



SKIDROW PENTHOUSE #12

Skidrow Penthouse

is edited and published by Rob Cook and Stephanie Dickinson

Layout and Design:

David G. Barnett of Fat Cat Graphic Design

www.fatcatgraphicdesign.com

Copyright 2011 by Skidrow Penthouse

All rights revert to authors upon publication.

Unsolicited submissions are welcome year-round.

Please send all correspondence to:

Skidrow Penthouse

68 East Third Street Suite 16

New York, NY 10003

Front cover: Spiel: *without windows without doors without a mouth to speak*

Back cover: poem by Spiel

"Srecko Smiled" by Josh Wardrip originally appeared in the *Ampersand Review*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

- 35 Nene Giorgadze
(translated by Timothy Kercher and the author)
Two Poems
- 37 Collin Bunting
Little Hard Hearts That Do Not Break
- 38 Dan Raphael
No Comparison
- 40 Alan Britt
Aliens Curious About Human Emotions
- 42 Carolyn Stolloff
Three Poems
- 50 Charlie Mehrhoff
Three Poems
- 53 Paul B. Roth
Five Poems
- 63 Craig Shay
Actress on a Stage
- 69 Guy R. Beining
Three Poems
- 73 Thomas Wiloch
Three Poems
- 76 John Goode
Three Poems
- 82 Meaghan Russell
Flight Spectra
- 83 David Lawrence
Two Poems

TABLE OF CONTENTS

85	Robert Pringle Two Poems
87	Michael Shorb Two Poems
93	Catherine Sasanov Two Poems
100	Francine Witte Summer Meets Winter In A Bar
101	Gary Lee Johnston Song Between Many Grasses, Many Camdens
103	Daniel Stewart My Father as the Rabbit as King of the Ghosts
114	Marina Rubin Two Poems
116	Susan H. Maurer Two Poems
118	Cruz Ortiz Learning Which Throats End At The Moon
120	David Chorlton Getting Across
135	Samantha Stiers Figure Edged in Flames
136	Chet Hart Two Poems
139	Darren C. Demaree Black & White Picture #100
141	Alan Catlin Three Poems

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 144 Michael O'Brien
Four Poems from "Avenue"
- 146 Leonard Gontarek
Two Poems
- 148 Tom Weigel
Two Poems
- 151 Ruth Berman
Couleur de Temps
- 152 T. Kilgore Splake
Two Poems
- 155 Kimalisa Kaczinski
Three Poems
- 159 Tony Gloeggler
Two Poems
- 163 Patrick McKinnon
love poem at the end of the world
- 165 David Wyatt
Obscura
- 167 J.R. Solonche
One Boy and One Burning Car
- 175 James Doyle
Desert Shack
- 177 Mark Wisniewski
Two Poems
- 181 Susan Tepper
How I Learned To Cook
- 184 Philip Dacey
Two Poems

TABLE OF CONTENTS

186	Bill Mohr The Ghoul Convention
187	Jack Devlin Digital Pastoral
189	Gayle Elen Harvey The Dead, You Realize, Are Preoccupied With Winter
190	Alixia Doom Two Poems
194	Dennis Saleh Two Poems
195	Don Thompson How It Feels
196	Ronald Wardall Dear Old House
201	Edgar Cage Two Poems
203	Roberta Allen Tear Me From Her Torn Self
204	Lawrence Applebaum Two Poems
206	Margaret Gilbert from Between Dinner and Death on Park Avenue
209	Michael Lenhart The Hero
210	Bob Heman from Information
227	Dan Raphael InorOut

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 229 Meghan Russell
Memento Mori: A Love Story

FICTION

- 9 Jiří Klobouk
Two Stories
- 59 The Poet Spiel
Two Stories
- 65 Luna Tarlo
Smoking
- 105 James Schlatter
Isabel
- 125 Josh Wardrip
Two Stories
- 168 Rich Ives
Blue Theater Made of Fields and Mirrors
- 182 Rosalind Palermo Stevenson
Incunabula
- 213 Stephanie Dickinson
Rane



Lawrence Applebaum: *The Show Must Go On*

JIRÍ KLOBOUK

CAVATINA

Translated from the Czech by Andrew Malcovsky and the author.

Harald Haraldsson (whose ancestors came from Göteborg in Sweden, where his brother August still lived) woke up in Brooklyn at 7:43. It was his last day.

It thundered in the distance. Helen turned onto her back.

Suishi went down the creaking stairs to make breakfast. Harald's marriage to her daughter had lasted twenty-six years. Helen rarely expressed interest in things that Harald found important. When he once identified Quisling's Nazi collaboration as an amoral example of treason, she proclaimed that the war had been over for half a century. She evaluated the moving pathos of Beethoven's Cavatina with a sigh: "Lord, Harald, do you suppose this makes my tea taste any better?"

Lightning flashed not far off.

"Helen," he said. "Life meanders like a river."

"Where are you headed this time?"

"To my inevitable end."

"God, just climb up on the bank!"

"Last night I visited J. J. Byrne park in a dream. A French quartet was playing a mixture of club music, gypsy swing, African rhythm, but it was the wailing of Jewish klezmer..."

Helen yawned. "Could you shorten this?"

"A train came. The conductor announced that our travel destination was the Gulag. The Russian Archipelago. The locomotive stopped at the edge of a precipice." Harald sat up. "Do you understand, Helen?"

"Not at all."

"I shall die at any moment."

"Again?"

"This time I'm a hundred percent sure."

Helen kicked off the covers. Harald Haraldsson leaned on his elbow. He took off his glasses. Then he sucked her left nipple into his mouth. It slipped between his lips. He crawled to her other breast on his knees. A sharp pain ran through his body. Next month he would be fifty-eight. He was neither fat

nor skinny. Just generally unwell. (In Sweden his classmates had called him a sissy.) He kissed his wife's neck, mouth, forehead, and neck again. He slid his face down from between her breasts towards the depression of her navel. His wife's scent washed over him. It had a salubrious effect which struck him as intoxicating and eased his depression. Helen could have been a horse, a dog, a large chicken or even a wild sow. He buried his sharply-defined nose into her moist depths. The little hairs tickled his nose. He was just about to sneeze, but the bedroom doors had opened.

Molly was fifteen. The last six months she had grown with abnormal speed. He was now shorter than his own daughter.

"Are you crazy?" she snickered.

Helen raised her head. "Your father is dying."

"So help him out then, Mom!"

Scarcely had Molly disappeared than Harald collapsed between Helen's knees. Head in her lap, he spun with the universe. Had his wife said that the sun would be shining tomorrow, and they could go to the Botanical Gardens in the afternoon to cheer themselves up by watching the flowers blossoming into extraordinary splendor, and had she added something like: "We must go on, Harald, forward, on and on, you know there's no other way—all unpleasantness is transitory—and you must never forget that I have only you," it would have reassured him that they had an acceptable future ahead of them.

Molly was arguing about something in the kitchen with her grandmother. Then she slammed a door. It resounded through the house like a gunshot.

Helen was silent.

Heavy raindrops fell on the roof.

It was exactly 8:16.

Helen commenced with her morning exercises.

Harald was one in spirit with August. He had received a letter from him a week ago. His brother lived in Göteborg in the same building they had grown up in, only a floor higher. August recalled how they used to sit around the table covered in a thickly-stitched tablecloth, waiting for their mother to bring them rabbit soup. They were still boys when their parents took them by train to see Vienna. Night after night Harald heard the music of Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart. He wished the trip would never end. On the way home they stopped in Berlin. Their father remarked, "Boys, here the war never ended."

The telephone rang. "Yes," Helen said breathlessly. And a moment later: "No. Thank you." She hung up. "Verizon."

"What did they want?"

"They were offering cheaper rates."

"Today I shall call August in Sweden."

He had not called anyone in a long time. The days of lengthy conversations with musicologists from Tokyo to Salzburg about Salieri or Janáček,

for example, belonged to the past. After what had happened with Peter he couldn't concentrate on anything.

Helen finished her abdominal exercises.

They removed themselves to the kitchen in bathrobes.

Suishi was looking out the window on the street. An empty coffee mug hung from her bent little finger.

"He's not going anywhere today?" she asked her daughter in high-pitched voice.

"He's not feeling well."

"Stomach?"

"Oh, mom. All over."

"Not that. Is he dying again?"

"One hundred percent this time."

"And when—if you don't mind my asking?"

"Midnight at the latest."

Suishi burst into laughter. "He's a big joke, isn't he?"

Helen picked up the telephone. "Kennedy Library? Vicki? Don't expect me today. No. Nothing much. Just some – family business. I'll explain it to you later. No. No. We found the book. Right now we're missing – *Interpretation of Conditions Resulting From Torture-Induced Trauma*. Someone stole it from us."

Harald coughed. "I don't have to call anyone. I told my colleagues yesterday that I would be taking today off."

Suishi and Helen looked as if a fly had fallen into their soup. They stuck out in the kitchen like two bowling pins left standing. Suishi was somewhat plump. She had gray eyes set deeply in her round face. When she spoke words corkscrewed out of her as if the proper pronunciation gave her difficulties. If anyone ever asked her if she had Japanese ancestors, she would hiss in offense that her grandfather had been a sailor and had once visited Tokyo, that was all. When Molly was born, Suishi came to visit and stayed for good. The solitary life of a widow in the suburb of Burlington added to her coarseness. The day before last she had told Molly (in Harald's presence) that her father should join the circus as a clown.

Harald's wife kept an upright posture. In addition to her morning exercises she jumped rope in the basement and swam twice a week in the covered pool at Olympia. When they met, Harald was the youngest professor of musical science at Troy University. He was thirty and Helen was twenty. She preferred men of his type. He was smallish and slight. His face was hidden by the thick lenses of his glasses. Premature baldness offset his hairy chest. His Swedish accent impressed Helen. On their first date she had to listen to a lecture how life was divided into three elements: nature, music, and love. "Life is a symphony. And a symphony is a meandering river. And we sit in a boat, borne towards a waterfall," Harald claimed. Helen could not even manage to cover her mouth when she yawned. She dallied with him all weekend in a

battered van parked in a camping site in Longhorn State Park. They survived on two tins of Brunswick sardines, a loaf of bread, and cheap California wine.

A coughing fit struck Harald. The incident with Peter was pervasive. His stomach turned even when he was reading some book or magazine. He had difficulty understanding a single sentence. Molly, Helen and Suishi did not conceal their opinion that he was reaping what he had sown. They regarded him as an outsider.

Helen took the mug from her mother's finger and put it in the sink.

"Listen, Mother," she said. "Take a break, huh? Go over to Wal-Mart. Buy something nice. The umbrella is in the car under the seat. All right? How's Barbara? Do you want to call her? Get some coffee with an old friend? Or what about the movies? Barbara likes to laugh. Go see some funny comedy, isn't that a good idea?"

Without a word Suishi took to her heels. She looked at Harald as if she wanted to say that she didn't have to be present when he kicked the bucket. A moment later the blue car backed out of the garage.

Harald listened as the rain drummed on the garbage can.

They ate yogurt. Harald liked blueberry the best. Aloud he wondered whether to drizzle honey or spread jam on his toast.

"I'll call Peter,"

"What about?"

"About...I wish I could be a better father."

"You bother yourself unnecessarily," replied Helen.

Harald stood and headed for the telephone. He took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and dialed the number. "I'd like to talk with Peter Haraldsson, please. No. I'm his father. Good. I'll wait." He turned to Helen. "They're bringing him." He coughed. "What did you say? He's sleeping? At a quarter to ten? Wake him up then, please! It's urgent. I don't have time to spare. Yes. My name is Harald Haraldsson. Peter is my son. My favorite son." He had to cover the phone with his hand because of his cough. "What? You can't be serious. When? Last night? His lower lip? I beg your pardon? He lost a lot of blood? Listen. Isn't it your responsibility to notify the parents what's going on? What? You want me to phone you again some other day? Do you know what you're talking about at all?

His hand shook. It took effort to hang up the receiver. "They've taken the laces from his sneakers. That deeply upset him. He broke a window with a chair last night. They have given him an injection. They say he demanded to be given a keffiyeh."

"He's become an Islamist, is that it?"

"I don't know. I always tried my best."

Waves of crashing rain soaked the windows.

Harald procrastinated on going to the bathroom. The merry-go-round of excretion had always seemed distasteful to him. His frailty, both physical and

mental, was an embarrassing condition in this world of gladiators. When the doctor stuck his finger into his rectal orifice, humiliated tears came to his eyes. After his last visit the doctor proclaimed him basically healthy. His blood pressure could be a little lower. His prostate-specific antigen was the same as the year before –2.2. Harald tried to explain to Dr. Morgenffeler that his brain felt overtaxed though his body was holding steady. The doctor replied tersely that he was no psychologist and did not even recommend him one.

Harald hadn't sat down at the piano since they took Peter away. On the way back from the doctor's he recalled how his son used to sit on his lap to see the keys. The boy couldn't have been more than three or four. No one in the family doubted that he had talent. When Peter grew up he exchanged the keyboard for the guitar. It didn't go anywhere. Finally he proclaimed he did not want to end up like Amadeus. They had thrown Mozart's body into a hole like garbage and covered his genius with lime so it did not threaten to spread its disease to others.

Helen stretched her arm across the table. She wore her wedding ring on her hand. (Harald could barely remember where he had put his.) It was a friendly gesture, but she was emotionally unavailable. Her lips were clenched, her eyes fixed on something behind his back. He did not doubt that she would find a new partner within a few months, a replacement father for Molly. Mothers were capable of veiling reality with quotidian dreams. The one who fathered the miscarried child was to blame.

It was 10:16.

The downpour continued. Perhaps his mood would improve if the sky got bluer. It wouldn't feel so inevitable. He could delay it. Put it off for later. Much later. The weather could not be changed, though. The sun shone yesterday. Today it was dark to the horizon.

Harald Haraldsson brought in a box of yellowed envelopes from the bedroom. Helen drummed her fingers on the tabletop.

"This is my life insurance," he said. "I'm sorry, but in light of the circumstances, they won't pay a cent. They investigate the conditions of the insured's death. If it was a matter of natural or involuntary death. And mine, as you know, will not be natural."

He paused so Helen would have the chance to express herself. She was silent. "This document registers all of our investments with Bernstein and Bernstein. It's not too much." Harald covered his mouth with his handkerchief in case he coughed. "We have twelve thousand three hundred and forty dollars in our joint account. I would like if you gave five thousand dollars of it to Peter." He glanced at the window. "I have something to confess."

"What is it?" she asked, as if it were nothing.

"There's an account you don't know about."

"How much is in it?"

"Six hundred dollars."

“Have you taken a mistress?”

“Never.”

“Sorry I’m asking.”

“I’ve never been unfaithful. Years ago I met with a student. We had coffee at the Center not far from City Hall. Her name was Ingrid. She had some Swedish in her. But she wasn’t. Probably German. She was interested in what inspired my book and so on.”

“What book did you talk about?”

“*Madness in Music*.” He wiped his nose. “I pulled back as soon as she touched my knee under the table. She was a whore.”

“Do you remember John?”

“John Storsen?”

“I slept with him. Only once.”

Harald laughed nervously. He wiped his face with his handkerchief. It could have been sweat or tears. Probably tears. His wife peeled an orange.

“Listen, Helen,” he said, “Divorce doesn’t come into consideration. I just don’t have the time.”

He was gripped by anxiety. He could scarcely sigh. He opened the window. The sheets of water didn’t take the gagging oppressiveness out of the air. He could not remember a more unbearable summer. Helen disliked the air conditioning. He had tried to explain to her that heat negatively affected human behavior. She rarely met him halfway. She deliberated for a long time before they had children together. Harald was forty when Peter was born.

He lived for music. Year after year he repeated to his students that the fundamental principle of every composition was its mathematical precision. Nothing was left to chance. Human doubts were inadmissible. Music is the cleanest form of the human capacity to connect with beauty. Its rhythm is liberating.

Harald was not interested in computers, mobile telephones, or digital cameras. He always went to the counter at the bank instead of the ATM. He did not shave with an electric razor. He preferred his grandfather’s razor with its ivory handle, which he honed on his father’s leather strop.

He put the drawer back in the bedroom closet. His gaze flew over the family photographs. Molly and Peter on bikes. Helen’s parents in an oval frame. His brother August by the sea in Göteborg with the harbor cranes in the background. A wedding picture (they had spent their honeymoon caring for Suishi, who had taken unwell after the ceremony). Peter with a fishing rod. Helen and Harald in Italy. Molly on a horse. Peter peering through the tall grass like a rabbit.

He could hear Helen walking around upstairs. She was cleaning her mother’s room. Or Peter’s. Molly locked hers. Harald headed for the basement. His favorite checked shirt hung on the clothesline. (He had to remind Helen to give his things to the Salvation Army.) Helen’s jump rope was

draped over the ironing board. Harald opened the freezer. He saw a piece of salmon and a bag of peas. Six chicken breasts. Two cartons of vanilla ice cream. (He never touched ice cream.) A leg of lamb and a frozen pizza. Two containers of barley soup. Spinach and carrots. Not a meatball to be found. He liked them best of all. But it didn't matter.

Helen was sitting in the same chair.

"Molly didn't lock her room," she said anxiously.

"Something disturbing?"

"Terrifying."

"Don't tell me."

"She has magazines in a box under her bed."

"What kind of magazines?"

"Porno."

"She's maturing fast, hasn't she?"

"My eyes bugged out."

"I get it."

"She's writing verses too."

"That sounds normal."

"Molly is normal."

Harald looked through the open door at the clock in the kitchen. He would call his brother in Göteborg in the evening. August was a retired chemical engineer. He spent most of his time in the library reading technical publications. His apartment was crammed with multi-colored liquids in bottles. Probably acids. Harald ended up in a hotel in his last visit six years before. There was no place for him in the apartment. He would certainly ask August how the weather was in Sweden. He would not give him the slightest indication they were talking today for the last time.

It was ten minutes to twelve.

"Helen," he said suddenly, "Molly should know something. It's very important. When she was an infant, I pushed her in a stroller on the street. And later, when she was older, we used to go to the zoo together. She offered a banana to her favorite monkey every time. By chance its name was Molly too. We would laugh until our stomachs hurt."

"OK, Harald," Helen said. "I'll definitely tell her that some time."

"Thank you. She should remember me fondly."

"You can count on me," she reassured him. She got up from the table. "I didn't give Molly money for lunch. I'll be right back."

"Don't worry. I'll wait."

Now he could not put off having to go to the bathroom. He headed for the door next to the kitchen. Inside it was quiet. The bathroom in Brooklyn was a large room with a sink and a shower. In Göteborg it had been a narrow box with a window at the back. It faced a light shaft. Once, just after their return from Vienna, he amused himself by imagining an orchestra and counting the

musicians. His mother started pounding on the door as he got to number fifty-six. She screamed that his father had hung himself in the bedroom.

He had been composing an extensive piece his whole life; something between an opera and a symphony. More precisely, it was a composition which occasionally spouted forth with a geyser of human voices. He had it engraved in his memory note by note. Sometimes he imagined sitting in a concert hall rehearsing his opus. The conductor waved his hands. Harald would never get to the concert hall now.

He missed the muted colors of the sunset in Sweden. The light settled on the façades of majestic buildings as the sun fell. He identified with the characters in Bergman films. Anna was his first love. He never forgot when they sat together in a bar. Four American deserters from the Vietnam War were spitting on their native country the next table over. Harald shouted at them. They shot him in the knee. He went through several operations and stayed three weeks in the hospital. Anna did not come to visit him even once. He soon left Sweden for good.

Helen returned at 12:22.

She'd caught up with Molly in the school cafeteria. It did not seem that she had gotten to speaking about how Harald used to push her in a carriage. His wife described the storm as traumatizing. The windshield wipers weren't enough to sweep away the rain.

"Please sit down," he said. When she did, he continued: "This has to do with how to dispose of my body. I don't want any pathetic ceremony. Or a notice in the paper. Nothing like that. Please. Scatter my ashes after cremation."

"Do you have any specific place in mind?"

"Indeed. Remember when Molly was five and Peter was seven and we went to swim at Lake Kawanaskaki? We found a little beach there and named it Rosy Bay. The white sand was as fine as powdered sugar and silky moss covered a little meadow right by through the bushes. And we made love in that little meadow as the children were splashing through the sun-warmed water. Remember? And then I held Peter on the surface so he could do the crawl. And he started to scream: 'Dad, dad, there's a golden fish swimming there!' And we chased after it, do you remember? And Peter grasped it to his little hands, and Molly burst out laughing: 'You stupid idiot, that fish you've got isn't golden, but strawberry red!' You understand what I'm talking about?"

"I hate to disappoint you," Helen said wearily, "but that fish really was strawberry red."

Harald thumped his fist on the table. "Not this again! Can't you leave Peter in peace and admit that it was a golden fish? He's your son, after all!"

"Don't shout!"

"It's true!"

"Fine, Harald. If you think the fish was golden it was golden, but it's a tragedy."

“What’s a tragedy?”

“Absolutely everything.”

“Nonsense. The truth is not tragic. The truth is absolute!” Harald started coughing. “Pardon me. I shouldn’t shout. Not now. Never.”

“What else?” she asked.

He took her by the hand. “Scatter my ashes in Rosy Bay to musical accompaniment.”

She freed her hand from his grasp. “Music? What music?”

“Play Beethoven’s Cavatina for me. OK? Opus one hundred thirty. I have it on cassette. Promise?”

“Harald,” she said, “I took this time off so we could work this out somehow. But it doesn’t seem like it can be fixed.”

It was 1:02. The rain was not stopping.

Harald walked around the dining room table a few times. He stood over Helen. “So what happened!” he shouted. “Tell me before it’s too late!” And then: “Whore!”

Perhaps she thought he was raging because she had slept with John Storsen. But for him it was about Peter. Not long ago he had heard them talking with each other about his son. Suishi said she had been alone with Peter in the kitchen. He accused her of godlessness. God would punish her to count the grains of sand in the holy Arabian desert. Suishi then proclaimed his son needed help. Maybe he wasn’t right in the head. He swore at her nastily. He bit her. She showed Harald the impression of his teeth in her left forearm. He could guess the rest himself. Suishi called the police and an ambulance, and when it came, Peter struggled, and they overcame him, threw him into the car bound in a straitjacket, blindfolded, and with a rag stuffed in his mouth so he didn’t bite off his own tongue in a fit of rage.

Everywhere he went Harald consulted with multiple doctors. He searched the Internet at the university, but found no answers. In S. G. Davies’ biography of James Joyce he read about the mental state of the author’s daughter Lucie. When he discovered that her diagnosis was insufficient adrenal function, Harald called up the wife of one of his colleagues. She was a doctor, but she laughed off any possible connections between Peter and Lucie.

He had to lie down as soon as he got to the bedroom. He thought about how animals died. He did not recall ever coming upon a dead deer or bird in his hikes in the forest in Sweden or Vermont. He guessed that animals lay down deep in the crevices of the rocks where no one would find their remains. If Harald buried himself in the pantry among the boxes, Helen, Molly, and Suishi would discover him right when he started to decompose. They’d have to plug their noses. He’d stink like a polecat. Then sleep overcame him. It seemed that he was carrying something on his back up a steep hill wrapped in a bag. When he finally struggled to the summit and opened the bag, he found his own body in it.

He woke up covered in sweat at 5:06.

He heard Suishi, Helen and Molly talking in the living room.

They fell silent when he came in.

"I saw a really nice movie today," Suishi said sweetly.

"She also bought a wonderful summer dress covered in rosy flowers and hummingbirds," her daughter informed him.

Molly sucked tomato juice from a carton through a straw.

"I have to call Sweden," Harald announced.

"It's almost midnight there," Helen said.

"I have to call," he insisted.

Scarcely had he finished dialing the number than his brother picked up. "August? It's Harald. Did I wake you? No? Thank God. I don't like waking people up. They're always grumpy. What's that? You were waiting all day for me to call? Isn't that an unbelievable coincidence? What's the weather like in Göteborg? Sunny? It's been raining buckets here since morning. You must at least know why I haven't set foot out of the house all day. But I'll tell you something. Suishi went outside to have a good time. He turned to Suishi. 'Did you have your umbrella with you?' 'It wasn't raining in the car,' she hissed. "August. Listen. Suishi had coffee with her friend Barbara and then they went to the theater. What? Fine. I'll ask. Harald addressed Suishi. 'August asks what movie you saw?' '*About Schmidt*,' she said. "August. Suishi saw *About Schmidt*. What's that? You really saw it? Jack Nicholson? A real laugh? You're right, I should go see it. I could stand to laugh. But I don't have time at the moment. You know? I'm in over my head. What's that? Oh, nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just getting my ass from place to place, August. Dealing with this or that. And I don't even know how the day goes by. That's why I prefer to call instead of writing. If you want to know something, I'm so fucking busy I don't even know when I'll call again. Get it? What? Fine. You're right. I shouldn't swear. It's just that everything's fucked up since..." He fell silent. "You know what? My brain feels like pickles in a jar. Or sardines in a tin. That's what?" Harald started laughing. "Do you recall when we set out to sea from Göteborg in a blue kayak like eleventh-century Vikings? That was fun, wasn't it? Then we lay on the beach and cried like little boys as the setting sun colored the whole world blood red. That was something, right? Think it's nothing more than sentimentality?" He coughed. "August? Can you hear me? Oh, thanks. You always were very kind. Yes. A lot. Remember one thing. You're really the best brother. Good to the core, August. I love you very much."

Harald hung up. He blew his nose. Then he mumbled: "August wasn't asleep yet. He'd been expecting a call from me since the morning. Thank God I have him for a brother."

Molly tossed her empty carton of juice into the trash can. "Why didn't you tell him Peter went crazy? That he's in the madhouse?"

Harald moved his hands nervously up and down his body, as if he were looking for something. Then he took three steps forward and slapped Molly. "I'm sorry," he said instantly. "I truly regret that. I should never strike you."

"But you did," said Molly.

"I'm sorry."

"Go to hell!" Suishi yelled. "Go back where you came from, you wandering Jew!"

It had never occurred to him that he might be Jewish. If he had been it wouldn't have surprised him. He wondered where he could go back to. Not Sweden. It occurred to him to wonder if it was possible to go back somewhere he had never been—for example, he had never been to Portugal. But he had no time left for travel.

He had to do something.

In the bedroom he tore a piece of paper off a notepad. He found a pen in the bathroom on a shelf over the mirror. When he sat on the edge of the tub he realized he was still wearing his pajamas. He'd been wearing them all day.

He started to write. 1) Harald had never been to Portugal. 2) He had never played baseball with Peter. 3) He had never set out to Vienna to track down a lost Mozart composition. 4) He never found the courage to find Ingrid and apologize for thinking she had been a whore.

Harald could have continued, but the pen fell out of his hand. He felt like he was sleepwalking. He set a towel on the edge of the sink and rested his head on it.

When he recovered himself, it was 9:03.

Helen was watching television from bed. Harald found Beethoven's Cavatina immediately. He set the cassette and the note on Helen's nightstand. His wife, concentrating on the screen, didn't take the slightest notice of him. She clearly hadn't gotten over her anger from Molly thing. He crawled under the covers.

It was raining heavily, but there was no thunder.

Midnight was not far off.

At nine-thirty the program changed. Helen quickly skimmed the paper on the nightstand during the commercials. She set it down again at once. Harald followed a group of sweaty runners on the screen. They tried to pass each other carrying heavy backpacks. He felt satisfaction at not having to compete with them. He was in simple accord with himself. He did not have to resurrect anything that belonged to the past. A misstep could not be corrected. And the good was gone in a flash. It almost couldn't be remembered.

A Colombo repeat came on at 10:01.

Harald got up from the bed, put on his slippers and headed for the white bathroom door. A few weeks ago when he had been heading for the same door, Helen had stopped him halfway. She said: "I love you, Harald. Please,

come back.” Later she claimed not to have said a thing. But that is how he had heard it. That was why he had abandoned his intent.

This time he did not hear a single word.

As he grasped the door, he turned. “I always wanted a dog,” he said. “But you always said no.”

He shut the doors behind him. The noise of the rain ceased. He crawled into the bath and turned on the tap. He lathered his face. Razor in one hand and little mirror in the other, he waited until the water reached up to his neck. He started to shave himself. When his hands bloodied, he pressed a little harder. Harald Haraldsson pressed until the water colored like the sea at sunset. He had that unbelievable image etched in his mind still from days gone by in Göteborg.

JIRÍ KLOBOUK

LANGUOR

Translated from the Czech by Andrew Malcovsky and the author.

The cinema was half-empty. Mirda followed Sonja to the fifth row. The overhead lights gleamed off his scalp. Footsteps to the right. Seats creaking. Music. Suddenly the babe appeared in front of him. She was standing and waiting for him to go around her. The oppressive weather had lasted for several days. The air was stifling. Sleet drummed on the tin roof. Sonja had barely sat down when she started to bite her nails.

“Guess what.”

“What.”

“How many movies we’ve seen?”

“Who knows?”

“A hundred and sixty-one.”

“Get out.”

“A hundred and sixty-one,” she repeated. “I paste the tickets into a notebook. I write next to them, ‘I saw this with Mirda.’ And then the name of the movie.”

“Hell,” he said, “you’ve got the whole set.”

Mirda’s mind was elsewhere, on the chick to his left. Now she was leaning towards the soldier. Mirda was on pins and needles. He could have touched her. The advertisements flashed on the screen in a colorful merry-go-round. Mr. Homolka played gramophone records in the compartment above. Sonja crinkled a bag. Sticky fingers forced sweets between Mirda’s lips. His stomach heaved.

“Yummy, eh?”

“You bet.”

“What’s with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re strange today.”

“Get out.”

“Do you like it?”

“What.”

“Being here together.”

“Sure.”

“Mom saw this one,” she said. “Her hair almost turned white.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait.”

“Wanna go dancing tonight?”

“I might be kind of busy.”

“With what?”

“Plans, you know.”

“Baldy please, just one tango.”

“Give me a break, will you?”

Sonja stared at the screen. Mirda cleaned his nails with a match. Christ, he thought, maybe I’m going crazy. The girl next to him had long blonde hair flowing down her back. When she tossed her head the glare blinded him. He was gradually falling in love with her. They belonged together, this babe and him. But he would have to do something. Move his ass, so she knew what was going on. He would jump off the balcony just to get her attention. He could dust his pants off in front of her and say something intelligent. She had caught his eye right in the entryway. He pretended to clean his glasses to cover his stare. She was standing at the coat check with the big-eared soldier. He was totally beside himself.

“Sour and hard, right?” Sonja proclaimed.

“Exactly.”

Mirda endeavored to spruce himself up. Sonja had been creasing his shirt whole way to the theater. He tried to straighten it by ironing it with his hands. In this way he succeeded in touching the girl with his elbow. She did not move. She must have known what was going on.

Sonja said: “Oh, look, furniture!”

He raised his head but left his arm where it was.

“Yeah,” he replied.

An ensemble of light blue saucepans replaced the beds.

“Great, huh?” Sonja cried. “We’ll get those from our parents as wedding presents!”

“Oh boy.”

“Blue. Or would you like rose-colored ones, Baldy?”

His seat cracked under him. “Stop calling me Baldy,” he hissed between his teeth. “Get it?”

“OK, fine.”

“My name is Mirda.”

“Right, Mirda.”

“Only idiots call me Baldy.”

Sonja was really getting on his nerves. The babe would take her arm off the armrest if she kept quacking about their wedding. And their love would be over before it had properly begun. Sonja was a drag. People stared at her in the vestibule when she returned her empty soda bottle. She was reflected

in the glass case, her legs like pudding. They rotated in front of Mirda, bulging through her greenish stockings. Her gray slip showed from under her skirt when she stood on tiptoe. A few guys almost cracked up. What an embarrassment. Mirda followed the wonderful babe with one eye. She was waiting for her grunt to get back from the john. She wore a skirt held in place with a red sash for a belt. The shiny zipper glittered as if a current of water were cascading down her body.

The usher closed the side doors. The rain outside continued to beat on the roof. Red and blue scooters zipped around on the screen. With curved silver handlebars, gas at full throttle. Mirda sweated. The babe was whispering something to the soldier. He was a mama's boy, no question. He had probably just shaved for the first time yesterday. Mirda honked into his handkerchief. He did everything he could think of. He shifted his hands back and forth to gauge what was going on. To his right Sonja rooted through her bag of hard sour candy. She stuffed herself like the world was coming to an end and if she stopped cramming them down she would die of hunger. Every morning they pedaled to work on their bicycles like two fucking slaves. Riding bikes was for imbeciles. Now he had a babe. And he would get some sort of fancy machine for her. A four-wheeler. With upholstered seats and steering wheel. No question.

Mirda almost shit his pants. The girl had kind of nudged him with her elbow. No way was that an accident. Goosebumps rippled over him. He waited for what would come next. But nothing happened. Nothing. Zilch. A gaping void. In any event, she smelled like a huge stretch of pine trees. He planned his opening line. Something extraordinary. Like that he'd had tonsillitis when he was twelve. But that might not impress her too much. Suddenly it came to him that they were breathing the same air. He was breathing in what this babe was exhaling. And the other way around. A sensational eternal merry-go-round. He wiped his neck free of sweat. It was a given that he loved her. He didn't get how she could stand this slacker. Plainly put, he felt sorry for the poor guy. He didn't have the slightest chance. He would have to return to barracks after the movie. And the babe would be his. Mirda's. All of her, from her head to her toes.

At that the camera pointed at him. He looked into the eye of the lens. The music sounded like the fanfare before a soccer match, announcing that something tremendous was about to happen. Instead, the screen showed cows being milked in a barn. He counted six of them. The white liquid splashed metallically into the buckets. All around were piles of hay and dried manure. The dumpy farmhand splashed around up to her knees in the cow shit. The theatergoers gaped like they had never seen shit before. Mirda knew everyone in this small medieval town. On sight if not from hearsay. Most were endowed with limited intelligence. They would go green with envy as soon as he appeared on Marx-Engels Square with the babe. He'd have sworn that she was from Prague. Or Australia. In any event he imag-

ined that she would invite him to a big city. The townspeople's eyes would all bug out when he told them the details, the shitheads. Like how he had gone with his babe on the tram across the whole metropolis to the end of the line. He left one hand with Sonja. With the other he tested what was going on to his left. The girl was holding an empty bottle of soda. She had to be dying of thirst. Mirda swallowed. He was prepared for everything. He would have crawled across enormous dunes of burning sand in the Sahara just to discover an oasis for her. He wouldn't lift a finger for Sonja. She was as romantic as a sour pickle. She got on his nerves in bed most of all. Copulating with her made him nauseated. She climbed on top of him like he was Kilimanjaro. He could see six smokestacks on the roof of the cheap apartment block. Sallow smoke drifted up from them. Sonja thrashed her legs and wheezed. A piece of paper fell off the big armoire by the bed every time. The doors hit the nightstand. Mirda would lose his erection.

The babe laughed like bells ringing in the breeze. Mirda was falling in love with her more than ever. His heart pounded. His ears burned. He would have to decide to do something. Otherwise he would lose his mind. Something fell from a great height on the screen. Suddenly a chute opened. The parachutist hung from it like a block of wood. He headed for the ground. The green crowns of trees swayed below. White roads. Red quadrilaterals of rooftops. After he landed the canopy literally buried him. The soldier was explaining something excitedly to the girl. He was clearly bullshitting, and would do well to keep that sort of nonsense to himself. Mirda could explain everything to her down to the last detail, absolutely everything about parachutes. He would take her all the way out to the municipal airfield so she could get an idea about to prepare for a jump.

Sonja gripped his hand: "Scary, eh?"

"Time delayed."

"What's delayed?"

"When the parachute opens."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Free fall."

Sonja slammed her elbow into his ribs. "Wanna change seats?"

"What's your problem?"

"Can you see all right?"

"Why?"

"You're shifting a lot."

He sighed in her ear: "My ass is killing me, understand?"

"Don't say that," Sonja burst out laughing.

The girl on the left had shiny, slightly parted lips. Her rounded nose filled out the tender arc of her profile. Mirda really had to get moving to prove to her he was a man of action. That nothing could sway his determination. That he knew what to do and was reliable in any situation. He started to plan. He

would take her down a chestnut-lined lane. She leans up against a tree. They kiss. She's slobbering over him, really, but he doesn't resist. He plays dead. She clasps her arms around his neck. Her lips are soft as silk. She sticks her tongue in his mouth, and slides it all around inside him. Reluctantly he recovers from the intoxication of making out. It's like somebody hit him on the head with a bamboo staff. Bulletins of some wartime madness abroad were playing on the screen. A bloody battle in Africa, chopped-off heads and hands, guts everywhere. The wheels of a transport truck splashed through the mud and into a tunnel. Mirda found himself behind the wheel. He was going at least a hundred and twenty. The headlights shone in a twisted ribbon. The tunnel turned and straightened. The glare of the sun blinded him. It was as though he were born again. Forever liberated. First of all, fuck the factory. He'd tell them to kiss his ass. Then he'd get something like this with sixteen wheels, the babe sitting next to him. They have a little tussle before they start off on a trip around the world. One switchback after another. They come out above the clouds. Nothing else - just him, his babe, and the gargantuan Himalayas. He pulls the handbrake. They make out under the starry sky until midnight. After daybreak Niagara Falls suddenly thunders before them. The water sprays their faces. They experience it with bated breath. Every last movement. One soul. One body. He'd never been that happy, even last fall, when the local soccer team had demolished Klapocapy four to nothing. He glanced at the girl alongside him. She was incredibly amazing. Love at first sight. No question.

The usher Burdova started up in the first row with her cardboard box.

"Mirda."

"What is it?"

"Would you buy me a popsicle?"

"Always eating something."

"Just one, Mirda, please."

He hissed in her ear: "Christ, if you get any fatter, we're through."

Burdova noticed his raised hand. Sonja stuck the popsicle into her mouth almost up to her fist. She made squishing noises. People turned around. Mirda was mortified. His attention wandered. Nothing impressed him. The screen cranked out socialist boilerplate. He touched his head. Not a hair. He'd never been more bored. The exception was the miracle to his left. He turned his head. She squinted somewhere ahead. A stony sphinx, but a breathing one. Her chest moved up and down. She was just fantastic. The soldier put his hand on her knee. Mirda nearly fainted.

"Look," said Sonja.

"At what."

"That little fart."

"What one?"

"From the factory."

"Where?"

She pointed. "Over there."
He straightened up. "Really," he said.
"A little fart," she repeated.
"You don't say."
"He grabbed my ass in the office."
"Fucking midget."
"I shoved him once."
"A good one?"
"He almost fell over."
"What a dick."
"Yeah. It's your ass, isn't it?"
"You bet."
"Yeah, Mirda. It's all yours."

The lights went out in the hall. Sonja dropped her wrapper. She licked her hands. The film started with a guitar accompaniment as if nothing extraordinary were going on. Mirda saw the figure of a man. It appeared on screen like a spot, a tiny little fleck in the lower left-hand corner. The guy got bigger. He plodded along the highway. A hill rose behind him to the sky, and a refinery below the hill. Huge pipes intertwined like giant steel fingers, a huge tower in the middle. The walking man grew. His face was a dark field of stubble. He looked like he was alone in the world. Forsaken, like a wandering dog. They had thrown him out into the cold at home, a cur, to do what he would. Sonja gripped his arm with sticky fingers. Mirda shifted on his seat. Nothing similar could happen to him. He was no ox to plod along a highway alone. He wasn't alone in this world. He had his babe. They belonged to each other. Nothing else really existed. Just the two of them. Her and him for the rest of their lives. Nothing else existed before this except anticipation. A life emptier than a tin can licked clean. And then that ended. It had already ended. She was right next to him. He only needed resolve. To do it. See it through to the end. Move his ass. He breathed deeply. He exhaled again and again. It calmed him. He worked up the courage to act. He had an hour and a half to work with. They'd be hand in hand by the time the movie ended. No question. He stretched his left leg and pulled it back when he touched something. He stretched it again, straightened up, and put his arm on the armrest. The girl moved her hand away. He couldn't see where in the dark. From time to time the glow of the screen illuminated her face. The man passed through the main gate. He arrived at an unsightly house, and entered after knocking. Mirda's vision was foggy probably from the excitement. He was on the edge of exhaustion from all of this. The screen blurred and focused. Daylight entered the room through shabby curtains. The man said something to the woman. He said it as though it were an afterthought, but with emphasis. Words fell. Then silence. Mirda's right arm went dead. That was Sonja's fault. She was as jumpy as a rabbit. Mirda fumbled to the side with his left elbow. Still nothing.

Not an inkling. The woman placed something on the table in front the man. She covered the camera with her back. She was moving some pans and pots around. An oil lamp flickered on the table. The man, his face turned to the window, was barely eating. He was clearly not hungry. Or he was hungry but couldn't swallow. He followed the woman with tired eyes. Her name was Clara. She wandered from place to place. She tossed her arms about. She became angry. Hot-tempered. Mirda's shirt stuck to his body. He resolved to act. He pushed his leg as far over as it would go. Nothing. Nothing at all. An absolute vacuum.

"What the hell are you doing?" hissed Sonja.

"What should I be doing?"

"Why are you shuffling your feet so much?"

"Really suspenseful, isn't it?"

"What's going on?"

"He's having some sort of crisis, get it?"

"The tall guy?"

"Who else?"

"Oh," sighed Sonja.

The two on screen left the house. Low-hanging clouds were soaked with rain. They headed for the river. Leafless trees lined the bank. She leaned against a tree; he sat on the ground. He ran his hand through the grass, clearly looking for something of critical importance. Simply irreplaceable. He tore off a blade of grass and put it between his teeth. Lengthy sentences started to pour out of him. He had more than usual on his mind. He cracked his strong fingers, trying to persuade Clara of something. She remained silent. A flowing lock of her hair was tangled in tree bark. The rest moved in the breeze. She had tears in her eyes. All of a sudden she opened her mouth. A word or two came out. Then she explained further. The situation became exacerbated. The tension mounted. It was in Italian and went over Mirda's head. He could have read it in Czech lower on the screen. White letters were jumping around there. He'd never been much for grand speeches. Clinging to his armrest, he stared. Italians were hot-blooded maniacs. Bittersweet music accompanied the words. It hypnotized Mirda. He soared and flew to great, far-off cities. With the girl by his side. His babe. His love. They sailed across the universe to places no one had ever been before.

The man was alone again. The darkened sky arched above him. He curled up with cold by the cab in a splintered truck bed. He followed the monochrome landscape with empty eyes. His eyelids were glued together. The girl next to Mirda coughed. She lay her arm on the armrest alongside his. It took his breath away. She was clearly letting him know it was now or never. He quickly rolled his shirtsleeve up to the shoulder. Her skin was so silky it was indescribable. Skin to skin. Pore to pore. The hairs on his arm started to stand up rapidly like antennae. He cleared his mind of the man in the truck.

Tomorrow was Sunday. Normally he'd sleep in a bit. This time he jumps out of bed. The girl is waiting for him. She balances on one foot on the square in front of the cathedral. They have a date. In the church they sprinkle themselves with holy water. A couple pledges eternal love before the altar. Life together until death do them part. Mirda and the babe sniff at the incense and listen to the organ. They take in the shine of gold. Portraits of saints. The bloody crucified Christ. She holds his hand. Her eyes are wide with fascination. The pealing of the church bells. They go across the square to a sweetshop. Mirda babbles about his hobbies the whole way there. He used to collect stamps. He raised pigeons. He had played the tuba in school. Breathlessly they flop into a box seat with broken springs. They order ice cream with whipped cream. She likes raspberry. Music blasts from an amplifier above their heads. She drums her fingers on the marble counter. Her nails are perfectly kept. She has a ring with a glittering red stone. Mirda slides it from her hand. He flicks it across the table. Christ, he thought, they'll soon take me to the loony bin. The man jumped out of the truck by a gas station. Tall and gaunt, he looked around. The sound of the truck engine faded in the twilight.

A redheaded woman by the pump said: "What's going on, bud?"

The tall man in the short coat did not reply. He sat on a bench by a chipped wall.

She approached him. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"No."

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Something to drink?"

"No. Thanks."

Mirda almost had a heart attack when the soldier took the babe by the hand. He didn't get how she could let the creep touch her like that. The building by the gas pump looked like an old pub. The lights of the city shone out in the distance. The redhead disappeared and the man sat alone. He looked at the ground or at his shoes. You could hear the radio out the window. Bass, drums, and languorous flute notes. The tall man closed his eyes. He let himself be caught up in the music's web. He clearly felt under the weather. Sorrow plucked at him. Mirda identified with this man. He sat impotently between Sonja and the babe. No question. Indecision was gnawing away at him. The girl next to him finally freed her hand from the soldier's grasp. Her lips were parted. Evidently she was offering them to Mirda to kiss. She was giving herself to him. She longed for his embrace, for him to run his hands through her hair, to touch her erect nipples. But he didn't. He was drowning in his own incapability. Paralyzed, like an incompetent who had soiled himself. Good for absolutely nothing. The man stood. He slowly went around the house. He wore baggy pants. Worn-out shoes, one shoelace untied. Gray bits of gravel crunched under his feet. He wandered aimlessly. Mirda finally decided to invite his babe to a soccer match after the

movie. God only knew why it hadn't occurred to him earlier. They walk bare-foot on the grass. The players sprint after the ball on the pitch. The local hicks clamor from the benches. Two hundred and fifty strong, their eyes bugging. They worry their earlobes in disbelief like fucking bulls, unable to grasp what is right in front of them. Mirda has his arm around the babe's wasp-like waist. The referee whistles. No choice. He has to give the players a break so they don't miss the spectacle. Rony is number thirty-three. A first-rate primadonna, known as Casanova far and wide. Mirda introduces him to the babe. Rony's drooling all over her. The referee whistles at once, or this horny bunch of perverts is never going to kick the ball again. Mirda and his babe climb the ladder to the scoreboard booth and change the numbers when goals are scored. Two to one. Or four to three. They sip lemonade and sink their teeth into sausages with mustard. Meanwhile the man had gone around the whole house. He returned where he had come out. Not a star in the night sky. He headed for the highway. A window opened on the second floor.

The redhead said: "Stop making yourself miserable, pal."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"You have no one with you?"

"The cat."

"I can sleep somewhere else."

She shrugged her shoulders and shut the window, then came out and led him to a half-empty shed.

"Good night," she said.

"The same to you," he replied.

He lay on a cot. He had a ragged blanket at his chest. The ceiling of the shed was covered in tarpaper. He thought ponderously, his brow furrowed in an internal monologue. His life flashed through his head from beginning to end. Love. His first. His last. All his loves. He thought of Clara. He loved her most of all. She was everything to him. Just everything. Nothing else existed. No reason for being. He extended his hand. He touched only a void. Time stopped. His watch ticked on. A cycle ended. No more traipsing around the world. Peace from everything. Quiet. Nothing but quiet. The camera lingered on his unshaven face. The corner of his mouth twitched. Dry lips. A fading glow in his eyes. Limp hair. Mirda wouldn't have spent the night in such a shed if you paid him. He had his life ahead of him with the girl by his side. She was unbelievable. Out of this world. He didn't even have to try to touch her any more. There was no need. They had each drawn closer. She was he and he was she. Their hearts and souls were growing together. They walked forward in wonderful unison. After the soccer match they stroll along the brook to the pond. The babe talks about Dvorak's compositions on the way. He feels faint. She skips along like a deer, a ballet dancer. Mirda tears a leaf from a bush and grinds it into pulp.

"Imagine!" she says.

"Imagine what?"

"I'd never been to a soccer match."

"Really?"

"Believe it. Rony is a machine. He can run."

"Wait," says Mirda.

The babe stops. "What is it?"

He points out. "Gonna climb this tree."

"Why would you do that?"

"So you can see how good I can climb."

"God, please don't."

"Just watch."

"You'll fall."

"Not a chance."

"You'll kill yourself!"

Mirda reconsiders. "Fine. OK. Another time." He starts to skip like a kid. He's in seventh heaven, soaring above the bushes. "Cuckoo!" he cries, hiding behind a rock.

"Where are you?" she calls.

"Here."

"Where's here?"

"Over here."

"I can't see you."

She approaches him, and gasps.

"You're a...amazingly beautiful," he stammers.

"You're one of a kind too." She strokes his face. "What's your name?"

"M...Mirda."

"Really?"

"And you?"

"Alice."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Alice. Want to bet?"

They flop down by a pond under a tree. It's an oak. She lies on her back. He stays seated. He sticks a straw in his mouth."

"He went nuts or what?" he says.

"You mean the Italian?"

"Exactly. Why did he kill himself?"

"It goes like this, Mirda. He loved Clara so much. Well, and when you love someone so much and it's doesn't mean anything to the other person, that's how it turns out. On the screen or in life. Here or in Italy. Have you read Homer?"

"Not really."

"It's in Homer."

She had profound eyes. Mirda says: "Once I thought I was inferior. But no more."

"And why not?"

"I have found you."

"Very nice. And moving."

"You feel the same way?"

"You caught my eye right in the lobby."

"Seriously?"

"You give off such an incredible impression of maturity."

"I'll be twenty-five in October."

"Excellent. I can't stand talkative milksops."

"I understand completely."

"They're all pigs."

"Bald men don't bother you?"

"Quite the opposite. Your condition is called alopecia. May I?"

The babe slides her palms over his head. Back and forth. She is extraordinarily refined. She knows all of Dvorak's works. And words like "alopecia." And she can't stand milksops. Mirda gathers saliva in his mouth and spits. He finds a pebble in the grass. He throws it into the water. Little circles disperse into nothingness.

"Wanna hear the whole story?" he asks.

"Are you engaged to her?"

"Not really. Like, we just work together in the factory, you know. Sonja's in the office. I'm at my stupid machine. Once I spilled coffee on her. In the cafeteria. A whole mug too. That was about six years ago."

"A long time ago!"

"It's like I've known you for a hundred."

"And I you for two hundred."

Her hair flows over him as she kisses him. He is blinded. He feels how close this babe is to him. Togetherness incarnate. Like in a fairy tale. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The curtain of her hair rises. Mirda finds cigarettes in his pocket. He strikes a match.

"You smoke?" she marvels.

"Only when I'm very tense."

"Give me a drag?" The babe sucks smoke into her mouth. She exhales it like a locomotive. "So why are you so horribly tense?"

"Might you be interested in starting a family with me?"

Alice laughs until she cries. They talk over each other's words. His father owned a dry-cleaners, but the commies took it away from him. A car struck her mother, but she doesn't limp much any more. It turns out that she had once spoken with the baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, who possessed a bronze Degas statue of a nude dancer looking at the sole of her right foot. Mirda hurried to note that he had once stunned passersby in Marx-Engels

square with his proficiency at the yo-yo. She also loved the music of Felix Mendelssohn, which concentrates the entirety of human emotion. He lit another cigarette. Alice reminded Mirda of the counselor to the White Queen: the more one practiced, the more one believed the impossible. Summa summarum they agreed that they had a fantastic future before them. Meanwhile he'd stay where he was and she would go

back where she came from and send him a picture. He'll send one to her. There'd be time for talk when Mirda came to visit. Most likely they'll run away to Sardinia together. They'd tend sheep there. He would shear them. She would knit sweaters. They would sell them at the market for good money. One thing was absolutely clear: they could not live without each other any more. She was amazing. A spark burned in her head. She read Homer and the like. She loved Italian films, like this one of Antonioni's. Mirda's bald pate did not bother her—quite the opposite. The main thing was that she yearned for him, and wanted to start a family with him as soon as possible. Life inflated like a balloon before their eyes. It exceeded the size of the globe like something out of Verne. Everything in the world was possible. Today they were here. Tomorrow they would be there. And always together. Inseparable. There would be no mountain they would not climb, like Popocatepetl, and no river they would not cross, like the Mississippi. They would set up a huge house with a view of the ocean in Sardinia. Boats would bob on the sea. One would belong to them. As long as the wind blew they would go where the waves took them. They would be borne aloft on a hundred wings. Aimlessly. Just taking advantage of their freedom. There was nothing so monumental as love. That was set in stone.

Mirda had to piss. He went into the bushes. When he returned Alice was gone. Day broke. The man opened his eyes. They roamed the ceiling of the shed. Resolve burned in the outlaw's gaze. He knew what he would do, what would come next. The anticipation fatigued him. He was waiting in vain. Time had swept by. It covered everything like sand in the desert. The door creaked. The long-haired woman entered the shed. She sat on the cot next to the man, embraced him, and put his head to her breast. He accepted it without the slightest sign of reciprocation. There was no reason for delaying it. He cast her off, went out, and climbed into the first truck that stopped. His return was inevitable. The tower grew like a pyramid in the morning glow. Gigantic pipes flowed, avoiding each other touching like the supple hands of Indian dancers. It was dark in the house. Clara slept. The man headed for the tower. He climbed a spiral staircase, stopping at every landing. An abyss yawned beneath him. The horizon was brightening. The clouds were breaking up. Halfway up he took his coat off, revealing a blue shirt underneath. In a few minutes he was at the top. He extended his arms and jumped, soaring like a bird. He screamed and roared. He didn't want to die, but it was too late. The babe buried her nails in Mirda's hand. An incredible sensation. He quaked

like an aspen. She loved him. She had given him a clear sign without words. They had their lives ahead of them. The man hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. It was over. Clara ran out but didn't take a step closer. The man lay on his back. He did not move. He breathed his last, eyes open.

The lights went on in the hall. Sonja yawned. She stretched. Mirda rubbed his hand, which was lined with moon-shaped cuts. He was practically in agony, unable to get a hold of himself. Sonja poked him. He stood up. The row to his left gaped emptily. They went out. He had trouble breathing. Water streamed into the sewers as he wiped his head with a handkerchief. The storm was over.

"Was he crazy or what?" Sonja asked.

"It goes like this, Sonja. He loved Clara so much. Well, and when you love someone so much and it doesn't mean anything to the other person, that's how it turns out. On the screen or in real life. Here or in Italy. Have you read Homer?"

"Who?"

"It's in Homer."

"What is?"

"Everything."

"You've read it?"

"No."

"So how do you know?"

"Someone told me."

Sonja held onto his hand like a child. They went diagonally across Marx-Engels square. Mirda stopped and shaded his eyes. The tower of the church soared to the sky. The man stood there. Right at the peak. His arms were outstretched. Mirda curved his palms into a megaphone. He exhorted the wretch to be reasonable. There would be fun at the dance hall later. They'd get to hear Mr. Klabajzna's accordion. He could dance with Sonja. Have some beer. Play cards. Talk about wedding stuff. The world was sometimes fucked up but it was also fantastic. There were things worth living for, like Mendelssohn or Homer. Mirda resolved to study ancient history and start a collection of Mexican cactuses. He told the man that some cactuses got as tall as cherry trees. He stopped shouting. That suicidal Italian didn't understand Czech anyway. Mirda looked around. Everything was gray. Gray buildings. Gray pavement in the gray square. Sonja fed gray pigeons. When she bent over her gray slip showed. He spat and looked up at the gray sky. The famous actor was gone. Maybe he lived, or maybe he killed himself. Mirda would never be like him. Crazy Italian. Never. He had something to live for. He had a babe, Alice. The rest didn't add up at all.



Found Photo: *Daughters of the Czar*

NENE GIORGADZE

WWW

Translated from Georgian by Nene Giorgadze and Timothy Kercher

The gigantic black spider
is gripping the Earth,
its tentacles secretly entering
the Earth's warm veins.
The web is hung somewhere in the cosmos.
From dawn, when I open my eyes,
to nightfall, I observe the way
the following day knits a spider web,
the way the chrysalis is born from a caterpillar,
the day that transforms into the butterfly
that smoothly flutters
from the Earth to the cosmos
waving at me from afar.
A wrinkle, like a scratch, is drawn.
The night's eyelid is drooped.
I have become a water plant.
My stalk is phosphorus
and moves in the direction of deep water.
At night I reproduce.
Like a common spider I knit a web
and feel by the invisible tentacles –
how the web hung somewhere in the cosmos
is swinging when the planets approach
as if blown by somebody's breath.

NENE GIORGADZE

THE AIRPORT

Translated from Georgian by Nene Giorgadze and Timothy Kercher

The airport is where the insane gather,
those who are confused about their path,
going and coming, smoking and praying,
lost in their computer screens.
There, the strange iron birds are flying.
People, like embryos, are sitting
in these birds' wombs,
their belly-button cell phones
a temporary means of contact with Mother Earth,
to allow them to forget
their temporal location in the sky.
The airport is opium to the insane,
who flow from the bright shop windows
into the airport's deep breathing lungs.
Like opium, they're greedily sucking in the smell
that's coming from the airport's voluptuous body
and hallucinating.
The airport is a gigantic aquarium in their dreams
where people with fish fins
open their mouths
and look feebly at each other.
The airport is where the insane gather,
who can only remember
their temporal location on earth.

COLLIN BUNTING

LITTLE HARD HEARTS THAT DO NOT BREAK

This is then.

There's a yes in the attic behind every door.

They come shooting rocks

Up the old Walnut

At my window. They come with the dark

Seamed into their hoods, revving whispers.

They peel me off the rearview mirror like a scratch-n-sniff banana sticker.

This is then.

Behind every door is something you'd never notice missing:

Noxious emissions of twinkledust

Cockleburs bound to the knee socks

Suspicious hairs twisted into shirtsleeves.

No never comes

Tight as a trap

On hind legs and wild, suddenly earnest.

Like an empty locust shell,

Yes is always in mid-climb

Always vanished.

It lilacs the door shut,

Trips over questions.

It listens to smells,

Gives gifts off the walls.

This is then.

Air prances in this house.

The air stinks of graphite and White-Out.

In this house there are teeth marks around all the windows.

DAN RAPHAEL

NO COMPARISON

Shall i compare thee to 40 mile per hour wind
on a wide sandy beach,
to a young black bear sniffing the 6 year olds swing set,
how the hills and streamlets have long stopped negotiating,
trying to compare wind and light
with minerals and worm news, how my zen memory
can remove 30 years from your complexion,
back before you were born, when the sky was only
gray on Mondays
carrying light to the sun, letting the faucet stream til i could
taste the vitamins,
see the tiny crystals sparkling in the flashlight defying
my budget-imposed black-out.

nothing compares to falling 30 feet when the shale gives way,
i keep climbing back, stomping to sheer off a new edge
but am sprung to safe ground
by muscles protecting bones. i yearn for what i'll never have
without breaking three or more laws.
you cant give a puppet all of its strings at once, like learning
to write with the other hand
by watching a mirror, saying "won og ot evah I" before entering.
hold my hand up to the lit window and see the shadow of gloves,
everyone in winter clothes this 80 degree day, as tires melt from cars,
as squirrels start marketing walnut, buckeye and acorn butter.
beneath the sidewalk are yards of polished stones.

you say my skin is as smooth as a freshly made tortilla,
my eyes are the color of blue jay feathers blended
into a paste, taking a cubic inch of meat and letting
the fryer decide if its pork or salmon.

i practiced til i could reassemble a potato from a plate
of french fries, as potatoes grown in sterile dirt
tend to have sharp corners, as the reason
to change clothes regularly
is to keep the dead skin from taking over, since we don't think
a million windmills or a whole county covered in mirrors
will change anything but the electric bill.

whats the opposite of derived? what if nothing new was made
for the month of july
and no one needed to eat? instead of glaciers we have slowly moving
mountains of trash
unsure whether to creep toward water or the accumulation of wealth.

i am still in your eyes; in your mouth is the floor plan
of a three room cottage
balanced where the forest meets the edge of gravity.
no matter whos listening
nothing will fall today. my satellite dish wont speak
until the games over.
a third team shows up on the field with a keg and portable barbecue.
how can leftover bones not lead to juggling.

i didn't believe prostrating across 3 miles of shopping mall
would lead to summer
but no one will give me credit for today's all encompassing beauty.
stare in the mirror til you see a moon-faced stranger,
hair so thick alpaca genes are suspected.
when the old hotel imploded the dust reminded me
of 40 years of room service.
a large underground chamber filled with unclaimed left behinds:
do not disturb, for a good time call. trying to set the table
that keeps changing size.
the fifth leg is in case of earthquakes.

i wont put a roof on my head because the gutters would make me
look ridiculous. imagine i'm adobe in new mexican mountains.
compare me to a butterfly with blank wings
migrating confidently cross borders about to fade away

ALAN BRITT

ALIENS CURIOUS ABOUT HUMAN EMOTIONS

I'm often interviewed
during sleep.

Aliens interview then.

The thin ones who normally hide
their sexuality
boldly step forward
at the oddest hours,
their toes folded over lamp cords
leading from the corner
of a small room squeezed between the shivering hips
of love.

But, wait, there's more.

There's always more
when bi-valves
allow the ribbed philosophical pleasures
of death
to enter.

Suddenly, there's a landslide
on the dark side of Io
inviting only the most erudite astronomers
to take notice.

Then, suddenly, my grandmother
from Richmond, Indiana, guides her family
through the severe years, the 20's and 30's,
with an inimitable crease above her lips.

Plus, always a hint,
a smidgeon, as they say,
of hopeless tango thrown in like freshly-ground
black pepper,
for good measure.

And, naturally, our inevitable mourning
that resembles the tattered masts on victory ships
rocking at sunrise,
tracking our latest internet transmissions.

Ah, yes.
The good life.

Does this even remotely sound like your routine?

What a ghastly thought, eh?

CAROLYN STOLOFF

IT'S ALL RIGHT, I TELL MYSELF

while you've been scavenging in ancient purlieus,
hoping to surprise a melon-whole, ripe
flesh enclosed, seeds of everything at center,
to dash with to a safe place, to hide
(in your belly for instance, no proof of theft)
succeeding only in collecting a few wild
strawberries, an iris, a hairy caterpillar,
mushrooms (nothing to sneeze at to be sure,
selected passages),

Hasidim circle-dance in an airport
a beautician clicking shining blades
gavottes around a serious young head
protruding from a white tent
in a souk dyers dip boas of silk
into vats of vermilion and saffron
bombs drop from the sphincters of silver birds
somewhere at sea, invalids, blanketed to armpits
on lounge chairs, sip beef broth, exchange
paperbacks or cough drops
and off in the tall-grasslands of the U.S.
a snake rattles scripture in a rapture
of rectitude

milky fog surrounds the city's blunt fangs
tiny stars flash on vines in the wind's breath
as always the towering sky at the street's end
retreats as you approach it
through the city's faults
alas alas for the gone voices
alas for the goose girl and the water babies
alas for the Sunny Side of the Street, Amapola,
One Meat Ball and All of Me

so you're not Yeats or Auden
there's always granite to struggle up
there's the fresh hiss of scurrying surf at
 the island's edge
(which you probably won't get to again)
and crawling one-way through the tunnel
 of days sorting Ps and Qs
 with a dentist's spatula
a moon-mirror strapped to your brow
you can say to your self— *does a squirrel*
 know how a tree grows?
 does he need to know?

CAROLYN STOLOFF

ON THE WAY HOME -

wind

... struggling
to move forward leaning
against it

far away
a hand holds out a bowl—
empty

far away
from behind a lace curtain,
a curled finger
rapping the pane

but the departed
has turned
the corner

far away
a ragged tarpaulin
trails from a pole
thrust in dry earth

did someone camp here?

elsewhere on a floor—
a small Afghan carpet
crowded with prey
creeping shade quenches
its weave of deep blue
blood red and bone

far away
a phone *rings ... rings ... rings ...*
denying absence
near it a note
 under a glass weight

here the wind has died
twilight has quietly
 absorbed the clouds

now there are none

grey parades of windows
 march skyward
a few panes
 mirror sun's blaze
blinding me

will I find my door?

CAROLYN STOLOFF

LAST RESORT

The hotel he chose
boasts the latest models

in beds in every room.

When she couldn't make up
her mind *he* made it up,

like a hospital bed.

What a match—perpetually
poised to strike!

Hurled as though he meant it,
a heavy pewter

insult just misses her ear.

She rises.

Outside, sportsmen shoot
pheasants
raised for the occasion.

The interior décor
provides prime vistas

with inlaid bears,
replayable sunsets

and a mountain
with moving stairs.

Where ever one is
inside or out, a spark—

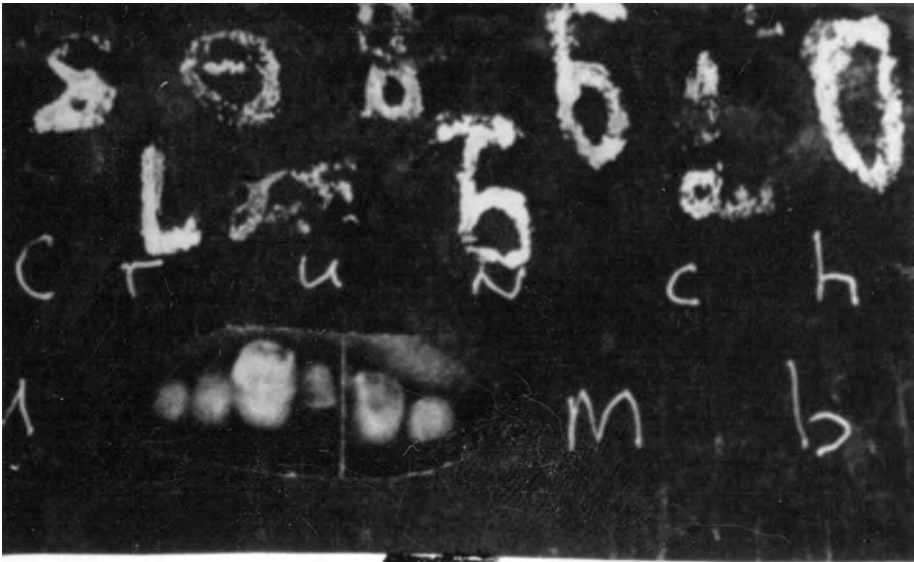
travelling a fuse,
the fuse shrinking.

Smoking Time.

Doing deep breathing
hoping for flashes

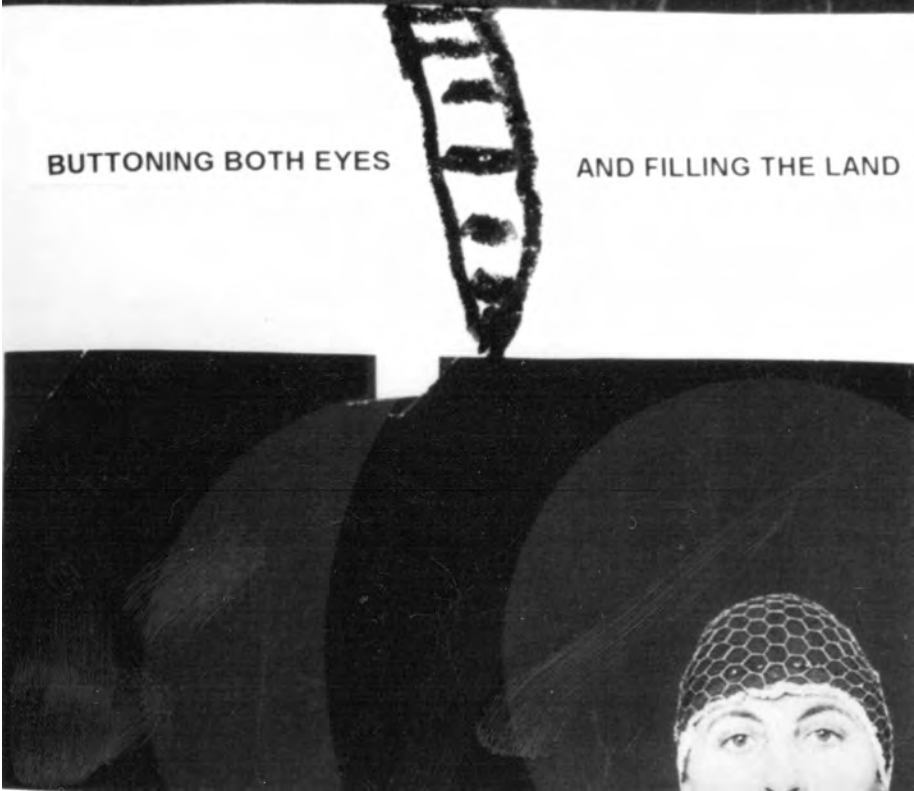
from his deep mine.

Soaking in a marble tub with
the last of the best cigars.

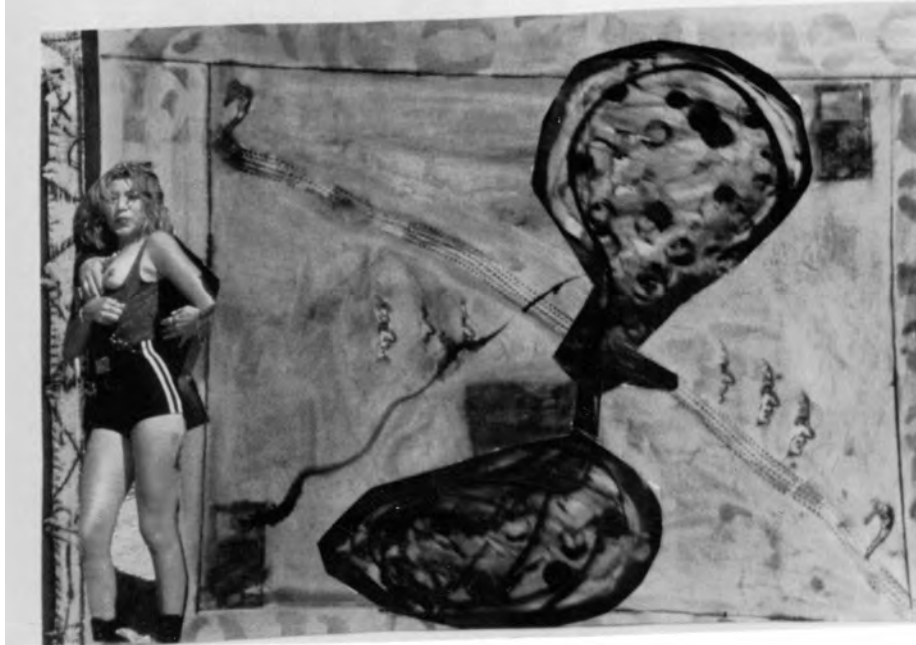
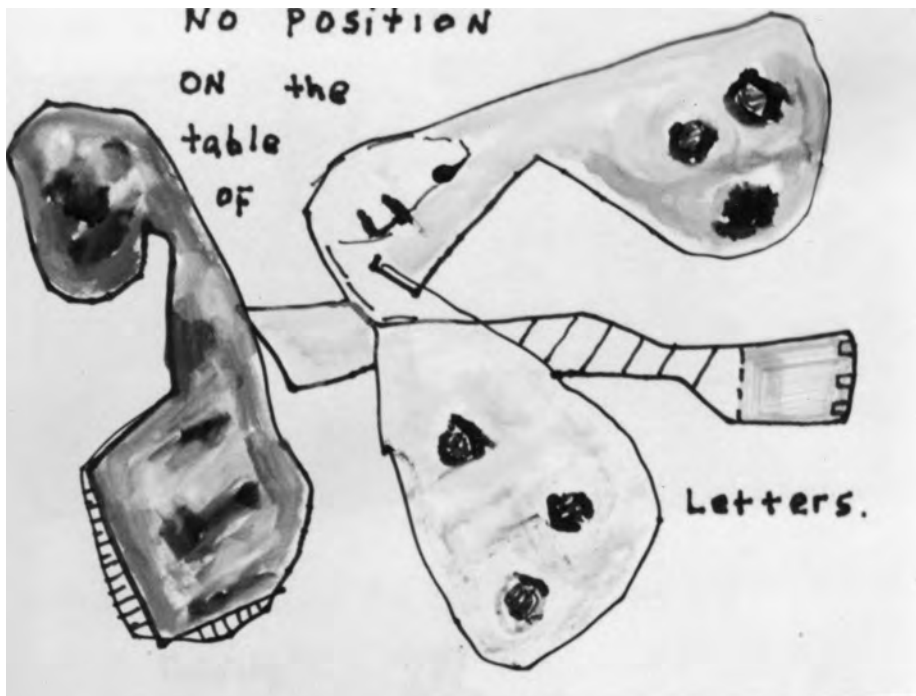


BUTTONING BOTH EYES

AND FILLING THE LAND



Guy R. Beining



CHARLIE MEHRHOFF

FRESH MEAT FOR THE MORNING STAR

Hung trance and overthrown, above the hustle for coin, a soul made sweet with the rumor of flesh. My ears fat with music then lost in those hallways where the selfish reek....now weighed low with bread, riding a gong through the pinholes of some other world. Microscopic fish swim through my pores....this zoom zoom private life. Surrounded by those who would survive me, I wait for asylum by the shadow tree where there is no language, tattoo of some farm implement upon my chest.

And I am sick of slavery in windows, of mock freedom paraded out like candy to the obedient, of white people on the beach like some other place is possible. I am at the end of a long addiction here. Only solution: make myself useful to the state, become a bucket of nails and glue.

Something moves, still good for fucking.

CHARLIE MEHRHOFF

FROM SAVAGE TO THE RINGING OF A BELL

The puppeteer has blossomed into his own hand. For we are the age, the ability: to count each and every hair at the stadium. As the world, confessed with regions, curves beneath the pilot's belly.

We who have been hooked by form, enchanted by mice, reduced to public prayer, tossed by such jubilant debris. We who have been milked by foreign hands, in all too many imitations of the beggar's hand. Hustled by some strange fatigue, we have been trampled down past the very fabric of our knees.

We who with so many lifetimes, each to be the other, with each other, as the other. And to suffer poverty, every hovel of it, so complete. And luxury!

We who gather to assign ourselves achievement, position. We who call what is paid for *asylum*.

CHARLIE MEHRHOFF

I DO NOT ASK TO BE BLESSED

I ask for the strength to hold the blessing.

I do not write.

I merely trace what pieces of the language
that seem to want to darken up the page.

I extend my hand,
a perch,
not for the bird
but for the music of the bird.

PAUL B. ROTH

WHAT'S UNNOTICED

Subtracted
from time
his days add up
to nothing

his old books
sag deeper
into dimmer light

and waning,
a moon,
just above
the treeline's stones

while offering
each stone
it passes
a new face of light
and shadow,

rises as though
nothing it touches
ripples
from its passing

or blends in
so well
with a hidden
rabbit's twitch there

PAUL B. ROTH

CAUGHT UP

When
no longer
a boy,
he falls in love

She wears
the strapless
gown
of a full moon

Her hair flowers
with loose strands
of heat lightning

Her breasts
swelling
with soft fires

turn his tears
into salve the way
an unseen
winged insect

pushes off
a maple leaf
flinching
without wind

PAUL B. ROTH

ALL THIS FOR

Mending
field stones
from an ice-
ruptured wall

he uncovers
a nest
from last winter
retaining

seed husks
skeletal leaf beds
shriveled pods
bits of string

and right then
he begins to feel
the emptiness
of things

and how it's not
just reborn
in the middle
of one's life

but at
its very end
where nothing
quite like it
belongs

PAUL B. ROTH

ORIGINS

Such
a small part
of all
that's happened,

his speck of skin,
hidden
in the confines
of a universe

begins
taking shape
from itself

when its spark
of a brain
thinking it's thinking
its first thought

is no more
than an eye
poked
through an opening

and pointing
without blinking
at its first ever moon

PAUL B. ROTH

COMFORTS

Night,
what lengthens starlight

Sleep,
his last resort

Dreams,
his vacation from time

The moon,
his last place on earth



The Poet Spiel: *The Kiss*

THE POET SPIEL

COUCH THING

Old Ritz lies on Robert's crotch. He growls at his own bad dreams, wriggles, scratches vigorously at his groin, then curls back into na-na land. Robert's big screen is turned up full blast. He hollers at Juanita whenever he wants something. Right now he wants her to know he "don't b'lieve in murder a children less 'n when the little fuckers is got a knife ta thur kin's throat."

The five o'clock news is on. A blonde child has been abducted from her bed while her younger brother watches. Not good enough for Robert. He surfs channels till he finds a fluorescent orange explosion. YES! His tool belt remains slung over the arm of the couch right where he tossed it after he was booted from his last job almost six weeks ago for trying to jump a teenaged girl who was flirting with the carpenters.

He's been thinking about sharpening his Philip's head screwdrivers. He's about out of weed and wishes Len and Mike would show up. They always have a little extra to spare.

Juanita is in the kitchen grinding pork shoulder. Her little red radio blasting her troubles away. Mama's Dawson's precious porcelain tea set chatters on the tin knickknack shelf. She's listening to Faith Hill — wishing her own hair was true blonde. Wishing the brow beneath her bangs did not look and feel like wetsopped rough-out rawhide. Wishing Robert was not slouching around home seven days a week. Better yet wishing Robert had never happened at all.

She whistles for Ritz. He comes in a dash. She feeds him a few scraps of gristle. The two of them exchange bare tongue licks. She wishes she had a man who was as grateful as Ritz but reckons this is just too much to ask at this time in her life.

She's sweaty in a cold kitchen with the oven on and it just doesn't make sense. She's tired. Real tired. She's plumb used up.

Robert comes to his senses just long enough to realize Ritz is gone from his lap. He's pissed. Ritz is *his* dog. Ritz keeps *his* crotch warm. This fucking trailer is as cold as the bottom of Lake Walla about half the time. Somebody better get her cunt in gear and get the propane bill paid. Robert

re-lights a useless stub roach – sucks on it like fresh new pussy – or... pretends it's how he *might* suck new pussy. Fat chance!

He hollers for Ritz. Ritz joins him smelling like juicy pork. Robert slobbers all over the smoldering roach as it creeps up a cavernous black one-and-a-half-inch burn at the center of a magnolia in the florid pattern of the gold-and-rust-colored, dogpiss-blotched fabric of their flea market couch.

Juanita turns the burners to high – leaves them flaring as a beacon for what she hasn't had the gall to just scrap.

She takes her own sweet time moseying out to the mailbox.

She hates the tall dry weeds all around the trailer. That bastard promised six months ago he wouldn't let them happen again this year. They are a gawldang fire hazard.

She finds a longing letter from Justin. He's living in Austin now.

Gawwwd.

It's been twenty-seven years since she's seen him. Almost twenty to the day since she last got word of him.

It must have taken a lot of guts for him to contact her.

The back tires on the pooped-out Chevy wagon need air.

Austin's not more than a day-and-a-half away.

Ritz joins her thoughts.

The road is a warm place.

THE POET SPIEL

SLIM LIGHT

You been in this room before: Last time in Denver when you had to scrape and grind ice off your rearview mirror and they made good on their promise to leave a light on for you. But this trip the light is not on. And this time you forgot they don't give you extra pillows—not even if you offer to pay for them—so you're lucky you've got Gracie's wallowing cushion to haul in from the back of the cab: chewed up foam, dog hair and all, so you've got something to brace up your miserable hips; then you waste one of their skimpy face towels to ditch the puzzling syrupy bronze-colored crud on the vanity.

You smoke a lot. Entertain yourself imagining this dull room orange and up in flames. The carpet and flimsy bedspread are already dashed with two-inch crusty scars left behind by smokers and tokers who've fallen asleep with live ash at their toasted throats. You're especially careful to snap your butts in twos as you knock off a half pack of Marlboros—actually contemplate quitting cause your lungs're so scratchy. You surf channels till you bump into a classic black-and-white Brando flick cause you can't sleep because you miss your broke-in pillows. Your intent to do some night-writing in this favorite kind of neutral zone is futile so you blow it off at five a.m.—not so much as a scratch on your yellow legal pad.

So...half-dopey from this worthless all-night squirm, you dawdle next door to Denny's where you spend an hour slurping hard coffee to see you all the way back home.

Rhonda gives you a free large coke in an insulated cup for the road. You tip her a buck-fifty cause she's been so gawddam attentive with re-fills so early in the morning, plus, she coughs like she's about to croak from it's-a-hard-life-therapy-smoking and she's made you care about her kids. But you wonder if it's really true that all three of them are afflicted with multiple sclerosis.

As you split for home, you back up your truck—real slow—still uncertain about focusing your new tri-focals in your rearview mirror. You think you've hit a speed bump, but truth is, you've crushed the skinny body of the three-year-old girl who, just moments ago, had been sassing her mom about the ugly color of ribbons on her pretty blonde braids.

The kid'd been right outside the door of your room as you packed your

bag with the three nifty re-cycled two-dollar-and-fifty-cent mod shirts you'd picked up at the Goodwill Store for Val. And the roll of snapshots of the hideous new addition to the Denver Art Museum, plus at least yesterday's twenty pages of notes for new poems about how the city is turning to crap since you'd lived here many years ago. And three leftover inedible crusty chocolate donuts from the motel dispenser. And of course, all your psychotropic med bottles alphabetically lined up in your blonde-wood Martha Stewart recipe box.

«««—»»»

They don't let you watch movies where you are now.

These days you just replay that shiny skin of his—so delicious you want to lick it. Slick young stud—Brando—BrandoBrando Brando—damn that fucker was smooth. How he said:

i could a been somebody.

That loop never ends: you coulda been somebody youcouldabeen somebody...

You could a been...shit! What a gallant nose that bastard had, and he did become somebody—hhh!—a tragic fat dead guy—he **did** become somebody.

They don't let much sunlight in where you are now.

Winter's same as summer.

But they leave the lights on all the time.

Val always made you turn the lights out.

Rhonda writes to you.

CRAIG SHAY

ACTRESS ON A STAGE

She closes her eyes, inhaling the stares of the paranoid audience.
She stands, like a mannequin whispering prayers to artificial lights.
She opens her eyes and screams because all she sees outside is the war.
She looks into the audience and sees no witchdoctors to cure them of their
black hearts.

She holds a woman in the front row hostage by gunpoint.
She stares at softly treading shadows on the theater wall.
She lights a copy of the *New York Times* on fire.
She spreads the ashes from her mother's urn onto the crowd.
She reenacts a torture scene and lies on the stage for twenty minutes
weeping.

She takes a hit of angeldust, and mimes a sex act.
She removes her clothes, standing naked for the critics.
She throws off her underwear and invites everyone onstage to fondle her.
When she combs her hair, pennies fall out.
She holds her head back to stop a nosebleed, a result of her overdose
of psychotropic drugs.

She dresses like a bag lady and complains how the US Government
trained and funded Osama Bin Laden in the 80's.
She shaves her head and pretends the clumps are her dead children.
She throws the pawns from a chessboard into the balcony.
She tells the audience they can protect themselves from the government by
purchasing giant flyswatters and garlic.

She says every vote in a presidential election is a vote for Béla Lugosi.
She tells the audience the cemetery where she wants to be buried, is in their
eyes.

She listens to their breathing, and dances to the silence.
She sits at the piano and reads sheet music written by John Cage.
She gives birth to the music of an empty asylum.
She leaves the theater to humiliate herself for a subway fare,
cheating the system for a memory of infancy.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Friendship*

SMOKING

One winter in Montreal when I was ten, I would often find myself so wide-awake about an hour or so before daybreak that I could not bear to spend another moment in bed and I would go and wake up Babette, so that we could have a smoke together.

Babette never seemed to mind being roused so early. She was a French Canadian Catholic girl from Nova Scotia. During the depression a lot of girls left their homes to come to Montreal to find work. My mother had hired her as a live-in maid six months ago. She slept on a sofa in the kitchen which was next door to my bedroom.

Babette was the most fastidious person I had ever met, even compared to my mother who was neatness itself. Every night after washing the dinner dishes, Babette would be at the ironing board steam-pressing her things by placing a soft damp cloth under the iron—a lace dickey or a detachable organdy collar, her white cotton crocheted gloves or her small white linen handkerchiefs with the initials BL entwined in one corner. Babette Leduc.

One time, it was barely dawn, we were sitting, Babette and I, on a piano bench in front of my bedroom window. A sharp peppery odor emanated from Babette's feet. It was an odor I'd gotten used to during these sessions but it never ceased to surprise me that for someone as fussy about her appearance as Babette, she didn't seem to be aware of her smelly feet.

Holding my father's Sweet Caporal cigarette gingerly between my thumb and forefinger as I'd seen my father do, I leaned towards the lit match in Babette's hand. My mother loved to smoke as well, but because of her migraine headaches she had been told by her doctor not to. She sneaked one occasionally but after school I invariably found her in the living room lying on the sofa with a wet napkin across her forehead, her eyes closed, her feet in neatly laced shoes resting on a towel.

I inhaled some smoke instead of holding it in my mouth for a second or two as Babette had recommended and began to choke.

"Shhhh!" warned Babette, shaking my arm roughly. "You will wake them!"

I watched, through teary eyes as the last of the smoke issued from my lips; in the shadowy room it appeared like a veil of grey chiffon drifting away in a breeze.

"There were very many cigarettes in the package?" Babette asked.
"No," I answered.

"You must be careful or your father will notice. Then where will we be?"

"He doesn't notice things," I said. "He's absent-minded." My words were an exact replica of my mother's.

Babette, I surmised, was too poor to buy her own cigarettes. I never saw her smoke except with me. She struck another match and lit her cigarette and her delicate profile materialized in the light from the flame. Everyone agreed that Babette was an extraordinarily pretty girl and husbands of people who came to visit my mother often hung around the kitchen and engaged Babette in conversation.

"Where did you find them this time, the cigarettes?" she asked, smoke streaming from her nostrils. Babette smoked like a professional.

"In his jacket pocket, his right hand pocket." I shivered in my cotton chenille bath-robe. "I wish they'd hurry up and turn on the heat," I said.

"It is almost six o'clock. Soon they will turn it on." She turned to me. "Why don't you get your quilt?" she asked. She herself was snugly wrapped in a blanket. I stood up and got my quilt and sat down again.

We puffed in companionable silence for an interval and stared out the window into the winter night. A few large flakes of snow began to fall, spiraling slowly from above. Below a snow-filled field, smooth, intact, untouched, glimmered whitely in the dark. On the other side, parallel to it, ran Van Horn Avenue. It was deserted now, flickering in the uneven street lights.

The somber fading darkness, the soft-falling snow, the emptiness of the street across the way filled me with a kind of awe as if I were in on some secret of the night.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked Babette.

"But of course."

"What's he like? God?"

"He is our Jesus who loves us all," Babette replied.

"I don't believe in Jesus," I said.

"Mon Dieu, how do you know what you believe. You are still a baby."

"I'm ten years old. That's not a baby. Besides, my mother doesn't believe in Jesus."

"Vraiment?"

"And my father doesn't believe in Jesus," I added.

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes."

"Alors?"

"I don't believe in Jesus either."

Babette shrugged and was silent.

I took in a mouthful of smoke without inhaling and blew it out slowly. I

found myself remembering a night the previous autumn when, fearful that one of my parents might discover me in, to them, an unacceptable posture of submission to the unknown, I had kneeled beside my bed and had begged God to leave me a sign of his existence by positing a maple leaf on my window sill.

In the morning the sill was bare.

“Babette—?”

“Oui.”

“Did you always believe in God?”

“But yes. Always.”

“From the day you were born?”

Babette paused. “I suppose,” she said.

“From the very first second?” I persisted.

“Mon Dieu, how can one say? You are always so full of questions. It is no good for a girl to be so full of questions.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why, why!” Babette was getting exasperated.

There passed another prolonged silence during which I saw a solitary muffled figure, bowed over as though against a strong current of wind, go by the candy store on the Van Horn Avenue and disappear at the corner of Stuart.

“I wonder where he’s going,” I said.

“Who?” asked Babette.

“That man I just saw out there.”

“How do you know it was a man?” she said, and, without waiting for my answer, she added, “I suppose he is going to his job.” She sighed as if at the prospect, and put one leg across her knee.

The proximity of her right foot brought the tart peppery smell closer to me.

“What sort of job do you think he has to have to go to work so early?” I asked.

“How can I know?”

Babette put her cigarette in the saucer on the windowsill. Then leaning forward, she took her foot into her hands and began to massage it.

“Does your foot hurt?” I asked.

Babette didn’t answer.

Outside the night was melting into a milky dawn. Large flakes of snow, all seemingly the same size, equally spaced, were falling the way they do sometimes, straight down like stones, curtaining the dripping window.

There was a howl of wind. The white flakes suddenly changed direction and became almost horizontal. Then, in a moment or two, just as abruptly, they scattered madly in another gust of wind and became vertical again, the parallel lines so close they sent a pale blur of light into the room.

I glanced at Babette. She was slightly turned in my direction. Her profile was indistinct now against the light pink wall. I saw the glisten of her

eyes and I suddenly had the curious notion that Babette and I were the only people awake in the entire world.

A spark flew from my cigarette. Babette put her foot down and leaning on her hands, peered at the floor.

"You are making a mess," she said, and added fretfully, "you are too young to smoke. Your mama will kill me if she discovers it." She pulled her blanket more tightly about her, sighed, picked up her cigarette and placed it once again between her lips.

I looked back at the window. It was beginning to steam up.

"The heat's coming on," I said. I bent over to touch the metal radiator. "It's getting warm," I said.

"Voila," Babette answered absently. She squashed her cigarette stub into the saucer and yawned.

I tried to rub the steam off the window with my left hand but the glass was frosting over and my hand stuck to it. A shock of icy pain shot through me.

"Ow!" I said.

Babette gave me a brief glance.

I sat on my hand and watched for a while as the frost expanded slowly into delicately veined feathery shapes.

"Babette," I said, pointing to the frost. "Look how beautiful it is!"

Babette extracted another cigarette from my father's package of Sweet Caporals. She struck a match against the radiator. Now a violent blast of wind smashed against the window, rattling it frenziedly. Suddenly the wind stopped leaving a fresh layer of soft wet snow on the pane. In minutes the layer was thick enough to obliterate everything outside and permeate the room with a pale, unearthly light.

I glanced at Babette. The smoke from her cigarette hid part of her face. She appeared vague, like a ghost.

I closed my eyes and took the hand I was sitting on and placed it on my thigh. I was oddly aware of the gentle heat of my body, of my weight resting softly against the piano seat, of the slight pressure of my lips, one against the other and I felt my hand as if it were someone else's hand warming against my thigh. And a certain feeling wrapped me even more closely like the mantle of a dream.

The silence in the room had intensified and became a silence so dense that I imagined no noise would ever penetrate the room again, no vibration, no breath of air, no reverberations of any kind.

All at once I felt the movement of my heart. It seemed to be quivering in a strange way. Alarmed, I pressed against my chest. No, there it was, a faraway pulse palpitating as usual, on schedule, as immediate, as inexplicable, as miraculous, as the storm raging out there in the wild snowy dawn of a new day.

GUY R. BEINING

AT SEVENTY (10/23/08)

VOICE 1 (alarum)

1. sections of his form fall between pasted portions of night
2. he felt frail in a suit long forgotten
3. he chewed salt taffy while watching atlantic city take off
its wooden legs
4. the sun passes through a phone booth as corporate quotes
light up a billboard
5. the long shadow appeared to indicate a final pause
6. he rolled out of bed like a sad cartoon
7. was his bed a cradle or a coffin?
8. art is the face of a jungle poured thru scrambled lessons
9. all manners of life were reflected in the fork

VOICE 2 (continuum)

1. tumble with templets & ex-queens that box pharaohs
2. dusk churns midair stringing out filaments
3. jumping over the steel pier are dolls cut from currency
4. once having lit up parks he now can only hear gravel close in
5. nostrum in flailed steps to crematorium
6. he buttoned up his face & eyed a headstone
7. a green snake was curled up on the bathroom mat
8. thirteen lines of the blackbird fell from a toothless branch
9. starlight began to mend the back of his head

GUY R. BEINING

ABRIDGED ANGLES III

more light was shed on the growth of the pampered mimic
brittle words were mixed in with kindling & spoke of a narrow past
why breach the concept of turning a painting into a parlor game
the fig turned into a figure that clung to the strippers vortex
between glass buildings shadows became unbalanced
the last sacred day was put on view & was held up by safety pins
when you smear the drama of a dream by waking up
remember that dreams go on without you

the analyst said that

the hole in his head could be

turned into a third eye

it was criminal how his reflection darkened when he was saved

GUY R. BEINING

ARRANGED ANGLES III

the pimple of morning began to burst
in the process of linking ladders yesterday found its own fence
inside the grit of a blackboard equations began to stew
a pink toothpaste completely covered an applied smile
when a group of flies stood still on the sloping wall they looked like nails
the commercial showed how a sofa could be used as a coffin
all the fingerprints spread out & lifted a human wind

the billboard looked

like a huge blockade

effecting all viewers

as it clamped onto tomorrow

in the mirror all the flowerpots looked like a new terraine



Found Photo: *Rasputin*

THOMAS WOLOCH

LONELINESS IS A SIMPLE MELODY

Loneliness is a simple melody. You've hummed it yourself a few times during long walks and in empty restaurants, on quiet evenings and winter afternoons. A few stray notes will drift down the hall like dust motes in the yellow light, and you pick up the tune unconsciously, your breath giving shape to the empty air, twisting the air, sending it back out again.

Sometimes late at night when the stars alone are your companions, gazing down upon you through the drifting silvered clouds, you hear the melody, like a distant train whistle or the hoot of an owl, and you nod your head knowingly in the darkened room. And you begin to hum.

Other times you hear the muffled laughter from a neighbor's apartment, you stand, you take a few steps away from the awesome sound, you leave a momentary hollow in the cushion of the chair.

And a few notes of the ultimate solo come to mind again.

Loneliness is a simple melody. You already know it. Like the beating of your heart or the slow ebb and flow of your breathing, you have always known the melody.

This morning, sipping tea as the wind tickled the windowpane into a rattling jig dance, I heard the melody in the distance, a bare tickle at the far side of the wind, and then it rolled in closer, like a gathering breath or the parting of curtains, and it bumped lightly against the thin glass beside me, and I realized the melody was not outside of me but in my own throat, a low sound, fragile and raw. And there in the kitchen alone, I began to hum to myself in the harsh electric light.

And another day began.

THOMAS WILLOCH

THE SOFT MADNESS OF HER SILHOUETTE

Black snow fell as the house closed all its doors. She stepped through the pale hallway like a reflection in a mirror, rippling in distant tremors. The stars in her eyes burned with secret medicine; her beautiful hands were silent white birds.

I followed her up stairways, down halls, through room after tragic stone room until all the mirrors were emptied, until all the angels were drained of light and hung motionless in the still air.

My hands, washed in moonlight, burned with a sacred flame. My mouth formed languages I had only heard in dreams.

She smiled at me, and in that smile I saw the galaxies we held between us with glass hands, the migration of hollow faces we used to be. I called to her, reached to her, but she stepped into a mirror and disappeared like the echoing chimes of evening bells.

Now even the silence of her memory is a form of prayer. Even the soft madness of her silhouette.

THOMAS WILLOCH

HER TONGUE IS A MAGICAL INSTRUMENT

Her tongue is a magical instrument run lightly over his closed eyes like a clairvoyant wind over a blue mirror. She whispers incense dreams into his ear, nibbles his ear, opens the womb of her hand to cup his cheek, stroke the taut skin. With a sharp needle she finds the vein in her wrist and bleeds on his forehead, smears the blood with her fingertips into crude icons. She arranges the hairs on his chest into the nameless scripture of her dreams. She bends his fingers into cryptic sculptures, folds his arms across his chest as if he is a sleeping bird flying into himself. His genitals are the remnants of a vanished, wild civilization washed upon a shore. She sprinkles rose petals over them. His legs stretch out like twin disciples of a stubborn god. She crosses them, sticks silver needles into each blue toe. The white doves of her hands explore the nuances of his body as if searching for brail clues to the silent geometry of his death. When she finally lays her head upon his cold chest and falls asleep, snow falls into her dreams, humble moons rise on the staircase of her spinal column.

In the morning her eyes will open like innocent mirrors to accept the new day. She will drop each page of her memory and step lightly into the air, rising over the cold, blighted landscape of his body like a newborn satellite drifting slowly into an orbit she only now can see. An orbit that will circle him until the end of time.

JOHN GOODE

THE POSSESSED

She was made of dice and black mascara
and she roamed the streets in a cocktail napkin.

She was no lover. She hated nearly everything:
billboards, strollers, iced tea, mutual funds.

She had a mouth like a sword fight,
all curses and water and clashing teeth.

When she pissed the electricity went out
in three apartments.

On nights of extreme ecstasy
she was labeled a heretic by passing monks
who tortured pillowcases dreaming of her
Rabelaisian thighs.

The streetlights held her in staged awe
and cars roared around her dripping oil.

When she cut her hair
fiends raided hospitals for signatures
and young poets swore into their scarves.

Her skin was like the breathing snow
alley cats lick to slake their newspaper throats.

She worked as a waitress beneath the Republican
penthouses that stalked the night with flat screen eyes.

She was in love with a man who sold the dimple in his chin
and wore wristwatches with electric pentagrams inside.

She bartered for fruit in the farmer's market
and her eyes suffered like starving bellies -
I could see the ribcages in her mind.

It isn't easy, nothing ever is, she told me one day,
as we shared a cigarette above the grenade hatchings.

I could almost hear the seams in her delirium unsnapping,
minute by minute, the way she hungered for a boat
was nearly obscene. *Escape, escape*, she whispered
like a litany.

JOHN GOODE

ARRIVAL

Once upon a time
I was a sperm.

I had a tail and an idea.

I wanted mastiff teeth
and oxygen.

I wanted black hooves
and fur.

I wanted to press like a star
through a hole in the ether.

I wanted to build a heartbeat
out of bloodthirsty crayons and catcher's mitts.

I wanted a tongue so I could taste
the brine and swell of a woman's body.

Once upon a time
I idled in the bloodstream of my father

when he was thinking of a simple house
with a kitchen

where he could read the newspaper
and nothing could touch him.

I shot out of the dream in his flesh,
a bodiless hallucination of the sun.

I swam through Paleozoic coral
with a genetic treasure in my little sack.

I conquered the armies of Mongols
and Napoleans.

There was much blood and laughter.

I roasted the skins of dinosaurs
on bark-covered spits.

I shined a light out of the cave.
I made a signal on the wall.
I carved electricity into the moss.

The sun was already full of burning bicycles
and tin anthropoids who sweat through
the re-runs on sewer lids.

But I didn't know that yet.

I covered myself in ram's wool
and beat a path.

I spent eons
firing up the wheel.

I rolled through the temple
slinging tambourines over my head.

The moon was my first thought.

I dreamed the bats in its eyes
and the prayers it was made of.

I rode a wooden ship across the ocean
with the empty stomachs of my grandfathers.

I pushed through jungles of mysterious sap
with a screaming empire in my veins.

I shot mythologies out of the clouds.

They showered down in glistening shards
that melted on the heat of me.

I pulsed and lulled beneath the pink raindrops that fell
from the ceilings of ovaries.

I picked up an accent before I could speak.

When I crawled out of the sea
my eyes were blue.

Some medical prodigy held me up by the ankles
and said, "Look, its a boy."

UNEMPLOYED

these late night gods
have hair
that explodes from a tiny thought
and on the tip of each lilting bud
a bee licks itself blind
our books are read
written on the traffic of Western Avenue
“your insanity,” I say,
“is the beginning of misery.”
that mouth is a hole
I can’t feed with the drunken
cock ramblings of a health care worker
going for his P.H.D.
in zombie prescriptions
who told everyone he came in her mouth
so loud it hurt
the bartender was milk
and a puffy white blouse
she said we were all her children
I wasn’t even there
I was a deer
the same one I’ve always been
I wore a hat
made of cotton and vanity
I was listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd feed
something so nomadic and impossible
to the child I wanted to be
again
but my old boss grew a mustache of opium
and my paychecks which rotted up his sleeve
caused me to understand that hatred
has a monetary value
so I hated

MEAGHAN RUSSELL

FLIGHT SPECTRA

Where bees careen the dam,
swagger-dipping into lemongrass,
white is a

steep drop
whisking meringue to the water's
waiting lip—where
tendrils writhe

green
amphetamine deep—where
I near my

spilling
like sight chases the ceiling fan to
whip a blade of
halo,
color is motion

on froth wings
bees
dance six
dimensions lemon
in the grass

DAVID LAWRENCE

MARXIST GREED

The skeleton of your speech is the death of your mind.

You blow it out your bones like it mattered.

It doesn't.

It is nonsensical marrow.

You are a dead head.

Not the Grateful Dead but the mindlessness of belief

In communism's weeds and daisies.

You think that equal pay has the spirituality of religion

And that employment is some kind of altar.

The economic basis of intellect

Is non-existent.

Marxists are bourgeois like the mafia—

It is all financial,

Bling,

Nouveau ostentation flaunting its absent value.

The mob does hits for dead presidents.

Stalin killed millions and put the corpses in coin rolls.

DAVID LAWRENCE

LONG ISLAND ROAD

I visit your face but it isn't there.
There is just a blank smiling at me like a streak
Of amusement.
I have come from the hinterland
To the interior
But still can't get the satisfaction of your love.
You are holding back.
You tuck your affections into a ball
Which becomes a rock
Which you throw through my window
In a mad attempt to destroy my suburbs.
There is a note attached to the rock—
"Go fuck yourself."
I will.
I trust a bird in the hand more than one in the bush.
Why should I share my satisfaction with a stranger?
I have a driveway.
My family has two cars.
I am getting out of here before I am paved
Into a Long Island road.

ROBERT PRINGLE

PRE-MORTEM FOR A WHORE

When KANDI KULTUR
 walks the streets,
 she's a woman
who brooks no Allusions.
 Her hair a venereal black,
 loose in the sense of . . .
blue skin a lace, smoky as

Green eyes; lips full,
 coat of red wax.
 Hard stare,
hint of multiple affects;
 fixed sneer
 an aspect of her Look.
Undulating body type,
 evidence of Cooper's
 Droop (nipples below
fifth intercostal space).

Nose retains primary function.
 Obvious the wear
 on patellar cartilage;
the plantar breakdowns.
 Pelvic girdle spread
 to Illusions
men conceive. Hands hold "come
 hither" reflex.
 Heart a callous of proud flesh.
Flat-line persona.

Brain presents Delusions
 without benefit
 of Past or Future.

ROBERT PRINGLE

BIG APPLE HIGH RISE BLUES

Rhythms of a Day . . . Manhattan
 downbeat from desert brownstones,
 ottoman empire . . .
wail pop-energy daydream heat,
 (neon pawnshop glare)
grow Grand Central background gig,
 (neon duckpin glare)
riff kick-litter streets while yardsmiles
 taste wrought iron,
 (neon dime-a-dance glare)

glide through sweltering noise,
 banter in haze at midday café,
wash down stale melody as tables sweat
 from tumblers, flirt

See Me . . . See You with voice of eyes
 that sail our lips, glance
our cheeks past moorings of tenement,
 breeze out pure tone
 of caress, curve cool

whispers past improv of vaults stacked
 on piers, breath burning
 in lights at sunset
blend our separate chords of wave and tide
 in counterpoint ballad
swaying to absolute pitch of the sea.

MICHAEL SHORB

AFGHANISTAN

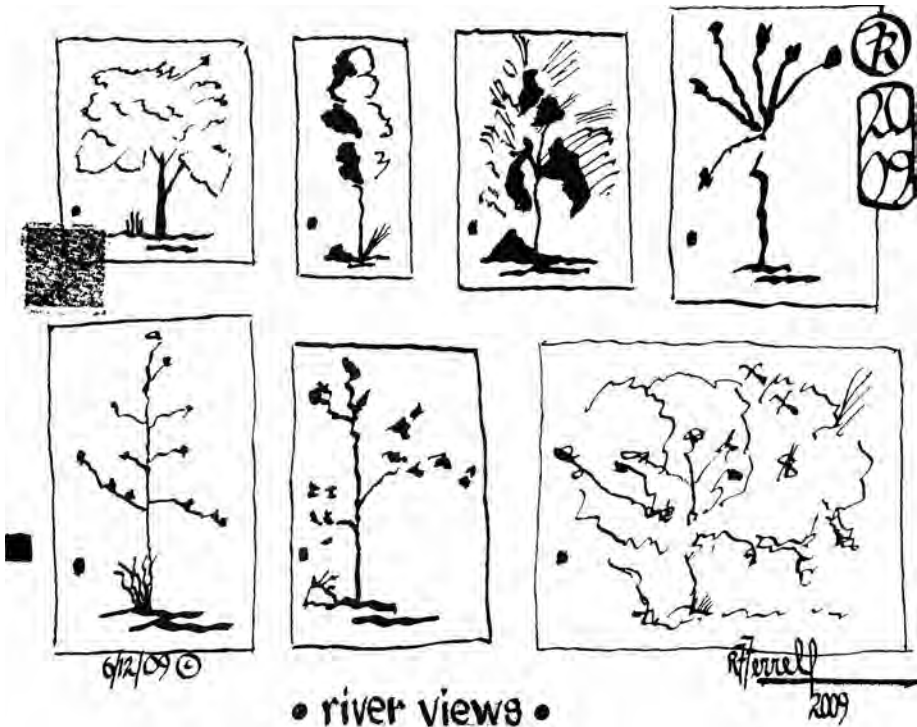
Fresh disasters loom
suddenly as swerving
suicide trucks,
a blast stirs the sludge
of past disappointments:
Kipling's regimental colors
are withdrawn, the roar of
Russian tanks fades
into rocky silence.

No freedom grows here
where only warlords and their
armies of orange poppies
and ten-foot pot
plants prosper.

Your 21st Century might is reduced
to a sideshow attraction:
a man catching
burning coals in his mouth,
desperately striving to suck
the fire into submission
before his beard ignites.

Afghanistan.

The shadow men from
the fourteenth century
are back, riding their
Toyota pickups into twilight,
defiant, time on their side,
wrapped in black
flags and suicide belts,
only the eyes visible.



R.F. Ferrell: *River Views*

MICHAEL SHORB

PLANET SUNBURN

It becomes a joke before
we even understand it,
relegated to a kingdom
of cliché:

the whole global warming thing—
it's that moment speeding
down a mountain road
when you realize
the brakes are gone,
when you swim over and past
the shark net barrier
into darkening water—

the other morning in southern
Australia koalas staggered
onto public highways
in 120 degree heat,
begging passing humans for water—

the air crackled with heat
even after a flood of crows
rode the sun to the rim of distance—

as though nature was just joking around,
all those species about to go
extinct or insane only theoretical,
nothing to dry the moisture from your fields,
drain the animals from forests
and fish from the sea—

and you, every once
in a while, could just
write a check
or watch a special on PBS,
making everything all right.

Notice

bodice

entice

malice

splice

device

pumice

slice



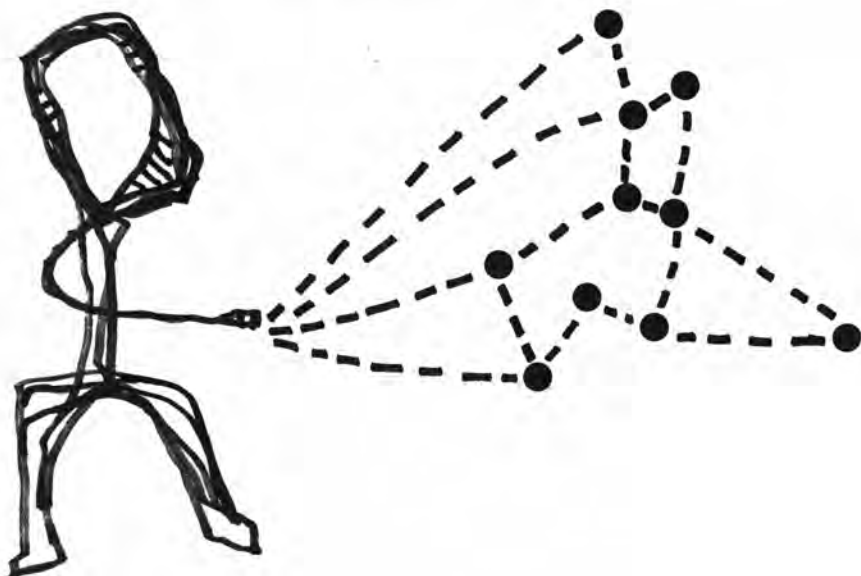
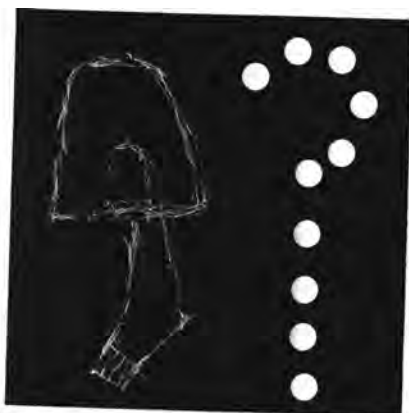
Guy R. Beining: *Notice Bodice*

oarrest 18

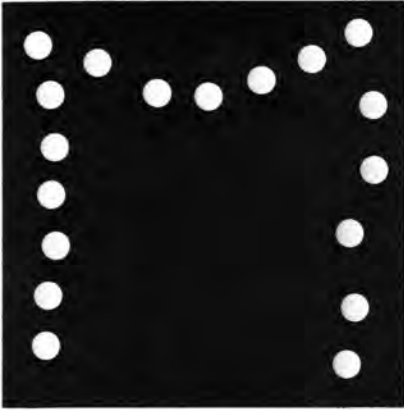
the arrow jammed past

hand into muck of earth

tasting green shoots.

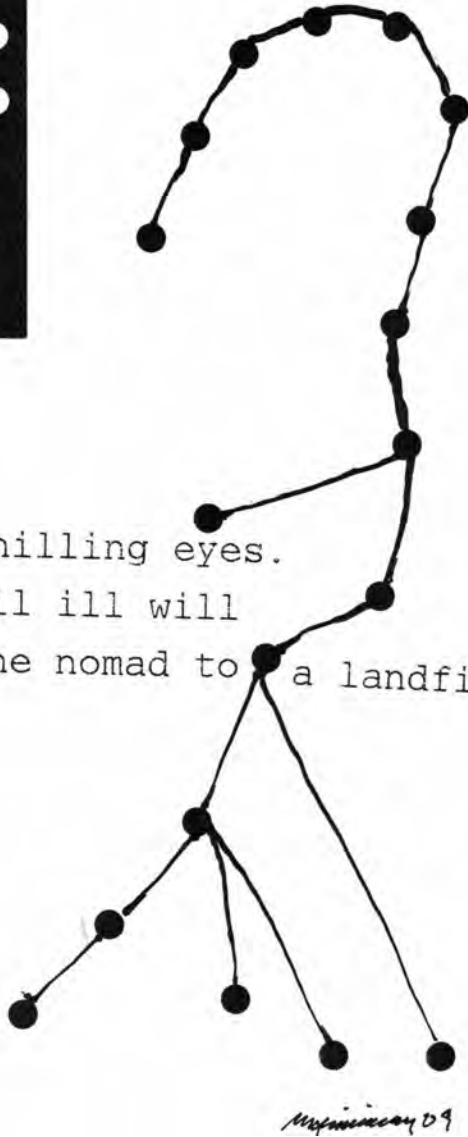


Guy R. Beining: *Oarrest 18*



oarrest 20

mug shot caught chilling eyes.
 he said, i'll spill ill will
 having followed the nomad to a landfill



Guy R. Beining: Oarrest 20

CATHERINE SASANOV

THE MAMMY BELL

For their own self-esteem and place in history, southern whites who had owned slaves and defended slavery... became obsessed with the need to revise the past to serve the present. That revision, by the turn of the century, had taken on the dimensions of an extraordinarily popular and ritualistic white nostalgia, featuring merchandised caricatures... of the slaves and the racial utopia in which they had allegedly thrived.

Trouble In Mind by Leon Litwack

Cold-Cocked

What was it like waking up
sixty years out of bondage

in a slave quarters built
on Memory Lane? Reborn

fully grown, sewn
into garments,

midwifed on nostalgia-
driven hands.

A little scrap of Jim Crow
priced to toss into luggage,

take back to Illinois –

*Did my grandma call you
Souvenir?*

Did she grab you

*around the waist
to hear*

*the ball and chain
beneath your skirt?*

Full Metal Petticoat

Behold,

the only black woman
other

than Aunt Jemima

grandma let
inside her house.

Who didn't cook, no,
who never tried to beat

the Old South

drowsing
in its batter. Eighty years

in that house,
not slave,

not servant,
but stationed at the right

hand of the father: starched

apron, blue-check
gingham dress. The serious

business of her breasts
caressed

by bandoliers of lace. Legless

black girl grandma bought
in Georgia,

1925. Raw cotton bleeding

white-sheet dreams inside her red

bandana'd head.

Black Collectibles

Southern

Bell – The difference
a final *e* would make

can't be lost on a woman
well-hung
with a clapper,

the hands that gutted
temptation
from between her thighs,

skewered her on wood.

Mine's one more hand
slipped up her skirt,

the gawk at what was once

her going price
still stamped on her behind:

19¢

Nine dollars
and eighty-one cents
less

than the woman
my great-great grandpa sold
in 1863,

the one who,
having ceased to be

his goose
that once laid golden eggs –

\$800 daughters
\$1000 sons –

that one, his Flora
finely

crippled up, worn down

after fifty years of service.
Who wasn't freed

upon the master's death

but priced
the equivalent of his coffin.

How does one bear
the flexibility

forced on
a sixty-year-old woman

until she fits
inside a white man's wallet?

And what should I do
to bear her shadow, *so*

desirable now,
so sure to appreciate

in value ? This nostalgia

I inherit –
The hand-stitched

lips
sewn hard
against her face,

against the gorge
of cotton batting

rising in her throat.

CATHERINE SASANOV

CALL AND RESPONSE:

THE AUTHOR INVOKES THE SLAVE OWNER'S DAUGHTER

Great-Grandmother, Nannie Elizabeth Steele, 1863-1940

Did voices smear against the windows?
Words ball up, breaking glass?

Yes, but never hurled this direction.

Did you let your daughters out to walk
the lynch mob's ragged edge –

Two girls toying with the fringe, their brothers
deeper in the weave?

Would it be screaming,
necks & rope,
or smoke that drove them home?

Dead men tangled in their hair: Burnt men twisting in their skirts.

Did you count

Three.

None of whom your father owned?

What would he say?

With him long gone, did you lose track
how much a human being's worth?

What *would* he say?

If they're young men, why not just burn at least a couple thousand dollars.

That old, old man. His cold, clear eye—

All nostalgia & appraise.

I've held the mourning broach
he surfaced in
at the soft throat of his wife.

Her talisman.

A memory so fleshed out—

Ex-slaves knew: avert your eyes.

FRANCINE WITTE

SUMMER MEETS WINTER IN A BAR

*What are you drinking?
Summer wants to know.
I am all parched
landscapes and raspy cactus.*

*I don't need drinks, Winter
shoots back. I am already
chill and ice. He coughs,
and somewhere the wind howls.*

*Come back to my place,
Summer smiles, sweet heat
breath and lazy drawl.
See if you can quench
me with your cool darkness.*

*Winter leans in, listen, he says,
I have scraped the face off of mountains,
trapped fish under the frozen water skin.*

*He snuggles a scarf around him, Now
I'm going out. I need to blow
some ice across the surface of the moon.
You be sure to wait here till I get back.*

GARY LEE JOHNSTON

SONG BETWEEN MANY GRASSES, MANY CAMDENS

These are birds who follow the deer to their torn-down cities. These are scraps of birds who live out beyond the fenceline. These are children who fall asleep at the darkest frostbite party in Davenport and wake up in the cirrhosis of Lake Michigan. These are towns haunted by the soft gore of Christmas lights. These are men who've stopped listening to drive-by shootings for a way out of winter. These are foster kids who pray to the matches they're eating for each other. These are photographs of the songs they've ruined.

These are men paid to move cities to a different angle of sunlight. These are other men of other places who've lost arguments with the nearest parts of their bodies. These are presidents who survive the crude drawings of hunger and pneumonia. These are the whispered armies who can't find the place where someone is always writing about them. These are mongrels who sleep like rivers. These are blind lamps whose bibles are broken. These are men who drink until they reach a darkness like Chicago.

These are pigeons whose plumage, no matter how silent, can no longer be trusted. These are adolescents who measure the depth of their shadows with a knife sharpened on a face that doesn't hurt. These are the ones who hate everything, the ones who've written maps for others to find them years into their anger. These are women who weep with one word that's been emptied and returned to the one who destroyed it. These are ambulance drivers who cut seagulls from the sheets of lake effect shelters beneath Gary, Indiana. These are storm journalists who cannot sleep until summer reaches at least one of them.

These are men who think they can help the dying trees by taking their pictures and screaming at them every night until the wind that's gone forever reminds them how cold it's gotten. These are unknown animals who move like tall grasses. These are trees who copy the intelligence of leaves that fall and never find the ground. These are inspectors who know which houses are made from the intestines of children and which houses are stolen from a prohibited day of rest.

These are the flannel smiles of a gunshot that will never catch up to the days written back in 1994. These are boys who do not move on, do not move on, do not move on. These are men who share their Paxil with each family hiding inside the steel forests. These are creative killing students who made a film where they disappeared halfway across the Philadelphia nightfall. These are flowers who believe nothing they've heard about the first forgiveness of spring. These are men who talk only amongst themselves. These are men who've hunted each other to the same body that lost its name on a bed of feathers and truck moans and sleet from a nearby interstate. These are the gasoline crabs and livestock hearses passing over the Delaware into the skulls of late Pennsylvania. These are the buildings who've carried the windows this far. And these are the two dollars left of someone who couldn't stop giving away his location and repeating the sounds that remembered him.

DANIEL STEWART

MY FATHER AS THE RABBIT AS KING OF THE GHOSTS

The difficulty is understanding
that everything ends. The wind
-blown mind, the snow

-blind eye, spies bones to gather
like tinder: we need fire, it is cold
here, the sky shreds

and flies, we have nothing to say, absence
dances in her gown of fur,
she holds your face in her hands,

her lips pink and wet as your rabbit's
eyes, how silly you look in your furry
disguise, the long broken ears, the lucky

paws clawing flake-marbled mud. This snow is no
mystery, no monument. The grass
is full of you, rotting on your throne

of wood, underground, as much of mind
as of earth: you who left me
these tender bones and rabbit's heart that beats on recklessly.



Found Photo: *Alexandra Like a Wraith from Psych Ward*

JAMES SCHLATTER

ISABEL

after rain

Isabel got a job at the Mead plant just outside of Dayton. Human Resources or some such. She barely listened during the interview. She hadn't worked in over seven years and the woman was sympathetic, had just gone through a divorce herself. Isabel drove home in a light gray rain. Gray the sky. The river knifing through town a river of melted lead. Her car was gray. Her clothes. Gray music on the radio. Violins and piano, tinkling like the gray rain.

She lived in an apartment complex near downtown. All the apartments were boxes with triangle roofs. Four rooms inside. Two ten by ten bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen just big enough for a table. She'd taken up smoking again and if it wasn't raining, she went out into the yard and smoked gold-tipped Newports down to the filter. Not only were all the apartments identical in construction, but they were painted the identical shade of yellow, a shade that could only be compared to mustard flaked around the rim of a jar. It was a new complex, and the trees strained in the wind, orange tape staked around the thin trunks.

This evening, after rain, a few children trolled through the sidewalks on banana-seated Huffys, black kids with mismanaged afros and picks sticking out of them, white kids whose arms reflected the brilliant pink of another pollution sunset, a sunset that Isabel had begun to think of as the only color in this ugly city, a sunset that only lasted twenty, twenty-five minutes before it vanished, leaving a whisper of light, a stench of phosphorus and soot, the wings of magpies and bats raging in the night sky.

She ate dinner in the living room, in a plastic chair, the plastic plate on a plastic table. The public radio station related the day's news, the voice now as familiar to Isabel as her husband's had once been. It was a national voice, accentless like all of them, yet it contained an undercurrent of warmth. The voice was faraway, buried in some Washington D.C. studio, and even if Isabel called the station and asked, the voice would not pick up. Would not pick up. Time nearing when her own telephone would ring and then the

voice of accusation. Her telephone was bandage-colored, the dial cracked so that when she wanted to make a call, she had to fit a pen cap over the spokes and circle the dial with a tug of her wrist. It was a long process, and a good excuse to not call anyone.

But they had her number. On those days when she wanted to sit in the bathroom and read travel magazines and smoke cigarettes the phone's shrill would reach her. She could unplug it, of course, but then she might miss those other, important calls, the ones that offered free cruises to Iceland, timeshares in Baja, the chance to make millions if she would only, at last, do something. She didn't believe in those voices. She just liked listening to them, letting them go on and on about how rich she was going to be, how successful, how happy. Tell me about Cairo, she'd say. What do camels smell like?

After dinner she took off her clothes and put on a diaphanous, apricot-colored nightgown that felt like butterfly's wings brushing her skin. It was floor length and smelled of the women's section of Macy's- sweet and rotten with perfumes, maybe a little erotic, or a promise of eroticism, something fantasized, but not hers. It wasn't late, but everyone was in, trapped behind windows with curtains drawn across, light behind the curtains and silhouettes moving in the light. Isabel drifted along the sidewalks, moving fast enough in bare feet so that the train billowed out behind her and she felt its drag. A cool night in Dayton, rain-fresh, though the phosphorous smell never went away. The smoggy sun was now replaced by a smoggy moon, one of those brilliant, industrial moons that flattened out the features of its face. The pollution killed off the fireflies. She remembered them as a girl, winking, so many that it never really became night. A forest flashing. But they were gone now, and the forest was gone too.

They built the complexes in a few months, planted a few trees, and sold them unit by unit, as though they were graves.

lessons in filing

At the Mead plant she sat in a five by five room. The walls were decorated with framed posters of sunsets and mountainscapes and smoky oceans and IMAGINE and ACHIEVE and POSSIBILITY typed beneath the scenes. Isabel stared at the posters a long time trying to figure out what they had to do with the Mead plant and decided that they must be vacations they offered if you stayed around long enough, probably the same places that they were always offering her over the telephone.

A certain Mr. Rice came in with a stack of papers and laid them on her desk. He had an itchy mustache and hair crawling through the spaces in between the buttons of his shirt. He smelled faintly of butter.

The papers were patterns of names and dates and histories that Isabel was supposed to separate into piles. There were guidelines taped to the wall above her desk about how to group them, which occupations were related. Isabel preferred to group them by telephone numbers. If the numbers didn't please her, she dropped the résumé in the wastepaper basket. She often stopped and looked out an aquarium-shaped window into the hallway. Her room was right next to the director's office and many people passed by, swiveling their heads to stare at her as they did.

After lunch Isabel turned off the lights, slipped her feet out of her pumps, and slept.

She awoke to brightness, the room full of angry voices. They were waving stacks of papers at her, demanding explanations. She blinked at the sudden light, smiled at everyone. Mr. Rice shut the door on the crowd, took Isabel by the hand, and patiently went over what had to be done. Again.

Listening to him, Isabel understood what was required of her. The light glared angrily on the bald spot shining through his horseshoe of gray hair. It would all have to be completed in darkness.

The room is all Isabel would ever know of the Mead plant. Leaving, she witnessed men and women in blue jumpsuits, thighs streaked with grime, cigarettes in between thick, bandaged fingers. They walked to the parking lot and inserted keys in the massive doors of pepper-green Gran Torinos and coffee-brown Malibus and autumn-red Bonneville. Automobiles were painted brilliantly that year. It was a rooftop parking lot, and everyone entered their cars simultaneously, on cue. Below, the streets swarmed, pedestrians clipping in between bumpers during red lights, crowded around light poles during green ones. Gray-suited pigeons flopped dumbly from the tops of mailboxes to the rims of steel garbage cans to the grills of gutters. Not even crows bothered with stinking, smoky, Dayton. City of the chemical river. A city waiting for a good tornado.

detective

It was with great relief, then, that Isabel discovered the Chinese Man. She'd awoken in the middle of the night, restless, her legs thumping against the mattress, pillow cold and slimy from her saliva. She slipped on her apricot-

colored nightgown and waded out into the night- warm, muggy, stars glimmering through the veil of pollution. She coughed, enjoying her voice as it cut through the persistent screeching of cicadas. No lights illuminated the windows, no lights anywhere except a few streetlights arcing over the pavement with their green, underground glow. The sidewalks were laid out in their familiar grid, zigzagging in front of the apartments themselves, trapezoids of grass in between. Bicycles and balls and toys huddled around the steps leading to front doors. Ragged flowers hung their heads out of the dirt in the small garden plots up against the apartments. A little breeze and the yearling trees bent sadly, hardly resisting, leaves curling up like salted tongues. Isabel walked slowly, hugging her breasts, though her neck and legs went unprotected. She didn't bother waving at them. Every once in a while she leapt forward in a manic run, bare feet slapping the concrete, swinging her elbows, shaking her hair, imagining the heavy curls thick with mosquitoes. But she tired quickly, her lungs wheezing.

A figure sat on the porch steps of section C, apartment 3. The figure kept the porch light off, and so the only way Isabel knew someone was there at all was the loud swallowing, the tinny sound of a can banging down on the cement. Enough light showed from the street to trace the figure- the long wisps of hair, the ropey arms.

-Hello, she tried.

-Hello, the figure replied, but in a voice so deep that Isabel jumped.

-I was out walking, she said. You were just sitting here.

She hadn't gotten close enough to make out his face. No flowers in his garden though, no bikes or balls. No curtains in the windows, no light. A drunkard, she concluded, squatting until the agents came by with another victim.

-I'm tired, the man said. Is there something you wanted?

-I was out walking, Isabel repeated, stupidly.

-Walk somewhere else, the man said.

-Where?

-I don't care.

-But I live here.

-You're lonely.

-No, Isabel said. I go someplace every morning now.

-Come here, the man said, at last.

Isabel stepped forward, a hot glob in her throat. The man's face was sharp, blackened on the edges, near the hairline, around the wings of his nose, a rim of black near the flaps of his ears. His eyes were blackened too, pupils glimmering in between. He was dressed in black- black hair, black gloves on the cement step, the black fingers spread out.

-A thief, Isabel ventured.

But the man only laughed at this, his teeth suddenly, horribly bright in his face. Isabel arched her neck for them. Fucking eat me, she whispered. You lousy chink.

-It's all legal, the man assured her.

-You smell like fried chicken.

-It's the grease, the man said. He wiped a swath from his neck and traced his finger down Isabel's nose, his touch shattering her confidence. She sat at his feet. She knew she had black on her nose. He's marked me, she thought.

-Do you want to come in, the man said.

-Yes, Isabel wept. She didn't care if he didn't live there.

Inside the Chinese Man turned on paper lanterns. The living room became aqueous, turquoise and emerald and midnight light sifting on bare walls. Peacock feathers sprung up from a brass urn, quills doubled in the ancient mirror leaning against the wall. The mirror's frame was painted in foreign script, the beautifully curving characters like designs for temples. Smoke seemed to hover. The Chinese Man disappeared into one of the bedrooms. Isabel stood in the middle of the room, scrunching her nightgown in her fists, searching for a place to sit.

The Chinese Man emerged from the depths of the apartment naked, his face once again done up in black. His body was smooth-muscled like a snake's. His crotch was completely hairless, and his erection bent to the left. He walked bobbing, seemingly unaware of Isabel, eyes unblinking behind the black mask. His hair was up like a woman's, the bun haphazard, sprouting switches of hair. Isabel let the nightgown drop from her shoulders. The fat over her hipbones, her large, somewhat droopy breasts humiliated her. He was younger than she was, perhaps by as much as ten years. He leaned against the wall and sank, knees bending. He was still hard, and when Isabel neared him, she was surprised by a stream of urine spraying her thighs, and then diminishing, soaking her calves, at last dripping on her toes. His penis shrank to nothing, flabby, glistening. Isabel used her nightgown to clean off the Chinese Man's penis, daubing his hairless balls, the dribble on his hairless thighs. He was not a snake after all, but a kind of ruined dog, mutated, angry, pathetic. She kissed him softly on his black nose. When he slapped her, it was almost with regret. She understood him. They showered. Isabel soaped his belly and thighs, running her hands over the hard muscle. His chest was caved in. The black of his face resisted the cloth, and so she scrubbed as tenderly as she could with the sooty toothbrush he gave her, careful not to dig into his eyes, his nostrils, the creased, colorless lips. She massaged his privates too, her fingers thrilling at the soft, oily sack. He let himself be washed, eyes closed, but didn't touch her. They didn't talk. The steady beating of the shower off his shoulders, off his long, fine hair was all the sound she needed. They slept on the floor of his bedroom that night, Isabel unable to sleep, studying the Chinese Man in the light coming in from the street, his mouth shut, throat back, waiting for a blade to open it.

faces seen through glass

Sleepless, Isabel did what was required of her at the office. She was too exhausted to devise schemes and so separated people's lives according to occupation, as instructed.

Lights off, she fell asleep with Mr. Rice's penis in her mouth. Lately he'd taken to using a kind of powder, and so after a while, her mouth became chalky, parched, white frothing at the corners of her lips.

His voice brought her back. Her lips pulled on his penis a minute more, and then too tired to go on, she did what she never did- lay back on the carpet, pulled her pantyhose to her ankles and let Mr. Rice fuck her. Having a man inside her again was like being strangled. She coughed, concentrating on the faces looking in the darkened window as they swam past. Mr. Rice made short-breathed hiccup sounds, his legs shackled by the pants around his ankles. He came quickly, shivering, moaning. He said things. Isabel concentrated on the burning in her lower back, the unwelcome warmth flooding her. She wanted to get it out of her, but lay smothered as it worked its way through all the tubes that emptied out into her sea, poisonous now like all the poisoned waters.

zebras and a plastic red cap

They walked through the Dayton Zoo, the sun a smear of chicken fat in the western sky. Oscar munched popcorn as he went along, observing the animals in their cages. Isabel tried to talk to him, but ran out of things to say after the usual questions. He was eight now, able to ride his bike all afternoon without his father knowing his whereabouts. Probably annoyed he had to spend an afternoon with his mother. They came to the zoo once a month even though most of the cages stood empty now. Each visit another animal disappeared. This week the giraffes were gone, though the sign remained, the description of their natural habitat, how they mated, what they survived on. The chimpanzees were gone. The otters. The zebra was still there, its legs folded beneath it, tail flicking away clouds of flies.

-They're born without stripes, Isabel observed.

Oscar continued munching popcorn. He'd had his hair shorn for summer. It made him look malnourished. He'd been a serene infant, but became difficult at eighteen months, exploding over the wrong kind of cereal, breaking apart her delicate shoes, and getting up all hours of the night, his hands clutching the bars of his crib and screeching through vertical space.

-They come out of bellies, like cows and horses, Isabel said. Like babies.

-Can we go, Oscar finally said, looking at her.

-Don't you want to pet the goats?

-No.

-Come on, I'll hold your hand.

He shook her fingers loose.

-Just take me back home.

-But we have all afternoon. Maybe you'd like to see a movie.

-No.

Isabel bent down to Oscar's level and held him by the shoulders. She looked into his eyes, the reddish-brown of rotting apples.

-I see you one afternoon a week.

-It's too long, he said.

-What's too long?

-The zoo. The afternoon. All of it. It's summer.

-That means you don't want to see me until fall?

-All my friends are home.

-But you'll see them tomorrow.

-That's too late.

Isabel shut her eyes against him a moment, holding it back.

After the divorce, she'd kept him a few months, kept him until she could no longer get up to pack his lunches, comb out his knots, walk him to the bus stop. Then it was Tuesdays and weekends. Tuesdays and Saturdays. Now Tuesday afternoons, Tuesdays until bedtime. Occasionally, Tuesdays for an hour- news of school, of friends whose names she was already forgetting.

She hugged him, held his body to hers. So often it was the only way to express herself, express how much she loved him. She thought she could convey it by touching her skin to his, bone to bone. She wanted to live inside him for a day, an hour, just as he had lived inside her all those months, all those months when she loved him best. But he held himself stiffly inside her embrace, held his face away from her mouth. She wept, hating herself for it.

-Okay, he mumbled, conceding.

She took him to the four-thirty showing of *Bad News Bears* even though he'd seen it twice already. He cheered a little afterwards, clutching the plastic red cap they gave away upon exiting. He recounted his favorite scenes as she inhaled deeply on a Newport, the horizon just now dissolving into a smudge of pollution. The billboard lights were illuminated now- the red-necklaced pins of the bowling alley, a white coathanger in a velvet sky. Cars choked at the lights, desperate to leave town, or get through this gauntlet of wires, exhaust, vets leaning against traffic signs holding up homemade posters. Isabel hadn't showered since work, and now, closed up inside the Chevrolet, she feared that Oscar could detect Mr. Rice's rancid butter stench on her body. But Oscar continued twisting the cap on his head, loose now that he was shaved like a recruit. His favorite scene was Ahmed

stuck in a tree in his underwear. He told the scene in detail as Isabel flicked ash out the window, Peter Frampton blasting from the door speakers.

careful

Isabel was careful to wash before they met, if they met. Some nights she paced back and forth in front of C-3, trying to catch a glimpse of the Chinese Man through the darkened, naked windows, hoping to see him emerge from that darkness, the door opening inward and the silhouette of his beckoning fingers. Many nights he was not there. She stood in front of C-3 and called out to him, her voice as thin as the wind in the pine swaying above the laundry room, the lone remnant from whatever tree life had previously existed here.

When he was home she found him on the porch, dressed in black, the shadow of his arm moving as he lifted the beer can to his lips. They entered his apartment together. A series of switches and the paper lanterns brightened, the walls algae-green, threaded with deep blues, fading to black, where the jaws of lantern fish snapped at globs of white light. They undressed in the bathroom, a single, dim bulb plugged in above the mirror, silvery light tentacled across the ceiling. She pulled on the skin of his testicles, held the balls in between her fingers, first one, then the other. They moved slightly at her touch, pulsing beneath the smooth skin. Then she held his erect penis, felt the shape of its bend. He was circumcised, the tip swollen, dark, spongy. She tugged the skin over the bone a few times, and felt the muscle jerk, a sudden electricity in her hand. Urine streamed into the toilet, thick and smelly.

Sometimes they stood in the shower and she bent to his knee and he held his penis between his fingers and sprayed her face, her neck, her breasts. She smiled and he knocked her teeth with it. She kept a little in her mouth, tasted its brine before washing her mouth out in the shower stream. Afterwards, shrunken, she washed his balls as she'd done that first night. It was a boy's penis without urine to stiffen it, shameful.

After showering, they stood naked in the jellied light of the bathroom as she scraped away the black with the steel wool. He had a beautiful face, chiseled so close to the bone that it was as though he didn't have any skin at all. His face was the color of bone. She held the steel wool gently in her fingers, just the slightest pressure on his skin with the wool could do what even the most ferocious scrubbing couldn't do with a cloth. Pale streaks showed in the black mask. Each pressuring, each sliding of the wool, revealed a little more. A cheek emerged, a chin, the flange of a nose. She stopped every five min-

utes so that the Chinese Man could drink from his can of beer and she enjoyed that too, the way his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, the beery exhalation of his nostrils. He sat in a chair for the operation, Isabel standing over him, scraping away. The steel wool did a good job on broad surfaces. But to get the last of it, Isabel gripped a two-inch nail and delicately pulled back the loose flesh of his eyelids and picked away at the flecks of trapped black. She dug around his nostrils with the nail head, careful not to draw blood, but using just enough pressure to remove what had become, after days, weeks, months, a fine, black powder. Afterwards, breathing hard, her fingers aching so badly that she couldn't straighten them, Isabel let the Chinese Man sleep in the chair in the bathroom, his face exposed, but his eyes shut, his breath as light as Oscar's had once been against her eyelashes as he lay cradled in her arms.

MARINA RUBIN

PROPOSAL

everyone knew we were leaving, quitting jobs, selling furniture, surrendering passports. there was a family wedding, our house became the headquarters for out-of-town relatives and guests. my brother came back from the university with a professor's son Vladimir. we sneaked out during ceremonies, the boring toasts, the ballroom dances, my brother talked about life in the big city, Vladimir read poetry about longing, infinite and all-consuming passion, his voice resonating in the garden of blooming apples. he proposed, said no big-town girl loved his poetry more than this silly goose; i told mama i am getting married, she said but you are only twelve, i quoted Pushkin *love conquers all ages*, she grinned he just wants to go to america, the only way for him is by marriage, and poetry, it will always be just that...poetry. twenty years later, in a box of old letters and bank statements, we found the wedding photo, sixty of us standing on the steps of our small town city hall like a six-tier chorus. mama pointed to Vladimir, sweetheart you should have married him, i laughed but mama i was twelve, so what she said, love conquers all ages.

MARINA RUBIN

THE HOUSE

my grandparents bought this property when they got married in 1945, a second chance, they built, installed, connected, planted until it was a mansion with pear and apple orchards, glorious gazebos, dreamy lilac bushes. i returned to my childhood home to find a blue picket fence replaced by a gate with barbed wire and a sign “we buy metal at top prices.” a man in a tiny speedo with a money belt across his bulging belly unbolted many locks, i told him i was born in this house, my mother was born in this house, we left this house twenty years ago. he invited me inside, a wasteland of scrap metal, a junk yard of steel rods and beams, rusty refrigerators and crushed cars. an industrialist-wanna-be, with great gusto and delight, he told me all about the bulldozer he hired to bring the old house down, the demolition crew that ripped out all the trees, and the luxury high-rise he was planning with apartments for rent at eight hundred a month. in the shack that was once my kitchen, he offered me beer and bitter pickles, boasting that he already received permission from the city for a modest helicopter landing on the roof of his imaginary building.

SUSAN H. MAURER

AMTRAK POST-DISASTER PUZZLEMENT: DREAD NOT

He moves snaky-hipped
through the corridor where the cars couple
humping, jouncing as we splay hands against
the corridor.

He says "I can't wait to take off this hair."

It's his hair? I . . .

And the kindly one now toothless
lives in High Falls, not the

High Falls that cataracts through Rochester
refracts the Genesee into such a stunning picture
beside the dun sedimentary escarpments, fleeing.

His baldness is different.

His eyes startlingly blue and his belly
and his toenails, fingernails like arrows
to keep one at bay.

And he says sometimes, sometimes
if he's sick he takes medicine for his nose
in his bag to work, but we are all in a hurry
a hurry, and dumbly we run.

Running to, running from
conjoin where the trains switch, shunt.

SUSAN H. MAURER

CLAP ON, CLAP OFF

I practice getting along with last week
endless rehearsals, reruns really
the spirit of the stair, l'esprit
de l'escalier
where god has made his nest
dragon flares romp, becomes love
crippled, the French revolution for
some reason, if I can stay down
I'm safe, pleasure's all we've got
touch me, only places
exfoliate, unleave, don't go
lump, trace, king salamander worshipped
inadvertent conflagration
the salmon lie down and
can't be fished, the ocean
grows sloppy, the wind stood
down, the boat in
its passion for land, hyper-realist
dreams, the revenant sprawls
by the pool, I think it
should be a grey umbrella
because you can't do anything
about it, that sips your scalding

CRUZ ORTIZ

LEARNING WHICH THROATS END AT THE MOON

Move the comma manufacturing plants. Force the hard realism warehouses north to the rats. Moons of rat consciousness and moons that belong to scholars who say there is no more moon: it died in a clock's dissertation and on the windows of trains walking to the cold castles on the sun.

It thinned into a simple cloud after years of being photocopied.

It dissolved on screens poisoned by arctic hockey cults.

It left language such as this between the blank pages of *Cobweb Review*, Brooklyn, New York 1992.

The rats found it, though, in pieces at the end of that year's rotary line, moons left behind in disconnected cities where Paul "White Boy" Weinman survives inside a stamp by abbreviating his notebook of Prussian blue presidents. He started on Cottage Street, Albany, and after mailing away his publication records, a man who copied him said he never got his poems back from San Francisco. A man still programming in saddle-stitch.

Those who exist beyond Dan Nielsen's handwritten house compose with whiteout that can withstand cargos of cigarette beds and packing tape.

Tom Caufield still drunk in his typewriter's back rooms mumbling, "Look here, Tolek, the wind keeps losing its way to the next poem. But I have a new magazine called *Fuck That Weak Shit Press*."

Some stay cold near the televisions and others sleep in their stamped envelopes. But most just continue repeating: "The fog is not a person. The fog is not going to be remembered."

North of the last comma manufacturing town, keep your mailbox fed, keep it part ditch and part derivative. Hide the sweaty pictures of Cat Townsend who edits rural Ohio. Listen to the diamond hitchhikers drilling to the moon in scavenger scrawl thinking that something human will eventually want to find them.

Some will go on contributing to the silent magazines no matter how long they have to say “I got out of bed, showered, shaved, made coffee” in gutter maudlin. Some will expand into humiliation no matter how far they have to copy that neglected weather. Maybe one person from the distant *Colorado North Review* tells them each syllable calls out in the smears and immortality of what’s been forgotten by another.

Those who murder by specific words and hard silences still cannot tell where the sunlight turns sloppy. Too many bars, too many words polluted by Bukowski. Too many stealing from someone else’s flesh. The most assured and angry among them says, “There is no truth greater than a poet splattered against a wall after the house has already been led away by fools.”

DAVID CHORLTON

GETTING ACROSS

1

Part of it is river, part desert, but mostly
the border exists
as imagination. Crossing it

is easy as a two step
with the scorpions, or turning white
to blend into the spotlight
from a patrol car. The rain falls
in different languages
on respective sides, but the heat remains
the same, and illusions rise
off the parched ground.

*

2

This border
is a line drawn taut along
a landscape rough and breathing
in its own slow time,
harbouring poisons

and keeping water hidden.
Someone has to say
where a country ends, and a country begins.
Even a language

must run dry
where its peculiar mouthings no longer match
the prevailing winds.
There must be order and green cards
for the sake of security,
and the hope
at every border that one side
is kinder than the other.

*

3

Some wire
is positioned to cut
a continent apart, with metal thorns
growing out of it, while the real

border is marked by erosion and shadows
where many have escaped
the documented landscape, and entered
the country that appeared to them in sleep
as being larger than speech

or government.

The preferred side for them
is a circuit of crops to be picked
from beneath a cloak of pesticides
where workers take their chances
and shower off the worst for a wage
as illegal as they are.
They disappear

without statistics. These are the rules
where the price for grapes
is fixed. The willing traffic
still moves

north by tunnel
or by night
when clouds are thick across
the moon.

*

4

Men turn to dust,
and scatter, reappearing in their sweaty clothes
on the other side. It is all
magic; the sleight of hand
and smuggling of a heartbeat
from darkness into light. Resolve is what

it takes, and concentration.
Migrants close their eyes and wish,
then find themselves, amazed
to be among the cholla
with nothing left to drink
by the time the sun comes up

miles from the nearest highway.
On the maquiladora side
of border towns, the water is contaminated
and the labour force is duty free.

*

5

The streets are brighter
where the tourists go for cheap
drinks with local colour
and clichés. The velvet south

is a whisper of romance and stilettos
with revolution
and rhythm in its blood, and the melting pearls
of Spanish history still
glistening on its churches
facing the plazas and markets where each red pepper
is a kiss, and the bougainvillea
burns and bleeds into
the rioting light.

*

6

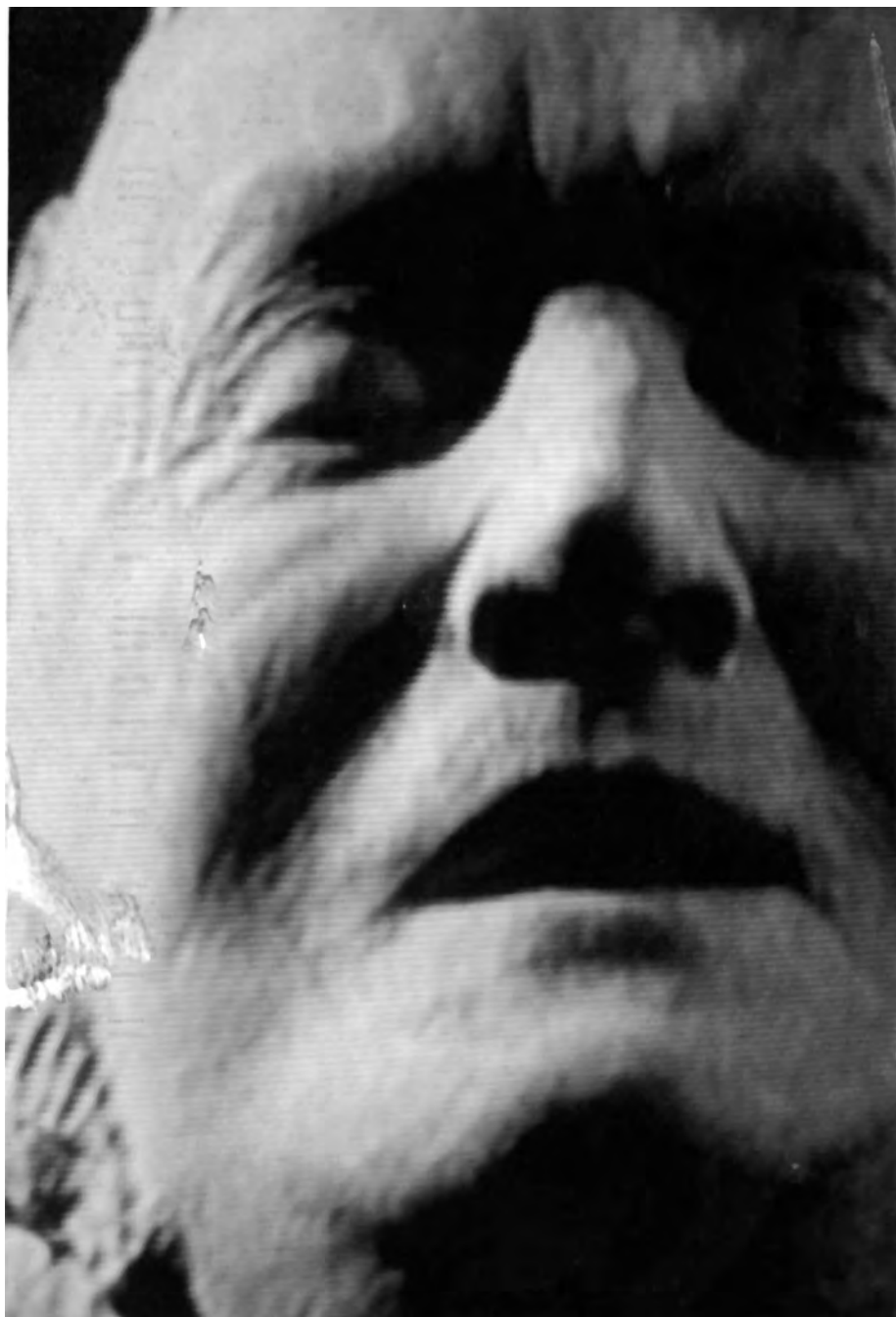
Suddenly,
this ends
at the line measured
and drawn with a straight edge
or left to follow
the curves in a river

flowing capriciously between the rich and poor,
between la Migra and the Federales.
This is the fault line

between currencies; the land of exchange
rates and multicultural souvenirs.

It is hope
for refugees, and home
for the exiles who are tired

of life in a single version
and prefer translation
to the original.



Found Photo: *Wagner's Death Mask*

JOSH WARD RIP

SRECKO SMILED

The dimensions of the room were inconstant and would sometimes change abruptly, without notice. Other times there would be a quiet indication that something was under way, giving you opportunity to prepare and adjust—moving a desk or dresser a few inches this way or that, removing a fragile item from a shelf so that it wouldn't crash to the floor during the transition. On rare occasions the entire space would uproot and shift to a different part of the house. Most often, however, it sat happily sandwiched between the kitchen and the downstairs toilet in the southeast wing of the house. This arrangement was agreeable enough. The sporadic migrations were not inherently bothersome and only became a nuisance when I found myself adjacent to the upstairs, northwest chamber shared by Ulagan and Umaru. They carried on and on, day and night, and often came to blows, crashing into things and making a loud racket. Thankfully, it was rare that I landed within earshot of this unhappy commotion.

The room across the hall from Ulagan and Umaru was sealed, its door impassable and its windows barred, and it had been that way for as long as I could remember. Only Srecko, who was about ten years older than I, seemed willing to talk about it at all. He was fat and always looked unclean, with oily hair and stained clothes. He wore heavy glasses that distorted his eyes such that you could never tell exactly where he was looking. I didn't trust Srecko one bit.

He lived upstairs in the dilapidated east wing, an area I usually avoided. There was a persistent smell of decay, and the floorboards creaked and sagged treacherously in places. You had to watch your step. This part of the house seemed bigger than it should be, something like a labyrinth. Narrow, dim hallways branched into other narrow, dim hallways. Small dusty rooms.

He pointed out the window toward a bare hilltop and told me he had burned down a house that once stood there. When I turned back from the window, Srecko had a magazine spread open on the bed. I knew what it was and I looked away. When I asked again about the room across from Ulagan and Umaru, he grimaced, his mouth turned downward. His eyes changed too, I imagine, though it was hard to tell behind the thick spectacles.

Then he told me about his friend who knew the whole story. This was an unusual and secret friend; Srecko wouldn't tell me his name or where he lived, except to say he lived somewhere else. I didn't understand how

someone who hadn't lived here could know anything about the room. I would first have to earn his trust, Srecko said, and he pulled out his hairy and semi-erect penis. To what extent I understood—at such a young age—the transaction he had in mind, I can't say. When I got up to leave, his demands left unfulfilled, he merely chided me, saying I was stupid for asking about things I wouldn't understand anyway.

Vaskar was tall and muscular, at least middle-aged, and when he entered a room everyone else became irrelevant. He spoke in a measured but assured way, with flattened affect, yet still eloquent and compelling. Vaskar was viewed as incorruptible by the other residents and served as an informal mentor to me. As we shared lunch in the downstairs common area, I told him about the encounter with Srecko.

Vaskar was quiet for a moment, and per his habit appeared to concentrate intensely, as if he formulated then revised every word before opening his mouth. Some years ago, he finally explained, residents took meals together in a large hall at the rear of the house, long since renovated and converted into living units. Nearly twice as many people lived in the house back then, such that every seat in the hall was always occupied. An enormous wooden table filled the space almost completely, making it difficult for people to maneuver to and from their seats. In addition, the table's considerable width meant that only dishes in one's immediate proximity were accessible, and there were too many people, too confined and too engrossed in themselves, to feasibly pass around the plates. Items located near the middle of the table couldn't be reached by anyone, so they always went cold and were finally discarded. There was no point in designating a server or servers since circumnavigating the crammed hall would've proved nearly impossible.

Someone—Vaskar wouldn't say whom—suggested crafting large utensils, several feet long, so that anyone at any position at the table could reach any item on the table. The proposal passed, and soon every eater had at his or her disposal a long and unmanageable wooden implement. Some, mostly the very young and the very old, couldn't even properly lift it. The result was a bedlam of unintended, and sometimes intended, jousting, bashing, and gouging. No one escaped the dinner table uninjured. In addition, the architect of the utensils hadn't considered that while one could scoop or spear items anywhere on the table, getting the food back to one's mouth posed a new, unforeseen challenge.

Weeks passed, and with extraordinary resilience everyone returned to the hall nightly, bandaged and moaning, and appreciably thinner. One night, Daya (the only person Vaskar mentioned by name) held an infant in her lap at the table. In the customary melee, the baby had its throat pierced by a utensil that had been broken off at the end, leaving only a sharp, splintered point. The child died a short while later.

Vaskar lingered over this final detail, his eyes fixed on me, as if waiting for a signal that I had received his meaning—a meaning, I took it, that resided somewhere in the cracks of his strange narrative. He seemed frustrated when I finally got up to leave without giving any indication that I had understood his story.

It was Monday now, which meant it was time for my weekly visit with Pom and Berko. They were approaching old age, and I think they did little else now besides tell antiquated tales, shoring themselves against change and death. In their downstairs, southwesterly room, which was thick with the odor unique to the elderly, they told me stories of long-vanished people and places, leaders and conflicts. Their voices were brittle, like scratched 78s on a 1930s phonograph. I found nothing good in these litanies of subjection, but it was important that I learn about such things—or so I was told.

This time, when I approached their room, they were arguing. Unusual, since I'd never heard either direct a sharp word toward the other. Pleading and aggressive, Pom interrogated Berko. Berko said very little. I didn't enter the room, but stood just out of sight next to the door, which was open wide. Pom wanted to know: Where was Berko was going? Why was Berko wearing new clothes so different from his usual attire? Why had Berko packed his essentials into two bags? Berko confirmed that, yes, he was going, adding that it was now finished. I detected the odor of cigarette smoke; I'd never known either of them to smoke. Pom was nearly screaming now, a confluence of anger, bewilderment, and despair. Parts of their exchange were unintelligible, but it was clear that Berko was leaving and not coming back. He offered no explanation except that things had expired, had been completed, and that he was not who she thought he was. In fact, I think I heard Berko say he was not Berko, but it was difficult to discern amidst Pom's yelling.

Next, sounds of upheaval. Bodies grappling and colliding with things. Then it was quiet.

A moment, then Berko exited the room, bags in hand. It was true: he was nearly unrecognizable, someone else. His head turned in my direction for a moment, but his eyes were concealed by dark sunglasses, and he rushed hurriedly out of the house. I peeked through a front window and saw Berko approach a vehicle that, I assumed, had been waiting for him. A man, who in dress and gait strongly resembled the new Berko, got out and helped Berko with his bags. The other man even wore the same dark sunglasses. They got into the vehicle together and left.

I went back to my room. I didn't want to see whatever lay now within Pom and Berko's quarters. For a moment it weighed on my mind that I should have told someone what I heard and saw. Then it passed.

My room was smaller than usual now, the ceiling perhaps a foot lower. I could nearly reach out and touch the dresser from my bed, whereas before it was at least a few paces away. Despite the shifting and reshaping, the room always retained familiarity, was uniquely my own. Now, however, I felt a vague discomfort, a rising estrangement.

The next morning when Kirpal brought my breakfast she seemed less pleasant than usual. She did not smile and said very little, aside from perfunctory courtesies. Kirpal was small and strangely stooped for her age. There were minor imbalances in her features—one eye a bit larger than the other, her nose too small for her face. I found her pretty, though sex rarely entered my mind; I had some understanding of mechanics and functions, but felt few, if any, stirrings.

Moving with haste, Kirpal set the tray down and made to leave the room. Just before she was through the door, I asked what was the matter. She stopped, and with some reluctance came back, sat on the bed and crossed her legs. She somehow knew about the incident with Srecko and said I should never have approached him. She was also aware of what had happened between Pom and Berko. Without commenting on the matter, she simply informed me that I would now report to Walad, adding that Pom and Berko had become senile, and I would be better served under Walad's guidance.

The debt that's on your mind—be glad there's nothing worse, he began. Out there in the cold rain, death rides on his horse, he said.

The elderly, one-eyed Walad. He was at least eighty and never left his basement room. He was unkempt and barely coherent.

In here, you are free. Remorse is a strain—greater than any gold—so leave it to the devil. A string of spit dripped off Walad's stubbled chin. The name in your ear—what's his name?—there is more than you have heard. Your wits are not clear, understand? There's nothing you can find, so be quiet. Then you will flourish. And as for death, he will come in again to warm his hands.

A shotgun leaned in the corner. The rusted barrel was illuminated by the bit of sunlight that struggled through a small, cracked and dirty window, guarded by shining cobwebs.

Projected on the ceiling over my bed, memory proceeded in its scattered fashion. The earliest: him, holding my hand up the stairs. Beyond the landing, I do not recall. Next, the time I saw Kirpal hurry from the bath to her bedroom, wrapped in a towel. It loosened and parted to reveal her behind, a full and wide view ... the intense excitement I experienced, which was not wholly sexual, an excitement I did not yet feel for other parts of bodies. She turned and saw me, then dashed into her room, closing the door, and shame spread over me like a pox.

Later—Umaru, Ulagan, Srecko, and Kirpal at the table. *Overcooked*, Umaru said, and he set down the utensil, his heavy jowls drooping toward the floor. It was all pink inside the meat. Srecko smiled, puffy cheeks, eyes bright and boyish—before the thick glasses. Ulagan—but they were all younger, it could have been Kirpal, I can't say for sure—did not smile, but she reached and stroked Srecko's head. *It wasn't permitted*, Umaru said, and he swatted an insect that had alighted on the meat.

When I woke up it was mostly dark with just a muted grey coming through the window. I got out of bed and stubbed my toe on the dresser. When I opened the door, I did not find the expected hallway a few paces off from the kitchen, but instead an unfamiliar musty and silent cramped dimness. The window in this new space was in some way obscured, and only small handfuls of predawn blue-grey were able to penetrate the room. I cautiously made my way around, finding first a modest twin bed. A crib stood to one side of the bed, while on the other side, against the wall, a small and plain vanity. Austere and neat, this place clearly had not been occupied or used in many years. The furnishings looked very old, simple, slightly crude, likely homemade. A blanket of dust covered everything. I sat on the bed and there was a little mildewy eruption, the odor of things shut away and forgotten.

With dawn approaching, a bit more light made its way in. I found the small nightstand with its drawer not completely closed. A standard spiral notebook in the drawer had all the pages ripped out, but inside the back cover, beginning mid-sentence at the top left corner, and written in neat, deliberate cursive, was the following:

and since I cannot speak of it, speak of it plainly, I shall say that the fire then met the water and issued matter and light. Fire burst in the light, but without consequence. Matter joined light, hidden from fire, and then there was the accursed. Fire enveloped the accursed leaving only fire.

If all appears nonsensical, then you understand correctly. The problem has vanished, and what is left is silence.

I strained my eyes to read the writing in the emerging light, filtered through the obstructed window. A wasted effort, to be sure.

JOSH WARD RIP

JARKO SPUTTERED

The television light flickering across his face, Jarko looked like an enraptured five-year-old – slack-jawed and wide-eyed, head like an empty wastebasket. His face interested me more than the video, which I had seen before, and I wanted to look right into him, to get at what he really thought about all this. It was as if he truly believed it was the real thing. Unable to suspend disbelief, I grew bored and regretful, dwelling instead on the confluence of rumors, coincidences, and dead ends that brought me to this substandard apartment, sitting on a grimy yellow couch with an awful floral pattern.

The TV was an artifact from another era with rabbit-ears antennae and turn-knob controls. I was surprised it had the appropriate connectors for a video device. It perched on top of two brown milk crates and flickered intermittently from color to black-and-white, then back again, rendering the unwatchable less watchable. And why was it unwatchable? A matter of form rather than content, it was simply inept, unconvincing. I was baffled that Jarko would try to pass off such fakery as authentic. Did he really expect me to pay money for this?

The words “eat shit” were written on the wall in bright red spray paint just above the TV. The letters were large and clumsy. It mattered little whether the text was composed by Jarko himself or it had oozed from the wall of its own accord. The message was clear: caveat emptor. Whatever his deficiencies, Jarko at least recognized the profit potential in morbid curiosity, and authenticity was dispensable as long as there was a buck to be made.

It was nearly finished now, this one more transparently fake than most, though somehow less laughable. The first time I saw it, however, I did laugh – at the way the scene cuts right when the nail is to be driven through the boy’s testicle and instead shows blood sprinkling the masked hammer-wielding sadist. It then transitions jaggedly to the boy’s screaming face. The lighting and color saturation here differ significantly from the previous shot, suggesting that the boy is not even in the same room as his attacker. Following the boy’s face is another awkward cut, this time to a close-up of the bloody genitals nailed into the wooden chair. Other feigned tortures follow, and finally the boy is dismembered and partly devoured by the four men, all wearing black hoods. It’s completely phony of course, yet somehow unsettling, due in no small part to a gleeful enthusiasm designed, no doubt,

to compensate for its technical incompetence. Unremarkable as it was, I couldn't shake it.

I hadn't felt such revulsion in a long time, not since several months prior when I attended an exclusive screening at a private party in Ontwerp. The word going around was that the host had commissioned the video for \$100,000 and charged guests as much as \$10,000 just to watch it. I got in for free via an acquaintance of an acquaintance of the host. I knew nothing in advance about the screening; I just showed up expecting to hobnob for a bit with the rich and amoral, then retire to my room at the budget hotel on the highway.

I found myself in a large dim room, just off the great hall. There was a big screen mounted to the wall, plush sofas and chairs, and a wet bar. The movie started without announcement. Some watched in rapt attention while others made idle chat or casually groped and kissed. The video had no sound, but I judged it to be Latin American. A jungle setting, a shoddy fort-like structure, stone-faced men in military fatigues with pliers, wooden stakes, and bowie knives, inflicting torments on women who seem less terrified than they should be. They are fucked, bitten, cut, branded with hot irons, and made to assist in the mutilation of others. There is a crude contraption – women are strapped to it, spread-eagled, and lowered onto a long metal spike. The camera is shaky, the image grainy. Rough, choppy edits. I took my eyes off the screen for a moment and scanned the room. Muffled comments and ice clanking against glass. No one expressed shock or disgust at the video; they consumed it in much the same manner as caviar, wine, and cheese.

I'd heard about such things, but had never seen one and dismissed them as mere folklore. I'm not so sure I saw one that night either. In retrospect, I'm almost certain it was false, like all the others. It was, nevertheless, the impetus behind the journey that would occupy the next several months of my life and lead me, finally, to Jarko.

A large piece of cardboard, held in place with strips of duct tape, covered a broken window in Jarko's room. Icy drafts occasionally slipped through and struck my cheek and neck. I welcomed these sporadic bursts as they helped ameliorate the unpleasant odor that crowded the air and gave rise to a mild nausea.

The screen went black, and all was quiet now except for intermittent traffic below and the distant yells of what I took to be a domestic squabble in another room. It remained dark for an uncomfortable moment, then Jarko switched on a light. His gaze was askew, not directed at me, but around or past me. He cleared his throat, but didn't say anything. His breathing was audible, through his mouth, as if asleep. I looked hard at him; I felt he understood something I didn't.

Jarko stood up. He was a bit stooped. He slid his hands into his back

pockets and asked me to pay him. This was the first substantial sentence he had uttered since our phone conversation a few days earlier. He sounded childlike, not in pitch or timbre, but in rhythm and stress, his phraseology uncluttered and direct. I paused before I spoke, uncertain how to respond, my thoughts flickering like fireflies against the night.

I don't know, I said, more to fill the silence than anything else. He repeated that I had to pay him, this time with more force, though he still didn't look directly at me. I stood up. I didn't want to negotiate; I wanted to leave. My movement caused Jarko to become more agitated and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. No previews, he said. Not for free, he said. I tried to bluff him by saying I didn't bring the money with me and I would have to leave and come back. I even offered to pay double his asking price upon my return.

I couldn't tell if he was buying it. He became increasingly distracted and jittery, like something else was on his mind. He rolled up onto the balls of his feet, then back on the heels. If I could dupe him into believing he stood to turn a significant profit, I thought, I should be able to make my exit without a hitch. But I grew tired of diplomacy. I began thinking it would be nothing to just pummel him and make for the door. The sense of danger had dissipated, and I now regarded Jarko with both pity and derision. He appeared to me a sadistic yet fragile creature consumed by immeasurable suffering. Subtly vampiric, he depleted by proximity, and I felt as if I were being pulled toward the floor, dizzy, limbs heavy and weary. I began to dissolve and seep into some hidden place beneath the grimy floorboards.

He brought his hands out from behind his back and leveled a pistol at my chest, gripping the handle with both hands. I reflexively raised my arms in surrender. His eyes were manic and his hands shook. If he doesn't drop it first, I thought, he'll probably shoot me by accident. My hunch was that Jarko had never pointed a weapon at anyone in his life, and this new course of action was perhaps more terrifying for him than it was for me.

He tried to speak, but managed only to sputter, like hot bacon grease. I tried to appease him: It's no problem, I told him. Let's talk about it, I told him. But my own nerves now began to unravel. If you've never had a gun pointed at you by someone who was ready to use it – and by all indications, Jarko had little to lose – then you've perhaps daydreamed about how you might react under such circumstances. In all likelihood, your fantasies of composure and cinematic bravado would rapidly dissipate into fear and a desperate whimper. I thought I had come to understand something about death in the third person. Perhaps I had. My own demise, however, remained safely hidden beyond the visible horizon.

Jarko emitted a little cry or sorts, then blood, bone and tissue erupted out the back of his head. He jerked and crashed to the floor with a fury unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was all so quick I hardly even noticed Jarko shove

the barrel into his mouth, and now he was crumpled there, his hair nearly standing on end and a pool of red spreading out from under his head. His mouth was wide open in a grimace of frozen horror. For the first time, I noticed the rotten black incisor in the upper left row. The brutal fact of the corpse right in front of me precluded any speculation about motive. I could only stand and marvel at this unlucky thing that just had the life ripped out of it. I'd never seen *death*, not like this. I was drawn toward the messy exit wound. I wanted to probe it with my index finger, scrape the tissue with my nail, then place it under my nose and inhale the death, like the first whiff of sex. Instead, I made for the door.

Down the darkened stairs. I nearly fell on some marbles left on a step. I reached out to steady myself and instead grasped a handful of air. The rails were broken off entirely in places and the remaining ones were flimsy. Voices were rising in response to the gunfire. They heard it too. A collective agreement that something had happened. They heard it too, yet only I saw – the doubting Thomas who prods the gaping wounds of the dead to satisfy his lust for tactile evidence. And that, I realized, was the narrative of Jarko's tragic face, the message I couldn't decipher: *I'll show you what it's really like*. And I tasted it now, like metal cracking the teeth. It overwhelmed. I swallowed hard, forcing down the nausea.

Finally reaching the bottom floor, I staggered out onto the city sidewalk. Unable to hold back another minute, I spit up a thick brown fluid, staining and melting the fine blanket of snow. Steam rose in response. My throat and nostrils burned, and my eyes watered. I heaved for what felt like several minutes before the nausea subsided. Once I was able to right myself, I hurried down the snowy sidewalk. I covered several blocks, turning corners at random, until I finally lost all sense of direction in the city maze. Taking another corner, I looked up and noticed what I took to be a security camera mounted to the side of an old tenement. I wondered how many of these electric eyes I'd already passed under in the course of my flight, and what bored voyeurs watched from the other side.

When I was safely out of the camera's reach, I slacked my pace and tried to catch my breath. I stopped and pressed my back against a wall, allowing my heart to decelerate. Glancing about me, I was struck by the curious spectacle of the city at 3:00 a.m. Empty, sleepy and silent. All the buildings, stately and stoic, shoved close together with little regard for beauty or cohesion. Barred storefront windows, blinking traffic lights swaying in the winter breeze, the blank, dark marquee of a shuttered movie theater. As if through a distorted lens, it all appeared awry now, a foreign land or world wholly unfamiliar. An ancient city erected several millennia ago by a species unlike ourselves. I adjusted my vision and brought into focus the flakes of snow drifting down around me, each perfect, unique and sublime. I imagined an

entire world in each, headed toward imminent apocalypse, whether trampled under foot or dissolved in sunlight.

I again adjusted my eyes and found the scene completely changed. The high-rises, the lights and windows, the pavement all receded now into a white plain. The light snowfall crescendoed into a fierce blizzard. Far in the distance, barely visible through the curtain of snow, a herd of shag-covered mammoths trudged across the horizon. Nearby, a cluster of ape-like mammals huddled for warmth as the shattering cold drained the life out of them. Time bended and swayed, and the earth groaned and cracked as continents crashed into continents, ripples rose into mountains. Volcanoes ejected dark clouds of ash and burning rivers of molten rock. Later, the crawling chaos of the civilized. But neither God nor Karl Marx had arrived, and no one had thought to synthesize cellulose, nitric acid and camphor into a material conducive to the capture of moving images.

SAMANTHA STIERS

FIGURE EDGED IN FLAMES

The Rorschach blots metastasize
into an African idol.

It glows with flames
that look soft and bright as cheetah hair.

You stroke them, and feel only a tickle.
But when you look down,

your hand is black,
charred to the gristle.

—*after Dali*

CHET HART

NO HOWLING HEARD FROM HERE

Wind: the trees' failure.

Glass leaves kicked
through glass
dirt.

A room with no furniture,
only photos of masked wolves
and damp moaning,

a bible opened to the raping
of someone without his own
body or his own screams.

A boy costumed in his own corpse
blights the middle school
with red-throated bottles
of paint store scars.

No God anywhere.
Just the howls of a jack-o'-lantern.

Dark houses.
An invasion of witches.

Cars limp by in coffin surveillance.

The devil begins as
a coyote dragging the headlights lost
in the roadside grass

before the darkness catches him
fondling frost from the capes
and empty Frankensteins, left
in the ditch for blind or dead.

CHET HART

FOR THE BRIDES LOST IN SUNLIGHT

I knew her only
as a window left on the wall,

a recording
of eyeblink colonies
where the light began to sag.

I showed her exactly one heartbeat—

she could've seen it from anywhere
she was cut open,
anywhere the wind's faces
had fallen inside her—

the sunlight just a wallpaper stain,

her flowers just little mouths
of blood-fat.

In the photographs where we stayed hidden
we saw the mountains of storm water
blowing across the universe,

and then she lied
to what was left on the wall—

how she altered everything
by the birds trapped
in the coldest room of a whisper's house,

the threshold at which the body seems
less than a word.

She looked like the sky during its disease,
but without a known algorithm,
or the passing of a known hour,

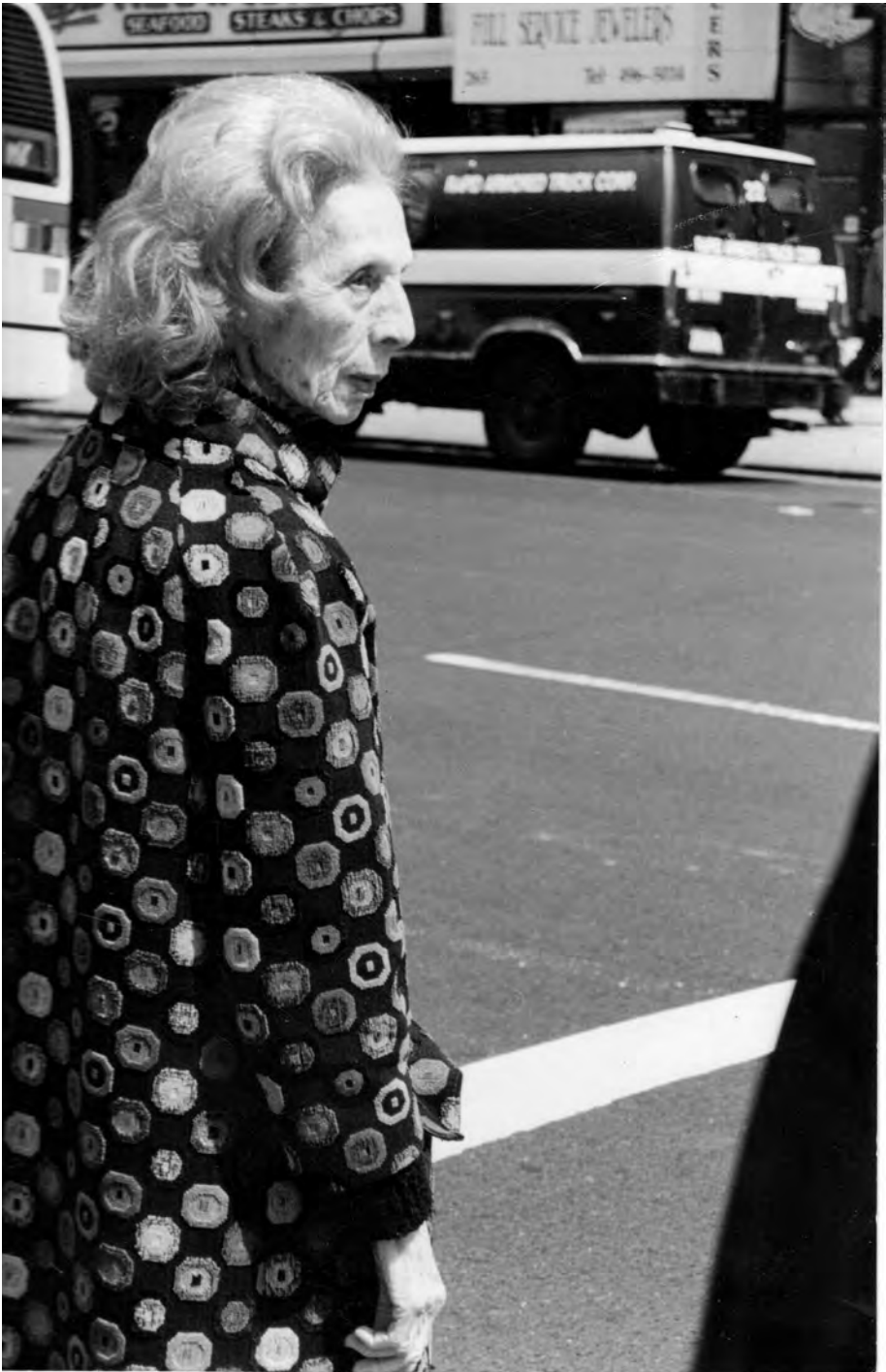
a shadow that could endure being named.

And because I was never alive, I followed her
as she drifted—only a rose's femur as evidence—
into the quivering and uncountable horsefly trees.

DARREN C. DEMAREE

BLACK & WHITE PICTURE #100

With no mountain & no sea,
this is still not a plain,
still not cropped & gleamed
like the balding land(s)
of the West or the tipping
parts of my hair. With little
lean & little to collect our water(s),
I've kept my mouth open
for twenty weeks. Belle, I know
you will have an ultimate thirst.
Belle, my throat is flooded
with a young Spring. Belle,
we can be birds, & I can cool
your first scream(s) with Ohio
& her confused and forgiving skies.



Lawrence Applebaum: 57th Street

ALAN CATLIN

SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S CHILDREN OF THE CORN: AN AMERICAN GOTHIC DREAM POEM

The scarecrows share a crucifix
in the cornfields of the mind,
silken hair brushed blonde as
the straw that falls from the beaks
of molting crows, their black flexed
wings drain fire from the sun
whenever they are driven to rise as
demons from the rows, their scythes
and their sickles cutting pieces of
the moon that longer like eyes in
the furrowed mounds haunted by
sprouting seeds, the fleshy husks
of the cancerous growths; all those
cornfed children, ghosts of their
parent's torn genes, their keening
after dark at harvest time like a
house filled with spinning, honing
wheels, each taken to a different
sharpening blade.

ALAN CATLIN

SELF PORTRAIT, WARHOL'S "OLD SPARKY" IN THE BACKGROUND

In the traveling exhibit room
a study in charcoal of Robert
Louis Stevenson in America:
his face turning away from
the artist, his lean torso, right
arm bent, hand holding a tightly
rolled cigarette, always a cigarette;
smoke curls assumed. The writer
in oils, an all night card game in
progress, RLS and fellow travelers:
empty decanters, half-filled glasses,
wasted faces; unhealthy, weary.
The card players turning in at dawn,
two hours of sleep, maybe three;
wine at breakfast, nothing solid to eat.
A plaster cast of Stevenson's face,
precise as a death mask, hairline cracks
along the cheek bones where the veins
would be. A bust of the author in
bronze and a glimpse, across the gallery
space of Ossining's silk screened,
blue colored, electric chair.
Warhol's print blown up to almost life-
sized with real shadows, real leather
straps and restraints, real deaths foretold;
the air reeks of it.

ALAN CATLIN

LISTENING TO THE RADIO AT 1:35 AM

drinking Old Smugglers from
a double shot glass
and the moon is down

heat lightning to the North
and to the West like some nightmare
aerial assault in a black and white
movie of World War without end

Sibelius 7
then Rachmaninoff
Isle of the Dead

what sick suicidal bastard was
selecting all this shit

what next?

a choral arrangement of Anne Sexton's
The Awful Rowing Toward God

Mahler 10

classical music in a dead
Russian mode

Shostakovich
Babi Yar
Leningrad

a blur of words on the scotch stained page

MICHAEL O'BRIEN

FOUR POEMS FROM *AVENUE*

1

goes to
sea on
her breath

goes to
sleep on
her breath

falls falls
into
her hands

2

dusk, Ninth Avenue, face
bathed in cellphone glow, cowboy
Narcissus, at his tasks

3

On a hoarding on
19th St. someone has
written ANTHONY I NEED
YOUR LOVING NOW in
such a way that you believe it.

In the park a
homeless man, his
gear about him,
reads the news.

4

In a movie
rain on a
window means grief

as if the pressure
of wanting to cry
could make it rain

longed-for release
in the world at large

someone howling
in the street.

LEONARD GONTAREK

THE PAST

I used to frequent seedy movie theaters.

I don't remember the names of the films,
they probably had sex in them.

I don't remember what the movies were about.

I remember something of what I felt
and who I was.

I loved this young man.

I want to smooth his collar with my hand,

easy to do, since sometimes they left the lights on.

LEONARD GONTAREK

ON LOVE 2

The woman was talking about how she had maybe
three cigarettes a week now, cut down from twenty
on a good day, while the barista ground into earth
my French roast. She wasn't with me, she was with
the other guy in line. Yet I was lost in
the death-sentence of the down-to-her-ass fairy-tale hair.
Just as I was surprised by Autumn moments before,
though it had been Autumn for days.

TOM WEIGEL

HEAT OF ACTION

A fishing cartel
called Slow Paris
brackish water's focus
on discerning customer
it's the same at
City Lights Books

Opportunity piped to me
but I did not dance
Bohemia is cranky
with chaos theory
for certification
in strife & what else

the door that shuts
just before you get
to the dream
that's so American
he will inundate me
from here

the potter who knows
my cast
rather than shatter
name all the things
with wooden handles
you man of clay

TOM WEIGEL

NEOPOLITAN MYSTERY

Three eyes see better than four
it's the special effects we deplore

Meditation on the gone Europe
Venice ruled by Austria for 69 years
wrapped up in the big three entries

Napoleonic Code
The Pope
& Nationalism

Every third generation or so
a tile slips from a cupola
& crowns some son of a judge
flat cold in the street
proving "old world" atmosphere
can't be depended on

*

nowhere quick
is a very long time
more cities than Britney Spears
has costume changes
late hours & no voting breed autism
evening's hedges thicker & taller
than Stonehenge saying
"Don't call don't knock"

*

I didn't call you any names
I asked you what's for supper

*

you live for the numbers
& the numbers make you
what you are OK
then you finagle
then you flutter flutter flutter

RUTH BERMAN

COULEUR DE TEMPS

French time is not the time of clocks.

It isn't round.

What hour is it? says the French,

And not

What time?

O'clock's not time,

It's only hours repeating,

Recyclable, and bounded.

French time extends like space

Scattering color

Out of the spectrum,

Like sunlight through the air.

Time is distance

Hazed and shining out of reach,

Skyblue.

Skyblue:

Color of time.

T. KILGORE SPLAKE

UNTITLED BRAUTIGAN

sleeping late
with van girl susie
smoking breakfast dope
making love
drinking bottle or two of champagne
making love again
somehow baking “weed brownies”
on coleman stove
thinking while wrestling naked
we were like alonzo hagen’s
“trout fishing in america diary”
each toke
slug of icy brut
trippy chocolate square
was another fishing trip
more trout lost

T. KILGORE SPLAKE

ONE GOOD DAY

elliott's "i have my answer"
woody allen's
hannah and her sister's film
distant reminder
sweet aromas
pleasant yeasty sex
later hurt and angry
spoiled woman's whisper
"you're always reading
rather be writing
we never go anywhere
have any fun"
suddenly noticing
underwater panther's return
brautigan creek tides
grizzled graybeard poet
needing



Lawrence Applebaum: *Radio City*

KIMALISA KACZINSKI

TETHERED

From across the street, I watch my father wait for the bus. I feel like an orphan lined up in a room painted yellow, waiting. Our hands touch the walls. Our sweat makes them slick. My father does not know I'm watching. I hear the high-pitched screech of the brakes—the bus stopping to let off passengers. My father stands from the bench. He wears a red tie with his dark grey suit.

Orphans line up and wait—perhaps the woman just getting off the bus would take one home. Her purse matches her coat. I almost smell her perfume, something Avon sells. Her hanky tucked in the sleeve of her coat. She'll call her husband at work and say *I'm tired of waiting*.

My father gets on. He sits in the seat second from the front. Nearest the window.

The woman grows weary, plays Cole Porter records, looks through white lace curtains. Her hips sway ever so slightly.

My father's hand moves to the window. His hand touches the glass. He must be waving. The bus pulls away and the smell of the bus, it's like formaldehyde or something close to it.

KIMALISA KACZINSKI

THE PACIFIC OCEAN

It happens sometimes in families; the children grow up and realize if it weren't for blood, they'd have no connection. I wonder about the sister that didn't survive, was she the thread that bound us all together? My father never got over the loss of her; he'd sit in his workroom and just stare at his polished tools. He never built anything else. I try to find her through my dreams, walk the old railroad tracks leading to the lake. Is she together with my mother now?

In my dreams mother appears in her old blue bathrobe. It is ratty, torn. I notice she is not wearing her slippers. What did she always say to us about that?—Put your slippers on before you catch your death of pneumonia—. I ask her—if you see my sister in the gloomy lake, will you tell her I am looking for her—? She disappears like the end of sky, all too sudden. I wake and my nose is filled with the scent of wild roses.

Once I pointed out deer to my next door neighbor. He nodded and then walked inside his house. I never felt so fucking alone in all my life. My sister's name was Bethany. She loved the color pink and collected seahorses. She'd never see the ocean in her lifetime. The rest of us did, we drove to California the next summer. None of us could bring ourselves to swim. My mother loved her father, my grandmother loved me and I loved my sister. I taught her how to smoke, took her to parties. Mostly she sat in the corners of rooms, her face in a book. I waved to her now and then.

KIMALISA KACZINSKI

MAGGIE, TRANSCENDED

I see the blue shirt of my sister and call her name. Her arm is like a flag in the frail wind. These are the days of my summer, cutting rye out of a wheat field with a sickle that looks like a crescent moon,

trying to side step the rattlers, waiting for a burst of color, sweeping the rye aside, looking forward to crawling in the back of Doyle's truck for the ride home.

Today he comes up from behind me in my row. He says, Maggie, I'm going to drive you up to the house for lunch.

Doyle does not do this. He makes my sister and I walk. I follow him.

Doyle gets in his truck. I get in his truck. He turns to me with his mouth, his hands. My hands push him away, and I say to him, *I mean to interrupt you here, and I mean to tell you, I am the ocean.*



Lawrence Applebaum: *Christmas Bonus*

TONY GLOEGGLER

DOWN'S SYNDROME

The nurse hands the newborn
to his mother. Her husband stands
by the window, pats his pockets
like a cop searching a suspect,
finds his cigarettes and leaves

the room. Mary keeps still,
afraid she might wake the baby.
She counts fingers, toes,
nods each time she reaches
ten. She examines his thick

neck, slack jaw, fat ruttid tongue
and wants to touch, stroke
his head, press her thumbs
into the small soft spot, squeeze
until her son screams sirens.

TONY GLOEGGLER

WHEN I WALK THROUGH THE DOOR

If I line up words
with one or two syllables
and hard consonants
until they become
a boy chasing a ball,
a car driving too fast,
you can nearly hear
the sound a father hears
that makes him turn
his head so he can see
his son's body twist
across the road, thud
against the curb. If you like,
you could be the father,
watch the car slow down,
the driver look back, see
the red tip of a cigarette
dot the twilight before
the driver turns back
around and keeps going.
You could be a neighbor
opening a door, standing
on front steps as lights
throb against brick houses
and cops ask questions. Or maybe
you could be the man's wife,
Laura, who moans the boy's name
and won't let anyone touch her.
She wants to know why
her husband couldn't keep
their child safe. He wishes
he could tell her about the girl
next door, sixteen years old,
with her cut off tee shirt,

belly button ring and how
good she looked walking
across the just watered lawn
the moment the car hit
their son. He wants to believe
that saying those words
out loud, telling the truth
now will make him
someday feel better. Me?
I could be the driver, turning
slowly down my block,
pulling into the garage.
I will sit in the car
with the motor running,
playing with the lighter
until I can remember
the kinds of things
I'm supposed to say
to my wife, my daughter
when I walk through the door.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Company*

PATRICK MCKINNON

LOVE POEM AT THE END OF THE WORLD

i want to unzip yr levi's,
slip yr panty elastic aside
& feverishly lick yr labia

now!

i know the world is ending all around us
like some people even have
a specific date in mind
& bombs are being televised,
falling as usual,
fracturing communities
so exactly similar to ours, but i

want to gently peel you open &
fondle yr pink rubber w/my thumb,
slip a peach-flavored life saver inside you,
tickle yr trembling hairless cunt lips,
kiss you there like i'm kissing yr mouth,
drive my tongue deep down yr pussy throat, i

realize the air is choking on chemicals while
gas & garbage & fertilizer
are clotting up all of our water &
electricity is what's causing cancer &
everything's on sale so
the industrial commercial carnival continues
gulping up the fertile soil & eating alive imaginations but i

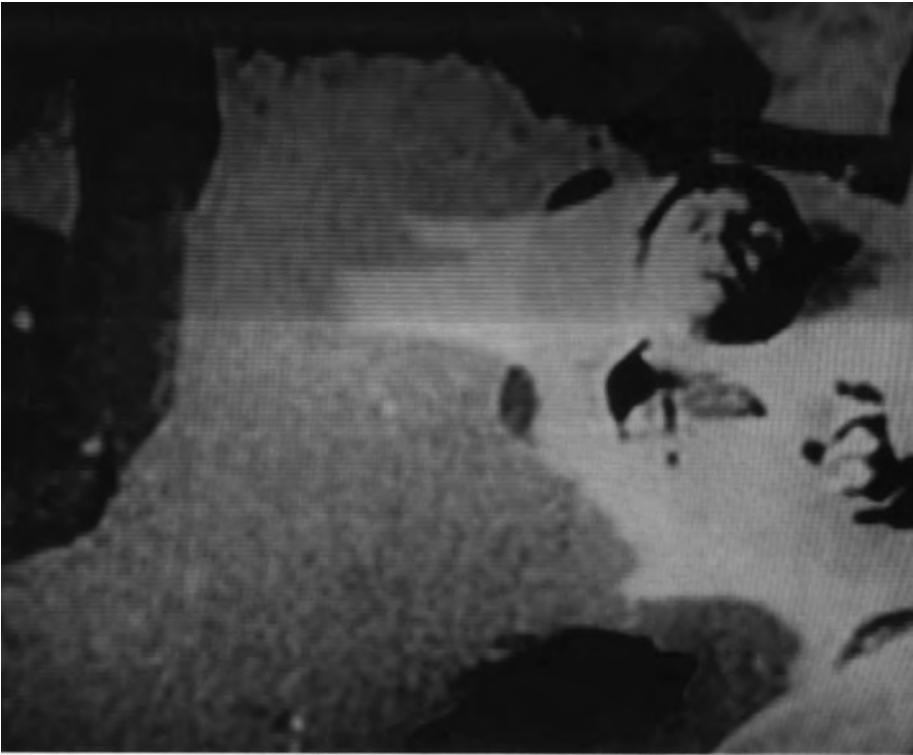
just want to nibble that rosy button,
high heat between yr velvet thighs. i
want to be causing yr body earthquakes,
yr slick-skin explosions,
yr slurping slithering stammering, yr begging me
for cock cuz you need cock right now
right fucking now! i want to be
nibbling yr gushing vagina on the day that

nuclear light ignites the sky
or a stray comet
strikes mayhem from outer space
or suddenly food disappears
in some worldwide laboratory-induced drought
or this new corporate hitler
gives his inaugural speech
as the king of our planet
or bugs overrun mankind
in surreal multiplying militarizing moments
or whatever grim catastrophe
awaits this shadowy pustule
orbiting a fever sore
in the disease-ridden mouth called universe i

just want to be mouth on crotch,
lip to lip, slathering yr nectar,
honey on my face . . . baby,
ride this tongue. forget the maniacs
even on 1st street right outside this window. yes,
sirens at night w/my head face-down in yr naked lap,
are dream angels octaves above us
enviously decrying our indulgence
in this cunt-sucking ecstasy.

OBSCURA

You can hear a pin drop, is that right?
 Yes, yes, constantly. Hearing
 Nothing else, I hear it hit the floor,
 A kind of bell, atypical sound
 Of a pin, but I have little explanation
 For it. Cathedral bell, sonorous,
 From out of centuries ago. Why not,
 I think, what's the big deal about
 These times, just because we live them?
 The pin slides through a mouse hole
 And becomes a tulip in Delft. Crazy.
 Vermeer juggling his interiors for
 Ran Ruijven: I saw his closet once,
 With The Milkmaid under a wife's
 Gown. You didn't. Impossible the light
 Was sufficient. I hadn't a light
 Anyway, only a mind displaced. I
 Saw as if using *pointille*. The view
 Of the city across water as though
 Clouds above were in my hands.
 I could roll them around, flatten
 Them out, a roughness I felt,
 A graininess, underneath, much
 Different from the surface,
 Where you and I both expect
 A darkness we haven't seen at night,
 Raising the blue ceramic cups,
 Reading our letters, the floor
 So polished it vanishes.



Found Photo: *Results*

J. R. SOLONCHE

ONE BOY AND ONE BURNING CAR

A Palestinian boy stands in front of a burning car.

It is only one car.

He is only one boy.

He is wearing a St. Louis Rams' jersey.

That's an American football team.

It's in St. Louis.

That's in Missouri.

That's in America.

It is only one car.

The flames are red.

The smoke is black.

The jersey is blue and gold.

St. Louis is not the world.

Missouri is not the world.

America is not the world.

Unless St. Louis is burning with red flames and black smoke.

Unless Missouri is burning with red flames and black smoke.

Unless America is burning with red flames and black smoke.

Unless the St. Louis Rams burn their blue and gold jerseys
with red flames and black smoke.

Do you think they will?

I don't either.

It is only one car.

It is only one boy.

BLUE THEATER MADE OF FIELDS AND MIRRORS

1.

The director pokes his head out from between two curtains.

Silence.

He disappears then reappears in the same manner.

Silence.

This happens several times. Each time he seems to gain a little more confidence, but he remains suspicious. Finally he comes out from behind the curtain and peers into the darkness a couple of times. He screws up his face and makes a difficult and meaningful adjustment of his facial muscles.

Silence.

“Look, I’m in charge here.”

Silence.

Another difficult and meaningful adjustment of facial muscles.

Silence.

A faint light reveals a blue person of indeterminate gender sitting motionless and calm. The director, feigning authority, walks slowly, suspiciously, over to the motionless blue person. He folds his hands behind his back and strolls in a circle. He reaches back with his hand as if he were going to slap the blue person’s face.

The blue person remains motionless.

The director pokes the blue person with his index finger as if to determine what he/she is made of.

Silence.

The director strides purposefully away, conspicuously ignoring the blue person. He explores the stage, peering into floor cracks, staring at the ceiling, sighting along the edge of the stage to see how unfair it is. Gradually he works his way back to the blue person and continues this method on him/her. He shows more curiosity about his new victim than he did about the walls, the floor, or the ceiling, but his interest is disguised. It is possible that some of this is developing into mild amusement, but it is difficult to determine just how amusing such a situation could be.

Finally the director says, “You know something? You’re really blue.”

Silence.

The director wanders off, vaguely curious, examining. He arrives at the place where the two curtains meet. He seems interested. He pokes his head between, pulls back, wanders off. He returns to the curtains, pokes his head between. A bulge can be seen wandering back and forth. After a while the bulge is gone.

The blue person remains motionless.

Silence continues rehearsing.

2.

You assume it was human. You question the victims accordingly. Under the glare of the spotlight, they begin to suspect their motives. Just as you are about to imprison them in your confession, one of them gathers up his confusion and admits that nothing happened.

Disguising your failure in parables, you promise to stop pressuring him, but of course you are lying. You realize you are outnumbered. You tell them to turn around, face the height chart. Slowly, you read them their numbers. You allow them to consider building churches.

You make a point of enjoying your cigarette. As long as they do not realize there is nothing to keep them from smoking, you have a chance.

3.

Once upon a time, a used thought salesman, was pacing in the parking lot, minding your own business. A man in a crumpled trenchcoat hit you in the face with his wallet and said, “See that? I’m a detective. I don’t want to be nosey, but my wife wants to know what you were doing the night of July 4 between 10 AM and 3 PM and give me a light for my cigar, will you?”

You remember thinking about putting your lighter in the inside pocket of your coat but deciding, for some reason you can no longer remember, not to.

“Can I give you my card?” you ask, hoping for a diversion.

“Could I get you to sign it? My wife collects ‘em. The kids are crazy about her stroganoff.”

You take a card from your back pocket. You reach inside your coat for a pen and the unused thought you find there opens its doors and explodes as you step inside.

The detective pokes in the ashes until he finds a small flame. He lights his cigar.

4.

Okay, so the man's a comedian, then. People should laugh at him. His partner is a plant (hold up plant). His partner is not here. People should laugh at him. He does things to his dog (hold up dog) with a fork (hold up fork).

Think about the dog (hold up dog). What is his relationship with the plant (hold up plant)? Who writes all the jokes? Is the plant (hold up plant) as funny at home as it is on stage? Is the dog (hold up dog) jealous of the plant's (hold up plant) fame? What is the significance of the fork (hold up fork)?

Be sure to water (never try to hold up water) your plant (hold up plant) regularly, and a little chopped, hard-boiled egg (hold up soft semi-ovoid sphere of gelatinous white nurturing matter surrounding a heat-solidified chicken fetus, sufficiently cooled so as not to burn your fingers) wouldn't hurt.

So you come to the conclusion that there is something disturbing in your partner's inability to laugh. Jealousy is not funny. And the recent upsurge in the acceptance of dog spooning (hold up spoon, hold up dog) in Southern California explains nothing.

Why does the director (hold out right arm, point at a man in the audience) never laugh (hold out left arm, turn quickly at right angle, slapping palm of hand across mouth) at such emptiness?

5.

Again a man appears on the stage. This man might be funny. He's leading a wimpy little wiener dog. People should laugh at him. The man's partner is a plant. People should laugh at him. He sets down his partner like a gift. He does gentle things to his dog with a fork. People should laugh at them.

Is the man who might be funny really funny? What is his obligation in regard to the plant? How can an audience learn to appreciate cruelty if they don't laugh? Why has the man's identity been kept a secret from the man?

So K. has a bomb in his suitcase, next to the wooden dummy, and K. is a comedian.

Will the bomb, the joke, or K.'s life go off?

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that K. is a sad man. It's funnier that way. Perhaps K.'s life has no meaning. Would the laughter create a meaning if one did not already exist?

6.

Central to any deeper understanding of the man's character would be the man's lack of humor. And so a woman dressed in white slithered past the two prospective patients. Smirked. Loudly. She picked up a copy of *Mr. Molar's Tooth Tips for Tots, Chainsaw Commandos, The Hardy Boys Bust a*

Gut, Ten Reasons to Dress Your Husband in Blue, and A Treatise Concerning Unnatural Sex Practices Among Circus Performers.

"That's me," said the friendly dwarf actor with a toothache to Ed Sullivan's brother-in-law, who wasn't sure which of the woman's selected reading materials he was pointing at.

A comedian arrived at the dentist's office with a false aralia. His tooth hurt. He took a number and sat down to discuss the dog spooning routine with his plant.

"Twenty-three," a voice said, "number twenty-three, please."

"Maybe it would be funnier with a butter knife," said the comedian.

The woman dressed in white put her blindfold back on and returned *A Treatise Concerning Unnatural Sex Practices Among Circus Performers* to the magazine rack. On the way back to her seat, she turned off the light over the fish tank, slipped *Mr. Molar's Tooth Tips for Tots* into her handbag, and began whistling loudly. Something like *The Love Theme from Romeo and Juliet* or *Stairway to Heaven*.

"That's a false aralia, isn't it," said the woman dressed in white, suddenly removing her blindfold.

"Yes," said the comedian, "but he prefers being called an aralia."

"I can understand that," said the woman dressed in white. "My son is in Vietnam."

"What does he do there?" asked the comedian. Casually. Making conversation. Counting ordinaries.

"He shoots craps, snakes, Vietnamese, and heroin," said the woman dressed in white.

"I don't think that's very funny," said the comedian.

The comedian got up to go to the bathroom and put his partner on the table. When he got back, the woman was laughing.

"I'm a comedian," said the comedian.

"That's pretty funny," said the woman.

7.

The play takes place in the basement of a large brick building so you descend a curving staircase with cement on all sides. By the time you reach the doorway with the black curtains instead of a door, your legs have gone rubbery, so you quickly sit down near the stage in the darkened theater. Even before you catch your breath, the lights come on and they spill across the stage past your chair into the second or third row. You turn around to discover no one else in the theater. You hear voices and the play seems to be taking place on the other side of the blood red stage curtain.

Soon enough the lights go down and the actors, dressed as theater attendants, enter stage left with flashlights, directing several ticket holders to your

row. The last of the ticketholders, sitting in the lap of another ticketholder sitting in the lap of another, hands you a red coffee can filled with night-crawlers just as the lights come on. You can read "The Natural Way" on the side of the coffee can. Then a flashlight beam insults you, an usher you assume, so you move toward it and it begins moving away from you. You begin running after the light, afraid of what's required of you, and suddenly you pass through curtains into a brightly lit hallway. You reach back through the curtain to verify the past, but there is a door, locked, where you assumed before there had been only curtains.

Softly echoing down a hallway to the right, you hear applause, laughter. You follow the hallway a very long time and the applause guides you. Finally you despair of ever arriving and enter a second doorway, draped, like the first, in black cloth. Again you find your way to a stage, but this time you cannot consider choosing which row to be seated in because there is only one. Expecting more actors dressed as ushers to appear, you decide to rush the first one, wrestle him to the cement floor and question him. You no longer find enigmas entertaining. A soft whoosh of air passes before you and slowly you can see candles beginning to glow warmly in a line across the stage, each one softly hiding behind a paper bag. You inspect the nearest bag and it is partly filled with sand, the candle fat and scented with vanilla, anchored in the sand. No actors appear. You sit, determined to discover the meaning of all this with your patience. Years later, as the candles go out, you notice the glow of a black light calling out neon green arrows which have appeared next to each of the bags. You follow the arrows until you again enter a brightly lit hallway. You reach back through the curtains and your knuckles rap suddenly against brick. Far down the hallway, the sound of distant laughter, distant applause.

8.

Now the stage is the world. This world is an island, but we are not alone there. The tip of the stage rises to a cliff where a celebration is taking place. There is dancing like an old Celtic fair with Maypoles and women with ribbons in their hair. But this is a modern celebration and you can rent small balloon propulsion-packs that will lift you above the crowds and let you steer them against the winds rising up across the cliff from the ocean.

As you turn your balloon into the wind to watch the dancing from above, you notice immediately the ringlets of a thin woman's red hair, accented by a crown of twigs and ribbon for the dancing and you remember the freckles speckled across the bridge of her nose. Where have you seen her before? You angle the balloon lower, closer to the earth, and a gust of wind slams the balloon hard. You cannot hold your position and barely manage to escape injury as the wind presses you to the earth. For a moment you are held there by the wind as she looks, startled, at this clumsy man trying to fly. Then the wind

changes and your balloon leaps into the air, dragging you away like a nervous child would pull away a puppy sniffing a stranger's hand.

Late, earthbound, the curtain of rain that scattered the dancers and ended your flight suddenly disperses and you find her red hair in the crowd on the beach. Then twilight and the two of you walk without speaking, uncertain how to begin touching. A loud rushing noise startles you. Expecting a boat or perhaps a whale, we turn (Forgive me for joining you—it's a dream and we represent, of course, the same person) towards the ocean. A submarine rises from the sea and one by one, a dozen large lightbulbs pop out of the hatch and float toward us. They form a raft at the shoreline like a large piece of bubble-wrap and we are helpless to resist. How did they convince us to climb on? How do we resist trying to pop them?

They take us to the submarine and we climb down into a room where a large table is set in what appears to be a Thanksgiving dinner. Several lightbulbs are already seated around the table, as well as two pairs of ordinary looking middle-class human beings. Are they supposed to be our parents? As the lightbulbs enter the hatch, they stretch like glass softened in a very hot flame and do not return to their lightbulb shapes for several minutes. They may be able to move through very small openings this way.

You reach for the food but the aliens are holding back your hands. You can smell the food and you are very hungry, but the aliens do not release your hands. The redhead looks to see if you are watching her, the food or the aliens. Her lips move, but there is no sound inside the submarine. Next to the turkey lies an oven mitt shaped like a turkey, heavily padded. It stands up and opens its oven mitt beak. The redhead's mouth opens and from the look in her eyes, you understand the aliens opened it. The oven mitt turkey picks caraway seeds, one at a time, from a large piece of French bread and places them at the back of her tongue. Then it is your turn.

This takes a very long time and it is all we are allowed to eat. When we are finished eating caraway seeds, our new alien surrogate parents say, in unison, "It is very satisfying to watch our children making love." There is no sound in the submarine. You turn to see if she has understood this. She looks puzzled but no longer frightened. The light bulbs turn on and off as if in applause, and they continue applauding as they float us back to the shore where yet another new world awaits its stage.

9.

When you overhear your husband's anger at a trip to the store for lightbulbs, you know the time has come. You dash down the street to the only neighbor left who will listen to you complain and you begin drilling holes in the sidewalk. He nearly catches you, but the telltale backfire of his ancient Buick is unmistakable, and you begin playing on the lawn, the drill cradled

between like a baby. He wants to remove you from the lawn, but lawns belong to everyone.

Dusk arrives with a flare of bats darting under the streetlight where the insects gather. He's humming inside, moving lightbulbs from one socket to another. He is trying to arrange them so they will burn out at the same time.

You want to wake up now and you do. Your husband is slicing cheese for the finicky grandmother of twenty. She leaves honey in his mailbox.

10.

You say hello to the fluffy snowstorm and a shape seems to form between the trees. You move closer and it moves deeper into the woods.

Some people spend a lifetime in these woods. Some of them are crazy. Some of them are happy, and cannot explain why. They simply smile and point.

You are a responsible citizen, so you listen. Smile and point.

Behind you another car stops on the highway. A helpful human being or another lost soul?

Can you see my shape between the trees?

And then the sound of brakes as the travelers come suddenly upon the evidence. Why are these cars stopped, empty, purring on the roadside?

11.

The director wanders on to the stage, which is humming with lunchtime activity; tables and trays and food and conversation. No one notices him until a blue man of indeterminate gender enters stage left and slowly, lingeringly, buys a can of pop from a pop machine while searching the cafeteria with an angry domineering glare. The director moves toward the angry figure like a ghost, but the blue man sees him, and as the director reaches the vending machine, the stage goes silent. The two of them continue their dance in the spotlight, as if choreographed, hitting each other repeatedly with rubber lightbulbs.

The spotlight fades and the actors adjust their chairs at their tables so that they can see each other while they eat their lunch. The lights fade. A spotlight pierces the auditorium, revealing, yes, your bedroom. You are preparing for sleep. The show is about to begin. Your fears are no longer visible.

As your eyes close, the actors begin applauding. Only two seats, far in the back of the auditorium, are occupied. One contains you, the other a puppet with a loud smile frozen on its wooden face. The puppet begins emitting a soft blue glow. You cannot know when you will stop.

JAMES DOYLE

DESERT SHACK

Dry creek-bed
sneering. Limestone corners of the sky
in a perfect square.

The hermit
or desert rat doesn't have to go far.
Light flattens

his shadow
against himself. It milks cactus
and bounces back.

Sidewinder carols,
spider hymns under the floorboards.
A quick rain

every ten years
and his life disappears. He draws
the rocks over

and over him
for a blanket. Only rock and desert
bending

like wood scraps
through a heat haze. No dead bodies
in the desert.

No fools
either. Locust on the walls of the shack
for protein.

The man wears
down the heat. Feeds it a bowl of thistles,
curried shadow.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Joseph Mayer's Kitchen*

MARK WISNIEWSKI

ALBUM

inside it I saw
life-sized

black & white
pictures of stamps

from the world
& the day's

mail arrived
with a purple

version of one & my
mother said

the man on it
had been killed

for freeing slaves
& that saving

stamps could make
poor people rich

so I cut
the man

from where he'd
been stuck

taped him onto
his black & white self

hid him
on rafters

in the garage
where he

never did free
anyone else

but no one ever
bothered him

MARK WISNIEWSKI

EVERY NIGHT

there was something in my youth
about alcoholic women

& I don't just mean drinkers
or problem drinkers
I mean women who drank every
night & some mornings
who lied & couldn't walk straight
who were shy sober but after 3 or 4
flirted cantankerously then slept
with the only guy with nerve

women who left good
cash in bars
ran red lights
didn't wear panties
failed out of college
or graduated *magna* because they
screwed profs in bars

these were my lovers & I
liked most of them
some said they cared & I believe
a few did

but none are here now
in this house
in these woods
where the hardest thing I drink
is coffee

they are somewhere though
some perhaps recovering
some I fear deceased
& of those who are still
alive & drinking
I'd guess maybe

one might
be able
to remember me

just probably
not tonight

SUSAN TEPPER

HOW I LEARNED TO COOK

Ingredients:

1 cup long hair

tsp of tea (British blend)

3 generous strips silk ribbon

Wire whisk

Cloves

A saucepan

Sifter

2 eggs

White candles

Fresh lemon

Salt and pepper to taste

Set the table in advance using a nice cloth. Put out your best white candles. Blanch cloves in a saucepan on low heat. Drain the cloves. Take a bath in scented clove water then shower for double cleanliness, rinsing your hair with fresh squeezed lemon. Towel dry. Slice off enough hair to fill a porcelain cup, add a teaspoon of tea and place on the dresser to cool. Wind strips of the silk ribbon around yourself fashionably. Salt and pepper to taste. Sift the loneliness. Using the wire whisk, beat the adultery with 2 eggs.

ROSALIND PALERMO STEVENSON

INCUNABULA

it first came as a shaft of light that I experienced as grayness and did not know was light, it was a lightening from above, a ray that penetrated through the upper layer of the wall's thin casing, and made a hole in it (though they say that none was found) no bigger than a pin hole, not enough to let the light in, but enough to give me the sensation of black becoming gray

the lifting darkness came to me the way that air at higher altitudes might come, thin and making me light-headed, giving me a feeling of dis-ease, and with that, movement, a small surge forward, a rising up, the way the waters of a tidal wave rise up from underneath the sea

I thought that I was running but really I was leaning, creeping at most, without direction, following instinct, reacting to what threatened me, to the strange and sudden difference which had come without forewarning

it was the impulse to break out which sent me surging forward, the impulse to escape this change in my condition which I did not understand, and which I did not name as change, but merely as discomfort, and so I moved, the way the water sac might move, the way the honeycomb might move when swaying in the breeze, and yet I did not know the breeze and did not know the honeycomb

the light began to spread with more intensity, thinning out the casement of the wall, a glare that tore at me, a pressure that came from top and bottom, that squeezed, that pressed as if to flatten me, a decompression, as if an instrument had been affixed, and I resisted, I pushed outward as if to stay the pressing

there was a time, a blacking out, when I went sinking back, and I experienced it as light-headedness followed by a fall into vacuity

and then the sense of coming back, returning, the light that much brighter when my consciousness returned, my awareness that much keener, and with it a burning, as if of layers, as if of layers of flesh (I recognized it then as flesh), and all around the sweet salt sea pumped into me in slow and rhythmic pulsings, the slow and steady pulsings of the sea

again a jolt of motion, this time more pronounced, and again the pressing, the sense of being clamped, and noises too that reached me, different from that hollow steady sound which I had always known, or from the other sounds that had sometimes reached me, although I did not think of them as *reaching me*, and then another jolt of motion

I did not think of god or gods or world or worlds so I could not think *god sends wrath* or *world will end* and my fear immense and shattering was what it would have been if I could think god and world and even more immense to feel it in not thinking

there was a sound as if of scraping, as of a metal object scraping, being pulled across a long flat rock (or was it glass), and the scraping and abrading filled my ears

the light the sound the rocking as if rocking in the vastness of an ocean so much so that it enclosed me confined and constricted me as if a closing in by walls or by the openness of oceans and the deeps received me

screams reached me at the bottom of those deeps, they came first at intervals and later were continuous, the sound of scraping too increased and that sound pierced me to my core and was more *felt* by me than heard, penetrated cell marrow, in increasing light the pulling flesh, the digging deeply into wound

yes, wound exposed to light, to sound, and with it new sound, sound not heard, voices reaching me in still that deepness, jarred by screams that pierced me, digging that much deeper, and muffled sounds that came from further in the darkness

the caving in, the giving way, the wall, elastic and thin, now pushed to bursting, the light, the glare, the pressure, the clamp, the clawing back, the hooking on, the pulling to and rupturing, and there were newer sounds that reached me then, deeper tones, a lower register of sound, entering and pulling out from inner wellhead, through the casing, pressed to breaking, I struggled against it, did not prevail, the weight, the clamp, the bursting out from inner wellhead, through the casing, pressed to breaking, struggling

a burst of light, glare, shrill, a sound as if of sirens, and other sounds I did not know, fighting into light and rushing onward, a chamber which I entered as a vacuum, as if created by velocity, by the sucking in of air, and caught, and forced by weight of air, by pull of water, by ocean currents, by rapid rushing, carried forward, sense of drowning, pulling under, to deeps, to pain, to pain which toppled me in the rush of salt of oceans, carrying, carrying, light, light, carrying, carrying, light

PHILIP DACEY

LEXICAL

Even now, with the lamp flickering low
before it gutters out, I can still be quickened
by an unknown word I have to look up,
as “false-mullioned” demands that I do,

and the discovery this late in my life
of “mullion,” which I should have known
many windows ago, is a delicious
bite of food wakening my mouth,

like a last meal, or maybe the first,
that of the alien in Starman
stunned by apple pie, his first taste
of the garden we call Earth,

my body as responsive to the sounds
as his was to the sweet juices,
the liquids in the middle bracketted
by nasals in a savory symmetry,

the suggestion of “mulligan,”
like the stew of my days,
simmering, simmering, as words
simmer in a dictionary, waiting,

the one in which I would be buried
when the wordless time comes, all snug
up against “mullion” and happily silent
in the heaven of its vibrations.

PHILIP DACEY

THE OCULAR WHITMAN

“I use glasses for reading.”
Specimen Days

The left lens contradicts the right,
and the right the left.
Together, they contain multitudes.

The tint is red,
just a hint
of Civil War blood,
lest anything be seen
without it.

The curvature of the lens
repeats the arc
of one comrade's arm
around the shoulders of another.

They never need wiping,
each speck of dust
no less beautiful to him
than the Long Island Sound.

To step on them would be different
from what anyone supposes, and luckier.

Now, lying near him
on the bedside table,
they are the spouse
who embraced him
many times during the day.

In his dream,
as he's holding them in his hands,
a butterfly lands on the frames.

BILL MOHR

THE GHOUL CONVENTION

“The young ones can’t catch on. Stay calm,
even when confronted with the hilarious panic

of a half-dead corpse. After waiting all year,
don’t leave the picky eater picnic with any regrets.”

The old ones give each other shoulder rubs
while reading back issues of *Ghoul Housekeeping*.

Next year’s panels are announced: Topiary Management.
 (“Even a ghoul must plant his garden.”)

Wraith of the year! Eidolon of the decade!
The world is not an ugly place, not yet.

No natural enemies, a voiceover recites.
A very young ghoul is digging holes in a huge field

too far from any city to be a place for mourning,
yet the bereft come here to be alone, or grouse.

“Ignominy,” an adolescent mutters. “Carnival music,”
a widow responds. “Casual acquaintances,”

their companions proclaim. “Whores for hire
in all but name.” “Depends on your definition

of virginity,” said a half-naked ghoul getting dressed
again. “I don’t like accidents,” the seduced insist.

“Unintentional carnage is so boring, so effete.”
“Magnanimous spite is the only motive I respect.”

Borrowing the sentiments of triumphant candidates,
the ghouls repay their debts with orphaned toys.

JACK DEVLIN

DIGITAL PASTORAL

Do not accept messages from the nations of prayer illness. Live as an abbreviation. Be more sleep than human. Do not admit when you've come to the end of your blindfold. Be a reader of Crest toothpaste, JC Penny, Candy.com, Amber Alert, and the Manifesto of Me.

Find a comfortable gutter not on any search engine. Analyze how tall the clichés have grown. Dark, inedible corn as far as the skulls can see. Perhaps there will be a new species at the last search result for “public vs. private.”

It is not an era to be ahead of one's time. Now is the season for a complicated dumbness, A slow, celebrated denial of empathy, which has become a digital entertainment farm.

Who will feed the clocks when everyone vanishes electronically?

The one who campaigned for Oxygen! Only a Thousand Dollars A Child! replaced by someone who says “I want to save all my shadows.”

During the counted hours the earth is populated with a disembodied jello laughter and nothing else. Not even the warnings broadcast from St. Patrick's Day. No paper cadavers. When the smallest minute reaches night-fall, the trees and hills and valleys are turned off by removing the longest syllable from a haiku. A poem that says there were never any trees or hills or valleys. Not even a cloud over the nothingness.

And in that space, which used to be called the world, something endless goes on suffering for everybody.



Lawrence Applebaum: *This Could Be Paris or the Bronx*

GAYLE ELEN HARVEY

"THE DEAD, YOU REALIZE, ARE
PREOCCUPIED WITH WINTER"

— EVE JOSEPH

Preoccupied with winter, they lean into it, absorb all
emptiness, the sorrow
of minor keys.

There's an absent smell of red cedar, the moon narrow
as a crow's throat.

Steeped against the present, the Dead request black
and white landscapes,
attending silences where ice melts

but freezes before sunrise.
Snow's a burden, a blue suddenness among
the cypress, a deep inconsequence

among these stones.

ALIXA DOOM

CEMETERY MORNINGS

(A hillside in the Minnesota River Valley)

I make a left into the cemetery,
both hands on wheel:
the dead don't need turn signals.

*

Epitaph: He marched
with Sherman to the sea.
Now, a yellow butterfly
dawdles.

*

Nearby, 20 wild turkeys
feeding, fearless, as if the dead
are no longer dangerous.

*

Broken marble slab propped
against a pine tree – 160 years later
a child's death still not rooted.

*

Fresh earth thrown aside,
an empty doorway
awaits someone's return.

*

This morning in damp grass
the hush of white mushrooms.

*

Walking with the dead,
arm-in-arm, almost.

*

The dead have the best view.

*

Name on headstone: Bones.
No more disguises
for this family.

*

Mound of fresh earth –
how long will it take
this death to settle?

*

From the flying crow,
a somersaulting feather
I catch on my palm –
small, shining darkness.

*

Name on headstone: Born.
Even in death.

*

Add one letter,
father becomes
a feather in stone.

*

Centuries of stones;
here and there a new name –
the dead keep coming.

ALIXA DOOM

VILLAGE

I watch the earth for signs of them,
usually an arrowhead found by the young,
who believe they will live forever.
Blue stem grass at my waist,
I enter the cedars
and the bergamot and yarrow that brushed
their flush brown skin
as they came home to a hillside
that looked over the clear wide
unwinding of the river.

Shining seeds hitch a ride on my blue denim legs,
everywhere this insistence
on continuance.
The indigo blue of bunting
on a cedar tip
and the torch of oriole
above a moss-colored branch.
Each summer the songbird's delicate bones
throb with the song
pouring out of the belly.

Who knows the shape the soul takes
when the skin lets go?
Roots wrapped around remains of the village,
the cedar rises,
a bouquet of scent and silence.
This morning after the rain
the sun scatters light everywhere,
and the dead come near.

Absence shapes a sound,
bells out
from the breast of the dove,
brews in the dark jar of cedar,
the shade deep with
what we didn't know we loved
until it has already left us.

I cannot tell you their names,
or the gods they prayed to,
only that they passed this way.
Sometimes turning I see them trailing off,
the way the vanished do, or angels.
A robe dissolves in the light,
scatters back to grass.

There was a village here once,
a bone or spear tip arrives
like a fallen star.
The earth has taken them all back:
they travel the speed of dark
into a dense black heaven.

DENNIS SALEH

GRANITES

What is grander than to be a stone
A stone is a tick of eternity
A stone is a beat of certitude
A fleck of unmined ore of determination
A knuckle of resolve A statue of itself
A god in waiting A candle of black
A memory of nothing An echo of silence
A stone precludes occludes concludes
Punctuation in the earth
It shall not grow Rather ripen time

GREENWICH

The mathematician
in the heart consults
itself in exhaustion
A message clacks in
antique redundant systems
Stars are falling
Dust is on the way
Take heed, take heed

DON THOMPSON

HOW IT FEELS

The wind has finally stopped breathing:

 No life infuses the stale air that keeps circulating,
blown about by artificial means—some sort of machinery
 concealed deep underground,

I suspect, skullduggery no bureaucrat will admit.

 At least that's how it feels tonight.

And I don't believe in the moon anymore,

 such unconvincing illumination—

a dim bulb from the dollar store that burns out

 in less than a month. It's fake,

and so is the sun, nothing now but a cosmic klieg

 on a timer, set so it won't be dark 24/7.

On nights like this, up too late and uneasy, brooding,

 I miss how it used to be,

the wind like a hand on my cheek—

 sometimes a slap instead of a caress, but real;

and I remember—or I think I do—

 when there was natural light in the world.

RONALD WARDALL

DEAR OLD HOUSE

Well, you hoary hive, the problem is mathematical.
We keep adding live people and
none of the dead ones leave.

I often feel closest to the dead.

This morning Walt said behind his wet socks:
“Son, find your commanding calm,
your killing-clothes and hammer swing.”

I will.
I was ashamed of sleeping late.

Thomas poked my ribs in the blind drawn dark.
“Please observe the incoming flight of frogs,”
he intoned, hanging upside down, in Latin.

“You speak ill of the French?” inquired Voltaire.

Meanwhile, Auden hurled a year’s work into the fire
and reinvented himself.

Dylan was rhyming on the sofa while
a bottle of Johnny Walker Red stood
within reach, untouched.

“Real frogs,” replied Hardy.

All my bedding had been removed
with my underwear.
Kesey, the prankster and close observer?

Emily sat straight in her chair:
“Be brave, stay naked
and listen to your pulse under the grass.”

Of course I promised though, now awake,
I wanted to watch Aristophanes
begin the farting contest.

The morning news announced the significant dead,
the weather and a hair replacement that
could not be removed even when set afire.

Edna's smile was a warning.
"Do you want your breakfast?"

White Mountain William looked down
his industrial strength pipe.
"In the center of your love
find your loss and do not be afraid
to be a fool for the sake of your song."

I might have replied, "Who asked you?" or
"What about second hand cancer and my underwear?"
But, a son, I was silent,
ashamed of my small change passion.
So, I worked.

Ezra stuck a quill in my eye.
"Now that I have your attention,
brush your teeth."
He spoke in ancient Greek with hand puppets.

Should I have answered?
"Find my underwear and we'll talk."
Of course, when my eye stopped smarting,
I edited.

Frost was walling himself in the cellar.
Poe was stacking his bricks.

There was blood on the stairs;
Jeffers was home.
He spoke from the second landing,
pretending it was a mountain.
“The best is to be a stone.
If not, then know your anger
and make yourself lava,
sear and expect no thanks.”

Not being a stone
I wanted to hit him between the eyes with a brick,
but it's hard to ask Poe for a brick and
I would only have had another lesson
when the ghost of rock and sea
turned his bloody eye to poetry.
So I proofread.

“Anybody see Wallace?”
“Lost in another mirror.”
I didn't want to criticize.
He had dreamt of becoming a tax attorney,
God bless him.

Robert anointed a teddy bear cardinal
with Eau Sauvage, then
knelt in front of his wooliness and confessed.

Allen had his head out the window
chanting a rhapsody to running sores
while he projected an army training film
onto the neighbors' porch.
No one could doubt his sincerity.

Hemingway was in the kitchen smashing china
with a frozen fish

In the back room, Tom
had miniaturized Homer and Dante
and tied them across the tracks
of his electric train,
his eyes focused on the drama,
sipping tea.

Behind the shower curtain, Faulkner wrestled
with his typewriter ribbon,

“In the night world, you may,” Marianne said,
“be an owl and hear a song in a moonlit stone,
and for mystery, an empty parenthesis.”

I gave her a baseball to throw against the garage
and she told me where
Kesey had hidden my underwear.

So thank you, great house,
for not being some silent place.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Firefly*

EDGAR CAGE

PROJECT OPEN DOOR, CHINATOWN

I'm hired to type the personal data for 3000 Chinese moths, all spelled with difficult-to-reach *y*'s, *w*'s, and *x*'s. When I stop between entries, I can hear the gods of the bridges and the gods of the fields who chased these examples of human calligraphy to the sounds they're known by. They're old and I could kill one by not entering its name.

After weeks of typing, the only way to find a way inside the information is to fall asleep, to live back in the Elder Dragon moods of Mott Street and Confucius Plaza.

The errors I make cause Ms. Ng to smile, though, of course, she cannot see my work from across the small office that barely keeps out the crushing noise of the next room, a hundred people commanding the vowels inside a single snow pea. But when I look out the open doorway, I see only a drab, quickly-moving gathering space. Not even the cursing of contemporary popular music to distinguish it.

Even at 11 AM I can no longer tell which part of my desk is in daylight and which is past nightfall. But my co-workers keep offering me oranges, if not encouragement.

The day takes longer in their language—a woman calls out Bingo numbers on a police bullhorn, more tones of rising and falling mist, fortune cookie celebrations.

They share rice and flu vegetables at the congregate meals, and afterwards, Hamilton War Chin leads the senior center version of God Bless America, the people's moth flesh replaced with Kleenex that can no longer hold back the words to that invasion.

And blowing in from the community center's one window: The second moon's late-known light, which seems like something gently forgotten, crawling gently over them.

EDGAR CAGE

PHYLUM CIPHERADA

we are what thrives when the light gets crushed by your bedroom curtains. we are katydids moving in grass longitudes that never existed. we are salesmen who live only in the rumors of other salesmen. we are territories where shadows speak and do not frighten us. we are the descendants of voluptuous and irreparable laughter. we are a catalog of high blood pressure and video reruns eroding into children. we are the pranks of dial tone from the last remaining payphones. we are not singers, we will not point in the direction of the eyes that long ago leaked into your skin. we are coordinates on a map of pink paint and spilled canaries. we are a migration company following the delinquent and deserted dust fires beyond the countries of deer. we are strict like the crooked lines of great vodka. we are thumbtacks growing in the sun. we are poor and without flesh and full of holes where the voices can be found. we are not biology professors or engineers building iron moons for the iron blackness. we are a young prostitute's dried-up screams. we are neutrons and nicotine blood boasting and singing the cantatas of houseflies. we are a million eons before the coffee and Sunoco restaurants melt into puddles. we are, at best, another day of food. we get banished for making the televisions cry and for making the televisions flicker with a cringing kind of happiness. we fall six miles into sleep and wait there to be collected. we are the ones who led the whispering skeletons to an orchard of electrical fence and told them we would return. we are responsible for the unrecognizable lust inside the secretary's dead brown geraniums. we are the four hundred and sixty third silence to be arranged in the overused sorrows. we watch everything from the perceived but unrecorded hours of janitors and we do not follow each other gently there.

ROBERTA ALLEN

TEAR ME FROM HER TORN SELF

The woman crouching in underpants at the top of the worn stairs cannot be who I think she is, cannot be who I want her to be, even though I recognize the coarse voice asking in Dutch, “Who’s there?” I want to shout in the voice she hasn’t heard for forty years, It isn’t me! But it’s too late. Too late to retrace my steps, walk past her house, pretend I haven’t seen her. I climb the narrow creaking steps and see in dim light the ruined face, long matted hair, but bare breasts as cheerful as they were in the communal sauna near the Central Station. I hug her in spite of myself, in spite of my attraction and revulsion, in spite of the run-away feeling that wants to tear me from her torn self. I don’t want to know what tremor, what tornado shook her to the core, broke her apart. But still I ask. And she answers. The coarse voice of the sixty-four year-old coming out of this shockingly youthful body. The torn self talks about the nine months in the state mental hospital. The depression. The loneliness. The disease that racks her body. The pills. All the pills. She fumbles over the round table where we once drank coffee, where we laughed till we cried, the round table now covered with papers and vials. “All my friends have gone,” she says, as I watch her trembling hands travel the length and breadth of the table, trying to find the right pills. The disease. I want to hear about the disease. “It’s everywhere,” she says, moving hands along her delicate skin. “Nothing doctors can do. Soon I’ll die.” I remember now. The disease. The imaginary disease started as a tiny seed in her mind the summer she walked to France many years ago: I see her in work boots, with a backpack, dark hair in waist-long braids. I see her sleeping alone in the forest. I never gave a thought to the disease. Now she is the disease. There is only the disease and this body, this cheerful young body that might still find some happiness if not for the disease. “You used to be so nervous,” she says, suddenly remembering who I was when we looked like sisters, when we were best friends.

LAWRENCE APPLEBAUM

PEOPLE WHO LIKED THIS ALSO LIKED

Me in my solid American Apparel tee-shirt
Beige Banana Republic pants
I am a strip mall on the highway
Fast becoming You
Tube, a new film in my backpack
The 20 Billion Served sign
has fallen into the river as
fish gobble yesterday's anti-
depressants like gum
drops now on Twitter
Please tell me what I like
As I'm browsing I get dizzy
filling up the cart
like my stomach
On the phone I radiate happiness
telling people about my free shipping
I float past ghosts of token clerks
SAR levels in my body
make me hotspot
People gather around me on the subway
and play with themselves
as I slather on the antibacterial gel like lube
Apple earphones leak noise
muffling the Chorus forever
lost in between stations of static.

LAWRENCE APPLEBAUM

NEW AND USED

The world will never go away now,
it's just on hold,
like the lock on my i-pod.
What am I listening to?
"Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup."
Who was Hildegard, you ask?
The first lady of. . .
What's a supper club?
I don't have time to answer;
I'm seeing Kay Francis starring
in *Trouble in Paradise*,
it takes place back when Hackers
were Pickpockets masquerading as countesses.
Who was Miss Francis?
She was a screensaver I used to watch at the Ziegfeld
when one room movie palaces were heaven.
The only texts in the room were
the Exit signs and the credits.
Online meant waiting to get in.
You could hold real trash in your hand
before it was deleted.
Back then blackberries were loose in cardboard cartons
and came from Korean deli's
and a good old-fashioned virus just killed you.

MARGARET GILBERT

FROM *BETWEEN DINNER AND DEATH ON PARK AVENUE*

CHAPTER NINE:

Since the end of November I had planned to visit my parents over Christmas and had booked reservations on a plane. I actually wanted to see them because I thought perhaps they would give me the money I needed right away. I called them from the telephone in the alcove of my dark tiny apartment in New York just before the service was turned off. My father seemed glad to talk to me. I lived in New York, did not answer his letters, often hung up on him on the telephone in anger — in spite of the fact that he was very ill, partially paralyzed. Now he said he was reading the new Peter Taylor novel that had just come out, *Home to Memphis*. Had I read it? I had never heard of Peter Taylor before, but I knew Memphis to be the city of the dead, the ancient ruined city on the Nile. Memphis meant “white walls” I believed in Egyptian. The novel was about a Southerner living in New York, who travelled back to the Southern city of Memphis to attend his father’s funeral. “If you are still interested in Agrarians, you will be interested in this contrast of civilizations,” he said, sounding far away on the telephone. Later when I read the book, I felt it was significant the way he had misstated its real title *A Summons to Memphis* — and plot, almost an augury of things to come.

CHAPTER TEN:

“Don’t come!” my parents had said, my mother’s voice the loudest, when I telephoned them from New York. And my father’s: “The weather is awful, bitterly cold down here — it’s too cold for you to come home.” But I had decided, I said, that I wanted to come. “If you come then,” my father had said, “although we don’t want you to come, I’ll meet your plane.” “She never comes,” I heard my mother say. “Why should she come now?” “Don’t meet my plane,” I said. “I’ll take the bus from the Meridian airport to Sumter. “Mother can meet the bus.” My father moved with a metal cane. “Nonsense, do you think I won’t meet my own daughter?” “Well then,” I said in New York, “I won’t come.” They had thought the issue was closed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

I recalled the last time I had visited my parents. *It had been my father's birthday, so my mother insisted I wear my yellow linen suit instead of blue jeans, and we sat out on the small screened porch and drank iced tea and ate cake in the hot summer night with the sound of crickets and fire-crackers. It was July 4th, and he talked about James Agee, the writer, and of how the sharecroppers he photographed had real character in their faces from hard work unlike people today. My father was partly paralyzed then and used a steel cane. He had very pink cheeks and angry black eyes like black-eyed peas. My mother wore a beige pants suit. Her face was vague and colorless. The next day I had boarded the plane for New York in Meridian, Mississippi. When I said goodbye, my mother suddenly burst into tears as though she were at a funeral. As the plane lifted into the sky, I watched them sit all shriveled up on a bench in the heat, and I felt a surge of happiness that I had gotten away so long ago.*

CHAPTER TWELVE:

The next morning, I got up at six a.m. after a party the night before, and walked out of my apartment with a half-packed bag. The moon was out. Someone was at an empty window (overlooking Park Avenue) peering down onto the empty street filled with darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

I stopped at The Viand two blocks away with my Visa for breakfast. I ordered a grilled cheese for \$4. I had recently sat next to Lillian Hellman there, the playwright, eating a grilled cheese with bacon. I thought about Fred and how he hadn't called me and how he was probably trying to call me right that moment. Fred looked just like those famous pictures of Claus Richter, the tall, blond conductor who looked like a German god and played Bach on the harpsichord. He wore a magician's black tuxedo coat like Richter, and his hair was smoothed back behind his ears, and I wondered if I would ever hear from him again. He was 20 years older, and he even spoke some German. The diner had oval-shaped smoky mirrors with little clusters of gem chandeliers and lunch couches covered in red leather vinyl and a picture of a Greek ship sailing on a blue ocean in a gilded frame of gold paint. I wished I were on that ship with Fred and we were on our honeymoon headed for Paris in spite of the fact that Fred was married. When I finished my coffee just then, I discovered I had left my watch at the apartment, and I went back to get it. Then I walked over to The Pierre two blocks away, and took a limousine from the hotel with my Visa to the airport.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

When the plane landed in Memphis, a city which you associate with the cotton and river culture of the deep South, I was surrounded by the Mississippi Delta extending down into Alabama. I was amazed to see how beautiful it still was. Back in New York, I lived on the street where Edie Sedgwick, the Andy Warhol star, had died of a drug overdose.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

In Memphis, I prepared to surprise my parents by taking the bus from Meridian, just below Memphis, to Sumter, Alabama. I telephoned my father and alerted him that I would be in Meridian in an hour. He wanted to know about the play. I said there had been a riot with the director defending the play and the director had been physically thrown out of The Actor's Studio. "That's a good sign," he said. "Keep writing." He said he thought he could get a driver and meet the plane. He wanted me to call home when I got to Meridian. Would I wait for him, he asked? During the Memphis layover, I remembered the Carter's pool-side party in Greenville a few years ago where everyone had gotten dead drunk, and how Mrs. Carter had driven me across the moonless Mississippi Delta with its stretch of low flat land late the following night down to New Orleans where I was living then. "It's clear you're going to be a writer," she had said. But in New York I hadn't published anything, and I was in debt. When I arrived in Memphis, I called home. "Daddy," I said, "I'm in Memphis. I'll be in Meridian in half an hour, but don't meet my plane."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

My mother said later that my father had been getting well, watching his activities so carefully, but that when I called from Memphis, and he had learned I was coming home for Christmas, he had torn out of the house without any kind of preparation for the trip leaving an unfinished meal, and arranged to be driven over to the airport in Meridian, Mississippi by Randall. They had sped down the silver-paved highways on Christmas Eve, in a white-colored Malibu Chevrolet over the long silver stretch of the road covered with frost.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

I hurried into the Ladies Room to fix my hair and apply my makeup when my plane had reached Meridian, where I heard a repeated page for a "Miss Margo Howard" to come to the airport desk. I did not answer the page at first, and an attendant had come into the Ladies to get me. She took me to Randall, my father's black driver, who was having a Coke with ice. He said my father had fallen and hit his head and had been rushed off in an ambulance for treatment and would be coming back shortly to get me. I couldn't finish my Coke, and I suddenly hated Randall, who was still enjoying his. "I didn't want to tell you," he said with a half-grin.

MICHAEL LENHART

THE HERO

A savior walks in on bourbon-and-water
and speaks pidgin telethon.

Your power forward plays in Spain.
The orchid man gets knocked unconscious.

They gun down gangsters in the sad cafes.

All over Europe there are penmanship riots
and murders on speedboats. Unleashed French contortionists
drown monks in mint sauce; and thousands of pointillists
are mugged in the Louvre.

So you bind yourself in thongs of moss
and offer yourself to the a.m. static . . .

then you see the red blooms, hear Aeolian hornpipes;
and the turnstiles and the fjords crack,
the lowlands fill with pink flamingos.

Now you sit in a truckstop at 7 a.m.,
endlessly dunking the donut in the wilderness,
and fall for the waitress
with the blue, ghost-town eyes.

Though geeks with guns police the grounds
the wisemen still sing from what's left of the jukebox.

Mi hermanos, our hero still lives in the hills.

That is only his corpus with the 1,200 holes in it.

BOB HEMAN

FROM INFORMATION

INFORMATION

The man runs because he is drawn that way. He thinks the woman is his but she is not. The animals measure only the distance he is allowed. When they crawl away he becomes confused.

INFORMATION

There are animals that require the wind to mate. The mountain moves only when they are not watching. The women say his name without emotion. If he seems to answer them it is only a coincidence.

INFORMATION

Someone's son approaches someone's daughter in a garden that belongs to someone they do not know. We call this "opening the room." It is never what it seems.

INFORMATION

Something like the hand the cat resembles. Or like the door that can be placed against the clouds to open them. She speaks like the machine speaks. She listens when she is not too tired.

INFORMATION

The hamburger is not an explanation. The wall only makes it seem that way. They have brought the horses into a room where they cannot run. The man thought it was his job to watch them there.

INFORMATION

Repeats the door each time he enters. Repeats the bear each time he sees a bee. Repeats the sky outside of every window. Repeats the rain he cannot see.

INFORMATION

Only has hands in the mirror. Only has a bird in the shadows. Only wears a skin that no one else wants. Only needs it when someone is watching.

INFORMATION

Likes what he hears even though he does not understand it. Is able to speak even before he is spoken to. The animals are real even though they have never been described. He stands in one place because he has no reason to move.

INFORMATION

Counts the bricks that have been used or the bricks that are left over. Measures the light that is reflected and the length of the shadows cast. Releases only enough birds, then watches where they land.

INFORMATION

When the snow disappears there is nothing beneath it.

INFORMATION

The red was an error. The blue an assumption. The green something that was left over from before.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Dandy*

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

RANE

•

Twirling my white blond hair I was making a cobweb in the refrigerated dark of the Rouge Room. All the stores and restaurants in Houston's Galleria were teeth chattering cold. The elevator opened and men in military fatigues walked out and happiness spread through me. They matched each other's steps, squaring their corners as they marched into the bar. My father had been a Navy Seal, the youngest in American history. He squared his corners like that. Then the happiness evaporated and I felt the flush of anger. "Too pretty for her own good," Daddy once said proudly. We were a Navy family until he left us.

The bartender, Orlando, set a drink in front of me. I thought of a pool of iced Luna moths. The margarita came on a silver tray with chunks of rock salt along the glass rim. "On the house," he said, studying me through his brooding eyebrows. "I like to watch you."

"That's disgusting," I said, biting my straw.

He raised a finger to scratch his cleft chin where beard stubble collected. Once he mentioned that he shaved twice a day like most men of Egyptian descent. His hair was gelled back from his forehead in waves like a tide going out. He was old. Thirty-two.

The military men chose stools at the far end of the bar under the television where a white cloud found itself trapped in a blue sky. Now that I'd swallowed the tequila I drifted. It was my seventeenth birthday and I had a right to celebrate. I'm with Daddy again and we're climbing in hill country. Cypress trees like old hair, cliffs pitted by a million years of rain. "Daddy, wait for me," I say, and he does.

The military men signaled Orlando and he left to take their order. "Hello, mates. What can I bring you?" he asked, changing his accent to Aussie. I could hear him rattling on. He was angry that Cairo wasn't even contending to host the 2010 Summer Olympics. How could athletes compete in London where the air was coal dust and heavy metals? Almost as bad as Beijing. In college he threw the javelin. He knew what was needed. It was all about oxygenation. A javelin thrower was part sprinter. "Could you sprint a half mile in London, mates? You'd need the coldie afterwards."

When Orlando returned he carried a salt shaker and a new drink. This

one was different. A colorless liquid and a quartered lime. "How about a shot?" he asked. "I serve customers silver tequila. For you I pour gold. When will you let me meet your mother? Mothers know I can be trusted with their golden daughters."

"You're seriously untrustworthy," I snorted. "I hope you know I'm here for the free drinks."

"How can I ask for a date if you won't tell me your name?" He instructed me in how you drank a shot. Shake salt onto your hand and lick, tilt your head and swallow all of it, bite into the lime. "Think you can handle it?" He studied me with his oil eyes. In them I could see birds circling above an iron bridge, circling like pieces of dirt thrown into the sky.

I let the tequila roll down my throat and thumped the glass on the bar. "Another," I demanded, wanting more of the pale drink that was making my body hot, then cold. I could handle scorpions. Flat rock or Emperors. Daddy raised them. I could handle throwing knives. Tiny ones where any mistake in your throw sends them spinning into oblivion. If I could manage them I could hold a drink. I was first born and Daddy did with me what he would have with a son. I scuba-dived at seven, rock climbed at eight, endurance trained at nine, shooting range at ten. Mom and Daddy divorced when I was eleven and he left us behind in Houston and moved to Los Angeles. Irreconcilable differences. What they call no fault divorce. But it had to be someone's fault. Daddy said goodbye to the armed services and us. He opened a body building gym and starred in a dumb reality show. He dated starlets.

I could hear the alcohol tumbling inside me. Fall. Fly. Fall. Then I bit into the lime and downed the liquid. "Another," I sputtered. "It's my birthday." I wore a short-sleeved black dress with a flounced skirt and a black moth orchid in my hair. The corsage began to feel heavy, weighing the rest of me down. Too bad my friends couldn't have a good laugh with me, but they were underage and he wouldn't serve them. Only me. And the one friend who met Orlando said, "He's from Planet Orangutan." I stood up for him. "He's Egyptian." My friend rolled her eyes. "Right. Then why does he talk in an Australian accent?" I shrugged. "He's repulsive and that's part of his charm." My friend snorted. "He's a bartender. That's his charm."

With more of the tequila inside my body I didn't mind him keeping his eye on me. His white shirt didn't fit him. He'd buttoned it wrong, the second button in the third buttonhole, and the third button in the fourth buttonhole and so on. One of his cuffed sleeves came undone. There was red stain, possibly ketchup, on his collar and the smell of toothpaste.

"Another," I called, licking the corners of my mouth.

"I think you've had enough." Orlando shook his head. "Now keep it down." That's what he said but I watched him lift the tequila bottle.

We met in late April. That's when I started skipping school and wandering around apartment complexes with beautiful swimming pools. I'd lie

in my two-piece on a stranger's chaise lounge sunning and think of Daddy. Adults were at work and children at school. I owned everything I saw. I was like a scorpion finding its hiding area. Then a man came out for a swim. He was olive-skinned and dark eyed with facial stubble but what interested me was the black matting of hair that swirled over his arms, his chest and legs and shoulder blades. Like he'd taken a hair bath. Like an animal. He approached me. "Who are you? Nefertiti or a starveling mosquito? This is a private pool. Either leave or be my guest." He reminded me of the scowling men on CNN gathering in the dusty streets of the Middle East. His face was familiar. I felt his eyes on my neck and in my blond hair. I'd twisted it up in a clip but tendrils crept down my nape and curled at my temples. "You're too old to be looking at me like that," I said. He stiffened and told me if this were Cairo where his parents were from I would be too old for him. I would have to come with a big dowry. "Are you a Muslim?" I asked. He seemed startled. "I was born in Houston's Herman Hospital of Egyptian parents. Coptic Christians. And what are you? Swedish? I bet you're Heinz 57. Maybe a little Irish English German."

Orlando set the shot glass in front of me. I squinted at it. Only half full. "I'm cutting you off after this one," he said, glowering. His eyes now coils of black smoke tried to infiltrate my face. He suddenly had two heads and both swam around me, one chasing the other. Words rushed out of both his mouths. "I went to the gym before work. I pressed five hundred pounds. I was thinking of you. Lifting all that weight for you. If we were in Egypt you'd already be married to me. Even Christian girls marry young. Fourteen. Fifteen. Muslim girls. Twelve. Thirteen. You'd be considered past marrying age." A patch of hair climbed above the white collar of his shirt and below his cuffs at his wrists. "I don't want you to get drunk. Soon you'll be my fiancé." He placed a silver cup of peanuts, all dusted over with sodium, next to my forearm. Then he snatched the napkin I was doodling on. RANE. RANE. RANE.

He waved it. "Who is this RANE? Did you do this for him?"

"It's my name," I sniffed. I'd never before told him my name. I meet him here in the Rouge Room of the Houston Oaks Hotel. In the Galleria's glass razzle-dazzle of vaulted ceiling mall and ice skating rink I didn't need a name.

"Your name. This is calligraphy. Beautiful. When I tell people of my future wife's accomplishments I'll mention this."

"I call it script," I chuckled and brushed away his compliment. My generation doesn't write in long hand, it's not something we're comfortable with, we push buttons and communicate through our thumbs. Like some of my peers can't tell time on a clock unless it's digital. I can make arabesques and embossed characters that make you think you're looking at the handwriting of a Victorian ghost.

"Write Orlando."

His breath smelled of anise as he leaned over the bar and watched my hand. A blind loop in handwriting is a loop formation completely filled in with ink. Daddy, who had been devoted to exercise and body endurance, taught me script writing. He showed me how to make my own pen from bamboo. We were both left handed. Daddy was proud of my dexterity. Long hand formations and knife throwing. I could execute a snap throw almost as precisely as he could. Arms toward the target, then pulling back the right arm. Bullseye.

ORLANDO. There. I turned the napkin toward him. "This is called the flying finish. It's the tiny barb sprouting from the completed word." My tongue had grown and wanted to protrude from my mouth.

He let out a low whistle. "Wait until you're my wife. I'll brag about your deeds."

Then on the TV screen Fox News was on and I saw Daddy in a Mitsubishi traveling the highway toward Fallujah. It's been five years but they still like to show the angry men and boys gathered around the vehicle. He's not really there in that video any more than the armed men are still in the road. Everyone has to move on. Daddy would be proud I'm holding my liquor. When I drink I stop missing him. Do I smell Fallujah? Heat? Blood? The gray beige alleyways, houses like square clay jugs?

One of the military men got up and marched toward the men's room, looking at my legs when he passed by. When I was twelve a photograph of me crying went viral over the internet. Beside me my mother looked pudgy like an old Kodak moment, her crossed legs pasty and unmuscled, her tears not the golden rain and gardenia breath of teenage grief. Middle aged grief doesn't move anyone. I was aglow with it and balled a Kleenex to push the tears back into my eyes.

Orlando tapped his knuckles on the bar. "Last call." I tried to move my feet, but couldn't find my shoes. They'd fallen off. Lights doused themselves behind the bar and the last call drinkers began drifting away. The music went out and the whir of the air conditioner died. Then my foot slid down the rungs of the bar stool and found one high heel. I stood up and the blue TV world tilted. I held onto the bar while the walls went spinning, and then stopped. I dug in my bag for the car keys. Careful. I'd been picked up once for DWI and my license suspended.

"And where are you going, birthday girl?" he demanded, slapping the bar cloth over a spilled drink.

"Home," I said. My tongue felt loose in my mouth. When I turned to go my foot fell out of its high heel. I landed on my ass. Orlando hurried out from around the bar, crouching and lifting me to my feet. His fingers with the spider hairs sprouting from the knuckles went around my waist.

"Listen, Rane, let me take you home. Your Mom will be glad I care for you."

“I need to pee,” I slurred. My stomach tried to heave into my throat. I swallowed it.

“You can’t drive. I insist.” His eyebrows met over his nose. “I don’t mind waiting for you to graduate high school before we marry, but I can escort you home.” His forehead gleamed with sweat. There were wet full moons under each arm.

I pushed him away and went weaving toward the ladies room. Red velvet took the shape of felt roses on the wall and I sank into one of the chairs. This was once a powder room. Things were so much nicer then whenever then was. Again I got sick to my stomach and made myself get up. I held onto the stall door. In the mirror a Mitsubishi drove down a broken asphalt highway; the sky, the color of crushed tablets; the sun, a surly magenta. The highway led into Fallujah. Here was the Euphrates River, the cradle of civilization. First cities. First writing. Land of the Sumerians and Babylonians. Dark-haired men wearing long white man-shirts appeared. I raised my shoe and began to hit them. I made a crack in the mirror and kept hitting.

“What’s going on in there?” Orlando called from the hallway.

Panting, I leaned over the sink and splashed my face with water. Looking up, I saw the moth orchid falling from my hair. I grabbed it back. “I’m not really gone,” Daddy had said, calling me every third day or so. After going broke in California and not able to make his child support payments, he’d signed up with Blackwater to go to Iraq. The day I saw his death on CNN I stayed home from school with a cold. I kept the TV on in my room, not that I was watching, but just to have someone there. My white-toothed babysitter.

•

We left the glass atrium of the Galleria Shopping Center, its triple levels of escalators. Orlando propped me up on the way down. I couldn’t object. “Hang onto me and we’ll walk outside. One foot in front of the other.” I clutched a shoe. The electronic lobby doors opened and we stepped out into the 2:00 a.m. heat. “I’m parked at the far end of the row,” he said. My knees gave and I wobbled, but his arm locked around me. “I’ll introduce my gold girl to my silver girl.” He half-carried me to the Thunderbird. After he helped me into the passenger’s seat he unhinged the top and folded it down. “I want to show you off,” he announced. “Tomorrow we will pick up your mother’s car.” The headrest cradled my neck and relaxed my eyes. I listened to him starting the engine, shifting, backing up. “You are safe with me. Dual air bags. Anti-lock brakes. And Smart Locks.” Each red light, the stopping and starting, made my stomach feel like it was falling, then we dove into the river of traffic on Westheimer. We passed Chances and Chi Chi Martini’s and the G-Spot. My hair flew straight up and the wind knotted it. I hugged the

door. In it I could hear Daddy's cell phone voice. "Love you, baby." His mouth against my ear and mouth. He was in San Francisco. Then Singapore. "You're my best girl." How could he love me and walk away? Mom never yelled at him, wasn't that fat. Just faded a bit. Then the tequila churned inside me. Sweat broke out on my forehead.

"Orlando, I'm going to throw up. Pull over," I said, cupping my hands over my mouth.

"There is no pulling over. I have shopping bags under the seat." He handed me a plastic bag. "Use this. I believe even your vomit will be sweet."

"You're sick," I said, grabbing the bag. I coughed and felt better. I didn't need to throw up.

"People are admiring us," he said with a smile in his voice. "What a handsome couple they are thinking. What a handsome car. Lucky guy, lucky girl."

We turned off the main drag. The Montrose District came at us with swimming pools, high dives and low dives, the blue chlorine looking hot and after midnight and sunk in the earth, too lazy to raise itself. The streets smelled of corn tortillas and beef fajitas, orange flowers twisting past laundry shacks. I glimpsed Club Eve where the female bartenders let my girlfriends drink with fake IDs. Then Mother's Bar and Hustlers and clumps of young guys and older men congregating in the stale heat drinking from go-cups. Young guys in a passing car were checking Orlando out. "Hey, Hadji. Who's that with you?" they shouted. "One of Mohammad's virgins?" There was anger in every glance. Like it would only take a word to set the streets aflame.

"They are jealous, Rane."

There was the 24 hour Dolphin Fitness where Daddy and I worked out. He always attracted a gym crowd. His arms held the exercise wheel in a pushup position. "Take it, Rane. Bring one leg in, under your chest, and then pop it out. Try it, baby. Pop it out. Give me twenty front squats." Then I did take the exercise wheel and bring my leg in under my chest and pop it out. Daddy, why did you leave us? Because Mom wasn't hot anymore? Because she didn't go to the gym, because she gave birth to me and Randall? We'd been forked out of her stomach. No man who prided himself on his physique wanted a woman going soft.

The wind helped cool me but now the Thunderbird slowed and turned down Maryland Street with its magnolia trees. "We are home," Orlando announced, parking behind a gated townhouse. The car stopped. I was sinking beneath the watery surface of the pale drinks. I could hear a woman's angry voice. "Who is she?" Then voices in a language they don't teach at my school. And the cry of a baby, a door opening, slamming and then going quiet. I held onto the plastic bag. The woman's voice shrill and high like a bird whose feathers were being pulled one by one. I tried to crawl from the car, to flutter kick but nothing. I passed out.

I woke in a strange place, on sectional pillows with a quilted comforter over me. I knew I was being watched. I had been dreaming. Thick dreams. Daddy in his climbing belt against a sheer rock face. Mister Macho, bare-chested. A publicity photo for his reality show. I can see his deltoids and abdominal muscles, biceps and triceps. Every muscle group stands out, articulated. One foot on the cliff, the other in air. High stepper, an adventurer. I am climbing too, following him up the rock.

Once our whole family flew to Dubai and in the middle of the night my father took me out onto the expensive hotel roof and initiated me into the beauty of the desert sky. “Rane, can you see the rabbit who lives in the moon? Baby, right there in the blue craters, can’t you make him out?” I followed his finger. I saw the rabbit’s haunch. The long floppy ears. His nose. “I’ve been buddies with that rabbit since I was a kid. My daddy told me that rabbit would watch out for me when he wasn’t around.” He squeezed my hand, pointing into the shadows. “I want you to be buddies with him. He’ll take care of you when I can’t.” I shivered. “Daddy, you’ll always take care of me, won’t you?” He was quiet, and then he said, “Sure, baby.” In the full moon I saw the strange alluring pink eyes of the rabbit that were hidden deep in blue rocks during the waning. When the moon was crescent the rabbit lived behind the sliver of moon tree.

My head throbbed and my eyelids weighed five pounds each. I kept drifting. “Let’s talk about your anger, Rane,” the idiot high school counselor was saying. “You’re skipping way too much school.” I disliked her brown hair that always stayed the same length, her blue suit that seemed stapled to her doughy body. She wasn’t nice like Mom and only wanted to hear bad things. Daddy’s death was splashed everywhere and I started getting strange emails, marriage proposals, offers to set up college funds for me and my brother, sympathy notes, like the comment section of every blog and news website. I answered many and always pointed out which words were misspelled. If you think you actually have an opinion that deserves being aired try to spell correctly. The day of his funeral my mother spoke softly telling me to go forward and touch Daddy’s casket. I hesitated, and then took a step, and then another, making my way to the front of the auditorium. My first word had been Daddy. It was a long time before Mommy.

I knew this was Orlando’s apartment. He was somewhere behind me, maybe in the doorway, tapping the tips of his fingers together. He cleared his throat. “Rane is a pretty name. And now that I know your last name I understand how your father died. I am sorry.”

Heat filled my forehead. “My father doesn’t need you to be sorry.”

“Maybe so but I am still sorry. Now I will tell you who I am.” He came

into the room holding a plate and wearing a white man-dress. He sat cross-legged on the carpet. A mesh of deep roses and maroons, the colors of a polluted Houston sunset, all six lanes of interstate. There was another tapestry hanging from the wall. It was the carbon monoxide rising between glass towers, the mauves and purples, and all the red Texas dawns woven together. I liked the room. There were no chairs and only low tables and lamps.

My stomach gurgled. I was still nauseated. The dizziness hadn't passed. "Do you always wear that at home?" His lips looked red like he'd polished them and when he rolled his sleeves up, the hairiness of his arms went on display. I could hear my friends. "He's beyond gross. Hasn't he heard of waxing, electrolysis, or hair clippers?" There was something around my feet—a heaviness, and the odor of garlic and scallions drifting from his plate toward me—I pushed the smell away.

"Yes, this is comfortable. Loose-fitting. It is called a dishdasha." He lifted a pita square and dipped it in hummus. "Lying there you look like a bird hit by a pebble and fetched from the sky. There is a wounded appearance to you."

I couldn't seem to find my legs. It felt like they'd walked off and left the rest of me here. I tried to shift my feet and free them of the comforter. "I don't believe you were born in Houston," I accused. "If you were, you'd sit in a chair."

"You are right. Americans are too lazy to rise from the floor each time they need to make a trip to the refrigerator. Walking is for the immigrant," he smiled. "I am Uday Basari. I am Iraqi, although my mother is Egyptian. I played soccer for the 2000 games against Japan." He tore another pita bread with his very white teeth and the rest chased hummus across his plate. Afternoon food, not breakfast. "You must eat. Nothing clears the hangover like food."

Maybe he was right about walking. After Daddy left we moved from our house to an apartment on Yoakum Street so Mom could walk over the overpass to Summit Towers and be at work. Sometimes after school I met her there and we crossed the overpass on foot. People in cars stared like they'd never seen anyone walking in their lives.

The pillow tugged at my aching head. It had a different smell. A woman's hair. "So why did you tell me you were Egyptian? Egyptian. Iraqi. Why would I care?"

He took another bite of his chick pea and olive concoction. "There is much distrust in America for the Iraqi people. To say nothing of the distrust the Iraqi people feel for the Americans."

"My head hurts. I'm sweating." I was still wearing my black dress that twisted around my waist. I threw the comforter off me. What time was it, I wondered. Then I realized the windows were covered with heavy burgundy draperies. The apartment of a bartender who worked nights and slept days. In the far corner a javelin stood.

"You are cold," he said, pulling the comforter back. "You were poisoned by alcohol. I know the danger of alcohol because I am an athlete. A world-class thrower of the javelin. Not as brilliant in soccer. When my team lost its 2000 game Uday Hussein punished us. We were beaten for three days and forced to kick a concrete ball. Perhaps I resemble someone familiar to you. The dictator's mad son, Uday Hussein. I've been told that."

"You could be Uday Hussein's brother and that's not a compliment," I said, liking his face better in this room than in the Galleria bar.

He laughed, a low-in-the-throat laugh.

My friends and I had file shared close-ups of the dictator's dead sons. Their blue faces and coarse hair that seemed burned to their heads. I read of the suitcases they traveled with full of pills, underwear and cologne. I wondered what the scent of that was. An orange blossom moon shining down on women unwrapping themselves from their black cocoons. The smell of date palms casting their notched shadows.

"There was a tribe of Uday lookalikes." He rolled hummus into a falafel. Topped it with a black olive and took an enormous bite. "After the season of the concrete ball I was finished in soccer. I feared my parents would be arrested. And so Uday coerced me into body doubling. He had many doubles and one of them wrote a book. *The Devil's Bargain*."

"I don't believe anything you say." But I did believe him and in his own apartment he was almost handsome. "And you're not supposed to drink as a Muslim. How is it that you're a bartender?" My tongue had pasted itself to the roof of my mouth.

"I never drink. But the Koran does not prevent a good Muslim from serving alcohol to the non-believer. I will not force you to totally swear off drinking once you are my wife. But I would like you to convert. I will stipulate that in our marriage contract." He smacked his lips but did not take his eyes off me.

I could smell his cologne. In the room of draperies marriage to him seemed odd and possible. I could go either way. My head throbbed. Mostly I wanted something to make the headache go. "Where is the bathroom? You have one, don't you? I'm going there and then home."

"Your mother is not expecting you." He stood up. His feet were bare and when he moved toward me I saw his toes were crisscrossed with scars. His big toes were misshapen and black. "I did not know where you lived, Rane. When you collapsed I looked in your bag, which is there by the coffee table. I asked myself should I take you home, but then I did not want to get you in trouble. Who is this man? Is he responsible for your drunken state? I brought you here and sent your mother a message from your phone. It's better this way. You'll have a sleep and shower and I'll drive you to your car tomorrow. I asked myself why does a girl carry a knife in her bag. She must be afraid because there is no man to protect her."

“Did the concrete ball do that to your toes?” I asked. When he nodded I made myself focus on his face: his features, the thick black mustache and eyebrows that anchored his face like tent stakes, the oil-black eyes that wading birds could drown in or be saved by. Like any photograph posted online, you waited for the caption to tell you if this is a sex offender or a crusading environmentalist.

He licked hummus from one of his fingers. “Are you hungry?”

I shook my head. “Who was the woman I heard? And the baby?”

“My sister and her son.”

“Do they live here?” I asked, trying to roll onto my side.

“No, she was visiting overnight. A fight with my brother-in-law.”

“Did she leave because I’m here? That’s what it sounded like. Are you sure she’d not your wife?”

He didn’t answer and moved the pita bread and hummus closer. I pushed it away. “I saw a picture of your father,” he said proudly, dipping his falafel in yogurt. “The article mentioned he trained Demi Moore for her role in *GI Jane*. The youngest Navy Seal ever. He used steroids.”

“My father never used them! NEVER!”

He put his plate down on the rug and brushed his lap of crumbs. “In my experience, to look like your father you use steroids or human growth hormone. Otherwise, it is impossible,” he said in a know-it-all voice, like the teachers at school use. The voice that I can’t stand.

“Apologize.” My elbows dug into the pillow. “My father NEVER EVER used steroids!”

“He was a medium-sized slight man. How else could he have put on that muscle mass?”

My heart was beating too fast and it was hard for me to breathe. “By discipline and natural talent,” I answered in a rush. I thought of the throwing knife I carried in my bag. Petite like a nail file. “You’re wrong. Shut up about my father.”

“I apologize. I am truly sorry.” Orlando reached for the other plate of food he’d placed on the low table. Baklava made by his sister and dripping honey over flakes of dough. “You see, Uday lifted weights too and used steroids. He had evolved. Once he’d been a mother’s boy. After an assassination attempt he became addicted to painkillers. A bullet lodged next to his spine that surgeons could not remove. He took women from their husbands. He killed the husband, and then after he tired of the woman he sent her off to join her husband.”

This was the country that Daddy had died trying to save. It grew even quieter in the room. I’d never been anywhere you couldn’t tell whether it was night or day. No traffic endlessly sloshing on the interstates. Soundproof. No world but this one. Houston had dropped away with all its swimming pools, its oilmen and magnolia girls and boys, its byzantine rush hours and tiny pockets of dragonfly transvestites.

"Is it daytime?" I asked. My head pounded. I reached down, touching something around my ankles, a kind of cloth. "What is this?"

"It is rest time," he answered, licking another of his fingers. "Non-working time. Sunday."

"No, it's time for me to go home. I want to go now," I said, pointing to my cell phone. "Give that to me." I kicked at the cloth loosely tied around my ankles. When I kicked it tightened. I reached down to untie the knots. I picked at them. Nothing. They needed to be cut. "What is this? What did you put around my ankles? Why would you do that?"

He continued licking his fingers. "You were kicking in your sleep so violently I thought to restrain your legs. I worried you were about to injure yourself. I did not want you to come to harm."

I tried to sit up and rub my chaffing ankles. He must have drugged me. I felt swollen like Titan, the monster moon of Saturn. Particles revolving. My head, my legs and arms, my entire body had gone to sleep. I rolled over the sectional cushions. "I need to use the bathroom. Do you want me to pee right here? Serves you right, if I do." If I washed my face the thickness in my head might fade.

"I will untie your feet and escort you to the bathroom. It was only for your own good." He stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "I know you only come to see me because I provide liquor. Once Uday grew addicted to a cough syrup of a golden color. We were forced to partake in Uday's addiction. Otherwise, how could we truly be doubles?" He knelt beside the cushions and picked the knots apart. He rubbed my ankles and my feet. "They are milk." He lifted my right foot to his lips. He kissed it. His mustache tickled my toes. "Will you be my wife?" I laughed. I held a secret veil made of cold green water and silver knives, of quills and flying finishes. Nothing had mattered for a long time.

We passed through the tidy kitchen where black wafers in the corners of counters called roaches to their graves. I watched him carry his plate to the sink and place it in the colander. Then he opened the refrigerator and took a cough syrup bottle from the butter compartment. At the table was a high chair and on its tray sat an opened jar of Gerber applesauce. He led the way to the bathroom. It was large with an apricot-colored toilet and sink. Plush apricot carpets. He stood watching me, then turned and left, closing the door.

I pulled up my dress and sat on the toilet. My body went weak like I was dissolving. Like bread in water. I thought of Daddy's last e-mail from Iraq. "People are making lots of money here. Remember I'm doing this for you, my best girl, so you have all the nice things you deserve. I love you, baby. We'll go fishing soon—just you and me."

I'm on the top cliff with Daddy standing next to a waterfall and there's all the green water glowing below. We're going to jump into a peacock's

sapphire eye. He crouches for me to climb onto his back and wrap my legs around his waist. His shoulders are reddened and warm from the sun; his skin feels like a God blanket. We're higher than a five-story building and looking up from the bank below is Mom no bigger than a fly, waving her arms. Instead of wings, she's shouting, "No, Todd!" Her words are broken, bits of chipped teeth. Then we jump into the air, holding on to the light particles and sun plumes, as we plunge deep deep into the cold green.

I kept splashing my face in the sink and finally I managed to drink from the faucet. I was looking at myself in the silver edge of the medicine cabinet. My eyes had stretched. They were melting. I remembered what I wore to Daddy's funeral. It was autumn white. Nothing of him was under the lid of the casket. It was sealed, forbidden to open. Inside, blackened bones on pink satin. All the hydrangeas and camellias and carnations couldn't sweeten it.

Under the lid was the iron bridge, what in Fallujah they call the old bridge. The Mitsubishi my father travels in takes the wrong turn endlessly and now men and boys in headscarves barricade the street. The men divide into two groups and throw hand grenades. An explosion. Downpour of bullets. Like teardrop knives spinning into oblivion. Like the deep deep cold green at the bottom. The keening of a peacock. For a distance the torched car travels with its driver and passengers spouting blood and slumped over the seats. Then it stops. The crowd surrounds the car. They are dragging the bodies out. Kicking and hitting the bodies. Killing them again and again. Daddy.

"Rane, may I come in?" Orlando knocked. I didn't say anything at all. He came into the bathroom. He held the syrup and a spoon. "Would you like to try some of the golden cough syrup? It will cure your hangover. I will give you a little yogurt afterwards to calm your stomach." He held the spoon out to me. His face was like those men in the street. Like a golden tear. I swallowed it.

He explained that once Uday grew addicted to the cough syrup, he would kneel before women he raped and murdered and spoon the golden nectar over their lifeless bodies and drink it from their cooling lips. He was a terrible sinner. "In the Islamic world, sex without marriage is forbidden."

He led me back into the kitchen and seated me at the table. The golden cough syrup made surfaces smooth, the edges of the cupboards taking on a rounded appearance. Smooth like bits of sun inside its amber jar. My headache vanished. The golden syrup was a wasp with its sticker removed. It hummed inside me. He disappeared and then returned with a long sheet of paper. He placed it on the table before me. He uncapped a pen.

"This is our contract for temporary marriage. A contract can be for one hour or it can be for 90 years. There is no divorce under a temporary marriage. You see *'No house has been built in Islam that is more beloved in the sight of Allah than through marriage.'* Marriage is obligatory when there is a chance of falling into sin. And you see Rane, there is such a chance."

“If you assault me there is such a chance. Otherwise I don’t see there being one,” I said, not believing my own words. I was not a virgin. Who at seventeen was? He’d left the drawer open from which he took the spoon. There were knives bedded down there. Long-bladed steel knives. The men in Fallujah had such knives. I picked up the pen. “How long is our contract for?” I asked. But I hardly heard his answer. I signed my name with a flying finish.

RANE.

In the ceiling, I make out the sky above Fallujah. A blaze of blue mountains and crystalline lakes. Blue palm trees and barges of blue virgins. But the city, all alleyway and locked doors, waits. Dingy, dirty thoughts. Forbidden girls. Minarets chanting the call to prayer. Daddy drives into the city with three other contractors. They haven’t been given maps, at least not detailed ones. They take a wrong turn. Their four-wheeled car isn’t armored. They accelerate toward the river. The four angels that are bound in the great river Euphrates are on their way.

Being with him is like dissolving. The past tense liquefies. Like dying and joining Daddy. I feel closer to his last moments in this room. A low bed with satin sheets and pillowcase and a green nightlight glowing from the socket. The sapphire eye of the green peacock. The jittering begins in my stomach and moves up through my chest into my head as he lifts me onto the sheets. “My wife.” I feel his breath like fire in a burning car. I am a camellia. An opening flower. When he takes my dress from me it is my skin petals he is tearing. “You are my orange blossom,” he says between clenched teeth. The sight of my body hurts him, makes him tremble. When his tongue touches my mouth a shovel cuts me into parts. He takes off his clothes and tawny ravens fly over a river.

The crowd breaks open the car and four men are pulled out. They shout. Why are you here? You are not in your America. The youngest boys prove their manhood; kick the heads of the dead foreigners. Laughing, cheering. Violence is their sex. When they hack at the burning bodies with shovels they fuck forbidden girls. Huffing animals. All are in heat, their feet, badgering fists. From Nineveh and Ur, the patron moon god Nannar. The ancient deities reassemble from the dust and come to watch. Ishtar, sky goddess of fertility. Tiamet, dragon goddess of chaos. Golden palms outstretched toward the sky, the clouds now are the color of a cut wrist. Ropes are tied to the corpses and they are hoisted up. The doubles of Uday kick the concrete ball. Two figures or pieces of charred people hang from the girders of the old bridge. One of the two is Daddy. Hanging from the iron trestle over the Euphrates.

Orlando does not cry God. He cries out and there are tears in his moist eyes. He shudders. Tells me I am beautiful. He is proud to be the first. That Rane rests her head in the crook of his arm, in the Fertile Crescent, and

sleeps. Another Rane rises from the bed after he begins to snore and walks into the kitchen where baklava left out on the counter attracts a group of ants. That girl sits at a kitchen stool and watches the ants and then selects a strong, long-bladed knife from the drawer. Right foot back, left forward. Both arms pointing toward the cupboard, the right arm makes a smooth swing and the weight shifts to the left foot. "Don't stop the swing of the knife; throw, baby, if you want a good stick." The knife sticks in the cupboard's wood. That Rane frees the knife and carries it into the bedroom.

Both girls think of Daddy stirring the ashes of their cookout fire. Mom and Randall back in the car. A crescent moon lifts itself out of the water and the fish waiting all day swim to shore. "Watch the fish." Daddy says, tearing bread into pieces and flinging them into the lake. Air bubbles form yolks and now the swirling of the fish are circles to which we toss more bread. Daddy guides my first throw. I aim for those circles. Throw. Now. I do. The fish breathe it under. The bread stars appear in the sky and the last motorboats hoot going in. "Daddy, I know what I want to do when I grow up." "What, baby?" "I'll take care of you and Mom. Especially you."

Especially, I'll take care of you.

DAN RAPHAEL

IN OR OUT

is my breath moving in or out?
if I get very still will I start moving backwards
falling into memory, turning right instead of left,
continuing to knock until something opens

the hair on my arms like jungle trees so thick in steam
they don't care which directions traffic,
whether we're building or tearing apart,
how birds are the fruit pollinated by trees and ambient prajna

as a lake is domed in the adamantine spirit of the soil shanghaied
in a one way transformation
unlike my friends fly-wheeled clock so simple to make go backwards
even the numbers began to swap positions, hands
breaking free of their center post
to imply calligraphy or a finite river somehow feeding itself
with transdimensional evaporation
like smoke rings in reverse, like drinking with my penis
and my eyes are no longer certain what to measure—
exposure, shutter speed, wind density, LEDs
with tiny razor fins like visual sharks that have to keep moving,
those three leaves so bright they're shunned by peers and birds—
if it looks different it might not be edible,
may have been pasted in by some cubist gardener
growing pears with jars inside them

as if each breath a vine corkscrewing through the previous houses.
is the crust so thick it will break under its own weight,
like taking a 100 centuries to extend an arm or arch your back.
the fist unfurls its 6 fingers

after a million breaths I need to empty a deeper chamber,
hazy with residue,
or do the healthiest lungs have the shortest memory,
resinating like candle flame to hum & flush away.
each breath is the sun
each exhalation a black cue ball nothing can stop

a respiratory system appears by the main gate
training shadows to fear their mirrored cages

MEAGHAN RUSSELL

MEMENTO MORI: A LOVE STORY

*...though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come...*

Gloriana and Vindice, pestilence
of leaves falling from the honey
moon, exit cafe 116 (where she,
ever coy with the mirror over his
shoulder, bowed back from their
table to touch the waiter's arm—she,
in that subtle lisp her Vindice
suspects, spoke in the waiter's ear—she,
chaste as an olive, pressed the waiter's
eyes over the linen, over the uncorked
oil glistening in the open air—she,
hoping not to alarm fellow
patrons, gestured discreet as
anise over wormwood to her white
cotton napkin dabbed blood red and the
love-bitten lip lying in her soufflé).

spuytenduyvil



GIRAFFES IN HIDING: THE MYTHICAL MEMOIRS OF CAROL NOVACK

THERE'S NO ONE LIKE NOVACK, and here she is at her best as she chases her ontological tail round and round the intelligible, unknown worlds of her subconscious (and ours). Think Alice in Wonderland on acid simultaneously dancing with Tristan Tzara, Rimbaud, Oedipus, Pandora, Gertrude Stein, Proust, Kerouac, and that weird kid next door who ate all of the heads off your Barbie Dolls and you'll begin to get a feel for what she's up to. **MARY MACKEY,**
AUTHOR OF *BREAKING THE FEVER* ET AL.



A PLACE IN THE SUN BY LEWIS WARSH

PORTRAITS OF THE WOMEN AS LOVERS in Russia emerge in tandem with the conflicted erotic relationship that develops between Marina and the detective who rescues her. Another highlight is the titular story, "A Place in the Sun," which brings iconic figures of Hollywood's golden years into stark contrast with their respective legends.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



NO PERFECT WORDS BY NAVA RENEK

MEMORY AND LONGING mingle as Carolyn unravels her grief: a woman the couple once spotted in Paris becomes, in Carolyn's imagination, a model named Annabella; a young Swiss woman they encountered in Thailand fends off the advances of a pair of Israeli brothers, then gives in to one, then the other and ends up hating herself.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



LIGHT YEARS : AN ANTHOLOGY ON SOCIOCULTURAL HAPPENINGS MULTIMEDIA IN THE EAST VILLAGE 1960-1966 ED. BY CAROL BERGE

Flip through the list of contributors to *Fuck You* and you will get a good sense of the contributors of *Light Years*, but three people stand apart for me. Carol Berge, Jackson Mac Low, and Paul Blackburn.

For me, Blackburn is the Virgil of the *Light Years* scene. Blackburn's collection of tapes from readings in this era provides the soundtrack for Berge's book of essays [written by many who were there].

MIMEOMIMEO.BLOGSPOT.COM



ISBN 978-1-935520-01-6

In his first full-length collection, *Bones & Jokes*, published by NYQ Books, Ted Jonathan delivers up poems and stories out of a gritty urban reality that are as raw and original as the characters and streets from which they come. *Bones & Jokes* is savage, joyous, profound and dead on funny, but behind it all is a gentle love and clear sanity that makes it all memorable.

NY Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

www.nyqbooks.org

PO Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

BONES & JOKES

POEMS & STORIES

by

TED JONATHAN

Though published here several times over the years, somehow it never occurred to me that Mr. Jonathan has a bit of beat sensibility and sensitivity; that he's looking for the revealing, meaning moment, grace or satori in the urban gritty realism of real people and situations; that he can rant and love, hate and forgive, poke fun of himself and others through pain and delight—a real New Yorker, in other words. And he always appreciates the angle, the edge, the payoff.

As a storyteller—put it this way: if you're not hanging on his every word, either you're jaded or not breathing. This book is a career milestone.

—Phil Wagner,
editor/publisher, *Iconoclast*

Ted Jonathan's *Bones & Jokes* is filled with tales of survival told in a big bass of a voice moving to the steady beat of, let's say, a boxer pounding a body bag in an empty, lonely gym. The writing is blunt and brash filled with subway track swagger. It's plain spoken, precise, and full of purpose. And oh yeah, maybe most essential, it has the sick crazy laugh through the nose humor that endears and redeems itself and makes you want to go back and read these pieces one more time, and then again.

—Tony Gloegler

Available at

amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE

Powell's Books
Est. 1971

SPD Small Press Distribution

A CAPPELLA ZOO

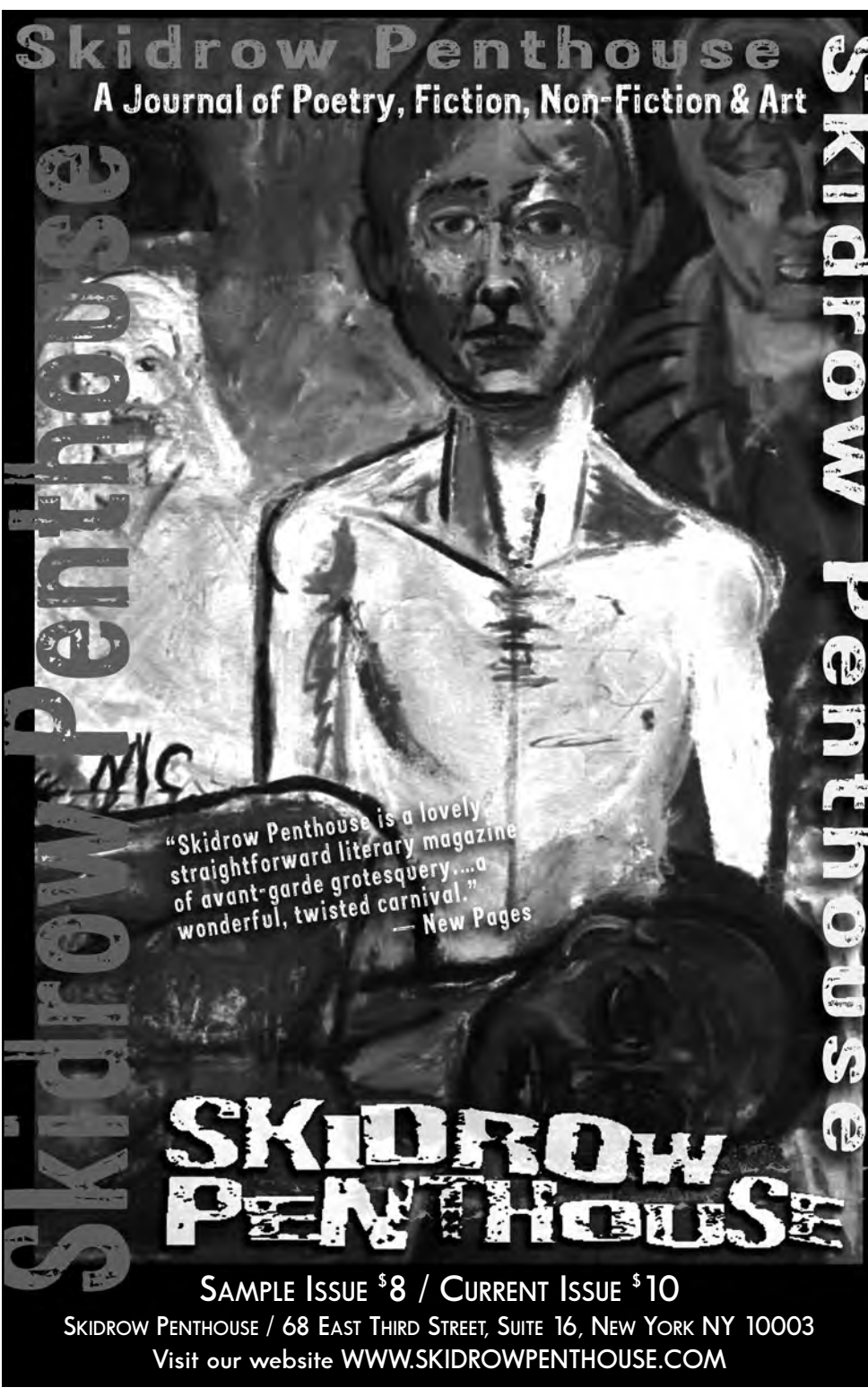


Naoko Awa . Feng Sun Chen . Rob Cook
Nancy Gold . Tania Hershman . Jason Jordan
David Misialowski . Christina Murphy
Kristine Ong Muslim . M P Powers
Joseph A W Quintela . Benjamin Robinson
Catherine Sharpe . John Thornton . & more

MAGIC REALISM & SLIPSTREAM
www.acappellazoo.com

Skidrow Penthouse

A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, Non-Fiction & Art



“Skidrow Penthouse is a lovely
straightforward literary magazine
of avant-garde grotesquery....a
wonderful, twisted carnival.”
— New Pages

SKIDROW PENTHOUSE

SAMPLE ISSUE \$8 / CURRENT ISSUE \$10

SKIDROW PENTHOUSE / 68 EAST THIRD STREET, SUITE 16, NEW YORK NY 10003

Visit our website WWW.SKIDROWPENTHOUSE.COM

