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INVISIBLE CITIES

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INVISIBLE CITIES
LATE WINTER/EARLY SPRING 2013

CITIES, LIKE DREAMS ARE MADE OF DESIRES AND FEARS, EVEN IF THE THREAD OF THEIR DISCOURSE IS SECRET, THEIR RULES ARE ABSURD, THEIR PERSPECTIVES DECEITFUL, AND EVERYTHING CONCEALS SOMETHING ELSE. —ITALO CALVINO, *INVISIBLE CITIES*

EDITOR'S NOTE

It feels to me as if I've always known Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. As if my brain were born and instantly had *Invisible Cities* in its matter to refer to. But that wasn't the order of things. Pippi Longstocking came first and then someone—probably my friend Yates who came from a family of architects, artists, and readers—pressed it on me for the first time. And someone else in college—my professor of post-War Italian Literature, or my professor of Italian feminist theory—made me read it. Whereupon I chose to devote an entire semester to studying it. I remember feeling like the calligrapher to the perverts trying to execute a coherent thesis in my remedial Italian about one of the most complex crystal literary structures ever written. Yet, there is a point of origin in my consciousness, *Invisible Cities* came to me precisely when I was ready to read it, when my mind was blasted open to complexity and patterns—after which the world and my memory of it dissolves into a series of visual, theoretical and mathematical illustrations of Calvino's masterpiece.

So that: There isn't a city on a river that isn't split in two, twice; two parts on either side of the water and two parts on either side of the water's reflection. There isn't a massive tangled city center that doesn't seduce its residents into its heart, feed upon their life force. There isn't a city not made of dreams—and over time, broken dreams. No city that isn't a ghost sooner or later, and throughout its web of streets haunted by a single fleeing spirit. There is no unconquered city; they are all colonies. There are no cities that don't envy others; no populations who aren't desperate to have at least one something completely different. There are no storytellers who aren't Marco Polo recounting farflung adventures to an imperial Kublai Khan. Nor are there listeners who don't stop listening in order to weave their own synchronistic narrative—a second independent strand of thought, running alongside the first, reflecting and interacting, vying for dominance.

Calvino's fiction isn't a story; it's an ordering and reordering of the emotional and philosophical reverberations of our civilized world, our human condition. The book itself is extremely formal—each chapter is a prose poem describing a city. Each city has variations. Cities are grouped into categories according to random patterns. Each city is imagined; each city is conceptual. Every interlude between Khan and

Marco Polo is a thought experiment about powerful structures—empires, governments, languages, lands, tales. And the intelligence behind the entire construction is singular.

We have not tried here to mimic the original. With the polyphony of writing gathered, I'm barely sure we're referencing it. Our Invisible Cities satisfies itself by occupying the reverberation. Our stories and poems are our cities and they issue in many respects from Calvino's meticulous categories: desire, memory, signs, the eyes, the names, the dead. Some of the work is extremely formal—with precision edges and self-contained references—and some of it is so organic it dampens the page with its dew, heat, and flora. If there's a tribute to Calvino here, it's noisy and free form—more wake than memorial.

Minna Proctor

COVER ARTIST

DENIS DARZACQ
LA CHUTE N 09, 2005–2006
C-PRINT

La Chute, meaning "The Fall," is a stomach-churning, tingling series of photographs by Parisian photographer Denis Darzacq that captures ordinary people in familiar, urban settings and still manages to force the viewer to the edge of his seat. Seeing a man, one you might have passed a thousand times on the streets of your own city without taking a second glance, suspended in mid-air above a dingy sidewalk, makes us question the nature of the everyday. He hangs, just close enough to the ground to make us worry about how he will land, and just far enough in the air to put the seed of doubt in our minds as to whether or not he needs to. The fact that Darzacq refused to use digital manipulation in creating this series makes the product even stranger and more enthralling.

Darzacq uses this series to "question the place of the individual in the city," a daring endeavor, considering how easily an individual can be reduced to a subway schedule, a paycheck, square footage, or a carbon footprint in an urban ecosystem. These photographs examine cities as humanity's petri dishes, crucibles where human organisms are heated and spun and smashed together until their base nature is laid bare. Cities have been called aggressive places, but they might be better described as raw. Darzacq captures this pathos and then subverts it, likening the subjects of his photographs to "modern-day knights who can combine disciplined work and play, the laws of gravity and weightlessness." He uses photography "to build between two realities," drawing our attention to the empty space. The work creates a sense of magical realism and amazement that borders on the uncomfortable, as we are made to wonder about the invisible in these cities. Just when we're sure we are going to break our noses on the cold concrete, Darzacq's work considers the possibility that we could fly.

A. Miles Lizak

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Contents

Leon Weinmann
Want/Not Want

(From the Jataka Tales):
It was the starving-time. A good man and a bad man wandered in the woods. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, they spied a stag, huge, luminous, good to eat. The bad man shouted "Ahaha!" and drew his bow to kill. The good man, knowing ahimsā paramo dharma *(non-injury the best course) refused to raise his arms against the beast. But it was just an "illusion-stag," and the bad man's arrows fell in vain.*

A day later, fire broke out in the woods. The good man and the bad man fled in terror, coming at last to a raging river too wild to get across. At that moment the illusion-stag reappeared to ferry the good man, only the good man, across the river, leaving the bad man to perish horribly in the flames.

A noblewoman asked her confessor
how to attain salvation.
He said, You have to love God.

She asked, what if I want
to love God? Is that enough?

Simone Weil changed her handwriting.
Her letters unmade themselves until

they became as pure as undressed stones.
She hated dancing, hated being kissed.
Her capital O was impregnable.

The word Sanskrit means adorned, finished.
I wanted to know everything once, and so
I tried to learn it. It was only the start.
The script, an ancient centipede,
crawled away from me on broken legs.

Yes, he answered, that's enough.
She said, What if I want
to want to love God?

It is not that she did not want to eat.
It is that she wanted to starve.

Words, you find, have their desires, too.
They mean, from IE **men-*,
hence *mens*, *mentula*,
the mind and penis.
They intend, fr. *in-tendere*,

to stretch out toward,
hence tense, tension.
Vouloir dire, lit., to want to say.

Now her breasts were twins of a gazelle,
her thighs the work of a master craftsman.
Yes, he answered, that's enough.

She'd read once how
Alexander, in solidarity
with his thirsty troops, spilled
his water on the sand. He'd conquered
his desires so he could suffer.
She admired this very much.

The night before my aunt's funeral
I stayed awake till dawn
translating a story from the Jataka tales.
I had to look up every single word.
The sun came up and I was poisoned
with cigarettes and coffee. I'd read
how the good man had mastered his will,

the bad man drawn his bow to kill,
how both went hungry.
What is the lesson here?

Tell him, I am sick of love.
The confessor suffered so badly
blood, the rooster's sign, showed in his seed.
Self-hatred did not dispel it.

If beauty is excess of meaning,
and meaning excess of desire,
then beauty is also excess of desire.

She liked to smoke, perhaps desiring
the moment when desire is burned out.
I find the thought of her smoking beautiful.

I'd liked her but I hadn't known her well.
I knew she'd been a heroin addict,
which is one way of knowing what you want.
After she got AIDS she showed me a poem
she'd written in her prison writing class,

something about one of her old boyfriends
taunting her, rubbing his torso at her—
See this, baby? Too good. Too good for you.
Her teeth were gone by then, her voice a whine.
She served me a sandwich on moldy bread
and I ate it.

O my love, my dove, my perfect one.
All night his little meaning kept its watch,
a deictic particle indexing
the love which moves the sun and other stars.
He is thinking of writing a theological treatise.

She dressed plainly, almost like a man.
People thought she was a saint.
Saints are almost impossible to define.

In the story, the good roots
shriveled and stank.
The women's breasts were beaten
skins, the dry-
mouthed children too sick to cry, and when

they finally came back in
with a couple of wild hens,
all tendon, wracked with mites,
and gave them to the women, they saw
they were filled with tiny stones.
Everything was wood, stone, bone,
the whole world, in a little while
they were to become bone as well.
Her legs had grown so thin she could not stand.

He wants. He does not want
to want. He does not want
to want to want. Et cetera.
He considers Pascal's scourge,
the silence of infinite space.

To mix your ash with God you have to burn.
It's possible to conquer your desires,
but first you have to want to conquer them.

And then they cremated her.
There wasn't much to burn.

I left the church and it was snowing hard,
the world doing what it wanted to do.
I lit a fire that night and watched the flames.
The fire ate, it wanted
what it had eaten,
it was still hungry.

Stephen O'Connor
Ghost

"There's a ghost in this house," says Monica.

"Stop it," says Nell, holding her palm up flat.

Just outside the window, beside a low, bare hemlock branch, a ghost is listening.

Most people imagine ghosts as the leftovers of cancelled lives, but, in fact, they are only possible lives that never happened. That doesn't mean ghosts exist, however. They don't. Possibilities exist. And life is dense with possibility. But as long as something is only possible, it is nothing. Ghosts sorrow. They are haunted by the lives they might have lived. Their longing has no end.

"I'm serious," says Monica.

"I don't believe in ghosts," says Nell.

"The first wife of the man who built this house," says Monica, "had only one name: Mercy. She is buried in the Methodist cemetery, not far from the grave of the man, his second wife, and their children. On Mercy's gravestone there is only her one name and an inscription, 'Consort of Ezra West, as discrete in death as she was in life.' On the census records she is Ezra West's wife, but on her gravestone she is only a consort. That's because she was a slave. They fell in love in Connecticut when they were teenagers. They ran off together. This was the frontier in those days, and they thought that here they could live together as they pleased. But they were wrong. More white people came, and Mercy had no place among them. She was discrete. She was unfailingly polite, and kind. When she died, Ezra West believed she had

died of heartbreak, but what she really died of was outrage. That's why she is still here. That's why she will haunt this land even after the house is gone."

It is bedtime. All the lights are off. Nell and Monica are standing at the bottom of the stairs, moonlight shining through the window.

"Why are you telling me this?" says Nell.

Nell and Monica, each alone in her bed, hear footsteps downstairs. Monica is sure a ghost is pacing around the dining room table. Nell doesn't believe in ghosts, but even so she hears what seems to be a ghost pacing the hall at the bottom of the stairs, and is terrified. She can't help herself. At the moment, her terror has yet to escalate to panic, and so is manageable. But she doesn't know what she will do if she should hear footsteps on the stairs. Her room is at the top of the stairs, first door on the right. Nell knows many things. She knows that the footsteps are matters of tension and release. Like earthquakes. This is what she tells herself, lying flat on her back in her bed, staring into the dark. At night the thin floorboards cool faster than the beams supporting them, and thus contract more rapidly. The tension between floorboard and beam builds and builds until the force of the contraction exceeds the resistance of the friction, and then, ever so slightly, with an audible crack, the board pulls back. Tension released, the cycle begins again. And because the board cools at a steady rate, the audible cracks come at regular intervals—tonight, like footsteps; other nights, like the straining of ship's timbers. Nell has transformed the ghost into basic physics and pieces of wood, but her fear is undiminished. If the footsteps should mount the stairs, and if the knob of her door should start to turn, she does not know what she will do. And she does not know which prospect frightens her more: the ghost itself, or what the undeniable reality of the ghost would tell her about everything she has ever believed. Eventually it is morning, and Monica says, "Mercy paces in the dining room because she couldn't sit at the table with the white guests, and so had to behave as if she was the servant."

"How do you know that?" says Nell. "You can't possibly know that!"

Nell is a zoologist. She is wearing hiking boots, shorts and a tank top, and has binoculars, a digital recorder, and a camera with a massive telephoto lens hanging by straps from her neck. She is up to her shins in fiddlehead ferns, and the ghost is hovering slightly behind her. The ghost doesn't have a name, but had she existed, she would have been Nelly—so Nelly will do. Nelly envies Nell's physical reality. She watches Nell's chest rise and fall as she breathes. She notices the faint sheen of per-

spiration on Nell's honey-and-buttermilk skin. She notices how the droplets of perspiration on Nell's upper lip are warped by the pale filaments of the all-but-invisible down amidst which they emerged. Nelly has absolutely no relationship with the physical world. The breeze does not eddy around her. She cannot draw air into her lungs. She cannot sweat—not merely because she has no body, but because she can be neither hot, nor cold, nor anything between. Nell, by contrast, is a thing among things. Her feet press the earth and the earth presses back. All around her, sunbeams drop between the branches of trees and burst into ragged agglutinations of emerald brilliance. One sunbeam touches her leg at her knee, imparting to it, not just brilliance, but clarity. The corrugations of the rough skin at that place where her shin becomes her kneecap stand out like sand dunes at sunset. Another beam touches the back of her head, making her coffee-black dreads glisten, turning a droplet of moisture, just fallen from a leaf tip, into an iridescent gleam, ringed by radiant needles. Nelly doesn't only envy Nell's physicality, she wishes that she could be Nell—but Nell with a difference. Nelly would like to be a Nell who would relish without restraint every glorious instance of her being. Nelly would like to be the Nell who Nell would be if she were Nelly.

Mercy paces in the dining room because she couldn't sit at the table with the white guests, and so had to behave as if she was the servant.

"Roger called while you were out this afternoon," says Monica. "He asked if it would be okay to come for a visit. I said sure."

"What!" says Nell. "Are you fucking kidding me! Are you out of your fucking mind!" Nell drops into a chair, and flings her chest, arms and head onto the kitchen table. Her voice has gone wobbly. "Why did you do that? I can't believe you did that!"

"Oh, come on, Nells-Bells! You know this is just what the doctor ordered."

There are different kinds of possible lives, some so close to the actual that their not having come to pass seems almost an accident: I am a mammalogist, but I could have been an entomologist. Others are so distant from the actual that they seem little more than thought experiments: I am a mammalogist but I could have been

a luna moth. The most disturbing ghosts, however, are not usually those closest to reality. After all: I am a mammalogist, but I could have been an entomologist—Who cares? Whereas: I chose respectability, but, had I stayed with you, I might have lived in bliss—That's a wail at midnight. It cannot be ignored.

Nell and Monica were roommates for two years in college. Then Monica dropped out to sing with a rock band and do heroin. The band got signed and toured the world for seventeen months. One night in Buenos Aires, Monica shot up, vomited and inhaled her vomit. She only survived because, while waiting for the ambulance, the bassist performed the Heimlich maneuver on her repeatedly, and with such force he broke her ribs. Now she lives in her great grandmother's house on the edge of a forest and teaches yoga to senior citizens. When Nell told her she wanted to study the vocal communication of foxes, Monica said, "Then come here! There are foxes everywhere. You go out at night and you can hear them shrieking to each other up and down the mountain, especially in June." That was in September. One of the main reasons Nell wanted to take Monica up on her offer was that she and Monica had hardly seen each other over the last decade, and she missed their old friendship. Monica was full of fun. Monica was more alive than anyone Nell knew. Then it was June, and Nell hardly cared about Monica or the vocal communication of foxes. All she wanted was to get away from Roger. Roger, who once asked, as they crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, "If I jumped off, would you follow me?" Who, after they were well into a bottle of Knob Creek, liked to say to her, "What if this was our last day on earth? What if we agreed that we were going to kill ourselves tomorrow, and right now was all we had left?" She didn't like him when he talked that way. It was all a sort of joke, she told herself. A thought experiment. He was a drama king. Then there was the night he placed a pistol on the top of his dresser and said, "Tomorrow we're each going to put this to our heads and pull the trigger." He was smiling, so she thought he was just being an asshole. "You don't believe me, do you?" he said. Then he laughed. "But first we're going to fuck," he said. "And it will be the last fuck of our lives. And it will be like the first fuck of our lives, only better. We're going to fuck like we've never fucked before." She was so drunk that at first she hardly knew what she was doing, except that it was horrible. But then, suddenly, it was wonderful. Or it was wonderful because it was horrible. It was wonderful because they were both so fucking sick and so bad for each other, and who knew: maybe this really would be the first and last fuck of her life, and would that really matter anyway? Then it was all over, and she had to go to the bathroom. As

she passed the dresser, she lifted the gun straight into the air—no thunk, no click, no cuff of metal against wood. She placed the bullets one by one on the mold- and rust-mottled bottom of the toilet tank, and threw the gun out the window. If Roger noticed in the morning that his gun had vanished, he didn't say a word. Nell walked out his front door, got into her car, and promised herself she would never see him again. Never ever. Not ever.

With every passing instant a human life comes to a pair of doors. As it is impossible for anything to exist in two places at once, the human life can only enter one door and not the other. And it is impossible not to choose. In this way we have no freedom. We must choose and reject. Every single instant. And so the lives that might have been lived beyond the rejected doors never come to pass. Although sometimes it doesn't feel that way. Sometimes the choice we desperately want to make is the wrong choice. And when that happens, no matter which choice we actually do make—the right or the wrong—the choice we didn't make will shimmer brilliantly with something like the life it never became. For years, perhaps. For a whole lifetime. But it is not life. It is nothing.

"He said you never pick up when he calls," says Monica, "or answer his texts. He says you've defriended him, and you're even blocking his e-mails."

"He tells you all that," says Nell, "and you say, 'Sure, why don't you come on over?' Did it ever occur to you that I might have a reason for wanting him out of my life?"

"Oh please!"

Monica twelve-stepped for years. But that's all over. She doesn't need it any more. Now she likes to drink. She is only thirty-four, but she has broken capillaries on her cheeks and on her nose. She is standing at the stove, white onions sautéing greenly in olive oil. Nell is sitting at the table, thin-slicing sausages so that they look like rows of fat nickels. Filleted chicken breasts wait in a bowl. Monica is the best cook Nell has ever known. Every meal since Nell arrived has been a surprise, and every bite a delightful delirium spreading from tongue to throat to belly. Fistfulls of tarragon, basil, oregano, and thyme in a row on the cutting board. Salad bowl heaped with arugula, spinach, and red-leaf lettuce that Nell gathered in the garden with her own hands.

"Roger says being a lawyer is making him hate humanity," says Monica, as she tops off Nell's wineglass and refills her own.

"I don't care," says Nell.

"He says family practice is worse than being public defender. It's all children trying to cheat their parents, and husbands stealing from their wives. Nobody cares about anything but money."

"He's so solipsistic!"

"No he isn't."

"He's a narcissist. All he cares about is how things affect him. He's incapable of thinking about the big picture, about the effects of his own actions, about the people who need him."

Monica tilts a colander over the skillet, distributing chanterelles with a wooden spoon, then stirs them into the onions, and sprinkles the mixture with sea salt and tarragon leaves. "So how come you hate him all of a sudden?" she says.

"I don't hate him. I just don't like him. I've never liked him."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is. I never liked him. Even in college."

"That's not how I remember it."

"What went on between us was only chemistry," says Nell, "and that's not the same as liking. When he moved to Oakland, I didn't want to see him. I said okay to coffee just to be polite. But then, you know, he walked in and there it was: that chemistry. I wish I'd never met him."

"You're crazy," says Monica.

"Maybe," says Nell.

Outside the window the backs of a dozen sheep rise out of the high grass like yellow moons. The field belongs to Monica's neighbor. And so do the sheep. They have dull-tinkling bells around their necks. Every now and then one of them makes a low *bah*, and three or four others answer. A breeze blows through the window. Nell feels it coolly in her armpits and softly against her ribs inside her shirt. The low sun through the wine bottle casts frayed loops of gold across the table and onto the cream-colored wall. There is a gleam-spiked nest of gold at the bottom of her glass. The sheep are there also. And the grass. Nell lifts her glass and takes a sip. The wine is cool, sour, delicious. Everything is so beautiful here. Is it possible that Monica has the perfect life?

*

Roger is catching a morning plane. Tomorrow he will be here. He will arrive in time for dinner.

Nell is in her room, and Nelly is there too. There are moments when the distance between them lessens. Just now, for example, Nell catches sight of herself in the mirror and, for an instant, sees herself as someone she would be happy to be, as someone who might be desired, well-loved. Her skin: butter soft and sunset pink. Her dreads: an obsidian fountain atop her head. Her eyes: merry, kind. And in this instant, Nell is seeing herself as Nelly sees her. It is as if Nell is on one side of the mirror and Nelly on the other, and they relish one another with identical satisfaction. Or it is as if, in this instant, there is no distinction between the actual and the possible; they are one and the same. But only for this instant. Then the instant is over.

"Did you hear her?" says Monica.

"Who?" says Nell.

It is morning. Monica is sitting at the table with an empty coffee cup in front of her, a cigarette in her hand. Nell is standing in the doorway, barefoot, in her nightie.

"Mercy," says Monica.

Nell says nothing.

Monica says, "I spoke to her. Last night. I was wondering if you heard her."

"I didn't hear anything."

"It was so loud. I was sure you would have heard."

Nell comes into the room, sits down heavily on the chair across from Monica. But she is not looking at Monica. She is looking at the coffee thermos on the stove beside the kettle. She wishes she had poured herself some coffee.

"I don't know what time it was," says Monica. "Late. Long after we went to bed. I woke up because I heard this sound. I didn't know what it was. I thought it might be the sheep bells. But then I realized it was coming from the radiator. It's hard to describe."

"Radiator?" says Nell.

"It was like someone was brushing the radiator with—what do you call them? Those wire brushes jazz drummers use."

"I don't know what they're called."

"Anyway, you know what I mean."

"Brushes, I think."

"Yeah. Like brushes," says Monica. "But also like it was a voice. I could just tell someone was speaking to me. So I said, 'Mercy, is that you?' And as soon as I said that, it happened again. Just this one stroke over the radiator bars. Like when they sprinkle fairy dust on TV. So I said, 'Mercy, if you mean yes, do that again, right now.' And she did, just exactly as I said that. So I said, 'Do you have something to tell me?' And she said, 'Yes.' 'About something that's going to happen?' 'Yes.' 'Something good?' She didn't answer, so I asked, 'Something bad?' 'Yes.' 'Very bad?' 'Yes.' 'Evil?'"

Nelly has absolutely no relationship with the physical world. The breeze does not eddy around her. She cannot draw air into her lungs.

"Monica!" says Nell. "That was a radiator! Do you realize you were talking to a radiator?"

"Let me finish," says Monica.

"A radiator, for Christsakes!"

"This is important."

Nell doesn't say anything.

Monica says, "I said, 'Evil?' And she said, 'Yes.' Something evil is going to happen. So then I asked, 'Is it going to happen to me?' and she didn't answer. So then I said, 'Is it going to happen to Nell?' 'Yes,' she said."

"Jesus fucking Christ!" says Nell. "A haunted radiator! Are you crazy?"

"Let me finish!"

"This doesn't make any sense!"

"This is important!"

"They didn't even have radiators in slavery days! Do you realize how completely moronic you sound? Why would a slave ghost haunt a radiator?"

"Listen! You have to listen! This is the most important part!"

"I need some coffee." Nell gets up from her seat, picks up the coffee thermos, but it's empty. "You drank all the coffee."

"Listen! This is about you!"

Nell brings the kettle to the sink, turns on the faucet.

"I said," says Monica, "'Is Nell going to die?'"

"Oh, fuck!" Nell flings the kettle into the sink. "Are you intentionally trying to scare me with this fucking stupid story?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Talking radiators! What do you think this is?—Pee-wee's fucking Playhouse!"

"Listen! I'm almost done. When I asked that question Mercy didn't answer. So that means, 'No.'"

"I'm outta here! I can't take this anymore! I tell you I never want to see Roger again as long as I live and you invite him to stay with us! You stupid fucking bitch! How could you do that? I can't believe I ever thought you were my friend!"

Nell knocks Monica's coffee cup off the table as she strides from the room. The cup is empty. It bounces on the floorboards. But the handle breaks off. The handle skitters under the stove.

Monica shouts, "I wasn't trying to scare you! Mercy said, 'No'! I thought you would be relieved to hear that she said no."

"I'm leaving!" says Nell, her feet banging on the stairs. "I'm packing my bags. Ten minutes and I'm in my car and I'm never coming back!" Her feet stop banging. A door slams.

Nell is driving. And Nelly is on the seat beside her. Sometimes Nelly is in the driver's seat too. But she weighs nothing, displaces no air, and her hands on the wheel cannot shift it a micron. So Nell never notices. The car is on an incline, nose down. The forest is rushing uphill, back to where they used to be. Nelly notices that there are tranquil places in the forest—behind the trees that move so fast they can hardly be seen, behind the other trees that move more slowly, and seem to rotate as they pass. These tranquil places are where the sunlight comes down to touch the leaves or grass. Places where deer might like to take their careful, stiff-legged steps, or perk up their big-eyed heads. Nelly thinks these places are beautiful. She thinks driving is beautiful too, the way it transforms the world into constant transformation. Nell also knows that the world shooting past her windshield is beautiful. As she flees Monica and a life so love-sore and turned against itself that she fears it will only bring her pain, shame, and bleak solitude, what she wants most is to feel the beauty all around her. What she wants is for that beauty to fill her completely. In this way she is nearly united with Nelly, because, in this instant, Nelly is completely beauty-filled.

Nell is standing in the forest at night. She is taking notes in the dark, her flashlight off and dangling from her belt. To her right, on the trunk of a fallen tree, the green light of her digital recorder glows like a plump star fallen to earth. And in the darkness all around her, amidst the stirring of insects and leaves, there are foxes crying. To Nell, these cries are tapered and moon-white. They rise like pale flames, first

here, then there, then farther away—then so close they set the hair on her arms upright. And they are human. Like the voiced despair of women and children at the instant of some swift, silent death. So many—every second or two for the last half hour, in so many parts of the forest. The cries are a language. Nell is certain of that. But a language so foreign, human ears don't know how to sort its meaningful parts from its noise. This is her first good recording. When she has more, she will play them though her computer, slowed down, broken into their constituent elements. She will turn them into graphs, into sheets of numbers. And she will compare them to her notes about temperatures, noises, breezes and time, to see if such factors correlate in any way to the cries. But her expectations are low. She knows that to really understand what the foxes are saying, she would have to watch them in their dens, or as they brush snouts, or pick their ways between bushes, over desiccated leaves. She would have to enter fox eyes, fox noses, fox ears, fox hearts.

Ghosts are only potential, so can never fail. Not Nell. Nell can fail and fail. There are moments—this is one—when she feels she is only failure. She is in the car again. Returning after having already returned. "I knew it!" Monica said that afternoon, as Nell drove back into the driveway. "I don't believe in running away," said Nell. And later she said, "I won't be home for dinner." Failure. All of it. And now she is following a yellow line back through the black. She clicks off the radio because the songs make her sad. Nelly, too, is sad. Sad because she knows that Nell can be beauty-filled. Sad because she knows that there is no reason why Nell should not be beauty-filled. But Nell has failed. And Nell will fail and fail. Nelly knows that failure is part of being real. But that is all she knows. To Nelly, failure is just another thing among things—a thing she can know only from the outside. Like skin. Nelly is fascinated by skin—that boundary between everything she knows about being Nell and everything she doesn't. Oh, if she could only live a single instant inside that skin! Oh, if she could only comprehend the complexities of being female in female skin in a world so full of men! Nelly knows that failure is nothing like being female in female skin. But her tendency to see it that way confuses her. Makes her wonder if failure isn't, in fact, a secret form of joy. Deeply secret. She is wrong. She knows she is wrong. But she can't make the thought go away. Nell drives back though the black. But the thought stays.

"Hey! Hey!" shouts Monica, lifting her arm over her head.

Roger doesn't move, except to sip from his glass. Only when Monica says,

"Here she is at last! Our prodigal friend!" does he turn his head to look at Nell. And then Nell sees it: that gaunt, stern face being taken over by a boy's smile. There is a stirring in her chest and an answering stirring between her legs.

"Nelly!" he says.

So everything burns, except the garage.

She lets the screen door close behind her. She puts down her backpack and her flashlight. She walks around the couch, to the plump, wing-backed chair next to Monica's, across the coffee table from Roger. He is sitting on the couch.

"Hey," she says softly.

"Hey," he says. Then he looks at her. He is so happy to see her. It is all over his face. But then she sees the sadness begin to creep in. He is still smiling, still looking straight into her eyes, but he is getting sadder every instant.

"You must be starving," says Monica.

"I'm okay," says Nell.

"Dinner was delicious," says Roger.

"I had to work," says Nell.

Monica splashes wine into Roger's glass and dumps the remainder of the bottle into her own. "Time for replenishment!" she says. She pats Nell on the back. "I'm bringing you a glass!"

"Thanks," says Nell.

Then she looks back at Roger. She cannot help but look into his eyes, as he looks into hers. Those green eyes with the chestnut freckles around the pupils. His sadness is mostly gone, replaced by something fierce, something she cannot help but return in her own gaze.

"I've been hearing about your ghost," he says.

Nell rolls her eyes. "Oh, please!"

"Monica's a trip," Roger says.

"She's fucking insane!"

Roger smiles again, and his happiness is back, his happiness to see her. "She's fun. She's completely herself. I don't know anyone else like her."

Nell doesn't want to talk about Monica. She looks down at the twisting smoke-ribbon rising from Monica's cigarette in the ashtray. Then she looks at Roger, but doesn't speak. The happiness fades in Roger's eyes, but the fierceness does not

return. She feels that, for the first time in all the years she's known him, she's the one with the advantage.

"Did she tell you how I ran away?" she asks.

"A bit."

"I didn't want to see you."

"I know that."

"You shouldn't have come."

"I know that too, I guess."

"I'm not going back with you, Roger."

He sighs and looks up at her with sad eyes. She feels herself going all loose inside, but not because of his sadness. Because of his fierceness, which is there after all. That implacable determination which never leaves him.

"I mean it," she says. "I'm not changing my mind."

"I'm not asking you to," he says.

Monica has returned with an open bottle and an empty glass.

"I know a ghost story," says Roger. His face is the red of a skinned knee. His eyes watery, alive, reflecting candlelight. "This old guy comes to see me. Wants to set up a trust for the kids from his first marriage. 'Did you have any kids from the second marriage?' I ask. 'They don't talk to me,' he says. 'Anyway, they can take care of themselves.' I ask if his first wife is to be a party to this trust? 'Oh, no,' he says. 'She's gone now. It's been years and years.' Then I see his eyes are watery. These old yellow eyes warped by his glasses. 'I'm sorry,' I say. He wipes his eyes and says, 'Don't worry about it.' Then he tells me this story. He and his first wife got married when they were fifteen. This was in Oklahoma. After World War II. She was pregnant already. They had their second child on her seventeenth birthday. They were too young, of course. They felt like they'd been locked in cages. There was lots of fighting. Drinking. She started flirting with this old boyfriend. Maybe more than flirting. So he beats her up—the old guy does. He was mad at her, of course. But mainly he beats her up because he was mad at the world, and she gave him the excuse. That's exactly how he told it. So his uncle moves to California, and he goes with him. Says he'll send for his wife and kids, but really what he wants is a whole new life. He gets a job at a printing shop in Vallejo. Gets himself a new woman—the one who will become his second wife. But before that happens, his mother calls him up. His first wife burned the house down, and herself with it. The kids are okay. She chased them out

before she started spreading kerosene everywhere. But then she spent three days in the hospital with most of her skin burned off her. In horrible pain. Then she died. So he marries the second wife, and raises the kids of the first wife in Vallejo. The second wife doesn't like them. They don't like her either. And when he starts having children with the second wife, the old kids hate the new kids too, and vice versa. His life is hell all over again. But still, he does pretty well for himself. When the printer retires, he takes over the shop. Then he sells the shop and goes into real estate. By the 1960s, he's bought and sold half the East Bay and has this big house in the Oakland hills. Then one night the house burns down. Everybody gets out okay. His wife, all the kids. No one knows how the fire started, or how it spread so quickly. The firemen have never seen anything like it. But then the old guy's standing out on the street, watching his house burn, and, in the shadows behind a crowd of his neighbors, he sees his first wife. She's looking right at him. Then she's gone. So everything burns, except the garage. A couple of days later, he's in the garage getting stuff for the house they rented. He looks around, and there's his first wife again, standing in the shadows. This time, she speaks to him. 'We're still married,' she says. Then she disappears. The next day, he goes back to the garage, mainly to see if she's there, and she is. This time she tells him, 'Our love was a true love. There was never anything wrong with it. It's only that we met too young.' And he realizes that that's true. He never loved anyone the way he loved his first wife. 'I'm sorry,' he says, but she's already gone. So he builds himself a new house, right where the old one was. And he keeps the old garage, even though his second wife thinks it's an eyesore. Every night he goes out there, and his first wife is waiting for him. They talk and they talk. They're more in love than ever. Also, she tells him things—like his second wife is cheating on him, she's stealing his money. And it turns out that those things are true. He divorces his second wife, and thinks he can just be with his first wife until it's time—you know: to join her. But the day he signs the divorce papers, his first wife appears to him in his office downtown. 'My work is done,' she tells him. Then she disappears and he never sees her again." Roger takes a deep sip from his wine. He smiles.

"That is so sad!" says Monica. She is sitting on the couch with Roger. She jabs the inside of his thigh with her fingertips. "Look at me, my eyes are full of tears!"

"It's just sick," says Nell.

Roger laughs.

"You're such a cynic!" says Monica.

Monica has been sitting next to Roger ever since she came back with the sec-

ond bottle of wine. Nell has been all alone on the far side of the coffee table, watching Monica laughing too hard at Roger's jokes. Watching how she can't stop touching him. How every time she touches him, she looks over to be sure Nell notices. Nell drank most of the second bottle of wine herself. Then Monica brought out a third. Now a fourth is standing on the table, almost done.

"The guy's an abusive control freak!" Nell says. "He beats his first wife because he thinks she's cheating on him, then he divorces his second wife for the same thing."

"But it was true!" says Monica.

"How do you know?" says Nell.

"He got the divorce, didn't he? He wouldn't have gotten the divorce if it wasn't true."

"Maybe she divorced him!" says Nell. "Maybe she got sick and tired of a man who went out to the garage every night to talk to himself!"

Monica puts her fingertips on Roger's thigh again, just above his knee. She jiggles them back and forth. "You tell us, Roger! Was it true or not?"

Roger laughs. "I have no idea! All I know is what he told me."

"It's all a crock of shit!" says Nell. "All that about going out to the garage every night—that never happened. That just doesn't make sense."

"You are so closed-minded!" says Monica.

"Closed-minded has nothing to do with it," says Nell. "Even if there were such things as ghosts, I just don't believe he could be going out to the garage every night. How would he explain that?"

"Who cares?" says Monica. "That's no big deal. That's nothing." She turns to Roger. "What do you think? Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I haven't studied the matter," says Roger.

"Don't weasel out of it!" says Nell.

"I'm not weaseling out of it. I just don't have an opinion."

"It makes no sense at all!" says Nell. "If ghosts are just bodiless spirits, they've got no vocal chords, so how can they speak? And if they don't weigh anything, how can they make the floorboards creak?"

"Maybe we only think the floorboards creak," says Roger.

Nell looks at him. So does Monica.

"Maybe ghosts actually do exist," he says, "but only in our minds. If ghosts are disembodied spirits, it would make sense that they would manifest themselves in our minds. We could even be hallucinating, but the hallucinations would be real."

"Absolutely!" says Monica. "I've never thought of it that way before! But I bet that's absolutely right!" Monica looks Nell straight in the eye. Her chin is up. Her smile closed-lipped and wide.

Nell is so angry that if Monica says another word, she'll punch her right in that smug smile. "Goodnight!" Nell says. "I can't talk about this stuff any more. It's ridiculous."

She weaves as she walks toward the door. She slams her shin on the coffee table and her shoulder on the doorjamb. How did she get so drunk? A minute ago she was fine. Now she's so drunk she might vomit.

"Sweet dreams!" says Monica.

"Goodnight!" says Roger.

Nell wants to punch them both. Instead she climbs the stairs.

Ghosts walk through our homes in ragged nightgowns and worn-out sheets. We hear them moaning in other rooms. We hear them whispering crazily on the pillows beside our heads. Ghosts haunt and are haunted. They cannot sleep. Nightly they walk the same floors, suffering the same agonies, longing without relief. Look into their gaping eyes—sight-filled and black. Look at their mouths—'O's of grief, aghast, bereft. The grief of ghosts is pure. It is children's grief. Ghosts know nothing until we teach them, and so they weep. They weep for whom they think we are, and who we cannot help but be. Their love for us is a perfect love, and so they weep.

There are footsteps on the stairs. The footsteps grow closer and closer. Nell has been asleep, but now she is awake. She is looking up into blackness. The floorboards outside her door creak under a shifting of weight. Her heartbeat sounds loudly inside her head. She holds her breath. Her breath is like a hard package clutched inside her chest. The doorknob turns, but so slowly she can hear the altering torque on the spring, the click of the lock tongue, the mouse sigh of the door turning on its hinges. Open and closed. Now the floorboards inside the room creak. Nell can't see a thing, but she recognizes Roger's breathing. She thinks he is still standing by the door, but then his hand is touching the blanket beside her arm. "Nell?" he says, his voice soft but thickly male. Now his hand grazes the blanket between her belly-button and pelvis. Now the bottom of her ribcage. His hand rests half a second over her breast before gripping the edge of her blanket and pulling it aside. "Nelly," he says. He kisses her shoulder. "Move over," he says. Then he says it again. She doesn't move at first, pretending she is asleep. But then she does.

Brett Fletcher Lauer
Kingdom for a Horse

Years without thought
went time until wind

stilled. A world is heaven
until it inherits a name.

A creature cannot appear
from the house of light

on the hill. Years grow
into a ring or vice versa;

henceforth a consecutive
thought begins in a valley,

thinking deer for antelope;
magistrate for doctor;

containment for commitment.
Garlands for your neck, ghosts

to haunt. The snake charmers
lay their charges to rest.

Wind places the heart first
in the sea, and then in fables.

Work Product

I am here breathing
heavy into one end
of the receiver

in order to reassure you
I am here
on one end breathing.

I find it is important
a stranger feel
as though he or she

has just entered
a clearing where
a majestic bear, rare

so late in the season,
nears a pond. I practice
breathing at home

into an embroidered pillow
shaped like a parrot.
In the morning

I take my body
to where it belongs.
It is exhausting belonging

to anything at all.
In the morning
a small head

attaches itself
to my body.
I must concentrate

on the job at hand.
The phone is ringing
and I think

you were asking
something and I don't
believe I have the answer.

I admit I was practicing
breathing. I was off
somewhere else thinking

of the whales
that have beached themselves,
Yes,

I was somewhere thinking
of the crowd
watching the whales.

The phone is ringing
and Line One is a story
of talent and genius.

Line Two, it is your mother
and you are crying again.
Don't cry. I am touching

your shoulder.

Evidence of Absence

Forensically speaking, sun and day, moon and month,
are all the same word. A mirror held before a face
having just exhaled smoke, on a day without prescriptions,
frames the failure the mind is entangled with; it need not,
of course, be attached to any specific person though
speaking now with the requisite clinical experience
to form an objective opinion with a reasonable degree
of certainty, it does. I'm speaking of qualities themselves
and not the names by which they are known. Life bears
such scrutiny. Under any formal system, be it logic
or penmanship there is an infinite amount of downward
slant. Regardless, we must conclude something, call it
what you may, consensus, conspiracy, or oral contract;
one is bound to acknowledge the rain, practical matters
of dressing, answers to riddles: What is at the beginning
of every end and at the end of every place? I'm speaking now
more of the silence in which, by simply speaking we break
and I have sworn an oath, a service to acknowledge
relevant events as such might have taken place. Stretches
of time, longer than hours, let me rephrase this: By some
calculation, phases of moon or mechanical device, and early,
punctual, or late, time passes. Neither you nor I can judge.

Or let me rephrase that: I want to leave here a better person.
The other option to return to our regularly scheduled
programming, place sneakered feet on the coffee table,
ceiling fan circulating gray clouds with a hint of mint. And I won't
pass judgment. Neither will I condone "cries for help," absent
a genuine attempt to die. On inspecting further, facial muscles,
habit of eye conduct, all range of non-verbal instances reflected
and predicting how these simple acts would feel in different
settings: a grand hotel, on a sailboat—or wherever else my active
fantasy places you. Proceeding this I traveled the limits of failure,
the form of our partnership, noting people gain liabilities, however
total a state of entertainment they keep. This may be simple enough.
It seems to me there can be but one answer. On inspecting there
were other options. No one judge passes a decisive verdict.

STORY

Lexi Freiman
Insemination

With a heavy period Karina went back to the Swedish boy's blonde hotel room and refused to put down a towel. Straddling the fresh young Viking, she smeared blood streaks up her belly and rubbed rings around her nipples. At first his eyes got wide and his mouth drooly and he thrust her up like the dismembered head of his enemy. Then he saw a blood splat dribbling down the lamp shade, sunk back and asked her to stop.

"Why?" she giggled, tracing red war paint under his eyes.

"I'm not a rockstar."

"It's just a bit of blood."

"They'll think I killed a prostitute."

"I'm not a prostitute." Karina felt her arms crossing in front of her chest. The pretty boy sprang up so that his face was flush with hers and ran a repentant hand along her inner thigh. When he squeezed it, she softened. Then his mouth was at her ear, breathing hot and fast, "would you mind taking a shower?"

"Fuck you." She stood slowly, scanning over the clothes on the floor. She spied his t-shirt, sleeves angled out in a violent splay. It slipped obediently over her head, hugging to her stickiest parts. "Hey! That's an expensive t-shirt!" She saw his body sprawled over the comforter; naked, bloody and blonde. An unlikely protagonist for a public scene. She snatched her bag and marched to the door. In the elevator, blood ran down her legs and drizzled onto the caramel carpet. This, she thought, must look fucking awesome. She lit a cigarette as she stepped out into the foyer, then flipped her finger at the concierge.

*

Karina had disseminated herself all over the city. She droned ballads over bridges; baring half-moons of ass-cheek, bits of spit and skin snowing onto the denizens. She keyed her name into tables and the inked thickets of toilet doors. Sometimes she left her digits, sometimes she left her panty-scent. Nothing was too romantic. She shared lipsticks in bathrooms, borrowed sockettes on tennis courts. If she liked you she baked bread pudding and if she didn't, she drooled in your contact-lense solution.

She had a sense—stepping onto the curb, brushing the hair back from her face, glancing up at the sun—that she was watchable. That she moved with the flitty grace of a French New Wave film or lusty jeans commercial. She took photos of herself bedraggled on dawn trains, blogged about her missing shoes and other people's showers. Twice she sang a country song into her web cam and flashed a boob. The bathroom sink was like this too. Watching the makeup run down her face and feeling the dun sludge of an evening hung up; poised to deliver some revelation, to push her beyond germination and into a first term.

One night Karina stood by the chips and dips and talked a married man into the bathroom. He was older and whiter and while he banged her against the toilet bowl he whispered a filthy rap song in her ear. The tiles were wet and Karina had to grip the toilet roll to keep from sliding floorwards. After he'd stepped out, she sat on the toilet seat, wiping herself with a damp towel. In the mirror she saw a speckled halo spreading out around her mouth. She found some aloe vera, bagged it and breathing hard through a hand towel, slunk despicably away.

But the rash stayed. In the mirror the next morning Karina remembered the bestial predicament of bacteria and parasites and that she was not a silk scarf floating through a photo-shoot. She could feel an aquarium under her skin. With all of her bad behavior she had built a nest for life-forms that did not respect her aspirations. So she writhed and cried between her bed sheets, hating herself and holding herself in equal parts. Then she stood back at the mirror and tried to speak sensibly to the school science project on her face. What was its message? That she ate men and farted their bad habits back into the atmosphere? That she was not making art, she was making pollution? Her immediate impulse was starvation. Within an hour she had reassembled for the farmer's market.

At an heirloom tomato stand Karina met an organic farmer who recommended kale. Nature's super-food, she said. A kale smoothie each morning would certainly fix Karina's face. Then the farmer said she had a sick father on the west coast, so was renting her cottage for the summer. She handed Karina a kale stalk and told her to

take a bite. The bitterness spiked through her, elongating her body like a ballerina at the barre. A life-lengthening sensation confirmed by every cell in her body. Karina asked the farmer about her cottage. She said it backed onto an organic farm where the tenant could work for the summer. Although it would mostly be weeding and the wages were low. "We're like doctors," the farmer said, "making people healthy. So why don't we get paid like them?" Karina couldn't tell if the farmer was one of those people who kept a straight face when they were making a joke so she smiled and shrugged and bit into the kale stalk. But her skin had stopped rioting. Karina left the market with the farmer's spare keys and salubrious intentions.

The next morning Karina remembered the bestial predicament of bacteria and parasites and that she was not a silk scarf floating through a photoshoot.

The farmer's cottage was large and light and dewey with plants. They humphed on the windowsills and in the bathtub and hung imperiously from every ledge in the house. They took swings at Karina as she slunk around, seeping out the city's poison. In five days her skin was phosphorescent.

Her farm work covered only the rent, so all Karina could eat was food from the fields. Her taste-buds re-adjusted and after a week she stopped using ketchup. Two weeks later, her mind erased the memory of salt. She was now in a new, healthful phase where all of existence nestled in the fibers of a kale stalk. She took her chard and radish on the porch and watched the long grass shimmy in the vale. Daily, she drank five glasses of rain water and desserted on honeysuckle stamens. Each morning, she sat on the outhouse toilet and breathed the wet grass in gratefully as she deposited a perfectly cylindrical poo.

The gardening manuals had encouraged her in this direction. She found the books spiritually instructive and kept them open at select pages all around the house. She understood herself to be in a regenerative stage of life. Which involved a lot of nurture and a considerable amount of rubbing. Masturbation happened everywhere. On the porch, in the field, along the trail up the mountain. Nights, she sat on the back steps and watched deer fuck while the fleshy boles of nimbus clouds flashed peepshows above.

Some days she soothed herself in the field. She picked a cucumber and lay down between the tall leaves of garlic. Bees buzzed in the flowers and clouds rubbed together overhead. Her orgasms grew longer and more abstract. Dicks were no longer necessary. She came for full minutes with a smooth white mind. Then she cried. It was a deep pitful sob and for those few moments after, she felt peaceably barren. She stopped thinking about her place in the world, her purpose and the problem of artistic insemination. All that remained was a vague sense that she was doing good by being small, self-sufficient and localized.

Karina stopped filming herself, too. The eye that watched her was now dim and distracted. It had no hunger, no entrepreneurial angst. She didn't need to share herself with anyone and had no need of other people's news. She quit calling her friends in the city. She signed off on her blog and deleted her dating profile.

On the farm, Karina spent most of her time weeding. The root-pull had a discomfiting give. There was a moment of limbo in the twist, just before the hairy bulb broke free. She often wondered if this was the soul of the plant slipping through. She could now sense the life in things and felt her own personality peeling itself back to pure presence. All of this confused her sense of morality and she found it harder and harder to masticate. How could she chew up something as lusty as a pumpkin? Even nasturtiums had a love-life more intensive than her own. She started eating less and rubbing more and drifted up above the world where she watched from an impersonal distance.

One afternoon Karina was weeding in the green house, when a man walked in. He had the cruel brow of a Roman senator and his arms were thick and bronzed. But she didn't feel like seducing or being seduced. In fact she was fully sapped from an aerobic morning with a zucchini. Karina asked him what he wanted in a cold, plant-like way. He brought his arm up over the water pipe and flexed and smiled and told her that the farm was bankrupt. Karina felt her skin flame. How could she afford to eat organic in the city? Which bodily functions would she have to sell? She squinted at her sun-kissed classical messenger and asked him who the fuck he was.

"Duke," he said and put out a thick paw. She let it hang there a moment then met it with her garden fork. Duke snatched the fork and combed it through his hair. The move seemed tailored, inauthentic. "I love farms," he said, "it's just that this one is inefficient, which makes it way more toxic than the giants down south." Something plump about his mouth made him too lusty to be sad for nature.

"So," said Karina "you're here to tell me that I'm fired?"

"And re-hired. My family bought a small piece of the land and we'll need a gardener for our vegetable patch."

Karina felt besieged and gestured for her fork. He swung it back.

"There's a bungalow for you near the conference room." Duke smiled. "The family is more of a spiritual alliance."

He gave her a day to think about it. That night she watched the deer fuck under the mulberry tree. The purple berries botched their coats and made a diarrhoeal mess of them. Karina watched the pair scamper off in opposite directions and decided she couldn't return to the city.

Duke's family spent a lot of time laying in the field at night. Karina wasn't sure what they did out there, but she knew it involved astrology and massage. The family were cosmically susceptible. They took their emotional cues from the planetary flight paths and got group migraines from the moon. They talked openly about their childhood molestations and beat pillows and screamed together. Duke said they were on an intergalactic road to enlightenment. They all had sun-crushes and galaxy-boners and saw constellations mapped as seeds and voids. They rubbed shoulders and held hands and kissed each other a lot.

Some days they threw their egos funerals in the field. Most nights they skinny-dipped in the lake and sang to the stars and drummed at the moon. They looked Karina in the eye when they spoke and the men squeezed her shoulders. Many of them apologized for making her uneasy and excused themselves as "kinesthetic." But like a pack of well-fed wolves they seemed harmless enough to cohabit with.

Karina's bungalow was sparsely furnished with a rattan mat, mosquito net, and wall-sized moon chart opposite the window. She used it to mark her menstrual cycle and ignored the star-gazing books on the single shelf below. Karina ate with the family at mealtimes and occasionally let them read her horoscope while she weeded, but otherwise, she remained untouched.

After a week Duke came to see her in the bungalow. He wanted to give her a guided meditation. Karina could appreciate Duke's appeal from the perspective of another species. To her he was just a handsome Alsatian. She saw the way the women fought for his attention. Even the older ones—avalanched under their tie-dyed kaftans—got giggly and leggy and lost their gravitas. But Karina was more curious about the cosmological benefits of belonging to the family. Her vegetables connected her to the earth and she was a satisfied self-seeder, but perhaps her life had grown a little small. She invited him

in and they sat opposite each other on the mat, taking deep drawn-out breaths. After a few moments Duke took a pronounced inhalation and spoke.

"Karina, I want you to take the staircase down to your dark inner basement."

In her mind's eye Karina crept down the crumbling stairs of some cellar she'd once seen in a horror movie. She wanted to do well.

How could she chew up something as lusty as a pumpkin? Even nasturtiums had a love-life more intensive than her own.

"Now tell me what you see."

She saw a broken chair and a washing machine and felt like a failure. Then she remembered which movie it was and softly said "Zombies."

"Good. And what are the zombies doing?"

Karina peered around for some zombies. There was one in the corner, half in shadow, trying to get the machine started. He asked her for a quarter.

"And what are the zombies doing, Karina?"

Karina tensed her brow and tried to squeeze some evil from her zombie. The zombie sat back on a fold-up chair and started reading the weekend magazine. She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, "it's not working."

"That's okay," said Duke, "let's try something else."

Karina shrugged and settled back, closing her eyes and trying to steady her breath. Duke did the same and then after a long silence he spoke.

"Walk into your perfect forest. See the trees, the flowers, the running brook. See the deer . . ."

Duke's breath was hot against her ear. He had moved closer.

"Now lie down in the soft grass and look up at the sky. The sun is setting—"

She could feel the heat of his hand just above her collarbone.

"—and as the color changes from light blue to lilac to a deep rich indigo, you see your first star . . ."

He was touching her, his fingers tracing down her shoulder and making small circles on the soft underside of her arm.

"This is your star and it wants to tell you something. It knows who you are."

Her skin was tingling and a warm fuzz was tickling low in her stomach. Karina suddenly understood how unnatural she was being. Looking to fauna and flora for her sexual satisfaction. Coming with all of nature but not the one species

made to move her body. She felt light-headed. Almost drunk. As he squeezed her thigh her body began unclenching.

They fucked for two hours. Afterwards, Karina had the old familiar sense of being away from herself. But she felt their bond as a warm pulsing in her gut and made herself a satellite around it. They lay together until the sun set, then she followed him through the bracken and out into the field. When the sky was dark they looked up at the stars and he told her there was no such thing as *special*.

Duke sat beside her at dinner that night and then again for breakfast. He knocked on her door around noon and they lay on the mat for an hour, then she followed him into the field. She plucked wild nasturtiums and slipped them behind her ear. She flitted beside him, feeling the dandelions on her legs and kicking up their cotton. She was being watched again and it made her watchable. That night she saw her star in the sky and wondered if it was enough to be a small dissemination of something much bigger than herself. She shared her thought with Duke and he kissed her and pulled her down into the grass. When she got back to her bungalow she checked her moon chart and decided she was not ovulating.

The weeks passed like this and her feelings calcified for Duke. When she was with him her appetite returned. She didn't think of the carrot's terror or the turnip's death rattle. He wanted to talk about what was inside her, so she started fattening up.

Then a film crew was invited to the property. A precocious young director was making a documentary about cults and wanted to talk to Duke. The night before they arrived, Duke asked Karina to rinse his hair with lemon juice and then the two of them sunned all the next morning. The thought of cameras stirred something in Karina. She could picture herself as a willowy first lady, wending through gardens with weaves of lavender in her hair. She put on her shortest dress and rubbed a chomped strawberry across her lips. Then Duke asked her to meditate with him and they sat and held hands and Karina felt a warm surge of love circuiting between them.

As the crew pulled up in their van, Karina could see the camera already pointed out the window. Duke leaped up from the mat and went bounding off to meet them. When Karina appeared a moment later, he did not introduce her as his girlfriend.

That night the film crew joined the family for dinner. Duke had not touched Karina all afternoon and in the dining room he walked between the tables, laughing and massaging everyone's shoulders. When he finally sat down at their overfull table the director asked him about the connection between astral bodies and human ones. Duke sat forward and took the hands of the two young girls sitting to

either side of him. “We are all just disseminated star dust. The universe is randomness and equality.” Duke smiled and the girls giggled and Karina found herself gagging on a hairy carrot. At breakfast the next morning, Gina, a fox-faced redhead, sat at their table and talked animatedly into the camera about being an air sign. Duke listened with moist eyes and Karina took her breakfast out into the garden.

This continued for days. Duke was now cotting only half an hour in Karina’s bungalow and talking mostly about the film. And the solar eclipse that was coming. He said that this was a very important time for the family. The generative potential of the new moon would be transformative for all of them. Particularly her. Karina snorted and curled up into his armpit.

The next day Duke didn’t come to see her. She waited an hour then walked outside and saw him kneading Gina’s forearms and gabbing at the camera. Karina watched from the strawberry patch while she weeded. She found herself yanking the insurgent bulbs and dragging the strawberries with them. She didn’t replant the dainty stems with their delicate yellow flowers.

When the interview was over she watched Duke and Gina walk out toward the field. Karina stood quickly and the director spotted her. She started marching back toward her bungalow but he caught up, with his photographer stumbling a few steps behind.

“You’re the girlfriend, right?”

“I’m the gardener.”

“Oh, okay. I was just getting a girlfriend-vibe.”

“I grow the vegetables.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that; you’ve got a great face for the camera.”

She felt something like sunshine break over her skin.

“I used to make movies,” she said, feeling the old razzle of her cheekbones.

“I see,” said the director, “why don’t we talk?”

Inside the bungalow Karina sat below the moon chart with her elbow angled against the shelf. Her arms looked lean and she tilted her face to its good side. She told them how she had come from the city to fix a skin problem and stayed for the fresh vegetables. Then she talked about meeting Duke and how he had offered her a place on the family’s property.

“So you only came to plant a garden?”

“I like astrology too.”

“And him?”

“I like Duke.”

"And the semen in the sky?"

"It's all metaphorical."

Karina could see the director's mouth creeping up into a smile. She felt hot and knew the camera could see it.

"We were close, but that's over now." She had surprised herself. "I have things to do back in the city. Venus is in retrograde. This is a very creative time."

Duke said they were on an intergalactic road to enlightenment. They all had sun-crushes and galaxy-boners.

After the interview the director and his photographer stepped into the garden to film close-ups of her vegetables. Something about this disturbed her. As they zoomed in on her lumpy strawberries she felt puny and absurd. It was time for her to leave. She would find Duke and tell him. Today was the solar eclipse, it was the perfect time to make a change. She followed the film crew out into the field.

The family had set out a wide circle of chairs with an inner orbit of basins steaming into the air. They stood outside the circle in scantily clothed couples, humming and tapping their feet. Duke was standing with Gina, looking stoically toward the center of the circle. Then Nina, a ragged woman with dolphin tattoos, crossed in front of them, clasping the hand of Ben, a rangy dread-locked boy, and Karina watched as they paraded solemnly to a seat. Nina placed Ben's feet inside a basin and eased him back into the chair. Then she knelt before him and began to massage his heels, holding his foot up like a telephone and humming into its arch. Ben closed his eyes and a tear came streaming over his cheek. He mumbled thank-yous between soft sobs and stroked Nina's greasy hair. Now more women were leading men to chairs and bathing and massaging their feet. Gina held Duke's toes between her bosom as she trickled water over his ankles. Karina watched as he smiled and whispered in her hair. Gina ran her hands up Duke's thighs and hoisted herself onto his lap.

Then all the women were straddling the men. Some of them were kissing. One of the older men had his hand up somebody's skirt. Karina saw nipples dip into mouths and dicks fling out of open flies. She looked back at Duke and saw his mouth disappear between Gina's naked thighs. Karina was going to vomit. She spun around, knocked up against the grip and tripped over a camera cord. When

she looked up, the camera was in her face. She pushed her hand into the lens and started running back to the bungalow, with her fingers boarded over her forehead. As she reached the door, the sky went dark. She heard yelps and moans and savage gusts of orgasm.

Then on the mat in front of her moon-chart Karina choked up a pile of kale. She scanned the neat rows of her moon-chart, checking and re-checking the dates. But her belly was rounder; full with something. She looked down at her tiny bulge and yanked a hair angrily from her navel. The root held on just long enough for her to feel its little life.

Steve Barbaro
1348 A.D.

The death mask's
Maker—or simply the plaster itself—formed, from his beard, vein networks sometimes
Ringleted.

Only a few fragments of his upper face are extant.

He had returned to the West
To drum up support for a restoration, though the territories he promised were of little use
Or consequence.

His gestures, too, appeared, to the dignitaries receiving him, hyper pronounced:
Walking past windows, he dutifully gazed at the glass, and his manner of examining
Reliquaries, even, seemed honed by practice.

This is exactly the kind of issue I don't put much thought
Into, he claimed, with a measure of calm as if forgiving a minor sin, the subject of incestuous
Intrigue in a fledgling kingdom having been at hand.

I'm perhaps more averse to gossip than I am
To scandal-prone manners. And when he was brought to the beach—only the most foamless
Saltwater filling his palms—he doused his cheeks and chin and sighed, then rubbed
His long-swelling neck.

Inflammations, he muttered, *dropping to the sand.*

Kettle-like in my chest . . .
So it somehow seemed fitting when he came to express gratitude for the swiftness
With which a sickness—my infirmity or iniquity, as he called it—disposed of its victims.

I'm not so much hounded as pestered by silence; but more and more I feel the less-and-less of my scale.

Space from Nothing

Rhythm being time
bound, I sit alone all day all
June—my foot my
leg's lackey, my toes tapping, filling
their distance. At night I roll
film, my reels of wings, tail,
clouds—the heights
speckled, one specific
fuselage nuzzling sun
shower-thickened, backlit flat
blueness. Now they say *sky*
blue, domesticizing
the ether, even. *Clock*
management, full
calorie, boardroom, unironically.
Detail oriented.
The bodies
pulled from the dirt near
O'Hare to free up
room for a runway were
disinterred. *I have never,*
I think, *been bored*. I start

pacing, designate four,
five moments
for rest. Watch
a moth
flit, the sink drip. Those flying machines
like cartons, sub-peachpit-
sized on the filmstrip—this water
glass, full and clear, so
eccentric, that bath
towel fit to soak up a sun
storm, cram it in.

The Hermit, Compromised

Idle damp morning. Ideal time felt in his sallow face, flushing to the door bell's ding, what with its single, sure meaning—only social yet not quite merely—mostly routine though, stuffing encounters into his memory. Fade-in, fade-out: too-purposeful sounds: the garish garnish, bric-a-brac-cum-units-of-measurement—see our subject, anxious, covering both ears. Eyeing his wristwatch band. *Paint-flecked Panamanian seashell, holey silhouette*, demarcations of the courtyard, precise function of chipped bricks. *The basement*, he is thinking, *the first or third tier—my bathtub, outpouring mellifluity, through faintly rusting faucet—through the minds of a whole persistent bell-ringing crew, perhaps, single file militant*—this equation, interpersonal, he being the sum, product, quotient—the idyllic sentient end—*yes this group outside, mine, if only shortly—signaling through walls, through doors for my attention with their fancies, their life-stifling facts—the main one being, of course, that relations are transitory—so it is that I must clutter my presence, must stagger my absence as the storm, soaking the squirrel's tail, becomes the swift ditch's spray once the sky clears—becomes, for a bit, the very casement's look—the wind's lift likewise fucks with the power lines, enforcing a certain catch and drop, catch-and-let-drop—* even a faraway Pug's bark sounds affected*, a kind of self-gauge or inner meter, a verbal opiate or old episode in the brash melancholy of spirit*, another oddly deliberated indulgence. Property, indeed, seems everything. Sink: sea. Staircase: Andes. Vehicle: body. Flagpole: community. *Perfectible womb, enhanced filtration*—he can tell who's out there now, he thinks, simply from the doorbell's pitch.

Lucy Biederman
California Hallway, c. 1940

In the winter room behind the on-the-rocks jangle of a brisk splash of family and a few dashes of the recently departed, stirred, jazz is playing. Rock 'n' roll doesn't exist yet, but sex and drugs are well-established.

The balcony's French doors are open. The loose, unseasonably warm night is swinging around out there, the age is blowing in. *Decorating is eliminating.* The hardest part is done. You'll just keep doing better and better until you die.

No one's outside.

No one will ever be outside.

An Example

Past the endurable, you're out there alone, empty tank. Take Walter White, the life exiting his face five times an episode. Closes up like a bloodroot when no one is around. But unerasable. Stored in New Mexico, an old map and some crackers to stay alive with while locked in a trunk overnight. Everyone knows it won't turn out all right. Weltered and wasted something inestimably precious and previously imperceptible, so he's punching the paper towel dispenser. Crumpling each of the not-dead-yet days ahead and tossing them into the trash. Changed so hard he ruined the universe. Who he considered provided for will rip themselves apart before him and this too will drain away. Wake up the next day saying, *God, I don't think you can do it, pry me loose from the wrong I've done.*

Collier Nogues
The Record

The whole herd
cut in half by the road, each elk
dark and soft and touched in turn by a panoply of others:

smart to get uphill of us
where we couldn't follow them with binoculars out the window,
the little dog whining with the smell, the little girl counting carefully.

We fear most the children we may make,
at half-mast our desire to make them. They are a lamp

buzzing in the understory of the forest.

A school bus in the flatlands.
A garden greenhouse tarped in plastic.
Every time I lift my hand to part my hair I slide a little farther.

*

Meticulous, methodical,
the way she wipes them down

each café table, each ring of water on the bar.

It would be wrong to think that as the present becomes past
it becomes our closest memory,
the easiest to reach.

I think of weeks ago.
Not our little girl, not our dog. They were guests.

*

In the next room your chair creaks
and you are more than
yourself at work.
                You are a fresco,

pastel,
        spreading through the house whose walls turn yellow
swirled with white and pink,
                the gown of earth,
the light made of you and everything you're made of,
soot and egg and stucco,

the dream
of what a person is who shares another person's space.

Come out of your room
and you are yourself wanting a glass of water
looking directly at me as I cross,
having lost my antlers.

I can't not look back
as I would passing on the street in a city.

*

A hand's gesture can't last
but making a mark with that gesture introduces duration.

Grow this in your greenhouse,
                notch these saplings
so that the calves born will be spotted and striped.

This is the record of spirit's action on matter.
It's tender in print,

the name of my partner now I have one. God knows
what I'll be when you leave me.

Tender
is still the word: the power lines and the top of the empty store,
the new trees,

the school bus full of what we haven't made
talking to itself.

Gladhanding

Knowing not
what someone else's fear would do,
our homework finished before the fire
instead of here or now

instead of harps and penny wells
through the wished-for windows onto plains
instead of mountains,
the view receded, pinned

to the war the country was bound for.
The fountain spread its pastel
water to the city limits.
The tide had turned

from what each parent knew
and made a void where privilege slept,
solid perfume and lavalieres
selling strongly at the cave's edge.

Instead of uncles
there were veterans,

instead of widow's weeds
were flags.

Each child raised her hand for the sake
of a silver dollar, and the doors
slammed on the strings attached to loose teeth.
The vegetation began to recover.

Intelligence suggested
short sleeves for the weather, sandals,
a good time if we picnicked.
The divided highway touched each chance

of leaving gently and released it
as doves at a wedding.
Spendthrift windowshoppers,
gawky walkers from the library

back home, tame widowmakers
went for broke into the curtains,
falling, heavy velvet hitting every cheekbone,
every hairdo, every tap shoe

as we ran. Each person faced me in the mirror.
Roofless, removed, with no privacy
or really any ugliness
(the worst rebuke: *Now, don't be ugly*)

and nothing owned or operated
by itself, nothing there without us
pushing play, we chased
what looked back over our own shoulders,

chased the ball into the street
above the other streets, suspended
rainbow May-Day ribbons slipping
from their knots, their labor.

[In focus: the firescreen folded,]

In focus: the firescreen folded,
calcium-white and backed by green ferns.
A formal sitting room

fronting the pit of flowers into which I'd fall,
were the window open.

A tree tied to a pole to guide it.

A boy rides by on a high-handled bike.
He always looks at animals, and then the roof fails
and we put in a fence.

The town's too small
for public space for everyone;
just men really,
the benches on the store's cool porch,
the corkboards posting for sale or trade,

the scarecrows in the cucumber field.

Carry me.
Brisket.
A value.
Uneven.

Three clocks on the mantel, brass seats of recall
loved by the women in the family.

Self-portrait, deft sketch, daft punk, dread noon
because it splits the day in half I'd hoped
to lift with both hands for a prize in perseverance.
Yes,
it's loud outside. They're filming.

The scene I miss: the mise-en-scène of first
reply of angels to my mother. I least expect it.

Automatic
wandering ghost, you wonder where I come from.

I talk to you.
Witness the seven ways I do it: whisper, holler,

paint, secrete, ignore, fall out, and sleep.
Worn out from riding high,

I talk to you. It's only you I talk to.

Corpus Christi

A family's whole body of work

a couple taking their daughter to the Gulf for the first time,
all her girl cousins waiting to be allowed to carry her.

Pink trees. Everything fleshed out

sun on your collar,

the front of your pants turning bright white,
the window vibrating against the toe of your sandal.

Raise your hopeful

Eager to jump up, one dog runs toward the other

and the gall of the sun
to show everything: the interstate, the place the engine fell out, he said,
just fell out and rolled along the median.

His jaw's wired shut, scars grown over with a black beard.

A tableful of people,

glass jars, picnic things
big umbrella unfolded
not all grieving; rather, finding out,

figuring, trying to get over humps

adding a rail to keep from falling to the bottom story.

Yellow sprinkler,

reclaimed swatch of perfect grass whose
periphery shades to sand

where always someone young at home, thinking
if it's lace, if it's red dirt
or locusts I want something to swarm

I want something to start moving

Or older, asking
is it a blessing
that this happened instead of something worse?

STORY

Eric Barnes
Perfection

Nora and I are watching the girls out back as they give each other a hobo bath. They've both put on bathing suits and one of them has climbed into the metal garbage can that we keep in the backyard and that we use for all sorts of things, none of which involves garbage, and which they've now filled with water and an assortment of readily available soaps and shampoos. One girl sits still in the can, not only the object of the unwavering attention of the other, but in fact allowed to be in full command of the other, directing her to rinse, wash, and scrub in any manner she wishes, as the luxury of the bath is not just the bath itself, it is the joy of directing the other to do as you wish.

No arguing. No dissent.

"It's a hobo bath," Carmen says to Nora and me, as Ellie slowly pours water over Carmen's head.

*"*Hobo*," Nora says to me. "Where do they learn a word like* hobo*?"*

When we're alone, Nora and I like to make fun of gypsies.

This starts on a trip the two of us take to Paris, every day watching from cafés as the gypsy beggars go through their daily routine, settling down at well-trafficked street corners, covering their heads in threadbare shawls, holding out their dirty paper cups for coins, sometimes even taking a prone position on the cobblestone, laid out as if wounded, with only the strength to hold a paper coin cup up in the air.

Nora and I begin to imagine that our four kids will end up as beggars too. "One bad decision," Nora says, "and Carmen will be living as a gypsy."

I nod. "You know," I say, "I've been thinking that you don't hug her enough."

We share a dark sense of humor. A secret pleasure in the unfair and inappropriate criticism of the people we see around us. The making of comments that aren't meant to be shared with anyone we do not know.

I shower with a garden gnome and a plunger and, since I was a kid, I've slept with a baseball bat underneath my bed.

"I have a friend who calls her ex-husband 'the other,'" Nora says to me on the phone.

"Capitalized?" I ask.

"Absolutely," she says. "The Other."

Nora is talking to me as she leaves an early-morning soccer game far out in the suburbs, many miles from our home, where she's just spent an hour cheering on Sam in a game against The Dragons.

Nora and I often seem to spend the whole weekend in our cars, apart, leaving the house by eight AM, holding in our hands a schedule of sports games and school activities and friend pickups and drop-offs. We bring maps, coffee, extra bottles of water, a spare sweater, a change of clothes for the children.

Soccer, play practice, volleyball, cross-country, football, basketball, model UN, student council.

We don't do baseball. I'm not sure why.

Nonetheless, we traverse the city, from one edge to the other, picking up, dropping off, coordinating with other parents on the pickups and drop-offs of our children, their children, brothers and sisters who are looking to get a ride between points in their day.

Sometimes Nora sends me photos from her phone, quick images of wherever she is. *In case I'm never found again,* she'll write, and attached is a photo of a ubiquitous chain restaurant in an unidentifiable corner of the suburbs.

I'll need more of a clue, I email back. *You could be anywhere in America.*

I am anywhere, she emails back. *Anywhere, nowhere, my soul and body divided.*

Horrible, I email back.

However, she writes, *I did manage to pick up milk and OJ.*

There are gyms near our house, there are friends who live many miles away, there are soccer fields located so far to the east that you inevitably have to pull over,

checking your map once again, shaking your head and getting back on the road and only ten minutes later do I reach the field and when Nora calls me asking where the game is, I can only say, "It's just slightly farther than you can possibly imagine."

"Fantastic," she says.

"Right when you get to the point where you think you're totally lost," I tell her, "that's when you drive another ten minutes. And then you're there."

We cross paths in the stands, on the field, at plays and play practice, kids roaming around us with their friends and teammates. We double-check schedules, refine timing, plot routes. "Remember lunch because otherwise Ellie won't have eaten before the second game."

Our weekdays start at five AM, Nora exercising then off to work. Me working at my desk or on the porch before going to the office. By six-thirty on a school day, we're waking up the children. On weekends, the kids sometimes get to sleep in till nine. The days then go on until ten or eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

I think there's a way in which we'd like to live as gypsies. Unbound from regular routines. Not responsible to anyone except the clan.

Making fun of gypsies is, surely, a defense mechanism against our fears. Our deepest fears about the quality of our lives. The choices we make as parents. Our worries about how all of this will eventually turn out for everyone involved.

The hobo bath might go on for a few hours. Each girl taking turns in the silver garbage can. Whole bottles of shampoo will be used. Multiple bars of soap, two bottles of bubble bath, the still fragrant remnants of a container of holiday-scented hand soap that the girls found in the dark recesses of the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

Carmen is watching TV in the den. I walk by, but pause when I see she is tearing up. She's watching an ad for a life-insurance company. Images of a young family moving into a new home they've just purchased, fleeting glimpses of beautiful children going off to a nameless but venerated college, an unspoken aura of education funds planned for, retirement money saved wisely, the now aging couple walking hand in hand along the beach.

"Everything just went so right for them," Carmen says, pushing tears away.

I look from her to the TV, searching for a joke, but suddenly I find myself just slightly short of breath. My throat tightens. My eyes, only barely, start to burn. And in a moment, all I can do is nod.

*

If the girls make enough of a scene, they'll get the attention of their brothers and then the boys too will take hobo baths in the garbage can.

Cole will jump in only in his boxers. Sam will get a bathing suit on and even then refuse to take off his tee-shirt.

Hair is washed, then washed again. Bubbles are blown. More soap is found.

They are ten, eleven, eleven, and twelve years old.

It's Thursday and I've decided that the boys' scatological fixations are a result of a deeply ingrained, essentially Darwinian survival instinct.

"Why else would they be so focused on their own poop?" I'm saying to Nora. "I didn't encourage this. You didn't. And yet the boys are deeply obsessed with poop and pee. They always have been."

"And it's our job to put a stop to this," she replies. She is reading a magazine as we sit at the dining room table.

"True, but that's not my point," I say. "My point is that the only possible explanation for this fixation is that it's something instinctive. It's Darwinian. Think of this: For most of the last 10,000 years, boys have grown up needing to learn how to hunt. They've had to learn how to track animals. How do you track game in the wild? Poop and pee."

"You're making this up," she says, turning the page in her magazine.

"I never said I wasn't," I admit. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

She refuses to look at me. She is intensely beautiful. Forty-one and graying wonderfully. Clear blue eyes. Something about her lips. If I were to think about it too much, I'd lose my train of thought.

"Think about it," I continue. "Until maybe a hundred years ago, men and boys were first and foremost hunters, gatherers, protectors. Has it been two hundred years? Say it's five hundred. Regardless, you can't just eliminate the previous tens of thousands of years of instinct in a couple of generations. Hell, boys have only been subjected to indoor plumbing since the late 1800s."

She doesn't look up. She says, *"Subjected?"*

"My point is that if you lived in the woods, surviving by your wits, it would pay off not just to be comfortable with poop, but to actually study and understand poop. You'd want to be able to identify by sight and smell—" Nora winces—"all different types of poop and pee. Deer poop, buffalo poop, rabbit poop. Heck, you'd need to be able to identify different types of human poop just in case a warring tribe were nearby."

I'm silent.

She turns a page.

In a moment, she says, "Is all this meant as justification for Cole's continued inability to flush the downstairs toilet?"

"Not really."

"Will you talk to him?"

"Sure."

"I mean, I'm not saying you don't make a compelling case."

"But we just want the toilet flushed," I say, nodding, standing and looking around for Cole.

She nods. "Just want it flushed."

Nora and I will wince at the scene of utter destruction now spreading across the backyard. But, inevitably, we will give in to the innocence of the chaos, this absurdly wholesome choice of activities, and we'll allow the kids to begin hauling buckets of warm water from the kitchen, tracking soap and dirt and water into and out of the house, as Nora and I call out to the four of them that they will need to save enough energy to clean up after themselves when they are done.

"And I don't want to hear about how tired you are later," I'll say, and in response they say, each one of them, "We know, we know," although later, of course, one of them will inevitably try to cut a side deal with Nora or me. "You know," Cole will say, an empty bucket in his hand, soap bubbles dripping onto the kitchen floor, "the girls were doing this for a while before we joined in, so, really, I think Sam and I—we'll clean up, sure—but we shouldn't have to clean up quite as much," and in unison Nora and I will boom, "No, you will all clean up!" and Cole will move on, saying, "I know, I know, that's not what I was saying, I know."

There are things I plan to do as I get older. I plan to work more in the yard. I plan to fix the leaks in the porch roof. I plan to paint the house's trim. I plan to exercise more. I plan to read more books. I plan to travel to places I've been and places I've never seen.

Pictures will be taken. Brief home movies shot. Instantly they'll be sent to friends and families around the world.

"We'll have to talk to them about the word hobo," *I hear Nora saying as we look out on the scene.*

And I nod, making a note, one more idea to discuss with the four of them, one more small bit of parenting and education and context to get through to the kids as soon as there is time.

The six of us are at the dinner table. We eat here every other night. An hour or more in the dining room. A chaotic rumble of reports from the day at school and the day at work and all the activities that followed. A constant harassment of table manners, repeated reminders of what is good and bad behavior.

We start every meal with a blessing, even though Nora and I don't take the kids to church.

The hobo baths are over now and they are all making hot chocolate over a fire they started with sticks they found in the backyard. Ellie brings out marshmallows. Sam is using stray rope to make a swing near the fire pit. Cole scours the yard for more wood. Carmen has fashioned a bench near the fire using just bricks and branches.

Cole is playing some sort of game on the computer.

I glance over his shoulder, inspecting the relative violence and mindlessness of the game. "What are you doing?" I ask, though I can see the game is a remarkably simple and gore-free castle assault challenge.

"Killing bad guys," Cole says, then pauses, fingers lifting from the keyboard for a moment, squinting at the characters on the screen. "Or nuns. I'm not really sure."

"Let's hope it's not nuns," I say.

"Well, yeah, Dad," he says, fingers moving across the keyboard again. "Nuns will bring down the wrath of the lord on you."

"What?" asks Ellie, who I only now realize is sitting under a large red blanket that's piled up next to Cole.

"That's what nuns do," Cole says. "They bring down the wrath of the lord."

"No they don't," Ellie says, her voice still muffled. "They just don't get married. That's what nuns do."

Soon Carmen pulls a pack of balloons from the depths of her closet, and outside hoses have been gathered and massive squirt guns filled with water and the hobo bath and fire building and hot-chocolate making has evolved into a water fight in the warm afternoon sun, sunlight broken only by the oaks above and around us, the kids' screams rising as they cross back and forth across the grassy yard amid streams of

water and brightly flying balloons, the four of them caught in an impromptu dance as they turn in place and swing their heads, ducking down, standing up, then tiptoeing so delicately across the bricks in the narrow walkway.

I do the math sometimes and realize that in eight years Ellie will be a senior in high school. The other three will be off to college. Ellie will be the last in our home. And at the end of that year she will be gone too, and Nora and I will be alone. Just forty-eight and forty-nine years old. Young, I realize now, looking at my own parents, friends, and co-workers. Nora and I talk about this. About how we'll travel more. How we'll be free of carpooling kids to games and friends' houses and weekend parties. How we'll be able to sit in the living room and read.

Nora walks by me. "I think there's buffalo poop in the downstairs bathroom," she says.

The past eight years have gone at a startling speed, each year accelerating just that much faster than the last. The next eight years will be nothing.

Eight years and they'll be gone.

And this activity that will have consumed some twenty years of our lives—the raising of these children, the constant effort at leading them in the right direction, pointing them to better choices—it will have ended.

I wonder what kind of job I'll have done.

I wonder how I'll deal with the sadness of seeing them go.

I wonder if I'll feel I did the best for them that I could.

Now the kids have created a huge swing out back. Someone found a rope, another had an idea. With my help they strung the rope across a branch forty feet in the air, now swinging on a seat of wood or taking off the wood and putting a cushion from some outdoor furniture in a loop at the end of the rope. They swing on two cushions, sometimes three. They've found a long cushion from a small outdoor couch and, by fashioning the end of the rope into a kind of double-lasso, they've realized they can lie down on the cushion, their chest and ankles supported by the two loops, and then they take out the cushion and stand in the loops, swinging now like a pirate boarding an enemy ship.

*

Sam has asked Cole to duct-tape him to a chair. They are both out on the back porch, where Sam has already taped his ankles to the legs of the chair. However, he needs help from Cole to strap down his arms and chest.

"And you'll have to be the one to cover my mouth," he says to Cole, but Nora and I are already yelling, "No! No covering of mouths!"

Nora tends to be looser than me when it comes to the informal safety rules for the kids—those largely unspoken and undefined parameters as to which objects can be bounced on, how hard balls may be thrown, how high in a tree or onto some structure someone is allowed to climb.

But apparently even Nora is wary of the danger of duct-taping shut someone's mouth. "It always seems like a bad idea to cut off air," she says to me, a quick statement of principle as she heads toward the upstairs, fleeing the slow-motion scene of torture unfolding on the back porch.

"It's only a stress position, Mom!" Sam is saying loudly. "I'm okay! It doesn't hurt very much at all!"

Cole continues to circle him, tugging at the roll of tape, the tape stretching off the roll with a loud, deep groan, like a trucker grinding his gears down a mountainside. The boys have not made clear what the ultimate point of this endeavor is. It seems fairly clear that Sam will, eventually, want to try to escape from the bonds he's put upon himself. But is it a test of his strength? A test of his cunning ability to loosen the tape, secretly, even as Cole is applying it to his body? A test of willpower as he waits, patiently, for Cole to tape him ever more tightly to the chair?

I often find it helpful to view the kids—their activities, projects, their choices, and even their personalities—through a basic, almost anthropological lens. Sam has created a test of survival, spontaneously testing himself midway through this Tuesday evening.

Bear cubs wrestling in preparation for a future hunt.

Apache boys dancing with their elders around the great buffalo fire.

And yet I've become ever more aware that there will never be anything like hunting in their lives. They need not hunt or fight to survive. But they continually want to be physically challenged. They seek small tests of their endurance. They try out ways of inflicting pain upon themselves and each other.

After long days sitting in class, reading and studying math and science and the early history of the Roman Empire, the boys come home and throw rocks at each other. Not viciously. Not meanly. Not without mutually agreeing that, right now,

there is nothing each would like to do more than take turns tossing small rocks at one other.

It leaves Nora and me wondering if we're doing right by them. The constant teaching, coaching, prodding, and discipline. The assessment of friendships and sports choices and music lessons and eating habits. The dollars poured into private schools and summer camps.

Maybe, in the end, they should just be out back throwing rocks at each other. Maybe, in the end, that's the best means for them to become their most complete selves. Maybe that's the best way for them to achieve happiness.

I mean, exactly what else do we want them to achieve?

Cole has emptied the roll of duct tape onto Sam's body. "There you go," Cole says.

He walks away. Sam nods firmly. I leave him be.

Half an hour later, I find Cole reading in a tree out front. "Where's Sam?" I ask.

"I don't know. Maybe he's still trying to get free of the duct tape?"

Another ten minutes and Sam emerges from the backyard, walking confidently into the kitchen. His arms are bright red. His clothes wrinkled and disheveled. But he is free.

He strides to the refrigerator and pulls a can from the rack. Cracks it open loudly. Gulps down half the drink.

I can't help but glance at the can, making sure he's drinking lemonade.

"You did it," I say casually.

He nods. He finishes off the can, crushing it in one hand. He heads to the dining room to start his homework. There's an essay on Native Americans due tomorrow.

I find myself thinking that if Sam were ever kidnapped, he'd make it out just fine.

I find myself noticing that, on the back of his neck, there's a shard of duct tape clinging to his skin.

I don't mention it, though. Why would I? Let it stay there as a warning, a warrior's mark, signifying harm to anyone who might try to sneak up on him, an enemy secretly trying to duct-tape him to his chair.

They launch themselves from any number of objects. Their favorite is the hood or roof of one of the cars parked in the driveway, but I soon ban them from using the cars as launching points, so they now pile up objects at the outer apex of the rope's range,

attempting to launch themselves from the greatest height they can attain. A planter stacked on an overturned trash can. A chair stacked on the can. The trash can on the chair all positioned carefully on the planter.

I shower with a garden gnome and a plunger and, since I was a kid, I've slept with a baseball bat underneath my bed.

There was a time when I really was scared at night. Fearful of strangers or robbers or the kinds of images and memories that linger after a dream. But now the bat is there simply out of habit.

The plunger is just a practical matter. We live in a very old house, with plumbing that is prone to failure.

The gnome, however, appeared in the shower about a year ago. I'm not sure why. Not sure who put it there. Nora and I haven't discussed it. Haven't even mentioned its presence. We're waiting each other out. Trying to see who will be the first to break. Who will be the first to acknowledge the joke.

There's only a small degree of danger in the swing, as far as I can tell. Nora only glances at the scene. "I think it'd only be bad," she says, "if they landed on the concrete."

From the dining room, where everyone is working on their homework, I hear Ellie ask, "What makes an erasable pen erasable? The ink or the eraser?"

"The ink," says Sam.

"The eraser," says Carmen.

"A unique chemical combination of both," says Cole.

"Find Daddy," Ellie says. "Daddy will know."

I duck into the bathroom. I open a browser on my phone and start searching for the answer.

There's an unspoken promise at play. The promise that I know all.

They swing for thirty minutes, sixty. They take turns. They laugh hysterically as they swing upside down. They reposition the cushions, they re-string the loops, they find new ways to sit, new ways to lie down, new ways to hang.

Nora walks by me. "I think there's buffalo poop in the downstairs bathroom," she says. "But maybe Cole can venture in there to figure out for sure?"

*

Sometimes, they just stand on the loop and lean slightly, gliding gently to and fro.

I happen upon a stuffed monkey hanging by its tail from a string in Ellie's closet. The string runs up through the ceiling and must come out somewhere near one of the boys' rooms. The monkey hangs there, smiling, rocking slightly as if in a wind.

Then they push each other again. They climb atop new launching points. They swing each other harder, even harder, even higher, higher still, till finally one will scream that they are too high, too fast, too much, and then they will stop and reset the swing and the launching point and they will now see how many of them can swing at the same time, two, then three, then all four of them climbing onto and into and around the double loops at the bottom of the rope and with all four of them on the rope, begging for the help of Nora or me now. Swing us! *they'll scream,* Please swing us! *and it's like they are toddlers once more, three and four years old and in need of our help to swing themselves at the park, and they will be laughing now, screaming, giggling helplessly as they swing, back, then forth, once again,* Swing us! *they'll scream,* Please swing us!

It's hard for me not to fear for a disease. Leukemia or Hodgkin's or a car that hits them in the street or something unknown and undefined that enters our lives.

The thoughts are fleeting. But I have them. Doesn't everyone? Thoughts of a thing beyond my control that will take hold of one of them.

And at four o'clock on this Sunday afternoon, with the kids still in their bathing suits from the hobo bath they started hours ago, the other parents will arrive to take the kids away. To their other homes. With their other parents. One more beat in the rhythm of our days, Cole and Ellie off with their mother, my ex-wife, for the night. Sam and Carmen off with their father for the night as well. And there are no tears, no scene, no drama of any sort. We've done this for many years. "I'll see you tomorrow," Nora and I will say to the kids as we always do, because they are always home tomorrow, an alternating of days, the rhythm of our lives as divorced parents in a second marriage, and the kids are off with homework and backpacks and whatever objects they might want to take with them, to have or to show to their mom or dad, and now Nora and I are alone. It is quiet.

There's a moment, of course, where the quiet is just a little bit sad.

But we will take a nap now. We will wake up in an hour and the two of us will go out to dinner. We'll do laundry and check emails from the office and get ready for

work in the morning, and we'll sleep and wake up and be back in the ceaseless hum of another activity and task. The constant sweep. The steady motion. The swirling momentum that makes up our lives.

Nora and I look to each other for security. The security of our presence, really, of this life we have created. We're in a place we never expected to be, divorced and remarried and making one family out of two families, with two other families—the kids' other parents—existing simultaneously. It's exhausting and confusing and unknown in so many ways.

There is no model we follow. No clear plan we have. We just figure it out each day.

And so in the fray of this we seek each other for security. The security that this is good. That this is working.

That this is permanent.

Every day, I need Nora to hold my hand for just a moment.

Every day, she needs to know what the routine will be, and the schedule for when the two of us will have time together. "Can we just meet somewhere for lunch?" she'll say. "Or even just meet out on the porch?"

And always I'll tell her that of course we can.

It's five AM. We get out our calendars. We write down when we'll have time together next. She'll put her calendar in her purse. She'll find her keys. And I'll hold her hand one more moment, even a second, before she goes out the door.

Weston Cutter
I used to think everything was part of a larger conversation

but maybe there's only the boats
susurrating to the buoys + shore. Look:
if you see boats in every direction
you're either from where I know, a place
which kisses some lake too much
to call anything other than great, or you're
hollow and hankering to be filled
in. Along the bike path mornings after
storm the blown branches betray
how thin the myth of connectivity re
mains despite facebookery + www.
whatever.com yr even now telling yrself
u won't waste such hours browsing.
Tomorrow. We all want to be filled in, all
hope we're the choicest blank form
yet devised. Let's find fire + stand honest
before it: at the Chinese diner where yes
terday I ate lunch there waited by the door
a box marked *Lost and Founded*, in it
the usual, hats counter-toply abandoned,
shirts left ghosting chair backs as
owners bolted. Who knows why boats

or half-empty boxes in doorways
draw note: a woman I once knew as well
as weather cried weeks because she
was sorrowed by the lack of a thing the size
of a bean. Nothing's the same size
as how we carry it deeper in, beneath what's
been lost and/or founded: I used
to think I knew what drinks to order all
my friends, what stories to tell to tug
them from the murk we all occasionally sink
into, lately all I know is salt, how sweat
can find a reservoir in any elbow, how tears
end wherever they've spent their viscosity.
Let's build satisfied tongues with whatever's
been left here + let's say what we can.

Beefeater Drowns

Unlike the taste of D I can still
        without blush or suffering
recall the way that first gin hit
                while we sat
pretending next to each other
        we didn't know the shape
night was taking as it scalloped
                day's edges
blue to thicker blue. *gin and mint*
        she'd texted from miles
out, + *tonic 2*: the list of what
                I should be
ready for her to want once she
        arrived with her Minnesota
thirst + shed-everywhere dog.
                bet i can get
you thirsty too she texted some
        miles later + I did not fall
asleep thinking the usual *could*
                this be
thoughts—her name, how her
        tongue, loosened by drink,

slid through *come on*. We believed
a shared
start carried merit, that electricity
formed from the fact that
we both meant the same place
when we
spoke *home*. Perhaps we'd begun
to run from
the same gun's report. I slept
on my arm so hard I felt
nothing for the day's first half
hour, D
on waking didn't or couldn't
or wouldn't stop blinking:
we came of age near the mouths
of moving
water, knew how thin the line
between fast flow + flood.
that was a nice boat she didn't text
as she drove
the next day away, both of us
guilty of buying, again, tricks

of liquidity, though buoyancy's no
measure +
nothing we kissed rhymed with *shore*.

liveblogging the snowfall

a letter at a time, word typed
for each eave more coated
by the minute, you'd think

it'd have to stop and you'd be
right depending on how long
a view you'll take says spring,

says muddy tires, says the body's
recollection of fresh flesh
pushed against ancient

process. Ahem: *processes*,
like there's only one way
to slide safe into second,

to shout *ready or not here*
I come. Where I come from
we finish each other's sen

-tences when we've had
enough beer + are within reach
of a river, where my love's

from they believe wind's
one of god's great traits, they
turn cheeks like the devout

kneel. We take the long
view together after dinner,
glance at the everywhere

all the time fuck-it's-nevergonna-
stop snow + we're
sedimentary lovers, know

the sway of transformative
heat + time on layers of muck
and how stone will later be cut,

used for buildings we can't
yet imagine. She says *I'm cold*,
I say *so am I*, thank you snowfall.
Signing off.

John Kinsella
Flying Fish (counterpoint)

The Boys, as they like to be called, are on their way to Geraldton to sort their travel arrangements for the Big Trip. They will fly to Java, board a ship in Jakarta, and sail up the west coast of Sumatra to Padang. Flat out in the V8; Acca Dacca on the stereo. Loud. Yelling over the music. Pumped. Then they'll head inland, into the jungle, and see what happens. Swigging from a bottle of Jacks, they joke about how out of it they'll get on Sumatran heads and mushrooms. Better than getting them second-hand in Perth. We'll be stoned off our faces and won't even know which country we're in. Fuck, yeah, out in the jungle being chased by Sumatran tigers!

> Around the islands the waters make shadows work up against the sun. It's all in reverse. The flying fish skim the surface. Sometimes they fly right through you.

Neither of the boys, aged twenty, has been out of Australia, even Western Australia before. They are hyped. Steady down, Josh says. You'll stack the car before we even get to Gero.

> The killing of cats at the rubbish tip. Picasso. Memory forged its links and the flying fish baking on the deck became overwhelming. All the dead they'd made stank in the tropical sun.

> Anything would do as targets by the wheat-bins, the pickling air getting to them. They fired off round after round.
>
> Exocoetidae. Exocet. Josh's mother was French, though she'd never spoken a word of French to him. Not even as a baby, she said proudly. The only register of her Gallic pride came when Josh's school project on the Falklands War (why the Falklands War, Josh? his teacher had asked), had gained a distinction, the high point of Josh's schooling life. Exocet. French. Named after flying fish.

Perry—real name Jake, but nicknamed Perry by a girlfriend who had been into wagging school and watching daytime television: she called Jake 'Perry' because she thought she herself looked like Della . . . no other reason—Perry guns the accelerator even harder, and the V8 Commodore hits 200ks an hour, the bodywork vibrating at maximum stress levels.

> As the sails of the fish take lift and the tail zigzags the glinting sea, orange-red at that latitude, at that time of day, The Boys are dazzled, confused. The kill-urge is confused. The girls, the radical girls, are standing beside them. Looking out over the railings, the ferry furrowing north. The girls have peace signs on their batik tops. They are on the run, they've confided. A Marxist-Leninist group from Europe. They are German. This is history Josh has told Perry, who wants to know if they've killed people. Bombed places. Josh won't let him ask. They watch the flying fish, fast, sleek, full of purpose.

Asians are okay in their own countries, says Perry. Dad reckons so. We should be fine. Perry and Josh have hung out with white nationalists on visits to Perth. How did that happen? Guns. At the shooting range. Josh and Perry have handed out leaflets but didn't really take much notice of what they said. Though Josh was a reader, is a reader, will always be a reader. But that's what he claims. Who is he telling? Assuring?

> Cypselurus. Sleeker. Do they overlap? Cross flightpaths? We've been friends forever. Neighbouring farms. Big farms. Eight thousand acres.

> Mothers lonely, both born elsewhere. Both with accents. Touches of other places. Fathers hating that. Things in common. Hunters. Ride over to each other's places on dirt bikes. Boundary riders. Are you girls lezzos? What? You know, do you do each other? What? Lick each other out? What? What? What?

Once, the Boys were hauled up by the new cop in town, but he was disciplined and transferred. At 200ks they laugh over it and Josh hurls the empty Jacks bottle out the window, something else at that speed. Beyond the laws of physics. Fuck, man, see that. No! Ha. Funny bastard. I'll roll a spliff, slow down, you mad cunt.

> Flying fish are mythical as well. Of course. On the net, Josh notes, 'fish out of water.' It sticks in his craw as he apologises in private to the girl. His girl. A terrorist. Assumed name, false passport, on the run. I am into peace, she says. But I hate the state, I hate fascists, and I hate racists. Would you kill a racist? he asks. Where is this boat sailing and why? she asks. It is following the flying fish, he says. No, they are accompanying it, she replies. He wonders how Perry is making out. Perry had wanted to sleep with 'Sumatran hookers.' He was getting sidetracked.

This car is a fucking flying fish, yells Perry. He is *pumped* and the car is disintegrating around him. Slow down, fuck ya, Perry. Slow the fuck down.

> But why tell us so much about yourselves? You pulling our legs? It means spinning a story, making it up and having a joke at our expense. Sorry! You were giving signals. I thought you wanted it. That you were 'bi' or something. I'd do it with a lezzo, no problem. Why are we here? Because of the flying fish. We caught the ferry at the same time as you. Out of Jakarta. We arrived, went to a hotel, slept, and got a cab down here this morning. You gave us money. Lots of money. But we're not doing it for that, or you. We're just doing it. You took us on board the yacht. We heard your words, your anger. We fucked you senseless while those big crewmates of yours listened. We had no problem being understood by the driver or anyone in the hotel. You'd think English was the language here. We even tipped the bloke. He seemed fine. And we've not complained

about the egg, rice, and fish-head meals. We've not pushed anyone around. When in Rome . . .

You'd think Perry was a sports star, but he isn't. He played footy but was middling. He was a lousy schoolboy cricketer. But he is a fair shot and loves roo-shooting. He isn't averse to wounding, to leaving them hopping around in circles. Actually, he finds it hilarious. Hilarious is a Perry word. A catchall.

Wanna feel how hard my arm muscles are? See, like rock. That's because I work hard. Perry does as well. We were on the bins making extra dough for this trip. We'll both inherit farms. We'll take wives from outside the district. Maybe from far away. We'll take them back and . . . domesticate them. It's a family tradition. Nah, I'm joking! Can't you take a joke? You might speak English okay but you sure as hell can't understand it. Nah. But seriously, if you want to come back to Australia . . . You bitches think you've got us by the short and curlies. You're mouthy, but you don't know what that means, do you?!

Steam erupts from the bonnet and the car rapidly decelerates. Fuck ya, Perry, now you've screwed it. The car careens and Perry rights in onto the gravel shoulder, hitting the brakes, skidding, fishtailing back on to the bitumen and then back onto the shoulder. Pounding the wheel, shrieking, Cunt cunt cunt of a thing! Josh hands him the spliff which he'd arced up just before. Perry grabs it, tokes hard, holds it, then slumps back into the seat. Fucken hell, sorry mate, he says. They are friends to the core.

I don't get all this political shit, says Perry to 'his' girl. I've handed out some pamphlets. Keep everything in its place, I reckon. Yeah, it's nice being next to you. Yes, it's nice. It's so damned humid. I'm sweating like a pig. Probably puts you off.

Okay. We'll have to hitch. Let's just get to Gero and sort the trip out and then worry about the car.

Perry, you've changed. We've only been on this boat for a day and you're saying I've changed? I changed when we got into the Sandman. I changed

> when we boarded that yacht with the clothes we stood up in. I changed when I begged my girl for more. For more. But then again, you've changed too. You're an ocean of change. I don't know you anymore. Did she ask you again? To do it? Yeah, she did. Will you? Might. And you? Same. Blood brothers.

He's stopping. Grab the bag. I've got the shit down my pants. Okay. Long time since I've seen a Sandman panel van done up like that. See what it had on its side? Repainted. Some kind of beast.

> We'll just store it in our bags and carry it casual-like. If it goes off before we get there, what the fuck. Pain in the arse, but we won't know much about it. You know, I like her. I like mine as well. They might like it where we come from? Good place to hide. Yeah! Fuck, did you see that flying fish. Must have flown miles. Nah, it went in then out. Fucked the water. Yeah . . .

Hey Josh, Perry calls, reaching the PV first. It's a couple of chicks driving. I thought it was a pair of hippy blokes. Josh had reached the car. Josh reaches the car. He is studying the paintwork. That's a flying fish, he says. A what? A flying fish. Looks magic. Yep, going to Gero. You girls just cruising around, on holidays or something? Yep, great, we'll climb in the back. Sound like Germans to me, says Josh to Perry as he turns the handle to open the hatchback. Look strung out. Should we go with them? Yeah, why not! Might get rooted! Right. Let's go.

> A Sumatran prison would be a bad move, Perry. Yeah, true mate, but to tell the truth, I've got nowhere to go anyway. Not really. And it might not happen. You know. I am sick of the farm. Of inland. I like the sea. I like the air. I like the tropics. The flying fish. Water and air. You're sounding 'poetic,' Perry. Yeah, mate. It's frightening, ain't it!

They are reported missing at around the same time as the car is towed into town. The engine has been cooked. There is no trace of The Boys. Their passports are gone but there is no record of them having left the country. The travel agent hasn't seen them. No, not at all. Their mothers insist they were going to see the travel agent, to book their trip.

*

> The fish flew out of the sea and landed on the steel decking of the ferry. What do you reckon they look like inside, girls? he asks as he picks it up wriggling, placing his fingers under the gills and bending the head back until the neck snaps. Must be a complex organism. Don't be an arse, Perry, can't you see it's upsetting the girls? Upsetting them? Doesn't bother them much to bump off a few *capitalist pigs* in Italy, does it! You're losing it, mate! Come on girls, leave him. He gets like this. Don't worry, we'll go through with it. You can count on us. We're convinced.

It is the strangeness of it all. That's why they're missed. It doesn't make sense. We know they were in the car. The car broke down. Then they vanished. No one saw anything, no one knows anything. It was the end of the harvest and people were thinking about Christmas and New Year's and spending their wheat cheques. The next working year, the next school year. The dams drying up, winter creeks dried to their bones. Town swimming-pools overstocked with slippery children, frazzled adults. Waiting for the heat to subside, the first rains to come, seeding . . . making hay while the sun shines. Old accents grow a little fainter, the dirt and dust work on the sound of voices. There's no reward out for information. Why would there be? There'll be an explanation. It will become evident one day, or we'll forget and it won't matter.

Benjamin Sutton
From *Notes from the After-Images*

East of this place. Follow the trailerpark like a funnel cloud
We don't bother to name the new litter so they don't bother
growing. When you call, Brian, Brian doesn't come
It's the open window weather. It's the wind that blew the blue frock over
the pond with the beauty still in it. This is the dream to check under the bed
to find another bed. Half the boys resigned then and left
in a car of loud rain. The other boys made a nightlight
with a cat's tail of gasoline. Brian, find the trailer with a boy-sized dent
in its gut. Find the boy that carries the trailer on his back
like the weight of a trailer on his back

From *Notes from the After-Images*

Downtown and its case of heaven. The buildings inhale / suck in at the belly
The city full on years. The city so bloated it bursts
like a dress. What was left was what we didn't take pictures of
Brian, this is the dream of the unexpected. One foot behind
nothing. On a map this could be anywhere
Brian, walk out the door and share a yawn with the first
truck rut of the morning. Each person arrives here to claim the year
they were born. The snow collects on every part of our skin not covered
Brian, under the belly of the interstate the cats are more magnets
than cats. The way they attract the cars

From *Notes from the After-Images*

The tornado feeds exclusively on the barn. Only a bare bulb
left to hang. The sound of the afterwards is words
I occasionally forget. This is the dream of the tree that broke
like a boy. There is a god of it. There is a god
who rebuilds cities from retired coke cans. Brian, this is the dream
the world has. The end comes when it comes. It comes
like a pond to the door. We weigh as much as it takes
to keep falling

*

But the radio and its expectations. Carve out the day
in the first bowl of grits. This is the dream of the ordinary
One pant leg. Then the other. Front page of a paper's focus wrapped
around what's left of a fish
This is the dream we sing the river into our hands. Brian, wake up
the chorus. Sing of the sign of incomplete stereo
Sing the tone of the fire alarm. How it unveins the building
The song resembles loss / the song reassembles loss

From *Notes from the After-Images*

After the snowstorm, February is a ditch for every car
This is the dream of half-truths: The city will be here when we wake
Or, the city will be here when we wake. We tooth-sweat
We madness. This is the dream of being battery-operated. Drop
a coin in my chest. I will metropolis
Brian, lasso the other vacant buildings on the block. We can
sit by the fire. Tell of when kids ran up our stairs

*

Knotted up in the tourist trap of the dream. The woman hugs
the beautiful woman tattooed on her chest. Is known for doing it
This is the dream of excuses. Just a just a
just another peek at what's missing. More superstitions
are what this dream needs, Brian. Here are all the ladders
as promised. Here is the ghost in the mirror. Let her know
you know her name. There is more to it than that
She offers a hand to the mirror / offers a hand through the mirror

Erica Anzalone
Bibelot

I touched
bludgeon
and felt
dim blood
coursing.
I turned
the first bull
and it
tore out.
His egg
slipped
from its
sheath.
I held it
to Mary's ass
to see
how many carats.
Pretty nothing.
Milky fire.
What do
I owe you?

Tea Party

I sipped a tornado
from a teacup
with the red
gazelle. Run
slowly
and jump
high before
fleeing. What
good advice
the moths give
between mouthfuls
of hair as they
chew off my body.

A bee stung my face

A bee stung my face
and fell into my lap.
The marquee lit up.
I stood in line
to see the bee
resurrected.
I placed the ticket
on my face. It
soothed the burn.

Kelly Easton
Shapeshifters

When Cecil stepped out of the parking structure, he was momentarily blinded. Although it was May, a blizzard had arrived. The mosquitoes that attacked him on his way into work were now corpses on ice. Insect popsicles, he joked, although no one was there to laugh. The city workers were on strike again. The road was unplowed. Not that it mattered. At sixteen dollars a gallon, he couldn't afford to drive. His car was a carcass outside his apartment building, littered with parking tickets, devoured by petty thieves who stripped the tires and looted the glove compartment.

The only thing that kept him from turning back into the garage was the thought of Nadja. She'd be waiting for him at home, along with his buddy Walter, who she hated.

Cecil had found Nadja at Stein's Kosher Deli. How Stein's Deli managed to escape being swallowed by the conglomerate digestive system was a small miracle. Cecil had stopped for a loaf of rye bread and seen Nadja, her eye black and purple, crying over a cup of tea. Cecil figured that Stein had given her the tea gratis; he had a good heart. No one would go hungry around Stein. "Promise me, no mayonnaise on that bread, Mr. Cosby," Stein said. "That's the only way I'll sell to a goy."

"I promise."

And even though he liked mayonnaise, put it on his French fries, his eggs, even his peanut butter sandwiches, he never went back on his word. He liked the idea of being an honorary Jew, admired the Jewish way of suffering. Agony, but with a sense of humor.

Cecil was to the door when he heard Nadja sob. It was meant for him, he knew. He also knew that if he turned around he was a dead man, because he was a dead man for anything: stray cats, his high-school buddy Walter, the landlady's endless stories about her past lovers. He was easily distracted. It was why his life had come to nothing.

He walked over. Nadja's eyes peered up like an old fashioned movie star, although a bad one: Jane Wyman or Martha Ray. His muscular thighs pressed against the table. The thighs weren't an achievement of his. They just came that way.

"The world . . . coming to an end." Her accent was heavy. He guessed she was one of the refugees who had flooded the country illegally. The continental shuffle, had created new borders. He no longer knew his geography, could not keep up with the nations that erupted overnight, the governments shifting alliances like unfaithful lovers. Even their state had been renamed three years ago, by a senator obsessed that terrorists all came from countries that started with vowels. So congress passed an act that added consonants to the beginnings: Gohoio; Biowa, Cutah, Ridaho. Only Alaska balked. A prominent blogger proposed they secede from the union, along with Texas. Still Cecil still wears his college t-shirt—Ohio State, Iowa City, Idaho—which in innocent days seemed an amusing joke on those who didn't know the difference, Californians mostly.

"It's just the satellites down again," he finally said, but she was probably right. World peace had been achieved, and people got bored with it. Revolutions shot up like brush fires, were shown on TV with frequent commercial interruptions.

"I can see the future." She stood up. There was victory in her face, but he deluded himself into thinking of it as *his*, a tiny misogyny of the old order, like from a musical. He could use her a bit, in her time of weakness: *Damsel in distress. There is nothing like a dame*. He realized that were she employed, say, and well dressed, say, she would not give him the proverbial time of day. He walked out of Stein's. She followed him along the empty streets. "I want bread."

He tucked the bread closer to his body, held it like a baby, tickled its chin. "Where'd you get that shiner?"

"What is . . . *shiner*?"

"Black eye." Cecil could tell she was already thinking of dumping him.

She pulled him toward her and took the bread. She tore a piece off and began to eat his baby. She didn't offer him any.

Four months ago, that had been. She was still with him. She sulked on the couch, fought with his buddy Walter, watched the chaos on TV. But never, not once, had they had sex.

It would start with kissing, what he and Walter called in high school "heavy petting" but then she would freeze up. "Keep going," she'd say. "Have sex with you want."

"*If* you want," he corrected. "How can I, with you lying there like a corpse?"

"What difference it make?"

Four months, and nothing. Another mouth to feed.

There was victory in her face, but he deluded himself into thinking of it as *his*, a tiny misogyny of the old order.

A wind sliced through his thin jacket. He moved on the icy streets like an old lady afraid of breaking a hip. He passed the hospital, the brightly lit emergency room that had expanded to a chai bar with wireless. It was the ultimate reality TV. People could come in while their family got sewn up from attacks with chainsaws or accidents with eating utensils. Who could forget the boy with the forked head?

He entered his building, then walked the ten flights. He slammed the door meaningfully when he came in. Walter and Nadja were glued to the TV on their separate sides of the couch, their own small countries in a shrunken world. Neither looked up.

Cecil went to the TV. A missile moved across the snowy screen like a weak straggler bird. "The news sucks today," Walter said.

Nadja turned to him. "There is war. We under attack."

"We need cable, Cecil," Walter said. "We're down to one channel. You can't even get a football game on this fucking screen."

"Feel free to purchase cable," Cecil said.

"Before this, story of woman giving birth to twelve babies." Nadja looked enraptured.

"It was a hoax," Walter snapped. "Turns out the babies were actually lollipops in disguise. Polish slut!"

In high school, Walter had been wiry but mellow. Now, he was heavy, but electrical inside. He'd been fired from three jobs in a row: for smashing a vending machine to get a bag of Cheetos that wouldn't drop; for wrecking a car; for threatening to strangle the boss's chihuahua. "I have problems keeping up with the times," he admitted when Cecil bailed him out.

Still, they'd always been there for each other. They were buds from way back,

the good old days, when all they watched on TV were sports. They'd dated the same girl, then agreed she wasn't worth it, had both been stricken with acne like craters on the face of the moon. They'd been *faced* together more times than Cecil could remember, vomiting tequila and beer in parking lots and on front lawns.

"Missile headed for us." Nadja pointed to the missile. "And you talking about lollipops."

"Missile *is* headed for us. Speak English, Pollack!"

"I was rich in Poland. I had servants. Years ago, when Poland had chance, my father say to president, 'Find one thing we do well and capitalize, like fast and safe autos.' But president chose canned sardines, and Poland went to dogs."

"Who was the president?" Walter sneered.

"Some man. It's always man who causes trouble."

"If your dad was so important, you should know."

"I forget."

"You're a liar. A goddamned phony. You're probably from Arkansas."

"Sharkansas," Cecil corrected. He went into the kitchen. The dishes were piled into the sink. "Nadja, I bought ground beef. Can you do something with hamburger?"

"What? What I do with hamburger?"

"Earlier they said a plague has been let loose. A strain of TB that's gotten resistant to antibiotics," Walter said.

"Consumption," Nadja corrected.

"Huh?"

"I *said* consumption is what they call tuberculosis. The disease *consumes* the lungs, the breath . . ."

"She's creeping me out, Cecil. Tell her to shut up."

"Make him go home, Cecil," Nadja begged. "Facist!"

"I told you. Walter's my buddy. He hangs out here."

"I want to make love."

"Now?"

"Make him go and we'll sex."

She unbuttoned her blouse. Her skin was the color of birch bark. She smelled like raw potatoes.

"Go home, Walter." Cecil was surprised at the coldness of his own voice. His shaking hands.

"But it's . . . dangerous out there."

"You heard the man," Nadja hissed. "You not wanted."

"You'll be sorry!" Walter ran out the door, sobbing.

*

The sex became a regular option. Cecil started doing the cooking and cleaning. It made him feel old fashioned for a while, the way he'd felt when he and Walter won a football game and went out with the team for cokes.

After, Nadja was talkative. "Wintertime, in Poland, we would shoot a deer and hang it on hooks in the village hall. Everyone share. No one knew whose deer they were eating. We were so poor, but still, we were a community."

"I thought you were rich."

"I have been both."

"All of your stories about Poland sound like they're from some nineteenth century novel. Where are you really from?"

"I came here because I heard it was a good place. What a lie."

"Better than eating deer on hangers."

"The good life snuck out like dinner guest who steal silverware. But why?"

Cecil thought about that. He had a feeling it was something small: the glut of restaurants serving buffalo wings and fried mozzarella, the volume of TV commercials, the salaries of baseball players. It all reminded Cecil of a childhood story called *Shapeshifters*. It was a frightening tale about how things transformed in the night: a man into an ironing board, a tree into a monkey, a gun into a sausage.

A month passed. No missiles hit, but the airport was out and the cell towers. The changes in weather had given him a cough. No one came to park at the garage where he worked. All of the monitors died but one. Cecil thought of Nadja as he watched the emptiness float past him on the screen. He'd heard that when you die, you travel down a tunnel with images from your life. Would his tunnel be filled with empty parking spaces, the blue wheelchair symbols the only color?

One night, he walked by Stein's bakery. It was closed. The bread racks were empty. The smashed windows were papered with posters offering word processing, dog watching, and prostitution. A drawing showed a king on *the throne* doing his business on a small child. Beneath, in black marker, was written: *THE RICH ARE SHITTING ON US!*

"What took long?" Nadja asked when he got home. She sat on the floor in her bra and underwear. Walter was back in front of the TV. Cecil wondered how he had managed to become fat, when food was so scarce. He worried that this wasn't actu-

ally Walter, but an imposter.

Cecil knelt beside Nadja. "What are you doing?"

"Meditating."

"You should put some clothes on."

As if on cue, Walter turned his attention to Nadja.

"Go home, now, Walter. Okay?"

"This *is* my home. I gave up my apartment."

"When?"

"After you let *her* move in."

"Where do you go when you leave?"

"The fire escape."

"The Dalai Lama is lecturing about compassion." Nadja jumped up. "It's at the Convention Center. Let's go."

The good life snuck out like dinner guest who steal silverware. But why?

"The Convention Center burned down," Walter said. "Besides, the Tibetans are free so who cares?"

Nadja ran toward Walter and began hitting him. Walter pinned down her arms. It was too similar to an embrace and Cecil wanted to pull her away, but the room felt like a Tilt-a-Whirl. "Why is it so hot in here?" Cecil unbuttoned his shirt and threw it in the sink. "I'm coming down with something. One of you has to get a job."

"The slut can get a job."

"I have to hear the Dalai Lama." Nadja struggled in Walter's arms. "Only he can save me."

"*I've* saved you," Cecil said. "Consider yourself saved."

"Different kind of saved."

"I had a dream last night," she said. "About the Dalai Lama. I was swimming in a river filled with funeral pyres and floating heads. The water kept rising. There was no place to get to shore. I struggled along, grabbing whatever I could hold onto, not caring if I made someone else drown."

"It was just a dream," Cecil said. "Wasn't it just a dream, Walter?"

Walter shrugged. "Who cares?"

"The Dalai Lama was on the shore. In his saffron robes, his shaved head. Do you know how he is chosen? By signs. By circling birds, by the direction of clouds.

The last Dalai Lama liked to fix radios, but this one likes to sing. Even as a baby, he could sing in several voices at once. He looks at me with his compassionate eyes, and I am saved. He is seven years old."

"You know what I brought home for dinner?" Cecil pulled a jar out of his pocket. "Caviar! Can you believe it? I'll send Walter out for champagne. He can rob a liquor store. We'll start making him useful."

Curfew started. The sirens howled. The Pope once gave a mass at Dodger Stadium. Would a world spiritual leader kneel in the ashes at the Convention Center?

"Are you going to take me, Cecil?" Nadja begged.

"I can't go out there again."

"Then I'm lost!"

Cecil remembered a song from *Damn Yankees*. If there were a savior, it would be baseball: *Two lost souls, on the highway of love . . . Isn't it great? Isn't it grand? We've got each udder.*

Walter pushed Nadja onto the couch. They began kissing.

It was here. Cecil's own little apocalypse. He coughed and blood splattered onto the counter.

The TV sounded the emergency alert. Cecil rushed to the set. "Something is flying toward us! I can see it on the news. How did this happen?"

"This is how it happens," Nadja said from beneath Walter, no trace of accent left. "You're in your own land. You don't notice it. There are other lands. You don't pay attention. The skin you've pressed against for years has grown slack. You don't notice. The landlord's son has taken over for him. But you still call him Charlie, thinking he's the same man. The apartments all look the same, even the residents, dressed in khaki's and topsiders, as if they live by the sea. You open someone's door, mistaking it for your own. One room leads to another, like in an Italian movie. But you don't notice. What are you adding to this world you haven't noticed?"

An explosion sounded outside. The sky lit up. "Is it a bomb?" Cecil rushed to the window. Pieces of street illuminated and went dark, like photos of a crime scene on reality TV. "What is it?"

Another explosion. Orange sparks erupted in the sky, then blue, then green. Cecil watched out the window, but still couldn't tell if it was real or unreal, a bomb or fireworks, or even if it was beautiful.

Sarah Rose Nordgren
Mary

There was a hypothetical pregnancy.
The woman in question accumulated a box-full
of video cassettes featuring pregnant
characters. She wore beads around her waist
and sat up late in bed with a shawl
of her own hair. Roommates circled
her like roosters, offering her most tender
bites of meat, and the apartment
reeked of sweat and powder. And because
in the end there was no fetus
she got to live for several years like this,
long-awaiting. And because I was only
a visitor, I envied the attention paid to her
by God, how He doted on her body.

The Performance

It's not right that she should do this
to her body as she speaks,

but it's the only way we can understand her.
We who weren't raised on sand

and cherry-pits. Whose stepfathers
held their tempers.

The South is a mean place
we forget about. The windows

boarded up all over town. She says,
dogs chased her down the tar-

soaked road like devils. Each dog with three
heads, three tails. She says,

we might've mocked her story,
but never now. First, she strikes nails

against her chest like matches.
Then, when we think we can't

take more from her, she eats
her own hands. Who are we now

to say that art should not destroy us?

Geoffrey Nutter
The Strange Orchid

We lived among the open secrets.
We lived among the known unknowns.
We woke among the fish ponds and violas,
dripping with translucence like the fruit trees.
Listen innocently, Sol Cubano,
you know our sensibilities, fine
but hard, like granite thread,
the silk with which we weaved
our garments and our raiment.
We were negligent among the zealots,
vigilant among the violets,
the low-lying ferns, the piercing scent
of the green bay laurels; we boiled honey
in the free-flowing water of the coldest spring
for winter mead, we listened to the creaking timber
like opening doors in the boughs of the pines.
Here is the easiest thing to remember:
your options grow fewer . . . but there is an alternative.
A long life is good, and does have its place,
but there is also the mountain, and the top of the mountain.
We listened to the fortuitous calling
of the buildings in the night, the buildings of

the night, the pinnate leaves, the ship of pearl
and the cold sea maids and youth's
sweet-scented manuscript. And we
were wide awake at summer sunset
under the alders, near the elders
and the aldermen drinking beer
beside the fishermen. It was
the century of Januaries. It was
time to watch the opening
of some strange new kind of orchid.

The Man of Noon

The man of noon
is mightier than the morning.
The inside of the ornamental dome
seen from the rotunda
is illumined by the sun,
illumined by the gold that gilds
the carvings of the dandelion,
columbine, and buttercup.
Outside, the palm trees, yellow grass,
blue hills hazy in the distance.
And the cows lying down
in the burnt yellow grass repose, repose.
And the rust-covered scoop of a steam shovel
lying in a fenced-in pile of rubble
and some workmen smoking cigarettes repose,
repose. The man of noon is mightier
than the million-fold beads of dew
in the grass, the burnt up grass.
The granite headlands and the cool
glacial fountains, the isolationists
among the strange ungoverned sleepwalkers,
the lobbyists shaking hands outside

the senate chambers: they are the totality
of who is there. And the red-gold paintings
of past governors standing in their offices,
in mountain shadows, cloud shadows, leaf forms,
bee pastures, violet thistle . . . .

The Lapidary Crystal

All around the city, people
are staying up late, burning
the midnight oil, losing sleep,
trying to get things done, to find
answers, acquire knowledge about
subjects unknown to you and me;
in the stone and glass pavilion
of the orthopedic surgeons
or the porn-strewn bamboo forests
that grow beside the highway
they are consulting maps and ancient books,
reading the illuminated tablets
or examining the facets of the blue
many-faceted stone. Others
are dining long past midnight,
on smoked eel and lemongrass
on square green plates; they
are smoking hookahs, drinking brilliant
red drinks and lighting Roman candles.
And in the subterranean food court
with its huge Walpolian hand for signage
lit with burning fustian, purple bulbs,

and treacle, they are eating tentacles
in man-made noodles where motherhood
is ripening. And when dawn comes
two men lay full-length beside the river,
asleep in their pointed boots in the tall weeds
in the lee of a moss-covered boulder,
the city shining behind them.
A few instructional pamphlets
are scattered in the dirt beside the sleepers:
one on how to flavor cigars; the other
on the annealing of bronze for bells;
the last on the shining of the lapidary crystal.

Rachel Zucker
Pedestrian

don't want to go to the well-reviewed movie
The Maid at the Angelika or read Harriet
Mullen's *Recyclopedia* or eat chicken soup w/
roast chicken & egg noodles from Kelly & Ping
or buy anything in any superb boutique except
a slightly elliptical stoneware sugar bowl
with a smooth top & elegant spoon I've been
looking for that for years no one has that
or write a poem even though I vowed
to write one every day in November or walk
to the Asian grocery on Mott & Canal to buy
katsuo-bushi & rice sticks & usukachi & bamboo
shoots & rice wine vinegar so I can cook my way
through the Momofuku cookbook I've made
pickled cauliflower so far which was delightful
I don't want to have coffee or not have coffee
or listen to *This American Life* podcast on infidelity
which makes me tired b/c I don't want to have sex
with anyone just want my dear husband to
read me *Game of Thrones* by George RR Martin
while I lie in bed with a buckwheat eye pillow
are you scandalized by my admission of love

for genre fiction? where are our kids in this
fantasy? let's be movie parents their kids never
intrude on the viewer's enjoyment I don't want
to stop at this espresso bar or that one or that one
or even live in NY anymore or go to the daycare
before I teach at the 92 St Y or not see my son
and feel guilty/trapped wonder why I don't live
in Maine or have more children or fewer or
how I feel about my parents or poetry or what
constitutes a "practical decision" or finish reading
this *NY Times* mag article about the Obamas'
marriage which I took with me in case I didn't
want to read Mullen I don't want these poetmom
emails with cute attachments of kids in Halloween
costumes I hate animals still shouldn't eat them
this hipster music makes me slightly suicidal
on the subway another rider's newspaper says
another NYU student got through the suicide
barrier at Bobst library you know one can make
pickles with almost anything the radish
pinks everything up nicely but itself goes white

I don't like the expression 'in a pickle' to mean
fucked or *out of luck* or *stuck* or *down on luck*
as pickles are one of the few things I like
especially the daily transformation brought about
by sugar & salt & vinegar today I said *My tolerance*
for traveling through space & time is increasing daily
I think I was lying why do I imagine someone's
interviewing me sometimes they are & always
ask about my "real life" & the "juggling act" which is
stupid I'm not juggling my family like eggs or oranges
my bangs are too straight make me look androidal
I should stick to cutting my own hair is *this* writing
"work" Donald Hall says so but I don't know
I've stayed on the local b/c why go nowhere faster
I'm paying for daycare anyway so have "free
Time"—ha HA!—this is a kind of despair (not
needing to be/do anywhere/anything) (I could
disappear perhaps have) also an extravagance
for which we pay dearly—time—the toddler
puts in his time lives there really as I travel the city
hating poetry & my haircut & all the things I do not

want to do the man with maroon kerchief gives up
his seat for a large woman who now sits marking
sheet music what should I be doing? dying? I am
I have an idea for a website where mothers shoot
home movies & I upload them as part of my ongoing
project to "accurately describe women's lives"
the woman next to me is reading a FSG book
can't see the title the man on her left snores
& leans into her please someone remind me what's
the point of literature? 72nd St & Cathy Wagner's
book *My New Job* includes the word "penis" frequently
that's nice & makes me feel happy like a pinked up
pickled radish or maybe I should say pinked down
since radishes start out red but lend their color
to the brine & neighboring veggies as they soak
please! I'm not "relating" this to the NYC subway
how vile of you to think so—96th St—I told Matt
taking the shuttle at Times Square during rush hour
causes me serious distress a human tsunami perhaps
we deserve a large-scale population reduction
it seems inevitable I'm dehumanized by NY

& my proximity to others fatal loneliness
of crowds—(reading or writing creates a little
private sphere in a way that thinking can't)—I
sometimes wonder if I actually have a self that's
ridiculous you want to witness stream
of consciousness? Times Square's your destination
the Spanish around me is lovely indecipherable
noise a pleasure not to understand I imagine
it's not all banal & meaningless like my own daily
communication of course those aren't synonyms—
the banal is often full of meaning—a woman coughs
all over my air everyone's scared to die except
the people who aren't Jeremy said *Death as an idea*
is scary but as a process quite natural I like him
& the way he makes me feel smarter than I am
even though he doesn't like the way I respond
in interviews doesn't buy the James Schuyler line
I often quote "I've always been more interested
in truth than in imagination" Jeremy thinks I'm
selling myself short selling short is what Jeremy
as a hedge fund manager actually does are these

associative games worth their weight in ink? he'd
sell this short I bet this poem's possibly timely
not likely timeless which someone once said separates
poetry from the pedestrian

Amy Bonnaffons
A Room To Live In

BEAUTY IS A MATTER OF SIZE AND ORDER, AND THEREFORE IMPOSSIBLE EITHER (1) IN A VERY MINUTE CREATURE AS IT APPROACHES INSTANTANEITY; OR (2) IN A CREATURE OF VAST SIZE—ONE, SAY, 1,000 MILES LONG. —ARISTOTLE

I decided to give the boys little slingshots and toy trains. For the girl, I made a tiny doll; I had to use my most powerful magnifying glass to paint the freckles and eyelashes.

"Classic, well-appointed," Mrs. Perlman had told me over the phone. "Deep plush carpets, a piano downstairs, filigreed wallpaper in the master bedroom." She hoped for me to re-create, in miniature, the apartment in Vienna where her mother had lived as a child, before the war sent them into poverty and exile. There were two boys and one girl, though one of the boys—Otto—had died in transit.

I gave him the better slingshot.

Carl and I were washing the dishes that night, in our usual way (side by side, I in rubber gloves, he armed with a towel), when he suddenly cleared his throat. "I was thinking," he said, carefully, "that we could do something."

"You mean sex?"

"Well, actually, I was thinking in larger terms."

"What terms?"

"Well, I was thinking we could have a child."

"Tonight?"

"No, just sometime."

"I don't know. Where would it sleep?"

"Well, it could sleep in my room, and I could sleep in yours."

"Where would I sleep?"

"In your room, too."

"With you?"

"Yes."

We'd been over this before. Carl had asserted, many times, that as my husband he had the right to share my bed. But I always maintained that anything seen too close-up grows fuzzy and indistinct. Carl's head next to mine on the pillow displaced too much air, the wrong air. I could only see one of his features at a time: his nose, or his eyelashes, or his nipple. It gave me a sort of horizontal vertigo.

But sometimes, when I peered through his open doorway and saw him sitting on the floor cross-legged, plucking his banjo, I felt a desire of exactly the right size. Then, when the desire grew bigger, I asked my feet to take me into his room. They obliged. Then our bodies asked things of each other, and they obliged too.

"Carl," I said. "You know how I feel about that."

"Well, I know the words you've told me before," he said.

"I'll try to think of other ones."

"This isn't an issue of words, really, though. It's more an issue of our bodies and where we put them."

"I suppose so," I said. "I'll think about it."

Later, in my own room, I thought about it. I tried to think with my body and not just with words. I tried to trick my body into different positions, to put a new angle on things. I sat cross-legged on my bed, then spread-eagle on the floor, then I attempted a headstand against the wall and failed. My body made a loud noise when it crashed to the floor.

"You OK?" Carl called.

"Yes," I called back. But I was curled in the fetal position on the floor, clutching my knees to my chest. This seemed to be the default position I ended up in when I thought about Changing Things. I did this only when Carl asked me to: infrequently in the first few months of our marriage, and then with greater and greater frequency, and then pretty much weekly. Tonight marked an escalation in the seriousness of the request; Carl's dissatisfaction with our system had grown more urgent. When I thought of his unhappiness growing sharper and sharper, like some pointed thing, I grew unhappy too.

But I still couldn't imagine sharing my bed every night, let alone having a

third person in the house, someone possibly very loud, who oozed body fluid and need. No, no, my position wouldn't change.

I used my hands to pry my knees away from my body. I got up and did the only thing that reliably calmed me: I got to work.

I carved the two younger children from imported Tahitian balsa wood, with a blade designed to perform thoracic surgery on insects. I modeled them after a blurry black-and-white photograph Mrs. Perlman had provided. In the photo, the family stood squinting in the bright sun. The parents stood in the back. They were the kind of couple who looked like siblings (parallel genetics? or a harsh molding by convergent life experience?)—both thin and pinched-looking, with the same severe shoulders and eyebrows.

The sun shone down on the children, twelve-year-old Franz and eight-year-old twins Otto and Gretel. Franz had curly hair and the open, handsome face of a future homecoming king. (He killed himself in 1972. His son, David, now owns a carpet factory in Pittsburgh.) Gretel had two braids wound tightly around her ears, like Princess Leia. She had fat cheeks and an impish smile, a girl who clearly expected to be fed and loved ceaselessly. (She grew up to be the mother of Mrs. Perlman and of two other children who both died in infancy. She's since lost a breast, a kidney, and most of her mind. She lives in a nursing home in Bedford, New York.)

Otto, on the other hand, was thin and angular, like his parents, and from the piercing yet opaque expression of his eyes, I could tell he would have grown up to be a soldier or a scientist, a man of great privacy and precision, and that he would have loved one woman secretly for his entire life. But nevertheless he was a child, so I tried to give him the look of recklessness and delicacy common to all eight-year-old boys everywhere.

This proved difficult, even with such a small blade.

On my way to bed I heard a soft, rustling noise coming from the dollhouse. I got up to investigate, fearing mice. We had a problem with them last winter; Carl caught them in a shoebox and released them in the park.

But it wasn't mice. It was Otto and Gretel. They were rolling around on the floor of the master bedroom. They appeared to be wrestling.

"Give me the slingshot!" said Gretel.

"It's mine!" said Otto. "Slingshots are for boys."

"You two are being awfully loud," I said.

They froze, pulled apart, looked up.

"Who are you?" asked Otto.

"I'm Irene. I made you."

"Are you God?" asked Gretel.

"No," I said. Then I considered this. "Well, not in an absolute sense. But in reference to you, yes, I suppose so."

I carved the two younger children from imported Tahitian balsa wood, with a blade designed to perform thoracic surgery on insects.

This had only happened once before, this coming alive. Six months ago I awoke to find that Drexel, modeled after the teenage son of my Upper East Side client, had stolen my charcoals, scrawled MY DAD IS A GIANT COCKSUCKER FAGET all over the walls of the dollhouse, and escaped from my apartment—probably through the fire escape. I had to completely re-paper the inside, of course, in addition to replacing Drexel; it cost me nearly a week of work.

I had to admire his audacity: the real Drexel—dour, inbred-looking, personality-less—would never have dared such a thing. Also, his misspelling of "faggot" seemed oddly apt, perfectly descriptive of his father's Francophile pretensions.

Still, it was unsettling, and I didn't tell Carl. This was the second reason for keeping him out of my room: Who knew when someone would come alive again? And if they did, and he saw, then what would happen?

On the one hand, I suspect that Carl would be less perturbed than a normal person if he came across a four-inch talking human: Unlike anyone else I know, he believes in the inherently secret nature of everything. He believes in the dream-life of penguins, in the quiet longings of plants, in the muscles and heartbeats of prehistoric fish. He eats oranges slowly, out of respect.

On the other hand, who was to say? Perhaps he'd become terrified and divorce me; or perhaps they'd go dead in his presence, and I'd have to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing. There were too many potential outcomes, running around my imagination like wild animals, impossible to corral. One thing was certain, though: if my creations spoke to him—if these two compartments of my life overlapped and interacted—it would complicate everything, in ways I could not apprehend. It was not a development I felt I could risk.

*

The children asked if they could play. I told them yes, if they went to sleep in an hour.

"Let's play pretend," said Gretel to Otto. "You be the man and I'll be the lady."

"Here," I said. "You need costumes." I handed Otto the bowler hat I'd made for his father, and Gretel her mother's shawl. Gretel promptly lay down on the table and threw her arm across her face, in a pantomime of distress.

I tried to give him the look of recklessness and delicacy common to all eight-year-old boys everywhere.

Otto tipped his hat. "Hello, Mrs.," he said. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Well," said Gretel, "I have terrible dreams, about black ants crawling up my nose-holes."

"Well, I am a doctor, so I can help. Do you have a washcloth?"

"Let me see." She got up and looked around the worktable until she found a stray square of cloth. "Yes. So what do I do with it?"

"You soak it in Forgetting Liquid."

"And then where do I put it?"

"You don't put it anywhere. *I* put it." He lay down on the floor and put the washcloth over his own face.

In the morning I awoke to find that Otto and Gretel had made their way off of my worktable. I followed the high-pitched sound of their voices into Carl's room—which, fortunately, was vacant; he'd already gone out on his piano-tuning rounds.

Otto and Gretel had climbed up onto Carl's turntable. Gretel stood on the record, and Otto at the base of the needle. "Are you ready?" he asked. "I'm about to do it."

"I'm *ready*," said Gretel. "Just start already."

Otto took hold of the record with his little hands and hurled it sideways, so that it began to spin. Gretel, standing on top of the spinning record, fell down to her knees and screamed with glee. "Wheeee!" she cried. "This is the most fun I've had my whole life!"

"That's enough, young lady," I said. I brought one finger down to halt the record mid-spin. The two of them looked up, terrified. I could see their tiny hummingbird-heartbeats through their clothes.

"We were just—"

"We got lost."

"Because we fell off the table, and—"

"Well, first of all," I said, "I know you didn't fall off. You'd be dead. I know that you shimmied down the table leg."

I was bluffing, but I'd caught them: They looked down at their feet, ashamed.

"You should know," I said, "That this room is forbidden."

They continued to look down at their feet. I thought I could see Gretel's little round shoulders shaking.

"You are going to have to think about what you've done," I said.

I took them back into my room and put them in a shoebox and shut the lid, punching a few holes for air. Then I sat down at my table and attempted to carve the clawed feet of the bathtub.

The children stayed quiet for a long time, and then I heard them mewing softly, like kittens.

I had decided to make them suffer until they learned a lesson—the last thing I wanted was for them to walk into Carl's room again—and so I tried to ignore the sound of their weeping. But I felt a growing heaviness: forcing other people to suffer, if even for their own good, has got to be the loneliest feeling in the world.

I stopped working. I sat there and sympathized with God.

Finally, I went into the kitchen, found a wide soup bowl, and filled it with sugar. I brought it back and set it down on the worktable.

"Here," I told the children, plucking them out of the shoebox and dropping them into the bowl. "You can play around in this." I quickly carved them a pair of shovels and gave them some thimbles to use as buckets.

"I wonder what it is," said Otto, sifting it through his fingers. "Is it manna?"

"What?" said Gretel.

"You know, you blockhead. The white food that fell from the sky, when the Israelites were wandering?"

Gretel shoveled some grains directly into her mouth. Her eyes grew wide. "It's sugar!" she cried.

"Impossible," said Otto. "It's too big."

"Just taste it!"

He put a grain into his mouth, and the frown on his face slowly softened. "It *is* sugar," he said, incredulous.

I pinched some between two fingers and sprinkled it down on their heads, as if dusting the top of a pie. They giggled and caught it in their palms and put it into their mouths.

In spite of myself, I smiled.

Watching them scamper through the sugar, I thought about Mrs. Perlman's family. "My grandmother never recovered from Otto's death," she'd told me. "She went a little batty after that. She kept thinking she saw him. Always eight years old. Even when she was in her eighties, when her *own* kids had grandkids. She'd go up to random children on the street and slap them in the face and yell at them in German for how worried they'd made her."

Otto and Gretel had such hard lives ahead of them, I thought; perhaps all three of us did. I felt with sudden force that I wanted to keep them, and keep them happy.

"I invented a new dance!" Gretel called out. She hurled herself down into the sugar and proceeded to do something that can only be described as humping.

"That's disgusting," I said, plucking them out of the sugar, trying to stifle a smile.

"Can you show us something else?" asked Otto, brushing the grains of sugar off his trousers. "Something fantastic?"

"All right," I said. I hunted around my desk and found a dried-up orange leaf. Carl liked to bring them home from the park when they were particularly vivid, little gifts for me from the outside world. I held it up for the children to see.

"That has *got* to be from the time of the dinosaurs," said Otto.

Carl and I met in the park. I was new to New York, and I still didn't know anything to do with my free time besides painting in my room and going to the park to sit and stare at things. So I was sitting and staring one day, and I noticed him. He sat on the ground, playing his banjo and singing softly. He wore a blue button-down shirt and a long red beard.

I came back at the same time the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. He was always there. I felt free to stare, because he never looked up from the banjo—not once. But on the fifth day, he suddenly stood up, walked over, and sat down next to me.

"I've been watching you," he said.

"What?"

"You have very nice hands."

I looked down, as if to verify his statement. No one had ever told me this before. "But how—"

"I'm good at noticing things," he said, "when I don't seem to be noticing them. What's your name?"

"Irene."

He lifted the banjo into his lap and played "Goodnight, Irene," very softly.

Sometimes I live in the country
Sometimes I live in the town
Sometimes I get the feeling
I'll jump in the river and drown

Then he got up and resumed his spot on the grass across from me and continued to play without looking up.

I came back every day, and sat on the same bench. Each day, exactly once, Carl would take a break from his playing and come over next to me. Neither of us would say anything; he would just sit and play a song.

I suspect that Carl would be less perturbed than a normal person if he came across a four-inch talking human.

Then one day, instead of coming to sit on the bench, he packed up his banjo and slung it onto his back. He came and stood in front of me and said, "Let's go somewhere, Irene."

We went to the Museum of Fabulous Entomology, a little-known museum on the Lower East Side and Carl's favorite place in the city aside from the park. He took me through the insects one by one, explaining why each was a marvel of Creation. "This is the Merifluvian Java Beetle," he'd say. "It changes color upon the approach of rain, and has six distinct emotions."

When I went home, I carved and painted replicas of his favorite insects. I strung them together so that they hung, heads down, like beads on a necklace. I presented the string to him the next time we met. He stared down at it and blinked. "This is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me," he said.

I took it from his hand and tied the string around his neck. I felt as if I were performing some tribal mate-choosing ritual. I stepped back and viewed him, the string of insects gleaming around his neck in the sun. My heart beat wildly.

We were married, officially, six weeks later.

By the afternoon I was so caught up with the children that I forgot to listen for Carl. We were playing a game I'd devised to tire them out. It was called Run, Scream, and Fall Down.

Gretel had introduced her own modification: Rather than just screaming an open vowel sound, like "ahhh," you had to scream the name of an imaginary

person. Gretel screamed "Hermann Klass," "Linus Hoffenpepper," and "Frau Umbrella." Otto, clearly more cosmopolitan, screamed "Lord Kensington," "Hoopa Loopa," and "Samurai."

They were screaming "Uncle Moses" and "Hitachi Electronics" (which Otto saw on my radio and mistook for a person's name) when I heard Carl's footsteps, loud and sudden, in the hallway. He was home early.

"Shhh!" I cried, scooping the children into my lap. "Be quiet!" I placed one finger over each of their mouths.

"Irene?" Carl called.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Who are you talking to?"

"Um—that was just the radio."

"The radio?"

"Yes. It's a new program that just transmits the sound of street noises from all over the world."

It was unclear to me whether Carl had heard the children or just me, but I needed to assume the worst. Through a series of gestures, I conveyed to the children that they needed to stay very quiet or something terrible would happen. I gave them a piece of paper and a pencil as high as their bodies. Working together silently, they pushed the pencil across the paper and drew a series of triangles. Each triangle was more competent than the last, and at number seventeen—a perfect isosceles—they stopped. Exhausted, they lay down on the desk and fell asleep instantly.

To throw Carl off the trail, I was very accommodating at dinner, practically solicitous. I found this surprisingly easy: The adrenaline of the narrow escape, and the thrill of having such a robust and vibrant secret, made me feel reckless with things I'd previously confused for my dignity.

So when Carl said, "Have you considered my question," like a statement (perhaps because he expected a disappointing answer, and did not want to signal false hope by a rising inflection), I said, "Just give me some time to think about it. All I need is some time." I was basically lying, but at the softness in my voice, I sensed him relaxing.

As we washed the dishes, our elbows touched, and I felt a new sexual charge between us. I had never thought of the elbow as an erogenous zone before, but now it made perfect sense: It's so exposed, so sensitive, so easily bruised.

Usually after dishwashing Carl and I retired to our separate rooms to practice our respective arts. But tonight, without a word, I followed Carl into his room. He

looked surprised when he turned around to face me, but not in a displeased way. He reached out and initiated sex the way that he always did, the way that I usually liked: by lightly playing his fingers over my ear, until I nodded, giving him permission to move the wandering fingertips down to my breast. But tonight, things seemed more urgent; I took hold of his hand and moved it down to Step Two.

Carl smiled, and before I knew it we'd skipped three and four entirely and we were on five. We did five and then we did it again. Five, five, five.

I awoke the next morning to the sound of the children's voices.

"No, they live in *caves*," Gretel was saying.

"Everyone knows," said Otto, "that in China, dragons are pets. So they live in stables, like horses."

Leaving them to their discussion, I performed my midweek cleaning ritual, happily humming along with the vacuum. But the noise terrified Otto and Gretel. They huddled in the empty drawing room, curled into each other, hands covering each others' ears.

To console them, I uncovered the only dollhouse I'd ever made for myself: a replica of my apartment. Kitchen with tiny dining/living room area, bedroom, back room (which became Carl's; I made everything—the snowshoes, the turntable, the banjo). There was a Carl doll, of course (red beard, blue shirt, bare feet), and an Irene (pale skin, thin dark hair, round glasses). Under the Irene doll's worktable sat a dollhouse, an exact replica, and in the bedroom of that dollhouse was another dollhouse, and inside that one, another.

I let them walk around inside. Otto and Gretel fit right in, as if the house had been designed specifically for them. But still it was uncanny to watch them: The house had never contained anything living before.

The children dragged the Irene and Carl dolls—larger than them, but light and hollow, like scarabs—into the kitchen, and sat them down at the table. Then Gretel climbed into the Irene doll's lap, and Otto into the Carl doll's. It made an odd picture: Irene and Carl stared straight ahead, their wooden faces composed and unmoving, while Otto and Gretel squirmed in their laps.

"Nothing's happening," said Otto, after a while.

"What were you expecting?" I asked.

"Just some kind of special feeling," he said.

"We always wanted to do this with our parents," said Gretel, "but they never let us."

They continued to sit there, though, shifting positions every few seconds as if that might change things. Finally Otto sighed and said, "Let's go play."

They sat down in Irene's room, in front of the dollhouse-in-the-dollhouse.

Otto picked up the Carl and Irene dolls. "I want to make love to you," he said, twitching the Carl doll's body around.

"Otto!" I cried. "Do you even know what that means?"

"Yes," he said. "It's a way of praying. You rub your bodies together and say Oh God, Oh God." He demonstrated with the dolls.

"We saw it happen once, In the back pantry" said Gretel. "We tried it later," said Otto, "But we didn't feel anything."

"That's because brothers and sisters can't do it," I explained. "Also, children don't like it very much. Wait until you're older."

"When will we get older?" asked Otto.

"Well." I thought about this. "I guess I don't know if you *ever* will." The thought made me suddenly, profoundly sad.

"Will you?"

"I'm already older."

"So do you make love?"

"Yes. But not like that."

"Like how, then?"

There was a real answer to this question, but I couldn't imagine giving it. "Well," I began. "For one thing, I don't say 'God.'"

Otto nodded with understanding. "Taking the name of the Lord in vain."

They went back to playing, apparently satisfied.

That night, I pulled Carl toward me before we'd even had dinner. We were in the hallway that connected our two rooms when we started touching; after a few minutes, he murmured, "Can we do it in your room this time?"

I hesitated. We were in a rosebud-gathering, hay-making mood, and I didn't want to ruin it. And though we'd rarely had sex in my room before, it wasn't the same as sharing a bed for the whole night. It was a step I felt able to take.

Then again, there was the matter of the children, napping in the shoebox on my worktable. But they usually napped for several hours, and they'd just gone down, so we were probably all right. And the tiny element of danger actually made me feel excited. Maybe, somewhere deep down, I *wanted* Carl to discover Otto and Gretel.

"All right," I whispered.

Carl and I did several things differently this time. We switched the order of seven and five, and we did number eight backwards.

And it was wonderful. It was so wonderful, in fact, that I completely forgot to notice how we were positioned, not just relative to each other, but relative to other objects in the room. We were midway through a particularly vigorous number nine when Carl's foot swung out sideways from the bed and knocked off the shoebox. It landed on the floor upside down, with a heavy thud.

I held him and I held him and I held him.

I leapt off the bed, and without thinking I started to scream. "You idiot!" I cried. "You big clumsy idiot. Get out, get out, get out!"

"But—"

"Get *out*!"

Carl dashed out of the room, naked, quickly and with an air of great shame.

I slammed the door behind him and locked it. And then I opened the shoebox.

Otto and Gretel were all right. They were sleepy and confused, rubbing their eyes, reaching out for each other, murmuring questions: "Was that a dragon? Was that an ogre? Was that a giant?"

But I couldn't sleep. I lay awake all night, thinking about what I'd done to Carl, about the way I'd shrieked at him, as if *he* were the monster. I could think of only one way to un-ruin things.

I stayed awake all night, trying to gather courage.

I got up early and knocked on Carl's door.

"Come in," he said, feebly.

"I have something to show you," I said.

I held the shoebox out to him, steeling myself for his reaction. My heart was pounding. Silently, he took it from me. He lifted up the lid, peeked in, and then removed the whole lid and stared down at the contents.

"Well," he said. His voice sounded puzzled. "They're beautiful."

And only then did I look over and peer into the shoebox myself. And I screamed, a terrible scream, how I imagine Otto's mother must have screamed when she watched him slip beneath the moving train on that terrible morning—because there were Otto and Gretel, just as I left them, but completely inert and

unalive. They stared blankly up at the ceiling with their painted eyes, the expressions hardened in their empty balsa-wood faces.

I took back the box from Carl. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so sorry."

Because I understood, then, that our marriage was over. I had compromised too much, or perhaps too little.

Carl moved out. A week went by. Like a delicate idea that loses its viability when spoken aloud too soon, the children failed to come alive again. Their pretty wooden bodies lay on their tiny beds, still and horizontal as corpses.

I finished Mrs. Perlman's dollhouse. I wrapped the Otto and Gretel dolls, along with their parents and older brother, carefully in brown paper and twine. I delivered the dollhouse to Mrs. Perlman but did not stay to see her reaction.

I went back to making accessories that I would sell in bulk to dollhouse suppliers: teapots, houseplants, Tiffany lamps. The work was numbing, and I threw myself into it completely.

I avoided the baby clothes.

A few weeks later, I went to Central Park and found the spot where Carl played. I sat on a large rock, from which I could see him but he could not see me.

I sat and listened. He was playing one of the songs of our early courtship:

And he made a fiddle bow from her long yellow hair

Oh, the wind and rain

I sat and listened. It was amazing how small and far away Carl looked, even from this short distance. I took my hand out of my pocket and lifted it up, bracketing Carl's body with my thumb and pointer finger. I sat like this for a minute, holding him between my fingers. I held him and I held him and I held him.

W.M. Lobko
On Moving

That was the summer I could read my name
in the accidental Braille
my gin & tonics left in Irish bars. I caught flies
by sitting still
& let them descend the cave of my throat, explorers,
their wings
would be useless down there. I hoped. I felt
a profound alliance
to the idea of never moving again, but these
alignments collapsed
as my brother did following a night shift keeping
the office building safe,
he'd fallen asleep at his wall of TVs, static angles
gone grey,
footage shot from sharp perspectives. TV did
inform my sleep
that summer, I always had to light out on the run
from some hazy army,
over dells & fields, alleys, cornfields plowed under,
stalks
like rows of bones. Since I seemed more daring
while dreaming I vied

for control of this part of my life: who my rookie
partner would be if the captain
insisted I have one, no matter how I glowered &
said I worked alone,
yeaaaaah/with nobody else, my traveling music
dirty blues riffs
kicked up the bikestand & blew exhaust smoke
in squares' faces,
left on a cross-country mission of desperate import,
once more over
the republic of my own gigantic silhouette, swagger
& zeal, even if
I wasn't free at all those day-shifting summers
shunting watts
to the masses as an intern at the power company's
swank HQ.
Oh electric city that I learned would never need me.
Oh my brother
who found the world eager to heal itself with no scars
to indicate
who you were or what you did, that this is atmospheric
or like oceans
unless you continue to move. Or make, as in tracks
across the country. Or,
simpler, abstract craft, summoned pure forms, bright
hikaro dorudango
in the Arts sections I studied that summer, the mud
spheres Japanese
schoolkids learned to sculpt & polish, shining a portion
of earth for hours
until they gleamed, wholly immobile they stared at their
work except
for that detached, intense "wax-on/wax-off," Daniel-san
deployed it
in his defense in the first *Karate Kid*, another untried
teenage hero

chased by gangs of skeletons, forced to fight by events
nobody controlled.
His quarries weighed the threat he posed, he thwarted
them
with the almost-magic, weirdly-still ambition of the
Crane Kick,
he & I would mimic it on crosshatched orange lawns
in even older summers,
holding, holding still, hold, now William Wallace
with his ranks
of Scotsmen whose extra-long pikes lay hidden until
the English cavalry
was just about to break upon them. Did he feel he'd
held his place too long
& couldn't regain control, the planes in action flicks
that vector in on crags,
you can't wrench the yoke up from where it's drifted—
after all he died
at the feet of mountains. That was the summer I raced
up peaks
& did not stop at his house, who had time for that
on such a solo flight,
I used to think like that, like Lennon, how brother,
our band broke up,
& I don't believe in Lobkos, I just believe in me,
that sort of thing that summer
I loafed one critical Sunday in Strawberry Fields where
the flowers arranged
in a large Peace sign stayed put because of the efforts
of a sad former
welterweight in purple Zubaz pants. A strummed guitar
from the benches
where some tourists lounged away the day but none
so long as I would lounge,
gathering energies, eyes closed so I could feel I bobbed
on the Amazon,

fishing, a monster on my line when who comes running
from the jungle,
but Indiana Jones, or Jon, who can tell, the pontoons
of my seaplane
thunking with spears those lithe Hovito hunters hurled
so well on the fly—
Well, so much for fishing, so much for that swim, & how
will he possibly
make it now? I thought, these engines thrum. I thought,
I'm not leaving without him.

Jane Lewty
1989, Hillsborough, Sheffield, U.K.

[A police officer was assigned to each body, issued with a sponge to wipe the faces so that a Polaroid picture could be taken. The photographs would be the identification before relatives were allowed to see.]

An so anfield, far. hillsbro boys pinched out

of the wetly walled in
buttoned-up upright, farther just a little farther and broken
no mean or minute left

Radio bitcrusher type efffect down to 6-bit, OR a distortion. What what type?

Horses

Cutt off lows up to 800Hz sawtooth on screen on air on fence. Don't close

It, whoever said open

over and out was said
The low volume white noise, love that, great, thanks was said Can't hear them just see
them, was said, can't hear you. Odd. Hear me: AFTER doing all the above, increase

that sharp treble presence, optionally
or don't.

The first wave with their silver cuts
crosshatch pitch pattern on every face.

Mini-squares from wire.

Dying in linetool timber fall-light and shadow.

Sleep now preciousnesses, so say the forums. You will need all the elements of the river to clean you.
You will be the man on the hoarding forever.

My small my only, my most flow of all water, all crowd, you smithson on the way home, far.

Sleep now hush now. Never mind the punctual three.

Circuit someone, somewhere

Circuit someone, somewhere
circuit—crack—chip
someone says listen.

Nuance and pace plays, how I miss you, what a tune, it makes me say *we*—

We, the pale arrivals, pale sedentary
see our last—
our last roofs, mountings,
awnings go down, tele—poles
wait, where do we need
to be?

In water we go round
and we go round.

In all water
is all compounds
is this town, its hard quarry
its calcite weathers, redbrick and radial—

In our town, our river runs
it runs always
as if over stones.

ESSAY

Chris Arthur
How's the Enemy?

About ninety minutes' walk from where I'm sitting writing this, there's a curious feature of the landscape called "the Rock and Spindle." I'm in St. Andrews, whose university—founded in 1413—is the oldest in Scotland. The town is also famous as the home of golf. Walk from here in the opposite direction to the Rock and Spindle and in twenty minutes you'll reach the Royal and Ancient Club. If a 600-year-old university and a golf club that traces its founding back to 1754 are not enough to establish the town's historical credentials, St. Andrews also boasts an impressive ruined cathedral, the original structure of which dates from the twelfth century. But all these venerable human institutions are dwarfed by the age of the Rock and Spindle. It's some 300 million years old.

St. Andrews has two main beaches. The West Sands—two miles long—is by far the larger and better known, made famous by the opening sequence of the film *Chariots of Fire*. It's here that Eric Liddell and the rest of the 1922 British Olympic team are shown training, running in their old-fashioned white shorts and singlets along the water's edge. The smaller East Sands stretches from the harbour to the foot of Kinkell Braes, at which point you can join the thread of a narrow footpath that shadows the shore's nips and tucks like a nerve, leading to Boarhills, Kingsbarns, Crail, Anstruther, Pittenweem, and Fife's other coastal villages, some of which have a history as long and interesting as St. Andrews. Start at Kinkell Braes and in less than a mile the path will bring you to the Rock and Spindle. It's not signposted, but you'll know you've reached it well enough—it's an unmistakeable landmark.

*

The Rock and Spindle stands alone in a small bay. It's an upright column of rock, perhaps thirty feet high, with a kind of swollen circular base, the flattened face of which is marked with curious radial striations suggestive of a giant spinning wheel, hence the name. It has a distinctly phallic air to it. Were it in India rather than Scotland, one would be forgiven for thinking it might be some sort of gigantic Shiva lingam, one of those frankly penile pillars of devotion to the great Hindu god that dot the Indian countryside. Such explicitly sensual religiousness, homage to a deity perceived as both erotic and ascetic, would seem outlandish here. The colorful exuberance of the Hindu pantheon is a world away from the strictures of John Knox, who preached in St. Andrews; Hinduism's ability to accommodate, if not absorb, a diversity of views is alien to the brutal sectarian antagonisms of Scottish religious history. There are brass markers set into some of the town's cobbled streets, indicating where, in the sixteenth century, Protestant martyrs were burned at the stake for heresy. But despite the austerely Calvinist outlook cultivated hereabouts since the Reformation, it would be an improbably chaste mind, I think, that—as the Rock and Spindle comes into view—would not get some impression, however fleeting or denied, of an erect male member, its hard tumescence rising from the spindle's swollen bulb.

Whatever its sexually symbolic potential may be, the Rock and Spindle is no lingam cast by human hands but a naturally occurring feature. It's a volcanic plug, marking out in stone where a vent once ran hot and liquid, spouting the fiery ejaculate of the earth's magma. The roaring throat of the volcano that erupted here in the Lower Carboniferous age has slowly been weathered away until this single tracheal thread of basanite—a variety of basalt—has been left like a final frozen scream of fury cooling over the aeons. Volcanic ash and debris would once have sheathed this spurting vent. But its camouflaging cone has long since been eroded away to nothing, leaving behind this single finger of congealed stone to point at itself and mark where the membrane of the now quietened earth was once riven by eruption. It stands isolated and faintly absurd in the ragged remains of what was once a crater but has now become just part of the landscape, littered with sand and rocks and sea.

I've not walked to the Rock and Spindle for perhaps a year. It came to mind, improbably enough, when I was thinking of a favorite expression used by my friend and teacher Arnold Benington. The expression had nothing to do with volcanoes, still less with Shiva lingams, but its persistence in my mind over many years makes

it seem kin to this stubbornly enduring basalt plug. Like the Rock and Spindle's obvious singularity, its lonely upthrust drawing the eye of every walker to its form, Arnold's *How's the Enemy?* also had an air of difference about it; it didn't sit flush with the surface of everyday conversation, but rather jutted out of the usual metalling with which we pave the pathways of our talk. It always drew attention to itself, made listeners stumble, think they had misheard. Moreover, just as the Rock and Spindle's faintly ridiculous shape, its proximity to the ribald if not grotesque, belies the weight of its history, the interest of its story, so beneath Arnold's strange locution lay depths of significance unsuspected on first hearing—when one's immediate inclination was to mock what seemed a quaint archaism, rather than meditate on what it might portend.

The Rock and Spindle is no lingam cast by human hands but a naturally occurring feature. It's a volcanic plug.

To begin with, Arnold was always "Sir," or "Mr. Benington." He was my biology teacher at Friends' School Lisburn. Friends', as its name suggests, is a Quaker school, Lisburn a County Antrim town (granted city status in 2002) some eight miles from Belfast. I lived there until I was eighteen. Arnold was an active and committed Quaker. My agnosticism—if the swathe of shifting uncertainties that came to characterize my outlook warrants such a term—was a source of considerable concern to him. An educator rather than an evangelist, he never tried to pull me into the same niche of Christian believing he occupied with such secure assurance. Instead, he sought only to increase my depth of learning about the plants and animals around me, confident that faith is born from knowledge of the natural world, rather than through any kind of proselytizing coercion. He seemed to see in nature incontrovertible evidence for a benevolent creator. He was an all-around naturalist, interested in wildflowers, insects, birds, and trees—life in all its myriad diversity of forms—but raptors were his special passion. Their fierce beauty entranced and lured him. Incredibly to me, he saw no contradiction between a loving God and the violent death routinely meted out by these merciless avian predators. For me, such bloodiness raised questions. I found it impossible to reconcile the butchery of a sparrowhawk kill with the unfailing compassion with which Arnold credited his

God. Often its prey is not dead when the hawk starts to eat it, hacking and slashing with its hooked beak, hungrily devouring the shreds of living meat. Such a brutal communion seemed to me no likely harbinger of any overarching benevolence.

Arnold was one of those rare teachers who can pass on the fire of their interest, skillfully feeding enough material to keep it burning brightly without blanketing the embers with a smothering weight of information. He was expert at fostering that sense of novelty, exploration, enjoyment, and discovery that keeps an interest vital. He was inspiring too in the out-of-school activities he encouraged—making a butterfly garden in a neglected corner of the school grounds, organizing bird-watching trips (some as far afield as Iceland), running a natural-history society and taxidermy club. I didn't know it at the time, but was unsurprised when I discovered that in the midst of Ulster's Troubles, in addition to all he did at school, Arnold was involved in reconciliation work between the country's warring faiths. He made visits to a school in one of Belfast's most notorious Catholic enclaves, quietly forging links of understanding and affectionate regard with the other tribe, of whom we knew as little as they knew of us. For years, Ulster society operated a kind of religious apartheid that was almost invisible to outsiders. Protestants and Catholics lived, worked, and were educated apart. Their mutual estrangement—and frequent demonization—provided the poisoned wellspring that fed the violence that so disfigured the country's history.

He sought only to increase my depth of learning about the plants and animals around me, confident that faith is born from knowledge of the natural world.

As I grew older and Arnold became a friend, "Sir" or "Mr. Benington" slowly gave way to using his Christian name. Given the age difference between us—fifty-two years—and the respect in which I held him, it was not an easy transition. I found it hard to take those first few steps into the spoken familiarity of "Arnold."

Despite the time we spent together, much of it "in the field" as he termed it; despite our many conversations; although I can picture his face precisely, bring back to mind without effort his gestures, the exact timbre of his voice; though he's someone I held in high esteem and listened to both in and outside the classroom, I can't

remember now verbatim anything he *said*—beyond two odd, isolated phrases. I suppose talk wears a kind of camouflage when it comes to recalling it, so that memory is unable to pick it out—it simply merges with the spoken landscape of the past and becomes more or less invisible beyond approximation. The wash of words between us is so much a part of us, so constant and commonplace an accompaniment to the moments we inhabit, that expecting it to be remembered in any detail would be as unreasonable as expecting memory to grasp the air that surrounds us. In any case, a word-for-word preservation of our discourse would soon overload the mind, risk clogging the operation of its other functions.

Conversation is, I think, as liable to erosion as volcanic ash; in the end, all that time's weathering leaves intact are a few isolated columns of singular expression. Their ability to perdure, their resistance to erosion, seems rarely if ever linked to any intrinsic significance. On the contrary, many of these verbal Rock and Spindles seem markedly trivial. For instance, one of my uncle's utterances over all the years I knew him have only left the residue of a single whimsical vocable—*boys-a-boys,* his gentle exclamation of wonderment or surprise, interspersed with a kind of tutting shaking of the head, whenever he was listening to some exciting piece of news. Likewise the wraith-like wordy revenant to which a much-loved neighbor's talk has now been reduced, consists of his oft-repeated *wouldn't ye know*; what was once a wholly insignificant phrase, a verbal tic peppering his intelligent and amusing diction, has swollen since his death, grown almost monstrous, all but eclipsing what it once merely punctuated. In a similar manner *Lorblessus!*—my grandmother's contraction of "Lord bless us," exclaimed with the genteel reserve of her generation where mine might come out with "Jesus Christ!" or worse—has become a kind of grotesque idol of crude idiom beneath the shadow of whose recall the delicate substance of what she said has been sacrificed. The gross aural physiognomy of *Lorblessus* has all but obliterated the finer features of her talk. No doubt it is the promise of durability that it offers that confers upon writing some of its allure; inscribed upon the page we can invest our thoughts, our spoken words, our feelings with a basalt-like permanence quite different from the transience of their unwritten occurrence.

Whenever I think of Arnold now, the two strange verbal plugs that stand upright in memory's weathered crater are: *Tight lines!* and *How's the Enemy?* However unimportant—ridiculous—they sound, this is what catches on the hooks of recollection. As the mind's ear sweeps back across the vanished vistas of our talk together, all

the words that we exchanged, it's these odd pillars that break the flat surface of forgetfulness, rising out of the anonymous dust of thousands of forgotten sentences.

"*Tight lines!*" was the cheery greeting Arnold called out to any fishermen we passed. One wood we visited frequently to watch sparrowhawks was bordered by a lake, popular with local anglers. Standing in their green thigh-waders, patiently casting their lines into the waters, most of them—especially the younger ones—were bemused by this tersely phrased expression of good luck, shouted out as we went by without any other comment. I can still recall the expression of one angler, no older than I was. He looked at Arnold as if he was certainly mad, possibly dangerous. The cry of "*Tight lines!*" engendered fearful incomprehension. I can understand his apprehension, though I didn't then. Arnold was a striking figure—keen eyed, as fierce looking as one of the raptors he adored, and with a shock of white hair emphasizing the craggy, character-laden features of his weather-beaten face. He had something of the air of an Old Testament prophet; his aura of passionate engagement with the natural world carried an edge of something almost threatening, certainly to be wary of. To find such a figure suddenly bearing down on you by a lonely Ulster lakeside, not far from where sectarian atrocity had recently been perpetrated, would be worrying enough, even without his mouthing of apparent gibberish. It's no wonder the boy angler was unnerved. I was reminded of "*Tight lines!*" recently when I was reading John Gimlette's *Theatre of Fish*, a marvelous account of his journeys through Newfoundland and Labrador. Gimlette records the traditional greeting locals used to shout to Newfoundland sealers as they set sail for their annual harvest. Not "*Tight lines!*" but "*Bloody decks!*" Had Arnold shouted out this more alarming Newfoundland expression of good hunting, I doubt whether the boy could have looked any more puzzled or alarmed.

"*How's the Enemy?*" was Arnold's customary way of asking what time it was when we were "in the field." Or, more precisely, how long we had left before, reluctantly, we had to call it a day and head back into town. We both lived in Lisburn's suburbs then, near the railway station, a pleasant enough locale but entirely inferior in Arnold's estimation to the precious moments he could spend in the countryside, glorying in its natural wonders.

The first time he asked me "*How's the Enemy?*" I'd no idea what he meant. Contemporaries I've tried it out on are likewise left bamboozled by this expression. Some dictionaries give "*How goes the Enemy?*" as a colloquialism for "What time is it?" and suggest it was a popular way of asking the time in the nineteenth and early-

twentieth centuries (improbably derived from a catchphrase in Frederick Reynolds' 1789 play, *The Dramatist*). It's evidently one of those sayings whose currency for one generation isn't carried over to the next, or, if it is, its transition must be localized and uncertain. Perhaps there are some parts of the English-speaking world today where "*How's the Enemy?*" would still be recognized as legal tender, but for me it was as archaic as a farthing or gold sovereign. After my initial incomprehension, I quickly grew accustomed to the phrase and thought no more about it; it was just one of Arnold's verbal mannerisms. It was only much later—the Enemy having advanced further against me, felling Arnold as it came (he died in 1982)—that I started to think about the implications embedded in this odd locution. Gradually, his peculiar question took on a depth of resonance I never suspected in those affectionately remembered days together "in the field."

Should time really be regarded as our Enemy (the capitalization was always implicit in the manner of Arnold's asking)? Despite his casually casting it as foe each time he asked what time it was, I suspect that had he stopped to consider the matter, he'd soon have parlayed with his old Enemy and brought it into the sunny purview of his optimistic outlook. The natural world—as he saw it—provided abundantly persuasive proof of the God he believed in. Time is the element underpinning—allowing—our experience of that world. It is the canvas enabling the seasons to be painted, the stuff out of which are forged the hooks of minutes, hours, and days on which life hangs its colorful apparel. Time is the medium that brokers the hatching of a hawk's egg high in a swaying spruce tree, allows the delicate mechanisms of momentum that see the fluffy chick fledge into adult raptor, each unfolding nuance of development pegged and knotted by the cord of time, the umbilical drip feed of nanoseconds swelling to encompass not only the life of every individual bird but the existence of this bloodline as it traces out its evolution and continuance from archaeopteryx and before, threading through the aeons.

Arnold read reinforcement of his faith out of whatever script the world presented. Time provides the blank pages on which are written all the stories that caught his attention. As such, he would have somehow accommodated it within his welcoming theology. I don't mean to suggest by this any naivety or dishonesty in the way he viewed the world. It's not as if he turned a blind eye to the violence that abounds in nature. He didn't hurry over or ignore the pages showing blood and death. No more was he blind to the dark side of our humanness; he'd looked at Belfast's bigotry up close, witnessed the tragedies it birthed. It's more that he pos-

sessed an ability to see benevolent design even in ugly places—or perhaps he was afflicted (blessed?) with a kind of color blindness when it came to horror, so that its terrible opacity, the fact that no light shines through it, went unseen.

I often wish I could read things the way he did, but while Arnold's outlook inclined toward the "healthy minded," mine is more geared to a "sick souled" mentality—to use the divisions of William James' great typology. This Jamesian dichotomy divides us into those who affirm, and those who question, life's essential goodness. However much he referred to it as "the Enemy," time too would have succumbed to the positive theistic hue that stained Arnold's understanding of existence in such robustly cheerful Christian colors. Perhaps, had his upbringing encountered a more plural and contested scene, something that went beyond Ulster's cramped religious duopoly, the bright primary colors of his faith might have been chipped and streaked, muddied with a whole spectrum of less certain, more subtle shades. Stand beside the rock and spindle certainties of Christian doctrine—a linear trajectory through time for every life, begun at birth, ended at death, judged thereafter—the cyclical complexity of a Hindu worldview, and the currents in time's waters move in altogether different patterns. Can we be sure the narrow path we follow through the days is something plainly linear? How can we know the trajectory we're set on isn't covertly, intricately looped?

How's the Enemy? There are so many ways in which we can pace out its condition, measure how it leans its intangible weight against us, how its life-giving, death-dealing embrace is contoured into stranglehold or caress. If you set out from where I'm writing this, leaving at noon and walking until six, following Fife's coastal path from the end of the East Sands, it would take you way beyond the Rock and Spindle—perhaps as far as Crail or even Anstruther. It took that time—six hours—to burn Patrick Campbell at the stake in 1528. The spot where he died is marked by a monogram of his initials set into St. Andrews' North Street. *How's the Enemy?* It allows the time for execution, for agony and ecstasy. It lets 300 million years pass between the forming of the volcanic plug at the Rock and Spindle and our perception of it today. It gives the minutes needed for a sparrowhawk chick to peck its way out of its egg, the decades required to reach maturity by the tree that bears its nest, the choking minutes gasped by those herded into Nazi gas chambers. *How's the Enemy?* Sometimes it appears gargantuan, draped in the 4.5 billion years that have elapsed since the universe was written on its fabric; or we can cleave it into comfortable dimensions that are easy enough to handle—like the ten minutes

taken to read from the first word of this essay to here. Set side by side, the measures grate and jar, rip the canvas of any picture that tries to place time within the neatly calibrated frame of benign purpose. Could Arnold's theodicy really have coped with seeing the conflicting expressions that writhe and jolt and leer across the face of his old Enemy?

Each moment that we live moves us simultaneously further from and closer to enormities of time in which we don't exist. The Enemy is at once the embrace that holds everything in its effortless containment—both delicate and awesome in the encompassment it effects—and the unstoppable leak in every life, every object; the conduit of universal loss. No wonder the eighteenth-century Irish thinker Bishop George Berkeley was moved to remark (echoing St. Augustine's famous perplexity) that when trying to understand time he found himself "embrangled in inextricable difficulties." There are no easy tight lines of philosophical enlightenment when we come to grapple with it.

What was once a wholly insignificant phrase, a verbal tic peppering his intelligent and amusing diction, has swollen since his death, grown almost monstrous.

Someday soon I'll walk to the Rock and Spindle again, my mind an embranglement of sparrowhawks and slaughter, gods and martyrs, enmity and friendship, remembered faces, forgotten conversations, and the totems of a few odd phrases. If, as I sometimes do, I follow a route that takes me past the cluster of houses on the quayside of St. Andrews harbor, I'll derive a moment's wry amusement from the fact that I'll pass Shiva, Lord of Destruction and Creation, before reaching the East Sands. In a ground floor window there—no more than a stone's throw from the walls of the cathedral—a large brass statue of the dancing Shiva sits on the inner sill. How horrified the monks would have been to see this, to their eyes a pagan idol, here in the heartland of their faith; how disapproving Knox and his ilk would have been at this exuberant expression of divinity! This form of the god—the so-called Shiva Nataraja, or Shiva as Lord of the Dance—is an eloquent expression of time and birth and death, and "that gleam in the midst of a long night" (as Poincaré dubs the marvel of our sentience). Both an aesthetic and symbolic masterpiece, the Shiva Nataraja is now widely regarded as one of the triumphs of Hindu art, blending in

a single image a wealth of religious vision with an essential simplicity of form. Its aesthetic merits have not gone unnoticed in the West, where no less an authority than Rodin has praised its beauty. Titus Burckhardt suggests that it is perhaps "the most prefect fruit of Hindu art"; its metaphysical potency has moved that great commentator on Eastern art and philosophy Heinrich Zimmer to write some of his most lyrical passages in explication of what the image means.

The Nataraja shows Shiva as an androgynous figure, neither male nor female, dancing life into and out of existence within a ring of flames, his feet trampling the demon of ignorance, his four arms laden with icons of becoming, extinction, continuance, and the intricate interconnections that flow between them. In this complex diagram of time and space, of life and death and the riddle of existence, there is a consummately realized portrait of the Enemy who has reduced billions of our conversations to nothingness and provided the echo chamber of history in which all our talk reverberates. Shiva's *prabhamandala*—the ring of flames within which s/he is shown dancing—and the naked flame held in one of the deity's four hands, ignite a collision of fiery images in my mind. The volcanic light flickering upon an ancient landscape; the campfires kindled in our ancestral caves; stakes lit here in this small coastal town; the countless funeral pyres far off along the Shiva-haunted Ganges, where the newborn and the dead are not seen as beginning and end but as points in an arc that wheels through aeons. Can we find any warmth of meaning at such flames? Do they illumine more than their, in the end, incomprehensible incandescence?

When I reach the Rock and Spindle, I'll put my hand upon the ancient stone surface as reverently as if it were a lingam I believed in. "*How's the Enemy?*" I'll whisper affectionately, as if greeting an old though sometimes irksome friend who never tires of posing "inextricable (yet entrancing) difficulties." I know the hard stone column will remain fixed and cold and utterly unresponsive, but it will feel as if the very atoms jangle beneath my touch in a dance in which it's hard to know what's fire, what's ice, and whether it's a god or demon, or just the echo of our own lonely steps across incomprehensible distances, that partners our brief pirouette into oblivion.

STORY

Doug Ramspeck
Crow

At school, the playground fence made a pattern of light against the ground. It was triangular light. The boy bent down and touched the shape with his fingers. The asphalt had cracks in it out of which grass grew, out of which shapes grew.

Around him, voices lifted like waves in a distant sea. Around him, boys and girls rushed everywhere but not too close.

Sometimes whole days passed like a whisper.

On the bus home he felt the railroad tracks jiggling beneath him. Then, past the reservoir, the doors whooshed open. He climbed down. Dust rose into the air as though ghosts were returning to the world. There wasn't another house in sight. Just yellow paint above the limestone.

"There's a snack on the table," his mother said.

Past the back yard was an open field and a thin finger of creek. The boy walked there before supper, searching. He found a small green snake and chased it through the undergrowth until it disappeared. He found a butterfly wild and erratic in the air. The butterfly couldn't decide where it was headed.

He heard his mother calling. These days it was just the two of them. His father's clothes were still in the closet, the boots still in the garage, but his mother made the absence sound like snow in winter that covers the earth and will be there forever, as though that white is as permanent as stone.

After supper his mother had to drive over to her sister's. She told him not to leave the house. In the garage, high up, he found his father's rifle. He'd learned to bring a chair out from the kitchen.

His father, back when there was snow on the ground, had taught him to work the bolt. The bullets were in a box that opened with a cardboard flap. He gripped one bullet between his thumb and forefinger, the way he'd been taught. He fed it into the opening, pointed side first.

There were crows in the field. Black wings. The color of dirt. His father had called them dirt birds. Beautiful dirt birds. The boy felt the tall grass brushing his body. Saw insects rising like spirits from the swales.

He threw the bird up into the air. Fly, he thought.

Night was gathering its dark hallway in the trees, but the light, here, was trapped. He pointed the rifle the way he'd been taught. He squeezed the trigger the way he'd been taught.

The explosion was as loud as horse hooves coming toward you in a dream.

At first, for two days, he kept the bird hidden back in the closet. It had black eyes. Black beak. You could touch the black feathers with your fingers.

Sometimes he brought it into bed with him. The bird had a quiet voice. In the field it had called out to the clouds, but now it held itself as still as the silence between heartbeats.

Crow, he called it in his thoughts. And he said, aloud, "Crow."

He plucked one feather and brought it with him to school. He pulled it out while he was sitting at his desk. He ran his fingers across it in the playground. You could stroke the feather like petting a cat.

It rained that afternoon. He climbed from the bus and found worms crawling on the driveway. He lifted one and it wriggled in his fingers. When his mother wasn't watching, he brought the worm to his room and touched it to the crow's beak.

"What stinks in here?" his mother asked when she was tucking him in that night.

He said, Nothing.

She said, "Something stinks in here."

He said, Silence.

The next day he carried Crow out the back door to his father's toolshed. There was a black tarp. He hid the bird beneath it.

He dreamed that night that the bird had been nailed to a tree and was trying to escape. The wings thrashed. The bird made a sound like an angry wasp.

On Saturday he carried the creature into the field. The thin trickle of creek was a living brown. He held the bird's beak to the water.

Drink, he thought.

Later he held Crow in his palms, then threw the bird up into the air.

Fly, he thought.

He brought Crow back into the house, down into the basement. His mother's washing machine and dryer were a restless thrum. He sat on the cement floor with Crow in his lap.

He closed his eyes and pictured the return of winter. Saw snow falling from the sky, making everything the same. Imagined snow covering Crow until even his wings were white.

Imagined Crow lifting into air while white flakes battered his white body.

Stephen Longfellow
Little Prayers to St. Sisyphus

Pray for us who have
wheels beyond counting,

who have wheels enough
to make you cry.

*

Bringer of Hope
in your eternal task,

we remember:
you cheated death twice

and lived to old age
despite a god's anger.

*

Patron saint
of the sine wave,

of rhythm
and period,

of dancing
and circles,

You, who turns up smiling
balanced on your bicycle

in our midnight games
of solitaire,

remember us.

*

To the crazy lady under
the overpass,

who each evening pushes
her shopping cart

up to a drum of fire
and sings, sweet Sisyphus,

to her we offer up
our change.

Second Sight

The sun is as white as the snow this morning,
low on the horizon, without heat, chaste.

Her fingers touch the lace
of ice-bound trees, move on, enter the eye,

find their way to me, deliver
too much careless splendor.

Close relative to infinity—
who can hold onto such a thing?

*

Dust blooms everywhere within a stone mill in December
where stories of open grillwork are powdered

as though with the snow outside. I have climbed
the stair grates upward, my eyes baffled

by a great volume of webbed air, a layered filigree
of steel catwalks and pipes. Here and there,

in the unheated space the beasts that eat stone
are hunkered down as though sleeping out

a millennium of winter. Dirty windows filter
in translucent gold, a sea of saffron breath

filling a concrete pillow. Near the roof the mystery
of real feathers lies everywhere until I see

a single pigeon huddled in a corner,
maybe too sick to move, or simply too cold,

and I am unsure of the dark glitter
of its eye in all this stone softness.

*

For divination then, an eight ball,
a bathysphere in reverse,

and floating out of the fathoms
hoarded in its dark eye,

a bloodless hand waves
against the scratched porthole

—a slow gesture of recognition
in murky water under ice—

then sinks back down into sleep.
Was the answer *Yes* or was it

No?

*

On a night train, half gestures flash
upon my window. In the doorway of a tenement,

two figures stand together, lean into each other,
talking. Here and gone. I provide them with lives

so I can provide them with names
—Dear Heart, True love—

Later, above an untamed stillness of naked branches,
clouds move slowly in the dim glow of distant cities

as though fish stunned by the cold.

EXCERPT

Angel Igov
A Short Tale of Shame

Translated from Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

The girl next to him fell silent and it took Krustev a while to realize that she had fallen asleep. He looked in the rear-view mirror: the other two kids were also dozing in the back seat. He himself had hardly slept the last few nights and longed to feel drowsy. Since the middle of April he had been suffering from insomnia more and more frequently. He refused to take pills; he put on his jacket, went out into the garden, and stared at the patterns on the birch trees for hours. They were perfect in their spontaneity.

The noonday sun made people sleepy and insects crazy. Krustev was driving quickly and from time to time a black fly would hit the windshield with a dull thud. There was a fly, now there's not. Period. I'm surrounded by sleepers, Krustev said to himself. Instead of envy, he felt claustrophobia: the teenagers' triune sleep pulsated in rhythm with their deep breathing, each breath filling the car to its utmost limits and pressing Krustev to the wheel—a fluffy, shapeless white mass, receding and swelling again, a sea of sleep, a white sea, the Aegean, they were traveling toward it, yet it had already slipped into their car.

The phone of the girl next to him buzzed like a fly: Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name, so they listen to '60s music. Krustev felt flattered, as if he had written the song. He hadn't written it, but he had played it in one of his wilder bands back in the day, which was called Stinkweed—archeologists had just discovered the ancient sanctuary near the village of Stinkweed, shades of pagan priests and memory-weary stones. The singer, for his part, chewed stinkweed and spent whole days in the kingdom of the shades. The band didn't last long.

The girl stirred, dug her phone out of her cargo pants and rasped: Hello? She explained that she couldn't go wherever they were inviting her because she was on her way to the Aegean Sea. The other end of the line was apparently envious. The date was put off for some other awakening. Krustev didn't start a conversation with her. He could sense her clumsily cleaning off the sleep that had clung to her so strongly precisely because it had been so short. The girl sighed and rubbed her eyes.

I know you, she said suddenly. Me? You. You're Elena's dad. Krustev let out a laugh, only later would he realize how long it had been since that had happened. I can't deny it, he said, and who are you? Maya. I've known Elena since we were kids. Do you remember me?

Maya. A fleeting memory of a studious little blonde girl who perhaps sat next to his daughter in elementary school carelessly flitted through Krustev's mind. The young woman now sitting on the other side of the stick shift was also blonde, but she didn't look too studious. Maya. I think I do remember you, Krustev said. We went to the same grade school, Maya continued, then we lost touch, but then we found each other again. It was really funny, because both of us had changed so much that it was like we were meeting again for the first time. But we liked each other again. She's in America now, Krustev said. I know, said Maya, we used to see each other pretty often before she left, once she had a party at your place and I saw your picture there, otherwise I wouldn't have recognized you. Krustev mentally noted the compliment. The family picture which hung in a frame in the living room was taken five years ago. He had been only twenty-five when his daughter was born. She was now twenty, so that meant that's how old the girl next to him was. Sometimes it occurred to him that he was getting old, just as it occurs to you that you've forgotten to call an old acquaintance whom you ran into on the street and promised to call. He rubbed his stubbly face with his palm. Have you kept in touch since she's been there? Actually, no, Maya said, she's somehow dropped off the radar. Or maybe I have. Krustev could smell some kind of intrigue, but he left it for later, he had fired off his questions solely to find out whether the girl knew something of the events in his family, that's how various concerned relatives and business partners, whose repulsively soft and sweaty hands reached out to squeeze him in insipid sympathy, put it, but since she hadn't been in touch with Elena, most likely she didn't know. He was tired of everyone knowing. That's why he'd taken off in his car. The trees along the roadside didn't know.

It hadn't even crossed his mind to pick up hitchhikers along the way, in fact, he had hardly seen any hitchhikers in recent years; the person who until recently had

hitchhiked either now had a car or had left for somewhere much further away, like his daughter. She had hitched a lot in high school, that is, her official stories always said otherwise, but Krustev and her mother could tell, they worried, but kept quiet, after all, they were young enough to remember the stunts they had pulled at her age. Only Elena seemed not to know that they knew she hitchhiked, and for quite some time Krustev wondered what the point of this secrecy was, but afterwards decided that his daughter simply needed to keep secrets from her parents and while it had seemed laughable to him at first, later he accepted it as normal. Over the past few years, however, hitchhikers had become few and far between, most often foreign couples with huge backpacks, with skin tanned and hair bleached by the sun, sometimes he stopped for them, just for some company, but their stories inevitably turned out to be identical, the stories of young, curious Europeans wading into the weed patch of Balkan exoticism, and he had almost stopped picking people up, he only did it when some completely sudden impulse whispered to him and in those cases he never regretted it. Now that same impulse had stopped him in that place, the first straight stretch since he had entered the mountains, and he was surprised that such a place even existed, a long sigh in the road before the next bend. There were three of them. The other girl and the young man were still dozing in the back seat and Krustev suspected they had also seen his picture in the living room. He felt a slightly unpleasant tickle: he was driving strangers who had been in his house and had probably even properly trashed it, as usually happened at Elena's parties. But perhaps they were his stroke of luck, they had a destination, they wanted to reach Thasos. He envied them. He had simply gathered up some luggage, checked his credit cards, and taken off in the car just like that, to wherever he felt like. And when he had stopped for them, and they had asked where he was headed, he had frankly admitted that he didn't know, it hadn't crossed his mind the whole morning that he didn't know where he was going. Now this is what I call hitching, the black-haired girl declared, as she settled into the back seat. He jammed their backpacks into the trunk and said since they were going to Thasos, he would drive them to the port at Datum, but he didn't think—it only fleetingly occurred to him—why

He was tired of everyone knowing. That's why he'd taken off in his car. The trees along the roadside didn't know.

shouldn't he, too, continue on to the island by ferryboat, maybe even along with them, he didn't so much need the company—he needed to know where he was going. Did this make him a tagalong, but hey, they were the ones who had gotten into his car.

So, Maya piped up, why did you just take off in your car? Krustev was silent for a moment, then replied why not? That's great, if you can get away with it, the girl murmured, Krustev grunted. I guess I didn't have a choice, he said, but I'll explain it to you later. She kept quiet. She was surely looking at him in confusion, but he avoided her gaze and stared at the road. What should he say now? Fortunately, the backseat came to life, hey, we actually fell asleep, the young man yawned. You know who's driving us, Maya turned to him. Elena's dad. Boril Krustev.

Krustev almost never heard his full name these days. When he was young, he had liked stating it in a defiant tone, it uncompromisingly drove home his Slavic descent, and in the '80s that could stir up trouble for you in the capital, but Krustev had learned to wield it like a sword, a cold weapon which drew blood. Afterwards, of course, things had settled down, at the moment being a Slav in Thrace was no worse than being an Illyrian or Paeonian, and it was definitely much better than being a Dacian. Since the accepted wisdom back then was that Slavs could either work the fields or sing mournful songs, Krustev left the fields to his grandfather and started playing, his music grew ever less mournful and they even became stars of sorts, and later it was no longer so important whether you were a Slav and after he left his last and most successful group, everything had worked out amazingly easily for him, the promotion agency, the big concerts, and the stores for audio-visual equipment alongside that, he had become comfortably wealthy and it was as if this made him less of a Slav, or people just didn't care so much about that now, and he didn't care, either.

The young man was worked up about something else, however, since he was Boril Krustev, was he playing anywhere these days? No, only for fun, and even then rarely, Krustev said, skipping over the fact that that, too, had not happened to him in a long time, he hadn't played in public for ten years now, since Euphoria had broken up. Then everyone from the group had set out on their own paths and all those paths led equally far from music, toward the world of private business, which had opened up with liberal aplomb, from the very beginning Krustev had decided that he would bring foreign bands to play in Thrace and wouldn't you know, it had worked out; sometimes, going back over his memories, it positively spooked him to think how badly he had wanted to break into that business without any cash, with

only his love of music and the connections he had made abroad, and how quickly everything had taken off, those were crazy times, he would tell himself, crazy times. The young man really liked Euphoria, however, especially the first album, and hinted that they could get back together at some point, isn't that what usually happens, the dinosaurs of rock suddenly get back together and go on tour. Krustev chuckled despite himself. So they already counted him as a dinosaur. This was getting more fun by the minute, he had done right in picking them up. The young man kept chattering on about Euphoria and Krustev was thankful that he didn't mention his daughter at all, even though he knew that it would come up at some point, but didn't he miss the rock-and-roll lifestyle sometimes? Krustev started to explain that when he had been his age (he mentally smacked himself for the expression) he was just getting into those things and they had seemed so romantic to him, music, freedom, being on the road, people loving you, getting into you, and playing like crazy; but there's also the flipside of the coin, all the slogging, exhaustion, alcohol, drugs and fights of every kind, because you've teamed up with people who all think that they're the shit, believe me, Krustev said, if I could turn back time, I'd spare myself at least half of all that. He inhaled more noisily than he meant to. He hadn't strung so many sentences together for months and he wasn't even sure it was sincere, actually he was sure that it wasn't sincere, but he badly needed to reject his entire past, especially now, to transform himself merely into the person behind the wheel, with no history, no life and no death, a function of the highway, the mileage. So, he's a pureblooded Thracian, probably of communist stock at that. You're not a musician, are you, Spartacus? Well, no, actually, it doesn't really go with his name, the black-haired girl suddenly chimed in, I mean, if he'd been Orpheus . . . Since Sirma's also awake, our little clique is now at full strength, Maya said next to him. I've been awake for a long time, if you really want to know, I was listening to you and thinking about various things; Sirma, nice to meet you, she moved so that Krustev could see her in the mirror, curly black hair and blue eyes, and waved at him. So you're Elena's dad. Talk about crazy. Now that's what I call a coincidence. It's not fair, Krustev tried to joke, you all know my daughter, you also know me vicariously, but I don't know anything about you. There's time, Sirma yawned, didn't you say you don't know where you're going?

Krustev really didn't know where he was going and Sirma suggested point-blank that he come with them. It makes sense, he thought, that way they have a sure ride, they don't seem the type to lounge around frying on the beaches of Thasos for more than a day or two. However, they hadn't decided where to go after that. Maya

laughed nervously, she had also thought of asking him to come along, but you know how she is, while she was sitting there wondering how to put it, Sirma had beat her to it. Sirma was clearly the boss and Krustev asked her if they wouldn't get annoyed with an old fart like him. Again he told himself that he shouldn't talk about what was coming up, don't act with them like everybody your age acts with them, drop the Elena's dad act. But he wasn't sure he could put on any other act. Maya and Spartacus burst into energetic protest, talking over each other. Sirma waited for their buzzing to die down and simply said, come on now, in a business-like tone.

He had stopped for them, and they had asked where he was headed, he had frankly admitted that he didn't know.

And with that, things likely should have been considered decided.

In the house, the windows are sleeping, the furniture is sleeping, the refrigerator is sleeping, a plug dangling from its shoulder. The doors are sleeping: beautiful, solid, heavy doors. Krustev is sleeping, hung on the wall, his wife is sleeping on one side of him, his daughter on the other, they are sleeping with open eyes, smiling amid the garden outside. The empty bottles jammed into the black bag in the hallway are sleeping. The air conditioner. The lawnmower. The dirty dishes piled in the dishwasher. The slippers, collapsed from exhaustion, are sleeping in indecent poses. Sssssleep . . . The only ones standing guard are the tiny lights of the alarm system and a few inexperienced spiders, who have stretched their webs in various corners of various rooms, stalking their puny prey, without an inkling of one another's existence.

As if to make up for this, the whole garden is awake: the birch trees are whispering, the willow is murmuring incomprehensibly, in the furrows the multifarious plants with Latin names are trying out their new flowers and buzzing excitedly in exotic languages, the rock garden is juggling miniature stones and there, next to it, on the lawn, is the place where their family picture was taken five years ago, the places where the three of them have set foot can be clearly seen, where they carved the moment in gently and unrelentingly, there the grass is flattened and will not straighten up again.

Actually, it suddenly popped into Krustev's mind, aren't these three in college? It's the middle of May, shouldn't they be going to lectures right now? He received a full-

on lecture in reply. All three of us are taking time off, Maya explained. At the end of sophomore year, lots of people begin doubting whether their major is really for them, they had, too. The three of them had gotten together at the end of last summer and decided that they would give themselves a year to clear things up, then they would decide whether to keep the same majors or to change, interesting, Krustev said, do the three of you always decide what to do as a group? Pretty often, the girl again gave her nervous laugh. It's been like that since the beginning of high school, always the three of us together. In the beginning everybody thought it was weird, Spartacus cut in, then little by little they got used to it, at the end of the day there are people with much stranger relationships. Krustev couldn't disagree with that, he himself handled strange relationships well, significantly more successfully than normal ones, take me, for example, Spartacus continued, I'm in law school. Sirma jokes that that's why I'm such a chatterbox. Right now, I can't say that I don't want to study law anymore. It's just that I need a year off to think things over and figure out whether I really want to go into law or if I'd rather do something else, and now's the time, because afterwards it will be too late . . . Sirma wanted to know what Krustev's major had been. Me? He had studied management. Only it was different then, he shrugged, I never really had the college experience, because of music I started my BA a lot later, after the Euphoria guys and I had ditched our instruments and decided to go into business. And I was in a hurry to graduate, even though I'm sure it would've been the same, even without a diploma. While they were teaching me how to run a company, I was already running three. He suddenly thought this sounded too arrogant and added that in those years, that happened a lot, it still does now, too, Maya said.

The road rushed on ahead and took the curves fast, narrow, but nice, repaved recently with the Union's money, traffic was light, few drivers chose to pass through the heart of the Rhodopes on their way to the sea, and Krustev felt a fleeting, hesitant delight in the freedom to drive freely, without getting furious over the trucks and junkers blocking traffic. Below them, to the left, was the river, high since all the snow had already melted, running its course with a cold and no-nonsense determination; beyond it rippled the newly greened hills. They passed through several villages, long and narrow, built along the river, with two-story houses, their black wooden timbers sternly crossed over whitewashed walls. Since few cars passed, people were walking along the highway here and there, sinewy grandfathers and ancient grandmothers, some even leading goats and from the backseat Sirma for no rhyme or reason announced that she had dreamed of being a goat her whole life,

but didn't manage to expand on her argument, seemingly having dozed off again. Krustev put on some music, Maya and Spartacus, perhaps to make him happy, or perhaps completely spontaneously, sang along quietly and swayed in rhythm such that in their interpretation, the careless rock, designed for Saturday night and chicks in leather jackets, sounded and looked like some mystical Indian mantra. Krustev kept silent, he drove slowly through the villages and looked at the people. They spontaneously reminded him of his grandfather, a strange, scowling person, who always looked angry before you started talking to him, then it turned out that he gladly gave himself over to shooting the breeze and telling stories, mostly amusing tales, one, however, the most recent story, was swollen with darkness and violence, and Krustev thought of it from time to time. His grandfather's village lay on the border of the Ludogorie region, the only Slavic village around, and his house was on the very edge of the village, near the river, a quiet village, pleasant, albeit a lost cause, the communists had forgotten it in their general industrialization, occupied as they were with the more densely Slavic regions, after the fall of communism the state had left the Slavs in peace once and for all, but back then it was the Dacians' turn, they had moved into erstwhile Thracian towns, and, of course, in the end they fought, the Thracians called it "The Three Months of Unrest," while everyone else called it the Civil War of '73. Before the war, everyone from my grandfather's village figured that the quarrels between the Thracians and the Dacians weren't their business, they even joked about how the names of the two peoples rhymed, people for whom they felt equally little love lost, the civil war in the Ludogorie, however, made the hostility their business, too. The battles began, the Dacian militias defended their cities street by street and building by building against the army, who rolled in with tanks, but the tanks didn't do much good in a war in which you couldn't see your enemy. Everything really had lasted only three months and Krustev, no matter how young he had been then, could confirm that beyond the region and even in the capital, people were hardly aware of the unrest in practice, his father and mother said the same thing, his grandfather's village, however, was a whole different story. For three days they heard machine gun fire from the direction of the city, all the radios were turned on in hopes of picking up some news, but they only played cheerful Thracian music around the clock. On the third day, the shooting ceased. A rumor spread that the army had taken the city and that the Dacian fighters had scattered, every man trying to save his own skin however he could. The village mayor warned them not to take any Dacians into their homes, should they arrive. Only five years had passed since the Slavic events in Moesia and everyone was afraid

of what might happen if Thracian soldiers came to search the village and found hidden enemy fighters. That evening, my grandfather went out to feed his animals and when he opened the door of the barn, he saw two human eyes. It was a young man, no older than twenty, with dirty, matted hair, a gashed forehead and blood stains on his ragged striped shirt, like the shirts the Dacian militias had worn, he hadn't even managed to take it off. He was severely wounded and feverish, wheezing, rolling his eyes from the cow to the mule and back again, he didn't say anything. What could Krustev's grandfather do? All alone in the very last house, just as his village was all alone between the hammer and the anvil of this war, which was not its own. Perhaps the boy would die before the soldiers came, but perhaps not. He left the barn, grabbed his hoe, went back in and brought it down on the boy's head with all the geezerly strength left in him. He loaded him on the mule somehow or other and threw him into the river. The neighbors kept quiet. The next day a Thracian regiment really did arrive in the village, searched a few houses, sniffed around suspiciously, doled out slaps to a few young men whose looks they didn't like, and went on their way. The river carried the corpse away and no one in the village mentioned it, his grandfather, however, for some unclear reason was sure that the neighbors had seen everything, he crossed himself surreptitiously, like under communism, and kept repeating, a terrible sin, a terrible sin, a terrible sin, but what else could I do? He lived a long life. He had told Krustev this story the same year that Elena was born and several months before he died. Much time had already passed, he had taken a second wife, a widow from the village, and he had continued living in the last house by the river. Senility was already getting the best of him and Krustev had even wondered whether he hadn't made the whole story up, because who, really, who could imagine his grandfather killing someone in cold blood with a hoe? Yes, indeed, he had lived in a different time, he had fought in two wars and had won medals for bravery, so that means he surely had killed people, but not with a hoe and not in his very own barn, although do the place and the method really change anything, Krustev grunted and tried to keep his mind on the road.

He hadn't strung so many sentences together for months and he wasn't even sure it was sincere, actually he was sure that it wasn't sincere.

Sirma announced her latest awakening with a powerful yawn and a quick commentary on her friends' mantra-like chanting, and for the next half hour they all talked over one another, including Krustev. The asphalt was much better than on the last road. Maya, for her part, had never come this way. They argued for sometime about whether she really hadn't. Krustev asked them whether they hitchhiked often. Not very often, they had done it more in high school. Surely his daughter had tagged along with them as well, but in any case, his observations about the decline of hitchhiking were confirmed. The three of them generally tried to hitch together, sometimes they tried other combinations, but it never went as well. Spartacus had once hitched with three other guys and only a Gypsy horse cart had deigned to drive them between two villages, after which they split up, otherwise it was never going to work. Sirma, for her part, had hitched alone a couple times. Didn't you ever run into any trouble? No, only once, when a woman had picked her up. Everyone laughed at that, even Krustev. He was feeling better and better, he was tempted to say more normal, but he was no longer sure whether this was normal or whether, on the contrary, the scowling pre-dawn, semi-twilight he had inhabited for such a long time was. There had been flashes during the winter, too, but then Elena had left and he had collapsed again, only he didn't turn on the television, but read instead, first he read the books he had been given on various occasions in recent years, then the ones Elena had left in her room, after that he went to an online bookstore and ordered a whole series of contemporary titles in translation, they were delivered by van, an astonished young man unloaded two full cardboard boxes in his hallway and left, shaking his head pensively, Krustev read them, some were good, others not so good, but once he had closed the last one—a novel by a Dutch writer about a malicious, blind cellist—he decided that he wouldn't read anymore and that he had to get out of the house. Maya said that she thought she had forgotten her bathing suit. As if we haven't seen you without your bathing suit on, Spartacus replied, then realized that they weren't alone and fell silent, embarrassed. The three of them seemed to spend so much time together that when they found themselves with other people, they quickly forgot about the others' presence. With the involuntary habit of the male imagination, Krustev envisioned the girl sitting next to him without her bathing suit for an instant and felt uncomfortable about it, as if he had made her an indecent proposal. She was his daughter's age. Sirma preferred Samothrace to Thasos. Samo-thrace, only Thracians, Krustev joked, without knowing whether they spoke Slavic, but at least Sirma seemed to get it and repeated in delight: Only Thracians, how cool is that! Thasos and Samothrace, the two islands the new state

had managed to save when the Macedonian legacy was divvied up. Like many other Slavs, Krustev, with a nostalgia instilled by foreign books, sometimes dreamed of Macedonian times, when the Slavs were merely one of the dozens of people who had inhabited the empire and were in no case so special that they should be subjected to attempts at assimilation, but still, things were clearly changing. Twenty years ago, Thracian kids wouldn't have taken a ride from a Slav. Twenty years ago, there weren't many Slavs with their own cars and even fewer of them would have dared to drive straight through the Rhodopes. Had they been to any other Aegean islands? Last year the three of them had made it to Lemnos, while Maya had gone to Santorini with her father. We also want to go to Lesbos, Sirma announced. You two go right on ahead to Lesbos, Spartacus said, that island doesn't interest me a bit, they all burst out laughing. Krustev was impressed, however. So now that's possible, he said. We're all part of the Union and the borders are open. Do you know how hard it was to get a Phrygian visa back in the day? Especially for me, Sirma suddenly blurted out, seeing as how my grandfather is Lydian. But she had never set foot in Lydia. Spartacus and Maya looked extremely surprised, apparently not so much at her parentage, rather at the fact that there was something about her that they didn't know. The mood crashed for a whole five minutes, at which point Spartacus started talking about Euphoria's first album again, asking Krustev whether he had it with him in the car and insisting on putting it on. Later, Krustev replied, because in disbelieving gratitude for this kind-hearted twist of fate, he felt himself wanting to sleep, the curves ahead were giving off warm sleep, and when on the outskirts of the next village he saw a shabby roadside dive, he stopped immediately to drink a coffee.

Theodore Worozbyt
Air

To the river, with no question.
To the holes in the guitars.
I stood over a pile of flowers.
All of the end stops were white
as the blooms I sent to a baby.
All of the ends were stopping
like the river of no question.
The holes in the guitars
I arranged like flowers
under the bed, in the corner,
alongside the green chair.
Their music was being
when I sat and played the air.
Never again, was their reply.
Never again, my answer.

Retuning

So no more retuning, is what the journeyman took me aside and said, or to the person
Next to me. That was a typographical error in the greenhouse, made as his sharpening disc spun
Greasily and with a lash of sparks in the shed. I asked him about the rows of jars, and his nails.
"If there had been more pianos in the manor I would have pursued the task
Of sharpening them, too, and talking back to the mosses under the benches after
All these months I've been gone away." So the dialogue went. And the answer is Viva!
To the crossword name of paper towels, and "Romanian acrobat." As if it, and I, could waft a
Way like a parachute seed. Puzzles though have no punctuation. Nor circuses clear moments
Of poignancy. I have been asked, beside the ivy that can't send from the sand anything
More up the wall than a furze of coal-emerald under the spigot where yellow
Jackets massed to swallow sharpness, whether I have anything
More to say to the house. Look, I want to aver. I would paint lawns and cut my own
Hair if I could climb inside for a day, but someone wants to die there, so I must go.
To spread the green stalks, to verb the nick of my antepatronymic,
To ted the field where I shall lie agley and my crocuses come up the same.

Flavia Company
The Island of Last Truth

By Kate Munning

In my social circle, there's a moment at every party in which I suddenly realize my friend April is commanding an audience with one of her stories. Her voice starts rising, her gesticulations get more expansive, and guests cluster around to hear about the time she hiked barefoot out of a remote, drugged-out hippie commune deep in a northern California forest accompanied only by her colossal dog, or when she grabbed a high school rival by the hair and slammed her head against a curb for stealing her credit card. Invariably I join the group of listeners, often egging her on. Outrageous and well told, these anecdotes fascinate me no matter how many times I hear them. To what extent they're true is almost irrelevant; April has written her own rich personal mythology. The storytelling is what's important; those who quibble over precision are missing the point.

The Island of Last Truth left me feeling the same way, and not just because the opening scene is set at a cocktail party. It privileges the story above all else. Digital-age global citizens have so much data immediately accessible to them, giving the impression that all facts are concrete and irrefutable. An argument can be won decisively in thirty seconds by pulling out a smartphone. Which is what makes Flavia Company's novel such a jewel—small, vibrant, beautifully faceted, and possibly fake. After reading the last page and closing the book, I looked at the front cover and read the title again, realizing that it's an elegant little joke. I don't believe

Translated from Catalan by Laura McGloughlin. New York: Europa Editions, 2012.

Company thinks that there was a first truth, let alone a last one. And she tells us so in such an entertaining fashion.

Dr. Mathew Prendel, celebrated surgeon and expert sailor, disappears from New York for five years and returns in the present day, transformed and reticent. The local gossip is that he was shipwrecked and marooned on a desert island after his yacht was attacked by pirates. He refuses to talk about the experience with anyone until he finally shares it with his longtime lover Phoebe Westore, a much-younger English professor, not long before his death. A clever conceit for the novel is that the bulk of it is secondhand information, the exploits of Dr. Prendel transcribed by a woman who wasn't even present for any of the action and adventure. Phoebe's credulity makes her both the perfect audience and the ideal narrator. After all,

> At no time did I doubt the legend. At no time did I think it might be a falsified story, a trivial anecdote embellished to the extreme and that, for example, Prendel could have lost his boat a few meters off the coast of Africa due to a more prosaic collision with a rock or another boat and later on, rumors had made it into a heroic exploit.

She wants to believe. Her reasonable voice lends structure and credibility to an otherwise far-fetched yarn—but is that credibility warranted? Company shows herself to be a skilled wordsmith here, evoking the legacy of old-fashioned storytelling folded into a contemporary narrative full of treasure, blood, pirates, and beautiful Portuguese waitresses. This fusion is particularly visible during Prendel's stream of consciousness after having jumped overboard, floating in an endless sea, waiting for death to find him: "He is afraid of being devoured by a beast. He fears the bite, the pain, the horror. During the night he suffered a shock: something brushed against him while he was almost dozing, doing the dead man's float, and he came to violently. He has lost his sunglasses." Laura McGloughlin's exquisite translation skills are in full effect throughout, from Prendel's engrossing, off-kilter internal monologues to his riveting escapades.

With all those trappings, *The Island of Last Truth* reads much like a fairy tale, a fable with a twist. After his own bad judgment results in a pirate attack and the deaths of his two best friends, Dr. Prendel floats in the Atlantic for days, his body shutting down, before being washed onto the shore of a desert island approximately 800 miles off the west coast of Africa. He is nursed back to health and then must coexist with Nelson Souza, a fellow castaway and former pirate who uses the threat

of violence to restrict Prendel to a small section of the island. As with every mythic protagonist from Eden's Adam to Bluebeard's wife, Prendel's curiosity tempts him to explore the forbidden, leaving him to deal with the consequences that follow.

The symbols of classic storytelling Company uses to embroider this novel are just window dressing for the meat of the story, which explores the murkiness of human nature. Prendel's fellow man turns out to be a more foreign, inhospitable wilderness to navigate than the tiny, rocky island he's found himself marooned on. Puzzling out Souza's intentions is just as important to Prendel's survival as distilling fresh water and catching enough fish and insects to keep himself fed. It's less *Robinson Crusoe* than *Crime and Punishment*, the psychological rivalry between Prendel and Souza ultimately dominating their physical survival. The authoritative, rational narrative voice of a successful American doctor is eventually subsumed by confusion, doubt, and need, resulting in a shifting ethos that renders Prendel's unfortunate decision-making surprisingly believable:

> In the end, he has given up. He has abandoned himself to the island, has become part of it. He has renounced any purpose in life and has reduced himself to surviving the way his prey do, be they worms, lizards, or insects. He moves only when strictly necessary. He has completely lost any notion of time and his memory is blocked. . . . He is in no hurry, but he has decided that one day or another he will end up committing suicide.

Prendel does survive, even if it's only as the myth he created. There is no record of those five years of his life, just the desert island and one other man and hundreds of miles of ocean. He struggles to readjust to his comfortable life in New York. All that's left of Prendel is his story, faithfully relayed by Phoebe. In the postscript, told in Phoebe's voice, she does some twenty-first-century information seeking that turns Prendel's version of events on its head: "I walk through the streets of the Alfama neighborhood, erect as the truth that has been revealed to me and that I have decided to keep for myself alone. . . . I find a wastebin, stop, take [the] letter out from my bag, tear it up, and throw it away. I don't know if it is an act of love or revenge." What's revealed is Phoebe's fidelity to the story rather than the man himself. Which is perhaps as it should be.

Susan Steinberg
Spectacle

By Michael Miller

While coming-of-age stories generally point a protagonist toward self-recognition—a resting point at which a character learns who he or she is—its mirror-image genre, the "uncoming-of-age" narrative, treats the self as a topic worthy of intense inquiry if not outright crisis. We've seen a number of uncoming-of-age books in the past year: Allison Bechdel's deeply therapized *Are You My Mother?* uses D.W. Winnicott as a touchstone while searching for an elusive "true self." Zadie Smith's *NW* and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* offer close-ups of characters so overwhelmed by their inauthenticity—a sense of falsehood so deeply ingrained that authenticity seems unattainable—that they begin to unravel. Novelist Sheila Heti wonders, in wonderfully self-conscious detail, *How Should a Person Be?*

We can now add to this list Susan Steinberg's grimly comic new story collection, *Spectacle*, a book in which communication between any two characters becomes nearly impossible—corrupted by falsehoods, impossible-to-convey feelings, empty gestures. Her characters aren't individuals per se but players in a human comedy in which behavior can almost always be boiled down to artifice. "At what point does one tire of performance," one story asks. "At what point is it all just tiring. The friend's performance of guy. My performance of girl." For Steinberg, Heti's question becomes something far more skeptical: "How *can* a person be?"

Unsentimental, unhinged, and sometimes hilariously drunk, *Spectacle*'s characters arrive in jagged bursts of language. Superficially, you can see this by

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Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2013.

simply looking at the page, with its ragged margins and long stretches of staccato, one-sentence paragraphs. The stories have a powerful sense of movement, particularly in isolated segments ("My boyfriend hit me in the face with a book," one story begins). But cumulatively, the sentences are not team players; they compete, interrupt one another, execute sharp turns in logic. Rarely does Steinberg's unnamed narrator—there's just one, but more on this in a moment—say something without stopping to offer a comment on what has just been said. Take, for instance, the opening sentences of the first story, "Superstar":

> I once hung out with this shit group of kids and they were just such shit.
> This is to say I made some mistakes.
> Like breaking into this one guy's car.
> Like stealing the stereo out of that car.
> I was young and I didn't steal the stereo because I wanted the stereo.
> I stole it, rather, because I wanted the guy.

Steinberg's lurching prose style has an off-kilter charisma. It also provides a subtle way for the book to evoke a number of internal tensions—between the longing for connection and fuck-it-all nonchalance, between raw expressiveness and a dogged refusal to offer up details. There is not a single character name in the book, only vague denominations like "the first guy" and "the second guy." In the story "Cowboys," the narrator doesn't say what she does for a living except that she's in "a job I was trying to quit."

Specificity is suspect. Just when you think you might get a read on a character, someone who has behaved in a particular way, or expressed him- or herself, the story interrupts, reminding you that the behavior is an act: "The woman performs happy woman on a sunny street." Scenes are stripped down to primordial sketches: "I was just a girl, and rules were broken; I was just a girl and blank happened once, and blank happened twice; and blank was said; and blank was felt . . ." This tendency to empty out characters and scenes threatens to reduce the stories to generic episodes. But in Steinberg's hands, even the most withholding scenes crackle with intensity, barely concealing their impatience, rage, and distrust of all surface behavior—the spectacles of everyday life. She's like Penelope with her tapestry, embroidering scenes only to unravel them later.

This isn't to say that nothing happens in *Spectacle*. The book is acerbic and full of bad behavior and occasionally quite funny. One series of stories describes the narrator's conference call with her brother, mother, and a testy doctor; they

are discussing whether to take the father off life support. This first of these pieces, "Cowboys," contains some of the book's most extended passages, including this grimly droll gem:

> The doctor said my father had flatlined several times. I knew the word flatlined from my ex, who had flatlined three times when we were together. He had flatlined, my ex, because he was an addict, and being an addict, as it turns out, will make you flatline. After the first time, my mother, a nurse, said, He'll never be the same. But he was the same, as it turned out, because he flatlined again. After the third time, we broke up. I'd like to say we broke up because I'd had enough, but really he broke up with me for another woman, a thinner woman, a paler woman, the veins too vivid through her face, and she eventually flatlined too, and she eventually died from this, but he did not. He became a firefighter.

As the book progresses, themes accumulate and images recur. Phones and machines (answering, life-support) become motifs. The word *beautiful* is repeated—and its meaning interrogated—in multiple stories. We visit, and revisit, an after-hours drug den called Club Midnight, where bowls on the floor overflow with mysterious pills ("We liked not knowing what they would do. It didn't matter which way we went."). These recurrences create a surprising continuity, suggesting that a single narrator is behind each one of *Spectacle*'s monologue-like outbursts. There's even a hint that this narrator shares a name with her author. In one story, the narrator grumpily recalls how her father, when he was still alive, would sing "stupid songs" to her answering machine when she didn't pick up the phone: "Wake up, little etc." That "etc." hides a specific name, that of the author herself. The father is clearly singing the Everly Brothers' "Wake Up Little Susie." Replacing her own name with "etc." is typical of Steinberg—simultaneously an act of self-erasure and droll absurdity.

Of course, a book like *Spectacle*—a book in which authenticity is nothing more than pretending not to pretend—doesn't lend itself to easy answers or Eureka moments. Steinberg's stories achieve a strange consistency in the questions they raise: If gender roles—any roles, really—are only masks, what lies behind them? Are Steinberg's characters—or her readers, for that matter—anything more than an accumulation of their performances? Is the book autobiographical? These are in part the questions of a skeptic, and the book is certainly good at laying waste to everyday illusions. But *Spectacle*'s real power lies in its mysteries—in the enigmas that arrive when something real is exposed to be false. Steinberg's characters don't have the answers. But they do wonder.

Rachida Madani
Tales of a Severed Head

By Callista Buchen

Accomplished and award-winning poet, editor, and translator Marilyn Hacker, who has previously translated work by Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Hedi Kaddour, and Marie Etienne, among many others, offers an affecting interpretation of Rachida Madani's *Tales of a Severed Head*, out now from Yale University Press. The original text appears in what Hacker calls "Madani's language, a French informed by disparate literary traditions and still entirely its own," while Hacker's English translation appears on the right, highlighting the power, resonance, and musicality of Madani's energetic work in passages like this:

> It was the sobbing tale of a shattered woman
> the bloody take of a head severed
> on the way to revolt
> And without a tear, in the glass garden,
> the blackest owl
> took its turn to stand guard.

Born in Tangiers in 1951, Madani is, as Hacker notes in her excellent introduction, a "Moroccan activist, teacher, Muslim feminist, painter—and, preeminently, writer." *Tales of a Severed Head*, Madani's second collection, explores contemporary struggles against repression, including issues of gender and class oppression, political corruption, and violence, held up alongside and against the story of Scheherazade and *Thousand and One Nights*.

Translated from French by Marilyn Hacker. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.

The power of language and who or what has the power to speak is central to the project of *Tales of a Severed Head*. Like Scheherazade, who must use language to save herself and the other women of the kingdom by preventing King Shehriyar from fulfilling his jealous promise to marry a new woman each night and kill her in the morning, Madani makes language central in present-day oppression and resistance. She writes:

But Scheherazade is only an invention
of men
to clear Shehriyar's name.
Scheherazade is only revenge postponed
During the massacre.
And it's thus that they stole my sentences
distorted my sentences

Later, she says he "*stole my mouth / my only weapon.*"

In the second sequence the speaker pushes back. Poetry becomes the vessel: "from poem to poem she moves forward / every poem is a skiff / headed for the other shore." She is persistent, urging "Onward, my skiff," and recognizes a multi-dimensional (ongoing) history of loss:

Night falls on the ocean
and drowned men guide us . . .
How many of you died for
having dreamed of another shore
of another dawn
another justice?
I see you:
you are a torch
in my woman's night
trapped brother
citizen of underground cities
who hails my skiff from behind your bars.

Such themes continue in the third sequence, where the speaker suggests urgency, writing of "peace / with poems / of war . . ."

Waiting, she places a mine
into each poem she launches
without knowing what forehead it will burst
before the word
in her mouth is taken back from her.

She promises, "*I will climb unto a dune / and rewrite the thousand and one nights / to clear Scheherazade's name.*"

Tales of a Severed Head succeeds in bringing together and magnifying the strengths of its writer and its translator. In a recent interview with *Guernica*, Hacker explains the benefits of translating:

> The plus side of it, for a writer, is the engagement with language—the language of the original, but one's own language first and foremost. The possibility of working with it outside one's own frames of reference, connotations, formal or historical concerns—in that way it's like attempting to write within, and straining against or stretching out into, an unfamiliar formal structure.

Here, each word, each space, each short line, each sudden repetition feels deliberate and specific, and though something happens in the act of translating and perhaps a third version exists in the space between Madani and Hacker's versions of the text, the reader is likewise engaged in the language, in the strain, in the oppression and resistance. Hacker and Madani, together, help us to hear, to stretch out into "*where the water goes.*"

As a book from *The Margellos World Republic of Letters* series, which is "dedicated to making literary works from around the globe available in English through translation . . . to stimulate international discourse and creative exchange," the translated *Tales from a Severed Head* is a remarkable text, one that synthesizes craft, activism, passion, languages, traditions, and grief. Madani's close interrogation of the power of speech, of language, of poetry, delicately and explosively unravels the oppression of women and men by political leaders, by countries, by hierarchies of gender and class, questioning, reinterpreting, and remaking the multitraditional myths that forward this oppression. Madani doesn't just help us see the real, see the loss, see what is at stake, but allows us to participate as "she swings from the pendulum of sorrows / and probes the void / with her foot."

Quim Monzó
a thousand morons

By Josh Billings

Quim Monzó's *a thousand morons* is a flat book, and this can be either a good or a bad thing depending on which of its stories you're reading. Good first. As the papa of flat American prose Ernest Hemingway (who Monzó has translated into Catalan) said, there is a way that the activity we usually associate with finished writing can obscure rather than reveal the thing being written about. It's like fishing: Move around too much and the water gets muddy. Conversely, if you sit still, the water clears and you can see the truth sleeping at the bottom of it like a trout or submarine. The key is in the metaphor of vision: Writing is not something you read, or even see. It's something you see through, like a keyhole. Reality is on the other side of it, and though you may never be able to get there, you may be able to earn glimpses of it, the way Nick Adams does when he catches a trout and thinks, "By God he was a big one. By God he was the biggest one I ever heard of."

Monzó's narrators have never been to Montana, or fished, or had their sexual organs blown off, but they walk around with dazed Hemingway-like expressions on their faces. They are creatures of habit and more than habit, repetition—men and women who sink so deeply into whatever activity they are doing that after a certain point (usually about one third of the way into a story) it starts doing them. The result of this submersion is, typically, violent. A woman who has spent all day throwing away traces of her ex-lover ends up cutting off her own skin; a man staring out a window imagines shaving off his earlobe; a boy shows up to class with a

Translated from Catalan by Peter Bush. Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2012.

wound in his neck and is upbraided for his lateness. In each case, the gash either occurs off-stage or is related in the same flat, unaccented tone as the rest of the story—an effect that makes it seem like the logical conclusion rather than an out-of-the-blue interruption. This is the power of realism, which can make anything seem normal, so long as the author's face remains believably unimpressed. Watching the woman take a knife to her own arm, we think "Makes sense," instead of "Where did this come from?" So Monzó's patient, effective, utterly unexcitable storytelling actually reverses a famous modernist dictum: Instead of making the ordinary strange, he makes strange things ordinary.

The word for this kind of combination is, typically, "the absurd"; but it's important to specify here that absurdity, for Monzó, has nothing to do with random acts of weirdness. On the contrary, the strange things that his narrators do are always logical—at least to them. They are the final, or sometimes not even final, steps in plans that have been lovingly constructed and faithfully followed: obsessions, in other words. There is an attractive pathos in this: You want them to wake up; at the same time, you want them to follow their twisted little stars on the remote chance that the world will actually bend to them. It never does, but it does swing close at times, revealing glimpses of reality as clear and transcendent as any in Hemingway. Here, for example, is the narrator of the appropriately named "I am Looking out of the Window":

> I doubt that anyone in the world has ever looked out of the window with the same devastating conviction that I am now: the conviction that I have transformed a banal act into a futile obsession to which I will have devoted a few hours and, then, forgotten forever; or at least I hope so . . . It is very likely that on another day—or maybe even today—I will take another look through the window, but possibly never, ever will I do so with such fervor and dedication. At least, with that glee in discovering an unexpected possibility in this life where everything is so familiar.

Moments of clarity like this one are heartbreakingly unsustainable to Monzó's morons—not just because that's the nature of clarity but because as soon as they're achieved, the moronic mind commences to pick them apart. There is a horror of propagation in this: a fear of the way that people, things, and even ideas can be broken down into simpler pieces. No matter how unassailable a thing might seem, it can be reduced; similarly, it can be copied, reproduced, extended. The frightening characteristic of the modern world is the slight resistance that it offers to this kind of manipulation—how often, on the contrary, it allows contradicting realities to

stand next to one another, the way a child might rush into class with his neck gashed open and be yelled at for the mess his blood is making on the classroom floor. Clearly, the child and the teacher exist at that moment in two different worlds. But instead of pointing in horror to this disjunction, Monzó downplays it, suggesting by his calm that such contradictions are not absurd at all but typical of everyday life.

He doesn't always succeed. The strongest stories in *a thousand morons* represent boredom and obsession in ways that are interesting and various; the weakest, however, are merely accurate. They are mathematical problems: equations whose solution is obvious as soon as we recognize the terms. This is at least partially a problem of length, for without room to unfold, Monzó's stories feel claustrophobic, like duffle bags that we are being asked to stuff ourselves into. "How do I know I have a story? When I have two stories," as Grace Paley famously said. But Monzó's obsessive narrative logic insists on riding his single stories to their predictable ends. Going with him is like fishing in a bathtub: Sure, you can see the bottom, but what is there to see?

Asking such a reductive question of a writer who is essentially a parodist seems unfair: After all, when talking about obsession, the point is not what, but how one sees. Or, the point is all the various ways that one contrives not to see. Either way, in *a thousand morons* the keyhole of words reveals only more doors and more keyholes.

Ernst Hernbeck
Everyone Has a Mouth

By Dan Beachy-Quick

Despite its scant pages and small size, an unexpected materiality infuses this chapbook, the tenth in Ugly Duckling Presse's Lost Literature series. The title is pressed down into the cover stock, a darker gray against the light. Below the title are three figures, human heads and torsos in profile, caught somewhere between the *moai* on Easter Island and an obsessed doodle, whimsical but meaningful, ignoring time by passing it by in creative pursuit. Translated from German by Gary Sullivan, these small poems gather into themselves an oddity that seems to spring from the work of arriving to us from a different language. They mark their strangeness in surprisingly straightforward ways: clarity of diction, directness of image. But Sullivan's translation accomplishes a necessary work: capturing in the poems that untranslatable quality of seeing another mind engaged with itself, consciousness's own impermeable stone.

In his own past, Herbeck reported feeling possessed by the emotions of other animals and people and, after a brief military experience, was institutionalized. In 1960, the psychologist Leo Navratil worked with Herbeck and asked him to write poems, offering him each time a topic to write on. These poems are the products of those prompts, which goes some way to explaining how they become a form of radical sympathy with the thing-ness of the world, and with the colors of those things. In poems about colors ("Yellow," "Violet," "Red," and "Blue,") and multi-hued objects and animals ("The Water Lily," "The Rhino," "The Telephone,") Herbeck

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Translated from German by Gary Sullivan. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012.

reveals himself as the poet of the adjectival, one who knows that "Yellow is the sand of the earth / Yellow is the color of the bronze forests. / Yellow is the heart of flowers . . . / yellow is for example my pencil."

The letterpress edition is sewn together by a plum-colored thread, its knot slightly separating pages 24 and 25. Upon opening the book, two aspects of Herbeck's work are immediately felt: He is concerned with language as it speaks in lovely ways about the world; he is concerned with the lovely things in the world that are there to be spoken about. Two poems, quoted in their entirety, offer a glimpse into what this slender volume holds:

The Mother Tongue

The mother tongue is fine and
graceful. It is good and harsh,
I will not forget this.
This is far too little. One for
another time. Love the beautiful
Love you. are so pretty.

And:

The Hare!!!

The hare is audacious animal!
He runs until the trapsall
fasten. The ears point out; he
listens! For it — — — — it's never time
to rest. Runs runs runs
poor hare!

Attuned to the ways in which language doesn't simply embody paradox, mere literary trope, but must open paradox as a condition of the poem, Herbeck describes by antonym, claims opposites simultaneously, and yet knows, almost intuitively, that doing so still says "far too little" about the nature of "The Mother Tongue." He offers us a small command: "Love the beautiful." It feels Socratic in its depth even as it feels childish in its curtness. In the second poem, Herbeck also offers us a vision of an animal—all ear and all fear—whose flight ends only in the all-trap of the trapsall. The poet and the hare aren't all that different. They share a sensitivity: The poet, like the hare, must listen, and in listening interpret, and in lines the poet too must run run run in some ambiguous relation to what he fears and what fascinates him. It is a restless work.

I sent a graduate student of mine this collection, and he wrote back this insight: "A single poem of no more than ten lines seems almost at times to have the simplicity of Edward Lear and the concerns of Wittgenstein." He's exactly right. Herbeck gives us a poetry that reminds us of Socrates's definition of philosophy as "serious play." These poems are in serious play to such a degree that they cut straight through those concerns of experiment versus tradition, concept versus epiphany, to offer us a poetry that refuses to see such opposites as irreconcilable. Herbeck's poems remind us, as important poetry must, that each of us suffers the condition of needing to find a way to speak—harshly and gracefully—about the world, and that each of us doubts fundamentally that we can. But we do speak. We speak in the medium of this other thing of the world, that thing called language—in which, as Herbeck lets us see, "a + b glow in the clover." Such vision is deeply gifted, reminding those who read these poems that poetry's work is one that seeks those fundamental equations about the nature of the world—the clover's own algebra, the hare's own geometry, love's own affective physics—and this small book proves itself nothing less than a primer. It is a primer we all need, though we scarcely ever admit so: a little lesson book on what is.

Bill Peters
Maverick Jetpants in the City of Quality

By Gloria Beth Amodeo

In his new novel, *Maverick Jetpants in the City of Quality*, Bill Peters profiles a mysterious period of serial arson in Rochester, New York, through the eyes of Nathan Gray, a twenty-one-year-old kid who lacks a job and prospects but has a handle on the English language that can bring communication to new heights. In fact, the only true thing validating Nate's fictional existence is the words we read, penned from his perspective.

Peters begins building a world around sentences by creating a community where the greatest battles are of the tongue. He offers up pages and pages of dialogue that resemble rap wars, code phrases born from inside jokes, with darkness sitting at the root of each character's humor. The way in which Nate argues with his best friend, a suspected Neo-Nazi named Necro, is just one example:

> "Whatever! Colonel Sandbags Ladyface Hellstache, Nate!" he says.
> "Colonel Sitz-Bath Wolfhound Hellstache, Necro."

Nate and his friends call these complex colloquialisms Joke Royalty. They give each other "Holy Grail Points" for their respective levels of wordplay, merit that only has value in their social circle. We have characters named "Lip Cheese," "Wicked College John," and, "Rambocream"—names that some characters answer to and others that Nate only uses in his head. But language isn't heroic, it's just a tool of heroes, and so it ultimately fails him.

New York, NY: Black Balloon, 2012.

Peters structures the entire novel around the language that fails Nate, giving his words a value that reaches outside of the novel itself. Even from within, the truth of Nate's experience glows through the witty wordplay he hides behind. It's clear from the start that Nate worships his friend Necro, the one who introduced him to Joke Royalty. Necro builds a website and publishes drawings that make him look like the arsonist, leading to the slow deterioration of their friendship. As Necro leaves Rochester and Nate's life goes on without him, we find that every moment draws Nate back to memories of Necro, his foil, the one who Nate would spend all his days with, if he could.

> And now I know for certain that I can't convince him [Necro], at the last second, to Maverick Jetpants out of here with him off to Pennsylvania and overthrow language together.

Maverick Jetpants is a novel you have to read to believe, a powerful story told from a vantage point of extreme subjectivity but, due to Nate's surprising ability for insight, also deeply satisfying. I found myself most gripped through the juxtaposition of deep honesty and fierce denial Nate uses to recall catching sight of a girl who his friend raped in front of him, many years afterward.

> I could catch up to her. I could talk to her, vaporize some guilt right then. I even stand there; I even debate myself over this, for a good four minutes. I even walk after her a few steps, before I lose sight of her, completely. Afterward, I buy what I need and spend a half-hour at the pet store aquariums, looking at the neon tetras and the clown loaches. Bright-colored fish that begin dying the second you bring them home in plastic bags.

His character culminates there, in four sentences. *I could, I could, I even, I even.* This is where first-person perspective proves itself, where fictional narration reads like candid memoir, where we are shown everything we could so easily be told. Bill Peters has created a narrator so full that the book itself is his body.

Because of Nate's interaction with the text, his incredible way of using language to hide and reveal himself at the same time, I wondered if words are what Nate worships because he is made of words. Perhaps he is only good at words because they are the very thing he is composed of.

Shara Lessley
Two-Headed Nightingale

By Renée Ashley

Shara Lessley's debut is a marvelous frustration you really must read, though it's one which, if you're much like me, will spin your expectations until you're woozy with recalculation.

First books often feel so much like . . . first books. More than a pocketful have that *oh-boy-I've-gathered-all-the-poems-I've-written-and-now-I've-got-a-book* feel along with the *my-strongest-work's-in-the-front-and-you'll-be-so-wowed-by-that-you-won't-notice-I-stuck-the-weaker-ones-in-the-middle* formula that's become the standard. Bottom line: First books too often feel like a motley of apprentice-writer phases and accumulated MFA assignments squeezed between covers rather than a cohesive whole, a unified book with a vision.

And I'll admit there is a faint ghost of those first-book-shaping heuristics in *Two-Headed Nightingale*, though it's not an issue of strong versus weak at all. Make no mistake: The execution and vision of this book are to be admired and learned from. But because I'm so interested in the arc of work over the period of a book's composition or of a poet's writing life—and because those observations are so integral to how I understand this particular book—it seems imperative that I say up front that these poems appear to be drawn from a much longer writing apprenticeship than most first books, a period through which the poet herself wrote well but from markedly different levels of maturity. If I'm correct, it's a fascinating trajectory: The craft always strong; the writer changing. Right or wrong, it feels like

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Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2012.

a book by which you can track the path of its author, the way a meteorologist might track the path of a storm.

My favorite poem of the collection, in fact a contender for one of my favorite poems of the year, or maybe even the decade, is the very first, "Fallen Starling." It's masterful, literally breathtaking, and doesn't lose its pow! after repeated readings.

The poems that follow that brilliant starter are decidedly different but not decidedly less. The turn-of-mind and level of craft demonstrated throughout (with one notable exception) is pretty fabulous. And if it took me far too long to find my footing in her book, it's not Lessley's fault. Her titular bird should have given me more than a hint about the astonishments I would find: The bird has two heads, for heaven's sake.

But I was slow to catch on. Bird in the volume title, bird in the first poem: a set-up for a nice little book of bird poems, I thought. And I do like a nice little bird poem. And so my expectations were measured as such. But in the reading of *Two-Headed Nightingale*, as opposed to the presumption of my expectations, I was taken aback frequently by what felt like seismic shifts between poems or sets of poems. I began to distrust both the book and myself.

"Fallen Starling" was written with a scalpel. It is that keen. And I got stuck there, reading and rereading, setting the book down, and then rereading again. The poem had already changed me, sharpened my concept of *clean* and of *effective*, given me a new benchmark for *streamlined*, given both my emotions and my intellect something hard and resonant to ponder. And so, those twenty-four short lines that made up that first descriptive piece, ostensibly detailing the desiccated corpse of a not only real but single-headed bird, raised my bird-book expectations exponentially.

A starling, larger than a big sparrow and smaller than a small crow, is a member of a destructive, invasive species introduced to the States from the U.K., oddly enough during the lifetime of the historical Two-Headed Nightingale. It's a nuisance bird now, flocking in huge numbers, its thousand-voice choirs often heard roiling in the tallest trees at dusk. That Lessley has taken a single starling from the vast hordes and, in such detail, described its postmortem condition, and then turned that around to reflect on us all, carries with it at least a bucketful of lessons—several poetic and philosophical among them. "Fallen Starling" is a poem so perfectly tuned, so absolutely airless and clean, that I'm tempted to call it a pure poem. Even the miniscule bit of backstory of the dead bird (that it was "driven to land") is set out so compactly, precisely, and lyrically, gruesomely and beautifully—

and with such weighted lines and downward thrust—that both the bird's depiction and the poet's effective design are rendered unambiguously clear.[1] Here is the first stanza of "Fallen Starling":

> Driven to land like light
> it is unmade—or rather
> made into something other:

Because poems are linear, and detail as well as effect must accrete over time, and because the two words of the title supply the subject/context/situation of the poem, that first speeding line can astonish the reader with the powerful and initial verbal, *driven*, and then break, with only three quick syllables in between, on the word that surprises most: *light*. The second line rapidly sums up the bird's terrible damage—it *is unmade*—and sets up the rhetorical suspension that introduces the notion of the reconsideration. The next line will clarify and open up the precise rendering of that re-visioned damage that is also the manner in which the remainder of the poem will unfold. The third line makes a rhetorical pleat, a perceptual re-evaluation of that initial, posited damage. There is no respite from the poem's downward movement even at the end of the first stanza where the reader feels the snug, sonic union of the two end rhymes (*rather*, *other*) making these two lines inseparable. Then the colon comes along and throws the reader forward and down to the second stanza in which the exquisite catalog begins.

> the bird so new its skull
> tells its secret—bone-
> cap clear as blown glass

The sonics, rich though subtle, in this stanza, are so closely woven that the reader doesn't have a prayer of hindering or escaping its resulting profluence. The *s*'s are slithering throughout; the hard *k* sounds spread out as well; and *l*'s are circumnavigating those same, inextricable lines: two in the line-end *skull*; two in the line-beginning *tells*; and then the three, beautifully spaced, in the last line of the stanza, "cap clear as blown glass"—each of those three in the second position of stressed words. Reading this stanza is like smoothly drawing out the ends of the black silk drawstring of a little velvet reticule so that it closes tightly but without locking shut. Lessley's compression is radical. Even the punctuation forces the reader down the page at a fevered pace, the first full stop not occurring until the first line of the fourth stanza, *sac of pigment* ("/ sac of pigment. Body east; /") with its period tucked

in right after the *t* of *pigment*—those velars (*c*, *g*) and plosives (*p*, *t*) popping to rival the bang-bang-bang of the line's end, *Bod-y east*, with its semi-colon's pause setting those abrupt little blasts off by its silence.

The tercets are relentless: urgent, airless, and solid. The voice of controlled astonishment aligned with image, literal and figurative, are so powerful that the reader cannot look away, can't not listen. And if, as Janet Burroway explains in *Imaginative Writing*[2], sense materials, images like those that Lessley excels in, are processed in the brain's limbic system and ignite the physiological responses which are emotional responses, then a reader's emotional stakes in this poem are already extraordinarily high—and what should be ghastly and gruesome is not. It is, instead, crystalline and mesmerizing.

Let me say it again: "Fallen Starling" is nearly *pure*. Nothing fussy, nothing lightweight. Nothing tricky, nothing wasted. No air, plenty of forceful movement. Even its downward trajectory and silences are loaded, and the swift, cheerless closure (which I refuse to spoil) will turn you around and make you take it all in again from the top.

It's no surprise, then, that my expectations for the rest of the little-bird-book rose exponentially and I became concerned: *Will I be able to bear a whole book of such intensity?* I really had my doubts. But when I finally pulled myself away from that initial piece and moved on, I found the second poem's tactics were nothing like the first's and the poem equally as consuming. It's another excellent poem, its excellence manifested in such a dissimilar manner that I was able to leave the world of the first and enter that of the second without experiencing any cross-wiring interference. I entered wholly and easily. And then my expectations, of course, were tossed to the midden all over again.

That second poem, "Captive," is another example of the hard-look category, but this one moves externally only until the closure, where it shifts to the interior realm of the speaker. This poem is filled with air and white space: couplets, the second line of each indented about ten spaces.

> Locked inside my window,
> a cicada plodded above a death field
>
> of insects: two bees, four flies,
> a dark basket resembling a spider. How it
>
> got stuck there, I couldn't say
> though it clung to the ledge, then fell

White light on the page after the first line, as the second line creates the floor of its white space; white light on the page before the second line where it runs along the ceiling of the previous line; then the double-white bars of its eleven stanza breaks. The enjambments are mostly annotated rather than fevered, and there's a softness to this poem, both tonally and dynamically, that contrasts dramatically with the previous poem's clean, mean efficiency. The efficiency of "Captive" is evident and intact—it's a fabulous poem—but it redefines *efficiency* at a slower pace, in a looser, more discursive syntax.

In the poem, the speaker tries multiple times to free the cicada trapped inside her window screen, but, in the end, simply cannot. Her desire to free it, then, soon becomes subordinate to the irritation of its piercing song. In a tone of chilling satisfaction, and in another sideswipe at the reader's expectations, she states:

> I let it die, and it felt
> good to let it. The death, proof of my consequence,
>
> or that I might be
> capable of love, if only to withhold it.

It's a turn so brutal that, for the reader, the speaker might as well have slammed the window casing down on the creature, and yet the brutality is couched in thought—in revelation, really—rather than deed. Its impact is more forceful for the elegance of that legerdemain.

"Fallen Starling" and "Captive" are so mature and skillfully wrought that reading them for the first few times was like being led by an invisible though trustworthy hand through a dense, uneven wood. Still, trustworthy hand or no, I could not see the path I was following and had to gingerly feel my way along. I reread those two poems at least half a dozen times and then set the book aside and thought, *How can this be?*

When I finally read the volume straight through, I was knocked off balance even again by what seemed to be its stubborn and perplexing ability to be both different and the same. For many more days than it should have taken, I could not put my finger on what was throwing me off, making me stumble while trying to pin down my reaction to and assessment of the entirety of her remarkable and curious first book. I'd think: *Why does the ground here seem so uneven? Why don't my feet touch down as securely on each parcel of her territory as they should?* And until I stripped my considerations down to something nearer an X-ray than nakedness, I couldn't see it. But then I could and it was basic. It rested in the relationships between *material*, *matter*, and *manner*.

For clarity's sake let me explain my take on the difference between material and matter.[3] If this is old news, please forgive me.

One aspect that helps a poem be a good poem is the inclusion of at least two working levels, one visible and one invisible. You may hear this division articulated in any number of ways: the *literal* and the *figurative*, the *concrete* and the *abstract*, and, even sometimes, the *sensibilia* and the *sense*. I think of it in terms of *material* and *matter*. The material of a poem is what's visible, the images you use, the story you tell, the thought you articulate—the what-you-actually-write-down.

Matter, on the other hand, is what's invisible, what the poem means, the larger issue at hand, the abstraction at the heart of the emotional core that is evoked rather than articulated—the what-you-really-write-about.

It works like this: For a reader, the matter of a poem is the abstract framing transmitted via the local experience of the material—as though the poet has created a very concrete, very visible little neighborhood (the material) through which she leads the reader on foot—right through the center of it, poor reader picking the literal gravel from her shoe. In other words, matter (invisible) takes on the form of material (visible) and is manifested for the reader by the poet in a particular manner (style or method).

It seemed clear to me that Lessley's poems did not vary so much in quality (with that one startling exception that I will get to soon) but in the maturity of the speaker's outlook and choice of material, the poems' stuff of story, their first and obvious meanings if you will, and the inclusiveness of recognition did vary greatly and in more than just a topical way—they varied in the more profound *manner* of approach to the deeper meaning, the *matter*. The matter is consistent; except in the youngest of the poems, the deepest, unspoken emotional core is *loss*. It's the little towns of material and design and paint jobs of manner that vary so greatly and the elements of which are remixed throughout the volume while still allowing for familiarity that's sometimes a bit confounding. For example, the binding element of motif—birds, of course, literal and figurative, and their wings, but also the act of hard looking, at the mechanics of the body, the contexts of flora, fauna, and the metaphor of the simple machine and of stitching and unstitching—all work as manifestations of her silk drawstrings tying things together, creating a cozy material surface of likeness.

I am tempted to do a close reading of all the poems in this section—of the entire collection, really—but I'm going to leap to the last poem, "Wintering," which begins, "Already, winter makes a corpse of things." I take up my examination here

because the line gives me a sort of right-brain whiplash, where the rightness of each phoneme sucks the wind right out of my lungs. What an image, what an astounding opening line! And what an incredible, artful way to draw the quickness of winter's arrival and the thoroughness of its effect. A lesser poet, I think, if she could have conjured that line at all—and I seriously doubt that she could have—would have saved its blast of cold for closure. Lessley, to her great credit, however, is apparently not worried about putting wham-bang stuff up front. There's no toe-in-the-water hesitance, no wading into context or meaning or impact. She does not work up to her poem; the poem starts. Period. The body of the poem is startling as well, but never so staggering as that first sentence, and closure wisely enhances that synoptic, opening image rather than trying to supplant it. ". . . Ice splits, / " the speaker says, "in the distance. What breaks will break. Let it." Even her resignation, it appears, has an edge; the what-she-says is sharp, but the how-she-says-it is the clincher: plosives, period; velars, period; and the shortest sentence of the poem, gliding on its *l* to its abrupt, plosive rest, "Let it," and the resigned, untensioned fall of that final syllable. The poem, and I will be so bold, intentional fallacy be damned, as to assume the poet as well, is self-assured enough to understand that more great stuff will come, she needn't be stingy with what she has now; and that closing annotation is superb. She didn't try to outdo herself; she deepened what already worked insanely well.

The second section of the book begins with the title poem, "Two-Headed Nightingale," which is not about a bird, monstrous, mutant, or otherwise, but about a pair of conjoined twins, born into slavery and sold while they were still young to a showman—hence the song and dance team billed as the "Two-Headed Nightingale." With the biographical notation beneath the title, "Christine & Millie McCoy, 1851–1912," what we get, before we get to the body of the poem at all, is the vision of the conjoined body of the two women. Lessley is smart enough to know she doesn't have to explain; the juxtaposition of title and notation is sufficient for the reader to fill in what's needed to set up and see the poem.

The poem's format, which at first glance seems open-field, underscores the twins' joining without being a cutesy, visual representation of conjoined twins. Its design produces an enactment of complication and contrast, certainly a deeper truth than might have otherwise been enjoyed with a more literal visual effect. I believe—and it remains speculation—that at this point in the book Lessley's earlier work begins. The form feels tentative, like the experiment—successful though it may be—of a younger writer; the subject matter prompted by curiosity and empathy, perhaps, rather than investment. It is a lovely poem with a closure that seems to

foreshadow Lessley's later knack for the unforgiving edge. It's the perfect title poem for a first book that feels both young and old at once.

The younger self is most dominant in the dance and dancer poems; the young girl's dream and difficulty—a topical arena that seems to emanate from a more girlish place than the surgical precision of the poems of wider scope in the first section. The control in these dance pieces is still good; my disappointment with them—and it is my disappointment, not a failure of the poems themselves—is the material. It's girly; I'm not. And because I have already experienced what Lessley is capable of, I become impatient. I find, too, the breadth of realization, or at least the inclusivity of resonance, is narrower. Young girls, even young female writers, are more often enchanted with self than with the larger world.

This section includes the only prose poem and the only failure I see in the book. And I include this not to be unkind but because in the context of what appears to be the book's arc, it's fascinating.

"Finale: Curtain Call," begins with a prose block (of unrelenting repetitive performance preparation, pain of varying degrees). Its fragmented, list-like quality appears to be a diary, or pseudo-diary, of the experience.

> bone spur. ice. class. audition. height: training: weight:
> 103. cast. rehearsal. sweat. bone spur. master. shave.
> bone spur. hunger. pianist. Pas de Quatre. bone spur.

The block goes on for another fifteen lines and then the text comes unglued in a sort of scattered-on-the-page final movement—a clever enactment of nerves at the point of performance and the curtain's fall. The final word appears alone on its line: "applause" with no period. Applause? Well, yeah, applause! Of course applause! Good grief. But as the payoff for all that listmaking? One more literal chronological notation? Yes, I get it: suffering for art and the love of applause. The enactment of the tedium and pain. But that's it? No accretion of meaning, no subtext? Nothing that might be news for the reader? Just that flat, literal line of occurrence? For me, that's the deadest giveaway that the poem was written by an immature poet. The poem never gets bigger than the poet. The girl in the poem got what she worked for, end of poem.

If we write at all, we've written an equivalent of "Finale: Curtain Call" and probably many more than just one. And that's ok. It's a poem we probably need to write in order to get to, assuming we ever do, something as I-bar strong and sleek as "Fallen Starling." In fact, juxtapose the poems "Finale: Curtain Call" and "Fallen

Starling" and you can see the corollary effect of the way the title poem's title ("Two-Headed Nightingale") is juxtaposed to the notation ("Christine & Millie McCoy, 1851-1912"): It's all one needs—those two pieces—to infer a larger story. The larger story in the space between the two poems is bigger than a poem in context: It appears to be the history of a poet's beginning. But in "Finale . . ." itself, there is no larger story. It means only what it says. That's the tragedy of the bad, or very young, poem. The poem stays the size of a young girl's gratification.

The greatest number of poetic variations occur in the third section—and there are poems there that make me swear Lessley can do just about anything, poems as fabulous, I think, as "Fallen Starling," but entirely different in nature, in voice, in execution. Lessley's ability to cast the unforgettable image, however, is strong and carries over. Here are two opening snippets: "In the long night called girlhood the heart holds / tight in its bony crate. Like a bird of fire caged."; "My inheritance is a thumbnail's splinter; / a pocked lined with grease. I come // from a frayed line, DNA's loose / stitch—on my mother's side . . . ." The first is from "Metronome," a beautiful lyric; the second from "Genealogical Survey across Several Counties," a personal narrative, a two-pager so strong—and so utterly different from almost everything else—I had to stop and reread the opening section of the book again to convince myself that these poems were actually in the same book. It's remarkable, such quality coupled with such variety, and remarkable, frankly, seems an understatement.

The fourth section does its work by shuffling topical opportunities and formats, pulling from the themata of the book, poetic and personal: a museum poem, a narrative piece about an aerialist, a devastatingly angry and effective apostrophe to a dead father, a couple of myth-reliant pieces, the obligatory "After Reading (*insert someone*)" poem, a fabulous, furious, anaphoric poem incorporating the blistering father theme, from which I will quote only the beginning and the end. The opening:

> If seconds is what it takes to excavate the reared tarantula
> If John Wayne is nowhere in sight
> If the female spider is *solitary*, *velveteen*, *loathsome*
> If *female* is always *a killer*

and the last:

> If the fallen man weren't my father,
>
> what above remains fact?
> If half, if a fourth, if a fraction
> If truth's better third is invention
> If ever daughter's a verb

It's a far, far cry from "Finale: Curtain Call." And without conjuring Kipling, she's turned him inside out, flayed him, and hung him out for others to view the way a rancher might shoot and then hang the carcass of a dead coyote on a barbed-wire fence as a message to other sheep-killing coyotes. It's brilliant and bitter and I love it.

The fifth section, and the book's closure, is made up of a single poem, "Self-Portrait as (Super/Sub) Pacific," written in twenty-one three-tercet sections. ". . . A great fog," she says,

> pushes back the Pacific's
> restless hills. And the past rises
> again before me. As I
>
> navigate its pitched surface
> *daughter lover sister other*
> no myth I was holds true.

It's a key to the door of wiggle-room that also eases the pressure of many of my questions and eases me out of the book as well.

I've been chasing Shara Lessley page by page throughout this book and every time I thought I was about to catch her, she changed. And she's so skilled at her changes that it's not until long after my initial readings did I understand that she's Proteus, each of her conformations utterly convincing. *No myth I was holds true*, she says at the tail end of the book—so I'm betting she knew all along the maze she was threading me through. A flawed book? Yes, sure. But fabulously flawed in a wonderful, telling way.

Two-Headed Nightingale is dark and irregular and filled with light. All of those. And I look forward to reading anything Shara Lessley writes, though I'll try to hold back any expectations. I'm anxious to see how her enormous talent will manifest itself next and what shape the proffered hand will take when I go on to navigate the pitched surfaces of her vast poetic forest.

ENDNOTES

1. I am not saying that Lessley intended this effect, though she certainly may have. I'm saying that the effect of her having done this is such.

2. ". . . [I]t is sense impressions that make writing vivid, and there is a physiological reason for this. Information taken in through the five senses is processed in the limbic system of the brain, which generates sensuous responses in the body: heart rate, blood/oxygen flow, muscle reaction, and so forth. Emotional response consists of these physiological reactions and so in order to have an effect on your reader's emotions, you must literally get into the limbic system, which you can do only through the senses." Janet Burroway, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*, 3rd ed., Penguin Academics.

3. I pirate and alter a bit from my short-lived online column on craft. "Some Notes on Making Poems: Material and Matter," a *Tiferet* online column available only to subscribers.

Andrew McKay
To Flood Stage Again

So much happens in a house.

At the end of a street that's more lane than street, in a small valley town in Northern New Jersey, there's an old well in the middle of a field, and close by, the remains of a pine tree I once thought could have ended up in Rockefeller Center at Christmas. The height was there, but probably not the density. Yet, I remember how the lowest branches reached down, encircled. I would lean my back against the rough and peeling bark, and it was as if you could stand here during a storm and stay safe and dry. The backdoor to the bungalow—my room—opened here. Not more than a dozen paces away, a White Ash tree Pop planted in the '40s, marked the front. You can see where our dog, now long gone, left the groove marks of his chain.

I collect a few walnuts that land with a thud signaling the last half of summer. I press my thumbnail into the rough surfaces of the green casings, smell the rustic spice of pine and clove, and I can see the bare bulb hanging from a cord in the bathroom, how the morning sun placed two distorted widows on the blank wall above the kitchen sink. I can feel the dip and spring in the floors, hear the jangle of the upright piano, see my sister swaying as she plays Für Elise faster each time, her hands racing over the chipped and yellowed keys.

Sometimes it's enough to hear the word *bungalow* and I can feel the click of the black metal latch in my hand, see the grain of the pine plank door flowing in parallel streams, splitting around knots. The house now twenty-three years in the ground—knocked down and buried where it stood.

*

We made towers out of our things, rooms of towers. In order to build you needed to see how the water would come in—pooling on the linoleum by the front door, making for the space beneath your bed.

I learned the word *crest* at an early age, how runoff from anonymous hills made the hours after rain the most dangerous. The river's measurements would come on the hour, then the half, over the police scanner. We would hold still each time, as if to help the river hold to its last height. And once, over the police scanner too, that year when the highest towers weren't enough, a question, Why do these people insist on living here?

The bungalow slowly collapsed around us. Snow dusted the inside ledges, the end of our beds where two distorted windows ceased to meet. The living-room floor was a V. You spilled it, you chased it. And whenever relatives came by to hear my sister play they might accidentally kick out the piano wheel-chock, and we would take cover, as if the piano would crash through the back of the living-room wall and keep going, all the way down to the river. That was our joke.

Despite the resignation that seeped into the structure, the impulse to stay with the bungalow at the height of each flood was strong. Pop, my great-grandpa, bought this land, cleared it with a scythe, dug the well, hauled the dismantled house from a military depot and drove-in the nails. He brought his wife and two boys here to cool-off from the pressures of the Great Depression. So many friends joined them that the place became known as "The Camp." And after a day of swimming, it wasn't uncommon to see a couple in formal attire, waltzing beyond the party, spinning through the tall grass, down to the riverside. My grandparents met here again and again through their letters during WWII. And while I only knew my grandma as sad and forlorn, surrounded by stacks of self-help books, she once visited this place in winter during my grandpa's long absence and saw something else: *Even though it looked a little barren around there, it looked good to me. I walked through our garden then down by the river. I said to Dad, I bet you'd like to be standing on that little dock doing some fishing. As we stood there I remembered you and I going off last summer up the river in the row boat.* The summers Mom spent with her grandparents were stored here, too. It was the place she ran to when the clogged up town and crowded house of her parent's home, the stares and sanctions brought-on by her Dutch, yet German-sounding last name, years after the war, became too much. It was Mom and Dad's first house, the place where I remember seeing Dad's slides of Neil Armstrong in the Canyon of Heroes, the place we moved from to live next door where there was more space and we looked back to watch someone else

take our place in the bungalow—an artist, who on blustery days would don a black cape, run the length of Hemlock Street shouting "Oh the wind, the wind!" as if to launch above the birch trees. It was the place we returned to after the separation, and instead of being cut off from family history as the divorce books warned, we lived deep within it.

Mom knew how to time the floods. Some floods, the thinnest reach of water would lap at the bottom step and we would stay, others it was much more. And she could shine her flashlight on the dark pools connecting in the yard and form a map from above, knowing in her veins which escape routes were closing, which were already gone.

There are some things you can't know until you're chest deep.

Once the call was made to leave, Bill, our neighbor and a firefighter for our town, would come slogging through the front door, his rowboat pulled up to our steps, the oars removed to reduce injuries from panic. Or he would hoist me up on his shoulders. The floods became so routine that Bill and I would just pair up. And if you've ever been carried fireman style, you know how painful yet reassuring it is. I can still feel Bill's shoulder jamming my solar plexus, stealing my breath away. I remember how, in the dark, I would judge the depth of the water by the change in his gait—every bit of which I felt in my gut—from splashing steps near the house, to something with more of a lean to it, a sideways give and take, as if a thousand hands began pushing and squeezing their way up his legs as we joined the wider current flowing down Hemlock Street.

And no matter how many times we abandoned the bungalow over the years, I'll never forget how quiet it was. No talking. No sirens. Just the hush of the creek up the street, like a car radio tuned low and beyond its signal. This, and the floodlights high on the valley hills like so many fireflies in the swirling water.

There are some things you can't know until you're chest deep. The creek was the place to get through. You'd see it in the dark distance like the white underbelly of some great leaping thing, the white noise growing. This was the place where the rush of water came from the woods like the prop of a speed boat at full throttle. Before entering, Bill would shout his instructions to leave the space of ten people between, so that one misstep would avoid the whole string of us going under. It was here that his steps would slow to purchase, and the boiling water would rise to within inches of my face. And in the middle of all that the call was made to turn back or press forward. Once, during the year of the question, when five feet of water

entered the bungalow, Bill pushed our boat to the edge of the creek and said, while up in town they were still asleep, "If I go down, let me go."

Water would lower to an accessible level then hang around for days, uniting near and far, giving the woods a silvery glow, taking away the purpose of a fence. It would leave objects floating behind closed doors, large sticks, mostly, and mud on the walls—striations marking the pauses in between risings that remained faintly behind no matter how hard you scrubbed. As a kid, I didn't worry much about losing the house. I would float my battleship in the driveway, watch fins break the surface of sky in the yard, let the rings of wind pass me by in the field by the old well. The floods felt as normal as all of this.

Then, for no reason, the water would begin to move again, exposing things from other places, a license plate, a doll, shards of a mirror, as it sought its level and rest. And everything would dry to a composition in gray.

You see them on the news. They live in Tornado Alley, on a cliff-side in California, in a trailer park in Florida, and you think, Why do those people insist on living there? The Jersey Shore, Staten Island, Lower Manhattan, and Rockaway Beach may join these places under the new norm of shifting weather patterns.

Visiting this plot of land lately, I think of the victims of Hurricane Sandy—the retired woman in Staten Island searching for photos where her house had been, the shells of houses strewn along the shore. Loss, dislocation, and displacement are among the hardest of what we endure. But I think of Harry Truman, too, not the president, but the feisty old guy who, despite all pleadings, sat rocking on his porch beside Mt. St. Helens. And Wendell Berry, who wrote, "What I stand for is what I stand on." Mom remarried and rebuilt here—here where we add dirt as the bungalow breaks down and sinks further beneath the surface and her grandfather's daffodils still bloom at the edges of your vision like spots of sunlight in the woods. The impulse to stay is strong, even in places where a little bit of living was done. The house arises inside us and demands it.

Contributors

Gloria Beth Amodeo (books 196) is a graduate of The New School's MFA creative writing program and the winner of the 2011 *H.O.W.* Journal Fiction Contest. Her work has appeared in *H.O.W. NOW*, *NY _____*., and *Carrier Pigeon*. She is currently cofounder/contributing writer for Mantaster.com.

Erica Anzalone's (poetry 101) first book, *Samsara*, is the winner of the 2011 Noemi Press Poetry Prize. She is book review editor of the literary magazine *Interim*.

Renée Ashley (books 198) is poetry editor of *The Literary Review*.

Chris Arthur ("How's the Enemy?" 147) is author of five essay collections, most recently *On the Shoreline of Knowledge*. His work has appeared in a range of journals, including *The American Scholar*, *Irish Pages*, *Northwest Review*, *Orion*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southwest Review*, and the *Threepenny Review*. His essay "(En)Trance," first published in *The Literary Review*, was selected for *Best American Essays 2009*.

Steve Barbaro's poems (51) appear in such journals as *Conjunctions*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Washington Square*, *Caketrain*, and *Denver Quarterly*. He lives near Chicago and is currently writing a novel about paranoia and crowd behavior.

Eric Barnes ("Perfection" 71) is the author of the novels *Shimmer*, an IndieNext Pick, and the forthcoming *Something Pretty, Something Beautiful*, along with numerous short stories published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Best American Mystery Stories 2011*, and other publications. By day, he is publisher of three newspapers covering business and politics in Memphis and Nashville.

Dan Beachy-Quick (books 193) is the co-author, most recently, of two collaborations: *Work From Memory* (with Matthew Goulish) and *Conversities* (with Srikanth Reddy). A study of John Keats, *A Brighter Word Than Bright*, and a novel, *An Impenetrable Screen of Purest Sky*, will be published in the fall. He teaches in the MFA program at Colorado State University.

Lucy Biederman (poetry 56) lives in Lafayette, LA, where she is a doctoral student in English Literature/Creative Writing at the University of Louisiana. She is the author of *The Other World* and has poems forthcoming in *Handsome*, *SCUD*, *Bone Bouquet*, *RHINO*, and others.

Josh Billings (books 190) is a writer and translator who lives in Portland, ME. His translations of Alexander Pushkin's *Tales of Belkin* and Alexander Kuprin's *The Duel* are available from Melville House Books.

Amy Bonnaffons ("A Room To Live In" 126) lives in Brooklyn, NY. She teaches writing at New York University and is at work on a novel.

Callista Buchen's (books 187) poetry and prose have appeared in *Gigantic*, *Gargoyle*, *jmww*, *>kill author*, and others. Her reviews have been published in *Mid-American Review*, *The Collagist*, and *Prick of the Spindle*. She lives and teaches in Kansas.

Weston Cutter (poetry 83) is from Minnesota and is the author of *All Black Everything* and *You'd Be a Stranger, Too*.

Kelly Easton ("Shapeshifters" 104) is the author of several novels for children and young adults, such as *Hiroshima Dreams*; *The Outlandish Adventures of Liberty Aimes*; and *The Life History of a Star*. Awards include the Asian/Pacific American Literature Award, and the Golden Kite Honor Award. She is on the faculty at Hamline University's MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults. Her particular interest is writing in clinical settings.

Lexi Freiman ("Insemination" 41) is Australian. She worked as an actor for Australia's national Shakespeare company and in New York she works as an editor. She has an MFA from Columbia, and this is her first published story.

Angel Igov ("A Short Tale of Shame" 167) is a Bulgarian writer, literary critic, and translator. He has published two collections of short stories, and his first collection won the Southern Spring award for debuts in fiction. Igov has also translated books by Paul Auster, Martin Amis, Angela Carter, and Ian McEwan into Bulgarian. He is currently getting his Ph.D. in European Literature.

John Kinsella's ("Flying Fish (counterpoint)" 91) most recent volume of poetry is *Jam Tree Gully*. He is also author of the critical book *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*. He is a professional research fellow at the University of Western Australia.

Brett Fletcher Lauer (poetry 33) is the deputy director of the Poetry Society of America and poetry editor at A Public Space. His first book, *A Hotel In Belgium*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2014.

Jane Lewty (poetry 143) is the author of *Bravura Cool*, which won the 1913 First Book Prize in 2011. She is a professor of English literature and creative writing at the University of Amsterdam.

W.M. Lobko's poems (139), interviews, and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Hunger Mountain*, *Slice*, and *Boston Review*. New work is forthcoming from *Seneca Review*, *Grist*, and *The Paris-American*. He is a founding editor of *TUBA*, a new review of poetry and art. He currently teaches in New York, where work on his poetry and his novel *The Quick Brown Fox* doggedly continues.

Stephen Longfellow (poetry 160) presently lives over a junk shop in Wabasha, MN, where he spends way too much time gazing out his window at the Mississippi.

Andrew McKay (last words 209) serves as director of advancement communications for Fairleigh Dickinson University. He is currently working on a memoir titled *Living Here*, which chronicles his experiences growing up in a New Jersey floodplain in the early 1980s.

Michael Miller (books 184) is an editor at *Bookforum* magazine, and is an advisory editor to *The Literary Review*.

Kate Munning (books 181) is managing editor for *The Literary Review*. When not writing for outfits like *The Rumpus* and *Bookslut*, she inhabits her alter ego as a trowel ninja and ambitious cook. Her garden is bigger than her house.

Collier Nogues' (poetry 58) first book is *On the Other Side, Blue*. She has received fellowships and grants from the MacDowell Colony, the Ucross Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, and Oregon's Fishtrap, Inc. Currently, she teaches writing at the University of California, Irvine, and lives in nearby Long Beach.

Sarah Rose Nordgren's poems (111) have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Pleiades*, *The Harvard Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, the *Best New Poets 2011* anthology, and elsewhere. Winner of the 2012 James Wright Poetry Award from *Mid-American Review* and two-time fellowship recipient from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Sarah Rose grew up in Durham, NC and teaches at Miami University of Ohio in Middletown.

Geoffrey Nutter (poetry 114) was born in Sacramento, CA and studied in San Francisco and Iowa. He is the author of *A Summer Evening*, *Water's Leaves & Other Poems*, *Christopher Sunset*, and *The Rose of January*. He has taught at The New School, New York University, Columbia, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He lives in the Heights of Manhattan.

Stephen O'Connor ("Ghost" 18) is the author, most recently, of *Here Comes Another Lesson*, a collection of short fiction, as well as *Rescue*. He has also written two works of nonfiction: *Will My Name Be Shouted Out?*, a memoir; and *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*, biography/history. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Missouri Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Electric Literature*, and *Black Clock*, among many other places. His essays and journalism have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *AGNI*, *The Boston Globe*, and elsewhere.

Douglas Ramspeck ("Crow" 157) is the author of four poetry collections. His most recent book, *Mechanical Fireflies*, received the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize. His first book, *Black Tupelo Country*, received the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry. His poems have appeared in *Slate*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *AGNI*. He is the recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award. He teaches creative writing and directs the Writing Center at The Ohio State University at Lima.

Angela Rodel (translation 167) is the translator of *The Apocalypse Comes at 6 PM* by Georgi Gospodinov, *Party Headquarters* by Georgi Tenev, *Thrown into Nature* by Milen Ruskov, and *18% Gray* by Zachary Karabashliev. She was awarded a 2010 PEN Translation Fund Grant for her translation of several stories from Tenev's *Holy Light*.

Benjamin Sutton (poetry 97) is the winner of the Kay Murphy Prize in Poetry awarded by the University of New Orleans and *Bayou Magazine*. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Quarterly West*, *Sycamore Review*, *Third Coast*, *Barrow Street*, and *Washington Square*, among others.

Leon Weinmann (poetry 11) has published poetry in numerous journals, including *The Antioch Review*, *Boston Review*, *Third Coast*, *Mimesis*, and *Blackbird*. He has just finished his first manuscript of poems, *Exercises with Fermata*, and is currently working on a book of essays about life in contemporary Rome.

Theodore Worozbyt's work (poetry 178) has appeared or is forthcoming in *Antioch Review*, *Best American Poetry*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Mississippi Review 30 Year Anthology*, *New England Review*, *Poe&sie*, *Poetry*, and *Shenandoah*, among others. He has published two books of poetry, *The Dauber Wings* and *Letters of Transit*, which won the 2007 Juniper Prize.

Rachel Zucker (poetry 120) is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Museum of Accidents*. She teaches at NYU and the 92nd Street Y and is the recipient of an NEA fellowship. She lives in New York City with her husband and their three sons.

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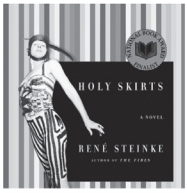

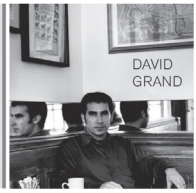

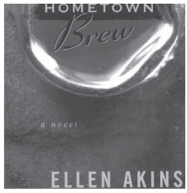

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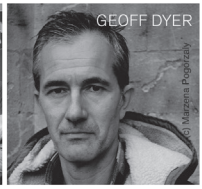

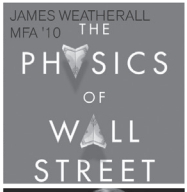

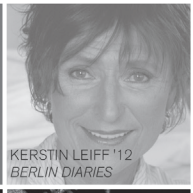

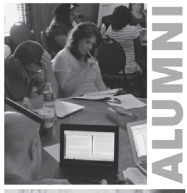

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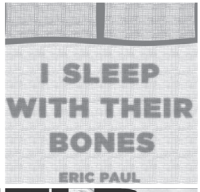

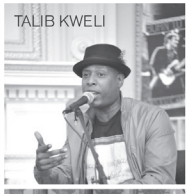

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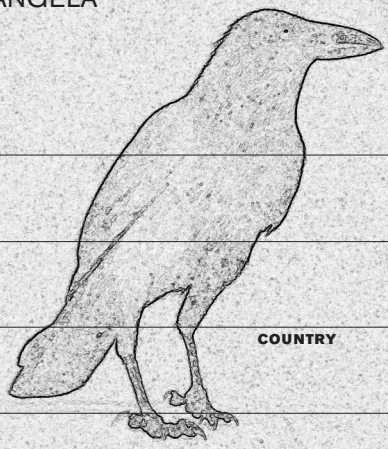

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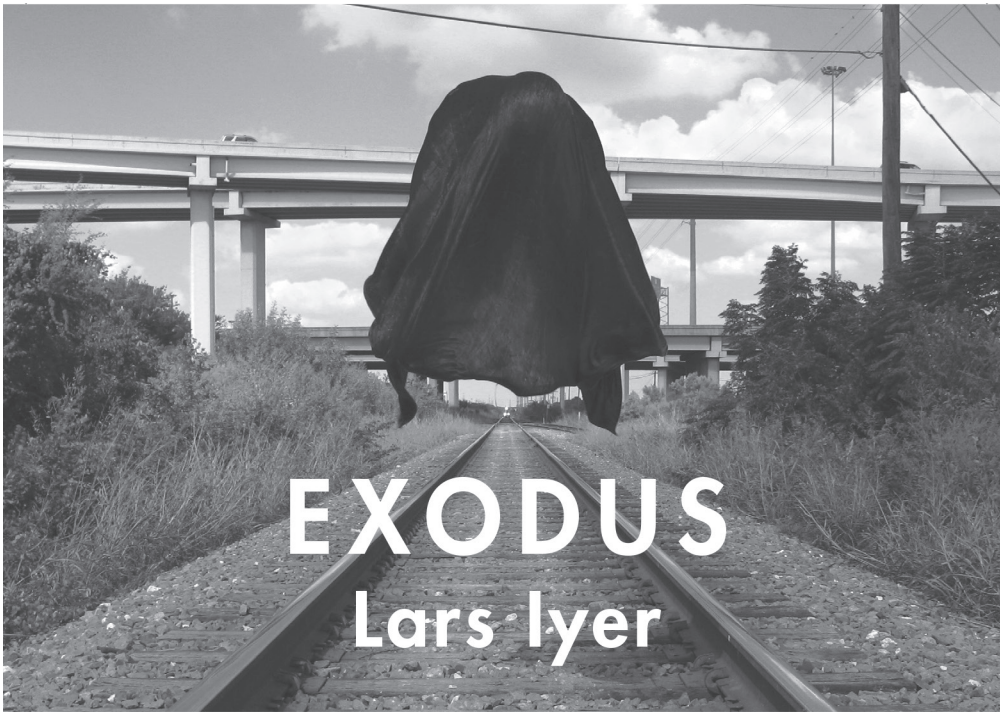

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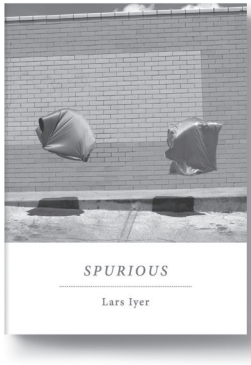

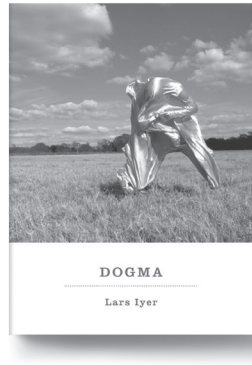

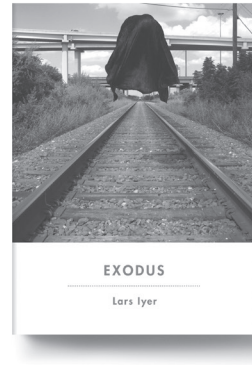

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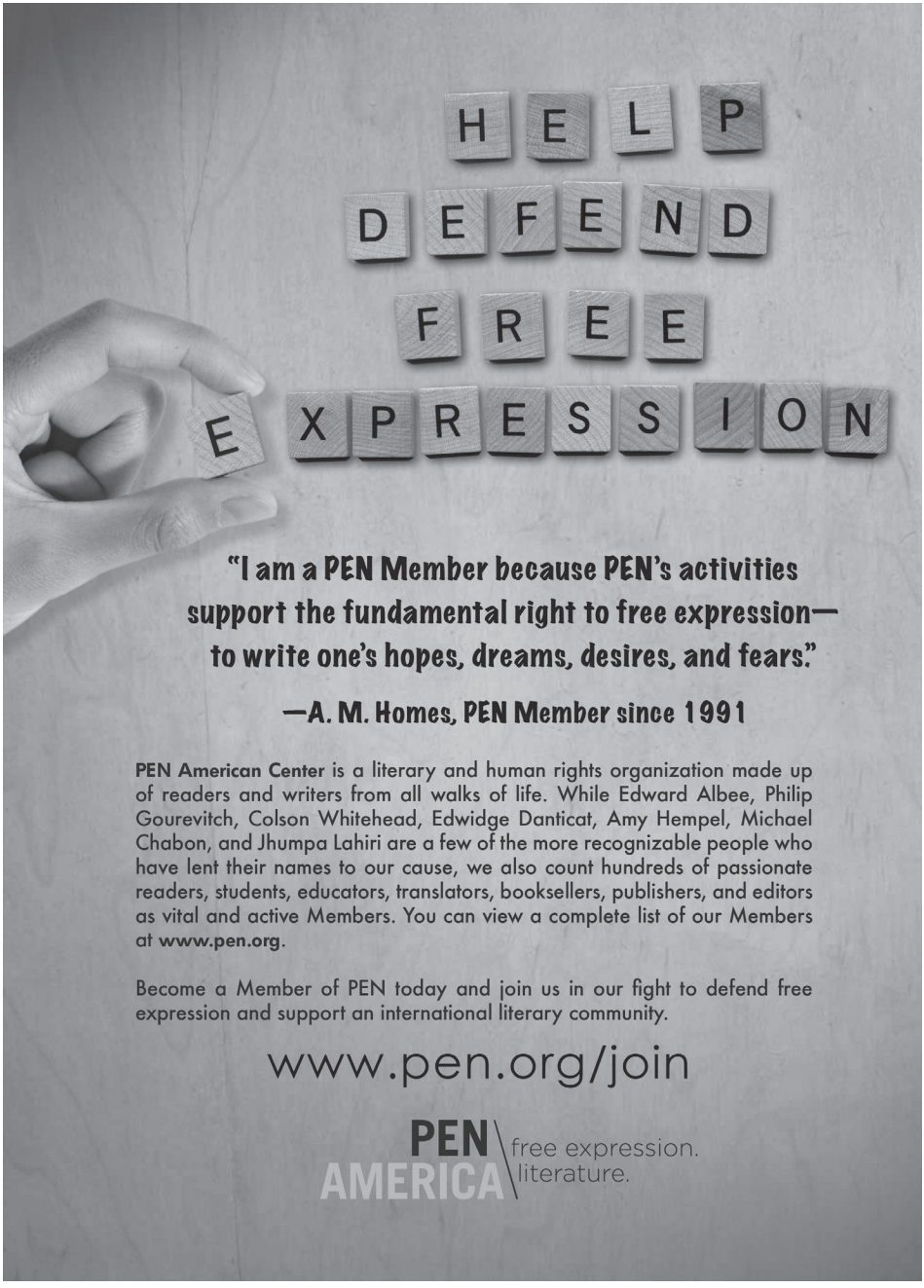
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