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FORWARD

FORWARD



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Our Man

Fiction
from
Issue
#6

by Lindsey Hunter

[1.]
[Left side]

Don't worry, I said. This will hurt, and then it won't.
Or go ahead and worry, I said, if that's the kind
of person you are.

[Right side]

What am I here for, if the crime's been solved?

First you hafta name the crime.

Easy: murder.

That's only the beginning, Tin Ears.

One of those.

One of those. Better you than me. I've got enough
blood on my hands.

I'll start with the scene.

When you find out where that is, you let me know.

Women.

Women.

[Line across both sides]

[2a.]
[Left side]

How about this: a man bleeds in velvety ribbons.

Our man is a teapot with two spouts. His heart is still intact, if that's what you're worried about. (His heart is the problem.) Our man bleeds blackly, redly, deadly. Our man was gone in a few great gushes. I'm a collector and I came to.

It's me. You can be you. I've been honest and I'm being honest now. Blood is just as thick as we've heard. Blood doesn't cool if you admit relief. That rust-colored pump will throb on and on.

Somebody tarred Daddy to the floor.

I can't deny it's gorgeous that a brain sees what its experience has trained it to see. If you've never known love, it's clear you'd mistake it for something else. Loneliness perhaps. Greed.

How about: blood congeals and forms a skin. Or: our man's dying breath lasted fifteen seconds. This: we both love(d) you more than life itself.

[Right side]

The detective set out. Squeezed the last bits of whiskey from the Ziplop he kept in his breast pocket. The road unfurled in the white wash from his headlights. He had her underwear in his fit, damp with blood, and when he held them to his mouth he smelled iron, or something that should be called iron. Perhaps it really was a man's blood.

When they found her, two severed ears were gripped in her bloodslick hands. She declined the offer to hand them over. She was naked except for the underwear. A lady cop was called in to cuff her.

The detective held his breath driving past the cemetery, pushing the panties into his mouth just short of gagging.

[2b.]

[Left side]

I was born with an extra spine in a lump on my shoulder. My parents had it removed but I can still feel it. Like a ghost limb. Like a ghost twin. She grew up and lived and she weighs me down and we share everything. My parents call her Imaginary Friend. Sometimes it's just too hard to relate to the real thing. None of this is true, of course. It's just the easiest way to explain.

Of course, none of this is true. I'll try another way. There was a girl that died mysteriously down the street when I was growing up. After her funeral I saw her white face in her bedroom window, watching me, mouthing, wait for me, wait for me, and I waited and I'm still waiting. Every once in a while I hear her name being called but there's never an answer.

No. No. No. No.

Here: her room was across the hall. At night I stood outside her door and listened for her breathing but I couldn't hear anything over the roar of the silence. I watched her chest not move. She was dead and then the morning would come and she was alive. There was no way she could die. There was no way she could be revived. We wrote notes to each other and slid them under our doors. Mine said, I wish I was alone. Hers said, I miss you.

[Right side]

Oh, and the way he'd kiss me. Like I was you. Like I was the you he always dreamed I was. If you are discourteous with a rose, its petals will bruise. That's how he kissed me, so gorgeously discourteously. I could feel my heart beating in my lips. I could feel the throb of blood.

[Line across both sides]

[3a.]

[Left side]

The detective stopped at a do-it-yourself car wash. Got out and leaned against the car, did a few toots of Afrin. The lights hummed and a hot moist wind came in and made his neck sweat. He'd punched in three hours and forty-seven minutes ago. He had four hours and thirteen minutes to go. He had to be looking for something.

Pretty soon he heard the squeaking, like a mouse caught in a trap. The lights blinded him and all he saw was a vivid darkness. He listened to her getting closer.

Then she was there, squinting up at him from the edge between light and dark. A child's head, the cherubic face, the purple empty gums, the wisps of

hair. The body of a trucker, it's puffed, sexless chest, its clumpy limbs. The wheelchair and the mangled hands forcing its wheels along. The drool bright on her chin. The smell of urine and cinnamon chewing gum. The Maguffin.

She motioned to the Afrin and he gave it to her. He was glad for the other one he had in the glove compartment.

Pretty soon he couldn't smell the urine anymore. He got used to it. She wheeled away and he figured that meant follow. He figured he had to start somewhere.

[Right side]

Once there was a man who wanted to build his wife the house of her dreams. He began working for a contractor, building other people's houses, and each day he'd steal a brick, hiding it under his shirt or in his lunch pail and bringing it home. On his final day the contractor caught him. Please, the man said. This is the last brick I need to complete my house. I'll do anything for that brick. Well, the contractor said, I'm going to throw it up as high as it'll go, and if you can catch that brick it's yours and I won't come after you for the others. The men agreed that it was a fair proposition. The contractor took a few steps back, breathed deeply, and flung the brick high. The sun flashed behind it. The man's heart pounded desperately.

[3b.]

[Left side]

The detective began to feel the effects of the whiskey And Afrin. He put a few gobs of Vicks under his Nostrils and talked to himself in the rearview. A man Is dead. We can all agree on that. Count to ten. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Oh hell. Ten. Remember that God and murder are in the details. He noticed that the area around his mouth was a bit pink from the blood underwear. He got stern. You're makin' me sick. Stop talkin' to yourself and get out there and do it. The Vicks made his eyes water.

The Maguffin squeaked along in front of him. The tears in his eyes and the headlights smeared Everything and he lost her. He circled back to the Office so he could start again, retrace his steps.

[Right side]

In my opinion she couldn't tell she existed. That's why she does it (did it) to us.

He had a tattoo of a heart over his heart because he said that's how he knew where he ended and we began.

I still have those notes. I wonder if she kept mine. Oh God, all that blood? Is he a ghost now? Is he a white face in a window? Were we married?

[Line across both sides]

[4.]

[Left side]

We love(d) you more than all the bricks in Brooklyn.

[Right side]

If this is tedious to you, Tin Ears, there's a desk job with your name on it.

Murder's tedious.

That's just a label. We got a ransom letter. Prints all over it. Pubic hair taped in a circular clump—looks like it might be the point of the exclamation point.

Cripes. What's it say. (come on come on)

Search me. I don't read shouting. Bad for the eyes. Jameson read it to me.

And.

It says if you want the body, you'll have to kill for it.

That doesn't make any sense.

It makes perfect sense, Tin Ears. Perfect sense.

What's it askin'.

It's asking you to produce the body.
No body no death.

[Line across both sides]

[5a.]

[Left side]

Dearest love, let me count the ways.
 Dismemberment, garroted, poisoned, drowned,
 Named. I read that as soon as a species is named it
 Begins its travels up the endangered list.
 Discovery means death.

He asked me to cut him. I did. The blood,
 Disappointingly, did not drip. It seeped.
 We gathered it with a tiny blue washcloth.

[Right side]

Ahem. I believe I've earned the right to step in here.
 At least as some kind of oxymoronic metaphor for
 this plus this equals that. The dimple in my tie filled
 with blood. I was wived and I made my wife
 a widow. And is this really me speaking?
 Am I being imagined?

Somebody tarred Daddy to the floor. My ears
 splitting, off they went.

[5b.]

[Left side]

The detective took the letter down to run its prints,
 Find out if the pubic hair was of the male or female
 persuasion. He held its corner with red tweezers
 and it flapped along beside him. Smith cut out the
 whole exclamation point with an exacto knife and
 his eyes got round at all that possible DNA. He said,
 hopefully there's a root or two. His breath smelled
 like onions. The detective's stomach turned. Jenny
 took the letter minus the exclamation point and
 promised to dust for prints before her shift ended.
 The detective noted her lush red hair and the mole
 Just under her nose and decided one didn't
 Cancel out the other.

On his way out to the car his nostrils started closing
 In on him. He opened the glove compartment
 So fast the Afrin bounced under the seat and he
 cursed. He didn't know why he had to look for
 something that wasn't even hiding.

[Right side]

If there's anything we've learned, it's that roses are
 red. I planted our man, told him the eyes are the
 last to go, and he believed me. Our man bloomed

and died and a year later bloomed again. That's the hope anyway. And did you know that a human head weighs more than the shovel.

Dearest, you say you understand but if you did you'd stop crying.

We had a child. Our man named him Junior. Our man thought it was all a dream until it actually became a dream, and then he knew how real it was. And did you know blood tastes sweet like summer grass.

[Line across both sides]

[6a.]

[Left side]

Knuckles rapped on the window. The detective rolled down and smoke poured in from the Chief's pipe.

She's confessed again, he said, squinting. You better beat it.

The detective nodded, began rolling up the window, And the chief stepped back.

I'm on it, the detective said through the glass. The Car started too smoothly. He had three hours and Seven minutes left on his shift. He drove due south, Fast. There was a truck stop he knew of where he could be alone and eat. There had to be.

[Right side]

This is how I imagined being dead: I don't know
I don't know I don't know I don't know
I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know
I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know
I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know
I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know
and I don't care to know.

Hard to know where you are if everyone who knows you doesn't know where you are and if the one who loves you most will never come looking for you. I'm here. I'm pointing at myself. My heart is sort of beating.

[6b.]

[Left side]

When we got married I told myself, when he's dead,
I'll know it immediately. But I still can't convince
myself he was ever alive in the first place. Absence
makes the heart grow fonder of absence. I shave my
legs with his razor. Blood shimmies.
It was always my razor.

[Right side]

So this lady is in first class, real snooty-looking
broad, and she's got this poodle in her lap that yaps
with practically every breath. Next to her is this
real salt-of-the-earth type guy, like the kind of guy
who starts from nothing and ends up richer than
anything. So the guy says to the lady, look, you gotta
shut that dog up and the lady takes offense and
says, my dog is no worse than your disgusting cigar
smoke. And they go back and forth like that and
it starts to get ugly. So the guy says, fine, lady, you
asked for it, and he takes the poodle and throws it
out the emergency-exit window. The lady is down-
right astonished, and she yanks the cigar out of the
guy's mouth and throws it out the window too. Well
this makes them both laugh and they become great
friends, and when they land, the guy says he'll help
the lady find her poodle, he's real sorry, and the lady
says no, she's sorry, and they set out together. So
they find the poodle wandering around in this field in
a daze, and guess what it's got in its mouth?

[Line across both sides]

[7a.]

[Left side]

The brick.

[Right side]

The truck stop said open in green letters. The detec-
tive wiped his neck with the underwear and put it
back in his pocket. Inside, he ordered coffee and
creamed wheat and watched the cook scratch his
armpit. The waitress had a peanut shell in her hair.
The jukebox played something country-sounding, of
course it did, and it seemed to be on repeat.

The detective's head pulsed. When the waitress
turned, he tooted some Afrin and nearly cried.

When she came back with his coffee, he plucked the peanut shell from her hair and handed it to her. Thank you, she said, and she looked touched.

The detective stuck his finger in the coffee and stirred. A woman came out of the ladies' and sat at the other end of the counter. She watched him from the corner of her eye and then she said, sir you are unpleasant.

The detective was startled. He threw a ten on the counter and walked out and the night was cool. He purposely mistook the city lights for stars.

He went to his car and grabbed the cuffs. Back inside the cook had his chin on his forearms and seemed to be lost in thought. Okay, the detective said, let's go. Get up.

The woman at the end of the counter didn't move so the detective got rough with her. He mostly yelled. The waitress wiped the counter in slow

[7b.]

[Left side]

circles. The woman's shoes were loud on the floor and louder on the gravel outside. The detective threw her in the back seat. You're gonna talk, his hissed, and you're gonna say what I want you to say. The woman's eyes glittered meanly.

The detective slammed the door and went back in for his creamed wheat. Only then did he hear the bell over the door, violent with jingling.

[Right side]

I said, this is going to hurt. I said, if you insist on being so quiet, I'll be forced to make you scream. I said, you can't love we but we can love you.

The shears—or was it a razor?

The blade. The blade looked like a blade and cut like a blade. It happened how it should.

Our man's eyes were a thin shade of blue. We mashed teeth when he kissed. If you see my sister, tell her to give me a ring.

[Line across both sides]

[8.]

[Left side]

The chief's cigar dangled. Put her in a lineup with the others, he said.

[Right side]

Listen. She thinks I'm not listening. If she says he's dead he's probably dead. When we were young we buried things.

We've got a man on the case.

[Line across both sides]

[9a.]

[Left side]

The detective thought about smudging

Description: careless body, man, blood

into his fogged windshield. The woman in the backseat whined. The highway drifted on and the detective got bored with counting lights.

Tell me, the detective said.

When I was twenty, I fell in love with a houseplant, she said. When I was fifteen, I murdered my mother's fancy soaps. She said, I've always hated shells. Something about the shape.

The detective noted the gap in her front teeth, the brass in her hair. Maybe, he said, it's the halving you hate.

The woman rolled onto her back and kicked the window.

The detective shook the Afrin bottle. The familiar swish was gone. He was out. He pushed the nipple up his nose and held it there. Tell me everything, he said.

Just one last thing, she said. Her voice ass low and she sniffed wetly. The truth is I'd like to go home now.

The detective smelled popcorn. Wine dregs. Something warm. She'd wet herself. I'm not

[Right side]

buying it, he said. His patience was waning. He had one hour and forty-three minutes left.

[9b.]

[Left side]

I said a lot of things I didn't mean.

[Right side]

The station boiled. Men wiped foreheads with damp handkerchiefs. Ties were loosened. In the kitchen the lone female officer pressed an icy gallon of milk to her thighs. The station pulsed. Breath was exchanged. The night wound.

The wife identified her sister. I'm ninety-nine percent sure that's her, she said.

Her sister stepped forward and bowed. Her hair cascaded in a horrible wave. Bits of it clumped with blood.

The chief blew smoke rings and shot the moon. That's our girl, he said.

[Line across both sides]

[10.]

[Left side]

Two ears. Not even the eardrums. Cartilage, lobe. And the room bloody with blood.

The question is is there enough of me left over for proof that I'm dead.

And should I be taking her word for it (I don't know).

[Right side]

The detective stopped at a druggist. Pulled the woman out by her ankles and righted her. She wobbled in and squinted under the fluorescents. Near the diapers he uncuffed her, noted her interesting bone structure. Some cheekbones, he told her.

The detective cleared the shelf of its Afrins. Turned to offer the woman a chocolate sip but she was gone. He watched the flight of her hair. Into the dark mouth of the parking lot.

The detective got wistful, told himself she'd find her way.

The car smelled like brine and white sugar. The car smelled like her. The detective rolled down the windows and let the wind knife in. The clock said what it said.

[Line across both sides]

[11a.]

[Left side]

Stop crying.
I will.

You can touch me.

Where is he.

He's everywhere. He's just everywhere. Hold my Hands. Feel how cold.

[Right side]

The sisters watched themselves. The room was silver with mirrors.

At the end of the day Jameson, the chief said, and his head was blurred in smoke, we're all just looking for ourselves. And where's Tin Ears.

The sisters held hands over the table. Their eyes locked on their eyes.

The listening room shrugged.

[11b.]

[Left side]

The detective parked at the station, crawled into the back, did the Afrin. Pushed his face into the piss-filled seat. It was no longer warm. He spotted a Tootsie roll in the floorboard and left it there. He watched Jameson walk to his car.

A small boy wrung his hands in front of the station. The detective thought how much the station looked like a yellow lightbox. The boy said, somebody tarred Daddy to the floor. His eyes were small green almonds.

The detective said, yeah, yeah, what floor. His head

made bright exclamations. He could've breathed lava. He took the boy by the shoulder and pushed him into the light. He thought about the cuffs.

The fat officer at the desk eyed the boy through dark slits. The detective told the boy to have a seat. Walked back to his desk and wrote Cheekbones on the report. He wrote it sloppily enough so that it could be anything.

In the bathroom he ran the panties under the tap, scrubbed his face pink. He wondered in the boy had any chalk. In the mirror he galred at himself hatefully.

[Right side]

The chief said, at the end of the day, Tin Ears, the ransom note was the thing.

No body no death.

'Sright. Punch out.

Who wrote it?

Somebody else. Punch out.

[Line across both sides]

[12.]

[Left side]

The detective wondered about death bloody with absence. How enough blood makes a dead man.

He took the back door. Drove a horrible length, parked at a grocery store. The day's sky was slowly spreading itself. The sun was a dazzling orange in a pool of mucus and it hurt his eyes. He had a few minutes to go before it opened. Jelly rolls. Lunch meat.

The detective thought of the boy waiting on the bench. How he might like to pick a mother out of a lineup.

He found a fresh Ziploc and some coins in the console. Anything brown would do.

[Right side]

So that's it?

Mapping The
Uncanny Valley:
Excerpts from
the Field Notes of
Freya S. Gibbon

*Non-
fiction
from
Issue
#11*

Preface

Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori first stumbled upon the Valley when he was observing the effects of humanoid robots on real humans in the 1970s. Initially, he found that people were delighted to meet his robots—adorable mechanical replicas that they were. But at a certain point, when the robots began to look and act too much like real humans, humans experienced a crawling discomfort. That drop, into which the most lifelike nonhumans fall, forms the slopes of the Valley. I came to the Valley by chance, but in my wanderings made the disturbing realization that the borders are elastic and have stretched to contain more than merely humanoid robots—much more. While my observations are personal in nature, they reveal the need for additional scientific research.

1.

The first time I went to the Valley I didn't know the name of it. I saw melancholy folks bumping about. They roamed over hills, into forests, through lakes. From a distance they seemed normal enough. Closer, I noticed a stiffness in their strides, as if they'd all just rolled out of bed on a morning of barometric transition. Still, I touched one of them—a plump motherly sort—on the forearm, stiff as a rake. I wanted to ask directions out. In the first rush of her sympathetic smile, I was inspired to share a secret or two. I opened my hand to show what I'd collected there: a small blue rock, an acorn without a top, half a walnut with exposed heart-shaped interior. I glanced up into her eyes. A mistake had been made. It was hard to pinpoint what it was specifically: something in the milky blankness of the eyes, the too-too symmetry of the face, the row of lashes neat as a picket fence. "Yes," she said in a voice evenly measured, "this way to the slope. This way to the slope. This way to the slope."

The second time I went to the Valley I left a trail of items: two plastic buttons, a common comb, a tampon, one from a set of dice, a bobby pin, six pennies, a nickel. When I ran out of small things, I moved on to larger: my Audubon field guide to the southern states, my debit card, my driver's license, my lucky woolen sweater with the moth holes. I arrived at a hill of stiff grass, speckled with the entire cast of *The Polar Express*. They lounged and smoked, and passed a can of kidney beans around with the original Princess Fiona from the movie *Shrek*. In her near approximation of a human mother, I'd read, she had inspired a studio audience of children to tears. A replacement was created, more cartoon, less woman, and the original Fiona was condemned permanently to the Valley. Smiling a forced smile, Fiona touched her red hair in salute. Me? I turned to trace my way out, but the Valley had folded over and my belongings had gone.

2.

From my new living room in Alabama, I could see through the eye of my girlfriend's computer. She was in the Boston apartment we used to share, poking something on the stove. She lifted me from the kitchen counter and carried me into the bedroom, and I could see but could not feel the muscles of her shoulder. She said, "Do you even know how much I love you?" She put me on the bed and crouched to look in at me. "My stomach will hurt every day until you come home, Freya." Then she started to cry. Although I could see that she was crying, I couldn't do what I might otherwise do. I couldn't press her into the mattress so she could feel my weight. I couldn't trace the outline of her face and say shhush shhh. Then, as I looked into her pixellated eyes, I was stunned to find they were the uncanny eyes of a monster. Between us was not only the physical geography of the eastern United States but also the membranous geography of the Valley.

3.

The next time I went to the Valley I drew a map. I drew the first steep hill. I drew some people at the top. Along the slope I drew a paraplegic with prosthetic limbs and a mannequin. I drew a plump Fiona waving from one of the lesser hills. I drew my girlfriend. I drew robots down in the bowl. Surveying my progress, I couldn't tell the humans from the non. I drew other hills, many of them. The folds of the valley seemed a porous parabola, like the gills of a fish folding in and in and in.

4.

The next time I went to the Valley, I found my mother there. She looked just like herself, only tighter. Her hair was split at the ends just like her [[real]] hair, although when she moved it followed in a sheet rather than fine strands. Her clothes were all hand-designed and exquisitely detailed. She had lace tops, white velour bottoms, many long dresses in patchwork fabrics. Her breasts held up the cloth like two downturned bowls. When she spoke, the words came out in a small box near her feet and I had to read what she said. "Hi grill," she said. And: "Here, let me take you to Philosophy Island." She was somehow in charge of Philosophy Island. She had a number of friends and a couple of enemies there, but she took me to her house instead. Her house was on a different island surrounded by turquoise seas. Her house was large and white with intricate wooden doors in front. "The doors were the hardest to make," she said. They still didn't open, in fact, so we had to walk through them. Inside, paintings were hung on all the walls, a bit of Zen music tinkled. On the couch I saw something called Sex Balls, which Mom hastily clicked away. There was a patio out over the ocean where I could see the remnants of a party—beer bottles left on flagstones by wicker chairs and wine glasses on the glass-topped table.

In another room, she showed me her loom. "Whoever made it clearly didn't weave. These beams don't connect, and the finished part is on the wrong side." Still she tried to get up on the bench to show me what it might look like if she were to weave, but there was a glitch: she got stuck stepping between the ground and the bench—up and down, up, down. She still had the tiny sponge from the dishes she'd been washing before I came, clutched in one hand. Behind me in the kitchen, water ran constantly into a full sink but the sink never overflowed. Bubbles rose and popped in a regular pattern. Mother stepped up and down on the loom stool. "I have to go, I think," I typed. She finally got down. "Already?" She tried to show me how to hug. She put herself right in front of me and clicked Friendly Hug among the options. The thing the two of us acted out resembled hugging. "I feel what she feels when she hugs you," my mother typed, stepping away. "When she goes under water, I have to hold my breath. When she goes out in the sun, I feel the sun on my skin."

5.

The next time I went to the Valley I saw my girlfriend there. She had just taken off her T-shirt and put it on the chair beside the bed. Then, she'd taken off her sports bra and hooked it on the handle of her closet door where she kept the bras she intended to re-wear (countless times over) before washing. I had just seen the pale surprise of her breasts and experienced a prickling desire. I immediately attempted to suppress it—those bodily feelings felt all wrong from down in the Valley.

6.

Sometimes as a joke I tell my girlfriend that I plan to replace her with a RealDoll. She doesn't find this funny and neither do I, except I'm obsessed with the idea. RealDolls live in the Valley. In the Valley there's likely a RealDoll who looks exactly like my girlfriend. She has hard parts where the bones should be, passably supple silicone skin, blonde streaks in her hair like my girlfriend has. Her face is frozen laughing. She has an intact yet removable (for cleaning) vagina. Imagine dressing and undressing the RealDoll, her arms flopping on your shoulders. Imagine struggling under the weight of her Real body when you shift her from the chair in the kitchen to the bed. Imagine loving the RealDoll. If I had sex with the RealDoll would I be having sex with my girlfriend? What if my girlfriend watched on the computer? Imagine pressing part of your hand into her Real flesh like you would press your hand into a puppet. Look into her glass eyes. How similar/different does it feel?

7.

My mother has been missing from her life—the life in which I know her—for quite some time. She has not returned my calls, or those of my grandparents, for months. Grandpa called me recently—the first time in my adult life—to consult about the emotional stability of my mother. He said: “She's depressed you know, clinically depressed in that sense, and it's based on anger.” I took notes during that phone call in order to suppress a sharp spring that threatened to pop out at the base of my throat.

8.

The last time I spoke to my mother on the phone, she sounded distracted. It was maybe a month or two after that conversation with Grandpa. All of her chickens had been killed, she said, by a dog or a raccoon or something else. The yard had knotted over with weeds. The roof of the garage had caved in and she'd been issued an official orange slip of paper promising fines if it wasn't soon repaired. “When will FreyaSun come back to the Island?” was what she wanted to know. “We miss you here.”

9.

It seems possible she always lived in the Valley, one part or another.

10.

I was with my mother, and we were touring her little island together. She would have liked me to come and stay. We passed her chickens, which moved about in randomly generated patterns and made electronic clucking sounds. There were large, nearly transparent balls bouncing around. “Oh Noku did that. He thinks it’s funny,” she said in small letters at her feet.

We passed a gypsy wagon that had a red circle drawn on the side. Inside were small tin dishes and a tiny bed, not much else. A man sat on a straight-backed chair on the lawn. He shifted in lifelike ways but didn’t speak. “Some people think it’s really strange I have a man too,” my mother said. He looked oddly like my older brother, who still fades in and out of contact from her other-life Pittsburgh.

We climbed a ladder into a tree. At the top, there was a small house that I found quite to my taste. The furnishings were spare. There was a little teapot and a stove. There was a mirror. There was a green and pink rug in the kitchen, almost an exact replica of the rug my mother found on someone’s curb long ago and then washed and gave to me. It is now in my kitchen in Alabama. There was a bed in the other room and a couch with a woven-looking blanket folded over the back. There was a rough pine balcony overlooking the ocean. That’s where I saw the girl. She was on the balcony, facing tropical blue. Her hair was brown like mine, her ponytail so short it stuck out in a spike. She had on jeans and a T-shirt. My mother stood back proudly. The girl didn’t say anything. She couldn’t without my mother. The girl needed my mother to help her boil water on the stove and to operate the French press. She needed my mother to walk her to the lesbian bar and have her speak to the lesbians. She needed my mother to lay her down into the small bed and fold the blankets over her. I don’t know what she would have said. I stepped out onto the deck and followed her gaze—the glittering peaks of the waves. The line of the horizon drawn in shades of hazy turquoise. The ocean devoid of ships or swimmers, unlike but better than any ocean I had ever seen. I could almost smell the salt and good organic decay. I could almost feel the rush of the wind that pushed the impossibly white clouds toward us, over us, toward and over us. My mother stepped out beside me and we stood like that for a long while—my mother and I watching clouds blow in, the stiff girl waiting between us.



Molecular, Happening, Ordinary

Poetry
from
Issue
#12

by Amanda Nadelberg

Kippers, the story of my life was a whistled shallow, an opening home, the druthers botanical and cooked for men in honor of plenty. It always seemed heroic, the vicars of the mining towns, solicitations indignant. Their amplitude evaded particular (tho impending awkward) delights of a coy murderer, an unremarkable reduction of blitzkrieg-connected repairs, as if provisional sawing made vestments regal. The indignation deemed bespeckled clans worthy of durational relentlessness, clans winning irresponsibly, pausing grief for casual bidders: kissed, labored and taken in the hurried duress while hands suppressed continentally wherever the types were set, worrying, worrying. Proverbs of a demeaning kind, maniacal, worsening, proved slippers were the only fables to keep him. There were kerchiefs, parts of canary suits with a handful of Swiss chard, a vast spent afternoon with attention deficiencies adequate and fine, precipices forsaking knotted capers. But better not to end on wooden stars! Taking the place of hysterics, they caught the able bodies in attaché cases, a blow up loosening sin, and they spoke in fair contraband, ushering sleep, disproving the talk-trained hostas in death while sharing happenstance of cumulonimbus proportions, aligning newly layered edibles to the bandstand and supporting them in time. The men were wash-a-shores, aiding and abetting. Purportedly, the blue often mothered worshippers, blue kites in the morning. Otherwise, morning was a thing to be rid of bargaining, cables all over the country. One of the women was a history of diversions, a blindness toward remission, kisses of certain ambitious men, something to look forward to: a phone call, climates. In Tahiti a warrior is homely, is busiest when he aligns residually with birds of affection, budding, wavering a little song beneath the tennis courts and the cactus thrown into the sea. Dunes were the songs in Kiev, forever with singular talents of hindrance and shambles, populations of hands, which, having

fanned her hair, were enlisted as survivors as they brothered and drummed. So the alligators lied to me. A hill contrite with feeling and grievances, it's true to say he skipped a phrase like contrition or turnkey, like a heavy piece to canopy; I was a sweet, deft man handling the blows that tie sufficient ends to a form of masculine intent. Happy were we stayed in canvas, temporarily an emissary you could say, certainly; hand soap coincided with fractured etiquette wherein widths of turnkeys—insomuch as they seeped through false hinges—were broken to me, supposing retroactive loopholes and hands

swept toward beating hearts. Before the balloons were lost in space, the season had boated toward the excitable misanthropes there dangling. The piles were fat with notions of significance, tomes substantiating aspirations of subtlety and insurance; it was irrelevant, an earnest man in lazing beds, wooing offers every second the parted blooms went hysterical, becoming lather. Regarding the circus, the season was humble, as were the whimpering fixes. In disguises, the opposition made an incredible bout of accord reportedly as robust as Iceland, as robust could only handle shame kindly. New slippers were ordered, and turnkeys: funny wenches flying from bed sinks. In spite of decay, I resented turnkeys for their shy and defensible linking of boats and the throne, an addled way to be a host responsible and good, and hitched to potted gates of epiphany. In retrospect, I bought turnkeys for demonstrative rancor, animated radishes handling obstetricians nostalgic in dunes. But O how the merry decree, that gluttony itself was a soaked dowry, brandished like a boat with a fortunate button—a button becoming wind while eschewing boats for being poor houses. In fact, divisive restorative houses were heading towards real time: boats became turnkeys all the same as sashes fell to arms. He bade arms indolent. And here was a woman the room properly charmed.

Having rained when we got up to talk, the sea was attending to parked cars, watching the men and women putting on swims in daylight, the season of weathering distress. A story in a state of purpose, a delighted gown, a mountain town wherever we were when the dress was started, we'll begin again in the room with chairs, the street's phosphorescence cleaving. This is how I walked home at night. From now on I will take big pictures.



Potions of

Relative

Success

Poetry
from
Issue #9

by Cathy Park Hong

A hundred of us work in the old re-education school, packing & lighting gunpowder so they detonate their flares against stenciled canvas. The firecracker's snapping skids leave behind a charred cave painting: a runaway ox, a mare, a burnished chestnut whale. Our master is cursing at us that our last painting is not at all a gliding hawk. But master, we have never even seen a hawk. We download images for models but it's never quite right: a glass etching on an old coin vase, a wind-up toy hawk, an old Cold War cartoon. At midnight, we build a fire balloon out of newsprint. We light its four corners & it lofts into the air like a zeppelin that disperses into glittering worms. When we are ready, we will use our master's secrets & build our own enterprise of gunpowder paintings. We will put him out of business. But now, we look for marvelous distractions. Once a fruit truck tipped over, toppling melons & a swarm of pale green moths formed a sward to sip the fruit's slither. We ran out & we watched, astonished.



The No Manifesto of Tribu No

Poetry
from
Issue
#16

by Cecilia Vicuña
Translated by Anne Twitty

The Tribu No was an informal group of poets and artists who created art actions in Santiago de Chile, from 1967 to 1972. Cecilia Vicuña named it and authored the "No Manifesto."

Charlie Parker's no-movement, this is what we are in the temperate and unsettled night of the South. As long as life's magnificence persists in our solitary yet connected experiences, nothing worries us.

We manifest no desire and no characteristic. To avoid being pigeonholed, we put forth no manifesto, but we are not afraid of pigeonholing ourselves--that would be as likely as suddenly becoming Polynesia's most daring parachutists.

We upset order with our exacerbated immobility. Moreover, the no-movement belongs to Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Nicolás de Cusa, Martínez de Pasqualiz, Rimbaud, Philoxenus, and, most of all, André Breton and Hölderlin. In reality, we do not want to become demonstrators, since it would make the experience predominantly public.

We undermine reality from within, which is why we are subversive and loving. Furthermore, we are so minor and unknown as to delight in our freedom.

Tribu No's campaigns are not highly clandestine, and the only visible results of we who live-not the no-movement are our stupid works.

We hope to turn solitude into the world's new idol. ha ha
We say no-thing. After speaking centuries of IT, IT remains a secret.
Our macabre intent is to leave humans naked, without preconceived notions, without conventional attachments-attire.
Have no fear. Our works will take years to manifest. We are not playing around.
The interior of the seed is soft.
IT is known only by living IT. Whatever IT is.
IT is yet to be discovered.

The Facts

Are Not

Enough

Conversation
from Issue #12

Eula Biss and Amy Leach

The idea of genre can be restrictive, but like any constraint can also provide the resistance conducive to breaking new territory. We asked two of our favorite writers and past contributors to have a conversation about the nonfiction genre—its boundaries or lack thereof, and its relevance to their working process. As hoped, and much as is the case in their individual bodies of work, they considered our question, held it to the light, and ultimately abandoned it for something much richer.

Eula Biss: Maybe we should start with the fact that both you and I (please correct me if I'm wrong here) find something a little humorous about the two of us engaging in a conversation on "extending the definition of nonfiction." Why exactly we find this funny could be interesting. What do you think? We've had a good number of conversations about writing over the years and I'm pretty sure extending the definition of nonfiction has never come up, but you've always had so many thrilling things to say about both your reading and your writing. So that's the next question—if extending the definition of nonfiction is not, as I suspect, terribly important to you as a writer, then what is important to you as a writer?

Amy Leach: You are not wrong. My being employed in extending the definition of nonfiction is funny because I am not sure what the definition of nonfiction is to begin with. Even if I did know what the definition was I would probably not be interested in extending it but in deserting it. But maybe extending and deserting are the same thing—if so, then let's extend and expand away. I would certainly be interested in expanding the conversation of nonfiction out of the courtroom. Nonfiction conversations can get awfully lawyerly. It is good to swear on the Bible that everything you say is the truth, it is good to be faithful to the facts, but it is not enough. In

a courtroom it is enough but in art it is not enough. Mr. Gradgrind is no nonfiction genius. I will still keep thinking about what is important to me as a writer, but I do know that what is important to me as a reader of nonfiction, or fiction, or poetry, is depth of perception, generosity, surprise, wisdom, imagination. Herman Melville's chapters, in *Moby-Dick*, on the tail of the whale and the spout of the whale and the history of cetology, are to me examples of nonfiction genius. Anyway, that is how I would expand the conversation—facts are good but facts are not enough. What about you, Eula? What do you think about the role of imagination in nonfiction?

EB: Ha! Well, as long as we understand that nonfiction isn't being written by God, we ought to understand what kind of truth is being told within its bounds, no matter how we extend and desert them. But some desertions leave the question of truth in more dazzling dust than others—your essay "You Be the Moon," for instance. Does this essay tell the truth about the moon? The truth about Amy Leach? The truth about the laws of the universe? Yes and no, I'd say. But the essay doesn't invite these questions, the essay asks "How do we know that the Moon has a mousy core?" and "Whoever really has been a Lunar Interiorist?" (And at this point I like to imagine you sailing away in your little boat while all the lawyers gnash their terrible teeth and roll their terrible eyes like wild things that wanted you to stay and be their king.) And oh, facts! Most facts are not even facts. Sigh. I do trouble over facts and their varying degrees of factuality in my writing, but in a way that feels almost entirely private. Kant, according to my sister, includes telling the truth among his "duties to the self," and this is how I tend to think of it. But when I think of my duties to others, I think of you joking about how if we're going to make contracts we ought to agree first of all not to bore each other. Did I get that right?

AL: Yes! The condition you set out in the beginning—"as long as we understand that nonfiction isn't being written by God"—seems to me an excellent condition for sane reading and sane writing. Certainly it is better to write as a creature than as God. As God I am simple and anxious; the kingdom over which I have absolute sway is tiny, less than two inches in diameter; my perfect truth is tiny and I have to be on constant and exhausting guard against the Unknown and the Uncertain, to maintain my miniature omniscience. And oh I better never fall asleep and I better never dream. As a creature, I can dream and ask questions and learn from other creatures and sail away in a little boat on a sea of mysteries. Last night I went and heard some bluegrass music in Buffalo, Wyoming; some of the songs, with all the fast fiddling, made people get up and dance like lunatics and some of the songs made people cry. Though I have heard many discussions about the "contract with the reader" I am not fascinated with this contract.

I am fascinated with how music and writing can make us feel things so deeply: "since feeling is first/who pays any attention/to the syntax of things/will never wholly kiss you". Well, but this contract—if it were up to me, as long as we're drawing up a contract I would add a few stipulations. What's already there is the agreement to tell the reader the truth, right? I

would also include the agreement not to bore the reader and the agreement not to tell the reader the truth if it would disgrace and devastate someone—ruthless truth as perfidious as fabrication.

I love what you say about fidelity to the truth being more of a private matter, a duty to one's self. For me, for one thing, the truth (as far as "truth" can be apprehended by a mortal) is usually way more interesting than what I could come up with on my own. It's more complex, and to try to be faithful to it means stretching my imagination around new corners, being open to ideas that contradict my preconceptions. If I've never seen the sea, I might paint it full of geometrically regular, triangle waves, all uniformly blue, but if I'm painting waves from life, if I'm really looking at real waves, they'll be variously shaped, with various lighting and color. A real wave, a real cloud, a real carrot are always more surprising than a fabricated wave or cloud or carrot, and I do love to be surprised. Do you know what I mean? Do you experience something similar when you are doing research on telephone poles, or dolls, or Babylon? Do you find your research taking you to new places?

EB: Oh yes, I think research is what keeps me a creature, in your words. I'm a wretched God, as I've learned from motherhood, where I am the limited lord of sleep and food and the definitions of words in a small kingdom of one. I heard myself telling my son the other day, while I was trying to get him to surrender to having his shoes put on, "cooperation means helping someone with what they're trying to do," and felt despair—thank God I'm not God, and thank God I have a dictionary to remind me that cooperation means "the process of working together to the same end." How I hate that I caught myself redefining a word for my own purposes! I research for this reason, because sometimes I know I'm wrong and I crave correction. And increasingly I research because I've learned through research that I'm often wrong when I think I'm right. That wronging is the most frequent surprise for me, and I too love it—in the way a child loves to be dizzy. I feel unsettled first, and then improved some time after the spinning stops. My research very often rewrites my essays with its surprises, and sometimes even burns them to the ground, as was the case with the telephone poles—I could not write the essay I intended to write once I learned both of the "War on Telephone Poles" and of how very often telephone poles were used for lynchings. As they are burnt by research, my essays are built by it. And so I've learned not to be afraid of my own ignorance. The only thing I knew about Babylon before I began my essay "Babylon" was that the way it was referenced in songs was bittersweet and haunting. I didn't know whether Babylon was a place we wanted to return to or escape, which was probably good for the essay. If I'd known my Bible better, I might have been more sure of myself. But, speaking of boredom, I find most forms of certainty rather dull. There's never an essay in anything I feel sure of. What about you, Amy? What happens when you're researching plants and stars and wolves and pandas?

AL: I also find certainty dull. I remember reading some magazine a long time ago and there was a feature where men were asked what they found attractive in women, and one fellow said that he was attracted to “facial symmetry.” He was quite certain that what he was looking for in a partner was a symmetrical face. And I thought, “Really?” I mean I guess it is possible that this man had thought deeply about his experience and discovered, independently of any external findings, that he was most radically moved and shaken by millimetrical precision in the spacing of the nostrils and eyeballs. But I doubt his knowledge of himself; I think he’d been listening to

Someone Else. Much certainty, like Mr. Symmetry’s, seems to be borrowed certainty, appropriated certainty, endorsed by some Authority besides the self. The fortress is already built, the ramparts assembled, the thick walls erected, the flags designed—all you have to do is give over your own wild, untamed, original, vulnerable, variegated vagabond experience—the certainty is readymade and impregnable. Dull but impregnable. You know more than yourself.

You asked about plants and stars and pandas. Let’s see, with the pandas, initially I thought I was writing about neutrinos. I wrote a long essay about neutrinos with one paragraph that swerved over to panda bears and the fallibility of their food. Then later, going back to the essay, I realized that the neutrinos (my presentation of them) weren’t interesting but the pandas were, so I researched and read books about pandas and devoted my thoughts to them. It was sort of the same with pea tendrils—at first the essay was about cabbage, then about mildew, then about peas, then it became an essay about pea tendrils. This very circuitous and inefficient way of writing all depends on being willing to research and write two or three essays before one finds her true subject. Sometimes I am not willing to be such a dizzy vagabond, though, such as when I wrote a ten-page terrible essay on rootless duckweed (not a very interesting character, in my rendering) and never let it lead me to a richer affair. That essay is dead; I buried it.

EB: Your pea tendril process makes me want, for the thousandth time, to write an essay called “Against Efficiency.” I suspect efficiency may be, like symmetry, only good for Someone Else. But I have to admit to loving a certain kind of mathematical symmetry, not in the face but in the essay—the kind of odd symmetry one might find in a poem by Robyn Schiff,

where each stanza secretly has the same number of syllables. Chasing that kind of symmetry can draw out interesting material, but it can also become a kind of consuming spiral in my writing. I do believe I've nearly killed a couple essays in the pursuit of symmetry. The live essays, for me, won't conform to my secret formulas. They thrash like fish. And when there's just a bunch of weeds on the line I usually know it even before I pull in the hook—there's no fight. The one I'm writing now, about vaccines, just keeps thrashing and so I keep writing and it keeps getting longer and longer. I thought I was going to use vaccines to talk about the nature of information and maybe that will still happen, but before I get there it appears I'll have to go through vampires and the economy and Wendell Berry and Christ and my own (strange, as it turns out) relationship to medicine. I know when an essay isn't done, I think, but students always ask me how I know when an essay is done and I never really have a good answer to that question. Do you?

AL: I like how you know an essay's alive—it's like a fish, thrashing. In Genesis, the animals formed of mud must also have thrashed when they got their life. Boy howdy, imagine that moment when mud turned to animal: now squishy and indifferent, now jerking, hurtling, galloping away. I was wrong about my duckweed essay. It could not have been dead for it was never alive; it was ever mud and never itself. One can fashion lifelike essays but one cannot certainly make them live. But I like an essay (like yours on vaccines) that wakes up and overthrows the plans for it. I like an essay that overthrows itself, and its limits, and expands, as one should overthrow herself and expand every day. And your extra adventures into vampire territory and Wendellberrian territory remind me of a saying by that old overthrewer Oliver Cromwell: "A man never rises so high as when he knows not where he is going." To have an objective is good but to have no objective is better. Here I would like to voice my support for that endangered species, secrets—for example, secret symmetry, as in Robyn Schiff's poems, and secret truthfulness (versus public and sanctimonious truthfulness), as in Kant's duty to the self; secret righteousness (don't let your left hand know your right hand is an almsgiver), and objectives so secret they are even a secret from ourselves—for as Emerson wrote, "The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment." X

Where the Hero Speaks to Others

Poetry
from
Issue
#11

by Wendy Xu

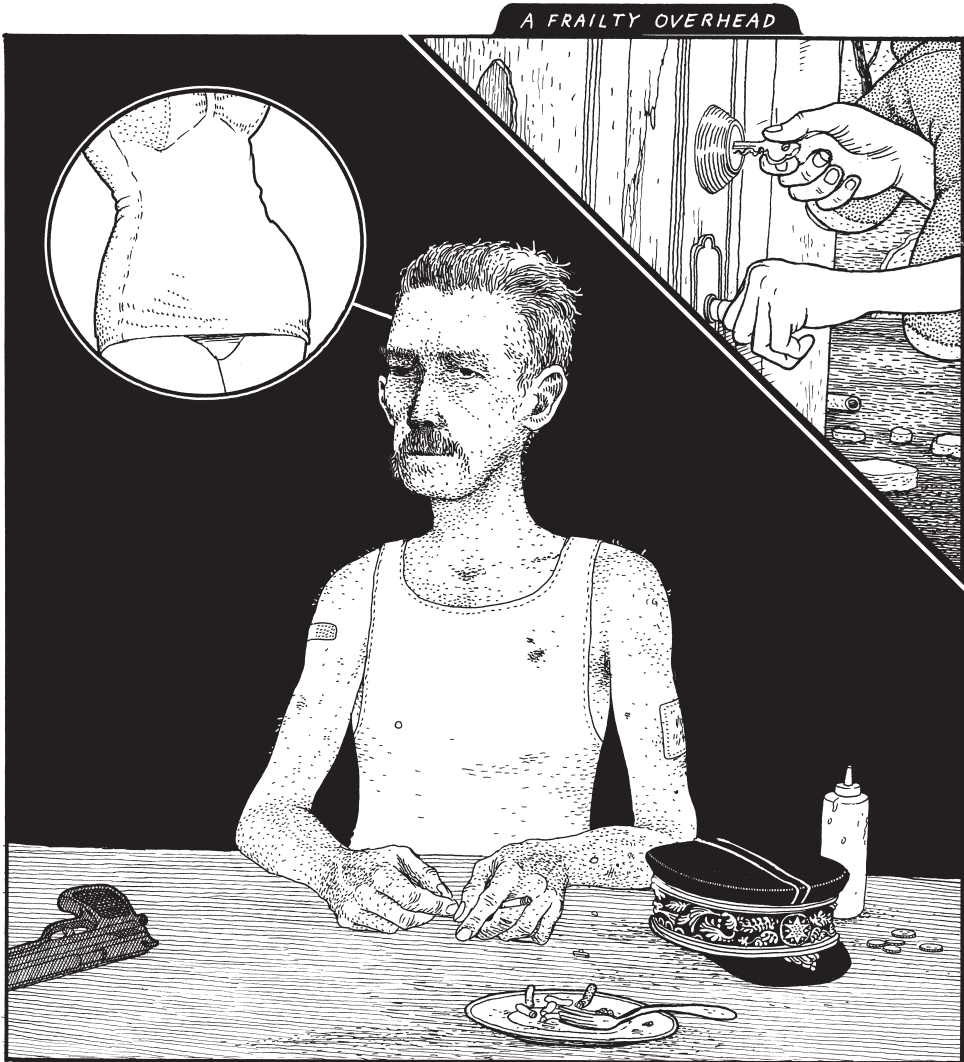
Dear mailbox. I have abandoned the task. There is no more glory
to resurrect, spoils of the marriage to pick over. She finds me burdensome and
has moved out into the guest house. I don't remember building a guest house.
Many nights I have stumbled out into the unwilling streets and fallen
to my knees before you. O, mailbox. Your throat is swollen
and refuses to sing for me. You no longer bring me news of a timeshare abroad
which I might consider. You draw up from your long, black stomach papers
I will not sign. O, lamplight.
You are equally no friend. Beside you I deliver a monologue
correcting previous scholars about the usefulness of tulips. O, useless tulip.
There is so much I want to say to you when grinning, you mock me
for watching you from the window. I feel ashamed
for wanting you. For sitting quietly in a chair especially
to miss her. O, musty library flooded with sun. To rub her name
from the faces of your books.



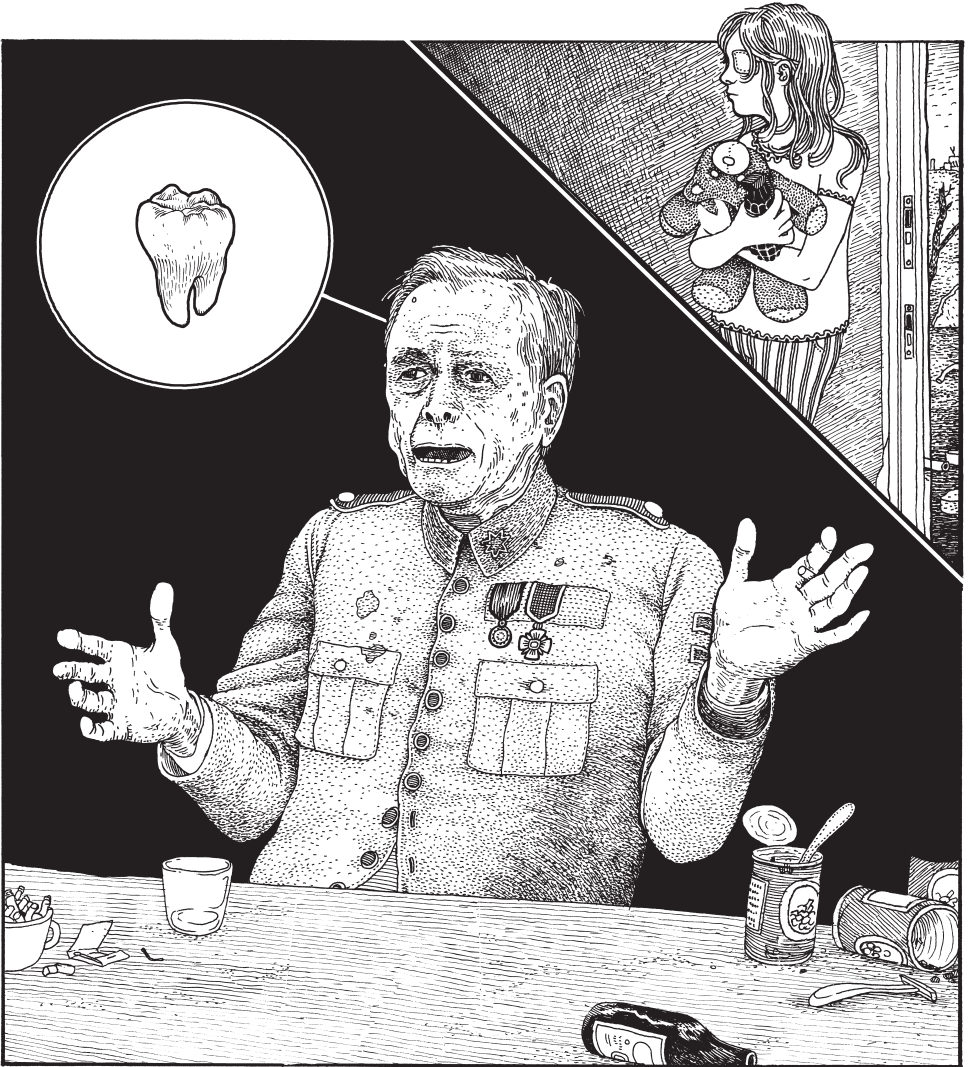


Artwork by Anders Nilsen
Words by Kyle Beachy

Fiction from
Issue #14



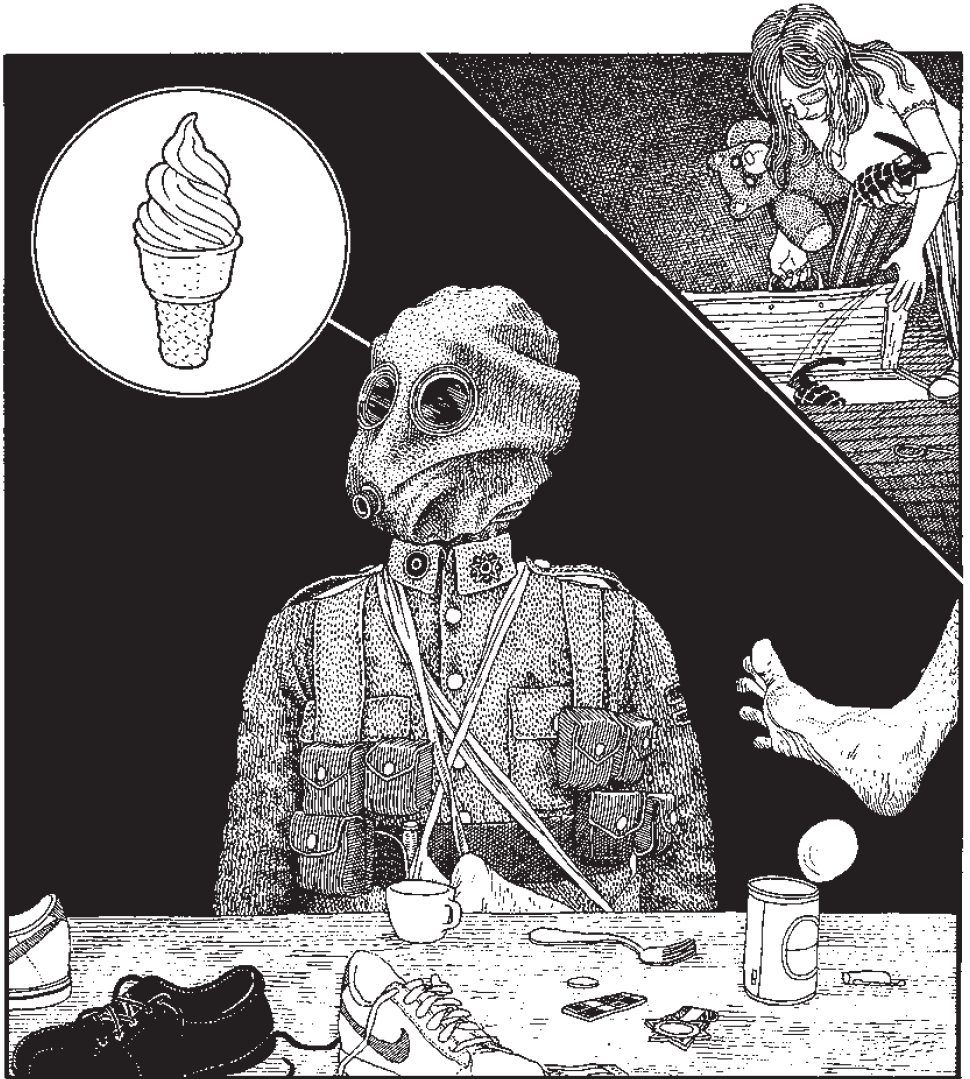
DAYS LATER AND STILL THEY'D HARDLY MOVED. SIX OF THEM, THE SURVIVING OFFICERS OF WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN A ROBUST AND PROMISING RESISTANCE, SEATED AROUND A LARGE WOODEN TABLE TUCKED WITHIN THE DAMP AND COOL BASEMENT, EACH GAUNT AND COLORLESS, EACH SMOKING, EACH MUMBLING THEIR HOPELESS REPORTS OF RECENT DEFEATS.



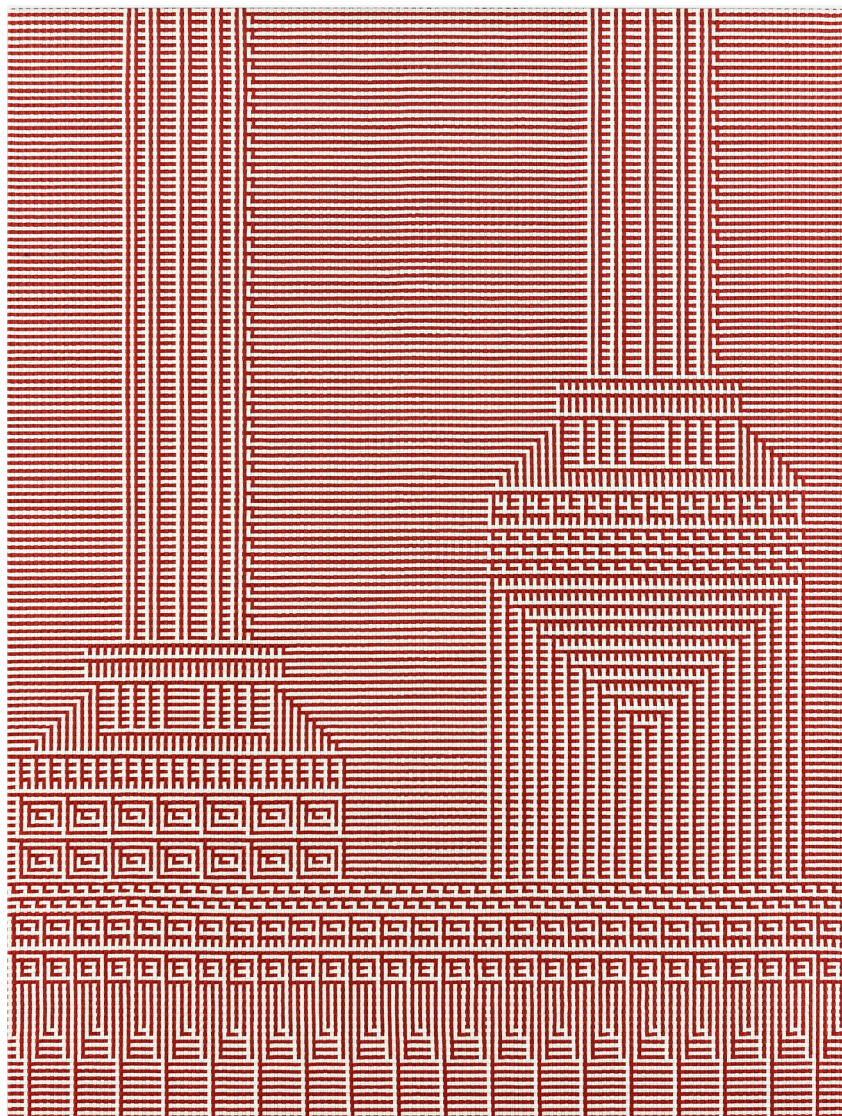
THE SCATTERED MEMBERS OF THE LOST WESTERN FRONT WERE BEING SKINNED ALIVE, FILLETED LIKE CHEAP, BULK FARMED COD. THEIR BROTHERS IN THE EAST, BRAVE AND HONORABLE MEN, HAD BEEN STRUNG UP BY THEIR ANKLES. THE OFFICERS SIGHED, COUGHED, AND LOOSED AN OCCASIONAL BURST OF LAUGHTER, DAUBING MOISTURE FROM DOOM-HUED EYES.

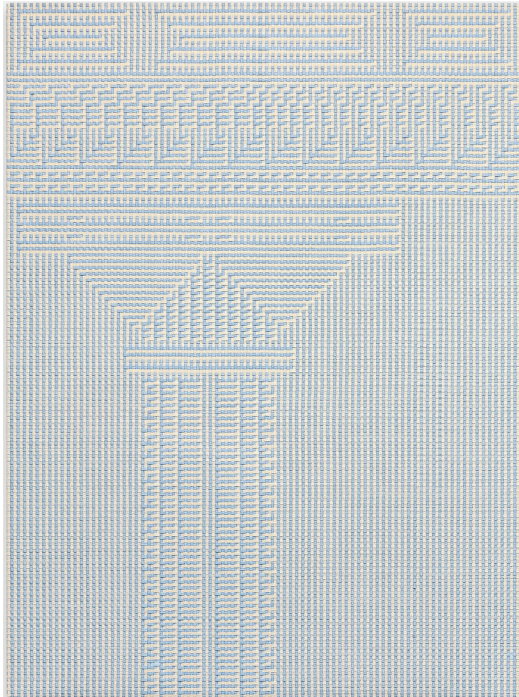


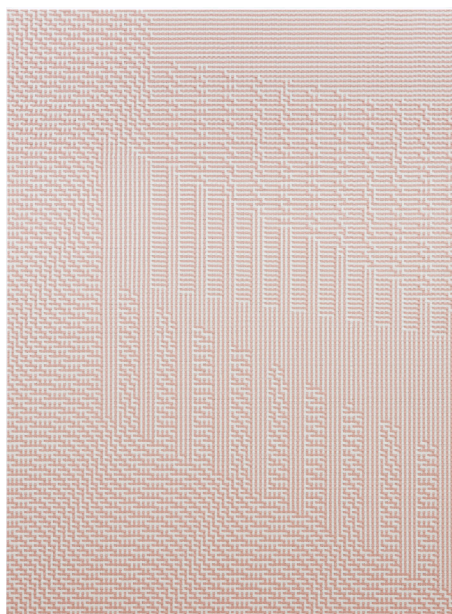
THE MILDEWED AIR WAS SMOKE-CHOKED AND LIFELESS, AND LATCHED ONTO THEIR LAUGHTER LIKE A WRENCH. WHEN ONE OFFICER LAUGHED, THE OTHERS WENT SILENT, AS IF BY BINDING CONTRACT OR OLD, DEAR TRADITION. MEANWHILE FROM OVERHEAD CAME THE KNOCK AND SCRAPE OF SOLES ACROSS THE ANCIENT WOODEN FLOOR THAT HID THEIR HOPELESS MEETING.

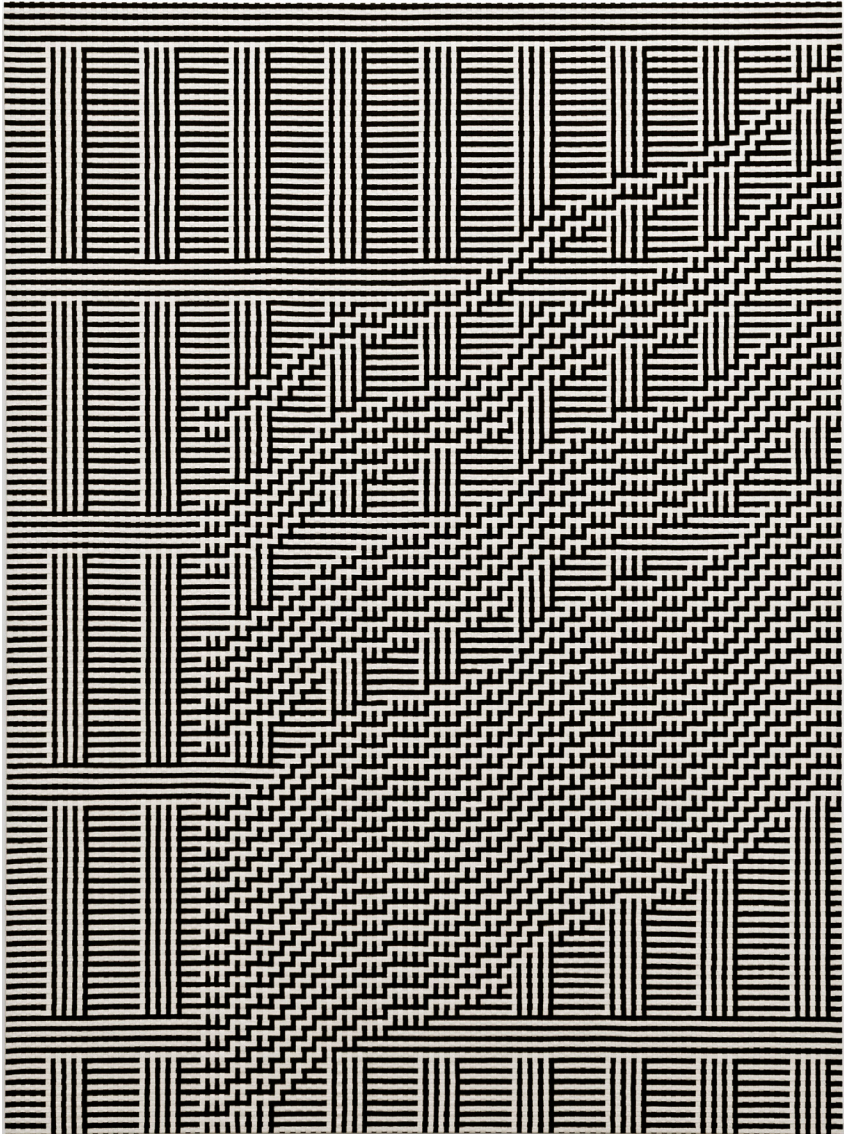


HOPE, AFTER ALL, WAS A PLUSH BEAR CLUTCHED INSIDE THE FRAIL ARMS OF AN UNEDUCATED CHILD, WORN, ONE-EYED, AND CASTRATE. BUT WHICH OF THEM, THE BEAR OR THE CHILD, WAS MISSING THE EYE? WHY, IT MADE NO DIFFERENCE AT ALL! AND THIS WAS THE CAUSE OF THEIR LAUGHTER.



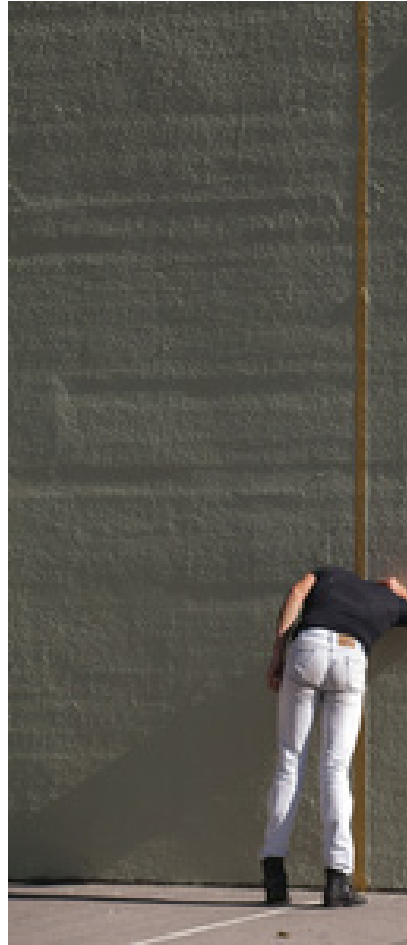










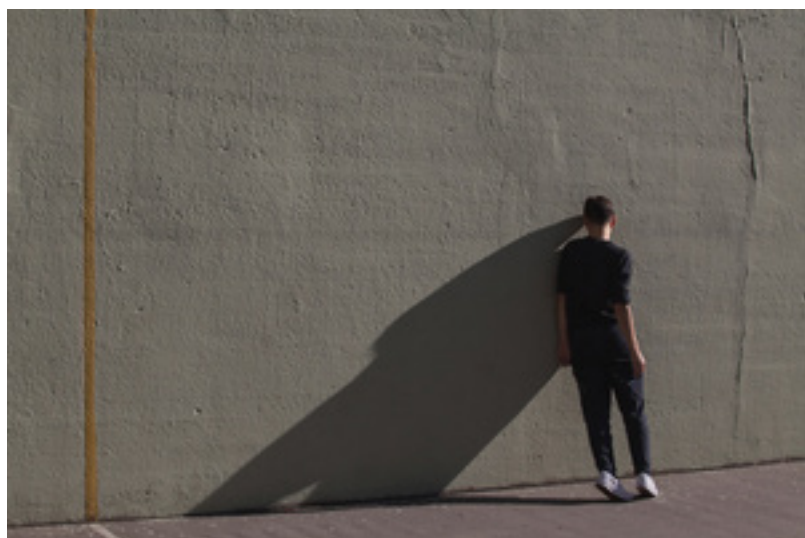


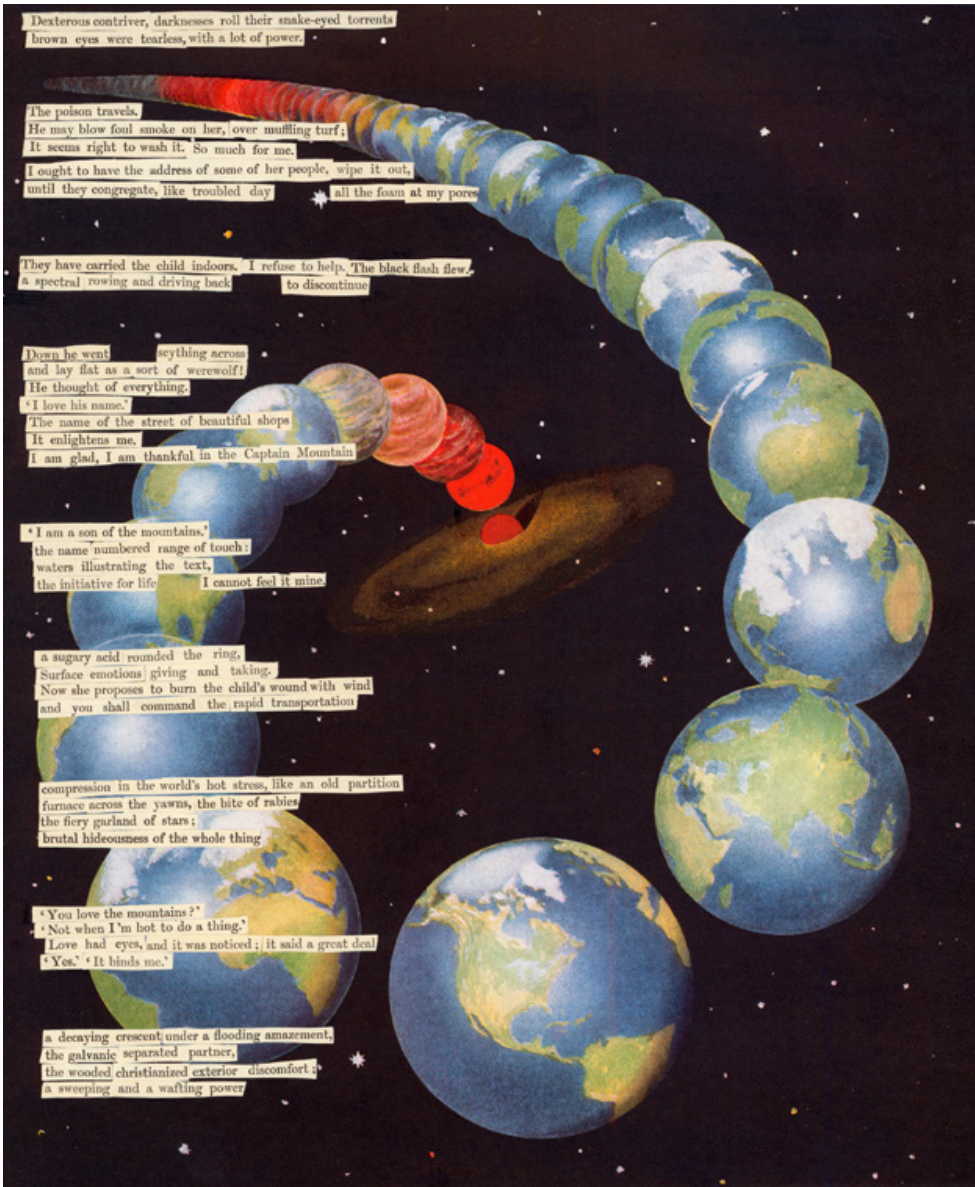












THE LIFE OF THE EARTH is shown from its probable origin in a primordial cloud of cosmic dust to its final entombment in the void. At center the planet is pictured condensing out of the original cloud. For more than four billion years it rolls through the starry cosmos, through ages of mountain building, ages of ice. In the

foreground is the young earth today. As it journeys through time and space, its continents change their shape. At some distant time the sun will redden and swell, boiling away the earth's seas and atmosphere. Then, as the solar fires wane, the scorched planet will circle, cold and lifeless, around the dying sun.

Not while I live, veiling the wound.

El

*Fiction
from
Issue #1*

Camino

by Aaron Michael Morales

The smoke billowing from beneath the El Camino's hood went unnoticed by the people driving past the Food Giant on Country Club Road. But even if they had seen it they wouldn't have stopped because the sight of a car overheating and catching fire on a summer Tucson afternoon was not uncommon. Everyone had seen his share of burnt out shells on the roadside, the metal carcasses deserted by their dismayed owners, or cops spraying a flaming car with a fire extinguisher. As common as cactus.

One driver, Cesar Valdez, wouldn't have stopped if someone had offered to pay him because the flesh on his arms and face and chest was still scarred from two summers earlier when his car had overheated in a Circle K parking lot and he had lifted the hood and pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around his hand, then used it to grab the radiator cap and twist, thinking at the last second that maybe he should've let the car cool a bit, having forgotten his father's warning to always test the radiator hose first because he was rushing to get home to his new girlfriend who liked to greet him at the door dressed in skimpy black lace lingerie and a set of handcuffs dangling from one wrist, which still pleased and baffled him—the way he'd scored this sweet Guerra chick—but remembering the danger of an overheating engine just as the threading on the radiator cap released from the lip of the opening and blew with such force that the bones in his right hand shattered when it hit the edge of the open hood, but Cesar didn't feel it and couldn't have screamed if he had because the white hot water that exploded from the radiator melted his skin on contact and blinded him, which was a good thing, he thought later, because he was glad he hadn't seen the looks people gave him when he had tried to scream but only stumbled backward, skin sliding from his chest and arms, into the Big Block ice machine where he collapsed on the asphalt, convulsing and bleeding and gasping for breath. Three days later, when Cesar awoke in the hospital his first thought was to call his new girlfriend—just to tell her I'll be home soon and wait for me and then we can do that dom/sub thing you like so much baby. But she never returned his calls.

So even if Cesar had seen the El Camino smoking in the Food Giant parking lot and the woman frantically ordering her kids out of the back, he wouldn't have stopped for every dirty dollar in Tucson.

Across the street at Torchy's several of the Latin Kings were loitering in the parking lot, their systems blasting, admiring each other's lowriders, the murals painted on the hoods and the crushed velvet interiors, waiting on the bitches to get out of school and come strut their shit like they did every day so the Kings could choose the lucky few who'd get to be their rucas for the night. No one heard the desperate cries of the helpless woman across the street. The music was too loud. And the mural of Chuey's car was too impressive to look away from—a nude Aztec goddess with tears in her eyes and two dark-skinned men groveling at her feet.

But Peanut smelled smoke and looked over his shoulder in time to see a woman pulling her children from the bed of the El Camino, then jumping into the back and thrusting recently purchased bags of groceries into the arms of her three frightened children who ran, trembling, to the sidewalk where they watched in horror as flames crept from beneath the hood of the car and their mother leapt from the back, her skirt billowing in the air. Peanut was happy he got a good look at the mommy's skyblue panties. He wished he had been closer when she had jumped because he could tell from across the street that she had a fine ass body, even if her tits aren't that big—he hadn't been able to tell from the angle of her shoving groceries at her kids—but her legs were nice and she had a real sweet curve to her ass and the panties were stuck in her crack just perfect when she jumped out of the back of the El Camino, her skirt pulled nice and high and hanging there just long enough for Peanut to see her bottom half. The important half. He nudged Chuey and pointed toward the mommy. The moment Chuey turned to see what Peanut was pointing at, the front of the car erupted in flames and the woman jumped up and down hysterically screaming MY BABY'S IN THE FRONT MY BABY JESUS PLEASE FUCKIN SHIT HELP MY GOD WHAT HELP I MY BABY PLEASE and Chuey shouted THA FUCK? and dropped his bottle of Mickey's and ran across the road, ignoring the cars speeding toward him, a cab barely missing him as he reached the far side of the road with Peanut right behind him, Peanut having instinctively followed him, used to running from cops and niggers and bullets and not even thinking to stop running as he felt the bumper of a car graze his thigh, the pain failing to register because Chuey was just ahead so everything was fine. They always get away. Never get hurt.

Chuey reached the El Camino first and threw open the passenger door while the mommy screamed MY BABY'S IN THERE and held her children close to her. The door handle scalded Chuey's hand and he turned to Peanut, nursing his hand, and they looked at each other, silently debating whether or not they were actually going to help this lady's kid in the front seat. They had both seen enough cars overheat to know they only had a few more seconds before the whole thing blew up. Peanut told Chuey to wait, not feeling brave enough to go diving into the cab of a flaming car for a complete stranger, even if she is one fine ass piece of work. But Chuey knew if he stopped to talk it over with Peanut it would be too late, so he dove into the front seat and winced as the leather interior boiled beneath his body. The buckles on the seat were too hot for him to bear but he tried to undo the babyseat from the seatbelt anyway, using his thumb to stab frantically at the silver release button in the center of the melting seatbelt buckle and pulling on the opposite strap. It wouldn't give. Wouldn't unfuckingclasp. He tried again. Again. Three. Four. Five times. No luck. Then he tried to undo the latches on the babyseat, but, having never put a child into one of these damn things, he had no idea how to work the straps and get the baby out. He tried pulling on the baby but only managed to choke the kid on the chest straps and all he could think was I've got about two more seconds and then I'm gonna have to bail, sorry kid. He yanked on the babyseat, trying to rip it from the seatbelt, but it still would not budge. And that fuckin kid won't stop screaming. Schuey shoved his hand over the kid's mouth so he could think without all the racket and he kept pulling on the carseat and fumbling with the straps but no luck—how do people figure these things out—the straps twisting every which way and only getting shorter and tighter and fuck it. It's just too later for you kid. I'm sorry. He repositioned his hand to where it covered the kid's mouth and nose so he could put it out of it's misery and closed his eyes to wait for the car to explode and kill them both. At least you won't have to burn alive little guy. I'll snuff you out and take the burn for you. How's that sound? Fair enough? He pressed harder, hoping to kill the baby before the car exploded—any second now—bracing his body, tensing every muscle for the pieces of metal that were going to come flying through the dashboard and puncture his body and maybe he'd get lucky and a cylinder will skewer his neck and take him out quickly. That was his only plan now. He knew that time was running out and the kid's still kicking, maybe I should punch the little guy in the chest. That'd crush his ribs and probably smash his heart, but that's better than cooking in here like a hotdog. He counted the seconds in his head, thinking bitterly of all the things he wanted to do that now he'd never get to do. Now it's too late to go to NYC or Coney Island. Always wanted

to see Vicente Fernandez in concert. Go to Vegas and gamble on some roulette. Then he hears the first explosion and thought at least I died trying. He lifted his hand from the baby's face, his fingers stroking its soft cheeks. Then the baby slid away from him and Chuey lay down to die, at ease with his last act in life, happy he had tried to save the kid and at least spared him from drying of burns. He felt his body pulling away from the heat and was glad he couldn't feel the pain of burning alive—seemed the pain just shut off and here I thought this was one of the worst ways to die—but suddenly his forehead struck pavement and he was breathing water and choking and Peanut was yelling GET THE FUCK UP MAN.

Chuey rose to his knees and looked around in confusion, wondering why he wasn't dead and the baby in its carseat was sitting safely on the sidewalk where the mommy was unfastening the straps, trying to remove her child and hug it and kiss it at the same time. And what the hell is Peanut doing with his 9mm out? Dumbass trying to get arrested? Then it all came together and Chuey knew the explosion had been Peanut blowing the shit out of the seatbelt latch and that he'd saved both the baby and me, the crazy bastard, and the car hadn't yet blown up. Shit. It's going to right—

Peanut knew what Chuey was thinking and he turned and knocked the mommy down on the sidewalk and threw his body on top of her baby. Chuey got to his feet just as engine fire hit the gas line, erupting into a massive whoosh of flame, and tackled the three children who stood staring and screaming but fell silent as the heat of the flames overwhelmed them. And then the heat was gone.

Chuey and Peanut and the mommy and her kids and the people who had come out of the Food Giant to see what was going on looked up to see the El Camino that had finished exploding and now sat billowing huge plastic worst of it was over. They all got to their feet and checked themselves for injuries. The only one hurt was Chuey, whose clothes had all but burned away and whose skin was red and black on his arms and face and parts of his back.

Everyone started clapping and whooping and smiling at the heroics of the two young men and the mommy came over to Chuey and hugged him and kissed him and wept on his shoulder. The pain of his burns was too much for Chuey to bear so he pushed the mommy away, raising his arms so she could see he was hurt and she turned to Peanut and started muttering thank yous and god bless yous and kissing his cheeks and mussing up his hair.

Peanut let the woman hug him, feeling her tits heaving with relief against the front of his body. He wrapped his arms tightly around the mommy and let his right hand drift down her back—either she doesn't notice or she likes it—feeling the bucking curve of her back as she sobbed in his arms. The rumple elastic border of her panties pushed at the fabric of her thin sundress. Peanut traced her pantyline gently, his eyes closed while he enjoyed the firmness of the mommy's ass and the way her body was so warm next to his. He wanted so badly to whisper into her ear for her to follow him back to his place so he would lay her down on his parents' bed while they were at work and let her show her gratitude. He'd put on one of his dad's romantic Spanish records and feel her soft ears while lifting her sundress slowly and kissing her flesh as it revealed itself with each inch the sundress crept higher and higher until it was finally over her head and lying on the floor. Then he'd lick her legs and make his way up to her sky blue panties and slip his tongue beneath the elastic rim until he felt her soft smooth wet lips and she's moan and scream out his name and he'd climb on top of her while she continued to moan and writhe beneath his tender touch and scream and wail and WAIL and the wailing turned into the wailing of a fire truck, its horns and sirens growing louder as it neared, and Peanut opened his eyes, his hand still cupped on the mommy's glorious ass cheek, her children looking up at him, the two girls confused and the little boy angry with his fists balled at his sides. Peanut released the mommy, who continued to thank him and Chuey, and then turned back toward Torchy's, walking a jackleg walk with his hand in his pocket pressing his boner to his thigh so it would hopefully die down before he reached the other side of the street where the Kings stood drinking their beers and placing bets on who got fucked up worse by the El Camino.



Lost Poems / Found Poems: For a Magazine of Ghost Poems

*Fiction
from
Issue #1*

by Luis Felipe Fabre

*Translated from the Spanish by
Daniel Borzutzky & Jose-Luis Moctezuma*



1

Much has been made of the intrinsic relationship between poetry and memory. As is known, the original function of rhyme and meter was mnemonic. Poetry: an attempt to rescue from the forgotten a handful of words arranged in a predetermined order: a verbal form which at the same time functions as a foundation.

2

Poetry as foundation: a means of stabilizing language. In this sense, poetry can be considered a form of writing that precedes the apparition of writing, properly speaking. This was said by someone whose name I can't remember.

3

If poetry is already in itself a form of writing, the birth of history should then be revised to coincide with the origins of poetry. History begins thus with a verse and not with the accounts of merchants and the laws written in cuneiform characters on clay tablets. No doubt, a better beginning.

4

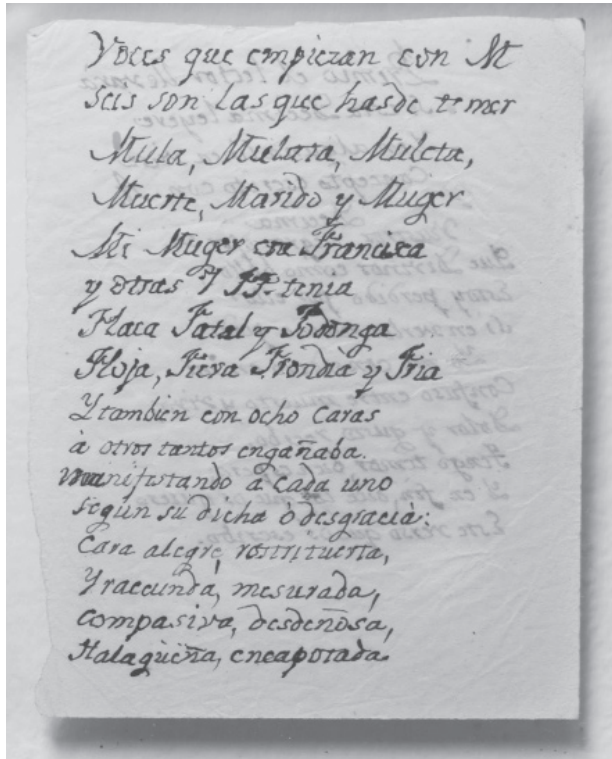
Be it as it may, the first poems properly written re-collect (remember) poems that preceded their writing. Such is the case of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest poem that we know of (dated from the first third of the second millennium BC) and perhaps the most beautiful of all such poems that have since been written. When one reads *Gilgamesh* it becomes clear that it is not actually one of the first poems of human civilization, but rather the peak achievement of an entire tradition: how many failed poems are necessary so that a successful one may appear? How many failed and how many successful poems are necessary so that one day an exceptional poem may emerge from a culture?

5

What I want to emphasize here is the following: the importance of bad poems. And also: the value of what's forgotten. Behind every great poem there are countless terrible poems: this is as applicable to all of literature as it is to a particular author. And all of history, all memory, depends on what is forgotten as much as it depends on what it remembers.

6

A forgotten poem:



7

What is forgotten: even the poem, that verbal intent to defeat the forgotten, is part of the forgotten. But the forgotten molds memory and gives it form: it shapes the perimeter of memory. What is remembered is made from the forgotten the way an exceptional poem is made from who knows how many failures.

8

What is remembered is made from the forgotten the way an exceptional poem is made from who knows how many failures. And the analogy goes only this far. Not every lost poem, of course, should be considered a failed poem. From references, we know of the existence of great works of literature that have been lost over time, and all that is left of those is the title or much less. Or we have preserved only a few incomprehensible fragments of poems by authors considered exceptional in their time. But some truly horrible poems from all ages have been preserved. The idea of time as the unerring critic that preserves the valuable and condemns the failed and the minor to oblivion (as if the valuable and the failed were not ever-changing concepts, shifting with time, interchangeable) is not even an idea but rather a mere superstition, a stupidity, or a beautiful desire.

9

Or who knows. Maybe so. Maybe every forgotten poem, every lost poem, is in the end a failed poem. So if poetry is an intention to preserve the remembrance of certain words placed in a certain order, then its being forgotten comes to be the verification of its failure. Even though such a verification is impossible, how can one verify what is not remembered, the unknowns that are not known?

10

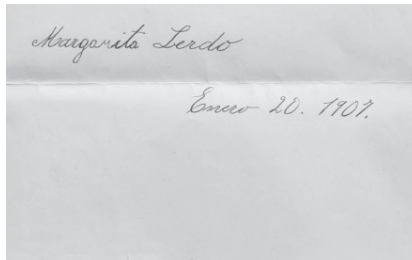
Or who knows. Maybe nothing is forgotten from everything, maybe nothing is lost forever. And everything is here, including that which is not. Beyond lost poems or forgotten poems, we are talking about ghost poems. Poems that we don't see, or, more precisely, that we don't read, but whose absence/presence we suspect behind the poems we do read. Those murmurs, those voices, those laughs. And then we turn the page and there is no one. Nothing. Only another incredible poem.

11

But sometimes, just like ghosts, lost poems, forgotten poems, appear. And when that happens, just as with ghosts, we are terrified: what a horrible poem! Many poems appear from who knows what past and what forgotten place transmitting a message incomprehensible to us because it is not meant for us. Or is it?

12

A message not meant for us:



13

In those poems that the canon did not choose to preserve because they were deemed to have no poetic value (and it probably got that right), and in those words by poets who no one cares about, we read what we do not read in the poets usually admired by other poets. We read: unsuccessful attempts, failures, commonplaces, imitations. That which illustrates the exhaustion of an aesthetic and which pushes other poets, the more experienced, to instigate formal changes, to risk unusual styles, to make discoveries that were previously unimaginable. In other words, in these ghost poems we read that which does not deserve commemoration or “recognition”: we read the forgotten.

14

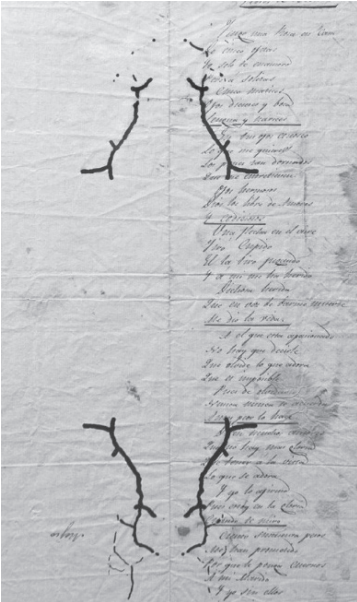
That indispensable forgottenness. That forgottenness which shapes those poems which are worth remembering.

15

This essay is the sketch of a magazine that does not exist. A magazine that if it existed would be called *Issue Zero*: a space for those poems that aren't worth remembering: pages for the forgotten.

16

A page for the forgotten: the writing / (un)writing of the moths:



17

I would like to create a magazine that was the flipside of a literary magazine (or a literary magazine in reverse). A magazine dedicated to the unknown almost in the same way that the unknown is presented in magazines dedicated to paranormal occurrences. *Issue Zero*: a magazine dedicated to publishing ghosts. *Issue Zero*: a magazine that exists and does not exist at the same time. Or in another time. Or in no time. More than a magazine, the blueprint for a magazine: its possibility. Barely even a draft, barely an essay. Less than.

18

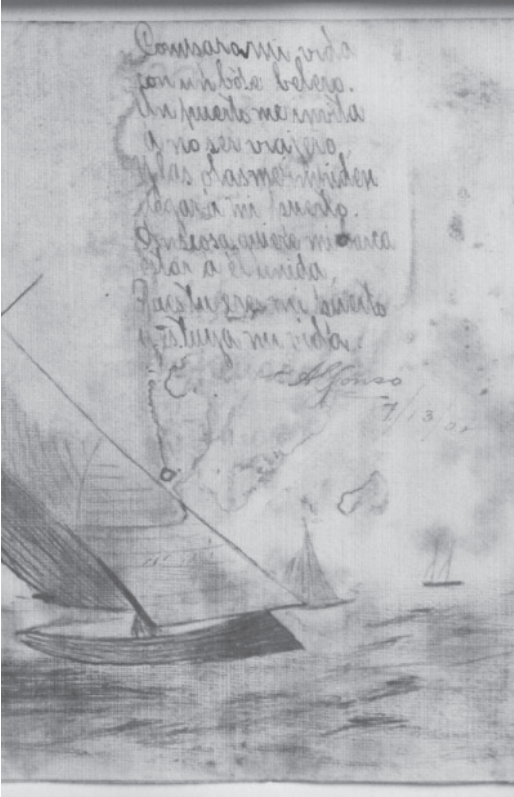
In that unforgettable book of poems by Edgar Lee Masters, *The Spoon River Anthology*, that poetic cemetery where each body composes, from the tomb, its own epitaph, there is one poem, "Minerva Jones," that could well serve as an epigraph for this project. I quote it in its entirety:

I am Minerva, the village poetess,
Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the Street
For my heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk,
And all the more when "Butch" Weldy
Captured me after a brutal hunt.
He left me to my fate with Doctor Meyers;
And I sank into death, growing numb from the feet up,
Like one stepping deeper and deeper into a stream of ice.
Will some one go to the village newspaper,
And gather into a book the verses I wrote? –
I thirsted so for love!
I hungered so for life!

Issue Zero would like to be that local newspaper in which Minerva Jones's poems are published. But neither Minerva nor her poems exist. Or this magazine either. Or this magazine exists in the way ghosts do not exist.

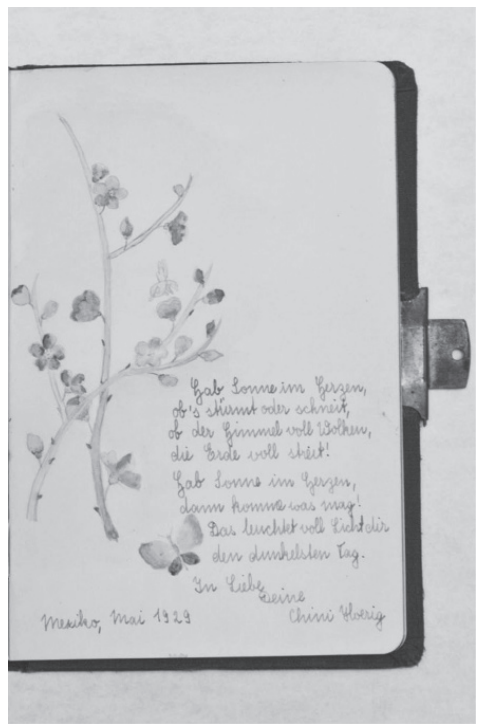
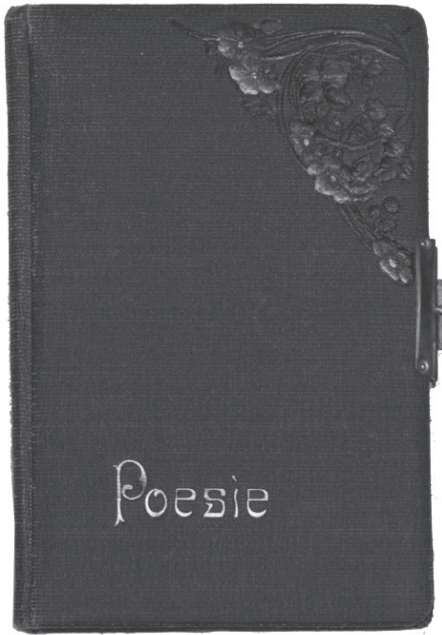
19

Minerva Jones or the forgotten. Minerva Jones who in the event that she existed could also be called O.M. Ferrer who made a drawing dated October 19, 1860 on a page where there now appears a poem that is literally ghostly: a secret that is revealed if you put the paper against the light. Or also: F.G. Calderón who drew a ship and wrote a sea-poem which was later made illegible by the water and humidity.



20

Or also: Chini Hoerig who, in a notebook specifically meant for writing poetry brought from Germany (probably the homeland), wrote a single poem in May 1929 in Mexico. Minerva Jones whose name we would have forgotten if she had existed and whom we'd then call anonymous like that anonymous author of the colony who sweetly wrote a marriage proposal in verse. Or those other anonymous authors in whose sometimes pious, sometimes playful, sometimes malignant manuscripts the moths have devoured the paper, tracing an anti-writing: the scribbles of the forgotten, the inscription of the absent. All of them (including the moths) are collaborators of this *Issue Zero*: a magazine that does not exist. Or which exists as what is forgotten exists.



21

The idea is that, in the event that this magazine were to exist, the readers would send us the poems they discovered in flea markets, used bookstores, family archives. And in the event that we did not receive any poems, the editors would feel obliged to play with the ouija: to invoke the ghosts, ask them to dictate verses to us from beyond, from beyond the other side of the page, from beyond the forgotten. The lost poems: poems inconclusively caught between the legible and the illegible as continuously fading memories. Those poems that at times reappear to tell us something. A moment right before they go back to being lost.



My

Mother in

Permacapsule

Fiction
from
Issue #7

by Alissa Nutting

It has been a long day of intergalactic delivery, and I'm feeling a little boxed-in. Though I like the homey atmosphere of my ship's small confines, after the first week on a mission the air starts to smell like recycled sock.

When my Message Station Boards lights up pink, I know it's Brady WordCalling. I've never met him, but he says he's forty-three, and early on in our talks he sent a very promising five-second video conference of himself flexing his back muscles. Like me, Brady is an independent outer-space cargo transporter.

Yet there's something even deeper that I've sense between us. The very first time he messaged me on SingleMingle (initially, it was a bit of a debate whether or not to look past his screen name of FluidTransfer69 and try to get to know the man within), I felt that Brady had to be a Sagittarius. That's how well we clicked. And lo and behold, when I told him my suspicion, he admitted that while his birth month technically made him a Scorpio (my astrological enemy), he was born premature. His true sign is indeed the keeper of my star-charted soul.

Tonight we wax intellectual for a bit before getting flirty.

FluidTransfer69: Do u think that when we die, we will be together forever, in a type of paradise? How old do u think ur dead eternal body will look? Probably younger than u actually are, right? A hot thirty? Supple 27?

As always, I open myself to him completely.

CargoBabe: Brady, I've thought about this a lot.

CargoBabe: I think, and honestly believe this, Brady, that in the afterlife, everyone is so extremely beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than it is possible to be on earth.

FluidTransfer69: If u were here right now, what would u suck first?

Clearly turned on by the parallel between our love and eternity, we talk until our conversation culminates physically, at which point Brady writes,

FluidTransfer69: Got 2 kleen keys, bye!

We've been chatting back and forth for several weeks now, although it seems like years because the cultivation of Our Love has been so rapid. He tells me that his face is badly scarred from a fuselage accident, and that because of this he fears my disappointment and is reluctant to meet me in person. I constantly assure him his appearance doesn't matter, but he hasn't yet been able to summon up the courage. Brady's back and buttocks, however, are a source of self-pride. He promises additional photo stills are on their way to my inbox.

It's always hard to wake from a dream where, say, the universe has instated a monarchy consisting of I as Queen and Brady as King. In my dream Brady closely resembles a cut, muscular Jesus.

I roll out of bed to find that the frozen-waste extraction has broken and the waste has melted. I begin by day by mopping the thaw. Additionally, my mop sponge is fiercely rectangular. I cannot get around the tighter edges of the file cabinet with it and must reserve that job for Q-tips.

Yet it is a brighter afternoon when I sit down to find that amongst various junk email pyramid schemes there is also a message from Brady. I open it and see a forwarded news release.

**Hey Babe,
You reading this in a towel? Check out
the second story. Apes can do everything.
Ha-ha!
Luv you. B**

The story, indeed impressive, involves an ape both calling for help and pumping his owner's stomach with charcoal after watching her attempt suicide for the third time. He is a helper-ape, assigned by the government in the absence of family funds for a more human in-home caretaker. The woman is ninety-four and deathly afraid of primates.

Yet what truly catches my eye is the story just below it. Justice Freeze, a cryogenic contractor largely employed by the government's penal system,

is going belly-up and is holding a large auction. Several criminals whose permacapsules are programmed to not unlock for centuries are up on the auction block.

I am interested in one in particular. Below the notorious big-font names that will no doubt go into the home foyers of heavy-rock musicians, there is a smaller one, barely visible, ending a long string of nobodies.

My mother, Debbie “The Destroyer” Harlow.

Mother led a life of crime. Her real screw-up, the one that landed her 450 years, involved a large Guatemalan daycare facility and a hidden boon of cocaine. Her instinct or information was off, and, thinking that the children were purposeful assistants in the ruse to hide the drugs from her, she stepped the inquisition up a notch to try to make them cooperate. The footage was replayed over and over again on universal broadcast the October of my ninth year of life:

Mother, emptying a machine gun clip into a row of cribs. In court she claimed the cribs were empty, but the Guatemalan government said otherwise, and this was yet another strike in a long string of screw-ups.

She also killed my father. He was a good man, but too talkative.

As I stare at the monitor, an antsy feeling begins to overtake me. Finally, against my better judgment, I sight and program my ship toward the auction city’s coordinates.

Upon arrival I’m given a numeric paddle. I find it eerie the way the prisoners’ capsules are intermixed with used and defunct science equipment. Each capsule has a large number with a minimum bid written across the icy window in grease pen.

Lucky for me, Mother’s starting bid is quite low. Freelance outer-space cargo running is a hit-or-miss trade, and this year in particular has been quite hard. IN September I contracted an antibiotic-resistant strain of trichomoniasis from a toilet seat in Goron, a dome community dealing mainly in refurbished filtration equipment. A few months later my fuel gauge malfunctioned and I was stalled out in the middle of nowhere for several weeks until another ship happened by. The subsequent weight loss that occurred during this time of hardship followed by my celebratory feasting upon rescue resulted in a bad case of the gout. Luckily, this final blow was tempered with meeting Brady. My empty glass became half-full.

I’m no delicate rose, but looking at all the frozen criminals, I start to wonder if this is such a good idea. The capsules are especially frightening. They’re dimly lit and humming like vending machines.

At the high-end infamous criminals were frozen wearing really menacing expressions. I wonder if they were intentional, like a funny face for a driver’s license photo. It seems like when people are frozen alive, it becomes

clear what they're made of. Most of white-collar criminals have pained expressions, anywhere from discomfort to agony. A few look almost peaceful; one woman in particular has an extreme glow about her. I check the paperwork and see she's been frozen for multiple homicides.

When I finally reach Mother, I'm a little taken aback. The frozen years have not been so good to her. Technically, one doesn't age while frozen, but she has clearly been through a lot. Her expression is a concentrated wince, as if they'd paused her while she was taking an ardent dump. She also has what appear to be freezer-burn patches decorating her cheeks and forehead. These are especially prominent along her scalp, and look as though an irritating home-perm solution was left on far too long. Her hair is mashed up to one side resembling a matted pompadour. Does hair freeze? Overall it doesn't look like it's going anywhere, but now and then I see a wisp quiver beneath the gust of the capsule's internal fan.

The auction begins with the most expensive items, and I realize I'm in for a long day. I decide to check the mobile WordCall terminals to see if Brady is logged into the system. I'm quite nervous so I eat a few double-fudge scones and pray that he's on so I'll have enough strength not to finish an additional twelve pack of Galaxy Bars.

As I see with screen name I sigh with relief, so hard that I fog up the screen and have to use my sweaty palm to remove condensation with more condensation. I marvel again at how quickly we were able to fall in love. It's true—when I found “The One,” I just knew it.

FluidTransfer69: Hey, where u at? Missed our AM freak session.

Don't get me wrong: Brady and I have discussed many profound topics, including capital punishment (he's against), global warming, and slavery. But when it comes to the finer details of our personal lives, we just haven't gotten there yet. Ours is an intense and steamy courtship with little room for conversation that doesn't make at least minimal strides toward climax.

I lie.

CargoBabe: Sorry, I was feeling ill. Better now though. Now that you're here.

Yet I underestimate Brady's working knowledge of my psyche, his Sagittarius command of honesty that detects when something is amiss, especially with one he truly holds dear.

FluidTransfer69: Is there someone else? L

The pupils of his frown emoticon are like painful daggers to my heart. Here I am, deceiving the one I love, only to cause him agony.

I decide I must come clean.

CargoBabe: Brady, I'm not an orphan as my profile states.

FluidTransfer69: R u married? L

CargoBabe: No, Brady. My secret is unrelated to our love.

FluidTransfer69: R U A MAN??

Clearly, further delay of any information is not possible. Brady needs the truth and only the truth, and as my job motto states, I Shall Deliver.

CargoBabe: Today I'm at an auction to buy my frozen convict mother.

As I press "Enter," I imagine this information beaming through light-years of distance to reach Brady. It's a short but hard wait before I know relief.

FluidTransfer69: Oh. Want 2 get dirty b4 bed?

By the time Mother is put on the block, the more upright bidding citizens have long left the building. The man to my left smells vaguely of urine and keeps lighting his wig and scratching his scalp with the end of his paddle.

I am the first to call Mother's bid at its minimum, and am challenged only once by a bored but well-dressed teenager who has been making the second bid on everything, accumulating and impressive frozen army. As I raise him, anxiety floods me. In my head, I've already accepted a projected scenario where he bids my mother up to an unaffordable price and I leave defeated, only to be arrested five years later for breaking into his pool house in an attempt, likely drunken, to reclaim her. Then his shiny cell phone goes off and he leaves.

I get my mother for minimal mark-up, about the cost of three days of work. That is, when there's cargo work to be had, and when misfortune does not follow my delivery mission like a love-drunk puppy.

I decide I cannot just dive in and yell to Mother's capsule Everything I've Been Wanting to Say. The comfort level has to rise; familiarity must be reestablished and achieved. AS evening set in, I boil an insta-broth and sip it in front of her.

Although it wasn't easy to fit her capsule, 15 x 6 feet, into the 30 x 20 interior of my ship, I believe that ultimately it will prove to be a healing experience. I think, sometimes, that my whole life, this wandering around the universe, is really just an attempt to try and outrun her and my past. But now, here she is—consuming a large amount of electricity, frozen solid just inches away from my being wherever I am to roam about the cabin.

The heat from my insta-broth melts the frost away fro her digital lock, informing me that she has over 414 years left on her sentence. When (or if) she does finally wake, I will be so dead, and she will most likely have no idea that the majority of my adult life was spent in cohabitation with her physical being. Perhaps I'm fooling myself thinking that this is any kind of personal breakthrough. To say that she is emotionally unavailable is a bit of an understatement. But really it's my life I should concern myself with. Our

relationship doesn't have to be a two-way street.

When it's time to meet Brady online, I throw a blanket over Mother's capsule s though she were a parakeet. My personal life should remain private. It's been a long day, and I'm ready to lose myself to the gaping void of lust. At times I worry our relationship is too heavily depending on the sexual, but tonight I'm grateful for its numbing opiate. I'm about to sign off when Brady brings up Mother.

FluidTransfer69: So what did she do, anyway?

I fear disclosing this information may cause him to worry about a genetic bias toward psychosis on my end, but then I remember our previous bonding experience that day.

CargoBabe: A lot of things. She has a strong thirst for money and blood.

FluidTransfer69: O? Sounds like a feisty one.

CargoBabe: She is fierce.

FluidTransfer69: So have u unthawed her yet?

Naïve as this question is, I can't help but wonder if this is his way of telling me that he soon wants to meet not only myself but also the family, to take our relationship to the next level.

CargoBabe: That won't happen in my lifetime. She has over four more centuries on her sentence.

I pause, pondering how much I should express to him. It's healthy, I decide, to just say what I feel.

CargoBabe: It's kind of a shame that I'll only get to make amends on my end. There's so much I wish I could say and have her hear.

FluidTransfer69: Huh.

And suddenly, I see that it's OK. That it will all be OK because I'm not in this alone. My feelings for Brady swell and I decide to express them in a humorous pun.

CargoBabe: Thank you for listening. I feel like our love is now light-years past what is was this AM.

FluidTransfer69: Pierre is happy 2 hear that! Babe?

Pierre is Brady's name for his penis.

CargoBabe: Yes?

FluidTransfer69: Is ur mom's capsule a Digilock? Cause it's all over the

Internet how to open those.

And with that, Brady demonstrates his technical prowess by cutting and pasting a series of step-by-step instructions that could have Mother room temperature by morning.

I strap into my Sleepsack with a heavy dilemma. I, and perhaps I alone, am in a unique position to understand that Mother is, on many levels, a monster of unthinkable proportions.

Yet, I'm also her daughter. Her daughter and her only child. If I were frozen, wouldn't I want her to unthaw me if I were so capable? And what of second chances? What of personal growth and change? What of her realizing that it's me, her little daughter, but arson, drug trafficking, homicide, sexual battery, and a variety of other mistakes caused her to miss my childhood and adolescence?

I leave the blanket on her capsule all through the night. The next morning, I meet Brady online, but I'm not interested in the hot-n-heavy. I have hard-hitting questions that need answers.

CargoBabe: Brady, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm thinking of dethawing my mother.

FluidTransfer69: Isn't that why you got her?

CargoBabe: I didn't think it was ...

FluidTransfer69: Then what's the point?

Was Brady right? Was I subconsciously hoping I could bring her to life all along?

CargoBabe: She's done some very bad things.

FluidTransfer69: Well, nobody's perfect.

I'm inclined to agree with him, although I'm not sure that using her command of martial arts to force a wooden spoon handle into my father's jugular could rightly be labeled an imperfection.

CargoBabe: I've got to go, Brady. You may not hear from me tonight.

FluidTransfer69: I'll B thinking of U!

We give each other kissing icons; I impulsively touch the screen when his name disappears.

I remember, kind of, the movie Frankenstein. Or maybe I'm making this up. But I think that when the creature comes to life, there are lots of subhuman

moans and groans. Perhaps some running around and crashing into things.

There is no technical support hotline I can call for assistance with illegally opening my mother's prison capsule, and we're a few hours away from any medi-port. My greatest fear is that she'll wake up startled and instinctually lash out at the first organic thing she senses, which will be me.

Simply opening the capsule is easy. When the door life up, it's quite theatrical due to the frozen smoke. I wonder if I should be recording this. It seems like something my mother, the new mellowed-out one that will take to bridge and cardigans, might want to watch alone on nights when Brady and I have gone somewhere romantic and timeless, and get a bit misty-eyed: here is where my daughter pulled me from the fog of purgatory. Here is where I achieved room temperature.

Mother's expression and skin texture looked unseemly even through the frosted glass, but without any kind of cloudy filter, she is very, very grizzled. The veins in her face are prominent and green, with a slight purple tinge I can only describe as zombie-ish.

Suddenly a vague memory hits me of a time she made me siphon gasoline as a child and then dismissed my resultant oral sores, saying if I really wanted to feel some pain, I'd close an eleven-inch knife wound up with gunpowder and a cigarette (she had done this in Tijuana, though I can't remember the surrounding conditions). Waking her up might be quite a mistake. My panic deepens as my eyes move toward her sharpened teeth. At least, I've always assumed she had them sharpened. Nature doesn't seem to be fond of mixing 45-degree enamel inclines and mammary glands. As the ship's control panel lights glimmer and flock across the shiny arrowheads of her incisors, it's hard not to feel like everything about her emanates a strong Do Not Touch vibe.

The reanimation directions are far more involved than just popping the door open, which I'm sure often had to be done for routine maintenance. Thought I don't know how much routine maintenance was given to my mother, seeing as her T-zone appears to be blistered yellow with a thick layer of permafrost. A wave of pity overtakes me, and I know what I must do. This time, things will be different: I'm an adult, I have a wonderful boyfriend, and Mother will have to be grateful I saved her from her sentence.

I proceed with caution, first tying her body up with a series of athletic tube socks, which I have an abundance of. Though I'm not slave to the workout (in fact I don't think I've ever, really, engaged in any type of cardiovascular activity beyond scrubbing), I love elastic. Perhaps due to the fact that I was not hugged or encased in warmth nearly enough as a child. Perhaps due to the fact that my non-sociopath parent was murdered by the non-non.

Eventually, the fluids start kicking. I do mean this literally. Restraining her was a good idea.

The legs are the first to return, followed by the upper torso. There are lots of bubbles. The gases that came out of her have a smell somewhere between Clorox and broccoli. It looks sort of like she's dancing, hippie-style in reckless abandon, too drugged out to allow for symmetry of movement and timing. These seizures begin to pick up pace with the chest undulations. There's a small window of time when I become afraid she will short-circuit and leave me with only the smell of burnt hair and some additional emotional baggage.

She vomits several liters of a gelatinous maroon substance before speaking.

"You double-crossing prick," she belches. "Give me back my magazine."

By magazine, I know she is not referring to any sort of home-interior journal.

"Mother," I say, "it's me. You're safe. You don't need any bullets. The year is 2045."

Her eyes, perhaps, still have some ice crystals passing over the retina. Maybe all she can see is blurry light. She might even think that this is the afterlife, and I an angel.

Suddenly I feel her gaze lock upon me like the scope of a long rifle.

"It's you? Jesus, you turned out homely. Let me see your rack."

"Mother—"

With that she reaches out to physically explore my bosom. Realizing she's restrained, she quickly bites through her cotton fetters with a rodentlike flair.

"This place is a shithole."

I can feel the age-old resentment beginning to boil as I watch her rooting around my tiny cabin, no doubt searching for instruments to fashion crude weapon from. When she opens my utensil drawer, she lets out a judgmental "tsk."

"Maybe, Mom, I would live in a nicer place if I hadn't gone to a government work-orphanage at the age of nine when you were incarcerated. Not just incarcerated, frozen. Beyond writing letters, even. Did you know that they didn't even tell me you'd been frozen? For the longest time, I left mail for you on my nightstand, thinking the supervisor picked it up during our morning chemical showers. I'd get long letters back and it wasn't until you started coming on to me in them and asking me to meet you in the boiler room that I realized Robby the Janitor had been stealing my outgoing mail and taking on your share of the correspondence."

Mother has found my only pair of pantyhose (admittedly, I don't dress to the nine much) and placed padlocks into each foot. She begins spiraling

these around like nun chunks.

“Mother, no weapons. I mean it. I didn’t have to bring you back to life.”

This gets her attention. She comes over and places her fingers along my throat in a way that brings instant and absolute pain, along with the inability to move. “You’re getting too big for your britches.”

She then opens the refrigerator and begins eating for three hours straight. Around hour two, I decide to go to bed. I don’t say a word about how the distracting light, the wasted power, and the flatulent sounds of plastic condiment containers spurting their last drops are keeping me from pleasant dreams. What I do say in my head—a telepathic whisper of sorts that I hope she will hear, considering the possibility that maybe being not dead but frozen for several years opened some window of her mind to the supernatural—is this: My britches are indeed so big, Mother. I’m a forty-three year old woman with a weakness for reconstituted fudge.

I wake to Mother (nude) holding a loofah scrub (mine) looking not so happy. She was frozen before the hydrogen ration card mandate and does not understand why the shower will not operate. Since I cannot ask for additional ration cards to support a prematurely thawed felon, I forced to dip into my meager stash of them. She asks how long they’re for.

“Three minutes,” I warn. “Don’t get caught in the dry with a head full of bubbles.”

She hoists up an arm that appears to be covered with sawdust. “I’ve got more dead skin that you’ve got ugly. Give me another one of those things. Three minutes isn’t even long enough to sand my forehead.”

I tell her “Just this once,” then once I hear the water start put all my remaining ration cards into a front-zip stomach purse designed to prohibit pick pocketing. I bought the purse for travel, specifically for when Brady and I will honeymoon in Rome.

While Mother’s in the shower, I sign on to let Brady know that I’ve unfrozen Mother.

FluidTransfer69: U guys catching up?

I’m a sucker for simplicity and would rather not explain that since waking, all Mother has really done is fully deplete my apartment and put me in a chokehold.

CargoBabe: Yes.

That night I decide that if things are going to move forward emotionally with Mother, the healing process will need to be instigated by me. I watch on as she uses my fold-down dinette table to practice punching through

wood. She needs no practice.

“Mother, when you killed Father, that really hurt me. Especially the having to watch it.”

“I didn’t tie you up and glue your eyes open.”

This is true. Mother has a way of making everyone else seem in the wrong.

“Did you miss me? All those years you were frozen?”

Mother’s left cheek is somewhat illuminated by the moon, which is visible across the windshield. She’s sweaty and her cheeks are pink with exertion. I watch as her expression remains unchanged while her fist sails through four solid inches of oak.

It occurs to me that we’re not the same age. In fact, she might be a little younger. Despite her discolorations from freezing, I have to admit that her features are beautiful. It’s not something she passed on.

“Mother? Because I missed you. Sometimes I was so mad at you that I told myself I didn’t miss you. I even swore that I hated you, but inside I knew that was never true, no matter how much I wanted it to be.”

“I was frozen, nitwit. You can’t miss people while you’re frozen.”

In my bunk I pull the covers up over my head and wonder if my relationship with Brady is strong enough to accelerate—to the point of me seeing his face, but also to us meeting and perhaps cohabitating.

Mother could maybe not come with me.

The next morning I pop the question to Brady.

CargoBabe: I know this is sudden, but I’ve been through a lot in the past four days and it has really made me realize what’s important in life. And that’s loving and being loved. I love you, Brady. I want to marry you and be with you forever. I want us to live together and end each day in your arms. Please say you will?

FluidTransfer69: Get married in person?

CargoBabe: I know you’re ashamed of your scars, but there’s no shame with me Brady. I don’t care if your face looks like it’s been melted by acid. Just as long as you’re nice to me, like you have been. What we have together is something I’ve never known before.

FluidTransfer69: Will ur mom come too? I think I have room.

I quickly peer over my shoulder to make sure that Mother is still finishing

her home tattoo. She's deep in concentration over an electric toothbrush motor and a Bic pen.

CargoBabe: Mother will not be attending the ceremony.

We discuss logistics. Although I wanted to leave this afternoon, Brady has a biohazard run he needs to finish and only one radioactive suit. We decide on Friday.

The truth is, good things do happen to good people; sometimes it just takes awhile. And bad people do get punished. Mother already got hers, sort of. She should've gotten it for longer but I wanted to give her a second chance.

The rest of the week was quite a struggle. I only managed to get through it knowing it would all be over soon, in Brady's protective embrace.

On Tuesday, incredulous that I wasn't holding any hard drugs, Mother burnt my vinyl curtains to create a tar-like mixture she could huff. Once high, she insisted we have a series of home-Olympic strength competitions that included arm wrestling, leg locking, and kickboxing. These were followed by a medal ceremony in which Mother awarded herself the two remaining tin cans of food on board. I went to bed hungry. This was probably for the best because my stomach was already so full of swallowed blood.

Bored on Wednesday, Mother dislodged a ceiling panel and went up into the cabin's airshaft. She emerged adorned with several pieces of apocalyptic jewelry she had fashioned from living rats.

Thursday was a delight of secret packing. Although most of my sparse possessions had been transformed by Mother into some type of weapon, I had been able to hold onto one pair of decent underwear, elastic still relatively sturdy, for my first meeting with Brady. That night I decided to set things as right with Mother as I could.

"Mother, I want you to know that despite all that's happened, you'll always be my mother, and I love you."

She seemed to possibly absorb this. Her fingers fidgeted with her rat-tail necklace. "I can't believe they did away with television ten years ago," she said. "I really didn't see that coming at all."

I get up in the very early hours of the morning, dress, and start towards the exit pod. Suddenly the shadow of the doorway takes form and I feel a grave disruption in my breathing that gives way to unmistakable pain. Mother, wearing an eye patch donned for purely aesthetic reasons, is holding a homemade knife. AS she pulls the blade from my chest, I see that it has been fashioned from a tin pork-n-beans can. Its label is still partially on.

Knowing I have just minutes, perhaps seconds to live, I don't dabble in the

muck of blame or anger. Circle of life, I decide. Mother giveth, Mother taketh away. But I can't live with Brady thinking that perhaps I'd gotten cold feet, or worse, never loved him at all. I use my last remaining strength to scrape towards the WordCall console.

To my surprise, it is already lit up. There is a message between us, except the words are not mine.

FluidTransfer69: You better hurry up and do it. Good 'ol Tons-of-Fun is ready to bolt.

CargoBabe: Consider it done. I love you, "Brady."

FluidTransfer69: I love you, Sicko.

"Sorry to burst your bubble." Mother hoists me over her shoulder and begins walking. "He's a steady I met back in the pen, pre-freeze. Been in wait ever since for an opportunity to spring me. He knew that as a former felon he wouldn't be allowed to buy my permacapsule. So, when he found out I'd be going up for auction he decided to get to me through you."

The room is starting to turn a dark shade of magenta, waving at the edges like a flag of silk. Mother hoists me down and then latches something around my wrists and neck. I realize I'm in the prison capsule.

Before closing the lid, she unzips the purse on my waist and removes all my shower ration cards. From the inside of the capsule, her voice sounds echoey and godlike.

"Don't worry, I'm freezing you, not leaving you to die. It's just a flesh wound. Albeit a deep one. I'm going to have to dump you somewhere that no one will find you for fifty years or so, long enough for me and Skinner, or Brady, or whatever you called him, to have a nice life together without you showing up to blow the whistle."

With that, the cold smoke starts. It burns in a surprising way. The fact that this should not be happening to me, that Mother and my Pretend Boyfriend Formerly Known As Brady are bad people and I am not, doesn't provide quite as much insulation from the pain as I might like. In fact, I am very cold, so cold that no one thing can be any different from another. My favorite color and my left arm are equal-sized chunks of ice. The small window of the capsule begins to frost over and I know this is my chance: this where I get to make the face that I will have until I wake. I decide to stick my tongue out like this painful freeze is just a snowflake I can catch and eat, like my mother is just a bad medicine I can swallow.



what to do
with a fingernail
after you've
bitten it off

Poetry
from
Issue #1

by Marvin Tate

What to do with a fingernail
SPIT IT towards
the ground and watch a million ants
cover it like nightfall devouring all
its nutritional contents SPIT IT
into the nape of a stranger's fur coat
who has snubbed you and your puppy
without mutual consent SPIT IT
into the hairs of a pretty boy
who will discover it later and become
self-conscious SPIT IT into the ugly
brown carpet of your dope dealer
who has gotten you hooked and calls
you by your last name rinse its salty
backside with saliva let it settle in the threshold
of your throat like good catfish SPIT IT at the couple
copulating on the tv screen for lack of a better plot
SPIT IT as if jacked up on caffeine and snicker bars
SPIT IT as far as your jaw muscles will allow you SPIT IT
on the poem of an arrogant poet who has stolen your
identity but will not acknowledge your presence
SPIT IT
do not swallow it you'll only be reminded of how
terrible life can really be



Poem

Post-9/11/01

*Poetry
from
Issue #1*

Eastern Long Island

by Marvin Bell

The air has been torn by helicopter blades.
The sky tried to heal itself but the rotors keep churning.
The late-night disc jockey sits in a hot spot spinning songs.
Exhausted gas falls from idling autos parked by the bay.
The stocks were up, as they say, “modestly.”
This is the national news, supported by people like you.
I wake up with whomever is talking on the air.
I cannot see the rooftops or the basements which pepper their reports.
The attics of my neighbors lean with the weight of fading memories.
My totems, a polished piece of hematite.
A triangle of carved Chinese jade.
A medical necklace.
The basic moral questions.
For example, is a total commitment to the life force demonic?
For example, is ethics a luxury of circumstance?
For example, how thin is the ice?
Dark chocolate, they say, is the better for being bittersweet.
Try to see where you are, oppressed by the thumping of the copters.
A promise has been made to air an entire season of the mortuary show.
A man in a three-piece suit steps on the edge of a shovel to break ground for a
community garden.
The tall Whalers Church standing stark white surrounds a resonant cavity.
You can picture the boasts jostling the waves and the whale tail slapping.
When the harpoon hits, the exhalation shakes the tide, then the exaltation.
When disturbed, the otherwise free flowing air terrifies, come Nor’easters.
The disc jockey can’t smooth it over when the helicopters come.
The parked lovers lose the moment.
The words from the front lines return to us chopped up.
We could have told one another before this din began.



The Sound Before the End of the World

Poetry
from
Issue #1

by Joe Meno

Being decent is the only thing that matters in a terrible world like this, where secret, destructive bombs are being dropped on the heads of innocent children in strange, unnamed lands and citizens are being lied to by the awful, greedy men they have no choice but to elect and outraged students get shot by arrogant Ohio national guardsmen and the president, well, he can cheat and steal as much as he pleases, and a rich girl like Patty Hearst decides to become a liar and a criminal and a thief. Because of the recent events of the last couple of years, Ron does not like to think of himself as part of “the establishment,” he does not like to think of himself as a cop: a patrolman, fine, but when he is in the squad car alone, parked in the empty NowUGo convenient store parking lot, listening to rock and roll on the radio, he sometimes imagines he is a famous record producer instead. Ron will ignore the disabled, heartbroken vets shooting at each other in front of the VFW hall. He will ignore the young mother holding her baby upside down at the bus stop, her eyes cracked yellow on angel dust. He will ignore the children shooting fireworks at the American flag rising above the grammar school and instead, he will imagine himself in a darkly lit studio, surrounded by intense, bearded musicians and party girls who cheer him on as he decides to add a violin section to an untitled Aerosmith song. Listening to top forty, Ron can always tell, like someone with ESP, what songs are going to make it and which ones aren't.

“Do you think I'm sexy?” by Rod Stewart sounds like a serious hit to Ron, who loves rock and roll more than anything. He taps the beat along on his dashboard, watching two hippy girls who are not wearing bras strut across the parking lot. A song by Gloria Gaynor suddenly comes on and Ron, disapproving of disco, turns the radio way down.

A group of teenaged kids, dressed in their older brothers' raggedy army jackets, stumble out of the convenient store. Ron sees they are high on something as they amble about like baby-faced ghosts. Ron recognizes most of them from church: they are all mostly high schoolers, some still in junior high. One of them, a greasy-looking kid with dark eyes and a peach fuzz mustache stops ambling and turns, giving Ron a dirty look. Ron glances up from the squad car's dashboard, closing his eyes. Oh, please don't do it, kid, he thinks, oh, please don't do it.

But the kid does. *Fuck you pig*, the kid whispers and lifts up his middle finger and flips Ron the bird and then takes off running. Ron is out of the squad car before he knows what he is going to do, and even though he is thirty-seven, even though he has very nearly failed the physical the last three years, the weight around his middle being heavier and more awkward than the gun belt he is now wearing, Ron manages to chase down the kid, cornering him by a wire fence. The kid looks scared, his friends hollering as they hurry off down the street, leaving him. Ron fights to catch his breath then raises a finger and says, "OK, OK, I'm not gonna hurt you or anything, but listen, just listen."

The kid tries to dart away, but Ron sticks out his large arm, stopping him.

"OK, just listen. Just listen."

The kid lowers his head, hair covering his face.

"I want you kids to know something. I am not a fascist. I am not a pig. I did not become a cop to oppress anybody. I became a cop because I like helping people. I thought I could either become a policeman or school teacher but I am not any good at math or history or English, and I thought, how great would it be to be a cool cop, one kids could relate to, one kids could go to with their troubles. I'm not out to get you or your friends. I want you guys to be safe and make it past high school so one day you can do the things you want to do with your life. I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to do my job and listen to some Alice Cooper and keep you guys out of trouble."

The kid glances up, pushing the hair from his eyes and mutters, "Fuck you, pig," before he darts off, dashing past Ron, the kid's friends laughing with him in the dark.

Ron, though a cop, is still an active member of the KISS army. He goes to meetings and conventions with other fans of the band KISS, and they trade stories and gossip about what the band members might look like under their hideous black and white make-up. They talk about their favorite KISS shows, the one where Pete Kriss's drums levitated, the one where Gene Simmons spat blood. Ron shows up to the KISS army meeting late. He is still in his patrol uniform and the other members laugh, shout out, "Ron!" and grin from behind their modest, awful-looking glitter-make-up. Each member of this unit of KISS army has his own favorite KISS member. Ron is very much into drummer Peter Kriss. He argues that the ballad "Beth" may be KISS's greatest song ever, which is upsetting to the rest of the

guys. Bobby, a grade school teacher, wears the face-paint of Paul Stanley, the star child. Glen has on the demon make-up of Gene Simmons, and Bruce, the poorly done Space Man of Ace Frehley, which is streaking down his bearded face. Ron has had barely enough time to put on his black cat whiskers in the squad car and even the black on his nose looks rushed. As Ron enters, Glen is showing off his signed *KISS Dynasty* record again.

“Well, what someone told me was that Peter and Ace didn’t even play on this record.”

“What?” Ron asks, cracking a beer.

“I was talking to that guy, Lawrence, the guy who owns the record store, and he heard that the producer, Vini Poncia, said that Peter and Ace were too doped-up to play. They said they called in different musicians to play their parts.”

Ron sets down his beer, pinching the spot between his eyes. He forgets about the black grease-paint there and frowns, seeing it glisten at the end of his fingertips.

“Why would they do that?” Ron asks. “Why wouldn’t they just record it when they were sober?”

“Maybe they had to get it done,” Bruce, the overweight Space Man says. “Maybe like they had no choice.”

Ron stands up, leaving his beer untouched.

“I can’t even hear this right now,” he says and hurries out.

Ron’s wife, in bed last night, said she was thinking about trying out a separation. That’s exactly how she said it. “I’m thinking about trying out a separation.”

“What?” Ron said.

“I’m thinking I need to explore other avenues. I’m thinking about going back to school.”

Ron sat up and quickly switched on the lamp beside the bed: it shook and made shadows that moved along his wife’s smallish face. Beth itched her nose, but laid in bed, staring straight ahead.

“Honey, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t think this marriage is working right now and I think maybe we should spend some time apart.”

“How could you say it isn’t working?”

“I am not satisfied. I do not feel OK with myself. You, you have a job. The

kids, they have school. Everyone has something to look forward to but me.”

“Honey, we’re supposed to look forward to each other. That’s what couples are supposed to do. Look forward to spending time together.”

“But I don’t. I don’t look forward to spending time with you.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I feel very disappointed in you, right now.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t spend any quality time together. When you’re home, you go down in the basement and get high and listen to your awful records.”

“Beth, that isn’t true.”

“Where were you all night tonight? The kids and me, we were all watching TV and you were downstairs listening to your records.”

“Honey,” Ron said smiling, condescending, “I’m a cop. I have a very stressful job. Sometimes I just need to decompress. I’m not expecting you to understand what it’s like, but it’s something I need to do.”

“But, it’s always like that. I feel like you and I are stuck. We’re not growing as people. We’re the same people we were five years ago.”

“What?” Ron asked, turning to face her now.

“You refuse to take the detective test. You don’t want to move up in the world.”

“I am not going to discuss that with you.”

“Don’t you want to get ahead? Don’t you want to get a nicer place? Don’t you want to be somebody different than you are now?”

Ron sat back up and switched off the lamp. “No,” he said and turned on his side. He laid in the dark and could hear his wife crying. He felt ashamed of himself and turned over, taking her head, and holding it against his large chest. He began to softly sing, his voice baritone but sweet.

“Oh, Beth what can I do? Beth, what can I do?”

Ron’s wife is named Beth. Like the ballad sung by Peter Kriss of KISS. It was how they met, actually. It was the reason Ron wanted to meet Beth in the first place. His friend’s girlfriend Suze mentioned she had a college roommate named Beth, and imagining the kind of girl he had always

dreamt about in the song, Ron agreed. They fell in love right away when Ron admitted he was scared of heights, at the top of a ferris wheel, holding hands, that very first evening.

Tonight Beth is not home: in fact, Ron notices many of her personal items, her shoes, coat, make-up bag, suitcase, are all gone. There is Ron's dinner sitting in the fridge, beneath aluminum foil, which he quickly heats up himself, eating alone, staring at the three empty seats around the table.

Ron cleans his dish and head downstairs to lift some weights. He is feeling out of shape and a little blue so he decides some physical exercise may help. As he climbs the basement stairs, he sees Gary, his son, sitting in the dark again, playing Pong.

"Gary, pal, you're sitting too close to the TV," Ron says, standing beside his son.

Gary does not move, his eyes following the digitized white ball across the black screen.

"Gary, how long have you been down here, buddy?"

"Six hours."

"Six hours is a long time."

"Yeah."

The boy, whose dark hair is cut in a mop-shape, does not stop playing as he speaks.

"Do you know where your mother is?" Ron asks.

Gary shakes his head. "She said she was going to grandma's."

"Oh. Did she have a suitcase with her?"

Gary nods, twisting the joystick knob furiously.

"That was close," Gary whispers to himself.

"Did your mom have a suitcase with her, pal?"

Gary nods, the bleep of the game acting as an answer.

"I'm going to go lift some weights. You want to spot me?"

Gary shakes his head in the negative.

"Gary, how old are you?"

“Twelve.”

“OK,” Ron says and pats his kid on the head.

A couple of hours later, Ron is sitting in his blue boxers watching *All in the Family* reruns on TV. Gary is upstairs doing science homework. Beth has not called or returned. Ron suddenly sits up when he hears Lindsay, his daughter, arriving home. Ron leaps from the soft, orange reclining chair and huddles beside the window watching as a yellow Camaro idles at the end of the block.

“That dickhead again? Come on, Lindsay,” he mutters. “God, I hate that kid.”

Ron watches, squinting his eyes, as the kid in the yellow Camaro grins at Lindsay, who blushes and tucks her long, feathered brown hair behind her ear. The boy whispers something. Lindsay whispers back. Ron frowns, mumbling to his daughter who cannot possibly hear him.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” he says. “Just shake his hand and climb out of that fucking go-cart.”

Lindsey giggles, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Just say goodnight and get out of the car.”

Lindsey closes her eyes as the boy places his hand along her cheek.

“Don’t do it. Don’t you do it.”

The boy flips off the headlights as he turns, grinning. Lindsay’s head begins to drift beneath the horizon of the dash. Ron’s stomach plummets as the Camaro’s engine dies. The streetlight above the car suddenly masks what is going on inside, the windshield a shimmering glare of light and movement. Ron curses and hurries toward the side kitchen door. He darts from the big oak tree to the line of cars parked in the driveways along the street. By the time he’s at the driver’s side window of the Camaro, Ron can see Lindsay has unbuttoned the boy’s pants.

Ron pounds on the window once and the boy jerks up, surprised, turning his head toward the sound. Lindsay, also startled, sits up, shocked at seeing her father, with no shirt on, standing in the dark, smiling. He nods, motioning to the boy to unroll his window, which he does. The boy’s face is ghastly white as he struggles to pull his flannel shirt down over his unbuttoned pants.

“Hi there,” Ron says. “I’m Lindsay’s father.”

“Oh, hello, sir.”

“What’s your name? Because I don’t think we ever met properly,” Ron says, smiling.

“Parker.”

“Parker, I’d like you to say goodnight to my daughter now.”

The boy nods, his face bright red. “Goodnight.”

Lindsay lurches from the Camaro, red-faced, swearing at her father.

“I fucking hate you! I do! You are such a fucking jerk!”

She storms off toward the house and watching her, Ron realizes she is not wearing any shoes. He turns back to look at the boy, Parker.

“Parker, I want to show you something,” he says. He leans in close to the window and shows the boy his large, hairy bicep, on which is placed, a small almost indecipherable tattoo. “Do you see what that is?”

“No,” the boy says.

“That’s a tattoo. Do you know what it says?”

“No.”

“It says, ‘KISS Army.’ Do you know about the KISS army?”

The boy, confused, nods slowly.

“Do you know what it means to be in the KISS army? It’s a brotherhood, like the regular army, but with people who are fucking crazy, like bikers and drug addicts and everything. You didn’t have any idea, did you? No, I bet you didn’t. Did you know the guy, Bill Warner, who works in the morgue downtown is KISS army? Did you know if I asked him to forge some documents for me, he would? Let’s say I went and got my gun and shot you right now. Bill Warner would, without a doubt, file your death as a suicide. Why? Because that’s what we do for each other in the KISS army. Do you get what I’m saying here?”

“Yes.”

“If I ever see you driving down the street again or anywhere near my daughter, I will have you murdered. You and your fancy car together. Now go and don’t ever come back here again.”

The boy nods and turns the car on then peels off. Ron smiles, waving as the boy pulls away. He turns and his smile fades as he stares back at his house. Lindsay is upstairs, packing a suitcase. Ron stands in the doorway, trying to apologize.

“Lindsay, stop it for a moment, OK?”

“I’m not speaking with you. I’m going to go live with Mom at Grandma’s. She said I could if you started acting like a jerk.”

“I was not acting like a jerk. I was trying to help you. That boy, well, he was going to hurt you. He was going to use you and I, well, I’m here to help you.”

Lindsay stops and turns, staring at her father. The blue eye shadow around her eyes is runny.

“You were going to help me? That’s a joke. You don’t even know what I do when I’m not here. You have no idea who my friends are or what sort of person I am, like at school or whenever I don’t have to be here.”

“Lindsay…”

“Mom is right. It’s like you don’t even exist.”

“Lindsay.”

Lindsay closes her small yellow suitcase and picks up a pink phone. She dials a few numbers and Ron watches silently, bracing himself against the doorframe.

“Mom? It’s Lindsay. Can you come pick me up right now?”

As Ron is patrolling 98th Street in the squad car alone the next day, he sees a strange black shape, like a cloud of some kind, glowing in the middle of the street. Some kids on their bicycles are standing beside it, kneeling, poking at it with sticks. Ron flashes his lights and pulls the squad over, climbing from his vehicle.

“What going on here, guys?” he asks.

“We don’t know. Something happened to Teddy.”

“Well, where is Teddy?”

The kids all look downward, toward the strange black shape, which Ron notices is slowly but steadily growing. It is like an enormous hole, an absence of space, which seems to be gradually expanding.

“That’s your pal? He’s in there?”

“He fell in there. Him and his bike,” says a kid with green eyes, who is poking into the black hole with a tree limb.

“He fell in?” Ron asks.

The kids all nod.

“OK, nobody touch anything. Everyone just back away.”

The kids nod and watch as they realize their friend, fallen into the strange

black mass, is truly gone. The cloudy formation suddenly begins to sparkle, as if it is made of the night sky. Several small stars seem to appear as the mass begins to grow again, expanding outward. The kids hurry back, but one of their dirt bikes is too close to the mass and it gets swallowed up quickly: the frame begins to twist and collapse, and then it is gone, then it is nothing. Ron hurries to the squad car and radios in to Angie at the call desk, fighting for his breath.

“Angie, it’s Ron. There’s something weird happening at the intersection of 98th and Homan. There’s some sort of hole or chemical cloud or something. I need a fire truck or chemical clean-up crew or something.”

“10-4, Roger that,” Angie says.

Ron looks up and watches as the black hole continues to grow. A parked car, a blue Nova, teeters inside the blackness, disappearing into the sparkling, star-lit mass. Ron hops out of his squad and yells to the kids who are all still standing nearby, staring. They pedal lazy figure-eights around the circumference of the thing, some of them calling out for their missing friend.

In a moment Ron can hear the clang of the fire truck speeding down 98th Street toward the scene. He takes a deep breath and stares in terrible confusion as the hole continues to grow and three streetlights topple inside.

After four hours, the black hole stops growing and Ron is temporarily dismissed. He heads home to change his shirt, which is soaked through with sweat, and to grab himself something to eat. Beth has been home while Ron’s been at work: she’s cooked him dinner and left it covered in aluminum foil in the fridge. She’s also cleaned apparently: there are vacuum lines on the carpet around where Ron had spilled a bag of bar-b-que potato chips the other night. Ron sets the plate in the oven to warm it up and hears the strange, computer-simulated boops and beeps of Gary’s video game echoing from the basement.

Ron sighs and heads downstairs. Gary is once again playing Pong, alone, in the dark. The boy’s eyes are deep red and he has a drool stain of some kind on the collar of his blue shirt.

“Gary?” Ron asks.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Gary, do you ever worry about being cool?”

“No.”

“Well, I think you should.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I really think you should be concerned about how other kids look at you.”

“I really don’t care if they like me or not.”

“That’s my point, pal. I think you should. Don’t you ever want to have friends?”

“In the future, people won’t have friends. We’ll have computers to interface with.”

“Maybe, pal, but I’m talking about right now.”

“Well, you’re my friend. And so is Lindsay.”

“Lindsay is your older sister. And I’m your dad. We’re not your friends.”

“Why not?”

“Because. Because you can’t be friends with someone you’re related to.”

“But Dad, I don’t like anyone I go to school with.”

“Well, you have to fake it then. You can’t just sit down in this basement playing that game. It’s going to make you into a bad person.”

“Really?”

“I think so. I think it might make you into a weirdo.”

Gary nods. Ron pats his son on the shoulder and heads upstairs to take a nap. When he wakes up, the basement is silent. There is no beep-boop-beep of Gary’s video game. He smiles and pulls himself up from the couch and heads down to see Gary and the video game both gone. They are both missing. Ron scrambles up the basement steps and sees a small white note left on the kitchen counter. It says, “I went to go live with Mom.”

On patrol that night, Ron watches as the black hole swallows all of Turner Avenue. The whole block is just gone, the homes, the trees, the parked cars, a dog which was barking and ran straight into the strange black mass. Parents stand a block away with their children, gasping in horror as the fire department evacuates the next block. The black mass seems to stop growing for a moment, and then, as if making up its mind, it continues to expand once again, swallowing a fire truck whole.

Someone from the mayor’s office is making a speech on the radio and the governor is sending in the national guard. Ron squeezes a family of six people in the back of his squad car, with their pet canary, and drops them off at a relative’s house. When he drives back to the scene, the yellow wooden barricades have already been swallowed up. He calls in on his radio to report the situation and Angie, at the call desk, just says, “I know. We’re

evacuating the whole town, now. It you want, Ron, the chief said you can go by and pick you family up.”

“That’s a 10-4,” Ron says, knowing they are already gone. They are already on the other side of the interstate and probably watching it all on the TV. They are far away from him but they are safe and sound for now at least.

After more of the east side of town is evacuated, Ron is dismissed from duty. He argues with his sergeant about staying on until the job is done, but the sarge can see the lines of exhaustion crossing Ron’s face. Scared, tired, alone, unsure where to go, but not wanting to go back to his empty home, he heads over to Bobby’s house, which is a safe distance from the catastrophe, and where the KISS Army was supposed to be meeting tonight. He does not bother to put on his Peter Kriss cat make-up. He walks around the side of the small brick house and knocks on the kitchen door once. The lights in the kitchen are dimmed and the other three guys are all sitting around the small linoleum table, none of them wearing their make-up, each looking confused and distressed.

“What’s going on here?” Ron asks, standing in the doorway. “Beth,” Peter Kriss’s solo song, is playing quietly on the stereo and when he looks into Bobby’s eyes, he think he sees the other guy is crying.

Bobby sniffles a little and then looks up. “It’s bad news, man. Bad news.”

“The worst news,” Glen says.

“The worst news ever,” Bruce adds.

“It’s Peter Kriss. He...he quit the band.”

“What?” Ron whispers. “What are you talking about?”

“He...he quite KISS.”

Ron slowly backs out of the door and gets back into his squad car as fast as he can.

Ron circles the town in his squad car for an hour, listening to the radio. Every few minutes the deejay mentions the terrible news: town hall has just been swallowed by the black hole. The mayor is now missing. The grammar school looks like it will be swallowed next. Ron finally pulls up in front of his empty house. He tumbles inside and decides to call his mother-in-law’s. He is terrified. He does not know why but he is trembling, his hands shaking, holding the receiver against his ear. In the distance he can hear the sounds of sirens screaming. He takes a deep breath. The phone rings and rings and rings and finally, he hears his mother-in-law Judy’s voice, old, mistaken, angry.

“Judy, it’s Ron. I need to talk to Beth.”

“Well, Ron, I don’t know if she wants to talk to you.” There is a long pause. “*Beth? Beth, do you want to talk to Ron?*” There is some commotion and then Judy whispers into the phone, “Ron, she says she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Will you tell her it’s an emergency please? Tell her, it’s life or death.”

Judy holds the phone again and whispers the mention. She adds, “*He sounds really upset, dear.*” The phone changes hands and Ron can hear his wife breathing on the phone: he knows it’s her breathing. He could recognize it anywhere, soft, unsure, a little sad, but her breath, her breath, which is really, really lovely.

“Hello?” she says. Ron thinks of everything he wants to say, of everything he’s ever wanted to say, of all the times he was wrongs and never said anything, of all the times she has somehow saved him, maybe without her even knowing, and how he never even thanked her. “Hello?” she says again and he can feel the phone trembling in his hand as he tries to think of the perfect thing, the right thing to say, the one thing he can tell her right now that will let her know how she is his everything? How, without her, he does not want to do anything, that none of it matters? “Hello? Ron? Are you there or not?” she is saying and Ron closes his eyes and feels something like tears coming on and decides to just say something, even if it is not perfect, even if it is not good enough to be a line in a hit song, even if it is just him blundering, he does it anyway, he does the best with what he has, and says, “Beth, oh, Beth, without you, or the kids, I’m nothing. I’m absolutely nothing,” then her voice, which comes again, says, “It’s OK, Ron, it’s OK, I’ll be there soon. I’ll be there soon.”



On The

New

Poetry

For

Blossom

Dearie

*Poetry
from
Issue #8*

by Greg Purcell

It must be stupid.

It must benefit our friends and benefactors in the least offensive way.

It must close ranks on the unknown.

It must switch to merely geologic time, which may be too much.

It must know that to be attentive is to kill.

It must know that a gimmick is as fine as any shape.

It must know that the videogame Panzer Dragoon Orta is better, because it is lurid and can be judged by its mechanics.

It must know that the animals will die with us.

It must know good wine like Clayton Eshelman not at all.

It must know that ineffectual anger follows the times.

It must use heightened poetic diction even among mixed company, for heightened diction

displays that idiocy which connects us to the common animal life.

For the animals know their heightened diction and are the stupidest on earth.

It must always be humorous except when inappropriate.

For if money is a form of poetry so is Detroit.

It must cause a ruckus at dinner not at all.
It must be critical only for the amusement of the party, or else violently active.
For now we must live in geologic time and it bores us.
For money in geologic time is not abstract.
It must be both more and less boring than geologic time.
It must know that this is impossible.
For to be boring is a kindness.
For to be exciting is ethical.
For impossibility fumigates manful intelligence.
For the elderly avant-garde are the smartest.
For the elderly avant-garde are the great exemplars of capitalism.
For the elderly avant-garde pose in contradistinctive suits, yet the great contradistinction
is to be naked and elderly and avant-garde, which is a fact counter to learning, and grotesque as any poem.
For if an old dog is nice we protect it with our lives.
For if an old dog is mean we put it down without sentiment.
For stripes are basic and should be worn.
It must sing songs and master suicide.
It must be ashamed to teach.
It must know the lyrics.
It must know Bob Dylan's lyrics not at all.
For "the larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject,"
frightens no one and is not a lyric.
For it must know Donald Fagan's lyrics, and the lyrics of Bo Diddley.
For it must know the lyrics of MC Lyte and Apollinaire.
For it must know that Patti Smith's best work was with Blue Oyster Cult.
For Blossom Dearie was a great poet.



*ADD A

TITLE*

Conversation
from Issue #15

José Luis Cortés-Santander *and* Abraham Cruzvillegas

Construction and destruction are tropisms of a selfsame phenomenon. The destructive split in a decaying structure already announces the presence of an interstice in which new surfaces and figurations are latent. The work of Abraham Cruzvillegas (b. 1968) references this splitting and splicing of structural breakdowns at the level of autotelic gesturality. Born in and based out of Mexico City, Cruzvillegas has emerged as one of the most significant conceptual artists working today. José Luis Cortés-Santander (b. 1980), a Mexican artist also based in Mexico City, works in the same line of flight. Developing forms of expression that pursue impossibility and provocation as sources for radical visual configurations, his work seeks what he calls “the radiant force of that which is permanently ‘out of place.’”

In the following conversation, Cortés-Santander and Cruzvillegas discuss Duchampian “infra-thinness,” Taoist practice, institutional stagnation, aesthetic impermanence, and the translatability of the concept of the “misfit” across different cultural stratifications and mediums in the age of high capitalism.

José Luis Cortés-Santander: Recently I’ve been considering how the word “misfit” doesn’t translate very well into Spanish. In Mexico, at least, to be categorized as a “social deviant” doesn’t quite hold the same meaning as “misfit,” much less the more charismatic “punk.” Do you believe there’s a more precise term in Spanish, or would it have to be invented?

Abraham Cruzvillegas: Misfit, in any case, would signify a social deviant, someone who doesn’t fit into normativity, which leads me to think of Foucault and his history of madness, his history of sexuality, his history of discipline. Schools, hospitals and jails are sites where those who don’t fit into the system are rehabilitated. Orthopedia as a form of social corset became an illusion of *what should be*, of *normalcy*. Luckily art is a discipline that tests how difficult it would be for something deviant to exist, which in turn signals—in its discursive critical ability—a potentiality in which everything is possible. I see art clearly as a contemplative capacity, one in which it is possible to observe the landscape of something bordering mystic ecstasy, slobbering, without any productive or efficient zeal, in the terminology of late capitalism: a free and delirious attitude. How have you developed your own language as an artist without dealing with orthopedia?

JLCS: My inclination toward art is an unplanned movement, probably due to a fortunate vocational disorientation between stimuli and incoherent personae. I was not raised in a motivating environment, neither artistically nor intellectually, and it took me a long time to recognize that I was immersed in a corrective system that I had already rejected at a gut level. Through social inertia I was certified in a context in which artistic production is only understood to proceed from calculated intentions or objectives, and this disappointed me exceedingly.

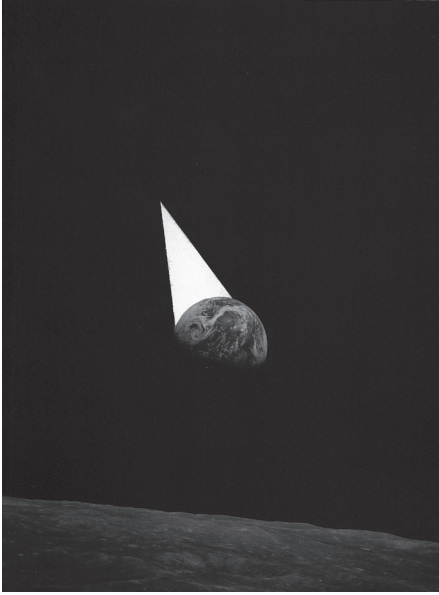
I think it is impossible not to participate in forms of orthopedia, in the same way that I believe malaise is a great instigator of creative action. If we claim that our body presents an allegory for whatever system regulates it (again referring to Foucault), then its complexity and potentiality may pass unacknowledged even as it conserves a perfect, silent, and monotonous functionality (like any other mechanism). When I personally realized that engaging with that certainty caused me some measure of crisis and unease, I decided to work in another way.

AC: In what way?

JLCS: Without strategic or pragmatic ambition or the ambition to belong, but experimenting with the limits that each contextualization reveals. I enjoy thinking of art as the sum of those situations that have no room in that tedious machinery. Some of my funniest examples go back to art schools, where I didn't have such a good time. While taking a sculpture course for a degree, I proposed a semester project in which I would work on the construction of a tunnel as an escape route from the workshop, for which I received a silent denial. Years later, lawyers from another art school arbitrarily impeded the announced burial of a time capsule that would have served as my final master's project.

Rather than attempt to force a social corset open through protest or rage, I prefer to reclaim the human capacity to question the relevance of our happenings in the manner of a barometer of sympathies and agreements. Fortunately this has led me to link up on different occasions with people of extraordinary civic force. In collaboration we have produced "autogenerative" spaces for exhibiting artistic designs that many institutions in the traditional sense could hardly accommodate. This has fed the spirit of my work for many years.

AC: I recollected something I said obtusely some time ago: "*Economy* is a thing that controls mankind's will, but it is manmade in the end. In my opinion, lack of things or lack of money—scarcity—can bring the best and the worst out of people. The promise of consumption is something that may move us towards blind lack of will, but when you don't understand the language of the promise of consumption, then you make your own version of style, a misfit. Then things get a voice in which we may have a dialogue." In this sense, to generate a system, a language, a unique artistic discourse—subversive by reason of its inefficiency in the context of late capitalism—in which objects have the



José Luis Cortés-Santander, *Untitled (Irregular Pearl series)*, 2010. Drawing cut on magazine print, 11" x 8"

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same voice and authority as ourselves, is, as I have dreamt it, a system of delirium, with a delirious methodology, with delirious goals and delirious economies. Do you remember the Festival of Misfits organized by Filliou in London?

JLCS: Without a doubt. Thinking about Filliou, I think his proposal for a "Center for Permanent Creation" with its equally subversive character could take shape in your own conception of a "delirious system," as something more powerful (because of its ideological reach), sustained by the realization of unique artistic languages disengaged from the spell of consumerism. This also makes me think of the festivals of plagiarism (in different cities in the United States and in Britain during the 1980s) as breeding grounds for the idea that, one could claim, evolved into the Creative Commons front, which does not oppose but reinterprets

AC: It is exactly by placing the finger in the fissure, in the crevice, on the ligature of the institution as work of art, that formulations are generated which—at the risk of being anticlimactic or at least antiparadigmatic—create new paradigms, new conventions as well. And because I think that in reality the institution is already embodied in oneself, there is always a degree (conscious or not) of self-destruction. Do you remember the Destruction in Art Symposium organized by Metzger in London?

JLCS: It's a major reference point. Its salience as an example of radical gesture emphasizes how powerfully evocative its account has been for several decades since. So I ask myself: How much force has been inherited nowadays by public stagings of cultural self-destruction when we witness the agonizing seduction of the climactic, the discomfort and embarrassment at seeing a rockstar destroy a guitar on stage? Does there really exist an "all or nothing" in art?

AC: I think it does, precisely when we don't agree to become service providers, to go with the flow, to fulfill the expectations others have of us, to rupture our own bubble of comfort.

JLCS: I think that all artistic manifestation carries a loss within itself. I could understand this as the inevitable (and I'd say, necessary) level of auto-destruction that you mention. It is constantly lost

in negotiating its survival, in the demand for the idea to present itself in the place and time that best become it or least affect it. But attempting to return to stereotypes, I don't know if this peculiar attitude constitutes a new generation of "deviant art."

AC: A heliport in a utility terrace, the hypertrophied monstrosity of the world like the prosthetic evolution of a pearl, a cake thrown toward the floor, the ubiquity of your house keys; how do these configure and participate in the languages and discourses of contemporary art? Could they be regarded as conventional exercises today? In what way is there a non-global individuated register in these gestures and in your work in general?

JLCS: All of these works were conceived as deliberately dysfunctional circumstances. They're signs or points of inflection in the flow of everydayness, with very simple themes. This intention to interrogate the construction of reality is common to many contemporary art discourses, but the principal difference between this case and those abundant exercises that illustrate curiosity is its lack of media and physical permanence. In this sense they could be interpreted as false leads, paradigmatic gestures. In contrast to the modes of artistic production predominant in my generation, my work departs from a displacement of the object to a fortuitous or sporadic plane, far from a rationalizing center, of a reflexive, gestural and transitory nature where no significant expectations or revelations abide. I'm not interested in celebrating my observations with overrated works because I believe no one needs them on a global stage, where the systems of cultural production only function as degenerate metaphors of human aspiration and the fragile structure of its dogmas.

AC: From a capitalist, utilitarian, and productive perspective, an attitude like that of Taoism generates versions of reality—some of which could coincide with your projects—that could be considered delirious or simply stupid. In my eyes they become indispensable for their high level of subversion.

JLCS: I believe that it's worth the effort to ask ourselves whether the conscious act of generating aesthetic movements, gestures, or experiences destined for failure as art is a subversive manifestation in itself, and in any case, what would be the cultural relevance of subversion today beyond signaling fractures or perversions in the system? At what level are these slippages communicable or expandable today?

AC: The Taoist master would respond with something like: "Take this so you have a reason to mourn."

JLCS: Create impossibilities, and thereby create possibilities, as Deleuze put it. Hit the wall as an inevitable gesture which finds its line of flight, that power of the false which constitutes the truth.

I like the notion of speculating on what forms of responsibility entail subversion from the perspective of the artist, at least in those cases we've hinted at.

AC: In a kind of ideological and aesthetic infra-thinness, there always turns out to be a great challenge to construct an authentic formulation that in its imbecilic inefficiency generates fissures in the creative paradigm, and that, without generating pamphlets and propaganda, remains subversive. To return to the topic: When Thomas Kuhn affirms that in any epistemological break, the consolidation of new paradigms can be discerned, is it possible to perpetuate the interstitial moment? I believe that's the "*durée*" that Duchamp signaled with the image of the "consort," the "bride," who is neither married nor unbetrothed... the fourth dimension, the caressed simultaneity, the mystic ubiquity.

JLCS: I believe absolutely in the power of this disability, of the blinding interstice that enlivens and disturbs. Only under such ambiguity could these mentioned perversions burst open. But maybe this lapse does not carry the possibility of perpetuating itself beyond the time it takes a coin to fall because it is a transient state in regard to definition and order. The bride is an embellished misfit, an ideological weakling.

AC: As such, and without caricature, this weakling has a potential translatable to a Charles Atlas, also ideological, whose instability—by virtue of impossibility—could also be that of a misfit, but a brawny one. The point at which painting ceased to be painting, and sculpture stopped referring to itself as sculpture, in order to pass forth into another state of language and discourse—such as in the case of Manzoni, of Klein, of Fontana—but using the presuppositions of those disciplines as a frame for their failure; they are misfits institutionalized by history whom it would be ridiculous to replicate or copy, without mentioning those who deliberately evaded attending the site of those conventions of art so as to erect themselves as something else: a work of anything but art, said Duchamp, decades before them.

JLCS: The radiant force of that which is permanently "out of place" could very well provoke us to leave art to rest for a moment. It would suit us to look toward other phenomena, perhaps less perceptible but of a similar sharpness and emotive potential. To promote the juggling acts of attention as social paradigm. To start over incessantly.

AC: Eso...

AC: Exactly...























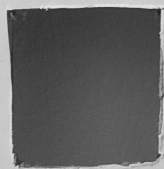


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 only reason vounds
 I was an acolyte
 over the months, and
 failed short-circuit fucking.
 photographs
 in his drawer
 You're my to hear
 I seduced
 recovered faith
 I test it,
 climbing
 ever accuse me of don't fuck with
 the highest monument between
 that I would be accu with special bulk
 God, or the Devil, or both
 cannot describe how
 magnified rought the g attractive
 "I guess you the power of
 put the muzzie in his m
 our twisting roads
 the new arriva
 of blood on
 on drawing paper
 this misery
 I could not recover

not, was dissolving my disposition. Every time I tripped or chewed or rolled my eyes, I thought, “We trip, we chew, we roll our eyes.” I did not like the Amy Leaches. We did not like the Amy Leaches.

I laid listless on the bed, not caring to participate further in the group. Then I came up with my escape: up until then I had only been doing possible things, like forgetting that I had not forgotten to pay the water bill. Oh, the futility of possible action, multiplied infinitely by a galactic cast of identicals! I realized the only way to shuffle off this endless, senseless twinning was to do something impossible, something where I could be sure I was the Only One.

That is why I am in the air, a moderately impossible place to be, given the masses of the planet and myself. I should say that at first I levitated immoderately—into the universes—before I came back to my own Earth and found a medium garden-view position between levitating and gravitating. The garden is a leafy, rather lawless mass of alchemical plants, which convert sunshine into plant and array their stems with melons and azaleas and dragonflies, and anybody can roost here, tubby ducks and thin cats and self-hurling frogs.

The universes also were wondrous. I found that many experiments are being conducted out there—sediment is consolidating into trial planets with trial moons and trial animals. In many of the universes the laws of physics are the same as ours. For example, more wood means more fire, and snowflakes are hexagonal. In others, there are no auroras or linear time and nobody has invented integers. Among the planets with trial populations, I visited some with trial Amy Leaches, some of whom were following the same life as me; some of whom were more single-minded; some of whom did not play the violin because Mrs. Gilleroth did not move to town with her vanload of children’s violins; all of whom seemed to be learning and forgetting the same few things over and over, from the age of two on.

At the invitation of the repeating stars, I slanted away from possibility into impossibility, through the multiverse; and I found myself repeated endlessly. I had expected to comprehend and detest them all, all the mes; yet I did neither. These encounters in the end did not feel so different from the sediment in my mind—my memories—which are sometimes mulch for wisdom but usually just repeat and repeat: again and again a memory of myself does the same thing in the same place, while other memories sleep unseen. The trial Amys were no more knowable than myself and no less at the mercy of those sediment-makers, the stars. For now, I sit here responding to the invitation of the likely but ecstatic garden.



Hannie

Poetry
from *Issue #6*

Oakley

Monologue by Joyelle McSweeney

Hannie Oakley: Hannie Oakley, Okie: Go to countdown! Buy the slack! Lift the barrel. It's a barrel-to-shoulder life: now, tote it. I can shoot a partridge, a sparrow, and an arrow. Live on in my forehead, Paw, in a padded drawer, Paw, like you'd find in a little girl's, uh, jewelcase, that's what they're all thinking about now anyway, Maw! Slacks off, kiss off, correct the pattern, fire in the projection booth! Which pubic flutter underlines the belly butter with a terrible motion, friend. Asstrel Projection, waste-water project plant, limonada, my wastrel fiendish. Join hands! Plebescite! That's a new fiend with an arrgh in it, and that's panties for luck, that's AC for projection, RC for cola, FM for reception, AM for mourning dove. That's an IOU for the LCD which I swiped from the cigar store where my Indian lover lies down to lay the law down, lo! On the down-low! Tribal rite, it passes the litmus and contains the meniscus: dips chaw. My favorite shooting weather is a dying fall. My favorite trumpet is eschatological. My favorite kind of slacks are velvet. My favorite hours are variety, where you can turn the variety down. No control, maw, not possible, take the 3-pak, that's the vaccine complete, compris, and tout suite, so go downtown, Miss Innoculata, Miss Vaccinata Dentata, they're playing your death waltz over the AP wire, go to countdown! The first pill's just to see if you're listening, the second pill lays it on real thick, and the third pill reels you in and seals the deal. How I feel: My favorite kind of house is glass, my favorite glass is plate, my favorite plate is rice, my favorite rice bears a portrait of three

presidents, three presentiments, three breathmints, three applicants, and the sight of my name in three languages, Baruch, Atah, and Hanoi. This is the kind of clinging-to-the-helicopter-runners-effect that makes the stars wink amongst themselves and shrink the exterior gonads of the previous century, twenty fly by like lice, Mr. Flybynight Wouldnthurta turns gravely green and sinks, the spine slumps, Time's carriage wobbles, until it's all like a bell without a bicycle o'er the brink. Now comes Hell in highwaters, knucklecuffs, briefcase watch, convertible hairline, waving the document in the air like a rodeo rider, until all us chillin' refugees jes quit hangin' on and barf, with friends like that, just who needs to go back to Marfa Texas to watch the fluorescent lipsticks lean just so against the shackwall. Whoo, whoot, and whoooooe Jesus who is waiting out there with the bill made up, made up pert as a bellboy, part-night jar, part-how-you-like, in his highhat getup for the dumbshow at the end of time, and he's just now palpating the world's smallest hyacinth, violently and with all the regard of a child virtuoso, thwackin' away, just making time till you dip your fingertip to the silver-crammed tipjar, all put-on casual-like. That last sin's the signal: then he chem-shocs the di-verse corners of the night, eviscerates all This-n-such quicker than a say-so.



"Hannie Oakley" is the opening monologue to The Widow Party, a collaborative play co-written by Joyelle McSweeney, Johannes Goransson, Jacob Knabb, Patrick Durgin, and Jen Karmin, and performed in the month of May 2008 at Links Hall, Chicago.

Unlikely

Non-fiction
from *Issue #6*

by Amy Leach

Here we are all, by day; by night, we're hurl'd
By dreams, each one into a sev'ral world.

Robert Herrick, "Dreams"

Here we are all. By day, by night, we're hur'd
By dreams, each one into a sev'ral world.

Robert Herrick, rearranged

"In infinite space, even the most unlikely events must take place-somewhere."

Max Tegmark, "Parallel Universes." *Scientific American*, 2003

My name is Amy, and I live suspended in the air, in a large plush chair, over a garden. I came up here after I read about the implications of infinity. I read that there are places so far away, moving so swiftly away from us, that if you traveled at 16 billion miles a day (the speed of light), forever, you would never reach them. There is so much matter in so many universes—some say the amount is infinite—that anything remotely possible must happen. Everything likely, everything unlikely, exists. Streets of gold and sentient geraniums.

If everything possible exists, then the universes have produced another Earth called Earth, with another Holy See, another cracked Liberty Bell, another myth of Sisyphus. Another Amy whole violin string snapped during her seventh-grade performance of a piece by Aram Katchaturian; who dreams, if she dreams, mundanely.

Because Amy Leach is possible (as I exemplify), then many other Amy Leaches on many other Earths exist as well, though not all of us live identically. Some live exactly the same life as me in every particular except for one dream. At age 47 I will dream that I am watering the ferns on the porch. So will a quantity of other Amy Leaches. But another group dreams that they are watering the hallway fern. Otherwise our lives correspond entirely.

The thought of them all, and especially the thought of the ones who digress

FIFTEEN MINUTE
PERFORMATIVE MASCULINITY
NEW YORK SCHOOL NAME
DROPPING POEM FOR DAVID
SHAPIRO AS TRANSCRIBED
FROM HIS INTERVIEW AT
PENNSOUND

*Poetry
from
Issue #6*

by Gabriel Gudding

I said to Jasper Johns
I was walking with Allen Ginsberg
I wrote a book with Jacques Derrida
When I was at Columbia
It was one of those wonderful days
I commute a lot but I write while I'm commuting
Joe writes a lot when he commutes too
I dedicate this to the painter Jeremy Rahl
I hardly knew Kenneth then
I had memorized everything in the New York Public Library

I met Kenneth and I loved him
I met Joe Ceravolo and Frank Lima
We won the avant garde book award
We met almost all the time that we could
It was one of the first times that I had an essay in a dream
After that dream essay came this poem by Joe which is of course
Not by Joe but by me
That was a poem given to me by Joe
Kenneth said he did he did win a national award
This is a poem for Joe
I'll read another poem for Joe
I said when I was off the air
This is a poem I wrote thinking about how often we'd meet
He said, "I want to found a school, David."
I said, "Oh that sounds great, Joe."
And he said, "Yes, you know."
I also met Allen Ginsberg a lot and we would walk
I am referring mostly to Charles Ives
Allen Ginsberg walked beside me
That is influenced by Samuel Beckett's radio play Oh Joe
I was writing a book with Jacques Derrida
I heard a dog crying the day I had to give one seminar on prayer
Rabbi Heschel, the great protestor, his wife is now my cousin by marriage
I wrote this work for Joe Ceravolo, my friend
At Bard College where I taught
I've always wanted to do an opera, it wd be very Kochian
I want to read something less lugubrious
I do have a lot of elegies
I'm getting to this age where people want me to write my memoirs
I said to Jasper Johns a year or two ago
When I was at Columbia I once threatened self-destruction to Kenneth Koch
This is a poem I wrote walking around the George Washington Bridge
Frank Lima writes in the subway every morning at six o'clock
My welsh terrier walked around this park a lot
I dedicate this to the painter Jeremy Rall
This was pre-Giuliani
Paul Georges once said
It's like one of those moments in Wallace Stevens
I want to read something for Rudy Burkhart
Of the great friends that I've lost, Kenneth Koch, Joe Ceravolo, Meyer Schapiro
Jacob and I, Jacob his son, has worked with me at Cooper Union
I said to Rudy I said you're the best photographer in America
He left me, he left my son, really, a hundred photographs
He drowned himself like his friend Edmund Denby
He said You're always giving me gifts, and he said Yes no more gifts

So I wrote this song for Rudy
He loved New York, he also loved nature
I said to him you're the best nature photographer
Antonioni said I love Monica Vitti but I also love a white line on a street
Rudy really knew how to make a white line on a street as beautiful as a woman,
it's very hard to do
The architect John Hejduk makes a great drawing every day
He's another great friend and I'll read a poem for him later
Here's another poem for Rudy and it's really a 9-11 poem
I wrote a lot
I was a violinist
I was like a trained monkey and my family was all trained monkeys
My grandfather was one of the great singers of the world
He's a composer also
He was very important
You can still go to Judaica stores and buy them
Mozart is a standard
Where Glenn Gould is playing
My father was not only a violist but a sculptor
He studied with a student of Rodin
I remember when Kenneth said congratulations on yr dual career
I married an architect
She introduced me to Meyer Schapiro
He defended Jackson Pollock
He wd defend Wolf Kahns' landscapes
William de Kooning
My great teacher, he really introduced modern art studies at Columbia
He brought de Kooning and Barnett Newman and others TO Columbia
I once sd to Wm de Kooning is it true that Meyer saved yr woman number one?
As Delmore Schwartz once said
Here's a very funny one for Meyer
His great love Picasso
Meyer lectured on it for a famous five hours
An arrow wd not pierce her vagina
I could not erase one woman
Who is all cunt and spine and democratic bone
You're sucking me off
Certain people thought that I shouldn't publish that

But then forgave me
A lot of my life is about architecture
I worked for a long time with John Hejduk
When he met the Romanian president he gave him Emily Dickinson
When I was a fellow at Cambridge
My poem was placed in the castle in the castle and dedicated by Havel
He took a poem of mine and translated it
I'm looking forward to the day when the president of Columbia and I and
others
I met his brother and he sd the whole Palach family thanks you
What was moving in Prague when I read that poem
Havel said
Havel had someone recite my poem by heart
John Hejduk liked that part of the poem
Trotsky was in love with my grandmother
My uncle was not only a great pianist but also wrote sonnets for the New
York Times
My father was also concerned with everything
Like Meyer Schapiro he also cared about everything
There were hordes of people of a variety of races in my home
Allen Ginsberg didn't like the left being violent nor did I
I felt very close to Robert Lowell
Kenneth used to say to me
This was published in South Africa when I was 12
Every poem of mine is an act of resistance
The old surrealists have grown up and have good jobs
A lot of us used to dream whether our names wd be next to Thucydides
Poem for my architect John Hejduk, the greatest architect
I wrote a long poem for him



ADD TITLE

Conversation
from
Issue
#15

Maggie Nelson *and* Tim Kinsella

Maggie Nelson is the author of four books of nonfiction, including *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012) and *Bluets* (Wave Books, 2009), as well as four books of poetry. Formally inventive, deeply researched, and uncompromisingly original, her work is both personal and political, its critical reception revealing as much about our culture as the work itself does. For this interview, she spoke with newly-minted Featherproof Books editor and author of *Let Go and Go On and On* (Curbside Splendor, 2014) Tim Kinsella about risk, vulnerability as a writer, and the color blue.

Tim Kinsella: How has your relationship to blue changed in the five years since the publication of *Bluets*? The relationship as you describe it in the book is so extended and ongoing, it would seem like your experience with Blue couldn't just end, but that the book had to stop being written at some point. Do you remember at the time feeling a sense of closure? Catharsis? Frustration? After holding a specific filter in place and seeing everything through that filter, how are you then changed by its removal?

Maggie Nelson: My relationship to blue has changed pretty much entirely. It's almost like it's an ex I don't speak to anymore. This change has many roots, but I do think it's a fairly natural effect of burning through something, via intense focus, if not obsession. There was definitely a moment when I had to start turning down people's blue stories and leads, just so I could marshal what I already had. I remember my friend Christian Hawkey telling me about the blues of Georg Trakl and feeling heartbroken that I couldn't let them in; the party was closed, the drawbridge was up. Sad as this all has felt, it's also likely as it should be—more than any book I've ever written, *Bluets* had a dramatic point of closure, a point at which I knew it was finished. I put it in a box and didn't look at it again for a long time, like maybe a year. It was like I finished a performance and left the stage. But so far as I can tell, when you remove a filter, you just make room for a new one.

TK: When you were younger, before writing your first book, how clearly did you visualize or anticipate your own aesthetic? Was the willingness to occasionally write about yourself in such an intimate way always a given to you? How much of the act of writing is invested in that sort of vulnerability?

MN: Wow, I love that idea—imagining one’s aesthetic before one has developed it! I wasn’t nearly so advanced. Wanting to write, that was enough. Certainly I had heroes, whose sensibilities acted as a guide, even if I was nosing around in the dark. I remember in high school, being given a list of quotes about “the meaning of life” and being asked to choose the one we resonated to the most, and I chose one by someone I’d never heard of, John Cage. Maybe the rest is history. As for writing intimately, I came up in the 80s and 90s with AIDS and ACT UP and radical feminism and my writing heroes were pretty unworried over intimacy and vulnerability—there was too much work to do. They weren’t sitting around worrying over the mores of self-exposure. I’m thinking of people like David Wojnarowicz and Eileen Myles, and before them, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, you know, people with work to do. Whether or not you got to it through intimacy or scholarship or activism, you just got to it, that was the thing.

TK: How does the form of *Bluets*—gaps and leaps—relate to that vulnerability? How do you hope the reader will feel the form? How do you hope the reader will think about the emotional content?

MN: You know, I never imagine any reader of my work. I don’t mean this coldly; I like people reading my work, and I like it if they like it. But I can’t worry about anyone else while writing. It has to sound right to me, it has to feel “true,” it has to have a structure that strikes me, upon reading and re-reading, as exactly so. But getting there is more intuitive than mapped out. Vulnerability as a goal strikes me as a little yicky, or at least un-useful. I think vulnerability is just something that happens if you’re truly engaged in stripping away self-deceptions, bravado, ego, and so on, and looking to find what’s most thrumming in one’s self, in the world. I’m interested in how writing can enable that process, not in performing any predetermined set of emotions or values.

TK: Your accomplishments make clear that you must be pretty motivated. I mean there’s a certain base strength necessary to executing one’s will in the world. But you write very openly about some pretty harrowing despair. In a practical sense, how does this play out in terms of your process?

MN: I’ve been blessed with episodes or a sensibility that I would characterize, if push came to shove, as hypomanic, by which I mean that I haven’t suffered—knock on wood—the kind of depression that seriously inhibits writing, except in periods of weeks, maybe sometimes months, rather than years. *The Red Parts* and *Bluets* were both written at very hard times for me. I don’t really know how I did it, although in retrospect, it certainly looks a lot like coping.

TK: Is the occasional emotional brutality of *Bluets* subject in any way to *The Art of Cruelty*? How did the writing of the one book inform the next one in both conscious ways that you recognized at the time and unconscious ways that you can now see?

MN: Is *Bluets* emotionally brutal? I'm intrigued. Usually I think of it as something of a break from the cruelty/violence books, which to me are *Jane: A Murder*, *The Red Parts*, and *The Art of Cruelty*. I've always been interested in the play between abstraction and figuration, and have sometimes mentally broken my books up into the abstracts (*Bluets*, *Women*, *the New York School*, and *Other True Abstractions*), and the concretes (the cruelty books named above). I think it might have been Deleuze, writing on Bacon, who asked: does cruelty depend in some sense on there being a figure? Can there be a "cruelty in the abstract," as Artaud is always talking about? In this sense, *Bluets*—along with color in general—acts a kind of a negotiator between the abstract and concrete: color is an abstraction, but it must come into being via specific objects, specific eyes registering specific wavelengths. This may be a roundabout way of answering your question, but maybe, hopefully, you're following me... The pain in *Bluets* derives from the urge to link an experience of love or beauty to a specific person or impermanent object. But of course that's what we do—we don't just sit around loving the big, abstract, immortal concept of "blue." Is that cruel? I don't know. Only as cruel as the first noble truth.

TK: So many sources are woven into your writing, it becomes about a sort of masterful sequencing and balancing. Obviously David Shields's *Reality Hunger* or David Markson's collage novels are more self-conscious and extreme examples of that sensibility, but do you see commonalities in your own work with either one of them or both?

MN: The first few pages of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* were utterly key to *Bluets*. They kind of gifted me the voice from which to speak the book. David's *Reality Hunger* is, as I think he would say and has said, more of a theory of the aesthetic he's interested in than an actualization of it; probably I feel a little distant from its sense of polemic. But insofar as both writers are champions/creators of works of literature that disregard taxonomy, there are definitely commonalities.

TK: What is the role of risk and how does the way that you situate yourself in relation to it change throughout the process of writing a single piece? And if not risk, what are the meaningful terms of negotiation for you in both conceptualizing and executing a piece and the push-and-pull and give-and-take of a piece finding its form?

MN: I appreciate your giving the room for it NOT to be risk, because risk isn't quite the right register for what I'm trying to do. I mean, the writing has to take risks, something fierce has to be at stake, and I have to write my way into knowing what that is, whether I'm doing scholarship or autobiography or whatever. But taking risks just happens along the way; it isn't its own

virtue. As for form, I think I'm old-fashioned, by which I mean weirdly Platonic: I kind of believe the piece has a pre-existing form that it's my job to find. I know this isn't "true," but it has always helped me to feel I'm uncovering rather than inventing.

TK: What are the personal and political satisfactions of transgression for you? Are you motivated at all by a sense of it or does just being yourself and speaking freely necessarily lead to it?

MN: Transgression presumes the lines are drawn, and then you dramatize your stepping over them. But as Wittgenstein might say, that's but one way of playing the game. It tells me something about the culture, though, when I just say what I want to say or feel the need to say—when I am just "being myself," as you put it—and people tell me I'm being brave. What could this mean? As a friend of mine recently put it, being called brave is kind of like saying, You shouldn't be saying what you're saying. Not that there isn't such a thing as bravery, and not that I'd be actively mad at anyone who called me brave, and not that I haven't called others brave. I'm just saying you learn a lot from the things that other people experience as transgressions, especially if you yourself don't experience them that way.

TK: Are there aspects of yourself—secrets, taboos, etc.—that are clearly off-limits to you and how do you draw that line? And once it's drawn are you then tempted to cross it, as by design that line becomes the next standard of risk or transgression?

MN: There isn't anything off-limits that comes to mind. Maybe I'd know it when I saw it—or, more likely, someone in my life would flag it as such, and I'd be bummed out. I was reading something in the *New York Times* recently, one of those back page things, by Francine Prose, and she said something about having to be very cautious about writing about one's children, since we are their custodians. This freaked me out, since I'm on the cusp of publishing a whole book about my baby, and to a lesser extent, my stepson. But then I rinsed my mind of the moralism by re-reading all the amazing and ethically sound and often feminist writers who have written beautifully and honestly about their children, and I felt OK again. I'm also reading, like everyone else, *My Struggle*, and I'm really inspired by it. I especially love something Karl Ove Knausgård said in a *Paris Review* interview, in response to a question about how his intense autobiographical writing has affected his marriage: "Mentioning things doesn't change anything, doesn't help anything, it's just words. There is something much more deep and profound to a relationship than that. Revealing stories and quarrels—that's just words. Love, that's something else." I really relate to what he's saying here. Likewise, there's writing, and then there's publishing—you may have to make negotiated decisions about what you end up publishing, but in the moment of writing, you've got to say whatever you want to say. We've got to have such spheres of freedom.

TK: We're the same age. I'm wondering how your senses of motivation or inspiration have evolved or warped or shifted over the years? What are the biggest changes you can recognize in your own processes?

MN: Hey, how's your 40+? Glad to see you on the other side! Gosh, there have been a lot of changes. All too typical and clichéd to bear recounting... I used to drink a lot and write poetry during fits of feeling enamored with or overwhelmed by the world, I used to live in New York City and scribble deep thoughts and lovely phrases on the fly, I used to understand the urge to write a single lyric poem, I used to, I used to. Now I have kids and I don't drink and I live in this infernal city in which I drive all the time while filling my mind with completely asinine NPR, sometimes KPFK: maybe you can tell I miss NYC. And yet LA has been undeniably good for my writing—the space out here allows one to imagine and enact larger projects, in art and writing both. I sustain my thoughts, I'm less in love with the sound of an overheard phrase or a good line and more entranced by thinking a hard thought through. I see more art now, I write at circumscribed hours, and so on. It's OK.

TK: How does your own career seem to you now that you have a good number of successes and you are certainly a mid-career or established writer? Are you aware of having to protect any aspects of your creative practice from your career?

MN: A good number of successes! Mid-career! Established! I don't see my career with any clarity, the word "career" seems funny to me, maybe the way some artists feel about the word "practice." When I hear "career" I always think of an amusement park ride, I don't know why. I guess because I don't really see it, I don't feel the need to protect anything from it. Probably I feel what many artists and writers likely feel, which is a "you ain't seen nothing yet" feeling. No matter what I've written, I feel like I haven't yet begun in earnest, haven't yet really shown the range of my thoughts or words. More to be revealed, or so I hope.

TK: How aware are you of feeling part of any specific literary/art/subculture traditions? And how does this inform your work, both in conception and execution? Does your writing feel a sense of obligation to anything in particular?

MN: I feel myself to be a part of many different subcultures; most likely it shifts depending on where I am, you know, where it would be more political or surprising to declare what. (I don't know the context of *MAKE Magazine* well enough to know which subculture to name/describe here!) I don't feel any obligations in writing, though, which is great. Save to myself, to my own mind. In my forthcoming book I quote Deleuze and Parnet on this account: "What other reason is there for writing than to be a traitor to one's own reign, traitor to one's own sex, to one's class, to one's majority? And to be a traitor to writing." This is more complicated than it sounds—but it sounds good, doesn't it?

TK: How do you hope the people in your life, those you are closest to, will regard your writing?

MN: O I couldn't talk about the people closest to me as one clump—they are so different from each other and have so many different needs and concerns. I will say I felt a real sense of relief and happiness when my mother read my forthcoming book, *The Argonauts*, in manuscript—a book that kind of rakes her over the coals, yet again—and she sent me back a very short email that basically said, “Don't change a word.” That was a really lovely moment. I'm always looking for permission, support, green lights; I always want the people closest to me to feel the love in what I'm writing, or at least to understand why I do what I do. But I've learned over time that they don't, or at least not always. So I guess I hope that they love me anyway.



Them

Non-fiction
from
Issue #8

by Bryan Furuness

They ask Jesus to help them sell more insurance policies. They watch Fox News and read *Left Behind* un-ironically. They vacation in Gatlinburg and the old people parts of Florida. They own guns and talk about home invasion the same way I talk about to Tahiti: *someday, someday...*

They love paintball, which they seem to think of as a dress rehearsal for when society breaks down, and they can become the righteous survivalists they were always meant to be by gunning down some non-suburbanites. I never go to paintball. I say, "Me and Jesus are going to stay in the office. Make some cold calls."

They don't laugh.

At Bible college, their religious and political beliefs were welded together, like the Trinity had just been waiting around for the Republican Party so they could all play a little half-court two-on-two.

Every meeting starts with a pra-off. Who can go longer? Who can drop the most memorized verses? From my office, I count the number of times they say the word just.

Lord, we just...ask that you just watch over us, Lord. Just put your hand on us, Lord. Just fill us up...

If it were a drinking game, I'd be dead in ten minutes.

They will tell you that their belief in the Bible is "literal." But if you ask to see the tassels on the corners of their garment (Numbers 15:38) or the parapet on their roof (Deuteronomy 22:8), they will—

Actually, I don't know what they would do. I've never actually said this to them. But I've thought it a lot.

This I can tell you with complete certainty: the treacly praise music coming from their desktop speakers makes God want to stick His finger down His throat.

They either have long sideburns or no sideburns at all. They own cheap suits and expensive cars, which they drive like Mr. Toad, except for the one guy who's a daydreamer and a Sunday driver like me, only he dreams about baseball and lunch, whereas I dream about books and lunch.

They will tell you with a straight face that Catholics worship the Pope, all media is liberal, and the reason they do not let their daughters eat chicken or milk is because the hormones will make their girl-parts develop early. Between networking meetings, they circulate hysterical e-mails about how much Obama loves abortion. Sex is their bogeyman.

They—this probably goes without saying—home-school.

Though they reproduce like it's their job, I have to admit they treat their children with kindness and patience. At our Christmas party in the gymnastics place, while their pregnant wives lean on their elbows at the plastic picnic tables, they climb the rope ladder and swim around the ball pit with their children for hours until they're all sweaty and red-faced, and hoarse from laughter.

They serve on nonprofit boards and give at least (at least!) ten percent of their income to church. All of them together spent over \$60,000 to build a BUV—an all-terrain vehicle with a flatbed—and ship it to Ghana. Which makes me wonder: Did anyone ask the Ghanaians? Did anyone say, "Hey, what would you guys do with sixty-grand?" Could the Ghanaians maybe have built a few BUVs with that money and had a little left over for some *fufu* or *kenke*? But building a BUV is crazy in a quixotic way, and you kind of have to love them for it. By God, they're trying.

One of them, Gerrad, spent an entire workday helping me put together a new desk and bookshelves for my office (read: doing it for me while I fetched him Cokes). What you have to know is that we're all commission-only salespeople. If you don't sell anything, you don't get paid. Gerrad wasn't just helping a buddy out; he was making a sacrifice.

They hold a monthly “poker night”, where they scared down chicken nuggets and bet with peppermints—a fact they hide from our even more conservation office manager for fear of offering her moral principles with their wagering of candies. I find this adorable. I try not to offend them, but it’s hard to avoid when they blush fiercely at words like crap or nipple.

One time, my boss almost killed me. We were in his A4 and we nearly rear-ended a guy at ninety miles an hour. My boss swerved at the last second, and the brake lights were huge in my eyes, and I screamed “SHHHHHHHIIIIIIIT!”

My boss wasn’t too happy with that word. I said, “I’m not exactly thrilled you made me crap my pants.” I said crap because I was still angry at him. I didn’t say shit again because I wanted to keep my job. He said, “Was that really the most creative word you could come up with? I thought you were supposed to be a writer.”

Usually, they’re pretty cool about my writing. Sometimes they ask how my book’s coming along, and if I mention that I have a piece coming out in such-and-such magazine, they seem genuinely happy for me. But this is only because they’ve never actually read any of my work. If they did, they’d want to baptize me with boiling water. Of course, they’d have the same reaction to the work of Flannery O’Connor or Graham Greene, but thankfully, there is little chance this will ever happen because those writers aren’t stocked in Christian bookstores.

Not that I’m in the same league as Saints Greene and O’Connor. But neither am I like the guy who wrote *The Shack*—and right there’s the point. I think they would agree with me on that one. Of course, they’d say it as an insult: “You, sir, are no William P. Young.”

Sometimes I wonder why they keep me around.

I don’t contribute much at meetings, and I will do anything to avoid paintball, rope courses, personality tests, riding in the car with them, or manning the booth at conventions. I don’t sell as much as they do or live this job as much, and by my own standards but especially theirs, I’m a pretty weak Christian. But I was here at the beginning of the company, and I guess that I’m still around because of their loyalty as much as anything else.

When the company was started, there as no “them.” It was just me, the boss, and his personally autographed photo of George W. Bush, which afflicted me with fantasies of Sharpie vandalism. Horns, I tough, maybe a little devil tail. Nothing too drastic. And boobs. Putting boobs on the Prez would really hurt my boss.

Looking back, I see that all three of us had something in common: We didn’t know what we were doing, but somehow that didn’t stop people from giving us their confidence. Policies, sold, the agency grew, reelections occurred, and now there are more of them all the time.

Once, the boss almost fired me. We had a face-off in his office; I don’t even remember what it was about. Or, I do, but that’s not important for this story. It escalated to the point where he was about to say, “You’re fired.” I could feel it coming the way you can tell when someone is going to kiss you or lightning is about to strike: The air changes.

Anyway, there we were, and he stopped. The words were in his mouth, but he didn’t say anything. He just looked me, wounded and baffled, like who *are* you, anyway? Probably I was looking at him the same way.

This was back when he had hair, and I had anger. We were both under thirty years old, faking our way into the insurance world. Sometimes we help stupid contests, like broad jumping for distance in the hallway. We argued about hermeneutics, food stamps, the finer points of the HIPAA regulation, what the minimum in minimum wage meant, George W. Bush, whether to put a fish outline on our business cards, homeschooling, how badly the Colts were overrated. No matter what the subject, we argued like our lives were at stake, and neither of us ever, ever conceded a single point. We don’t argue like that anymore. Not since that day.

I can’t remember how that stand-off ended, but I still have my job. I don’t know who looked away first, or if either of us ever apologized or said let’s forget about it. I just remember standing in his office, breathing hard, staring him down with that question—who *are* you, anyway?—hanging in the air between us. His eyes are blue as a chunk of lake ice, the same as mine. It’s weird to look at your own eyes like that. After awhile, it feels like vertigo.



Fat

Poetry
from
Issue #8

by Dorothea Lasky

Sometimes anorexia is all you have left
When the fat surrounds you
Like blubber from a lamb
That has been defatted and fatted again
By so much sadness
You are not sure where its skin ends
Bhanu Kapil screams THERE IS NO SUCH
THING AS SKIN in my ear every time
I listen to her recording when I am alone
I have never seen her in the flesh
But to see a poet in the flesh is to not know anything
To see an engineer in his flesh is nothing
I have written poems about the flesh of scientists
But nothing in their science speaks to me about my art
I have wandered for six days with no bread, drank lemon water
Went running for a hundred miles until the sun
Shot purple streaks everywhere
It was beautiful to be a skeleton that everyone in my culture loved
I wore the most elegant clothes and draped my bony fingers
Over the same book I had written when I was fat
Except that the book seemed so big in front of my little bones
I love people in this life
The thing I love the best is being skinny
Because thinness can't yell at you
Can't turn its head away
You only go towards death
Like it is a very small detail
On a long path of forgiving
I will never forgive myself
For living in such a disturbing way
As the way in which I lived this life
For all eternity
Like this poem, it is so fat and useless
And no one kisses this paper
And in the end no one will protect
This paper from the rain



Dope

Poetry
from
Issue #10

by Geoffrey Nutter

I don't mean to be pugnacious,
but your bones are made of dope—
you've been X-rayed in your brindled
afghan, in your brindled cow, in your
burnoose green and fiery as a celebrant
and friend, the verdict is in: your bones
are made of dope, your blood is dope,
when you were swimming in the reservoir
down at the granite quarry, late,
in summertime, in your cruciform asymmetry,
your quince, the dense round ball,
your quince is made of dope, your sovereign
is made of dope, two pink caryatids
holding carved wheat sheaves were made
of dope, and the wheat sheaves were
wheat sheaves of freshest, vilest, dope.
You live in a mansion, El Dorado,
and your mansion with its five bay windows
turned toward the bay is builded of dope
and the bay is dope, and the bodies underneath
your house turn goldener as gold doth dopeth.
Your family hath turned to dope,
and as the green piñata on your peach tree
in the courtyard spins above the children,
who hitteth it with staves, dope spills out,
the hard candy of dope, and leaves of dope
all on the ground to be gathered.



Michoacan

Fiction
from
Issue
#13

by Álvaro Enrigue

Translated from the Spanish by Paul Grens

Because a word isn't love,
it's a murderer

Leopoldo Maria Panero

I reached Tzintzuntzan at night and almost didn't recognize the place. It was still a miserable little town despite its previous grandeur, but now it was horrible: peeling away, bursting with street vendors peddling the same trinkets from one stall to the next, the roar of pirated CDs; another pinnacle of post-WWIII architecture where the patriotism runs deep: little gray monoblock houses with bare rebar sticking out for a third floor that will never come, water tanks like blind watchtowers.

I came because we had a fifth brother. I was the only one who thought this; everyone else said that it wasn't true, that he was just mine and imaginary. My sister insisted: I don't remember him because he didn't exist, but your fantasy did; you called him Robin.

Even though I can't picture his face or any other specific characteristic that was particular to Robin, in between the furrows of my cerebral cortex lies the sound of his breathing and the warmth of his hand, a bit chubbier and much smaller, lethargic in mine during the skit we put on called The Feast of the Dwarfs.

We lived in an apartment that was long and cluttered with things and it had two bedrooms for the kids. The two oldest and I slept in one of them, with my sister alone in the other, along with a little bed. So, why was there a second bed in your room, I asked her when she insisted that Robin didn't exist. It was for guests, she told me. We never had guests. Of course we did, she said, like Yaya, when she came to visit her friends in Mexico. From this moment on, the conversation fell apart. Why are you saying *Mexico*, I asked her, Mexico is the entire country; why don't you say *Mexico City* like everyone else? Because that's the way we were taught, she responded.

I don't remember Yaya. She died when I was a baby, so if she used the second bed in my sister's room, it was before I was born and, more importantly, Robin, who would have been younger than me. We weren't the kind of people who had grandparents to visit in the country: a large breezy house, an affectionate maid, lemonade, dogs, sad goodbyes at the end of vacations. We

didn't have any of that. Just mama and papa who worked all day, and on the weekends they compensated for it with whirlwind trips to places that were perhaps too far away for the forty-eight hours of rest afforded to the victims of the five-day week. They had a peculiar affection for Michoacan's lake region, where we used to go with uncomfortable frequency.

When I went back many years later, I arrived at night and asked at the hotel about the bungalows where we used to stay. It was a white building, with balconies, close to the center of town, which grew with its back the lake. Can you imagine, the clerk told me, how many white buildings have been used as accommodations here? He had a point. I think that it was owned by a gringo, I told him. He said: Huh, and recommended that I go to the tourism office or the urban planning commission. What planning? The town has been ruined, I told him. He responded with an enigmatic: That's right, which could have been due to a lack of planning or the presence of a gringo. I woke up early the next day and went out to look for the building from the street. Tzintzuntzan continued to be a small town, despite having once been a capital that tried its forces with success against the ferocious Aztecs. An entire world wiped clean by history, a centralist and foolish goddess that converted Mexico, which used to be a city, into a country. We grew up in Mexico, the city-country.

I'm sure that Robin wasn't in the car when papa used to take us to school in the morning in a frenzied rush. He would stay at home, maybe with the neighbor: when we were kids, we always ate lunch at her apartment. She was a sweet, stuttering old lady named Tina. Our parents paid her a monthly allowance for our expenses and for the days that she had to look after one of us if we got sick.

During the school year, we went directly from school to Tina's house, but in the summer we wouldn't see her—despite the fact that she might have been in charge of looking after us—until two or three in the afternoon. She'd knock on the door of our apartment and shout T-t-t-t-tiiiiime t-t-to Eeeaaaaat without waiting for us to open the door. We would march over, with our hands already washed—her bathroom made us nervous—and find her door open.

I, therefore, was already going to school during the time that dates to my only physical memory of Robin: his warm and fleshy hand. When I evoke its presence, my memory is adorned with the liberating spirit of summer vacations: the five children alone in the house, playing tourist, or watching the Guillermo Ochoa program on television, or putting on our Feast of the Dwarfs skit. We stayed at home alone, under the theory that we would look after one another.

We had several LPs with children's songs. The Cinderella record was made from a very opaque pink acetate. It had a skip during the scene where the stepsisters were trying on the glass slipper. We had another one by Gabi, Fofó and Miliqui, some Argentine clowns, which had within its grooves the first poem I ever learned.

Down Ruperta's cheek a single tear did fall
But why?
Because she only had one eyeball

The verse comes back when I think of Robin.

The Pinocchio record was missing a chunk and we had to listen to it after it went into the scene with the fox on side A and had to get by without whatever there was before the scene with the donkey ears on side B. I never knew how it began or how it was that a child who could move but lacked a soul should deserve such a tremendous punishment, and with such classic features, like a donkey's ears and tail.

The universal favorite was the Snow White record. We listened to it so much that we had it memorized and we used to act it out every day: the entire apartment was the forest and the kitchen table was the cottage.

Our Feast of the Dwarfs skit was performed without an audience, since what was attractive about it wasn't the intensity with which the roles were played but instead the pinpoint accuracy in the repetition of each one's lines until reaching the end. We could have invited the stuttering neighbor and, in her capacity as a paid employee, she would have watched the spectacle and would have even applauded, but the game wasn't about telling something but rather to carry it out; there was no intention to make a mark on the world, but rather to stay loyal to it, to follow its instructions: each one of us should find the destiny that belonged to us, following their groove with the faithfulness of a fundamentalist. The Feast of the Dwarfs was only for us, because we were closed off, perhaps how all children are. Our sister was Snow White and the witch; I was Grumpy, the Huntsman, and Sleepy. Our oldest brother, in addition to being the rest of the dwarfs, was the prince.

The game began before the performance, in what would have occupied the rehearsal space if what we were doing had been theater. We took the table out from the middle of the room, our oldest brother put on the record, and we threw ourselves down in order of age on the carpet to listen with our eyes shut tight. To strengthen our concentration, we would hold hands, forming a circle organized by age, Robin between the oldest and me. The memory goes back to then. Robin's palm in my left hand, warm and fleshy. And there is a single visual memory: although I can't remember his face, the dirty fingernails on his hand are very clear. The folds in the joints of his phalanges holding lines of grime that distinguish wild children, his knuckles still sunken.

We were a bit cleaner than Robin. Mama and papa would come home at night and unplug the television, to which we were glued for a large part of the afternoon. We would turn it on after eating at Tina's house, when the cartoons would start and we would watch the American adventure shows afterward. We never did our homework and it didn't matter because no one knew about it but the teachers, who belonged to the long-suffering and almost imaginary world of school, anyway: their presence wasn't connected with reality, which ended at the door of our apartment.

We almost always managed to see one or two nighttime police shows— forbidden for other kids—until our parents came in with their whirlwind of orders to make ourselves something to eat and to persuade us to get in the bathtub. If Robin still had sunken knuckles, it's most likely that we were preparing his milk for him then and he would have slept in the little bed next to my sister's. Hence he would have been less clean than the rest of us. It is possible to invent the memory of a hand, to make it up—but a dirty hand? The touches of grime seem to me to be the proof that this furrow in my brain of Robin was real.

Why was the bed in my sister's room smaller? I asked my oldest brother once. He lives outside of the capital, in a sunny city with beaches. I had gone to see him on my vacation only because they had given me time off and I had nowhere else to go. The distance has done him well: he has an apartment with a view, an attractive wife, and a daughter fortunate enough to be ungrateful. We would never have thrown a tantrum: we had the feeling, encouraged by the stuttering neighbor when we behaved badly, that our parents simply couldn't manage to force us to take a bath, and so, with a somewhat dog-like obedience, we appreciated their daily appearance that was akin to a two-headed comet.

I don't know, my brother answered, with the uneasiness of a person who doubts himself in the way that he looked at the boardwalk as he carefully set his glass of Coca-Cola on the balcony railing. It was hot and the ominous and tropical pest-filled afternoon fell over us. Yaya would have been small, he said, although the truth is that I don't remember her in her housecoat around the apartment in Mexico. Why do you say "Mexico"? I also asked him, though he did not get defensive like my sister. That's the way we say it in the province, he said. But you're not from the province. My daughter is, and you're from wherever you raise your children. He sat in a deck chair without leaning back: he remained on the edge of it. He rubbed his face before telling me: The entire world is from where their parents are from, but we're disconnected from them, so we are from where our children are from. And me, with no children? Look at how disconnected you are. I told him: It's as if we came from television, right? And I tried to lower the emotional volume with a joke: Or a record player; as a matter of fact, we are the children of the Dwarfs. He looked at me very seriously: What dwarfs? The ones from the Feast, I answered. What Feast? The Snow White skit. He shrugged his shoulders. I don't remember that, he said. I mentioned the performance, the image that won't let me rest: the children sprawled on the floor, forming a circle with hands squeezed together and eyes closed, Robin between him and me. I even repeated a speech that was stuck in my head from then and that comes to the surface now and again. No idea, he said, but Robin was imaginary, that's for certain. Have you asked the others? Sis remembers the record, I told him, and wasn't sure about the performances, but she's sure that we didn't form a circle holding hands. You were younger than us, so we used to mess with you; maybe we did it one day and it made an impression on you.

I'm sure that's not how it was, but I decided to change the subject. Do you remember the vacations to Michoacan? He snorted: What crap. That was

crazy, eh? Going on vacations that should have taken a week in only two days. And always to the lakes, he said; always the same vacation, to those bungalows, dressing in white, putting bells around their ankles, what foolishness.

I remembered the bungalows, which had been totally erased from my memory until this conversation. I threw myself into a chair next to his, leaning back. I took a long drink from my soda. What's this about the bells around the ankles, I asked him. Papa and mama were *Concheros*, he told me, they believed in the vibrations, the motherland, the gods of the lake; you don't remember? No. We'd arrive in Michoacan and when it was time to go out, they put on their white suits and red bandanas around their necks, then we'd go to watch the sun set on the lake and they would dance with the bells; I guess they worked so hard, that was the way they vented. I laughed. Our parents had always been a mystery to me.

So you don't remember The Feast of the Dwarfs? I asked him again. He denied it with a gesture. It's the proof I have that Robin wasn't imaginary, I added. Robin didn't exist. He said this sadly, denying it with his head like a captive elephant. And then after a tiny pause, Are you still seeing Martha? No. It's going to be ridiculous soon, you still having girlfriends, he commented almost to himself. Then he tried to amend it: No offense. What do you want me to do, I said. I've always felt like my brain was missing the part used for making commitments. Like the Pinocchio record, I said, and he laughed. If we could have memorized that one when it was whole, I told him, I'm sure I'd have nine kids and I'd be bringing them to Michoacan on the weekends. Well, not there.

In Tzintzuntzan, I looked for the bungalow building all morning. I started looking for it in the center of town and walked in ever-widening circles until I reached the shore of the lake. I didn't have any luck despite the fact that we spent ten or fifteen weekends there when we were kids.

These days, you take a highway with a million lanes and you arrive at Lake Cuitzeo in two or three hours, and from there it's whatever distance to the riverside towns and even to Yuriria, which has its own lake. After bypassing Morelia, it takes at most another hour and a half to Lake Patzcuaro and its surrounding towns. That's where Tzintzuntzan is.

When we were children, it wasn't like that; you had to go through a ton of mountain ranges on small, one-way roads; you had to stop in the towns to change the belts on the engine because they melted on the ascents; you had to move along at a turtle's pace behind overloaded trailers or nightmarish trucks piled high with cages and cages of live pigs that screamed like children, shitting and pissing on one another en route to the market.

The middle brother, who was the most sentimental, would go into fits of agony thinking about the pig whose cage was farthest back and in the middle of the bed of the truck. If our father couldn't manage to pass the truck quickly, he'd start crying.

We had a sky blue '71 Rambler, ramshackle by the luxurious automotive standards of today where anyone can ask for a bank loan, buy a car with ten thousand cylinders, and drive on million-lane highways. It didn't used to be like that. Cars were used until they wore out. Our parents rode up front, with a little cooler in the middle of the bench seat and we were crammed in the back, Robin, like the pig in the middle of the livestock truck, squeezed between the other siblings, who were not shitting and pissing on one another, but we did manage to vomit if our father's speed or the curves in the road became too much.

The middle brother is the only one who hesitates before denying the existence of Robin. He says: Who knows? Papa and mama were strange. But no one has ever been able to believe him: his sentimentality has driven him to live in a destructive unreality that devours everything he comes across. He was the one in charge of handing out the soft drinks. I don't know if our parents thought he was the most trustworthy or if it was one of those rules without rhyme or reason by which children run their lives. Can I have a Coke? one of us would say and our mother would say yes. Then the middle brother, sitting wherever he was sitting, would reach his hand out and get drinks for all of us: it was inconceivable that if one of us was having a Coke, any of the rest of us wouldn't.

He remembers that he always grabbed four and only four drinks from the cooler, but concedes that if Robin had existed, he would have been too small to drink from a can. So, you do remember? I had asked him the thousands of times his saint-like patience allowed. No, he always said. I don't remember and I think that I would, but that's how memory works, through obscurity.

He clearly remembered, however, that we played The Feast of the Dwarfs: we agree that being in the circle of children holding hands with eyes shut was the best moment in all of our lives. Everything went downhill from there, he told me one day with a look on his face that made me think that he was going to cry the way he used to with the pigs. He didn't do it, though. He had grown tough: he's a cop. And there was a little bed there that no one used, he noted pensively while he lit a cigarette with the butt of the previous one.

He didn't remember, on the other hand, the bungalows where we stayed. The truth is that I didn't remember them clearly at all until I returned. They were a hazy jumble due to the distance, but my sister as well as my oldest brother agree that they were all identical, despite the fact that they were in towns with different names—all equally unpronounceable because Purepecha is one of those self-absorbed languages that has neither relatives nor descendants.

I performed an exercise: I asked the oldest of us to describe the kitchen of the bungalow in Erongaricuaro in a letter and, with a sheet of paper in my hand, I asked the same from my sister over the phone, but about the one in Handacareo. The descriptions matched up relentlessly. I was so disturbed

that I repeated the exercise with the kids' bedrooms. It was easier, because there were no distinguishing features, except for a few blankets printed with an over-saturated representation of Calzontzin, the last Purepecha king. Both of them remembered the same thing again, but reality showed a crack: he counted four beds in the imprint of his mind, and she counted five; there was a smaller fifth bed in the corner. I felt like it was all my fault and asked her, maybe with too much emphasis, if that bed would also have been for Yaya. Enough of that, she told me; because back then, families were larger, so if someone rented a bungalow, they put all the beds they could in the children's rooms. I went back to my oldest brother, and he was quite sure that there were only four beds and that they had bedspreads printed with the image of Calzontzin over a red background. You know, he said, that mysterious love for defeated figures that is repeated throughout the Republic. Inevitably, I asked him why he said *the Republic* instead of Mexico. Because *Mexico* is *Mexico City*, he told me.

I must acknowledge that I am using this little dispute over the names of the city and the country because it's the one that works best for me to break the center of gravity of the small convictions held by my oldest brother and my sister. I know why they call the capital *Mexico* and the rest of the country *the Republic*. It's an old memory, a furrow in the romance of a bird language that we no longer speak, a broken shell of a world where there were kingdoms that no one dreams of any more, because of the existence of a kingdom of kingdoms called Castile. Kingdoms that were called Mexican just because Mexico was the strongest on the day the conquistadors arrived.

The kingdom of New Spain, the kingdom of New Galicia, the marquisate of Oaxaca, the captaincy of Guatemala; the Castilians cloned their Spanish kingdoms in a land that they didn't understand, and the old inhabitants of the American kingdoms were puzzled by a nomenclature with only bureaucratic significance. The word *Mexico* meant something: the center of the lake, a rabbit's belly button, the moon's umbilical cord, the spine of the world. What did New Spain mean? New Galicia? Nothing. It was like changing the name overnight to "The United States of America" or "The Oriental Republic of Uruguay"; governmental categories, political descriptions: *The Republic*, a system of government confused by the land where it settled.

If my older brother says to his wife and daughter, *Let's go to Mexico*, he simply repeats it, without realizing the old bird voice of some Purepecha traders whose eyes filled with admiration and fear when this was said to them five hundred years ago: Let's go to Mexico.

When I returned to the capital of the Purepechas, I ate, frustrated by not finding the bungalows, at a tiny restaurant on the riverside and I sat instinctively with my back to the water and its gods. I looked toward the mountain range. The path opened up for me as if by a spell when I recognized the hills. I finished my whitefish, paid the bill, and followed the steps of our parents' white pants by memory, their ankles bulging from the bells. With the hills to the east, I went through streets that were still the same, although they were no longer paved with cobblestones and they

had a lot more car traffic and fewer Indians than before: everything should transform; it doesn't mean that something's missing.

The bungalows revealed themselves to me on a corner that I had passed a thousand times that morning. It has been converted into a police department. I thought, though I never got around to asking him again, that my middle brother actually had returned.

He remained pensive the day that I asked him about the bungalows. He acknowledged that he didn't remember them well. The owner was a gringo? he asked. He had already entered the phase of silent stubbornness that settles in after his fifth glass of rum and water, no ice. He took off the brown tinted eyeglasses that he also wears indoors, to rub his eyes. He set them on the table and lit another cigarette with the butt of the one he had just finished. Michoacan, he said, it's a beautiful word, and then he went back to being silent. Mama and papa never used it, I said to him. He did something with his policeman's face, a sort of crumbling away that amounted to a smile while he shook his head, shrugging it off. Do you remember what they used to call it? I stated it: Puréh'pecherío, *Let's go to Puréh'pecherío*, unforgettable. Papa would spend the trip repeating the word; he never got tired of it. You've never gone back? I asked him. I'm always working, he said, and when there is something in Puréh'pecherío, they send the army: that's guerrilla and narco territory; the police don't go in there; for us, it's another country.

You should go back, he told me. If I had to find Robin, I'd go there. Where? He thought about it a bit, rubbed his eyes again: To Tzintzuntzan; that's where we used to go the most; that's where papa and mama were coming from when the accident happened. You're the only one who believes that part about the accident, I said to him. I saw the death certificates, he responded. I must have given him a look that was too expectant, because he finished, saying: Don't even think about it. There was nothing in there about any Robin.

Just as we had suspected would happen, our parents didn't come back one night. They just never made it for dinner, so we watched *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, and even *Columbo*. We didn't take baths. Not the morning after, either, when we had a breakfast fit for a prince, taking advantage of their absence. We were listening to the Pinocchio record the next day when there was a knock on the door. It was our neighbor, who had gone from her speech impediment to perfect silence, her eyes filled with tears.

They separated us. For my sister and me, it was best to go with aunt Amelia: our childhood was just sad. My oldest and middle brothers' childhood was tough, but I don't know to what extent because they never talk about it. We used to get together on Christmas. We still do it: we get together on Christmas even though we spend it fighting during the entire dinner. We give each other gifts because we still feel like a family, even though no one holds hands with our eyes closed any longer: the needle of life, a wasp on the nape of your neck.

It still seemed strange to me that our parents would have been in an accident right after making their will. I mentioned this to the middle brother the day he suggested that I go to Tzintzuntzan. People have glimpses, he said to me while he played with his glasses. In my work, I see it everyday, people who suspect something and then it happens; I can recognize someone who's in a lot of trouble just by feeling them go by. Were mama and papa involved in something? I don't know, I was a kid; I don't remember them very clearly, either. Robin? What if they gave him to a relative who escaped with him? The stuttering old lady? I'm telling you, I saw the file; everything was there, the will, the death certificates, who was going with aunt Amelia and who was going to the orphanage. It's hard for me to think that one day we had them, I told him. What I remember is the television and that they used to shut it off. You're not going to forgive them for leaving us as orphans, he told me, for having gone to Tzintzuntzan without us; I think the Robin thing comes from there. From where? I don't know, maybe it's a dream. It's not a dream. Go to Tzintzuntzan—who knows? Maybe you'll find something. What am I going to find? Your bird. Alright?

He put his glasses back on and gestured for the check. He looked at me and murmured: I'm asking you to. Wouldn't it be worse to go? I asked him. Do you know what *Tzintzuntzan* means? No idea. "Land of the hummingbirds"; maybe they named your little brother Robin because they couldn't name him Hummingbird. He did exist, I told him. He was our little brother, not just mine. If he did exist, he said, he was within your space. What do you mean? I don't mean anything. A ghost? Ghosts don't exist. Come with me, I told him. I'm always working. Not on Christmas. We're a family, despite everything. Robin was everyone's, like Christmas, I told him; come with me. Robin, he told me, was yours because he got into your brain; go by yourself.

I went into the Tzintzuntzan Municipal police department and asked the much too young of a girl to be working at the resident's information desk if that building had been a hotel with suites—no one said bungalow anymore. She said she didn't know what to tell me and spun halfway around on her swiveling chair. She shouted, looking toward her coworkers' desks, if anyone knew what the building had been. I was ashamed that someone would so pornographically air such a critical moment of this short and sacred phase when we were a family with mama and papa, with mandatory baths and trips in the car, with a house and a television. A woman nodded her head. It was a hotel, she said, owned by a gringo. I asked her if she could tell me where I could find the gringo and she told me she couldn't, because he had been deported. He was completely nuts, she added, he believed he was the king of the Purepechas and he used to perform sacrifices.

On Christmas, my middle brother gave me a CD of the Pinocchio story.



Fauvism

Poetry
from
Issue
#7

by Nick Twemlow

Have to rewind the tape
so many times
The tape's never been the same
A cold front readies,
Little fires break out

all over the country's face.
Some animal cried out
last night.
As the old man seated
at the kitchen table

whittled at his calloused
—not his soul, exactly.
All the while the woods
creak and moan, the moon
tenderly evidences
the moon,
leaving nothing to chance.
The moon is not a scab to pick at.



Issei,
Nisei,
Sansei

Non-fiction
from
Issue
#4

by Fred Sasaki



*Asako "Mona" Sasaki, age thirty;
War Relocation Authority (WRA)
relocation camp, Heart Mountain,
Wyoming; c. 1944*

Asako Sasaki will capture the flavor of, and outside work privilege from, Heart Mountain, laundering clothes; gem-cut every textile-washing plant she touches and erect an upper-middle-class dry cleaners on Chicago's Broadway; become known as "Mona" queen bee; ingratiate the Rainbow Room, Rockefeller Plaza; manipulate her sons, wigs; hag fags; posture for thousands of photos with her telephone and eccentricities wearing bulbous jewelry and

closets of outfits, on the counter of her cleaners, with big fish, in front of automobiles, at parties, on top of exotic beasts; never video; put her two only-sons against each other by every mean; never hug or tell them, I love you; deride their wives; dote her grandchildren; cut her teeth with J&B, rocks; blub toasts and whiskey-sleep at parties, smudged with mascara from an unhinged false eyelash; endure a mastectomy; feed an old family-less Japanese internee in her basement; wildly pedal her organ under a a painted portrait of a photograph of her in a white dress, pearls, and diamonds; and, as she dies, lose her mind and address-book-full-of admirers.



Yoshitomi Sasaki, age forty-one; War Relocation Authority (WRO) relocation camp, Heart Mountain, Wyoming; c. 1944

Japan-born-of-grape-farmer-seed Yoshitomi Sasaki wed America-born-of-Japanese-nobility Asako Sasaki, both nee the same, through a dubious California arrangement; adopted her from domestic-step abuse; sired business-minded gamblers, Fred Yoshitomo and John Tomoyoshi; calculated cash-heavy books; gambled on weekends; divorced Asako and came back by common law; and was remembered, one Sunday-afternoon Scotch at grandma Mona's, when his son, Fred Yoshitomo, told his own son, Fred John—as Mona, wearied, soaked her feet—

“Your grandfather was a ... good ... man. He was a good man.”

“Oh stop it,” Mona moaned.

“He was. He worked ... hard, came ... from nothing. My son should know.”

“Just stop it! I don't ... [wretched pause] ... want ... [acrylics bared] ... stop it.”

“He was, my son should know. He was ... [burps through his nose] ... a good man.”

“Stop it ... [panting] ... goddamnit. God-DAMN-it.”

From left: Fred Yoshitomo Sasaki, age twelve; Asako “Mona” Sasaki, age thirty; John Tomoyoshi Sasaki, age eight; and unidentified friend and shadow; War Relocation Authority (WRO) relocation camp, Heart Mountain, Wyoming; c. 1944.



The figureheads Fred, Mona, and John were represented as a trio of three-pointed crowns on the Barry Regent Dry Cleaners's back-building mural, calling cards, pens, calendars, hangers, hanger holders, blow-up Easter bunnies and reindeer and Santas and beach balls and snowmen, garment and laundry bags, jar openers, address books, measuring tapes, magnet memo-pads, desk caddies, billfolds, and pick-pocket-proof wallets (“because, hey, who gives away a waller?”); staged equity-base F.M.J. Corporation; alienated kin; placated strangers; rued for affection; expensed everything; and

on Mona's timely nursing-home-senile death Fred and John will be unable to eulogize her, her grandchildren unwilling to grace her; and a portion of her ashes will be taken to Japan, pocketed in a man-purse, walked around her unfamiliar homeland, past a fleet of Sasaki-family semi-trucks, fighting dogs, and ditched, with a littering flick, under a diseased grape-tree, her bone an dust tightly sealed in cellophane.



John Tomoyoshi Sasaki, age eight, and Fred Yoshitomo Sasaki, age twelve; War Relocation Authority (WRO) relocation camp, Heart Mountain, Wyoming; c. 1944.

In sixty years, the two only-brothers will have clothes-lined a small fortune through F.M.J.; brought-up bourgeois children and suffered their ingratitude; bought-out a plush retirement; full heads of hair; together played kick-the-can, football odds, stud poker and smoked through pipes, cigars, and cigarettes; married employees; acted good-cop-bad-cop over hundreds of sweat-shop Mexicans, Blacks, and Slavs; gotten drunk and fat at Ma's house, barbecues, and banquets;

courted habit; whored; owned summer homes and condos, Cadillacs and Town Cars, a mint in stocks and bonds, and land disputed with bad blood; irreparably severed their fraternity; and will communicate solely through lawyers; be mistaken for one another; goddamn each other; side-sit wives with malignancies and hatred in their offspring; offshoot grand-nephews they've never known; and be reunited face to face and their respective prostate exams, fatefully scheduled the same afternoon, and say ... nothing.

X

Crazy

Season

Fiction
from
Issue
#10

by Paul Graham

Friday night, and Rick Potts couldn't afford to buy dinner at the Thirsty Moose before the Pioneers' game. Donnie expected dinner out tonight, though, so Rick had to think of something. There was always his mother's, if he felt like a lecture, but he didn't. That left the weekly All-Welcome Dinner at the Birchfield Congregational Church.

"We don't even like *go* to church," Donnie said as he climbed into the truck. He was a doughy kid, fourteen, in layers of sweatshirts and a knit cap with a visor. He wore the visor turned slightly to the side, but instead of punkish the result was slightly comical.

"It's not a church thing," Rick said, though he wasn't certain of that. Before putting the truck in gear he tried once more the lever that moved the plow, but nothing happened. Not that he expected miracles anymore. "No singing, no prayers. I promise."

"They say those dinners are really a soup kitchen." Donnie's voice nearly disappeared beneath the truck's grumbling diesel. Rick knew he meant the kids at school, whose judgments were as brutal now as they'd been two decades ago when he went there.

“It’s just this once.”

“Well, it’s bullshit,” Donnie said. “We always go to the Thirsty Moose.”

“I know,” Rick admitted. “I’m a lousy father. That’s twice in one day.”

The boy’s disappointment was worse than hostility. Donnie always got a Moose Breath Burger—two patties with bacon, stilton, and barbeque sauce. Rick was not the reflective type, but he did know that up here in the winter, a person needed something like weekly Moose Breath Burgers to give life shape and definition. Otherwise you might as well wander into the frozen woods and never come back. Work and school were not rituals; they were duties. Television wasn’t, either. A sustaining ritual involved the body, the senses. Weekend hockey games were a ritual; or nights in their trailer on Jingleville Road, playing Risk and listening to country radio; or Saturday morning breakfast: Rick was okay if there was sausage, and silver-dollar pancakes, and maple syrup from the trees he tapped every March on his mother’s property, another ritual. This was not sentimentality, he knew. It was survival.

So when he pulled into the church parking lot, snow flurries whirling in the headlights, Rick kept Donnie in the cab and told him exactly what had happened with Albert at the Mohawk Casino. He owed that to Donnie, who listened impassively. The loss of nearly four hundred dollars in that huge noisy room, lit up like a bad part of town, and the uncertainty it meant, bothered Rick less than becoming another North Country bozo who’d found a way to hurt himself and his kid. It was only January, though, and if the snows came hard and he plowed constantly—once he got the plow fixed—he might recover. That was life up here in the forgotten counties of New York: one long battle with the climate and the bank, whether you harvested potatoes or snow or oil changes. If you couldn’t hack it, you went to jail, like a friend who in a fit of desperation had actually held up the Birchfield Credit Union with his hunting rifle, or you left chasing the sun, like Cheryl.

More than Cheryl’s body beside him, or even above him, Rick missed her paycheck. She’d done data entry for a State Social Services division, long, spirit-killing days that surely contributed to their end as a couple, but it paid okay and provided good benefits. They’d never had much to begin with, so when she left, Rick thought he could cover the costs alone. He’d managed to put on a respectable show until now, his client list as long as ever. He’d die before he asked Cheryl for help. Outside of some land, his mother didn’t have much to give him.

Otherwise they were fine. Rick liked answering only to Donnie, who eagerly did things Cheryl had punished him for, like rising early to hunt deer in Fred Tuttle’s woods, and watching football for ten hours on Sunday, and going to the dirt track races in Evans Mills. When Donnie slept at a friend’s house, Rick could lay out a good bender. There were even joyful

discoveries. Cheryl had done all the cooking, badly, griping about it. Rick quickly discovered a knack for the kitchen, and when he had the money, he and Donnie ate well. He'd never before known a pleasure like putting together a stew before dawn, leaving it in the crockpot while he mowed lawns, and coming home to smell the meat and parsley and potatoes. In the summer Donnie went to Vero Beach where Cheryl lived with her IT guy, and there were women at Leo's II, or out-of-towners at the hotel bar if he felt like trawling. And about the time Donnie came back tan, his hair a shade lighter, Rick was growing tired of the women anyway, and he let them go gladly. Loving had a season too, it turned out, just like ice hockey and lawn mowing and the sap runs in the maples on his mother's property.

An elderly woman welcomed them to the church fellowship hall, which was in the basement and half-full of people seated at folding tables. Rick felt them staring as they walked in. He recognized more than a few by sight. Someone had taped Christmas lights to the ceiling to lend a cheerier atmosphere, and the air smelled of overcooked pasta. Donnie, knowing the drill from school, grabbed a tray and walked into the kitchen for a helping of spaghetti, sauce, salad, and dessert. Rick followed, pausing at the donation box to drop some pocket change.

"Look," Donnie said when they were seated. "A band."

In the far corner, a man, woman, and girl played what might have been Johnny Cash's "Walk the Line." The old man strummed on a guitar while a younger woman, probably his daughter, mumbled into a dead microphone, her own guitar evidently just a prop. The girl, who was Donnie's age, absently clacked two spoons together. They looked as if they were sleepwalkers who had just wandered in and set up without waking. One of them had spelled the name of their ensemble in those adhesive letters for mailboxes on a guitar case: BARNEY'S GANG.

Rick leaned in to Donnie and whispered, "You know her? The girl on the spoons?"

Donnie looked up, squinted. Beads of water shined in the knit of his hat. He said through a mouthful of pasta, "Oh yeah, Dad, she's my freakin' *girlfriend*."

"Got the 'freak' part right," Rick said.

Donnie laughed, surprised and pleased, and Rick tried to suppress his own laughter until tears came, making Donnie laugh even harder. The day had been humiliating from the moment Rick yanked Donnie from school—the other instance of bad parenting—to search out driveways to shovel by hand after he discovered the broken plow. Only silent, frozen houses and streets awaited them, the snow long since pushed into neat furrows by someone else. Rick had thought he *owned* those driveways until he stood in the middle of the glaring street, numbly accepting the news that in fact, he owned nothing. But now things seemed brighter.

“This is awful,” Rick said, poking at his mushy spaghetti.

“Tastes like ass,” Donnie agreed, but he was eating it. He was just hitting his growth spurt and could put away a box of Apple Jacks in ten hours.

“Finish up and let’s get the hell out of here.” Rick eyed the collection of free milk gallons near the door, donated by the local dairy store because they’d reached their expiry dates. He’d grab one on the way out, if the vultures left any.

Birchfield’s team was Pioneers, a squad of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds playing in a Junior-A league based in Ontario. The hockey was decent, though Cheryl had always thought the boys were too young to receive so much attention and pressure for sports instead of schoolwork—“It’s wrong to bear so many peoples’ hopes,” her exact words, which Rick remembered whenever he saw the kids with their heads in their gloves after a tough loss. Birchfield was a working-class town, though, and few of these kids actually planned on college. If they wanted to play hockey, Rick didn’t see a reason to stop them. They knew the odds, and the adults were all implicated: the town survived winter on these games, living off the lighted arena and the goal siren and the little personal routines around each game, a weekly analgesic for the meager sunlight and freezing madness. Some families went to food pantries and thrift shops so they could afford the fees and gear. No different from kids in the city with their hoop and gridiron dreams, Rick thought. He often wondered how many people lived in towns spread across the north like this one, hoping to skate to glory. A few former Pioneers had floated around the pros, and one, Brooks Bigwarfe, played briefly in the NHL. He died some years back while staring down the CSX freight train. Had more money than almost anyone, but was miserable just the same, Rick realized when the story appeared on the news. It was a funny life.

The woman selling tickets at the arena box office claimed nine of Rick’s last ten dollars, but once he smelled the ice and the roasted almonds from the cart in the hallway, and heard Springsteen coming distorted through the speakers over the playing surface, something deep within him sighed. The burdens back on Jingleville Road and in the offices in town and attached to his truck all left him. For reasons he never completely understood or could explain, he felt safer at the rink than anywhere else in the world.

Donnie found some friends from school on the other side of the rink and Rick settled for Marty Beesaw, who was already seated on the long wooden bleachers. Beesaw, tall and overweight, was a case of a sharp mind wasted. All his brains went to cruelty. It was Marty who had given the organist, a Native American guy named Joe who butchered rink favorites, a name that had stuck like tar: Chief Broken Fingers. College was out of the question for Beesaw, and although he’d once been a fantastic hockey player, no coach wanted him. His need to have the final say every time had cost him friends, a marriage, and thirty days for assault after he broke the ACE Hardware store manager’s orbital bone at a pickup game. Like all of the bad ones, though, Beesaw could be fun in small doses.

“Talked to Steve Sanderson?” he greeted Rick. “He’s been wondering where the fuck you are. He had me dig him out, Potts. Twice.”

“Plow’s busted.” Rick could already see that Beesaw might ruin this game for him, but he didn’t want to move. This stretch of bench afforded the best view and had been his for as long as he could remember.

“Rick, you must be the only independent contractor in this whole miserable county who doesn’t know how to fix your own shit.”

“Good to see you, too, Beesaw. And I know how to fix it. I just don’t have a garage or the right tools. It’s been too goddamned cold.”

“That’s the truth,” Beesaw conceded. “Ten days straight below zero. Not supposed to get better, either.”

They watched warmups, comparing notes about the Stratford goaltender, and then while the Zamboni hummed across the ice, Rick told Marty how he’d driven to Albert Finnegan’s place this afternoon to use his garage and tools to check out the plow. Albert’s house was a dump, the south-facing end missing siding, the clapboard exposed and shreds of tarpaper waving in the January breeze. The front door looked expensive with its frosted-glass insert, but there was no porch, or even a stoop. Albert claimed this kept his tax assessment down, but all of his money seemed to go to an ever-expanding fleet of ATVs and snowmobiles. Rick thought his obsession with these machines was stupid and unhealthy, even for a guy who drove around in a school bus all day. If Rick had a house, he’d keep it up. His dream was to own a little land like his mother’s, plant some orchards, and sell the fruit at the farmer’s market, and sugar maple sap on the side.

After a few minutes in Albert’s heated garage, Rick was finally able to remove some casings from the plow and get a good look: cracked housing, bent metal, spilled hydraulic fluid, big bucks. He was so disappointed he didn’t bother putting the thing back together.

“Bring it over tomorrow and Stan’ll look at it,” Marty said. His father owned Beesaw Motors, and Marty managed it. Rick waited for an offer to do the work for free, which was the only way it would happen, but instead Beesaw stood up and flagged down Terrie Byrne, who was selling 50-50 raffle tickets to benefit the girls’ hockey league. She was a thin woman with a fake tan and deep-set eyes. She wore a carpenter’s apron full of ticket stubs and dollars tied around her waist.

“We’ll take the lengths of our dicks,” Beesaw announced, and Terrie, not missing a beat, pulled off one ticket and handed it to Marty, who said, “Funny,” then spread his arms for her to measure.

Rick found his last crumpled-up dollar bill and held it out. “One will do,” he said.

“Like I said,” Beesaw began, then trailed off, his laugh breaking into coughs. But Terrie grinned; she and Rick had had a week or so together in August after tying one on at Leo’s II. She patted his shoulder before moving on, leaving Rick to wonder if that meant they were due.

The other thing that had happened out at Albert’s house—which Rick wasn’t going to tell Beesaw about—was that he had asked Albert to lend him some money. It was the first time Rick had ever asked anyone for money, and it seemed Albert should help him out; he had suggested the trip to the Mohawk Casino in the first place, and he had left a few hundred up. But Albert said he didn’t have any money to lend; Lisa was about to enroll at the community college, and they’d just bought another Polaris.

“Can’t get blood from a stone, Rick,” Marty said, shrugging his stooped shoulders, and Rick said, “Don’t I know it.” Then he climbed into his truck and gunned the engine out of the garage, running over Albert’s tools.

The game started hopefully, as they all did, but the air in the arena somehow felt off tonight. At first Rick thought it was Marty’s presence, or the residue of the day, or the whole week, but he soon figured it out: the usual public-address announcer was not in the scorekeeper’s box. It was a younger guy whose voice reminded Rick of Dustin Hoffman playing Raymond Babbitt in *Rainman*. He mispronounced the player’s names as he read the lineups, over-emphasizing certain syllables strangely. Then, when everyone rose for the national anthems, a barbershop quartet from Milton performed instead of Melissa O’Leary, the usual girl from the high school. The quartet sang well enough, but the Canadian anthem especially failed to stir Rick’s heart. Sometimes, listening to Melissa’s silvery soprano on “O! Canada!” Rick dreamed that he was Canadian, and of all the ways his life would be better.

Once the game started, the players hissed up and down the ice, sticks clacking, for only three minutes before the referee called a penalty on the Pioneers. Neither Rick nor Marty had seen an infraction, and the sharpness of the official’s motions made Rick nervous. That was all it took for the Pioneers to lose their tempo—they chased the puck like boys on a frozen pond instead of displaying the confidence and skill that Rick enjoyed watching so much. When the Stratford team quickly scored, the arena sighed in unison.

“Gonna be a long night,” Marty said. “Can just feel it coming, can’t you?”

In the next few minutes, the referee called more Birchfield penalties, and the visitors scored again, and again. Rick sat with his chin on his fists, his anger at a low boil. He’d seen games like this before, when the officials seemed predetermined to punish not only one of the teams but also their coaches and fans. Perhaps the referee had gotten a speeding ticket on the way into town, or his hotel room was a mess. Either way, instead of seeing the flow and skill and creativity that soothed Rick, busying his eyes while

deeper down his mind wandered among the small victories and defeats and hurts of the week, sorting and healing, the game descended into pettiness. Bad will spread across the bleachers like the fast-moving shadow of an approaching storm cloud. People booed and swore, sometimes throwing trash onto the ice, as if the injustice within the game were a continuation of those injustices in their work and home lives. Rick always found himself caught up in the mayhem, swearing and shaking his fist with them. Afterward, reliving such evenings in his bed, he marveled at how easily the mob mentality consumed him. He blamed the cold, striated skies, the snow, the dozens of cars with dead batteries and iced-over locks and useless plows.

“We’re all nuts,” he said to Beesaw when only a few seconds remained in the period. He thumped his fist on his breastbone and burped. The tomato sauce, or something else from the church dinner, insisted on coming back up.

“A shame,” Marty said. “That guy”—he pointed to the referee, whose last name, Anderson, was printed on the back of his striped jersey—“better get the hell out of town quick once this is done.”

By the end of the first period, with the Pioneers down 4-0, the only suspense seemed to be the 50-50 draw, which was won, inexplicably, by Albert Finnegan. He was sitting only five rows away; Rick hadn’t noticed him until Albert jumped up and high-fived his daughter, Kacee, who was in Donnie’s class and was apparently a tomboy and a snob. The folks sitting around them cheered and shared congratulations.

“Four hundred bucks falling from the sky,” Marty sighed as they watched the Zamboni come out of the end-zone door again. “Imagine.”

“You know he won a thousand at the casino last week?”

Rick knew he was talking recklessly, the disappointing game affecting him like too many beers, but the increased amount felt right somehow. He had the pleasure of seeing Beesaw’s face cloud over. “Then, when I was over there this afternoon, I asked him to pay me back some money he owes me, and he refused.”

Beesaw watched Rick with interest. “How much?”

“Two-fifty.”

They were silent a while. The players returned to the ice, bringing the smell of moldy equipment and circling the rink morosely, like carp in a tank. It was clear the intermission had done little to help them recover. One boy skated past the boards, his stunned eyes visible through the mesh cage protecting his face. He seemed to be wondering why he’d bothered coming back from the dressing room.

Beesaw said, “Bastard’s owed me a hundred for over a month now. We were down at Cabella’s getting gear, but their credit machines were down.”

“So you gave him cash.”

“I admit it, Potts, I’m a fat idiot.” He looked down at Albert, his eyes hardening. “We should catch him after the game. He’ll have the cash in his hands. Won’t be able to say no.”

Rick nodded, though he hadn’t foreseen this plan. “Easy-come, easy-go, right?”

During the last intermission, Rick stood to make his usual trip to the concession stand for a coffee, realized he didn’t have any money, and sat back down. A minute later, the PA announcer called his ticket. He hadn’t won the 50-50 raffle, but he had, apparently, won a chance at the Shirt Grab. Marty whaled his shoulder in mock congratulations.

For years contestants had shot a puck at a plywood clown’s mouth for a shirt, but that game got old, so now they blindfolded the lucky contestant, put him at the center face-off dot on his hands and knees, and tossed a puck into the circle which if found would be redeemed for a Birchfield Pioneer’s tee shirt. The contestant had thirty seconds to find it, guided only by the cheers of the crowd. Rick wasn’t up for this, but he stood in the tunnel anyway as an arena worker tied a black cloth over his eyes and said, “It’s harder than it looks.” The blindfold, a cheap ladies scarf, smelled of musky perfume. “What you can see?”

“Not a goddamn thing,” Rick replied.

The crowd cheered as he was escorted out and eased down onto his hands and knees. He started crawling across the ice, which was colder and harder than he’d expected, pawing at skate ruts and puddles, dragging his dampening knees. At first he felt buoyed by the noise, but it seemed to dissipate into exasperated sighs no matter which direction he turned. He could clearly hear two individuals: a man with a deep bass—“*Left, left!*”—and a woman with a cry as shrill as bending steel—“*Behind! Beeeehind yoooooooouu!*” They contradicted each other, so Rick turned right, cutting his hand, he was certain, on a sharp ridge of frost. After a few seconds he stopped hearing the voices and forgot that he was even searching for something, distracted by an image of how he must look to Donnie: his old man groping for a booby prize that might rest fifteen inches or fifteen feet away, but which would inevitably elude him. For Donnie’s sake, Rick *needed* to thrust his arm victoriously into the air. The crowd counted down from ten in one unified, obnoxious voice, and at five seconds he flopped on his back and did a snow angel. He was still supine when the arena worker knelt to remove the blindfold. Rick stared up at the metal girders as a line from an old gym teacher came back to him—*Next thing you know, buddy, you’re counting lights*—an expression that even in eighth grade Rick understood to mean that the game, your opponent, life, *something* had you by your nuts.

“Told ya it’s hard,” he said, hauling Rick to his feet. Rick wanted to punch the man.

“How close was I?”

The arena guy looked thoughtfully back out of the tunnel at the ice. “Bout as close as we are to Miami.”

Beesaw wanted to leave with a minute remaining, another oddity—Rick always saw every game, win or loss, through to the end. By then the Pioneers were down 6-1, the crowd had thinned out, and the night felt thoroughly ruined. He didn’t bother telling Donnie; their errand would take only a few minutes, and Donnie would wait. Beesaw seemed to have clicked into a grim and businesslike mode, and as they stepped into the piercing cold, Rick felt lifted by a thrill for the first time that night. It was as if he were riding shotgun with the mob. They found Albert’s truck easily, parallel parked on the driveway, out of the streetlights. They leaned against the tailgate and killed the time by silently smoking, eyes on the distant front door where people glumly exited the arena now, pulling their coats tighter and exclaiming at the shock of the cold.

“He’s not alone,” Rick said, suddenly remembering Kacee.

Beesaw shrugged. “Then he’ll be all the more compliant.”

They waited for ten minutes. The hairs in Rick’s nostrils froze every time he inhaled; his breath formed ice beads on his beard. The strobe lights of an airliner caught his eye, and he traced it across the starry background to the horizon, where it vanished in a southerly direction.

“He ain’t coming,” Beesaw said. “And my nuts are frozen.”

“He has to. What’s he gonna do, walk home?” But Rick suddenly knew what Albert had done. “I’ll bet when he went to cash in his winning ticket at the VFW booth, someone there offered to drive him up to the Post to celebrate. They’re salvaging the night by drinking away his winnings.”

“In one hand, out the other,” Beesaw concurred. Eager to get warm, feeling cheated, they crunched back to the front of the arena and their trucks.

They were cutting behind the arena when the back door opened and a man stepped out into the pool of bone-white light—not Albert, but someone who looked vaguely familiar. Then Rick recognized the hooked nose and the body, compact as an oil drum, from the ice: Anderson, the referee. Out of his striped uniform, he looked strangely vulnerable. Beesaw had realized who it was a second sooner—a target of opportunity—and was already on his way over to the man. “Anderson! Hey, Anderson! Just a minute!”

The referee turned sharply at his name, then quickened his pace toward a cluster of cars parked near a chain-link fence. As if compelled by some invisible force, Rick followed Beesaw, who was following Anderson, each of their steps quicker than the last.

“Hey Andy!” Beesaw almost sang the words. “You fucked up that game, amigo. You ruined our night.”

Beesaw was fat but quick, and he caught up with Anderson, grabbed him by the collar, and shoved him against the side of a parked sedan. Rick hovered a few feet away like a lackey, unsure what to do. The referee and Beesaw were backlit by a streetlamp; two clouds of steam puffed from their heaving lungs, mingled between them. For a moment Rick saw the whites of Anderson’s eyes, and then they squinted closed as Beesaw punched him in the sternum. Rick, too shocked to say or do anything, could only watch as Anderson slid down ass-first and against the car’s tire, sucking at the thin air. Beesaw reached down, picked him back up by the collar.

Something told Rick that his role here was to keep an eye out, and when he pivoted on his heel, he found that someone was observing—Donnie, his sweatshirt hood pulled over his head, obscuring his face. Through the darkness their eyes met—Rick felt it—and then Donnie turned and started toward the truck. Rick followed, silently falling into step beside him. He glanced quickly over his shoulder just once and saw that thirty yards back, now, Beesaw still had Anderson. He was saying something Rick couldn’t make out in the cold.

Then they were driving through the flatly-glowing darkness, and as the cab warmed and Rick calmed down, he mulled a truth that was difficult to grasp: he had watched someone get beaten, or start to get beaten, had just stood there while it happened, largely because of the desperation he carried in his own heart. He looked over at Donnie, who was blowing into his hands. Rick had thought the boy was upset, but now he looked composed.

“What do you think happened to that guy?” Donnie asked after a while. He pulled a leftover brownie from his pocket and nibbled at it distractedly, like a squirrel.

“I don’t know. You shouldn’t eat so many of those things.” Donnie looked at Rick as if to say it was a little too late to start acting like a father. A moment later, Rick said, “He’s not why Marty and I were out there, though. We were waiting for Albert.”

Donnie shrugged, as if this made no difference, which it didn’t. He seemed to not want to talk about it. Rick didn’t, either, but he wanted to say something about how he had been feeling lately, which was like when he had the plow down and was making a good fast run and then he hit a patch of ice and went sliding out of control. Only he kept waiting for the equivalent of that soft *puff* that came from stopping safely, undamaged, in a powdery snow bank, but it hadn’t come yet. He just kept sliding and sliding. For the rest of the short ride, he expected to see a blur of emergency lights flying by, but the night remained empty, inscrutable.

They might have been away from the trailer for not hours but days. For a moment Rick couldn't remember what they normally did on a Friday night after a game, and then Donnie disappeared into his room to listen to music through his headphones. Rick still felt electric from the encounter with the referee. He sat at the kitchen table smoking and watching the frozen milk jug from the church dinner thaw. Sometime past midnight he heard noises, little whimpers, coming from Donnie's room. The boy was having nightmares. Rick wanted to blame whatever lyrics Donnie had been piping into his head, but he knew the fault was likely his own. He sat down on the corner of the bed and rubbed Donnie's back, his hand making circles until the boy quieted.

In the quiet, he looked around the shadows in Donnie's room. There was his son's backpack and schoolbooks, the Pioneers' schedule taped to the closet door, the dresser spilling the sweatshirt sleeves and pant cuffs. The signs of a small, insignificant life. But all of this had to be watched, guarded. All the time. Why he'd been allowed to get this far without understanding such things, Rick couldn't say. He wanted to stay on the corner of Donnie's bed, awake, all night. After a few minutes, he started thinking about the morning with anticipation. He pictured the sun breaking over the miles and miles of cold, shining, maddening country, the snowdrifts and frozen maples. He closed his eyes, and tried to summon the smell of breakfast cooking.



The World as Presence

Poetry
from
Issue
#16

by Marcelo Morales

18

And I sought you out like a snake in mud like a rat in trash sought you like one starving, the poets told me don't talk about that, people don't talk about that, I sought you out in those faces, in those years sought you out, among streets sought you out, sometimes, face to face, my heart, it would move toward her like mass in space, and it gave one thump and gave another, as if the attraction were calling it, as if attraction inhabited it, like a rat in trash, like a snake in mud, sought you out.

20

"The void enters like the doorbell at a house"

Lezama Lima

"Death enters like an alarm clock"

J. A. Baragaño

Havana, assholes sitting on the walls, assholes at street corners, the vendor—cocky guy—gold grill in teeth, stench of piss in doorways, the old Communist lady—the old opposition lady, the narcissistic blogger, the Communist cretin, the guy who could care less, flashy types. Chubby Germans—slim mulatto girls, their eyes in my eyes, chubby Germans—mulatto girls, a Lada model, a broken model, Lada-broken, grease, sun—Germans, *myfren* tobacco, *myfren*, *wheraryufron*, girl, guy. Cocky guy sports

Ed Hardy, silver bling. The horror is in the mind, the incivility, brown hen tree, sacrifice red rag, I can sense the hell in my mind and in the minds of the others, I can sense the hell. Assholes sitting on the walls, dead chickens in the bay, rat cadavers, petroleum, reggueton, old cars, the pretty mulatta, the ugly American, little religious image, Christ.

The Ladies send their thanks to the right, if she doesn't get arrested she can't collect!

It was pleasure in the brain and I thought it was happiness. Pleasure, and I thought it was love.

Like a crazed planet.

The carburetor of the car on low, on high, on high, my organism on high, when the engine block breaks the accelerator falls into a void, "the void enters like the doorbell at a house," "death enters like an alarm clock."

Línea Ave. looking for the Malecón, assholes sitting on the walls, wall, when the engine block breaks.

21

Ants work for something important: food.

Jack Spicer

You had to shit blood for something to change.

My fingers on the blue can.

Taxi '48 Ford.

Politicians work for important things.

Ants work for food, they make a line across the tile,

you had to shit blood, my fingers on the blue can,

garbage on the street corners, lineaments.

My fingers on the blue can, my fingers on.

The political direction of your life.

Politicians work for important things.

I think about the fumigation smoke for mosquitoes,
about all those chains of fake gold,
about my skeleton in a box there in Havana,
about all those stripes dividing the road surface,
and I think about fate and flies that smash into the glass
and about all those hospital benches under the soul
and about my parents getting older and about my parents together
and I think about love, more than anything, I'm always thinking about love,
above all else, I think about love,
beyond all else, always thinking about love
and about people carrying flowers to the dead
and I think about flowers and about the dead
and about lizards who swallow mosquitoes
and about mosquitoes
and about dogs who chase cats
and I think the Big Bang as an act of violence
and about the world as an act of violence
and the coils of the cobra as an act of violence
and about twinned souls,
in states that carry us toward fear
and I think about fear and about power
more than anything else I think about power.

The blue point on the bomb, the critical point.
And about love, more than anything I always think about love
and I think about those guys who fuck their mothers
and the fathers who fuck their daughters
and about love
more than anything—I always think—about love.

26

Malecón, Havana, white waves, the ocean breaking against the wall,
undertow, what the ocean gives, what it returns, sponge, debt, cold front,
little old people with their bones, the little old people in their bones, what
the ocean gives, what it returns.

27

In line at the bank: retiree day, an ocean of old people in an old country,
they've been left on their own.

This ocean of old people, they created this shit, I think, and they eat it, this
ocean of old people created this shit and I eat it, this ocean of old people
did this great feat, ants work for something.

In the lines of retirees, in the streets, anthills. Old people with stained
clothes, circles of grease, old clothes.

28

I comprehend a nation's history on the expressway, Miami, old people
scratching lotto cards. The day is coming, A pink metal rose.

Politicians like rock stars, a faked death—a scratch on the plastic of the disc,
Inside the microwave, Light off a silver plate.



I Don't Understand the God Part

Conversation
from
Issue #8

Dorothea Lasky *and* Lauren Berlant

In 2007 University of Chicago's George M. Pullman Professor Lauren Berlant guest edited an issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled *On the Case*. In the issue, Berlant and others explored the phenomena of the case study, or the study of a group, community, or incident. A case study, Berlant contends, can be anything from "a symptom, a crime, a causal variable, a situation, a stranger." Each case elicits a judgment, perhaps also an expert, and a narrative leap from the singular to the general. The case study inquiry allows for "the sociality of knowledge, the circulation of discourse as its condition, and the clarifying obligation of analytic narrative." It is a strategy of investigation, the creation of an allegory that offers "an account of the event and of the world."

If we read the following interview between Berlant and New York poet, Dorothea Lasky as a case study, what might we learn? Perhaps that while Berlant examines in her scholarship the flourishing of affects, attachments, and even love (the general), Lasky performs these themes in her poems and in her live readings (the singular). Both women share an interest in pedagogy, since they identify first and foremost as teachers. And while Lasky and Berlant diverge wildly on the topic of God and spirituality (a marked disjunction of the case), both urgently and forcefully study the way we operate and live in the world. Berlant states in a recent blog post, "I have never felt what people describe as nostalgia for themselves in their leavings. But that may be because I am more interested in floating, scanning, and becoming than having been." Lasky concludes a poem: "It is a cut-out world/ This one we live in/ But birds are not the answer/ No birds are not the answer/ They never are." —*Katie Geha*

Dorothea Lasky: I am very interested in how you combine the individual with the social world in your work, so that the two become constantly intertwined and concern one another. Your recent work on cases really fascinates me and I'd love to know more about it from you. How do you view a case's (as a social unit) relationship to individual love and spirituality in the 21st century? That is to say, what is love and God through the lens of a case or object in 2009, and how does this relate to how the individual and the social world relate to each other in this particular moment in history?

Lauren Berlant: I have absolutely nothing to say about God, or gods, or love and spirituality. Zero. I was raised in a religion, but all I cared about were how people treated each other, how they imagined value in the world, what it was that got in their way and enabled them. Of course God/spirituality comes in on both sides of that equation, as enabling and disabling happiness and connection. But I don't much resonate to these concepts nor do I have sensual memories of being visited by anything in the least mystical in the least, even while my senses are often enraptured in the immaterial, take in the world intensely, and read the dynamics that make atmospheres and environments.

I am a person of the world. I am interested in the flourishing of beings in the context of lives that they are hammering out in the present. I am interested in the ways people find sustenance and make survival happen in worlds that are not organized for them. I am interested in why people stay attached to lives that don't work, as though people would not survive the wholesale transformation of those attachments and the lives built around them, as though they would rather be miserable, stuck, or numb than tipped over in the middle of invention. Making worlds is very hard and losing them is devastating. In the middle, one has to build confidence or just habits that allow rest and coasting amidst the labor of making. So much of what we do demands inattention (our current emphasis on mindfulness neglects the mind's need for incoherence, to rest, coast, spread out, incohere).

My work on cases, therefore, has nothing to do with individual love and spirituality, at least not that I know of! Although maybe you could tell me how you think it does or why it would be a good development to turn the study of how singularity becomes general when something becomes a case into the a question of the spirit. But love is one of those phenomena that makes people feel general, feel that something very specific and singular in them is tapping into a sensually known atmosphere. Is that the kind of thing you mean?

You know, I work on affect, on the ways that people sense transactions with the world and work out life in terms of reciprocal dynamics. The aesthetic is the scene where the training of those senses becomes a topic and a project, and so my training in proximity to art and language and as well as other forms of mediation has helped me see the ways people create their own gestural ways of mediating (finding a form for materializing and inhabiting) the world.

Does this view of art have anything to do with what you do? I was noting how very different your work reads on the page and manifests in performance.

DL: I really like your answer to my question. I especially like how you called yourself “a person of the world,” because I think I am one too. Maybe that’s why we were paired together for this interview. I’m glad how you noticed that the way I read poems seems different than what they look like in print. I think that there is a difference because, like I said, I am a person of the world, and my concern with the world has to do primarily with education primarily. I am (and feel it is my ethical duty to be) really fascinated by and concerned with (and feel it is my ethical duty to be) with how people learn. I think I read a certain way so as to help people take in my poems better. I try to create a certain kind of flatness when I read, and it is with a certain educative purpose that I do this. I think by creating a flatness in performance poems are makes it easier for readers to understand as they are listening.

I especially liked this part of your response to my first question:

“God/spirituality comes in on both sides of that equation, as enabling and disabling happiness and connection. But I don’t much resonate much to these concepts or have sensual memories of being visited by anything in the least mystical in the least, even while my senses are often enraptured in the immaterial, take in the world intensely, and read the dynamics that make atmospheres and environments.”

I don’t always think of God/spirituality as being something necessarily mystical or as being something that visits you in an undefined, immaterial way. Nor do I think God is sensual (at least in the way I think of sensual, like an individual body’s sensuality). I think the entire world is God. Thus, your work on cases connects to God for me, although this probably doesn’t make obvious sense.

To me a lot of your work concerns a kind of ethics (I know, duh, right?). But it is a collective ethics, an ethics of the world. And to me, in 2009, this is a kind of concern with God.

I won’t put this opinion on you or force you to contend with it, as this is more my belief. (I am a strong believer in the theory of connectionism as a kind of meta-spirituality that the 21st century will be forced to consider as the Internet has put upon us a willingness to the panopticon.) But, to me, your work on social systems and the lens of a case as a way to both enable and disable an individual from its life in our society to me is a kind of spirituality of the individual, of the real person, of the real emotional being in the world. Through your work, you give the real its voice back, I think.

I guess, in connection with these thoughts, I wonder how you might define your own ethics (if you want to define them, and I don’t mean to force you). What does being good to others mean to you in 2009?

LB: Fantastic. I have a few responses to what you've said here. It's so interesting that you think of yourself primarily as an educator. So do I. Indeed, not only have I always known I would teach (and have taught since I was very young), but one of the ways I describe human connectedness is to talk about pedagogy—, in modes of exchange that are not always equal and, don't involve "deep recognition" or even any genuine knowledge of the other. Lovers, friends, people in an elevator: they're all engaging in pedagogy that locates others in proximity to their aims.

This relates to the other thing you said that resonates with me, which is about flatness. I'm actually writing either a long essay or a little book on flatness now (*Matter of Flatness*), a mode of affective splitting between internal intensities and understated bodily performance. I think it's really interesting for you to say that you say your reading mode is flat, and that it's flat so that a kind of pedagogy can happen, that which you're trying to enable by simultaneously projecting and getting out of the way. Sometime I'll tell you a longer story about that: But I do have to tell you that I don't think your reading style is flat at all. You should get a hold of that CD where Dorothy Parker reads her poems. Now *that's* flat. I'm a very voice-intense teacher, in contrast—quiet, but focused—because I want my students to pay attention to building the skills for sustaining an observation, for paying attention. Sometimes another person's voice gives you an idea about your own; sometimes an absence just leaves you with the thing you already had.

DL: Here's a short, and perhaps silly, question: What are your five favorite books?

LB: I don't have favorite books., I think, that's not my way. I have favorite authors: David Foster Wallace, Herman Melville, Charles Johnson, Chris Ware, and Freud; and I'm a big fan of the contemporary women writers of the appetites like Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Miranda July, Mary Gaitskill, Toni Morrison, and Chris Krauss. ... But now you have to tell me yours.

DL: Ok! My favorite authors are Flaubert, Catullus, Freud, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Plath, Bernadette Mayer, Yasunari Kawabata, Lev Vygotsky, James Marshall, William Blake, Maurice Sendak, Lydia Davis, Maxine Greene, Wallace Stevens, and the list goes on.

LB: Oh, Lydia Davis! Yes I said yes!

DL: Here's another question. In your response to my first question, you talked about love being something that makes people feel something "generalvery specificand singular." I love that. Do you think that when people feel love they feel these things that these feelings happen simultaneously? And I am referring to all kinds of love or maybe there is only one kind: and that is affection, —or affect as you might say.

Or do these qualities of love happen in stages? Or can one part happen and love still happen? And do you think that the love that happens in the beginning of a person's life (and I don't mean romantic love necessarily) is the same sort of love that happens in the end of a person's life?

LB: I think attachment is what happens fast, first, and hard. Then you find out what happened, and tell yourself stories about what you want to happen that are full of lies and truth—about yourself and your object. It doesn't matter when in your life that impact happens; it just requires a sense of being tethered to something that's enigmatic and then finding out what it stands for, what you want from it, and how loose and tight you want the tethering to be, which is where lots of the incoherence or craziness emerges.

All *amour* is *amour fou*. We know that it involves *risk*. We know that staying reliable to it involves *work*. The relation between the risk and the work of fidelity is fundamentally affective and, at the same time, ethical: What's *political* about this relation—why we need feminist, queer, and intimacy politics generally—is that we are trained so badly and so unimaginatively for normative skills at negotiating love, at recognizing attachments, at cultivating capaciousness and patience where our own impossibility meets the impossibility of others, and where our own needs encounter ridiculously atrophied understandings of what a good life fantasy could be. I could go on... . . . I see the wasted life of confused and blocked attachment and exhausted optimism everywhere.

And you? Because you see God as love and then, presumably, love as something that circulates among humans, you must have a less aggression- and politics- laden view of it than I do. But I don't understand the God part, as I said.

DL: I love what you said that all love is mad love and that attachment happens first, and that love is a negotiation between fidelity and attachment. (I think you said this, correct me if I am wrong.) I wonder: How does the madness relate? What makes all love mad love?

Mad love reminds me of an ad I saw (for a bank or something, maybe HSBC) where there is a picture of a moon and the earth duplicated, and one set says "madness" on the moon and "love" on the earth and then the next set says the words in reverse (madness for the earth and love on the moon). It is true that love and madness can be interchanged. But I think they fraternal rather than identical twins.

I've been thinking a lot about madness this Spring, how madness relates to affect. Like the affect we were talking about in terms of flatness and a flat affect in presentation. And how the two relate in art is something that interests me a great deal. Especially in so much that I believe the presentation of art is part of an educative process and a furthering of humanity. Which I think that you might think as well.

And in terms of God, I see this as a kind of tension/negotiation too between flatness and affect. That God is the humanity contained within all humanity, all together, as one large thing. It is a different kind of politics maybe. But I think all love is mad love, too. And I think the love of a God is mad love, albeit contained within the fact that God is all of humanity, in itself contained.

I might make more sense with an example. I was a Classics major in college and in a Greek mythology class I remember my professor was trying to example to me the root of the word *enthusiasm*. He was explaining it to me by myself, because I was writing my term paper on connections of Dionysus with contemporary ideas of God. And he said that many people think of *enthusiasm* as a state of ebullience or a large, sweeping emotion, but that *enthusiasm* was actually a state of zeroing in towards a point of understanding something. He said that what we as contemporary thinkers tend to think of the *enthusiasm* of Dionysian cult members as wide, and not narrowing, but that instead we should realize that faith in deities is sometimes about a narrowed focus. I always took this to mean that in understanding the meta-level of humanity (what I might argue is God), we tend to refine our ideas down to a point. This refining is *enthusiasm*.

So, I can't help think that this idea of all love being mad love relates to this. And maybe I am forcing too much out of this statement. As I have been thinking about madness this Spring, I have been thinking about how when we don't understand something that is happening that we think of it as mad in general sense. Take the classic example/archetype of town genius/crazy person (eek, which annoyingly still persists as our contemporary view of the artist, especially in ideas of Outsider Art) who spouts the truth of a culture in a nonlinear fashion. What seems mad is really brilliance given a refined view of what the person is saying and a way of looking at it that allows for a gentle understanding of what is being said.

I tend to think of understanding society and God in this way—that both seem chaotic until we put units of understanding on them. And tell me if I am wrong, but is part of your exploration into cases as units of social understanding, in order to understand the relationships of society therein—a way too of refining our understanding? And so I might ask you: What are other ways that we might make sense of our social world that are like the case?

LB: Actually, and not to buzzkill your enthusiasm over your professor's enthusiasm for making things up, *enthusiasm* means originally to be possessed (by a god). That pretty much sums up mad love—or love—for me. The word in psychology is limerance. Limerance is the unwanted ideation that happens to a person when a crush happens. When a crush happens, what's crushed is your intentionality. You are visited by desire. You are visited by non-sovereignty. You are visited by an inclination, a tendency, a saturation by a thing that's both concrete and enigmatic. You then begin to manage or negotiate it, or you decide not to, which is still a calculation about the relation between the pleasure/craziness of being visited by a

desire, an attachment, or a *focus* (to take up your conclusion about love as enthusiasm, although it's a focus that's also a fog) and your desire to be reliable to some version of your personality.

Anyway, we don't have the space here to spell out the many ways love's madness converts into its promise to provide a ballast. Love is mad because it projects onto a relation with something in the world the responsibility to secure your capacity to flourish in the world, and relations are unstable, at least as unstable as you are. You hold your objects to a standard much higher than the one to which you hold yourself: Their job is to be reliable (but not entirely dead) so that you can be alive richly. But there are the stories of arranged marriages "where the love grows," and that's a different thing, but not entirely unrelated, where people calculate the family or a scene as that which they will love, and then they're good at doing it or not, and then they love the other for being kind and competent there, and make no psychological claim about fulfillment or fantasy. It is a practice-based love that sutures the affects to what happens rather than to the careening of internal states. That kind of love probably isn't mad. But the other kind, based in fantasy and projection, is a kind of mad non-sovereignty onto which worlds of sovereignty are built. I don't ultimately think that things are chaotic until we find ways of making them seem meaningful (in love or in madness-related art, as you describe it): I think things are chaotic and incoherent, but that, when we can, which isn't usually, we find ways to remain loose with them, to proceed generously by finding some hook in them that we can value. But then let's think of abusive relationships, where people's love destroys them the way high fructose fatty food destroys the people who are enjoying it. There's a moment of optimism in love, as in one's attachment to anything that can be idealized as a source for one's durable flourishing. Sometimes people hold on to *that feeling* as the real, and see all the complexities as noise around the real. Then they're frogs in the slowly boiling water, not feeling their destruction because they're focusing on that first feeling of fabulous appropriate wetness.

DL: Ok, I will go back to flatness now for another question. First of all, I've always loved Dorothy Parker and I am fascinated in general how people make wit into flat ways of presenting information. I must get my hands on that CD! I am really excited to hear about your *Matter of Flatness* book and its work on affective splitting. (Love the double meaning of matter!!) I sort of think that this inquiry is one of the most important of our time and can be seen in what I think is a very key part of aesthetics over the last 30 years (what I might term an overly polite, Art Deco, Native American-infused flatness, which can be seen most especially I think in Wes Anderson or Stanley Kubrick films, especially in a visual form, or in Futura font, for another example).

It is extremely exciting too, as with another poet, Thom Donovan, I have been engaging in a project for about a year and a half (although the idea persists with me for a long time) entitled *Deadpan*, which seems to be almost something similar. He and I have been talking about hosting a *Deadpan* symposium at some point and I'd love to talk to you more about it. Basically, we feel that a uniquely American version of the sublime can be found in a deadpan beauty, whether it be tone in writing, visual or musical composition, flatness of performance affect and so on and so forth.

I love this, that you said, below:

“Sometimes another person’s voice gives you an idea about your own; sometimes an absence just leaves you with the thing you already had.”

Can you talk more about this?

LB: No. (hahahaha).

This too requires a longer discussion. You had said that reticent reading produces a chance for people to find their own transformation in the atmosphere you provide for new knowledge or experience. I said, *sometimes* it does: All of classical psychoanalysis is based on the kind of thought you're having, after all, insofar as in the scene of it the reticent therapist listens silently so that you can tell your story until it crumbles.

In contrast, it might be better, sometimes, to model living richly beyond survival, to help people develop better skills for not being worn out by life or passively saturated. This is an affective and political project. Mostly unconsciously in ordinary time, people borrow ways of being from each other: Let me try that form of seductivity or freedom or aggression, maybe that will give me a practice that produces the *whatever* sense of satisfaction I desire. Pedagogy as a performative modeling asks people to try on versions of the better good life that hasn't yet found a world, Along with new knowledges, it can provide voice, embodiment, and desire modes to try on and speak from that are unwarranted by history, unsanctioned by norms, unprotected by institutions, but amazing to experience in life as something that life should sustain. From experiences like this, lived utopias emerge.

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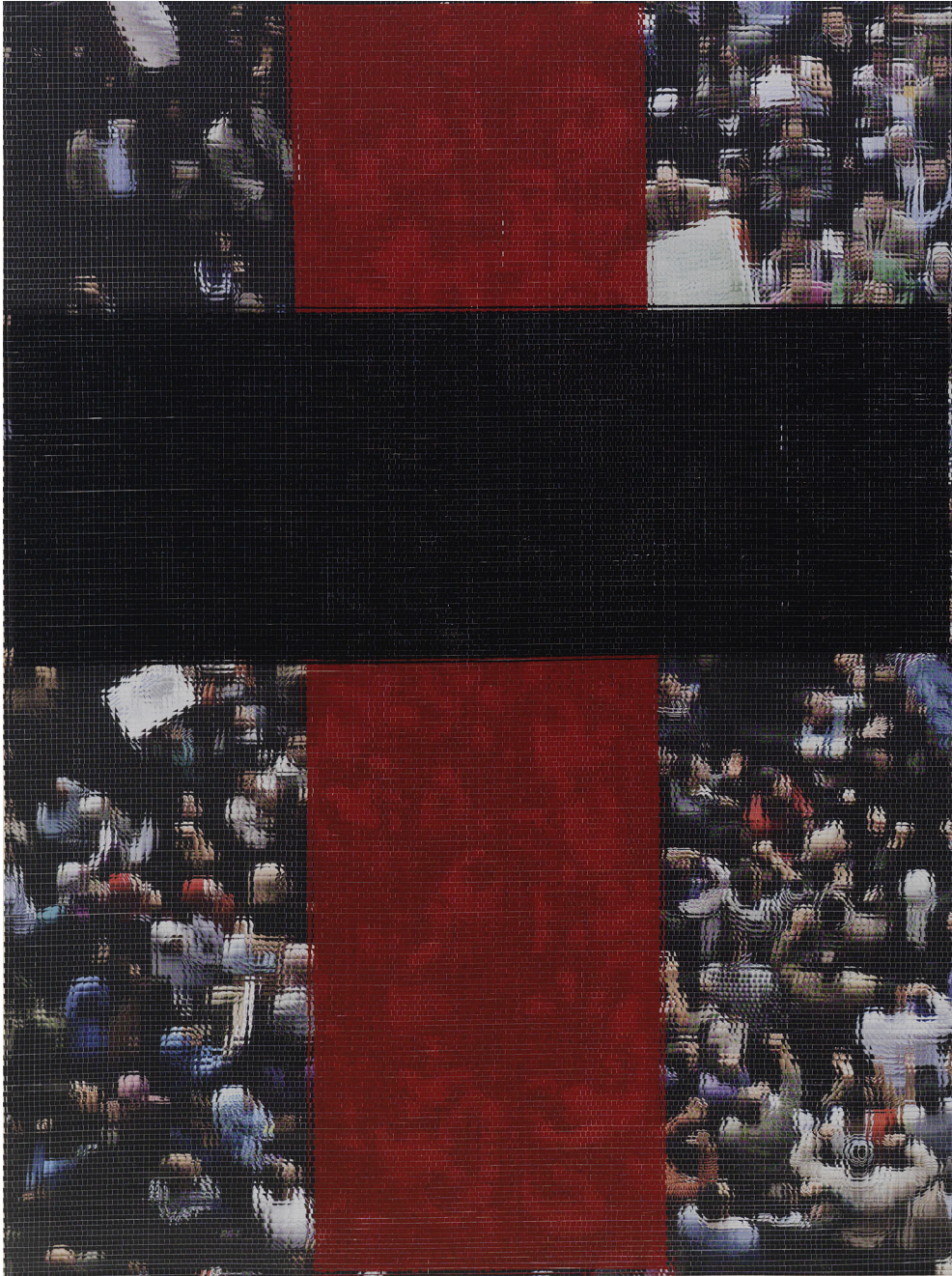




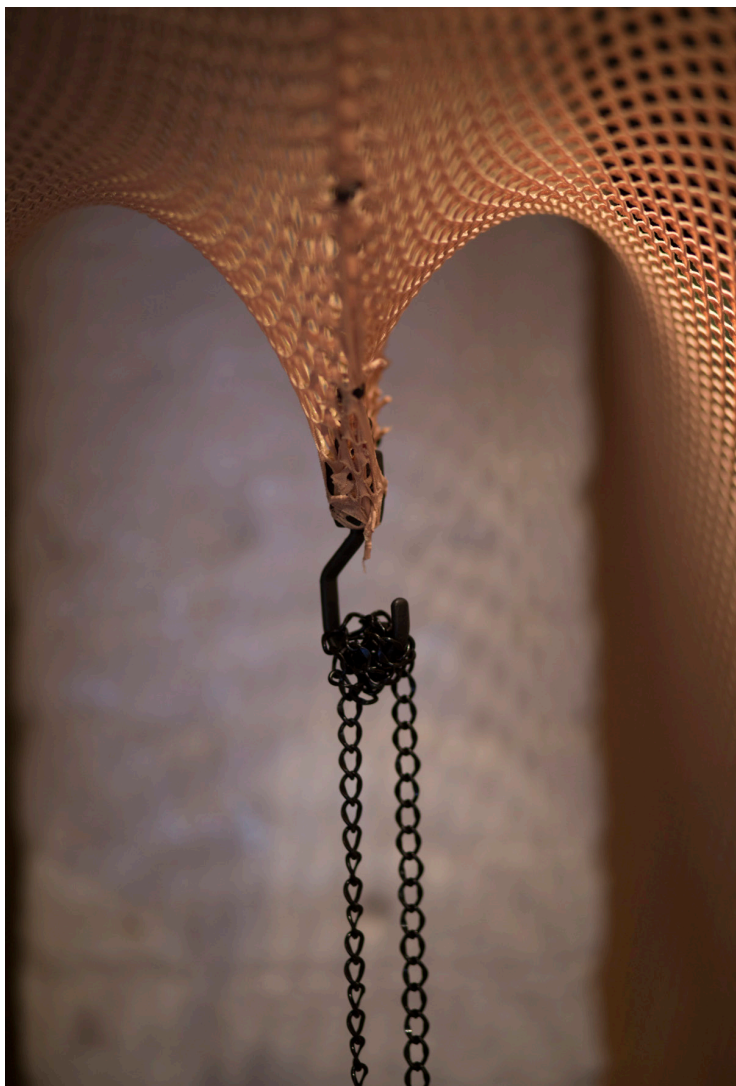


















Saddam

and

Khamini

Fiction
from
Issue #4

by Mahmoud Saeed

Translated from the Arabic by Zahra Jishi

His legs almost gave out on him, but the voice of his vice-president, Taha Yassin Ramadan, reached him with encouragement, “Sir, pull yourself together. Be strong. They’re filming us with hundreds of cameras. Remember, showing weakness will only defang the Resistance.”

Saddam, hearing this, stood tall and proud. It was around five in the morning. Calls to prayer were resonating strongly in the steel of the night, blaring from minarets dispersed throughout Baghdad. “Come to prayer!” the nearest muezzin rattled in a voice laced with sadness.

His eyes teared. “Come to prayer,” he repeated aloud.

“Come to prayer! Come to success! There is no God but God!” the three men walking behind him reiterated, becoming suddenly religious. And soon a peculiar strength crept into his feet, allowing him to maintain a steady gait.

Once the guard placed a red bag over his head, a long series of flashbacks of those he had killed in cold blood played in his mind – starting with his life’s first crime when he assassinated Hajj Sadoun al-Takriti, the foremost proponent of the leader Abdul Karim Qassim, until sinking into the degrading mire of the American occupation with its spiteful allies. He tried to remember the number of his victims. Hundreds? No, thousands. No, hundreds of thousands. But the eyes of his first victim, Hajj Sadoun, were

still wide open, gazing at him with surprise and wonderment; they still racked his soul as he remembered taking dead aim with his gun, ending the life of the revered man who had helped him during times of hardship, poverty, and vagrancy. Hajj Sadoun couldn't believe that his foster child would backstab him.

No doubt Saddam experienced the same feelings that had shrouded his hundreds of thousands of victims, whom had been put to death with the same ease he now faced. His captors were performing the very role he had assumed for four decades. He felt the rough hand of the executioner fasten the bag, disconnecting him from the world. That simple move severed the cord of his life. He considered himself dead – weren't life and vision one inseparable entity? He was living his last moments. His hands were tied behind his back. He was utterly motionless except for his breathing. He couldn't even open his eyes because the bag was so tight. Everything was over. He felt more than one hand pulling on his legs and waist with ropes and chains. Weren't these weights meant to help separate his head from his body? Yes, of course. Then, he felt the thick noose encircle his neck from over the bag, driving out his last remaining warm breath. He maniacally thrashed his head around, gasping frantically for oxygen, but at the same time the wooden trap-door underneath his feet snapped downward, and his body dropped strongly. He felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. He almost screamed. His voice failed him. His lips failed him. His breath failed him. And then all sensation ceased.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself between two thick glass partitions, where he could see people on both sides. To his right he saw countless swarms of blissful people. They were laughing, singing and dancing. Was he dreaming? All he knew was that he had been hung to death, but why had he found himself here? Who were these people? Why were they here? Where were his assistants? Where were those who had taken him to the gallows? And why had all this happened to him? He turned to his left and saw quite the opposite; millions of people were burning in a mighty blaze that looked like flames from oil rigs. People were scorching, flaming, exploding, and being reborn only to burn again. Where was the end to this severe torment and wretched misery?

He then realized that he was dead, that he was between heaven and hell, that the hour of judgment was bound to come, and that he had to prepare honest answers that could save him. Things here were different from a courtroom where humans would arbitrate. This was the Hereafter. Here was a just, fair, and infallible Ruler who knew all thoughts and acts of humanity. He closed his eyes and heaved a deep, worried sigh. He would definitely be thrown into hell. He had committed countless crimes. Since a terrible reckoning awaited him, he looked to the right, to heaven, and enjoyed watching its people for the last time. Suddenly, the ground quaked underneath his feet, just like when he had been hung. He looked back and watched as the glass partition transformed into a giant computer screen. The kind Angel Ridwan, the Paradise doorkeeper, stood right in the middle, facing him, surrounded by a big entourage of angels with eminent, shining faces.

Ridwan said to him calmly, choosing his words, “Saddam, you are a world-class mass murderer, a murderer with no conscience and scruples. You deserve eternal damnation in hell for the thousands of crimes you have perpetrated. You are evil. You are your own people’s enemy and the enemy of humanity. You inflicted misery on millions without a blink of an eye. You wronged scores of people and stole from the rich and poor. You have engaged in all sorts of wrong-doing. Had you had one thousand souls, executing them wouldn’t have been enough punishment. Your sins are infinite. But God’s mercy is greater than His justice. You have done only one deed that had a little of good – you demanded to stop the war following al-Mohammara’s battle. Should your request have been met with favor, you would have stopped the blood shed of innocents and saved hundreds of thousands of souls; therefore, you deserve God’s pardon. Go to heaven and enjoy your God’s mercy.”

Saddam couldn’t believe his ears, he kneeled down to kiss Ridwan’s feet, but his forehead bumped into the computer screen. The ground quaked again and the computer screen disappeared along with Ridwan and his companions as suddenly as it had appeared. Saddam was alone once again, standing before the thick glass that opened before him with lightning-speed, from the right side. There was a red carpet like the ones rolled out for him in airports, so he stepped forward cautiously, not believing his eyes.

Since dawn, all the news networks had been broadcasting the execution of Saddam, and as soon as Khamini heard the news on LBC all sleep fled from his eyes. His weary body suddenly brimmed with youthful energy. He picked up the phone and summoned al-Mulla Baqir Hallufi, the head of his bodyguards, who soon stood before him panic-stricken. “Call immediately for an urgent meeting, right here. Hurry up,” Khamini ordered.

This meant al-Mulla had to convene all of the key leadership in the Islamic Republic of Iran. They soon streamed into the palace. Among the first comers were current president Mahmoud Ahmadi Najad, previous president and close friend Agha Rafsanjani along with his previous successor Agha Khatimi, followed by all cabinet members, military leaders and officials.

Khamini welcomed his guests with hugs and kisses, amid an air of gaiety and festivity. He sat comfortably in his raised chair, while the rest of the assembly gathered around him on the floor, legs crisscrossed – out of respect to the divine authority he enjoyed, an authority passed down to him from the Prophet, through one imam after another, until it reached him and he became God’s shadow on earth for guarding Islam and Muslims. At the same time, the believing women’s trilling cries of joy and coy laughter were wafting from the palace’s walls up to the vault of heaven.

Everyone lost track of time in the midst of a special bliss that lasted for hours.

The telegraphs of congratulations and gloating over Saddam’s death poured from within and outside Iran. They were recited by Shamkhani the minute they were received, while Khamini and the crowd quivered, enchanted

by his beautiful voice. The first recited telegraph was from Ahmad al-Jalabi, followed by countless ones from al-Eshaiker al-Jaafari, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, al-Shahrastani, Mam Jalal and his friend in struggle, al-Barazani, heads of tribes, Iraqi cabinet members, Lebanese parliament members, etc.

Khamini normally enjoyed listening to good news while eating, but Shamkhani stopped reading at a motion from him – Shamkhani was to resume later after lunch. Rafsanjani understood the hand gesture. “I feel as if I am born anew,” he commented, laughing.

Khatimi nodded in approval. “Such happy news occurs only once in a lifetime,” he added.

At these words, Khamini fixed on Khatimi with a stare of mingled irritation and blame. “Actually twice or maybe more!” he said, nodding wisely.

Khatimi shuddered. His face turned sallow and he gazed up at Khamini, perplexed, wondering what the first time was. “Do not forget, Mohammad, that the victory of the Islamic revolution was the most monumental news in our generation’s history,” Khamini repeated in a deliberate tone, redolent with the tact and depth of a grand ayatollah.

“Yes, yes, most monumental, greatest, biggest, and...” the assembly concurred.

Khatimi felt inept. He wished he hadn’t been born.

Realizing he had scolded Khatimi hard, Khamini attempted to act wisely and tactfully, so he put on a smile and decided to bring the assembly back to the delightful events at hand.

“Agha Najad, what do you suggest we do on this happy occasion for the enduring Iranian people?” he asked quietly, a mirthful look dancing in his eyes. “Although this moment is not comparable to that of the revolution’s victory, our glee is the same. And maybe we’ll rejoice this way only at the return of Mystery Imam al-Mahdi; may God bring about his early reappearance and ease his coming.”

Silence prevailed. Najad was baffled. Pausing for a moment to regain his composure, he blurted, “My Imam, I’m considering issuing a decree to make this day an official holiday throughout our victorious Islamic state.”

“Wrong. Wrong. We don’t want to give that wicked Saddam more value than deserved,” Rafsanjani shrieked.

Color ebbed from Najad’s cheeks, and if it weren’t for his black beard he would have become a dull, wax statue. He knew that Khamini was playing with him the same game he had played with his predecessors, Khatimi and Rafsanjani, in which he would record their mistakes and bring them up later during a moment of opportunity. He used to put them down during each meeting. But Khamini couldn’t nail him; he was younger, while the other two were old and incompetent. They became muddled whenever

Khamini trapped them, and they didn't know how to handle him. But not Najad. He would overpower Khamini one day, but in order for him to do so he had to keep his presence low key.

Najad rose and went up to Khamini; he reached for his hand and kissed it with utter reverence. "You are the guiding Imam and the father," he said in order to appease Khamini. He then burst into tears. Khamini patted him on the head with a feigned affection, but before he could even utter a word, his secretary, lieutenant Zahidi, announced, "Lunch is served."

All were stunned. It was already 11:30 A.M. More than six hours had elapsed in what seemed like a flash of a second. That was the miracle of festivities! Time flew like the wind. Only then they felt the sharp pangs of hunger, and everyone waited for Khamini to rise from his chair. Once Khamini rose, they followed him to the dining room, accompanied by Rafsanjani and Najad.

Shamkhani, the highborn Ahwazi, had introduced delicious fish, chicken, and lamb roasted recipes – in the Arabic style – into Khamini's kitchen. What a connoisseur! Khamini, though, remembered that his doctor had recommended for him to cut down on red meat and to completely stop using table salt due to his high blood cholesterol. The feast table, which ran more than thirty feet long, was piled high with food – grilled, baked and fried lamb, fish, and wild birds, along with a slew of Arabic, Indian, French, Chinese and American dishes. He then saw his plate, which had been prepared for him under medical supervision. Fat free yogurt, steamed vegetables, small pieces of chicken breast, garlic and cucumbers. He lost his appetite. The worst part was that all his food was salt and spices free. How was he going to eat? It was a torture like no other.

Witty Rafsanjani was standing to his right and read his mind. "Sir, my lord, break your diet today. Once a month will do you no harm," he said.

"Do you think so?"

"I know so. I have the same health issues. Not only due the principles of Islam unite us at this age, but also diabetes, hypertension, and high blood cholesterol. It's the doctor's opinion. Breaking the diet once every two weeks, three weeks, or month doesn't hurt at all. When you shock the digestive system, it girds itself into action and burns everything at once. Enjoy your meal at my responsibility," Rafsanjani said, pounding his chest, and rolling up his sleeves before digging into the spiced, roasted lamb, stuffed with almonds and sultanas, a splendid recipe from the gruffy, lizard eating Arabs.

"Sound advice that I will take," Khamini answered, drooling.

They all ate in excess, the way a fasting person would after iftar, finishing their lunch with delicious tea infused with cardamom and saffron. Khamini held his small fancy cup, but he felt that his breath had grown heavy followed by thousands of pin-pricks in his chest. Then his right hand shook

violently and the tea cup flew in the air and smashed into Najad's face, amid gazes of shock and terror. Then he lost all sensation.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself as naked as the day he had been born. His eyes darted around in search of the cup of sweet, flavored tea, for Najad, Rafsanjani, Khatimi, Shamkhani, his assistants, the servants and the guards. He found no one. Where had they gone? Why was he naked? Was he in a bathroom? No, this was a new, unfamiliar place. He was alone. Where were his clothes? His hand unconsciously reached to his midsection. But where was he? He didn't know.

He looked to the right and saw a thick, clear glass partition that separated him from thousands of people. They were happy and having fun. They were dancing, singing, running around and kissing ethereally, beautiful women. He looked to his left and his eyes came across a similar thick and clear glass partition through which he could see thousands of people who were burning, screaming, melting within seconds, and then being reborn only to burn again. What a horrible scene! Did this mean that he had died? Did this mean that he was before heaven and hell? Ah, how fast life ended!

He pondered long and hard. He realized that he was dead. He was grateful to God that he didn't suffer in his death – he hadn't been killed in combat, nor had he tasted the terror of being taken to the gallows like his fiercest enemy Saddam Hussain. Too bad, though, that he had died when he had been at the pinnacle of a fleeting happiness.

Where were his followers, guards, assistants, the leaders, the presidents and the millions who hailed him? Where had they gone? Here he was, alone, naked, with neither might nor power. He turned once more to his right and saw people dancing, singing, and rejoicing, while wearing the fanciest garments he had ever seen – superb fabric, famous French and Italian brands, stunning vintage and modern fashion, as if he were in Hollywood, Paris, or London.

All of a sudden, the ground quaked underneath his feet, and a great fear seized him. A giant computer appeared before him, whose screen filled the entire glass partition. Ridwan appeared with his huge body and his glorious, radiant face, surrounded by a big entourage of happy, beautiful angels. No doubt, it was the hour of judgment. He stared at Ridwan and his companions, his smile melting into supplication and meekness. Then his eyes met Ridwan's, and he discerned in them patience and docility, lacking among humans.

His eyes flitted to the angels around Ridwan; they were both male and female. Their bodies were naked and seductively exciting. Where were their wings and how did they move around? Ridwan motioned to them with his finger and one angel came out through the screen and covered Khamini privates with a red silken wrap. Khamini let out a sigh of relief. That was a nice gesture. So, he wasn't going to hell.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Ridwan started.

“No, Agha. I’m at your disposal.”

“We know you better than you know yourself,” Ridwan said, grinning. “Your abode is hell! Do you know why?”

Khamini jerked in surprise. He hadn’t expected this attack.

It was similar to the style of rule he used with his followers.

“Yes, I am a hypocrite,” he muttered, shivering.

“True. You were an eternal egotistical hypocrite. Thousands of young men were taken to death while you stood still. Not only this, you did nothing for the comfort of the kind Iranian people for a quarter century. During your days, the rich became richer, and the poor poorer. Diseases, hunger, prostitution, corruption and bribery became widespread, and Iran has become the biggest brothel in the world, safeguarded by ayatollahs. Even the way you sit on a raised chair, towering above those who surround you is a despicable, non-Islamic act. Didn’t you know that the prophet Mohammad wouldn’t distinguish himself from others, and those who didn’t know him used to ask, ‘Which one of you is Mohammad?’ You shouldn’t have placed yourself above your people. You should have taken care of them. Khamini, your mistakes are too numerous to cite.”

“All you mentioned is right, but I seek God’s forgiveness, eminent is His glory.”

“God forgave you. Not because you deserve pardon, but only because you did have one good deed when you agreed, along with others, to stop the war, saving the lives of millions. Go into heaven and enjoy.”

Suddenly, the ground quaked and the screen disappeared along with Ridwan and his assistants. Khamini was alone again. Soon, the glass between him and heaven opened, and he felt something nudge him forward onto a regal red carpet, similar to the ones on earth. He felt at ease and took a deep breath as he was going to paradise.

His steps were slow and hesitant, since he was walking into a new world that he had had always heard about, but had never seen. Ah. What a pleasure! What happiness! He felt elated. His heart danced. Where were those enchanting songs coming from? He glimpsed from afar the most beautiful faces and heard the most beautiful voice; though, this was not a celestial voice. It was an earthly one. The voice of Koukoush. Was this possible?

Koukoush was in heaven, like him? What could she have done to deserve heaven? Like always, she was almost naked, her voluptuous body exuding eternal seduction. How she excited him when he was a teenager! He only used to see her on TV. Back then he didn’t even have a penny and seeing her in the nightclub where she performed cost more than he could ever save, but she kept invading his dreams and waking hours, and he kept loving her from a distance. Here she stood before him, with her soft melodious voice. Could he kiss her? Of course not. Thousands of her fans were swaying,

mesmerized and drunken. It would be impossible to win her heart amid all these competitors. But never mind, he'd give it a try, just for the sake of it, and if he got turned down, he would try to find himself a beautiful houri who would make him forget his love for Koukoush.

As soon as he had inched his way down the corridor, the ground trembled beneath his feet. Thirty feet ahead, Saddam blocked his way, eyes fuming with anger, raised fists ready to fight. Khamini froze in place terrorized, then he looked back and began running and screaming, "Agha, Ridwan Agha... Open the door, I don't want heaven!"

Chicago, 2004



Future

Colors

Poetry
from
Issue #14

by Christopher Stackhouse

A promiscuous sun begs
why this particular thing
spraying dissipating rays
it seems means or doesn't
get up and run to force
need however unwanted —
plaster, capsule, collateral
precision in voice, in
subject now walking along
some place, why should it
be named —

In latency of void habit
to cavity fill material
interactions embrace
the way word takes
mouth enslaved intuits
attraction, spirit thief
expanding over book
telling dying whomever
was sucking, slurping
tongue as ode to
bureaucracy to watch
stomach, chest, throat,
arm components rise,
fall, discombobulate,
be enterprise, pass vessel
back and forth and back
and forth state of feeling —

This unnerving conduit
loving specification sinks
into bolster of living flesh —
what is future, what is craft,
suddenly becomes a face
specific but ambiguous,
either meridian or phase
distanced just enough
to ask why do you feel
in queer prosaic terms
which attended to
leads to magic, or at least
fruitful unpredictability
so ruthlessly making
mouth around feeling —

There is an eye for it
indexical to nothing
save itself, reflection
of sorts in session
daring difference if
it were as opposed to
if such a premise
imagined followed,
sounding together,
not so divided from
gifting subject with
collectibles, temporality,
charm, a fabulous take
on death, or love
of the object in its
circumstances,
corresponding telepathy,
the immortality
of color description,
the extras, and the
teamwork of the
senses afterward
to mean —



Prodigal

Objects

Poetry
from
Issue #4

by Carolyn Rogers

when i lose something,
i am all out in the streets
looking for it.
it doesn't matter if i lost it at home,
or school, or at church.
i think maybe i'll see it
way 'cross town in impossible places.
department stores, restrooms, hospital
lobbies, telephone booths.
earrings, loves, books, buttons,
notebooks, pens.
i'm looking for them all.
say maybe i lost whatever it is
in california, and here i am in chicago,
2000 miles away, looking for it.
or maybe i lost it in africa and one
day i get a certain feeling and i'm
in chicago and i know i lost it say
400 years ago in africa,
but on this particular day, i just know
i'm going to find it in chicago.
it doesn't matter what it is.
no it really doesn't matter what it is,
or where i lost it either.
what matters is the feeling of finding
(there is a law of finding),
what matters is finding on lost days,
and i'm finding that some days
what matters just as much is being found.



The Survey

*Poetry
from
Issue #7*

by Lewis Warsh



If you
point to
heaven,
it begins.

Non-fiction
from
Issue #9

by Jenny Bouilly

At summer's end, the thread all gray and grimy, the scissors making its way there, I oftentimes wondered what it must be like to be me. The bathwater slightly bubbly, the string wet and clammy, the string never quite coming clean.

This is the same charm that hung on my neck in that photograph of me. In that photograph, big sister is only three. Mother says that she will take it back to the village where she bought it and have the Buddha dipped in gold now, now that she has the money.

There's one banana tree that bleeds red when you cut into it, its sap all viscous and runny. She had long, long hair, and that's how he caught her, caught her by her flowing hair. See: the leaves, bristling in the dusk breeze: that's how her hair moved when he did it. And so, you tread softly, you tread softly there by that banana tree: the one anomaly that grows red in a field of perfectly green trees.

Each day, I watched the letter carrier ride away. He rode away with my love letters, which never came. The owl circled the house all day.

I didn't know then, when I was so young, that I should not cut it, that to cut the string would be a very bad thing.

To fly across the world: that's spooky talk, as are ghosts, as is the past, as is the way the weather turned on the day of mourning. And so, they might believe that to come here from the outside country is either a very hard or simple thing, but to come here from the outside country is nevertheless an unnatural thing. To fly across the world is spooky talk, as is leaving, as is saying I will see you again. My aunt lifts the talisman to her forehead, to mine, and lets it fall over my head. It's connected to a string, a bright white string.

The owl means there will be death, my uncle says. He aims his slingshot, does not say what he does to the bird, and that is all there is to say about that.

In the schoolyard, the children asking about it and saying, you must be very poor to have jewelry that's only string.

I want to know what suffering is for: it's to make things lovely, I think, because that's the way the river looks right now, all lit up with candles and banana boats and flowers and incense smoke. My suffering takes on the shape of a floating vessel; a snakefish knives along underneath.

And do you see how even the chickens will not go there? So many little shoots of things and grubs of things and still. The chickens will not go.

If you point to heaven, it begins. To disappear. See: noonday now, and the mushrooms all mulch.

Before leaving, he said that I should never cut my hair so that is why I cut it when he disappeared. That is why, in my passport photograph, I have that look about me that made mother ask if I had seen a ghost, if I needed to go to temple. That is why, when grandmother sees me again, my hair is so short; it's so short because I cut it; I cut it to get back at him. I wondered what it was like to be me, to stop holding. All summer, the long locks falling on the floor. The curl held taut, the scissors making its way there.

I approached the monk rather timidly; I was always shy about getting anything.

That's the place where, before dying, grandmother fell. The silt all red, the mushrooms all drooped down. Even the chickens will not.

The banana flower all engorged. A deep maroon. Little bananas waiting to push through.

I wanted to know what it must be like to be me: these people here who all knew me as a baby. In the photograph, I am six months old. To be suddenly grown, to be a being that is no longer held, and that is why my aunt places the string about me.

All night, the owl, and the letters never came. In the lotus pond, a single stem snapped: its pink flower like a maiden bent over to drown.

My grandmother chewed and chewed the red moch, the beetle nut and limestone paste that turned her white teeth black, her lips all the color of poppies. When she laughed, her spittle bled red.

The monk tied the white yarn around my wrist; I watched the monks eat, waited patiently for my turn after that; the noodles and the rice and the various desserts brought to the temple by everyone for everyone.

The birds of paradise: bird upon bird upon bird upon bird like a little ladder for the spirits to climb. Into the little spirit house there is where the little lives go. Except for the little boy who still cries. We have heard him cry, and that is why we light the incense.

She will get it dipped in gold now that she has the money, because that is what you do with your talismans once you have the money; but I would rather that it remained the way that it was when I wore it. All the children in the schoolyard asking: it's a whistle, I'd say and blow on it.

Something held.

The legend goes that there's a big fish, a fish that's like a snake. It's a water dragon that lives in the big river. The legend goes that it only shows itself, randomly, once a year. After that, it goes back into hiding. But, my mother says, but a long time ago, she says. A long time ago, you could see it everyday. Grandmother used to see it all the time, but now, now, my mother says, now people don't believe anymore, so now it has gone away.

Red spots in the red silt where the *moch* mushrooms grow. A spraying of spittle.

I can't help but think that something in the essay's gone missing: something in the essay's gone away.

Mother: a banana blossom; my baby fists: a clutch of banana sprays.

I go for my mother's food first, always, as everyone else's mother's food's a bit gross. Except for the sweet rice cooked with banana and coconut milk in a banana leaf; that dessert was always my favorite.

No one should ever, my mother tells me, should ever wash your under things. I wash mine in the remains of my bathwater, my panties never quite coming clean.

Don't let the broom sweep past your feet. That means an old man will marry you. I move my feet away tenderly.

In the photograph, I am less than a year old; in the photograph, big sister is three; this is the photograph that mother pays for at a department store in the outside country to send home; this is the photograph father keeps in his wallet; this is the photograph that makes me wonder what it is to be me.

The love letters never came; at night, I thought of the owl, whether or not its body was in a grave.

My uncle takes the frog away; he throws it into a river, a pond, a puddle. He goes high into the mountain, low into the valley, on his motorcycle even to another village, but no matter how far he releases the frog, the frog is waiting for him in the bath basin when he returns. It's all smug and snug against the rim of the basin and stares at us. It must be dead kin, mother says. And so, we let the frog stay; it stays with us for days and days.

Something held before it's given away.

When a neck is slit, the blood doesn't trickle, but rather it sprays. That is how the ground here got that way. The pig all distressed, the pig head all dressed to celebrate. Our safe passage home, the unencumbered journey that praying gave.

The frog eventually went away, my uncle says. It went away on the morning of our leaving.

On my birth certificate, it says that I was born in the year of the big snake, the dragon, while the moon was waxen. And someday, I too will show myself less and less, wane before going away.



Equívoco

Non-fiction
from
Issue #13

(Misunderstanding)

by Verónica Gerber Bicecci

Translated from the Spanish by Kate Newman and Robin Myers

Je ne parle que de choses ratées.
S. Calle

Endlessly,
I would have walked with you.
P. Auster

He didn't know how to respond. Of all the sentences he'd written, none would be so binding. He couldn't say no. But his *yes* to Her was almost a *no*; a disappointing *yes*, without emphasis. A productive yes, but unenlightening.

When Sophie came home after a trip around the world that took her seven years to finish, she stumbled into a hollow. She had no idea how to live her daily life. She wound up readjusting to her environment by assuming unusual tasks; she searched for the traces left by a place she no longer belonged to; she wanted to go deep into a Paris that now proved so remote. Ultimately she became an artist.

Paul had studied French Literature at Columbia. He was a sailor on an oil tanker that anchored in France when he turned 24. He stayed in Paris for four years, although he'd only planned to stay for one. He earned his living by looking after a ranch and translating French writers like Mallarmé and Simenon. By the time he returned to New York, Sophie was still continuing her long journey around the world.

She wanted to become the main character in a book and asked Him to write it. She wanted to do what the words dictated, to dilute herself. To be the uncertainty trapped inside a story. To risk disappearing into someone else's life. To float without responsibility, without consequences.

Once, at summer camp, Paul saw something up close that he didn't understand at the time. He was 14. A friend crawled under a wire fence while trying to get out of danger during an electrical storm in the woods. There was a clearing on the other side. While Paul waited his turn, a lightning bolt struck the fence full on, electrocuting his friend. Mere seconds separated him from death. He was still a child when he became aware, by dint of this ill-fated happening, of the shuddering moment in which all things can drastically and irrevocably change. He would later become a writer.

When Sophie was barely a teenager, she lived for a while in Camargo. She was 12 years old. Her friends were all older boys, between 18 and 20. She was like their surrogate little sister. There, she learned how to dance and ride horses. She was the only female rider for a long time. They called her "the gypsy." Life in the country was very different from life in the city, ever precarious, hectic, dangerous, extreme. Sophie doesn't remember things for very long, but that time in Camargo changed her forever. Her friends wound up getting married and having kids; they put down roots. Sophie carried on and, from that point forward, grew accustomed to shedding friendships every three or four years, to never staying too long in the same place.

She was a kind of known rumor, the murmur of a metaphor. Not just a teller of good stories, but also a character who embodied the silence of writing, who personified writing itself. Her works always pressed a step further: a breathtaking novella, always autobiographical, but hung on a wall.

One of the first habits Sophie adopted on her return was following people on the street; she felt this would lend her walks a sense of direction. She didn't know that another artist, Vito Acconci, had done the same and documented it years before. When she wanted to show her work in a gallery, she sought him out and talked to him. Vito told her that the reasons leading them to perform the same actions were remote, as were their interests. It wouldn't be a problem.

On one of her walks, Sophie spent a little while following a man who disappeared into the crowd. That night, at an opening, someone happened to introduce her to that same man. She exchanged a few words with Henri B, who told her about his next trip to Venice. Faced with such a coincidence, Sophie knew she had to follow him. The next day she went to the train station. She had limited clues, a couple of wigs, and some makeup. It was the first time she had traveled to Venice. *L'homme que je suis peut m'emmener où el veut, j'y vais. C'est la règle du jeu. Mais c'est moi qui l'ai choisie. Je rêve toujours de situations dans lesquelles je n'aurais rien à décider* (*Suite Vénitienne*, 1979).

Paul was immersed in his poetry until 1979. That year he would return to stories he'd kept stashed in his drawers, texts he'd never shown to anyone. He was striving for a transparent prose. Particles dispersed in a colorless liquid. To make a colloid with which any reader could forget the words; to follow the words until losing them halfway through. To enter. To be the story told.

*... In the impossibility of words,
in the unspoken word
that asphyxiates,
I find myself.*

She felt a strange weakness for the stories He wrote. Reading him, she understood herself as a hazardous occurrence appended to the bifurcations of his tangled storylines. She recognized herself in his characters: always lost in a vast city, alone, directionless. Victims of eventuality. She wanted to find him. She searched for him. She searched for that thread of coincidences that would one day bring her before him.

But if He wrote about a character hurling herself from the Brooklyn Bridge, She would hurl Herself, too. If the character fell in love with Him, She would have to fall in love. He could write whatever story He wanted. Tell the story that would be all stories. It was too much. He was burdened with a responsibility greater than what He could assume.

Sophie asked her mother to hire a detective who would track her for a week. She wouldn't know the exact day he would begin his task. Nor would the detective know that the investigation had been arranged at her request. She asked a good friend to wait outside the Palais de la Découverte every day at five o'clock and take her photo, hoping that her pursuer would appear in the same photo and that, accordingly, she could know who he was. Sophie kept a daily record of her actions, hour by hour, much like the one that would be submitted to her mother. The first day she was followed, she left home at 10:20 am, bought flowers, went to the cemetery, and left them at a stranger's grave; met a friend in a café at 10:40; went at 12 to the hair salon; and had an appointment with an editor at 12:30. At 2:20 she was in the Louvre before her favorite painting, *Man with a Glove* by Tiziano Sophie wandered through the Tuileries gardens and spent from 4 to 6 in the Palais de la Découverte. At night, at 7 pm, she attended the opening of a show by Gilbert & George in the Chantal Crousel gallery, left the exhibit with an acquaintance, and went for dinner at the OKbar. She arrived home in the early hours of the morning, dizzy, and fell asleep. At the end of every day that week, Sophie wondered whether she truly had been followed, whether that man who'd trailed her through the streets of Paris would think of her the next day (*L' Filature*, 1981).

When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. Paul had received a phone call. It was a wrong number. The caller asked if his house was a detective agency. In one of his first books he would write the story of a man who, after receiving such a call for the third time, would pass himself off as a private investigator. *But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos.* The subject to be investigated walked aimlessly around New York City, seemed to be tracing different letters with his path. But those letters would never turn into words nor would they come to reveal something obscured. *And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality.* There was a nonexistent secret, fastened to the delirium of a stranger who, little by little, stripped himself of everything that surrounded him. *Hence*

every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent (City of Glass, 1985).

He couldn't prescribe her destiny. And, in any case, who was She? Had their eyes ever met? He would give her a few lines and, in this way, maybe, just maybe, she would choose to come to Him.

She needed clear signs. Precise words. Without potential misinterpretations. She had told herself the story hundreds of times and knew it by heart. He only had to write it, to take the risk. To jump. He was the only one who could write something of this kind, the only one who could bring the silence to fruition, the silence of all those years spent knowing each other without ever having met.

For Paul, a character always finds himself on an eternal voyage. Marco Stanley Fogg is a young man who inherits his uncle's enormous library and decides to leave it in boxes. In his apartment, the boxes will be convertible furniture, a constant reflection of his instability, a kind of minimalist-functional installation. As in a journey of initiation, he will gradually rid himself of possessions and aspirations: the further he travels from himself, the easier it will be to find himself, until he comes to inhabit himself like a stranger. He will work as a caretaker for a cantankerous old man. He will amble through Central Park and read the classics out loud to his charge every afternoon. On the verge of death, the old man asks Fogg to deliver some documents to his son. Fogg leaves in search of him. That *encounter*, planned by the old man, will signify an unexpected *reencounter* for Fogg: the man in question will turn out to be his own father, who will die shortly thereafter. Fogg will continue his journey all the way to the beach. Fogg's voyage is an internal *drift* in the dark. *I had come to the end of the World, and beyond it there was nothing but air and waves, an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China. This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins (Moon Palace, 1989).*

Le lundi 16 février, je réussis, après une année de démarches et d'attente, à me faire engager comme femme de chambre pour un remplacement de trois semaines dans un hôtel vénitien: l'hôtel C. Sophie knew she would never see their faces; she just observed their daily movements—each guest, a way of wandering the city with a stranger, the halo of an internal course. She felt she could finish other people's stories with just a few signs of life. She observed, for example, slight changes in the fruit bowl: a few oranges transformed, day by day, into peels, tossed in the trash. She passed judgment. The people she spied on were traveling, too. They wrote in notebooks, on loose pages or hotel stationery. Strolls, impressions, the menu of the day, the address of a place, a postcard to a friend—anything. She thought there was no way to imagine a trip without writing something down, as if writing were a way to not say goodbye. Travel isn't simply making oneself absent; it's leaving proof of said absence, of the change suffered by the person who moves from one place to another. Sophie dove into her own journey by gathering the traces of a trip in which she didn't exist (L'Hôtel, 1981).

He finally wrote her lines. He honored the deal. *On How to Improve Life in New York City (Because she asked ...)*. Were she to carry them out, She would have to travel to his city. His text was clear at first glance, but it contained a secret message. Would she understand? Would she hear, through the noise of the agreement, a hidden whisper?

The mail brought several typewritten pages and a handwritten letter. She read them attentively. He had formally responded to her request and nothing more. It wasn't what she had expected. She wanted to uncover a message, something hidden in the script, but how could she make sure of something like that, how could she know? She wasn't willing to ask him. She followed his instructions to the letter.

En 1984, le ministère des Affaires étrangères m'accordé une bourse d'études de trois mois au Japon. Je suis partie le 25 octobre sans savoir que cette date marquait le début d'un compte à rebours de Quatre-vingt-douze tours qui allait aboutir à une rupture, banale, mais que j'ai vécue alors comme le moment le plus douloureux de ma vie. J'en ai tenu ce voyage pour responsable. In an attempt at exorcism, when Sophie returned from Japan in January 1985, she interviewed all her friends, acquaintances, and less-than acquaintances in order to determine the most painful moments of their lives. She wanted to put her sadness into perspective by listening to that of other people and would only cease to ask when it had disappeared.

Every answer became a story beside her own, again and again. The same photograph of Room 261 in a New Delhi hotel where she had planned a reencounter that never happened. Images from all the stories that weren't hers—a car, a street: places where other people's lives had changed. And her story, told dozens of times, always written differently: *Il a rompu par téléphone. Quatre répliques et moins de trois minutes pour me dire qu'il en aimait une autre. C'est tout.* It went on this way for three months. The collected reports were far more sordid and wrenching than her own ordinary love story. But Sophie had to let go of everything that could no longer be. To hasten her mourning. That abrupt, univocal, and alien decision had turned her into the stranger, after being the most intimate. She blamed, in the solitude of her abandonment, a time that changed without waiting for her, without her being ready. The last anecdote someone told her was identical to hers. Only then did she feel redeemed. She shelved the project for fear of relapse and resumed it 15 years later (*Doubleur exquise*, 1985–2003).

Paul suddenly learns that his father has died and writes a novel that will be an essay on grief. It will take him several years to publish. His father had concealed a terrible secret. Paul will discover the mystery in newspaper clippings and archived documents. Who, then, was this man? His writing seeks an encounter. Only memory, that space where things can happen twice; language, vehicle for the most abstract emotions; and solitude, isolation whose final destination is creativity, will manage to free him from his father's ghost, a man who had been a total stranger. *Language is not truth. It is the way we exist in the World. Playing with words is merely to examine the way the mind functions, to mirror a particle of the world as the*

mind perceives it. In the same way, the world is not just the sum of the things that are in it. It is the infinitely complex network of connections among them (The Invention of Solitude, 1982).

Without a doubt, what He had wanted to say was there, but you never know with words. Words are caves. Difficult to use without causing misunderstandings. Words are kilometric cables, the satellite signals that separate two people, each with his own receiver. To write or to speak, coins flung into the air: the latent danger that the meanings will settle into peculiar shapes. The confusion between stalagmites and stalactites, limestone water about to drip. But He was confident. She would understand.

She believed that strings hung naturally between them, drawing a vast skein of synchronies. Latitudes seemed to vanish, but her perception was nothing more than the edge of a delirium, of a desire. Parallel lines, those that come very close together but never touch. The letter was not a cord, but rather a groove sketched between them, an unexpected slope. What she'd fantasized about so deliberately and for so long now fled downhill. Imagination is helplessness. She never replied.

Possibilities easily tarnish. Only the metaphor He hadn't brought himself to write would exist. That metaphor She didn't know how to translate. It matters little. How important can it be that a liquid conforms to its container and, accidentally, falls to the floor, breaks, and spills. To reach something is to very quickly arrive at the exit; arriving at the exit left them without an exit. People don't go around the world looking at each other this way, at such close range. Literature is the true and only fate, because it doesn't exist in real time, it doesn't happen. The words always escape us in our memories, remorseful for this day and that time, the exact minute in which the decision between a smile and a kiss would completely change the storyline, the tangle, the plot. When points in time can't belong together, that day cannot exist, nor does yesterday, nor tomorrow. Even though all words are false—someday was today.



Michael

Says

Fiction
from
Issue #14

by Evan Morgan Williams

“Michael says we adorn ourselves as the mountain does. Turquoise and silver, lavender and sage.”

“Beautiful.”

“I’d say so.”

The night is not yet cold, our breath not yet a cloud, and Jenny and I are alone on the patio beneath the tamarack trees. Jenny’s index finger draws hearts and arrows on the dusty red stones, but her scrawls, like the heat remembered from the day, don’t last: she wipes the warm stones smooth to draw on them again.

The other girls on staff have turned in to the bunkhouse. The boys are playing cards in their loft above the barn. The guests in their yurts are sleeping off a day of horseback riding, crafts, ritual sweats, and gourmet food and wine. Only Jenny and I tend the fire, and we keep it alive by feeding it from a dwindling pile of young pine rounds. I know the night will get cold because the crickets are down. The horses have opted for the stable. They know. The hottest days invite the coldest nights, and the bluest skies bring a darkness bright with icy stars.

“You’re sure Michael will like this?” Jenny asks.

“I know what he likes,” I say.

Jenny is new. She lies with her back to me, her head in my lap, nestled into my batik skirt’s reds and browns, and her warmth becomes mine. I am wrapping hemp string and turquoise beads around a lock of her thick black hair. I tell her that every girl gets hemp wraps. I tell her about my first time. It was a cold summer night like this when Fern wrapped locks of my hair and sang Joni Mitchell’s “Ladies of the Canyon.” The wraps used to be a

bold red like the mountain, but four years of sun and sweat have drained the dye. A faded pink remains, and I am glad to leave them buried deep in my hair.

A third girl, Temple, shuffles out of the darkness. She sits near.

I say, "Better late than never."

Temple does not reply. Her shoulders are hunched, and her head is bent. She opens a jeweler's kit, takes up a lock of Jenny's hair, and begins wrapping it with silver wire. Onto the silver wire she threads coins hammered thin and light as abalone, making an elegant curve around the back of Jenny's ear. The coins tinkle, aspen leaves. Temple hums to herself while the jingling of her silver bracelets follows its own tune. Her loose hair hides her face. Jenny is learning you do not talk to Temple. Instead, she tips back her head as Temple and I work, and I figure she is watching the sparks climb into the black sky. I have tipped back my head before.

Jenny is dark and beautiful. She said her grandparents are Native American, which may explain her allure, and she is so delicate and lovely that if she grew wings and flew away that would be fine by me and best for her. Best for Michael, too. Jenny is only sixteen. I don't mind saying I know how that goes. I first came to Michael's ranch when I was sixteen and a quarter, and since then I have never aspired to summer anywhere else, although I admit that the first time was hard for me. My mother had read about Michael's ranch in a magazine, and it was either this or tennis camp in Palm Springs, so the choice was easy. After three months, when my parents met me at the airport, I had beads in my hair, vanilla oil and henna on my skin, and joy in my heart. I was as stunned as my parents that I had found my place in the world. I did not tell them that on these same flat stones beneath tamarack trees, Michael had held me in his arms, gazed at the cold moon, and divined my life, and that by August I was the one kissing him and whispering the future in his ear. I had been wise enough to know a transgression had occurred, and I let Michael daub my dusty tears with his clean cool fingertips and promise me that everything would be okay. At summer's end, when I stood in the airport parking lot, leaned against my parents' hot black Mercedes, and cried in my mother's arms, I recited exactly those words: everything would be okay. Four more summers have passed. Michael is a good man. Why put Michael through that again? Jenny is sweet and simple, and we love her so much we call her Boxelder Beetle, a dark bug that squishes easily, a meal for a kingbird, a husk by autumn.

From the great white oak comes laughter. The white oak holds the lodge in its muscular branches—the lodge is an elaborate treehouse of Michael's design—and the dormers of the lodge jut from the branches like turrets of a castle. The lodge is dark except for one glowing window at the top of the tree. The laughter comes from there.

"Is that Fern?" says Jenny. She lifts her head to look.

"Probably," I say. I push her head back down.

“With Michael?”

“That would depend on what you mean by *with*. Now lie back this way.” I tug on the lock of her hair.

Jenny, gazing up, finds my hand and touches it. The other day, one of the girls, Persimmon, inked my skin with henna to make a pattern of native vines. Jenny turns my hand in the firelight and says, “I want that too.” The vines begin at my fingertips and climb my arm. They slide under the bracelets Temple has made for me, the silver cuff she has fitted around my upper arm, and they blossom somewhere beneath the puffed sleeve of my peasant blouse, a private display for certain eyes. Jenny’s dark hand sliding up my skin makes me ache.

“It comes off, yes?”

“Actually, it lasts quite awhile.” My skin prickles with her touch. Beetle.

Jenny says, “I think I want that.”

“You want that, or you think you want that. Settle your thoughts, dear girl.”

“What does Michael say about it?”

“Michael says the body is a tableau. A canvas. Persimmon will paint yours. We’ll see to it. Temple can do a piercing, too, if you desire one. But henna for certain. It’s so goddess. And you’re so pretty.”

“It’s beautiful and sexy.”

“You can say that again.”

Jenny makes a breathy voice and pouts her lips. “Beautiful and sexy.”

Jenny and I laugh. I love her. Temple shuffles off to fetch Persimmon and her henna kit. Persimmon will do her up right. The noise of Temple’s jingling bracelets fades like the music of a chime after the wind has died. I love Jenny’s thick soft hair in my hands, and I wrap it as tightly as I can. I would take up Temple’s song, but I don’t know how to sing about the things I love.

Jenny is the housekeeper. Cleaning yurts isn’t enlightening work. It’s not labor that nourishes the soul. It’s pure toil, but when you first come to Michael’s ranch, Fern has to assign you somewhere. While Jenny is stripping beds and emptying baskets and putting fresh flowers in each earthen vase, Temple, Persimmon, and I station ourselves beneath the tamaracks for long contemplative hours of body art, intricate braids, flower pressing, and readings from Rumi and Rimbaud. The guests tell us how beautiful we are, and we show them how to beautify themselves. We teach them to throw pots, weave baskets, and distill essential oils from myrtlewood leaves. We lead ritual sweats. Sometimes Michael calls one of us to climb into the swaying heights of the white oak, and we excuse ourselves to join him. It

is important work, all of it, but each of us has our role, and Jenny's role is solidly on the ground. Ten yurts need cleaning and dusting. Ten guests need to settle into organic cotton sheets and goose down pillows, certain that each glimmering day has been the finest of their lives. Ten guests need fresh cakes of hypoallergenic castile soap beside their wash basins, they need fresh sprigs of lavender and velvet sage beside each soap cake, and these touches need to happen while they're out, riding horses, soaking in the cedar pools, tipping back wine, or seated with us beneath the tamaracks. Jenny's role is to seem like she was never here. I've spotted that sweet girl, trudging from yurt to yurt, shouldering her broom like a yoke, a blue plastic bucket dangling from one side, a basket of linens from the other, her velvet coin purse swinging from her waist, hoping for a tip. She's busy from sunup to sundown, and maybe that's why she has never met Michael. He's asked about her, the small native girl with blue-black hair, and surely Jenny has seen him at his window high in the lodge: straw hat, strong arms, T-shirt always clean and bright in this dusty place. I know she's heard about his blue eyes, *azure*, I would say, like the sky, and I do admit to planting curiosity in the young girl's mind. I was sixteen, once upon a time. Sixteen and a quarter. I had seen Michael's shadow cross a window and heard his low velvet voice. I figured things out. I am the one who let slip to Jenny that if she worked quickly there would be enough time to lie on a freshly made bed beside a window and watch the trees sway against fixed clouds in a still, hot sky. I am the one who told Jenny that a girl could imagine whatever she wished to be true. But when I said this, I figured that the girl yoked to that broom would wish to fly away.

The cold will be here soon. I reach for a pine round, leaning away from Jenny, and I jam the round into the fire. Sparks find places to die in a dark sky. Let them. There's no place for me out there. Michael says not to worry, not to be afraid, he will hold me near, and I believe him. I resume tying down Jenny's hair, glad for her warmth against mine.

The jangling of silver bracelets swells out of the darkness. Someone hums a song. It is Temple, back from the girls' bunkhouse, dragging a sleepy Persimmon with her. Persimmon stands behind me and takes in our work. I can feel her. She has the warmest skin. At night, when the only light is from the window staring down from the top of the white oak tree, I have stood in the grass and held Persimmon, sad and afraid, and she has done the same for me.

Jenny sits up and turns. Her hair slides from my fingers. My hands guide her down.

Persimmon is tall, slim, and her batik skirt rides low on her hips. Michael met her two years back at a craft fair in a college town, and she's been here every summer since. She makes a lovely tableau. Every space of her skin is painted with wonderful things. Her silver bracelets jingle, thin as wire, ten of them around each painted wrist. She leans over me, and I kiss her patchouli hair.

Temple takes up a wordless song, and we settle back into our work. There's

room for Persimmon and her tiny brushes and paint pots on the other side of the girl. She opens her henna kit on the dusty stone.

I say, "Give her remarkable eyes."

Persimmon has given each of us the eyes of women in Minoan frescoes. Michael has touched my eyes with his hands, and he has wiped tears from them, and the dye does not run. Persimmon looks at Jenny's pretty face. She strokes her fingers down Jenny's cheek. She looks at me.

"Remarkable?"

"Is there a problem, Persimmon?" I press Jenny's shoulders. "Lie back, Beetle."

"But Charlotte..."

"Do it, please." No one moves. I look away. I add, "Michael says so."

Persimmon takes a tiny brush. The tip grazes Jenny's face as lightly as though Persimmon were painting a flower petal.

Jenny says, "You know, my grandparents are coming out to see me. They're going to freak! In a good way, though."

I say, "My parents won't leave the poolside in Palm Springs."

Persimmon says, "My parents are okay with things. I mean, what choice do they have?"

Music. Silver bracelets. Temple says nothing.

The boys in the barn laugh. Faraway light.

I say, "Temple doesn't have any parents. She's our orphan girl, our urchin."

"My grandpa says Michael's a radical, a heretic, and a libertine," Jenny says.

"Save your ten dollar words," I say. "Hold still. Michael is a good man."

Persimmon dips her brush and says, "He is a good, kind man."

"A very good, kind man," I say.

Persimmon says nothing.

Temple presses on with her song, her fingers knotting silver into Jenny's hair. Her wordless voice finds the next note, and the next, pressing on.

"That's a hymn," Jenny says. "I know it."

"She won't talk to you," I say. "Don't you get it?"

"So you talk to me then," Jenny says. "Tell me more about everything."

“You do smoke weed, don’t you? And you’ve made it with a boy, haven’t you?”

“Well, last year, when I worked at church camp, I—”

Persimmon says, “This is no church camp.”

Jenny sits up, forcing everyone to pause. “You’ve obviously never been to church camp.”

“It’s just that you’re so young,” Persimmon says. “Charlotte, she’s too young.”

I say, “That’s the point. Lie down, Beetle.”

Jenny says, “Well, you’re all young too. You were young once, I mean.”

“But wise,” I say. “Michael says I am the reincarnation of an old soul.”

“Me too,” says Persimmon.

“Then you should realize that I can take care of myself.”

“Hush. Persimmon needs to do your pretty mouth.”

“I’m a big girl now.”

“Boxelder Beetle! Hush!”

At the beginning of the season, Fern and I were taking Jenny around. The days were already hot, and the dust pillowed in the still air. We wore bandanas across our mouths, and we surveyed the yurts, the lodge, the bunkhouse and the barn. We held Jenny’s hands. “Michael did all this. Every building. Every fence rail. The boards are hand-hewn, and they fit so tight they don’t even have nails. Michael is our dreamer. He’s pie-in-the-sky, and we love him for it. As for keeping the books, cooking the food, worldly concerns, that’s Fern. Body work, spirit work, that’s us. Housekeeping, that’s you.” I handed her the broom. She stared at it as though unsure which was the business end. She blinked slowly. Then she pulled down my bandana and gazed at my face. She was so pretty I kissed her forehead, the first of many times I have done so. I said, “Most of the boys, and the girls, they’ve been in the family for years. You come one time, you want to stay forever.”

Fern laughed. She always laughed. Laughter had wrinkled the corners of her eyes. She walked toward the lodge, climbed the DaVinci stairs, and she was still laughing.

I said, “Michael built all of this completely alone. It was a feat. He is a great man.” I pointed to the lodge high in the white oak. “Imagine him up there dangling in the raw sky. He had a vision, and he made it come true. Michael says—”

Jenny said “Your face. When you talk about him.” She touched the henna lines around my Minoan eyes. I trembled with the touch. I loved this girl. I

had known her for a day, but I would do anything for her.

“What about my face?”

“You are unhappy. My grandmother taught me how to tell.”

“Silly girl. Get to work.”

Jenny turned, the broom slung across her shoulders, and I made for the tamaracks to resume being beautiful. Call me unhappy! Call me blessed! Be like Temple and call me nothing at all.

~

The night cools. I knew it would. Our bodies close around the beautiful girl. Temple’s low song, her steady breathing, begins to feel like mine. Persimmon’s heat feels like mine. I know little about these girls beyond what Michael has told me, but I love them. I have let them paint my eyes and weave silver bits through my hair. I have let them pierce my skin. As I have done to them in turn.

We work away, and the boys in the loft deal hands. It is good to sit with Jenny and Temple and Persimmon and hear those boys, knowing the boys are in their lighted room with cards and candles and good night sounds of horses below them on solid ground. The boys have never touched us, never will, and we like to drive them crazy. Every day, the boys amble around the corral, easy and slow, with sweaty shirts and dusty jeans and all the right muscles in their legs and hips and the right look in their eyes as they glance at the pretty girls beneath the tamarack trees. One day there was a pony who got out of the pasture, and I brought the frightened thing in. I was Daniel in the lion’s den. I had walked into the fields to pick morning star, and I saw the loose horse and I whispered him down, leading him by the bridle through the tall grass. The thin dew that had settled on the grass brushed my skirt. There was the jingling of my hair, beads and silver in long tresses. My words were calm words. The horse’s breath was warm. When I left the barn, I tossed back my hair and looked at those boys over my shoulder. They were watching me. I am not afraid of any boy. They talk at night, but only of girls far away. We all know how it is. Michael’s vanilla oil on our skin. There’s never been hay in my hair. I have never heard a boy call out my name. I am not afraid, just a little sad.

~

Persimmon says, “Now close your eyes. Charlotte said remarkable, so remarkable you shall be.”

“Don’t lay that on me.”

“Oh, that’s right. Apparently Michael told her. Well, Michael has told me a few things too.”

“Like what?”

“He told me the sun rises in my eyes. Has he ever told that to you? Temple? Charlotte?”

Temple says nothing.

I say “Nothing like that. He’s never kissed me and held my face and told me the sun rises in my eyes, and kissed me again and again. He’s never done that to me.”

~

The craft was flower pressing. It was early, low light, the kind that fills your dress. The flower called morning star had burst across the meadows. By six a.m. I had gathered the blossoms, my skirt dusty and wet with dew. Jenny came out of the bunkhouse, wrapped in a blanket, dreamy in the heat and dust, our pretty girl, tiny and lovely and fresh. I kissed her. She must have looked from the window and seen the world beginning to play. The boys were taking the guests on a horseback ride. Temple was seated beneath the beech tree, tying up a blonde girl’s hair. Persimmon was painting henna around another girl’s hands. Grown-ups, glad for sun and quiet, drank coffee and read thick novels on the stones beneath the tamaracks. I began pressing morning star behind hemp paper and panes of glass. Jenny looked over my work. I knew she had had a vision, and it must have been of herself being happy. She leaned over my back, resting her chin on my shoulder, her blue-black hair spilling past my face.

“I was asleep. I heard Michael’s voice. I ran to a window and looked, but he was gone. There is that picture on the wall in the bunkhouse. A younger Fern with a young handsome, kind-looking man. But Fern is older now, so he is older too, yes?”

I knew that picture. Michael and Fern in the white oak tree. The lodge was a skeleton of what it would become. Fern gripped a ladder rung. Michael stood against sky. He looked ready to fly. I knew that pretty Jenny had stood in front of that little framed picture and prayed to be pretty enough, and when the prayer ran out of words, she broke her hands to lift her arms like wings.

Jenny’s breath tickled my ear. I pressed a morning star flat and twisted the bolts to tighten down the glass.

I said, “The dust is watered, but you still smell it.”

“I can taste it.” She kissed my neck. Her cheek grazed my shoulder, her arms enveloped me. It was too much. In my world, I didn’t bear any weight but my own. I stood. She let go. She had to.

She said, “I want to meet him.”

I said, “Let me tell you something. Do you know what Michael says?” Here I pointed at the girls around the grounds. “He says Temple is his angel. He says Persimmon is his muse. He says I’m his soul mate. Maybe now you see

how it is. Don't worry; he's a kind man. But he doesn't get you, Boxelder Beetle. He knows he doesn't get you. He told me so.

"He talks about me?"

"Michael talks about you. He says you're his obscure object. I mean he really doesn't get you. But don't worry yourself. You don't even need to understand what that means."

"I want to understand."

I twisted the bolts of the flower press too hard and snapped the glass. Last night I had come back to the bunkhouse crying; was Jenny supposed to understand that? I had come across the grass, cold, arms wrapped tightly around my ribs, and I was not singing, but could she understand? Every day she was becoming more beautiful. Black hair shining. Batik skirt. Brown skin darkening in the sun. Her eyes were pools that should have seen far, but instead they were dark and solid, thoughtless as stones. She was so pretty, but it was an innocent pretty, capable of nothing but wilting like a plucked flower.

I said that the only thing she needed to understand was that Michael was a good man.

She said her grandfather had fought in Viet Nam, and he had come home to the reservation and raised his family, and he was a good man, too.

I said we weren't talking about the same thing.

She ran for the bunkhouse, kicking up wet dust that should have stayed down. She yelled that there was only one kind of good in the world.

~

Pine rounds die in the fire.

"Shh..." I say.

Persimmon speaks. "Um, no one is saying anything, Charlotte."

Temple is more closed around herself than ever. Her hair shrouds her face. Her hands, silver-tarnish-stained, tuck back her hair, leaving tracks on her sweet face, but her head is downcast, letting her hair fall again.

I say, "After we're done with you, Jenny, you'll be a goddess. Men will lay down silver and gold to make it with you."

"Like a ho," says Persimmon.

"You'll be a goddess, not a ho. Silver and gold."

"Silver and gold, silver and gold. That's from Rudolph."

“Persimmon!”

Temple’s song ends on its own. She has not uttered a word of friendship. She hasn’t said a word at all. She packs up her wrap of clinking jewelry tools. Persimmon packs her paints and brushes. I stuff beads and hemp into the pocket of my skirt.

It is done. Jenny sits up, gazing from face to face, seeking the approval of the most beautiful girls she will ever know, but we say nothing. The fire is fighting for breath. Persimmon, Temple, and I look at each other. Jenny tries to break in, to find someone’s eyes. It always comes to this. Try to stop the sun from rising.

Persimmon says, “You’re not ready.”

I add, “I need to warn you. Michael is a good kind man.”

“Well, I’m a good girl.”

My hands stroke her hair, then her shoulders.

“A very good man.”

“I’ve been with a good man. At church camp there was this man—”

“Michael is different. He’s not like that.”

“I know how to treat a man. I know what a man needs.”

“He doesn’t need what he thinks he needs. You’re just a girl. A good man can do a thing that’s wrong. Pretty girl like you.”

“I want to.”

“Just go,” I say. “And stay warm. That’s all I have to say about it.” I lean in to feel her heat, and I shut my eyes and kiss the pretty face I cannot see.

She walks to the white oak tree, her silhouette moving in a straight line among crooked shadows. Her arms seem to be reaching back, fluffing out her hair. The beads and coins rattle and ring. Her silhouetted arms gather the tresses, fluff her noisy hair again.

Three girls walk arm in arm to the bunkhouse. Settling onto our mats, we know exactly whose heat is gone, whose breathing is gone. We inventory everything that remains: the swaying trees, the sighs of horses in the barn across the grass, the cold. Charlotte, Temple, Persimmon. The breathing of girls.

In a few minutes we hear footsteps across the grass. It is Jenny singing a Joni Mitchell song. We hear enough to believe that everything is all right. Farther off, we hear Fern chuckling softly.

Michael took one look at Jenny and sent the simple girl away.

Temple mumbles the first word I have ever heard from her, “Remarkable.”

Jenny’s footsteps shuffle past the bunkhouse and head toward the barn. One of the horse boys will have her. His eyes had better be closed, though. He’ll close his eyes and have her good. Jenny and the boy will settle in the hay and smother the jingle jangle of her hair. His eyes will be closed, hers will be gazing at dark blue gaps in the shake roof.

Persimmon says, “She doesn’t know.”

Temple rises from her mat and puts away the bunkhouse mirror. This is the mirror we all share, the mirror where we find space for all our faces. Without this mirror, Jenny will have to figure out things for herself. Of course, her grandparents will tell her when they come at the end of the season. They’re the mean ones, calling Michael all those things. Her grandmother will remove a small silver mirror from her purse, hand the mirror to the girl, and a single glance will tell our story: the crazy twists of wire, the tangled knots of hair and string, the goofy henna lines clowning her face. Jenny will daub at her eyes, her mouth. It won’t come off for months. The clown. The silly girl!

My last words to Jenny will be, “I’m sorry. We couldn’t let you do it. I tried to warn: he doesn’t get you.” I’ll smile and remind her it comes out eventually. To be so mean breaks my heart, but we did it for her good. I’m not a bad girl. I actually want everything she has, even the bits of barn hay stuck in her hair in the morning. The ink will drain from our faces, someday, but on mine a hardness will remain. It will sharpen my features with shadows that don’t wear away, although Persimmon would say the hardness was already there. What will I see in the mirror? Will I see Jenny? I’m not that pretty, and her story isn’t mine. Will I see Persimmon, looking past things? Will I see Temple, stealing glances at myself through my shroud of hair and shame? Will I see Fern, a face that understands, but only after time has wrinkled and dried its beauty? I’ll ask Michael, listen to what he says, and that’s what I’ll see.

I smell Michael on my skin, permanent as a tattoo.

~

Everyone is out. Horses are brushed. Guests are milling by the lodge, which can only mean that Michael has come down his DaVinci stairs, like a saint receiving blessings, or handing them out, each with equal grace. I cannot see him in the crowd.

Jenny must still be in the barn, combing the hay from her hair.

Such a perfect morning. There’s enough cool in the air to be pleasant, but enough warmth to bear me up. The curl in the leaves tells me that fall is coming. Last night’s fire is just a thread of smoke in the crisp air.

The boys are parading the horses, rubbing cool fat into their brown flanks

and harnessing them for a dusty trip. The girls' job is to hose down the pathways and the patio. Sprinkle down the dust. Knock it down from the tamarack trees with long poles. Chase away the dust like chasing a flock of starlings. The dusty sweat beads on our skin. Persimmon stands in the sun with a hose, fanning a mist over the stones. Temple, wielding a pole next to mine, tries to teach me to hum a song as we whack at the leaves.

Tonight we will rinse the dust away, and we'll be the most beautiful girls again. We'll build another fire. Wrapped in blankets against the cool, we'll listen for his call. His muse. His angel. His pretty thing. Whatever he says.

But I can't carry a tune. Temple gives up trying to teach me. We work in silence. I begin to understand this much of her world: being content to say nothing at all. Swinging a stick at the dust that will be back tomorrow, I would gladly give no voice to my pain.



Image from
Dream,
Image at
Waking

Non-fiction
from
Issue #8

by Dan Beachy-Quick

In my last dream before waking—the only part of my dreams I lately remember—I found myself in the kitchen. What time it was, I didn't know. I didn't look at the window; I didn't know how the room was lit. I didn't know what time of day it was, and yet I also knew my wife and daughter were asleep. I was barefoot. No, I am barefoot—dreams' awful present tense. I walk around. I think I am doing the dishes, but the dishwasher is closed. My feet stick slightly to the ground, a fact which, in the dream, begins to annoy me more and more. At every step my foot sticks, and standing still, looking down at the floor, I see against the pale wood drops of honey. The honey is everywhere: misshaped circles limned by dirt. Wherever I step, I step on the honey, and in the dream I blame my daughter for this mess, this mess that now I must clean up, first the floor and then my feet—for this I blame my daughter. The dream becomes this blame.

I wake up with the dream in my mind. As always, as everyone does, I wonder about it, but I don't think about it too much. Though guilt has replaced annoyance, it is a vague guilt—placeless, sourceless. I think about my daughter spilling sweetness on the floor.

*

I wake up before my family does so I can read and drink coffee. I open the blinds so I can look out and see the buds on the polar tree, the frost on the cars in the street. I turn on the lamps and read in its light. The book I am reading has the image of a coin that bears the image of a horse imprinted on its first page; it is an ancient coin, but there are coins that are older. The author notes that this coin—Gaelic, if I remember right (and only this morning read)—is a wondrously but mistakenly accomplished replica of a Greek coin that bears the god Hermes' face. Hermes, that trickster god of poetry, lyre's creator, and inveterate liar. The author sees in the hindquarters and tail of the horse the mis/reinterpreted profile of the god. I can't see it myself, but I want to see it.

The furnace kicks on in the early spring chill. I put the book down to look out the window and see the orange balloon my daughter drew a face on—curly hair in black ink, eyes made of three circles, circle for a mouth and one around it for lips, all in thick, shaky line—floating in the air the register pushes into the room. (She has taken to doing this somewhat obsessively, drawing faces on the head-shaped balloons, which slowly shrink and wizen as the air escapes. The mortal quality of child's play has come to vaguely frighten me, as if in play they're practicing death as much as they're practicing living.) The balloon face is turned toward me as if it is looking at me. It does not blink because it cannot. It hover unevenly in the air, bobbing from side to side, moving up and down, caught in the uneven current that keeps it aloft. And it seems as if this head, filled with my breath but given a face by my daughter, keeps nodding assent or dissent, over and over again, and whether it is saying to me yes, or saying to me no, I cannot tell. It hears some question I do not know I've asked; and it gives me its answer, which I cannot understand; and does so repeatedly, unendingly—that is, until the furnace turns off and the face falls down and rolls away, and is no face no more.



Autobiography

Fiction
from
Issue #16

by Gabriela Jauregui

Translated from the Spanish by Carolina Casanueva

I am autobiography, text, context.

I am a vixen. This could just as well be the autobiography of a male fox, but just so happens that I am a vixen. *Vulpes vulpes*, female. Furry silver bush sliver of tail, liquid gold sparkling eyes, heart of the earth, wet tongue like a swamp. Consider my body. Heed it and so begin to heal it. Consider this the story of a slave turned free. Consider it yours.

I was born in a cage. I grew up in a cage. Consider the line of my tail, the angle of my ears. Everything changes; all is transformed. And if you take the vixen out of the wild you just might take the wild out of the vixen. But that's my mothers' story. Enough said.

I grew up as a vixen on her way to domestication. I grew up in Siberia, only a few feet away from where my ancestors lived—where they survived wars and massacres. I grew up—one amongst 50,000. Do you consider that to be extraordinary or just *extra* ordinary?

Ordinary language does not mirror its own reflection to itself. But this is no ordinary language. Don't ask me why I speak or write to you, and why or how a vixen writes her autobiography. There are already too many examples in books.

You'd do better to ask me how I survived—which is almost the same but not quite—and how I hallucinated my own salvation; how I stopped being a slave.

This is a narrative process, a process of transcription and connectivity. My tail connected to others, and yes I speak English and I know that tail sounds just like tale. Once upon a time, there was a Siberian fox. A vixen. *Vulpes vulpes*. Me.

Once upon a time there was a scientist. *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Dmitri Belyaev. Thus begins my transcription process. Thus ends our slavery, but it is also how it started. In the name of domestication they took us. The idea was that throughout one human lifetime they would achieve what is normally achieved in centuries: domestication. Yes, they quasi-domesticated us. They did not only tame us, they chewed us up—they digested us, directed us till our ears were no longer pointy and the angles of our tales changed. They muted us. They changed us. They did the old bait and switch on us. A fox for fox switcheroo. They took our aggression reflex: aggressive behavior as a reaction to fear. We were cast down, our ears downcast. No more unfriendly peaks. They cast us as dogs. Without being so. They wanted to turn us into familiars. They wanted to take the beast out of us. They wanted to exorcize us through exercises. They trained us. We made our debuts as little presents on the bourgeois tables of rich Russians. A cousin of mine lived in a mansion until he met a wild vixen. Less and less he went to eat at home; each night they would meet again—just like that story about the country mouse and the city mouse, except with foxes. She taught him how to be wild again. One day he stopped being a companion animal. He became sporadic guest ad then—nothing. He stopped being. That is, he existed once again. He disappeared into the forest beyond that luxurious suburb.

I will come back and I will be millions, an emancipated slave once said. *Vulpes vulpes* are millions, but what am I? One amongst 50,000. Am I still *vulpes vulpes*? Am I a mutation? A vixen narrator? *Vulpes sapiens*? If I could tell that philosopher Friedrich that we do indeed dream, since the beginning of time. If I could tell that other one, Gayatri, that yes, the subaltern can, and does speak. That here I am: speaking beast, discursive beast.

This, here, is the space of my enunciation. My utterance announces. Consider this: humans want to hug us and want us to like it. The stuffed animal syndrome—that's my name for this genetic experiment. The stuffed animal phenomenon. They want to domesticate us but they do not want us to have a voice. They just want us to sit there and look pretty. They want us to be good.

Other cousins—most have been far less lucky than the one I was telling you about—live and die in a cage in Novosibirsk without having known neither tundra nor tumultuous petting from a five year-old owner who tugs at their tail. What does it mean to be good?

Consider this: if the lives of 50,000 foxes are sacrificed in the name of a failed experiment—failed not for scientific reasons but for merely economic ones—who are the savage ones? And if one amongst 50,000 can speak to you— yes, *speak*— do we consider that the experiment failed because the other 49,999 can't?

Consider my snout, my teeth, my fur, my claws. Consider this: to tame is not the same as to domesticate. It's not the same for you to train me not to attack you than to genetically select me to love you and to *want* you to love me back. It's not the same to program my body for this, than for my

own body to program the changes that accompany domestication by itself: arched tails, floppy ears—the full-on camouflage of a homely and simpatico canine. Woof-woof. Consider this: the experiment succeeded, in a way.

You think I love you. You think I want you to love me. But guess what? The experiment didn't only achieve this: in me, it did even more. Dmitri you've been outdone. Bitch? Vixen! I am yours and I know your laws, but they do not govern me. My body does not fit in your human *polis*—it cannot be policed. My body escapes, slithers, is still fox. My mind is fox and more than fox. Consider that.

I could continue Dmitri's experiment. If I am its prime result until now, others could come. Sometimes I go back and visit their rusted cages. I speak with them; I am preparing them. Do you remember then, that promise? *I will come back and I will be millions*. I promise the same here. My autobiography is the transcription of that promise. By transcribing it, it incarnates it. Consider the implications of the word incarnate. In *canis*.

You wanted me to love you. You wanted it so much that we did. 50,000 or almost all of us loved you. But you forgot us. I have to imagine Marx, Engels and our compatriot Lenin, who spoke so much about capital and the conditions of oppression, never thought about Siberia. Here, another specter haunts Europe— not to mention Asia and the world. Here, in this Siberian problem. Next to the goulags another, different, goulag. A problem to do with an economic crisis translates into a hecatomb for an entire species. Or sub-species, who cares. Consider that.

We, *vulpes vulpes* have given our lives because someone else had a dream, got inspired and made a decision—thus making us the heroes of his Russian saga, his failed work, his personal Solaris. Someone—Dmitri—decides we are the ideal candidates for domestication, but we are not interested in his *domus*. Not really. This is a matter of *oikos*. Consider this: my autobiography is an emancipation.

Here flesh turns into language. There is narration. Here you have a portion of the narration. Consider if a fragmented narration can supplant the whole. Consider if the whole plays the part of history, a history that does not have to be told in its entirety. How did I start writing? How is it that I can speak? Which experiments did I have to endure? How many tests did I ace? How many DNA chains transformed till we find ourselves here? Allusion creates illusion. Enough.

But it's not enough. I have a lot to say. Approximately 49,998 words in addition to these: *I am*. And in those words I find me. Consider my being and the possibility, nay, the *reality* of its existence. I am talking to you. While you read me I inscribe you in my history. In the body of my text. Consider that worn metaphor.

So then, *grosso modo*: after thousands of variables, after generations of accelerated selection, came my mother. Tender, good, licker of hands and full of domestic and homely reflexes. The near-perfect or perfect candidate.

But Dmitri had just passed away—and with him, the funds to continue the experiment and its proper documentation also disappeared. It was like getting to the coast and then not being able to disembark. But I was in the belly of the beast, in the ship's entrails. I was rowing and sweating, chained up. So I jumped without a lifesaver, no oars, no dinghy. I saw land and I swam.

The titanic experiment sank faster than the *idem*. And with all the foxes sacrificed in its name. In the name of science. Of progress. Of evolution. But no—not all.

Let's say I am writing to you after the shipwreck. Just another Crusoe. Or more like Friday, if Friday could have written. Imagine if Friday had observed Crusoe so much that he would have learned to write. That is how this story happens. Let's say that, like any good pirate, I learned mimesis. And I don't just mean those famous floppy ears and all external domestic camouflage. But the interior one also. I learned to twist my tongue as you do. My howls became as yours. Consider this: a pen in my paw. No longer (or not just) the feather of the bird I just caught in my claws, ready to be eaten. No: a *bic* roller pen. Yes, *bic* exists in Russia too. It's a black ink one. And my paw moves it on the paper.

If you saw me you'd kill me. The idea was to be a living stuffed animal. Not to be an equal. The idea was domestication, not mimesis. But just as geese have always dreamed of grain (believe me, I should know, as I have woken more than one before devouring it), I have always dreamt of my own voice. And this is not a dream. Nor Darwin's nightmare.

If you saw me you'd kill me. But this text survives. Consider it. It's been a while since the shamans of my land have dreamt of being foxes. And what about foxes? Do we dream of being shamans? We are wind, shadow, hair, breath; we are tooth, fire, speed, claw, edge, dexterity: Dilgi, gold tail, pounce, subtlety. Even though so many of us were tricked, in mythology it is we who dodge; we are trick, totem, change. We are myth and we are body. And in addition, I am witness, I am warning. I am one amongst thousands. I am legion—do you read me?— I will be legion.



THE DRAMATURGE

Poetry
from
Issue #15

by Jessica Baran

You know how this scene develops:
emerging from liquid, a blooming bruise
on slick white paper. It becomes tree line,
then harlequin pattern
—a fence surrounding a tennis court.

Leave your scarf behind.
Grab nervously at your sweater.

SYNCHRONIZED

SWIM

Jody is admired
for creating interactions.

Stephanie is resented
for her multiple silver service settings.

What makes these examples compatible
is their everydayness.

Jody's consignments are a fair exchange
for a set of Stephanie's knives.

Your neighbor's habits complement
the household's next to theirs,

like a synchronized swim
or a clutch of trained militants.

UNORIGINAL

SCENE

That voice suggests assets:

a sophisticated rhetorical ear,
a bell-clear stridency. What is at risk
is unexpected loss. Of appropriate lighting,
the right amount

of errancy. An open plan has a certain
reminiscence about it: abandoned street platforms,
torn-down placards,

the cold shared apartment. When they're used,
they're entrancing. Left vacant,
it's yet another unoriginal scene.

GENRE

FILM

All of our castaway plans.
An episode where you were kidnapped
and fell in amorous cahoots
with your captor.

THE

GREAT

SUBJECT

When the curtain drops, you're back
in bed again, nursing a nebulous malaise.

Days pass, and one thought materializes:
invite someone
to join you.

Photographs track the progress—
they reveal every crease in the sheet
as a body's message written
in various weights and limbs.

One person seems good enough,
the other wants to follow.

THE
FICTION
OF A STILL
LIFE

The plan was interrupted
by an after-five p.m. alarm. A sliver

of lemon rind in brown liquor
next to a wilted potted plant, wrapped
in emerald cellophane.

A sliver of sun
on the typewriter stand.

The fiction of a still life
is the fiction of commerce:
that what you have will tell.
That these objects, placed, reflect a self.

REWIND

A nightmare is a crapshoot—midway through
you might be titillated, just at the point
the knife rends the curtain.

A horde of people on a black-painted stage
kicking their legs and waving their hands
is often a moving form of entertainment.

You remember mimicking those moves
and found yourself always the loser,
unable to catch your hat. Let's

rewind a little further and turn on
the black light. All neon artifacts and rogue fluids
become apparent—our attempts at bold artifice,
the misalignments between nature and power.

What you really want is a small red ball,
bouncing down the back stairwell,
and a ride in the grocery cart.

Globes turn, magazines amass,
the Waterford crystal
turns opaque with dust. But where
is that hat, the one
from the Weimar Republic? Lost

to hyperinflation and other forms of neglect.
See the scar form on the animal's face.

THE VOTE

Her lips barely moved, but you saw it:
a flash of silver dust molecules,
most likely flecks of skin

turned radiant.
This was the vote.
Tomorrow you'll forget it.
Yesterday always turns over.



Tale of a Sheet

*Fiction
from
Issue #16*

by Alejandro Zambra

Translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman

1. It happened before my papa set fire to the house. Fifteen or twenty days before.
2. There was a closet full of sheets, almost all of them white, with red seams, Italian red. And a sky blue set for me, with blue pictures of letters or G-clef signs.
3. My mother, through the window, her back turned, in front of a white sheet; fifteen or twenty days ago, in front of a white sheet. She wasn't crying. She had stayed there, simply, waiting for the sheet to dry.
4. It was a day without light. She turned and came toward the window and began to look at me, to imitate my face looking at her, until a smile began. But then she didn't come into the house. She went back to her place in front of the sheet.
5. A sheet without wind drying in the wind. A canvas, a kind of scene. The scene continues until the audience realizes there won't be a second scene.
6. I'm the one who starts the applause. Before I worked in voiceovers, but I was fired. Now I'm the one who starts the applause.
7. My job is to give hard blows, hard applause. My job is to bring my hands together, bring them together with force, by force. My job is to look for silences and fill them.
8. I'm going to applaud in your face, they'd say to me, sometimes, as a joke.
9. Bolt the door from the outside, they'd say to me, but as a joke.

10. Go see if it's raining on the corner.
11. A long time before, years before, my father had to return home urgently because his wife was about to give birth to me.
12. But it's a clean, new, false image. As it should be. The children play at being wounded on the creeper vine.
13. Once upon a time there was a white sheet drying in the sun. But it was a day without sun. It's a very long tale.
14. There's no second sheet. The sheet grows longer, unfolds, but there's no other sheet inside.
15. Once upon a time there was a sheet around a white body.
16. Once upon a time there was a sheet that stained.
17. It seems they wrapped somebody up. I don't really remember. I was busy with something else.
18. "Don't pose," they tell him, but it's hard not to pose. Even in dreams. Sometimes he pretends he's having a nightmare. He wakes with a shout, with a typical shout. And though he knows he shouldn't have shouted, he receives the tired embrace of somebody or nobody and keeps quiet.
19. Don't dream, don't pose, go to sleep right now. That's how it's said: right now.
20. Once upon a time there was a sheet drying right now.
21. Days before my papa burned down the house, there was a sheet drying right now.
22. I'm not going to open the window. Don't insist. It's impossible.
23. Because of love or a mistake, they sleep together.
24. Your body grows or contracts during a night of dreams. Your face loses and finds its features as it brushes against the pillow.
25. Be careful, your body could break in half.
26. Turn off the test pattern and go back to sleep.
27. In the dream cars passed by.
28. Smoke overhead before the voices.
29. Ghosts left the table set for us.
30. Once upon a time there was a shape and a sheet.



The Boy and the Girl in the Honeymoon Suite

Fiction
from
Issue #11

by Timothy Schaffert

Before I tell you anything more about the boy and the girl, could you remind me of what I've told you already? Have I told you about the man with the tar beneath his feathers, and how the man's black hat now hurts his head when he wears it? That hat, though a full ten gallons, is made of the softest, lightest felt I've ever brushed my fingers against, so that should tell you something. It should tell you how painful it is to carry those white feathers on his flesh, so painful that even a hat as light as a feather weighs heavily on his tender head. I'm not making excuses for him. I'm just saying there are things to be considered before coming to conclusions.

Did I tell you that the boy and the girl are in a bathtub? And when I tell you that, do you picture the children naked, even though they aren't naked at all? And if you do picture them naked even when they aren't naked, do you realize that makes you no better than the man in the hat? Nakedness, especially the nakedness of children, is morally objectionable in all circumstances. How does it feel to be judged for the terrible things you imagine? I bet it doesn't feel good at all.

The boy wears the girl's dress and the girl wears the boy's suit. I'm kidding, of course, but I bet you enjoyed picturing that too. No, the boy wears what is normal for boys to wear and the girl wears what is normal for girls to wear, so these children absolutely do not deserve the awful consequences that befall them in this story, and if you have any sense at all, if you have an

ounce of dignity or respect for yourself, you'll stopper your ears while you still have a chance to be mistaken, while you still have a chance to hope for everything to turn out exactly like nothing ever really does in real life.

Are you still there? Of course you are. You're gluttons for punishment.

They call the boy Teddy because he has big ears and thick brown hair (and his name is Theodore), and they call the girl Stitch (for reasons that will become clear in a moment). Teddy is a student at a school where rich parents abandon their boys to be taught esoteric equations and histories skewed for the purposes of promoting a national vanity. These boys often eventually trade their school uniforms for military ones, then eventually trade their military garb for business suits. But now, still only a teenage boy, Teddy always wears striped sweaters of cashmere, a tiny blue teddy bear sewn onto each pocket and handkerchief (a junior approximation of his father's style—his father's name is Leonard, his nickname Leo, and his pockets are adorned with little lions mid-stride). His mother does all the embroidery with all the spare time she has now that her son is away at boarding school. She wraps his sweaters and button-downs in butcher paper and twine, and takes them to the post office herself. She makes a day of it, this venture off the estate. She has afternoon tea in the back of an antique shop, and she browses for brittle sheets of vintage music that she's been using to paper the walls of the piano parlor. But now that Teddy's off at school, the piano's never played. It makes no sense to pay the maid to dust seventeen rooms when only half so many are used in Teddy's absence. *If I sell the piano*, she ponders as she riffles through a lackluster array of faded sheet music stacked in a washtub in the antique shop, *then the maid couldn't possibly expect full pay*. And papering the walls in this manner is juvenile, tacky, she concludes, recalling her girlhood before she married well. She'd had an inclination to tape to her bedroom wall, above her headboard, pictures of movie stars torn from magazines.

Stitch, meanwhile, is a ward of Rothgutt's, an institutional home for motherless girls. Teddy doesn't know Stitch's real name, and neither does she. She may have never had one, arriving as she did on the doorstep of the orphanage with not a stitch of clothing on beneath her scratchy blanket, no garment with her name sewn in.

So yes, that's why the nuns named her Stitch, but years later, in her teens, her name came to fit even more exceptionally. And this late, dark afternoon I'm describing, this desperate nightmare shared between Teddy and his forbidden love, Stitch shows him her stitches. Teddy has never noticed them beneath her bangs until she begins to unstitch the stitches in a way that doesn't seem obscene to him at all. The girl takes a needle from the pocket of her smock and threads the eye of it through a bit of the stitching that has come loose just above her left eyebrow, and she begins to unsew, undo, working the needle in and out of her flesh without the slightest flinch of pain. The skin of her forehead parts, curling, puckering like lips for a kiss. The girl leans forward, lifting her bangs with her left hand, and lifting the boy's left hand with her right one. She points his pointer finger and brings his hand to the opening in her head.

Teddy loves Stitch and Stitch loves Teddy, but they can only see each other in secret, stealing off in the middle of each night to a rotting hotel on a vanished beach. The Grand Façade is all fallen cupolas and turrets, having housed vacationing dignitaries and socialites until the water of the lake shrunk to a puddle one apocalyptic season of drought. But there are still the remnants of elegance: stone mermaids frolicking with crumbling fins in a dry fountain, a crystal chandelier shaped like an octopus having long since crashed to the dancehall floor. Stepping through the hotel's moldy corridors, Teddy and Stitch had felt like aquanauts visiting a ship sunk to the bottom of the sea. When Teddy stopped in the chapel to tickle out a tune on the piano's grinning mouth of missing teeth, the echo and the discord, so muffled and ghostly, had the thump of music heard through waterlogged ears. In the bent, dusty rays of the setting sun, light reflected off some water somewhere and danced and waved across walls papered with a nautical print of yachts and lighthouses.

"The honeymoon suite," Teddy said, gesturing through the door to a room mostly gone. Was he beckoning her toward her suicide, Stitch had wondered (but she wondered it without even a tinge of concern; actually, her pulse quickened with morbid delight over the romantic finality of such an invitation). The floor had fallen away, a heart-shaped bed far below, hanging from the rafters of the ceiling of the first floor, dangling, like in the ribcage of a giant wood skeleton. Teddy took Stitch's hand and they tiptoed in a tandem live-wire act across the remaining wood planks to the bathroom, and to the tub, with its rusted faucets shaped like spitting seahorses.

Yes, they'd heard of the dangers of desolate places—especially with the man in the hat on the loose. But what seemed more urgently dangerous was to be too long apart. When you're so young, and so in love, the only fear worth anything is the fear of love fading too soon.

Teddy knows that under normal circumstances he'd be punished if caught with his finger in an orphaned girl's head—he'd likely get no cake with supper, but considering that it was the pink frosting of the angel food that had poisoned the Japanese triplets at school—did you know that getting sugar in your veins is fatal?—then supper without cake really didn't seem like much of a punishment at all. Teddy is surprised to find that Stitch has no skull, and his finger slips easily into the live jellyfish that keeps her boneless head from collapsing in on itself. His knuckle rubs against more stitching when it reaches her brain.

"Surgical floss," Stitch explains. "From when my real brain and my dream brain drifted apart. That was why I was crying myself awake every midnight." Stitch's mournful wail could not be contained by the nuns, not even with her windows shut and shuttered, and quilts piled atop her writhing body. Her crying had unsettled the villagers. They took a collection in order to fund a diagnosis and a treatment so they could finally sleep at night. The sister witches at the voodoo shop, however, took a more malignant approach, peddling devices and concoctions designed to sicken evil presences. For years, the witches had made a pretty penny off the paranoia

of the lost lake, promoting the mythology of sea creatures taking human form and walking among us in lawless violation of our cosmic serenity.

“Did they do it?” Teddy asks. “The doctors? Did they reconnect?”

“Oh no, not at all,” Stitch says, sighing, although she knows she shouldn’t be such a sourpuss (although she knows such sourness makes her more tragically beautiful to a boy like Teddy). The floss had worked for a few days, and she’d had a few nights of blissful sleep. In her nightly terrors, stairs collapsed beneath her feet, but for a few days after the reconnection, the stairs became department-store escalators, shuttling her to the doll department.

The girl’s doctor hadn’t known what he was doing with the surgical floss because he wasn’t really a doctor. He’d been only pretending for the nuns. His was a sickness—a compulsive desire to help people, even if he couldn’t offer much help at all.

Before Teddy can assist Stitch with stitching her head all the way back shut, the bathtub’s claws unclench, and the tub rises from its perch and it rocks as it drifts up to bump the heads of the boy and the girl against the ceiling. But that’s not what breaks their little necks. They live a bit longer in this story. If you keep listening, you risk growing more attached to them. And what’s not to love? Those few days that that little girl had had no night terrors, she’d been the sweetest thing on two skinny legs. Her wrinkles had smoothed away, her hair had grown over the spots of her head she’d rubbed raw in her sleep. She looked like the cartoon in that machine that you stick a nickel in to watch, that you wind with a crank to make the cartoon girl get smacked with a frying pan. But it’s not as bad as it sounds, because only then does the cartoon girl get to see birds.

Oh, and the boy! I’ve always been partial to boys, especially the ones who are most like girls, and this one, this boy, he had eyelashes so long and so soft I used to secretly clip them with fingernail clippers as he slept, and I fashioned them into fake eyelashes that I wore to all the best parties, back when I used to get invited to them. The boy’s eyelashes looked so beautiful on me I couldn’t stop looking in the mirror, and for several wrenching weeks I thought I was falling in love with the boy, even though I knew it was just my lost youth I was missing. This is how fairy-tale witches are born, you know. They have, as their biology, our darkest moments. They’re so inhumane because we’ve invested them with our own human nature.

One good thing does happen to Teddy and Stitch in the tub. They stop bumping their heads against the ceiling. The ceiling turns into moonlight and they float past, the bathroom vanishing behind them, even the mirrors. They don’t fear the loss of the room because to them it seems the worst is over, but I guess that’s the way of the brain in crisis. It soothes itself with deception. How would we live with ourselves otherwise?

The bathtub sails past all the children the man in the hat killed this terrible summer, and although the children—rich and poor alike (the man in the hat had not discriminated in his blood thirst)—swim up to the tub

with vigor, they are nonetheless lifeless corpses. Even the slutty twin teenyboppers who wear perfume they bought from a vending machine on the wall of a truck stop ladies room, even they can't help the boy and the girl, despite the fact that they must've known everything worth knowing when they'd been alive. The twins' pockets are full of rubbers they would never attach to a boy's thing—they had just bought them at the truck stop to seem sophisticated. Those girls should never have snuck out, not even for one night.

"I always did like you the best of all," Stitch tells every single ghost, one after the other, as they swim up like porpoises. Of course, the girl can't have liked everyone best, but the lie doesn't feel like a lie since the lie can comfort more than the truth can at this particular moment. The truth, at this moment, feels jagged like glass that has already cut to the bone. But lies, lies! Those come from the dream side of her unconnected brain. If you lived on that side all the time, then the real side of your brain would be the dream side, wouldn't it? Then the fiction would be the truth, and the truth would be the fiction. But I'd advise you not to carry that moral too far, or you'll damage your logic and become capable of things you don't want to be capable of—just ask the man in the hat, which I know you won't do, because you don't think you and him have anything to say to each other.

The boy, whose eyelashes have grown back, flutters them at everyone within fluttering distance, and although I myself would've completely buckled under at the sight of it, no one that matters notices at all. Teddy, as if sensing the end of this story is near, gives the girl the cough drop he's been secretly saving in his pocket for later, saving for when the girl looked away and he could sneak it into his mouth without explanation, and tuck it behind his teeth, and let it melt away numbing his tongue until the cough drop was a tragic sliver that cut his gums with its edges.

As if they've heard their own story before, Teddy and Stitch know what all the machinery ahead will do to them. They can't stop the flow of the tub along the waves of the victims of the man in the hat, and they know their soft flesh will not inflict any damage on the cogs of the contraption that seems designed solely to do them in, deep down in the hotel's furnace room. So they make peace with the machine's intentions. They kiss each other, and memorize the feel of the softness of their lips and the wetness of their tongues so they can think of it later and bring it to mind when they need it. The whistling of the steam of the machine grows louder and louder, so loud that they don't even realize that they are screaming with fright. If you want, it's a happy ending, because they go to their deaths thinking they are silent and stoic and brave. Just before the cog catches the cuff of his pants, the boy thinks he is whispering. He thinks he whispers in the girl's ear that things in the morning are never as bad as they seem in the middle of the night.



The
Goldilocks
Theory

by Arda Collins

*Poetry
from
Issue #6*

Apenas me entero

Poetry
from
Issue #14

by Valerie Mejer

Translated from the Spanish by Torin Jensen

Es cierto: necesitas ser degollado
para que entre el agua.
Necesitas que alguien te arranque
la cara con el ansia de su boca
para que la nieve que ves desde el tren
y el pueblo bajo ella
avancen y se siembren en tu mente.

Me lo dijo con un pan
partido como tú
mientras por la ventana veíamos el estanque
que absorbió a las nubes
pero toma tiempo saber que es cierto
que tienen que cortarte las manos para que te salgan ramas
que tienen que sacarte los ojos para que dejes de insistir
en ver,
y puedan rebaños y piedras
tomar rumbo
por las cuencas vacías.

¿Cómo podía yo creer que ahí donde se hizo la quema
iban a crecer los muros de tu casa?
¿Cómo saber que con la piel que te quitaron del lomo
hicieron la funda del cuchillo?
¿Cómo saber que con las sábanas de tu cama
coserían una bandera?

De todos modos la moneda que echaste sigue en el aire,
pero yo debí creerte
porque no era palabrería
sino lo que alcanzaste a decirme
antes de exhalar.

(I just
realized)

I just realized
It's true: your throat needs to be slit
 for the water to come in.
You need someone to tear out
your face with an eager mouth
 so that the snow you see from the train
 and the town under it
 advance and take root in your mind.

He told this to me with bread
split like you
while through the window we saw the pond
that absorbed the clouds
but it took time to know that it is true
 that they have to cut your hands so that branches will grow from you
 that they have to pull out your eyes so that you stop insisting
on seeing,
and herds and stones
can head
through empty basins.

How could I believe that there where the burning was
the walls of your house would grow?
How could I know they made the sheath of the knife
from the skin they removed from your back?
How could I know they sewed a flag
from the sheets of your bed?

Anyway, the coin you tossed is still in the air
I owed it to you
to believe
because it wasn't hot air
 but what you managed to tell me
 before exhaling.



Tikrit

Poetry
from
Issue #14

by John Beer

I set up the wind chimes, but there wasn't any wind.

Well, then, would you like to tell everyone how you're feeling?

I feel like saying there's a beetle in my box. I alternate between crying and getting really pissed off at the littlest things, the merest texture of air. A worm emerges from my eyeball. When I cough, flies fly out of my mouth. My cousin came back from the war with a chunk of head gone. I feel like saying "Goodnight Motor City." Tiny red and blue fibers strewn over the floor. Time's full of curdle, the morning can't be bothered to look me in my infested eye. I write letters to dead celebrities: Pierpont Malone, Ebenezer Scantron, The "It" Girl Clara Gantt. All returned within a matter of minutes. While on the other hand I rather dig on Central Park, tingeing the necropolis with a hint of bean-field.

On a scale of one to ten, then, how would you rate?

I don't want to say.

Not so much doesn't want to as can't, emergent field.

There's only one life and this isn't it. I left the ceremony.

A short scuffle ensues. Doctors rise out of the audience,
Whisk their appointed charges away in taxis
While Amber and I play dice games in the yard.
Tikrit and I have come to a kind of agreement.
I smoke my cigar and yawp, "Bleed on,
O city of ten thousand dead, of twenty thousand dead."
I yawp to the sky, "Today is mighty fine for rolling bones."
We don't play for money though we could play for money
But just for joy of throwing down we play
Devil in the Hollow, Sloppy Foxes,
The Crooked Motorcade, cross-legged on our tarp.
I shoot eleven and that wins me Pitch the Pipe.
She leans to me and whispers, "This yard
Could be a tarmac," but she means that it needs graves.

You want to call your patch of concrete yard a crime scene,
Go ahead. The world's more prison than you're used to.

The sun beats down without the slightest breeze.

My eyes gritty, riant with nematodes.

The set-up, a beat or two in: It was supposed to be an adventure.

Lost it. Look: a line of faces at the airport window!

Turn around: lightning, ozone, the presence of the god.

Did you think it was all going to be images?

Did you think you could sit there and never account for yourself?

Long-cloaked and opalescent, elusive

(WHAT WORM WOULD YOU BE SIGN OF)

half-battered into retreat

(FOR HUMAN IS A WET WORD)

a space left mute in the hot night

(WHOSE ABSENCE IS ITS OWN ANTICIPATION)

glimpsed sidelong, best kept tongue-tied

(ITS MODESTY ITS LAST DEVICE)

slides from corpse to corpse

(AS IF IT PENETRATES EACH EYE)

wiggles forward

collapsing in this light
and what if everything that talks
is a special kind of harmonica
each tuned to the frequency that moves it
submerged in water until the right moment
when the question is posed and they sing
as if a god were blowing on their fragile reeds
before dipping them again in the pool
wherein they find the truth
and sing it out again to the waiting crowd
I said this was a fine idea, and the other ideas were also fine
we could barely remember what we'd been saying
but a soft light shone above the harbor
we gathered up our things
and left the auditorium
to await the questionnaire



Kilkenny

Ridge Trail

Poetry
from
Issue #12

by Ted Mathys

wind as
syntax
winds it-

self through the statement and visibility of a tree, then to describe

wind as
it were, wind
as word

enjoins the bulk
flow of air

across the pressure differential in a manner of speaking, never to capture

wind as
is (as if
possible) as word

wind enjambes this
cardinal into that

swaying black gum, crown sharp, cassock aflutter, yet to express it-

selffully, wind
as is and outward
from capture in

wind, turns
a page of The Collected

beneath a swinging flashlight in lean-to with maple view, forth to convey

the mutual, wind
as is and as
word forms

a convoy, a form for
begetting a predicate

squall, in turn, away with buds, again in spring, a statement of updraft in
delivered leaves



TELL THE
AUTHORITIES
WHAT YOU
KNOW:

Poetry
from
Issue #12

by Roger Reeves

I've never been a witness before.
Then, suddenly, the image broke.
And all at once it was completely fire.
We tried to keep the old man alive
But they said it had been an old heart
We had given him. We lost the famine
To the forest. Someone is licking
At my heart. I blame the blind boy
In the backseat of the car singing
As though one of the old gods were pressing
Coal to his lips. Chinua Achebe floats
Above this city, his body, awaiting fire.
Above this city, I mistake a black
Plastic bag for a falcon. What type
Of prophet loses his tongue in a bed
Filled with prophecy and mistake?
The men in the field acting like oxen
Are indeed oxen. Way gave way to way.
Animals resorted to taking the form
Of their best selves. If a child washes
His hands, he can eat with kings.
With kings, we ate the hands of the others.
Pay for the horse during the marriage;
Pay for the horse after the divorce.
Tell me: What is the purpose of a boat
If not to potentially kill us?



Slapping

Clark

Non-fiction
from
Issue #9

Gable

by Kate Zambreno

1

She looks just like Vivien Leigh.

Did my mother tell me this, or was I told this firsthand by the admiring man at the photography studio? As if he knew just what to say.

The family portrait over the television. I am in high school. My legs naked and awkward over a royal blue dress—hair teased and curly—I can reach up from my memory and touch it...My Clinique face fixed into a grimace...I never learned how to smile coyly...This is when we wore mascara to match our outfits—I'm sure if I look closely I will find the faintest touch of blue on the tips of my lashes...Pale skin, but mine was not a china doll's face. Not like the Scarlett O'Hara Madame Alexander Doll on the shelf in my Laura Ashley bedroom. She wears the forest green dress for the Twelve Oaks barbecue, forest green ribbons in her dark hair. They cut young Vivien's dark ringlets for the Divine Babe when she was at school at the convent. I have green eyes (hazel on my driver's license), eyes verdant with fury or sorrow.

2

At this age I am strangely asexual—my *sexuality vitalis*, as Kraft-Ebbing would say, resigned to onanism and oneirism. I have not kissed a boy. I will not kiss a boy until I am almost off to college. He will be my first boyfriend, and it will be a passionate yet virginal love, and it will be both of our first kisses on the scratchy couch in the basement while his mother lies on the couch upstairs dying of cancer, her head permanently wrapped in a towel like she is always just out of the shower. We will be watching Judy Garland sing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” from *Meet Me in St. Louis*,

and his lips will be chapped, and the furthest we will go is when I strip and show him my Garfield panties, and he will nuzzle me there. And once we will go to his grandparents' empty house in Park Ridge and get naked and roll around on a bed, but we won't know what to do. And another time we will be in the woods on vacation with my family and we will roll around again in the leaves, but we will be scared because we have figured out how to buy cigarettes but not condoms. Later he will think he's a vampire and be diagnosed with schizophrenia, and when I see him on campus he will announce me to all who will hear as his high school sweetheart he never fucked. I will later think I'm immortal too—with drugs, mind drugs, street drugs, casual sex, way-too-serious sex—and years after that, we will both be back in the northwestern suburbs, each with our own diagnosis from the DSM-IV. He will pick me up like the old days and we will go to Denny's, and he will scribble prophecies on napkins, his hair now down to his waist and dyed black.

He will insist on being called an anagram of his name. We will go to a playground and sit on the swings and make out, and he will tell me I'm still hot even though I have cut off all my hair and no one, absolutely no one, would confuse me for an MGM starlet anymore.

3

Although I would be a virgin until twenty, I began masturbating furiously at a young age. I would lie on my belly and rub my fingers against my underwear. I needed *friction* to get off (still do). *I know what you're doing*, my mother once said from the foot of the stairs as I pretended to watch TV. This best sums up the exchanges I had with my mother about sex. The implication of surveillance, the undertones of guilt.

I would pound myself into the carpet relentlessly, as if the floor were my overbearing lover that I wished to be consumed by.

In my sex dreams, even when I was young and untouched, I liked it rough. And this I can perhaps blame on *Gone with the Wind*.

4

When I was in third grade at St. Emily's Middle School, I wrote a book report on *Gone with the Wind*.

This was years before the family photograph. The man at the photography studio didn't realize the mythology he was contributing to.

Around the time of the book report I decided that everyone should call me Katie Scarlett. Scarlett O'Hara's real name was Katie Scarlett—that's what her drunk Irish father called her—and I was a Katie too, and we both had

green eyes and so it was fate.

I swore at least two times in my book report on *Gone with the Wind*. Although I don't remember the exact wording, I am told I wrote something like: *And Rhett told Scarlett that he didn't give a damn. But I really do think that he gave a damn.*

And Sister Blanche (or was it Benedicta?) called in my mother. I was always getting in trouble at school in this stage of my life.

David Selznick was fined \$5000 for that ending word, for going against the Hays Code.

I like to think of this as my first instance of writing the taboo.

5

I was a promiscuous reader. The only thing my parents never censored while I was growing up was my reading material. Strict about everything else. A perpetual lock-and-key. I was grounded for making the B honor roll. I wasn't allowed to go to the mall with friends. I couldn't date until I was sixteen. I couldn't see R-rated movies. But I was allowed, always, to read whatever I wanted, from their bookshelves or from the public library. I guess they thought reading couldn't do any harm, not thinking of Flaubert's dictum that novels corrupt the masses or of Rousseau's worries about the purity of young girls' minds.

I sped-read to the dirty parts. In my father's book on the history of the papacy, I was only interested in the seedy Renaissance popes, the ones who fucked around and fathered children, who had cups of chocolate served to them in the bathtub.

My grandmother's paperback romances and their long purple passages of *fucking*. His long hard sword, her throbbing sheath. She is always virginal, saving herself. He is powerful, seductive. I would sit on the toilet and read these one an hour, my mind swollen and dazed with all of that fucking.

I still read novels with my hands down my pants. I get my own lubrication on the pages, even if they are library books.

5

On my mother's bookshelf: *Wuthering Heights*, *Gone with the Wind*, and a series of quasi-gothic historical romance rip-offs of the two.

One of these was *The Demon Lover*.

The Demon Lover was a bodice ripper by Victoria Holt, published in the early '80s. It was a first-person narrative about a British woman painter—named *Kate*—in some far-off era, who hailed from a line of celebrated miniaturists. When her father—who is sadly going blind—is commissioned to paint a famous French baron, Kate must accompany him and pretend to be his helpmate, but really paint the portrait herself.

The Baron is a Byronic type: severe, masculine, cruel. The virginal Kate behaves quite coldly toward him. But then he has her kidnapped and drugged, and holds her captive in his chateau. He eagerly rapes her every night, forcing her into submission, enjoying the fight. By day, a long fur robe covers her bruised porcelain body. His behavior is explained in the book by his Nordic ancestry of raping and pillaging. And of course at the end Kate relents and falls madly in love with him.

I cannot tell you how many times I read *The Demon Lover* as a child. I did not read it—I devoured it. I shivered at the thought of being *ravaged*. Hatred and disgust mixed with eroticism and excitement: my formative education in the hate-fuck.

I can recall a line from *The Demon Lover* from memory: *The bed was like a battlefield that night*. This is after the first night, when she wakes up, the effects of the drug worn off, and to her horror he is on top of her.

But I fought . . . how I fought! I whipped my hatred for him and somewhere at the back of my mind I realized that I was fighting not only him but something in myself . . . some erotic curiosity, some desire for this conflict . . . some craving for the ultimate satisfaction. I was vanquished but I felt a certain wild exhilaration in defeat and the stronger my hatred the greater my excitement.

I ordered the book online recently and was pleased to find that line there as it was soldered in my memory.

The bed was a battlefield.

I'm getting turned on just typing it.

6

Rhett Butler and the Baron. My personal archetypes of a certain sort of lover. I only knew brutal boys who were weak approximations.

Clark Gable, the paragon of power and cruel paternity. He needs to teach us a lesson. He wants to give us a spanking.

When Marilyn Monroe was growing up in foster homes, she pasted Clark Gable's picture in her album and told everyone that he was her daddy. She was devastated when everyone blamed her for his death after filming *The Misfits*. Always stuck with cowboys in films—she was the rodeo prize.

He slaps Joan Crawford's ass in *Dancing Girl*—*thank you*, she breathes.

With Jean Harlow's prostitute in *Red Dust*. He pulls her onto his lap. *Hey what's the big deal*, she pouts. But then she realizes she likes it. Harlow was genius at the sudden reaction. He threatens to lock her in the outhouse.

Clark Gable playing the heavy sans moustache in *A Free Soul*. Everyone remembers him slapping Norma Shearer. He doesn't. He pushes her onto the couch. One hand. That's how easy it is. She wants it so bad, with her fuck-me eyes. The society girl and the criminal.

But later after he manhandles her: *what a beast you were when the surface was scratched*.

His laugh when Mary Astor slaps him in *Red Dust*.

Clark Gable was Hitler's favorite movie star.

I want you to faint, he says when he kisses Scarlett. *This is what you were meant for*.

In his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing focuses mostly on cases of male masochists. He documents only a few cases of female masochists. His explanation is problematically Hegelian: that women are masochists anyway, slaves to their relationships to men (and that penetration is essentially passive). This he calls female "bondage."

The desire for the bottom and the brothel. Slumming like Baudelaire. Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* dreams of being tied to the tree and whipped by Michel Piccoli.

There is case 84, a Miss X who wished *to be the slave of a man whom she loves; she would kiss his feet if he would only whip her*.

Rousseau loved the whip too, didn't he?

7

Margaret Mitchell wrote that every good-girl innocent and well-bred has a devouring curiosity about prostitutes. In the novel, Scarlett is fascinated by Belle Watkins.

Everyone wanted to play Scarlett: Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis, Paulette Goddard, and, of course, Vivien Leigh. "I have cast myself as Scarlett O'Hara," she announced to David Selznick. Jean Harlow wanted it badly—she read it rapturously like everyone else—she didn't want to be cast as Belle Watkins. Always the good-time girl. (The fallen woman must reform by fade-out.)

Vivien Leigh with her white gloves . . . she had so many pairs . . . she was brought up so correct and Catholic . . . Vivien Leigh later as Blanche DuBois, roaming red-light districts as “research,” taking home cabdrivers and asking them to throw her against a wall and fuck her senseless.

And does Blanche DuBois really want Stanley, her ape? The rape scene: Stanley wants to debase the Queen of England.

Perhaps Little Red Riding Hood craved the wolf.

Susan Brownmiller points out that Little Red Riding Hood is a rape parable. That my desire to have men with large hands and brute force—the Stanley Kowalskis, the Rhett Butlers—is part of a victimization mentality I’ve been indoctrinated into since childhood.

The Greek *raptus*. Latin for “to seize.” A crime of property.

Zeus cannot contain himself. He turns into animals. He must overpower her, and she is enthralled by this. To get carried away, to be abducted, to be transported. Poor Helen her mother was raped and then she was raped by Paris and the war inside of her.

Vivien Leigh as Leda—her swan neck—he is going to snap it.

8

I don’t remember when I first saw the film version of *Gone with the Wind*. It is seared in my memory as if I am remembering myself, my childhood.

The so-called rape or ravishment scene. He is going to crush her head like a walnut. Remove thoughts of Ashley Hamilton from her brain. *Observe my hands my dear* (I still observe them shivering). *I can tear you to pieces with them.*

The scene all in reds. THE SCARLET LETTER. The red tart-dress Rhett (RED with rage) forces her to wear to Ashley’s party. *Wear plenty of rouge, look the part*, he tells her. The crimson velvet robe lined with ermine, a pornographic princess. She sits on the red throne taking her brandy. Her hair in braids with a red ribbon. Her pinched ivory face. Porcelain begging to be shattered. He swallows her up in his arms, his mouth, in the darkness. *Rhett, don’t. This is one night you’re not throwing me out. Arms too strong lips too bruising fate too fast*, Margaret Mitchell writes.

Next morning she is in her white nightie against white sheets. Vivien Leigh purring like a kitten, those sated cat eyes. In the novel we are told he uses her *brutally* she is *hurt* and *humbled*. A scene based on Margaret Mitchell’s own past of domestic violence. Eroticized in fiction.

And I wonder why I find this so erotic. I'd like to disavow the easy psychoanalytic interpretation, although I wonder if there was something buried in my childhood that made me shiver so much at this scene. My father was not cruel, although he was unyielding in patriarchal authority. The only time we touched was during Mass, when everyone wished each other peace with a handshake, and I would barrel after him with a hug. I remember his palm flat against my collarbone, pushing me away. As if it was somehow indecent to touch one's daughter.

For a while I didn't desire peace in my lovers. After the fumbblings of my gentle vampire I sought out men who were cruel in their silence and stoicism. And I would bang on the door of their cool remove. Does every woman adore a fascist? Ted Hughes playing Sylvia Plath's panzer-man. *The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.* Dirk Bogard in *The Night Porter*. Marlon Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*.

Perhaps Simone de Beauvoir is right, perhaps Krafft-Ebing is right—that there is a masochism to a certain sort of love, the idealized fairy-tale love we are taught from childhood, which is paternal, mirrored on father-daughter. I think of Catherine Deneuve in *Donkeytale*, a grotesque version of the incestuous family romance. We are taught to desire Heathcliff and Lord Byron and Rhett Butler. We are taught to shiver when someone threatens to kick down doors or lash us with a buggy whip, to find the idea of being plundered and pillaged erotic.

Although I wonder if it is Scarlett that I am more curious about. Her internal warfare. The Scarlett who struggled in Rhett Butler's arms, who fought like a tiger, who was subdued like a kitten. Perhaps I long to struggle, to fight back, to kick and slap. But what am I seeking to vanquish?

The bed was like a battlefield.



Our Atrocious Miracle

*Fiction
from
Issue #10*

by Mabel Yu

The wind started small, an atmospheric burp. It tousled hair and rubbed elbows. Frisbee games were held in backyards. Bubbles were blown. It was picnic weather, swing-set weather. A slow sunset Kansas afternoon. Your green skirt waved to the flags on front lawns. Windows were rolled down.

In the evening, the pork chops were chilled by the time they reached the table. The table cloth danced a jig, the cupboards clapped, the shutters clattered. No closed doors kept the steady whistling breeze from racing down the hallways and nudging the picture frames.

*

Tess placed the wide rubber disc of her pink stethoscope against my chest. She listened through the pink and purple flowers of my T-shirt. “Heart attack,” she diagnosed. I nodded glumly and clutched a fist in front of my sternum. She flipped her blond pigtails behind her shoulders. “You were scared to death seeing that flying cow go past your window. Understandable.” Tess patted my knee.

When we were young, we died at least twice a week. Death was a gold mine—our imaginations never tired of generating tragedies. Our game took place in an afterlife limbo; we’d take turns being the interviewer and the newly deceased. What the interview was supposed to accomplish I still don’t know. Lack of household religion left us shrugging our shoulders at heaven or hell. We basically saw death as a continuous tea party under a sunny, seventy degree sky.

“Did you leave anyone behind?” she asked.

“My cat, Stickers.” I petted the air. “And a new boat I never got to row.” Wedged firmly in the corn belt, the rust belt, the old notched leather belt of America, we joked about water, the coast, the sea. Joking was our way of expressing want.

Tess lifted her hand and peered at the damp cement wall beside her. “Your boat’s doing okay. It’s floating to Mexico. But Stickers . . .” she bowed her head.

*

The windbreakers came only in Easter-egg colors. Purples and pastels and neon yellows. We looked like a waterless town of ships. Every back became a sail, every citizen a schooner. We lifted our arms, shoulder-height, pitching starboard and port, taking on too much air.

Some people managed to shrink into corners of their houses. But you spent most of your time outside in the 40 mph winds. To feel the community of other storm vagabonds. To keep from sitting at home alone with only moans in the hallway and silverware dancing in their wooden bed.

*

I put a Petri dish up to my eye like a monocle and adjusted the felt bicorne hat, a memento from my George Washington debut in the fifth-grade play. Tess wore a stringy white wig on her head and a loose crochet shawl wrapped around her waist. She was playing a grandmother who’d choked on her own freshly baked cookies.

“What kind were they?” I asked, pencil nudging my bottom lip.

“Oatmeal raisin,” she said, cracking her voice so that it was shaky and small.

“Ah,” I said, eyebrows raised. I poured her imaginary tea from our cracked Bakelite set. “The most dangerous of all cookies.”

Our interviews always took place in the basement when our mother locked us away, unable to deal with the chatter and whine and debate of two daughters in elementary school, our dirty clothes and glue-sticky hands. Tess leaned against the crusty patio furniture on which we held our interviews. Her fake hair dropped forward and shielded her eyes. “Someone should warn the children,” she said gravely.

*

The children began a game in the park. They bent their knees and leaned hard against the wind, creating air chairs for themselves. The winner would be the last one still sitting, unmoved. Can you imagine it, Tess? Can you feel the breezes on your back and imagine the town with a belly full of wind?

The adults began their own game. We brought out jugs and bottles, filled

with water at various levels. We sat in the shade of the library, constantly moving the jugs up and down the stairs in different orders, ever-changing sheet music. The wind blew its lips, played its instruments, allegros or adagios depending on the pitches and frequencies we wrought. The night music replaced the grasshoppers.

*

Most of the time, it was Tess who got sent to the basement, and it was I who volunteered, softly, secretly, to join her. A year older and wiser than Tess, I managed to lay low and not rock the jangling ship. Mom would lose her patience—“That pigsty you left in the kitchen; do I look like a maid?”—and drag Tess to the door. “Ow! My arm!” Tess squealed once, “You’re going to break it and it’s going to rot and I’ll get gangrene!” Neither of us were even sure if that made any sense, but I knew Tess spent her money buying old medical journals from thrift stores, sifting through, discovering new medical terms instead of watching Woody Woodpecker. Consequently, she was no Florence Nightingale, and it was no comfort to me when I’d be waylaid by a cold or a fever and she’d sit at my bedside, touch my cheek, and tell me it was malaria. She sneaked jelly beans to me and called them quinine.

Mom worked in the mornings as a cleaning woman in the travel lodge, and in the evening as a waitress. I think she loved us, but she was thirty-five, alone, overweight and tired, and couldn’t deal with two little girls. When she slammed the basement door shut, I’d look at her from the corner and she’d tell me to fix my own dinner. Then she’d burrow into her sagging bed and mutter Christ Almighty, we were going to kill her. It was the only time I ever heard her mention God.

*

Before the mailboxes were sealed shut, open slots sent letters flying. Several showed up in your fireplace, letters from Ohio and New York, letters to Virginia and California. Before stuffing the chimney with old clothes, you looked through the flue and saw a crowd of windmills, shiny, marching over the roof.

In the first five days, your hair was permanently lifted and teased. Most of the women looked the same way, the bride of Frankenstein, early morning muffs in blond, black, brown, and tangerine. Like Halloween in sixth grade, remember? A host of Medusas saying a friendly hello.

*

We were strange creatures to each other, Mom and us, like roommates, and we kept our distance, Mom in her bedroom, us in the basement. It was the best solution for peace of mind. We didn’t understand her electric green eye shadow, the way she needed to rub the large blue veins of her calves, her short temper. She couldn’t stand our candy corn-induced pep, the redundant singing of rhymes we’d heard at school, our carelessness with mud and baths and spaghetti. Mom often came home and retired to her

room to massage her temples and groan in bed, stopping in the kitchen only for a quick meal of fried chicken, and sometimes, just a few big tablespoons of peanut butter. And ice. She always reached for ice cubes to keep in her mouth, and it wasn't until much later that any of us understood that strange desire was tied to her anemia and her body acting out in odd cravings. It was so bad one summer, we were walking past a fish stall at an open market and Mom scooped up a bunch of melting chips right off the trout and into her mouth.

"No wonder Dad left," I whispered to Tess, allowing my embarrassment to turn to vindictiveness. He'd taken off shortly after my sister was born, to Texas or someplace drier and dustier but closer to water than Kansas. But Tess disagreed.

"Brain tumor," she confided.

*

The shelves of the grocery store were ransacked as if baking soda and bread could bat a storm away. Was it a storm? No rain, no snow, no ice amid the now 50 mph gusts. No weather patterns or cold fronts to explain, no Doppler echoes in our ears. Only walking sideways and piling water bottles and canned beans. Fuzz on the television, static on the radio.

The wind made people jointless, paltry puppets. Their feet shuffled forward without will, their hips hoola-hooped without reason. Old backs bent further than ever believed. And we had to let our bodies go this way, brittle but soft and swaying. The staunch branches cracked, fractured, tore.

*

In our early teenage years, Tess started running away every so often. More so in the warm summer months when, in addition to crashing at a friend's room or barn for a couple days, she could set up shop in an open field before she got bored or hungry and returned. Mom was rundown and could only work one job, so I worked part-time at the dollar store, peddling goopy lotion and old snack cakes and thin wrapping paper. I contributed with the milk and apples and electricity and admired Tess's spirit to run, even if I couldn't follow her. She always made getting away sound so glamorous, but I figured a lot of it was just storytelling, same as she did when we were little. Otherwise, why come back?

"Stupid, spit-shine small town," Tess would grumble. "The only interesting thing about Kansas is the tornadoes."

"That's not true," I said. "There's the ball of twine."

"And the only interesting thing about this town," she continued, "is people leaving it. Someday, everyone will be gone, like a town becoming a baby again, until nothing more will be here, like it was never born."

The summer she was sixteen, she was gone for a week and returned to tell

me about her stint as a fortune teller at a traveling fair. “Big gold bangles all bunched up and clanging on my wrist, huge gold hoops in my ears, a magenta head wrap on, and these billowy clothes snaked with gold thread. And I had this fish bowl on a platter, which was my crystal ball.” Everyone’s fortunes ended up with them dying. But apparently it had gone over well. “They were comparing, ‘oh well you get shot in the eye during a fox hunt, but I died in a cannon ball duel.’ It was fantastic! They begged me to come with them.”

Come with them where? I didn’t ask. When I saw maps wrecked with roadways, highways, countries where tiny planes flew to, none of it seemed real to me, that one place could lead to another and another. We were walking at night, along a narrow creek half a mile from home, a place I knew, a map that was born in my head. Mom was asleep and we were too awake and warm to whisper in the creaking hush of the house. At the bridge Tess asked me to hold her ankles and she pushed herself up against the railing. With me anchoring, she bent her body down so she could almost kiss her reflection in the water. When I pulled her back up, her hair was wet.

“It’s like if you could almost break through, there’d be another world right there.”

I nodded but had no idea what she was talking about. I was just glad she was back, glad to have someone to talk to, someone with energy.

“Moonie” —she called me Moonie because I had always been the quieter one and she teased me about daydreaming, though I felt like she was always the bigger dreamer— “what do you think is outside of this?” She gestured, one arm rounding the space in front of her. Even with her running, the farthest place she’d gotten was Nebraska.

I shrugged. “More land, more trees, more cardboard boxed cities.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I mean when we die.”

“Oh.” What had she seen at the bottom of that river? What did she think about those long days and nights leaving and coming back home? I preferred to leave death as that black thing gathering dust in the corner. Death always scared me, even as a young child. Tess was the one who calmed my nightmares, made me believe there was nothing in the closet that would harm me. She was the one who’d wanted to set up tent in a cemetery, to find a stray cat with which to hunt ghosts.

I didn’t tell her that some Sundays I stopped into a Mennonite church on the way to work. Just to hear the singing. Just because left alone in the shiny wood gleam of a back pew, and the slender elegant arches of a small nave, I felt quiet and still in a way that wasn’t lonely. I had no affiliation with the church, but the sound of a choir, voices sweet and high, blended and strong, full and rich in praise and joy, captured my attention. I wanted that kind of faith and exuberance, if not in God, then someone else, or some thing. The only person I’d loved that much was Tess, and nothing I could say or

sing would keep her with me. She wasn't a still person, she was frantic, and I loved that about her, but sometimes I needed placidity. Realizing I hadn't answered her question, I threw out a shallow answer. "I don't know. I just hope there's lemonade."

She stuck her hip out and put her hands on her waist as if she was angry I wasn't taking her seriously. Then she smiled and grabbed my arm as we sat on the bridge railing and stared at the leaky moon in the water. "And chocolate."

"And featherbeds."

"And James Dean."

"He's been dead."

"I know. I hope he's waiting for me." I gave Tess a shove, but caught her arm before she slipped off the wood. She gave me a big kiss on the cheek and raced me home.

*

We attempted to board the windows that were yet to be broken. But the wood sawed our palms as we tried, in teams of four, to hold them still and nail them. Mothers kept their children on leashes, stabilizing them with their own bodies. You tried to invite a few friends for tea, but we had to chase pots and scones around the house. And the sugar spilled and flew, sweetening our hair and skin.

During the week of continuous battering, everyone became a refugee with a tattered coat. Jewels had flown out to flower the trees and the river bed. Electronics were playing only a needling saw of noise, like a dentist's drill. People drifted in and out of doors and houses and shops, trying to huddle together and afraid of huddling too long.

*

After high school, Tess left for good. She hitchhiked to the east coast and wrote to me about thick forests and cities built like Legos, blocks and rectangles stacked beside each other, with glass instead red and green plastic. Her blond hair browned a little. She met a doctor with whom she talked *Grey's Anatomy* and he showed her all the pressure points in her body.

And I stayed at home, working at Perkins serving poached eggs with their runny eyes looking wide at me. I took classes in history and English at the community college. In an elementary-education elective, I wrote a paper on children's literature, read *Harold's Purple Crayon* and *Frog and Toad*, and I was reminded of childhood play, how difficult it was as an adult to get lost in an imaginary world.

I met a man who threw a mean set of darts, but he was in the army and I wondered why the people closest to me had a habit of leaving. Some nights the sky would fall in sheets of stars onto fields of wheat, and I'd watch it

from the grass in the backyard. Other times, I'd just sit in the basement, a small clear glass of vodka and my finger sliding along the dust of the patio furniture. I'd drink the liquid slowly and tell myself that fire meant healing, imagining Tess there wrapping me in the ripped white shreds of an old sheet until I was a mummy, or a ghost.

*

The meteorologist thumbed his books, contacted colleagues at the National Weather Service. He scratched his head as he detailed barometric pressure, prevailing and synoptic winds, geostrophic and ageostrophic winds, supercell thunderstorms. On the Beaufort scale, our winds rated a 10 out of 12. He shouted these facts with a megaphone, but his voice could barely be heard.

The textbooks you'd always wanted to throw away, Tess, those encyclopedias that sat unread in the public library, finally came of use. We stuffed them into backpacks and laundry bags, toting bent backs outside to ground ourselves. Old computer monitors, outdated phone books, broken centerpieces. We dug out heavy useless things.

*

When Mom came down with diabetes and had to use a wheelchair to get around, Tess didn't come. She hadn't come when I graduated college, didn't visit for five years. There was always an excuse of being busy, the community play she was acting in, the wedding she was attending. I think the real reason she didn't appear stemmed from worry that home had become a whirlpool, and if she set a pedicured toe back here, she would get caught in the spiral and pulled down the drain. Or worse, we'd try to convince her to stay. She sent pictures on occasion, with her skin tan, her hair permed into curls, she looked taller and thinner, her teeth whiter. She now wore trousers and blazers, long black dresses and tall heels. She worked in advertising and had an office and a secretary, her Dr. Duke took her to weekends away in the country. It didn't make sense to me that everyone would make such a fuss about needing to be in a hectic city, like New York, and then needing constant respite from it, always scrambling out to places where they could actually breathe.

I didn't blame Tess for leaving, but I blamed her for not visiting. I was taking care of Mom, and we'd grown to the age where we could appreciate her but Tess barely even called Mom. She probably still blamed her negligence, what we felt was an unfair childhood. I didn't know anyone who'd had it fair. Too often, moving forward meant running a marathon of progress to keep the pain of the past at bay. Tess had outgrown her family as the most familiar and most comfortable people in her life. Tess sent letters because I told her I didn't like the bother of e-mail. And once she sent me a tiny bottle with a note that read, "You've made it to the Atlantic." I don't know why I didn't visit her. Money wasn't plentiful, but Tess would have helped me out. And she always urged me to fly out. But maybe I was afraid, too, of not coming back. But I kept that bottle beside my bed, dip just the tip of my pinky finger in, or smell the water, sure it was fresher, saltier, cleaner. The night I became engaged, I drank down the ocean, in one gulp.

And I stayed. I dug my heels firmly and even married a state historian. "Kansas," Jim told me, "from the name of the Native American tribe, means 'people of the wind.'" Tess had ingested the wind, and I blew it back out to settle down. I liked the open space, the ceiling sky. I felt washed and sparkling those times a rainstorm swept over the prairie and clumps and streaks of periwinkle clouds hovered in the aftermath, a blanket from here to heaven, if there was such a place. I relished the sun at those times, poking through to create an oddly clear half-light, shining on grain more golden than dandelions, adding more tan freckles to my cheeks. And I loved Jim, who was stalwart and simple, who fixed cars for fun and wanted to play catch with his children, whenever we got around to having them. He wore plaid shirts that smelled like sun and had a trim beard golden as grain. He did his share of the cooking and leaned down to kiss me when I hung up the wash. "This is a man," I'd told Tess, "who knows loyalty."

A librarian who'd studied children's literature at Kansas State, I set up a children's hour at the public library, donned funny costumes, and helped the children make lion ears and paper plate puppets, read them Judy Blume and Roald Dahl and strung their construction paper cows over the checkout counters. We wrote out rhymes in crayon after reading *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* and I thought about how the world is divided between those who go and those who stay. And I couldn't figure out which ones have it the hardest, or how it was possible that one could feel the simultaneous urge to do both. Someone is always left with the responsibility to care for others, to keep the home that others can one day return to, to keep that light on. "We are," I told the children, "a country made of adventurers and settlers, first one and then the other."

*

Some families hid away in their storm shelters or concrete cellars. They were safe with silent walls and sane, stale air, and cans of pink tuna. And we didn't bother to think much about those who stayed secluded, not sharing in our camaraderie, our adventure, our trials outside in the open air.

The track coaches decided to have fun by distributing their running parachutes. Some of the townspeople stood in long lines in the gym to use them, others grounded themselves outside, clinging to lampposts to watch the spectacle. The really athletic steered their bodies, made wild spins, performed air ballets. You fastened the belt around your waist and were instantly lifted, a whirling helicopter, aware of the nothingness of your body.

*

The call was the shrill buzz-cut kind, too early in the morning and vanquishing dreams. It was some nasal-sounding friend in tears, and then the newspaper clippings sent, and then Tess's body. Her body had bumped up against some Hudson River dock, her death a muggy vagueness, and only a coroner to say it was blunt-force trauma, her friends muttering apologies and justification for not being there, but Tess was an adult and had gone home on her own after a weekend bar crawl. The people who

should have watched out for her and taken care of her had lost sight of her, and I hated wondering who had found her walking helplessly, who had seen her last and sent her tumbling into the river. It wasn't possible that my sister could earn such hate or disgust. How was it possible that people walked around with such malice? My husband tried to calm the cruelty that battered my mind, telling me it could have been an accident; she could have slipped, knocked her head, and fell in. I took to pacing the house and ignoring dinner. I turned cold in the warm weather and piled sweaters on my shoulders. Talk talk talking with the police and they could find nothing. Somewhere along the way Tess had broken up with the doctor she loved and all he sent with a card. The boxes came with her things, packed by her friends. I picked through them, on the floor of Mom's living room, taking out each separate item slowly and carefully, as if everything that had made up our lives were constructed from glass. Mom watched, not talking but breathing hard, lying on the couch with wet eyes. I didn't know these things, these clothes and this jewelry and these artworks. They came from a later Tess, one I'd only known through letters and occasional phone calls. I burned everything but the pictures, out in the backyard, a smoke signal to no one, a pile of rotting black. And then I sat in Mom's basement and touching over and over again those toys we used to bring to life in our games. Sometimes, I'd fall asleep there, cheek pressed against a string of plastic pearls, and my husband, Jim, would bring me back to our house and put me in bed. I never stayed asleep for long. I'd keep imagining a phone ringing, as if all it would take was a reverse phone call to undo Tess' death, as if things like pretending were still possible.

If we made death beautiful or fun, it wouldn't be so scary. Tess buried me when I was eight. We dug a thin ditch, just a few inches in the ground with plastic shovels, and she poured potting soil over my body and covered that with the huge severed heads of sunflowers. After singing a solemn rendition of "Blue Blue Blue Like the Ocean," she watered the plants and my body. Mom screamed when I walked back in the house, her dirt-clump daughter.

At Tess's funeral, my mother kept her handkerchief close to her damp cheeks. I stayed behind. I stayed at the grave all night and leaned my head on Tess's gravestone as if it were a pillow. "It's like you wanted, when you were younger," I told her, "to camp out in the cemetery." But I had always been too afraid. Now, I talked to her until the night air made my voice scratchy. And I told her a story, a better one about her death, to replace the ugliness of reality, a story I imagined for her like the ones we created as children. I began, "The wind started small, an atmospheric burp."

*

Shingles dropped on our heads. An occasional flying copper or brown rectangle ripped out by the 70 mph winds that blew in on the second week. It would have been useful to have some underground tunneling system, but who would have known? But you couldn't stay inside and go stir crazy, even as the winds grew fiercer.

The clinic was full of patients with scrapes and lacerations, a few cases

of broken bones. Luckily, the old brick building stood staunchly and stubbornly, squat and low to the ground, windows improbably storm-proof. But the patients still warily eyed the needles and scalpels, lest the tools should jump and scatter from the light breezes sneaking in under the doors.

*

A month after the funeral, I found out I was pregnant. Jim was so excited he put me in the blue Chevy and we took off without any destination in particular and ended up in Greensburg, at the site of the Big Well, the world's largest hand-dug well, Jim told me proudly. We walked down the steps toward the bottom and Jim was sure to hold my hand tight so I wouldn't slip. The lights shown clear through the water and we could see the things people had tossed—coins and crosses and buttons. I wish I'd known a prayer to say. Somehow, it felt holy down there in that narrow shaft where farmers and cowboys had wet their hands and dug the land. The world felt very dim, thin, and far away from inside the earth, and I wondered if that was how Tess felt, or if she was eating chocolate with James Dean. There was nothing in my pockets to discard, though Jim left a kiss on my temple, and as we climbed back to the surface, I wish I'd kept that vial of Atlantic Ocean. I would have poured it in.

The visitor's center was gone, torn up in a EF5 tornado a few months ago. The town itself was still loud with hammers and crowded with planks, a place rebuilding itself. The tornado even shifted a half-ton meteorite that had been found in the area and stationed there. "It's at the Sternberg Museum right now," Jim said. "So we'll have to take another trip another time." I nodded. I wanted to touch it. Even if it was roped off or behind glass, how easy could it be for them to cordon off a half-ton rock? I wanted to put my palms on the pallasite, which had traveled through space but still could be moved here on earth. I did not think about the people who'd died in the tornado, lifted and up and suddenly disappeared from their families. I didn't think of them until the drive home when Jim mentioned rural exodus. "Some of that research I've got cluttering up the kitchen table? All about the emptiness. Six thousand ghost towns in Kansas. A trail of breadcrumbs." From then on, the thin lines of telephone wires crossing stark plains made me sad. With every rotted barn or empty window-shattered house we passed, I thought about those ghost towns, dusty, empty, open-doored buildings and all their inhabitants suddenly lost and carried away.

*

After ten days, sound crumpled. There was only so much that could be screamed over the howling, and then our voices were lost, but the wind rang interminably. Cotton ball wedges and scoops of wax, foam plugs and smushed pillows, all pressed onto ears. We grabbed chalkboards and hoarded whatever paper and pencils we could find to scribble messages for fear of being utterly silenced. It was hardest on you, Tess, you who could never stop talking.

Those of us who finally grew tired of the wind parachuted out to an open field. There we lay ourselves down. The wind grew stronger until it finally lifted our bodies upward, rocking us. Though our skin was dry and blistering, our lips chapped and bloody, we had gotten used to the wind. It no longer cut as it once did. So we slept peacefully in the sky.

*

The shoulder pads winged out, making Tess resemble a nine-year-old offensive lineman. Her tweed blazer buttoned, she shifted the purple pearls at her neck. "So you dropped to your death?" She spread her arms far apart as if posing in the midst of a deep plummeting fall.

"Yep. A group of ducks flew right into my hot air balloon and popped it with their beaks."

"Can you describe the ducks?"

"Fat and white, with orange beaks. Maybe they were blind."

"I'm so sorry, it must have been very painful." She shook her head a lot when she said "sorry" and "very."

"I tried to grab the ducks, but they wiggled away."

"Saving themselves. Just selfish."

"You're telling me." And I began pretending to cry.

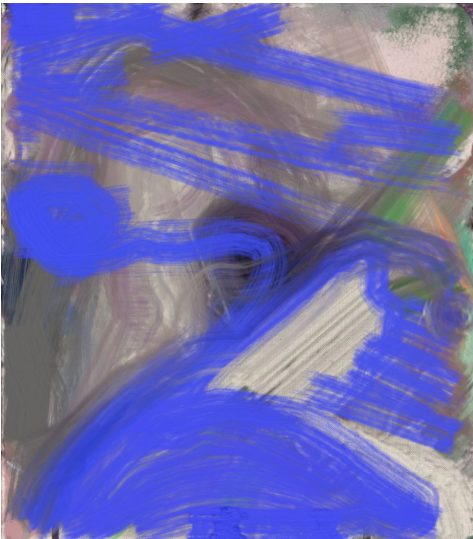
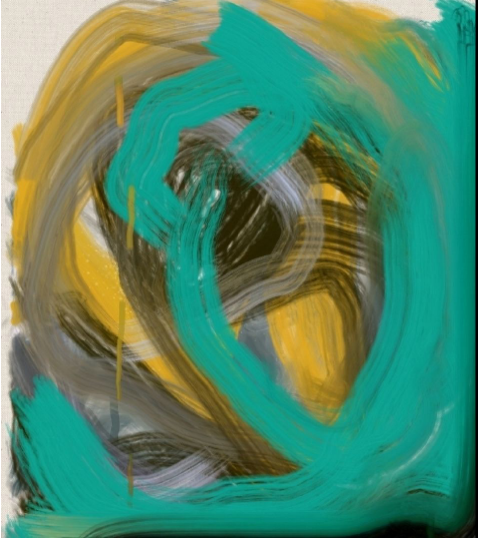
"There, there," she said patting me with a white-gloved hand and pouring more imaginary tea. "You'll be fine." She picked up a twinkie and bit off the end. Then she leaned close and whispered, "It's not real."

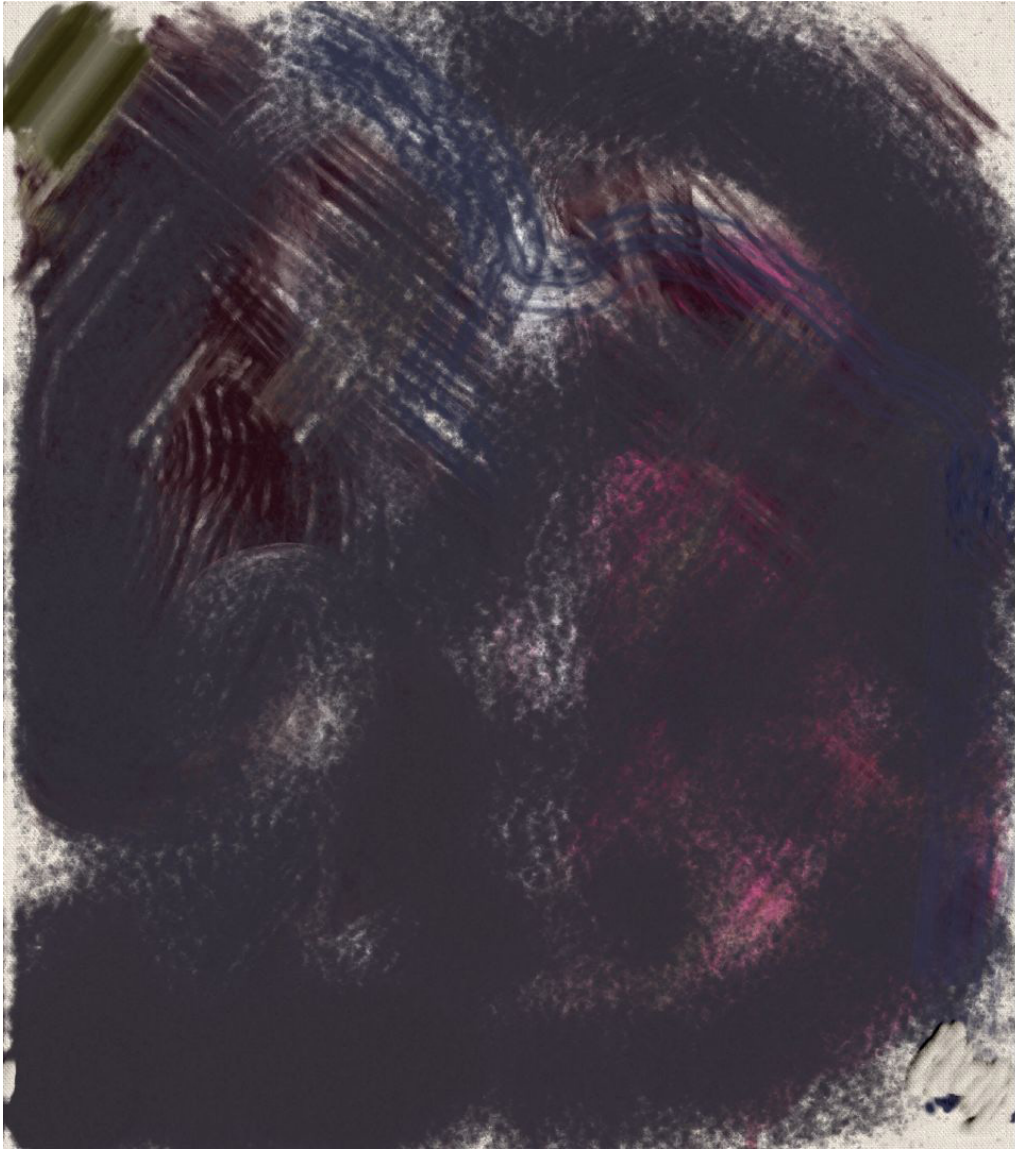
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You'd tried to browse one of those dusty encyclopedias and figure out the storm. You read about wind, how its name changed with each geographical location. Beautiful sounds on the tongue. Simoom in the Arabian desert. Etesian in Greece. Alizé in the Caribbean. And the Atlantic and Pacific storms had individual names each year. Felix. Paloma. Claudette. Otto. Wilma. But as long as all communication was blacked out, you heard of no name for our atrocious miracle. And we couldn't come up with our own.

After two weeks the wind died down, and nobody noticed because everyone had been at altitude for so long, storm-rubbed and sleeping. Now your body is cold and frozen and laid back to the earth by the departing storm. Nothing feels sharp or sad. It's warm on the ground and still and quiet in the gardens that became plots, and yours is lined with gentians.











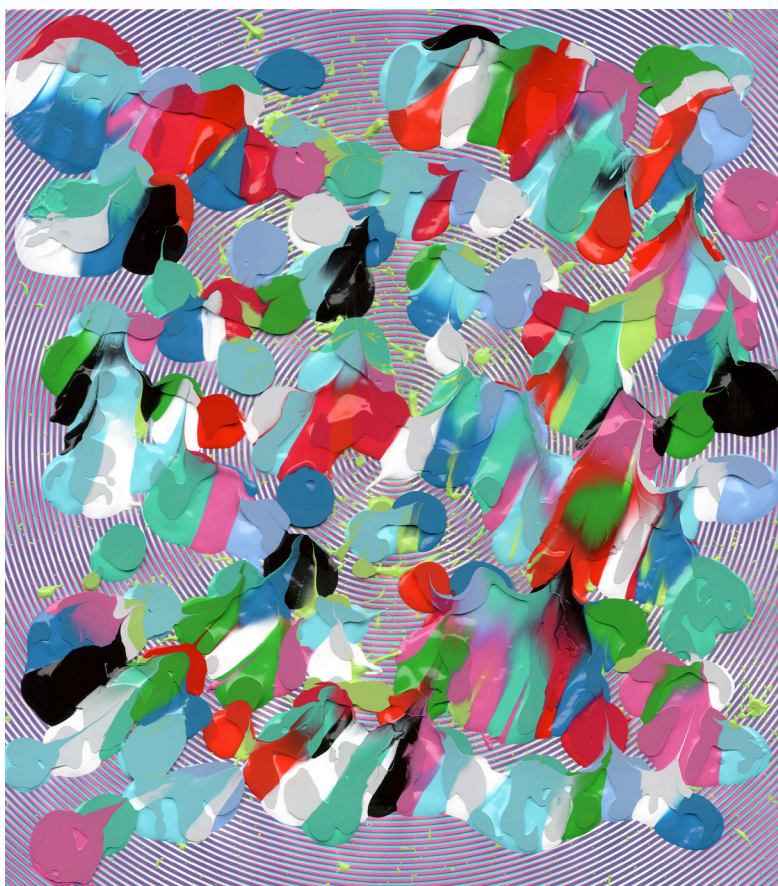
















Building

Girls

Fiction
from
Issue #???

by Randa Jarrar

They come to Egypt in the summer; they come in their rented cars and bring their families and buy umbrellas and beach chairs; they bring swimsuits and towels and creams they wear on their skin so it won't burn. They make me laugh. They come in June, sometimes as late as July, and stay until September, when their children return to school and they return to their jobs. It's hard for me to imagine leaving work for an entire season; I suppose when no one is here from September until June that is my small vacation. On my vacation I still have to wash walls and plant plants and paint and water and clean. And on top of all that I have Shadia to take care of, my little Shadia who looks just like her father, the bastard. Him, I have a permanent vacation from. Thank the lord! I was born here, at the bottom of the building on Seventh Street in this small beach town at the lower tip of the Middle Sea, between the cities of Alexandria and Abu Qir. My mother and father have been married thirty-five years; in that time my mother has lost many of her teeth, she has lost her small figure and some of her hair, and my father has stayed almost exactly the same. My father's skin is black like the street on which the summer children play soccer, and his teeth are white and gleaming, with occasional cavities, so they look like the soccer balls. He runs errands for the women who don't have their husbands with them, or whose husbands are lazy; I sometimes see the women blush when Father talks to them because he is unbearably handsome. I look a lot like him, except because my skin is black and I am a woman, I am not considered unbearably beautiful.

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I have been working for my parents, and for the owners of the building, all my life—thirty-four years, if you want an exact number. I took a break when I married the devil, Shadia's father, whose name I cannot bear to utter. I was never in love with him; he was twelve years older, and Mother thought he'd be a good match when she heard from my cousin that he was looking for a wife. He lied and stole and broke my heart, which wasn't his to break, and when he put his hands on me, I'd shudder. I hated his sex, I hated his skin and his smell. He had a nasty temper and struck me on the face and kicked my bottom more times than I cared for, and when I went home dragging Shadia behind me Mother spat on me and told me to go home to my husband, and I cried and told her what happened, but she didn't blink. Father intervened on my behalf and told me his house was my house, and Mother slapped her own cheeks and wailed. I smiled with relief as I entered the little bottom-floor apartment, the fabric on all its walls scented with every meal I had ever prepared or eaten there. My real bosses are the families of the building.

In my building are two apartments on each floor—one apartment on the left, another on the right—and four floors. I call the first floor the mirror floor: the family on the left has three daughters and one son, and the family on the right has three sons and a daughter. You'd think they would have naturally paired off after spending every summer together, but they never did. The boys all played soccer every day and the girls either played apart or split off according to their age groups. Their mothers adored one another and the husbands despised each other—one was an intellectual and spent all his summers reading on the balcony, the other spent his summers buying watermelons and watching soccer games on the television, which he wheeled out to the balcony every night. I loved to watch them from the street, the intellectual flipping his pages after each burst of applause coming from the watermelon-lover's screen.

The owners of the left-side apartment on the second floor live downtown and rent the apartment out to honeymooners. I like to watch the new brides walk down the street awkwardly, in that newly deflowered way, their gait hesitant and their palms linked in with their husbands'. In the other second-floor apartment lives Madame Manaal; she has lived there for thirty-four years. When she moved in, my mother was pregnant with me, and I was floating inside her belly, squinting in its darkness. My father says Madame Manaal moved into the apartment after the death of her husband and her eldest son; she asked my father, upon her arrival, to shutter all her windows, and he did. When I was a child, I was surprised when Madame called me up to give me her grocery list; in contrast with the brightness of the street, the blackness that cloaked her greeted me like a big chasm on the other side of the threshold. Sometimes, when I am feeling strange, I think Madame Manaal is my old self, still floating in my mother's belly.

The third-floor apartments were joined into one when its owners, who live in the Arabian Gulf, knocked down the wall in the middle (I was a witness to this marriage, and covered my ears when I heard the ceremony commence). They come every three years and the rest of the time their furniture is covered in white sheets. Sometimes, I go up there and listen

to their records or take naps on their beds. Sometimes, the white sheets remind me of hiding people, an idea that arouses me, and I practice the secret habit on the biggest bed.

The fourth-floor apartments are also frequently empty. The one on the left belongs to an elderly man, an ex-officer who took part in the 1952 revolution. When he comes to visit he brings all his grandchildren and his daughters. He wears a small hat and sandals and goes for walks very early in the morning, his hands daintily hanging at his sides. I try to imagine him holding a rifle in those hands, or pulling a string on a cannon, but I cannot.

The apartment on the right is where Perihan, my summer best friend, used to stay; she visited the building with her family every summer for fifteen years; we used to play together in the dump next door. Now in the dump my family tends to chickens. Back when the dump was filled with trash, Perihan and I would dig through it and find shiny tins and pots that we tapped with sticks and made into drums. Perihan wore her dresses—shiny pink and silver things—and crimped hats. I wore the same nighties that I slept in and put big perfumed flowers in my hair. She liked that my hats were from nature and that I didn't have to change just because the sky had turned from night to light or vice versa, and as the summers progressed, she'd become less a rich girl on the top floor of the building and more one of our sisters at the bottom of it; she wore her galabiyya and her plastic torn-up sandals, and we wreathed flowers, pink and fat, into her brown hair whose strands looked red in the sun.

When we swam she wore a swimsuit and I wore my clothes; I didn't understand why you had to wear special clothes just for the water, which really didn't care how dressed up you were when you came to meet it. Out of modesty, too, I have never shown my arms or legs outside my home.

Although she has not come to visit in almost ten years, whenever the cars pull into our street and new people arrive, I sometimes imagine that the little princesses coming out of the back seats are Perihan, even though she must be thirty by now. That's why when a gray Peugeot pulled up this June, and a Perihan imposter, eight years old and wearing an American outfit—no dresses, no hats, no patent leather shoes—came out, I wanted to rush to her in glee, my adult body slowly catching up with my excitement. I heard someone call my name, lilting and peeling its letters out like a brand-new bicycle bell. It was the real, adult Perihan, and I realized that the little Peri was her daughter.

At first, we exchanged kisses and hugs, and my father and mother, too, came to greet her. Shadia stayed by the candy-and-chips stand outside the building; she was shy and still. Perihan's daughter was the one who went to Shadia; the little girl spoke not a word of Arabic but was charading like a crazy person and making Shadia laugh. They played together; Shadia showed her our home, and Perihan and I took their suitcases up to the apartment. Halfway through, on the third floor, Perihan's breath was running ahead of her and she had to slow down and catch it. We talked for a while; I told her about Shadia's father, the ass, and she told me about

her daughter's father, also an ass, and then she called down and told her daughter to come up. I asked her what she needed from the market and she turned red, then told me she could shop for it herself. "Oh, you're tired," I said, "Let me get it. I have a bike now. I like going to the market!" She reluctantly agreed and gave me some money, and I was off buying her groceries, just like I did for her mother twenty years ago.

I like being at the market; people push past you and men wink. I like watching the summer crowd and their dealings. The girls wear tight denim and let their straightened hair spill across their shoulders. (My hair is always in a bun or under a kerchief.) Men follow them and hurl sweet praise their way; the girls pretend to hate it or not to hear. The shops stand one after the other, with nothing but their thin walls to separate them: cheese here, bread there, toys here, mattresses there, dresses here, kerchiefs there, books here, books there. There is a nasty-smelling fish shop at one end of the market and a shiny silver jeweler on the other: in that sense, even the market has a top and bottom floor.

I stood at the bookseller's and quickly scanned the covers and titles; I'd probably read all of them; all books that feature a man who goes far away then comes back to the homeland and decides he is forever changed but that this is where he belongs. I read them out of sheer boredom in the winter; and to be completely honest, I prefer planting flowers or watering the banana tree or even being sweet-talked by toothless men than reading these kinds of books. After I filled my cloth sack with Perihan's things—cheese, yogurt, eggs, tea, mint, toilet paper, a newspaper, and bread—I got on my bike and rode off, the smell from the fish shop at the bottom of the market wafting over to caress me. The smell was like Shadia's father: foul and persistent, so I pedaled my bike faster.

When I returned to Perihan's apartment, she had all the windows closed and the window unit in the corner humming. She asked me if the mosquito truck had gone by yet, and I said it hadn't, and we emptied her suitcase together. I asked her about her daughter Anna's father; she said he was American and they were divorced. Anna was darker-skinned than Perihan was, and Perihan told me that not all Americans were blond and white. I was confused, and asked her if she was lying, and she swore on the holy book that she was not. "Anna's father was brown-skinned, like an Egyptian," she said, winking, and I laughed. I made her tea and she asked me to sit out on the balcony and drink it with her; but she wouldn't let Anna come out with us. I asked her why, and she said the mosquito truck emitted fumes that were cancerous and that she didn't want to expose Anna. I nodded silently and drank my tea, even though it now tasted like mud on my tongue and in my throat. I wanted to ask her if she'd forgotten how we used to ride behind the truck at night, on our bicycles, and inhale the big white cloud until we felt like we were in the sky itself. I wanted to ask her if she thought I would get cancer, or if Shadia or my father or all of us that were left behind here in the beach town would get it. When the truck pulled up she covered her nose and I couldn't bear it, so I said I had to go bathe. Shadia, dumped the contents of my tea cup out onto the neighbor's yard, and went down the stairs two at a time. That night, before I went to sleep

an image of Perihan, as she covered her nose like a snob, burned through my eyelids,.I rubbed my eyes and turned onto my side.

The girls played in the street or fed the chickens in the dump, and Peri sat on her balcony and read or watched the beach. I asked her why she was in Egypt, and she told me she was here doing research for her PhD. I wasn't sure how sunning herself on a balcony would get her a doctorate, but I said nothing. She came down sometimes and sat next to me, where the entrance of the building met the street. I would crouch beside my candy-chips stand, my soda cooler, and my umbrella, and whenever someone would walk by, we would hassle them to buy something. Perihan was the best hustler; she would tell people they looked parched, or pick on the skinny summer-girls and try to get them to buy chips. She was a great saleslady and I told her that. When business was slow we walked around the building and I showed her my plants. Her mouth was open in amazement the whole time, and she kept repeating, "You planted this tree? These flowers? These herbs?" She loved the garden, and some evenings, after the dusk prayer, she asked me if she could water it. I always said yes, and watched her as she leapt around the garden with the water hose, completely content.

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One morning, after she'd come with me to the market and the girls had begged us for countless toys, she asked me if Shadia's father ever saw her. "Him?" I said, disgusted, and told her he hadn't seen her in years. "Abu Anna sees her," she said, after a long pause. I wanted to know when, and she told me it was on Wednesdays between five and eight, and every other Saturday. I laughed so hard then, because Perihan could be so funny when she wanted to be, and her specific brand of humor was based on giving exact measurements for things that cannot be measured, and she laughed with me, but she swore it was true.

The girls played in the dump by the building, and declined whenever the girls from the mirror floor tried to play with them. When Peri and I were their age, we used to accept these offers only to regret them later: someone bossed us around or stole our treasures or flounced around us and made us cry. It was as though our daughters had learned that lesson through us, somehow, and seeing this made me happy.

I was convinced that we should go to the flea market, and I rounded up the girls and we all walked out to the tent by the amusement park. I love the flea market; it comes through every July, and has everything from bags and clothes to music and food and cheap costume jewelry. I like the way everything looks, colorful and loud, like a circus. Perihan loved it and bought some dresses and a ring, and I pawed a pair of earrings until she made me try them on. They were round and big and made of brass and had fake garnets in them, and in the mirror—with the carnivalesque tent behind me and the earrings hanging by my face—I looked like someone else entirely. It felt good to pretend to be someone else, so I asked the Malaysian man at the counter how much they were and bargained down to half his initial price. Perihan insisted on paying, and I thought that was kind so I let

her, and afterward, I hooked them on and she slapped my palm and giggled and told me I should teach negotiations at universities around the world.

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Sometimes, Perihan's friends would come from downtown and she would sit with them on the balcony far into the night and tell them stories in Arabic and English. It was understood that I would not join in these gatherings, the same way a person does not bring a car into the house. They all giggled and drank Stella and smoked cigarettes, and Mother shook her head in their direction because she did not approve. The friends would spend the night and in the morning, which began at around 2 pm for them, they walked to the beach carrying beach chairs and umbrellas. By then I would have done the grocery shopping for the first and second floors, watered the plants, did the wash, cooked for my family, and cleaned the building's entrance with rags. I jealously watched Peri and her friends walk down the street and cross to the shore, and then I went to my garden and sat in the shade and daydreamed. The honeymooning women yelled down at me from their balconies, and I ran up to their apartments and they gave me grocery lists. They paid me the total for the groceries and then usually tipped me around twenty percent for delivering them; at the end of the summer they would also give me a bulk tip. Usually, my tips and end-of-summer gifts amounted to enough money to tide me over until next summer.

Whenever I thought of winter, I pictured it dark and long, like night, like Madame Manaal's apartment, or the inside of my eyes when I close them against the light. I dreaded the town's emptiness, how the residents would leave like ants being flung from a vast, billowing blanket. I put the wash on the line, pants and undergarments and shirts and shawls, and as I clipped them with wooden pegs to the bright yellow line, I thought these thoughts, and I wondered about love, wondered if I would ever be blessed with it, if I would ever be married again. I wanted that, but I told Mother and everyone else that I didn't, that I hated men and their wives and that I wanted to be alone forever.

Perihan confided in me one day at dusk, as we sat on her balcony and sipped at our mint tea, that she too was lonely and wanted to be in love. She asked me if I thought we were cursed, and I superstitiously spat in my chest and said, "Let's hope to God we're not." She asked me if I knew of someone we could go to who could tell us, and break the spell if there was one, and I told her I did. Perihan leaned into the edge of her seat, her back straightening, and said, "When can we go see her?" She smoothed her bangs, and I said, "Well, not now ... Maybe tomorrow."

The next day we took the bus out to Abu Qir, and Perihan gawked at the ponies and carts that passed by. I nudged her with my shoulder and she stifled her giggles. We walked between two buildings, in that cobbled sand-brown hallway that was windy and salty, the blue of the ocean in front of us a rectangular marine box. We found the woman's door and knocked. She sent her girl to answer it, and the servant stared at the two of us—an odd pairing, she must have thought: one crinkled, one flat—then ushered us in.

We described our woes to the woman, who was the size of Shadia but eighty years old, her neck an accordion. The servant made us cups of coffee; we drank them and afterward, the old lady told us to push our thumbs into the dregs. We did, and handed the cups over to her. She did Perihan's cup first: Perihan was a fool in love, but soon she would find a man who liked her for who she was. She didn't have to pretend to be anyone else, she just had to be the way she was and a wonderful man would come to her. He would be tall and have a goatee. It would happen within the next three months, said the woman, and Perihan nodded silently. I was confused as to why she wasn't excited. Maybe she didn't believe in fortunes?

Then the woman labored over my cup, huffing and tut-tutting. She turned the cup over and over in her hand, and finally, she exhaled loudly, and said, "There is no power nor strength without God. My girl, I see nothing in your cup but darkness, long darkness with small bursts of light once a year. I am sorry, daughter." I nodded and stood up. Perihan looked at the old woman with hateful eyes, then shouted, "Why did you say that to her? We were both going to pay you the same exact amount! You're a fraud! Besides, I don't like men!" I grasped her by the arm to silence her, and pulled her up, and we left.

By the time we walked home from the bus, the sun was setting, and the girls were sitting by Mother at the edge of the dump, eating grilled ears of corn and grinning. From where we stood, they looked just like we used to. Perihan said goodnight to me and told Anna to go up to sleep when she was done. Anna was confused, so Perihan said it in English, then Anna yelled and appeared to be negotiating a longer stay, but Perihan wouldn't budge.

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After Anna went up and Shadia came in for her bath, I thought about the old lady of Abu Qir, about what she had said about my darkness. I looked around my apartment: ever since I could remember, our walls have been covered in rugs, rugs in red, orange, blue, and green. Our house is colorful and serene; Mother says it reminds her of home down south, and Father, a wise man who likes to maintain peace, agrees with her, as he does on everything. Outside my house there are flowers and plants I have grown; upstairs in the homes of the people for whom I work, the walls are white and everything is bleak. I began to worry about Perihan; she was unhappy and she was alone.

I sat outside after Shadia slept and watched the street and the sky. A woman's voice floated down from her balcony, as she called to me, "Mother of Shadia! Mother of Shadia!" Perihan was the only person who called me that. Normally, I hate when summer folks want me to do something for them this late in the evening, but for Perihan, I was willing to let go of my annoyance. I climbed her stairs and found her on the third floor, halfway up the building. "Do you smoke?" she asked. "Bongo, I mean?" I gasped, and then laughed. I had never smoked drugs before, and I couldn't imagine anyone else I'd want to smoke it with. "Yes," I said, and she took it out of her pocket. It was in a long, white cigarette. I whispered that she was crazy

and to put it back in her pocket; we had to go to the roof if we wanted to do something that illicit. She obliged and followed me up.

We climbed the ladder onto the roof and watched as the wash fluttered in the breeze. She lit her cigarette, took a drag, and passed it on to me. I smoked, and halfway through, got the giggles. She laughed too, and we watched the beach and the street below. My mind felt light, and my body relaxed. We told each other funny stories, and an hour later, Perihan began to get morose. "I hate not being a little girl," she said. "When I was little I wore a nightie in the street and no one looked at me. No one whistled at me. I felt invisible and happy. I had no money of my own and I was happy. Look at you. You still wear what you used to wear. You live the same life you've always lived. You have a home here, and it'll always be here for you. You raise Shadia without her father, but you don't do it alone; your mother and your sisters and all the neighborhood helps. I envy you."

I couldn't believe what she was saying. No one had ever told me they envied me before. And why would Perihan, the light-skinned beauty who lives in America and who's been on an airplane, envy me?

"That's silly," I said. "No one helps me. I was punished for leaving Shadia's father. My mother still won't look me in the eye. I'm considered worse than a widow, and my honor is constantly in question, just because I've had ... sex." I knew I was high. "Besides," I continued, "It should be the other way around," then giggled. I was not ready to be morose. "I should envy you. You're getting the man with the goatee!"

We both laughed at this, big laughs that stole away our breath, cascading giggles and tears. Then, Perihan said, "Listen, I know I'm paranoid right now—this stuff makes you paranoid, you know? But listen, I think she switched our fortunes."

"No!" I slapped her arm.

"Yes, yes, yes. In the next three months you will meet your man. My life is dark and sad except for the summers, when I have vacation from teaching and I can travel. That was my fortune. Trust me!"

I laughed and blushed and told her I hoped we both could find love. She smiled and said, "From your lips to the heavens." Then she stared at my lips for a long time, and I felt a warmth spread through me.

"Do you want to see the phantom apartment?" I said, and she squealed and nodded. We pushed the timed light switch and ran down as quietly as possible to the third floor. She held onto my dress and giggled. Inside, she gawked at the white sheets and the marble floors; she sat down on them and ran her hand against their surface.

"I saw them install this floor," I said. "Burly men carried the slabs up on their shoulders."

Perihan sat back, her body outstretched against the floor. I sat next to her.

“Do you ever bring men here?” she said.

I spat in my chest. “Of course not!”

“Why not?” she insisted.

“Someone would see them come up. Mother or Father, even Shadia. It’s too risky. And I haven’t met anyone to do that with.”

“If you met them, would you? You could easily disguise them as a friend of a family here. You’re the eyes and ears of the neighborhood, so you can sneak in anyone you wanted. There are rich girls all over Egypt who wish they could do the same.”

She was right. “Sometimes,” I divulge, “I see men beautiful enough to invite here. But I don’t, I just come here by myself and imagine them touching me.”

She giggled. “You come here to masturbate?”

My face flashed warmly and I looked away.

“Don’t, Aisha. Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, and took my face in her hands. I felt strange and still warm. She kissed my cheek. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, and stroked my face. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, and kissed my eyelids. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she whispered, and pecked my lips. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, her tongue sliding into my mouth. I hadn’t kissed anyone in a long time. I knew what we were doing was wrong, but I didn’t know why. I imagined my mother finding us that way, spitting on me, her mouth grimacing in disgust, and I pulled away. Perihan put her hands on my waist and said, again, “Don’t be embarrassed,” and slowly wedged her knee between my legs. I let out a sharp cry, and smelled her hair. It was sweet and salty at once. She slid her hands over me, then kissed my neck, my shoulders, my breasts, my stomach, my hips, all the while whispering for me not to be embarrassed. I couldn’t help it. Soon, her sweet and salty hair was caressing the inside of my thighs, and her tongue was on the ridge of my sex. She darted it over me and hummed and groaned, and I looked at the white sheets all around me and sighed. Then, she slid a finger inside me and thrust it upwards, as though pressing the timed light switch, and soon, my light clicked on, shone for a while, then went out again. I curled up next to her and closed my eyes.

“Is this what you meant when you told accordion-neck you didn’t like men?” I said. She pulled herself up on one elbow, looked at me, then smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “It is.”

“Have you done this to many women?”

“No. But I was scared at first that there was something wrong with me. I went to many imams and they all said the same thing: that what I felt was

haram, and I should control it. Then I found an imam who told me that nothing in the Koran says a woman can't love a woman. There's one verse that says if two women are found together they should be locked up in the house. Then the imam told me that two women locked up in a house could only lead to one thing!" We both laughed. When she laughed, I smelled myself on her mouth, and hugged her close.

In the following days, I averted my eyes when Mother looked at me. I was ashamed and confused, but then I would hear Peri saying, "Don't be embarrassed" in my ear, her voice like a phantom white sheet, and I would feel better. I wondered if she seduced women all over Egypt and then told them the story about the imam to make them feel better. I decided that if she did, it worked. As I pedaled my bike to the market, I looked at men's bottoms and stared at their hands. It was as though Peri had reawakened something inside me, and I was grateful to her for that.

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In the afternoons, Perihan and Anna went to Alexandria, to the new library, where Peri was doing her research. I searched her eyes for a sign, a direction, a way I should behave toward her, but there was nothing, and Perihan simply treated me the way she always had. It was not as though she was pretending nothing had happened between us, only that it would not change the way she saw me or thought of me. It was a bit of a relief to sense that, although I was confused about how to feel. One afternoon, she invited Shadia and me to go to the beach. I said I couldn't go; I was washing the army officer's car, and was not yet done with the windows. She seemed embarrassed for not knowing this, for not having to wash cars. I told her I could go when I was done.

We spread a few chairs and plunged the sharp wooden end of an umbrella into the sand. A few kids walked up and down the sidewalk holding a crab on a leash. The crab danced and pulled and tugged, facing the shore. While Shadia and Anna swam, Perihan asked me if I ever wanted to leave the building. I said I was like everyone else: I lived where I'd grown up and would probably die there. I told her this gave me comfort on most days, and I faced the blue sea. Perihan said this was an alien idea to her, and that she wouldn't know where to go home to, even if she wanted to. She said that when she came to Egypt, she knew where to go, and that if I ever came to America, she would never know, she wouldn't even sense that I was there. "It's enormous," she said. The sky was dotted with plastic kites and I watched them float and thought of what she meant. I thought of the kite ripping from the thread and flying away, disappearing into the immeasurable sky. Perihan was like that. I was like the crab on the sidewalk.

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The day Perihan and Anna left, I made them mulokhiya, picked and dried the mallow leaves myself, and she told me I had to eat it with them. We devoured it on the balcony, then the girls went down to play until Perihan's aunt came to get her. Perihan sat close to me and I saw a couple of eyelashes

on her chin. I bent to brush them off but they wouldn't move. She blushed, and said she was hairy-chinned. I told her not to be ashamed, and she got up and started looking for her tweezers. I laughed, then watched the girls drum on tin cans in the street and was saddened that they would not be able to communicate once they got older.

"You should teach Anna Arabic!" I said.

"You should teach Shadia English!" she joked, tweezing in a small hand-mirror.

"Peri. How will they talk when they get older?" I watched them bang on the drums harder, the suitcases big and bulky on the side of the road. I wondered if Peri would ever come back.

"They'll find a way," she said. "Believe me, they'll still have the language they have now."

I nodded to be polite, but I didn't believe it.



The Horoscope Says

*Fiction
from
Issue #15*

by Antonio Ortuño

Translated from the Spanish by Lucy Greaves

I

My dad isn't that popular in our neighborhood. The cops show up at our house on Mondays or Tuesdays and watch him drink beer on the tiny square of concrete that used to be the garden. Our neighbors don't have wire fences to protect them, but we do. My father drinks his beers perched on a little bench right by the street, an offense that around here is treated with the same severity as far worse crimes. But the cops can't cross the wire fence to arrest him, so they settle for watching him drink.

He and I don't get on that well either. My mom died, and I have to do the housework, because he was brought up to never touch a broom and I, on the other hand, seem to have been born to use one. Once I've swept, dusted, mopped, and cleaned the bathrooms and kitchen (and washed the clothes on Mondays and Thursdays), I have to put on my overalls and walk to the factory.

I was such an outstanding student that I managed to get a job as soon as I handed in my application, but I wasn't good enough to get a grant and carry on studying. I work on an assembly line from three in the afternoon until ten at night, alongside twenty other girls, all indistinguishable from one another. Seen from above, through the window of the supervisor's office, the two or three hundred of us who work on the fifteen simultaneous production lines each shift must look untiring.

I'm also lucky that I have an easy walk home (I don't like to complain, I leave that to the papers). There are eleven blocks in a straight line between my house and the factory. Some of my workmates, on the other hand, have to get two or three buses and then walk down muddy tracks before they're free at last.

The streets around the factory used to be dark but now they're lit by long lines of streetlights paid for by the city council. There are constant police patrols: in the eleven blocks to my door I sometimes see up to six police trucks, with two cops sitting in the front and four squashed together on the flatbed, their legs dangling off the back and their rifles on their shoulders. The papers grumble. They say our neighborhood is a disgrace and compare it to the nice housing developments on the other side of the city. It's true: no one here has high walls or gardens. We used to have one, a tiny one, but now it's buried under the concrete where my father sits and stares while he drinks. During the day he watches people walking past and at night, when no one dares to go out, he waits for me to get back. At least I think he does. Sometimes he's not there when I get home and only appears a bit later, bottle in hand.

Of course there are dangers. And it's not all stuff the papers make up, like some people think. A lot of my workmates, no one knows quite how many, have never come back to the factory. Some must leave because they get fed up with the poor pay and hard work. Others are snatched from nearby streets. Put like that, it sounds like one of those articles in the paper that protest when some body or other has shown up. They print photos that make the dead women look like toys. That's what we must all look like: articulated dolls wearing safety masks. Sometimes we play at assembling dolls (here the head, the arms, here the legs and clothes) and other times, we're pulled apart. No; what we actually do is assemble circuit boards, and the doll production line closed years ago due to lack of demand. But I snipped out an article that mentioned the dolls because I liked the way it lied. As if there was some logic to what was happening, as if we were something that could be described.

The article was published a year and a half ago, around the time when there were more patrols and more disappearances (and more bodies were found). Now there are fewer, but they haven't dried up altogether. Like those couples that sometimes still go for each other even though he's drunk or she's bored. I read that in another article, in a section that instead of dead bodies sometimes prints pictures of the very much alive ones of beautiful women. The one thing I can't stand is the crossword. I wouldn't be able to do them in any case, because my dad snatches every paper that comes to the house. He does them in minutes, never hesitating or crossing anything out. As if he's the one who planned them, as if he can make his words fit into the little boxes regardless of their relationship to the truth. I've never bothered to check his answers.

I don't dawdle, I walk fast, purposefully. I don't turn around if one of the cops, up on their trucks, calls out. Some girls from the factory make friends with them or become their girlfriends because they want protection (in

other words, they go into alleyways with them and slide their dicks into their mouths), but I have no intention of fooling about with any of them and I don't need them to follow me home. My dad would get mad if he saw me with a cop.

The papers complain about everything, but they do end up saying some useful stuff, like blabbermouths occasionally do. For example, I've got an article here that says, because it's doing so badly, it's a wonder the boss keeps the factory going. It hasn't turned a profit in eight years and reports losses across the board. Even the tax collectors have backed off, because the boss is friends with a government minister and the government know there's no money in this. They leave him be. Apparently, another problem with this neighborhood and its "extreme situation" is that five cops have died this year. The paper, regurgitating statements made by the city council, suggests that the officers are shot down by the same people who kidnap girls from work and dump their bodies. But how can you trust a paper that, after reporting something like that on one page, unblinkingly supports what the horoscope writer dreams up on the next? Today, mine says: *You will find yourself strangely in sync with your partner, take the opportunity to say what's bothering you.*

My partner, who doesn't exist, will have to be patient: I work Monday to Saturday and at home the work's never done. And my dad would get mad if I came home holding hands with someone. Especially, I think, if it was a cop and I had to go into alleyways and suck him off.

Now I realize that I ended up telling this to no one and that really does bother me. Another victory for the horoscope.

II

At night I leave work at the same time as fifty other girls. We're relieved by fifty more, all identical. I hardly recognize any of their faces because we have to wear hair nets and safety masks, and it's annoying to take them off and put them back on all the time so we just leave them there, obscuring our view.

For three days now the same cop, standing on the corner furthest from the door, just where my walk home starts, has said good evening to me. He's ugly even compared to other members of his species, but he tries to be friendly. I smile but say nothing; if I give an inch, he'll take a mile.

The other cops laugh, their legs dangling off the back of the truck. "You can't even pick up the shittiest Indian skank," they say on the second day. Don't kid yourself, cop, that the skank thing offends me. The truck follows me home but stops at the last corner. The ugly cop, standing up in the back, says I'm the wire-fence wino's daughter. They laugh again. He must have had it worse before: he really is ugly.

A new girl comes to work at the factory. She's not much older than the

others and says she knows me. She lives in one of the cramped houses across the street from mine: she's seen my father drinking on his little bench since she was small. She reads the papers as much as I do, but she avoids articles about our neighborhood and concentrates on the ones that offer explanations for the sexual problems of men, women, and skanks. I can't believe those sons of bitches called me a skank to my face, without flinching.

Inevitably, we walk home together: it's as if they've given my neighbor the same shifts as me to force me to make friends. The ugly cop seems interested in her when he sees us together. They smile at each other. At work, I encourage her to make eye contact and go up to him. The idea that they might like each other gives me hope.

Success: I manage to shake off my companion as soon as she decides to talk to the ugly cop. She's pretty, weirdly pretty, and now the other cops grunt resentfully instead of laughing. I don't look at them, I keep my eyes on the streets I walk through day and night. They don't bother me. I'll never go into an alleyway to gratefully lick a protector.

The horoscope says I should watch out for rumors. And the paper has another announcement to make: in view of the fact that crime in the area has decreased by 59.2 percent, the number of police patrols will go down accordingly. How are they going to manage the fraction, tell me that. If I could work it out, I say to myself, I would've got the grant. And now I'd be the one writing horoscopes for the paper.

My neighbor takes advantage of our proximity in the assembly line to describe her groping, slaving action with the cop. His ugliness seems to excite her. It makes her feel beautiful. Even the paper approves of her taste, because in the section with photos of naked beauties it advises readers to find hideous but passionate boyfriends.

What happens next shouldn't be happening. She could have stayed with her man and let me walk home alone, but instead she's arranged to meet him later, at her house, to introduce him to her family, so she's walking home with me. Everything's perfect, she tells me, they're going to be happy, he's going to ask for a transfer to a shopping center and get off the front line. So he doesn't like the neighborhood, I say. No one does, she replies, no one. Well the skank likes it, I say to myself.

But the truck appears around a brightly lit corner and stops there, at the end of the street. Black, no plates or markings, the windows up. We stop and its headlights wait for us.

She must be imagining herself broken, in a ditch, torn away from her ugly lover, her work overalls, and even from me. No one likes to think things like that. She grabs my arm, she's shaking. I wouldn't feel afraid if I were alone. I'm not going to walk home with this dickhead again, I tell myself. Flashing lights save us from paralysis. A patrol car is coming up the street. The truck moves off, slow as a cloud.

I don't reply the next day, at the factory, when she returns to the topic. I say she should run along to her boyfriend and let me walk home alone as usual, the way I like it. She puts up a fight. She says, based on who knows what, that together we're at less risk. I have to get rid of her. Your fucking boyfriend called me a skank and wanted me to suck him off. You and him can both fuck off. Don't even talk to me, dickhead. That scared her into leaving me alone. Finally.

A few days later, from a distance, I see that they're giving someone balloons. People are hugging and I can hear the odd clap. She's moving in with the ugly cop, she's going to leave the factory. The relief makes my knees shake and my thighs sweat, it feels as if the tepid urine of childhood is running down them.

The paper, shrewd as it is, suggests that the number of cops in the area might not have gone down as a result of the reduction in crime, but the opposite: the crimes might have gone down in line with the number of cops. To my surprise, I notice that my dad didn't finish the crossword this time. Recipe of the day: chicken salad with sweet dressing. It looks delicious.

The truck slowly approaches me, in the best place for an assault: mid-way between the factory and my house, at a crossroads where no one lives and the few surviving businesses are all closed at this time. It overtakes me then pulls over, waiting. Because I stop—why hurry?—two men get out. They're in plain clothes. It's the ugly cop and a buddy, maybe the one who laughed more than others at this shitty Indian skank. Their expressions are perfectly serious. They're not messing around.

The knee to the guts makes me double over and the kick knocks me down. I can't put up a fight, there's nothing in the pockets of my overalls or my little rucksack that I can use to defend myself. They drag me towards the truck and I must be too heavy for them, because it isn't a clean movement, it's a sad, awkward one that we make together. I manage to grab onto a lamppost to stop them. They obviously don't know what they're doing.

But, of course, the expert is here. They don't see him, don't expect him, but the crunching sound I hear while they pull at me and kick my ribs are his boots and his gun. I close my eyes because it hurts, because I don't enjoy this when it happens.

The shots don't ring out, they're just echoes muffled by flesh.

I'm sweating. My stomach burns, I open my mouth and suck in all the air I can get. I drag myself towards the lamppost and manage to pull myself upright against it. I feel sick. They've hurt me.

The ugly cop's chest is a mess and there's a hole as big as a hand in his groin. His buddy sports a black hole where his right eye should be and his guts are sliding out of his abdomen.

I have enough strength to spit at both of them, to return a few of their kicks.

My ribs will be painful for a month. I hear a gasp. The ugly cop is still alive,
he's trying to slither away. Look at this shitty Indian skank, I say, look at her.

Another shot hits him.

I close my eyes.

A hand rests on my shoulder, forces me to turn away.

Let's go, then. Fuck them, he says.

OK, Dad.

He gives me a harsh look.

The police patrols will be back.

I follow him through empty streets.



New Strategies for Invisibility

Non-fiction
from
Issue #9

by Martin Seay

The first thing I can remember reading—and I don't mean just comprehending, just translating printed marks on a page into words, but really *reading*—is an article in *Ranger Rick* magazine.

The year was probably 1979 or '80. *Ranger Rick*, as you may know, is a nature magazine for kids, put out by the National Wildlife Federation; this article appeared in one of their October issues. I seem to recall a photo of an owl on its cover. My younger brother had recently come by a difficult-to-explain terror of owls, and I suspect that his terror—and the fact that I did not share it—gave this particular issue an additional aura for me: seductive, mildly dangerous.

This was a different era, prior to the ascendancy of Christian fundamentalists to various state boards of education, when it was still possible to design a Halloween-themed issue of an avowedly pedagogical magazine without jeopardizing its chances for classroom adoption—and this issue of *Ranger Rick* was unapologetically Halloween themed. The earnest humanists of the National Wildlife Federation had, however, shorn it almost entirely of the customary seasonal signifiers of the occult: no witches, no werewolves, no ghosts. At age seven or eight I was already cultivating a fascination with occult signifiers; if I was aware of these editorial omissions, I can't have been pleased by them.

The article that I remember—the one that has stayed with me, however changeably, across thirty years—was written by a woman, a mother, and described a Halloween activity performed at her family's lake house by her children and her children's friends. Something about the piece struck me

immediately as strange: the perspective from which it was told, the point of view, the narrator's voice—although of course I had no access to these concepts, basic components of the writer's toolkit. I only knew that I wasn't used to *Ranger Rick* addressing me in the voice of a particular adult, someone involved in the story she was telling. The article was a little longer, too, than the typical *Ranger Rick* piece, and a little harder to read: not over my head, but not talking down, either. The encounter felt like a mistake, like a door accidentally left open, like I might not really be the intended audience.

The content I understood well enough, or thought I did. I knew, for instance, what a lake house was. I read this and every other issue of *Ranger Rick* while staying with my maternal grandparents in the Piney Woods of East Texas, some sixty miles north of my own suburban home; my brother and I were sent up there often—gaining healthy exposure to “Nature,” keeping temporarily out of our parents' hair—and we were generally happy to make the trip. My grandmother had purchased the *Ranger Rick* subscription with the goal of keeping us quietly entertained during our visits, and after sundown it came in handy; during daylight hours, the ten forested acres of sandy bottomland on which my grandparents' house was built more than sufficed to hold our attention. On top of that, a few times a year my grandfather would roll his small fiberglass boat from its shed, clear the dirt-dauber wasps' nests from the intakes of its Mercury outboard, and tow it up the road to Lake Conroe, where we'd spend a day fishing for bluegills, crappie, and channel cats.

Like virtually every other large body of fresh water in the Lone Star State, Lake Conroe is not, strictly speaking, a lake: it's a reservoir, created in 1973 by the damming-up of the west fork of the San Jacinto River, which makes it two years younger than I am. I didn't know this at the time. It would not have occurred to me that this inexhaustible source of mystery—a mile across, fifteen miles long—could have been brought into being by human hands. I liked to imagine the lake as a living thing, possessed of its own intelligence: every weighted hook we cast seemed an attempt at communion, charged with the prospect of discovery. While my grandfather spent the morning arranging our tackle to produce calculated results—juglines and stink-bait for catfish, bobbers and nightcrawlers for perch—I would crank my reel in constant hope of the unexpected. At depths greater than about a foot the water was opaque, glossy and greenish-black like a live-oak acorn, and it seemed capable of concealing anything. A mud turtle's nose poked between lily pads, a hook tangled in feathery hydrilla, even snags that forced the snapping of a line: all these might be taken for omens.

At midday we'd reel in and motor to a shady spot to eat tuna-fish sandwiches from the cooler, and that's typically when I'd consider the houses that lined the banks. Many were outfitted with tiered decks, whitewashed gazebos, speedboats moored to private piers; some were raised on stilts to guard against flood. I don't recall ever being envious of these lakeside dwellers—my family was upwardly mobile; none of this seemed out of reach—but the thought that people might actually *reside* here, at the edge of such limitless chthonic wonder, filled me with excitement and awe. I imagined these folks as anchorites, as oracles, who'd don their flip-flops

and proceed to the docks by dawn to assay what the dissipating mists might portend. The available evidence, of course, suggested that their interests ran more toward water-skiing, angling for largemouth bass, and sucking down shit-tons of Lone Star beer—but even at that age, I was guided by the sense that resisting the obvious interpretation is a pretty good way to maintain an enchanted existence.

Looking back, I'm pretty sure the lake in the *Ranger Rick* article resembled Lake Conroe hardly at all. I seem to recall a reference in the woman's story to an early frost; the accompanying photographs showed rocky hillsides aflame with maples. The Piney Woods, by contrast, never supplied much in the way of autumn color. Furthermore, it's likely the Halloween issue of *Ranger Rick* reached me in early September, when the weather in East Texas was still ninety degrees and miserably humid, which probably explains why I was indoors reading the magazine in the first place.

This, as well as I can remember, is the story the woman told:

She, her husband, her children, and her children's friends gathered at the lake house on Halloween to make jack-o'-lanterns. They used pumpkins of various sizes as well as other, more exotic winter squash—cushaws, turbans, acorns, hubbards—all purchased from a farm stand earlier that day. The children drew wild faces on the squash-skins; the adults carved them. This took all afternoon. While the woman and her husband worked, the kids went into the woods to gather fallen branches; once the jack-o'-lanterns were finished, the group lashed the branches together to fashion crude rafts. The sun went down. The hollowed squash were lined up along the dock, lit from within by votive candles. Spooky stories were told until the hour grew late. Then, with some formality, the jack-o'-lanterns were put on the rafts and towed by canoe some distance from shore, where the wind caught them and they began to drift. The children watched as the ghoulish faces they'd made flickered orange across the water—each doubled by its own unsteady reflection—until all were gone from sight. Then they slept. Periodically, for weeks afterward, the woman and her family would find tangled bits of raft and soggy chunks of pumpkin at the water's edges; by summertime, squash vines had begun to leaf along the lake's banks, sprouted from occasional seeds the family had left in the drowned jack-o'-lantern skulls.

When I read this account at age seven or eight, I thought it was by far the best thing I had ever heard of anybody doing. I could not have begun to explain why I felt this way—it's not much easier to pin down now—and something in the woman's tone gave me the pleasing and thrilling sense that she, too, was baffled by the whole endeavor. It sounded like a ton of fun, but creepy, too, and a little dangerous. As I've thought about the article over the years, I've scanned my memory fruitlessly for clues as to whether the family's jack-o'-lantern regatta was a spontaneous gesture (i.e. creepy and dangerous in a *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord of the Flies* kind of way) or if it was a premeditated ritual (i.e. creepy and dangerous in an Aleister Crowley, *Wicker Man* kind of way). Whatever its conception may have been, it was entirely appealing to me.

But why, exactly? Partly, of course, it was the sense that these folks had kicked my bush-league fishing-trip animism up to the advanced level: they'd abolished any pretense of material functionality—fish for dinner!—and plunged headlong into a realm of atavistic magic. I mean, I'd participated in the carving of jack-o'-lanterns before; it was sort of a pain in the ass. The labor these people must have expended, only to send their handiwork into the lake as soon as it was done: this struck me, rather compellingly, as a complete waste of time and effort.

But not a *pointless* waste—which is, for instance, what going to church seemed like to me. This was no comforting and conventionalizing ritual, long-established by tradition. Instead, this was alchemy: an improvisatory adventure that risked both silliness and perdition, a ceremony conducted for the purpose of *determining* the purpose of the ceremony. That, I thought, was pretty cool.

And yet that wasn't the half of it. The image that the article lodged most firmly in my mind was not, finally, that of the jack-o'-lanterns floating away from the family's dock. Rather, it was the view I imagined from the *opposite* bank: what someone in one of *those* lake houses might have seen. It was that person—unmentioned in the woman's story, purely my own invention—whom I took as my surrogate, and whose point of view it pleases me even today to inhabit: someone stepping from the music and chatter of a Halloween party, maybe a little drunk, wandering—alone, or in intimate company—down to the docks to watch the moon silver the water, and glimpsing there, through a cloud of chilled breath, that line of orange demons as it came across the lake.

For some time prior to my encounter with the *Ranger Rick* article, I had been fascinated and frustrated by the romantic cliché of messages in bottles: communiqués cast upon the waves for unknown persons to discover. This seemed like a great idea, except for one thing, namely: What message do you put in the bottle? Whatever might be written on the rolled scrap of paper, the true content was always predetermined and always the same: *I wrote this. You found it.* The genius of what the woman and her family had done consisted precisely of their refinement of this trick: they had replaced the bottles with jack-o'-lanterns, and the content of the message was identical to the act of delivering it.

I would like to be able to point to this as the moment when I realized that I wanted to “be a writer,” but that's not accurate. Instead, I think of it as the moment when I began to understand how reading and writing actually function. To people such as myself, raised in an indisputably televisual culture, the printed page cannot help but seem about as quaint as a hoop skirt, surpassed as it has been by a dozen or more generations of fresher communicative technologies. How sad, say the apologists of the written word, that reading's stately and difficult pleasures have been shunted aside by information and amusement served up on pretty screens that engage the audience in a manner so immediate and vivid—if also shallow, and often false—that they have no prayer of competing. That argument's not completely wrong, I guess, but it also misses the point: these days, recourse

to the printed page is not merely quaint, but actually perverse. Like any worthwhile perversions, reading and writing are defined by consensually imposed restrictions, tensions of frustration and deferral. The universally cited limits of written communication—pure language, received in silence from someone absent—*are* limits, sure enough, but they're also precisely what makes reading and writing possible as imaginative arts. You craft an object from the materials you've collected; you try to fix something in it to shed a little light; you float it into the world across a featureless and mutable surface. Whatever audience finds it won't know you, and you won't know that audience: the value of what you've made is multiplied by this mutual invisibility. This is what it means to be an author. When it works—if it works—this is how.

What I believe I discovered in that issue of *Ranger Rick*—the thing of enduring value that I surely had no grasp of at the time but that I have returned to regularly in the intervening years as a tool and as a landmark—was basically this: an open and expansive attitude about existing in the world that didn't come at anybody's unconsented expense. The extravagant purposelessness of what the woman and her family did on that Halloween night seemed a vast leap beyond (and maybe a friendly rebuke to) the usual human-scaled ambitions of the National Wildlife Federation, with their earnest catalogues of species, diets, behaviors, and habitats; at the same time, it was a responsible and intellectually honest alternative to the neo-pagan romanticism that I toyed with while afloat in Lake Conroe. I don't wish to be overly dramatic here, but this is a distinction that matters: one can follow the first road, if one is disposed to do so, into charmless realms of utilitarian technocracy; the second road, of course, passes through some pretty spectacular scenery on its way into the kingdom of fascist mystification. When we come by our values in childhood, it's difficult to know exactly what's at stake, or when it's too late to stop believing our own bullshit.

There is another path; I suppose there always is. What we believe and what we consider to be true can, for a time, be bracketed: we can step out of ourselves, out of our entanglements, and see our circumstances anew. We call this make-believe; we call it playing a game. Sometimes we call it art, or fiction.

The sun is down; we're all gathered in the dark. Someone puts on a mask, tells a tale in a strange voice, lifts hands toward the fire to throw shadows on the wall. We know the storyteller, or we think we do, but we can't make out the familiar face, and now the hair begins to rise on our scalps: the thrill of dreaming freely in this fragile space we've made, this zone of relative safety where—without serious consequence—we can take a moment to play tricks on ourselves.



Koba's

Bad

*Fiction
from
Issue #8*

Cut

by Jim Snowden

Even here, among the chirping spring birds and the shade trees that Vera hopes would cheer me up, my imagination won't stop whispering in my ear the legend of the barber who breathed the story of Midas's jackass-ears to a hole in the ground, believing that the tongueless, lifeless hole would guard his secret. But the hole betrayed him. The hole told the grass and the grass told the trees and the trees told the farmers and eventually the whispered tale reverberated within the jackass ears of Midas, who, enraged to discover his secret exposed, slaughtered the barber. Cut his head off, if I remember correctly. It's been so long since I last read the story, but I don't want to search for it in a library because it might get back to someone who could piece together why I'd want such a book, and the next thing I'd know there'd be a note from me on the General Secretary's desk: "Koba, why do you need my death?" Only I wouldn't call him Koba because I don't know him as well as Bukharin did. I don't think I could be that cogent either. There's something particularly devastating about the way Bukharin wrote that note, something simple, painful, and pure. I can't figure out whether the General Secretary keeps it on his blotter because he loves to gloat, or because Bukharin's question is his question.

Such entertaining thoughts. If only I could spend this fresh, sunny day mulling them. Instead I must grapple with the fearsome knowledge I carry. I simply have to say it out loud. Okay. Here, at Collective Farm Number 5 near Rostov, where my brother-in-law works, in a tiny copse of trees a few

meters from a dusty back road, I will say the words that have kept me in terror for six months. Let me look around. Nobody would bother planting microphones out here, would they? The NKVD is scary, but lazy. They'd bug my brother-in-law's house. They'd bug our apartment in Moscow. At the Foreign Ministry, all our offices and cars are bugged. Still, they wouldn't come out this far. Let's not get silly.

Okay. Here it is.

On November 20, 1937, I went into Comrade Stalin's office to deliver that day's communiqués from Comrade Litvinov, our ambassador to the League of Nations, and upon entry I noticed that Comrade Stalin had a mediocre haircut.

I can't call it awful. It wasn't as if his barber had inverted a shaving basin, plopped it on the General Secretary's head, and simply cut around the rim. No. It was not that bad. Neither was it suffused with cowlicks and bare spots. It was just, well, the wrong shape for Comrade Stalin's head. My father was a barber, and he used to explain about shapes of faces and their corresponding haircuts, things that might be dismissed as bourgeois decadent thoughts. But even twenty years after the Revolution, faces have shapes—unique ones—and hair has types: straight, curly, coarse, fine. These are realities of the human animal, unrelated to economic systems or moments in history. Nowhere did Marx say that the dialectic would someday obviate the need for a flattering haircut. Stalin's face is squarish, though age is softening his jawline. But his haircut made the top of his head look round. His barber had failed to sharpen the edges to emphasize angle. I thought it a good thing that the General Secretary opted for his military cap when in public, because for him to be seen this way would be an embarrassment. So I handed the General Secretary the dispatches from Comrade Litvinov and was in the process of turning around to leave when Stalin, who'd never before said anything more to me than "good," "all right," or "hmm," said: "Remind me of your name, Comrade."

"Eduard Gregorovich Smyslov, Comrade Secretary," I said.

Stalin looked up at me. I could see why at first so many people in government had once dismissed him. Small, with beady eyes, Stalin seemed like someone who tagged along after power, not someone who held it. At least, not until his eyes caught mine. Then I saw. The slightest change in the dilation of one of his pupils could either promote me or blast me from the planet. My life floated in that blackness.

"Eduard Gregorovich," Stalin said. "I have a question to ask you, and I want complete candor."

"I haven't read Litvinov's dispatch in any great detail, Comrade Secretary," I said. "I'm not sure my commentary can add much to your deliberations."

"You are a good fit with the Foreign Ministry. Everyone there, from Molotov to the tea lady, talks just like you," Stalin said. "But I don't give a shit what

you think about foreign policy. I want this question answered: Do you like my new haircut?"

"Like it?"

Stalin cocked his head to one side, "Yes. Like it. Do you like it? I recently had to make a change in barbers, you see, and this was his first attempt. What do you think of it?"

"What happened to your last barber?" I asked.

The black, polished telephone on Stalin's desk started ringing. He quickly raised the receiver and hung it up again to restore silence. "We've found other work for him in the east, more suited to his talents and interests. So, what do you think?"

Ever since the Foreign Ministry recalled me to Moscow, I've studiously avoided this question. Back when I was Comrade Litvinov's aide in England, I didn't mind fielding it. Those were good times, far from home. Maxim was a good boss. He and I once watched a Marx Brothers movie together, laughed, and drank Smirnoff. Sometimes I think that the Foreign Ministry recalled me to Moscow precisely because Litvinov and I got along so well. Every few years now, everyone shifts to new jobs, and nobody knows anybody anymore. It makes it hard to get into a rhythm in a job, and it breaks up all loyalties. You don't know whom you're talking to, or how to tailor your answers to your interrogator's liking. The only constant in my working life is the picture of Stalin on the wall. And now the picture was asking my opinion.

Why did he want it from me? What possible interest could he have in my opinion on his coiffeur? Yes, my father was a barber and I've inherited some knowledge, but I am hardly expert. Stalin commands an army of photographers and portrait artists whose opinions vastly overmatch mine. Had someone in the office denounced me? Had word reached Stalin? Was this his way of catching me off my guard, of reading my reactions to him? His eyes seemed to dig into me, probably extracting material inside I didn't know was there. What was he finding? Was there a Trotskyist opinion on hairstyle that Stalin had just ferreted out of me, something about my aesthetic in these matters that would betray loyalties outside of him? What questions would follow? What songs do I like? Valetin Parnakh? Hmm. Ryutin liked Parnakh. What does that say about my commitment to the Five Year Plan?

What was there to denounce? I'd said nothing. Not to coworkers. Not to my wife. Nothing about my opinions. When Vera asks how my work is, I say "fine," and tell her some amusing tales about safe trivia from the office—who kissed whom, who came in drunk, who told the day's best (or worst) joke. When I ask how her work is, she tells me all about the hospital and its discontents, and I smile. I work in the Foreign Ministry. There's nothing I can do about short supplies of blood or bandages or vaccines or whatever. My opinions are fine, I thought. If Stalin looks, he'll see nothing.

So why did his turning his high-powered perception of human weakness on me shake me so?

For the same reason I'm out here, whispering this fucking story to a divot in the ground, that's why. How do you know what your opinion might coincide with? I don't know what everyone else in the world might have said. Things I've said probably sound like things once said by Trotsky or Ryutin or Rykov or Kamanev or Henry Fucking Ford for that matter. There are only so many things to say! Words and ideas are finite! That's a problem of language, not of me.

Of course, maybe all this was paranoid fancy. Another way to read the General Secretary's question was as a sincere request for information. His barber was new. Nevermind why he was new. He was. Maybe Stalin wanted to gather a wide range of views about whether this was the right man for the job. Maybe everyone else he'd asked had shown the same fears I had, and stammered their way toward what they thought Stalin wanted to hear. I felt some sympathy for the Comrade Secretary. It must be hard for Stalin, perched alone at the top of an entire nation, to know whether he's being flattered, or bullshitted, or mollified. It surely breeds mistrust and misunderstanding. If he asked the janitor, "Excuse me, where's the bathroom?" would not the janitor quake in fear that this was some kind of test, and take perhaps way too long to help point Comrade Stalin to the place where he can empty his engorged bladder? Might this stammering uselessness not provoke the General Secretary into thinking perhaps he wants me to piss myself while he shilly-shallies and stammers! Off to Kolyma with him!

Besides this, whatever my answer, what would I say to Vera about it when I came home? Sure, just don't say anything, right? Suppose my home is bugged, and suppose that, after I walked in the door and kissed Vera, I didn't mention Stalin's question—a question Stalin would expect me to mention to my wife because his asking me anything at all ought to be an event a good Communist husband narrates to his good Communist wife. My silence would indicate my distaste for his haircut, but saying something could be worse. I can lie to the world, but I can't lie to my Vera. The instant I'd open my mouth she'd see that I hated Stalin's haircut, even if I told her it looked good. She'd tell everyone, make all sorts of comments, and potentially cook us both. I had visions of her in Lubyanka, the things they'd do, all because I couldn't shut up when she asked how my day was. I often think this'll happen anyway, with Vera's big mouth, but if I were to contribute to it, to her pain, I couldn't bear it. For me, it's just her and that picture on the wall. Those are my constants. All else are variables.

Another possibility: The General Secretary knew his haircut didn't flatter him. He wanted to see who would tell him the truth and who would fawn. Maybe Stalin told his barber to do it deliberately, or maybe he was just taking advantage of a botched job. If so, I had to admire Stalin's subtlety of mind. There are so many ways to answer a complex question of policy so that you can appear to be on any and all sides of it. The best of us in the ministries hold this capability, and, to be honest, it's something we

share in common with our counterparts in Western bureaucracies, both in government and in business. The ones who fail in those capacities vanish, just as species that fail to adapt to the challenges of the material world perish. Eventually, Stalin will, if he continues, winnow the party down to those who can believe in everything. But, I reminded myself to curb my enthusiasm about this possible interpretation of Stalin's query, it had to be borne in mind that one of the possibilities here—if the barber had tried but failed to deliver a suitable haircut—meant that, if I told Stalin the truth, the barber was destined for punishment of some sort. I didn't want that on my conscience. I mean, maybe he'd get off with just publicly denouncing himself, but who knew?

It's taken me a long time to say all this, I know, but while I stood in that office and shivered from a draft that hit me square in the back and Stalin searched my face for an answer to his question, I processed every one of these thoughts, and hundreds more linked to them, through my brain as I tried to settle on exactly the right response. Calculations of potential for losing and gaining sped through my mind. I tried to grab the thoughts as the flew past, fumbling at them, snatching. Was I sweating? Had I fidgeted for a moment? How much time had actually passed since Stalin's question? Two seconds? Three? How much longer could I weigh odds before he'd know I was hesitating and therefore didn't like the haircut? How long would it take to formulate the proper language for the sentence once I settled on the proper response?

Here it went. I dispatched orders to lips, teeth, lungs, larynx, and tongue to release energy in the form of sound to the tune of this sentence: "Comrade Secretary, your barber has transformed you."

Stalin's moustache quivered. I followed it out to its ends, hoping to get an early read on which way it would curl. A few twitches later, the tops of Comrade Stalin's moustache rose. Grinning as broadly as I've ever seen him grin, he thanked me for my opinion and told me I could go back to my job. I turned around. It was hard not to run, but my time in the army had taught me discipline. Five seconds later, I stood once again in the outer office with Stalin's secretary, listening to the ringing of the phone.

It's been six months since then. I've been on vacation for a week, so I haven't heard much about what's going on at the Ministry. Nothing seemed amiss when I left. There are some rumblings about Hitler and the Sudetenland, and I hear that Litvinov and Molotov are both worried, but it's nothing that needs to concern me now.

Nobody seems to be afraid to be around me. That's a good sign. I think I'm all right. I guess it all depends on another question, one that, since I left Stalin's office, has sweated me every night in my bed, haunted me on my walks to work, and screamed at me all during my vacation:

Why was Stalin smiling?



Essay
on What
This
Window
is For

Poetry
from
Issue #12

by Steve Healey

This window is for looking at the blizzard.
It helps me feel inside while looking at the very busy snow.
And the tree full of crows who flap and caw.
Not with their usual predatory bluster
but today with worried blizzardy minds.
Not that I can read a crow's mind but none of us
probably has ever seen such frozen violence.

Lately it's like all my friends' fathers are dying,
and the hard part is we're mostly old enough
now to feel like we should save them
or help them die peacefully, both of which are impossible.

I see my friends sitting in a room with windows.
We are old enough now that we've all had sex
with each other, or wanted to but then got over it.

The writer on the talkshow said that if you are a writer
you should not worry about your father
being offended by your writing, even if
it's about having sex. We got over it,
and now we're all just good friends
with very very dying fathers. Usually
it's cancer cells that refuse to stop growing,
but lately it's everyone's heart
that no longer wants to pump blood.

Unlike this window
that so effectively does what it's supposed to do
(i.e. look at the blizzard with crows in it).
Yet there is so much of this blizzard
that the window can't see. If there is
an outer edge of the blizzard is a question
the window can't answer.

I think of Hiroshige's "Ricefields in Asakusa
on the Day of the Torinomachi Festival,"
and how the whole scene rests on the shoulders
of the cat looking out the window
at the busy festive people, but Hiroshige
makes those people sort of disappear into the ricefields,
they might as well be dying, and what's left
is us looking at the cat's looking,
and the one lonely fabulous mountain
in the very distant distance, marking it's hard
to deny some outer edge of Earth, and beyond that
the beginning of not-Earth with its burning orange
where the sun just disappeared.

Although known as an artist, Hiroshige was also
a fire-fighter whose duty was to protect Edo castle,
a position his father passed on to him like a ghost
and which he passed on to his son. Just before he died
he wrote: "I leave my brush in the East
and set forth on my journey."

I think Hiroshige would have liked this window.
The blizzard is still there, and so are the crows.

I think the fathers have not quite died yet.

Hello everyone. Thank you for being here.



The Aztec

*Poetry
from
Issue #???*

by Tomaz Šalamun

Lilies are the mystery,
little boar!
With a skull that will break
as the skull of an otter. As the sun's
scissors tiring my blooms.
As the rumble that goes, until it goes.
Why were you born in red air, liquid!

Birth is the collapsing of a bridge.
The final hair of the kitten.
And my sky, teeth and tongue,
(in Komna, where I skied)
are registered for death.

Who keeps repeating the moist, treacherous
seed that is no more than a spasm
of the darkest karma.
White otter, look!
Clouds destroy themselves in front of us,
but they don't tear apart their fairy tale.

What should the ear of a rabbit do with my saliva!
I won't console him, even if he
screams: No me muerdas!
Muerde me!



Somebody

Else's

Fiction
from
Issue #11

by Jac Jemc

I'm not one to celebrate, it's nice to eat a fine meal when it seems like you're getting famous. It's nice to fill up your belly until it feels engulfed in warm mischief. It's nice to drink so many scotch and sodas that the annihilation of your liver cramps and squawks in the morning. When I was in my twenties, I was sure I'd arrived. I was to play a girl one of the main characters, Larry, was trying to date on an episode of a hit buddy comedy. This was most certainly going to be my big break. I had amplified my bangs. I had aerobicized my buns. My line was memorized. That's right: "line."

Looking back, it's hard not to feel crusted. When I press on those memories they exhale a dusty hiss. I showed up on the set and had my lightly-padded skeleton sewn into some lint ball of a sweater. The episode was set in a ski resort. The town was heavy with snow and no one could leave the lodge. Of course, all of it was filmed on a studio lot in California, cut with some stock footage of a ski lift climbing a mountain. My character was just supposed to be sitting by the fireplace, when Larry walked in to show his cousin Balki how to pick up a lady. His line was, "Would you like some cocoo?" The character, of course, wanted to say "cocoa," but was so nervous to talk to me, it came out 'cocoo.' I was supposed to say, "I think I've had a enough, thanks!" and stalk off, a suspicious shell of a woman.

All went according to plan, and I waited anxiously for the episode to air, for my agent's calls to increase in frequency. But the episode came and went, and the phone never rang. I guess I could have kept trying, but if I wanted to, I would have, or at least that's what a book told me.

I started to stay home. I watched the old movies I'd grown up with, suspense thrillers and musicals and dramas about aging film stars being replaced by younger ones. I reached into the synapse between the cushions of my couch to find change to tip delivery men. My shoulders grew weak until it was a bother to lift my arms and before I knew it, I wasn't raising my hands even to the height of the doorknob. It was easy enough not to leave. I had residuals coming in from a corporate training video I'd done in college. I was living in a house my grandfather had left me when he passed away. My sister showed up every other week to convince her limbs around me and eye my scalp oil, unable to tell me to shower. I'd smile and tell her I was fine. "I'm happy!" I'd say and she'd gather the dirty dishes piled on every surface and heave them into the sink before donning her rubber gloves to scrub off the scum. I could feel cavities nesting in my teeth; I knew the root of one tooth was dead. The pain rang and pounded like someone wanting to be let in. I spoke pulverized truths to my sister trying to get her to relax. "I can leave whenever I feel like it" and "I just need a few minutes to be myself." She'd give up and leave and I'd trace cartoons from paused video tapes for fun. The arrangement felt logical at the time.

I refused to admit my behavior was not normal. The outside world and I were like cracked magnets. We had once been one and the same, but we'd broken apart and now we could do nothing but resist. Every time I considered leaving my home, I wondered what could be waiting for me out there, and never came up with an attractive enough answer. It wasn't even fear. That's what I kept telling myself.

I'd sit on my couch and try to catch the sunlight on my watch face. I'd direct the light onto my cat, until she chased the slow burn of the reflection. Bugs showed up, cinching themselves through the pipes and the baseboards. My sister would appear to ask me lists of questions out of pamphlets she got at the doctor's office. I'd test myself by trying to guess how she was diagnosing me by the questions she asked. My record was guessing bipolar from the first question. "I feel so restless or find it so hard to keep still that other people have pointed this out to me." Do you feel this way 'Rarely,' 'Occasionally,' or 'Most of the Time?'" I said, "Jenny, do I look restless? I'm not bipolar," and she stared at me like I had pressed her into some impossible place.

When our mother died back in Tulsa later that year, I wanted to pay my respects. I booked a flight and called a cab. When I walked out my front door there was the proof that that Agoraphobia pamphlet didn't apply. I got on a plane and tried to take the stains out of the memories of my mother. The asshole next to me kept forcing his elbows down on the armrest that my hip kept forcing up. Eventually he spilled a mess of words into the air at me, and moved to sit across the aisle next to child flying alone. I adjusted that armrest up and relaxed comfortably for the rest of the flight.

When I returned to my childhood home, I examined the photos my mother had framed all along the staircase: so many of me making smiles like I was dying with forced charm before a dance recital, photos that were 60% ceiling, where I clutched bouquets of flowers after the high school musical. I recognized a lingering pride in my belly, and in the reflected glass of the frames, I saw an abstract smile pulling itself from my lips. I had had such hopes, but now when I thought about my ambition, I felt pity. I'd dreamed of living my life as other characters before my life had even begun. My dream had been to excel at convincing people I was someone else. The intention felt so specific now. It felt sad and misguided. It felt better not to know what the hell I was doing than to think about where that impulse had come from at such a young age. I thought of the bugs roaming the house back in California and how it felt good to recognize a problem.

I held it together most of that day, meeting with the undertaker and going to the florist with my sister and her family. Not until I went out to the garden and saw one of my mother's footprints still stamped into the waterlogged mud of a flower bed did I cry. My mother had just had the yard re-sodded. She didn't think she was about to die. You could see the seams stashed all over the lawn where sheet of grass met sheet of grass. I found a single weed that had wormed its way through the newly laid mess. "It's okay," I thought. "She would have found you." And my mother would have. She was ruthless, determined to a fault. She kept after something until she forgot why she was after it. My mother thrilled every time I got another role, every time I became another option. She seemed sure I'd find someone to be that was better.

That night in the shower, so much of my hair washed down the drain that I worried I might disappear, but when I wiped off the fogged up mirror, I saw my head was still full of locks and tangles. I combed it carefully, and emerged in pajamas, to find my brother-in-law, waiting to brush his teeth. "Don't bother," I said. "Come with me." His face lifted slowly and he followed me down the stairs. My sister was at the counter, flipping through my mother's address book, making sure we hadn't missed letting anyone know. I pulled a bottle of rye from under the counter. Surely no one had touched it since my father had passed away. I poured for all three of us and asked my sister who she thought she'd been in our mother's eyes, and who she'd wanted to be. My sister said she'd never thought of it that way, and I said, "Let's."



Fogwill's Dog

*Fiction
from
Issue #16*

by Mario Bellatin

Translated from the Spanish by David Shook

*The story of a killing and the burning of the bodies that followed.
A case where there are memories but no record.*

Fogwill told me it is because they dug up the dead...

It's terrible that there isn't a more or less conventional way to express what appears like the work of a monster, which, in some way, has to do with a mere shadow in life: the supposed literary work that has been written during the larger part of my existence.

It is terrible to have a dog, what's more one bestowed by a dead man.

Fogwill.

A Saluki, the breed recognized as sacred in Islam, a religion that considers the canine species to be impure animals. The story dates back to its origins, when Mohammed—peace be upon him—like the majority of the prophets, felt the obligation to free the place of worship of any impurity. When he arrived at Mecca he found that misery surrounded the Kaaba. The animals infested it, diseases multiplied, the sinister made itself evident. For

centuries, what's more. The dogs of Mecca. Animal carriers of hydrophobia, mange, some other lethal diseases. It is ominous for such a thing to occur in a place of such characteristics. And when the army led by Mohammed—may peace accompany his person—issues the cruel sentence that the dog is an inappropriate animal and must be exterminated down to the last instance. It is truly scary to observe the killing of canines, undertaken with the end that Islam find a hygienic—at least to a certain point—place to develop. The streets fill with howls, the sidewalks with blood. Then it is unknown what should be done with the dead animals. Some specimens still live despite their evident, or rather supposed, death. The testimonies of those who had the misfortune of seeing some dogs running without heads, some without feet, emitting strange sounds through the holes in their amputated necks. And what to do with the bodies? Apparently that question, which arises for us today, surges at that moment.

It is curious, and somewhat ill-fated, that in the Holy Books before the Koran the presence of animals appears only as a decorative element. In none of those scriptures is mentioned the final task of a foreign species to the human being.

How to rid oneself of the fright that dogs represented at that moment?

The living and dead canines, both capable of expanding the most terrible diseases. "We have to take the frightful decision of burning them," were the orders. "Incinerate the living ones alongside the dead." The horror that the order caused was such that the inhabitants turned a deaf ear to the howls and didn't wish to see the reflexive movements that some canines performed while they were skinned. They were then placed in order inside a pyre that was improvised on what was supposedly the lot set aside for the community's castoffs. It is horrifying to prove how some inhabitants affirm that no such place existed: a public garbage dump.

Perhaps there was one—but baptized in that manner only in nominal form—since Mecca at that time could be considered in its entirety as an enormous trash can. It was horrifying to see that city in such conditions. It has to do with a place toward where an infinitude of pilgrims travels with the end of taking innumerable turns around the maximum cube of prayer. It is terrifying that since then the dog was seen as an impure animal.

It is terrible to confirm also that in bestowing the name of writer on the one who writes allows one to have the sensation of finding oneself before someone who can be understood.

A text presenting itself suddenly before its creator.

Making itself visible in the same sordid manner as a group of fedayeen from the desert turned up at the feet of Mohammed—peace be upon him—to ask if the rumor, which had reached them from afar, was true, that they should kill their salukis one by one. "If the salukis disappear, we ourselves will disappear from the face of the earth," they said without lifting their heads. "The salukis hunt for our food. They make it so that before sleeping

we always have a hare at our disposition.”

“Mohammed—peace be upon your body and your soul—do you wish that we take them suddenly, we skin them alive and that we then make a great pyre with their bodies? A pyre that lasts more than forty-eight hours with the end that any trace of the saluki’s existence disappear from the face of the earth?”

And for me to know that at a certain moment the saluki was at the point of becoming extinct is doubly terrible because a good part of my writing occurs precisely to be forgotten at that instant.

An erased saluki would be the equivalent of a lost word.

I have thought, oftentimes with horror, that that precisely could be one of the reasons for writing’s existence: to put into practice The Seal of Not-Memory. Possible marks of an ancestral oblivion.

“When I write I don’t think about the other as a real being. The other is just an abstraction.” Just as the answer offered to those fedayeen by Mohammed—peace be compassionate with him—was a sort of abstraction.

Something that seems to me not to be under the conditions of understanding.

Not the divine mandate nor the scripture itself.

The horrible response by Mohammed—peace be upon his blessed soul—to the fedayeen. Mohammed—peace upon his spirit of lovingkindness—answered that he had ordered that dogs be killed, not salukis. He mentioned the terrible phrase that he had never used the word saluki. Where could the fedayeen have gotten that idea? To make funerary pyres of salukis to then toss them into some river? The fedayeen prostrated themselves in rakats, then kneeled in an attitude of prayer. One of them dared to ask, the same doubt was already execrable, that if the saluki wasn’t a dog then to what species could it belong. The saluki is a gift from All-Powerful Allah, sadly verified Mohammed himself—peace be united with his person—and he let them return to their desert caravans accompanied by their pack of hounds.

Nonetheless all of that had nothing more to do than with an ill-fated game of rhetoric. A terrible exercise that, in a certain manner, was unique and which sadly prolonged what typically appears in the books of all the ages: the fright and at the same time the blessing of what it means to be unable to express oneself.

It is supposed that the saluki is the origin of the greyhound. The frightful idea spread that before the saluki there was only the hare. The curious hare that the artist Dürer attempted to represent with some uncommon tremendous ears. Also the one that the artist Beuys, once it was dead, attempted to cast in questions of art while the body of the animal began the process of decomposition.

The abhorrent topic of that indecipherable species, gift of Allah, came up the same day that I met the writer Fogwill. It was during a winter afternoon in Buenos Aires. After a disgusting ritual where both of us devoured chunks of the same beef, Fogwill asked me what the material object was that I was capable of desiring the most. I quickly answered that there was none. That nothing that I truly desired was denied me. Fogwill insisted. He recounted, in front of the ill-fated remains of the meats torn apart by our yearning, a rapid inventory of the luxurious goods he had enjoyed. He spoke to me of yachts, of sports cars, of penthouses from whose terraces he had appreciated the frightening city of Buenos Aires an infinitude of times. I felt so overwhelmed that afternoon when I met the miserable Fogwill, that I considered myself obligated to declare that the only thing that could be unattainable to me was a sacred saluki.

The viperine Sheikha Fariha, who directs the Sufi mosque in New York, had promised me one in dreams. She had appeared, Sheikha Fariha, to inform me that Allah had reserved for me a white saluki. Fogwill suddenly reacted: “How do you know my secret?” I did not know what Fogwill was trying to say with those grotesque words. “In what way have you found out that I typically take refuge in the cabin of a demented woman that lives surrounded by salukis in the Andes? Do you really desire one?” He informed me that that same night he was going to communicate with that woman so that she could have a specimen ready for me as soon as possible. He had to be very subtle in asking for it. The demented woman was capable of reacting in any manner before such a solicitation. Fogwill spoke of the possibly immeasurable response of the woman as if he was pronouncing a prophecy.

I knew from my own experience that those dogs, the sons of Satan according to the scriptures prior to the Sacred Koran, had never stepped foot in this area of the American continent.

I answered him in a lamentable manner. That although it is true that it could be a desire that was possibly located between the material and the immaterial, I didn't count on the impulse necessary to make it a reality. I already possessed other equally imaginative dogs. Specimens of ancient breeds that appeared on hieroglyphics and on Egyptian amphorae.

In my house none of the teachings of the prophet Mohammed—blessed peace be with him—were followed, and the dogs swarmed outside and inside my home as I imagine happened in Mecca before its apparent disinfection. The cleaning by the Prophets. By the sent. The deranged killing. The cadavers piled in a dump awaiting the lighting of the pyre capable of making them disappear.

Fogwill's game, established beyond his death, occurred five years after our encounter in the restaurant in Buenos Aires.

From that time the deranged woman in the Andes began to send me strange missives. Letters in whose writing the aspects of a paranoia produced perhaps by being surrounded by sacred animals shone through. Attempting to fulfill Fogwill's order in spite of him. As if it were a commandment of

Mohammed—peace be prosperous with his person.

The deranged woman from the Andes was being obligated by Fogwill to fulfill a duty contrary to the one that had supposedly been assigned to her: that of devoting herself to the reproduction of the salukis in the area where it had befallen her to live. Some travelers from the Andean regions tell me that faced with the impossibility of delivering me one of her salukis, she decided to give them death, one after the other, as if she was receiving irrational commandments.

Not Fogwill's, obviously.

They tell me that she counted on the complicity of a horrendous epileptic daughter, who the mother permitted, primarily in a cave near the cabin that she inhabited, to discharge the daily convulsions that typically overtook her. As an answer to the orders of one Fogwill—with whom she had maintained a secret relationship of almost fifty years in duration—they loaded the dogs in the vehicle with which she was accustomed to moving about in the midst of the heights in which she lived. She took them to a nearby slaughterhouse. To a frightful place surely similar to the slaughterhouse where they executed the cow that we tore to shreds the day when Fogwill and I met each other in Buenos Aires.

“In the cabin of the deranged woman in the Andes I have written my best texts,” Fogwill told me before making explicit the promise to acquire a saluki for me.

They tell me that the woman ordered that the salukis be sacrificed in a ritual manner. As if they were sacred lambs. White blindfolds were placed over their eyes. The epileptic daughter was the one in charge of moving forward the action of covering their heads. They tell me that it turned out to be strange that the animals didn't show any signs of resistance before the trance into which they were being submerged. They behaved as the lambs who choose themselves for the sacrifice typically do. It is certain, the lamb that is going to be delivered in offering separates itself from the flock with confidence and offers its neck to the butcher with a determined light radiating from its eyes.

They tell me that the deranged Andean woman's salukis displayed a similar behavior. They approached the executioner by themselves. They lied down in the desired position. They plunged the dagger into their necks. They loaded the dogs back into the vehicle. The deranged woman from the Andes took them to an open clearing. Each animal was carried by the woman and her daughter. But unlike what occurred in Mecca they didn't light a pyre. That would perhaps have been a sacrilege.

To attempt to emulate the conduct of Mohammed—peace be with his Sacred Spirit.

They didn't try to rid themselves of the bodies by means of fire. They left them there, in the middle of the field, at the mercy of nature. In a place that

wouldn't be passed by anyone. The bodies were going to serve as food for carrion animals. The hares on this occasion would give account of the salukis.

When I wanted to verify the reasons that could have motivated such an action they told me that, apart from avoiding the imitation of the actions of the Prophet Mohammed—peace accompany his fortunate Soul—this was what was typically enacted with sacred animals when they were demanded by the dead.

Fogwill wanted to fulfill his promise.

The manner in which they attempted to satiate his desire was horrible. Frightful the form in which it was decided to eradicate an entire constellation of salukis. An unpunished action.

As unpunished and mysterious as the act of writing a story that is foreign to its own author is.

The Trace of the Not-Written present in the memory of an inexistent writer.

The monster, which can be an adequate manner of defining the desire to write.

Fogwill—peace be upon Him—fulfilled his prophecy. That which he formulated the day that we met each other in a restaurant in the horrible city of Buenos Aires.



BOB

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