



NOTRE DAME REVIEW





NOTRE DAME REVIEW

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NOW AND THEN

Mark Halperin

Wasn't the present to be that knife-edge
on which the past and future tottered,
cleanly dividing them, with no saving up
or weighing consequences, not this
effort against that result? Wasn't the past

to contain no more than old habits,
and love to be not simply prelude to grief,
source of soiled hopes that beggared,
riddled and despoiled the view? Remember
a bridge, a rise from which the square

opened in snow, the marble, angel-topped
column in the distance and a dome?
Remorse could wash you one last time
and each parting seem the final one,
unique in its own diminished future.

Then, now—the present became one
life you left off for another, a changing
coastline of new sounds, the wilderness
we only visit and a foreign country where
time goes on unveiling endless variations.





MISSING

Debora Greger

I. Not There

There was no one in the house I'd borrowed
except the twilight of far-off Florida—

that purple you don't see anywhere else,
and then it's gone. Where were you?

There was no one, only the night at the window,
the shade undrawn. A moth opened its book

to the same dusty page as always. What
was about to happen? Close the book!

A ghost of the subtropics, a pale pink gecko,
was looking up the word for food.

Through its skin, I saw a small blue heart.
Twin sacs of blue air emptied and filled.

The headlights of a car saw through it
and swept the room: no one was there.

No frog barked from a tree in the afterglow
of a thunder shower. Oh, love, I remember

that student of ours whose boyfriend came
from the desert to visit. She said she woke one night

to find the door of the apartment open.
He was standing there, watching rain fall

in that relaxed and ruthless way it does in Florida.
Though she would marry and divorce him later,





in sleep she'd missed him, while he'd been missing
the kind of rain he'd never known.

II. Not Here

You weren't here. We didn't breathe the same air.
Mine held a note of smoke, as if prunings burned

in the vineyards. Or had the foothills turned to flame?
Outside my window—no, much farther off,

your absence rose like some foreign city.
It stood in water, admiring its reflection,

even in decay. Like you, it hadn't slept yet,
though its barges bore the burdens of a new day

past the old customs house and the church
of Santa Maria del Salute: Venice needed Coke

and Xerox machines. And stacks of artichokes—
or at least their hearts afloat in lemon juice

so they wouldn't darken, exposed to the air.
I didn't know I could love a city the way I loved you.

A dredge scooped up mud for breakfast,
but Venice wouldn't wake from its dream of water.

A water taxi opened the Grand Canal like a book.
Its pages were green, edges deckled with foam.

In every slip and slap I read the long marriage
of city to lagoon. Each watery, salty kiss devoured.

How far away you were: I wrote zero after zero
down a page of the deepest green water.



MAN IN A DREAM STATE

—John Muir, 1867

Debora Greger

Today at last I reach Florida,
the so-called “Land of Flowers.”
Here, just a few yards away, it was—
flat, watery, reedy, with strange moss-dressed trees
in the distance.

The steamer found her way
among reed islands like a duck.
Visiting this state in dreams, I had come
upon close forest, trees in flower yet bent,
tangled by vines with even brighter blooms,
all of it flooded by sunlight.

But such was not the gate
by which I entered the promised land.
Salt marsh more sea than land; groves sunk
to the shoulder in sedge and rush;
land not rising in hilly waves and swells
but stretching out like water.

We were discharged,
without breakfast, onto a rickety wharf
a few steps from a rickety town.
There I bought bread without asking a single question,
making straight for the gloomy shade.
At the first dry spot I threw down my flower press
on something like a deserted muskrat house,
and applied myself to my meal.

Not a mark
of friendly recognition, not a breath,
not a spirit-whisper of sympathy came
from anything around me. I lay on my elbow
eating my bread, listening to the strangeness.





A rustling sound behind me—
had my mind been healthy, my body not starved,
I should only have turned calmly to it.
But at once I could feel the stroke
of a long notched tail, rows of teeth
closing around me, just as in pictures I had seen.
I do not know the measure of my fright in time or pain.
But then my man-eating alligator
became a tall white crane, handsome as a minister
from the spirit world.

Ministers tell us only man
is immortal, plants are soulless, etc.;
but my first palmetto told me grander things
than ever got from human priest.

Yet I gave up hope
of finding food or bed, searching only
for a dry spot large enough to sleep on,
safely hidden from freed slaves. All creatures
of these trackless woods had a home but I.
On that far-off dry plain, a stone for a pillow,
Jacob must have been happier.

Yet I slept,
waking next morning wet with dew,
and breakfastless. Could this meal be dispensed with,
I doubt civilization would see me again.
Ask the owl, the noisiest
of all my unseen witnesses.



THE MAQUILADORAS

John Koethe

They oversimplify our lives,
These stories, stripping them of context and detail,
Recasting each one as a journey, moving from the country
To a factory on the border, from a rural home

To one that I'd imagined, to this place
That I inhabit, locked in the idea
Of a room, a home, a city street, the country
Where I live and I was nineteen once

And where I find myself a subject of two states,
Of two distinct domains: a private one
Of furniture and poetry, pottery and silent monologues
While shaving in a mirror, thinking through

A turn of phrase, the course of an emotion,
Tracing the trajectory of a thought
That takes me to the kingdom of a single mind
Where what I think and feel and say all seem the same.

We all live in the other one. On the news
Last night a woman in New Jersey
And a man in Pennsylvania read my mind. More dead
Filled up the screen as someone read their names

Instead of mine, which would have been the same.
More Walmarts in Chicago, on the sites
Of some abandoned factories, while the doors keep closing
On the maquiladoras in Tijuana and Juarez

Through which the money flows, and flows away. Who says
That life is change, and change is for the better?
It can look that way when looked at through the blinders
Of an individual life, one constantly embarking





On a journey of its own, of everyone's,
From adolescence through late middle age. Nineteen
Was nothing special and I wouldn't want it back,
Yet sometimes when I think about the years to come

I see almost as many as the ones since then.
I feel a vague and incoherent fear, a fear
Of waking from time's dream into an even stranger place,
As different from today as now is from nineteen,

Without a sense of where I am or where I'd been before—
Which is always here, in my imagination. When I ask myself
What home was really like the answer is sheer fiction,
As I picture to myself an endless summer

Sky above a Culver's or a Dairy Queen,
A school, the Hansen-Onion funeral home, the modest
Mansions on the quiet, shady streets
Of a small Wisconsin town time left unchanged.



TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL

Paul Kane

And Raphael was sent to heal them both, that is, to scale
away the whiteness of Tobit's eyes, and to give Sara the
daughter of Raguel for a wife to Tobias the son of Tobit;
and to bind Asmodeus the evil spirit.

—Tobit 3:17

Was it enough to walk with him
beyond the dry hills of Nineveh,
enough to roast fish together
on the banks of the Tigris?

I knew him as a countryman but
not for what he was, unknowable,
a voice in the stricken night, crying
“I am brethren, I will bind you to me.”

Such a distance to travel, under
a milky sky, with dust in the air, sharp
pebbles underfoot, birds raucous in trees,
and the puzzlement of his eyes.

What more could I take in but that
tone, that surety hanging like a cloud
about him? Even my dog staggered
in his presence. What question could I frame?

Blindness he could cure, yet one day
half-blind himself he and I carried a table
through a doorway and up the long
passage, as if we both might thereby see.

Later, a vision of my father, of gall
anointing his upturned face, of whiteness
pilling away from the corners of his eyes
and he falling upon my neck and weeping.





I had no such tears to offer, knowing
so little what time brings, the sacred
affliction, the unsought recompense
on the outskirts of the waking town.

And what of Sara and the dark angel?
I was mad to wed her, trembling
on the threshold desiring either her flesh or
my death, I could not distinguish that night.

In twos and threes and then decades
at a time, the years passed as I prospered.
Was it enough to attend to his words
now that words are no longer enough?



ENNEADS

Paul Kane

He was unlike all others, other
than all those he made appear the same:
a blackened pine tree scarred by lightning,
singled out for a knowledge never
forgiven, struck by blazoned power
intolerable—the light whitening
around him, falling like a shower
on us, who first heard our secret name
and rose at its burden's lightening.

But then others came, and then more, such
that we despaired to know our true place—
there were so many with so little
to give, and they took much, far too much
for us or him to sustain, so down
that spiraling staircase of riddle
he went, speaking strangely and around
the central point, creating a space
all his own, all edge, with no middle.

We followed him to that edge and then
no further, for there was nowhere else
to go. We turned back only to find
he had turned his back on us, and when
most we needed him—or thought we did—
till suddenly there occurred a sign
for us that neither revealed nor hid
a truth, but showed what was false:
a disease of the eye—he'd gone blind.



How the blind see! Poet, prophet, man
of utter insight, the blinding stroke
turns the world inside out, draining shape
and color from form until the hand
reaches out to grasp the silhouettes
fading in the light, but they escape
in formlessness, the mocking objects
of our desire to believe. He spoke
of this, as of an inner landscape.

From then on, we knew our sole duty
was to open our eyes and for once
see as he saw us, unobscured by
form, sheer life visible, the beauty
of nothingness—and to find then form
as a coating that displays just why
we are opaque and cannot perform
the least service to ourselves: this blunts
self-regard—our life become our lie.

As you would expect, the death was hard
on us all, though surely least on him
who welcomed it as a sloughing off,
the body a skin of no regard,
though we buried it and mourned our loss—
but the voice we missed most, lilting soft,
then with harsh rebuke, as if to toss
aside some mask and unmake us limb
by limb, alien to ourselves, cast off

into shallows, where wallowing in
swamps of pity we picked ourselves up
in the end, purified by knowledge
of baseness. O, what a state to win
on this earth! But now who could debase
himself, walk out to the very ledge
and beyond? Before what god deface
the countenance of pride, how disrupt
the casual tide of sacrilege?





We had no answers, who only had
questions, and those unanswerable.
And the rhetoric of inquiry!
We could not stand our voices, the sad
mimicry and despair that laced
our words, until the iniquity—
the wheedling pretense—came to be faced.
Amidst decay, what was durable?
What could we wrest from our nullity?

And then we knew, we had understood
more than we knew, for in leaving us
he had left us ourselves, fraught with all
our diminishing flaws—yet we would
go on, like birds repopulating
a barren pond: seeds, parasites fall
as they breast the waters, negating
the emptiness around with surplus
of life. Do you grasp now why we call?



LOVE BENEATH THE NAPALM

James D. Redwood

Mr. Tu leaned forward on his haunches, and with the aid of a trowel, gently dug out a weed which had insinuated itself between two pansies and threatened to choke them. It was late afternoon. A sharp breeze broke from the Helderberg Mountains seven miles away. Winter was coming, and he greatly missed his native village of Long Dien, which would now be entering the long hot dry season. Mr. Tu did not look forward to the death of his flower garden and the eight long months of wait before he could bring it to life again. He shivered in his thin, second-hand flannel jacket, a gift from Mrs. Hai-li, the Chinese owner of the Golden Dragon Restaurant on the corner of Peach Street and Route 138 in downtown Schenectady. She paid Mr. Tu thirty dollars a week to tend the two square boxes which stood beside the stone dragons in front of the restaurant.

"Hello, Uncle," a voice said to his back, in Vietnamese. Mr. Tu arched his neck in surprise. It had been months since anyone had spoken to him, aside from Mrs. Hai-li, and more than a year since he'd heard his own language. He turned.

The girl gave a sharp little cry and stepped back. She placed her hand over her mouth and stared at him, her eyes wide. Mr. Tu's jaw crinkled as he flashed her the resigned little smile he gave everyone. If he had not been peering down at a nice bauhinia flower on the An Loc battlefield when the bomb hit, his eyes would have fried like eggs and he would never have seen the look his face always inflicted on strangers. But then he noticed how much the young lady standing over him resembled Le. She had the same lush black hair, the same doelike, almond-shaped eyes, the same playful smile of a kitten toying with a coil of hemp, now that she had recovered from her shock. Even the tilt of her shoulders was the same as she leaned forward again. Mr. Tu's heart pattered joyfully.

"Why, hello, Little Sister," he said, struggling to keep his voice from quavering. Mr. Tu then spotted the man beside her. He was American, and had looked away, of course.

"I like your flowers," she said. "Wait, Phil," she added in English, tugging her companion's sleeve. The American was big, blond, and handsome, though in Mr. Tu's opinion not as handsome as he himself had once been. Mr. Tu sensed the man's irritation at being stopped from the way his fist tightened around the restaurant door handle.

"Come on," the American growled. "I'm hungry. You can squawk with





this guy later.”

The girl blushed at her companion’s comment and stepped back from Mr. Tu again. The implication that their tongue resembled the talk of chickens would have caused Mr. Tu to blush as well if the plastic surgeon who’d repaired his face after An Loc had left him any color to work with. This man reminded him unpleasantly of his induction training in 1971. The American advisers at the Thu Duc Military School had mocked his beautiful language, made fun of his eyes, his skin the color of Cham drums, his inconsequential stature. Their innuendos about the inadequate size of the Vietnamese male member filled him with humiliation and rage. Mr. Tu glanced at the beautiful girl again. Had she taken this blond ape because of the bulk of his penis?

“Hoa?” the ape said, nudging her arm. His voice whined with impatience, and Mr. Tu felt perversely tempted to goad him.

“So your name is Hoa,” he said conversationally, leaning back on his haunches. He tapped his garden box with his trowel. “It’s a name I like.” He was tired of hearing only the Chinese word for flower.

The girl laughed like a wind chime tinkling nervously in a breeze, and the sound filled Mr. Tu with delight. Mrs. Hai-li carped at him constantly and gave him nothing but scowls.

“I can see that,” Hoa said. Mr. Tu was impressed at how quickly she picked up on his implication. This girl was smart as well as pretty, just like Le. Mr. Tu sighed at the memory of his fiancée. He’d met her in 1970, shortly after his father died and he moved to Saigon. Le was studying at the Faculté des Lettres and living with an old aunt in Gia Dinh. Back then Mr. Tu was something to look at, and their courtship blossomed like his pansy patch in summer, until the day he was called up for duty.

Hoa crouched down beside him.

“Did you garden back...there?” she asked.

The word *there* coursed through Mr. Tu’s veins like a spring flood rushing along the Mekong. He watched as she indolently ran her fingers through the dirt of one of the flower boxes and then carefully straightened out a pansy which had bent in the breeze from the Helderbergs. *A girl from the earth*, he thought with satisfaction, *a true Vietnamese*. Yet what was she doing with this American?

“Not after I went to Saigon,” he replied. “The ground wasn’t suitable, you see. And—”

He stopped talking. The girl had suddenly snapped her head back over her shoulder. The American was staring at the street. Mr. Tu was disconcerted at the interruption but looked on.





A red Thunderbird convertible with the top down chugged along the street toward them and screeched to a halt just beyond the Golden Dragon. Russet-colored maple leaves whipped up by the little car fluttered to the ground beside a clapboard house across the street. Two teenaged girls in the front seat, a blonde and a redhead, turned their heads and whistled at the handsome American. Hoa leaned toward Phil but then froze. The scowl which had overspread his face when she began to talk to Mr. Tu melted into a big smile. The redhead, who was slightly overweight and had a half-empty bottle of liquor in one hand, jutted her breasts forward in a gesture which Mr. Tu found both vulgar and inviting.

"Hey guys, wanna party?" she crooned, swaying in her seat.

She winked at Phil, who burst into a laugh.

"Later, girlie," he called, giving her a friendly wave. "Save it for dessert."

The redhead giggled, and the convertible took off. Mr. Tu's brow darkened as the woman beside him bit her lip and glanced down at her own tiny breasts. Suddenly she jabbed Mr. Tu's trowel into the potting soil and almost tore off one of the pansies. She threw the trowel down and looked away. Mr. Tu hastily leaned forward to fix the flower, but it flopped forlornly on its side, its neck broken. His heart yearned for the girl. He shared her humiliation as though it was another mark of their national disgrace, like the size of his penis.

The American leered at the Thunderbird as it disappeared up the street. The wind whipped through the man's hair like an autumn breeze through wheat. Mr. Tu sighed. Phil was just the kind of loon who would appeal to a superficial woman like the tramp in the convertible. Such swine never lifted their snouts out of the muck. Mr. Tu eyed Hoa longingly. How could the tow-headed lout *ever* understand this lovely girl who'd seen through his face to the very heart of him? Only the Vietnamese appreciated the pearl within the oyster. But still he was uneasy.

Phil glanced down, and his face tightened in a frown.

"Come on," he said coldly, tapping Hoa's shoulder. "That's enough. Let's eat."

Hoa barely looked at Mr. Tu now.

"Goodbye," she said, but her voice was distant. Mr. Tu gazed regretfully at her as she rose to her feet. He was hoping for another smile, just like Le's, and felt a pang of disappointment when instead she turned and edged close to Phil. Yet he knew she had to keep up appearances, and he took comfort from the fact that she held her body rigid beside the American. Mr. Tu thought of the many conquests of his youth, when women had dropped into his lap like persimmons from an overlaid tree. Of course she





was standoffish, reluctant to look at him! No woman likes to struggle with her affections. But she was beginning to fall for him, Mr. Tu felt certain. He could tell that from the way she'd laughed at his little joke about her name. He had a sense of these things. They were both Vietnamese, after all, linked by bonds invisible to the Americans. Mr. Tu felt suddenly exhilarated. His soul had peeked through his blistered skin at her like a crocus through the snow. As he leaned back on his haunches again and watched them enter the restaurant, he realized he was in love.

"Let's row out to the middle of the pond," Le said, grabbing his arm.

It was March, 1972. Mr. Tu, twenty-three and crisp in his new lieutenant's uniform, removed his white kid gloves, folded them neatly in half, and slipped them into his pocket. He turned to her and smiled possessively, like all acknowledged lovers, and led her carefully along the dock which jutted into the crescent-shaped water lily pond on the grounds of the Botanical Gardens. It was the trysting place of lovers, but the disastrous Lam Son offensive of the year before had thinned the ranks of males, and solitary females could not take pleasure in a spot like this. Tu and Le had it all to themselves, briefly. He had to report to his unit the next day. A new North Vietnamese offensive was rumored.

When they reached the end of the dock, he unmoored a rowboat, got in, and assisted her to board. He seated her in the stern, sat down amidships, fixed the oars in the rowlocks, and shoved off.

"How I shall miss you!" Le cried, leaning towards him. Tears glittered in her eyes like sun-spotted diamonds glancing off the surface of the lily pond. Their marriage had finally been set for the following month. Le had waited patiently for two years with the old aunt in Gia Dinh for Mr. Tu to finish his training. Now they would have to wait some more.

A doleful-sounding vespers bell clanged in a nearby Buddhist monastery, and Mr. Tu felt a weight upon his heart as heavy as the iron from which it was cast. The bell seemed to toll their final moments together. The sweet scent of jasmine and rare orchids from the greenhouse on the far side of the island toward which they were heading only added to his sadness, and he pulled at the oars with long desolate strokes, like a mourner lugging a funeral barge.

"Don't think about it, my dearest," he said bravely, but Le burst into a torrent of tears. Mr. Tu quickly rowed beneath the Japanese bridge which crossed over to the island and stopped beneath one of its arches. Here she could indulge her sorrow in peace. He made the boat fast against the bank





and seated himself beside her. He kissed her eyes, her lips, drank in the warmth of her body, the panting of her breath. She was beautiful, and he was happy and sad at the same time.

"My big strong soldier," she wailed. "How I shall worry about you!"

Mr. Tu nodded grimly and drew her close. In their two years together in Saigon other women had tempted him to kick over the traces, as was only natural with a man of his looks, but Le had managed to hold the reins tight and keep him on course. Never had they imagined she might lose him to the war.

"You will take care, won't you, darling?" she said, her voice choking.

"Of course," he responded, trying to sound cheerful. He hoped she would not notice his trembling, however. He thought of his father, who'd been caught in an airstrike while out tending his rice field on a foot-powered paddy pump. All they found of him afterward was a white powdery residue which looked like the chalk dust on the erasers at the Long Dien village school. Mr. Tu gripped the gunwales hard to stop his shaking. His unit was headed into the Iron Triangle, the jaws of the tiger. Le would have plenty to worry about, and so would he.

"Oh, my handsome one!" she exclaimed, collapsing on his shoulder and breaking down completely. Mr. Tu slumped in his seat. His carefree days were over. She fluttered against his chest like the last bird before winter...

The wind snapped off the Helderbergs again, and Mr. Tu shuddered and shook off the sad memory. He heard a noise and looked up. Mrs. Hai-li stood over him, staring down.

"What are you still doing here, blockhead?" she asked, her voice shrill. "Take yourself off."

She craned her neck and scanned the sidewalk for customers. Business had fallen off lately, and she blamed it on Mr. Tu's face. People lost their appetite when they saw him. The sidewalk was empty.

She turned back and frowned at him.

"Shove off now, that's enough for tonight," she said, waving him off the stoop with the back of her hand. "You'll frighten the whole neighborhood if you stay here after dark."

Mr. Tu rose reluctantly to his feet. He longingly eyed the restaurant door and thought of the girl Hoa seated somewhere behind it. Would he ever see her again?

"And don't forget that trowel," Mrs. Hai-li barked, pointing to the tool which was barely visible in the dim light. "If it rusts in the damp air, the





replacement will come out of your pay.”

Mr. Tu attempted to bite his lip. He leaned over and picked up the trowel, gazing fondly at his beloved pansies one last time as he did so. Their ugly little mugs reminded him of his own, and they comforted him in his distress as Mrs. Hai-li continued to berate him even while he trudged sadly away. Why had fate linked him to such a doltish shrew? Once he wouldn't have given her a second thought, but now he had to march to her tune, all because of An Loc. Truly his lot was a hard one.

When he stumbled into his darkened garret a few minutes later and switched on the light, the drabness of his lodgings further dampened his spirits. Rodents pattered behind the plaster, and the wind howled through a window gap covered with cheap masking tape. Boys who lived in the neighborhood had thrown a rock through the window soon after he moved in and then laughed at Mr. Tu's pink hairless skull when it peeped through the jagged hole. Mr. Tu shook his fist at them, but they just laughed harder and strolled away in a leisurely fashion to show they were not afraid of him. Afterward Mr. Tu kept his head covered with a New York Yankees baseball cap, but he still felt aggrieved. The boys were Vietnamese.

The wind whistled through the window crack again, causing Mr. Tu to shiver and fluttering the candle which stood inside a tiny spirit lamp on top of his bureau. He thought how nice it would be to have the girl from the restaurant to warm his bed, and then he stared at the photograph beside the spirit lamp. Le smiled alluringly at him from a painted Chinese background, a sprig of *mai* blossoms in her hand. He'd taken the photo himself, and at the time he was very proud of it. But after he parted from her that last day in Saigon, with the North Vietnamese inexorably closing in, Mr. Tu succumbed to the superstition that cameras took away a person's soul...

“This is my favorite part,” he whispered, leaning over in the crowded movie theater and touching Le's sleeve. It was April 30, 1975. On the wide screen in front of them a tall Chinese warlord, girded for battle, strutted about his palace bedroom, gesticulating wildly at his wife, who stood scowling in the middle of the room, her fists tightened in a bunch. In the far corner the warlord's favorite concubine lay weeping.

“Yes, *thuong anh*,” Le said, nodding. She kept her eyes glued to the screen. “Just let me watch, will you?”

Mr. Tu thrilled with pleasure when she called him her beloved one, words he had not heard since that sad afternoon in the Botanical Gardens three years earlier. Given the way she'd greeted him that morning, he would





not have expected it.

She'd shrunk behind the statue of the Virgin Mary in the deserted square outside the National Cathedral to protect herself from the unknown mutant who kept calling out her name and insisting he was her fiancé. Mr. Tu was hurt and chagrined until she remembered his voice. But Le too had changed. She was dressed in a pricy western mini-skirt, her hair curled in false ringlets, her mouth and cheeks painted red as a *Hat Boi* actress's. Still, he had recognized *her* immediately.

A rocket screeched by overhead, close to the theater, and Mr. Tu instinctively ducked. When it hit, his and Le's seats, as well as those of the other patrons who'd come there hoping to escape the war, shook in their sockets, and several people cried out in alarm. Le glanced at him anxiously, and Mr. Tu put his arm around her shoulder to comfort her. They clung to each other and watched the conclusion of "Endless Passion," quaking whenever another rocket hit.

Mr. Tu spotted Hoa from the far side of Liberty Street, late in the afternoon, near closing time. She was sitting in a chair by one of the tall library windows, reading something and basking in the rays of the declining sun. The gardener darted between some fast-moving cars and gained the other side of the street. He peeped in at her from several feet away, his heart pounding. With her head bowed over a magazine, her face at an angle, she reminded him of Le even more than she had the evening before. She was dressed in a leather mini-skirt that reached above the knees, and although from the tilt of her head he could not tell if she was wearing makeup, her hair was curled in exactly the same way as his fiancée's. Mr. Tu's heart beat faster as he scurried toward the entrance.

After the movie, Le had insisted on going back alone for some traditional clothes to make it easier for her to blend in with the hordes fleeing the capital. Mrs. Lanh, the madam, was fed up with men and would surely create a scene, she said. She would not be long.

He waited for her on the crowded dock which jutted into the Saigon River at Newport, where the big American ships used to land. Artillery shells pounded the city, and a pall of thick black smoke ringed the metropolis like a funeral wreath. Mr. Tu ran back and forth along the dock, glancing frantically about, mouthing out her name, trying to avoid the bodies trampled in the final rush to freedom and now lying crumpled beneath some crude woven mats. He started peeking to see if Le was among them, but stopped when the third body he came to had a face as mutilated as his





own. A boat horn blasted behind him. People yelled at him to come on. Slowly, reluctantly, her name still on his lips, with tears struggling to form beneath the dead skin beside his eyelids, he turned away...

The librarian date-stamping books behind the checkout desk glared at him as though his face might set off the security alarm, but Mr. Tu glanced only briefly at her as he pushed back the door flap and strode intrepidly toward the stacks. Departing patrons whisked by him, some of them with books crooked under their arms, and paid him hardly any mind. Yet Mr. Tu started to tremble when he saw the row of sunlit windows up ahead and spotted her, poring over her magazine still. Hoa was seated all alone. His feet began to drag, and he froze in his tracks. The dust particles which danced in the air all along the bookshelf separating them seemed to Mr. Tu's distracted mind to be playing with her hair, which had lightened to a beautiful shade of auburn in the glow of the sun. He had difficulty breathing, and might have stayed there forever, just watching her, if a young man impatient for a book on the shelf beside him had not roughly ordered him aside. The man was rude, contemptuous, as though Mr. Tu's face gave him the right to be that way. Mr. Tu winced beneath his skin grafts and stepped uncertainly forward.

"Hello," he murmured, coming up to her. He was embarrassed when she didn't hear him. "Hello," he repeated, so loudly this time she jerked her head up from the page.

"Oh, hi," she said mechanically, and Mr. Tu's heart faltered. Didn't she remember who he was? No one could forget a face like his.

"So you come here also," she added, but her tone was flat, devoid of interest. She gazed at a bookshelf behind him. Mr. Tu knew he should leap at the opening which lay before him like a dropped handkerchief in the movies, but just at that moment his Adam's apple snarled up his windpipe and his courage flagged. The girl shrugged and lowered her eyes again. She flipped the magazine page, and Mr. Tu heard the paper snap as if she was angry at it.

He shifted awkwardly on his feet. Now that he was standing over her, he didn't have the slightest idea what to say. Hoa remained silent.

"May I join you?" he asked at last, indicating a chair across from her. She flicked her hand, impatiently it seemed, and Mr. Tu settled in and tried to make himself comfortable. But instead he became quite nervous as he stared at the beautiful bowed head and the tantalizing body opposite him, which had stiffened since he sat down. Occasionally, she glanced up at the





bookshelf again, but not at him. Mr. Tu started to sweat, and the thought that she might smell him filled him with horror. His mouth went dry, and what finally emerged from his throat was little more than a croak.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Miss Hoa?"

She looked at him and smiled slightly, for the first time. Mr. Tu was encouraged.

"Oh, you remembered my name."

"How could I forget it?" he blurted out.

Her face immediately darkened, and Mr. Tu's hand jerked spasmodically on his chair arm. He was going too fast. She was trying to sort out her feelings for him, and he had to proceed cautiously.

"I work with flowers, remember," he added, trying to sound casual.

"Ah, yes. So you do." But she shrugged a second time.

Mr. Tu decided to hazard a smile, but stopped midway, afraid his defective face muscles might turn it into a sneer. For a moment he almost envied his father's fate. No one had been indifferent to the little pile of dust which was heaped up in the middle of the old man's rice field and which was virtually indistinguishable from the powdered fertilizer USAID had given him to increase his crop yield. It was the talk of Long Dien village for months.

The sound of raucous laughter suddenly came from behind the bookshelves, and Hoa popped her head up once more and frowned in its direction. The laughter was followed by giggling, then the hurried whisper of voices, one male, one female. Hoa looked across at Mr. Tu, visibly upset. He summoned up all his courage and flashed her the most engaging smile of which his blackened lips were capable. His smiles had cheered Le through many a troubled time. Hoa trembled slightly, and Mr. Tu felt emboldened. But his skin crinkled like a strip of tanning leather when he spoke again.

"Would you like to get a coffee somewhere?" he squeaked. He sank back down, embarrassed.

She twitched as though someone had yanked a rope around her neck.

"With *you*?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

She quickly shook her head, but Mr. Tu did not lose heart. He'd picked up the breathlessness of her reply, the rapid twittering of her fingers on the page. Women were programmed to demur, then to yield. He waited.

"I can't," she said, glancing anxiously at the bookshelves yet again.

Mr. Tu waved his hand as though her refusal was only to be expected. He tried to fix her with his eyes, those beautiful unscarred eyes which the gods had spared from the napalm at An Loc. Le had melted at the sight of them.

"Well," he said, attempting to keep his voice steady, "the Stockade





Diner's just up the street."

She peered at him.

"But you're so...different," she said.

Mr. Tu's heart finally sank within him. He thought of Mrs. Hai-li, who never looked him straight on, as though his face might blind her like a solar eclipse.

"You think I'm ugly, don't you?" he said feebly, unable to look at *her* now. He felt as insignificant as a mound of dust.

The laughter resumed behind the bookshelves. Hoa's magazine abruptly snapped shut, and Mr. Tu lifted his head. The girl darted to her feet and moved away from him.

"You're *Vietnamese*," she said, her voice filled with sudden scorn. Her eyes were glued to the book racks. Mr. Tu's jaw dropped as far as it was capable.

"But...so are *you*," he stammered, his face contorting itself into something resembling a look of confusion.

She glared down at him and shook her head vehemently.

"That was before," she said. "I want to forget all about that now, and you remind me of—"

A rustling came from the stacks, and Hoa paused in mid-sentence. Mr. Tu felt angry and hurt. He shot to his feet.

"Of *what*?" he said, his voice rising. He tried to grab her hand, but she drew away from him. "What do I remind you of?"

She didn't answer, for just at that moment Phil emerged from behind the bookshelf. Mr. Tu turned and spotted a wisp of red hair disappear in the direction of the checkout counter. Hoa flitted to the American's side. She scowled suspiciously at him and craned her neck in the direction of the exit. Phil grasped her roughly by the arm and twisted her around.

"Ow!" she yelped, trying to disengage herself. "You're hurting me!"

In spite of her curious remarks to him Mr. Tu stepped gallantly forward. Only her own people could help her in such a predicament.

"Be gentle with her, young man," he admonished, wagging a stern finger at the American.

Phil stared at him and then gaped at Hoa.

"What the fuck is this bird talking about?" he demanded. All of a sudden, Hoa wrenched free from him and turned on Mr. Tu.

"This is *our* business, so stay out of it!" she yelled. "And yes, you're right. You *are* ugly," she added savagely. "I would never go out with *you*!"

Mr. Tu was astounded. Never had Le treated him like this, nor any of the other ladies who had swooned over him in his youth. He drew himself



up proudly in front of her.

“And I would never be seen with a whore like *you*, either,” he snapped, tossing his head self-righteously and twisting his face into what he truly intended to be a sneer this time.

Hoa turned white and trembled all over. In a single bound she sprang to Mr. Tu, and with the swiftness of lightning she raised her hand and slapped him hard across the face. Mr. Tu’s skin smarted as though it had been set on fire a second time. He felt dizzy, disoriented, and the tears which had been so many years in coming burst from his eyes at last. In his blindness the angry young woman with her fist still raised looked as though she stood at the edge of another world, beckoning for him to come back to her. Mr. Tu stretched his hand out and tried to call her name, but no sound emerged from his throat. He staggered against the chair he’d been sitting in and gingerly lowered himself into it. He bowed his head to calm his nerves. When he looked up again, a minute later, he was alone.

Mr. Tu’s heart felt as thick and heavy as lead. His face burned fiercely still, and the pain, as it settled deep inside him, was much more intense than it had been the first time, when all he lost was a battle. A librarian began to switch off the lights in the stacks. She spotted Mr. Tu and started. Slowly he rose from his chair.



VIOLIN

John Peck

With all pasts and futures harboring in this present
then all, happiness and unhappiness, is a choice
if only because I have agreed to build here. Yet even
the most daring choose happiness alone, and thinking
will never get me through this, and feeling loiters in it—
only Great Harbor floats all of it, fresh, waiting.
Following descriptions of the North Pyramid at Dashur,
the Red Pyramid stripped of its red sandstone facing,
then photographs from recent expedition reports,
I found no speculations about precisely why
this pivotal structure slopes at forty-three degrees,
a matter of moment, perhaps or perhaps not, yet
I saw sand shelving along the base of the west face,
a ripply ledge smoothing along remnant facing
and blending with it— the same as on Plum Island,
barrier beach for piping plover and pale-bellied sand shrubs
dropping its steep bevel sucked at for miles by surf,
the rolling sound momentarily sinking away in it,
its high edge fronting dune grass nervy against sun.
No Joseph among us to build granaries, no Jonah
to ironize destruction, no Jacob to hammer choice.
One third through the mere sixty years which saw the great
pyramids rise, this one, with the lowest inclination
at forty-three degrees, *cautious* some say to forestall
shiftings which skewed the vitals of the Bent Pyramid
somewhat earlier and three quarters of a mile off,
was the first achieved prototype. A slope which has me sense
greater mass and area than it commands. A discovery
about proportion and it may be an application
of lore no one yet has been able to read from the record.
This time the architect lifted the burial chamber
higher inside the mass—the squared cone of sunlight—
and for the first time aligned the coffin east-west
with tomb temple and the sun's track. Its capstone
pyramidion was of the same red sandstone,
not the gilded white stone or granite of later practice.





The entire casing bulged slightly outward much like the faint entasis on a Greek column, though not meant for Greek good looks, but rather for what would stand. Altering the slope's angle rise by rise with cord and peg, masons jesting with the overseer: this innovation in masonry was not imitated. Senefru, who enjoyed people, calling his staff *Dear Friend*, the only king known for doing so, presided over erection of the Bent and the Red pyramids, as well as two others at Meidum and Seila, the start on Egypt's Manhattan Project, four solar fusion battery casings for his charged body, at three locations. He was buried in this one if its hurried completion is any evidence. Osiris's theology by then nosed ahead of the astral one. An east-west journey at night with the sun in that god's boat. Setting out through river reeds, their silken forgivingness. On one side, barrier dunes thrusting up into solar acetylene which tracks with me along their apex, while on the other vast drenchings sink into the low slope. Four fiberglass fishing poles shoot lines off into surf, their necks bent studiously, their shanks in tubes rammed into sand, their armchair owner dozing under a blue towel. Four nylon zings of tackle as if sounding unison. They baked loaves for him in the reliefs. He himself ran a race in the Heb-Sed ceremony, as did his fathers, all in renewal of their powers, his predecessor loping hugely across the slab which seals a shaft at Meidum. Though no tides any longer moisten the stones, those tunnels smell of the sea. The burial of full-scale ships began under his son Khufu near the vast piles at Giza. My ears ring with a cricket-like susurrrus that comes from years of holding taut line out into the oncoming rush. A certain age renders further ambition supernumerary, my buried boats need no more cult. For all the forces at play in this wide theater, its spaciousness declares a propertyless state. May I now take up the violin that nearly came to me at age ten, my maternal uncle's gift? brought ceremoniously on a special visit, yet it went back with him, the fact of it raising an outsize grief in my mother for herself, perhaps.





Rest in peace and the mystery, with the silent thing in its case.
Or may I pursue this engineering further? surrogate
for the womanly body of that fiddle gone downstream.
Yet they were building spirit reservoirs, surge tanks
for seam voltage, soul-welding solar granaries, and one architect
had been chief priest. The hand tracking shadow at Dashur
from rod to rod for the foundation's first course of stones
may have held a lamp for priests in the last chamber
as rare privilege—for their ordained invocations
tested by many sequencings, happiness on alert
through ordeals, the chances awful and the aim real.
I woke with the sand grains of his destiny alive
across my maroon blanket, mustard golden spores
thrown over him by the king, a gift of land to that
Dear Friend. Deir of the geometries. His eye through the pile,
its red slope, the Forty-Three: design stabilizes the *mana*
of earth lofted into fire's force and held there,
steadies the dangerous changes. Guards against them
even before the end, so that a fine instrument
recharged and tuned during the royal run but at last
taken away may morph to mastery in some other walk
by another sea. May turn—mangled god—mischance into the path.
For this I sing: Deir of the triangle with plumb line
portable and pendulous in his eye's mind intending
this for the powers, the king and people, the realms
interlocking, past calamities, through dynasties dangling
in the shaky cycles of order.

I took from his case the still shiny
stream-bottom varnish of the thing and chin-clasped it
per his instruction, and before setting it back in the inky
blue plush drew one long wavery whine
from the G string, pushing up slowly with the bow.
Delight broke from his face. The dark closure not yet
having come across hers, she parted her lips, eyebrows
arching expectantly. Labored, nursed, caressed, that sound
could go on past the end of its own curve, such was
its Pythagorean hint even in my raw hand,
animal miracle among the ratios.
Next morning it was gone. This then sing:
that were I to walk that sand's bandwidth between desert





and facing stone, I would tread neither the waste
nor the monument, but one string stretched like the dune's world
behind my barrier beach, scrub and wiry foliage
nestled minutely into pockets of the in-between
and giving ear steadfastly to immensity.
That close to forty-three degrees is where the G-string
lands a bow's tilt, as a pro will testify.
That even the smudge across her happiness, and the murderous
touch of *creatura*, and the inept weight of fate,
dissolve where the soul burns and melts, where tone
and overtone release each other, and if all stabilized things vanish
in the furnace, truing the line and lighting the chant
give love to the fire. An immense fragrance rose
from the violin case's dyed velvet, the sealed wood,
strings, rosin, fogged bakelite of the chin cup,
the untreated inner wood of the curved body,
the equine substance of the glue, the fluted pegs,
ivory nut to tauten the pale sheaf of horsetail,
and a man's sweat and breath, when he opened these to me.
I have not imagined myself long in the burial chamber,
neither as carver nor priest, and only for a brief spell as builder
scanning the ceiling slab for telltale cracks. A vast
aroma lifted from that case among the bright faces.





GRAPHOLOGY 100: SALT SYSTEMICS

John Kinsella

Crystallography. Archway. Transgression.
Slip on the crust as underfoot a slick mud.
Underfoot a bottle unbroken down like
the box, house, even bricks: in channelling,
ditch diggers, to drain
into the Avon, a drainage bonanza, a sluicing
and discharge frenzy, a dance of gouging, cutting, ramming,
ripping, removing: so visitors might wonder,
an aesthetic. In the horror, pure beauty.
New Holland honey-eater curved beak picking at wattle, sucking
up brine and sap in the resonating flute. Aliens have sex there,
and from a gully
you might watch.
You might touch the opened earthquake parts.
You might facilitate. Beyond the traps,
the rabbits, the foxes.
The dam heavier, lighter than the Dead Sea. Flint stones,
struck rock chips kindred, corroding
if that's the word for it, transliterated.
How many stars guided under, a mass like rings outside the telescope,
haloes of expansiveness, the trees sparse on horizons,
inclement. Fragments of restitution, as if revenge
is a savage, resilient scrub, salt-tolerant,
begrudgingly succulent, poison to humans and stock.

History is absurdity. History is the scrub grappled out of its holds. History is the urge
to get the last tree out despite the tractor bogging down lower than its traction
point;

history is overlay; history is rummage in the delicate lattice-work of salt, the
pluralism of crystals reaching out, so inclined to externals, a building erosion
that is so dialectic, if you want to play with words
when it gets so hot white blood cells
are not whiter. It's all white, glaring, burning,
like skin cells being stretched to breaking point, and then breaking.





The camera dulled down and no body-lines precise, not line
sharpened by excessive light: to fuck here is to risk
sterility.

She-oak islands. So thin the fertility they manage,
small birds attracting eagles
with nowhere to nest.

Through the swamp grasses that spike in low-ground
chemical water, an oily film
tidal and Sargasso beneath the colorful horns of Christmas spiders,
the perky vauntings of stilted plovers, swathes of gnat anarchy, caught en-bulk,
but so singular, so crazy in their range, specific and motivated. Through swamp grasses
that are Christian in their rending, a castigating breeze that is only of the salt,
a low over crystals, a glare trough or soul movement
we can see, though maybe at dusk when shadows
run without trees, hearing it: midday sun
like shell casings, ejected twenty-two brass pedestals,
greening at the edges. And then nothing, so open to run across
attracts nothing.

As said to the army boys and their word orders of warning,
their words of combative dawning, the enemy over ridge
and under leaf, there's none of that left here now: stripped bare,
it's like a Freudian vacuum, a scouring post analysis,
a bursting out of the body that drains you dry
of all magnesium. Prophetically,
it's a madness, a journal entry on a journey
always inland, where seeing the edge of your expedition
is no comfort, always inland.

Out there, you can see who's approaching. Mulga parrot, zebra finch,
black-faced woodswallow, clamorous reed warbler... shadow paralepsy,
retrovirus in lively concentrated color array, so seemingly plural
in brevity, islands of samphire and introduced grasses, clever with insects. The magnetic
properties of salt are barely understood. A medium has more powers and ectenic forces
correlate: I left the argument so explosive with love
I went nowhere, and touched nothing: no walls, not sensation of salt panels



crunching underfoot. Kind of like swimming,
but caught up in voices. They were very much alive,
I was dead, even if swimming. A vast amount of energy was generated. I could see it,
feel it like the salt burning my skin. It wasn't touching me though, and I couldn't touch it.
You know,
the blood-orange effusion of sunset where vistas have been blown open,
where creeds and God colorations
watch faith into crops no longer connected to their origins.
A fusion reactor, cold if touch could be imagined. And the dead imagine
the other dead so full of life the sunsets
are sanguine. A connection has been shorted, and everywhere live wires kicking
off water, the sodden low ground in a drought-ridden zone. It says modernism was for
fascists and those who didn't have to work for a living. Post-moderns
are architects.

Salinity is not a problem. Salinity engenders no strategy. Sodium burns in air, in water. It
is popular. Chlorine cleanses swimming pools. Kills in war stories.
Uncle Harold was shot, his buddies elsewhere chlorinated.
And here, stable, innocuous. Little goes there.

Hansard. Dante. Johnny Cash. Ernie Bridge's pipeline. How I remember is a lens
and a mirror, is a solid dissolving and re-forming out of solution. My uncle, cousins, the
tractor—the kings of the tractor—the followers with skills
less useful, a mnemonic step in gum boots hacking with mud clots,
on the edge of paddocks sown for bread,
sown for fodder, wandoo fence-posts bleached
and anatomical: all the saids, obviousnesses. A tour.
I don't want to be anywhere else, and the health is a parody of growth. A profit
of healing. You could build over the lot and the ball of the earth
is about gravity and no more. Holding companies.
Riff-raff refrain in drunkenness, where no audience
but a nankeen night heron knowing crustaceans in the dam's abandoned
waters, even stream below feeding thirst-crushers. Palliatives and cheeky
red-capped robins, cheeky in its own fraternity, this bright male
jester. It's not. It's a comparison made from loneliness, or a desire for understanding.
You won't understand this. There's a place in our galaxy—our other place
in the galaxy—where palinodes remember us and spend all capital
at hand getting here. Arriving, they can neither be seen nor heard,





they congregate on the salt and have sex
because there's nothing else to do before they starve to death. It's the logical end
to a lifelong journey.

What's polished in the hubbub of family, of travel,
of earning a living. What garnishes creeks, spray residues, corneal grafts?
To love in all of that is so effusive, coming across as else-wise.
A jargon of tree stumps burnt out to generations.
Traps limbering on fencelines.
Marsupials co-existing and lost.
A day book, tallying of prices diversifying in pacts of ants: multiple varieties,
few discovered, items
of obstetrics and men birthing illnesses, as if the ache of a child's face
looking up isn't enough. These earners,
these map-pins and speculum-makers. Salt-births, spontaneous regeneration of flies:
and there's proof of this and that.

Avant-garde isn't the page. It's not carving up the
salt with the one-tine plough, or contour banks of argument,
it's flows and distribution outside the sheets, on the edges. We know this.
It's what you eat, what you do and don't say. Poets never have it, nor
the absolute metal of a plough, names we might recognise. Actinic. Hiding
the black.



REVERBERATIONS

Steve Timm

How can you speak without ears
the science of ergonymistry.
Oh father a limning of the reaching
of forgetting. The right
translation in the wrong
mouth. The hilarious alibi
like a leper dressed in cellophane. Sirens
rap. Logose. Ode to
—& from. *Of course*. Oh
to ear the foam cursing
veining the name of gravity
or its stoplight opposite. The trials
that time souls. Lone
souls alone in loneliness the lexi
con sez the walls of
talk back.

How can you not
back talk
sazz the ear in its lonitude. The moon
goes full one night
then it's clouds the next the next the next
(ask a german symp/hon/ath/ist). Your pain
is your pain. Uns
pea
kable
a method of clover to stretch
the death of winter
as though not a solitary
bird among the limp
leaf.





Not
as final as one'd think not
as onely as an end. Go al-
ong, boy, you brother me. Wolf
-boy stranded mid us humans
itchy ears like a deaf spy. Spry
holo thusiast set back the whole
bangshe gled
bun. Rare avid pion
eer tricking streams
for leads. The furled
reaches. The retched echoes
of the never herd.

Sweet nothings when/
sweet nothing-wens like
on a face in a folk
tale from somewhere
in Asia you can't remember
can you than. These are the doses
that top our drums. The roses
our dooms. Ellipsis
the devil's work ours to find
where the three quashed beats be
long. Where longing
beats. Beats all.



Utterly hopeful. They hand you
a ticket—Salt Lake City, Tuscaloosa
or is it Tangiers, Fish Creek, Nth Street. Oh, it
—it matters. The train the young woman
telling her hair the old
operalovers tacit helping
coats on the you the
I. It is not like going to work
it is not like enforcement. A cardinal in a heated
birdbath in the shallows
of a mild winter
neither. We each
claim our *nor* the sound
of in a language I for
get light.



THE GENERAL SILENCE

Simeon Berry

More people had died in the Leningrad blockade
than have ever died in a modern city—anywhere—anytime:
more than ten times the number who died in Hiroshima.

—Harrison Salisbury

Not the first time a Russian city was exiled into apotheosis. When the Red Army cast the White Army out of Odessa, they threw thousands overboard with weights. Divers saw them walking across the bottom of the harbor toward the city, waving their arms wildly against their chains.

Quieter here, in Leningrad—*Peter's cursed error* he built on the swamp while serfs ate baked clay instead of bread. *In an ancient book it is written:* the Panzer 103rd will founder, but the sideshow goes feral long before: the death-throes of the zoo elephant go on for hours, frozen sparrows leave their light bones in mid-air.

The silence is total, music left to those who walk upright, to Shostakovich, and the practicality of the concert notes: *The 1st violin is dying, the drummer died on the way to work. The French horn is near death.* Outside the auditorium, the stacked dead ring like metal when dropped.

Hunger psychosis, faces staring black with frost, the held gaze on infinite regress. A million gone in the streets. Dead crowds orchestrated by a blizzard's slow carousel. The painter can't help himself. Winter is ending, he has to stop the only other person in the park: *You understand. It is all strange, it is all alarming. But the sky is quiet as always.*

History is out of gear. For weeks after he drowns in the sub, the poet mails his wife letters. She hallucinates salt gritting the words, the envelope sealed with an indrawn breath. Vishnevskaya keeps watch by her stove with the circle of rats, thinking through post-mortem grammar: *Near death the diminutives, the suffixes increase. My little stove. My littlest door. My smallest one.*





RECONSTRUCTION

Simeon Berry

For the sake of argument, let's say you actually talked about those who drank, like your Dad, how he moved through its liquid translations from the speech of the drowned, and made your words light up

your lungs like tracers. Or why your brother kept his buzz-cut short, cultivated a stare like a prisoner of war in a tiger pit, reconstructing chess games while the rain wraps steel thread around the bamboo:

King's rook, Knight four, Queen's pawn. You must be exact, you must know it's all in the wrist, how two shots of glazed vodka can unbalance an evening. Or why, after five years of winning riding competitions,

you stopped when the fear of horses suddenly masked your fingers. How anagrams grew to cover half of every page of notes you took. I think I had only one chance to know: when you wrote the paper

on Mithridates and brought along the overdue book as evidence of your passion, where you'd laid down neon over all the passages describing how he sampled so many poisons they wouldn't kill him

when he finally wanted them to. I faltered, told you I used to fall asleep by imagining myself sealed into a capsule the size of a coffin bed and hurled out into space, into the perfect either/or. We stood

on the night pier with your immune king and my body ark, watching the partial prints of jellyfish glow in the current, as if the water had been gripped by someone who wanted very badly to live.



YOUR THIN GRANDMOTHER

Frances Sherwood

Thanksgiving was when she asked me. We were in the kitchen, she on a stool by my counter, I rinsing dishes to put in the dish washer and weary from making the pies—a pumpkin, a pecan, and a custard-coconut from a Bisquick recipe and doing the table à la *Family Circle*—corn cobs dressed as pow-wow Indians, their eyes bright red tacks, swatches of green felt wrapped around for miniature blankets, pilgrims from wooden spools found at the Goodwill.

“Like to drive me to the Women’s Clinic, like tomorrow?” Nina asked.

Nina and her family—Mark, and their two sons, Dali and Duchamp—had been responsible for the turkey. They planned to roast it in a hole in their backyard Hawaiian luau-style. I could have told them our Massachusetts ground was too frozen in November for a pit, but no, like ’49ers intent on gold, the two boys took turns with a pickax, the pale carcass wrapped in tin foil patiently lying on the ground beside them. At the last minute, they had to throw the cold bird into the oven turned full blast, burning the skin to a crisp, leaving the inside bloody raw, delivering it, Happy Thanksgiving, with a bottle of blueberry schnapps. I ate it faithfully. My husband, John, and my daughters, didn’t.

“The Clinic?” Naturally, the men were in the den watching the game. Kids were somewhere and Francisco, Nina’s tenant, had ambled over to join the guys with a hardy ho-ho. He had done the turkey thing, he said at his mother’s, but was hungry for dessert, a night cap.

“I love you, Connie,” Francisco cooed. “Like a Mother, and Nina. . . like a . . .” He wiggled his eyebrows provocatively, grabbing cookies like a bear fattening up for a long winter’s nap.

“Are you escorting at the Clinic, Nina, is that why you want me to go with you?”

“Not exactly.”

I had read in the *Telegram Gazette* that The Young Christians were having a marathon picketing at the Clinic the day after Thanksgiving. Volunteers were needed to shepherd clients in from the parking lot.

“Counseling?”

“Nope. You’re my friend, aren’t you? Jesus Christ, Connie, it’s post Roe versus Wade.”

Barely post Roe versus Wade. We were in the early ’90s. To Nina, history started in the late ’60s, the heyday of the “Movement”—Berkeley,





Ann Arbor, Madison. The most I did during those exciting times was go to Catholic grammar school in my pleated skirt, participate in Spelling Bees. Now in Worcester, I helped out at the Rescue Mission, contributed conscientiously to the local PBS station during pledge week “Everything will be all right,” we could hear one of her sons, Duchamp, singing from upstairs, but, of course, Bob Marley was dead of cancer. Duchamp, wearing a spiked dog collar, a reggae tam, and one dripping earring, looked like a grown boy nostalgic for dress-up games. Nina wore the other one of the pair of earrings, explaining that they were in son/mother matching outfits. My husband, John, was not amused. They’re our next door neighbors, I had justified, be a sport.

“Is Mark using the car, Nina? Can’t you use the bread truck?” It seemed that I wouldn’t be able to get all the dishes in the dishwasher, would have to do it in two shifts.

“Mark is in a mood, and I won’t be well enough.” Nina was fiddling with her wire-framed glasses, rubbing the lens on her sweat shirt, holding them up to the light.

Mark was prone to depression through association, Nina genetically inclined. Every afternoon, after her bread route was over, she arrived on my doorstep to deliver the state of the union address, updating me on her battle with the Big D, no details withheld. Of course, there were times I was not in a great mood myself, but it never got to the dramatic extent Nina experienced. My daughters, Sophia and Theresa, teenage Curious Georges, using John’s binoculars for bird watching, were able to keep tabs on additional doings and ditties next door since Nina and Mark did not bother with bourgeois amenities such as shades or curtains. Nina liked to say: My life is an open book, take no prisoners. My life was an open book, too, but not an exciting one. At six in the morning, if they were ambitious enough, my two girls could catch Nina and Mark hopping into their big, square bread trucks, twin, rusty red missiles. Side by side, barreling out to the bread warehouse, they picked up the loaves to deliver to supermarkets in the area before the first customer. Nina said she liked to work for her bread like a real person.

“Francisco will not be able to drive, either.”

Francisco, the tenant, had joined the men in the den.

“Since when has Cat-man-do not been well enough to drive? What am I missing here?”

“Shell-shock.”

I thought perhaps Francisco’s sleepy ways had something to do with marijuana. The one time I tried it, at Nina’s insistence, I wanted to lie down





in the middle of the day. Anyway, Nina and Mark let Francisco, a Conceptual Artist, live free of charge in exchange for fixing up the basement. Which he was slow at because his creative time was best spent constructing installations of Styrofoam named after great lovers, Palo and Francisca, Eloise and Abelard, Romeo and Juliet, a series to be submitted to the Whitney Biannual. Nina had to explain to me what an honor that would be, and how talented Francisco was, for I, not knowledgeable about art, mainly viewed him as a serious keeper of cats—twenty, not counting drop-ins for meals and mating – he, himself resembling his brood mare, Beany, with his droopy underbelly and a sleepy, stupid smile.

“Cats don’t care,” Francisco once informed me. “They even do it with their kids.”

“I didn’t know Francisco was interested in ‘Woman’s Right to Her Body’.” I could see something would have to be done with the turkey leftovers. I could chop them, fry them with onions and potatoes, make soup out of them, or throw them out the window.

“Hell, Connie, Francisco is the prime suspect.” Tina gave me a satisfied little smirk.

I opened a cupboard, stared hard at my everyday china thinking of the years of meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner, eggs and sandwiches, casseroles, a steady march to the nearest graveyard. My husband was allergic to nuts, and my daughter, Sophia, was lactose intolerant, and Theresa was on Atkins. I read about diets in magazines. Nina said it was a state of mind, said I had to think thin.

“Are you saying I’m too over the hill for birth control, Connie? Francisco is really cute in the buff, you know.”

“Is that so?” I was not a very good judge of male beauty. But I admired Nina’s energy. My husband and I had been married for over seventeen years.

“It will only take an hour max; you can get back in time for your soaps.”

“Thanks.” I have never watched a soap opera in my life, except on Masterpiece Theater, and Nina knew it.

The roar of a touchdown emanating from the den, lapped into the kitchen. Nina pushed her glasses on the top of her head, gave me her near-sighted look. “Remember that Hemingway story, ‘White Elephants,’ when the guy is trying to convince the girl to do it, a little air in, out. No Biggie. Zip, zap.”

“But, the guy in the Hemingway story didn’t know what he was talking about, Nina, and the girl. . . The *girl* in the story was scared.”

“Be a pal, Connie.”





"There must be somebody else you can ask, Nina."

"You're my best friend, right? Right?"

"I am your friend."

"So what's the problem? It's not like you are doing it yourself."

"It's just that. . ."

"You practice birth control, right."

"Yes."

"Do you tell your priest?"

"Of course not."

"Well then."

I looked closely at Nina, trying to see pregnancy softening her face, filling out her body, but she was as thin and girlish as ever, her sharp face cutting the air like scissors through paper. She still wore bangs, a high pony tail, but most of all, she was eager, forever the earnest graduate student she was once. Keeping her dissertation, she recounted to me, during those precomputer days, in the fridge against fire, in a safety deposit box against theft, and under the bed to slip out at convenient moment to show off to admirers. Speaking of which, she slept with everybody on her thesis committee, which is, she confided, what people did in those days.

"Even the women?" I had asked, thrilled. Nina's area of study at Berkeley was Early Childhood Development and I couldn't imagine a womenless Dissertation Committee.

"Thighs were in," Nina went on. "We looked like drum majorettes in our miniskirts. A bump, a bump, a bump, bump, bump."

Despite the fact that she was my senior by a good ten years, Nina *could* be imagined as a majorette in white boots with tassels on them, or as a kid jump-roping red hot peppers till she fell from exhaustion, or as a Girl Scout honor bright, her beret slightly askew, a devilish glint in her eye. She put her coffee cup down on my butcher block kitchen table from Williams-Sonoma. Material things, she once told me, will possess you, and I knew she was right. She picked her furniture at St. Vincent de Paul, wore castoffs. All her possessions, which she said were merely temporary were recycled, and each item was rich in history, the rings on her table, the scuffs on her chairs, the spots on her mattress, her books from the library sale. My husband, John did not share my admiration, said he didn't know how they could live that way. Even the washer and dryer in the basement, in Francisco's "apartment" amid the cat litter containers, were from the used appliance store.

"God will reward you for your good deed."

"Sure."

I didn't sleep a wink that night. Around two, I slipped out of bed, drove





to the Holy Cross campus in my robe, went to their church because all other Catholic churches in town were locked. But Our Lady, overseeing her corner of candles in serene alabaster, cloaked in baby blue, although available, offered small comfort. A guard asked what I was doing there.

"Praying," I answered.

I was praying for the usual things, Nina and her family, and also, a kind of dispensation, if you will, for I would be aiding and abetting the enemy, going against policy, practice, all that I had been taught and a good deal of what I felt. My last prayer was that I wouldn't see Father Michael or anybody else from my church.

My luck, the next day, there were some familiar faces among the Young Christians. Out in force, they were wearing choir robes, some dragging heavy crosses and others carrying big pickle jars of diluted catsup, or maybe it was real blood. Nobody could get through, although standing in the horseshoe shaped parking lot, not knowing whom to serve and protect, was a team of Worcester's Finest. The "Woman's Right to her Body Coalition," in a half crouch position, arms linked, legs together so that nobody could charge in from ranks of Young Christians to kill a doctor, surrounded the building and were chanting in unison:

"Hey, hey, what do you say? Coat-hangers make the day?"

As we approached a Young Christian, a middle aged man, lunged at us. "Murderer, murderer," he spat.

"Racist, misogynist fascist," Nina taunted back.

The Woman's Body Coalition chorused: "Five, six seven, eight, go home and masturbate."

Francisco looked like he wished he had thought of that earlier.

"Maybe we should go home."

"Shut up, Francisco," Nina said.

Francisco—Mr. Cool Cat, the ogre under the bridge, who goes there? Which is where it probably happened when Nina came down to do the laundry. Nina didn't fold anything, or believe in ironing. I wish I could be less obsessive about wrinkles. Anyway, they must have "done it" amid the dunes of cat crap and shadowed by the piled cardboard boxes, the cat condos. If they hadn't used the basement, it could have been the bedroom while Mark was out drinking in his bread truck, or sobering up in his "den," a bear's lair of baseball memorabilia. Mark was like a big bear himself, shaggy and handsome, and he could recite poetry, had studied the classics at Princeton, went to graduate school at Berkeley, same as Nina. In the summer he rested himself out back in the hole Dali and Duchamp had started to dig as a swimming pool—Mark and The Czarina, their pet beagle at incline on the





sides of the pool in the shade of the lilac bushes which divided our yards. Our garden featured tulips in the spring, roses in the summer and lilies in the fall. My husband was a master gardener, wrote the gardening column that ran in several papers. Summer now seemed a million miles away.

Nina and I prepared to make a break, but the picket line was too thick and the crosses the kids were dragging looked like what they were—instruments of torture. Strains of song from the other group “we are young and old together/we are gay and straight together,” wafted sweetly over our heads.

“I wish they would stop singing,” Francisco moaned.

“Shut up, Francisco,” Nina said.

“If we break through the picket line and accidentally brush against somebody, would that count as assault?”

“Shut up, Francisco.”

Then, finally, two of the Woman’s Right protectors left the human barricade they had formed against the wall of the Clinic, parted the line of pickets, saw us safely across to no man’s land.

“It will be over before we know it,” Francisco consoled us all as we entered the drafty, darkened hallway.

“Shut up, Francisco.”

Then we were in the “reception” area, which had the feel of a locker room for an under-funded girls’ sport in a rinky-dink school, a hefty and rather mature team, by the looks of it, the game lost.

“You have to take a number,” a large white woman told us. “Up there.” She looked like a Michelin man in her down winter coat.

Facing the rows of folding metal chairs was an unattended desk with a little number rack. White plastic disks with the numbers in bold red hung like the deli counter at Gorette’s Supermarket. Nina was number 16. They were calling out 8. We settled in. Mark and Francisco were the only two men there and everybody looked at them with curiosity and approval.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this, Nina?” My stomach suddenly was betraying me. “One more kid is all, you already have the room. I could be the babysitter. Once babies come, people love them, they can’t help it.”

“Be a pal and stop trying to convert me, okay?” She showed me her pouty teeth. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’ve run with the bulls, posed nude for art classes, I’ve told you that.”

“You have.” She was an exceptionally brave woman.

Another time she told me that she had decided as a kid when she read





the Dorothy Parker line—"men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses"—that *she* would make the passes. In the end, she did not get her Ph.D. because Mark arrived on the scene. Together they made bricks for the Peace Corps in Barbados, followed by L.A., scriptwriting, then driving in four furiously rainy days and nights to New York for years of editing legal documents third shift. Mark, who actually had a Ph.D. in American Culture, became an academic gypsy, teaching here, there, and everywhere. Dali and Duchamp were born in New Mexico and Montana, respectively.

Then last December, during a huge blizzard, John and I getting ready for bed, I sitting at my dressing table putting on hand-lotion and night cream, John plucking the grey out of his eyebrows in the bathroom, we heard a clanking and chugging in the driveway next door. A car dragging a muffler rolled in. A woman crawled out of the front, saw me looking out the window, waved as if she had just pulled into Shangri-La, she her own welcome wagon. I knew immediately that we would be friends. Soon, a grand piano arrived. It actually had belonged to Nina's father, who was a doctor. They cut the legs down so the kids could practice cross-legged on the floor, and my daughters also observed Dali putting a garter snake down his underpants.

"What's a little pain, Nina?"

"Shut up, Francisco."

The woman sitting in the row before us, gave us another look.

"It hurts?" Nina squeaked out.

"Damn straight," the woman said.

Mark and Francisco slipped down in their seats. They were holding hands.

"Want a sip?" The woman handed Nina a thermos.

"What is it?"

"Vodka, honey. Take a shot."

"Will it help?"

"A candy bar will help."

"I'll go to the liquor store, buy some booze."

Nina gave Francisco a poke with her elbow, and he slumped back down with a sigh, began to stroke his face. I will not say Francisco has a beard because beard would be a euphemism. More like patches, tufts, sprouts of fur scattered haphazardly. Meanwhile, Mark had stuck his fingers in his ears as if he were watching a scary movie and not to hear the creepy music lessened the horror.

The woman gave me a once over like I had done something to cause all this, then darted a glimpse at Mark and Francisco, because now the two





men were holding hands again and Mark was humming his favorite song, “Sunrise, Sunset” from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

“The thing is they will at least be giving me something for the pain,” Nina said, “and if I mix that with alcohol, I might go into a coma.”

“You wish.” The woman turned back to her two children who were busy with their coloring books.

“I took a good shower this morning,” Nina offered.

Compared to Nina I was obsessively neat. The last time I had seen Nina’s upstairs bathtub it was full of clothes, books, ashtrays and newspapers, the curtains drawn, Nina’s idea of cleaning house. My husband, John, won’t set foot in Nina’s house. Furthermore, he does not think that it is legal to have commercial vehicles parked in our residential neighborhood and, occasionally, threatens to call code enforcement on their bread trucks. Actually, he doesn’t know that when the cops arrested Mark for disorderly conduct, he had hidden himself in the back of his truck, hunkered down among the metal bread racks shouted: “You won’t take me alive.” Nina wanted me to help her bail him out, and although I dreaded being one of the people who go to the police station, I went with her.

There were other times as well, one requiring a lengthy sojourn on the Psych Ward of Mass General and weeks of nightly AA meetings for him and Al-Anon meetings for Nina, which she said was a dating service, because everybody had everybody’s phone number. Several men contacted Nina, she told me, which did not surprise me one bit. Mark had even been to a rehabilitation place. I envisioned it a kind of Betty Ford Clinic. Nina said it was more like a funny farm, the kind you’d read about in a Raymond Carver story with old guys out on the porch in rocking chairs crying in their 7-Up. Nina could make anyplace interesting just by her description.

At the moment, Mark, sober, a green-grey cast to his face, was in clean jeans and a grey sweat shirt that said Holy Cross, just the outfit for an abortion clinic. Francisco was in his painting clothes, not the white clothes of a painter who paints houses, but bohemian black. Black chinos and a black turtle neck into which he was retracting his neck. Are you a cat or a turtle, I wanted to ask.

“Sure you don’t want to go to my doctor for this, Nina?”

Nina always went to clinics, didn’t believe in private medicine, but, I thought, in this case, that she could compromise her principles.

“Connie, you always believe in comfort,” she accused.

She was right. I spoiled myself.

“Hey,” the large woman said. “She’s not supposed to be coming out the front entrance. They have a back exit.” She pointed to a woman coming



down the hallway holding on to the wall for dear life and walking as if she had ten sanitary pads wedged between her legs, which she probably did.

"I need a fucking cigarette," Mark muttered, putting his fingers in his ears again.

"Don't worry, folks, no way am I going to be hobbling out like that."

But Nina came out worse.

And the trip home seemed forever.

And I prayed that nobody was about with the binoculars when we pulled up in Mark and Nina's driveway.

"Upsy daisy," Mark said, lifting his wife out of the car, grabbing the pillows I had brought. Nina, all bird-bone and beak, was carried with ease up the stairs and put her on the mattress in their bedroom.

"What happened?" Duchamp wanted to know.

"Mommy just had an abortion," Mark said.

Duchamp was wearing his spike bracelet, the one he had dipped in mashed potatoes and eaten from during Thanksgiving and he began hitting himself with it.

"Stop that this instant," his father said.

"If you need me," Francisco said. "I mean, if I can help, I'll be down in the dungeon."

"You've helped enough," I replied tartly.

"I guess, then, it's *au revoir* and *auf wiedersehen*, adios and *ciao*."

"What's wrong with Du?" Dali emerged from his room. Unlike Duchamp, Dali always wore a buttoned-up shirt, carried a kid's brief case to school. A prodigy, he had built a giant Lego city in the basement, fixed the mother board of their secondhand computer himself. When of legal age, he was going to change his name to something like Newton, he told my daughters.

"I better see to the boys." Mark went down the stairs.

Then, quite suddenly it was quiet. Looking through Nina's window towards my own bedroom, instead of concentrating on Nina, I remembered that Sophia was conceived shortly after I met John. He said we were going to get married someday anyway. It just put up the date by about three or four years. We were married in his church, the Greek Orthodox, the whole service chanted. John told me that the first time he heard an organ in church he nearly jumped out of his skin. On Greek Easter when he was a kid, they all had to go outside the church, run around it six times.

"You were right after all, Connie. It wasn't like in that story by Hemingway, when the guy says, they just let a little air in. They take the air out, do it with a vacuum, The Hoover Maneuver."





"Mom, would you like to have some tea?" Dali poked his head around the door.

"Thanks, Dal, that would be great."

The poster above Nina's bed, mattress rather, was Che Guervera. At one time every campus bookstore in the country sold them. Poor fellow died of an asthma attack. How many Saturday mornings had I spent in the Emergency Room of St. Vincent's Hospital with Sophia's asthma's attacks. Once, when I didn't think it was that bad, John had been the one to rush her to the hospital, save her life, something I'll never forgive myself for, and for which John will always be my hero. On my bedroom wall there are prints by Romare Bearden of women ironing, washing dishes, which I framed myself at the Ye Olde Framers Workshop. They reminded me of my mother.

"It *was* a vacuum cleaner," Nina looked better as she sat up and drank the tea Dali had brought her. "but it felt like fire going in. Like the flame thrower we saw in the World War I *Masterpiece Theater*. I thought I was going to die in the trenches."

"You didn't." I squeezed her hand.

"There you are up in the saddle staring at the holes in the asbestos. Somebody comes by, swoops away the bottle, but you see it, Connie, shreds, patches, a bucket of blood."

"I'm so sorry, Nina," was all I could think to say.

"It's not your fault, Connie."

"Shh." I stroked her arm. I wanted to say something, but I am not good with words, although at U Mass I started as a French major, had taken two years in high school, was supposed to spend my junior year in Paris. One day they changed the classroom of my French III class and it being the rule in the department only to speak *Français*, I spent three days unsuccessfully trying to find the correct room. Finally, I went into the woods around the observatory, sat on a bench and had a good cry. John came along on his way to his Business Administration class. I don't know why, but I suddenly burst into tears right there when I was supposed to be strong for Nina.

"Not the waterworks; come on Connie." She laughed, coughed, winced in pain, had to put the mug of tea on the floor by the side of her mattress. I got some Kleenex out of my purse so she could blow her nose, went to the bathroom and looked, to no avail, for a washrag to wipe her face. When I came back into her bedroom, Dali and Duchamp had dragged in their sleeping bags and were setting up beside the mattress. The Czarina had ensconced herself in with Nina on the mattress, her head on a pillow. The dog began to snore, and under the covers, wiggle her tail, feet, give little yelps.

"Do dogs dream?" Duchamp asked.





"For sure," Nina answered.

"A nice warm house," I offered.

"Running away," Dali chimed in.

"Eating mud," Duchamp suggested, for he, too, ate mud, paper. My daughters had seen him.

"Getting petted," Mark, who had snuggled in on Nina's other side, added.

It was getting dark; I had to go home, see about dinner. Tiptoeing down the stairs, out of the house, I closed their door quietly, got in my car and drove into my own driveway. My story was to be that I had gone to the Mall to do Christmas shopping. That was what you are supposed to do the day after Thanksgiving. Now, I would have to smile mysteriously as if all the secrets in the world were hidden in the trunk of the car. Fortunately, John did not look up from the TV when I came in. They were doing a football score rundown.

"Sophia, Theresa," I called.

"They went to a flick, a Frenchy, *Entre Nous*."

Both my girls, still in high school, already spoke better French than I ever did. Sophia was born in Amherst, when John was finishing up his degree. Teresa came into being without premeditation, too, but, at least, by then we were married. No Teresa, no Sophia? Unthinkable.

"What's for dinner, Constance?"

Not being able to face the turkey, I opened the cupboard and took out a can. I heated the chili in the microwave, grated some cheese over it, and put the whole concoction on toast, with a sliver of pickle on the side.

"*Pièce de la résistance*," I said setting the tray down in front of John in the den.

While he ate, I put the dirty dishes from breakfast into the dishwasher, cleaned the counters, sponged down the stove, played the phone messages back. My mother, who had spent Thanksgiving with my sister in L.A., was going to do all her Christmas shopping when she arrived to stay with us in Worcester. She had raised the two of us alone, and now we couldn't spoil her enough. My reading group was meeting on Wednesday, a message said. The book was *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. There was a meeting for Concerned Catholic Mothers.

"Milk," John roared.

When I brought it in, and leaned down to place the glass on the coffee table, he lifted my skirt up, gave me a little whack on the *derriere*.

"You still have a gorgeous ass, Constance."

I knew what was to follow.





"So how about it?"

"I'm not in the mood."

"Oh, so we have moods here, too, do we. Suit yourself."

I went back to the kitchen, sat at the counter. A full moon illuminated the dead leaves which flooded Nina's swimming hole. I thought I saw the wisp of a little ghost, fragile as smoke, float up and out of Nina's bedroom window. Then, I saw a shadow which materialized into Francisco skirting the swimming hole and dodging the bare bones of the lilac bushes.

"Francisco." The last person in the whole world I wanted to see.

He plopped himself down on a stool, opened my cookie jar and took out a cookie in the shape of a pilgrim hat. Above us, I could hear the exercise bike in the bedroom going a mile a minute.

Francisco reached for his second cookie, a turkey.

"It could have been Mark's. *Anybody*, Connie," he said.

"I don't want to hear another word out of you, Francisco."

"Whatever."

"Nina is a big girl. Bigger than you think."

"She's not a giant, is she?"

"I'm splitting to Seattle."

"Good for you."

He ambled out with a handful of cookies, disappeared into the hedges. I set the dishwasher, went into the living room. In front of the house, the sidewalk, tinged with frost, gleamed with malice. I left the front lights on for the girls, dragged myself upstairs. Mark was already in bed. I put on my nightgown, the one with roses all across the front, the one I made myself, got in beside him, turned off my light. Across the room, I could see the family pictures stuck in the dresser mirror curlyqueing up at the edges. There were some from our trip to Greece, the four of us standing in front of the Parthenon. There was one photo of me and John, and for some reason, the lighting, something, our legs were faded off. Not a leg to stand on. I would have to destroy that picture, for I looked fat in it. Already I had weeded through the albums. I wanted to be remembered thin. Your thin grandmother.

"Have you always been faithful to me, John?" I said this out of the blue. The shells in the glass lamp by his side of the bed seemed to shift.

"I just want to know. It's okay . . ."

When he turned to me at that moment, I realized that his eyebrows grown together at the bridge of his nose were too grey to pluck, that his eyes held fear. Dear God, the terrain had been smooth a moment before, and I had planted land mines.



“You don’t have to tell me,” I said quickly, wanting to swallow back my dumb words.

“I *want* to tell you.”

I braced myself.

“Connie.” He took my head in his hands. “How could I be unfaithful to you, to the girls, to the family. I would see the Virgin Mary before me if I did anything to hurt you. I have too much self-respect.”

I didn’t know if the sudden sinking feeling was relief, or utter dismay, because for some reason I felt like crying. But I didn’t; of course I didn’t. I had cried at Nina’s. That afternoon, before Mark, the boys and The Czarina came upstairs to keep her company, she whispered, as if she had won the game after all, “I want to feel bad, but I don’t. I’m a player, Connie, I’m still a player.”



A FRAGMENT OF CULTURE II

Regina Derieva

then the character started being ruined,
hearing got worse, vision fell off.
But what to do if in Sparta
there were no temples or gardens?
But there was the law, otherwise there'd be
the precipice where they threw out the trash.
The pigeons pecked at millet
and the girls strutted wearing beads.
And the girls wanted money,
like birds of peace on a placard.
The person who tied together a common broom
spent an age in someone else's dressing gown.
And the authorities gave out homemade beer
and the guards leered crookedly
in the deserts, where the young men
marched in formation for the prospects of Sparta.
The world was built up anew
and took up almost the whole map.
Life became better, but nature
ran wild and couldn't get used to it.
The blind sullenly walked the map,
the sea answered the deaf.

Translated from the Russian by Richard McKane





HIGHLAND TOWN

Claudio Rodríguez

No air's so healthy
as in these places, but I haven't
come to recover from anything.
I come to grasp what deed
trembles in the light, what dark revolt
demolishes life in us today.
Here there are flags no more,
nor walls, nor towers, as if now
everything could withstand the thrust
of earth, the plundering
of sky. And our vision's
swept away, our bodies are
a free market, our voices, dwellings,
and love and years,
doors for one and a thousand to come in.
Yes, so rootless as always,
as we walk along the old streets today,
our heels are stained
with fresh grape, and we hear
those waters overflowing I know well,
the ringing riverbed of hearing.

It's alliance: this mountain
air with the tension of company.
And to know what distance
spreads from man to man, from one life to another,
what planetary range separates
two heartbeats, what vast expanse
looms between two looks
or from a mouth to a kiss.
What use are so many sordid
maps of towns sharply etched
beside rivers, founded
on separation, on rocky
pride?
Never houses: barracks,





never streets: trenches,
never a day's wage: a soldier's pay.
What good has so much fortress
been, deep moat, rugged battlement,
walled enclosure?
Fear, defense,
self-interest and vengeance, hate,
loneliness: here's what's made us
live in vicinity, not in company.
Such is the cruel scene
they left us to inherit. How,
then, can life here be fortified
if it's only alliance?

I'm facing your walls,
frontier town which the sky
never stops disturbing.
Old ambition admired
now only by tourist or archaeologist,
or somebody who fancies crests and coats-of-arms.
This is no national monument,
but the light on the high plains is,
the fresh air watering the dry lung,
filling and making it
sheer offerance renewed, a homeland
in open fields. Here there are no coasts, sea,
north or south; here everything's the stuff
of harvest. And if in a while
the time to go arrives,
good-bye to the strong ring
of air and gold of alliance, good-bye to the high hill
not a bastion, but company,
so long to so many men
unfreed until today. For everything
around is surrendering and there are no frontiers,
nor distance, nor history.
Only ravenous space and October's night dew
above these high fields
of our land.

—Translated from the Spanish by Louis Bourne





FENCE ON THE BORDER

Sheryl Luna

It is in the bending, in the pain,
the way old paint scrapes off wood,
and the way mothers light our way through time
on their way to small frailty.

And there's a halo about the painted head of Jesus
on the yellow wall of *Our Lady of the Valley* Church
where teachers make a pittance and live richly
in their work among brown faced children.

There's a burlap robe on the pilgrim
walking in sandals up Mount Cristo Rey
when the sunset blurs a perfect pink,
like the palm of god pressing down on the bent heads
of men and women who learn prayer amidst a harshness
I have yet to know. The barrio is full of narrow streets,
adobe homes, and sweet smelling yucca flowers
bud in the air like a rainy night.

There's a way the sand clings to the wind
and the sands brown the sky in a sadness
that sings some kind of endless echo of the border
where the chain-link fence stretches for miles
and miles and the torn shirts of men flap
from the steel like trapped birds.

The river is narrow and appears slow.
The cardboard shanties of Colonias unveiled
among the vast open desert like ants.

The faces of the poor smiling and singing
as if sunset were a gift; the desert blooms
red and white flowers of the thinnest sparest cacti,
as if ground-hogs lived coolly in the shadows of the earth.





And here, on Cinco de Mayo the cornea of god
glints faintly in a thin rainbow;
the hands of god rest over the blue hills,
the song of god in the throats of sparrows.

Bless You.

Bless You.

This is the way the border transfigures greed,
shapes it into something holy,
and road runners stand alert; even the pigeons soar
with something akin to the music of the spheres,
and Spanish flutters through the smoke,
and there is a strange burning through our small lives.



SONATA ON ORIGINAL SIN

Sheryl Luna

It was all gone: memory, time, trees.
The sea was imagined. Music
a fog, and although unwhole,
I'm quiet night. No red cauldron,
no lightening eye, no quick Jesus:

dance of mosquitoes, whirr of crickets,
the moon's fated face. The order of nature
streaks sky, rain falls to music, smoke
rises. Work, rest in the stab
of love. Hold yourself like a warm
blanket. The saving always slow. Your Guarded song
a space of self along borders.

Love is gone in work. Gone
in a pin-striped suit, the appearance
of slick shoes. Gone in the way we mouth
nothing to one another. Guarded back. Watch it. Watch it.
Stiff chin. False hair color. Hide it all.

Your body and eye. *Paint your eyes,*
my grandmother tells me.
Buy a girdle.
Are Death and beauty bought?

Speechless and slanted in the walk,
I jog now, feel my joints loosen
to the tune of suns.

Death and beauty bought in faces,
in handshakes, in flatteries and hurried steps
to buses in slick towns, where women
wear lip gloss and highlight hairs, the electric
pang of music running through veins.





You played trombone like a wounded animal.
I am remembering snow on your hair in the yard,
the trees too capped with it. And then you came
like a ceramic doll smiling, a music box, set
to play the same tune for years, until the break
that Fall.

Original sin fell from our lips. Now
I am cracked in red lipstick.
An old maid counting and loving stars
alone. Carpe diem! Old lantern, black and costly,
antique chevy. The rust of poverty like lost love,
empty fiberglass pools.

My face a butterfly rash. Lupus, then a lover lost.
Then came the ash. Oboe slowness—. The way
you walked your dog each night
over the ridge. Arroyo empty. Gutted.
Chain-linked razor-wire fence always mended
and tended. The weeds overgrown. The ache,
muscle sore to the bone. This is the way of borders.

A slow series of breaths rising, falling. The way things
thirst. Tree without green, window
with no curtain, dog left to die.

We have to know
how to play. Pour like water,
patter as rain.
Beethoven was deaf.

Be Light in the silence, light in the noise.
I hold my rosy cheeks, my butterfly shape.
In the mirror I more than peer.

Time is breath smoked away. We were young
and flowered. Once, we were silent
in a perfect trance of sleep.



Endless deep throated voices of rage
turned to snow one night. The voices of women nearby rose
lighthearted with the sparrows.

I mourn the way we were too afraid to kiss
beneath the oaks, the moon laughing,

the moon crying. Us at the center of the small
universe. We two stars lingered in the bodied voice
of time, rising from dirges and requiems
like dancing stars, or the chaos of a blood sonata.

**BIRTHDAY ON MT. WASHINGTON***Keith Taylor*

At 51 I'm satisfied to be
the slowest hiker on the slope,
satisfied to stop somewhere below
the summit's restaurant and parking lot
where others are pleased to see
the view from the highest place
on this part of their planet, mountains
falling off around them, blue and green,
in all directions. I'm satisfied
to keep my hike pristine,
if artificially so, satisfied
to sit at the bottom of a sea
of rock covering the quarter mile
to the top, to sit above the last
alpine meadow, beginning to bloom
just this month—purple lapland rosebay
as backdrop to diapensia:
small, white, threatened by the noisy world.
And I feel something
more than satisfaction—not
“euphoria,” but that direction—
when a ruby throated hummingbird
zooms up the rocks, circles
my head looking for blossoms, darts down
over cliffs and krummholz balsam fir,
then dives for the flowered slopes below.

June 4, 2003



GUARDIAN RAPTORS

Maria Terrone

*"More than three million migratory birds... bald eagles
and raptors... pass by Detroit each year on their way to the
Mississippi or Atlantic flyways."*

—Nature Conservancy magazine

The raptors are cruising
the city, hanging with gangs—
the raptors' -in-training
own damned angels, guardians
against kindness and
uninvited dangers of light:

the way an explosion of sun
on a junkyard bumper
can trigger memory, spinning
a child into view who laughed,
once, into a camera's flash.

The raptors distract, swoop down,
smother the glow to ash.

Contrary to popular belief,
proud angels did not fall to hell,
but soar, still. You can see them
by the millions above the city,
unfurling a canopy of rust-dark wings,
watching with fierce and brilliant eyes
over the not-quite-damned
who cling to craggy stoops,
gathering for the kill.



EMBER

Paulann Petersen

Let the sun rise and set
farther and farther south.
Let the days faster and faster
shrivel into dusk.
Sometimes my eyes work
on the fine world's print,
mostly not. Still,
each breath is a revelation
I've not breathed before.

This morning-come-lately,
the sun lobs a tree's
whole shadow-self against
an outer wall. Each leaf gives its
swaying sideshow of *Yes, let wind*
pass through me, or *No*,
not yet, not now.

A wind means one thing's
heating up, while another cools,
in uneven rate. I am *another*,
cooling down, click by
unsteady click—a last fever
lodged at the tip of my tongue.



ANTHEM

Paulann Petersen

Erotic thrum sounds
the names of this world
each moment.

Water, anther, belly.

Seed, stripling and sun.

Not merely our sex, no.
Never a *that* or a *this* only.
But earth's sex, the all
of binding and flying
away. Honey
hugged to six walls.
Pollen falling
from the bee's laden
haunches. All wings,
all coupling.

The pull of every
each to an each.



INTERMENT

Martha Zweig

Insists the right of the left hand, *What were you
doing yourself those days of plunder,
last days remained to us both?* & prods, right index
finger into the left palm,
Wasn't it comparable?—

(scratch I heard from within
the flowery lockbox, stitch in the side
they sew a man up so he won't go bleed
absolutely heartless) —*Un-
persuaded you add much to a ritual there's not*

*even otherwise more of, I bet you begged, you
ape-scraped knuckles on the pavement, dinged
a tinny cup, please, sir, moment of your time* to time's
ticky two January faces, one wicked & other the one
more-or-less good irrespective its turnabout.

But the left twitches ineptly, merely
electrically, little nerve
lost there. And look! a shady business both
minded shies off too. Childish, who's to pick
& choose? pickup over this-or-that greenery clod?



COUNTER-FABLE

Martha Zweig

Dear preposterous
grasshopper of opposite-
angled knees, glitch, insistent screed
of disproportionate bliss, I put my trust
in domestic economy once, eschewed
excess of appetite & disrepute, kicked the likes-of-
you con-over-career—

I recant. Field pillagers, who conspicuously
overrun the locale, welcome!—infest my circumspect
securities & exchange, day-in-day-out
pester askew the topiary hedges. Offertory: I
resign my estate. Do I quibble some? then shrilly
buzzknuckles-&-shins
dismember & remind me.

What hideous best bug
face any one of you puts on & tilts
to fool me, will. Fill
of folly I laid up long ago exhales: stale
meadowy breath exhuming out of the crib & dry
disintegrating bales, savory yet of the odd blossom,
grass sex, inimical thistle. Choked down

mostly what exhaustible bowl of dust I get, is why I
crave more, why scrape the floor, next attic
shelves, hurl spinning
hats into the shoe trees. Strum cheek-
by-my-jowl any green musician at all!—instigate in my crawl
spaces fiendish undoings, strip my stewardly
jacket & leggings for tatters & wings.





**1953: JAMES DEAN WALKS THE STREETS OF
NEW YORK ALL NIGHT**

Bill Meissner

All your life you walked in the middle of the street.
The night buries your hands in your pockets,
wrinkles your clothes like the folds in your brain
where you search and search, but can't find
sleep.

You don't know the reason you walk,
but it's something about America.
It's about the theater marquee light bulbs above you
that have darkened and cooled, it's about
the damp matches in your pocket and the fuse
to the atomic bomb. It's about the silence of this
night that won't stop exploding in your ear.

You could be the only
person alive in New York after the fallout.
There are no answers, man; just a few good questions.
You taught us that.
Some nights there's no shelter, no warning siren. There's only
that huge sky above that keeps tossing its useless coins,
there's only the sheen of the abandoned
street stretching endlessly in front of you.

In time, the rain stops, but the dreams keep breaking.
The dreams break—they break with each
step, ring out in circles like shock waves, then vanish
at the edge
of the black and silver puddles.



THE VENTRILOQUIST AND HIS DUMMY

Bill Meissner

Making sure your lips are asleep is what the mirror taught you.
Behind your tight smile, you learned
to pronounce each word
as though it were fine glass.

As a child you were too shy
for words. You pocketed them
in a cloth bag like marbles.
So you've spent a lifetime trying to will wood
out of its ancient silence,
learned to throw your voice
to the farthest corners,
his red enameled grin waiting to catch it.
You try your best to make the audience laugh, or sob,
to feel the knots in their stomachs.

Sometimes, propping the dummy on your knee,
you catch yourself thinking
you should trim his fingernails, offer him a glass of milk.
Other times, when the hinges on his jaw stutter,
you think of pounding his hardwood head
on the stage floor, his brain
smashed to splinters.

After the show, you're too deeply asleep to hear
his raspy throat inside the latched suitcase
repeating, one by one,
all the words
you really needed to say.



SMALL BLESSINGS

Ed Falco

Couple of years ago, Connie came home from work to find Doug, her second husband, swaying in nine feet of water like an aquatic Frankenstein, cement-filled milk jugs tied to his ankles, his extended arms bobbing in front of him, the hands lifting and falling slowly, as if waving a lazy good-bye to all the things of this world. Soon as she saw him, she swore off men forever, for eternity. She kicked off her pumps at the shallow end of the pool, took a seat on the rubberized lip, and sat a long while with her feet in the water just watching him sway, all that gorgeous long blond hair floating around his head in a sunny nimbus. Not that it had been a surprise. Some two years earlier, when they had first met at the hospital, where Connie was still employed as a nurse, he'd been on suicide watch, constrained in a straight-jacket—and there wasn't a week went by after when he didn't mention at least once the possibility of taking his own life. She'd met her first husband at the hospital, too, in Detox. He'd died in a drunk-driving accident three weeks after the church ceremony, only a few days back from the honeymoon. The other party in the fatal accident was a two-family brick Colonial. His car had actually gone straight into the front of the garage, crashing through the wooden door in what probably would not have been a lethal collision were it not for the brick wall at the other end. He went through that too before winding up—this is ironic—in the deep end of an in-ground pool. He technically drowned also, though the police said it was likely a good thing, given that his head injuries would have left him in a vegetative state. So. Small blessings. She still had the pictures somewhere.

For the last two years—she had only recently turned twenty-eight—Connie had dated women exclusively. Being gay had its problems; but, truth is, she never really decided if she were gay or just a woman understandably wary of men, who was dating other women because that was the only alternative to being alone—and she hated being alone. Living as a lesbian on Long Island gained her access into a large and lively social circle. She had a ton of women friends—straight, gay, and bi—with whom she could spend an enjoyable evening at a club in the city, or go out with to see a play or a movie or whatever. There was no lack of things to do and good people to do them with, though she had yet to date anyone with whom she could imagine actually settling down and making a life. First problem, she had to admit—and this is primarily why she had always really doubted she was a gay woman—was the sex. No matter how wild or kinky it got, no matter





the strap-on or sex toy in use, it just was not the same thing as it had been with James and Doug, husbands number one and two. Or for that matter with Billy, Ahamed, Ralphie, or Brick—the other four men she'd slept with in her life. She'd been with Billy and Ahamed at Syracuse University; and Ralphie and Brick, two city boys, on Long Island, before James. She'd been raised on Long Island, in Huntington, in a house overlooking the bay, and it seemed only natural to return there after finishing her degree. Brick was dead, from a drug overdose. Ralphie had disappeared, simply up and left the city with no word. For all she knew he could be dead too.

For the past three weeks she'd been dating a woman named Kellen, a doctor who worked with the criminally insane at Bellevue. She was a gentle and compassionate woman, who was already beginning to drive Connie crazy—though Connie wasn't sure it was Kellen who was driving her crazy or just the fact that Kellen was a woman and somehow devoid of something she seemed to need and had been doing without for a couple of years. Not that Connie could have told you what the thing she needed was. She didn't know. Men were simple compared to women. A conversation with a woman was an act of social engagement that included the communication of feelings and ideas along with the sharing of information. Men on the other hand barely knew how to speak. Oh, they could talk if pushed, but after a little while it was almost as if they resented the intrusion of actually asking them if they could just please try to go a little beyond the succinct communication of pertinent facts. Men were infuriating. But. Still. Lately Connie had found herself thinking a lot about men.

On a sultry Friday night in late summer, after a long day at the hospital, two years plus after Doug's suicide, Connie looked at herself hard and long in her dresser mirror and admitted she wasn't gay. Maybe she was bi, but she doubted that too. Mostly she was just pretty open and free about sex, and she figured what she'd done here was give lesbianism a fair shot, and now it was time to admit that it just wasn't her. There was some kind of dynamic involved in the relationship between a woman and a man that wasn't there between a woman and woman and she missed it. She addressed herself in the mirror and admitted what she'd been thinking and not admitting for a long time. She said aloud, "I want a man." She had been hanging around gay women for so long and had spent so many hours talking the politics of heterosexuality that she felt a deep blush of shame in actually hearing herself speak those words. Needing a man, she knew, was a manifestation of self-loathing. She sat down on the edge of her bed, buried her face in her hands, and cried—which, as always, quickly made her feel better. Once the tears stopped, she pulled out her frilliest thong and tossed it on the bed to





be joined by her sexiest jeans and white silk blouse. When she stripped out of her nurse's uniform on the way to the shower, it felt like shedding an old skin.

Coyote Ugly Saloon, a downtown bar featuring sexily clad barmaids gyrating and flirting with mostly male patrons, was the last place in Manhattan any of Connie's crowd would ever spend a Friday night; so when she pushed through the door into much hooting and hollering over the background roar of Guns n' Roses, she didn't even bother to scan the crowd. No one she knew would be caught dead on the same block as the Coyote Ugly, let alone in the midst of this sweaty crowd of what looked to be hormone-addled frat boys, lonely middle-aged men, and horny tourists. The handful of women present who weren't standing on the bar and dancing or serving drinks all appeared to be Connie's age or younger. If there were a black or brown face among the masses, she didn't see it—which might have had something to do, she thought, with the big Confederate flag pinned to the ceiling, its red, white, and blue bars and stars marking the place with a giant X. On the spur of the moment, crossing the floor on the way to the bar, she couldn't decide what was more offensive, that Confederate flag or the hundreds of frilly, multicolored bras hanging from the rafters like numberless tokens of male conquest. If she hadn't been out on the town in the hope of hooking up with someone for the night, she would have been offended enough to leave; instead, she found herself grinning at the outrageous political incorrectness of the place while she watched the legs and well-toned tummy of a twenty-something braless barmaid in painted-on, hip-hugging blue jeans and a skimpy red halter top who stood on the bar with the palm of one hand pressed against the ceiling and the other wrapped around a beer bottle as she swayed lazily to lyrics about an insane bitch who looked pretty tied up, or something like that.

Between the dancer's legs, a chalk-board beer list was visible against the wall of the bar, above a sailor's cap flung over a couple of bottles of Bud—hats being another of the principal décor items in the bar: bill caps mostly, but cowboy hats too, of course, white ones, black ones, even a red one with a yellow feather. In the couple of seconds between considering a beer and deciding on bourbon instead, Connie's thoughts took one of those deep, quirky digressions as she heard some little person who seemed to reside somewhere in her chest, approximately in the heart area, suggest that her life was a joke. Two dead husbands at twenty-eight and a failed two-year stint as a lesbian. How the hell did this happen to an ordinary, good-looking, Long Island girl who'd grown up with a stay-at-home Mom, a businessman





father (till she was fifteen), followed by a nice-enough step-father after her Dad died of liver cancer—which was a memory, actually, she didn't like to revisit? She'd been close to her father. He was cheerful man of desultory enthusiasms who believed utterly in the extraordinary capabilities of everyone he loved. Connie's mother was a saint, her uncle was a genius, his business partners were brilliant, and so on. Connie he told endlessly, repeated as if a litany, that the world was her oyster, that absolutely anything was possible, that whatever she wanted she had only to set her mind on it and it would be hers. Dad. Dad. He must have died in agony, though of course he forbid her to see him once he got too bad.

When a man's voice interrupted her sudden reverie, she was grateful; and when she turned to find a tall, handsome guy who looked to be approximately her age if not maybe a few years older, she flashed him her prettiest smile. He had just asked her what she was drinking. "Makers on the rocks," she shouted—as the screeching music necessitated—and then added, coyly if loudly, "And here I was thinking I might have to buy my own drink."

"A woman beautiful as you?" he said, showing off his own bright smile, rows of white, expensively cared-for teeth announcing at the very least a solid middle-class upbringing. "Not likely." He leaned over the bar extending a fifty-dollar bill in the direction of a passing barmaid with a green laurel wreath tattooed around her bellybutton. She plucked it gently from his fingers with a seductive smirk, he shouted his order, and few minutes later he was holding a Red Hook by the neck as Connie stirred her bourbon and looked up at him playfully. She was enjoying this. It had been a long time. With a man, anyway.

"My name's Ira," he said. Very cool. Very confident. Just shy of cocky.

"Connie," she shouted back. "Thanks for the drink."

"You're welcome," he said. "Let me guess: you're in the arts. I'm thinking artist of some kind: actor, dancer, musician . . . I'll go with dancer. That's my final guess. You've got a dancer's body."

Okay, so maybe he was a little too slick. Still, she smiled as if enchanted. "Nurse," she said.

"No kidding?" His surprise seemed genuine and the little honest sparkle in his eyes emphasized the essentially theatrical introduction. "I'm a doctor," he said. "Pediatrics. I'm just completing my residency."

"Congratulations." She offered her hand, which he shook gently.

"That's a hell of an accomplishment."

"Thanks," he said. "Where do you work?"

"Pilgrim State."

"Out on the Island?"





"Uh, huh," she said. "But no shop talk, okay?"

"Absolutely," he said, his free hand flying up palm forward as he took a small step back. "Believe me. I understand."

"So what's a doctor like you doing in a dive like this?" she said, and immediately upon hearing the squeaky lameness of the question, brushed her hair back off her forehead with both hands. Predictably, his eyes dropped to her breasts. Men were like computers in that way: they were all programmed to respond identically to certain key strokes.

"I'm here with my brother." He turned his back to the bar as he looked over the crowd toward the rear of the room. "He's been a little depressed," he said, apparently still trying to locate his brother. "This is a place it's hard to stay depressed in, don't you think?"

"Sure," she said. "If you say so," she added, pretty sure he couldn't hear her over the music.

"There he is." He nodded toward a far corner. "He's a great guy. He's a musician, he plays sax. He used to have a group that did pretty well for a while."

Connie looked to the back of the room, where Ira was pointing, and saw a long-haired guy with sunken cheeks and what looked to be multiple face piercings and tattoos. He was leaning against the wall and watching one of the Coyote Ugly girls up on the bar twirling a blue hoola hoop to the shouted encouragement of the crowd. He seemed almost frightened by what he was seeing, his eyes squinting slightly and his lips pressed together as if something bad might be about to happen. "That's your brother?"

"That's him," Ira said. "I know he looks kind of out there," he added, "but he's really an amazingly brilliant guy. He's a musical genius, really. And you know, musicians," he went on, "they've sort of got to look like that. It's part of the business."

"Really," Connie said. "You know what he looks like? He looks like if there were like a magic mirror somewhere, and if you looked into it you saw your reverse, bizzaro image, your everything opposite? He looks like you looking into that mirror."

Ira laughed politely. "You're funny," he said. "But I'm telling you, he's brilliant. We've got that in common. And I only wish I had his talent."

"Really," Connie said. "So you're what? You're out here trying to get your brother laid?"

"That's a little crass, isn't it?" Ira crossed his arms over his chest. He watched Connie a moment, intently. "He's a good guy," he said, "having a terrible time. I was hoping he might meet somebody. Nothing simple as the way you put it."





"And he can't do that for himself? Meet someone, given he's a genius and all?"

"Not if he never leaves his room except to go out for a gig and then goes right back to it afterward."

"And that's the way it is?"

"I think he's developing agoraphobia," Ira said, nodding toward his brother. "That's why he looks scared shit over there."

Connie turned her back to the bar to get a better look at Ira's sad brother. She saw that his long black hair was streaked with gray, and that his face—if it weren't so sunken and marred by an eyebrow piercing and some kind of silvery gem pinned to his nose—might potentially be handsome. "You love him?" she asked Ira. "You love your brother?"

"Oh yeah," Ira said without hesitating. "I love the guy." He tilted his head back and half drained his beer while he looked at his brother who was still leaning against the wall in the back of the room, appearing more and more frightened.

"Just out of curiosity," Connie said. "Did you think for a second, when you first saw me—" She waved her hand back and forth from Ira to herself. "Did you ever think, me and you?"

Ira showed her the back of his left hand and pointed to the ring finger, at a narrow circle of pale skin.

Connie laughed. "All right," she said, and when she picked up her drink and made her way through the crowd toward the back of the room, Ira didn't follow.

The music stopped for a moment as she was in the midst of a knot of boys uniformed in khaki slacks and knit shirts—college boys she'd have guessed, though they looked more like high-school kids to her. One of them, a short one, shorter than Connie, said "Hey Beautiful? Where you going?" which for reasons probably only known to such groups of young men, provoked general laughter. Connie pushed through them to Ira's brother and touched his arm familiarly, as if he were an old friend. In a mirror on the back wall, she saw the group of boys return to their shouted conversation as the music came on full blast, more Guns n' Roses.

Ira's brother looked down at her anxiously. Like Ira, he was tall, but up close it was clear that he was considerably older than his brother. She guessed early- to mid-forties. "Hey," she said. "Ira said I should come over and say hello."

"He did," the brother said, and his voice was startlingly low and gravelly, so that he sounded like he was growling as well as talking. He looked back to the bar, where Ira had his back turned to them as he watched the





dancer with the hoola hoop being helped to the floor by two huge, biker-looking guys wearing denim and do-rags. "Why'd he tell you to do that?" he asked, his eyes still skittish, and his posture, the way his whole body leaned back from her touch, defensive.

Connie let go of his arm to hold her drink with both hands. "He said I'd find you interesting. He thought I'd like you."

"He thought so?" the brother said. "I wonder what made him think I'd like you?"

Connie pushed her hair back off her forehead with both hands. "Wild guess, I suppose. Maybe he thought you'd find me attractive."

The brother nodded, as if her attractiveness was something they could all agree on. "So what did my brother tell you?" he asked. "He tell you I'm some sort of genius musician?"

"Something like that."

"It's bullshit," he said, and he looked down at himself, as if just to make sure he was still in the same body. "Looking for genius," he said, "you definitely in the wrong place."

"That's okay," Connie said. "I'm actually not really a genius either."

He smiled, exposing slightly yellowed teeth. "I'm a sideman," he said. "I've played with some greats: played with Miles Davis couple of years before he died."

"I've heard of him," Connie said.

The brother laughed. Something in her response seemed to loosen him up. "That's good," he said. "Ira get around to telling you my name?"

"Didn't get around to it," she answered. "Too busy telling me what a genius you are."

"Ash," he said.

"Jesus." Connie stepped back and looked over his slight frame and long frizzy hair, the sallow skin and sunken cheeks and burned-out eyes. "Jesus," she repeated. "That's perfect. Ash."

Ash seemed confused for a moment; then he grinned and finally he laughed. "Want to get out of here?" he asked.

Connie said, "Why would I want to get out of here?"

"Why would you want to get out of here?" He looked around the bar room, his eyes finally coming to rest on the Confederate flag. "I wouldn't know where to begin," he said.

"Try the bras," she suggested, gesturing toward a rafter where a dozen pink and red bras dangled in a clump. "The bras might convince me."

"Okay," he said. "The bras."

"All right," she said. "Shall we say good night to Ira?"





Out on the street, under the red and silver Coyote Ugly Saloon sign, a misty rain gathered in the otherwise clear, summery air. Connie ran a finger along her arm and wiped away a streak of moisture. Above her, the sky was clear, and even squinting she couldn't see the mist that she felt on her skin. When Ash joined her on the sidewalk, the music and shouting of the bar spilling onto the street with him for a moment before the door closed again, she said: "It's wild out here. It's misting," she gestured toward the sky, "but I can't see it."

Ash looked up over the rooftops. He was wearing a plain black T shirt that was frayed at the neck line, and he placed his open hand on it, over his heart. He inhaled deeply. "Smells like it though," he said, his voice, if anything, even deeper and more ragged out on the street, away from the screaming music. "Smells like rain, don't you think?"

Connie sniffed the air with what she hoped was comic intensity, and, yes, she did smell it: the faint tannic odor of wet leaves.

"My place is close to here," Ash said. "Do you want to walk? It's a nice night to walk in the rain, don't you think?"

"Are we going to your place?" Connie said as she looped her arm though his.

"Can't imagine where else," Ash said, and he started down the block, heading toward the East River.

"Is that—" Connie said, and then she hesitated a moment. She was about to ask if he had always sounded like he did, and then worried the question might somehow be hurtful. She found a gentler phrasing. "Have you always had such a deep voice?" she asked.

Ash looked up and touched his Adam's apple, indicating the source of the problem. "Growth on my larynx. Nothing serious, just can't afford to have it taken care of right now."

"But it's benign?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I'm a singer— Was a singer, anyway. It's an occupational thing. It happens."

"A singer?" Connie leaned back to look him over. "I can see that," she said. "You could be like an Axl Rose or Steve Tyler type."

Ash looked half pained and half amused. "I'm a serious musician," he said. "Sorry if that sounds pompous, but I'm not an act, a entertainment commodity." He laughed. "Okay," he said. "So I am pompous."

"That's all right," Connie said. "I'm enchanted. I never hooked up with a serious musician before."





"Is that what we're doing?" Ash said. "Hooking up?"

Connie didn't answer immediately. She walked alongside him in silence that was awkward for a moment before easing into a comfortable quiet. A few blocks later, he asked her how old she was.

"Twenty-eight," she said. "And you?"

"Forty. Just turned forty a few days ago."

"Happy birthday."

Ash nodded and pointed up the block. "I'm just around that corner. It's a fifth-floor walk-up. Think you can handle it?"

"The stairs I can handle," she said. "No problem."

"And me?" Ash said. "Starting to wonder about me?"

"You know," Connie said. "We're actually getting kind of wet here."

She stepped in front of Ash, stroked his hair with both hands, and then showed him the wet palms of her hands before leaning forward and kissing him lightly on the lips. "Just a couple of things we should get straight first," she said, gently. "I'm out looking for a wild night, you know what I mean? Nothing more than that. Things in my life, they've come to this point—it's like—I don't know. It's got nothing to do with you: you're just the one lucks out. I'm looking for one wild night. Long as you understand, that's it. And also, incidentally," she reached into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulled out a foil-wrapped condom. "This is part of the deal. Okay?"

Ash kissed her on the forehead and gestured toward the lighted foyer of an anonymous gray building a few doors down the block. "Let's get out of the rain," he said, and he touched the small of her back as he started toward the lighted building.

On the steps, under the doorway arch, protected somewhat from the mist which had gathered now into a visible fog and was moving rapidly toward a drizzle, Ash unlocked the door, but instead of stepping into the foyer, he switched off the light and then sat down on the slate doorstep with his back against the closed door. "Long as we're being honest—" he said, looking up at Connie. "Want to sit a minute?" He interrupted himself, gesturing toward the dark, empty street with its nondescript line of buildings. "It's a lovely view, don't you think?"

"Thanks," Connie said. "But, isn't your ass getting wet?"

"Kind of."

"I'll lean," she said, and she crossed her legs and leaned back against the door frame. The city was quiet for a Friday night. She could hear Manhattan's constant background rumble of engines accelerating and decelerating; and, overhead, the low rumble of an airplane somewhere off in the distance—but no street shouts, no siren screams. "It's peaceful here," she





said, looking down at Ash, where he had pulled his knees to his chin and wrapped his arms around them.

"You can hear the ships out on the East River," he said. "We'll hear fog horns tonight. I'm surprised we haven't heard one yet."

"I'll listen for it," Connie said.

Ash nodded. "It's a strange life, isn't it?"

Connie looked away from him, up to the rooftops, and an image opened in her mind of Doug floating in the deep end of the pool, the way his arms bobbed up and down, seeming to wave good-bye.

"Anyway," Ash said. "Things you should know: I'm an alcoholic. I've abused every drug known to mankind. I've wasted my life, wasted my talent. I've rotted my teeth—" He pulled out a dental appliance, removing his front teeth for a moment before snapping them back into place. "—destroyed a couple of organs, and in general fucked up totally and irredeemably." He paused a moment, as if pained at what he had to say next. "And the drug problems are ongoing," he said. "As is the alcoholism."

Connie said, "Do you have HIV?"

Ash shook his head. "That," he said, "thank God, I've avoided. I've got recent medical records upstairs, which you're more than welcome to peruse."

"Gosh," Connie gushed, hugging herself. "This is *so* romantic."

"Look," Ash said. He leaned his head on his knees and tilted his face up toward Connie. He seemed suddenly much more relaxed. "It's okay if you want me to walk you back to the bar. Honestly. It'll be all right."

"You know," Connie said, "you're not the only one with a life gone off course."

"I'm not?" he said, and then added a moment later: "I'm probably more like 'wrecked on the rocks' than 'off course,' don't you think?"

Connie didn't answer. She felt the story of her two dead husbands pushing up from someplace in her belly. The story wanted to push all the way out and be told—but instead her eyes teared up as it receded, sinking back down into her bones.

"What?" Ash said. "What do you want to say?"

"Past couple of years," she offered. "My partners of choice have not been men."

"A little sexual confusion? That's certainly unusual," he said. "Especially in this town."

"That's what I thought, too," Connie said. "So." She opened her arms and looked down at a rivulet of rain funneling between her breasts, and at the bottom of her blouse and the legs of her jeans, which were soaked through. "You know," she said, "we're both really wet."





Ash stood and unlocked the door. Like a gentleman, he held it open for her.

Once up the five flights of stairs and inside Ash's door, Connie had silently undressed him, and let him do the same for her. In the dim light from a open window that overlooked the black metal railing of a fire escape, they draped their wet clothes over the sink that was on one side of the room and then dried each other off with a stack of yellow Burger King napkins before getting into the bed on the other side of the room. After several minutes of kissing and touching, after the application of mouths to skin and fingers to soft and warm places, Ash rolled over on his side and turned his back to Connie.

"That's all right," she said. "Really. Don't go away."

"I'm right here," he said, his gravelly voice barely audible. "Just give me a second."

She stroked his back, running her hand over his arm and along the surprisingly youthful skin of his shoulder blade to the small of his back where there was a patch of downy hair. She kissed him on the neck. "Forget what I said before, about looking for a wild night. This is nice, really. This is fine."

"The mind is there," he whispered, "it's the body that's wrecked."

"I'm fine," she said. "I swear. This is good."

"Give me another second," he said. "Okay?"

She touched his shoulder and turned onto her back, clasping her hands under her neck and propping herself up on the pillow so that she could look around the room. The place was neat but small, even by city standards: one room with a sink, a hot plate, and a mini-fridge. She noticed the slight but recognizable odor of aftershave in the air. "Where's your bathroom?" she asked.

"Down the hall," he said. "Three tenants, one bathroom."

"Bummer."

"Truly."

"Are you going to turn over and talk to me?"

"One more minute."

"Okay," she said. "I'm counting." Across from her, in the far corner of the room next to the open window, a saxophone was propped up on a stand of some kind. She noticed it for the first time while she was gazing blankly at a light that had gone on in one of the buildings across the courtyard. It was almost as if the shiny brass instrument had magically appeared out the shadows. It was half hidden by the room's single black, straight-back





chair, which was positioned directly in front of the window, so that Connie couldn't help but imagine Ash sitting there alone in this tiny room watching the world go by. She leaned over and kissed his shoulder. "Kind of strange for Ira to take you out to a bar," she said. "Isn't it? Given . . ."

"I haven't had a drink in a long time." Ash lay his head on his bicep and talked into the wall. "Ira doesn't know about the drugs. Truth is, I've been pretty good with that, too. Still, not enough. I keep, backsliding. Then, you know, I swear never again. Until I do again. Then . . . Etcetera. It's pathetic, really."

"But," Connie said. "Are you getting better? Are things improving?"

"I guess so," he said. "You could say that. Until they get worse."

"You're a pessimist," she said, "aren't you? You're a cynic."

"No, I'm not. I'm just, what is." He turned around, propped his head up on his hand, and peeled the sheet down off Connie's body, giving it a yank when it got stuck on her feet, pulling it away to leave her entirely exposed. "My God," he said, after a moment of gazing at her. "My God," he repeated. "It hurts to look at you."

"Why?" she asked, and she sat up slightly to better peer down at herself. She looked pretty much the same as she did in high school, probably better, since she had taken up running as an adult and so was likely in better physical condition. Her body had always acted pretty much oblivious to all the traumas of her life. Fathers and husbands could die in her arms, but her body just went on glowing. "Is there a problem?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"No problem," he said, turning his gaze away from her body and to her eyes. "Except I don't really know anything about you, and you already know a good bit about me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me one thing deep," he said. "One thing that reveals a little of you."

"I'm pretty revealed," she said, gesturing toward her body.

"No you're not," he said.

"Oh. Okay." She squinted dramatically, miming deep thought. "Let me see," she said. "One thing . . ." She considered once again telling him about James and Doug, and once again the words wouldn't come. "Okay," she said. "My father died when I was young." She paused, meaning to stop there, but almost instantly she found herself speaking again. "Last good memory I have of my father," she said, "I'm about 14 and he's carrying me up the stairs on his back." She laughed. "I mean, I'm not a baby here, either. I'm 14 and I'm literally on his back and he's climbing up the stairs like a





horse. He was like that. He used to say ‘Who’s the pretty girl?’ and tickle my chin, to make me laugh. I’d be like it made me furious, but it was just so dumb, so incredibly dopey— You had to be there. We could make each other laugh, like, unbelievably hard, just, like, hysterical laughter, dumbest things. He, you know—he played with me. We literally played with each other, like a couple of kids.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“He was.” Connie paused momentarily and then she was off again, talking. It felt almost as if she were remembering stuff she actually meant to tell Ash, as if they were an old couple and she had meant to tell him these things and had just somehow forgotten. “I used to have this dream,” she said. “It was kind of a mix of a dream and daydream, where I’d be in his hospital room when he was sick—he died of liver cancer—and I’d just, in this dream, I’d just, touch him.” She was surprised at how fast the thoughts were coming. “I’d touch him and then he’d—the whole cancer thing, it would all be over. Just like that. I’d touch him, and it would be over, and he’d be back, just like that.” She supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised when tears started coming, but she was. “I don’t know why I’m crying,” she said. “It’s actually a sweet dream. I have this power in the dream: I just touch him and everything is okay again, everything is fixed. I touch him and he’s back, everything’s back good again. It sounds weird, I know, but it’s a sweet, sweet dream. It is. Really.” She was annoyed when she saw how solemn Ash looked. He appeared stricken gazing down at her. “Look,” she said. “It’s nothing bad, really.” She noticed that she sounded frightened, and that annoyed her even more. “Fuck you for looking at me like that,” she said, and the words came out loud, much louder than she intended. “You can just go fuck yourself, all right?” She could feel the redness in her face, the anger rising up off her like heat.

Ash climbed over her and went to the chair by the window where he sat quietly looking out at the rain.

Alone in the bed, Connie turned her back to him, petulantly, like out-of-sorts child, and then, an instant later, she realized with great clarity just how crazy she was acting. “Jesus,” she said. “I think I just freaked. Did I just freak out?” she asked.

“It’s not a problem,” Ash said.

“No. I did,” she said. She got out of bed and knelt alongside him. “I mean— I don’t know what just happened. I just—”

“Honestly,” he said. “Not a problem.” He put his hand on her shoulder and she threw her arms over his legs and lay her head on his thigh. She was trying to think of another thing to say, something that might undo the strange-





ness of her behavior. From somewhere out on the unseen East River, the fog horn Ash promised sounded, its low groan rumbling through the air. They both turned their heads when they heard it, and Ash's hand closed slightly on her shoulder as Connie's arms tightened around him, pulling him closer. Then a long time passed in silence as they stared out the window, watching the blank backsides of the street's mute buildings, watching a soft rain pour down over the city.

Eventually, Ash reached over her for the saxophone. He put the reed in his mouth and touched it with his tongue as if he were tasting it, as if he were feeling for something crucial in its texture. Then he leaned over the instrument and began to play a series of plaintive notes that coalesced into a melody Connie thought she might have heard before, but wasn't sure. She was amazed that so soft a sound could come out of so imposing an instrument. Soft as it was, someone across the courtyard apparently heard, because a young man wearing only boxer shorts stepped out onto a fire escape with a beer bottle in hand and gave Ash a perfunctory wave before settling onto a bench set up next to the window. The fire escape above him was lined with a green tarp protecting him from the rain. Ash nodded back and played a little louder. Connie kissed him on the thigh, meaning to encourage his playing, realizing she was hearing him for the first time. She could feel the music within her, as if it were coming from her as well as from Ash, and she thought the sound was extraordinary: moving and painful and peaceful all at once. On the fire escape across the courtyard, a young woman holding an infant joined the man in boxers. They were both handsome, with deep brown skin and lithe bodies, and they looked very young, barely in their twenties. Rain dripping off the green tarp surrounded them like a mesh curtain. The woman sat next to the man and leaned her head on his shoulder. She was wearing a summery, flowered robe, and after a moment she opened it and put the baby to her breast. Connie was impressed with their lack of modesty—the man in boxers, the woman with a baby at her breast. Then she remembered that she was naked in the shadows, as was Ash, and she laughed and said to Ash, "I like your neighborhood." Ash nodded, acknowledging he had heard her, and kept playing, the notes of his melody floating out across the courtyard, sailing over the rooftops and up into the still darkening sky.





INTERVIEWING THE GODS

Jeffery Bahr

I told the one with blue skin and tusks I'd let him know, punched the button to announce "Serving Number 65." The next one limped in, pale and hesitant, leaned a lightning bolt against the coffee cart and whispered he'd settle

for anything. One arrived late, looked out the window and jumped. Another swaggered in with matched deerhounds and demanded obedience. Number 77 was a silent pile of fieldstones that arranged themselves beside my bonsai pots; 89 was dressed

in greenbacks big as palm leaves. 101—a woman with a tiara of ivy vine and one exposed breast. Another said he'd eased up on mead and, currently, was counseling in the city. All afternoon they swam or crawled or flew

into the room. When I left for the day, an old man with a lunchbag in his lap remained in the waiting room. He held a wren in his hand and studied the print by Hieronymous Bosch. I asked him if he'd like to share a cab uptown, and helped him to the elevator. The doors closed, and I told him my story.



TO A DROWNED MAN

Michelle Margolis

—(after Horace, Book 1, Ode 28)

What on earth do you want?
Silence, according to the god, is a gift,
and yet you turn it down; is this true?
I carry in a sack three handfuls of sand
to cover your chin, your mouth like a cup, thin-rimmed.
Are you at ease, unburied?
Who walks, heartsick and harried, on a beach near Tarentum?
Best to pour wine, burn ox, fold the meat in its shining fat—
whether or not the god forgives
you should, if you can, rise, eat a few ripe olives with your friends
under the hollow tree.
Someone was kind once, looked the other way.
But we will not speak of this again.



THE SUMMER MY MOTHER ACKNOWLEDGES
MY SISTER AS HYSTERIC

Michelle Margolis

Round-faced & candescent, August
configures the sky & at a time, too, when Mars
reappears after it's been out of sight or mind,
say, about sixty thousand years. Sadly,
mama can't hold back tears & yet she doesn't cry.
She teaches me a tune decomposed, grand as opera—
What is lost, O, what I did not know . . .
which is why the moon rains debris
& illumination, she sings of things lovely & forlorn
& extreme, there's nothing like a ballad well-writ
belted to the back of the house
although the season's folding, funding for it
has dried up & still my sister's buying shoes,
wriggling into a bustier, futzing with fishnets
so the press will be wowed, knocked over
& knobby-kneed, they're brazen, these guys,
belligerent even but she's upbeat, keeps her affairs
in order except when things spin out of control
or slip through the fingers she's using for cashing out
& pulling up roots, she's busy, exhausted
after the uproar, defiant of kids & swollen-bellied cats
because their cries, as of late, are true—
no point in warning the husband, or lover,
all she needs is someone who'll take her a meal
of martinis, strawberries & tiramisu because it's the dead
of summer & mama's rich, smartly dressed
& yet always & forever (not too fast now, no sudden moves)
a mother in the wake of loyalty & fear,
trodden love as dear as memory.





OFF FOR THE WAR / HOME FROM THE WAR

Daneen Wardrop

1. "Off for the War: The Soldier's Adieu" —Currier and Ives, 1861

There is always something headlong about goodbye.
Canteen swings on your belt next to our son's face
as he hangs on to both of us.

You close the embrace, pick up your rifle.
Sun slides off the branch, pulls one by one at each leaf.

Tonight the boy and I will eat on red and white checked gingham
padded with a bowl of potatoes, pitcher of milk.
I think McClellan and Davis and Mr. Lincoln and Beauregard,
think it is only polite to believe in campaigns.
With a serving of fried chicken our son will pull a wing,
break the connecting flap that held sky in its recess
when it pecked at meal in the sand,
will twist it among spurts of grease.
Preen, wetted fingers, wing in his throat.

And in a blue meadow troops will tack, face each other as if by agreement,
square off, two opposing flags flapping in the wind, same direction.

Night a dark surf.
After dinner we'll put away toys and books.
I will say to our boy,
Please pick up from the floor your crumpled jacket.

He's left Wednesday under it.

Before you left, husband, you said, The war will be over by next weekend.



2. "Home from the War: The Soldier's Return" —Currier and Ives, 1861

This is where we welcome you home again,
 same season, same year 1861, same flowers still in bloom,
 as if fighting was over fast as wishing.

 Inside the picture, though, we know
years of seasons where hands have smoothed napkins, passed around bread,
cheese reconnoitered with the rennet.

We have studied the apple and pear for him. The curtain folds.

We have worn our bodies.
Our children use our hand to wave at a neighbor.

We have felt the nightwind shape itself to the keyhole and enter,
while faithful, a whalebone presses skin.
 Our time is dividual

as his, forgetting the cut-ching of bullet, grape and canister,
 the red moue of cannon.

 And so his rifle has been erased now in this picture—
and I ask, will an embrace be able to relove its arms—



BLUE STUDY

Kirsten Kaschock

*The burgeoning nude in a low field littered with sapphires.
And then they lift—dragonflies.
A sibilance like leaves reassigned to their trees, greening
the branches of a few locusts with life again,
with bright life's compound eyes—a thousand, tiny, spinless discos.*

Sky-square above a courtyard, space hovering on edge of prison.
Computer monitor. Flicker over a gas range.

An airplane gathers speed before its nose turns skyward.
Outside, the atmosphere seeks to embrace bullets
during their trajectories. The craft will not be loved.
The craft will not be held.

Machine—a single-minded elaboration of beauty.

Blue screen. A woman, back from some place, in front of a blue
screen. A camera is pointed at her. *Laugh, hold your belly, toss your hair.*
Later, we can make it so you look joyous—at the beach or something.

Blue bottle on the blue bookcase. Blue copy of *The Odyssey*.

Window cleaner. (Windows are not blue.) Not blue—
the color of the near-invisible. When he comes home and asks her
again—he always asks—how she feels, she tries to say
this. *This.*

The holiday is an illusion. The body travels, bodies
split clouds. The mind stays, wishing it had finished the dishes.

*Above the large nude in the field, glitter-flies hover—
and then in all directions break, shot out
like war. Like planes forsaking formation.*

Her husband hears knot blue.





Blue scream. Like a jet, she leaves sound
behind her. In the grocery store, after she has paid, been
bagged, and helped to the car with one child in tow, the other
abdominal—a low shriek shatters a jar of preserves.
Its thick dark issue is met (and then quickly
dispensed with) by a seventeen year-old boy in aisle four.



YELLOW STUDY

Kirsten Kaschock

Yellow is a kitchen.

The nude seated at a solidity of wooden table on a chair held together with Scotch tape.

The scene is unsanitary. The yellow, too warm.

They never get to water—the man, the woman, the child, the almost.

They keep talking about getting to water. It never happens.

Sex. Beside candlelight. Competitive with light.

Two bodies seeming more tender illumined in this way.

Tenuous. As if avoiding some new type of damage.

They will not argue in front of the child.

She has no idea what the discussion they are not having

would concern. *Concern.* He is that controlled.

The sun crawls up out of its hole. And there is forever breakfast.

The nude framed by countertop and disinfectant

sitting at the wooden block of table—*she looks*

like your mother. She is beginning to look like anyone's mother.

Only she is naked and therefore more terrifying.

Pages burn. Over time, they fall apart from burning.

The house, inside every bookshelf, is on fire.

She and the child should be in the park everyday.

She chases him down to shoe him. His laces must

be triple-knotted with wide-enough loops—

she does not know wide-enough for what.

She was once talented.

Proud of the deft way she had of recognizing and fulfilling desire.





The nude at the rectangular table, balancing on an instability of chair—
she is sallow. The lamp swinging above her head is, also, not a noose.
There could be beauty. You can see that. On this particular day,
she is dehydrated.
Other days it is other things.



SHADOWS AND DISTANCE

“What did I plan to say to her...”
—William Carlos Williams, “Waiting”

Brian Swann

(i)

The gate thuds. My tongue is braced.
Returning from town, voices are split
and spill all over.

I split out the back
where cold air tightens
to a mirror in which things seem
too big.

Here water is cunning
and hides everywhere, waiting. A
windblown sheet could lurk
in a mote of dust and the sky
knock itself to pieces.

(ii)

From rockveins
shadows surge wave
on wave. There's anarchy in
their contours but if there were
none everything would be upside-
down. You'd find stars in your batter,
planets in you bed. On whim,
everything could become the
shortest day or longest night.
Breath would be optional and deserts
wear you like shoes.



(iii)

The wind's
dry as the peonies I gave her
weeks ago. It has quenched itself
and sounds like children sleeping.
I take a deep breath and go
back in.
As someone once said,
we only cross, the distance never changes.





FROM BARRENS

Tom O'Connor

Ghostwind

Slathering light, in slabs,
 scatters the reflecting heat.
Only root and stone don't budge.
 You walk, the broom-grit
burrowing in your eyelids, your mouth,
 over sunburned dunes,
the fading silhouettes. Sister, you have no companion.
 Like this valley road, all words

lead to... never something new,
 your unique story of pain.
You don't believe it can be shared.
 From the full-moon road,
the overlook, mountain lions and coyote
 arise, sniffing for survivors
along the desert's stone spheres and spires.
 Sand whips over canyons,

rolls to reverberations: wind-noise
 at the desert borders. Here is no void
or you'd vanish. *Here* you stand,
 circled endlessly. The ghostwind
keeps the crouching spaces alive,
 transfigures you to nobody.
Your scars offer up their stories. What's leftover,
 coyotes will pick clean. Only





the surrounding hills' sediment survives
to translate previous ages—
witness to an invaded body
trundling over and over
itself, always absent. Someone lost
here, one myth goes, never
comes out the same again. Stone echoes
a coyote's cries.

Your new home is the ghost town below.
The car frame hitched on stone blocks
by the run down house, the clothesline
left to flap in wind and collapse.
Where rusting metal, spines of machines
heave through lacquered times.
The clocks stopped ticking long ago:
desert again.

*The Red Desert*

Silos sever the view with frames of barrels
and brewing steam. Your mother grips your hand,
walking the wet road beneath rasping smoke stacks,
fires pulsing in rhythm. She hasn't driven

since the accident. Her hand sweats over
yours. Something infects you doctors can't name.
At lunch, workers huddle by black bags.
You're frenzied with starving. She petitions

a man's *panino*, sold at the crossroads, half-
eaten. The desert feeds on you no matter what you eat.
Feeling derelict, she pulls you across mounds
of smoking ash. Always rattled. She knows

accidents, quicksands await these unknown
footprints. Defiled. Your father once hid inside
this fog, oversaw these buildings. Yellow smoke gusts
over grates and window grills.

That terrible something. Tonight
there will be no hearth fire, only a blanket rumpled
over her body. No moment of cover at your house
rumbling a mile away. The desert pinned you

snug with panic. It fatigues the scaffolds.
More real than the metal tanks, smoke
hisses along. You make no sound as she runs to you,
the fishless sea, seepage sucking

at your feet, streaming ash overhead. You sink
beside the road. Wind buries it.
No one looms on rusting
red land where nothing comes back.



*Disowned*

The chasm covered over. You disappeared where
no one follows. On unmarked roads,

their detours, shrubs fill out silt dust,
the mesa's old volcanic action. Something

unseen still creeps across: the distance—
nothing visible moves—hidden colors at your feet:

a red cactus blossoms for seconds after rain washes
rootholds away. You promised nothing would touch

you again. A coyote skull bleaches to stone.
You crouch in its stare, choking, drunk

on wine beside the disappearing, re-appearing
house, mounds of trash. This place you can't read.

Claret cups and cholla sprout only to be plucked
out. Sand whips the rocks, wind through

bag pipes and zithers. The same full blue moon.
He is just a dead body—a Hades for disappearing,

a face of Apollo that re-appears. Here, you belong
to him. Your mother searches through

a human winter, hoping you'll become Persephone
on land whose animals abandoned one another. You too

have no desire to eat. To be less than this emptiness,
a half-starved coyote. You begin to bleed,

walking west on roads where every car breaks down.
A human shape blurs over red sand—

*Stillness*

Nothing is what you thought it would be. The ranch house
you grew up in, beside rises of sage. It's still there.

You kick down poster board in the back window, crawl
in. Your flashlight blazes four iron bed frames.

Coil springs jut above flat springs. You
touch the decay that's touching you. Broken off the vanity,

a full-length mirror propped against the back wall. Once you hid
inside this house from the world outside. Your reflected

face no longer the dutiful daughter's—who dusted
looming bookshelves, your father's picture,

the hutch and grandfather clock. It's the woman's,
holding the flashlight. Only a ghost would enter the uneven

hallway, touch the crumbling wall. Sitting
on the camel-back couch, you open the dusty box of books, curled

Zane Grey covers, fishing almanacs: yellow, bendable.
The antiques are breaking down. Splintered

wood sprouts through varnish. In the yellow kitchen:
tomatoes and corn are sealed in Ball jars for winter,

whiskey jugs, crocks for corned beef, clay bowls
and rusty tins stacked in the pantry. You

let them crumble. In the living room, the crystal radio
and ash tray stand beside father's chair. You

leave them. The front door opens onto the cracked
porch, open air. Through ripped screens,

you stare across a treeless place beneath the mountain
stream, where trout hide at night, settle down in stillness.



LETTERS ON A REPRINT OF ROBERT DUNCAN'S *LETTERS*

Letters: Poems 1953-1956. Robert Duncan. Ed. and with an Afterword by Robert J. Bertholf. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2003.

Stephen Fredman

A Robert Duncan's *Letters*, first published in a beautiful letter-press edition by Jargon Press in 1958, has recently been re-issued by Flood Editions. The new edition does not have some of the deluxe features of its predecessor, but it is quite lovely in its own right and it performs the valuable service of bringing back into print a seminal work in the oeuvre of one of the best American poets of the past century. Written from 1953 to 1956, *Letters* marks a turning point in Duncan's movement from the Berkeley Renaissance fellowship he shared with Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser toward his Black Mountain cohort of Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley. Duncan effects this turning point by engaging the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, which had been lurking as a part of his intellectual repertoire since he heard it whispered of by his parents at theosophical meetings during his childhood. The conceit of *Letters* is that there is a "rime" in the operations of three different entities: the letters of the (Hebrew) alphabet, the creative unfolding of the universe, and the poetic company of the peers to whom Duncan's "letters" are addressed. Each of these entities is a constellation of powers, capable of bringing forth a new poetry of creation—a "projective" poetry tied not to the individual ego but obedient to greater impulses.

B An advertisement for the book: "The composition of *Letters* begins with 'Letter to Denise Levertov' ['For a Muse Meant'] and moves out over almost three years' work to complete a book presided over by an alphabet primary to world creation. These angelic letters then those powers hidden or discovered are substance of our speech. A naming of my peers, and an exclamation of joy: Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, James Broughton, Mike McClure, Helen Adam—it is the presence of companions, named and unnamed, that inspires *Letters*. A book of primaries, a book of companions. A book of praise. I have stored here, as best I know how, the songs of all I live by. For I adhere to form as the bee obeys the geometry of the hive" (54).





Letters grows out of actual correspondence with other poets, just as Olson's initial *Maximus* "Letters" do. The first poem, for instance, "For a Muse Meant," was sent as a letter to Denise Levertov, inaugurating a large and crucial correspondence that has recently been published as well (Robert Bertholf and Albert Gelpi, eds., *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003]). "Correspondence" refers at once to the (Medieval, Swedengorgian, Baudelarian) doctrine of analogies and to the active epistolary communities in which Duncan operated. The "hive-like" quality of the book gives evidence that, although Duncan repeatedly stated that *The Opening of the Field* (1960) was the first book of poems he composed throughout as "a book," the same is true of *Letters*.

C Kabbalah has become important to modern poets because of the powerful, even cosmic, significance it accords to letters, words, and the notion of the book. As David Meltzer explains, "The Kabbalah, as much as poetry, is the study of and submission to the mysteries of the word. The language used by Kabbalists is so intricately dimensional that it is almost impossible to fully convey the simultaneous levels of meaning revealed in the simplest of words. It is said that one word is the seed of a particular universe, a system of interactions and realities as complex as the birth and death of a sun" (David Meltzer, ed., *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* [Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998], xiii). In Kabbalah all of the levels of occult "work"—magical practice, meditation and contemplation techniques, visionary excursions, and spiritual and psychological self-transformation—can be found, as they would be in any esoteric system, but all derive from investigations of language and writing.

Duncan learned of the Kabbalah as a child listening in on his parents' theosophical meetings (Rodger Kamenetz, "Realms of Being: An Interview with Robert Duncan," *Southern Review* 21.1 [1985]: 9-10), where the most important kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, was read as one of the keys to the mysteries of the universe. From Duncan's own perspective, as he told Meltzer, the *Zohar* is instead "the greatest mystical novel ever written" (Meltzer, x). It is remarkable that Duncan, who was raised as a Christian hermeticist, would become the instigator of lifelong research by such Jewish figures as Meltzer, Wallace Berman, Jack Hirschman, and Jerome Rothenberg into a Jewish form of mysticism. Meltzer, for instance, who edited a journal devoted to Kabbalah, *Tree*, and an anthology of kabbalistic texts, *The Secret Garden*, calls Duncan "my exemplar" in Kabbalah studies (x) and credits Duncan with introducing him to the works of Gershom Scholem, the modern scholar responsible for reviving interest in the Kabbalah (xv).





D “RD: There are two things which would make Scholem’s book on Jewish mysticism particularly of interest to me in the first place. One was, I knew my parents were Christian Kabbalists and that they worked with the Hebrew alphabet, but since that was part of their mysteries I was never permitted to. Second, I’d already begun to get into letters and serious puns through *Finnegan* and to think more about them. *Letters* is influenced toward a creative veil or world-cloth which would be identical with the maya in which it’s woven all the way through. The warp and woof are connected and the figures emerge and disappear. All of that was there and working with the idea of letters—the letters of fire on a ground of darkness, isn’t that it?

“RK [Rodger Kamenetz]: The Torah is conceived as black fire written on white fire.

“RD: All of those ideas have a good deal of cross-resonance, and in the most intensified place where people lived entirely in the book—and it’s the book I was writing—the two would be James Joyce and those mystical Jews who live in the Torah.” (Kamenetz, 12-13)

E From the *Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Daniel Matt, ed. and trans. [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004]): “When the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters were hidden away. For two thousand years before creating the world, the blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them. As he verged on creating the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him, from last to first” (11). Each letter stepped forward in turn and asked the “Master of the world” to “create the world by me” (12). The Holy One praised the virtues of each letter based upon a particular word that it begins, but refused to create the world with it, until the letter *bet* entered and said, “Master of the world, may it please You to create the world by me, for by me You are blessed above and below” [*berakhah*, blessing, begins with *bet*]. The Holy One agreed.

The letter *aleph* had remained outside in humility, at first not wanting to assert itself where other letters had failed and then not wanting to usurp the favor that had been granted already to *bet*. “The blessed Holy One said, ‘*aleph*, *aleph*! Although I will create the world with the letter *bet* [using *be-reshit*, the first word of the Torah], you will be the first of all letters. Only through you do I become one [*aleph* is the number one]. With you all counting begins and every deed in the world,” (16).

Duncan: “Even the name *Letters* comes from the *Zohar* which I was reading in that period” (Kamenetz, 13). Or as he says in the preface to *Letters*: “the lore of Moses of Leon in the *Zohar*, has been food for the letters of





this alphabet" (*Letters*, xii).

F Duncan's relationship with the Kabbalah is not a religious one. Were he alive today, he would not have accepted an invitation to accompany the rock entrepreneur Madonna on her recent pilgrimage to Jerusalem's Western Wall: "Already by the time I'm reading Scholem I was not at all in search of religion, but in search of the nature of the imagination. It seemed to me that in mystical traditions of Judaism, religion was passing into imagination, including the imaginary. But the imaginary is not significant in relation to the imagination because the imagination is the final ground of reality. That's what I mean by the imagination" (Kamenetz, 13).

"[I]n creating something, you don't refer to it. You can't refer to it. And what you then create doesn't resemble something else. Finally, imagination is my ground and I hold to it. . . . Creation to me is a mystery of the Universe—I'm a Heracleitean in that the universe creates itself, and human beings have these ideas; they have them like plants have flowers. We don't have tulips but we have ideas and religions which are our distinctive way of blossoming, sorting out, mating—the same as the flowers" (Kamenetz, 14).

G From the "Preface" to *Letters*, under the heading "Nests": "It is an intensity of excitement which compels a man to work out a designed feeling that variously arrives at stations on three levels: the presence in the imagination in which the speech 'comes', a mortality out of immortal letters; the evident manifestation or trace we in the xxth century worship as Art and declare immortal; and the return, the dwelling of the imagination in the speech" (ix).

The circling that Duncan practices makes a hermeneutics that is deconstructive by virtue of its refusing to be grounded anywhere but in the imagination. In "For a Muse Meant," Duncan proposes a "deconstruction— / for the reading of words" (2), marking probably the first use of the term. The three nested levels of his deconstructive hermeneutics involve, first, the precipitation of individual speech out of the originary writing inherent in the "immortal letters"; second, the transposition of the "sacred" into an art that participates in the creative forces that structure the universe; and third, the imaginative act of reading, which recognizes the creative potencies at play in something written or spoken.

The hermeneutic circle of writing, art, and reading arises out of excitations that can be ascribed a biological basis in a reductive reading of Freud. Duncan accepts a biological reading of Freud but argues that biology and imagination intertwine, that patterns of speech are akin to patterns in





nature: "What happens when immediate excitements are postponed, when sexual responses are transmuted into hate and love, when talk is reserved to re-emerge as poetic speech? These are specializations of the individual creature, spiritual lusters or armories which I see as alike to the shells or furs or combs apparent in the animal world. Specializations of action. And then a will in living or a consciousness. I confound the two, having in mind a process which sets self-creation and self-consciousness in constant interplay" (ix-x).

H In *Letters*, Duncan is already mining the territory that will be worked a decade later by Edmond Jabès and Jacques Derrida. The continual puns and anagrams in the poetry of both Duncan and Jabès derive primarily from the puns and anagrams of the *Zohar*, in which the dramatic movement of the text comes from conjuring with words and letters. For both poets, too, the notion of the Book goes beyond Mallarmé's conception of a Book that contains the entire world. Jabès and Duncan regard the Book as a kind of deity in itself, within whose imperatives they must work. Duncan speaks of "this God in which we dwell," who "finds all our poor writing as we knew it to be: the Writing. In these excesses of confidence I become nameless agency of movements in a book that unimagined generations project.... For the Book, the autonomous book, bears witness for and against all claims" (xiv-xv). In "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Derrida speaks of "This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history" (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: U Chicago P, 1978]: 65).

In a long essay on the work of Jabès published in 1985, Duncan recognizes a poet whose *Book of Questions* shares the same territory he first began to explore in *Letters*: "*The Book of Questions* is meant to arouse, beyond the boundaries of apparent meaning, suspicions and rumors of meaning within meaning, words within words. Jabès writes in order to read, or reading is the order of his writing, and he brings us back again and again to this boundary of the presence of its being written in the presence of its being read—to the letter the eye sees even as the hand writes the word, to the rhyme or homophone the ear hears even as it attends the message of the voice in the book" (Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf [New York: New Directions, 1995]: 208-9)

I It is more than coincidental that Jabès in *The Book of Questions* and





Duncan in much of *Letters* investigate the powers of language through the vehicle of a prose poetry. “Passages of a Sentence,” for instance, is a chain of sentences in which birds that are words fly in and out, disturbing the ongoing sense, the predatory intent: “As we start the sentence we notice that birds are flying thru it; phrases are disturbed where these wings and calls flock; wings are a wind, feathered, a beating of the air in passage or a word, the word ‘word’, hovers, sailing before dropping down the empty shafts of sense” (*Letters*, 33). Even in its title, “Passages of a Sentence” can be seen as an embryonic version of the two unbounded poetic sequences Duncan was soon to begin writing: “The Structure of Rime” and “Passages.” The chain of sentences with birds erupting from it runs not only into the abyss, “the empty shafts of sense,” but also through a history of the prose poem, as Duncan read it in Charles Henri Ford’s “Little Anthology of the Poem in Prose” in *New Directions* 14 (1953), especially in poems by Mallarmé, Philip Lamantia, Magritte, Lautreamont, Ford, Poe, Nicolas Calas, and Nietzsche, and in Duncan’s earlier reading of St.-John Perse. This history continues in the prose poems in *Letters* and the Stein imitations of the 1953 *Writing Writing* and in the “Structure of Rime” series. And it comes into a new phase in the “New Sentence” of Language Poetry, as theorized by Ron Silliman.

There is a direct continuity between *Letters* and *The Opening of the Field* (1960) that Duncan sought to obscure by speaking of his “projective” period as including the latter book, *Roots and Branches* (1964) and *Bending the Bow* (1968). According to Bertholf, Duncan finished the poems of *Letters* in December 1955 and began *The Opening of the Field* less than two months later. Some of the very first poems he wrote for the new book were the first seven prose poems in the “Structure of Rime” sequence, which he published as sections of a single poem in the famous “San Francisco Scene” issue of *Evergreen Review* in 1957. The “Structure of Rime” picks up from the Kabbalah-inspired prose poems of *Letters*, taking words and sentences as animate beings capable not only of conjuring things but also of measuring the world and thought. The “Structure of Rime” calls forth an “*absolute scale of resemblance and disresemblance*” that “*establishes measures that are music in the actual world*” (*Selected Poems*, 46); this scale and the measures it establishes partake of the kabbalistic correspondences worked out in the poems of *Letters*.

J Despite their kabbalistic currents, the prose poems of *Letters* and “The Structure of Rime” played an important but mostly unacknowledged part in the development of the New Sentence in San Francisco in the seventies.





Duncan functioned for many of the Language poets as not only a primary conduit for the innovations of Stein, Pound, and Zukofsky, but also as a relentless and deconstructive explorer of the interactions of words, grammar, the sentence, and the book. The surplus metaphorizing in Duncan's poetry and prose prepared many younger poets to appreciate such qualities in the French thinkers and poets they would read and respond to in the seventies. In fact, the lush, over-ripe riming and ringing of tones in Duncan's poetry has the sound of poetry in French, where there is a much smaller phonemic repertoire to choose from and a tendency for much greater repetition. In English this can strike readers as a baroque quality, out of fashion in resolutely modernist circles. What Duncan gains by this obsessive word-play and sound-repetition is an ability to dig, like Mallarmé or the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, into the very structure of language—into that which makes statements and apprehensions possible.



TRANSPARENT THINGS

A Sinner of Memory. Melita Schaum. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004.

James Walton

An "Author's Note" identifies *A Sinner of Memory* as a collection of essays in "Creative Nonfiction," a genre that uses invention in the service of authenticity. Since all confessional narrative parses into fiction and non-fiction and all its narrators, in Shakespearean phrase, make sinners of memory, Melita Schaum's unnamed essayist can be identified as her book's Confessional Heroine (C.H.). At one point Schaum's C. H., like (say) Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre or Doris Lessing's Anna Wulf, brings us into the writer's present:

I droop over my writing, palm these reluctant pages. For four months I have been trying to tell this tale. I have made it a comedy, a tragedy, an instructional piece, a jumble of aphorisms, a *palatum cordis*—like the medieval monks who needed to taste the word of God with the heart's palate.

Elsewhere she makes occasional use of the present tense to execute her general design of containing multiple strata of the past—as memory or told story—within the narrative present. This procedure, of course, will recall Proust even (or especially) to those among us who have scarcely sampled *A la recherche du temps perdu*. A nearer comparison might be made with a slender fiction of Nabokov's in which present objects are treated as "transparent things through which the past shines."

In trying to *tell*, the narrator succeeds in a way that disposes of the Workshop canard about showing, *not* telling. The C. H. is less concerned that we see the figures haunting her memory than that we feel them as she does. Her parents, refugees from war-ravaged Germany, bloomed and faded in their adopted country, having made for themselves a "normal" life that elegantly illustrates that convergence of *heimlich* with *unheimlich* which Freud highlighted in his essay on "The Uncanny." The father, a reserved, adaptive academic, seems at times conjured into existence by his daughter's solicitude. The moral (not physical) dimensions of the mother are clearer. Early along, her retentiveness about *things* collides with the heroine's carelessness. Later the impression of maternal severity is softened by the discovery that the "child of war and poverty" is haunted by her own mother, whose avatar,





the resident of a nursing home, she treats with filial tenderness. As offspring of stolid middle-class immigrants, the C. H. and her “beautiful” sister pass from rival responses to parental authority in childhood to a recognition, in middle age, that they have become prisoners of no regime but their own.

The heroine’s family make affecting but faint specters by comparison with the figure she calls “my lover.” He haunts all nine essays, appearing and vanishing, never fully present, a demystified *dæmon*. Submerged within the C. H.’s circumstantial account of this relationship—the discourse of nonfiction—are the two traditional plots of amorous narrative—Separation and Reunion, Seduction and Betrayal. Both express the ambivalence of love, but it is the latter that supplies the *dénouement* of the present romance. An ironically named “Epithalamion” concludes a long series of proleptic glances at the end of the affair. (Very early she tells us “I gave him my life and he let it fall.”)

The book’s calculated confusion about genre and mode could only have been resolved at the expense of authenticity. If its fragments of personal history had been assembled into a linear narrative the C. H. would have emerged as a female Quixote, or even a modern *picara*, itinerant, transgressive, but subject to the conditions of contemporary life. Since narrative is necessarily a plot-seeking form of discourse, the eponymous Sinner, on a hint from Wallace Stevens’ “World as Meditation,” tries to shape her experience into an epic *manqué*. It begins *in medias res* with a descent into the underworld, or catacombs, of Paris. (Balzac and Hugo anticipated Schaum in representing Paris as an inferno of the here and now.) As *Odyssey*, the heroine’s journey homeward is thwarted by the Zeno-logic that a destination always approached can never be reached. Through an attribute transferred from her mother, she figures also as Penelope, waiting, weaving and unweaving, her art analogous to Schaum’s text, a fabric so reticulated as to give us repeated glimpses of the void.

Readers enthralled by Schaum’s descriptions of place will object to the present review’s devaluation of the visual. After Paris, the epic itinerary includes Ann Arbor, artists’ colonies in southern California and upstate New York, the Italian alps, the Rockies, the High Sierras, the Scottish Highlands, the Coral Islands, a Princeton nursing home, her parents’ Arizona retirement community—that last a littered desert, not in bloom: “But there was violet light, as beautiful as anything dreamt of by Monet, and crows flying slowly, high and separate in the cold, dense air;” and by evening “the edge of the earth” is “just a line of orange, then beige, then blue. The palm trees are elegant black silhouettes against the disappearing sky.” On her way to Mesa she stops to watch a sunset (“the horizon’s wild apocalypse”) that competes





with a burning truck for the spectators' attention:

One minute the sky was eggshell green and the clouds the color of fresh blood; the next, the arroyos were suffused with purple and the air shot gold. We were all of us drop-jawed—cops, truckers, the young camera-toting woman, and me—watching these sublime conflagrations.

The most vivid moment occurs during the heroine's snorkling adventure in the Coral Sea—her second ambivalent immersion:

All at once, I am dazzled. A school of jacks, gift from the sea, has materialized all around me like a sprung slot machine, an avalanche of silver. For several long heartbeats I am caught up in their wild shine, their perfect dance, as they dart around me in unison, glimmer on all sides like spilled mercury. Unearthly phosphorescence; sudden, sheer harmony.

Then the school parts and I see the sharks. Three of them, eight feet long, thrashing as if to shake themselves free of their own skins, mantled in a backdrop of dark blue where the reef plummets into open ocean. I realize that they have been herding fish into the wall of rock and coral; now they are about to feed. One approaches me, swerves, then advances again—ten feet away, seven, six, then passes so close I could touch its emery-board skin, could cup the black, inhuman eye that rolls back at me like a savage new moon. My heart lifts in my chest, enters a strange, bottomless space, a swoon of fear. All laws fall away.

What the reader “sees” in such passages is not a series of objects in space but a demonstration, on the flat field of the text, of the transformative power of Style. In the confessional narrator herself, after all, we behold not the original but a reflection in the mirror of her consciousness, transposed into language. The authorial subject is always absent. Schaum calls her “reverie's exile,” haunting her own life. Any contrary claim would be Nonfiction's fiction. All memoirs, of course (but not *only* memoirs), are narcissistic structures. As signature of the artist-as-Narcissus, projected into the order of Nature, Schaum chooses an object that has been used to a comparable purpose in Mann's *Death in Venice*, Joyce's *Portrait*, and countless poems: “We stop to watch a white heron, the island's namesake, standing motionless in a small lagoon. A pale question mark, etched against the gloom of cypress trees and water, its slim beak a dagger, hungry to spear its own reflection from the deep.”

At the conclusion of the final essay Melita Schaum's Confessional Heroine, in a twilight sleep on her way to surgery, has a joyful vision of the end as imaginary beginning, the unachieved objective of her troubled and ecstatic (she *did* find a word for it)—pilgrimage.





RHYMES WITH HISTORY: **JOE FRANCIS DOERR AND KEVIN DUCEY**

Joe Francis Doerr, *Order of the Ordinary*. Cambridge, England: Salt, 2003.
Kevin Ducey, *Rhinoceros*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon, 2004.

Robert Archambeau

What are the poets reading? If you were to ask Jeffrey Roessner, the editor of *The Possibility of Language*, he might say something like what he said in the introduction to that 2001 anthology of younger poets associated with Notre Dame. There, Roessner noted the wide range of influences on the poets, finding the range exciting and just a little bit troubling. It seemed that everyone was reading something different, and this, Roessner thought, indicated an unusual situation in literary history:

Contemporary poets have not inherited a single, well-defined lineage. Yes, the classics are still with us. But more poetry is being written and read today than perhaps at any other time in history—and almost everyone is reading something different. In this way, contemporary poetry mirrors the profusion of signals in satellite television: hundreds of channels, each beamed at a small, distinct audience. If T.S. Eliot began this trend by constructing his own tradition, now every individual talent is consigned to work through his or her own version of poetic history, often in maddening, disheartening isolation.

The loss of a sense of a shared collective tradition is the price one pays for freedom in one's influences, and for all of the discovery that comes with our post-canonical age. But just what are the poets of our age doing with this freedom? Roessner saw, in his poets, a range of reading and influence extending from Old Welsh texts to H.G. Wells, from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Strunk and White. But a glance through almost any of the mainstream poetry journals crowded into the back corner of your local Barnes and Noble reveals that too few poets have made good use of their post-canonical freedoms. Many seem to have read nothing but the works of their teachers at the local MFA mill, teachers who themselves seem to have used their library cards a bit lightly. In their work one is confronted time and time again, with poems that fail to get past the claustrophobia-inducing confines of the poet's daily life. Once seen as a courageous act of breaking through to raw authenticity, this confessional mode has become the cloister where poets





hide from the wider world.

If, however, the poets in question were taught by any of the rapidly graying Language crowd, one is often left with a different kind of claustrophobia: the usable past too often shrinks to a tradition born no earlier than Gertrude Stein. I once saw Charles Bernstein parody this tendency in second-generation Language writers: he showed a slide of cavemen crudely daubing the walls of their cave by torchlight, and said “here is the state of poetry before I launched my magazine.” Before the seventies, he implied, all was but a dire darkness and stricken lay the land. Oddly, he didn’t get a laugh from the self-consciously hip crowd at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. (If you look past the moon-eyed author portraits on the cover of the *American Poetry Review*, you’re likely to find some sort of ghastly hybrid of the confessional and the late-Langpo, a kind of unholy spawn of Jorie Graham, combining the worst from both solipsistic traditions. But let us leave those broad newsprint pages on the shelf, turning our backs on their sensitively brooding cover models).

The poets in Roessner’s anthology, whatever their individual talents or shortcomings, all show a wide sense of the possibilities of poetry in terms of both form and subject. In a sense, this comes from a habit not unlike that of their confessional or Langpo peers: they have read their teachers with admiration. And one teacher they all share is John Matthias. Matthias, who retires from Notre Dame in 2005, is one of the most well-read and broadly learned poets of his generation (“John is an interesting man,” John Berryman once said of Matthias, “but he is *very* literary”). Matthias’ stylistic affinities range across the whole spectrum of contemporary idioms, and across the centuries (he is, to my knowledge, the only poet ever to have made a poetic project of translating Thomas Hardy into Middle English). He has a well-informed historical consciousness, and his work reveals both his deep knowledge of obscure corners of history and his uncanny sense for the links between apparently disparate people and incidents. (If you read his “Working Progress, Working Title,” you’ll see exactly what Hedy Lamar had to do with the invention of the remote control. Really.) Joe Francis Doerr, one of the poets from Roessner’s anthology, has now come out with his first book, as has Kevin Ducey, a student of Matthias who came to Notre Dame too late to make the cut for *The Possibility of Language*. Doerr and Ducey each in their own ways exhibit the wide literary and historical range of their teacher. If their work represents a trend away from autobiography and old-school Language Writing, and toward a larger sense of the possibilities of poetry, it will be a most welcome and refreshing development in American literature.





Doerr's *Order of the Ordinary* draws from Matthias in its powerful historical imagination and in the way that it focuses that imagination around particular pieces of found historical text. In one of the book's most remarkable poems, the twenty-page "Corrigenda," Doerr also shows a deep affinity with one of Matthias' great influences, the often-overlooked Anglo-Welsh modernist David Jones. The poem begins by quoting a Welsh source text, the elegiac lament for a dead son "Marwnat Owain," a text now all-but-unreadable to anyone but the scholarly specialist ("Eneit owain ap uryen,/ gobwyllit y ren oe reit" read the first two lines). Over the course of the following pages we see the old Welsh poem slowly reworked into contemporary English. These reworkings are interspersed with comments on the translation, as well as John Cage-style acrostics that make further, somewhat elliptical comments on the act of translation. Eventually the "Marwnat Owain" emerges in modern English, but not as a literal translation. Instead, the fourth section is anachronistically entitled "War Music for Steel Guitar," and takes place in contemporary Texas where Doerr grew up:

Uriah's boy Owen is dead,
 may God have mercy on his soul.
We dressed him in his favorite green
 shirt and put him on the table there.
No one would spit in your eye
 for crying over him.

Owain remains a dead son, and remarkably like the Owen of the original lament, but the speaker and events are recognizably of our own time. Doerr has (in the manner of David Jones) shown the continuities of past and present, even as he shows us the irreducible differences of different eras by retaining the original text in all of its alien unreadability.

Doerr doesn't avoid the contemporary world or the powerful experiences of the self, even though he avoids the conventions that Marjorie Perloff calls "the authenticity model—the 'true voice of natural feeling' or 'natural speech' paradigm." Those confessional conventions, still predominant in the pages of the fat quarterlies pumped out by your local university's creative writing program, place the contemporary self at the center of the poem. In contrast, Doerr puts the contemporary self at the margin of his poem, as the translator of the Welsh text. We see this figure in the same way that we catch glimpses of the medieval scribes who left their spoor of commentary in the margins of their annotated texts. The speaker of "Corrigenda" faces the problems Doerr faces as translator, and this speaker can be as closely identified with the poet himself as is the speaker of any emotionally-express-





sive confessional lyric. Even in sections composed only of the source-text Doerr projects himself into the text with the translation-themed acrostics. But this self does not come to dominate the poem, which remains a far cry from lyric solipsism and confessional navel-gazing.

Doerr plays elaborate and fascinating textual games, but he retains a strong sense of emotional energy. As the linguistic impenetrability of the Welsh “Marwnat Owain” gives way to a revelation of the elegiac core of that poem, we experience a slowly growing sense of the pain of a parent who has lost a son, and a sense of the long, tearful history of such losses over the centuries. The poem has all the linguistic sophistication and self-consciousness of the Buffalo school, but takes us well outside the emotional range of all but a handful of those poets.

Doerr finds a kind of subject-rhyme between past and present in the juxtaposition of the medieval Welsh “Marwnat Owain” and the contemporary Texan “War Music for Steel Guitar.” He finds similar rhymes in many of the other poems of *Order of the Ordinary*, most often through investigating a historical text (such as *Venus in Furs* in “Thumbnails for Portrait of Sacher-Masoch”) or a language-archive (such as Nordic runes in “F U T H A R K 2K,” which must have made his typesetter cry). If you feel a little grandiloquent, you might call this the Poetics of the Archive. It is a fruitful method for our post-canonical times, in which those poets who read all read idiosyncratically. By choosing particular texts as his fields of poetic investigation, Doerr allows us the intertextual pleasures outlined in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” without relying on Eliot’s received canon of great works. The texts needn’t be widely familiar or culturally shared (what is, these days?): the sustained, careful working-through of the specific text or archive will make it familiar in the process of the reading. This method, one suspects, is learned from Matthias, who uses both specific texts and specific geographies to give his work a range of significance beyond the self.

Like Doerr’s *Order of the Ordinary*, Kevin Ducey’s *Rhinoceros* ranges far and wide through a variety of historical and literary references in seeking out the rhymes between past and present. Unlike Doerr, though, Ducey throws a generous handful of pop-culture into the mix, and tears some of his subject matter from the headlines of the newspapers. Consider “Dien Bien Phu,” a poem that begins with flintlock-toting chieftains from hostile tribes, takes us to the French at war in Vietnam, and then leads us here:

The Vandals beyond the Rhine
were largely runaway slaves dispossessed
freemen, seniors
unable to afford prescription drugs—





Rome had it coming.

The drawing of parallels between the here-and-now and the there-and-then is very much the sort of thing we'd find in Doerr's work. But the topicality of the poem and the easy offhandedness with which Ducey connects current events (American senior citizens road-tripping up to Canada to outflank America's unforgivably profit-driven medical system) and the historical (the slaves fleeing Rome) presents a real contrast with Doerr. There's also a difference in tone. Doerr is most comfortable with the elegiac, the disturbing, and at times something like the sublime—a rare combination in our times, and admirable. Ducey's touch is lighter, and he's often quirky and a bit comic. "Those hooligans out there, pal,/don't care much for your poetry —" he writes, "They zooming round in them/shaggy pony chariots (celts?) with/.50 caliber mounted on back. Go/tell it to the Geats." Yet he's no less an acolyte of the often-funny Matthias for this—a fact to which the poem's epigraph, taken from an essay on Matthias by Brooke Bergan, attests.

Ducey's poems delight in the miscegenation of mythologies, crossbreeding, for example, the Greek and the Native American in a quickie couplet that refers to "The shadow visit to hell where/coyote can't restrain himself." There is also a fair amount of pop culture twisted together with all the high culture. Batman rubs shoulders with Atalanta in "Hero Tales," and the book's final poem, "Wim Wenders vs. the Wolfman," gives us both cinema and the movies. What's interesting about this mixing of pop culture and museum culture isn't simply that it happens—the gesture was already showing its age when Frank O'Hara made it in "The Day Lady Died." It is the ease with which it happens that is of interest. There's no sense of campiness or condescension to it: Ducey is part of a generation suckled in the creed of postmodernism, and he moves between pantheons and cultural registers in complete comfort, feeling no need for any knowingly pursed lips, arched eyebrows, or fingers crooked into imaginary quotation marks.

All of this play is fun to watch: at times it is breathtaking. If there is a vice to the work, though, I suppose it could be found in just the slightest hint of the unbearable lightness of correspondences. Everything here-and-now seems to connect with everything there-and-then, quite quickly and quite briefly. If Doerr gives us a weighty (but never ponderous) poetics of the archive, Ducey gives us the intertextual freestyle, a running-and-gunning poetics filled with historical targets of opportunity. (I'd be delighted, by the way, if he were to use that as jacket copy somewhere. No charge.)

As distinct as they are, Ducey and Doerr share a fundamental orientation toward the rhyming of the familiar with the unfamiliar. They take





us out of the cloister of the self and beyond the version of literary history
Bernstein parodied with his picture of cavemen. They are well worth your
time, and their books are an intriguing index of the possibilities of poetry in
our new century.



"THIS DELICATE BALANCE": TWO BOOKS BY DIANE THIEL

Resistance Fantasies, Diane Thiel. Story Line Press, 2004. *The White Horse: A Colombian Journey*, Diane Thiel. Etruscan Press, 2004.

Kathryn Kruger

These two books—a poetry collection and a travel narrative—give us intelligent observations into the subtle dynamics of power and address the question of how can we live and relate graciously in this world. Her perceptions arise from a deep understanding of history, both human history and that of the earth itself. Thiel's books spotlight how the struggle for personal or political gain has shaped the story of life, a dialectic that makes for two worthwhile encounters.

In *Resistance Fantasies*, Thiel explores how desire propels and shapes our own stories. In these poems power figures not only as theme, but often as plot and occasionally as the antagonist or protagonist (depending which side you're on) of the poems themselves.

Thiel divides her book into four sections, each part developing the dialectic between desire and resistance, lust and disgust with power, as well as different forms of victimization. The first section, 'Black Seas,' offers poems from Thiel's memories of Odessa in the Ukraine as well as her preoccupation with Greek and Russian myths, folklore and literary legends. In "Sevenlings for Akhmatova" Thiel writes movingly:

I

It comes in threes—the red letter,
the midnight warning in disguise,
the knock that shakes the shutters.

My face learns to have three sides.
One third smiles and waves at the station.
Another slides under and hides.

The last goes to the interrogation

'Black Seas' not only sets the tone and theme, but begins the work of transformation that constitutes the book's poetics, for what Thiel does through careful organization and persistence of inquiry, is to transmute personal, human experience into the work of myth. Thus, in the second and third





sections, 'Resistance Fantasies' and 'Lost in Translation,' Thiel explores her own personal encounters with power and resistance through the same lens that she views the folklore and myths of her first section. 'Editorial Suggestions' returns the reader to a similar tone as 'Black Seas,' but by now Thiel has widened her discourse to include memory, nature, and the construction of language itself.

At the beginning of *Resistance Fantasies* the poet dashes any hope in the possibility of escape. In "If You Don't," the poet imagines eluding the struggle between victim and victor and what such a life would look like. In a series of negations she writes: "If you don't have a dog / your neighbor will not poison it / . . . if you don't have a memory / the past cannot devour you / when you stop moving for a brief / moment. Long enough to let the sorrow / catch the joy you never feel . . ."

Throughout *Resistance Fantasies*, poems succeed in weaving a complex labyrinth in which the reader encounters a Minotaur in its rawest and most passionate form. Thiel's poems are distinguished by her fine ability to transform the disparate experiences of everyday life into living myth. Each of us has been a Daphne resisting Apollo as well as an Apollo seeking domination. Thiel demonstrates how our lives are inscribed with this mythic tension. She does so with remarkable skill of form, rhythm and rhyme, qualities that invest her language with beauty and authority. From the sonnet, "Pushkin and the Black Sea":

He came to meet me shortly after
arriving—running down Odessa's Steps,
all ears on that compelling laughter,
all tongues in cheeks on the swing of those hips.
What did he want with all those women?
All he needed was a good swim in
my morning waves, my long caress.
. . . .

Finally, Thiel is a multifaceted poet. She handles the retelling of myth, both historical and private, with a deft hand, and then sets beside her own songs the voices of Sor Juana, Alfonsina Storni, Cesar Vallejo, Nikos Kavadias and Anna Akhmatova. The result is a multi-faceted, multi-vocal conversation, reaching back toward myth and history, and then extending forward to the language and experience of today. Thiel provides evidence that our stories are continuous, and that over thousands of years they have not changed.

In *The White Horse*, Thiel records her journey from Panama to Chocó,





the Pacific coast rainforest of Colombia where the Emberá tribe lives. Along with her intrepid guide and friend, Ana Maria, the two plunge into adventure. Their mission, a humanitarian one, entails hauling three microscopes for detecting malaria, a sack of medical books and incentives for starting craft industries to the rainforest people. Along the way, they encounter the warm hospitality of the Pan-American people and the region's otherworldly magic—from the haunting forest where tigers walk at dawn, to a river that winds toward the sea in which the skeleton of a whale is found beached and so large they can walk inside. Not a fairytale, but a real life adventure, Thiel writes:

The Chocó forest looked vast, dense, and impenetrable from where we stood, as it must have looked centuries ago when the first outsiders came to this land. . . It was a blessing to come to a stand of trees that was still intact, still full of old spirits. (80)

Like a Blakean 'Song of Innocence and Experience', Thiel records the beauty of a people and a place—even as these people and this place are being destroyed. Juxtaposed with this romantic landscape is the stark reality of loggers clear-cutting ancient forests and men fishing with DDT—scooping dead fish from the water for selling at market or cooking at home.

Enriching her narrative with science and history, Thiel traces the fascinating connections among the forces that have shaped Colombia—its geology, geography, foreign invasions, slave trade, gold mining, etc. Not through polemic, but through the eyes of a poet, Thiel writes passionately about how we as human beings can become aware of our interdependence with the forces that have shaped and nurtured us. In this way, the author's experience becomes our own. We feel with her the Emberá's connection to the earth as root and limb, straining under the unhallowed practice of deforestation. We can hear the felling of trees around the close-knit tribe. One by one they drop as the Emberá struggle to retain their community, history, and connection to the forest that sustains them. Taking part in one of the tribe's ceremonies, Thiel remarks how she felt herself transforming into one of the trees on which their lives depend:

They painted the earth pattern down each of my arms, one long stroke down and then short strokes coming out of the sides. . . I raised my arms so they could paint my sides, and I felt them extend upwards and burst into branches. (246)

In one chapter, Thiel meets up with a geologist who works for an American gold-mining company. The company is investigating the promise of gold on the land of a local owner. The search for gold, Thiel has already





reminded us in a previous chapter, was one of the major forces to shape South America—the land and its indigenous people—since Columbus. Over five hundred years later, gold seekers are still in business, and their politics, though less vitriolic, are as self-interested as ever. However, rather than denouncing history and the people who created it, rather than dwelling in outrage, Thiel moves the reader into the possibility of a new perspective, one where we see ourselves not as the earth's center, but as part of something greater, more extraordinary than anything we could have invented ourselves. Moving effortlessly from scientific fact to poetry, she states:

Scientists now believe that gold must have been created long before the creation of the earth. Any element heavier than iron must have been created by a supernova, which sprinkled it throughout this part of the universe. Gold is hence the product of supernovas, as we ourselves are made up of the same basic elements as stars.

The sun had not yet fallen, but one of the first stars had already come out and beckoned there on the horizon. An invisible thread connected my eye to the star and the star to the rock in my hand, and I felt the little river of gold run into my own veins, reminding me that I too was part of this delicate balance. (165)

“This delicate balance” forms the leitmotif of both *The White Horse* and *Resistance Fantasies*.



EDITORS SELECT

Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space*, translated by the author and Robert Hass, Ecco, 2004. This will be the final book of “new poems” by the great Polish poet. Written in extreme old age, the poems show no diminishment in his powers and engage with courage and clarity their mostly elegiac subjects. *NDR* is proud to have published one of the major poems in the selection, “Apprentice,” which is about the author’s early relationship with his kinsman and mentor O.V. de L. Milosz. That poem ends: “So it is important to know how to repeat after Goethe: *Respect! Respect! Respect!*” The last words of this last book.

Daniel Weissbort, *From Russian With Love: Joseph Brodsky in English*, Anvil Press, 2004. Weissbort published a long review of Brodsky’s *Collected Poems In English* in *NDR* #14. This book begins where the review left off. The author met and began collaborating with Brodsky on translations of his work soon after the Russian poet arrived in the West. The relationship between the two, both personal and artistic, is fascinating to read about. The book is simultaneously a treatise on translation and an elegy for Brodsky. As the James Bondish title suggests, it is also full of humor and Weissbort’s usual self-deprecating charm. The

tone of the book, in fact, has a great deal in common with Weissbort’s poems addressed to Ted Hughes in *Letters To Ted*, which was recently listed in Editors Select.

John Hartley Williams, *Blues*, Cape Poetry, 2004. Williams begins this book with yet another elegy—for frequent *NDR* contributor Ken Smith. Williams has a good deal in common with Smith, and writes an essentially European poetry rather than work that is English or British in any kind of insular sense. The poem to Smith includes a passage describing an almost uncanny event reported by everyone who was at the funeral of the author of “Fox Running”: “But I don’t believe/ that that the fox/ seen loping/ through the cemetery/ as we carried your coffin/ down the weed-grown path/ was anything more/ than beautiful coincidence/ nor,/ returning to your grave at midnight,/ that the shape-shifter fellow/ late vigil-keepers saw/ was anything other/ than that same/ interested creature, sitting out the night/ beside disturbed ground . . .”

Mark Scroggins, *Anarchy*, Spuyten Duyvil Books, 2003. Scroggins is the best known critic, and now also the biographer, of Louis Zukofsky. While this first volume of poems shows some affinities with Zukofsky, its attention to Cromwell, Ruskin, and Charles I’s apocryphal “Eikon Basilike” also locates it somewhere



between Susan Howe in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* and the recent work of Geoffrey Hill, if one can imagine either one of these poets also taking an interest in Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols. For a fan of the Pooh stories, however, his poem on "The Passing of Eeyore" is almost too much to bear (as it were).

Martin Corless-Smith, *Nota*, Fence Books, 2003. Corless-Smith, a British poet now living and teaching in Boise, Idaho, makes use of his sources in a way not dissimilar to Mark Scroggins. Creating a palimpsest and collage out of 17th century materials, his poem takes one of its epigraphs from David Jones' *The Anathemata*: "One is trying to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made." It will be difficult to find readers for this demanding book (or its predecessor, *Complete Travels*), but those with the patience to follow Corless-Smith as he tracks some of the things of which he is himself made will be rewarded for their attention.

Peter Riley, *The Dance at Mociu*, Shearsman Books, 2003. Two of these "stories and prose-poems" about Peter Riley's annual journeys through Transylvania appeared in *NDR*. In his preface to the volume he says that he "went in search of music; everything else was glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, and hung on the frailty of singular in-

stances. But instances which clearly could not occur anywhere else." The music of the prose evoking such singular instances is memorable and rich, like that of Riley's poems.

Ben Downing, *The Calligraphy Shop*, Zoo Press, 2003. Downing is a formalist of great skill and wit. Eric Ormsby has called him "a scamp in a tuxedo." Writing on Fermat's famous Last Theorem, he says "I have written a wonderful poem/ which this page, alas, cannot contain; in its place, accept a lesser one/ proving nothing and provisional as rain." In the title poem and elsewhere in this brief book, one finds some fine poems that the page is, luckily, able to contain and which prove to be a good deal more than provisional.

Two Chapbooks: Reginald Gibbons, *In the Warhouse*, Fractal Edge Press, 2004, and Gerald L. Bruns, *Fictional Poems*, privately printed, 2004. Gibbons' political and satirical poems include a "Prayer Heard from Behind a Pine Tree." Guess who? "Apocopapalyptic waiting, unerrucible faith!—/ we shall bless Thy name Lord/ and thine hysterious ways shall be revealed unto us/ as of old—mysterical things,/ and speaking in tongues shall return/ till after jabber a light shines from above,/ and crooked leg is made straight..." Bruns's chapbook you will have to obtain directly from the elusive and otherwise theoretical author. All we



know is that “the poems were set in Goudy and ITC Officina Sans in South Bend, Indiana, USA under isolated skies with partly sunny thunderstorms.” There are only 100 copies. We have number 8. We suggest that our readers try to secure one of the remaining 92 copies. Our contributing editor is a poet of real interest whose work, we hope, will soon appear in a larger and more accessible book.

Alan Goldfein, *Europe's Macadam, America's Tar*, American Editions Heidelberg, 2004. Short story writer Goldfein's second excursion into transnational nonfiction. The book deals with the incorrigible American heartland delusion of Best: wealth, infrastructure, morality, and contrasts all that with examples from France and Germany. Reminiscent of Jeremy Rifkin's *The European Dream*, but quirkier, more personal—and better written.

Joan Silber, *Ideas of Heaven*, Norton, 2004. Joan Silber's new book, her fifth, is termed “a ring of stories,” because a minor element of one becomes a major element in another. And, likewise, in the literary world, the volume went from being minor to major when it was named a finalist for the National Book Awards fiction category in 2004. Indeed, the minor to major jump was exaggerated because all of the fiction nominees were women

living in New York City: Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, Christine Schutt, Lily Tuck, and Kate Walbert were the others. This congruity spawned part of the controversy that followed, but its main cause was the complaint by those who generate publicity for books, the large papers and reviews, especially the *New York Times* (which only had taken notice of two of the nominees—Tuck [and In Brief review] and Walbert [the most commercial of the lot]—in its powerful Book Review.) This sort of brouhaha is cyclical and expected. It brought to mind the flap over *Paco's Story*, by Larry Heinemann, which won the National Book Review in 1987, and was only reviewed, badly, by the *TBR* after it was nominated. Literary fashion is a high-capital enterprise and those who control it do not like upstarts to interfere. You can only be a major writer if you are successful—that is, don't embarrass anyone with poor sales—and certainly you can't be one if the organs of enthusiasm don't know who you are and haven't made you famous. But, every once in a while those organs get their comeuppance. And, it appears, it is only prizes that let this happen, because there are still maverick judges who will be happy to tweak the establishment and show it how much it doesn't know. And the literary world—at least, those who promote it—don't know any more about who is good, who is great, and who ain't, than any other



flak hoping to climb aboard the fast-moving wagons of the overexposed. So, here's to the five women writers of Manhattan, especially Joan Silber, whose last book of short stories was noted in an earlier number (11) of Editors Select. For the record, Lily Tuck's novel, *The News from Paraguay*, was awarded the prize. But, all the books nominated are prizes themselves.



CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Archambeau's new book of poems, *Home and Variations*, was recently published by Salt. He teaches at Lake Forest College. **Jeffery Bahr** is a software development manager and lives in Colorado. His work has been recently published or is forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Chelsea*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Indiana Review*, *The Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Quarterly West* and *Swink*. **Simeon Berry** lives in Boston, where he is a poetry and fiction reader for *Ploughshares*. He has won an Academy of American Poets Award and a Career Chapter Award from the National Society of Arts and Letters. His work has been published in *The Antioch Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Cream City Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and is forthcoming in *Washington Square*, *AGNI*, and *Verse*. **Louis Bourne**, a long-time resident of Madrid, has been translating Spanish poetry for over thirty years. His translations of Claudio Rodríguez have appeared in various journals in the US and England, including *Granite*, *International Poetry Review*, *New Directions* 26, and *Stand*. He currently teaches in the Spanish Department of Georgia College & State University. **Regina Derieva** has published 20 books of poetry, essays, and prose. Her books have been translated into English, French, and Italian. Additionally, her work has appeared in the *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Salt*, *Ars Interpres*, *Cross Currents*, as well as in many Russian magazines. She currently lives in Sweden. **Ed Falco** has three books forthcoming this year: a volume of short fictions (*In the Park of Culture*); a collection of short stories (*Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha: New and Selected Stories*); and an as-yet-untitled novel. This spring he is teaching in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland, at Virginia Tech's Center for European Studies. **Stephen Fredman** is professor of English and Department Chair at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent book is *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry*. **Debora Greger's** new book of poetry, *Western Art*, was published by Penguin in Fall 2004. **Mark Halperin** is the author of four volumes of poetry, the most recent of which are *Time as Distance*, *Near and Far*, and *Greatest Hits*. His translations from the Russian have appeared in *Pushcart Prizes 2003*, *Paris Review*, *Antioch Review* and *Virginia Quarterly*. He, his wife, and their dog live near the trouty Yakima. **Paul Kane's** most recent collection of poems is *Drowned Lands*. A recipient of NEH and Guggenheim Foundation fellowships, he teaches at Vassar College. **Kirsten Kaschock's** first book of poetry, *Unfathoms*, is available from Slope Editions. She is a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia, and holds MFAs in dance and creative writing from the University





of Iowa and Syracuse University, respectively. Other recent work of hers is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *Octopus*, *Gutcult*, *LIT*, and *Diagram*. **John Kinsella** is the author of more than thirty books including *The Hunt*, *The Silo*, *The Hierarchy of Sheep*, and *Genre*. He is professor of English at Kenyon College, and his new volume of poetry, *The New Arcadia*, is forthcoming this summer. **John Koethe**'s most recent book of poems is *North Point North: New and Selected Poems*. "The Maquiladoras" will be included in a new book, *Sally's Hair*, to be published by HarperCollins. He is distinguished professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. **Kathryn Kruger** has published two books, *Weaving the Word* and *Solstice*. Her articles and poetry have been published in many journals including *Water-Stone*, *Sufi* and *Rhino*. **Sheryl Luna** is the author of the forthcoming *Pity the Drowned Horses*, winner of the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize awarded by the Institute for Latino Studies at Notre Dame. A native of El Paso, TX, she holds several degrees, including a Ph.D. from University of North Texas, and an M.F.A. from UTEP. She has published widely in such journals as *The Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Amherst Review*, and *Kalliope: A Journal of Women's Art and Literature*. She currently teaches at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. **Michelle Margolis** is a freelance writer living in Southern California. A previous contributor to *NDR*, her poems also have appeared in *Seneca Review*, *Passages North*, *The Journal*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *No Exit*, *Interim*, and *Rattle*. **Bill Meissner**'s fourth book of poetry, *American Compass*, was published in 2004. His collection of fiction is entitled *Hitting Into the Wind*. He directs the creative writing program at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. **Tom O'Connor** has had poetry accepted in *Dánta*, *No Exit*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, and *Soul Fountain*. **John Peck**'s *Collected Shorter Poems, 1966-1996* was recently published by Northwestern University Press/TriQuarterly Books. **Paulann Petersen**'s work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Willow Springs*, *Calyx*, and the Internet's *Poetry Daily*. Her third collection of poems, *A Bride of Narrow Escape*, will be out this year. She serves on the board of Friends of William Stafford, organizing the January Stafford Birthday Events. **James D. Redwood** is a professor at Albany Law School. His fiction has appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. He has stories forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*. **Claudio Rodríguez** (1934–1999) is considered one of the major voices in Spanish poetry in the latter half of the 20th Century. He made a remarkable debut in 1953, winning the Adonais Prize, Spain's most prestigious first-book award, with *The Gift of Inebriation* at age 19. In a career spanning more than forty years, he published five





volumes of poetry, and garnered the most prestigious awards in Spanish poetry, including the National Poetry Prize in 1983, the Queen Sofia Prize in 1993, and the Prince of Asturias Prize in 1993. His *Complete Poems* appeared in 2001. Born in Zamora, he taught at various universities, including the Universities of Nottingham and Cambridge (1958-1964), and for a number of years with “NYU in Spain” in Madrid. **Frances Sherwood** has published three novels: *The Book of Splendor*, *Green* and *Vindication*. Her latest novel, *Betrayal*, is forthcoming. In addition, she has published numerous short stories, and has had work appear in *Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Award* collections. **Brian Swann**’s latest book is *Voice From Four Directions: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literature of Notre America*. Forthcoming in 2005 is *Algonquian: Contemporary Translations of the Algonquian Literatures of North America*. **Keith Taylor**’s poems, translations and reviews have widely appeared here and in Europe. His most recent book, *What These Ithakas Mean: Readings in Cavafy*, a co-edited volume published by a nonprofit in Greece, was picked as one of the 2002 Books of the Year in the *Times Literary Supplement*. He teaches at the University of Michigan. **Maria Terrone** is the author of *The Bodies We Were Loaned*. Her work, which has been nominated for a Pushcart Award, has appeared in many anthologies and such magazines as *Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. She directs communications for Queens College in New York. **Steve Timm**’s work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Antennae*, *gam*, *Bird Dog*, *Moria*, and *Word/For Word*. He teaches English as a second language at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. **James Walton** is professor emeritus of English at Notre Dame. He has published a novel, *Margaret’s Book*, and an anthology of poets from Notre Dame, *The Space Between*. **Daneen Ward-rop**’s poems have appeared in *Seneca Review*, *TriQuarterly Magazine*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Epoch*, *Gulf Coast*, *American Literary Review*, and many others. Professor of literature at Western Michigan University, she is the author of two books of literary criticism, including *Emily Dickinson’s Gothic*. **Martha Zweig**, recipient of a 1999 Whiting Writer’s Award, is the author of *What Kind* and *Vinegar Bone*, as well as a chapbook entitled *Powers*. Her poems have appeared in *Northwest Review*, *Manoa*, *Field*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Progressive*, and elsewhere.





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