as if it were ready to puncture the sky. Leonor closed her eyes, allowing the world to worship her.

# R.G. Evans

## “And Then What America, And Then What?”

—MILTON KESSLER

What if California wasn't the end of possibility?  
Gleaming out past Alcatraz and Coronado—  
someplace real to reach, if only you could walk across the water.

Forget Manifest Destiny. What is ever manifest?  
What is destined? Today is only lupine yesterday  
wrapped up warmly in fresh wool.

Call it The Inevitable Bliss, or if you like,  
call it Best Western, the place where they have  
to take you in when Home turns you away.

What would you say to such a sunset,  
to the glittering waves conjured by the moon?  
I'll say I'm the brother of the water when I mean I'm the sister of the air.

What if we have always had this, this more-than-we-had-ever-imagined?  
What if all this time we've lived in dread  
of the end of something that just goes on and on . . .

and then what, America, and then what?

# Percival Everett

## Little Faith

A spring-fed creek ran through the ranch, and so even in the harshest summer weeks there was a narrow lane of willows and green grass. Moose and elk browsed and left deep tracks in the muddy banks with the spent shells of the occasional poacher. Sam Innis had grown up there with his mother, his father having died in the war in Vietnam, a death that had come with no accompanying details. The woman had tenaciously clung onto her husband's dream, leasing out pasture, raising a few beefs and giving piano lessons to the ranch children in the wide valley. She turned down many offers on the place, saying that even imagining such a thing would be a betrayal. Love of the spread had been rubbed into Sam like so much salve, a barrier against whatever was out there in the world, a layer of peace, a perimeter of barbed wire. His mother held him close, not wanting to lose her only remaining family, but let the ranch, the land shape him. She let him go for his education and died while he was away at vet school. He had the old woman cremated and her ashes were mixed now into the dusty furrows, mud, and deep tracks of the life of that place. At dusk, when the owls and bats were whispering about, Sam would sit by the creek and watch the few trout rise to some hatch.

The desert rolled like always, constant, brown, ochre, and especially red in the distance. The pressure of people, the efforts of people had killed off much of the life, but none of the desert. His mother had said it: you can kill everything, you can tear it all up and build, you can pipe water to it, but the desert is the desert, more desert every day. It unfolded itself before him as he crested the ridge and started down the big sweeping curve of highway that would take him to the dirt trail to his place. The

late morning sun was still behind him, but the shadows of the sage were beginning to shorten.

Sam and his wife were driving home from a memorial service. The oldest resident of the reservation had died at ninety-two. That was old for anyone, but especially for a Native man. Someone had told Sam that the life expectancy of an Indian male was forty-four. The Indian man who offered the statistic did so without the slightest show of bitterness or even fear. It's just a thing, he said. Ain't a good thing, ain't a bad thing, just a thing. Sam disagreed. The service had been at the Episcopal church. Sam didn't like churches.

Sam didn't know what the old man's death had been like. Apparently he was walking one minute and not the next. Sam hadn't known Old Dave Wednesday very well, for only a few years, but once, while Sam was out examining the horses at the tribal ranch, the two sat together on mustard-studded hillside.

I am an old man, Dave said.

I suppose, Sam agreed. How old are you exactly?

Ninety.

That's old. My mother didn't live to be near that old.

They had hiked up the fairly steep hill to look down at the ranch. Dave was telling him how the tribe planned to bring water down-mountain via an old-fashioned drainage ditch.

Dave pointed at the hills with an open, shaky hand. From over there. Them surveyors came and looked and said it was possible. Said we need some engineers. And all of them want to get paid money. They want to get paid money for everything. Even for telling us how much it will cost.

Sam nodded.

Dave rubbed his knees. I'm glad to be sitting. I can't walk like I used to.

None of us can, Sam said.

I will die soon.

Sam was not so comfortable with this talk, but he said, We all die. He hated his platitude.

So, I'm told. And there is nothing wrong with it, though I'm not sure I believe it. If you do it right, then you don't have to do it again.

They sat silent for a bit longer. Sam looked at the horses in the pasture below and then over at the yellow hills where the water would come from. Measure twice, cut once, he said.

Dave laughed. Then he laughed again, at something else.

What is it? Sam asked.

Us, the old man said. We are Sam and Dave. We are soul men. He laughed again, louder.

Sam brought the pickup to a stop on the gravel next to the house. He and Sophie sat there for a few seconds and let the ticking of the killed engine settle into silence. They stared ahead at the fenced pasture and the flowering willows far off along the creek. His mother had always been fond of the *salix exigua*, the coyote willow, almost as fond of them as the elk. A colt pranced around his mother.

You okay? Sophie asked.

Sam looked at her.

About having been in a church.

Sam chuckled. He did not like churches. Yes, I'm okay. Let's get changed so we can take care of these beasts.

Zip, the border collie, greeted them at the door and followed them into the house through the kitchen. Sophie stopped at the counter to check the phone messages. Sam walked upstairs, peeled off his jacket and undid the knot of his tie. He sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes.

These shoes hurt my feet, he said as Sophie entered.

You always say that.

It's always true. You should bury me in them. That way you'll know I won't be doing any ghostly walking.

I was looking forward to your ghostly walking.

You are a sweet-talker, aren't you?

Yes, I am. She unhooked the back of her dress and let it slide down her body to the floor.

All right. And you're a tease.

Yes, I am.

Come here, Missy. He reached for her hand.

You know I love it when you talk cowboy.

Do you now? Come here.

Me?

Yes, you, ma'am.

He stood and held her, kissed her.

The house shifted, it seemed. Then the whole structure shook, swayed as if riding a wave. They clung to each other. There was a crash downstairs. The little

electric clock bounced off of Sam's nightstand. And then it was over and everything was quiet for a brief moment. The mules brayed and the horses called out. Then Zip started barking.

Wow. Sophie dropped to a knee and comforted the dog. Earthquake?

I'm guessing so.

Sam slipped back into his dress shoes, did not tie the laces and headed for the stairs. Sophie grabbed her robe and pulled it on as she followed him down. Sam wondered if there would be another tremor. At the bottom he could see that the framed picture of his mother had fallen, but the glass had cracked only. Other pictures were askew, but nothing seemed to be broken. They stepped into the mud-room and changed into their boots, then walked out the kitchen door. The world didn't appear any different. The sky was cloudless. The hills were still standing at their same heights in the distance. Zip ran in tight circles. The horses were stirred up. The skittish roan mare was kicking her stall wall in the near barn. A loose barn door that Sam had been meaning to repair for weeks now lay flat in the dust.

You go settle down the horses, Sam said. I'll check the propane.

Sam watched Sophie move off. She stopped to say something soft to the little donkey in the paddock just outside the barn. Zip stayed with Sam. She always stayed with Sam. He went to the cabinet on the exterior wall next to the back door and grabbed a pipe wrench and a spray bottle filled with soapy water. The large green propane tank was thirty yards from the house. It looked fine, but of course that meant nothing. He listened as he looked at the gauge and felt and sniffed around the joints. He sprayed the connections and saw no bubbles. The line to the house was underground; there was no checking that. He walked back to the house and into the kitchen. He pushed the stove away from the wall a bit and sprayed the line. All good. In the cellar he checked the furnace. The pilot was surprisingly still lit. No leaks. Same with the water heater. Sophie was in the kitchen when he came back up.

Everything all right? She asked.

No problems.

I can't believe we had an earthquake. She sat at the table. I didn't even know we had a fault.

You don't, Sam said.

**I can't believe we had an earthquake. She sat at the table. I didn't even know we had a fault. You don't, Sam said.**

Who's the sweet-talker?

The barns?

Just that door. Horses are scared.

Horses are always scared. They'll be fine in ten minutes. Sam set the spray bottle on the table. I guess we should turn on the radio.

They sat in the kitchen, drank tea, and listened to the local station. There had in fact been a quake—the magnitude of which had not been determined—a surprise to everyone and a source for incessant chatter. There was little to report in the way of damage and they quickly grew tired of people calling in to repeat the experience of the previous caller. Broken canned goods, cracked washer drums, ruined china sets. One woman called to say that in the minutes right before the quake her chickens, to a hen, had each laid an egg.

And how does she know that? Sophie laughed.

The rooster told her, Sam said. He looked out the window. I figure the office phone will start ringing soon. Now that everybody has figured out they're all right, they'll start seeing stuff wrong with their animals.

The phone rang.

Sam picked up.

It was Norma Snow from north of town. She was a new transplant, from California to live the quiet life. I want to buy a horse and I need a vet check, she said.

What'd you think of the quake? Sam asked.

That was hardly a quake, the woman said.

I guess not for you.

There's this beautiful leopard appaloosa down near Randy Gap. Can you meet me there this afternoon? Two?

Sam looked at the clock. It was twelve-thirty. Two-thirty?

That's good.

I'll meet you at the flashing light at two-thirty.

He hung up.

Didn't sound like an emergency, Sophie said.

City woman wants a horse, Sam said. Everybody ought to have a horse. And the lucky ones of us can have mules.

You and your mules.

I'm supposed to look at Watson's mare at one and that's one-thirty. That won't take long and that's on the way to the Gap.

What about lunch?

I'll take an apple with me.  
Sophie made a disapproving face.  
Two apples.  
Just make sure you don't feed one to a horse.  
Yes, ma'am.

Sam walked out of the house and to his work truck, where he inspected his vet pack. It was his habit. He restocked every time he returned home and checked his supplies always before setting out. The sky remained clear, if a little cool, but heat was on the way. Zip hopped into the truck before him.

He drove the unused back roads to the ranch of Wes Watson. The back way was actually faster, but rough on the suspension, the truck's and his. He looked at Zip as they bounced along. Probably not the best thing for my prostate, he said to her. The mare he was seeing he'd seen before for vaccinations and once for a hoof problem. Now Wes wanted to breed her.

Wes met him at his truck. Greetings.  
Greetings to you, Sam laughed.  
I thought it seemed like a pleasant way to, to . . . .  
Greet someone? Sam offered.  
More or less.  
So, you want to breed the paint. You think she's in season?  
You're here to tell me.  
Live cover?  
Nope. Sperm's on the way.

Sam nodded. He followed Wes into the barn. The quarter horse was standing calmly, already cross-tied in a washstand and backed up against a rail. Sam looked at her while he pulled on his glove. Well, her tail's up, isn't it.

Her tail's always up, Wes said.

Sam gave the horse's neck a gentle stroke and moved his hand down to her flank. He slowly inserted his gloved hand into the animal's vagina. She took a step, but stayed calm. He could see she was in estrus before he was inside. He felt around, shook his head.

What is it? Wes asked.

We might have a problem, Sam said. He felt around more. I think she's got a hematoma.

Is that bad?

Sam carefully removed his arm and hand. No, not bad. But she won't be getting knocked up for a while. She's going to have to cycle a few times before this resolves itself. Won't affect her fertility. Shouldn't, anyway. We'll keep an eye on her.

How do you know it's not a tumor?

The other ovary feels normal. If it was a tumor, the other would probably be smaller than normal. Plus, she's not acting all crazy with hormones. I'm going to take some blood to be sure.

All right. That's disappointing.

**Wes's face was now blank as if he'd entered some territory he didn't recognize. He was just a degree away from cocking his head like a confused hound.**

Sam flexed his hand, rolled down his shirt-sleeve. She sure is a pretty horse, I'll give you that. I see why you want to breed her.

She's a looker. Even-tempered, too.

They walked back to Sam's truck. Zip lay in the vehicle's shadow.

So, did you feel the shaker? Wes asked.

Oh yeah.

We hardly did. The wind chimes on the porch shook. That was about it. So, where you headed from here?

Down to Randy Gap. Vet check.

Wes nodded and kicked at the dirt. So, I just leave her alone, that's it? Wes asked about the horse.

Leave her alone. Treat her like a horse. Sam opened a cabinet of the pack on the back of his pickup, pulled out a syringe kit and some vials. I'll get me a little bit of blood and I'll be on my way.

You know, you're okay, Wes said.

Sam looked at him. How's that?

You know, being a black vet way out here. I have to admit to you, I had my doubts. About what exactly?

Whether you'd make it.

You mean fit in?

I guess that's what I mean, yeah.

Wes, I grew up here. Grade school. High school. I've never fit in. I probably will never fit in. I accept that.

Wes's face was now blank as if he'd entered some territory he didn't recognize. He was just a degree away from cocking his head like a confused hound.

Sam said, But thanks, Wes. I'm glad you think I'm okay.

That's all I was saying.

I know, Wes.

Randy Gap, eh? Bad medicine down there.

That what folks in the tribe say?

No, that's what I say. You don't have to be no Indian to spot it.

I suppose that's right.

Sam left Wes there in the sun, walked back into the barn to collect blood from the paint mare.

Randy Gap was the confluence of two draws and two roads and the place had nothing to do with anyone named Randy or Randolph. It had been so named because supposedly every time old-timers drove cattle through there the bulls would get crazy horny and slow everything down. Now it was the weather in the gap that slowed everything down, snow and rain and wind seemed to concentrate on the area. It was windy when Sam found Norma Snow waiting there leaning against her Subaru. He crunched to a halt on the gravel roadside.

Hey, Norma.

Doc.

So, you want to buy yourself a new horse.

It's not far, she said. Couple of miles.

I'll follow you. He watched the woman walk back to her car. She was his age, but she looked younger. Or maybe it was that he looked older. What was forty-four supposed to look like?

He trailed her to a dirt road and then a half-mile in to a trailer home surrounded by pipe corrals and paddocks. Horses stood in most of the enclosures, some clean, some not. He'd seen places like this before and there was little good about them. He parked behind Norma and got out. He left Zip in the truck.

A sandy-haired teenage boy came from the trailer. He wore a tight tee shirt that said One in the Oven with a downward-pointing arrow. He tossed his cigarette butt into the dirt and didn't bother to step on it.

Well, here I am, Norma said.

I'll get him, the kid said without expression.

Warm, Sam said, referring to the boy's greeting.

The teenager came back with a fifteen-hand appaloosa gelding with a nicely defined blanket on his rump. The horse was clean and freshly shod.

Isn't he beautiful? Norma was not playing the role of the cool buyer. She stepped back and looked at the horse.

Sam circled the animal. Nice markings, all right, he said. But that's not why I'm here, is it? He reached out to shake the kid's hand. I'm Sam Innis, the vet.

The boy shook his hand. Jake.

Sam let go of the boy's limp mitt. Let's take a look at him. Is there anything you want to tell us?

The boy shook his head. I don't know anything. They come in, we sell them. This one eats everything we put down, I can tell you that.

You mind trotting him over there about twenty yards and then back to me? Sam watched as the kid led the horse away. They kicked up dust. Sam rubbed his chin and studied the animal. As they were coming back he said, He's a little wide in the chest. See how he paddles? Like he's swimming.

Is that bad? Norma asked.

Better than being too narrow and knocking his feet together. He won't be much good jumping anything. He asked the boy to repeat the trot away and back. He's loose in the caboose like an Arabian. Norma, his legs are everywhere. What do you want to do with him?

Ride trails, that's all.

Sam nodded. He might be okay. I can see why you like him. He's pretty. Being wide is a good thing for your comfort. Well, let's take a closer look. He's not exactly wide through the stifles. Sam caught himself. He didn't want to be too negative. After all, Norma liked the horse.

The winded boy came back with the horse and stood quietly. Sam measured the circumference of the leg just below the knee. Good bone. He grabbed the knee. He's just a little buck-kneed.

Norma came close and looked with Sam.

Sam looked at Norma. He's got a beautiful coat. Flies don't seem to bother him. Sam looked at the horse's eyes and then at the boy. Just how much bute did you give him?

A little, the boy admitted, caught off guard.

What is it? Norma asked.

Will he lunge? Sam asked.

Yeah, Jake said.

Sam took the lead rope from the boy and got the horse trotting counterclockwise around him. He stopped him and picked up his left forefoot.

What is it? Norma asked.

They gave the horse a drug for pain. He's got some navicular issues. I mean, Norma, you can live with all the problems I'm finding, I'm sure. Corrective shoes will help his heels, but he won't be much good for long or strenuous rides. What are they asking for him?

Three grand, Jake said.

Sam smiled. I wouldn't pay more than eight hundred.

You're crazy, the kid said. He was red in the face.

I've been told that, Sam said. Norma, I can keep checking him, but it won't get better.

This horse is sound, the kid snapped.

Sam nodded.

I guess I'll pass, Norma said to Jake.

So, that's it? the boy grunted.

Thanks for showing him to me, Norma said.

Yeah, right. He muttered something to himself as he walked the horse away.

Sam walked with Norma back to her car.

I think he's pissed, she said.

He was trying to rip you off. Maybe not the kid, but the guy he works for. Healthy horses are expensive enough to take care of.

Thanks, Doc.

Sam felt bad. Norma had had high hopes for the animal, was a little bit in love with him. He watched her fall in behind the wheel of her car, start it, and have a bit of trouble getting turned around.

Sam climbed into his own truck and laughed when he had the same difficult time getting himself about-faced. He drove home.

Sophie answered the ringing phone as Sam stepped into the kitchen. He sat on the bench in the mudroom and untied the laces on his boots.

We're fine, Sophie said. What about you? That's good. Oh, I see. Well, he just walked in. She handed the phone to Sam. It's the sheriff.

Dale, Sam said.

You okay over there? Any damage? the sheriff asked.

Nothing. What's up?

I'd like you to come out here and give us a hand. We've got a lost little girl up next to the reservation. Up in the Creeks.

How long has she been lost?

About six hours. I'm down at the little store at the flashing light. Only place I can get a signal on my damn phone.

Can you get in touch with Eddie over there? Sam asked.

Yes.

Have Eddie get me a horse ready. That way I won't have to waste time getting one loaded into a trailer here.

All right, you got it. I've got six men out now, four on horseback, two on foot. Of course the only thing the quake damaged in the whole fucking county was the helicopter. We're waiting on one to come from Casper. Duncan's flying his Beechcraft around.

Where are you exactly?

You'll see us. Just take the road on through to the far side of the rez. Just past the big dip.

All right.

Oh, and Sam.

Yes?

The girl is deaf.

I'm on my way. Be there in less than an hour. He hung up.

Sophie was standing close. What?

Little deaf girl is lost out in the Owl Creeks.

That's got to be Sadie White Feather's girl.

Dale didn't tell me her name.

She's so tiny.

When Sam came back from the washroom off the kitchen, Sophie handed him a knapsack.

Water, she said. Some fruit and some cookies. The cookies of course are for the child.

Yes, ma'am. I'm going to grab my chaps from the tack shed. Might have to pop some brush.

He gave her a kiss and stepped outside, called for Zip.

The sheriff had set up a staging area at the head of a little-used trail. It was two hundred square miles of barren, desolate, arid hills, full of worthless ore and seasonal creeks that could flood in a blink. The county-reservation line was somewhere around there, but no one knew for sure and no one really cared. Sam and Zip fell

out of the truck and walked to the sheriff. He was trying to talk with someone on a handheld radio. Sadie White Feather was sitting on a picnic folding chair a few yards away. She did not look up at the sound of Sam's approach.

Dale, Sam said.

I'm glad you're here. These damn radios work for shit in these hills. I don't know where the fuck anybody is.

Sam looked at the hills. Old Dave Wednesday would never set foot in them, called them haunted, bad medicine. Sam had actually liked the place, had ridden there once.

The tribal police put me in charge. Mainly because I'm suppose to have a helicopter. But I don't. Anyway, the whole tribal force, all three of them, are out there looking.

Okay.

Along with my two deputies and that new ranger, Epps.

What exactly is the situation?

Dale glanced over at Sadie White Feather. He motioned for Sam to follow him away a few paces. Girl's name is Penny. She went and wandered off away from the family's camp and just never came back. She was here with her mother, aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Her uncle's a tribal cop; he's out looking. The aunt and grandma went to find the father.

Sam nodded. They see anybody else around?

No. Did I mention that the radio reception is crappy in these damn hills? Cell phones are worse.

You mentioned it. Any sign yet?

Nothing reported.

Sam stepped over to look at the map the sheriff had spread out on the hood of his rig. It was held down from the wind by rocks. Circles had been drawn and x's were placed in spots.

She's only nine, Sam. How much ground could she have covered?

A lot, Sam said. And these canyons are just crazy. You could pass by the same wash three times and never know it. Mind if I talk to Sadie?

Be my guest.

Zip had already made it over to the woman and pushed up under her hand. Sadie was absently patting the dog's head.

Sadie, Sam said.

The woman looked up.

It's me, Sam Innis. You know my wife, Sophie.

Sadie nodded.

I'm going to go out and help look for Penny. Sam took a knee, faced the direction she faced, and studied the same empty space. But I need to ask you a few questions. You've been asked a bunch, I know, but a couple more, okay? They tell me Penny's nine.

Nine and a half.

Exactly where and when did you last see her?

She was playing over by those yellow mounds. She pointed with an open hand. She was throwing rocks. She glanced over at me and I signed for her to stop throwing rocks, but she pretended not to hear. We say hear even though she can't.

I understand.

Anyway, she kept on throwing rocks. My sister said to just let her throw rocks, she wasn't hurting nothing. I started cooking breakfast. I was making some chokecherry gravy. When I looked back over there, I didn't see her. I didn't think anything of it then, and I went back to cooking. Then I got to thinking about how she can't hear snakes and so I went on over and looked for her. I looked all over and then my sister and her husband started looking and we couldn't find her. I guess that was about eight-thirty, maybe nine.

Is she completely deaf?

Yes.

Can you show me how to sign her name?

You just put one finger to your forehead and moved it out. Like this. It's kind of a joke. We call her One Cent. You know, a penny is one cent.

Like this? Sam repeated the motion.

The woman nodded. She might laugh at you.

How do I say friend?

Sadie showed him. Crossed fingers this way and that.

Got it. And that's about all my old head can hold. And is Penny left- or right-handed?

Right. She does some things with her left. She brushes her teeth with her left hand. I've tried and I can't do it.

I know you were making breakfast, but did she eat anything this morning?

Nothing.

Did she drink water?

She always drinks a lot of water. Oh, she had a juice box, too.

Good, that's a good thing. What about her shoes? What kind of shoes is she wearing?

Sneakers, Sadie said. You know, those kind the kids love with the heels that light up when they take a step. She loves them. They're a little small on her. I guess that doesn't matter.

It matters and it helps to know, Sam said. Everything matters. Tell me, Sadie, is Penny a smart girl?

All A's in school. She's very, very smart. She knows the capitols of all the states. How much does she weigh?

Not much. I don't know. She's little. Fifty pounds? Not even.

Thanks, Sadie. We're going to find her, okay? That was what Sam said, because that's what one always said in those situations. He'd been a tracker for a long time and he'd never once set out actually believing he would find anyone, but he always said he would.

Sam walked back to the sheriff.

You need an article of clothing for your dog? Dale asked.

She's not a scent dog. She can't smell bacon cooking. But any dog is better than three men.

The roan over there is what Eddie drove over for you. He's driving the highway, just in case she makes her way, or . . . you know. And here's a radio, for all the good it will do you. Just try it periodically. It might work.

Dale's radio awoke with static and he stepped away, trying to find a stronger signal. Sam looked at the map again, then walked over to where Sadie had last seen the child throwing rocks. He picked up a few stones and hurled them at a boulder. Not far from the yellow formation was a narrow wash between waist-high walls. Not so intriguing for an adult, Sam thought, but probably irresistible for a child. The ground there had been pretty well trampled by men's boots and shod horses and then it became rocky. He decided he'd follow the wash.

He walked back to the roan, gave him a rub on the neck. He knew the horse, had treated him a couple of times. He of course realized that the horse did not remember him. He tightened the cinch of the synthetic saddle. The horse was a short, sturdy, big-butted quarter horse, good for breaking through growth. He mounted, whistled for Zip, and rode on.

Into the ravine. The walls were saddle high until the rocks opened up, spread away from the wash as it widened and joined another drainage. He saw where a couple of riders had gone on north. He veered down and around a steep hill and

rode on a mile or so. He checked his radio and already it was useless. These hills were full of something magnetic, he figured, or it was just spirits and Old Dave had been right. He messed with the squelch on the radio and was just able to hear Dale swearing at the other end.

He rode on slowly, looking ahead and scouting the distance and casting a glance down to study the ground and brush. He looked for something, anything, the tiniest thing out of the ordinary, a drag, a broken stick, even an animal acting strange. The ground was baked hard with a fine layer of loose sand that the wind played with. He dismounted and looked closely at the surface, moved his sight up slowly, squinted. He stared and stared. A lopsided creosote bush caught his eye. He led the horse to it. It was snapped off about a foot off the ground. It was a fairly fresh break. Anything could have caused the damage; he knew that. Still it was something. He combed the ground around and near the bush. Then, in a spot protected from the wind, he thought he saw some transfer of soil over pebbles and just beyond that some indentations where pebbles had rested. Hardly a definite sign, but he decided to view it as transfer and that gave him at least direction. He looked up and observed the clouds and sky to the east. Back in the saddle, he watched Zip sniff around some coyote scat. She left it in short order and heeled to the roan.

Sam rode up to a bit of high ground and looked over the terrain. He had come to an expanse of flat ground. Far off to the north he could make out the dust of a couple of riders, but he couldn't tell which way they were going. Above him a hawk circled high. There was an outcropping to the east, the direction he'd chosen. There was nothing between him and the rocks and so he rode toward the formation, the light sinking behind him.

The sun was a couple of hours from setting and was already giving the west-facing rocks an eerie bronze shimmer. The wind picked up and blew sand in sheets into his back. There would be no trail, human or otherwise. He stopped and examined a couple of odd spots anyway, thought one might have been where a small person had taken a knee to rest. He was reaching and recalled how easy it was for a man to see what he wanted to see.

The outcropping was surprisingly larger than it had seemed from a distance. There was plenty of space between boulders for a large person to wander into and get lost. The wind was whipping now and in these rocks it was bouncing and twisting in all directions. The temperature was quickly dropping. He considered letting the horse stand on a dropped rein, but because of the wind tied up to some sage

instead. He tried the radio. Nothing. He looked at the sky, listened for a plane or helicopter. There was nothing.

Sam left the horse and with Zip wended his way into the formation of rocks. They came out into a bowl, the floor of which was an expanse of flat rock. On the table of rock were a considerable number of rattlesnakes basking in the last rays of the day's sun, trying to collect all the warmth they could from the stone. In the middle of the flat area, in the middle of the snakes, was a washtub-shaped rock, and on it sat a little girl. Sam called out and immediately realized the futility in that. He told Zip to stay, said it twice. His actions now were very important. If he startled the child she might panic and move into the snakes. He didn't know if she was aware of the snakes; he had to assume she was not. His back was to the west and so he would be in silhouette. What could be scarier than a hulking shadow at dusk? Also, with his back to the west he couldn't use his watch crystal or anything else to reflect the sun to get the girl's attention. He moved left, moved to put himself somewhere else in relation to the sun. He could see that the child's eyes were open, but she stared blankly at the rocks thirty or so feet in front of her. He was losing the day, the light. It was colder still. He reached down and scraped together a handful of small stones. He repeated his command back to Zip to stay. He walked into the snakes, wishing he had worn taller boots. His Wellingtons came up only to mid-calf.

He pitched a pebble at the girl. It landed without effect near her sneakered heels. He tossed another and it skittered across the plane of rock in front of her and this time she saw it. She turned and looked at Sam. He froze. Stepping as he was through the snakes, he was certain that his posture, his body language would be difficult for her to read. He must have looked strange. He could see fear coming over her face. He put his hands up and signed friend to her. Whether he was doing it correctly, he didn't know. The fact that he was signing at all at least let her know that he knew something about her. He put his hands out, palms down, as if to tell her to relax. He then pointed to the snakes. It was unclear whether she was seeing them for the first time, but she pulled her feet up onto the rock and held her knees to her chest. Good, Sam said, but didn't know how to sign that, so he nodded. Perhaps she could read lips and then he wondered how much lip he showed under his bush of a mustache. He signed friend again. He looked back to see if Zip was obeying his last command and she was. Penny was wearing only a tee shirt and sweatpants. She was no doubt feeling the cold or would be very soon. A snake rattled near Sam. The sound echoed off the rocks. He looked around and tried to locate the agitated animal. Zip barked. Sam again gestured to the child to remain calm. He took another

step, watched as his boot landed between two rattlers, either one just inches away. He was about twelve feet from Penny when a three-foot long snake uncoiled and struck his boot. If the animal had rattled first he might not have been so startled, but he was and so took an awkward step and lost his balance. He put out a hand and caught himself. A small snake found his hand and bit it. He stood up and the snake fell off. He looked at the bite, not believing it. He looked back at Zip, saw she was concerned, and reminded her to stay. He looked at the girl, at all of the snakes, at his hand. Fuck, he said, fuck, fuck, fuck. He was glad the girl was deaf. Fuck. He told himself to calm down, to breathe slower, evenly. The bite pushed him on and in two steps he was on the little island with Penny.

They sat there and stared straight ahead. Neither cast a glance at the other. Well, young lady, Sam said, but obviously to himself, What we have here is two gallons of shit in a one-gallon bucket. He looked at his hand; there was little blood. I'll bet you're glad the big man has come to rescue you. He let out a nervous laugh, then sighed out a long breath, trying to slow his panic, his heart rate. He tapped the child on the shoulder and gestured that he wanted her to climb onto his back. He pointed at her and then at his back. He held out his unbitten hand and smiled. She leaned over and looked at his injured hand. He showed it to her. Yeah, he got me. I wish the fact that he was little meant something good, but it doesn't. She reached out and touched the hand, her fingers cool against his skin, small, light.

Sam turned his back slightly to her and patted his shoulder. The girl understood, put her arms around his neck, and climbed on. He stood, found her remarkably light, weightless. His hand hurt and he thought he could feel it swelling. So, much for any hope that it was a dry bite. He walked less gingerly on the way back, feeling a new sense of urgency, both for the girl and for himself, also recognizing that his too-careful pace had been the reason for his bite. He also harbored the notion that like lightning the snakes would not strike twice. That notion turned out to be incorrect. After successfully kicking away a couple of snakes, a large one that he did not see struck and latched onto his calf just below his knee. He reached down, grabbed the snake and hurled it away. The bite hurt like hell. Zip was barking and bouncing, but still she stayed.

Clear of the snakes, Sam gently put down the child and collapsed to his knees, mainly in disbelief. He was swelling at both bites and he either felt or imagined some tingling in his mouth. He felt weak. He was certainly dizzy. He stood and guided the girl back through the maze of boulders to the horse. He tried the radio.

Static. Dusk was on now and everything was indistinct. An owl hooted somewhere. The air was much colder. Or was it chills?

By his reckoning he was six or seven miles from where he had left the sheriff. A voice scratched through the radio. He pressed the talk button. Say again. This is Innis. Nothing. In case you can hear me, I have little Penny with me. Come in. I repeat, the child is safe, unharmed, and with me. However, I have managed to get myself bitten twice by rattlers. I'm about six miles southeast of the staging area. Be advised, need help. Do you read? Static. Maybe they heard me, he said to the girl. He pointed to his ear.

He opened his knapsack that he'd tied to the saddle and pulled out his first aid kit. Never leave home without a snakebite kit, kid. In fact, he'd never used a kit or treated a human for a bite. Bites to horses were rare and horses were so big that they usually just got a little sick and got better. Considering how long it had taken him to get to the kit, it seemed a lot like closing the barn door after whatever was already out.

If only he'd been bitten only once, he'd probably be okay because of his size. But two bites, that was a different matter. Two bites at distant sites. He addressed the bite on his leg since it was more recent and because the snake had been bigger. He cut his pant leg with his pocketknife and ripped it up to his knee. He then swabbed the area of the bite with an antiseptic pad. He fumbled with the sterile blade, nearly dropped it when he pulled it from the plastic sleeve. He sliced through the two fang holes and used the extractor to draw out what blood and poison he could. He hurt like hell while he did it. For some reason, swearing helped and so he did, pleased at least that the child could not hear him. He wondered if she could swear in sign language. He finished, looked at his hand. He had reservations about using the same blade again on his hand. He decided that he should not. Penny watched. He stopped and listened. The world seemed quieter with her there.

Sam studied the darkening landscape. He wished he had a flare gun, then laughed at himself. He could also wish that he could teleport them back in time. If we had some ham we could have ham and eggs if we had some eggs, he said. He tried the radio again. Dale's voice scratched through.

Dale, he said.

Sam? Night air seems to help the signal.

Dale, I found her. I have her here with me.

Everybody, he found her, Dale said to others. There was cheering in the background.

She's okay, unhurt. I'm about six or so miles east and a little south of you. I wish I could be more precise.

Copy that.

Dale, I've been bitten twice by rattlers.

Jesus, Sam. How bad?

I don't know. We're going to start back. I have a flashlight burning. I'll be sticking to flat ground. Come out and try to meet us.

Roger that. We'll find you.

Leaving now.

We'll find you, Dale repeated.

Sam took off his jacket and put it around Penny. He mounted and then pulled her up into the saddle in front of him. He cantered for a while, but the horse felt uneven. The girl was too small to add enough weight to be a problem. He stopped, got down, and looked at the horse's feet. The animal had a quarter crack on his left forefoot. He was hurting. If the animal came up lame, they'd be in a real fix, he thought. He put Penny back in the saddle and led the horse, walking as briskly as he could. His mouth was surely tingling now. The swelling at both sites was now undeniable. He was sweating and his mouth was wet with saliva. He spat and spat again. The sweating made him cold and then there were the chills. He did not yet feel nauseated, but he knew that was coming. He wished the girl could hear and speak, because he needed the distraction of conversation to keep himself together. He wanted to lie down, fold up, and go to sleep. Zip stayed extra close, sensing trouble. I'll be all right, girl, he said to the dog. You just keep me awake.

It was dark now. The nausea was beginning. The dizziness was more profound. He was glad he wasn't in the saddle. He'd probably slide right off. He was worried about a lot of things now. Walking in a straight line is hard to do, he remembered, and without a distant visual point of reference it was near impossible. Given his disorientation there would be no reckoning by the stars, even if he could do it all. The last thing he needed was to lead them off into the wilderness away from where they were expected to be. He stopped the horse and brought the girl down. He pushed down in the air with his palms, trying to say that they would wait there. He pulled some sagebrush together into a pile and in short order she was helping. He broke off some creosote branches and started a fire. There was a lot of smoke at first, chasing him the way smoke often does. It stung his eyes. He then imagined that the burning sage might cleanse him. He fanned it over his body as he'd seen Old Dave and other Natives do on so many occasions. He laughed at himself; he was hardly a believer

in anything. He looked to find the child doing the same thing with the smoke. He pushed at the flames and watched it catch better.

He put on more branches. The fire was large now, he thought, easy to spot from the sky or a distance. It warmed them, but it did nothing to stop his chills. He thought he heard a plane buzzing someplace. Penny took his hand, his bitten hand into her small grasp. He looked at her, felt himself drifting. He watched the flames, advancing, retreating, dancing, hypnotic the way flames always are. There was Dave Wednesday, younger than he had ever been while Sam knew him, sitting in front of a fireplace in a cabin.

You're thinking you're having a vision, aren't you? Dave said.

Pretty much. As offensive as that must sound to you.

Snake-bit?

Afraid so.

Dave offered Sam a mug of coffee. That stuff is real strong, will keep you awake for days and days. You're not a spiritual person, are you?

That's an understatement.

Yet, here you are, hallucinating stereotypes. You don't have to be spiritual. I don't know what that means anyway. So, here you are, he repeated.

Pretty much. Sam drank some of the coffee. It was actually rather weak, though it was too hot to even sip. So, how do I handle these bites?

You're the doctor.

I forgot. The earthquake sort of scared me. You were dead, so you didn't feel it. It was the surprise more than anything.

I felt it. Where do you think they buried me? Where are those bites? Dave asked.

One's on the back of my leg and on this hand. Little snake bit me here. He held up his hand. This is the one I'm worried about. You know, they say the little ones have more potent venom.

Could be.

Dave held Sam's hand and looked closely at it. Yes, it looks like a snake bit you. Did you get his name?

Rattler.

That's not good. I've seen a fair share of bites in my time. Seen a fair share of people dropped down into the soil because of bites that looked just like that one. I daresay the soil is fat with the corpses of people with bites like that one. Does that make you nervous?

I can't say that it makes me happy to hear it.

I have a joke for you. How many Indians does it take to screw in a light bulb?

I don't know, how many?

None. The Indians just stand still while the white man does the screwing.

Dave laughed. Here's another. How many blacks does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Go ahead.

Probably one, but you can't do it with your hands shackled to your waist. And do you know what the real punch line is?

No.

Rattlesnake. Come with me, Dave said. And he led Sam into a house and then out through the back door onto a big porch where some men were shooting dice.

It's your turn, someone said and put the dice in Sam's hand. Sam tossed the dice, and the number five came up. The point is seven, someone shouted. What are we playing for? another said. The pot had some bills in it, not more than twenty dollars. A tall man had a pistol stuck into his belt.

Let's play for the pistol, Sam said.

The tall man put the pistol into the pot. Why do you want it? he asked.

I don't think anybody should have it, Sam said. If I win it, I'm going to throw it into the pit under the outhouse.

The tall man shrugged.

And what do I get if you lose? the tall man asked. What about your gold tooth? He pointed at Sam's mouth.

Sam didn't know he had a gold tooth. He nodded in agreement.

He threw down the dice. Snake-eyes.

He turned to Dave and said, Come on with me. Dave followed Sam to the bank of a dry streambed about thirty yards from the house. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a vise-grip. Do it fast, he said and opened his mouth.

I'm not going to pull your tooth, Dave said.

Listen, I'm not crazy about it either, but I lost.

Dave held the pliers in his shaky hand. He reached into Sam's mouth. I don't like this.

Just do it fast.

Dave did it. Sam looked at the tooth and it wasn't gold. Dave looked at it too and then back into Sam's bloody mouth. Oops, he said.

Sam put his handkerchief into his mouth and bit down on it. They walked back to the house without speaking. Sam put the tooth in the tall man's hand.

The man looked disappointedly at the white tooth.

We're not going back to do it again, Sam said. That's the tooth you get.

Dave looked at the man and said, Rattlesnake.

When Sam opened his eyes, he was sitting in front of the sage fire with Penny. The fire had not died down at all. He pushed some more sticks into the flames. He felt the warmth of it and realized that his chills were gone. He looked at his hand in the dim light. The bite marks were there, but the swelling was not, it was not tender to touch. He wiggled his fingers. He looked at the girl. She was staring at the fire. He considered that he might be dreaming still and caught himself glancing around for Old Dave Wednesday. He looked up through the smoke at the dark sky. It was a clear night, deep, blue-black. He spotted a shooting star. He turned his head to see if the child had seen it also and she had.

She made a sign that Sam assumed meant star or shooting star. He repeated it back to her.

She nodded, smiled.

Sam felt good. He pulled away the flap of his ripped trouser leg and tried to observe that bite, but couldn't see it. He put his fingers to the site of the bite and it did not feel swollen. It was not tender either.

He stood and offered his hand to help Penny to her feet. Let's move on, he said and pointed his hand west. He thought to but did not kick out the fire. He stood in the middle of the smoke for a few seconds. He walked over and put the girl on the horse and they walked on. After about a quarter-mile, the headlights of a vehicle appeared, flashed, then steadied. Sam took the flashlight he had strapped to the saddle horn and waved it back and forth over his head.

The 4x4 stopped and three men got out. Sam couldn't make them out, but he recognized the sheriff's voice calling out to him.

When their faces were clear, Penny went running to one of the men. Sam knew it was her father. The third man was a county paramedic. Sam had seen him before, but didn't know his name.

How you doing? Dale asked.

Sam knew he looked confused, out of it, but that was, strangely, because he felt perfectly fine. I think I'm okay, he said.

Let me see the bites, the paramedic said.

Sam held out his hand. The symptoms went away, he said. Just like that. No chills, no swelling, nothing.

The medic shined his light on the wound. Well, there is a bite here, all right. But there's no swelling. I don't have to tell you that's a good thing. Must have been a dry bite.

Sam nodded. He didn't mention that it had been swollen. And on the back of my leg, here. He pulled away the pant leg.

The paramedic whistled. Yep, another one. I see you cut yourself. No swelling here either. Two dry bites. I'd play the lottery tonight, if I were you. You up-to-date with your tetanus shot?

Sam said he was.

The medic had Sam sit on the ground and took his blood pressure. He whistled again. One-twenty over eighty.

Dale looked at Sam's face. You all right?

Sam nodded. Apparently. He stood.

The girl's father came and hugged Sam. Thank you, he said. Thank you for finding my Penny.

You're welcome, Sam said, unsure. The fact that he felt perfectly well was unsettling and disorienting. He let out a long breath. He looked down at Penny, nodded, and signed, friend.

She signed back, but Sam didn't understand.

What did she say? Sam asked her father.

She said you will be fine now.

Sam looked at her eyes. She hugged his legs and he put his hand against her back. He dropped to a knee and hugged her back. He was so confused. He didn't know why he was not light-headed and nauseated and sweaty. Feeling healthy had never felt so strange. He looked at the girl's father.

She's special, the man said.

Yes, she is, Sam said.

The sheriff put his hand on Sam's shoulder.

Sam looked at the stars.

I know you're exhausted.

Sam nodded, but said nothing. On the contrary, he felt remarkably rested. Except for his profound confusion, he felt very well. You call Sophie?

I did. She's on her way.

The paramedic shook his head again. I ain't never seen two dry bites. The wounds don't look a bit angry.

Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth, the sheriff said. I reckon I'll ride the horse on back.

No, Dale, he's got a cracked hoof. I'll walk him back. You go back with the girl. The sheriff moved to protest. Really, Sam said. I need to be alone with my thoughts for a short while.

Okay, Doc, you got it.

I'll stay with you, the paramedic said.

Thanks, but I want you to ride back with them.

The young man looked at the sheriff and the sheriff nodded for him to get in the vehicle.

Penny left her father and stood again in front of Sam. She signed friend. The one word, as if she were speaking to a child. Then she signed what Sam understood to be thank you.

Thank you, he said. He signed her name.

The hike back to the staging area passed in what seemed normal time, not the protracted moment that Sam had imagined or maybe wished for, with no revelations and thankfully no replaying of the episode. He thought about a lot of things, his life, his practice, all the mundane thoughts that might have gone through his head during a drive home. The horse's limp was almost imperceptible, but it was there. He wended his way back through the same narrow wash he'd taken when he set out. When he emerged he saw Sophie leaning against a pickup talking to Eddie Yellow Calf. An electric lantern glowed weakly behind them on the hood. They were the only ones there and this relieved Sam. The horse huffed and drew attention. Sophie trotted to him. He hugged her and she then pushed herself back to look him over.

I'm all right, he said.

Dale told me that. He also told me a snake bit you.

Two snakes, Sam said. A little one and a big one. Seems snakes like me. But I don't think they were very good at being rattlers.

You're okay?

He nodded. The medic checked me out. Dry bites, we guess. Sam looked at her face. It was difficult to see her clearly in the shadows of the rocks. You're tired, he said. You should have driven out here.

Shut up.

Sophie clung to him as they walked toward Eddie. Zip ran around them, getting underfoot.

Eddie reached for the reins as they drew near. What did you do to my horse? He asked.

Flat tire, Sam said. Send me the bill. Split hoof. I'm not trying to make excuses, but it's been cracked for a while.

What do you know? You're just a vet. Eddie nodded. I'm glad you're all right.

Thanks, Eddie. Sam sat on the big black bumper of Eddie's truck, rubbed Zip's ears. Sophie stood beside him and rubbed his shoulders. Eddie removed the saddle and blanket and felt the horse's back. Well he's cool.

He didn't carry me back.

Sam looked around. The moonlight showed what was left of the camp and staging area. There was the fire pit, the folding chair in which Sadie had sat, and a discarded pint milk carton. Sam walked over to the carton. He expected his knees and back to complain as he stooped to pick up the trash, but neither did.

You really get bit? Eddie asked.

Twice.

Eddie whistled. What happened?

I died.

Well, you look it.

Sam looked at Sophie. She nodded.

Et tu.

The spirits were with you, Eddie said. That's all I can say. The spirits were with you.

Sam tried not to roll his eyes. Spirits might not have been there, he thought, but Penny was there.

Eddie lowered the ramp of the horse trailer. The squeak of it bounced off the rocks. Pretty cool, he said. Getting to be the hero and all. You saved that little girl. Hero.

Sam smiled awkwardly, turned to Sophie. There was some saving going on, but not by me.

Well, if it weren't for you, she'd be out there freezing to death, Eddie said. He loaded the horse, pushed up the gate.

Maybe, Sam said. Tell me, what do you know about little Penny?

Don't know her. Never seen her. I know she's deaf. Heard she's a healer, got a gift. Hell everybody's kid's got a gift these days. My kid has the eating gift. He can eat groceries until he's tired. Yep, everybody's little muffin is special.

I reckon.

You're pretty good at that cowboy talk, ain't you.

I reckon.

Eddie fell in behind the wheel and closed his door. Don't you lovebirds stay out here too long. He drove away.

Sophie and Sam got into the car. Zip settled in on the back seat. She drove them home. It was cold, but Sam kept his window down.

Is this air bothering you? he asked.

No. Everything okay over there?

Apparently. But you're going to have to stop asking me if I'm all right. I'm going to have to stop asking myself. Fact is, I can't believe I'm all right.

What happened out there?

Sam took his time and told her the whole story in as much detail as he could remember. He left out the part about Old Dave Wednesday. And then I walked the horse back and found you waiting there with Eddie.

Just another day at the office.

More or less.

What do you think?

What do I think about what?

You know, she said. Did that little girl heal your bites?

Sam looked out the window at the passing landscape. He said nothing.

Sam?

I should have played the lottery today, like the paramedic said.

The sky was so clear. The moon was so bright. Sam fell asleep, the glass of the window cold against his temple.

The sunlight glanced through the part in the curtains. Sam knew that he had overslept before he opened his eyes. He lay there and focused on the clock by his bedside. He was again bugged by the flaw that the hour hand was always a little ahead of the time and so he could never quickly read the time. It was nine-thirty. He hadn't slept past nine in ages, not even when he was sick with the flu. He could feel he was in the bed alone even before he heard the noises downstairs in the kitchen. He didn't remember getting into bed. He didn't remember taking off his clothes. The last thing he recalled was looking at the sky and feeling the cold air on his face. If he had dreamed during his long sleep, they were lost into wherever dreams get lost. He should have let Sophie hang a dream catcher over their bed way back when. Zip came and sat a few feet from him. He put out his hand and she walked over and rubbed her head under it. At least I'm in the right house, he said to her.

He sat up and put his feet on the floor, looked out the window, stretched. He felt awake, strong. He looked at the sites of his bites and saw the marks, but nothing bad. He showered, pulled on some jeans and a tee shirt and walked downstairs to the kitchen. Sophie was sitting at the table with her coffee.

I really slept, he said.

You didn't move all night.

I don't even think I dreamed.

Well, you had quite a day—night. How do you feel?

Great. What about you? You were up late, too.

I'm okay, she said. I kept waking up to make sure you were alive.

Was I?

Pretty much.

# Alex Dimitrov

## This Is Not a Personal Poem

This is not a personal poem.  
I don't write about my life.  
I don't have a life.  
I don't have sex.  
I have not experienced death.  
Don't take this personally but  
I don't have any feelings either.  
The feelings I don't have don't run my life.  
I have an imagination. I'm imagining it now.  
This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.  
This poem stole that line from John Ashbery.  
This poem wants you to like it,  
please click "like."  
This poem was written during a recession.  
I'm so politically conscious  
the word "politics" is in my poem.  
This is not a New York poem.  
There's not enough room for all the wars in this poem.  
Gay marriage is now in this poem.  
Have you liked this poem yet?  
It was written in 2011 in New York and posted 11 minutes ago.  
Would you sleep with the poet who wrote this poem?

Would you buy his book? [Click here.](#)  
This poem loves language.  
This poem has slept with other poems  
written by poets who love language.  
All poets love language.  
Let's talk about language while people die.  
This poem cares a lot but wants you  
to think that it doesn't really care.  
The speaker of this poem may have been  
born in a former Communist country.  
It may or may not matter.  
I had an orgasm before writing this poem.  
I have my sunglasses on while reading this poem.  
Everyone is going to die  
please don't take it personally.  
The world. The world.  
The world is blood-hot and personal.  
I stole that line from Sylvia Plath.  
Put your money on this poem.  
I love the money shot.  
This is not a personal poem.  
This poem is only about Alex Dimitrov.

# Brandon Davis Jennings Obnoxious in a Not-Yet- War; Dakedo, Sayo-fuckin- nar(o)?, Mr. Roboto

In order to pass the time in a not-yet-war, there are many activities to choose from. I will not list them all here, but believe me, there is a list, and from that list, I chose to be obnoxious. And one morning at the Prince Sultan Air Base Tech Control, a couple months into my grueling<sup>1</sup> ninety-day tour, I sat at my computer, searched through the illegally-acquired music bank, and clicked on “Mister Roboto.” It screamed from the desktop speakers, and Sergeants and Airmen alike smiled because the sun hadn’t come up, and playing any song that loud that early was obnoxious. A weak-willed obnoxiouser might’ve cut the song off then. I, however, am an obnoxiouser willing to take things as far as possible, so I let the song play until Technical Sergeant Williams ripped the speaker cable out of its jack. This ended the song and showed me how effective that song was at eliciting a physical response.

I walked into the Tech Control the next day and said, “Mornin’ Sergeant Williams.” Then I plopped down at my computer, cranked the speakers all the way up, and blasted “Domo Arigato, Mister Roboto” again. Sergeant Williams shook his head, and other Sergeants and Airmen smiled at how this song was still obnoxious and then went on about their peacekeeping business. After a much shorter interval than it had taken the morning before, Sergeant Williams walked over and tugged the

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1. Sarcasm.

cable out of the jack. He might have said something like, Cut that shit out, or, I hate that song, or, What the hell is the matter with you? Perhaps all he said was, Really? And if so, my unspoken answer was absolutely, Yes.

The third morning everyone was at the shop before me. They'd gathered around Master Sergeant Loftus. His arms were crossed over his chest (or resting on his remarkable belly, depending on how you want to look at it). And along with the stale air that swirled about the room, a somber black hole seemed to suck everyone toward Master Sergeant Loftus. It was too early in the morning for tight-assery, so I sat at my computer and clicked on "Mister Roboto," but no sound escaped the speakers.

"Jennings," Sergeant Loftus said. "Get over here."

I dropped to the sandy carpet and inspected the jacks to see if the cable had been unplugged. Each day, I thought, these bastards would try to foil my plan to continue this obnoxious behavior—behavior I intended to continue until I was placed on a plane and flown the hell out of the desert, so I could just get back to drinking myself to sleep, and counting the days before I was discharged, so that I could do something more important with my life. To really hinder my ability to maintain this same level of obnoxiousness, my colleagues could've deleted the song from the hard drive, but even then, I'd have found it somewhere on the Internet sandwiched between pornography and criticisms produced by people who produce nothing but criticism. They could present a new challenge every day for the remainder of the tour, but nothing would stop me from being obnoxious if I really worked at it. I would get through this boring tour of duty by creating my own pointless conflicts. I would be victorious.

"I'm not *asking* you to come," Sergeant Loftus said.

"Be right there," I told him. And I grabbed the cable and fed it down through the guide-hole in the console and then took a knee and yanked the cable through. When I plugged the cable into the jack, a robot voice chanted *Domos* that echoed over the comically-futuristic synthesizers of the Styx rock opera. I crawled out from beneath the console, stood and knocked my hands together to beat the sand grains off my palms; the measly sabotage had been overcome with ease. I smiled at Sergeant Williams but he didn't acknowledge my joy. Airmen and Sergeants dispersed and went about their business silently. Master Sergeant Loftus squeezed my shoulder and said, "We've been indefinitely extended." Robotic *Domos* bounced around my skull. "When the song ends," he said. "Go get us breakfast." But I didn't wait. I left before the song was over and haven't listened to it since.

# Susan Thornton

## Border Crossing

A young girl stood in a desert canyon just north of the border between the United States and Mexico. She was wearing a short, tight black skirt and a low-cut red blouse of soft, clingy material. On her feet were high-heeled shoes.

She was thirsty.

It was just before dawn on a Wednesday in mid-March.

To the south was Mexico. The girl stood on U.S. territory. The canyon was in Imperial County, California. The nearest city was Imperial Beach, only a few miles to the west.

A fence separates the United States from Mexico. It runs from Imperial Beach for fourteen miles into Tecate. The fence ends at Colonia Nida de las Aguilas, a riverbed, now dry, which crosses the border. The girl was standing well east of that point.

The land to the north of the border is four hundred square miles of dry and barren hillsides.

The girl had regular features, and smooth, unmarked brown skin. Her eyebrows had been plucked into a careful, artful line. As she looked at her surroundings she bit her lips gently together, then opened them and lightly ran the tip of her tongue along the back of her upper teeth in a reflexive, thoughtful gesture.

Her eyes were brown and her long dark hair was held back from her face with a red ribbon.

She stood at the bottom of the dry riverbed. Along the riverbed stood or sat other young girls, dressed like herself, in short skirts and high-heeled shoes. There

were perhaps fifteen girls altogether. At the head of the canyon stood a man with a rifle. He was looking away from the girls, to the north. With him was another young man. The men wore blue jeans and sturdy leather boots. The man with the rifle wore a white tee shirt and an open tan jacket. The two men were talking to each other. A third man stood some distance away. He cradled his rifle, an expensive American make, loosely with one arm as he smoked a cigarette.

The girls were being marched through the canyon. They had started two hours before, in the dark, and had walked seven miles in the desert to get to this point, just north of the border. They had crossed the border without incident, as the area was not well patrolled. It was cool in the canyon and the sky over its eastern rim was beginning to turn pink. Soon the real heat of the day would begin.

The girl was thinking. She stood apart from the other girls. If the guards were looking away, she could run. She looked down the canyon, the way they had come. The dry river bank had taken a sharp curve as the water that formed it had found softer rock to carve through. That created a natural wall, and a limit to the sight-line of the men holding the guns. If she ran back the way they had come, south, she would have a chance. Once she was behind the wall, she could climb up to the top of the ridge and escape down the other side.

She was only one girl. They had other girls to watch and they were hurrying to meet someone, someone with a truck, further north. If there were a diversion, a moment in which to run, she could get behind the wall. She tensed her calf muscle. Her feet were still calloused and hard. Once she discarded the crippling shoes, she could run. She knew she could.

## II

Altagracia Guzman was fourteen years old. Until nine weeks ago she had lived in a suburb of Delicias, a city south of Chihuahua, Mexico. She had been a student in middle school and had won the school prize in geometry the previous quarter. She was studying English and could count to one hundred and exchange simple greetings. Her father and mother were preparing for her Quinceañera, the party to mark her fifteenth birthday. Her mother ran a sewing and tailoring business out of their home, and Altagracia could sew a straight seam by hand if she had to but preferred the sewing machine. Her mother depended on her for simple tasks: shortening trousers, letting out a waistband, and was teaching her how to make a satin evening jacket for a high-paying customer.

Altagracia could also make perfect tortillas that never tore in her hands and never burned. She made arroz con pollo and corn tamales. When her mother was occupied with her little twin brothers, Altagracia did the cooking and had supper ready when her father came home from his maintenance job at the factory.

All this had changed when two men grabbed her on her way home from school on a Friday. By habit she walked with her friend Edelmera, but that day Edelmera's mother had called for her early at school; her grandmother had become ill and the girl was needed at home.

Altagracia had been alone on the two blocks that skirted the edge of the industrial park in the southern part of the city. When the white panel van pulled up to block her path she thought the driver meant to ask her directions. Then she saw the look on his face but it was already too late. Someone grabbed her elbows from behind, and the first man put a cloth to her face with a strong-smelling chemical. She was aware of being lifted off her feet and she heard the opening of a metallic door.

She came to in the back of the van, hearing the engine and smelling the diesel fumes. There were seven other girls in the van.

The first part of her journey ended in Calle Santo Tomas, in the La Merced section of Mexico City.

This neighborhood has been a home to low-end prostitution since the 1700s. She fought and was beaten, resisted and was starved. When she decided to quit eating and starve herself to death, she was force fed. At last she submitted. She was forced to parade in the square in front of them, display herself in her skimpy garments. Allow them to view her, to select before purchase, to walk with them back through the warren of rooms to the space allotted her. It was a mockery designed to make her feel complicit, to provide a pretense of agency where there was none. Each man bought fifteen minutes. Four men in an hour. Eight men in two hours. The nights began at ten PM and ended at three in the morning. Twenty encounters in each night's work.

Altagracia kept track of the nights by ballpoint-pen marks on the edge of her mat. When she was alone in the early hours of the morning she closed her eyes and

**At last she submitted. She was forced to parade in the square in front of them, display herself in her skimpy garments. Allow them to view her, to select before purchase, to walk with them back through the warren of rooms to the space allotted her.**

counted to one hundred in English, recited the conjugations of the English verbs she had been taught: to have, to be, to be called, to play, to eat, to love. She remembered garments she had sewn for her mother; she recited the prayers she had been taught in church. She whispered her street address and pictured the white tablecloth with the blue embroidered edge she had made when she was nine as a gift for her mother. She remembered the silver chocolate pot her father had purchased for her mother and recalled how her mother stirred the chocolate for the family.

The nights had followed one another for sixty-one nights. Then another panel van and another journey in the jolting darkness with the smell of diesel. They were being driven north this time—she was being taken into the United States. The forty-eight states were big. She knew that from her geography lessons. Once she was in that big place she would be lost forever. She wanted to go home.

### III

The sun had not yet come up and the light had an obscuring quality that she hoped would be to her advantage.

The two men at the head of the ravine were still talking. The third man put down his cigarette and turned behind a rock to relieve himself.

Then, a scream. And another. “Culebra! Culebra!” A girl had seen a snake. They were all terrified of rattlesnakes. A knot of confusion, more screams, a scuffle; the men were looking away. She saw her chance, she ducked, she ran. South, as they would not expect. East toward the sheltering wall. One shoe fell off as she pelted forward, then she stepped out of the other just as easily. Her feet felt sure on the hot flat rocks of the stream bed. Overhead she felt the air cool as the shadow of the rock wall came over her. In a moment she would be underneath it and then she would have a chance.

Behind her she knew the guard was raising his rifle, but she could not spare him a thought. Her entire being was focused on forward motion. She pumped her arms, reaching for the next foothold with her long legs. Her lungs were burning and there was a sharp pain in her side. She ignored it and breathed hard, in through her nostrils, out through her open mouth, keeping her lungs full so that she could continue running.

Now she was behind the outcropping of rock and she began to climb. Another stream had come down to join the main canyon where they had been. She found easy footing suddenly in softer, moister soil that was clustered with smaller pebbles.

She climbed rapidly upward into the heat of the sun, then turned south again with the rising sun on her left-hand side, along the top of the ridge. She kept running, looking forward, never back, the canyon now behind and below her. The land sloped rapidly downward to a road. They were this close to a road! She could hardly believe it. She feared the road because she would be exposed, but she could run so much faster. The road was blacktop, with clear white lines painted at the margins, and a double yellow line down the middle. She didn't know this but the road was California State Route 94, which parallels the northern border of Mexico.

She stumbled down the last bit of the slope, bruising her ankle on a rock, landing on her buttocks and sliding down; the sheer black fabric of her skirt rode up and the rocks scraped and cut her long brown legs. She couldn't think about what she looked like; she had to keep going.

At the margin of the road she looked again for the sun. South, she wanted to run south, home was south. She kept the sun on her left side and settled into a steady jog. No one was shouting, no one was shooting, she would not look back; she would only look forward.

The sun had risen higher when she heard a car. She glanced backward, fearful. It wasn't the van. It wasn't the white panel van. Suddenly she felt close to tears. She saw a boxy square shape, a large sedan. With sudden hope and desperation she stopped, turned to face the car, and stood in the middle of the driving lane, waving her arms.

The car slowed and stopped. It was a red Subaru, dusty from off-road driving, with a man driving and a woman passenger. Altagracia ran to the side of the car. The blond woman lowered the window on her side. "What's the matter? Are you in trouble?"

The words didn't mean anything to Altagracia, but she could read the woman's expression. Intelligent, cautious, maybe helpful.

"Please," said Altagracia in English. "Please . . ." Her English deserted her. She switched to Spanish. "Help me. Help me please. I must go south."

The man spoke. He had close-cropped dark hair and was wearing a blue polo shirt. "What's going on? What's she doing out here dressed like that?"

"She needs help." The woman spoke, in English, suddenly decisive. "And we're going to give it to her." She spoke to Altagracia in Spanish. "Get in. We will help you."

Altagracia pulled the door open and collapsed on the back seat.

"I don't know where she's coming from, Michael," said the woman. "But we're getting out of here. Let's get going."

Michael put the car in gear and stepped on the gas. Altagracia burst into sobs.

"Here, here, it's all right now." The woman spoke in English, then in Spanish. "¿Quieres agua?" She handed Altagracia a narrow water bottle. At first all Altagracia could do was hold it next to her face, then she got her breathing under control, opened the bottle, and took a long drink.

"¿Cómo te llamas? What's your name?"

Altagracia looked directly at this surprising woman who spoke to her in her own language. She didn't answer.

The woman continued in Spanish. "My name is Elizabeth. I am a translator. I work for the court system in Imperial City. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No trouble," Altagracia lied. "I want to go home."

"And where is your home?"

"Delicias, near Chihuahua."

"What's going on? What's her story?"

"She says she's not in trouble. She just wants to go home."

"Not in trouble? Dressed like that? In the desert at 5:30 in the morning? She's in trouble."

"Just drive, okay?"

"Is anyone following us?"

"Us?" Elizabeth turned around, scanned the empty highway behind them. "No, no one's following us."

"Good." Michael looked in the rear-view mirror and then again at the road. He wore glasses with silver rims.

"Are you hungry?"

Altagracia managed a small nod.

Elizabeth reached into a cooler by her feet, found a sandwich in a plastic wrapper, and handed it to Altagracia. The girl took it warily. It was thick, homemade bread, with cheese and some kind of spicy filling. She took a bite and chewed carefully. As she ate she became hungry.

"How did you get here?" Elizabeth asked.

Altagracia shook her head. "Some bad men. I just want to go home." She pictured her mother's kitchen clearly, the table with the white tablecloth and the blue embroidered lace border that she had made when she was nine. "I live in Delicias," she repeated, and gave the address. "Is it far? Please?" She said "please" in English.

"We will help you," Elizabeth said.

"Help her do what?"

“Help her get home.”

“Home? To Delicias? South of Chihuahua? That’s far. That’s not in Baja. That’s in mainland Mexico.”

“You understood a lot for someone who says they don’t speak Spanish,” Elizabeth said.

“Whoever brought her out to the desert is going to be looking for her,” Michael said. “I’m just looking at the larger picture here.”

“I don’t think so,” Elizabeth said.

“You don’t?”

“I think if they were looking for her she wouldn’t have gotten this far. And if she’s a trafficking victim like I think she is, they won’t be chasing her; they’ll be trying to get the rest of the girls across. The thing to do is to take her to the police.”

“No!” Altigracia shouted. “No. Not the police. No police.” She remembered the police who had been her customers in La Merced. She grabbed Elizabeth’s arm and began to shake uncontrollably. “No police. I just want to go home.”

“We’ll get you home, I promise.”

“And what about our trip?” They were on their way to land they owned in Baja. They had left their home early that morning. It was a vacation they had planned for weeks.

“Peter has those dental clinics in Mexicali. He can take her back into Mexico.”

“Smuggle an illegal back into Mexico? Are you kidding me?”

“Peter has never so much as smuggled a candy bar in all the years he’s been running those clinics. He crosses the border twice a day. They give him a free pass. He’s the perfect person. Then she can get a bus to Juarez and go south from there. It’s possible. It can happen.”

“And who’s going to buy the bus ticket?”

“That’s not important now. Just drive, okay? There’s no one following us. I’ll call Peter in an hour or so when he’s up.”

Altigracia had been listening with wide eyes. Elizabeth explained rapidly in Spanish. Home, Altigracia was thinking. She could get home. She relaxed against the back of the seat and fell instantly into a deep sleep. In a dream she heard a girl’s voice. “You’re just going to leave her here like this?” It was a voice she knew. Who was the girl talking about? Leave her where? When the car changed speed and slowed down she snapped awake. “What is it? What’s happening?”

**In a dream she heard a girl’s voice. You’re just going to leave her here like this? It was a voice she knew. Who was the girl talking about? Leave her where?**

Elizabeth's voice was soothing. "We're stopping at a rest stop. It's okay." The car slowed more, and stopped.

"I can give you some different clothes if you want them," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, please." Altagracia spoke in English.

Elizabeth took clothes out of a small bag in the back of the car. She walked with Altagracia to the rest stop, but Altagracia didn't feel the same psychological hold from Elizabeth that she had felt from the madam in La Merced. She changed clothes in a stall in the restroom—a pair of jeans, a clean white shirt with long sleeves that she could button as high as she wished. A tan windbreaker that was slightly too large. She looked at herself in the restroom mirror. There was nothing to show where she had been, what she had done, who she had been. She looked as she always had, only older. With luck, she could pass for eighteen.

"Do you want to discard the old clothes?" Elizabeth asked.

Altagracia put them in the trash container and they walked back to the Subaru side by side. Altagracia looked around. No one was watching them.

Michael joined them at the car. He looked at Altagracia. His look was neutral, not charged with possession or calculation. "All set?"

In the back of the car, Altagracia fell asleep again. She awoke again at dusk. They were in a residential neighborhood. "This is where our friend lives. Peter. He can help you. He can take you back into Mexico."

Altagracia nodded. Somehow she knew she could trust these people. "We will leave you here," Elizabeth said. "Peter is ready. He can take you in his car. You will have to lie on the floor of the back seat. We will cover you with a blanket and put some boxes next to you. He crosses the border regularly for his businesses in Mexicali. He is a trusted person. No one will question him. He speaks Spanish too, but not as well as I do. Here is money." Elizabeth put folded money in her hand; it was pesos. "This is for the bus." Then she gave her different money. "This is dollars. In case you need them."

Peter was small and stocky. He looked like an accountant on a TV soap opera she used to watch at home with Edelmera. He was waiting by his car, a Kia sedan. Altagracia lay down on the floor in front of the back seat. She was between two large boxes packed with glass bottles. Elizabeth touched her shoulder. "Peter will take you to the bus station. Good luck."

Elizabeth pulled a blanket over Altagracia and shut the door of the car. The car started and drove from the quiet neighborhood into an area of heavy traf-

fic. The sounds of the city were all around her. The car slowed and stopped. She breathed shallowly, through her mouth.

“Across again?” A male voice. Spanish. It must be the border control.

“Emergency surgery at the clinic.” Peter’s voice was light. His Spanish was good, but mispronounced: a strong American accent. “Got a panicked call. The technician needed some supplies. You know how it is.”

“Is that what’s on the floor in the back seat?”

“Yeah, it’s surgical kits, a new sterilizer, slides for the X-ray machine. Unless I’ve got lucky and it’s a teenaged girl.”

Altagracia stopped breathing.

The guard laughed. “You, get a girl? With that face?”

“Come on, it’s not that bad.”

“Crossing back to the states again tonight?”

“As soon as I deliver the goods.”

“All right then.”

The car accelerated again and Altagracia breathed. She was in Mexico, she could go home. Again she pictured her mother’s kitchen table; the white cloth with the blue embroidered edge, the stove and the kettle; the silver pot for making chocolate, her father’s gift to her mother.

They drove for several blocks. Peter stopped the car, got out, and opened the back door. “It’s the bus station; you can get out now.”

Was she still asleep? She could hardly believe this had all gone according to plan. Peter walked next to her and stood aside as she bought the ticket she needed with Elizabeth’s pesos.

“Are you hungry?”

Peter bought her a tamale and a Coca-Cola. He sat with her as she ate, and waited with her until her bus was called. He stood at the bus station, watching as the bus pulled out. She waved to him from the window.

No one on the bus paid any attention to her. No one took the empty seat beside her. It had all happened with such an easy logic: Elizabeth and Michael slowing to pick her up, driving her to Peter’s place; Peter taking her across the border. Now she was on the bus, going home.

In Delicias, outside the bus terminal, she held out her hand for a cab. At first she was afraid. She was young and alone. Would he stop? Would he question her? Perhaps it was the American clothes that made her look older. The cab driver nod-

ded as she gave him the address, the address she had repeated to herself over and over in those rooms in Mexico City.

As she approached her neighborhood she felt a tightness in her chest, a sensation that she could not breathe deeply enough. She was going home; she could see her mother, her two brothers, her father. Would he be home from the factory?

The cab turned down the familiar street. The cab stopped, she paid the driver and got out. The house looked the same. But of course it would, she had not been gone all that long. She walked toward the door. The street seemed steep to her suddenly, as if in her absence she had indeed aged, had become an old woman, an old woman with weak legs, weaker lungs.

The door stood open; it was a warm day. She hesitated at the threshold. "Mama," she said, "Mama." Her mother looked up, startled, from her work at the sewing machine. Altagracia seemed to see everything with preternatural clarity. There it was, the table, covered by the white cloth with the blue embroidered edge that she had made when she was nine. Her mother's sewing machine, the table piled high with shirts to be altered, with trousers to be hemmed. She heard her brothers playing in the other room. Her mother stood up, stepped forward to embrace her, her face open and smiling. But the scene changed, the light on the silver coffee pot suddenly blinding.

"Mama," Altagracia said again, and then she stopped, puzzled. An exploding pain was beginning in the back of her head, her vision went away in a searing heat of white light. "Mama," she cried again, and fell forward.

#### IV

Altagracia lay on her face in the stones of Cottonwood Canyon. The bullet had caught her in mid-stride and her limbs now lay still in the terrible disarray of death. The rifleman lowered his gun. He had seen her turn just as the other girls had shouted "Culebra! Culebra!"

He inspected his work. It was a good clean shot in the back of the head, exiting through the eye. He had spent many hours practicing his marksmanship over long distances and was justly proud of his well-made American rifle. Still, given the difficulty of hitting a moving target, it was an extremely lucky shot. He had hoped to bring her down with a bullet between the shoulder blades. The loss of the girl was regrettable. In the nine weeks at La Merced she had earned the syndicate almost 9,000 pesos; less the costs of her upkeep—food and clothing—since she had been a

slave and had earned nothing for herself. And his bosses would have realized \$2,000 for her from her purchaser in Arizona, but that would now not happen.

He stood and turned away from the body. "Okay. Let's get going."

A girl stepped forward. "You're just going to leave her here like this?"

Without a word he lifted the rifle and sighted down the barrel. The girl looked at her shoes and took a step back. He lowered the rifle.

The girl turned and followed the other girls. The footing was bad and the sun was hot as they made their way north, into Los Estados Unidos.

The rifleman followed. His boss had told him to expect losses in this part of the journey. Some girls died of exposure, some of snake bite. So far he had prevented that. And now the other girls would be more tractable. He reminded himself of a central fact of his business. More young girls were born and matured every day: this meant an inexhaustible supply of product. And there was an equally inexhaustible demand. He considered himself a fortunate man. He had found a place in the best business opportunity in the world.

# Ruth Ellen Kocher

## #106LinesOnBlacknessFor WhitePoetsAndPolicemen

I know all of the words to “Gimme Three Steps”

I love and regret the color red

I want to know how you got that scar

Both of my parents are blue-eyed

I worked as a housekeeper at 14

I never wanted blonde hair

My first accomplishment was controlling my rage

I learned to use chopsticks from the Hare Krishnas

I’m allergic to grass

I am 34% Italian, 14% Nigerian, 11% Beninian, 7% Scandinavian and I am black

I often wake from a deep sleep unable to breathe

I’ve always taken Ophelia personally

My first black boyfriend had perfect SAT scores

My first white boyfriend killed the girl he dated after me

My favorite kind of pie is blueberry pie  
My second favorite pie is sweet potato pie  
I learned to make sweet potato pie from Martha Stewart  
I learned to make blueberry pie after tripping all night in the woods  
The first person to call me *nigger* beat the hell out of me when I was 6  
Until someone beat the hell out of me, I'd never heard the word *nigger*  
After I heard the word *nigger*, I tried to push my little sister out of a window.  
I love greens  
I love tofu  
I love cornbread  
I never wanted blue eyes  
I narrowly avoided being homecoming queen  
I was the only black girl in my high school  
My father loved me  
My mother loved me  
I am prone to panic attacks in theaters  
Three years after Billy Joe failed to seduce me, I seduced him  
I don't regret using men for sex  
In 10th grade I fell in love with Lord Byron's clubfoot  
I wanted to be Lisa Bonet, not Denise  
There is a certain color of blue that I see as green  
When I hear "Walk This Way," I want to play pool

My first car was a Ford Maverick with no reverse  
I never heard a song that used my name  
A man from Bhutan renamed me “Apple”  
I first had cancer at 15  
I used to say *cock* but now I say *dick*  
My first white girlfriend built her own bed  
A man from Bhutan renamed me “Big Baby”  
I decided to have only black boyfriends  
I appreciate dreadlocks on white people  
When I think of my grandmother, I think of funnel cakes  
My mother put out New Year’s antipasto and polish sausage  
A man from Bhutan renamed me “Buddha”  
I stopped relaxing my hair in 1994  
I don’t know a single song by LL Cool J  
I am averse to the arctic tundra  
I sometimes speak to Gertrude Stein  
I moved to the desert so I could breathe  
I don’t like honey or bees  
I got my first tattoo at 37  
I fell in love with Balzac’s lies and desperation  
My first college boyfriend looked like a skinny Viking  
I discovered the desert could not help me breathe

Sometimes, glass breaks, spontaneously, around me  
At 5, I remembered a boy in a red shirt from my last life  
At 6, I had a premonition that came true  
My first college boyfriend looked like a red-haired Jesus  
I taught my poodle to shut the door  
I hate to take off my shoes in other people's homes  
I am not afraid of you  
I love corn bread  
I tasted corn bread first at 15  
From the moment of my birth, I have struggled to breathe  
I was named for a dutiful daughter  
I have anxiety when someone gives me a gift  
I obsess over the meanings of numbers  
My first white husband hated my cooking  
My first black husband couldn't care less about my cooking  
I worry about running out of time  
I've had insomnia since I was 7  
I often wake from a deep sleep unable to breathe  
In my periphery, glass shatters inexplicably  
I've never cheated on anyone  
At 18, I hitchhiked to the wrong polls and missed the presidential election  
I wish I had darker skin

Driving frightens me  
I've never met a celebrity  
I could take you in a fight  
My white mother sang like Diana Ross  
I'm a good shot  
I tell my poodle he is my best friend when no one's around  
I always look behind me  
If you listen, you can hear me struggle to breathe  
I think Ezra Pound was a thief  
I splurge on cut flowers  
I braided my hair to be less ambiguous  
My mother-in-law offered me money to leave  
I am not fond of socks  
If not Lauryn Hill, then Mary J.  
In our mediation, my colleague said, *it's not about race, it's about aesthetics*  
I have given up camping  
I eat French fries with vinegar in the summer  
My daughter is white and confused  
I am still concerned about my soul  
I often wake from a deep sleep unable to breathe  
I like all things orange  
I'm terrified the world will go on without me

I've had nightmares of being lynched

I've had nightmares of being crucified

I've had nightmares of the room spinning me out of a funnel

I don't need you to love me



# Contributors

Guyana was **John Agard's** ("The Limbo Dancer & the Press" 159–160) home until 1977, when he moved to Britain. He is an award-winning poet and has also written for children. His most recent poetry collections are *Travel Light Travel Dark* and *Playing the Ghost of Maimonides*. He is the winner of the 2012 Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

**Jeffery Renard Allen** ("Holding Pattern" 203–225) is the author of five books including the novels *Song of the Shank*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and *Rails Under My Back*, which won the Chicago Tribune's Heartland Prize for Fiction; the short story collection *Holding Pattern*, which received the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence; and two collections of poetry. He is a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia.

**Francisco ("Franz") Arcellana** (1916–2002) ("The Yellow Shawl" 34–42) was a Filipino writer and poet, recognized in particular for his seminal influence on the modern Filipino short story in English.

**Vera Blackwell** (translation 84–85) was the first English translator of Václav Havel's plays and has translated and adapted six of them in total.

**George Blake** (1926–2013) ("The Expatriate" 89–102) was a professor, poet, and short story writer. His stories appeared in the Martha Foley collection, *The Best American Short Stories 1967*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 1970*, and many quarterlies.

**Daniel Bourne** (translation 140–148). His stories have appeared in a number of literary magazines. His books include *The Household Gods* and *Where No One Spoke the Language*, as well as a collection of translations of Polish political poet Tomasz Jastrun, *On the Crossroads of Asia and Europe*. He teaches at The College of Wooster in Ohio, where he edits *Artful Dodge*.

**Marguerite Bouvard** (“In Argentina” 161–162) is the author of eight poetry books, one of which won the Mass Book Award for Poetry, and twelve non-fiction books, including *Social Justice and the Power of Compassion*. She is a resident scholar at the Women Studies Center for Research at Brandeis University, as well as a visiting scholar at its Environmental Studies Program.

**Ignácio de Loyola Brandão** (“The Men Who Discovered Forbidden Chairs” 105–107) lives in São Paulo, Brazil. He has published forty-five books: novels, short histories, chronicles, trips, and biographies (*Ruth Cardoso: Fragments of a Life*). He is best known for his novel *Zero*, which was initially banned in Brazil and went on to win the prestigious Brasilia Prize and became a controversial bestseller.

**Edoardo Cacciatore** (1912–1996) (“Excessus” 110) was a Roman poet and essayist. Although he didn’t publish his first book until he was forty, he went on to publish six volumes of poetry in his lifetime and two posthumously, as well as several books of essays.

**Guido Ceronetti** (“From *The Silence of the Body*” 111–114) is a prolific author of epigrams, essays, poems, and plays, and a translator as well. A regular contributor to the Italian daily *La Stampa*, he is rather notorious for his fiercely iconoclastic and anti-modern stances. *The Silence of the Body* is his first and only book to appear in English.

**Robert Cooperman’s** (Mary McCormick series 149–154) latest collections are *Draft Board Blues* and *City Hat Frame Factory*. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry. *My Shtetl* won the Holland Prize from Logan House Books. Forthcoming from Aldrich Press is *Their Wars*.

**Paula Delgado-Kling’s** *Child Soldiers* (“Child Soldiers” 228–238) is a book about her native Colombia, for which she has earned two grants from the Canadian Council for the Arts. She has been published in *Narrative Magazine*, *Pacifica Literary Review*, and *The Grief Diaries*, among others. She is the winner of the 2008 PALF Oneworld Nonfiction contest.

**Alex Dimitrov** (“This Is Not a Personal Poem” 267–268) is the recipient of the Stanley Kunitz Prize for younger poets from *The American Poetry Review* and the founder of Wilde Boys, a queer poetry salon in New York City. His first collection is *Begging for It*. His poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Yale Review*, *Slate*, *Tin House*, and *Boston Review*.

**R.G. Evans’s** (“And Then What America, And Then What?” 239) books include *Overtipping the Ferryman*, *The Noise of Wings*, and *The Holy Both*. His original music has been featured in the poetry documentaries *All That Lies Between Us* and *Unburying Malcolm Miller*. Evans teaches high school and college English and creative writing in southern New Jersey.

**Percival Everett** (“Little Faith” 240–266) is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California and the author of nearly thirty books, including *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell, *Assumption*, *Erasure*, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and *Glyph*. Among other awards, he received an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award.

**Eloah F. Giacomelli** (translation 103–104) was born and raised in Brazil before emigrating to Canada. She is the longtime translator from Portuguese of eminent Brazilian writer, Moacyr Scliar.

**Rachel Hadas** (“Mortalities” 120–125) is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry, essays, memoir, and translations. Her latest book of poems is *Questions in the Vestibule* and her new verse translations of Euripides’s two Iphigenia plays are forthcoming next year. Hadas is Board of Governors Professor of English at Rutgers University–Newark.

**Tamiki Hara** (1905–1951) (“Summer Flowers” 46–59) was a Japanese author who survived the atomic bomb at Hiroshima just a year after losing his wife. His best-known work, *Summer Flowers*, was written in the aftermath of those tragedies. It is considered one of the four monuments of Hiroshima survivor literature. He died by suicide at the age of forty-six.

**Peter Harris** (translation 108–109), poet and translator, spent the Year of Solidarity (1980–1981) teaching in Poland at Marie-Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, where he met his co-translator Danuta Loposzyko. Their collaborative translations also appear in *Shifting Borders: Eastern European Poetry of the Eighties*.

**Václav Havel** (1936–2011) (“Monologue from a Play, *The Garden Party*” 84–85). Czech leader and writer of worldwide reknown first appeared in *The Literary Review* shortly after the Prague Spring Uprising—in the wake of which his theater work was banned in Czechoslovakia. His 1969 contributor’s biographical note for this magazing read: “Václav Havel is a producer with the Balustrades theatre group. The same group has performed several of his satirical plays. His critical essays appear regularly in the magazine *Divadlo*.”

**Paula Haydar** (translation 165–171) is clinical assistant professor of Arabic at the University of Arkansas. She has translated ten novels by contemporary Lebanese authors Jabbour Douaihy, Rashid Daif, and Elias Khoury; Palestinian authors Sahar Khalifeh and Adania Shibli; and Jordanian author Jamal Naji. She translated Douaihy’s award-winning *June Rain*, her translation of Khoury’s *The Kingdom of Strangers* won the 1996 Arkansas Arabic Translation Award, and her translation of Adania Shibli’s *Touch* made the longlist of 2011 Best Translated Book Awards.

**Jerzy Hummel** (translation 60–73) translated Jerzy Putrament’s short story, “Holy Bullet” for *The Literary Review* in the Spring of 1967.

**Samantha Hunt** (“In Between the Storm and the Window” 201–202) is the author of four books of fiction: *Mr. Splitfoot*, *The Dark Dark: Stories*, *The Invention of Everything Else*, and *The Seas*. She is the recipient of a 2017 Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bard Fiction Prize, the National Book Foundation’s 5 Under 35 Prize and a finalist for the Orange Prize. Hunt has been published by the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Tin House*, the *Guardian*, and elsewhere.

**Yoshio Iwamoto** (translation 126–139) is professor emeritus of East Asian languages and cultures and of comparative literature at Indiana University.

**Brandon Davis Jennings** (“Obnoxioneering in a Not-Yet-War . . .” 269–270) is an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran from West Virginia. His collection of essays *The Red Book or Operation Iraqi Freedom Is My Fault* just came out, and he is also the author of the novella *Battle Rattle*, and an award-winning chapbook, *Waiting for the Enemy*. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *Passages North*.

**Wiesław Kazanecki** (1939–1989) (“No Smoking” 108–109) was a poet who lived and wrote in Poland.

**Shiraishi Kazuko** (“Yellow Night” 115–119) is one of the foremost Japanese poets of her generation and perhaps the most flamboyant. In the 1960s she pioneered the reading of poetry and jazz in Japan. Her English language publications include *Seasons of Sacred Lust*, translated by Kenneth Rexroth, John Solt, and others.

**Ruth Ellen Kocher** (“#106LinesOnBlacknessForWhitePoetsAndPolicemen” 282–287) is the author of seven books of poetry, including *Third Voice*, *Ending in Planes* (winner of the Noemi Poetry Prize), *Goodbye Lyric: The Gigans and Lovely Gun*, and *domina Un/blued*. Her poems have been translated into Persian in the Iranian literary magazine *She’r* and have appeared in various anthologies including *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poets*, *Black Nature*, *From the Fishhouse*, and *An Anthology for Creative Writers: The Garden of Forking Paths*. She is currently associate dean for the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado at Boulder where she teaches Poetry, Poetics, and Literature.

**Diana Kuprel** (translation 74–78) is a Toronto-based translator, editor, and communications professional. She translated Zofia Nalkowska’s Holocaust masterpiece, *Medallions*, and co-translated (with Marek Kusiba) the selected poetry of Ryszard Kapuściński, *I Wrote Stone*. She was the editor of Books in Canada and *idea&s: the arts & science review*, and has served on the editorial committee for the *Literary Review of Canada*.

**Krystyna Lars** (“Seven Scenes from the Life of Men” 140–148) is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Kraina pamiątek* (“The Land of Souvenirs”), in which “Seven Scenes from the Life of Men” originally appeared. She lives in Gdansk, where, along with her husband Stefan Chwin, she runs the literary publishing house Tytuł.

**Allen Learst** (“A Sheet, A Clothesline, A Bed” 155–158) won the 2011 Leapfrog Fiction Contest for his short story collection, *Dancing at the Gold Monkey*. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry appeared in *War*, *Literature and the Arts*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, and *Passages North*.

**Joseph O. Legaspi** (“Departure: July 30, 1984” 186–187) is the author of the poetry collections *Threshold* and *Imago*, and two chapbooks: *Aviary*, *Bestiary* and *Subways*. His works have appeared in *Poetry*, *New England Review*, and *Orion*. He co-founded Kundiman, a non-profit organization serving Asian American writers.

**Danuta Lopozyko** (translation 108–109) is a Polish translator. He met Peter Harris, his co-translator, at the Marie-Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin in 1980. Their collaborative translations also appear in *Shifting Borders: Eastern European Poetry of the Eighties*.

**Clarence Major** (“The Necessity of Saints” 43–45). His most recent book of poems is *My Studio*.

**Richard H. Minear** (translation 46–59) is professor emeritus of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His Hiroshima translations include *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, which includes the triptych *Summer Flowers*; *Black Eggs: Poems by Kurihara Sadako*; and *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*.

**Michael F. Moore** (translation 111–114) is a translator and interpreter for the Italian Mission to the United Nations. His most recent translations include *The Animal Gazer* by Edgardo Franzosini, *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi, and *Agostino* by Alberto Moravia. He is currently completing a new translation of Alessandro Manzoni’s 19th century classic *The Betrothed*, for which he has been awarded an NEA grant and a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center.

**Zofia Nałkowska** (1884-1954) (“By the Railway Track” 74–78) was a Polish novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. Born in Warsaw, she was part of the Young Poland movement that defined the country’s *fin de siècle* cultural world. She became the first female member of the Polish Academy of Literature in 1937, and was patron of a popular Warsaw literary salon. After surviving five years of Nazi occupation in Warsaw, Nałkowska joined the editorial staff of the literary weekly *Kuźnica* and was on the Commission for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes.

**Aziz Nesin** (1915-1995) (“Milady Monkey” 86–88) was a Turkish writer, satirist, and activist whose many novels, short stories, and fables have been translated into over thirty languages.

**Joyce Carol Oates** (“Dead Actors” 81–83) is currently visiting writer in residence in the graduate writing program at New York University. She is a recipient of the President’s Medal in the Humanities, the National Book Award, the PEN American Lifetime Achievement Award, and the PEN/Malamud Award, among other honors. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Philosophical Society. Her most recent novel is *A Book of American Martyrs*.

**Kenzaburō Ōe** (“The Day Another Izumi Shikibu Was Born” 126–139) is a writer of fiction, essays, and literary theories. He is the 1994 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature and one of the most highly esteemed writers to have emerged in post-war Japan.

**John M. Parker** (translation 105–107) is a translator from Portuguese, working from and writing about both Portuguese and Brazilian literature. His specialty is contemporary Brazilian poetry, in particular, on the poets of the Generation of 1945.

**Robert Payne** (1911–1983) (translation 19–33) had over 100 books published during his lifetime, among them such notable works as the biographies of Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Gandhi, and Mao Tse-Tung. He also wrote novels and poetry and could translate from several languages. Apart from writing his own books, he served as chairman of the Translation Committee at PEN until 1976 and then co-founded the Translation Center at Columbia University. During WWII he taught English poetry and naval architecture at Lienta University in Kunming from 1943 to 1946. Together with Chinese scholars at the university he compiled and co-translated *The White Pony*, a collection culled from 3,000 years of Chinese poetry.

**Jerzy Putrament** (1910-1986) (“Holy Bullet” 60–73) was a Polish poet, writer, editor, and politician. He was general secretary of the Society of Polish Writers from 1950–1953. Although a prolific and influential figure, his work was sparsely translated.

**Nicholas Rinaldi** (“Handkerchief” 163–164) has written three collections of poetry and four novels, the most recent of which is *The Remarkable Courtship of General Tom Thumb*.

**Annalisa Saccà** (translation 110) is a professor of Italian at St. John’s University. She has published books on literary criticism as well as five books of her own poetry in Italian: *Storie del Sud*, *Gli occhi di mia madre*, *Dove non è mai sera*, *Nominare Delfi*, and *Il tempo del grano*. Saccà founded the Center for Global Development. She also co-founded the Rielo Institute for Integral Development (RIID) and the World Federation for Health and Migration (WFHM).

**Maxine F. Salamon** (translation 86–88) translated Aziz Nesin for *The Literary Review’s* Turkish Issue in 1972 while a doctoral student at New York University.

**Ghada Samman** (“From *Beirut Nightmares*” 165–171) is a prolific Arab woman writer with over twenty-five titles to her name, including the controversial *Al-Raghif Yanbud ka ‘l-Qalb*. She has also published numerous collections of short stories and poetry and a novel, *Kawabis Beirut*, based on the early years of the Lebanese wars. Many of her works have been translated into Western and Eastern European languages. She lives and writes in Paris.

**Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel** (translation 126–139) is a professor emerita of Asian Languages and Literature at Wesleyan University.

**Melita Schaum’s** (“Exposure” 188–190) poetry and prose have appeared in such journals as *The Denver Quarterly*, *The Colorado Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *New Letters*, and *Mississippi Review*. She has authored five books, including a collection of memoir essays, *A Sinner of Memory*.

**Moacyr Scliar** (1935–2011) (“The Prescript” 103–104), was a Brazilian writer and physician who wrote frequently about the Jewish diaspora in Brazil. He is best-known abroad for the novel, *Max and the Cats*, and had twelve books translated into English.

**Prageeta Sharma** (“Belonging as Consequence: On Poetry” 226–227) is the author of four poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Undergloom*. She teaches in the Creative Writing MFA program at the University of Montana in Missoula.

**John Solt** (translation 115–119) is a poet, translator, and critic. He was awarded in 1996 the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature. Solt co-edited the selected poetry and prose in Japanese of his mentor, Kenneth Rexroth, issued in 2017 by Shichōsha in their World Poets Series.

**Terese Svoboda** (“Learning to Translate” 198–200) is a recent recipient of a Guggenheim in fiction and award-winning author of seven books of poetry, six novels, a memoir, a biography, and a book of translation from Nuer, a South Sudanese language. Her opera, WET, premiered at L.A.’s Disney Hall in 2005. *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge*, *Radical Poet* and *Professor Harriman’s Steam Air-Ship* appeared in 2016.

**Susan Thornton** (“Border Crossing” 271–281) lives in Binghamton, NY. Her memoir is *On Broken Glass: Loving and Losing John Gardner*, and her stories have been anthologized in *Puerto Del Sol*, *The Best American Mystery Stories 2016*, and *Flash Fiction Annual 2017*. Work has also appeared in *Blackbird*, *The Santa Fe Literary Review*, and *Rat’s Ass Review*.

**Mao Tse-Tung (Zedong)** (1893–1976) (poems 19–33) was a Chinese communist revolutionary, political theorist, and poet. He served as chairman of the People’s Republic of China from 1949–1959, and led the Chinese Communist Party from 1935 until his death.

**Leslie Ullman** (“Calypso, Twilight” 191–194; “From Nymph to Elder: Beyond the Viability of Seduction” 195–197) has published four poetry collections and a hybrid volume of craft essays, poems, and writing exercises titled *Library of Small Happiness*. Professor Emerita at University of Texas-El Paso, she works as a freelance manuscript consultant and faculty member in the low-residency MFA Program at Vermont College of the Fine Arts.

**Patricia Sarafian Ward** (“The History” 172–185) was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. She is the author of two novels, *The Bullet Collection* and *Skinner Luce*.

**Okogbule Wonodi** (1935–2001) (“Ashes for Granny” 79–80) was the first published Ikwerre poet, as well as being a college principal, lecturer, university administrator, company manager, newspaper publisher, and for several years in the 1970s, Chairman of the Port Harcourt Town Council in Eastern Nigeria.



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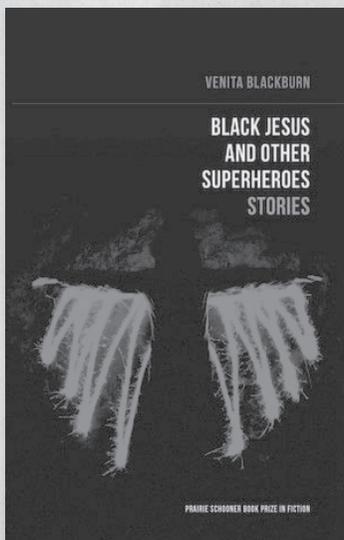
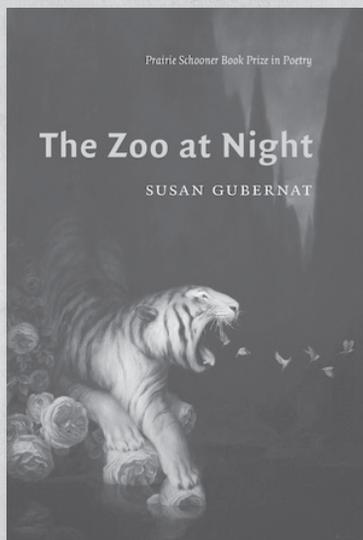
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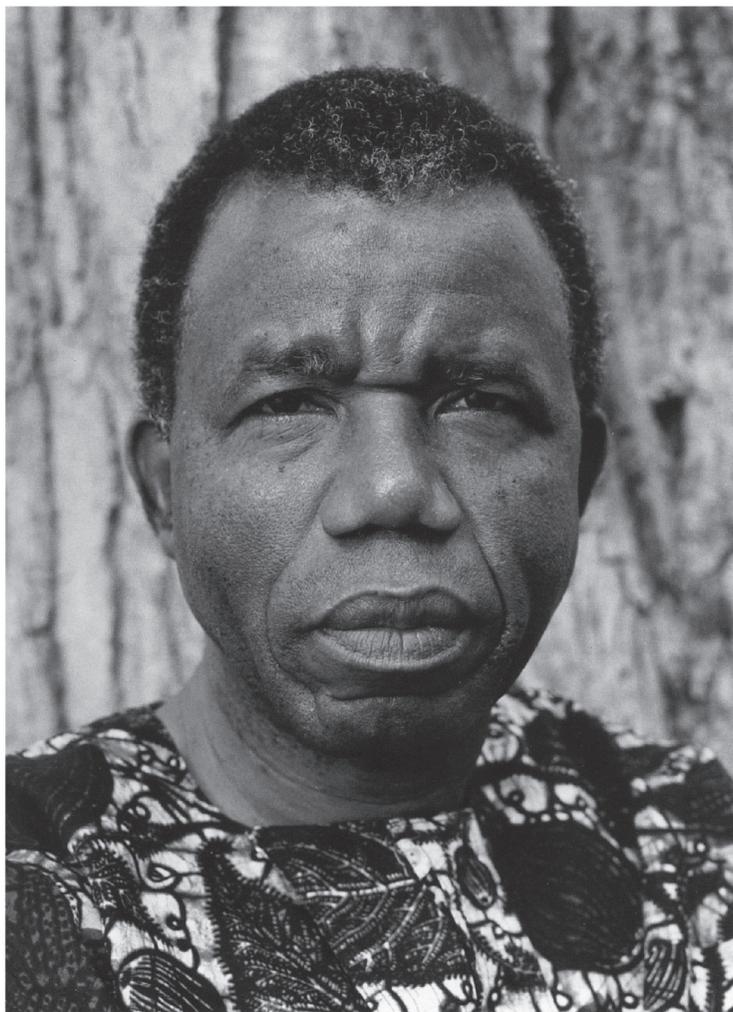
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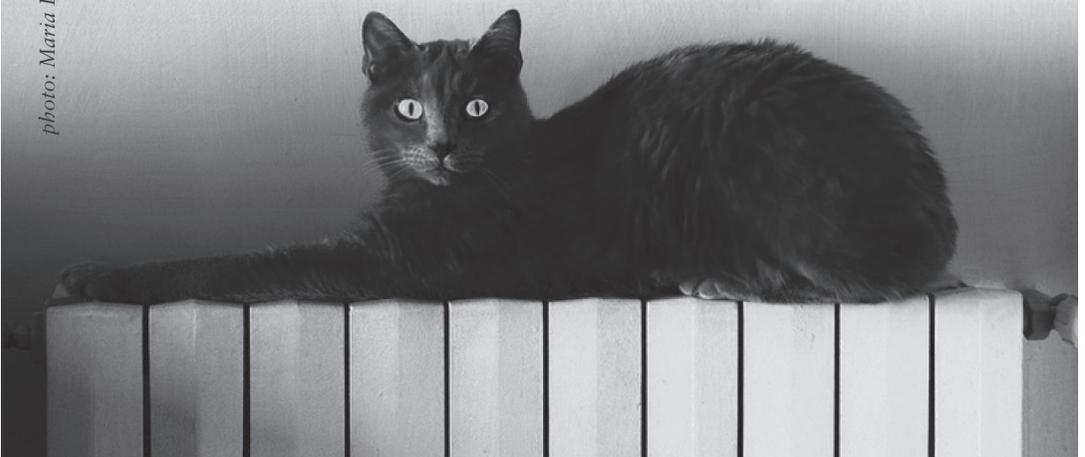
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