TLR

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THE ROGUE IDEA

Flickers at the periphery of its custodian's reach. Outlaw or fool? Bold genius, dreadful distraction, extraneous as neon blue? It's a gamble for sure, a tumble off the pendulum, that shadowy promise of what? Come with us. Take a leap. Follow this uncharted trail. It may be your only, your last, chance.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Selecting a theme for a given issue of *TLR* is both exhilarating and completely imprecise. From the outset, we wanted to broaden the definition of "theme" so that it was inclusive while remaining definitive—the idea being to suggest at least one context in which each individual contribution could be read and appreciated. As editors and readers, that has allowed us to open our minds to work we might otherwise have overlooked or simply understood differently, because we're able to read through an interpretive filter that amplifies rather than narrows. At the same time, contributors aren't constrained to produce work engineered to adhere to strict guidelines—the guidelines are really rather a provocation. Which has been a good balance. But not, as I suggested from the outset, without its moments of head-scratching confusion, particularly when the theme, as in the case of this issue, is in itself a kind of fundamental abstraction. "The Rogue Idea" began as a discussion, over lunch, about the art of book reviewing and ended up, here in these pages, on some idiomatic metaphysical spectrum, spanning practical jokes and fiction-writing workshops to police sketches and the geography of God.

What is a "rogue idea"? Do we recognize it as such (new, bizarre, innovative, dangerous) in the moment that it arrives, seemingly fully formed, on our horizon? Do ideas that seem to diverge from conventional wisdom sometimes reveal themselves to be the essence of convention? Are other ideas, received at the time of their introduction as if covered in cobwebs, like Miss Havisham's wedding cake, actually radical departures from the norm? Are those departures intrinsic, even essential to the norm? Is our cultural wholeness dependent on the anarchic twist? Or, tacking toward the lighter side, is an irregular, irreverent viewpoint precisely the gust of fresh air needed to blow away the cobwebs?

As a model modern neurotic with a predilection for obsessive (as in, inescapably circular) thinking, I idealize the rogue idea. It represents heroic clarity and unselfconscious aesthetic determination, a pure, organic phenomenon: Halley's comet slicing in an instant through a muddy midwinter night sky. —*Minna Proctor*

COVER ARTIST

ALESSANDRA SANGUINETTI
THE PASSAGE, 1999
FROM THE SERIES *THE ADVENTURES OF GUILLE AND BELINDA AND THE ENIGMATIC MEANING OF THEIR DREAMS*
CIBACHROME PRINT

I'm a veteran of good ideas often gone terribly wrong. For example, at the imaginative and experimental age of eight or nine, I decided to hog-tie the family cat. (I believe I was working on some sort of compelling mental cowboy scenario.) The cat was profoundly not amused, as was my father, who had to cut the writhing ball of teeth and claws loose. Still, it did seem like a great idea at the time. That spirit of discovery, teetering on the precipice of disaster, is captured in this issue's cover art, a photograph entitled "The Passage" by Alessandra Sanguinetti. A young, bare-legged girl in an impressively large hat, about to climb through a barbed wire fence . . . the idea, the imminent flaw in implementation and that glorious Seussian hat . . . a rogue idea indeed!

The photograph was recently featured in an ongoing series called *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Meaning of Their Dreams* at the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City. The series depicts the lives of two young cousins growing up on their family's farm outside Buenos Aires. The images are evocative, the girls' faces often impassive, a mental counterpoint to the background of rural landscapes redolent with texture and rich, deep colors.

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Sanguinetti is a native New Yorker and divides her time between New York City and Buenos Aires. She has exhibited widely abroad and her work is featured in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the International Center of Photography, New York. She has received numerous awards and grants including the Rencontres d'Arles Discovery Award, the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and the Hasselblad Foundation Grant.

—Jody Handerson

THE ROGUE IDEA

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Peter Shippy
The twins

There came a point where one would say *sleep*
And the other would sigh and ask, *sleep?*

I remember sleep or *I could sleep for-*
Ever and a day. Apply the poison

Apple, please, the potion. We grew strange
Muscles in our forearms for lifting

And heaving. We learned the angles for
Craning necks to hear suspiration

And nothing else or else nothing. No bird-
Calls, music, sighs, airplanes or oceans.

Then came a time where we could be left
Alone, where someone watched over

The twins for an hour, a morning, night
And a day but still we couldn't sleep through.

We huddled, whispering—*Which is that?*
Do you smell lightning? Once I caught you

Toting sacks of onions, bearing them
From car to kitchen and back again.

You watched me hiss and belly across
The cold floor hounding, searching for—?

A half-moon-shaped puzzle piece? A top?
A pacifier? A cigarette? Last will

And testament? Even without them
We stared at our monitors, focusing

Our ears to discern—siren or ghoul?
Is that wind? Can the north wind cry: *Mama*?

Then we knew. The twins were no longer
Required. Sure, they returned one Sunday

But our training was complete. They kissed
Our cheeks pinned tin medals to your tits

Kicked me in the balls and called their crow, for
Their boat called trumpets and they sailed on.

The ennead

GOD IS THE LIVING *ENS.* —IMMANUEL KANT

The enmity kept on
Trucking. Hence hypo-

Chondria enkindled
Our parish where the river

Came to stab the sea, where
The enisled built rafts

From fish scales engrafted
Onto parasols. "Any port

In an Enlightenment,"
My father, the phenom-

Enalist said, as he mixed
A can of wolf's blood.

After we ensanguined
Our doors we'd walk to Eat-

At-Joe's for enoki soup,
Ale and hot yak. I'd watch

The mayor ensouling lambs
For a dime. That was a time.

Our posthumous lives

FOR MAC

The first words you ever said
To me? "I like lower case Edgar
Less than upper case Edgar." Last night
I gave your book to a stranger.
I do that sometimes. I carry
A copy on the trolley or bus,
And choose some likely suspect
And pass it to them as I exit.
Don't tsk, it's not against the law—
Yet; plus, it's only between the jaws
That you exist, dead boy. I love
Your poems and wish you weren't
Weren't. Now, you're a little air
Lesson, this strange glitch attractor.
Toward the end you forgot a lot.
Apparently, if you overdo
Heroin, later, you can't smell
Madeleines. Something to do
With the sugar, Sugar? When I rub
Our lucky Krugerrand I recall
Sticking it through the hole between
Your front teeth. I miss beauty.
By the by, who was Edgar?

The wreckage of the dark, a postscript

Honestly, I don't understand why
It keeps raining. I've done nothing wrong.

Not especially. No more than usual.
The TV doesn't work. Is that a mystical

Nudge or capitalist adjustment?
My wife paid our bills on the computer, which

Is *pfui.* The screen won't hold a sentence,
So I can't write. If I could find a pen?

My mother claimed that as a babe I cried
In German. In other words—father's tongue.

I should note that in my journal. But
I can't unearth a pen. When I began

Writing I was scrupulous: blue Bics
And yellow legal paper. The last time

We moved I incinerated a box
Of those pads brimming with scribblings.

I didn't want the people of the future
To see my juvenilia. My wife laughed—

"Who do you think you are? F. Scott Faulkner?"
She doesn't *comprende moi*? Even her?

She laughed to see such a sight so my dish
Ran away with the spoon. The night we met

At The Revenant's Dance in the ballroom
Of the Grand Hôtel de la Pomme d'Or

She wore unmatched earrings—a cheap wire hoop
And a natural pearl stud. When I asked,

She explained—*the eye can only afford*
To see one gem. I watched her part, backing

Our car down the muddy drive when it fell
In a faint. She kicked the fender, grabbed

Her suitcase and walked. Where? “Anywhere,”
She laughed. Her figure sank into waves

Of bad weather. In cartoons, rain is drawn
Like teardrops—but this is incorrect—

Raindrops are shaped like the human heart,
Which is always misdepicted. The gauge

In my backyard filled days ago, so
I don’t know how much has fallen. Risen?

Cycles of heavy rain in the Sahara
Enabled early humans to emigrate.

There, now you can say you’ve learned one thing.
As she walked anywhere I finished the booze.

I know, a hackneyed gesture filched
From one of my minor masterpieces.

No ice cubes, of course. I dug out
The emergency radio and wound it up.

But, nothing. The air is bereft
Of transmissions, airplanes, and birds. Why?

Why are the clouds lime green? What should I do
In case of waterspouts? Falling frogspawn?

There is something of the mad prophet
In my face—the beard, shot eyes, harrowed

Cheeks. Yes, my looking glass works. I see you!
Is the library afflicted, too?

When I open my books the pages fly
Into yellow wings and potato skin.

Last weekend, I snared a leaf covered
With a sonnet that I once adored, but

I swear, those treasured words had reshuffled
Into clutter. Not all is for the worst.

The unremitting thunder has cleaned out
My sinuses. My record player

Is kaput, but if I place the vinyl
Under my nose I can smell the music.

Breathe-in—can you hear? "At the Window"
By sweet Jimmy Yancey? Once, she and I

Went to an internment in that part
Of Maine that feels like North Africa.

There was a room in the funeral home
Filled with model trains. No one spoke word one

About that oneiric cell for fear
That it might disappear. At long last

The dog has stopped barking. He sleeps, eyes
open. We share soup at dawn and beans

At dusk. Soon, one of us will wolf down
The other. That's no bolt from the blue.

Even as a puppy, there was something
In his love that recalled the wind.

By the way, have you come across the wind?

Sean McConnell
The Evolution Rapist

I see the boy and girl relaxing in his shadow, and I think—they don't remember far back enough and can't possibly understand how all of this happened.

They've forgotten the first sketch. The one published in the University Paper. They don't remember the stickman: the balloon head with black dots for eyes, the flat-lined mouth, the thin arms and legs splayed, feet flat, no hands. Standing unashamed, his back a straight and solid line that passed between the inverted V of his legs and ended at the appendage that hung between, shrunken and newborn.

I'm tired of people thinking I'm a copy-boy. At this University there is no such thing. Copy-boys work at copy places. I work in an *office*. My desk is in a room that you happen to walk through to get to the copier. I don't know the insides of the copier. I don't know what it means when the green **A** lights up and it stops working. But I have enough sense to follow the instructions on the panel that tell me to open flap **C** and twist the green knob until a toner-smeared sheet of paper comes out. I know this because I use the copy machine as much as anyone else, and, just like it does with everybody else, it occasionally stops working when I need something copied, at which time I follow said instructions. Unfortunately, reasoning isn't what they do in my building. The people here are philosophy and theory.

The people that come into this office read a lot of books and talk about things that don't really matter (at least to me). Take, for instance, Antonya and Feddy. Antonya is getting her Masters in Rave Culture, which I'm sure is just an excuse to have the school fund her partying and her dope. She likes GHB. She says it's flavorless

and makes her feel drunk but doesn't give her the hangover. One time I overheard her say it makes her horny, which I thought getting drunk did—a fact I can't really attest to because I can't afford to drink. But I watched a lot of TV when I had cable and the people who got drunk on it always seemed to get horny and screw. Most of the time it was somebody they shouldn't be screwing.

Feddy always wears the same clothes. In the same order. On the same days. Today it's a tight cotton shirt and a pair of jeans that bunch and hug his package and pull low when he bends over in front of me to check his mailbox. I am not a fan of this. Feddy studies the metrosexual in society and has big ideas on the ways in which the homosexual-looking-heterosexual is negating stereotypes. I don't know if he is gay or not. People ask me. They think I know because I have access to the computer log, which is connected to the Homeland Data Server. I tell the people who ask that the University does not concern itself with an individual's sexuality and that the computer log isn't a place to confirm gossip.

The vagueness in the print description didn't clarify anything: dangerous, strong, quick with his hands and feet, a deep voice.

Mailboxes cover the walls of the room I work in, which means that, by proximity, I have met everybody in the department. Everybody except Rankhi Vorn, who never checks his box—the box in which I constantly cram free copies of *Bi-Weekly Academic*. One of my tasks is to sort and place the mail. I'm kind of like the university mailman, only I don't deliver mail to people outside of the building. The real mailman wears a shiny blue helmet. One time I asked him if his helmet was bulletproof, and he sternly stressed that the unfortunate death of anyone—especially a government employee—at the hands of a few radicals is a tragedy. I apologized and he left in a tizzy, buckling his chinstrap as he slung the blue canvas bag over his shoulder.

Each day I pray Rankhi receives no mail. It is the graduate student's job to empty their box of junk, not mine, and it is getting harder to put things in Rankhi's box. Credit card offers, fertilization agencies interested in buying the unfertilized female eggs for families who can't have children and who want to genetically engineer geniuses, travel agency brochures, fellowship notices, and, every other week, a new copy of *Bi-Weekly Academic*—all of which get a raw deal when I'm forced to cram them into Rankhi's box. The other day I gave myself a paper cut and fought the

urge to urinate on his unclaimed mail. I'm sure I could take out the old magazines to clear space for the newer issues Rankhi won't be picking up, but, like I said, it's not my job. Besides, tampering with someone's mail is a federal crime and I already have two strikes against me. I can't have another.

Feddy is tucking in the waistline of the boxer briefs that always make a late appearance when he stands up.

Antonya says to me, "I think the toner's low. Some of my copies are a little faded."

She nods her head like I'm right on it and then leaves. Feddy follows her out, and I say to anybody who might be listening, "It's not my job."

For the second sketch, they put a beanie on his head and gave him a hoodie, the initial details that separated him from other rapists. No one suspected that he would be bold enough to keep them. They drew raccoon-like circles around the dots to intensify his pupils. Another crescent line gave his bottom lip a soft shape. A large triangle nose in the middle of his face followed. An evolution witnessed through the increasing number of incremental details, details that accumulated as the attacks increased. The early sketches were so simple anyone could draw them. I found countless students' attempts at the sketch on the walls of restroom stalls and in the margins of discarded copy paper. The progression was like flipping through the pages of the drawing books I had as a child; the ones that told me to draw circles, and then particular lines that connected them, and then to erase certain parts of certain circles and cross-hatch certain areas thicker than others, with a final instruction to smudge the lines so that it looked just like the horse at the top of the page—which mine never did.

The vagueness in the print description didn't clarify anything: dangerous, strong, quick with his hands and feet, a deep voice.

My mother died when I moved in with my girlfriend and I wouldn't have felt so responsible for her death if she hadn't told me on her deathbed that the thought of me living in sin was killing her.

My then-girlfriend and I had been from neighboring towns and had met on a group hiking trip through the National Park. We broke up months ago. It feels like years.

One day, after a particularly uncomfortable dinner with my parents, my Ex (not my Ex yet) asked what my mother thought of her and I blurted out that she thought she was a whore. It was the kind of candid disclosure that ended six months of co-

habitive bliss. So here I am, working at the college she wanted to transfer to after her first two years of community college. She told me this one night before kicking me out after a round of guilty post-breakup sex (by then my Ex). I remember those nights, listening to her talk and trying not to say anything stupid. The last night I saw her, I remembered her—for the hundredth time—telling me her plan for college and her future (never ours). I couldn't help being a bit skeptical, her life no further along than it was a year ago when we first broke up. I remember her listing the majors she wanted to sample and I like to think I said what I said because I wanted to protect her from disappointment. But, in hindsight, saying, "They're *really* smart over there," wasn't so smart, because she thought I was calling her dumb, which she wasn't (but she always had lofty goals—ballerina, deep sea zoologist, surgeon—ambitious for a girl who skated trays of fast-food to cars at a joint where they played fifties music and served soft-serve ice cream). She never forgave me, and, looking back, I think the reason she stopped visiting had more to do with what she thought I thought of her and not what my mother thought.

I'd been living alone for six months when my city tags expired. I hadn't paid the fee or taken the blood test because I was in flux, living month to month. At the time I wasn't sure how long I was going to stay at the University. It was around this time that I found the first ticket on my window. Apparently my private parking space was under police jurisdiction. When I called up to question the morality of such a ticket, I spoke to a lady who advised me that our conversation was being recorded and that a persistence of my hostile attitude would result in marks on my public record. She told me all the consequences surrounding my failure to register, or any subsequent damages that might result from my failure to comply with federal and state security regulations, all of which would be my sole responsibility, and how—should I violate any of these laws—I would be held accountable and subsequent penalties could warrant a second or third strike, depending. The next day I had my picture taken and fingers printed, as well as the required DNA scan, all of which cost money I didn't have even though I was due for a raise. The University was suffering the effects of a state budget crisis and was in month eighteen of a wage freeze and all they could give out were promotions. I was now Department Recorder and Office Manager, who, as of yet, had not seen any extra cash. The President of the University constantly promises to deliver the number-one ranking that will increase enrollment and give him a reason to raise tuition and salaries.

My second strike came two months after the first. I had parked in a thirty-minute lot at the end of the historic downtown mall and got stuck in a shoe store

behind an old lady who kept trying to pay with a credit card the store wouldn't accept. For several minutes I watched her put the card back into her purse only to dig it out later and try again thinking it was something else. On my way out, the old lady grabbed my elbow and asked if she knew me. It was a brief conversation, one in which I assured her that I did not know her or her grandson. When I returned to my car I saw another ticket on my window. I looked at my watch. Thirty-*five* minutes. The old bitch had cost me five minutes.

Eventually the sketch grew big hands with long fingers and a gold nugget ring for his right ring finger that he never removed. It was after the tenth victim that they started calling him a "serial" rapist. It was a kind of promotion, elevating him into a different category, one reserved for the kind of crimes that made it into textbooks.

Rahim is in the office checking his mailbox and making copies. He is an African American Studies scholar whose focus is colonial slavery and the Jamaican day-worker. He is a prominent graduate in the department and periodically covers hip-hop news for Music Television. I've overheard him speak nostalgically about the militant movements of the sixties and how he thinks it would be ironic if they turned over the states with rebel flags to the black people whose slavery they seemed so proud of. He doesn't trust politicians; feels that the last time they did anything for African Americans was because they felt threatened. He claims that during the civil rights movement, blacks were bought off with moderate and insincere political reforms as a delaying tactic; that the assassinations of prominent black leaders in the newly mobilized political force was a stalling tactic so the government could have the time to pump drugs into once vital communities in order to pacify his people. His sub-interest is on institutional uses of fear and coercion as effective propaganda in mobilizing minorities for global corporations.

Rahim never washes his hair and has a set of dreadlocks that emit an unpleasant odor when he moves while in my personal space. Occasionally he will try to trap me into conversations by asking me questions to which I rarely know the answers. Thankfully this is not one of those days, but he does seem angry.

At my desk, I'm reporting who logged on where and what they looked at and am amazed at how much porn people look at. I wonder if they realize that the Internet is just another traffic zone monitored regularly by the government and that institutions that receive government funding are not protected by privacy laws. For example: Jason Bennett loves *Celebrity Skin* and *Hardcore Hospital.* The only person

whose name never appears in the web log is Rankhi Vorn, who I imagine is too good for porn, or the Internet, and spends his time at the library with real books, above his contemporaries, in a carrel, coming up with big ideas.

Rahim's continued presence over me shakes me from thoughts of Rankhi's study habits. An unidentified but inescapable guilt overwhelms me and I can't bear to look at him. In my mind I try to remember if I messed up his mail or made a false entry in the log, if I've done anything to warrant his focused attention. It's only after he puts the newest sketch of the rapist on my desk that it dawns on me that he might have asked me a question and I just didn't hear him.

"What about this?" he says, pointing to the new sketch of the rapist. "What do you think they're trying to say with *this* bullshit? It looks like a flyer for a minstrel show."

I look at the sketch and I see what he's talking about. I'm not stupid. I see the less than subtle triangle nose, the exaggerated lips. He's trying to trap me, trying to get me to say what he thinks I'm thinking. I feign ignorance, I push my face closer to the drawing and say, "What, that he looks like a raccoon?"

Rahim snarls. I've never seen him work this hard to communicate his disgust with me. He points to the stack of papers in his arm, in which I notice are hundreds of copies of the rapist sketch.

He says, "The copier's fucked up. These copies have no tone." And then walks out of the office.

I make a note in the office computer that another student has complained about the toner in the copier and then put it out of my mind, focusing on my job, which must be important otherwise they wouldn't have hired someone for it.

Finally, after attack number twenty-eight, they give the rapist jeans. And then sweats. And then jogging pants. He begins to wear sneakers. He is a simple man. His face is still a blank caricature, only they've rounded out the features. Eventually his methods evolved. The attacks increased in randomness. In a park he approached a mother walking her son and punched her in the face, his nugget ring stamping her forehead and leaving behind a lumpy bruise. But he didn't rape her. He began assaulting men. A guy waiting for the trolley was hit in the temple and had his privates stomped on. At first nobody acknowledged these radical deviations, but the DNA evidence found in the wounds was a petri-dish of some of the past victims. Citizens took note of the change in M.O. and told themselves that, despite the flat face and generic features, the person in the sketch looked like somebody they knew. False accusations sprouted

and then died amid a flurry of defamation litigation. For a time the paper stopped reporting the attacks. Schools, public places, and government parks began to take extra precautions.

I'm late to work and having a bad day because, in an effort to limit the risk of getting my third strike, I've stopped driving my car anywhere. The reason my tardiness matters is because—for security purposes—the buses have added ID swipes and, in an effort to monitor our travel patterns, we are required to call and reserve our seat on the bus a day prior to traveling. I had been doing well with it, but this morning a day laborer putting in the electrical fence around my complex sliced through an underground wire and killed himself and the power to our building and effectively put me an hour behind schedule.

Since I live in the basement of my building and can't afford cable, I've taken to calling the local news station in the morning for the ten-day forecast so that I know what to wear. Today I'm told it will be partly cloudy with mild temperatures. They tell me if I would like to hear a joke to press six, but I always hang up. I don't have time. On my way out the door, my phone rings and I answer it, thinking it might be my Ex. I say hello and nobody responds. I hear the buzzing sound that indicates I've called back on myself. It happens all the time. But sometimes I imagine she's called to make sure I'm still in town and that I haven't said "sayonara," which I hope still makes her smile since it was what I used to say before putting my head between her legs.

I arrive at the top of the hill in time to see the bus driving away. The sign on the back features several local writers and encourages me to read in order to free my mind. From here it's a half-hour walk to work.

At the office, I notice the Department Head has already opened the door and turned on the computer. He is the Plan B in case I'm late, which is rare. Even he can't get in the way of students getting their mail. I check the computer log to see his opening entry. It reads: *Arrived on time. The guy who works the office wasn't here. Opened the door. Made copies for ten minutes then left. Something wrong with the copier. The tone is off.* I would change "the Guy" to Brian Kellermen if I could, but entries into the log are considered legal records and can't be changed.

Gallant Pakapolis comes out of the copy room with a small stack of copies. I quickly sit in my chair and begin the entry.

"How long have you been here?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't know . . . ." he says, rummaging through the box of paper clips. "Five or so minutes." Gallant freeloads off the supplies. He likes to take handfuls

of paper clips and rubber bands, along with any pens that might be lying around. Sometimes when the stapler is out he pretends to fill it, but what he is really doing is putting the staples in his pocket. He isn't sly about this and makes no effort to hide his actions from me.

I type in his name and time of arrival even though I am unsure as to whether or not he is telling me the truth. Soon they will be installing cameras at the entrances of the buildings, classrooms, and offices. I've been told that I'll have one and that I'll be able to verify whether or not a person like Gallant—a person I loathe—is telling the truth. When that happens, I can enter his lies into the log, documenting them so that they may be preserved for as long as we remain a civilized society.

"I say," he says, taking a handful of paper clips out of the box and putting them in his pocket, "the toner is calibrated wrong." Stray clips drip from his curled fist and land on the carpet. "When I look at this batch, I'm really not sure *what* I'm looking at."

He smiles at me as if expecting the sparkle from his teeth to blind me.

I imagine his head as the first brick of a vacation home made from the skulls of my enemies.

"Take it easy," he says with a nod before leaving, paperclips tumbling out of his corduroy pockets.

I type in what time he left and stare at the paper clips on the floor. It's not my job to clean the office—especially after a prick like Gallant. I know I'll eventually pick the paper clips up. Still, I give myself ten minutes.

After three years and eighty-three attacks, the first detailed composite of the rapist's face hit the ground with a whump, like one of those old newspaper headline montages: *Capone*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Black Sunday*, *The Serial Rapist*. Thirty-nine of the women attacked were students and The President of the University believed this was affecting the school's ranking, which had slipped to third after being tied for second two years ago. ID swipes were installed on the doors of buildings and classrooms.

Controversy erupted over the ethnicity of the rapist. With the exception of some detailed shading around the nose, mouth, ear, and chin, one would think him not that evolved from the sketches of previous years. People whispered in like-minded huddles that they had known all along that he was a "person of ethnicity." Next to the rendering of the face was a small note that read: skin complexion may be darker than appears. He now had a small chin, soft cheeks, and fuller lips and a flat nose. His eyes were described as "buggish," but in the portrait they seemed soft,

non-threatening. To be the repository of aggression from another human being who looked as peaceful and relaxed as him implied a failure upon you as a person.

To help distribute the sketch, children—honor students from the best schools enrolled in civil servant courses—were given permission to take a day off from school and help post the sketch inside every Federal and University building. Since the children only had a day to work, they were given the authority to interrupt classes and were issued special key cards. The hallways funneled their laughter into classrooms as they ran through corridors posting flyers and playing tag with the rapist's face, sticky-taping sketches to the parts of their bodies that fell within reach and running away before they could be tagged back. They came into classrooms chasing each other. Girls plastering sketches on the cute boys and giggling. Boys patting sketches onto the backs of scowling graduate students and running in circles around the professors as they tried to discuss hegemonic influences. They posted sketches in elevators, in hallways, on food trays, and in the brochure stands on cafeteria tables. They posted them on windows, on the sides of buses and in stairwells.

I imagine his head as the first brick of a vacation home made from the skulls of my enemies.

It was on this day that I heard a small voice singing a familiar radio tune. I followed the song out of the office in time to see a young girl at the end of the hallway, alone. Hanging from her shoulders were sketches that, in overlapping segments, draped down her body and expanded out from her waist into a white paper gown. I watched her twirl down the hall. As she spun toward the doorway, the red neon of the "exit" sign cast a hot-blooded red over her skin, and the subtle breeze generated by her wake lifted the sketches along the wall and drew them toward her like lunar tide crests. As the girl danced toward the exit, she periodically peeled a sketch from her body and—as if she were a daisy plucking her own petals—spun toward the wall and placed it softly on whatever empty space she could find.

The children left us having posted the rapist sketch next to award winners and advertised alongside Nobel Laureates. He went to class with you and ate with you. He rode elevators with you while campaigning with presidential candidates.

"I don't mean to be a bitch—" Sandra says, looking over my shoulder as I slide the mail into the boxes. Despite the number of people who have left in my almost four

years, Rankhi still receives mail and, according to the log, still attends the University. For months now I've been forced to pile Rankhi's mail on top of the mailboxes and stack his copies of *Bi-Weekly Academic* on the floor. "—but the toner is messed up on the copier."

She shows me a copy and I agree that something isn't right about the tone.

"I don't know if my students, or anyone else for that matter, will be able to make heads or tails of this."

"I'll see what I can do," I tell her. I make my way over to my desk, where I enter her complaint into the log.

Sandra is in the office with Sapa, both of whom are new graduates. Sandra's specialty is Rape Culture, which has become an offshoot in several departments and can be found now in Business, African American Studies, Pop Culture, Human Sexuality, American History, Economics, Psychology, Advertising, and Law. All of this is largely the result of an influx of new students that started after *The Times* ran a piece a few years ago about a "highly selective institution plagued by the world's longest active serial rapist." Initially the president played down the article and the rapist's impact on the university. But within a year a new subdiscipline had emerged, bringing with it an influx of new graduates from the best schools, eager to make names for themselves by making unique claims regarding this localized phenomenon. Always responsive to the winds of academic change, the president modified his stance and sold the rapist as *the* cultural phenomenon of a generation, a microcosm of society magnified for contemplation and discussion. The only University in America where history was in the making.

Sapa tosses her copy of *Bi-Weekly Academic* into the trash and says, "So, like I was saying, the women who decided to keep their babies are all locked up for, like, the next twenty-one years, with deals from all the major networks. Big money deals. Like, where are the rape children at five and thirteen type deals. What is the prom experience for the rape kids? Do the rape kids go to college? Do they grow up emotionally unstable as a result of their mother's decision not to abort? Multi-*million* dollar deals. People don't want to say it, but those girls hit the lottery. Literally, statistics say odds favor being a victim as opposed to actually winning the *real* lottery. It's almost shameful though, exploiting such a violation for economic gain."

"But some people don't believe in abortion," Sandra responds. "And it's our failure as a society since *we* haven't caught the guy yet. I mean, it's *exploitive*, sure. But we owe them *something* for our failure to protect them, whether it's through our pop-fascination or some kind of economic reparation."

I don't mention that both of them are here on fellowships because of the rapist. "Did you hear that another one of the frat guys died last night?" Sapa asks as she flips through the contents of an envelope containing spring break cruise packages.

"Well, I can't say I feel sorry for him after what they did. Still, did you see his picture in the paper? A hottie."

For Halloween, a group of fifteen frat guys decided to put on hoodies and beanies and paint their faces in black face. They came across a group of black students on their way to the same party and a fight broke out. One of the frat guys was killed along with one of the black dudes. The frat guy that died yesterday had brought the death toll to three.

"It was completely insensitive, what they did," Sandra said.

"I can see it, though," Sapa says. "I mean, *I* couldn't think of anything scarier to be for Halloween."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the *ethnic* sensitivity. There is nothing in the sketch that confirms that it is a black guy—I mean, what were those guys supposed to do when they saw them?"

"Not black?" Sapa asks curiously. "You don't think he's black?"

"I don't know. Where I did my undergraduate work, there was a guy you would have *sworn* was black, but it turned out that he was part Dominican, part Puerto Rican. He could be anybody. The bottom line is, the guy must be poor because there is no evidence of him in the DNA records, which he would *have* to have at this point if he had a job or went anywhere, so, as a society, we associate poorness with African American communities. I mean, Mexicans are poor—"

"You know, I heard somewhere that Mexicans were being rounded up, too—"

"Right, right, exactly! I had a maid and we used to pick her up on Sundays to come live with us. And she didn't live in the good part of town, if you know what I'm saying. I mean, there are other poor people out there—I mean, like—"

"But is he black or not? I dated a black guy, so I kind of have an eye for things like this. Maybe not, but—wow, were my parents not happy about it when they found out."

"No, no—I see what you're saying, I mean it's why the police have been rounding up every black guy on the street. Did you know that they're using the rapist as an excuse to clear out the rundown buildings off Main Street? Their 'best' effort to 'catch the rapist'? The city is reluctant to expand with affordable housing so they're using the rapist as cover to drive out the homeless and make condos. Somebody even said that the Italians are involved."

"Really? *Are* there any Italians here?"

"Of course there are. They're into everything."

"*Really*? I've never seen one. I mean, a *real* Italian . . . *Here*."

"Have you been to the pizza place downtown?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the guys that work there are all Italian."

"*Really*? They look Mexican."

"No. They give orders to the kitchen in Italian."

"I thought it was Spanish."

"It's Italian."

"Do you *speak* Italian?"

"Do *you* speak Spanish?"

Since security policies prevent the admittance of students into buildings that are not related to their discipline, our department has become a claustrophobic place to learn and work. People wander down to their mailboxes and shoot the breeze with colleagues they're tired of passing in the hallways. Invariably the conversation falls back to the rapist, which gets people's ire up. More than a few conversations have resulted in verbal fights. Some have come to physical blows. Sandra and Sapa have long been getting on each other's nerves for a while now, each one telling me after the other left that the other was a "know-it-all."

I've decided to leave my job at the next available opening.

Last night my phone rang and I picked it up. I hadn't called for the weather, so I thought it was a legitimate call from my Ex, maybe even my dad, who I haven't talked to since Mom died. There was a faint whirring in the background. I said hello into the phone four times and called out for dad. I called out to my Ex, "Sarah?"

"Hello . . . this is Trace Morgan . . . And I'm here to tell you about an exciting new real-estate plan that will get you and your family in a home . . . Fast . . . With minimal effort . . ."

I didn't take me long to realize that Trace was a computer salesman. Still, he had a nice disposition. He talked to me about mortgages, his voice prompting me to press numbers if I was interested in certain packages or needed further explanation, in which he explained the importance and intricacies of home investment. I talked to him about how I was sorry about Mom and that I should have loved her more and shouldn't have treated her like an inescapable weight that had been dragging me under the muck since birth. I talked about how I was sorry I implied that my Ex was stupid and how she was the smartest girl in her county and how I had stayed at my job so long because

I thought she would follow her dream and come here, and that when she saw me she would know that I hadn't forgotten about her for one second, even though I told myself I had every day. I told Trace about this place and how it was everything my Ex wanted and that she would fit right in because she was full of big ideas. I told Trace that the first day my Ex came to pick up her mail, she would know that I had put it there and that I loved her, that we were connected in a way that was about more than the sex we liked to have.

Trace responded with a few well-timed clicks and whirrs, before—in as friendly a voice I imagined one could program—saying he had several good offers, but, after processing my social security number, realized I didn't have the credit history applicable for one of his dynamite home-mortgage plans and that my precarious legal situation made me a hazardous investment. He offered me a curt good evening and told me to remember his company once I demonstrated more financial and legal responsibility.

I told him to have a nice day and that I missed her. When he hung up, I held the cordless in my lap in case he dialed back.

Sapa huffs, rolls her eyes, and walks out of the room.

Sandra waits a good minute and then turns to me and says, "I can't stand that bitch," followed by, "So, are you going to adjust the tone?"

"It's not my job," I remind her.

"*Really?* Then what do you do around here?"

I point to the mail in her hand and the computer log and raise my eyebrows.

She scrunches her eyebrows in response and makes a disgusting face, then says, "What a life," before walking out.

I realize that a certain amount of passivity has ruined my life and that I have accomplished nothing of substance in the four years I've worked here.

I decide to fix the toner and then turn in my two-week notice.

But I don't know where the toner is. So I flip open all of the usual flaps of the copier. I spin the usual knobs. I even slide out a couple black cartridge-like thingamajigs that have their own mini-knobs and flaps. I take strict mental notes where each piece comes from and, once I exhaust all possibilities for tone, put them back into place. I repeat the act ad nauseam until I'm left with a final flap and a hidden latch on the backside of the machine. When I open it I see a milk jug–looking container that has the traces of what I assume is toner. I take out the jug and some black powder falls to the carpet, where I notice for the first time the faded stains of previous toner changes. I open the only box that isn't paper and pull out a similar jug filled to the rim with dusty black ink.

The cap is on tight, so I put the jug in a headlock and twist until I crack the neck. I turn back to the flap and slide the jug into the slot at the wrong angle, so I turn the jug over believing that there is a contraption in the machine that will somehow puncture the tissue-like paper on the outside. There isn't, and a half gallon of sandy black toner tears through the thin covering and spills onto my shoes and khakis. I curse God.

Toner is all over me. My first reaction is to wipe it off my clothes and shoes, which is a bad idea. Before I know it, my hands are covered in a chalky black substance. A strong chemical smell—something akin to ammonia—fills my nose and I'm having difficulty breathing. My feet leave black shoe-prints on the carpet as I emerge from the copy room, lumbering around the office with toner trailing behind me in a leaden swirl of black smoke that I occasionally stumble back into, arms flapping. The air tastes like pen ink and I start to cough.

I see Rankhi Vorn's box and his stacks of mail.

"Fuck You, Rankhi!" I shout at his box. And then I'm putting as much of his mail as I can into my arms and running out of the office.

As I stumble down the hallway—the delicate spacing of the rapist's sketch from many months ago slowly shredding in tears, caricatures, phone numbers, quotes from politicians, and the spotted finger-print remnants of bits of white paper and tape—I think of all the people who have come through this office and can't think of a single person who's done less than Rankhi. I can no longer allow him to remain above the situation any longer. *Who does he think he is?* Nobody has the right to remain unaffected. He may think he's not a part of anything, that his avoidance and seclusion from what most people consider a normal life has ensured some kind of peace of mind, but I've felt the contents of his useless box: the magazines and brochures; I've seen glimpses into the life he's ignored, fragments he's kept hidden; in my hands I hold the stiff cardboard of greeting cards encased in pastel envelopes; I feel brittle onion-skinned envelopes of letters from distant overseas relatives; I crush the manila envelope sealed with peach lipstick. When Rankhi can deny these things no longer and eventually comes to claim them, he'll realize that his life, despite his best efforts, was affected by his choices, no matter how insignificant they might have seemed. But by then I'll be long gone and he'll be left to wonder why life is this way.

I push into the men's room, where I cram Rankhi's mail into the nearest trash-can, my arms emerging from the trash with pieces of paper towels stuck to them. I pick most of the pieces off, but some of it sticks to me as if moist.

When I am as clean as I can manage, I go back into the office and, using a ruler

from the desk, shave off a post-it and record my two-week notice and place it like a peeling stamp on the corner of the computer monitor. After that, I sit and type my trip to the bathroom in the log. Thankfully we are still camera-less, so I am able to omit the meltdown and the disposal of a large portion of Rankhi's mail. I look at the mess on the floor and tell myself that someone will be in behind me to clean the carpet; and, while I sit and wait for the day to end, I think about the faded stains of previous toner changes, and imagine the janitor who I have never seen on his knees scrubbing what he can of my footprints out of the carpet.

I look out the window at the students walking to class and realize that they can't see me through the security glass.

I decide to take my break at the end of my shift. I want to go home early.

The historic grounds of the University reflect the philosophy of exploration that was the belief of the University's founder. A week ago, on the historic central grounds, they unveiled the rapist's statue in the hopes that a physical reminder of his presence would help encourage those whose vigilance had waned. Here the statue is surrounded by two centuries of architectural history—progressivism embalmed in the red-bricked foundations of buildings held upright by alabaster columns that symbolize the strength of liberal knowledge as freedom and independence. We find ourselves living in the shadow of a crime so horrible—so massive and great—that the only way to understand it was to memorialize it. The sketch is done; as citizens we've simply assimilated it as another terror tale.

On my last day, walking across the grounds on my way home, I see two students resting near the statue—boy and girl. The girl leans against the marble base. She is wearing a skirt and I see her thigh, tan and sculpted from hours spent going nowhere on an elliptical machine. As I pass, I wink and say, "Sayonara." She doesn't notice me and turns the page of her sketchbook. I see a slight relaxing of the tense muscle of her thigh, a passing invitation in the line of her calf. I think for a moment that I know her. This is replaced by the knowledge that I've seen hundreds of her. The boy sitting next to her uses the shade provided by the rapist's statue to shield his face from the sun. It's impossible to tell if they even know of each other's existence.

As I book it up the hill, I shake my head. They have no idea how all of this started. None of them do. They think we're near the end of it all. That it can't get any worse. But if anyone thought to ask me, I'd tell them: it never ends. It's always getting worse.

William Zander
Not My Own Man

Not my own man, no.
I seem to be caught up in some
Monastic order where the monks eat brains,
Bent on being
Spiritual and numb.
Hooded, I shuffle through my routine,
Bonged on the hour by bells, dogged by plain-
Song that won't let go.

"Incarnatus sum,"
I mutter, vociferously, or thus
It seems, like thunder on a spooky soundtrack.
My scapular
Encloses me like a truss,
Leads me inward, but not too far.
Then what's that clatter, that clamorous yakety-yak,
Like bats trapped in the gloom

Of my own head? They haunt
My cavern, my moisture, my thoughts that scatter
Like bosons. O supersonic locater voices,
You want to zoom

Into space, into dark matter!
At 3 AM in my muggy room,
My breviary laying out the choices,
I don't know what I want—

Maybe to be alone?
Ah, the nostalgia for wilderness,
The bliss of the eremite, devoting his being—
To what? To God?
Or is it to silence, less
Yakking, no one but Self to prod
Or spare the rod on? What office am I fleeing?
I'm chaste, a monotone.

Factions of the Undead
Hump up, drawn by the heat of the sun:
Observants touting a more "authentic" life,
Conventuals
A regulated one,
Or contemplating behind their walls
Those refugees from Eden, man and wife.
Who's leader here? Who's led?

A savior's needed—who
But SIMON MAGUS? mountebank, cheater
At cards and pitching nostrums, who tried to buy
The Holy Ghost
(Acts 8:19) from Peter
And put the spirit to work in a most
Rewarding way: "My dear, you shall not die
If I lay my hands on you."

If a flock follows, lead them,
I say, and Simon soon acquired
A following, which didn't desire a system
But life forever.
His guiding hands were inspired.
He died and was soon forgotten, however,
Not loved, not hated, making hash of the dictum:
Extinctus amabitur idem,

As if we're exalted in death.
"Acta est fabula," I aver
In a dead language—or should I say "Undead"?
In my monk's cell,

I dream of love and stir
Again for the laying on of selves.
But I'm too old, my endeavors edited.
Too sore. Too out of breath.

I emerge from what I dreamed,
Bewildered but happy, my own man,
At least for now. I step outside and meet
Mickey Mouse.
Why not? As a child, I'd plan
My escape from every nightmare *Geisthaus*
I'd flee from, to stroll with him on Pinkney Street,
Where I was gathered, redeemed.

Torn Apart

. . . SEONOWE ONSPRUNGON,
BURSTON BANLOCAN. . .

Tearing someone apart with your bare hands, something like
a stuffed doll with a painted smirk—what man
has never tingled to grab hold? It rushes
into my head sometimes like Thracian women
pulling my cock right off, plugging it into my brain
directly, focusing my eyes with the exultation of a
goshawk seeing the *ding an sich*, hunger turned
into justice, something evil or too damn good—something
puffed up and croaking on its lotus—some bastard getting
what he deserves—you know, bones popping,
tendons snapping, guts spreading
like fungus after a rain, a field where everything's at hand—
not as he saw himself, no,
not as he looked under glass
rubbing his eyes as if he couldn't believe
how plain he was, how spare,
the dreams still nagging in him till he
doused himself,
the water dripping from his face and hair.

Judith Hermann
Misha

Translated from German by Margot Bettauer Dembo

But Misha didn't die. Not during the night from Monday to Tuesday, nor the night from Tuesday to Wednesday; perhaps he would die Wednesday evening or later that night. Alice thought she had heard it said that most people die at night. The doctors weren't saying anything anymore; they shrugged their shoulders and held out their empty, disinfected hands. There's nothing more we can do. Sorry.

And so Alice and Maja and her child had to look for another place to stay. Another vacation apartment, because Misha couldn't die. Their present vacation apartment was too small. They really needed at least two bedrooms, one for Maja and the child and the other for Alice, and also a living room with a TV for the evenings, a halfway decently equipped kitchen to take care of the child's needs, a bath with a bathtub. A garden? And a window with a view of something beautiful.

In the hospital, Misha was wearing a hospital gown printed all over with blue diamonds. He was reduced to skin and bones, a skeleton; but his hands were as they had always been—they were also soft and warm. On his bedside table there was nothing now except a bottle of mineral water and a sippy cup. Though by now he'd even stopped drinking water.

Alice packed her overnight bag. A nightgown, three tee shirts, three sweaters, a pair of slacks, underwear, a book. She sat down on the wicker sofa among the pillows and rolled a green plastic ball with a little bell tinkling inside it across the tiled tabletop toward the child. The child was already able to stand at the low living-room coffee

table, proudly holding on to the tabletop with both hands. She didn't react to the ball, but emphatically repeated the word "rabbit" several times in a row. Very clearly. Maja was on the phone with the landlord of a vacation apartment at the other end of town. Cheaper. Three rooms. With a garden. A washing machine too, yes, of course. Not any farther away from the hospital than this one-room place with its fake forsythias in a vase on the built-in cupboard, the framed photo above the TV showing the sun setting into an empty lake, the Murphy bed on which Alice had slept in front of the built-in cupboard, the double bed in the corner, and the wicker sofa pushed to the window. The curtains were drawn aside and the view was of a supermarket parking lot, cars coming and going, and people pushing brimful shopping carts.

In the Catholic Hospital, Maja was saying on the phone, my husband is in the Catholic Hospital. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her head cradled in her hand, her face turned away. Alice gazed at her back. Now the child had decided to take the plastic ball after all, lifting it up and shaking it hard, listening to the little bell with a rapt expression on her face.

We're moving, Alice said to the child. We're moving to another place. It's going to be really nice there, you'll see. There's a bathtub. A garden—we can go outside every morning. Trees. A lawn. Maybe rabbits, we'll see, maybe we can catch one.

The child didn't reply. She looked at Alice, a long look full of mysterious significance. A clear drop of spit trembled on her little chin. She was Misha's child, and she looked a lot like her father.

The way things had turned out, Misha now lay dying in Zweibrücken—Two Bridges. The name sounded poetic to Alice, but it presented a distorted image, because for the dying man there was only one bridge, if any at all. For whom was the second one? Zweibrücken turned out to be the end of an odyssey that had led from one hospital to another—and then in the end and by coincidence it happened to be a Catholic hospital in a town far from home where Misha now lay dying. He might have joked about it if he'd had the strength. But he no longer did. He had cancer and was on morphine, was nearly gone. Alice wasn't even sure whether the sound he made when she sat by his bed and put his hand in hers was intended as an expression of pain or acceptance. The doctors, who had withdrawn from the case a week ago, still hovered in the background out of courtesy. Now and then, one of them would come by and pretend to take his temperature or feel his pulse. For days they had predicted his death, but he didn't die. Kept breathing, in and out. In and out. In and out. That was all.

*

Maja was diapering the child on the double bed. The child was beautiful, her skin soft and white. On her back there was a heart-shaped birthmark, a mark of distinction. Alice sat on the wicker sofa and watched as Maja changed the child's diaper, holding both little legs in her left hand and gently raising the child by her little feet.

We'll take a taxi, Maja said. Could you call for one? In ten minutes.

OK, Alice said.

They didn't talk much. Sometimes more, sometimes less; it wasn't awkward. The night before they had sat next to each other in silence, watching the child eat pizza. For quite a while. Then Alice got up and washed the last of the dishes, two coffee mugs, two plates, the little bowl from which the child had eaten plain yogurt with banana slices at noon. Please pack up the things from the refrigerator, too, Maja said. She told the child to lie still. Don't move—just a minute more.

There were eggs, fish, tomatoes, and a piece of butter in the refrigerator. And fennel tea, potatoes, apples, and pears. Plus three bottles of beer and a bottle of wine. In the pot on the stove there were sterilized nipples and the child's little bottle. Alice unfolded two bright yellow bags, feeling unduly helpless—she wanted to do everything just so.

Then the landlord was standing at the door. He had knocked inaudibly, just wanted to check whether everything was all right. Alice counted some bills into his outstretched hand; she saw no reason to lie to him. No. We're not leaving town, we're just moving; this place is really too small for us. But otherwise everything's fine. Thank you very much. No, it will still take a while. It's not over yet. The doctors say he's very strong. The landlord smiled, a crooked, ineffectual smile; he looked quite awkward, but what else could he do.

Where will you be going?

To the outskirts of town, Maja called out from the bed. There's supposed to be a garden there; that's better for the child. But thanks for everything. Thank you very much all the same.

Maja and the child had been in Zweibrücken for ten days. They had come by plane; it was the child's first time on a plane, and she didn't cry at takeoff or landing. Maja had booked the vacation apartment from Berlin, had told the landlord that she wasn't coming to Zweibrücken on vacation. Did anyone ever go to Zweibrücken on vacation? The landlord didn't have an answer. Forty Euros a night for the room, the forsythia, and a bath with a shower. On their fourth day there the child had started crying inconsolably as soon as they were on the street leading to the hospital, and that's when Maja had phoned Alice.

Can you come? Misha is dying. Don't you want to see him once more? I need someone to look after the child; she no longer wants to go to the hospital with me.

Alice was tempted to ask, Do you think Misha wants to see me? Don't you think it might be too much for him? But how could Maja know whether Misha wanted to see Alice or not.

Instead she had asked, What's the matter with the child?

Maja had thought for a moment and then she said, The child doesn't react to Misha as if he were a person anymore. I can't take her into his hospital room anymore. But I want to be with him. You understand that, don't you?

Alice left Berlin the next day. She barely knew Maja. She knew Misha. Of course she wanted to see him one more time; what kind of a question was that. There had been times when she thought she couldn't live if she couldn't see Misha's face anymore. She had often told him that, and each time he had laughed good-naturedly. But she also thought he would die while the train in which she sat was rolling through the desolate and ugly landscape; she considered herself so important that she assumed Misha would die because she was coming and before she could be at his side.

In spite of that, she had left for Zweibrücken. Misha did not die. Not while she was sitting on the train, reading a newspaper, falling asleep and waking up again, drinking coffee, eating a tart apple, looking out the window, crying, going to the toilet, and twice changing her seat. Seeing signs in everything and misinterpreting them. Misha didn't die, not when she arrived in the city and Maja and the child picked her up at the station, not when they embraced and Maja said, We can cry later. Misha didn't die the first night that Alice took care of the child while Maja went to the hospital, nor the second, and before the third night they had decided to move.

They were standing on the sidewalk, waiting for the taxi. The stroller was collapsed. The bags of food from the refrigerator sat next to Alice's overnight bag and Maja's suitcase. Earthly goods. Every word suddenly had a second meaning. The sidewalk was narrow, cars rushed by, raising fountains of rainwater behind them. Nobody was out walking. The taxi didn't come. Maja, holding the child in her arms, rocked her a while, then she passed her to Alice. Alice took the child, afraid she might put up a fight, but the child didn't resist her, just looked so very serious. Alice held the child in one arm, supporting part of the weight on her hip, the way you hold children. The closeness of the little face framed by a fluffy pink pompom hat, embarrassed her. The child smelled of baby, of milk and mashed carrots; her blue eyes were huge and

shiny. Alice had to look away; she gazed up and down the street. What a place. The street crossed over the highway, ran through a park where disheveled ducks swam in a brackish pond, then on to the desolate center of town and up to the hospital—a walk of twenty minutes with the stroller and the child who, just learning to walk, wanted to walk all the time, but never straight ahead, rather this way and that way. She was learning to walk in spite of everything and precisely because of it all. Maja had been taking this walk for a week now. There. And back. The child had thrown soggy cookies to the ducks. The ducks barely noticed. It was cold, the middle of October, not golden. The child on Alice's arm turned her head and saw what Alice saw. Rain and gray houses. Nothing that they might have pointed out to each other.

Maybe I ought to call the taxi again, Alice said, but Maja didn't react, which probably meant that it wasn't necessary to call again. Alice found that Maja often spoke by saying nothing, expressing herself clearly with silence. Under different circumstances Alice might have objected to this silence. But Maja was Misha's wife. They had a child together, and once Misha was dead, Maja would be his widow. The affair between Misha and Alice had happened too long ago for her to claim any rights whatsoever. Just an anecdote but, Alice thought, if it weren't for that anecdote, I wouldn't be in Zweibrücken now. And yet, my being here doesn't change the fact that Misha is dying.

The taxi pulled up at the curb. The driver made a face; he didn't feel like climbing out, getting his feet wet, packing all their stuff into the trunk—the stroller, the suitcase, the overnight bag, the bags of food. He got out. Maja took the child from Alice and smiled at the driver. Alice got into the front seat. In the back the driver fiddled nervously with the child's seat. Maja was holding the child in her lap, still smiling. Then they drove off. Nice windshield wipers, music on the radio, the regional station, idle chatter, a gong, and then pop songs. Looking out the window. Driving down the street, crossing the highway—the directional signs, upcoming exits were all clearly legible, drawing one to distant places, the possibility of getting away from Zweibrücken again. Let's beat it, disappear, clear out, take a powder, skedaddle—it was a language that was suddenly no longer appropriate here. They drove past the park; the hospital whisked by, seven stories with twenty windows each—the third from the left on the seventh floor was the window of the room where Misha lay in bed, breathing in and breathing out. The door to his room always ajar, and his breathing so loud, you could already hear it as you got off the elevator.

You'll be shocked when you see him, Maja had said the first time Alice went to the hospital. And she had been.

Alice didn't look up at the hospital window. They drove uphill briefly, leaving the center of town, then through a wooded area, and into a housing development. The cab driver had a terrible cough. Number twelve, Maja said from the back seat. Alice paid, didn't ask for a receipt. The driver took their things out of the trunk, mumbling to himself. Then he drove off. Alice, Maja, and the child stood in the street looking at the house—a small, new, white house with a conservatory in which huge azaleas were pressing against the fogged-up panes. A rustic witch sitting on a straw broom hung outside the stained-glass panel set into the front door, swinging and rustling in the wind. Alice thought she knew what the doorbell would sound like. The air was brisk. Suddenly they could smell the rain, the wet soil, the damp leaves.

The nun looked at Alice and asked what sort of man he had been.

Alice had been at the hospital that morning. After breakfast. One of the doctors said, There are people who find it easier to die alone; let him be by himself for a little while, and don't worry. Misha had been alone from one o'clock at night till ten o'clock in the morning, nine hours during which he had been breathing and did not die.

That morning Alice sat at Misha's bedside, until noon. First on one side of the bed, then on the other. The room was utilitarian—built-in cupboards, a sink, the door to the toilet, a bare area of painted linoleum where a second bed had stood in which another patient had been lying. Some days ago the nurses had pushed him elsewhere, without giving any reasons. To some other place.

Sitting on the right side of the bed, Alice had her back to the window that looked out on the city and a distant range of hills. Sitting on the left side of the bed, she'd be next to the I.V. drip stand for the morphine, but leaning back against the wall unit, she could look out the window and see the hills when she could no longer bear to look at Misha. To look at his face. Misha slept with his eyes open. The entire time. Like a plant, he had turned to the light, toward the gray but bright day—his body, his head, his arms and hands turned toward the window. In spite of the open eyes he looked as though he were sleeping, but perhaps it was something quite different, this state he was in, anesthetized by morphine, flooded by images, or by nothing at all anymore. He had sighed, often and deeply. Sometimes Alice would take his hand, which was warm and so very familiar. The door to the room was slightly ajar, the squeaking of the nurses' shoes was comforting—the ringing of the telephone

at the nurses' station, the rumbling of the elevator, the whispering and laughter, a constant bustle, the food cart rolling past the room. Now and then one of the nuns would come in. An old, wrinkled nun came by often; Alice thought she came on her account rather than because of Misha.

Everything all right?

Yes, so far.

The nun had stopped at the foot of the bed and, holding on to the metal bar, had gazed at Misha with her head cocked. Interested. His mouth was open, the gums black, his unseeing eyes turned toward the window. The nun looked at Alice and asked what sort of man he had been.

How do you mean? Alice had asked, sitting up; she had been slumped down in the chair leaning against the wall unit.

Do you mean what was his profession?

The nun had lifted her hands casually and dropped them again, giving the bed a jolt. She said, Well, how did he spend his life? What did he do?

They had both looked at Misha, and Alice thought the nun would never know what Misha had been like, how he had looked, how he talked, cursed, and smiled—how he had lived his life. She saw only the dying man. Was she missing something?

Hesitantly Alice said, Well, I'd say he was a magician. A conjurer—do you know what I mean? He could do all sorts of tricks, pull rabbits out of a hat, juggling. Mind reading. But he always let you look at his cards. He always wanted to show you his cards. I can't explain it.

The nun said, I thought it was something like that. Her tone of voice was neutral; it could have been agreement or scorn, hard to tell. She said, Well, it won't be much longer. Once their features get so sharp, it doesn't take much longer. Then she left the room.

The door to the small white house opened by itself, they didn't have to ring. Probably everybody here had seen everything, standing behind the curtains of their terrace doors, in the shaded corners of their living rooms on this quiet, peaceful street. They had all seen the taxi stop, had seen them get out. A blonde and a dark-haired woman and a small child wearing a little pink hat. And all three with dark rings under their eyes. A suitcase, bags, and a stroller. The door opened by itself, the landlords came out of the house. Welcome, they extended their arms. A fat woman and a fat man, older people, the age of Maja's parents, Alice's parents. Alice was older than Maja, and Misha wasn't that young anymore either. Alice had always thought he would

outlive her. Would outlive them all. Misha would always be there. That's what she had thought. She wouldn't have been able to say why she thought so. Perhaps it was an expression of her love, something timeless. Standing in front of the house, the food bags in one hand and the overnight bag in the other, and Maja next to her with the child on her arm and all those little things at the edges of the picture—ornamental spheres in flower beds, the earth already dug up, green grass, a white clay turtle—Alice felt a trembling in her knees that threatened to get out of control but then went away again. The woman had a big bosom, was wearing violet-tinted glasses; she was incredibly cordial, not quite natural. The man, always hovering a little distance behind her, his hands, rough and worn, his handshake, firm; his tracksuit pants were quite dirty, and there were massive scars on both sides of his broad shaved skull as if his head had once been held in a clamp. It looked peculiar, but then everything seemed peculiar, had to be accepted for what it was. Alice carried her bag into the front-yard garden while the child on Maja's arm kept saying, Rabbit. Rabbit. Rabbit. As if to calm everyone.

The vacation apartment was in the basement. The woman explained that it had been their own apartment; they had finished it with their own hands. The man said nothing, just smiled. Their daughter used to live upstairs with the grandchildren and they themselves, downstairs. Then the daughter and the grandchildren had moved out, had gone away to another city. Now they were living upstairs again, so they wanted to rent out the basement apartment; it would be a shame not to. The woman gave this verbose explanation as if to apologize; she spoke in a heavy dialect, and Alice understood only half of what she was saying, but when all was said and done, it didn't matter who had lived in the apartment or when or why. Alice walked behind Maja who was following the woman who had immediately taken the child into her arms, had taken off the little pink hat, and was now carrying the child as though it were her own. They all climbed down the stairs. First, the woman with the now silent, serious child, then Maja, then Alice, then the man, who was carrying the suitcase, overnight bag, and bags of food. Very helpful. He was right behind Alice, breathing heavily.

The house was built on a slope. Only half the apartment was below street level, and at the back it led out to the garden. At first glance everything seemed fine. It had a certain coziness—a large room with a wall of built-in kitchen cabinets and appliances and in the middle a table of light-colored wood; there were shelves filled with cookbooks and bric-a-brac, a television set, and a corner sofa; leading off from this room there was first one bedroom and then another one, both with beds in them, and the bath with a tub and a washing machine.

But on second glance it wasn't quite all right—small details, here and there. Maybe these people had moved upstairs only yesterday, hadn't taken everything up with them, had left behind their personal stuff: framed photos, a collection of liquor bottles, crumpled magazines, and half-finished knitting. In the bathroom, rows of cheap shampoo and shower gel bottles on the rim of the bathtub. And children's toys—immediately discovered by Maja's child. Clothes in the closet, slippers under the coat rack. There really was nothing to object to, everything was comfortable otherwise, but it was also very intimate and personal, an additional burden. Alice felt a twinge of nausea, but then she remembered the depressing décor of the other vacation apartment, where everything had been practical but that was all. The child was very happy here. She immediately swept all the bric-a-brac off the shelves and pulled down the tablecloth, emptied a laundry detergent bin full of building blocks, and rattled the refrigerator door. The woman cooed and laughed, trying to reassure Maja, who kept apologizing for the child's behavior. The woman ran hither and thither showing off everything: the electric kettle, the coffee maker, the electric blinds, the television set, video recorder, bed sheets, keys. On the key ring, a tiny witch on a wire broom.

There really was nothing to object to, everything was comfortable otherwise, but it was also very intimate and personal, an additional burden.

Alice stood at the window in the built-in kitchen, gazing out at the garden. A porch swing on the terrace was covered with a tarpaulin. Four white chairs surrounded a plastic table and in the middle, a furled patio umbrella. The trees were already nearly bare. Wilted dahlias, asters, sunflowers, a pergola, and red grapes. A nice view of other gardens up and down the hillside, then the first city houses, and far to the left, there was the hospital—a long rectangle with many windows. Too far away for her to identify the window of Misha's room, but close enough to know: Misha's there. And we're here.

Alice saw it and felt that if she didn't immediately show Maja she would be guilty of a betrayal. But she kept it to herself a moment longer. Maja was busy with the woman and the child in one of the bedrooms. It sounded as if the child was jumping up and down on the bed, squealing with delight. Alice turned away from the window to look at the stainless steel sink, at the shelf above the sink. Plastic con-

tainers of spices, half full, marjoram, rosemary, multi-colored pepper, all of it a little messy, a sticky film on the jar tops; the sink wasn't quite clean either. She turned on the faucet to test it and shut it off again. Then the man was standing behind her. He put his arms around her, his hands on her hips, pulling her toward him, holding her like that; then he pushed her aside and let go. He said, The detergent tablets for the dishwasher are under the sink, and he pointed someplace.

Alice said, Oh, thanks, I'm sure we'll be using them. She raised her hand to touch the back of her neck, astonished, and slowly turned around to face him. As though it were possible to obliterate what had happened. To obliterate that embrace. He shook his head. He smiled out the window and said, There's no need for thanks. You're having a hard time. You're having a really hard time.

Then he stepped aside as though he were already standing at the ready-dug grave. He retreated with feigned modesty, his eyes cast down, still shaking his head. His wife came hurrying out of the bedroom carrying a pile of lilac-colored sheets and pillowcases in her arms, red spots on her face.

We'll make the beds ourselves, Maja called out from the bedroom, please don't go to any trouble; we can manage by ourselves, really. The woman looked at her husband, then at Alice, but not back again. Alice went over to her and took the sheets. Are you sure? the woman asked. Yes, Alice said without knowing what she was supposed to be sure of.

Maja came into the kitchen–living room; she leaned against the bedroom doorway. The doorframe was cobbled together from old beams, an imitation of permanence. The child crawling behind her on all fours now pulled herself up on Maja's hand and twined her little arms around Maja's knee. Wearing only a little shirt and tights, and hiccupping softly, she looked heartbreakingly tired.

Alice said, we're really glad to be here. It's lovely here, the garden alone—she searched for a gesture and found none—but it didn't matter at all. The man and the woman finally left, finally dragged themselves upstairs. Heavy animals, shy and curious; they went up the stairs backward, kept calling out reassurances, consolations, directions—until they disappeared from view, the man first. Maja pushed the door shut with the palm of her hand, then leaned her head against the glass pane.

That afternoon Alice went to see Misha once more. For an hour, while Maja and the child slept. She left the development, then walked along the street into town, downhill through the woods. It was no longer raining, just misty and cold. She had her hands in her jacket pockets and a scarf around her neck. It was peaceful in the

hospital. A mosaic in the entrance hall showed a monk with his arms spread in a blessing under a sky of thousands of little blue tiles. Next to it a coffee machine was humming. Alice walked past a bulletin board full of passport photos of the hospital's doctors, nurses, and nuns. She could have looked for the face of the little, wrinkled nun who had asked what sort of man Misha had been. Could have looked for her name, but something kept her from doing it.

She took the elevator up to the seventh floor and could hear Misha's breathing as the elevator doors slid open. The door to his room was slightly ajar. Misha lay there as though he hadn't moved in all the hours she'd been gone. On his back, arms extended to the left and right, face turned toward the fading light, mouth open, eyes open. Alice placed the chair she had pushed against the table that morning next to his bed again. She sat down and cautiously said his name. He didn't react. Still, Alice had the feeling that he knew she was there. Whether it mattered to him that she was there, whether it was a strain for him—*that* she didn't know. There was nothing to which he could have reacted anymore. Whatever there had once been was gone. All the things that had once existed between him and her were gone too. Nothing there anymore. It was all over; she could say goodbye now. Nothing but the pure, shining present. Alice kissed Misha, as she hadn't kissed him during his lifetime. She knew that he would never have put up with that kind of kiss when he was still alive.

They ate together that evening, Alice, Maja, and the child. At the table of light-colored wood, Maja and the child sitting on one side, Alice on the other. Fish and potatoes. The plates with pictures of yellow baby chicks, the glasses with flowers on them. Maja had done the cooking; she cooked with little salt, nothing fancy, a sort of Biblical meal; you could call it bland or plain; the child seemed to like it.

Did you eat together often? Alice asked

Now and then it was possible to ask a question, and Maja would answer or vice versa, if Maja asked, Alice would answer. But it didn't go beyond that. Questions and answers don't make a conversation. And that's how things stood, Alice thought. A focused emptiness.

Yes, Maja said. Not in the beginning, but later on, we did. When we were living together. Misha liked rice.

Oh, Alice said.

She had seen Misha only rarely this past year, had never visited him in the apartment where he lived with Maja. Actually she hadn't known anything about the child, and wouldn't have wanted to. A different Misha? Maybe not.

With the palm of her hand the child batted once resolutely at the plate with the mashed potatoes and fish. Maja took the little hand and wiped it gently with a towel, each of the five little fingers individually. The child watched, nodding. After the fish, there was plain yogurt without honey. And lukewarm fennel tea. The child drank the tea from her bottle, which she could already hold by herself. She was sitting in Maja's lap, looking intently at Alice while she drank.

—If God will thou shalt wake, when the morning doth break—

Well, Maja said, time to go to bed. She carefully set the child on her feet, waiting till she had found her balance. Then she began to clear the table and said, If Misha gets better, if his temperature doesn't go up again or something, we could order an ambulance next week. Go home, to Berlin. I want him back home. Misha wants that too. He wants to go home.

She rinsed the plates in the sink and put them into the dishwasher, having found the detergent tablets for the machine on her own. She moved around the kitchen matter-of-factly and confidently. No hesitation. Maja didn't shy away from anything; nor did anything seem to disgust her. She wiped the table and turned on the electric water kettle.

She said, Was his temperature up today?

Then, squatting in front of the dishwasher, she briefly studied the buttons and little symbols, pushed the door of the machine shut, and turned one of the knobs firmly to the right. Soft gushing sounds. Did he have a fever today?

No, Alice said. She returned the child's dreamy gaze, grateful for her neutral quiet. That morning, a pale young nurse had anxiously and awkwardly felt for Misha's pulse and had taken his temperature with a digital thermometer, flinching as if someone had yelled something into her ear at the soft sound—like the chirp of a cricket—that the thermometer made. She then entered some made-up, shaky numbers on a chart and hurried out of the room. The nurse seemed afraid Misha might die while she was taking his temperature. A sudden drop in temperature. Tumbling digital numbers. Plunging to zero. Alice had the feeling that the nurse's touch, her fingers searching for a pulse on his wrist and then on his neck, had caused Misha pain; after that Alice no longer held his hand in hers.

She said, No, he didn't have a fever. Then she got up and said, Let me take care of the rest. I can do it.

You always use so much water, Maja said. You just let the water run when you're doing dishes, I've noticed that before. Misha used to do that, too. But I cured him of it.

Maja put the child to bed. In the room with the big matrimonial bed in front of the mirrored built-in cabinets. Lots of blankets and pillows. Alice sat at the table in the kitchen, listening.

Where's the rabbit?

Where's the rabbit?

Here's the rabbit. Here it is.

The child's laughter changed into exhausted crying. Maja hummed, snatches of lullabies, *Morgen früh, wenn Gott will, wirst du wieder geweckt—If God will thou shalt wake, when the morning doth break—*. Now go to sleep. Sleep. Then it was quiet. Alice drank some fennel tea, soundlessly setting her cup down on the tabletop, a kind of meditation. After a while Maja came out of the bedroom, gently pulling the door not quite shut behind her. She sat down on the other side of the table, took a sip of tea, and like Alice, gazed through the terrace door into the dark garden. The glass pane was like a mirror.

Did he say anything to you? Maja asked.

No, Alice said. He was sleeping, the entire time. He scarcely moved. Sighed sometimes, heavily. Nothing else.

Maja nodded. She said, Well then, I'll be off now. I think I'd better comb my hair.

Alice said nothing. Maja washed her face in the bathroom, combed her hair; she put on a different sweater, gray with green stripes, fluffy, soft wool; it was like going out in reverse, Alice thought.

You look beautiful, she said.

Maja did look beautiful. With those distinct dark rings under the eyes, slender, pale, and tired; her hair firmly combed back off her face and pinned up. A pulsating, dark glow all around her. They went back into the bedroom and both looked at the child. She was sleeping soundly in a sleeping bag patterned with little lambs. Lying on her back, her little arms extended in complete surrender, clutching the ear of a plush rabbit in her left fist.

Call me if she wakes up and won't stop crying, Maja said. Otherwise I'll be back around midnight, we'll see.

Yes, Alice said. I'll wait for you; I'll wait up till you come.

*

Alice escorted Maja to the door. They didn't turn on the light, tiptoed up the stairs. The couple's apartment door was slightly ajar; through the gap came the noises of the TV—loud clapping and the glib, cynical voice of a game show host. The hallway was cold. It smelled of supper, laundry detergent, and unfamiliar habits. Alice put her hand on the handle of the front door and for a moment felt sure it would be locked. But the door opened. Evening air, as overwhelming as if they hadn't been outside for months. The light in the hallway went on, the woman was standing behind Maja; she wore a tracksuit but no shoes.

Going out so late at night?

Yes, Maja said. I'm going to the hospital. I want to visit my husband. I haven't been to see him all day.

The woman grimaced as if she'd been stung, as if something had suddenly caused her pain. She had completely forgotten Maja's husband.

Oh, I'll drive you there.

No, thank you, not necessary, Maja said, smiling politely.

Yes, yes, the woman said. Come on, I'll drive you there; this is no place to be walking around in the dark.

She wouldn't take no for an answer, disappeared into her apartment as though sucked in by the blue light of the TV, said something to her husband; he said something to her, all of it drowned out by the noise of the game show. Maja rolled her eyes. Alice didn't know what to say. The woman came back; now she was wearing shoes and a heavy cardigan. She pulled the cardigan down over her broad hips and held up the car key.

Come. Let's go.

All right, Maja said, see you soon. She briefly touched Alice's arm, then disappeared behind the woman into the front yard.

Alice closed the front door. She felt dizzy. From the apartment came the same blue cave illumination, the TV spitting out hellish laughter. She went back downstairs, into the basement apartment, locking the door behind her. The door had a frosted glass pane set into a wooden frame. Alice went into the bathroom, opened the window above the tub, a window facing the street. She could hear the car engine start, the car driving out of the driveway, turning, coasting down the street, getting fainter; then it was quiet.

Twenty minutes to walk to the hospital, twenty minutes back again. By car, five minutes. Traffic lights. Traffic at the intersection. A few scraps of conversation. Possibly the woman would decide to go in, too, for whatever reason, just might. Then

five minutes to drive back. Fifteen minutes, all in all, one long, eternal quarter hour. Alice stood in the bathroom, and listened. She counted the seconds, starting at one hundred, counting down, was almost sure and yet was still surprised when she heard him. The seventy-fifth second. He came out of the apartment upstairs, did something or other at the front door. Then came down the stairs, clop, clop, clop, his feet in slippers. He turned the corner in the hall, knowing his way, not needing the light on. Alice quietly left the bathroom and saw him on the other side of the frosted glass, his lumpy, heavy body. He was listening, listening just as she was. Then he knocked on the wooden door frame.

Alice pulled her braided hair tight with both hands. Tugged the sleeves of her sweater down over her wrists. Should she open the door or not? Should she open the door or talk to him through the locked door? Show her fear or hide it? Fear of what exactly. She cut short the stream of crazy thoughts, turned the key, and opened the door.

Yes?

He stood there with that scarred skull and the gray sweater over his fat stomach and those incredibly filthy pants. He gave off a distinct, sour smell. You don't have to lock the door here, he said.

Oh, Alice said. Her heart was beating fast. She could hardly understand him. She said, What's the matter?

He was smiling now, in a knowing, explicit way. Just wanted to see if you've got everything you need. That's what he said, if Alice understood him right.

Do you have everything you need?

He looked at Alice, her body, from her toes up, still smiling, deliberately and calmly. Alice knew what he meant, and he knew that she knew. Maybe in a figurative sense both of them might not mean the same thing, but in a direct sense they did.

Actually, I don't have any of the things I need, Alice thought. None of them. She said, Thanks, I have everything I need. We have everything, really. Thank you very much.

He thrust himself one heavy step forward and looked past her into his old apartment. Heard the familiar whispering of the dishwasher. Maybe it all seemed different to him now, what with all of Alice's, Maja's, and the child's things in it. Alice's jacket hanging on the coat rack. And the child's soft little shoe on the floor under the table and next to it the green plastic ball—all of it dipped in sadness; he could see how different it was.

Alice let him look. She looked too. She waited, knowing that it didn't matter

what her answer had been. He had ten minutes, at most fifteen—in that time anything was possible. But she didn't come to meet him half way, that made him hesitate, and the sadness repelled him like an illness.

Alice said, Well then, good night.

He still hesitated.

She said it again.

He retreated. Clop, clop, back up the stairs. Stopping before the last step—maybe she'd call him back. Alice wondered what Misha would have expected her to do. She didn't have a clue. Holding her hand to her mouth, she listened as the man arrived at the top. Then at last the TV chatter stopped as his apartment door closed.

Maja came back around midnight. Alice had made another pot of fennel tea, with honey, drinking it all, along with three of the child's cookies. She had pulled open several kitchen drawers, had gazed at the contents and closed them again. In the cutlery drawer, countless little spoons rattling around, spoons from cough-medicine packages, little ice-cream spoons, and plastic spoons. Messy, she said under her breath. Below the video recorder there were cassettes with handwritten labels, dubious content. On the built-in shelves, construction paper, scissors, and used-up glue sticks. It was getting more and more depressing. She forced herself to stop looking.

She'd emptied the dishwasher, putting the plates and cups into the cupboard above the stove, an involuntary imitation of a different life. Had tried to resist watching TV, then capitulated. She had fallen asleep at the table, head on her arms, safe in the random order of the objects around her: nipples, Maja's barrette, tea bags, crayons, and a children's cardboard book with soft corners. Suddenly she started up, her hands were numb. But the child was still sound asleep, her left hand tightly clamped around the rabbit's ear, and no heavy shadow in the hall outside the door. Alice had gone into the room where she would be sleeping, had opened the couch and made up her bed. A blue sheet. Her nightgown next to the pillow. Shades down, terrace door open. A gentle breeze outside, the brave constancy of things, their unambiguous names, the child would learn them all: tree, chair, garden, sky, moon, and hospital. Lit-up windows, dark windows. Small figures behind them, a Maja, a Misha, a nun.

11:45 PM.

Nightwatch.

Maja came back silently, without making a sound on the stairs or in the hallway; there was only her knock on the frosted glass pane. She was surprised to find that

Alice had locked the door, Was everything all right? Yes, Alice said, everything's all right, but it made me feel better this way.

Maja went to check on the child, briefly and conscientiously; she always seemed to have just enough strength for the things that had to be considered or done, no more and no less, precise and appropriate. Alice, sitting at the table, waited, her back erect, hands folded in her lap.

Want to have a beer? Maja asked.

Sure.

For a long time Alice rummaged among the plastic spoons for an opener, finally found one with the name of a service area near Bad Zwischenahn on it, took two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator, ice cold. They clinked bottles, without saying a word. The beer tingled, tasting sweet; slowly it toned down something inside Alice's head and made it go away. Expanding, stretching inwardly with alcohol? She'd read that somewhere; it seemed to be true.

It was nice at the hospital, Maja said. Very peaceful. They let me lie down next to Misha. We lay together like that for the first time in a long time. He was breathing quietly. I don't think he was in pain. Tomorrow, around noon, I can talk with the doctor after he's been to see Misha. Could be I even fell asleep for a little while. We slept together.

When did you first meet? Alice asked casually.

Don't you know? Maja said. Pleasantly. Amazed.

No, Alice said. She really didn't know. Misha had never mentioned it, but then she had never asked him.

The day you came back from the trip you took together.

Oh. Really? Alice said, astonished. That trip had been years ago; it was the only trip she'd ever taken with Misha, and at the end of it they had separated by mutual consent. I'm breaking it off now, Misha had said, once and for all. And Alice had answered, confidently, Yes, me too. They'd been content together, didn't argue, maybe that's why they were able to break it off. Misha had left first. Alice had stayed on a few more days. She suddenly remembered how she had started to cry after she'd taken him to the train station and was driving back to the house by herself. As if he had died—she thought, Well, I've gone through that. I have it behind me.

Maja said, Misha was happy when he came back. When I first met him. He was doing well, he was fairly well rested.

It was the sea air, Alice said. The change in climate.

They said nothing for a while. Alice hesitated, then she said, The last evening

of our trip we were sitting together—just like you and me now. Together at a table, with two bottles of beer, only it was in a garden, and it was June—but you know that already. The millennium summer June. Still very hot, even in the middle of the night.

She thought about it, how suggestive that sounded—hot, middle of the night, millennium summer June. Together, you and me. How vivid, the words behind the words. But that's how it had been, one evening before Misha met Maja; who would have thought.

And then? Maja asked.

And then a spider began to spin a web between our two beer bottles, Alice said. The first threads between the bottlenecks. She indicated the size of the spider with her thumb and index finger, a grain of rice. The fine, thin strand strung between the two bottles as if over an abyss. They had been sitting next to each other, shoulder to shoulder. Watching the little spider for a while, weaving so serenely, so self-absorbed.

He was sorry, Alice said. He was sorry that he'd have to destroy her work.

And did he destroy it? Maja asked.

Well, take a guess, Alice said. They both laughed, each one softly to herself.

C'mon, let's go to bed, Maja said, it's already half past one. We have to get up early tomorrow. Do you want to go see him in the morning?

And Alice said, Yes, I'd like to see him again in the morning.

They brushed their teeth. Standing next to each other at the sink on a blue terrycloth mat, in front of a mirror that had gold and silver shells glued to its frame. They saw each other in the mirror, their different faces.

Misha would like this, Alice thought, to see us like this. He'd be very happy, he'd say, Well, you see?—He knows. He's got to know.

Good night, Alice said. Sleep well, Maja.

Yes, Maja said, good night. You sleep well, too, Alice.

Alice woke up when Maja knocked on her bedroom door, saying her name. Maybe she'd been knocking for quite a while already. Alice was having a hard time emerging from a deep exhausted sleep. Later she wondered why Maja hadn't simply come into the room. Then she was awake. A momentary memory of her childhood and what it was like to be roused in the middle of the night to go on summer vacation. Terror and excitement. She threw back the covers and called out, I'm awake. Maja opened the door and stood there with the child on her arm, a cutout silhouetted against the bright living room where the lamp above the table was on again, and she said, Misha is dead.

*

How late is it? Alice asked.

Four o'clock, Maja said. The hospital called. He died two hours ago; they just wanted to let us sleep a little longer.

Wait. I'll get up, Alice said. She put a sweater over her nightgown, then walked barefoot into the kitchen. The child was sitting at the table, thumb in mouth, without her sleeping bag, wearing a little blue shirt with snap fasteners on the shoulder. Petit Bateau. Alice rubbed her eyes. Maja was just standing there in the middle of the room. Astronauts, Alice thought, we're like astronauts, there's no place to hold on to.

They wanted to know whether we'd like to see him once more, Maja said. If so, they'd wait for us. She looked utterly frightened by that.

I have to think about it, Alice said; it sounded like a question. She sat down next to the child, propped her elbows on the table. Just a moment. I have to think.

Have you ever seen a dead person?

No. I haven't.

Maja called the hospital and said, We're coming. Could they please wait, we need a little time because of the child and the time it takes to get there, maybe half an hour, would that be possible.

Who was on the phone? Alice asked.

Don't know, one of the nuns, Maja said. Not the old, severe one, a young nun.

All right then, Alice said. Let's go.

That afternoon she left for Berlin.

Maja would have stayed, but Alice felt she'd go crazy if she had to spend one more night in that apartment with the view of the hospital in which no one was lying anymore. The hospital was hollow, empty. A silent shell.

If we're not careful, Alice thought, we'll disappear too, Maja, the child, and I; we'll vanish without a trace in Zweibrücken.

She phoned the railroad station, and they gave her an exhausting train connection; she wrote the times down in her calendar, a magic formula, something to hold onto. Maja and the child would fly back that evening. Together they put the apartment in order, stripped the beds, rinsed the cups, and packed their things, while the child played on the floor in front of the TV, building towers with the plastic blocks and destroying them again, building and destroying, until she lost control.

Come, let's go back to sleep, Maja said to the child, lying down on the bed with her and breaking into tears. Alice carefully closed the door. She sat down at the table

and drank three large mugs of cold, bitter, black coffee, one right after the other. In the garden on the hillside that sloped down to the valley the man was sawing some cheap wood; he didn't look up to the terrace. He hadn't given Alice another glance, hadn't said a single word to her, everything had already been said. But he embraced Maja when she paid for the night and had to tell him and his wife what had happened. Maja took no notice of the embrace. No damage done. Alice had watched in amazement; Maja was a widow, vulnerable and sacred, she didn't have to be asked whether she had everything she needed, and her answer would surely have been different from Alice's. The wife had stuffed the rent money into the pocket of her cardigan, pretending she wasn't going to count it, and then as if on cue, had begun to lament, raising her hands to heaven. Alice had gone into the bathroom and waited there till it was over.

I'll drive you to the airport, the woman said to Maja. Of course I will. I'll drive you to the airport this evening; and Alice had said she'd take a taxi to the train station even though no one had asked her.

Maja and the child slept for two more hours. Then they got up, each in her own way sleepy and confused. The child's bare feet on the kitchen floor made a sound that Alice couldn't stand. She said, I have to go now. She had to restrain herself to keep from putting on her jacket then and there.

I know, Maja said. It's all right; I still have some things to do here, and then in a little while we'll be driving to the airport. Would you take Misha's suitcase with you? I'll pick it up later at your place in Berlin.

It was a small suitcase. With wheels, not heavy. At the hospital that afternoon when the room had to be vacated, Maja had sorted Misha's things. Sunlight was falling on the shiny linoleum and on the plastic sheet covering the freshly made bed. The nurses had given them a garbage bag. Alice held the bag open, and Maja lifted up each item in turn: pills, information about alternative cancer medicines, new socks, new pajamas, slippers—all went into the garbage bag. The things Misha had worn when he was flown to Zweibrücken went into the suitcase; the photo of Maja and the child, into the suitcase; the notebook with the blank pages, into the suitcase. They took the garbage bag back to the nurses' station. The child was sitting in the lap of one of the nuns and was saying newly learned words to herself, repeating them over and over, proudly, but hard to understand. Actually it sounded like: Aba. Ka. Dabra:

Abakadabra. It really did.

I don't mind taking the suitcase, Alice said. I'm grateful to you. I don't mind at all. She had no words for what she really wanted to say.

The cab driver was walking up the garden path. On the broken paving stones, past the flowerbeds and the clay turtle. The taxi was black, a limousine with tinted windows, no name of a cab company visible.

But this is a taxi, isn't it? Alice said, not at all sure; everything was out of sync, anything was possible. The cab driver didn't deign to answer the question. He took the suitcase from Alice, her overnight bag, retraced his steps, and loaded everything into the trunk; then he got in and waited.

We'll see each other in Berlin, Alice said.

Yes, Maja said. She was standing in the open doorway with the child on her arm. The straw witch rustled in the draft. The azaleas in the conservatory. The afternoon light. Have a good trip.

Alice turned and walked through the garden, out to the street, and to the cab. She got into the back seat, rolled down the window and waved. Maja waved back. She said something to the child, the child waved too. The cab started up. Maja stepped back inside the front hall with the child, closing the door behind her.

Caleb Curtiss
Swans as a Scourge

I heard once that after doing the math on Bruges
Hitler determined that it was too far off for him to bomb,
and so instead, he sent them a flock of swans—
a flock of swans as a scourge, as if such smallness
could itself be sophistication, as if he thought himself
a more elegant version of King Solomon—but he sent swans
as a scourge, swans instead of scorpions and swans
instead of bombs . . .
It is, of course, a myth but an amazingly easy one
for me to believe, for me to imagine the words
coming to him like a bad peace slogan from three decades later:
Swans Instead of Bombs!
The sort of phrase that begs so strongly for its repetition
that I'm surprised I've never heard it chanted before.
The sort of thing that Yoko Ono might have said
before we all stopped listening to her (though she could be
saying it right now). The kind of thought that smacks
with the snide priggishness of leaving too good of a tip
for a bad waiter, or worse, for a waiter you just don't like.
Once, after being served at a nice restaurant by Nick,
the captain of my middle school soccer team,
I got to the check before my wife could, and left

a thirty dollar gratuity on a fifty dollar tab. Left for Nick
who I hadn't acknowledged all evening, a nice little
fuck-you tip, before standing up to stumble off
into the rest of my night, professing in my silence
and in my intermittent stride an exquisitely forgettable maxim
for my better self.

Peripeteia in Goltzius's Icarus

It is evidenced here in the fact of his falling,
here in the arrogant tilt of his nose and here

in the slight fold of scrotum, of testicle
just visible—clutched between his curiously

hairless legs as his curiously hairless body
is overcome by its eternal weight, its eternal

fall, which occurred to me the first time that I saw it
as I saw in him a timeless guilt, or an eternal

guilt, and for me there was a sudden guilt
in simply having seen him this way—a thing

inverted, not just a reflection—a duplication
of a duplication.

Cancer Field

You are working in a field.
The cancer is back, in your leg this time,
Your calf this time, and it bleeds through the threads

Of your work pants. I watch while it bleeds,
While you step over a row
Of cotton thistle, onto a lane of pea gravel.

You step toward my truck. We listen as it stops,
Say nothing as it quiets. You say nothing,
Pop the hood, check the oil, check the spark plugs,

The brakes. You press down on the pedal, and I watch
The cancer seep from the cloth of your pant leg, watch it pass
Through the lips of your gumboot. You are standing suddenly.

We stand and we watch it fill. The cancer is as black
As motor oil. The cancer is hot like tar and we watch
While it spills on the gravel, while it soaks into the dirt.

We both watch while it spills from your leg and
Out from your boot. While it runs toward the field
While the damp rubber shimmers in the alien light.

You are working in the yard.
You are working on my truck, which is silly because
I've never had a truck and I said there was a field.

We are both beneath a truck and
You're trying to teach me something,
How to reuse an oil filter.

You are working on the truck, you are working in the yard,
Chopping at the thick stalks of milkweed and seasons
And seasons of volunteer growth. They run from the fence

Flush with the house. You are standing in the yard, toes
Set in the mud and you are asking me nothing, you're asking me
Something as I turn to limp away.

Yoram Kaniuk
Life on Sandpaper

Translated from Hebrew by Anthony Berris

At night she dreamed that I was strangling her because I was jealous of her success. I told her that the Talmud says that a dream is a sealed letter. She incorporated this into her secret beliefs and with a few of her friends corresponded in dreams and choreographed a new dance to Gerry Mulligan's version of "Makin' Whoopee." It was a hot and humid summer in New York. Lee was working in a show whose name I've forgotten and she and the other dancers used to sunbathe naked on the roof because on Sundays the offices in the Empire State Building opposite us were closed. They'd sunbathe naked so they wouldn't have swimsuit marks in the show.

Bob Fosse called one day and asked Lee to dance in a new show and also to be Carol Haney's understudy. The show, he said, was called *The Pajama Game*. Of course she wanted to. I was angry. She was working on the dance to "Makin' Whoopee" and I thought it was more important for her to dance the things she really loved, as she'd done at rehearsals, rather than get into a musical again and earn good money but what about the soul? Lee, who was the provider for *my* soul, thought a great deal about her own. Already as a girl she'd known that it was important to love your soul, but she had grown up poor and liked her soul to have a body around it. Our argument went on for a few days. I went to watch her rehearsing at the Henry Street Playhouse with Gerry Mulligan and she danced both seriously and with humor and she was wonderful. In the end I persuaded the poor girl not to go. Fosse asked if there was someone else as perky as she was and as good a dancer and Lee recommended Shirley MacLaine, who he of course knew and who'd sunbathe with Lee on the roof. Lee did her concert, got a good review in the *Times* and another in

Dance Magazine. The second performance was empty. Shirley MacLaine danced in the show and Carol Haney got sick, Shirley MacLaine replaced her in the unforgettable "Steam Heat" number. Hal Wallis just happened to be in the audience and five minutes after the show Shirley MacLaine became a star. Lee never forgave me. I told her she was right but it didn't help. Mira, Lee's childhood friend, would visit us every Sunday and we'd argue. Mira's face was a blend of Hedy Lamarr and a Jewish-Slavic princess: the corners of her mouth seemed to hold lots of little secrets. Lee came from a Jewish-Russian-Communist home. Mira and Lee used to shoplift together from record shops and department stores. On one occasion Lee was caught and a complaint was lodged with the producers of *The King and I* and they gave her a talk as she sat embarrassed in the corner, but all in all they thought it was cute. They spoke harshly but smiled at the same time. She recalled the smiles only years later because her childish hunger for love by then had extinguished her embarrassment at being reprimanded. After she begged and pleaded and promised not to steal anymore she continued dancing and getting bigger roles but of course couldn't help herself and went back to stealing. She usually stole only what she didn't need. For instance, she took the same record she didn't like five times and each time it was immediately chucked in the garbage.

He begged her to love him and she smiled and told him that she'd marry him and then perhaps she'd love him eventually. He asked when and she said in two days.

Mira was only twenty-two, more a woman than a girl. She had a mind like a razor. Got her B.A. at sixteen. I was scared of her. She was studying at Columbia and working on her doctorate. She had a violinist boyfriend called Yuri. He begged her to love him and she smiled and told him that she'd marry him and then perhaps she'd love him eventually. He asked when and she said in two days. Yuri, who was a talented violinist, everyone said he had a future, loved her even before he was born and out of sheer joy started scratching his hand open so it would be worthy of Mira's ring. They got married and moved into an apartment and Yuri later swore that he'd never had the guts to make love to Mira on their wedding night because Boris, her father, had accompanied her to their apartment and joined them and sat playing the piano. After two days she got up while Yuri was sleeping, took her things and left. When he woke up he was already separated. Her father, Boris, was happy. When he saw his daughter

coming back home with her suitcases he burst into a hearty Russian song. Her lovely gentle mother sat reserved as always, wearing a hat for all the trips she never took and holding a travel guide with maps and tips she'd never follow. Seeing Mira return, Boris hugged his wife, something he'd long since given up doing, and was thrilled since Mira had left "that idiot," whom he'd actually loved like a son for years. Boris was a chemist who came to the United States in 1942 and was taken immediately to Los Alamos to help build the A-bomb. When I met him we became friends because he was looking for worthy foes and to him I was the Zionist enemy, deforming Jewish history. He quoted Rothschild who'd said that a Jewish state would become a ghetto with the same prejudices as any other; petty, intolerant, narrow-minded, orthodox, expelling the goyim and Christians. He felt he could argue with me and at the time he had a chemical company where he conducted secret experiments. He spoke good English but with a Russian accent and had a small beard like Lenin and he used to sit facing Mira and his wife Zhenya and recite passages from Russian literature. He particularly liked Gogol and Chekhov. Boris had been gifted with a macabre sense of humor, thick wild hair under a beret, a deep bass voice, and he would eagerly deride the absurd idea of a Jewish state, a Chelm, a country of fools, beating the Iraqis. He knew entire books by heart and their English translations too. He also put up with me because unlike the other men around I wasn't chasing Mira and never had sex with her. Mira was looking for love but was incapable of being loved or loving and used her power to hate herself all the better, and more than that, to hate men. Defeated young men with their tongues lolling out like dogs in the heat hung around the building trying to get into their huge apartment on Riverside Drive and West Eighty-eighth Street and Boris would drive them away. Lee had recently choreographed *Once Upon a Mattress*. But Mira was a refugee. Sinister. She was a promise of what would never be. For no one. Everybody wanted to break her. Even being rejected by her was a great honor. All her life she searched for absolute ignorance. Boris had known Stalin. They'd been friends. They'd played chess in the Kremlin and come up with tactics. They would glare at one another and so decide who would lose that day and they would talk about death. They both loved power, the power that was always there in their hands, they'd play with a model railroad that Stalin had gotten from a western communist who'd brought it as a gift for one of the heads of the KGB; later both their heads had rolled. Stalin and Boris would humiliate each other. The Jews of Moscow knew that Stalin had a pet Jew but they didn't know who. When the mood took him Boris would harangue me about my supposedly enlightened ideas, which he detested. The people's love of tyranny, he said, is the great existential secret. The expulsion

from the Garden of Eden was the price we paid to know what is permissible and what is forbidden—that is, to be slaves. Human beings prefer to have someone else think for them, and if this someone is a tyrant, they're afraid—but the more they're afraid the more they love him because to live is boring, and it is dangerous and frightening without somebody out there thinking for you. Christianity and the monarchies understood this, they're both based on tyranny and so both have survived and both are eternal. Tyranny is eternal. Both Christianity and all totalitarianism are splendid performances. And in fact even the Christian and the communist rituals are similar. In all of these systems, the Supreme Being resides in a palace. The most wonderful sentence in Russian literature is what Ivan writes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Jesus comes to Seville. The Great Inquisitor has him arrested. At night the Inquisitor comes to his cell. He is tall, old, withered, but there is still a light in his eyes. He sits before Jesus and explains that he, Jesus, had founded the Church based on anarchy and justice and compassion while we, knowing the nature of Man, founded the Church on pomp, mystery, authority. In other words, on vanities, on fetters. Ritual is welcome brainwashing. In June 1941 the Germans attacked, but Stalin didn't believe they would because in August 1939 he'd signed a pact with Germany and he admired Hitler. He was convinced that a bastard like Hitler wouldn't violate an agreement with him. Stalin, said Boris, admired the SA commander Ernst Röhm, who Hitler had hanged from a hook, because he knew to take care of his enemies. Stalin loved his wife Nadezhda and killed her. Afterward, he said, something was extinguished inside him forever. She was his last connection with the world. Twenty-five million Russians died in the war, half of whom he killed himself. In his view, prisoners of war were traitors, and this included his son Yakov, and so he killed them. Boris drank some tea and wiped his face with a towel and smiled. Eh? Eh? I looked at him. Mira loved telling about how Boris had had lunch with President Truman, and told him that Stalin was a historic hero. Eternal. McCarthy, who devoured communists and anyone who even smelled like a communist, liked hearing Boris out because listening to him he understood what an important role evil must play when it serves a nation that doesn't know what's in its own best interests. Boris despised democracy. Why should fools decide who goes to war and who runs a country? There was something noxious and ugly in millions of ignoramuses electing a fool—anyone who can hypnotize them and convince them that he's just their size—to be their king. A king makes his people, not vice versa. Boris was offended on Stalin's behalf when he learned how eager the dictator's subjects had been not to die for their leader during the invasion. I remember

one of Boris's speeches in particular: the truth is an accepted lie. Somebody once said that the Devil is an optimist if he thinks he can make human beings more evil than they are. Faith has to feed on the blood of innocents because they are the fiction from which a leader is created. I never thought Stalin legitimate. I didn't believe in communism—but neither did Stalin. How can a thinking man believe in such foolishness, that people are born equal and that everyone will get what he deserves? When Mira and Lee were zealous members of the Young Communists in New York, Boris laughed at them—while Mira was admired because she'd once sat on Stalin's knee.

I thought that Boris hoped that Mira and Stalin would both get married. After Stalin died Boris was convinced he was still alive and hiding in South America. A man who'd been at the Kremlin but managed to escape the purges said that Boris and Stalin used to sing sentimental songs together but eyed each other with suspicion. They realized that each of them could happily murder the other. But they loved playing their games and enjoying such sweet anxiety. Boris said, Stalin had a murderous naïveté. But he loved those he was forced to kill. After the Germans invaded, Stalin put Boris in charge of getting the trains out of the Germans' path as they raced toward Moscow. The very fact of treason, said Boris, is the sign of something deep—just as Mira betrayed me by being her mother's daughter too, because she wanted to and she should have been born from me alone. Boris saw how the Ukrainians were overjoyed when the Germans arrived. At night he saw the German officers embracing and a terrible desire for new betrayal awakened in him. He already considered himself a traitor to the Russian people because of his friendship with the tyrant, but by then he didn't care. Stalin was lost. Trapped by people Boris thought were fools. Stalin was diligently retreating from the Germans he so despised, didn't listen to his officers' advice, killed the generals who wanted to save Russia, and Boris watched them all get shot in the back. When he was in Kiev

But Mira was a refugee. Sinister. She was a promise of what would never be. For no one. Everybody wanted to break her. Even being rejected by her was a great honor. All her life she searched for absolute ignorance.

some time later he met an American agent sent by Allen Dulles, who was pulling the strings from Switzerland. Boris was a specialist in something or other I know nothing about, and Dulles wanted it. Boris took his wife and Mira, but not before writing a letter to Stalin. The family went by train to Eastern Siberia and from there, via a rather strenuous route—as Greek refugees to Iran and then through Egypt—reached the United States. On his arrival he fell in love with America's shallow happiness. The twenty-eight flavors of Howard Johnson's ice cream. Coca-Cola, the Automat, cafeterias, all that space spread out with no purpose, without culture, beyond the big city, and Allen Dulles came on a private jet and took him to Los Alamos for the Manhattan Project, despite everything they knew about him. For two years the family lived in a small house in Los Alamos. He loved the town in the desert. It reminded him of Stalin's anger and the barrenness he so yearned for. He was angry when the bomb was used against the Japanese and not the Nazis. After Los Alamos he moved to New York and set up a laboratory. He chased around after Mira, who'd become increasingly lost. His overwhelming love for Mira. His rage at his wife who had dared bear her. He was dangerous when it came to Mira. Mira buried herself in study but didn't find what she was looking for in Judaism. She claimed that Judaism was colorless, it lacked ritual and God had no splendid palace—He was wretched, pathetic, He was theology without a hierarchy, without metaphysics. She drifted from theory to theory, from belief to belief, she studied Zen Buddhism, which was only starting to be popular in America then, she studied astrology, attended consciousness-raising workshops, went to all kinds of psychiatrists, talked with priests of every stripe, studied Christianity for one semester, worked for a time preparing gravestones in a cemetery, read whatever she found and wasn't excited by Lutheran or Calvinist Christianity but was attracted by Catholicism, was drawn by its absoluteness.

She became even more beautiful. Her face grew pale. She studied theology for a year and a half, started going to church, was baptized, delved deeper into religion. She learned about medieval monasteries and cloisters. She read St. Jerome and Aquinas and St. Augustine, who she especially liked, and was dismayed by his tortured soul, the fact he wasn't born to religion, and then one evening she came over to see us and as usual we argued. This was an upsetting evening because I tried to convince her of the error of her ways and she only felt sorry for me. She emanated a sort of Christian concept of sin and compassion, and then, after a stupid and futile argument about faith, which probably can neither be substantiated nor refuted, she left for a convent in Ohio. She wrote every now and then. Boris was happy. He said

she wouldn't marry a strict and obstinate Jewish God, but His Son instead, so she'd sin in her mind only with Him. Mira studied for about two years and became a nun.

We didn't attend the ceremony. She came to see us in her nun's habit. She said she'd cried for us, for our errant souls. She went to Spain, to Vejer de la Frontera in the Cádiz province. I still have her address: Frontera Rauch, Queipodel Lahauo #3, Vejer de la Frontera, Cádiz, Spain, and sometimes she'd even reply when we wrote to her. She was in the convent for about two and a half years. It was an ancient and remote place for old nuns. The mother superior was senile. Supplies would arrive from Cádiz every now and again, and the high mountains enclosed the convent and in winter the winds blew with what seemed like hate, Mira told us later. The nuns stayed inside. Mira arrived there in May, when the Holy Cross of Cádiz was carried in the Corpus Christi procession by forty men before a huge statue of the infant Jesus. She walked through the town that seemed to be shrouded in a veil of ancient terror, preserved in the very stones. She traveled a road between magnificent crags that touched the sky and reached the white-painted town of Vejer de la Frontera that looked over the valley from the heights of a rocky cliff. The houses of the town crowded together, she walked along a path between stones and wild vegetation and reached the convent. It was surrounded by thousands of acres of dried vines, neglected groves, a huge rotting winery and abandoned farmland, fruit orchards and withered apples. The nuns were completely apathetic, prayed and giggled and at night she heard them groaning and mumbling. They no longer had any contact with the outside world.

After some time Mira decided to save the convent. She found old accounts ledgers and began taking care of the property. The mother superior fell ill and no one was chosen to replace her. Mira did everything the old woman wanted and the nuns came back to life slowly, and young nuns were sent by the local bishop after Mira went to see him and begged for them. She began tending the vineyards, renovating the winery, she brought in a local winemaker who still remembered how his forefathers used to make the region's famous wine. She brought in workers, paid them well, sold fruit at good prices, cultivated the fields, the orange groves, reached a new productivity record after bringing in a noted expert from France, and the convent began to show a profit. Word spread. Bishops came and were amazed by the newly invigorated convent and said, There's a living, breathing Church here despite it all. Mira painted and renovated the convent, went down into the cellars and found important manuscripts there, some of which were in Hebrew, she found Shabbat candles, an old Chanukah menorah, she discovered that it was customary for the nuns to fast

on Yom Kippur and the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, which was adapted to the Gregorian calendar in an old book she found where the Gregorian months were listed in accordance with the Hebrew dates up to the year 2050. She sold part of the non-Hebrew manuscripts in Milan for huge sums. She became famous, wrote us that her life was wonderful and that she felt like she was founding a new nation, and said that she now knew how they used to sing in the Temple because here, she said, they had preserved those ancient psalms. The archbishop came to bless the place. More nuns arrived. Her ex-husband Yuri converted to Christianity. He studied and became a monk. He spent some time at a monastery in California, gave up his music, and two years later settled in Spain at a neighboring monastery. She had no contact with him but he was seen walking around the convent. He wrote to her, but Mira never told us what. She received a singular invitation from the Holy See. She went to Rome. She was granted an audience with the Pope—for a simple nun it was almost unheard of. The Pope knew about her past, her father, Stalin, and wanted to hear more. She told him. He permitted her to kiss his hand. He said she'd brought the roses back to the cheeks of the Church in southern Spain. Mira requested that her marriage be annulled. It's very rare that His Holiness intervenes in the annulment of a marriage because there is no divorce in the Catholic Church and the Pope is God's representative on earth, but he granted the annulment anyway. She went back to the convent and introduced more and more innovations, the region flourished, the villagers became prosperous, she adjudicated local disputes, fasted a great deal, sang Hebrew songs in secret, and one day took the Hebrew books and sold them to a Jewish dealer in Genoa. Mira, who in her youth had studied the piano, composed an oratorio in the Gothic style using the text of her father's letters and after it was sung at the Easter festival she traveled to neighboring Gibraltar and crossed to Algiers. She bought two cans of hashish and boarded a ship. She wrote to us asking that we meet her at the port and marked the number of the pier.

She arrived wearing her nun's habit and looked so beautiful, with her pale face and the habit and coif. She was carrying packages and the cans, which emitted a smell that even the seagulls could probably have identified. But the Irish and Italian New Yorker cops crossed themselves, their sense of smell having abandoned them. She looked completely pure in her habit, likewise crossing herself, and she even held a short prayer for the cops while the hashish sent out its aroma and Lee and I shook with terror. We took a taxi to Eighth Street. Mira hadn't explained a thing but went into a small club and came out half an hour later with thirty thousand dollars and we went to our apartment and she took off her habit. She asked Lee to steal a purple

or brown dress and shoes for her from Macy's, which Lee did, and then, after she got dressed, Mira went to see her father and we went with her and she told her story and everybody, except Boris, was overjoyed. He hissed some words in Russian that sounded angry. And from then on she went to bed with anything that moved.

Krzysztof Jaworski
Don Quixote Meets Mussolini and Explains How There Isn't Much Point to Fixing the World

Translated by Benjamin Paloff

you'd have to be a left-handed magus
to gather these tattered fragments artfully in a pile
deciphering whatever sense they make at the same time
you have to trudge through stinking spain
with a squire for good cheer and
such a sad country this spain where
I simply lose faith in my chivalric virtues
because the journey exhausts me I never much
cared for travel and really don't enjoy
battle and hate people but less about them so
that's why I'm saying I'd like to be a magus
being myself barely a half-dumb wanderer
with no one to part my lips toward
here in this crappy little inn
I've understood much while playing the fool
but now I'm going to my death
for I'm not needed here

Letters to U.M.

today I read a bit about the new
left and I want to dye my hat black
you know the one with the bill torn from the right and again
we have our evening free the traditional couple hours
for pondering and the platonic erection that which
becomes titans of spirit yet is not at all becoming
the common urchin have you pondered over
the male erection u.m. you of the pretty eyes condemned
to certain traditional evenings?
I know a thing or two about it

Go Ask Your Eva Brauns How They Like Austria

But the boys had a grand old time.
They wipe each other's mouths. But is a desert
supposed to beg for water
if it wants to remain what it is—
—the pang of conscience of an apathetic
sea?
Night is a consequence
of squinting your eyes. At least
that's what the sleepless say, deliberately
counting the days. The critique of a society
ruled by the heavy hand
of stupidity always comes with ease.
It's worse when we mull over our bodies
in foreign cities, to retain the continuity
of that which does not exist.
Later, with due deliberation, they announce
the era of cynicism, of logic or justice.
Awful to think what will happen when
they're all out of abstract concepts.
Our salvation in language, that one patient
policeman amidst the din of the world.

That Troubling Look of Sadness in the Sunken Eyes of Our Hero

But life will never be the same as it was before the camel.
He thinks that everyone will eventually see a camel like that.
Downtown, May, Saturday, about two o'clock.
Enough about the camel.

There are 500 years of hatred looking at me.
No exaggeration, with a stone's silence.
I'm about to go to Ehrenfeld to read at the exhibit
yet again that "The Optician's My Bitch."
The Copernicovian sun courses through the sky.
Its inquisitiveness is becoming pathological.
The homeless comb through the garbage like they're nuts.
There is no place that isn't my home.

They have an authentic brothel behind the station in Düsseldorf.
Depends which side you see it from. Authentic, huge,
right by the tracks. With numbers on the windows
and half-naked chicks peering
curiously from these windows.

I examine these Japanese, write. There really is
something not right with their eyes.
To tell the truth, it's not their eyes,
but just their eyelids.
I was comparing them to those of other people,
and it turned out that these Japanese eyelids
don't bunch up when someone opens his eyes
but rather disappear somewhere inside.
And not the whole thing, just part disappears.
The rest remains.
That's how it is with Japanese (Chinese?).
With Vietnamese (Danes?) it's completely different.
I may have discovered the greatest mystery of the Asians:
their eyes are not the least bit slanted.

Better warn the Optician that someone doesn't like him.
In this millionth city of ill-thought inclinations
this is truly a privilege.

John Kinsella
The Cartesian Diver

I have been a country boy as well, you know. I have known the dry . . . In the hard times when there was little work I went back out there, conjuring up a living . . .

It had been a drier year than usual in a very dry place. So dry that farmers hadn't even bothered putting in crops over the autumn and winter. The dams were empty, and wells drawn on, to the point of insolvency, windmills turning hard in the blazing easterlies that came in daily. House tanks were filled with water trucked from standpipes and only the wealthiest had kept their patches of lawn green in defiance, standing their ground in the face of suffering. Herds of cattle and flocks of sheep had been culled to bare bones, to basal metabolic rate, as the town doctor joked—and he spent most of his time propping up the wettest place in town, the front bar of the pub. He had a sick wit.

There was only one church in town and that was Anglican, though it was hard to guess that because it did business for a number of creeds. Even Catholics turned up there occasionally—though they mainly traveled to a neighboring town also in the grip of drought, whose baptismal font was equally dusty. The few Church of Christ believers in the district worshipped in their houses—you could tell a prayer meeting was in swing by whose cars were gathered along the verges. The C of C tended to be town-dwellers there, not so much farmers, though there were one or two C of C families with big spreads. When the meetings were at those farms, the others in town didn't really know, or didn't *really* care, because it's true that gravel roads exact their own kinds of surveillance. But in town itself, gatherings were always kept an eye on,

or out for, though none was sure why. Wherever and however they prayed, it was as dry for them as any other, as dry for each and every one of them. No prayers from anywhere would bring rain. The town had signed off on that with spiritual totality. It had ceased to believe in moisture.

Then a lay preacher, a self-styled Man of God, turned up on a corner of the main street and began to proselytize. This corner was opposite the bank, just outside the hardware store. The preacher was full of the sins of the townsfolk, and full of humanity's evil, making a clear link between the dry and their neglect of God. He might have been run out of town by all and sundry, but his promise of rain, of water, eventually struck a note. On the first day he was ignored; on the second he was abused; on the third he was listened to. A crowd blocked the main street, and traffic came to a standstill. He plied his message a fourth and a fifth and a sixth day.

Where he went after he finished his preaching, no one knew. He arrived early in the morning and set off at sunset, subsisting on a bottle of water and little else. He never seemed to flag or weaken under the sun. His hat was gnarled. He always came from the north, and headed back that way. No one thought of going after him—at first. But curiosity and hope got the better of them, and at the end of the sixth day they started following him when his sermonizing came to an end. They followed him north to his bush camp about five miles along the road. And there they stood by him and watched his every action until he said: Return at dawn and I will show you the truth of water. The liquid science of God!

Word spread quickly that evening and through the night. Such a crowd gathered that the scrub was trampled and damaged, and nobody cared. There must have been a hundred people arcing around the preacher, including the Anglican minister, the doctor (who looked sober and solemn), and the mayor. The town policeman, a C of C, was there, but not in uniform. I don't go on duty until 8 AM, he said.

The preacher still lay in his swag, but was irritated by the crowd. He tossed and turned. He belched and grunted. Suddenly he went still, as if in a trance, staring at the dawn sky. Around him, a half-dozen bottles of water—old two-liter lemonade bottles clearly filled with water. One of them near the supine preacher's head was three-quarters empty. What he'd suckled on throughout the night, the townsfolk guessed. And just as the crowd's impatience and agitation increased, clearly discernible as the scrub crackled with the snapping of brush underfoot, drowning out the birdlife, the preacher rose, dressed in rags, and spread his hands to the dawn, to the crowd. I am surrounded by water! he called, pointing one by one to the bottles of water strewn about. God filled these containers through prayer and conviction. My

prayer and conviction. Imagine how many containers we might fill if you take him into your heart and pray with me!

There was a long pause as the sun rose and made things colder, though no less dusty. The crowd stared at the beatified man. He spoke: Once I was a teacher of physics and it came to me during a demonstration to my students that *I* was a vessel waiting to be filled with the love of God, just as these vessels, these bottles around me, were waiting and then were filled. Observe a truth. I will take one of these bottles and introduce this small tube into the liquid . . .

The preacher, looking like Professor Julius Sumner Miller, went to a pocket in his rags and removed a tube closed at one end and open at the other, which he showed slowly and carefully to the gathering, instilling it with light and power. He filled it partly with water from the bottle that had been three-quarters drunk. He then uncapped a full bottle and submerged the tube through the neck, licking at the drops of life-giving water that spilled from the bottle as the tube was submerged. He then recapped the bottle and held the water bottle high, allowing the sun to fill it with strong prismatic rays, and all watched on as the tube bobbed near the top of the bottle, hanging there suspended.

This, said the preacher, is a Cartesian Diver! Now: as God squeezes our world, so this tube suspended in this bottle, our body—our individual bodies and our collective souls—responds! He squeezed the bottle and the tube descended to the bottom. He dramatically released some of the pressure of his handgrip, and the tube ascended. He then worked his grip so that the "diver" hovered midway in the world of water, in our bodies, our souls. Holding the bottle aloft for a good while, he said, Go now—this is the way. Herein flows your water. You will never thirst again.

Astonishingly, the crowd dispersed. Each walked off silently toward town, carrying the news of their witnessing. Those who had driven left their cars, and walked toward town. Even the policeman left his car there by the side of the road, near the bush camp, unlocked.

The preacher did not appear in town that day. In the evening all went back to the camp expecting to hear more good news. The skies remained as dry as ever, but they knew something was coming, something was due. They *believed*. But there was no sign of the preacher or even that he'd ever been there. Just the traces of where they'd walked and stood, crushing the scrub. It would be true to say, however, that the consequences of his visitation were fundamental, pivotal to the fate of that dry town so run down by a drier year than usual, when God seemed to have evaporated. A fate deep in the well of themselves they welcomed, ecumenically.

Michela Costello
How To Cook Curry

The shelf by the stove should be stuffed
with tens of little plastic bags, brimming
with spices and stamped *Swad Madras*,
proof of trips to the Indian store where
the owner slows lines at his register to wait
on your American questions. He knows
you are holding the wrong kind of coconut
and you know you could buy cheaper
mangoes at Safeway. But your look
tells the story of one who will traipse
hours to find cardamom and the perfect
green chilies, all for the man with eyes
as clear as the onions that fill your kitchen.
Let each grain of rice remain separate,
keep its shape. Let a dusting of turmeric
drown the dish in deep yellow, like a sari
gently draped over all you can offer.

We Are Not Noise

IF I WERE NOT A PHYSICIST, I WOULD PROBABLY BE A MUSICIAN. —ALBERT EINSTEIN

I never gave much thought to physics class.
My teacher only strung pulleys together,
and showed us jars of her silver gall stones.

But let's see if I can finally get this right:
sound is a wave between two objects,
the pitch among reaching points. This

makes the space between you and me
a humming pocket, a ballad stone
like a fist holding pieces of our dust

and light. And since NASA says earth
hums like a gentle B flat, you are the shift
from E minor to F sharp, an unexpected

calming change of chords. So what matters
is not matter, but sound. Einstein played
the violin. This life points to everything singing.

SHORT STORY

Joyce Hinnefeld
Benedicta, or A Guide to the Artist's Résumé

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The painter Van Lloyd, discouraged about the prospect of revolution, has decided on his final subject. We are entering the final round of realism. This is his last chance to get it right. Revolution now has a new, distinctly female form.

NAME (IN BOLD OR LARGER FONT)

Choose a professional spelling of your name and stick with it. If you have the exact same name as an artist who's already garnering attention, consider a variation. This might be frustrating, but it also might lessen confusion.

Richard Riesman (1978–1986)
Richard Van Lloyd Riesman (1986–1989)
Richard Van Lloyd (1989–1997)
Dick Van Lloyd (1997–2000)
DVL (2000–2001)
Van Lloyd (2001–2003)
The Painter Van Lloyd (2003–2009)
Benedicta (2009–)

CONTACT INFORMATION

Preferred mailing address, phone number(s) (work/studio/home), fax, e-mail address, website. If a gallery gives you a show or chooses to represent you they will probably

eliminate your address, phone numbers, etc. This is because they want potential buyers to contact them directly regarding any interest in your work.

Good! Fine! The Painter Van Lloyd has never owned his own place! He has mainly lived and worked in borrowed garages and cheap rented rooms! This was, for a time, connected with his fame!

Now he sleeps and works, Monday through Friday, in his first wife's weekend house. On the weekends he trolls the streets of San Francisco, looking for models. Young women today don't look like they did thirty years ago, which is a problem. Nor do they smell like the girls of his past; these young women trail behind them the scents of their shampoos and creams, their various elixirs. Save for the sleek long hair on their scalps they are hairless as newborn mice. They drink bottled water. Their edges are smoothed and leveled by pharmaceuticals so they can finally stop washing their hands.

But honestly, though he has been accused on several occasions of never having advanced beyond the age of twenty himself, his interest in these girls is purely professional. He says this and means it, no winking. He is looking for someone even remotely close—in her physical honesty, in her high seriousness, in her lack of self-consciousness—to his girlfriend Benedicta. Who has told him that after the birth of her child, after a year or so—now stretched to two years—of devoted care to this new being, "we will see."

EDUCATION

M.F.A.	1989	Painting	Yale
B.F.A.	1986	Studio Art	UC Irvine
B.A.	1984	Philosophy	UC San Diego

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Born: year and city/state or city/country
Work/Live: city/state or city/country
(Note: The absence of such information suggests that an artist might be hiding something.)

Born: 1961, San Diego, CA
Work/Live: Stinson Beach and San Francisco/California/U.S.A.
But before this there was San Diego/California/U.S.A., where The Painter Van Lloyd

surfed and painted and read Freud, Nietzsche, quantum physics. Paintings here were mainly of friends, fellow surfers and students, and were distinguished primarily by some skill with line and human form, plus an attitude of alienation and contempt conveyed on faces that were always cut off by the boundaries of the canvas. None of these paintings was sold, and none survives.

His interest in realism (unnamed and unexamined as it might have been) quickly became, in the eyes of others and then his own, a sign of a quaint, West Coast–ish ingenuousness.

Yale/New Haven/Connecticut/U.S.A. Graduate school. When his interest in realism (unnamed and unexamined as it might have been) quickly became, in the eyes of others and then his own, a sign of a quaint, West Coast–ish ingenuousness. Immaturity, provinciality. He would come home from the "pit crits" at Yale to lonely, bleary-eyed Linda and screaming, four-month-old Peter, hunkered down in their freezing basement apartment, with nothing left for either of them. What in God's name were they doing there? Who did he think he was kidding? An M.F.A. from Yale? Right. He belonged on a beach, with a surfboard.

It was Linda—jealous already, though at this point her jealousy was groundless—who said to him, "Well for God's sake why don't you just use that surfer boy persona here? They might not like your work but it's clear they all think you're gorgeous, some kind of Greek god Beach Boy. I've seen them at the bar. They *all* want you, the women *and* the men." She lifted her shirt and attached her screaming son's mouth to an angry red nipple. For a fleeting moment The Painter Van Lloyd longed to draw her and his son, but he suppressed the desire to capture this sad and lovely tableau in front of him. Mother and son. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Too romantic, too much realism, they would laugh at him, who was he trying to be, Norman Rockwell?

And so he assumed a de Kooning–esque persona—the raving California Dutchman, blond and tan and shirtless—and began to paint cartoonish breasts on slabs of concrete, the left breast always labeled *perfervid,* the right *sacerdotal;* he had discovered that the emeritus professor who taught his first art history course at Irvine used one or both of these words in every article he published. And then he moved to . . .

New York/New York/U.S.A. . . . and began working with women's underwear

and shards of glass. Work which was deemed somehow Parisian, though he hardly knew Paris, having spent only two nights there, in the summer of 1984, until he ran out of money and got back on a train with his Eurail pass and backpack, and headed to his younger sister's student apartment in Amsterdam. Where he spent his days sketching in *Vondelpark,* until he had completely exhausted the sympathy and additional funds of his sister and her punk-inspired friends. And thus returned to California and went to art school, married his first wife, Linda, and fathered their son, Peter, dragged Linda and newborn Peter to New Haven, then installed them in a gritty Long Island City apartment in Queens, shared a studio with some other Yale M.F.A.s in Williamsburg, and made disturbing, supposedly Parisian things out of cheap white underwear that he bought in packages of a dozen in Chinatown.

In New York in 1990, to have chosen torn white lace underwear, to have used the cotton crotches as canvases for the tiniest landscapes, done all in reds, was to be perceived as a reader of Foucault, a *Discipline and Punish*–style liberator, a mod deconstructor. By the time, years later, when—as Dick Van Lloyd—he displayed a tire sculpture resembling a labia and titled it "Many Who Claimed to Have Read Foucault Were Lying," the critical perception had shifted. And he had become known not as a liberator, but as a hater, of women.

The artist might be hiding something. Well, yes. If the critical perception of his work was going to be less about the work than about his life (the divorce from Linda, the dalliances with European models), then perhaps it was time he hid. In Europe, behind some aviator sunglasses, in some borrowed leather. If it's all artifice, then it's all artifice after all. The sculptor Dick Van Lloyd, heir to the conceptual artist Richard Van Lloyd, born of the never fully committed abstract expressionist Richard Van Lloyd Riesman. In Europe, as Dick Van Lloyd, he created rubber-tire-remnant constructions: the aesthetic of the American highway, with undertones of NASCAR.

But now: now what would he possibly have to hide? Two ex-wives and, at present, a girlfriend in Brussels. His son Peter now in London, where he makes a comfortable living representing the tire-remnant sculptures and sees his father, begrudgingly, twice a year. (It is Peter who has suggested that he put together this artist's résumé.) Yes, in the past he did carry on a ten-year flirtation with conceptual art that wasn't, in truth, very conceptual. Blunter than that, in truth. After the red landscapes came his signature white underwear with lace, this time dirty and bloodied at the crotch, glued, along with pieces of broken beer bottles, to slabs of cement. These sold, but he was too engaged in a protracted series of battles with Linda—who had taken Peter back to California with her; who found him lacking as both a husband and a father; who would have liked for

him to *come home* once in a while, for God's sake—at this point to have seen any of that money. When they divorced, she moved to San Franscisco, and he went to Prague.

In Prague he reveled in his status as an "outsider artist," which required that he hide his training, along with his ex-wife and son. Relics of another life. He dressed like a biker, torn denim and distressed leather, reeked, always, of cigarettes, claimed not to have finished high school in the U.S., and happily leered at women. Retrieving vestiges of torn rubber from Czech highways—dodging all those wheezing Skodas, like so many tiny, lunging beetles—proved difficult, which further enhanced his image. Dick Van Lloyd, the madman American. Brando of the roadway and the gallery, happily inhaling all those deadly fumes as he glue-gunned rubber to rubber.

He quickly put together work for a group show, called "Palimpsest: Beneath the Surface," held in a cavernous underground space below a seventeenth-century monastery. He enjoyed this very Czech-sounding title ("Beneath the surface lies . . . nothing!" Raucous laughter and the clink of shot glasses). For this, besides the signature tire-fragment sculptures, he brought in more underwear, glass, and cement. At the opening, he met Gizella, who was Slovakian, and who had him hold her glass of pilsener while she deftly removed her thong and handed it to him, "for using maybe in your next great work." He kept it in his pocket for quite some time instead. They married, and he returned with her to New York in November of the year 2000. At which point America had begun to grow stranger than anyone thought possible.

He was now affixing hunks of hair from roadkill to tire fragments to canvases, signed only DVL. Gizella—long-legged, pouting, spooky Gizella—quickly acquired some of his old New York habits (an interest in the company of someone, anyone, other than her mate, a failure to come home very often) along with some of her own (a fondness for heroin). And while many chose to marry in the wake of the September 11 attacks, he and Gizella chose to divorce. Gizella left for Prague on the first flight she could get out of New York; he watched the crumbling, smoking debris from the rooftop of a friend's building abutting the Brooklyn Bridge. And left soon after for Amsterdam.

With his notebook of sketches from the summer of 1984. In which was one of a dark-haired girl, a gypsy girl of his imagination, rendered there in her lacy camisole, long arms open and extended, dancing. Arabic? Romany maybe? Long hair loose and eyes closed, intent with concentration. Surely, for this was Vondelpark, stoned. While someone, probably her boyfriend, in torn jeans and flannel shirt though it was hot, played a guitar, badly.

He decided, on his return to Amsterdam in 2006, that he wished to paint

one last series of paintings: portraits of this gypsy girl, this anti–Joni Mitchell. And then one day, on the Rembrandtplein, he happened upon Benedicta, soon to be his Belgian girlfriend. She could have been the girl in Vondelpark, except that, as she pointed out to him when he pulled out his notebook to show her, she was not yet born that summer he drew his gypsy girl, his *belle Hollandaise*. Benedicta painted as well—large, dark canvasses. Unutterably bad, as she knew. She invited him to move in with her, and she allowed him to photograph her, right up to the moment of her baby's birth in the spring of 2007, there on the pile of cushions in the middle of her nearly empty Amsterdam flat, midwives at hand on either side, while her bourgeois parents, who seemed rather bored, drank tea in the next room, awaiting their opportunity to pack their daughter's remaining things and then whisk her and their new grandchild to the inn they ran outside Brugge.

He enjoyed this very Czech-sounding title ("Beneath the surface lies . . . noth-ing!" Raucous laughter and the clink of shot glasses).

The look on Benedicta's face, there in the quiet moments between the seismic contractions of her body, was the look of the dancer in *Vondelpark* years before: so avid in its focus, eyes so still yet so alert. Her body was fuller, lusher than he could have imagined, a fruit ripened beyond recognition, a flood bursting a levee. Her long brown hair, that waterfall of reckless curls, was wet and streaming. The photographs have failed to capture all of this, and so he must rely, also, on his memory. Every brush stroke here is crucial.

And because this type of information seems valuable for some reason, and because he would not wish to be accused of hiding anything, The Painter Van Lloyd would like to note that the child emerging from Benedicta's transformed body at that moment was not his. He had met Benedicta only four months before. "When it is ready, this masterpiece you are imagining, you will sign it with my name," she told him early in her labor, between contractions. "And then you will be taken seriously at last."

GRANTS AND AWARDS

His records here are sketchy. There were a few New York Council for the Arts Fellowships in the early and mid-nineties, an NEA grant in 1992, a one-time grant named for Vaclav Havel and handed to him, in the form of a check that appeared to

be signed by Frank Zappa, in a smoke-filled bar sometime near the end of the previous millennium.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND GROUP SHOWS, COMMISSIONS, COLLECTIONS

Records here are similarly deficient. Following the Yale Thesis Show in 1989, there were several shows at the Great Jones Gallery in Soho, a group show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1994, the "Beneath the Surface" group show in Prague in 1999, another group show, with a less interesting name that he's forgotten, at the Lazarus Gallery in London in 2000. Records of his work as Dick Van Lloyd and DVL, including information on collections holding these works, are available from the Painter Van Lloyd's son, Peter Reisman, c/o Bremmer Design, Inc., London.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT, CONT'D.

Here some history of the nude in more recent Western art may be in order. First, the Painter Van Lloyd's choice of title, "La Hollandaise," is a play on Walter Sickert's nude of the same name—named for a character, the prostitute known as "la belle Hollandaise," in a Balzac novel. When he was young and sketching in Vondelpark, when he was Richard Reisman, the Painter Van Lloyd discovered Sickert and the Camden Town painters, and he loved their dark visions of the lower classes. Their realism. Who, at 22, let loose in a hashish-rich park in northern Europe, would not be drawn to a painter some writers would later claim, in complete seriousness, was Jack the Ripper? It was Benedicta who reminded him of this, saying "And so I am your *belle Hollandaise?"* But he told her no, this is something else entirely.

Sickert, who admitted he was repulsed by most traditional compositions of nudes, finding them like a "dish of macaroni, something wriggling and distasteful," hid his prostitute's face in a swirl of hostile brush strokes. This was akin, Van Lloyd thought—after he was DVL but before he became the Painter Van Lloyd—to his own smeared underwear and cement constructions. His younger man's assumptions about Linda, whose pregnancy he'd largely ignored, about Gizella, about others. It isn't true that he'd hated them. What is true is that he had, for some reason, simply failed to *see*.

But what does his life story have to do with any of this, really? And why would his life story lead to charges of misogyny? He does not hate women. As a younger man, he may have appreciated too many, too much. But now he is simply, like so many artists, plagued by his inability to capture them in his work. Their clothes, flesh, fluids, focus. That tiniest passage for the largest of voyages. Van Lloyd was his

mother's last name; yes, it's true. He has chosen it for most of his career, over that of his father, whose career was as a Naval officer. A cold, distant man whose violent center would occasionally boil over, brushing up against the edges of his skin and then receding; he would turn red-faced and tight-lipped, raise his hand, then leave the room. In fact, the Painter Van Lloyd, little Richie Riesman, would have preferred to have been slapped.

He has never slapped his own son, who was raised by Linda and her second husband, Anthony, an English designer. Most likely gay, at least bisexual, but never mind—and yes, you're right: why must he persist in being jealous that his first wife would have gone on to other lovers? What right does he have?

His son is absolutely, unequivocally gay. And a very fine representative of his father's work. When Peter visits Linda and Anthony in San Francisco, the Painter Van Lloyd joins them for very civilized dinners, which he honestly enjoys; Linda and Anthony are excellent cooks. What he thinks, now, when he is with them—and this is true, not hiding anything—is this: what a wonder, that these kind and cultured people were once connected with *him*. That one even, in fact, shares a portion of his own genetic material.

He has never hated Linda, even at their worst. His own mother, Patsy, was a sweet woman, pretty and shy. And yes, of course, when she was younger Linda reminded him of her. Patsy had dreamed of being a singer. Music, however, jangled his father's nerves. The Painter Van Lloyd was eighteen when Patsy died of ovarian cancer.

But speaking of women and the history of portraiture, let's consider Thomas Eakins. Now there was a portraitist. Happy to get naked himself, if that would help his model feel more at ease. Poor fellow; where, in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, were the beautiful, upper-class women who would take off all their clothes? Now, of course, that's not the problem; it's the alarming robot-like quality, the brutal *sameness* of those lean, sculpted bodies that could drive an artist mad.

Ben Shahn said that Eakins loved "the incidental beauty of things, but even more the actual way of things." The Painter Van Lloyd has only recently discovered Ben Shahn's *The Content of the Form*. His reading now is as random and undisciplined as it was when he was twenty. As are his teachers and his influences. For instance, no one should be guided in life by a trembling, alcoholic proprietor of a store specializing in crystals in a beach town north of San Francisco; the Painter Van Lloyd knows this. And yet he can't help himself: he listens to Fred, the crystal store guy, as they drink coffee at the diner on the beach every morning, and he somehow

believes what Fred has to say. The revolution will come. It has its roots in ancient legends. This wisdom has preceded us by millennia. We will be nothing but spectators. Except he doesn't wish to be a spectator. And he now believes the revolution will come when we understand, at last, this one pure instance of beauty: a woman's legs parted, her cervix widened beyond recognition, for the passage of a human head. The moment, and the site of a woman's body, that we have all learned, instead, to fear and yes, even loathe.

We are in dire need of revolution. The birth of Benedicta's child has taught him this. But he can't simply wait for it to come, doesn't trust that what Fred is seeing, there in the bottom of his drained coffee mug, is what he, the Painter Van Lloyd, wishes to see.

Which would involve, perhaps, his mother singing. Linda swimming at Mission Beach. Benedicta crowning. Which would have more in common, maybe, with Van Eyck. Giovanni Arnolfini's wife, Eve in the Ghent Altarpiece. Or Van der Leyden's St. Mary Magdalen. Better yet: in Van Eyck's miniature illumination for the Turin Book of Hours: The Birth of St. John the Baptist. Women, pets, all those domestic details. A clean bed. Everybody ready and waiting, and not a man in sight.

Because if, in fact, he hates anyone, most honest appraisers of his work and his life would have to agree that it's men.

Or better perhaps: the painter—also early Dutch—known only as the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, who painted at least twenty Madonnas, all ending at the knees or above. The Painter Van Lloyd might be, then, the Master of the Female Full Frontal.

In the Painter Van Lloyd's final, largest canvas, Benedicta will be crowning. Such a perfect term for this view of the baby's head there between her legs. In studies he is working on now, using the photographs from that May morning in Amsterdam, he has her reclining on a pile of Marimekko print–covered cushions, in an otherwise empty Amsterdam apartment. There is an element of Fauvism in this one stroke of bold color. Also a nod to Vuillard and his mother's dressmaker's shop in the attention the Painter Van Lloyd has paid to the pattern of the print.

But the only influence that interests the Painter Van Lloyd now, in a garage on a cliff above the Pacific in Stinson Beach—nearly three years into what will be, he is convinced, his final project—is that of the early Dutch painters. His heroes, Van Eyck and Van der Leyden. Whose life stories are unknown. Who of necessity have hidden everything. Whose biographies make no difference. Who painted with the accuracy he aspires for and will pursue until his death.

What he envisions is an altarpiece, for a twenty-first century church of the body. A series of smaller panels, then—images of Benedicta walking, Benedicta dancing, Benedicta sleeping. It's for these images that he needs models, though he never finds one. He's really just passing the time on those weekend walks through San Francisco, after he's walked Linda and Anthony's terriers and watered their plants. Passing the time until he can return to their weekend house, to the garage where he paints. Walking the streets and reliving the day he met Benedicta in Amsterdam as she was tottering in her silly heels and short skirt, staring into windows, eating a sandwich and not at all interested in him. She was tall and so aloof, and she smiled at him and rolled her eyes when he asked if he was correct in assuming she was pregnant, and also perhaps an artist? Neither perfervid nor sacerdotal, she reminded him of something about his younger self. His much younger self. Pre-Yale. If there are young women like her on the streets of San Francisco, he cannot see them.

Realism, in a ridiculous age, is revolutionary. A mother giving birth. A woman of indeterminate race. In need of no one. Benedicta, *la belle hollandaise*. Call it a mother obsession, call it regret. But understand that he intends for this work to be as free of his own psychology as it can possibly be. Form equaling content, his own St. Benedicta, her body and her child. The actual way of things. Signed by her.

Each weekday morning, after toast and coffee with Fred and a walk on the gray, rock-strewn beach, the Painter Van Lloyd uses Linda's computer to send one e-mail message, to Benedicta in Brugge. In this message he reports on the progress he has made in his work, then asks if he might one day join her and her child, a daughter, bringing along his canvas for her appraisal and, perhaps, her signature.

And each night, before he goes to sleep, he finds the same reply from Benedicta: *Keep painting,* she writes. Then: *And we will see.*

Tedi López Mills
A

Translated from Spanish by Wendy Burk

Rivers of water, lone rivers of narrow, misty water, channeled
between two flanks, rivers of bad water with their easy backs breaking
with traps, fragile, uncertain metal toward the day's rearguard
with its luminous surge under foliage obscured by the haze
reckoned in my imagination as dense and crossed without difficulty
into the wet zone where rivers of water punish the banks
with their most retractile, hungriest mud, a mud enclosed
by tugging rocks, uprooting, undercutting any
course charted on earth, as if there were no measurable distances
except those laid out by rivers of water when they break loose from the breach
with their invading waters, tall waters altering the thicket's
rough topography and thoughts about rivers of water in your head
so many times mixed up with memory and not with the rivers
of water themselves, as yet unseen but heard: meticulous,
shy, proper, harpooned by the sun's sweetness
at perennial noon, rivers so sleek that your hand always
submerges in the same water or in its ghost and taps
what lifts to the surface from the notched depths,
rivers of water where I am and have never been, time
in the midst, exact minute of a different water, inhibited
though sometimes magical when it shoots through dikes, borders, ramparts
as ancient as its meander, but docile water in the end, slow water

touching me obliquely, yielding to me its mitigated turbulence,
river of real water, sudden river or silver rush moving back with its hobbled
flow sifting garbage, shunning what kills, what twists,
what is parched in the dry abyss, withered thread with its last droplet
in a shadowless bend where the wreckage of another river swirls
into sight and again with its water renews the first request, eye
wiser than the ear babbling with its fortuitous gold, circumstantial river's
greater sound, dazzle of light rambling toward letters,
luck's greater curve, mind's greater casuistry, what is it I see,
what is it I invent?

(CH)

Flowing backwards it would not have the exact, lazy look of loveliness,
nor its opposite, one course too many, outlandish, abstract crumb
on a path that forks east toward another earthy mixture,
swiping the aqueduct through a barren shortcut, furrow of all furrows,
wounding my clear concept of *river* with its black seepage
in the suburbs, in the alleys, story of a young boy floating
toward the trail of the first bridge, river's ugly mouth,
tin cans in various stages of decay atop the rocky vortex,
water again with its wire, cardboard fetched up against paper trash,
where would it go, poor yellow copy of the first gurgle
under the willow that frees its trace to the light, something so clean,
the first day, lessons learned, in my head the mystic
worm of a single expectation: that it would be like they said, would at least
be sad, if not beautiful, hoarfrost in the air, filth on the walls,
stone doves and later the ruins that hide their allusions
to a style, over there where my brother in life boasts of having seen,
just around the bend, river's hindrance, a bloated corpse,
boasts of misery, near-brilliant, the morning
black-and-blue on the ribbons of pavement where I seek a garden,
where I heard *orchard*, walking the potholes toward the nearest
arbor, my brother, retaining his role as invisible
watcher, smokes behind the wild trunk, wrought pine in the groove
between fence and yard, smokes like I do when I think

about what's come crashing down—not time, no, anyone
can hold its clear filtration, but instead the irony of having foreseen it all
in stillness, knowing everything except its weight, phrase
before facts, words' precise wavering, my brother
paints it white, watches over his shadow, becomes purity, looks at the ditch
in the arbor, no fish for ballast, and me without my totem animal,
such rites of ignorance among landscapes wandering loose
on the screen with dubbed voices, my diminished lion,
my everyday tiger, I'm no witness, have no more pity
than that neighbor, that no-name, even if that's what it's all about
in the end, empathy or love, I can't even taste their daily bread,
ephemeral on the tip of my tongue, in my world to feel for another,
to put myself in their shoes, is akin to giving alms, but it persists, brother,
out there where the merciful, rifted tiles slowly nullify
angles, out there in my world, where one brother hides another,
a dense and lovely flame spills over the wall at dawn,
I know that divided light, my irate glint of sun among clashing
colors, courtesy of the chemical haze,
my consciousness knows this, does not feel the dawn, an hour before,
its machine postponed, spirit is what I bring here
as it surrenders in contradiction and will not conform
setting its traps in place.

G

LET US CONSIDER THAT SILENCE
RESEMBLES THE SKELETON
OF A THEORY. —JORGE HERNÁNDEZ CAMPOS

Spoon of my moon, I call you in artifice, moon's light step, light life,
skilled stretch that defines what lasts, air and only air, brother
from another hell, air that comes and goes in daylight, morning's
identical demons, one who wastes his premised kindness on the compassion
he feels: poor world, he whispers, poor thing, thrice as poor to deny me;
another, with you and me atop: a kindly demon, watchful, submitting to my doubt,
time to think, he suggests, time to look outside where my world
looms, poor devil diatribe, I tell myself, so possessive of his people, that devil
who falls on a Tuesday in March, devil missing the whispers of an agitated populace;
my train of thought: any order derived from language is superficial,
although within, poor and stealthy copy, it may evolve into the simplicity
of a destiny beautifully outlined but ugly at bottom, as prescribed by rule;
vagabond devil, still devil, what do I discern, river that talks to me
from water's circuit in my head as if reading: hell's
beehive, what sort of buzzing, devil, slams the door on death,
what subterfuge, ashes of an ordinary summer or honey's own trick,
sweetness exchanged for innocence, though I'm not the one who's asking, it's the devil's
delay, it's the moon's digression, my fossilized moon in this sky, local moon,
who stabbed you, true on any given day, who predicts hatred sometimes, faulty moon
in a different mirror, moon's thread spun by a spring, I calculate your entanglement,
you're a sound that can't be seen, you're my blind devil, river's misstep at the curve,
stuttering river, your water with its tongue, where does fiction end and memory

begin, preconceived in my question, what descends, devil,
what soulless spiral twists in another of time's formulae,
what demon outside your law, refuge of your joke, shouts *land*
when I barely tap the air, what moon auctions off this silence
that I waste evoking a lesser substitute with every beam
of light, it's not me, who's asking?, memory's guilt, automatism
passing as consciousness, remembered calm, never heard,
wretched devil, air's habit, I tempt you friend, tempt you laughter, there was no sensitive, ambiguous heaven in the highest sphere, shoreless mind, self-knowledge,
moon within, fearful surprise of finding no one behind the skeleton,
no person at war with the notion of a name, rough rhyme
with no dilemma, boredom never abstains, devil's simple crank starts up
its hour, judges its weight, nothing impedes this streak of luck, chronic moon, devil
doesn't think, compares world to world, sharply whips his tail,
the beginning was worse than the end.

Geoffrey Nutter
Mister Greenglass

I think I'm learning how
to write a poem. Yes, but then,
pretty soon, it seems I forget.
How is this so?
While microflora grows along
the Great Octave of pre-song thought
like water-milled green apricots
in January, Mr. Greenglass sells
his steel for sea foam,
for fresh water cinnamon.
And the trains of yellow metal
that have brought them here
pass the Northern Gate of the Sun,
pass by Christopher City.
And I have been among the men
who can be seen beside the river at midday,
drinking bottles of beer by the water
in the sunlight, living in the present.

Shadow Government

With its buildings round as orient pearl
and senators in silken headgear—
while in small cities underground
the animals are in their warrens,
mazelike, our shadow siblings—
this modern world is edging forward
with the zeal of wishful thinking,
with Mother Wit, as full of gems
and evil magic as the Arbuthnot Anthology,
wolves, concubines, and harvesters,
the great yellow disc harrow resting
in its rust on the outskirts. In the center
sophists practicing a silken homiletic,
our fictitious sibling, our shadow
trustees in the buildings round
as dewdrops, while in small cities
within a city, small as dewdrops,
a shadow government is preparing
to govern.

The Quiet Parable

The wish to be a bird—
an average and innocent bird.
Not Parsifal, the coming-into-excellence
of the epic's leaves, not
the holy Taj Mahal, Hebraic
sunshine on Mosaic wings, nor
the ancient ghost-ship
of the frigate bird: not these,
not a bird with crystal plumage,
that sunset in the Netherlands,
an ultramontane ascension;
but to be a common sparrow, this,
no bigger or less simple
than a thimble, a tumbler
full of water, a common sparrow,
King of the Quiet Parable.

SHORT STORY

Christopher Sorrentino
Unhappy Families

EXCERPT:

Judy Meyerson, a family counselor, had run her practice for over twenty-five years out of a converted townhouse on West Seventy-third Street. The place attracted her from the first, perhaps oddly because of the elevator cage that obviously had been installed some years after the building's construction; the European aspect it lent the elegant old structure: she knew that, if she chose, she could ride that charming elevator every day, experiencing the vestiges of an era when change meant amiable embroidery rather than wrenching adjustment. On that day twenty-five years ago, however, the day on which she'd first seen the building, Judy chose to follow the rental agent two flights up the marble staircase to the small office suite she was considering leasing, a suite which at the time had been rented for decades by a general practitioner, Dr. Ruggiero, who was planning a well-deserved retirement. Her hand trailed behind her as she walked, fingers lingering on the cool stone of the banister.

Judy thought of him, of Dr. Ruggiero, occasionally, at intervals of years. If she spoke aloud of him, she would say something like, "He must be dead now," or, if she were feeling charitable, "He'd be a very old man now." He'd been in his office, tending to paperwork at the desk, when the agent had shown her through the suite. She'd thought of him as cute, charming as the elevator cage had been charming. She'd been thirty-three then. Now, having been in private practice for over twenty-five years, the couple from Brooklyn contacted her. It was the wife—it usually was the wife—who first phoned. Her name was Leslie Robbins, and she was in tears.

She said that while she loved her husband very much she'd become infatuated

with another man, with whose child she now feared that she was pregnant, and that upon having been informed of what Leslie described as "the relevant details," her husband, Alex, the designer of what she obliquely referred to as "a really good toothpaste for nonsmokers," had locked himself in the attic of the couple's brownstone and was refusing all nourishment. Feeling the need to adhere to procedure—the most stalwart defense of the sensitive practitioner, Judy had often thought to herself—Judy asked, in a calm and even tone, how Leslie had chosen her. "It's your office," Leslie answered matter-of-factly. "It's haunted by the spirit of Archimede Silverbaum, the aristocratic refugee from Danzig."

CRIT:

"I don't know why we have to have Dr. Ruggiero."

"Should it be Dr. Ruggiero's ghost, perhaps?"

"I appreciate the blending of genres but I'm not sure this is working."

"Well, if this is genre work I'd appreciate knowing about it so that I can draw on the proper critical apparatus."

"Uh, I guess I'd just like to learn more about the toothpaste?"

"I personally would give him a normal job to be locked up in the attic with. Insurance, coin collecting, so on."

"A woman like Leslie married to someone like Alex? No way do I buy it."

"The obvious response is Leslie is feeling the same way."

"I don't feel like we got to know Leslie well enough to speak to that with any authority."

"Speaking of distracting. What's all that about the elevator?"

"I think the voice is a little young for the character."

"Ruggiero isn't dead, he's retired."

"If this is some *Twilight Zone* thing I want to know right now. I insist on being told."

FIRST REVISION:

Judith Meyerson washed her hands clean of the dirtily antiseptic feeling, the feeling of latex and antibacterial gel, that afflicted her whenever she met with the couple with the spookily false-sounding surname of "Robbins." Immediately after her first session with them she had been overcome by the desire to wash her hands, to shower really, and this feeling had recurred each time they'd come in. The Robbinses were a couple who claimed to be traveling to her Upper West Side office from Brooklyn, although

Judith Meyerson knew Brooklyn, she was from Brooklyn, she returned to Brooklyn frequently enough to know beyond a doubt that there weren't any couples who looked like the Robbinses there. People who looked like the Robbinses lived on Mercer Street, or on Washington Street, or on West Eighty-first Street at Central Park West. They did not live on Clinton Street in Brooklyn. It was a fact of nature. She knew many fine-looking people, handsome people, even beautiful people, from Brooklyn; there were even movie stars, of a certain magnitude, living in Brooklyn, but none of them looked exactly like the Robbinses. The Robbinses glowed with their beauty; their problems seemed oddly canned—vaguely unspecific, putatively having to do with a "communications" issue, although this was belied by their almost joyful willingness to attend therapy together, their patience with one another, and the way that each tended to enthusiastically agree with what the other was saying, as if one had taken the words directly from the other's mouth. Even their body language, the nearly imperceptible gestures that Judith Meyerson had learned to decode over the years, signified accord. Another couple (a mortal, a normal, a less stupefyingly beautiful couple) in possession of such evident equanimity with one another while claiming to be fiercely at odds would have had Judith Meyerson theorizing that the problem must be sexual in nature (a common enough hypothesis for her to form), but it was clear to her that the Robbinses were united in their ability to sexually provoke one another, at any and at all times; in fact, Judith Meyerson could sometimes hear their amorous gasps and groans behind the door of the small water closet in the hallway before and after their sessions, and despite herself she would stop and listen, imagining that she could hear the sound of belts being unbuckled, zippers working, clothing being thrown to the floor.

"Did you actually interview anybody, a counselor or something, before writing this?"

It was during one of the couple's regular counseling sessions, after eight months throughout which Judith Meyerson had struggled to provide support and advice concerning the "communications issue" she had never even begun to discern, that she seemed to notice one of the Robbinses surreptitiously aiming a small electronic device at her, after which she felt lightheaded and disoriented. Soon after this strange incident, she happened to pass by the water closet one afternoon following a session and heard emanating from the little room not what she had convinced herself were carnally oriented sounds, but a grating, harsh language unlike any she had heard

spoken before. Disturbed, even frightened, she had hastened down the staircase for a breath of fresh air to find standing there Mrs. Robbins, who greeted her with a smile and a pleasantry, although Judith Meyerson couldn't shake the feeling that, for a fleeting instant, Mrs. Robbins had appeared in the form of a gigantic lizard.

CRIT:

"I feel like your way of being authoritative is to start listing things. How does this deepen my knowledge of the characters?"

"So they're not really having marriage problems, is that what you're saying?"

"I think the voice is a little old for the character."

"Maybe if we were to get some detail about exactly what they're doing in that water closet, the other times."

"I think perfectly good-looking people live on Clinton Street. That's why you can always get a cab there."

"I circled 'fact of nature.' I think you're getting into some pretty thorny bush here. I think you need a pith helmet and a swagger stick if you're going to talk genetics. I don't know if I'd go there if I were you. I just don't."

"What kind of lizard?"

"So, I guess what you're saying is that they don't come from Brooklyn?"

"I feel like we see a lot more of Mrs. Robbins than Mr. Robbins."

"Did you actually interview anybody, a counselor or something, before writing this?"

SECOND REVISION:

The Robbinses were referred to Jude Meyerson in September, after Alex Robbins had confessed to her husband, Leslie, that she had been having an affair with one of Leslie's senior colleagues. Leslie was an editor at the *New York Observer* and Alex had been wanting to "trade up" for quite some time, feeling as if her husband, all too happily (in her opinion) occupying the same middling position at the *Observer* that he had held for several years and stalled in the middle of his fourth novel, was too complacent and not nearly ambitious enough to suit her own aspirations, which—as she had comprehended with a start when she allowed the pudgy, waxy-complected man who'd worked beside her husband for three years to penetrate her anus—she was willing to realize with ruthlessness bordering on the sociopathic.

It would be Jude Meyerson's unhappy task to identify this particular personal-

ity deficit in Alex Robbins, although, once she had, she wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Leslie, as Jude had come to expect, sat beside his wife with his perfectly composed look of anxious concern on his face, listening attentively as Alex ran through whatever issues she felt the day's session called for—whether she was improvising or working from a rough script she'd memorized, Jude was never able to tell—before launching into his own rehearsal of his feelings and needs. It pained Jude to think that Leslie still believed that his marriage was salvageable, that Alex herself was salvageable, when Jude was perfectly aware that the world would be a far better place if Alex were to walk out of her West Seventy-first Street office one evening and be struck, fatally, by a bus. It also pained her to know that, ethically, it was none of her business if Alex was a sociopath; that there was no way that she could tell Leslie this while remaining within the bounds of her duties as Alex and Leslie's "couples counselor," and that even if she were to throw caution to the wind and take Leslie aside, he wouldn't believe her.

CRIT:

"I don't like the misogyny here. In fact I'm very disappointed here. If we're going to hate a woman, I think we have to get to know her very well first."

"Yes, you're going to need to draw her using finer strokes."

"I wrote that in the margin and circled it. I can't agree either with the straw woman approach."

"Not that I deny you your right to express your subject matter in your own way."

"But it should be less hostile."

"I wrote that in my comments in fact."

"I just feel like you need to take other people's sensibilities into account."

"Aren't marriage counselors supposed to not take sides?"

"I think the voice seems a little detached for the character."

"Why anal sex? And could we get some more detail?"

"I think I know who you're talking about at the *Observer* and you could get into real big trouble, I kid you not. Watch it, is my advice."

THIRD REVISION:

When Alex Robbins's father was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer, giving Alex roughly four months in which to wrap up the business of over forty years' association with the old man, the business of a lifetime, he went a little crazy—drinking to excess,

taking drugs with a sense of abandon he hadn't indulged since college, and having sex with any woman who responded to his clumsy overtures. Among these were several friends of his wife, Leslie, although he came on to many more, some of whom weren't shy about informing Leslie about what Alex was doing.

Leslie hardly fit the stereotype of the "long-suffering" wife—she was beautiful and stylish, and held a high-powered job working as associate publisher of a wildly successful magazine that commanded women to buy things, but she understood that Alex was going through a period that made incredible demands on his delicate psyche. To make a long story short: Leslie knew that she had married a genius, a man whose poetry was wiping clean and redrawing the slate of American verse every day, and if exchanging her own creative dreams and ambitions (for Leslie was a dedicated practitioner of the personal essay) for a two-hundred-sixty-thousand-dollar annual salary, expense account, and chauffeured limousine was what she had to do in order to bring about this revolution in American letters, then she was prepared to do so. Even—and here things in our narrative go a little dark—even if it meant that little Alex, the prospective child of her dreams, remained alive only in potentiality, even if her (fecund, yearning) womb remained unused. Leslie felt this way through it all, overlooking both the actual infidelities and the possibly even more embarrassing failed attempts, heaving herself into the backseat of the Lincoln Continental that waitingly idled outside the couple's Brooklyn home each morning no matter how badly she wanted to stay home and eat Oreos while listening to Alex read aloud to her from the newspaper, keeping herself childless, even though, as she was wont to say, "I'm not getting any younger," and of course setting aside indefinitely her dream project, a memoir about growing up as a child of divorce. Then Alex met Judd Meyerson, the radical couples trainer, who happened to have been Leslie's roommate—and clandestine lover—during their sophomore year at Wellesley.

CRIT:

"So, wait: Alex is a poet?"

"I don't know if the point of view shift works. I was all used to the doctor and now I get the wife. I wrote that in the margin."

"I'd like a little more about the lesbian affair. I mean, is Leslie confused at all about her sexuality?"

"Maybe if we could have one of Alex's poems."

"Or an excerpt from one of Leslie's personal essays."

"I really think we need the father."

"I just don't think it's a realistic portrayal of what a woman under those circumstances would think or feel. I circled that."

"I find that working in the free indirect style really helps me get in touch with my characters' thoughts. Maybe if you could rewrite it in the free indirect style?"

"I think the voice is a little meta for the character."

"I'm insulted that it comes back to wanting children. That's not what women want necessarily."

FOURTH REVISION:

Alex and Leslie Robbins were among those farseeing couples who, prior to there being even a hint of discord in their relationship, bring themselves to see a couples counselor as a prophylactic measure—a delight for a burnt-out case such as Judith Meyerson-Shelly, who viewed such a couple as an opportunity in the middle of an ordinarily harrowing day to relax and to congratulate herself and her patients on work well done. For three years the two had shown up in Dr. Meyerson-Shelly's office on Thursday afternoons, the three of them spending a pleasant hour chuckling over the bland difficulties the couple had overcome. The couple's persistent inability to conceive a child was the nearest thing to an "issue" in the relationship, and even in that case the marriage had withstood and even, apparently, been strengthened by the problem. Imagine Dr. Meyerson-Shelly's dismay when one day, while she was lunching at an outdoor café off Union Square, she spied Alex Robbins, a handsome book editor and former captain of the Yale water polo team, rushing down the sidewalk toward an adjacent sidewalk restaurant. His eyes were focused on someone or something at the restaurant, which is one reason why he didn't notice his therapist of several years seated at a table and gazing fixedly at him as he passed, and Dr. Meyerson-Shelly didn't even have to turn to know that, with his slightly desperate yet pleased look, Alex was arriving late for an illicit rendezvous. She checked her watch—it was one-seventeen—and then oh so casually turned in her seat to see that she had been correct: there was Alex, bending solicitously before a petite, incredibly shapely woman of about thirty-five, with cascades of blonde hair. That was all she could see of the woman from where she sat, Dr. Meyerson-Shelly. From where she, Dr. Meyerson-Shelly, sat, it almost looked as if the man was bowing to the slut, but then she could see that he was kissing her. From time to time Dr. Meyerson-Shelly would turn, her anger growing, to spy on the couple, her expert eye gauging (with superb accuracy, I might add) the duration (one year) and intimacy (extreme) of their relationship, their feelings toward one another (absolute, train-wreck love),

their overall mien (furtive and tragic), and the stage at which they currently found their relationship (insisting on only public meetings, although Dr. Meyerson-Shelly was not surprised in the least when the two of them, seemingly as one, leapt up from their half-eaten meal and strode to the curb, where they hailed the first cab they could—no doubt to hasten to a private place where they could ravish each other). As Alex helped the woman into the cab, Dr. Meyerson-Shelly gasped when she realized that the bitch was at least six months pregnant. Dr. Meyerson-Shelly wasn't sure how she was going to handle the counseling sessions, was certain that at the very least she had an ethical dilemma on her hands and that at most her uncomplicated self-congratulatory sessions with the Robbinses would now turn into sheer, backbreaking work, just like all the rest of them, when suddenly her cell phone rang: it was Leslie. "I'm pregnant, Doc," she announced, happily.

I wrote "soap opera" in the margin. And circled it.

CRIT:

"This seems to be more about the doctor than about the couple."

"I think the inability to get pregnant would pose a real problem in the relationship, and you just gloss over it."

"I circled that."

"You know what this reminds me of? Pedro Almodóvar is what it reminds me of."

"Yes, I think writing about a counselor and the problems she encounters in her practice should avoid being a soap opera."

"I wrote 'soap opera' in the margin. And circled it."

"Why is she burnt out? You don't go into that at all."

"Maybe the point of view should shift, and we could see more of Alex and his lover, especially once they get wherever they're going after they leave the restaurant."

"I think the voice seems a little formal for the character."

"Maybe the story would work better if we learned a little more about what Leslie does? If Alex is a book editor?"

"And what is that about Yale and water polo?"

FIFTH REVISION:

Leslie Robbins wrote prose that was so professionally unassailable that when Alex, his wife of seven years, abruptly awoke from the "coma" that she later confided had

overcome her throughout that time, she found that she was incapable of articulating what was wrong with it even to her own satisfaction, let alone to Leslie's. Let me take a shot at it: it was boring, smug, tense, unselfconsciously judgmental work, lavish in its use of an elaborately embroidered vocabulary to disguise its fundamentally pedestrian subject matter and even more banal language, precise to an absolute fault (and yet somehow inaccurate) with regard to the details of its settings, and always, always careful—consummately, flawlessly careful. It should go without saying that while this work was indistinguishable from that of many successful writers, it was equally indistinguishable from that of an even greater number of unsuccessful writers, among whom, it must unfortunately be said, Leslie Robbins had to count himself. Leslie would sometimes sit and read his work aloud to Alex—or, as Leslie might have put it in one of his stories, Alex would be obliged to *enjoy a generous bout of recitation*—while Alex would sit and plot his murder from behind the vacuous smile she wore on her face. It was when such homicidal thoughts began occurring to her that she realized it was necessary to get in touch with a professional, even if it *did* mean confessing to Leslie that she found his work reprehensible. The trick was to find the right counselor. Fortunately, Judi Meyerson had been a gifted book reviewer—even winning an award for her work—before she earned her Ph.D. in psychology. Alex provided her with copies of all of Leslie's published work as well as with the seven-hundred-page manuscript that, *mirabile dictu*, he'd had trouble selling, and Judi understood the problem right away. Together, the two women decided on their mission: destroy Leslie's ego.

CRIT:

"I find it very perceptive that you feel like a book reviewer and a mental health professional might have something in common. Psychological insight and so on."

"Who is this intrusive narrator? I find the meta thing really, really just takes me out of the story."

"Yes, I wrote that in the margin. I really feel that it calls attention to itself in a bad way."

"Maybe if we could have part of one of Leslie's stories?"

"I don't understand, was it a literal, like, coma? Or is that just a metaphor?"

"Yes, make that clearer. I circled it. If she's just bored with his work, why not just say so?"

"You know, I've noticed that Brooklyn was such a vivid part of the earlier drafts . . . I really miss Brooklyn as a central character in the story."

"I think the voice is a little Humbert Humbert for the character."

"Nabokovian. That's what I was looking for. In a bad way."

"I'd be interested to know who's earning the money in this family. We'd learn so much more about the dynamics here if it were clearer that Alex is supporting Leslie, or whatever."

"Maybe if we could learn about their sex life?"

SIXTH REVISION:

It was the *towel* habit, primarily. Les could understand the *towel* habit: Sandy's alcoholic mother had been neglectful of all housework, including laundry, throughout Sandy's childhood, and so as an adult Sandy felt compelled to throw out *bath towels* after only one use. It wasn't exactly the cost of the *towels* that irritated Les, however, although that amounted to *over one hundred fifty dollars each week*. It was the cost of renting an apartment with sufficient space in which to store the *towels*, which generally were *procured* during *semi-monthly spending binges* at Bed, Bath & Beyond, a store, Les liked to remind Sandy, to which she had once claimed an *acute aversion*. Apparently not any longer; Sandy would return from her *generous bouts of shopping* there with salad spinners, garlic presses, steamer baskets, sets of nesting bowls, and, of course, *towels*: at least fifteen, *thick, plush, bath towels* that it frankly *broke Les's heart* to throw out after one use. In fact, when he could *get away with it*, he would hang Sandy's *towel* up to dry and *use it himself* before throwing it, *with great, heart-broken, reluctance*, into the large *garbage can*, intended, he knew, to be set outside the kitchen door of the home of *a family of six*, that sat in the bathroom of their *loft*, for the *sole purpose of containing discarded towels*. But between the six hundred dollar *monthly towel outlay* and the overhead of maintaining *sufficient storage space* for a *rotating stock* of *as many as sixty thick, plush, oversize bath towels* at any given time, Les and Sandy found themselves in a *financial crisis*, which they set about to resolve in a way to which their lifestyle in a spacious DUMBO loft uniquely lent itself: they took in, at a *highly competitive* rent, a *professional couples counselor*, the noted Judit Myersohn, founder of the *"Myersohn Method,"* whose *fame for her unorthodox techniques was rivaled only by her reputation for her peculiarly nomadic existence*.

CRIT:

"I am so totally put off by the italics."

"More about the alcoholic mother, please."

"I think the voice seems a little italicized for the character."

"This just seems like you're having fun. You have to ask yourself what your responsibility to your readers is."

"A good story isn't fun. Back up and start again. Rewrite from the point of view . . . of a towel, perhaps."

"I really like the realistic touch of including the name of the store. It really put me into the story."

"I did too. I circled that. That kind of verisimilitude has really been missing."

"I have to ask, is this something you actually lived through? It just seems so, so *real*."

"But in a totally over-imagined way."

"Too real."

"Imagine it more responsibly."

SEVENTH REVISION:

"Alex, hi, Dr. Meyerson here. You'd said, well, you'd said to call anytime, and I just happened to be taking a little walk after dinner and I thought I'd give you a buzz. I'm actually, uh, I'm in Brooklyn, in your neighborhood I believe, not that I'm an expert or anything, I'm on Smith Street, right near DeGraw, thought I'd get a drink, and maybe if you weren't doing anything . . . ? Anyway, I'm here, for, I don't know (giggles), however long a drink takes. (Sighs.) Okay, then. Bye. Oh. My cell is 646-541-5778."

"Alex, it's Judy. Thanks for dragging yourself out of your bed of pain to join me. Maybe next time in my neck of the woods? Anyway, really a pleasure to see you on an extracurricular, you could call it, basis."

"Alex. That was *fun*. I really enjoy spending time with you. (Dramatic pause.) I hope you don't mind if I tell you that I miss you."

"I don't know how to handle the sessions anymore, Alex. I can't sit across from Leslie knowing what we're doing. It's unethical. I could lose my practice. And it's just wrong."

"I love you. I think I left an earring at your place. You'd better check the sheets. I love you."

"Leslie, this is Dr. Meyerson. I'm afraid I have some inconvenient news. I find myself in a position where I have to pare back my client list and I can only retain the clients with whom I've been working for quite a while. I'd love to keep working with you and, uh, Alex, but I'm afraid several longstanding clients do have priority under these unfortunate circumstances. I can give you the names of several excellent counselors, all of whom have a great deal of experience and all of whom I can vouch for."

"I don't know what I'm doing. I canceled all my afternoon appointments and

you call at the last fucking minute to flake out on me and now you won't answer your fucking phone? (Voice rises.) You know how Leslie calls you a prick during our sessions? (Shouting.) You are a prick."

"I'm standing across the street from your house right now. I dare you not to walk by the window and look out at me. I dare you. (Pause.) What did you just tell Leslie about the call? 'Just one of my clients,' I can hear you now, you fucking phony. (Long pause.) You know, you're such a coward I know you'll ignore the voicemail, so I'll send you a text. 'Across Street. Made you look.' Here I am. Come and see. Hope you have dinner guests. Hope you're sweating."

Alex, it's Judy. Thanks for dragging yourself out of your bed of pain to join me. Maybe next time in my neck of the woods.

"No, I did not 'stalk' Alex Robbins. He and I entered into a consensual relationship. He's a grown man, for Christ's sake. And a known adulterer. Why do you think he and his wife came to me in the first place? Charm? It's not charm. It's not a question of charm. It's intensity. When he turns his attention on you it's impossible to ignore him. It's like being caught in a spotlight. He seduced me, pure and simple. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but not completely. I know my ethics, but the attraction was overwhelming. It was mutual. When you feel that you don't say no. You just can't. If you think you can, you've never felt it like that. The 'stalking' is his invention. Pure and simple. I became inconvenient. Leslie has all the money. He knew I wasn't going to be able to support him. He wanted to stay home and write novels. Leslie was willing to do anything to get him back. She didn't even, God, she had no idea who her rival was! She knew someone was out there trolling for her husband. And I sat across from her and counseled her. That's the only thing I feel badly about. The whole thing was a huge deceit, but that was unforgivable. I hope she can forgive me one day."

CRIT:

"Great, another story about a woman becoming an out-of-control stalker-bitch."

"Yes, I really thought that you robbed Dr. Meyerson of all her dignity."

"I had a female therapist for many years and never once did I feel like she wanted to sleep with me."

"I feel like the voice seems a little hysterical for the character."

"Maybe if we could see them, you know, being intimate . . ."

"I don't like the point-of-view shift at the end. Who is she talking to? Where have you taken us?"

"Could you maybe put, you know, attributions? 'Dr. Meyerson said,' and so on?"

"Wait, is this all one conversation? It wasn't clear."

"I circled that. I circled the whole story, one big red circle."

FINAL REVISION:

Sasha Robbins sat before her Apple MacBook Pro one morning, inspired to creation by the argument she and her husband, Leslie Caperton "Pally" Robbins, had had the evening before. She wanted to project an imaginary couple into imaginary space and time, although the couple did seem very like herself and Pally. She was familiar with how she and Pally seemed because of the occasional counsel she received from Judith Myers, the famed relationship guru who had been her neighbor when she and Pally had lived in Chelsea, before they had moved to Park Slope after finding on Fiske Place a beautiful, architecturally distinct townhouse with large bay windows.

Sasha was taking a creative writing class at The New School and had been encouraged by the feedback she'd been receiving from her instructor, Judah Myers, a respected novelist who also happened to be Judith Myers's son. She worked at the story for three hours straight, enduring both the banging and crashing of the contractors who were at work on the third floor of the building and the small explosive sounds coming from Pally's studio in the basement, where he spent his days recording his own songs. Sasha's story had a beginning, a middle, and an end. It conformed rigorously to Freytag's Triangle, the "rising action" theory of storytelling that Judah prescribed for his students, ending with the unhappy wife, Sandra, finding fulfillment at last in the arms of her lover, a creative writing instructor, while across town, speaking quietly in a darkened parlor room in Park Slope, a sagacious relationship counselor enumerated to the sobbing, forsaken, but somehow bluntly hostile husband all of the ways in which he'd been intolerably and irredeemably cruel.

Pow, from the studio.

She applied a nicotine patch to her upper arm and took an antianxiety tablet. She ate a salad and nine Oreo cookies. Then she returned to her work. She decided that the husband, Buddy, didn't deserve to remain in the townhouse. She altered the ending so that he wept now in the relationship counselor's office, "his two monogrammed bags, gifts from a long-since forgotten anniversary celebration, the last vestiges now of what had once been a viable, functioning, mutually beneficial rela-

tionship." Meanwhile, the creative writing instructor, Lucas, gazed in happy astonishment at the airy, spacious room overlooking the verdant back garden, a room lately emptied of expensive recording equipment and sound insulation, that would become his study. The smell of fresh sawdust filled the air from the construction of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that would hold the novelist slash mentor slash lover's extensive library. Sandra would take for herself a more modest room upstairs in which to write, the two of them enjoying long and productive mornings and then sharing lunch together each day, reading over one another's work and making insightful, constructive suggestions.

Class was at eight.

> "Class is at eight," Sandra desultorily announced to Buddy. Buddy rolled over on the couch, where he was locked in a fatal embrace with the Gibson Les Paul Sandra suspected he loved more than her. "What's for supper?" Buddy said, tonelessly. "I was thinking we could try Blue Ribbon Sushi." Sandra tried to sound chipper. Buddy never wanted to go out. He didn't even like to call for takeout. He just heated things on the stove and ate them standing up. "I'll just make some pigs in blankets" he grunted, yanking a frosty box from the freezer. Sandra took the subway to New York, sighing heavily. Removing herself from the underground leviathan at W4 St., she walked slowly and deliberately to Starbucks. Checking her reflection in the mirror she said "I look like shit" then drank off the latte she'd ordered from the African American teen. It would give her the energy she needed to gaze directly into the sunlike face of Lucas Mayday."

"How about a little beef bourguignon for dinner, babe?" asked Pally. He was in the kitchen, looking in the refrigerator.

"I have class at eight," said Sasha.

"Oh. Maybe I could meet you?"

"Don't bother."

"Oh."

Sasha walked along Seventh Avenue, heading for the subway. She had in her shoulder bag a notebook, a copy of *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, and a folder containing a brief character sketch (her current assignment) and a previous assignment that she wanted to draw out Judah's opinions on. Frankly she couldn't read his handwriting. It seemed to say, "I lile he hnginnij but three cre sone POV slfts that covcerm me—trp to naintnin tense. Also, do you tlink tle clarasters sunlnlen delisior tu firt a pistol intc thl cunopy of thl lot-air balloon is pharsilbe? If shc's suicidal, you slould male it cheer. Othvlisl, lave ler kill ler lusbnd on ble grounl." Maybe

she should just tell him that it was illegible. She pictured him laughing, throwing his head back. "You should have been a pharmacist," she'd say, throatily. "I'd fill your prescription," he'd respond. Etc.

She'd ridden in the first car, so when she got off at Fourteenth Street she had to walk downtown, through the station. One man asked her for money. Another. It was 7:48, just enough time to stop at Starbucks. She got a tall redeye. She liked saying "redeye," because it didn't appear on the menu. The counterpeople would be impressed by her familiarity with coffee jargon. Before marrying Pally she'd worked as a barista in a San Francisco coffee house and had briefly been a contributing editor to a monthly journal, *Javalogy*, that had been distributed free to local establishments. You could say that's where she got the writing bug. Writing about espresso machines and shade grown blends. Yes you could. Sometimes she'd contribute a poem. Yes. Then Pally had come along and she couldn't help thinking that he'd ruined everything. He'd swept in with his Stanford sweatshirt and his crewcut and so much for the poetry. They'd gotten married at Grace Cathedral, lived briefly in Oakland while he finished up at Boalt Hall, then moved to New York where he'd become corporate counsel for a startup, ShitClick.com. Fertilizer online, why not. Big rollout after the v-caps were blown away by the company's vision of millions of farmers ordering tons of manure with a click of the mouse. Pally had seen the end coming early, unloaded his shares as soon as the restrictions were lifted, cleared eleven million after everything. He'd "retired," turning to his first love: Death-Noise Rock. At first he'd rented studio time at exorbitant costs, but then he'd decided that they needed to buy a house so that they could save money on studio time. Why, he could even rent out the studio—and himself, as engineer. They offered on the first suitable property they looked at.

Sasha hurried into the lobby of The New School building on West Twelfth. Checking the elegant watch around her left wrist, she saw that she had just minutes to spare before class began. Maybe she could catch Judah for a few moments before he began chatting with another student. He always seemed in such a hurry to go after class.

> "You've blinded me, Chum—but now I can truly see."
>
> "What are you doing with that pistol? Sara? Sara!"
>
> Blindly, Sara fired at the canopy overhead. With a whoosh like a resigned sigh the gallons of air began exiting the wounded balloon in a giant sough of exhalation. They began losing altitude, gradually at first and then rapidly.
>
> "I don't mind dying if it means I'll be taking you with me," said Sara. But Chum couldn't hear her—he was screaming too loud.

"You should have been a pharmacist," Sasha said, holding out the corrected story.

"Huh?" said Judah.

"I said, you should have been a pharmacist with handwriting like this."

Judah smiled faintly and took the story from her. They looked at each other for a moment.

"What was the question?" he asked, finally.

"I can't, um, read your handwriting."

"Ah." He read his comments over. Then he flipped through the story, nodding as he skimmed it.

"I'm telling you two, no, three things: first, try to maintain the point of view. Two, you're still having problems maintaining tense. Three, I don't buy that a blind woman bent on killing her husband would choose to lure him up in a hot air balloon on a flimsy pretext and then shoot the thing out of the sky. I just don't."

"What could I do to strengthen the story?"

"Those three things."

"Could we meet to discuss it further?"

"I don't see what more there is to discuss."

"Okay." She took the manuscript—which he'd shaken violently to punctuate each of his three points—and smoothed its slightly creased pages as she held it. "How's your mother?" she asked.

"My mother?"

"Isn't your mother Judith Myers?"

Judah shifted nervously where he stood and Sasha could see him as a little boy. "Yes. Are you friends with her?"

"Sort of. My husband and I."

"Clients?" He'd regained his composure.

"Oh, no. No. Neighbors. Not that, you know. Not that we probably couldn't have, you know."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Judah said clinically.

"No! I mean, just, couldn't *everybody* use some relationship counseling now and then? Couldn't *everybody*?"

"You know what?" said Judah. "I love my mother."

"Oh, I do too."

"I love my mother but her profession is a pile of bullshit."

Sasha didn't quite know how to react. It seemed, though, that a reaction wasn't called for.

"Why would you want to be with a person and then want to turn into another person and have that person turn into another person in order to be with them? Isn't that pathetic? Shouldn't you want to be with who you're with because they're who they are or do you think you should want to be with who you're with because you're with them? What is all this learning to communicate crap? Am I communicating with you?"

"Yes!" said another student, a tall, leggy blonde whom Sasha had—completely unfairly, she knew—nicknamed "the bipsy."

"If you don't like it, you don't like me. Simple. Why should I talk some other way?"

Sasha didn't quite know how to react again, but this time Judah expected something. He leaned forward so that his face was four inches from hers. "Do you like me or not?"

The only thing Sasha could think about was the tunafish she'd had for lunch. Did her breath stink? She spoke out of the side of her mouth. "Yes."

Four hours later Judah released her head and she let his rapidly shrinking penis slide out of her mouth. She rolled over onto her side and watched as he stood and began rapidly to dress.

"I have to get going," he said. "There's somewhere I have to be in about a half hour. If you just make sure the door is closed all the way when you leave it'll lock automatically."

This wasn't at all what she'd had in mind.

Steven Heighton
Thar He

ROY BRYANT'S DEATHBED CONFESSION

We was acquitted and then, protected
by the laws, we sold our story—how for hours
we beat that boy witless and then shot and
weighed him down in the river. Told jokes on it
too, at the time. *Aint it just like a nigger*
to try swimming the Tallahatchee with half
a cotton gin on his back? Four thousand, they paid—
most I seen in my lifetime, before or since.
Some reckon thats when the Lord stepped in. I dont.
Not when all we done is our natural
duty as husbands, and the Lord God, He must
of knowed it.
But something changed then. The niggers
closed down my store by shunning it. Across
all the South come changes—folks so vexed up
by a single death—and his daddy a rapist
too, you ever know that? Why dont them city
liberals ever say? Changes come, and me and
J.W. reap up the blame. I leave the state,
lose my store, my house, kids, my high school queen,
lose my sight too, in time, like maybe other
women aint worth the seeing now. Anyhow

its best, I reckon, not to see Death coming . . .
or to see you all here now, inquiring
about whats so long dead and done. That boy just
never ought to wet his lips to whistle. And
you all, ganged round me with questions—what is this
wrong digging, this killing hunger? Hell with you.
You all say that boy was young? In the hours
till he died, he grew younger and younger.

A Monsoon Suicide

AFTER GESTURES BY JOHN BERRYMAN AND EDVARD MUNCH

In this hired room, my window
gives onto shredded sea, intruding

slats between stanzas of foam,
those lines of breakers, scrolling

slowly into noise. The window's sealed
to cut the roar, but the woman who came

with the room has brought the sea
within (her salt, her soft, nautical snores)

while out there the plying and replying
surf goes on erasing the littoral, the break-

water barely holding. Some dreams drift me
outward like a liminal form

into winds that are deafening the shore
and land: a note of departure I've been

nearing from the first, by installment
like the tides. Do I miss the earth? If she

woke, we might speak. Let in the storm.

Collision

Away in the eyefar
nightrise over the sapwood, and one likes
under hooves the heatfeel after sun flees, heat stays on this
smooth to the hoof hardpan, part trail
part saltlick now as snowlast moults back
into the sapwood
to yard and rot
and one sees moonrise mounding
over a groundswell, but too soon and swifter
like never the moon one knows, no moon at all,
two moons fawned, both small, too hot, they
come with a growling and
hold one fast, so chafing for flight
but what, what, what, what
wondering—

and one can't move and can't although one
knows from backdays, eared and glimpsed
through sapwood budwood cracklewood bonewood
flashes of this same Wolfing
                now upon one, still
stalls the hooves on the saltlick and the eyebright

creature squeals afraid?—and one somehow
uphoofed in a bound not chosen high as if to flee with no
trying, no feeling, fallen flankflat, fawnlike

eyes above in the eyefar closing small
with the world

and now from the stopped thing
comes what its cub? legged up on its hinds,
kneels low to touch, but in that awful
touch, no feel no fear to feel
no at all—

Michael Z Murphy
Why Did You Make That Left Turn?

There was little preparation and no map—
Only a notion to follow some thread in
The sky. Maybe it was home I was seeking
Or the sound of it. No one told me
The landmarks. The street signs no longer
Reflected headlights. I saw many things
Tossed to the roadside and shed many myself:
A sealed unmarked box, a jacket, milk,
All the wishes but one. Dead ends passed by;
One or two tempted me. There was also a piazza,
Blue water, muddy water, places so dry nothing
Grew. I signaled several times, but changed
My mind. There were wrecks to avoid. The breeze
Was fine. When I tired I pulled aside and napped
Or ate figs, and was happy to watch other travelers,
To hear a train which made a tear form but not fall.
Eventually I reached this corner, and something
Pulled at my leg like a small boy needing balance.

Michael Copperman
Want

THERE ARE DESIRES NOT TO HAVE DESIRES. —CÉSAR VALLEJO

I want not to want. I would like nothing from nobody. I ask you to keep your complimentary ice cream cone and to steal away all the sunstruck days when all I have felt was well. I do not want the clouds to part, and I do not want the wind to cease, and I do not wish that the stumbling drunk on the corner, who sways and catches himself and starts again with his hands clutching his elbows as if to hold himself together, would have a life less sad. I do not want to stand straighter under a lesser burden. I am gladly solitary, and want no smile from the slim, golden-haired barista who serves me each morning, and I hope she learns to burn the coffee black and bitter. I ask you to keep your pity, and even your sympathy, two sides of a coin that cannot be flipped without landing on end. I will not hope my bold, broad-shouldered cousin bound today for Afghanistan will return safely, and so do not have to wish an end to all who might harm him—the woman planting the mine in the black dirt, the dark-eyed child in whose outstretched arms is an incendiary device, the weight of what he will have done to survive if he does. I embrace injustice and do not want the sick to be healed, the well to know compassion, the child born on the streets of Midnight, Mississippi, in a cardboard box to have been born into a gentler life. I enjoy the way that even presence suggests the imminence of loss. I want nothing at all from you, here with me desiring more than we can have—that is more than we can bear. We shall not want.

SHORT STORY

Jesse Goolsby
Resurrecting a Body Half

At another hotel, in another elevator, I finger the executive-level key card and stare up at the four-inch screen showing weather conditions at O'Hare, then, a police sketch of someone Chicago searches for. I've always wondered how one slides into the position of sketch artist. Do the local PDs scour art colleges for young abstractionists with an emphasis in portrait? Our police department didn't have the money, so we'd bring in the art teacher, Trent Kellog. He'd show with his charcoal set and pound the paper. He wasn't that good and most of the time we'd be embarrassed to put the sketches up around town, but what I really remember was his face while he drew: contorted mouth and bundled forehead, and he'd shake his head as if fighting a mental devil.

This suspect, the tinny elevator speaker says, is either male or female; thank God for that. Is there nothing certain in the world? At least *I* could tell them a black female, in a red sweatshirt. At least I could describe the car, the brown Ford Taurus I pulled over for rolling through an empty intersection. It was a standard stop and I did everything right, but when you're two feet away and their illegally tinted window rolls down, well, you can't dodge a .357 round. A day after my surgery Trent comes in and we walk through it: the thin nose, the haircut, the chin, and I realize I don't know shit, but description comes out like a fireworks show and before I know it, I'm creating someone. Trent is into it big time, shaking and groaning, using the side of his hand and fingertips, whipping the charcoal lump like a madman. Finally, we're done and I sit up from the hospital bed and look at the bust of a woman I recognize, so I nod and send him on his way, and return to the dreaded wheelchair catalog.

In this hotel elevator, on the small screen, the artist has performed brilliantly, conveying an androgyny and universality that denotes everyone and no one in their sketch, and just as I consider my own features someone touches my shoulder, my neck, and as I turn around a smiling woman with straight teeth brushes my cheek with her hand. She leans back and settles comfortably against another woman. The space is packed and I quickly turn back to face the front, trying to neutralize the mash of confusion, anger, and desire that erupts. In my dreams I've neared this experience and I always have something witty to say, but here, in the moment, I'm handicapped by my nerves. I feel it in my fingers. And in what appears miraculously, I feel a twinge in my groin. I try to summon the courage to acknowledge it, to turn back to them, but what would I say? Thank you? Let's go? I'm married, but she's lost interest? The problem is I want it to be easy: no stories. I want one of them to invite me to their room, where they'll undress me and lick one another before they take control and use me, but as I imagine the scene I've already lost their faces. There was a time when this squeeze and cheek brush was all my body needed to respond with an uncontrollable erection, but tonight, a twinge means more than anything in my past and a surprise desire fills me. I don't know where to reach or how to breathe. I glance at my hands. They're red and puffy, enlarging with each second. There's other chatter in the elevator: a gay voice murmurs of a bad back to a friend, a creaky grandma about the wind. I only have three floors to go, so I lift my expanding left hand up to scratch my cheek, just so the women will know. One of them giggles and I'm at my floor with the doors opening and I take one quick look back to get the faces and they look right back, but just before the doors close on my healers, one of them nods ever so slightly. The elevator doors close, and I turn to watch the numbers scroll upward, noting the pauses (23, 27), until the elevator starts back down.

Two months after the shooting, at the official line-up, I see her, the woman in Trent Kellog's drawing. I pick her out and leave. Lauren drives and holds my hand in the car. She loves me and I want to love her. And although I don't want to touch anything, she places her hand on top of mine and squeezes.

"May she rot in hell," she says, and doesn't apologize to our children in the back seat.

In the spacious hotel shower I turn the water temperature way up. I slowly touch my wet body. I feel my chest and face and hair. I rub at my eyes. I pinch the skin at the elbow without nerve endings. I think of how my spoiled body retains my healthy name. I reach down and touch my feet, a raised scar on my left foot. I think of a photo, taken two days before I pulled the Ford over. In it, I stand in our living

room in an evening robe I hate. I pose for Lauren, sticking my belly out in between the crossing flanks of cotton, patting it. As she took the photo my oldest daughter screamed from her bedroom. In my rush to her I cut my foot on the doorstop to her room before calming her down from a nightmare. All of that I have to create from a photo where I stand, frowning at my body. I consider getting out, but the hot water keeps coming and I feel like I break even with the room if I can drain an extra five minutes from a hot shower. I scoot to the edge of the plastic seat and caress my balls and finger the space beneath them, pressing hard. I search for the twinge that slowly receded after I returned to my room. I try to convince myself of the miracle in the elevator, and I know the only way is to feel it again. Once is a mirage. I'm lightheaded and know enough is enough and turn off the water, but stay seated while the steam slowly exits the small crack I've left in the window. After Lauren and I dated a couple weeks we'd make love in the shower, everything slippery and smooth. I'd have to crouch down to a half squat to enter her, and after, I'd always let her get out first to dry. We'd lie on my bed and I'd feel my aching knees and knotted quadriceps before falling asleep. In the mirror I consider my rehabilitation in the elevator, think about the consequences of sex without my wife. Is there morality in miracles? At what cost am I willing to be rebuilt? I dry as best I can and button up a tailored shirt and squirm into slacks.

Six months ago, a Tuesday night marks the three-year anniversary of the traffic stop, and my youngest child throws a fit over dinner in her purple overalls, screaming and pushing. She knocks her chicken on the floor and tells Lauren to shut up. It's butt-spanking time, but the damn kid squirts away and taunts me. I can't catch her in our white kitchen, and I can see the confidence in her eyes. With a rush Lauren catches our daughter's shoulder and spins her. I want Lauren to bring her to me, so I can teach her a lesson she won't forget, but before I know it Lauren winds up and delivers a fist to our daughter's lower back. It cuts the wind from her and she falls on the tile, swimming and squirming. Lauren grabs the bottom of her straps and lifts her up parallel to the floor before standing her up and slapping her temple, picking her up again, and slapping her red cheek. I see my daughter's eyes vacant and unbelieving. Lauren says something, but I can't hear it above my other crying child. Lauren looks up at the ceiling and screams and somehow my daughter slips away and bounds to me, crashes into my chest, shaking, and choking me. Lauren moves toward us, leaning into the stride with her shoulders and I lift my arm in defense, hear myself, in a voice that seems alien, beg.

I feel the energy and whispers of opportunity in the city night, so I stroll the

hotel lobby trying everything I know to look like I'm not waiting for someone. It's not hopeless, but the odds are not good. I am willing to wait awhile before I ask the doorman if he's seen the women. On a normal travel night, I'd do some mind fucking, because when you're married, this is the best self-preservation, even for the guilt seekers; it's easier on the body. It's late and I wonder how far my whiskey breath pushes into the air. Because this is my night they emerge from the elevator and one of them has a late-night sway. She's younger and plumper than I remember in a red skirt that shows her meaty legs. She says something I don't catch, and her friend wraps her hand around the swayer's bicep and gently pulls.

"You go in there, you walk out with something invisible."

"It's Mishna," she says with a southern accent, and takes a breath like she's run out. Before I can reply with mine, she comes close to me. "Okay, tell me."

"Motivational speaker," I say.

"We could talk around it, but I want to know, because she says," pointing to her friend, "that by the look of you, all of this is new."

She smells like vanilla flowers and her cross necklace dangles close to my face. The smallest twinge returns to my lower body and I think I feel something biting at a toe. I want to cry, but I hold it together and run through a catalog of stories and pick one that answers Mishna's lazy eyes.

"Lean in because it's embarrassing," I say softly. She does, her ear inches from my mouth, head bobbing. "You can't tell from my accent, but my parents were missionaries in Africa. Have you heard of Sierra Leone? Of course you have. So you know the battles. And we were caught in the middle trying to do what we could." The words sound magnificent as they leave my mouth. It's been awhile since I've used Africa, and I'm surprised that a twinge of regret isn't present since it's where I met my Lauren. I slow the story down now, vary the intonation, and remember to include the name. "Well, Mishna, I was in the wrong place. Mishna, I remember the sting, not much more than a bee's, remember crashing on the soccer field as children gathered around." I need her to touch me, even a brush, or at least look at me.

"So you weren't born with it," she drawls out.

"No, Mishna. I remember . . ."

Suddenly, she's upright, somehow satisfied, headed toward the bathroom; her friend lets her go, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, looking away. At the door Mishna stalls.

"Coming?" she asks.

I move to the middle of the marble corridor and stop as she enters the bathroom.

"You go in there," says a voice behind me. It's her friend, still facing away. "You go in there, you walk out with something invisible." I don't get it, but she puts her right index finger to her nose and shakes her head. Still, I go to the bathroom door and place my hand on the door's dull brass push plate. It's warm and a whiff of cleaner stench hits me. The fake mahogany door is an inch thick, on hinges, but I can't bring myself to push. I imagine Mishna on the other side leaning against the black marble counter, the top three buttons unfastened, waiting, and as I roll back from the door I wonder how long she'll wait for me there, heart and mind racing. I glance toward the friend, now leaning at the outward intersection of two walls and nod. I hear Mishna emerge, speaking over me. She flicks her nostrils with a newfound awareness in her eyes. I guess cocaine.

"Okay," Mishna says. And that's that as she walks to her friend, puts her arm around her, and they go out the heavy front doors.

I follow, hoping for a glance back, a beckoning. The doorman, quick on his feet, gives me a chance to catch up, but I don't know what to say or do. I hear their laughter as they disappear behind a row of taxis.

After the shooting Lauren waited months before asking me what I wanted from her. I knew this meant that she needed something, anything, so that night I took down the sheets and kissed her lower stomach and moved down while I held her hips in my hands and I searched for the pressure that always arrived in me, but felt nothing, not even as she came and jerked and pushed my head away. I watched her flail in the lamplight, normally a routine marking my turn, and sure enough, as she settled the electricity in her body, she smiled and pushed me to my back. She hovered over me, serious and tender, and asked me if I wanted her to touch me.

I stand at the outside entrance of the hotel, purgatory for all smokers: just warm enough to make it worth it, but too cold to enjoy the burn. It's abandoned except for the bass from the club down the street and some poor soul in a wheelchair, puffing her extra long cigarette into the night air. It's cigarillos for me and to be nice I ask for a light. Mid-thirties, I guess, with a delicate jaw line sliding into a petite chin. After a moment of silence:

"You know what I hate?" she asks. It's rhetorical by tone. But I guess mentally, still shaking off my encounter outside the bathroom, paralysis? Wheelchairs? Life?

"Stars," she says. "What a crock. Most are dead, yet here they are, shining away with all their fake ass light."

Great, stars. There could be bad poetry coming my way. I look up to project interest. It's overcast, the city nights projecting a cheap orange hue. Sure, I'm taken aback, but what the hell, it's someone to talk to, and she smiles at me like she's let me in on a secret.

"I don't think *most* of them are dead," I say. "Maybe just a couple." I need to keep the momentum going so I pull out the fifth and tilt it. She sits in a fading light the color of weak iced tea. Her surprisingly thin legs cross at the ankles and she's paid attention to her hair.

"No. All of them are dead," she says in a confident, preachy tone. "It takes their light a million years to get here." A pause. "Did you know that shooting stars aren't stars at all, just lunar dust particles floating around?"

I'm pretty sure this isn't the case, but she's in a wheelchair. It's a powered model, glistening blue. Her right hand clutches at the joystick, tenderly fingering the top. I can tell she wants me to understand all this celestial babble. She leans over her armrest toward me and her blouse picks up over the collarbone revealing a red bra strap. I consider for a moment what we'd look like on the bed together, if she'd just lie there or if she had more in her.

"Sure, all of them are kaput," I say, but my voice comes out like a child's, fluttering.

"You don't believe me. Fine. Not important to you."

"Yep," I say, as she leans back.

"You, at the fancy hotel. You, looking for someone your type. You, a believer."

I don't get this shift and before I realize I won't understand any answer I ask the question.

"You're not staying here?"

"Probably a goddamn war hero. That's it. Saved four people, back to a country that doesn't take care of you. VA sucking the life out of you with long lines and doctors that, let me guess, they just don't care. Married, broken dick, couple kids, war hero wears off and you weep at their fucking soccer games."

"I like this," I say and take a drag as adrenaline pours out over everything. I hold it in my mouth and think. The smoke gently burns my tongue and cheeks. "Genius in high school, athlete, cheerleader maybe, doing the big boys, flunking science. Had the looks before you were T-boned. Couldn't have been your fault. Johnny ball player walks away after four weeks and thank God he hadn't used the ring sitting in his drawer. Nice settlement, but it doesn't help the old back, and you'd climb on anyone if they'd just give you one compliment."

I know I have her because she swivels the chair to face me and reaches up to

touch her ear, ensuring its existence. She smiles out frustration with a twinge of defeat, and I consider for a split second if I'll forgive her. The pause stretches. I wonder if I got any of it right.

"You think I can't walk, don't you? You think this isn't a choice?"

What am I supposed to say? I'm at the end of a tunnel. No matter what has happened this is a line, one I'd fight over, but it's insane and I can't bring myself to answer. My mind spins and I feel the muscles in my back, tired now and conscious of the last seventeen waking hours. My cigarillo is a nub.

You think I can't walk, don't you? You think this isn't a choice?

I'm about to give up and answer, flick my smoke away, and head up. I've decided on "I'm tired," but before I can get it out, Miss Starlight flexes both legs outward, holding them parallel to the ground. I'm lost. My vision flexes and blurs. I feel my anger forming from somewhere deep. I look for the doorman but he's nodding off, and the pounding bass from the club has mysteriously disappeared. Legs still extended, she looks at me and laughs.

"All of this," she says looking at her chair, "just a temporary thing, nothing but a fall and three weeks while the bruise heals. You, on the other hand." She stops midsentence. I can tell she reaches for the right words, and her forehead crinkles up in frustration. I'm convinced she has said everything so I turn back to the doors, but before I get to the entrance she clears her throat.

"You sorry fuck," she says.

I'm alone in the elevator and they're showing the police sketch again, a full body sketch, and I realize that the criminals always stand in the police lineups. If there's someone in a wheelchair, with crutches, or a limp do they have to perform? Do they hire fake limpers? What's the command behind the darkened glass? "Number two, limp four paces with emphasized limp. Okay, number three, four paces." But I'm damaged and I can't laugh my way through it tonight and my head already starts to ache and the images are on the way.

It's 34 and windy at O'Hare with a chance of snow, which is never good. I wonder if my 8 AM flight will be delayed. I try to think of the plane, try to hold the image, envision its angle upward into the early morning, but it's too late and I think of my wife at home and wonder if she's alone. What kills me is that she probably is, wallowing in the guilt of the "for better or worse" bit. I can see her greeting me tomorrow in the driveway, rushing to take my suitcase from my lap. I can hear her yelling to

the kids that daddy's home, and them running out, arguing about who gets to push. I can taste her kiss, the first time we tried to make love after the accident, we'd waited months; can remember her floating over me as she asked if I wanted her to touch me there, and me saying, "yes," and being so scared of the silence that followed, scared to look down, scared to feel the seconds pass as I slowly sank into myself, and later, with shaking hands, going to the kitchen in darkness and pulling out a bread knife. I can feel the serrated edges pulling against the sharpener; remember taking my boxers down and gripping myself, feeling the weight in my hand, but nothing on the other end, just the quiet room.

The tings of the elevator floors come as a metronome of elevation. The doors open to my floor and I'm proud I'm not in tears. I start out but something in my arms fails to act and I find myself in between the doors. Like jaws, they close and open, close and open around me—chewing. I evaluate the worst thing that could happen if I get back in the elevator, but before the doors close for the third time I'm back in, pressing 23. Something in my working bones tells me they're on 23.

I roll off the elevator and take my place beside two fake leather chairs and a console table with a gold-faced lamp. I stare at the two elevator floor displays, digital red numbers stuck on 1. One of them moves to 4, but down again. Another begins its ascent and I'm stuck in a lottery of possibility. The number climbs above 17, stops, and starts up again. It's perfectly quiet and my seat creaks as I adjust. I don't know how long I can last, if I will have enough. I don't know what I expect, but as I look down at my bent legs, in the wrinkle-free slacks, I feel a warming in my gut and beg it to lower. I know the astronomical odds, but something inside me believes that the elevator doors will open to me and for the first time in years I'll feel my pants slide down over my knees just before they fall helplessly to the floor. Starlight was right, I am a believer. I have to be. And tonight, there will be a reckoning, a savagery, enough passion and blood and faith to resurrect the universe at 3 AM. But as the doors open and I see their tired faces I can't help but wonder if I have enough of anything.

Gary Fincke
Swarms

THE PARASITOID WASP CAN SURVIVE MORE THAN FOUR TIMES THE RADIATION THAT A ROACH CAN.

One morning, my wife called to warn me that
Roaches were swarming in the living room.
She whispered as if they were listening.

For sixty years now, the myth of roaches,
Its prophecy resting in the bellies
Of airplanes and silos, inside the holds
Of submarines ceaselessly circling while
We've memorized the extinction details
Of vomit and lost hair, of lives banished
From a planet of insects that scurry
In the dark, waking nobody from sleep.

One afternoon, my daughter, eight years old,
Memorized the definition of *swarm*
As she flailed at a thick flurry of wasps.

How we've shuddered reading Revelation
In the Postmodern Testament, but now
We learn that promise won't be kept, that when
Radiation saturates air and earth
And water, when everything is poisoned,
Roaches vanished, just these wasps will survive
The way this new Jeremiah of war
Has foretold the world without us, a hell
Of crawling replaced by a hell of flight.

One evening, *swarm* shuddered up within me
For ants at our sidewalk cracks, for fruit flies
Surrounding our trash, for caterpillars
Incubating inside translucent tents
On our blossoming decorative trees,
Any of those gatherings sufficient
To terrorize with their numbers, the way,
In crowded foreign cities, the jabber
Of a language we do not understand
Becomes a buzz or a drone or even,
The definitive sound of the future.

News

After her daughter disappears.
After the police. After the priest.
After an hour-long session with the one
Professional counselor in the town,
She calculates the rapist odds,
The lottery of stranglers, follows
The likely chance of sex and drugs.
She chooses items from the drawers
In her daughter's room, imagines
How each would look with blood—stockings
And sweaters, panties, slips—each thing
So suddenly heavy her arms
Begin to quiver from their weight.

A neighbor tells her he walks, each evening,
To the same spot along the river,
Watching the sky from the brush-choked bank
Because a throat through time empties
Into the water, because whoever
Has escaped from a distant horror
Is hurtling toward a darkness splash.
She watches him climb his steel ladder

To his leaf-clogged gutters. She follows
The tight tumble of rain-soaked leaves
And steps inside to inspect the news,
Staring at the crime and accident crowds
From Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Once, while a mayor made promises
From where a Korean shop had burned,
Her daughter was nearly there. Once,
She was almost at the curb when
A comic, holiday balloon passed by.
She keeps dental records in a folder.
They're filed with photographs that
Account for three different styles of hair.
Her neighbor has shown her photographs
Of the river's magical location.
In each of them an upstream bridge
Is so close to salvation she stares.

The Fear Warehouse

NEUROLOGISTS HAVE LEARNED WHERE RATS STORE THEIR FEAR. —NEWS ITEM

Missionaries came to my door this morning,
Speaking through the screen about the end times
That are running, one said, on fumes, grinning
Like the bright dot on my Celica's fuel gauge
When I am fifteen minutes from stalling.
Those preachers hoped to stir the fear I've stored
Since a thousand Sunday sermons rooted it
So deeply I could imagine a soul.
They spoke with the fervor of plague year priests,
The certainty of bloodletters draining
Two pints to cure diseases embedded
By a chronic imbalance of humors,
The four I studied once, remembering
The barber, past seventy, who had cut
My schoolboy hair, how thirteen years later,
He had stood with me outside his long-closed shop
And recited the contours of my head,
The way the strands nearest the crown needed
Special tending, and I, at twenty, confessed
How much he'd frightened me with his story
About the symbolism of barber poles,
How his father and his grandfather had cut

The blue veins of customers who believed
Their sicknesses could be emptied with their blood,
That even boys like me had a pint to spare.
The street was becoming a plain of absence
For an approaching thruway. My hair curled
Over my collar, something to cut; the veins
In my arms seemed swollen the way they felt
When I watched those two terrorists enter
The house of the woman across the street,
Admitted by the daughter who cuts herself
Daily, drawing a blade across her limbs
As if she were lancing the boils of fear,
Squandering herself on anticipation.

Daniel Wolff
Canvasback

What have I done in the time I've had?
Half of what I might have done.

The wind has cut the snowbanks back,
curved their corners, freed some branches,
and in all that time all I've managed
is not to talk about love.

The canvasbacks are busy eating.
They yank the reeds that clog the current
and feed on the delicate, knuckled roots.
If I dove down to black-shell bottom,

what would I find?
The truth?

Horned Grebe

Its shape on water (or, against water)
is pointed. As if hammered.
As if sheered by atmospheric pressure.
The body is what won't go under,
withstanding heaven.

Diving, the grebe's disappearance
is so abrupt—and creates such absence—
and comes to mark such utter persistence—
that as it runs through depths of silence,
I hold my breath.

The dive extends and still extends.
I leave; the water mends
behind me. Funny how the brain defends
desertion. It hears the cry the grebe (finally) sends
as laughter.

Ice Is Water Under Another Name

Water as ice
supports a thin layer
of water as snow—
which pocks the surface of
water as ice
till it sags and eventually
sinks below.

Ducks can't find
the water they know
and circle over
the closed pond.
But seagulls simply
accept (and stand on)
change.

Here and there
are marks from where
swans resisted
(breaking through),
or muskrats opened
hope between
hidden home and hidden food.

Thaw

Two ripe days of wet East wind
have fumed the long black coast—
pressed the sea and scored its whiteness—
raised the muddy bottom.
This isn't it, but the beginning of it.

Along the creek that forms the marsh,
salt water scours yellow grass
while stiff-legged gulls walk on lawns
once exquisite. Now it isn't
spring or winter. Gutter-screens hang from gutters.

> Let's call what tries to stop change
> Pride. Then the seawalls have been humbled.

On the risen water,
a piece of plywood has drifted free
and skims along, invisible. Or would be,
except mallards have made it a raft.
Land I'm sure of isn't.

Red-Tailed Hawk

"Easily identified by its distinctive, dark red tail."
Easy, maybe, if the northerly wind
would pin the bird as it rounds the point,

but it blows past, as does another
—smaller? barred? with black markings?
Gone before I can see what it is.

No: gone before
I can tell what it is.

A spotless day for migration: a spray
of old snow still left on the ground
and cold: the harbor frozen tight.

I walk as far as the channel markers.
They're dark red, too, but anchored in place
as if you could chart water.

Alex Stein
Relation to the Absolute: A Conversation with H.L. Hix

One road leads to another. (A few, it is true, lead only to the sea, but mostly one road leads to another.) I met the poet H.L. Hix through the poet David Mason. Or, rather, I have never actually met the poet Hix. He lives in Wyoming, a state of which only a few geologists and archeologists know the precise location. Our interview is being conducted by telephone. I've seen his photograph, by the way. Two or three of them in fact. He is a handsome poet. Not "handsome, for a poet," but actually handsome. Robert Lowell was handsome. A few are. I don't suppose the poetry must suffer for that fortune. Not all poetry suffers for the fortune of the poet. Lord Byron was a Lord, and he still wrote the lines, "For the sword wears out its sheath / and the soul wears out the breast / and the heart must pause to breathe / and love itself have rest," of which I think no honorable reader could complain.

Hix is the author of nine books of poetry, most recently First Fire, Then Birds: Obsessionals 1985–2010 *from Etruscan Press, which also published his book* Chromatic*, a finalist for the National Book Award in 2006. He is the author, too, of five books of essays on poetry, poetics, and theory, and of several books of translations.*

His aphorisms, in my opinion, are among the most invigorating pieces of poetic prose to have been written in this country in the last twenty years. "Halve the proof, triple the tale," he writes, and "For every philosopher who praises sound decisions, two poets celebrate unsound ones," and, "Minds like stars stay suspended in space by attraction to other stars."

Could I go on in this way, unfettered by word count or journalistic propriety, I would write out every single one of the nearly 300 aphorisms collected into his essay

"Toward a Prodigal Logic," simply for the thrill of watching those lyric thoughts light effortlessly toward genius beneath the fall of my own fingertips. One must try to gather glory to oneself in whatever way one can, I feel.

Alex Stein: Tell me about your poetry.

H.L. Hix: I'm influenced by my sense that, from Plato, dialogue stands at the base of western philosophy, so I'm interested in how conversation might happen in poetry. I love Harold Bloom's formulation that "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem." I see the poem not as the end of something, but as the beginning. The poetry I value most highly acts on me as an incitement to my own thinking and writing. That's what I hope for my own poems, that they act as provocations, that they charge other ideas, rather than that the ideas in them pretend to some final value in themselves. I mean "charge" in the sense of electrical current or power, but also in the sense of issuing an imperative.

AS: For how long do you figure you have been a poet? I mean, at heart.

HLH: Let me fudge a little, and offer two or three different answers. The first would be a backpedaling disclaimer, lifted from Louise Glück's *Proofs and Theories*, that the word *poet* names an ambition, not an occupation. If she's right, as I think she is, it's a live question whether I *am* a poet yet, or not. The second answer, the more direct one, would be that I've been trying to write poems, with the ambition formulated to myself at least, since my sophomore year in college. I took a British Lit. survey with Miss Wilson—God rest her soul—and I fell in love with the language of our readings. I felt clearly the spiritual power that was possible through that language. Which prompts a third answer: insofar as poetry for me is a spiritual enterprise, it has been a lifelong pursuit. My family is explicitly religious. I was brought up in a household in which things were formulated in terms of spirituality. Ethical questions were formulated in terms of spirituality. Political questions were formulated in terms of spirituality. So, too, personal and private questions. I no longer hold the particular religious views of my upbringing, but poetry fulfills, for me, some of the same functions religion once did. It is a vehicle of inquiry and a way of assessing values.

My first awarenesses of language were framed by church experiences. The sermon was the first approximation to poetry that I encountered. My family was Southern Baptist, and about twenty-five minutes of the standard, hour-long Sunday worship service would be the pastor—or as he was often called, the preacher—preaching a sermon. This nearly always consisted of taking a short Biblical passage

and interpreting it as a life lesson with contemporary relevance and immediate applicability, doing so in ways that attempted to make the lesson memorable. There might, for example, be alliteration: Jesus calls us to prayer, penitence, and penury, say. The aim was to provide some sort of succinct catch for the memory. The attention of the preachers to the ways in which a thing could be expressed was one of my first experiences of people moving out of everyday speech into some slightly elevated form of language. I don't know how many sermons I heard preached on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. You know: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love . . . If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but have not love . . .* That text was chosen frequently, surely in part because it is itself very elevated language with plainly visible rhetorical structure, so to preach on it needs elevated language reaching to elevated language. A meeting in the middle air of idea.

AS: Apart from the familial structure in which there seems to have been a certain amount of dialogue on religious considerations, did you recall having private considerations at an early age?

HLH: I did have an early sense of seriousness that came through prayer. Sharing my family's religious beliefs entailed that on a daily basis one was to understand oneself—and I did understand myself—as literally talking to God. That's bound to give anyone a sense of gravity about language.

AS: At what point did you begin to question the necessity of praying in a language that had been given you and thinking about praying, if I'm not misunderstanding things, in your own language?

HLH: My freshman year of college I had gone off to engineering school, thinking to become a mechanical engineer and design cars. After a time, though, I transferred to a small Baptist college intending to become a Baptist preacher. But, since I was planning to go to seminary after college, I didn't want to major in Religion as an undergraduate. It seemed redundant. Instead, I double majored in English and Philosophy. That's what did it. I found myself around people who were asking the same kinds of questions I had been taught to ask, trying to fulfill the same kinds of ambitions as were implanted in me, trying, for instance, to pray, but in ways that were less formulaic, less derivative. It became clear to me that in order to be consistent about my religious views, I had to discard them. I couldn't act out my religious beliefs within the framework of something that had been given me by somebody else. It was going

to have to be more in the manner that I was coming to learn through reading authors such as Kierkegaard: it had to be an absolute relation to the Absolute. As long as it was mediated by somebody else telling me, for instance, who God was or how to pray, it couldn't be authentic. Such self-interrogations ultimately led me pretty far from the origins of their impulse. It wasn't a crisis, really, just a gradual transition. I understood that I was no longer suitable for being a Baptist minister. Instead of seminary, I attended regular old graduate school. The thought of ministry gradually became the thought of teaching. The idea of sermons transitioned into the idea of scholarship.

AS: Have you had any mystical experiences, in the traditional revelatory sense?
HLH: The closest I've come, I guess, to what other people have described in that way was during the process of writing the last section of *Chromatic*. There was a period of months when my ex-wife and I were going through a difficult, stressful time. I started a habit of going downstairs late at night and sitting in the dark with a tablet and pen in hand. It became a trance-like ritual, and it felt in the moment like voices speaking through me. In the morning I would transcribe whatever I could read of whatever I had scribbled blindly onto the pad. With that exception, my process has been investigative and textual and rational, much more about inquiry than about anything like possession. Even the moments of which I am speaking seem to me now more a matter of habit, a utilitarian recreation of optimal creative conditions, than like any kind of mystic entry into a transcendent space.

AS: Can you tell me a little more about Kierkegaard and your relation to his work? Didn't he write something like, "To love well is to will one thing"?
HLH: Yes: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." He was very interested in both elements of that assertion. "Purity of heart" seemed to him problematic in many ways. Problematic in terms of Christian theology, given notions of the Fall, and problematic, too, just given what it feels like to be a human being, with our multiplicity of contradictory desires and ideas and our sense of guilt. "Willing one thing" was also problematic. In fact, if I understand him correctly, "purity of heart" and "to will one thing" were ideals that he saw as not humanly possible. And for that reason, he became interested (as, following him, I too am interested) in the ways in which we might pursue aims that are not humanly possible. That are, in short, divine. He became interested in an idea of faith that wasn't about belief, but was about a kind of "adequation to the divine," to something larger, and more out of our control, than is mere belief.

In my reading of Kierkegaard at that time, he seemed to be saying that if there were a God, God could not be as God is portrayed in Christendom, but that Christianity is much more difficult and complex than is usually acknowledged. I was very taken by the sense of magnitude that Kierkegaard possessed in pursuit of his Christianity. Something in it resonated with my own disquiet. Even though I ultimately discarded Christianity, I had to get to the discarding by first trying to take Christianity itself with a kind of ultimate seriousness. In order to move away from it, I had to come to see that the form of Christianity in which I was raised was, as I now see things, blasphemous. I had to recognize that it was contradicting its own standards. Kierkegaard denied the medieval belief that reason and revelation can be tested, one by the other, and that they go together harmoniously. If faith *were* always validated by reason, if the ethical and the religious *did* always coincide, then Christianity might be easy, or at least possible.

Of Kierkegaard's books, the one that had the biggest impact on me was *Fear and Trembling*. It shook up the easy sense of assuredness with which I had been surrounded growing up, the part of religion that offered guarantees. For example, one of the things we understood about God was that God wanted us to do only things that were morally good. But *Fear and Trembling*, reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, makes the simple, blunt observation that God instructed Abraham to kill his son. In terms of received morality, church morality, it is hard to think of anything more ethically abhorrent than that command. So, how was I to make sense of it? The whole super-structure I had been raised on came tumbling down in the face of that question. I was forced, in light of this tale, to realize the groundlessness of all my assumptions about God. I was suddenly, to borrow from a different formulation by Kierkegaard, "out over seventy-thousand fathoms." I was no longer standing on the solid rock that the hymns of my congregation had proposed.

AS: So then what happened?

HLH: So then began the long fall. I immersed myself more and more in literature and philosophy, and ended up studying at the University of Texas with the brilliant Kierkegaard scholar Louis Mackey. I took to heart much of his sense of philosophy: that it was not to be construed as an academic specialty so much as it was a vehicle for ongoing critical self-examination, and for the surveying and reconciliation of various ideas. That it was about how one lives one's life. I know you share my taste for aphorisms; do you know this aphorism of Kierkegaard's? "A theatre catches fire. The clown steps to the front of the stage to announce the fact to the audience, who think it

a joke and applaud. Then the clown announces again that there is a fire, but they roar with laughter and clap more loudly than ever. No doubt the world will end amid the general applause of these laughter-loving people who take everything as a joke." That was the sort of complex and subtle consideration that Dr. Mackey, by his example, suggested to me a person could worthily wrap her or his life around. I wouldn't make any claims for my *results*, but I hope my *efforts* at least have lived up to his example.

AS: This interview is going to be published in *TLR*'s "Rogue Idea" issue. What does the term "rogue idea" mean to you?

HLH: Spelling out the tenor for which rogue is the vehicle, I'd name such characteristics as solitary and predatory. But in applying those characteristics I'd want to distinguish between ways one might mean them. A rogue idea might be solitary in the sense that it defies limitations imposed by other ideas. I want to ensure that my ideas are *not* rogue ideas in that sense, not capricious and unconstrained by contradiction with one another. I *do* want my ideas to be solitary in the sense that they defy conventionality, that they make themselves beholden to other ideas, rather than to the forms of assent demanded by a group—any group—for inclusion in its membership.

Or, again, a rogue idea might be predatory in the sense that it consumes persons—their rights, their individuality—and transforms them into capital. Among such rogue ideas especially visible in the U.S. right now, belief in the rationality of the market and our notion of "free trade" are examples. I hope to be consistent in rejecting ideas that are predatory in that way. But a rogue idea might also be predatory in the sense that it consumes other ideas and transforms them. *That* is how I want my ideas to be: predatory rogues for which ideas, not persons, are the prey. Which brings us back to the beginning of this conversation, and my desire to see the poem not as the end of something, but as the beginning.

Renée Ashley
A Rogue Idea

The older I get, the more obvious some patterns of human response become. My neural webs—much like the worldwide one, another web taking up a lot of real estate in the foreground of my thoughts—make connections between my observations, my perceptions and experience, and thrust those recognitions forward in the mind-queue where they, more often than not, meet up with others of a similar bent. The connections mingle and multiply, and the dynamics repeat themselves, until fractals begin to look like cleanly sliced pieces of cake. And so I see, too, that this connecting and compounding has many correspondences with the small-world paradigm, otherwise known as the *human web,* manifested so aptly in *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon* on the internet and which appears to be a spin-off of John Guare's play, *Six Degrees of Separation,* which no doubt had its genesis in the 1929 short story "Chains" by the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy, who *Wikipedia* identifies as the "first proponent of the six degrees of separation concept." And these three manners of web—the neural, the world wide, and the human—call forth, almost against my will, a linguistic connection to yet another, much less complex, but still apropos, system of webbing: the one which exists between the toes of ducks.

And having none of these exactly in hand, I am nevertheless web-rich. And I can feel another association forming. So now, along with these two books on the

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The Art of the Poetic Line by James Longenbach, St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008 and *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*, edited by Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek, Brookline, MA: Rose Metal Press, 2010.

nature of line and no-line in poetry, Longenbach's *The Art of the Poetic Line* and McDowell and Rzicznek's *Field Guild to Prose Poetry*—the first a paradoxically tiny but encyclopedic compendium of techniques for poetic lineation and the second, a selection of personal essays on non-lineated or prose poetry—the anecdote of my own, but long-gone, duck seems both apt and felicitous. And then, the duck having been added to the mix, my mother must follow close behind.

And then, the duck having been added to the mix, my mother must follow close behind.

My mother is ninety-nine and lives alone, three thousand miles from where I reside. She still lives in the same house I'm about to tell you about, and we have no other family to speak of. So, obviously, I keep waiting for *the call* from a stranger. I've gotten plenty of calls, but, so far, not *the* call. As time moves on, the expectation becomes more charged with certainty, and the certainty more charged with resignation. The anticipation has been, in a way, renting out a large part of my conscious mind for over twenty years; it has, in fact, earned tenure, while I have not, and, under different circumstances this would be tragic, but with the long-now of the current state of affairs, frankly, the horrification factor is losing its edge. All that she will allow to be done for her has been done. She's made her choices by default; she will not budge. It's not that she's senile; she's not. She's stubborn and angry and will stick to her life-choice guns until no life exists for the choices to determine. I know that sounds hard-hearted, but the being-held-in-suspension has worn down my ability to feel. She must feel it herself, though I suspect that in her case she experiences it as a sense of abandonment and terror. She has always been the metaphorical long-haul trucker in the shiny, new eighteen-wheeler with mud flaps and a bottomless tank of fuel. And though she is somewhat diminished, she's still holding on to that trucker attitude and she's rolling her eighteen wheels in neutral and on her own terms downhill toward eternity.

The poor duck, the actual duck, on the other hand, came into my life late one afternoon, did its brief, surprising work, and exited the morning afterward. Ma was fifty-two or -three back then. Almost a decade younger than I am now and, for all intents and purposes, a single mother of one. She still worked full-time at the county courthouse as a PBX operator and she maintained her brittle thread of sanity by steady, predictable patterns of behavior and boatloads of cultivated aloneness disguised as self-denial.

I was in the very early throes of high school. We had just moved from an apartment on the other side of town to the almost equally as small two-bedroom, one-bath house on Hillview Avenue, nearer the high school and the courthouse. The bathroom, with a footprint just slightly larger than that of the bathtub conjoined with a phone booth, was just through the archway from the living room and on the right. It opened into what could only be called a small fainting room, though surely it was not a fainting room because the house was a bungalow, one old, stucco story but neither dignified nor old enough to have a genuine fainting room. Ma, when we first moved in, had ordered, extravagantly, an olive green nylon, multilevel loop, wall-to-wall carpet for every room except the kitchen and bathroom. And below the archway was a lumpy carpet seam right where, for some odd architectural reason, the hardwood floor dropped down on the living room side a full three-quarters of an inch. In the living room, the old maroon sofa, covered in a gristly, rayon frisé that engraved its fibrous, paisley-like pattern on your cheek as soon as you fell asleep there, was pushed back against the ecru drapes which, when drawn, nearly covered the picture window. There were two mismatched chairs on the other outside wall, perpendicular to the sofa. One was a low, masculine piece, my mother, sometime in a past so distant it was before my remembering, had reupholstered in a peony-leaf green fabric, nubby, but patternless. By this point, though, the chair had faded and was softened by age and use. Its arms were very low along the seat cushion, straight and upholstered, and ended with what looked a little like curled fists carved in dark wood. The chair had been my father's—Ma'd thrown him out for the last time close to a decade before, but held on to the chair. The other chair Ma'd picked up at the local auction house, an almost delicate wingback covered in a pinwale corduroy somewhere between pink and red, with a medallion of iris quilted into the center of its back. It had been uncomfortable when she brought it home, eighty percent of the chair poking precariously out of the trunk of her little white Opel Kadett, tied in with some small-gauge hemp twine that someone at the auction house must have given her, and it had not gotten more comfortable with age. Ma tended to sit sideways on the sofa, feet up on the seat cushions as though it were a chaise and her head propped between the sofa back and curtain-covered wall on a pillow she'd bring out from her bedroom.

The house was small enough that when I sat at the end of the sofa next to the front door, I could see a sliver of bathroom on the tub side; a narrow strip of porcelain, aluminum runner, and glass enclosure. But if I sat in the green chair, I could see a slightly larger slice of the same scene. There was never anything much to see in that

sliver and slice, but I was constantly aware of it because such proximity reinforced the notion of being entirely too close, of having no privacy, no place to go to get away. Of needing to shut the door. But even with the bathroom door closed, anyone could hear every jostle, breath, and displacement that transpired in that bright and claustrophobic room (someone long before we moved in had installed a primitive skylight with chicken wire in the glass high above the small sink whose scaly pipes Ma had concealed with a tiny Formica sink-surround from Sears). The toilet was tucked into a just-barely-toilet-sized rectangular alcove to the right of the sink and flimsy wire shelves were suspended between two peeling, fake-chrome poles, one on each side of the tank, which stretched loosely from floor to ceiling. They always held the same inventory: a box of tissues, Ma's liniments and emulsions, a compact of pale face powder, the long plastic tube of black mascara, a small cut-glass dish that seemed always to have three mostly used bright red lipsticks, plus a couple of hair brushes and a rat-tailed comb, my pimple creams, PhisoHex, and multiple mouthwashes. There was also a white china poodle whose poofy fur parts had obviously been extruded from a garlic press and who was chained delicately to two little poodles of exactly the same design. The mother poodle tended to fall over because her little china feet could get no steady purchase on the widely spaced wire shelves, though her doppelganger appendages were able to straddle a single wire and, more often than her, remain upright. Still, most of the time all three dogs were on their sides, apparently dead or sleeping, in the bathroom glare. The most interesting part, for the rare visitor, was that when you hunkered down on the toilet, all that paraphernalia on the shelves behind your head shifted a bit in an unsettling way, and your knees bumped the vanity. The longer your thigh bones, the wider you had to spread your knees to settle on the toilet seat. The combination tub/shower with its glass wall and sliding glass door was along the wall on the other side; that was your vista. You could almost reach over the sink and touch it.

Perhaps now is a good time to introduce the concept of the *practical joke. Wikipedia:* "A *practical joke* (also known as a *prank* or *gag*) is a mischievous trick played on a person, especially one that causes the victim to experience embarrassment, indignity, or discomfort. . . . The term 'practical' refers to the fact that the joke consists of someone doing something (a practice) instead of a verbal or written joke." There's a footnote on *prank* that led me to, "Other forms of pranks involve unusual applications of everyday items like covering a room with Post-It Notes." By these definitions, then, it was the hybrid *practical prank* that I was about to court.

The afternoon of the event, my friend Holly showed up with a mallard duck

decoy. I cannot for the life of me remember why she dropped by or why she had the duck or for what reason she brought it with her into the house. But the moment I saw that marvelous, awful duck, I knew what I was going to do. I asked if I could keep it overnight. Holly was reluctant. It wasn't her duck, she told me. "One night," I assured her. I'd bring it over to her place the next day. Honest. "What could I possibly do to the duck?" I asked her, reaching over and tapping on its hollow head with a couple of fingers. Swayed by my powerful yet specious argument, Holly handed it over and left shortly afterward. The duck was amazingly weighty for a rubber duck, but its green head and oddly yellowed bill were heavy with promise as well. Its sturdy rubber body was a nice speckly gray, its breast a little darker. It was at least life-size. It was magnificent.

Leaving the seat down, I placed him gently in the toilet bowl facing forward. It was a brilliant fit—he was neither floating freely nor wedged in tightly. It was as though that duck had been *created* for that particular commode. His regal, hollow, rubber head rose greenly above the white wooden seat with the clean, white porcelain bowl below, its water sloshing as though in his wake. His splendid bill with its apparently lifelike-from-a-distance speckly yellow-orange-greeny color slid smoothly across the seat front, poking just over the outer edge. It settled into the curve there so beautifully it was as though that particular seat had been molded for that particular bill and had been waiting for this meeting all its wooden life.

I was already laughing.

The plan hinged on my mother's predictability. Every weekday evening between 5:20 and 5:30, she would unlock the old front door with its two Schlage deadbolts, push it noisily open, and, keys still jangling in her hand, toss whatever coat or sweater she had, her gloves, and her purse onto the wing chair to her left. She'd look my way if I were in the living room reading or watching TV, a sort of weary *hello* would drop from her mouth, and she'd stand there a moment, as though she were relieved to be home, but her tired eyes would be scanning the room—and looking around the corners too, I would have sworn—assessing which of my chores had not been done or had been done perfunctorily. Did she smell baked chicken? Was the smell of warm laundry in the air? Had I vacuumed? I could see her counting off my, admittedly, few chores, her mind clicking away like an abacus. If my infractions appeared large on a particular day, her sigh would be deep and heavy, her shoulders would droop even lower, and she'd begin the inquisition; if they were small, she'd sigh as though my uselessness were just one more disappointment in a lifetime of disappointments. But, always, after that, she'd head straight for the bathroom where she would take a

five-minute freshen-herself-up, flush, open the door, and make that sharp left back into the living room where she'd gather up her coat, hang it in the small closet on the one, broad-shouldered wooden hanger we owned, then come back, pick up her purse, gloves, and keys and walk slowly back to her bedroom. Not bothering to close her door, she'd flop heavily onto the edge of her bed and kick off her heels. It would take approximately another five minutes for her to change from her work clothes into some other, less-good dress, slip on some low shoes, and head into the kitchen to conjure dinner.

Because I knew I could count on that pattern, I sat in the green chair that evening, the floor lamp shade angled perfectly over my open book so she wouldn't tell me I was ruining my eyes. And I waited. I couldn't read; I was too wound up. I kept looking out the front window, laughing to myself—Wait! Was that her car? I'd nearly vacuumed the green out of the carpet and had dusted the TV screen because I knew that a dusty screen was a dead giveaway. The chicken smelled the way chicken smells when it has another fifteen minutes to go and the fat is sizzling in the pan. I was a perfect child. This was going to be great.

I'm not really sure what I expected. I don't think I even thought that far ahead. But I certainly had expectations because my heart was beating like a hammer in my chest and I was looking forward to the night being different, to having a little fun for a change. Half of me probably acknowledged she'd catch a glimpse of the duck when she first walked into the bathroom and call out to me, "What the hell is a duck doing in the toilet?" and I'd have to restrain myself from answering, "The backstroke." But even that would have been sufficiently different, a change of some sort, if only momentary. And maybe a quarter of me thought she'd be startled by that green head looking her way and that she'd laugh and say affectionately, "Oh, Renée. You're such a nut," lift the duck from the toilet, giving it a little shake so it didn't drip on the oval, rubber-backed, shag rug, and set it in the bathtub to dry off—and not mention it again—but, still, the night would be better for that instant of genuine warmth. The other quarter of me, I'm sure, knew there was a real possibility she wouldn't notice the duck at all, she'd defile it, and I'd have to do some unpleasant duck-scrubbing before I saw Holly the next day. But in my mindless anticipation, the whole set-up just seemed funny to me: my zombie Ma, predictable, oblivious, and a big duck waiting in the toilet. How could that not be funny?

So when Ma finally turned the second key in the lock and pushed the door open, I was nonchalantly coiled up in Dad's chair "reading" a thick book with smallish print and yellowed pages, a library book wrapped in those old covers that felt

painted on and were almost always a solid, saturated color except for the title and author and Dewey Decimal System number stamped deeply in white or black onto the spine. I know it was a big book because I only took out big books. They were like anchors in another world. Ma tossed down her coat and purse and keys, gave me a look that said *I'm doing the best I can*, and walked past me and past the bathroom and turned right into her bedroom.

It was unthinkable! She *never* varied unless she thought I'd been in some way particularly abhorrent and wasn't in sight and then she might stop in the living room and do that deep-in-her-throat-controlled-fury thing that everything with ears and within walking distance of town could hear and she'd keep it up until I would come running to get my direct earful. But I was right there; she looked right at me. I was curled in Dad's chair waiting. And waiting. My face can only have been a rictus of stifled anticipation and confusion. She'd gone into her bedroom! She shouted to me from back there. Had I peeled the potatoes? And from my perfect spot in the living room I answered, "Yes." And still she didn't come out. "Good," she said after a moment. "Throw them in the water. I'll be out in a minute."

And I thought—more of a thought-scream than a thought-thought—"No! I *can't*! I'll *miss* it!" But I unwound myself from the chair and ran into the kitchen, overfilled the tri-corner Silver Seal pot with cold water, turned on the burner, put the pot on, threw both potatoes, whole, into the water, checked to make sure the splash hadn't doused the flame, and dashed back to my chair, pulled my feet up again, and picked up the book. Ma was just coming out of her bedroom. She turned into the bathroom and pulled the door closed behind her.

And nothing happened.

I straightened myself out. I moved literally to the edge of my seat—and I waited and waited and waited—and finally I gave up. Something in me acknowledged that in the not-too-distant future I'd be scrubbing a decoy—and then the bowels of acoustic hell blew out. A scream, the likes of which surely must never have been heard before, cut right through my disappointment. I could hear the crashing of cheap, thin metal. Then a cabinet door flew open and struck the wall with a *crack!* I could hear a shower of breakage and then what only could have been the sound of Ma's new sink-surround being pulled away from the wall. There was a horrible human groan. And before I could even process what came next, the bathroom door flew open. Ma, the wide, dark top of a nylon stocking flapping around each foot, her big white panties pooled around her ankles, her skirt and slip bunched up like a useless life preserver around her waist, was seemingly flung from the bathroom and into the fainting room

wall from which she ricocheted onto the closet door. And then, in a terrible ballet of confluences, she stepped with one foot on the opposite foot's nylon stocking, hit that seam in the carpet that covered that three-quarter-inch drop, and she was lost. She took one off-balance step toward the living room, her shin struck the coffee table and she fell, belly against the Formica coffee table top and her face full-flat into the center sofa cushion. Her arms, which looked broken, were sticking out like . . . broken arms. And she just stayed there, her pale white behind in the air, shaking, now, as though those flailing buttocks themselves were trying to catch their breath. And my mother—in that position—cried for what seemed like a very long time.

When I was able to close my mouth, I knew there was nothing in the world I could do about what was coming. I started to laugh. I was crying at the same time. When Ma finally raised her head and moved, and I saw that her arms were not broken after all, I knew she was going to kill me, but, still, I couldn't stop. The tears were rolling down my cheeks, over my jaw, down past my clavicle, and into my bra. I tried to stop, and I'd manage for a gasp's worth, but the pressure would build—the pressure of surprise and terror both—and I'd break out again, the laughter and the bawling having merged into a kind of a howl. I tried to speak. "Oh, Ma . . ." but my words were unintelligible. The pay-off of a lifetime, and nowhere to look and nothing to say. It was brilliant and awful. It was hilarious. It was horrible. It overshot anything I could have imagined, and every time I moved to help her to her feet and came close to her bare ass sticking up and the soles of her feet trailing those ruined hose, I thought I was going to disintegrate from the mixture of horror and astonishment. I was going to laugh so hard that I was going to die before she could kill me.

It had played out like this: Ma hadn't noticed the duck until she had pulled up, and pushed down, the usual articles of clothing, and she'd been lowering herself onto the seat when she caught, somehow, a glimpse of that green head and bright eye between her legs. She told me years later, still not laughing, her body had acted independently, had simply shot up and away. I could see it all: her reptile brain shouting *Flee! Flee!* She'd been a billiard ball speeding across green, level felt. She'd been physics and geometry. Every abrupt contact sent her helplessly shooting off in another direction until she focused her eyes and will just long enough to reach out and turn the doorknob. After a similar scenario in the fainting room, she'd taken her awkward rest where she had. And when she'd finally righted herself, and shaken off my hysterical attempts to help her, she'd said only one thing and she said it with a deadly calm: "Renée, you're a goddamned asshole." Beyond that, she didn't speak to me for a very long time.

And so, my hypothesis: that much of what we experience in human intercourse depends on a particular triad of psychological states experienced in cause-and-effect order: recognition, expectation, and reaction to variation.

And poetry is a human intercourse—created by one and experienced by another.

There is much in common in *The Art of the Poetic Line* and *Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*—and the observations of how both lineation and its absence work on the reader—with the story of my mother and the duck. The shared matters have to do with the recognition of a pattern, the expectation, in its nuanced or not-so-nuanced forms, of continuation; and the resultant payoff set into action by the catalyst of variation.

The payoff of a lifetime, and nowhere to look and nothing to say. It was brilliant and awful.

No one I know enjoys being bored. Readers of poems recognize a pattern and then develop an expectation—unconsciously, in all likelihood, but set in place all the same. The pattern is, then, somehow altered (line "ending," syntaxes, etc.) and, the reader's expectation unmet, her attention is ratcheted up and the triad set in motion again.

If you are the one who is the maker, who has experienced the blind "aha!" that precedes the setting in place of the plan, the setting up of the catalyst, you are the manipulator: let's call her the *daughter* in the anecdote above. The instant the daughter saw that duck, the game was afoot. Or, that might be the poet who suddenly has a lyric impulse. Neither plan nor poem need be articulated before or during the "aha." The "aha" is preverbal, a sort of understanding-but-not-yet-having-the-words-to-articulate-the-understanding-with moment. Articulation is a later step. On the other hand, if you are the one on which the plan has been foisted or the one to which, in some manner, the poem has been passed, you're either Ma or the reader. You are the manipulatees. And of course, since reading and writing are different expressions of the same activity, both parties, the manipulator as well as the manipulatee, can experience surprise.

Longenbach's *The Art of the Poetic Line*, is more than just the little (5"x7", 128 pages) book it appears to be. It's concise, yes, and though the font is a reasonable size, the book is almost airlessly packed with intelligent observation on the nature and possibilities of the poetic line. It's straightforward, absolutely clear, bursting with

information that will scoop up and hold the attention of a smart poet, want-to-be poet, or dedicated poetry reader.

The first sentence in Logenbach's preface is this: "Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines." I'd never heard it stated that way before. And I thought, uh-oh, a formalist in my hand. But then came this near the end of that same paragraph: "We wouldn't be attracted to the notion of prose poetry if it didn't feel exciting to abandon the decorum of lines." First of all, his use of the word *decorum* near the end of that sentence lights up, in retrospect, the words *exciting* and *abandon* that come earlier, making those two ideas look suddenly young and dangerous. With that first paragraph he has defined the parameters of his volume. In my second reading, I was better able to see the character, or at least the persona, of the man who wrote the book. His precision and efficiency—he lacks all prissiness and/or snobbishness—is ideal for the almost endless mutability of the reasoned line. I liked him.

Logenbach divides his book into three sections: 1) "how the power of lineation arises from the relationship between the lines and the syntax of a particular poem"; 2) how "the power especially of free-verse lineation depends on the interaction of different kinds of line endings within the same poem"; and 3) how the "relationship of lineated poems to prose" might be considered. This ambitious triumvirate sets the reader up for the decorum and thoroughness that is a hallmark of the book itself and Longenbach's many, and utterly crucial for the writer of poetry, observations on line. The basic point he makes again and again in context after context is that "line has no identity except in relation to the other elements in the poem." He is not being prescriptive, but descriptive; he is articulating what he sees and how it appears to function. And what he sees in "all accomplished poetry," is tension "between pattern and variation."

Longenbach is a great teacher, sagacious in his statements and restatements. An example from section one:

> If rhyme is jettisoned from a poem, what tactic must flex its muscles in order to keep the poetic contraption in the air? Meter. And if meter is foresworn? Line. And if line is abandoned? Syntax. And if syntax is abandoned? Diction. Sometimes it will be necessary for a poet to remember every tool in the kit; at other times it will be equally crucial to forget them, though nothing can be forgotten if it has not first been remembered.

I'm a sucker for a fabulous teacher, so how could I *not* be charmed by a man who has put into context now, and expanded precisely on, the "power of lineation" statement set up in his preface?

Here's a great excerpt from section one, "Line and Syntax," regarding line breaks in free verse:

> Deciding where the line should end in a free-verse poem might initially seem more mysterious than in a metered or syllabic poem, but in fact it is not: whether or not the line ending is determined by an arbitrary constraint, the line ending won't have a powerful function unless we hear it playing off the syntax in relationship to other line endings.

And this from section two, "Ending the Line":

> The purpose—the thrill—of a free verse prosody lies in the ability to shape the movement of a poem through the strategic use of different kinds of line endings. The line's control of intonation creates the expectation for meaningfulness, allowing a poem's language to wander from its more workaday organizational tasks.

And: "The drama of lineation lies in the simultaneous making and breaking of our expectations for pattern."

Isn't that fabulous? Isn't that true of what keeps us going in poetry—and elsewhere? The finessed and utterly necessary surprise?

In section three, "Poem and Prose," he says:

> We are used to thinking of prose poetry as writing that sacrifices lineation in order to partake more readily of certain aspects of prose: our attention shifts from line to sentence, and syntax must hold our attention without the additional direction of line (or meter or rhyme).

And then coming full circle:

> The effect of our more typical notion of a prose poem depends on the deletion of lineation from the formal decorum of poetry, and the absence of the line would not be interesting if we did not feel the possibility of its presence.

You should read *The Art of the Poetic Line*; it's a remarkable book. The speaker has convinced me that he is a gentleman and a scholar in the very best sense. Poetry—and the line—is the deep and only subject of his book—and this within a series of books that has often, albeit delightfully so, given the author's personality its head. His is a well-packed, weighty, and generous addition to the literature dedicated to the craft of poetry.

A different nature of book altogether, The Rose Metal Press's *Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice,* announces itself as a book of modest ambition: "[Our] book is here to reveal a small window on the vast

and potentially limitless universe of prose poetry," and the editors mourn the fact that the term *the prose poem* "has come to define a small, justified block of writing wherein 'weird shit happens.'" As do I. The "weird shit" imperative, though, must be emanating from writers who haven't read broadly enough to be aware of the gorgeous lyric and meditational, not to mention narrative, non-weird-shit prose poems out there, so I'm already convinced Rose Metal Press's objective is a commendable one. They go on:

> But the question remains, what exactly is a prose poem? There is no one correct answer. There are no two correct answers. In fact, there might not even be an accurate enough question with which to wrangle. The best we can do is call it something instead of calling it something else.

I have to disagree, though, that the question might not be sufficiently accurate: though there may be no "correct" answers, the question is plenty accurate. The fact that it cannot be answered definitively *is* its answer.

The book's contributors were asked "to speak about the impact of the prose poem on their personal lives and aesthetics," the editors having decided early on that they didn't want some kind of "be-all-end-all pronouncement on the genre's shape and prominence, but rather to add more voices to an ongoing conversation about what the prose poem can be and do and say." The book includes thirty-four personal essays, then, on the prose poem, "all written by current practitioners and teachers of the form" and an example of a prose poem from each.

The highlight for me, however, the most fascinating and telling part of the book, is in the Introduction:

> The story of the voting for the 1978 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry has been told many times, but it bears repeating here to illustrate said suspicion.[1] Two members of the three-member committee voted to award that year's prize to Mark Strand for his book of short prose musing on death, entitled *The Monument*. The third committee member, Louis Simpson, opposed the selection and ultimately kept Strand from receiving the prize. Simpson objected to Strand's collection on the grounds that it was composed of prose pieces, not lineated ones. Simpson argued that the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry was to honor excellence in verse writing, and after taking his argument to the higher-ups, the committee's selection of Strand was overturned.

I had never heard this story or if I had I'd forgotten it. But it took place only thirty-two

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1 Charles Simic once wrote, "The prose poem has the unusual distinction of being regarded with suspicion not only by the usual haters of poetry, but also by many poets themselves."

years ago! Granted, that's a lifetime for some, but it explains a lot as well as anchors this sub-genre, though I'd prefer to call it a *hybrid form,* in America's literary history with a heck of a hoot. It's both awful—poor Mark Strand! poor majority of the committee!—and, still, awfully funny. The dividing line for Simpson between poetry and prose was a critical demarcation—one worth fighting for—and despite the fact that the majority, both his peers, were ready for the merger, he won! And then, twelve years later, in 1990, Charles Simic's book of "mostly prose poems" won the Pulitzer Prize.

Things have changed. And they have not changed. As the editors at Rose Metal point out, the conversation continues. And to muddy the waters even further, the first piece in the book is entitled, "Prose Poem Essay on the Prose Poem"—a short piece by the poet Bob Hicok, known best for his wildly compressed, and mostly very funny, lineated narratives. "Certain questions," he says about two-thirds of the way through "are answered best with a shrug: why write until the carriage returns? Cause it's a pumpkin and I want pie," which at first sounded to me like the "weird shit" the editors mentioned earlier. But, because I know Hicok's work and his searingly dry wit, I lingered, and of course he's punning on the carriage that comes for Cinderella, zapped by her fairy godmother from a pumpkin, which will, once again, *become* pumpkin, and the carriage on a typewriter. But what's he saying, really? Simply, you do what you need to do to get the results you want. That's pretty nifty, actually. A nice compression, a bit of color, no imperative. The piece is sharp and goofy, and in its way definitive. "Once upon a time there was a little bit of plot and a lotta bit of letting go of plot," it begins. It's a piece full of silliness and significance: it *is* an *ars poetica* for the hybrid form. "For instance:" Hicok says,

> there was this guy I knew in this room of needing someone to look out the window and feel how the field of a prose poem grows, how like an acre it spreads across the page with the sense that we need more land to let language have its say. I like that. It's an impulse I recognize, but can't consistently harness.

And there are other well-spoken passages in the collection—many of which use simile well to make their point, and many, too, which touch on the same territory as Longenbach, but with a great deal more air. In prose poetry, Maurice Kilwein Guevara says,

> the line break is not available as an organizational unit so the writer depends instead on the sentence and the paragraph. It seems to me, for this reason, that some of the most interesting prose poems are constructed as complex electrical circuits with breakers and relays that create multiple patterns of energy and surprise in the gaps *between* the sentences and the paragraphs. In this sense, a

> well-made prose poem, when it carefully uses words and when it strategically does not, dramatizes the velocity of a human imagination at work and at play and in the buzzing conversation with itself.

Less literal precision, certainly, looser, but look: a fantastic trope! The prose poem "constructed as complex electrical circuits with breakers and relays that create multiple patterns of energy and surprise"! I love it, and I believe it. I can feel that; I don't have to think about it. And that sort of connective, metaphorical recognition is something that Longenbach, both his feet firmly on the ground of observation, does not provide. But after that initial glow, I've got questions. How is Kilwein Guevara's description of a prose poem any different from a lineated poem that exhibits velocity and imagination? A Bob Hicok poem, for instance. Hicok's work is bursting with velocity and imagination. Or what about one of James Richardson's marvelous, unlineated "Ten Second Essays"? You'll find a velocity and imagination there as well. So I'm confused. I seem to know something more than I did about the prose poem, or know it differently, but, oddly, I'm not exactly certain what that knowledge might be.

Can you write in an undefined form? How much does comfort have to do with form? Can you bear up under that much liberty?

I can see what I'm doing—and in a way it's not fair, and in another way it makes my point very well. The *Field Guide to Prose Poetry* is a book that had no greater ambition than to capture some insights and articulations by practitioners about what is admittedly a permeable, uncodified form. It is a sampling of tastes and experiences, and some of them quite interesting. Yet these writers do know what a prose poem is, even though many of their articulations are a bit swampy.

One piece that stood out in particular, though, was "Out of My Prose Poem Past" by David Lazar. In it he discusses his tastes in the context of his editorship at *Hotel Amerika*. "I tend to look for work," he says,

> that stretches my sense of what a prose poem can do, rhetorically, and I'm biased toward a sense of musicality except when the rhetoric is sharp and purposive. I like wit and distress to the point of extremis.

He *knows* what he's looking for, and that's a bit of solid ground to stand on, which is a relief, in a book that is basically about a not-knowing.

The book's title misled me, set up an expectation and, mostly, left that expectation unfulfilled; there's more musing than guiding happening here. So I go back to trope, which seems more real than this proposed *field.* This time to Tung-Hui Hu's "It's Not in Cleveland, But I'm Getting Closer":

> [A] good prose poem makes its own envelope. It wraps and secrets words inside a block of text, rather than unfolding meaning outwards onto the page (the Latin *implicare* rather than *explicare*).

That's good. It takes the justified margins and incorporates them into the image. Nice. I see it; I understand. And yet I have those crossover questions again: doesn't a good lineated poem also make its own envelope—if not in a rectangular visual resemblance, then in some other fashion? Figuratively? A poem is a *vessel* after all. And doesn't a good lineated poem also, and literally, secret words? Doesn't it unfold meaning outwards? I agree these are excellent criteria for a poem, but they apply to both prose and lineated forms. They are in no way singular to the prose poem.

But for this little segment from Mary Ann Samyn's "'Close to You': The Prose Poem: Some Observations," I do not have such questions.

> Perhaps this is the difference: in my lined poems, I expect to have to wait, exposed, out in the open; in my prose poems, I push a button and the elevator opens and then I go up or down, depending.

Or *did* not. Because now I have gone back to reread an earlier snippet from the same essay:

> It is not my process that differs; it's the push and pull of language. Magnets are a useful metaphor. In many of my lined poems, there is a strong sense of each line existing independently and, indeed, repelling, to some extent, the other lines. In my prose poems, the attraction is much stronger. The cohesive force holds the prose poem together and accounts for its blockiness. Yet, there is something happening sentence to sentence.

I believed the first quote was speaking about her process, different for lined poems than from prose poems, but this earlier segment posits an a priori *no*. And again, metaphor is working for me better than the prose at its face value. She is saying there's a different force to each, to lineated language and to prose. I recognize this, I do. Though I would not have come to the word *force* by myself, I understand this. I'm glad she said that. It's a true thing—and stable. I can stand there.

I wrestled with this book more than I might have, I think, because I read it immediately after Logenbach's solid-ground descriptions and evidences, his sturdy

informations. Context and positioning being such makers of experience, both books were redeemed—though in fairness they should not have needed redemption—by adjusting my wrong-sighted gaze, by trying to experience both books in the spirit in which they were offered, not the personal context in which I first tried to receive them. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide* is a book that, without really asking them, raises interesting questions: Can you write in an undefined form? How much does comfort have to do with form? Can you bear up under that much liberty? Can you write well enough, intuitively enough, to travel that particular *field* with guides who can only suggest where you might be and might be going, but cannot get you there? The *Field Guide* is more a book of faith than a source of information. A book of recognitions rather than of comprehensions. It's a different kind of resource.

And since I've been stewing about all these connections connecting (webs, jokes—practical and otherwise, the place of anecdotes in reviews, of secondary sources, of poetry both lineated and un-, and the recognition of the brittleness and utter importance of the role of expectation in poetry, prose, and life), I've come to the conclusion that my triad of brain-states and their interrelated dynamics are more than just present. I think they're basic.

The world has become a wider place since the duck, and even webbier. And so, because I can, and out of curiosity and a bit of sentimentality, I google *mallard decoy*. And as with just about everything else, the variety of decoys available surprises me. It's kind of terrifying and kind of funny. You can purchase various species in "cast poly resin," molded plastic, inflatable plastic, parachute material, and doubtless others I won't bother to find and catalog; you can buy them with weighted keels (what's a keel?), flocked heads, mechanical wings or feet or bills, remote controls (some that don't even need batteries). You can purchase a "feeder duck butt motion decoy," which is the back half of a faux mallard that wiggles in the water as though its head were submerged instead of missing, and is indistinguishable, evidently, from a live mallard butt action that takes place while its front half is feeding under water. You can buy a "landing motion duck decoy," or one with windmill-like wings that paddle like his feet, if he had feet, might. You can buy "drake mallard breast feathers intack" (sic), the "Expedite Quiver Duck Butt Mallard Drake Decoy," the "Higdon Floating Flasher Mallard Drake 6 Volt HDI-51057," or even a "Very Early Flap-o-matic Drake Mallard Duck Decoy OP." I'm rather partial to the idea of the Flap-o-matic. You can invest in beautifully carved and painted duck objets d'art not ever meant to touch water; you can buy practical carved or molded wooden ducks with either painted or glass eyes. But my duck, the duck of my acquaintance, is a collectible now, listed

under "Sports Memorabilia." It's the "Tuffy-Dux," thirteen-and-a-half-inch rubber mallard drake duck decoy. The one listed tonight at goantiques.com "could use a little cleaning," "has a few cracks here and there," but would be "a very nice display piece." It's in "Decent Used Condition" and hails from the mid-1900s, which is a comforting connection because so do I. There's a small, poor picture of the thing: the grayish body, the darker breast, the green head looking forward from which extends a yellowish life-sized bill. It is the duck. It could be the very same duck.

But Ma, alas, is no longer the very same Ma. Now, at nearly a hundred and still full of piss and malice, when I telephone to tell her about this review I'm writing about these books on poetry and how our duck experience connected everything—because I believe she'll think it's funny and laugh about this thing we shared so long ago—she calls me an asshole again and tells me I'm making it up. If she doesn't remember it, it never happened. It's that simple. And I suppose simple is good at her stage of life. Yet, once again, the outcome is not what I anticipated. I am surprised and saddened that, while the rest of the world, and me with it, is opening up by cyber-proxy and experience, Ma's world is shutting down, getting smaller all the time. And I see now just how much and how often I have been adjusting my gaze so that I might understand more of the world. I have been engaged, and that engagement, in a life that includes books about poems and in poems themselves, is also a good thing. And because I know that when the impulse for a poem—prose or otherwise—comes over me, I will not know how it will end until I come to its end. And that it would be less exciting if I *did* know. I am still capable of being surprised despite knowing surprise is on its way. It's the sequence—recognition, expectation, and response to variation—that keeps me from sleeping my life away and that makes poetry such a magical—nearly inexhaustible—opportunity for variation and response, be there line or be there no line at all.

Mathias Énard
Zone

By Ruth Curry

Marginal notes made in my first reading of *Zone*:

> *Where is a Dalmatian from? Damascus?*
> *Dalmatia = ancient region in what is now SW Croatia, formerly Roman Illyrium*
> *Nasser = ??*
> *General Nasser, Egyptian leader 1954–70, nationalized Suez and brought war with France, Britain, Israel*
> *When is this happening?* [note to page 35]
> *Greek gods—Balkans—Croats*
> *Feyadeen = Arab guerillas operating in Palestine vs. Israelis*
> *Lepanto—look up*
> *French Dad, Croatian Mom* [this not until page 166]
> *As narrative continues, he becomes more and more implicated/implicates himself*
> *What happened in Spain in 1967?*
> *Trieste 1993—What happened?*

Imagine all of European history as one endless sentence: dictators, kings, warlords, internment camps, ghettos, massacres, genocides, immigration, emigration, Christians, Jews, Muslims, presidents, gas chambers, pogroms, refugees, atheists, Jasenovec, Auschwitz, Nuremburg, Hannibal, Bonaparte, Stalin, Hitler, the Dardanelles, the Bosporus, Gibraltar, Srebrenica, *Kristallnacht,* Kosovo. Imagine this sentence spooling out over the course of a 1,500-kilometer train ride, shooting for-

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Translated from French by Charlotte Mandell. Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2010.

ward, looping back, crossing and recrossing the same bridge, stopping to examine a keepsake one moment, jettisoning all possessions in a flurry of motion the next. Take your imaginings, complicate them by a factor of a hundred, brush up on your Greek mythology, and add a meta-story of a Palestinian warrior fighting in Beirut, and you've begun to approximate the dizzying, mesmerizing, confounding, and upsetting experience of *Zone*, by French novelist Mathias Énard.

Énard is a master of the reveal: the narrative technique of doling out important information bit by surprising bit, of making the reader work for it, and then of complicating what "it" actually is. Our journey on this quest is led by Francis Mirković, a French-Croatian member of the French Intelligence Service. It is December 8, a "special day," Francis writes: the day of the Immaculate Conception and the day Francis ends fifteen years of service to the French government by transporting a suitcase of "secrets"—a dossier of information on torturers, the tortured, war criminals, war victims—to Rome and selling it to the Vatican. Not that anything is that simple in *Zone*, or the "Zone," which is Francis's portmanteau term for the time and the places he travelled as he collected the secrets he now has enclosed in a cheap plastic carry-on handcuffed to the luggage rack of a train.

I am a poor student of history, and *Zone* made me feel my limitations keenly. It is the sort of novel that demands to be read with a map in front of you and Wikipedia open on your laptop and followed up by a trip to the library for secondary materials—my favorite kind of book, in other words. No coincidence, then, that the books I thought of while reading *Zone* were W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, replete with diagrams, photos, and drawings; and *The Exchange Rate between Love and Money*, by Thomas Leveritt, which includes a helpful index of all the (many, very many) acronyms incorporated in the text. There's more, though, than these formal demands—Leveritt's sharp, ambitious novel, set in 2003 Sarajevo, takes on the international (read: Western European) investigation of Serbian atrocities in Bosnia through the eyes of hardened yet somehow also naive Westerners. In the same way, *Zone* is a torrent of acronyms, unfamiliar places, vowel-less surnames, and this onslaught is mediated by a weary, homeless scholar-of-sorts. All three books present themselves as hypermodern; they all use unfamiliarity, confusion, and immersion to engage the reader in the text. And while *Zone* perhaps resembles *Austerlitz* most in its structure—one long sentence, one long paragraph; the meditations of men on trains, truly, just a difference of degrees—it is in its elegant evocation of the ongoing train wreck (and I do not use that term carelessly) of history that both books push themselves forward and demand to be noticed.

Francis's recollections of Greek mythology and the gradual unfurling of the lineage of his family serve as a metaphor for the perpetual unrest in the Mediterranean and the way in which the shifting borders and loyalties of the area create internecine conflict. Francis's French father fought in Algeria in the sixties; his Croatian mother was born to Ustashi parents and was one of the few to safely flee Croatia at the fall of the Nazi-supported nationalist regime. Conceivably Mirković's grandparents were on opposite sides of the line in World War II and would have killed each other given the chance—instead, they became in-laws.

No one can claim innocence. Mirković's father likely tortured Algerians; even the Nazis were horrified by the brutality of the Ustashi. As for Mirković, he does not attempt to downplay or explain the atrocities he too committed while fighting for Croatian independence in the Balkans, he writes:

> for a long time I thought about what I would have said if they [the international war crimes tribunal] had questioned me, how would I have explained the inexplicable, probably I too would have had to go back to the dawn of time, to the frightened prehistoric man painting in his cave to reassure himself, to Paris making off with Helen, to the death of Hector, the sack of Troy, to Aeneas reaching the shores of Latium, to the Romans carrying off the Sabine women, to the military situation of the Croats of central Bosnia in early 1993, to the weapons factory in Vitez, to the trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo that are the father and mother of the one in the Hague

War demands the dissolution of the individual, and *Zone* transforms that requirement into a bauble—"a little Czech crystal star" (made by a prisoner in Thereseinstadt, of course)—which it then turns this way and that, seeing how it catches and abnegates light:

> do we always know what the gods are reserving for us what we are reserving for ourselves, the plan we form, [. . .] there are so many coincidences, paths that cross in the great fractal seacoast where I've been floundering for ages without knowing it, ever since my ancestors my forefathers my parents me my dead and my guilt, Alfonso XIII driven out of his country by history by collectivity, the individual against the crowd, the monarch's slippers for his crown, his body faced with the function of his body: to be both an individual in a train crossing Italy and the bearer of a sad piece of the past in an entirely ordinary plastic suitcase wherein is written the fate of hundreds of men who are dead or on the point of disappearing, to work as pen-pusher man of the shadows informer after having been a child then a student then a soldier for a cause that seemed just to me and that probably was, to be a strong on the bobbin that the goddess spins as she proceeds.

But people, collectively, forget (and this is something *Zone* also mourns), it is the

individual who bears the burden of memory, and Mirković shoulders it, knowing that it is his to bear even as it destroys him:

> you don't forget much in the end, the wrinkled hands of Harmen Gerbens the Cairo Batavian, his trembling mustache, the faces of Islamists tortured in the Qanatar Prison, the photographs of the severed heads of the Tibhirine monks, the reflections on the cupolas in Jerusalem, Marianne naked facing the sea, the squeals of Andrija's pig, the bodies piled up in the gas trucks of Chelmno [. . .] my mother at the piano in Madrid, her Bach fugue in front of an audience of Croatian and Spanish patriots, so many images linked an uninterrupted thread that snakes like a railroad bypassing a city, the possible connections between trains in a station

There is no doubt, either, that Mirković is destroyed, traveling under a false name, many deaths and living deaths in his wake, considering suicide, and rendered sleepless, dreamless, and restless by the weight of the information in his suitcase, which he is exchanging literally for thirty pieces of silver.

"The massacres of others are always less awkward," Mirković notes, wryly, of the Armenian genocide. *Zone* triumphs in giving the massacres of others something approaching—not equaling, but perhaps shuffling toward, bowing, self-effacingly gesturing in the direction of—recognition. For an American reader, though—or *this* American reader, I should say—it indeed renders these atrocities awkward, awkward in their unfamiliarity, in the ignorance they reveal. This book, I hope, will trigger many trips to the library, to the 949.7s, where the books on the Yugoslav Wars of Independence are kept.

The Shortlist

Scarlett Thomas
Our Tragic Universe

New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010

Some writers figure out what works for them and stick with it, as if each book is an annual pilgrimage: a journey to the same place, along the same route, and with the same payoff. And while Scarlett Thomas's latest novel, *Our Tragic Universe*, has a lot in common with her former books—a dizzyingly intelligent female narrator, an isolated half-wilderness/half-academia setting, a fascination with cryptography, literary studies, and homeopathy—reading it feels like shrugging into a formerly favorite castoff sweater to find that it fits perfectly and (bonus!) contains a $20 bill in the pocket. Meg Carpenter, a struggling freelance writer, is trapped on the coast of Devonshire with a partner who no longer loves her. When *The Science of Living Forever* crosses her desk, Meg seizes the chance to review it. The book leads her on a puzzling journey that touches on narrative theory, mysterious beasts, ships in bottles, quantum mechanics, and the vagaries of sexual attraction. The upshot of which forces her and us to ask: Does anyone really want to live forever? —*Ruth Curry*

Amélie Nothomb
Hygiene and the Assassin

Translated from French by Alison Anderson; New York: Europa Editions, 2010

In this challenging and delightful character-study-cum-novel, several unlucky journalists interview the elusive and terminally ill novelist Prétextat Tach—their ques-

tions weaving together to tell Tach's story by revealing his loathing of metaphor, his (literally) stomach-turning eating habits, his self-flattering opinions about writers and readers, and his abhorrence of women. But it isn't until the last journalist, Nina, reveals the story she's spent years researching and hypothesizing that Tach is caught off guard and forced to defend himself. In this fascinating exchange, Tach and Nina's sparring dialogue becomes a true battle in the last anxious pages. *—Drew Riley*

Michelle Latiolais
Widow

New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2011

In these seventeen often hilarious stories of loss, Michelle Latiolais depicts the gutted inner landscape of those left to empty a closet holding "shirts still fresh from the laundry in their clear plastic sheathes." Whether a character is being chastised by her doctor, or simply visiting a museum, they remain locked in remembering that which is gone. And despite trying to move forward by going to a strip club with girlfriends or a café with an instructor on the make, they can't get beyond the ache. *—Madeleine Beckman*

Tristan Garcia
Hate: A Romance

Translated from French by Marion Duvert and Lorin Stein;
New York: Faber and Faber, 2010

There is a kind of beautiful train wreck occurring on the pages of *Hate: A Romance*. The novel covers so many compelling topics: the discovery and rise of AIDS, the dissolution of the political left in France, anti-gay rhetoric, Foucault and Spinoza and cross-dressing—but what really creates a memorable, moving narrative is the way the four friends (two couples of sometimes lovers) come to terms with these things in their lives, the way they want so badly to politicize the personal and depoliticize the political, the way they are willing to destroy each other, and themselves, to figure it all out. *—Jena Salon*

Robert Steiner
Negative Space

By John King

Robert Steiner's slender new novel, *Negative Space*, is a taxonomy of erotic despair. A happily married man listens to the confession of his wife of twenty years: She's been having an affair for months, and her lover has so awakened her sexually, and emotionally, that her new allegiance, she says, must be to her lover. This chilling revelation jars against the explicitly erotic relationship experienced by this husband and wife for two decades. Her betrayal is not the puncturing of bourgeois complacency, but an inexplicable contortion of fate that somehow demands explication.

This need to find causation, the will to meaning, is what drives this novelette, each emotion unraveling into a new complexity, every epiphany fracturing into a futility of sensual impressions that will not quite cohere in the negative space of his loss:

> *What do you feel for me?* I asked without thinking, asking the question that should not be asked of someone in love with someone else elsewhere. My wife sighed, vexed, so I waved the idea away and started a cigarette in order to hear the match snap and then to see the fire strike against the night sky. My wife pouted her lips because she decided to think, in spite of her desire not to, for an answer to my question, which I regretted having asked. I said I regretted it, but even my wife was curious to articulate her feelings about me because she had spent an inordinate time articulating her feelings about the lover.

In such moments, the reader can see the uncanny, inhuman convolutions that occur during a breakup, that defy the economical resonances of traditional fiction.

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010.

There isn't an abundance of narrative scaffolding here: the narrator doesn't offer his or his wife's names, nor does he specify what he does for a living, what French village he happens to live in, or why he, a putative expatriate, is living there. These facts give way instead to existential immediacy, a hypersensitivity to the very molecules of a violated universe. The chaises on the terrace where he is listening to his wife; the lighting of so many Gitanes cigarettes into the emptiness of night; and the provocative emblem of the maroon Burberry coat that his wife would sometimes wear outside as her sole garment, all haunt him distinctly.

The greatest perversion in the story is the wife's meticulous reckoning of both her own psychological drives and her husband's psychological agony, in the abrupt deterioration of their marriage. The narrator recognizes that his wife has mentally erased him, in between moments of her new unimaginable bliss. Seldom do the surprises of such disastrous experiences get treated as realistically as this. Seldom do such psychological gymnastics make this much sense on the page. In these charged pages, Robert Steiner has written a beautifully nuanced, unforgettable lament.

Galsan Tschinag
The Gray Earth

By Anne McPeak

Born in Mongolia in the forties, Galsan Tschinag has lived a range of human experience I can only imagine: he has been, by his own description, a gatherer, hunter, herder, student, professor, journalist, and politician. *The Gray Earth*, the second book of an autobiographical trilogy, deals with the early years of his life—the awesome peril of the Siberian steppes, where winter is followed by a spring that is "harder still," and the encroachment of an alien law that threatens his language, traditions, and freedom.

Dshuruunaj, the novel's main character, and his family are Tuvans, a semi-nomadic minority probably best known to the rest of the world for their throat singing. A particularly bad winter has decimated the family's herds, and though he is only a child, Dshuruunaj carries a man's responsibility in trying to save the animals. Had his older brother and sister still lived at home, the burden would have been lighter, but they are away at a newly compulsory state boarding school. Now, the time has come for Dshuruunaj to join them, and so the novel's central struggle begins: it is the school's purpose to "civilize" the Tuvan children, replacing their language with Mongolian and their way of life with chilling totalitarian ideals. The rituals of the past are forcefully overridden by the rituals of the present: the children are taught to venerate Soviet leaders and principles and forced to adopt customs that are essentially Soviet counterparts to the Tuvan "superstitions" the school aims to quash.

There is a great deal of charm in this slim novel: the camaraderie among the stu-

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Translated from German by Katharina Rout; Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2010.

dents and the home that Dshuruunaj makes with his older siblings provide a cheerful counterpoint to the hostile environment they find themselves in. And though he is a bit of a brat, and at times rather prideful, Dshuruunaj has all the sturdy charisma of a Dickens character: he bites a grown man in self-defense hard enough to make him bleed; he brazenly acquiesces to being sent to a youth prison because he hates school and has always wanted to see the world; and he holds on to his dangerous ambition to become a shaman. It's interesting to unpack Dshuruunaj's shamanizing: his family is disapprovingly dismissive, and the school strictly forbids it; yet, when a dire situation arises—a runaway classmate, Gök, is in danger of freezing to death if he isn't discovered soon—Dshuruunaj's abilities are taken rather seriously by one of his teachers. It helps, of course, that Dshuruunaj has seen Gök while he's been in hiding, so has some idea of where he may or may not be . . . and yet it's to the novel's credit that the ceremony Dshuruunaj performs is as disorienting for him as it is for the reader:

> At that moment I see Gök in front of me. Tiny, his face as blue as ice, he is crouching in a corner. Quickly I forget my self-pity and try to run to him. My path is blocked by obstacles: walls, walls, and more walls are both separating us and locking us in—him, me, all of us—and there are dark beams and light beams, each harder and higher and more impossible to overcome. Everything I see and everything I think turns into chant. I can hear my own voice, muffled and distant . . . Suddenly I find myself back at the basin.

Dshuruunaj is venturing unsupported down an unknown path—is he doing it to bask in negative attention? To revel in being unique, special? Or is he like an artist, unsure of where his abilities come from, but compelled nonetheless?

The constant presence of the land and especially of the herd animals subtly underwrites the world Dshuruunaj lives in, and these elements become a sort of competing presence in the novel. The animals provide nourishment, fuel, clothing, and medicine; almost everything tactile relates back to their bodies. This observation may sound as unremarkable as describing a contemporary American character who is dependent on her computer, car, or cell phone, but the connection between the humans and their animals goes deeper than that here, I think; the allusions drawn between them are at times startling: "She pinches the back of my hand in reply, pushing out her lips before quickly pulling them back in such a scary way that her twisted face looks like a yak's hole after a pile of crap has slipped out." In the first book of the trilogy, Dshuruunaj rejects the cruelty of the natural world and its divine forces; in *The Gray Earth*, he and his classmates are forced into a pillaging of the earth that

is verboten. "The earth's blood appears to be a few shades lighter than sheep or yak blood, but the kidneys we tear from its body look as quivery and helpless as the kidneys of any animal," Dshuruunaj observes as he helps dig what is vaguely touted as a future municipal canal. This particular act of violence, which follows a similar act of desecration in a grove of trees, unleashes a series of events that will ultimately bring Dshuruunaj back to a belief and trust in his traditions.

The final installment of the trilogy, as yet untranslated, deals with the inevitable "breakdown of the adolescent forced to lead a double life," Tschinag has written. Dshuruunaj, then, has further to go in his struggle to define himself in his highly circumscribed circumstances. I predict he will come out okay in the end: in adulthood, Galsan Tschinag became a practicing shaman who led the Tuvans, resettled under Communist rule, back to their ancestral Altai Mountains. I see the man in the child; and I like to think of Dshuruunaj growing into adulthood, weighing his choices with honesty and integrity, and choosing the hardest road, if it is the right one.

Christian Wiman
Every Riven Thing: Poems

By Ryan Romine

In the fury of adolescence—when I felt the shuddering shape of every moment—I poured my passion into a dozen spiral notebooks. I never thought of it as *journaling*—a popular term then. My teachers in junior high showed us formal examples of journaling in composition textbooks, and I occasionally stole a glance at a friend's efforts; they were mind-numbingly boring. I've gone back to my notebooks occasionally since then and found them to be mostly predictable, yet rarely boring. At the time I certainly might have traded my charged thoughts for more mundane ones, as my indolent posture amounted to the cool satisfaction that teenagers presume to possess. Where did all the angst come from? Sex, of course; but also God. Yes, God.

My parents were appeasing and moderate Midwestern evangelicals. By my fifth birthday they had already burned the idea of salvation into my being. The apostle Paul argued that the faithful should work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Looking back, that's exactly what I was struggling to do in those notebooks.

Christian Wiman, the current editor of *Poetry* magazine, seems to have absorbed this same Pauline injunction. His new book of poems, *Every Riven Thing*, fits the outsized, adolescent feeling of existential earnestness into a very formal, adult glove. The majority of these poems immerse themselves completely in a complex, loving struggle with God. In order to engage them, the reader must invoke his or her experience with the divine, as in "Hammer Is the Prayer":

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010.

There is no consolation in the thought of God,
He said, slamming another nail

In another house another havoc had half-taken.
Grace is not consciousness nor is it beyond.

Even the ostensibly non-religious poems carry a kind of theological undertone. There's implicit frustrations at the fallen state of the world: "Oh the screech and heat and hate / we have for each days commute … tunneling, tunneling, tunneling // toward money" ("All Good Conductors"); or the occasionally descriptive scene that pitches toward piety: "at the Longhorn Diner in Loraine, / where even the oldest in the old men's booth / swore as if it were scripture truth" ("Sitting Down to Breakfast Alone"). Page after page I felt the familiar, implicit pang of the God I was raised to know—a demanding yet ecstatic patriarch whose love lay just out of reach. A subtle sense of appeasement pervades these poems, as though they are forming themselves at the intersection of divine expectation and emotional turmoil ("Lord suffer me to sing / These wounds by which I am made").

This was also my (much less practiced) approach in those notebooks of my adolescence—deep-seated frustration set in the form of confessional psalms. A bi-polar exercise; one page seethes with anger, the next begs for forgiveness or describes a transformative moment in a tone of obedient acquiescence. You'd be surprised how much emotion I was able to capture in this somewhat restrictive confessional form. Obviously, Wiman's verse is much more variable, but my ears kept picking up familiar undercurrents. Take the second half of the opening poem, "Dust Devil":

for I have learned this art

of flourishing
vanishing

wherein to live
is to move

cohesion
illusion

wild untouchable toy
called by a boy

God's top
in a time when time stopped . . .

There's a coded language loaded into these couplets—oblique in terms of what exactly it refers to, yet with a special attitude of certainty, as if possessing its own proud, private answer.

These poems carry the bottled intensity of a life acutely aware of mortality. Wiman was recently diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer, Waldenström's macroglobulinemia, which may have, in part, helped occasion an emphatic Christian preoccupation. Consequently, the collection deals primarily with the tension inherent in a faith facing death. Wiman heightens the tension by compressing it into a jarring formality (see "From a Window," below). The poems occasionally echo the discontented haunting of Hopkins's so-called "terrible sonnets," and more often Eliot's over-assured refrains in *Four Quartets*. Packed into terse stanzas, there is almost a metronome banging on the thin walls of the poems—as in "From a Window":

> Incurable and unbelieving
> in any truth but the truth of grieving,
>
> I saw a tree inside a tree
> rise kaleidoscopically
>
> as if the leaves had livelier ghosts.

The ghosts are birds the narrator has tricked himself into seeing ("Of course I knew those leaves were birds"). Yet the self-deception yields an unexpected epiphany:

> and though a man's mind might endow
>
> even a tree with some excess
> of life to which a man seems witness,
>
> that life is not the life of men.
> And that is where the joy came in.

The removed, contemplative tone ("a man's mind might"), carved in such a rigid style implies a kind of Jacobian wrestling, where reality is blurred into a metaphorical and metaphysical struggle. And yet the finality of that last, answering line carries a Sunday school certainty. Reading it and other lines like it resurrected in me that old habit of scribbling out a theological answer to an emotional problem.

Largely void of concrete sensuality, much of Wiman's verse relies on the reader's entrance into a deeply interior, and therefore highly subjective, logic. This is the elusive language of faith, tending toward a beautiful obscurity, like the abstractions

of the New Testament ("Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"). Wiman seemingly trusts the reader to intuit the contours of this obscurity, in part, as his faith.

God—the Judeo-Christian moniker for transcendent reality—is everywhere in these poems, and yet nowhere. To be more (or less) precise, Wiman's God haunts these poems both explicitly and implicitly; His presence (there is a removed, patriarchal stoicism to Wiman's calls and hints at the Almighty) is a menace as well as a reached-for comfort. The title poem bears this out beautifully:

> God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
> sing his being simply by being
> the thing it is:
> stone and tree and sky,
> man who sees and sings and wonders why
>
> God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made . . .

The form is constricted intensity; the words point toward a frustrated anger at God that paradoxically comes from God; the repetitive, incantatory cadence feels like a tug of war between obedience and madness. And the penultimate lines sing what would appear to be Wiman's obsessive dialectic: "A part of what man knows, / apart from what man knows." The linguistic playfulness that pivots on the subtle prepositional change is clever, yet left me longing to know the details of all that it implied. What does man know? What doesn't man know? What kind of knowledge is Wiman speaking of specifically? What is lost in that knowledge or lack of knowledge? How? And—what are the specific contours, scents, visions of that loss? This last question is the most pertinent, and the one that those of us with some semblance of religious faith love to avoid.

God was always the Goal, the Answer, and the Destination I was trying to decipher in the existential struggles of my youth. Yet the bearable passages in my notebooks are those that brought back a palpable sense of my supposed failures: my lusts, my shallow frustrations, my hungry obsessions—a witness to the unvarnished detail of who I was. These descriptions articulated, with grueling specificity, the questions I felt no answer to. Any sort of solution I tried to prescribe for myself now looks appallingly banal and forgettable. Wiman touches, much more elegantly, on both sides of this continuum, tending more toward answers than questions ("If it is grief that brings him here, it is / a grief in which the land participates." "Lord is not a word. / Song is not a salve." "If there was a weakness in the earth, / a give he

went down on his knees / to find and feel the limits of, / there is no longer."). His preference for a more controlled form often feels like an answer itself, as though the structure were predestined; a foregone conclusion into which the poem must fit. If Wiman intends the reader to enter into a dynamic emotional encounter with his poems, complimenting the strict stylistic control he so often imparts—in the vein of Eliot's objective correlative—then the *tone* of his content would require a much more radical deviation from the form. Instead of a containing wall, Wiman often builds an impenetrable fortress. The style and substance of each verse, each stanza, creates a brick and mortar bond that denies the reader access to much of Wiman's interior world. Were the nature of these poems less conclusive-seeming, less reliant on abstract anchors, and more rich in their doubtfulness, the outcome might feel more like an emancipation than a walk down a predetermined path.

Like all serious poetry, these poems seek to confront human suffering on a fundamental level; to address the sense of absurdity and fear that attends our march toward mortality. Perched above the void, they are waiting for the freedom to jump—a leap of faith, perhaps. Whether that jump lands the reader in the abyss or in the hands of God is not the poet's concern. Sometimes the beauty of faith is what it fails to find.

Valerie Trueblood
Marry or Burn

By Marion Wyce

You could make a convincing argument that I'm less than qualified to offer my opinions on a book consumed with marriage. I've lived alone for nearly thirteen years, never had a husband, a fiancé, a proposal. I set my own schedule, pay my own bills, make decisions, small and large, without negotiation or compromise. Indeed, some friends assume I'm happily single, pleased to have personal space and freedom to come and go as I wish. It's a conclusion I've left largely unchecked, because I find it easier than telling the truth: I suddenly very much want to be married but can't explain why.

And therein lies my trouble: It would be nice to understand this desire rather than just accept it. I was never the girl who played make-believe bride with her dolls. When I got older, I watched friends march down the aisle and felt a vague sense of terror. At a Filipino friend's wedding, he and his bride were yoked together by a piece of rope in the shape of a figure-eight, a symbol of their eternal bond. I looked at it and thought: *noose*. Love, commitment, children, intimacy, sex, companionship, health insurance, two incomes, someone to grow old with—marriage neither guarantees all of this, nor is it the only way to get it. So why do I want to join the club if I'm not convinced of its perks?

Even the title of Valerie Trueblood's astonishing new collection of stories struck me: *Marry or Burn*. It made me think of the signs hung on the backs of wagons during the Gold Rush: California or Bust. An essential destination, a predetermined

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Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010.

outcome—or ruin. Not just ruin: *burn*. White-hot destruction. Marriage as a kind of crucible where transformation can happen, a hard but fragile shelter from the flame. Likely also a reference to Corinthians in the Bible, an admonishment to avoid fornication by marrying: "It is better to marry than to burn." Marriage can save us, but in doing so, it also restricts our unspeakable desires.

Befitting the collection's title, these twelve stories are not quiet portraits of domesticity. Marriage here is a stage for upset and tumult: murder, sudden death, cheating, unplanned pregnancy, suicide. Trueblood catapults many of her stories into action with dramatic opening sentences. The first story, "Amends," begins: "When she was twenty, Francie Madden shot and killed her husband Gary"; the final one, "Beloved, You Looked Into Space," starts with: "Our father married a woman who took an ax to a bear." These potentially gimmicky setups are searingly effective because Trueblood startles us in just the way that life startles us; we are quietly carrying on with our routines and then something crazy happens and we think: *how can this possibly be my life? Now what?* In Francie's case, how can she come to grips with killing her husband? "Amends," like most stories in the collection, moves forward and backward in time so that we see Francie spend twenty years in jail, get released, and try to figure out how to make a life for herself. Though Francie was abused by her husband, Trueblood is too subtle a writer to make this a simple story of victimization; Francie had a violent temper too, we learn, and went after Gary not in self-defense but to get even. The tragedy of their marriage is not Gary's violence or Francie's criminal act but that the wedding took place at all. Francie recalls their life together, collapsed into a moment's thought: "They were going to get married in a few years. Nobody warned them not to. A suds of blood and then something else pumped out of his neck. And then what? Nothing, after that. For him nothing. For her, this. This life. If she closed her eyes she might see what was going to let her live it."

Which is not to say that Trueblood is bleak on the subject of marriage. She's as likely to surprise her readers with moments of unforeseen joy or hope as despair. In the charming story "Suitors," thirty-four-year-old Meg decides she wants to marry and is matched with three men through her friend's dating service. Her parents are dismayed with the choices, calling them Moody Farmer, Tall Street Person, and Borderline Busboy. Yet Meg manages to enjoy dating the latter two men and even marries the second one. Her parents fret about Meg's method of dating: "Would neither one of these men have found her on his own? That was the question. What was marriage anyway, if it involved the yoking of two who would not have encountered each other naturally on the planet?" Meg's happiness is short-lived, however; her hus-

band dies suddenly of complications from Marfan's Syndrome. It's the sucker punch that makes the story's ending all the more surprising: We flash forward to see Meg happily married to the Moody Farmer, who had seemed like a lonely loser. It takes a writer of great daring even to attempt a happy ending these days, and one of great talent to make it seem as inevitable as it does here. The Moody Farmer had seemed a minor character, a footnote in Meg's life, until the story's final paragraphs. Often in these stories, the details or anecdotes feel somewhat incidental, with the structure or significance not apparent until the story's end. In this way Trueblood's readers must piece together meaning much in the way her characters do, trying to make sense of their lives.

If marriage is the source of so much drama and angst, what, exactly, is the point? There's no grand reveal here, no flash of insight to tell us why—despite divorce, infidelity, death—the trip down the aisle is still one worth making. As the mother in the story "Phantom Father" says, "I learned my lesson very early, though I can't say what it was exactly. You'll find that. You can't say what you've learned, exactly, and whoever does—well, don't trust it absolutely." Yet her characters do learn *something*, even if it can't quite be articulated, by hitching their lives together, stretching, straining, bumping up against one another, whether for a lifetime or a year. When her sister has died and her husband has lost his memory, another of Trueblood's mother characters remarks: "Nobody will remember the same things I do, now." Maybe that's what we're after: me, the characters in Trueblood's remarkable collection, the millions of people who exchange vows each year. Someone who will remember the same things we do—for better or for worse.

Tina May Hall
The Physics of Imaginary Objects

By Cassie Hay

A few years ago I finally got around to visiting the La Brea Tar Pits, which are exactly what you'd expect: large pits full of poisonous, bubbling, black, oozy tar. Located smack-dab in the middle of urban Los Angeles, they continue their slow boil as they've done for thousands of years and they stink like rotten eggs. The monument includes several bronze statues of woolly mammoths, which are arranged in this scene: a mother and baby mammoth stand on the shore of a bubbly pit, crying out in anguish. Half submerged in the pit is the father mammoth, drowning and reaching up for his baby.

When I was there, I watched a man lead his little boy toward the edge of one of these pits. The father was sturdy and tanned; he wore a crisp light-green polo shirt and khaki cargo shorts. The boy, probably aged five, was towheaded and cherubic in a Central Casting sort of way. His pudgy arms poked out of a light-blue polo shirt. The father patiently held the boy's hand as they shuffled forward. The boy cocked his head and studied the dirty, glossy bubbles. They grew and grew slowly and then slower until finally they burst in a foul sulfurous belch. The boy giggled and clapped his hands in delight and the father cheered.

Then the tableau on the other edge of the pit caught the boy's eye.

"Daddy, look at the woolly mammoth!" he exclaimed. "Daddy," he said, "The baby looks sad."

The father was now supposed to tell his son that the mammoths were just

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Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

statues and that this all happened long, long ago. I found myself waiting for the reassurance too.

Instead the father said, "Yes, David. The daddy mammoth is going to die because he was stupid and didn't realize that the tar was hot and sticky. But it's okay, because his dead flesh is going to rot and that's what makes the bubbles that keep coming to the surface. See, like that one right there?"

The father pointed excitedly to a bubble on the other edge of the pit and as he did, the bubble popped.

The boy did not smile back at his father. I didn't either.

I like this story because even as an adult I still expect to be told things will end happily ever after. They really don't. They just are. This is the pervasive sentiment in Tiny May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*, her "curiosity-cabinet" of stories. The world she paints is melancholy and grotesque. Squirrels die and rot behind the walls, beetles are euthanized en masse, dead people shoved unceremoniously into the grave. In other words, her stories do not present a pretty version of things. *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* is not a feel-good book. I did not close the last page and sigh to myself, "Wow, I want to go out and lasso the moon, pull it down and put it in my pocket." Rather, the 2010 winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize for short fiction is like an angry specter, hovering about unpleasantly, haunting you long after you've tried to push it away. I don't mean to suggest that it is a bad book; it's actually quite wonderful. I simply mean that the stories are downright creepy and they force a certain confrontation with the cycle of life and death that leaves the reader squirming.

One story, titled "How To Remember a Bird," involves a hole growing in the center of a town. Things fall into this hole: junk mail and half-empty nail polish bottles, aprons and nightmares and aspirations and lost virginity and repulsive reporters. This hole reveals a way to a better self and then it doesn't. Over the course of the story, it comes to mean everything to the town and then it means nothing. The hole is inscrutable, like a Godhead. Does this make sense? It does and it doesn't.

The Physics of Imaginary Objects concerns itself primarily with the physical science of human relationships. In her novella *All the Day's Sad Stories*, originally published as a chapbook by Caketrain Press in 2009 and included here in the larger work, Hall follows the story of a young couple, Jake and Mercy, and as a young married female these stories left me particularly ill at ease. Jake and Mercy are struggling with fertility, and though the subject is obliquely broached, Hall keeps the focus on the macabre mundane.

> "You need new wiper blades," Mercy says. Jake doesn't say anything. He has lost twenty dollars at the casino. She has lost six hours of her life and two rolls of nickels . . . They hit the dog going around a curve. Its body flies up onto the hood and into the windshield in front of Mercy's face. A maze of cracks blossoms. She hears it hit the roof, and then they are slowing, pulling to the side of the road. It is Jake who gets out of the car and walks back. She sees him in the side mirror, crouched on the shoulder, a pinpoint of blue from his keychain LED. A car swerves around the curve and he is caught in the glare, head ducked, almost unrecognizable.

The writing is grim, wonderful, extreme, unforgettable, unforgiving. Hall's style is almost scientific, focusing robotically on the small details—the maze of cracks, the keychain LED. In an interview Hall told *Poets & Writers* magazine that she turns to scientific treatises to "navigate the border between empiricism and awe," and the truth is that science isn't arcane—every one of us at some point has to think scientifically to get through our daily lives, whether it is to decide who to have sex with, what to eat, or what protection to use. What Hall does well is use her predilection for scientific methods to drudge up an uncomfortable truth about the nature of reproduction in America: when having children has become so scientific, planned and mechanized, where does that leave the unquantifiable, the relationship?

Never one to shy away from moral ambiguity, Hall gives the subject some prodding:

> Jessamy wanted children, and Ben didn't. He didn't like the way they drooled and clung and had to be carried everywhere. That morning, after he had woken up laughing, Ben had gone to his lab and euthanized forty-two rove beetles to send to a fifth-grade class in Florida. When he had put them all in the killing jar with the tablespoon of nail polish remover, all forty-two opened their mandibles at him and waved their abdomens threateningly. This was the type of moment that made Ben love being an entomologist.

In his book *Home Game*, Michael Lewis comments, "One day someone is going to interview a statistically representative cross section of the population and write the definitive sociological treatise on the hidden debate inside the post-reproductive American marriage about whose loins were meant to be surgically closed for business. As that treatise has not yet been written, we are left to guess at its future conclusions."

I would argue that Hall has laid the groundwork for such a treatise. Though her style is cold and mechanical, she draws our focus to the deeper, warmer human relationship beneath the details. She may be talking about beetles or carrion, but what Hall does in the *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* is what art aims to do at its best:

she elevates the ordinary or even ugly to expose the truth about people, the human struggle to love and be loved, by one's spouse, by one's offspring, all in the search of a happy ending. So I did not smile at the father I overheard at the Le Brea Tar Pits, but it doesn't mean I couldn't appreciate his honesty. In the same way, *Physics of Imaginary Objects* didn't leave me smiling but, in point of fact, it didn't leave me at all. In the end that's the most I can ask for—in this semidetached world.

Juan José Saer
The Sixty-Five Years of Washington

By Suzanne Marie Hopcroft

It recently struck me that only some novels speak to me in my own language. With them, I experience that uncanny feeling of recognizing myself in the prose, of stepping into a world that I can envision in vivid color, and I look to dive increasingly deeper into a place that is only half foreign as I advance from page to page. The rhythms of the language resonate in their naturalness, make me want to read further because the act of reading is comfortable and consonant with what I know (or think I know) about how words are meant to work. Reading a novel like this is ultimately an act of connection rather than of estrangement.

Then there are novels that distance themselves with their foreignness. Fictions that seem to delight not only in laying an unfamiliar universe in front of the reader but also in making that universe in some way disorienting, uncomfortable, even impenetrable. Language can play a large part in this sort of distancing, with barriers to comprehension erected through syntactic gymnastics or through diction that feels unnatural or out of place. So can the flow of the narrative: the order in which events and context are introduced to the reader, or how the interplay of inner consciousness and outer lived experience shapes the text. I read this sort of novel with the distinct sense that it is not a part of me—I may carry it with me for a time, but it remains a foreign body, unassimilated.

Juan José Saer's *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington* is distancing in just this way. Originally published in 1988 but newly available in translation, the novel is

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Translated from Spanish by Steve Dolph; Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2010.

remarkable on several levels. Most literally, this is a story of just a few hours. Two men, introduced as Leto and the Mathematician, find themselves on the same street in an Argentine seaside town in the early 1960s. From there, they walk and talk together—and, in talking, recall the story of an event long ago, a party that neither one of them attended. The premise is simple enough, and in this respect, the plot of the text is limited in its scope. Nonetheless, the highly tangential quality of the narration, which follows the meanderings not only of the two men's dialogue but also of their consciousness, allows the novel to cover far more ground than that.

Indeed, below the surface, this novel marries an interest in arguably universal, urgent questions of identity, perception, and understanding with a trenchant view of a period in Argentine politics that remains critical to contemporary notions of power, terror, and human rights: the decades of violence and political turmoil that followed in the wake of the party, when "military propaganda [invited] the unemployed youth to join gangs of murderers and torturers in order to save the nation from the cancer of deviance." In this political context, as well as from a more general, humanist perspective, the novel's musings on the insubstantiality and incompleteness of memory and imagination become critical:

> Siena is a rosy mirage, floating in the warm fog of the afternoon; Paris, an unexpected rainstorm; London, a problem finding hotel rooms and some manuscripts in the British Museum [. . .]. The Mathematician's memories [. . .] are unable to render the thing more accessible even when they come from what the Mathematician could call his experience.

Such moments in the narration confront the reader with the simplifying quality of human consciousness, the quality of thought that makes it possible to distill an entire city into a single moment, and which ultimately reveals itself to be intimately related to ways of processing the trauma and emotional pain that we discover in this story. The fallible nature of human subjectivity is also under fire, shown to allow uncertainty, misunderstanding, and false information to dominate fact until relationships collapse and even the most mundane human interactions become a struggle.

While these are fascinating ideas, what interested me most was how *Washington* pushed me away with form and language even as it pulled me in to communicate them—and why this may ultimately have been necessary. The instability of knowledge and understanding isn't just a burden that plagues the novel's protagonists. Rather, this concept is also integrated into the overarching character of the novel, whose narrator, far from reassuring us with his omniscience, insists from the start that the truth doesn't even matter: "Suppose it's October, October or November, let's say, in 1960 or

1961, October, maybe the fourteenth or sixteenth, or the twenty-second or twenty-third maybe—the twenty-third of October in 1961 let's say—what's the difference." The novel is full of theoretical musings on the nature of mental activity—how ideas come to mind and how they fall away again, the endless capacity of the mind to wander and explore. But this theme is explored as much through the form of the text as through its content; in fact, *Washington* relies so heavily on stream-of-consciousness narration that the insights into Leto's and the Mathematician's consciousness begin to feel burdensome. I struggled at times to understand the syntactic flow of Saer's winding sentences, fighting to reshuffle the whirlwind of nested clauses into a manageable order. Nowhere is this more clear than on page 40, where Saer writes, speaking of Leto, "For some reason he ignores, and that he, of course, is not conscious of, Leto's thoughts and memories are interrupted, and he sees the street, the trees, the newspaper building, the cars, the Mathematician, the sky, the air, and the morning as a clear and animate unity from which he is slightly separated but completely present to, in any case at a fixed and necessary point in space, or in time, or matter, a fluid or nameless, but no doubt optimal, location, where all contradictions, without his having asked or even wanted it, are, benevolently, erased." Nevertheless, I also found that the experience of reading and rereading, of turning these phrases over in my mind, was in some sense no different from the way I might process an insistent memory—the thought of an event so terrible that it might somehow remain incomprehensible even as I replayed it.

Of course, these sorts of frustrations are not unique to Saer's readers; there are clear echoes of modernist conventions in the way Saer estranges us. I also couldn't help but wonder, having perused both the new translation by Steve Dalph and the original Spanish text (which was published with the title *Glosa*), whether the foreignness of the English version is to some degree a function of the translation itself. There are cases in which the English and Spanish versions are identical in their placement of adjectives and punctuation, and given the differing linguistic conventions of the two languages, such usages understandably feel less natural in the translation than in the original. It seems that a less literal translation might have more closely approximated for English-speaking readers the experience of reading the text in Spanish.

Regardless, *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington* is worth working through—not only for the richness of its content but also because the effort itself is what gives us a three-dimensional understanding of its themes.

Contributors

Renée Ashley ("A Rogue Idea" 155) is the poetry editor of *The Literary Review*.

Anthony Berris (translator 67) was born in the United Kingdom and has lived in Israel for most of his life, working as a teacher and freelance translator.

Madeleine Beckman (books 177) is the author of *Dead Boyfriends*, a poetry collection; her work has appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Confrontation*, and elsewhere. She teaches at the City University of New York.

Wendy Burk (translator 96) is a poet and translator of Tedi López Mills's *While Light Is Built*. She has recently completed a translation of López Mills's selected poems.

Michael Copperman's ("Want" 129) fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *The Oxford American*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *GOOD*, *Brevity*, *Guernica*, and *Copper Nickel*, among others, and is forthcoming in *The Sun*.

Michela Costello (poems 84) is a poet and English teacher at National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. Her recent writing is published in *Tidal Basin Review*, *The Glasgow Review*, and *The Edinburgh Review*.

Ruth Curry (books 172) is a student in the M.F.A. program at The New School. She lives in Brooklyn.

Caleb Curtiss (poems 62) teaches high school English in Champaign, IL.

Margot Bettauer Dembo (translator 41) was awarded the 1994 Goethe-Institut/Berlin Translator's Prize and the 2003 Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator's Prize. Other than three books by Judith Hermann, her translations include *The Swimmer* by Zsuzsa Bank and *Hitler's Bunker: The Final Days of the Third Reich* by Joachim Fest.

Gary Fincke (poems 138). His latest collection is *The Fire Landscape*. His memoir, *The Canals of Mars*, was published this year. His story collection, *Sorry I Worried You*, won the Flannery O'Connor Prize.

Jesse Goolsby ("Resurrecting a Body Half" 130) is the recipient of the Richard Bausch Fiction Prize and the John Gardner Memorial Award in Fiction. His work has appeared widely, including publications in *Epoch*; *Harper Palate*; *War, Literature & the Arts*; *Our Stories*; and *Vestal Review*. He teaches at the United States Air Force Academy.

Cassie Hay (books 191) is an essayist and former editorial assistant for *The Literary Review*.

Steven Heighton (poems 122) is the author of the novel *Afterlands*, a *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice. His stories and poems have appeared in *London Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, and *Best English Stories*.

Judith Hermann ("Misha" 41). *Alice*, which this story is taken from, is Hermann's third book. Her first, *Summerhouse, Later* (*Sommerhaus, später*, 1998) received wide acclaim in Germany and internationally. Her second, *Nothing But Ghosts* (*Nichts als Gespenster*), was published in 2003. She lives in Berlin.

Joyce Hinnefeld ("Benedicta, or A Guide to the Artist's Résumé" 86) is the author of two novels, *Stranger Here Below* and *In Hovering Flight*, and a collection of short stories, *Tell Me Everything and Other Stories*. She is Cohen Chair for English and Literature at Moravian College in Bethlehem, PA.

Suzanne Marie Hopcroft (books 195) is a Ph.D. student in comparative literature at Yale University. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gargoyle Magazine*, *LITnIMAGE*, *> kill author*, *elimae*, and others.

Krzysztof Jaworski (poems 76) lives in Kielce, Poland. He is the author of nine collections of poems, most recently *Irritating Pleasures: Collected Poems 1988–2008*.

A novelist, painter, and journalist, **Yoram Kaniuk** (*Life on Sandpaper* 67) has published more than thirty books of fiction and cultural commentary, including the novel *The Last Jew*, which appeared in English translation in 2006. A feature film based on his novel *Adam Resurrected* came out in 2009 to great critical acclaim.

John King (books 178). His fiction has appeared in *Turnrow*, *Gargoyle*, *Pearl*, and *Painted Bride Quarterly Annual*. He teaches creative writing and composition at the University of Central Florida.

John Kinsella ("The Cartesian Diver" 81). His most recent volume of poetry is *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*. His critical book, *Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley*, just came out, and his next volume of poems, *Jam Tree Gully/Walden*, will appear next year. He is a Professional Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia.

Tedi López Mills (poems 96) has published eleven books of poetry and an essay collection in Mexico. Her most recent book of poetry, *Muerte en la rúa Augusta*, received the prestigious Premio Xavier Villaurrutia.

Sean McConnell ("The Evolution Rapist" 21). His fiction has previously appeared in *Fence*. He lives in Chicago with his partner, Maya Mackrandilal.

Anne McPeak (books 180) is the managing editor of *A Public Space*. She lives in Brooklyn.

Michael Z Murphy (poem 128). Union County College instructor of communication, dad, retired urban educator, certified massage therapist, life member International Listening Association, playwright, poet, tree hugger, Montclair State alumnus, no television 24 years.

Geoffrey Nutter (poems 102) has published three books, *A Summer Evening*, *Water's Leaves and Other Poems*, and *Christopher Sunset*. He lives in New York City and teaches at NYU.

Benjamin Paloff (translator 76) is the author of *The Politics* and the translator, most recently, of Andrzej Sosnowski's *Lodgings: Selected Poems*.

Drew Riley (books 177) reads and writes in Helena, MT while attending the M.F.A. program at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Ryan Romine (books 183) is assistant editor of *The Literary Review*. He has poems in the forthcoming issue of *Commonweal*. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Ann.

Peter Jay Shippy (poems 9). His most recent book is *How To Build the Ghost in Your Attic*. He teaches literature at Emerson College.

Christopher Sorrentino ("Unhappy Families" 105) is the author of four books, including, most recently, *Death Wish*, a critical monograph on the eponymous film. Recent work has appeared in *BOMB*, *Bookforum*, *Granta*, *Open City*, *Playboy*, and *Tin House*. He is a visiting writer at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Alex Stein (interview 149) is the author of *Made-Up Interviews with Imaginary Artists*, a genre-bending collection of interviews, interview fictions, and short essays considering the art of the interview as an act of translation. He is at work on a second collection.

Daniel Wolff (poems 144) has published in *The Paris Review* and *Partisan Review*, among others. His latest nonfiction book is *How Lincoln Learned To Read*. The poems appearing here are from a collection in progress, *The Names of Birds*.

Marion Wyce (books 188) has received an AWP Intro Journals Award in Fiction and had her work performed in the Interact Theatre Company's stage series Writing Aloud.

William Zander (poems 36) has published poetry in many periodicals (including *Yankee*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Poetry Northwest*). His most recent collection is *Gone Haywire and Other Old Sayings* from Serving House Books.

Pushcart Prize Nominees

The Literary Review is pleased to announce our nominees for the 36th Annual Pushcart Prize.

POETRY

Weston Cutter

(Flinch; Exposure to Various Flow; Summer 2010)

Steve Davenport

(Diminishing Innuendo of Hog Sonnet; National Geographic; The Sestina Has Been Drinking; Travel and Leisure; Winter 2010)

Rebecca Wolff

(The Curious Life and Mysterious Death of Peter J. Perry, Fall 2010)

PROSE

Kelly Luce

(Rooey, fiction, Spring 2010)

Percival Everett

(Confluence, fiction, Spring 2010)

Jessie van Eerden

(A Good Day, essay, Fall 2010)

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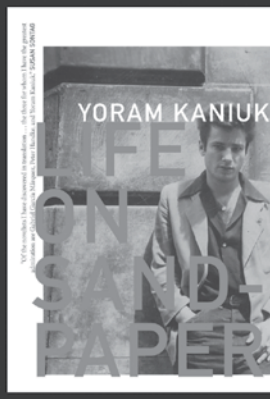

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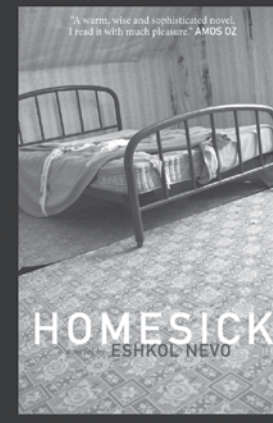

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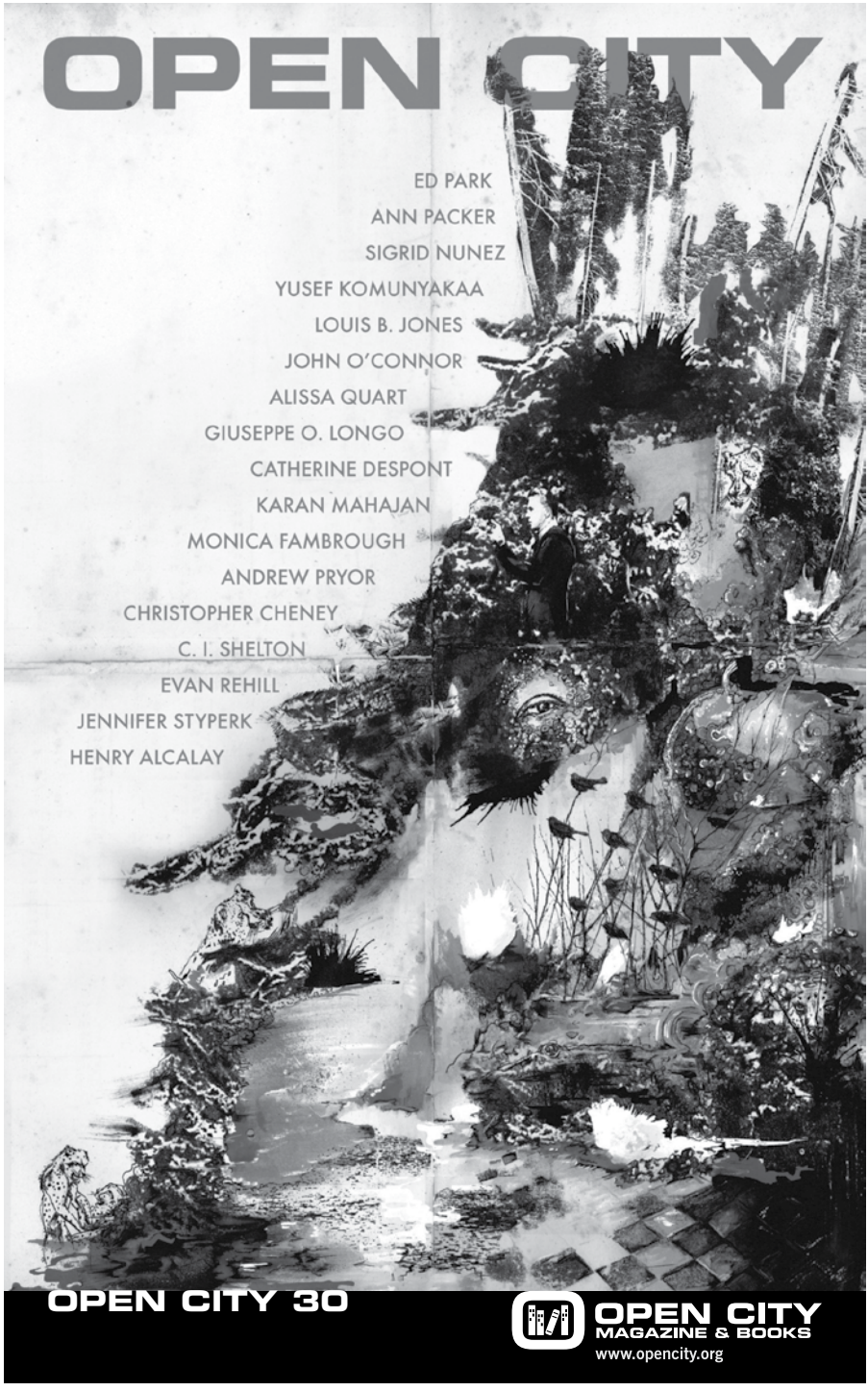
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41–61: "Misha" by Judith Hermann is from *Alice*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: S. Fischer Verlag, GmbH, 2009.

67–75: Yoram Kaniuk's *Life on Sandpaper*, excerpt here, is forthcoming from Dalkey Archive. It appears here with the permission of the publisher.

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