

# NOTRE DAME REVIEW



# NOTRE DAME REVIEW



NUMBER 22

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DREAM OF A VARIABLE SURFACE*Seth Abramson*

*Shaman*, I am told, or *caliph*—  
 you must think of it  
 this way: what you see as ocean, say, south of Katsuura,  
 is no more than the clotting of seventeen seas  
 to a whole, the curling veins which roar and spit across  
 the breakers—longboats coming of age  
 with painted necks—the trills where sunlight is plucked  
 from an empty throat. Confront these again  
 as the components of a scene, and do you see what it is  
 a pattern does  
 to itself, with no end to maneuvers or aimless transports—  
 the mid-deep greens slipping through the shade  
 to dredge closer that view, that most horrible, a glimpse  
 of hells? The answer, no answer at all, strides off  
 with a breath of foam toward a ragged reef  
 awash in delicacies and jutted with eglantine—a grace won  
 in other times—the extravagant vagaries  
 of the damned. It is no more the thrilling gauze of eels  
 and water lily; invoke your theory of space *now*  
 and someone, buttoning his coat inside this archaic hole,  
 slings a dressing gown across a captain's chair  
 and riddles his toes to a mawkish beat—balancing it all  
 on the tip of a saber. Answer him falsely  
 and the oceans rise, imperfectly, into oceans, the sunlight.



wet strips of lamb and hare,  
and the barber's chair, maybe something else  
only *he* is, something untouched  
by necessity. Now he is spoken to

for the very first time: his tiny ears denude,  
his crown is sealed away  
in a huddle of bones; with a word, maybe less—  
a sword—  
his fingers are swollen with blood. Now  
the blood itself has a whisper that is only his  
to hear: for Moses the mute, Moses the blind,  
is going to do everything, oh, *everything*  
he has been told.

MAENAD TEARING ORPHEUS*Seth Abramson*

The smile, not so much cursed as legendary, went one way  
 and harp the other. He'd been tuning  
 when the riverbed began to speed, as things do  
 when caught by surprise, leaning reeds and eddies of green  
 apprised, suddenly, of everything—*magic*.  
 A minor chord braced itself into a major, as if it could be  
 otherwise, now; less painful than ever. A lifting,  
 feet only, nose in the warble of a brook. The frigid weir.  
 It wasn't a promise. It salted the air; it was just *possibility*.

Everything went wrong. It couldn't be done, not pityingly  
 as before; the rote was organic, snapped, organic  
 and snapped. It wormed over, senseless. It was bad science.  
 Something in it took aim at the incredible, the inadmissible,  
 a mythology of muddy faces and worse-for-wear  
 panaceas—a deity, in bolts of silk, riding hard for Home—  
 the news tied to the wing of a whip-poor-will—Orpheus is  
 dead; Orpheus is dead. Yet somehow it is less  
 than literal: she'd forgotten how to do it; it never happened.

COIL SLAB OR HELIX*Kevin Ducey*

*I tell you to come home  
you say you're tired  
of being indoors...*

Richard Thompson

**1**

They have some pots  
that are simply  
impressions of a fist  
in mud—not even  
coil or slab.

He  
went on in this way.  
Some cultures are  
better than others—  
his eyes  
following his ex-wife  
about the room as the  
conversation drifted.

These were  
not Greeks and I'm not  
talking about ornament here—  
she was  
dressed in Madhras and  
sandals. He straightened his tie.

I caught  
in that first crude jug—  
punched out of a fist  
of Mississippi clay—  
an impress of sorts  
of the wing'd chariot  
swooping down on  
Wordsworth in his rowboat:  
How the mountain  
rises up to meet you.

—though it takes  
 no great skill to heap  
 up a lot of dirt. Monk's  
 Mound no ornamental  
                                 Palenque.

There's no writing,  
 he said. Even animal skins will  
 survive into our time, but  
 there's no writing.

                                She brought  
 her new boyfriend  
                                 dogging  
 her heel. The Mayans  
 wrote, sure, but the  
 connection hasn't  
 been established yet.

  It'll come.  
 One day. There are hundreds  
 of grad students—  
                                 he watches  
 her over the rim of his wineglass  
 —working on this. Somebody  
 help, I mean, somebody will  
 make a career on a DNA trace.

**2**  
 Who is the ghost returning  
 returning to the world  
 that has forgotten him?

Hamlet's father hovers  
 over the roofline. The  
 attention wavers and the jungle

treeline will have to be  
 blown back with napalm. The  
 father hovers, a whisp

of smoke asking our  
remembrance. Asking. Ulysses  
pulls his chair away from

the fire. The return to his  
house, but in disguise. Rites  
of passage: we don't know who

we are. Hovering over the  
roofline. Visiting death upon  
his birthday—the old nurse

recognizes the scar on his  
thigh. Who it is—remembrance. And  
he takes her by the throat.

**3**  
Some grad student will  
do it—trace a caduceus  
twining up the  
Mississippi from the  
Gulf of Mexico—not love  
at all.

A Potter's fist  
pressed into a slab of  
clay—lifted to  
one's lips a trace of dust.  
Sure, she's brought her  
new squeeze.—Oh, mercy,  
I won't tell; the house  
full of suitors—only one  
dissembler.

4

Before becoming garage  
mechanics, they had  
hunted egrets, and they  
described their technique,  
which consisted  
in placing cornets  
of white paper on  
the ground in such a way  
that when the tall birds,  
fascinated by the  
immaculate whiteness  
similar to their own,  
thrust their beaks  
into them, they became  
hoods which blinded  
the birds and made them  
easy to capture.

The finest feathers  
were plucked from  
living birds during the  
mating season. There  
were, in Cuiaba,  
cupboards full of egret  
feathers, since  
the noiseless collapse  
of the feather market.

**5 Ghost stories**

Abraham ties the son to stone  
lifting ritual blade, bringing  
it down to cut  
just a little.  
He lak'd a lyttle said the Green  
Knight.

A little. They still  
meet like this sometimes. For  
the sake of the children.

Parties. The boy's eighth-  
grade graduation. He comes  
laughing through the kitchen.

The father  
grasps love by the throat to keep  
his name unspoken. Ulysses,  
it could be anyone, or no  
one who has blinded us. Hovering  
over that roofline blinded  
by love, told to be silent.

It could be anyone—  
I asked who your friend was  
you said Santa Claus or  
Lev Davidovich  
in Mexico, as he pulls his glasses  
from their case, bends  
to read the article  
the young man has written.

'The consumption of articles  
precedes their production.'

Lev laughs, "only in a world  
of credit.  
And what banker would bet  
on us?"

Ah ha ha, in that last  
breath he senses  
the mountain  
rising up as fast  
as we can row—

The potter made the  
vessel pressing his  
fist into the wet clay, we  
manage a DNA trace  
to drink. The glasses  
tranquil as Mount Popocatepetl  
on the blotting paper  
in Mexico as he bends  
to read. Christmas' heavy  
boot tread in the hall,  
hovering along that winter  
horizon with an ice axe.

6

The anthropologist stopped  
along his safari to ask  
how the egrets were getting on.

Lord how they fly. He traces  
tribal face markings on white paper  
one thing leading to another:

they're continually making  
sense. They can't help it. It  
is not a recapitulation.

Take the children  
into the bush and  
we can't help them.

Child running through  
a kitchen  
brought up short at the sight  
of his father.  
Traced across his  
forehead, listing to the  
father's complaint. Whether  
we will or no—  
the helix pulled  
from potter's wheel.

COVER STORY*Angela Burchett*

In the Cities' toniest subdivision's  
 Last remaining Lustron All-Metal Home (un-  
 furnished)—interrupted by only ourself—  
 Why are we waiting?

As steel walls abetted a clean-forgetting  
 Of the bloodshed world, aren't we undergoing,  
 Through this nonce outstripping of moveable goods,  
 Purification?

Isn't disposition illusion also,  
 Since we got the Lumina? and our clothing?  
 And an ex en-route with his pickup truck full  
 Of our belongings

(Singularities once desired, soon casting  
 Past associations on sun-clean spaces,  
 Shadowing immovables)? While we're on that,  
 How does a Buddhist

Reconcile voluminous incarnation  
 Here, as hidden treasure, with recollections  
 Haunted by dependent arising? daily  
 Entries amassing

Desolated years in concatenated  
 Journals, twenty-eight of them, which you'll shelve where?  
 Till your rough life's work can be pieced together  
 Into the memoir

Of a small town girl who was struggling to es-  
 cape her situation, her spirit shackled  
 To the appetite and disease of older  
 Wandering spirits,

From whom ax, aim, arm set her free to strike out  
On the pathless path to become a writer,  
Winner of the Nonfiction Pulitzer Prize,  
Famous forever?

Do you find, whenever you share your bio,  
People coming out of protected backgrounds  
(Not to put down privilege: All else equal,  
Doesn't Joe Average

Crave security above even money?)  
Never really leave those protected backgrounds,  
Disentwine their swaddling clothes to conceive life  
Under disaster,

Days spent pawning needs elites take for granted,  
Never fearing, never enduring troubles,  
Let alone the worst times, when peace and quiet  
Head-on collided?

Which our readers know all about already,  
And is that his truck we hear coming—? Or no?  
Why do questions make you uncomfortable?  
When is your birthday?

You're a Cancer? Are you aware who else is?  
Are we soulmates? Are we the same? About when  
Did we first suspect he was standing us up?  
Where are we going?

Did the split with John even blip your radar?  
After you'd inherited Charlie's bundle,  
Wasn't he just means to that end we've quitted?  
Didn't you love him?

Is there any reason that Charlie'd name you  
Beneficiary, except contrition  
For a wife and stepdaughter screwed together,  
Proving the rape she

Disbelieved, who pinned his familial hightail  
 On your accusation? Weren't you her hospice,  
 She your cellmate, as corybantic tumors  
 Crowded her body?

Did you wear those moribund habits over  
 Into your entanglement with the owner  
 Of this lit-up two-story we're discreetly  
 Parallel parking

Smack in front of, in the last spot on Windsor—  
 Us between a Lexus and Volvo? Which one  
 On the drapes is his silhouette? Are others  
 Guests at a party?

From what you recall, is there any reason  
 Little flags invisibly fence the edged lawn  
 But to shock his spaniel for straying from him?  
 When did the sun set?

Was the porchlight turned on by hand or timer?  
 Are the souls who flit from front door to cardoors  
 Friends of John? or her, on the threshold, waving—  
 Elegant, slender—

Clicking down the drive on her prenie high heels,  
 Biding, as the three-car-garagedoor opens  
 On two empty spaces, to park her Beamer  
 Next to the absence

Of his pickup and our possessions? What's left?  
 Detour? Roadblock? Traffic jam? Lost? Unless he  
 Had a—? We had—? I—? Or it happened: one more  
 Accident had me?

## END TIMES

*Evan Kuhlman*

*What a terrible town to die in*, Carl thought, while crossing over railroad tracks that seemed to lead to nowhere worth going to, and gazing at a rusty grain silo and a soot-covered brick building that looked to be an abandoned factory. Even the pale blue sky and unmoving cotton ball clouds above the mess appeared sickly and malnourished.

Irene, his wife, glanced at a map she had printed off the computer, then folded it and slipped it into the glove box. Her hands were shaking, but her doctor had told her that it wasn't anything serious like Parkinson's, just sorrow working its way out in little electric quivers. "That's it, on the right," she said. "Slow down."

Carl took the right and pulled the Chevy into the gravel lot of the West Henderson police station. He drove in back and circled a few cars then parked next to an old white Dodge, a beagle unhappily inside it. The dog stuck its snout out of a partly rolled-down window and yapped at Carl. "Likewise," Carl said, killing the engine.

Irene was looking at the white brick police building, a sort of library of sorrows: a million reports in there about accidents, shootings, lives cut short. "Are you sure we should do this?" she asked.

"Hell no," Carl said, but he got out of the car anyway. Irene joined him, and as they walked toward the station Carl noticed that the sun was shining on his wife, almost selectively. It was the generous July sun and it lit up her permed, auburn hair, and highlighted the networks of veins and arteries running along her arms. Carl wondered what such a golden creature saw in him. He was, by any objective evaluation, chubby, morose, and not very interesting. Why did Irene stay? He felt he was due an explanation but he didn't ask for one.

They pushed through a thick glass door and entered the station. It appeared to be abandoned. While Irene read a brochure about bicycle safety, Carl studied the city seal, painted on one of the glazed green brick walls: a farmhouse, cornfield, office building and the sun, and the legend "West Henderson: Where Commerce and Community are Good Neighbors." His eyes then moved to a large framed painting of a police chief, circa 1900, wearing a uniform with gold buttons and epaulets, a gold-trimmed hat held to his side. He had slicked-back peppered hair, a handlebar mustache, and a confident, fatherly smile. Carl thought the man looked more like the kaiser of a protected, faraway land than a police official in a small town in shoot-

‘em-up Nebraska.

A young cop, clean-cut and muscular, appeared behind a Plexiglas window and said, “Hey folks” into a microphone that bore similarities to a drum major’s baton, half of it. Irene set the brochure down and looked at the cop and thought *somebody’s son*. Carl assessed the officer and figured he must have messed up pretty bad to get assigned to front desk duty. Probably frisked a female prisoner too aggressively or slept through a robbery at First National.

Carl stepped closer to the window, and Irene followed suit. “I guess we’re the Bradshaws,” Carl said. “Our son is... was Jonathan—”

“Oh yes, sorry about what happened,” the cop said. “You know, we’ve never had a double-homicide here before. Just about everything else you might imagine, but not a double-homicide.”

“You were due,” Carl said.

Irene frowned at her husband, then told the officer that they’d been traveling all day because they wanted to get copies of the police reports related to their son’s murder.

“You better speak with Captain Lewis,” the cop said. He buzzed them through a security door, and as they marched to the captain’s office Carl noticed that no one was sitting at any of the desks, making him wonder whether the mighty West Henderson Police Department consisted entirely of a captain and a screw-up officer.

Captain Harold Lewis shook Carl’s hand, patted Irene on the shoulder, and gave his condolences. “Please, take a seat,” he said, aiming an arm at two green vinyl chairs with sunken and patched seats.

As Carl sat down he glanced at the captain’s service pistol, held in a side holster: it was made of black steel and capable of drilling several holes in Carl’s head, should Captain Lewis see fit. Carl had a recent fascination with guns. Some days he wanted to buy a handgun and shoot the next person who walked onto his front porch unannounced. Other days he wondered how guns could exist in this delicate world, could even be collected and displayed with pride.

“Where are the detectives?” Irene asked. “We were hoping to meet them.”

“Out on a case,” the captain said.

“Ours?”

“No, but they’re still working your son’s homicide. We probably get one or two new leads each week. Something will pan out.”

“It’s been eight months,” she said.

“We don’t have much to work with,” Captain Lewis said, “just the bul-

lets taken from the victims. What usually happens in these kinds of cases is that the perpetrators do a similar crime, get caught, and are linked to past crimes.”

“You still think there were two men?” Irene asked.

“Yes, it’s usually two. They travel to these small and mid-sized towns, hit a store or gas station, then hop back on the interstate, figuring they can outrun the local cops.”

“They guessed right, didn’t they?” Carl said.

“So far,” said Captain Lewis. “But we’ll get them.”

Irene asked about seeing the reports.

“Are you sure?” the captain asked. “It’s a pretty fat file, lots of terrible things in there.”

“We’re sure,” she said. “The story’s not complete. We need to complete the story.”

Captain Lewis consented, but said he couldn’t give them any paperwork related to tipsters or suspects.

“Suspects?” Irene asked.

“Several,” he said, “just not enough evidence to make an arrest.” The captain paged the front desk officer and instructed him to make a copy of everything in the Jonathan Bradshaw file, except the detective’s reports and autopsy photos.

“Look,” Captain Lewis said, steepling his hands. “At the time of the shootings the nearest sector car was on Fifth, watching a drug house. If we had him patrolling Main, well, who knows, maybe a different outcome. Each day is like a chess game. You make your moves, hoping for the best.”

Carl felt a sudden fire in his belly, and one in his brain. The fires were traveling toward each other, soon to meet in his chest where they would consume him. He imagined himself, ablaze, lunging for Captain Lewis’s throat, saying, “It’s not a game of chess, you idiot. No one dies from chess.” But then he saw a certain experiential sadness in the captain’s eyes, and the fires began to calm.

“So your son was headed to California?” Captain Lewis asked.

“Yes,” Irene said. “He wanted to see the West Coast and the ocean before starting college. He—”

“You’re a father,” Carl said.

“I am,” the captain said. “Two sons. One’s married, they’re up in St. Paul, and the second’s in the Navy. How’d you know?”

“I was a father, once,” Carl said, his voice quavering.



The patrolman returned a few minutes later and handed an envelope stuffed with copies to Carl, who immediately handed it to Irene. Captain Lewis, heading home for the day, told the Bradshaws he'd walk them to their car.

The sun was still beating brightly as they marched to the Chevy, though it no longer seemed to be favoring Irene. When they reached the car, the captain asked if they were staying the night in town, and suggested the Howard Johnson's at the truck plaza. He was promising to be in touch with any news when Carl asked him if he had ever been shot.

"Nope. Shot at a few times but they missed."

"I wonder what it feels like to be shot," Carl said.

"I'm sure it's no picnic, but the coroner told me your boy didn't suffer much," Captain Lewis said.

"I know," said Carl. "But he suffered some."

‡ ‡ ‡

Inside of their car, Irene and Carl gazed at the manila envelope resting heavily on Irene's lap, the stack of reports inside of it as real and as awful as a tombstone.

"Should I open it?" she asked.

"Not now," he said.

Irene felt queasy, and blamed it on the sickening sentences waiting inside the envelope. "Should we go by the store where he was *sh-o-tee?*" she asked, her sadness stretching out the last word, hoping it would burst.

"Maybe first thing tomorrow," he said. "Maybe never."

They drove to the Howard Johnson's and got a room. Carl dropped a duffle bag full of clothes on the floor and Irene plopped the envelope of reports on a table near the bed, before clicking on the TV. The local news had started and Irene thought about how disorienting it is when you see newscasters that aren't your own. *Who are these imposters?*

"Anything but the news," Carl said, fearing he might weep rivers if he was told about some area high school kid driving his car into a tree.

Irene flipped through the stations with the remote, and decided they'd watch a *Seinfeld* rerun. "My feet hurt," she said, flipping off her blue deck shoes. "Would you rub them for me?"

Carl looked at her feet like they were verminous, something the state health department should be taking measures against. He had, until Jonathan's death, sometimes enjoyed sucking Irene's toes, kissing the webbings between, and making up obscene versions of Little Piggy Went to Market.

“Maybe when I get back,” he said.

“You’re going out?”

“For a bit. I need some air.”

“Pick us up some beer,” she said. “I need to drown.”

‡ ‡ ‡

Carl drove into town, looking for a store, but avoiding Forrester’s Market on Main Street where Jonathan and a clerk, Beatrice Lawson, were gunned down in a robbery. The register was emptied, several cartons of cigarettes were stolen, and Jonathan’s wallet was lifted.

He couldn’t locate a grocery, but he did find a bar, Midtown Tavern. He parked the Chevy and went inside. “Hey, I need a cold six,” he said to the bartender.

“Sorry,” said the man, bulky and red-haired, “the law says I can’t sell you that. But you’re welcome to sit down and drink yourself silly.”

*Now there’s a plan*, Carl thought. He placed a five-dollar bill on the wooden bar and ordered a draft. “Surprise me,” he said. The man handed him a mug of Canadian beer, a little bitter and flat but he’d go with it.

As he was considering saying something to the barkeeper about Jonathan’s murder, a young woman came up to the bar and asked for change for the cigarette machine.

“You’re not eighteen,” the bartender said.

“Yes I am,” she said. “I just forgot my ID.” She patted at the pockets of her blue jeans frantically.

“Aren’t you the Givens kid? You’re like fifteen.”

“I said I’m old enough!”

“Sorry, kid. No ID, no ciggies.”

The girl stomped away in a huff, threatening a multi-million dollar lawsuit. Carl set down his beer and went after her. Once outside he spotted the girl, about half a block away, and yelled to her, “I can buy you cigarettes.” She waved him off, so he yelled louder, “And beer, and anything else you want.”

She turned around and they walked to each other. “What’s in it for you?” she asked, one of her eyebrows rising up.

“I was young once,” he said.

“A long time ago,” she said.

She climbed into his car and they began to drive. At the first stop sign, Carl asked if he could place his hand on her leg.

The girl shrieked and reached for the door handle, but then stopped her

escape and looked at Carl, perhaps assessing her ability to outfight or outrun him.

“I’ll pay you forty dollars,” he said.

“Just for touching my leg?”

“A bit more.”

“I don’t have to do anything?”

“Not a thing.”

“Okay, I guess. I could use the money, anyhow.”

The girl led Carl down a maze of side streets and alleys as they hunted for a place where he could touch her unnoticed. While searching, he stroked one of her blue jean-covered legs until she said that it hurt a little, “like an Indian burn.” He apologized and removed his hand, and then interrogated her. She said she was indeed the Givens girl, Barbara Anne, though she preferred Annie, and she’ll be eighteen in nine days. She liked horses, had a boyfriend, Bud, “that’s his nickname, he’s a doper,” and she hoped to someday captain a luxury ocean liner.

“I heard about that double shooting you folks had a few months back,” Carl said in a loose, unaffected voice.

“It sucked,” she said. “I knew the lady that got killed. Now when I go into that store I get the willies.”

“The guy that was murdered, did you know him?”

“No, he was from some other place. Don’t know what he was doing here. This is a town you get your ass away from, not come to. If you’re smart.”

They found an alley where Carl could park the car between two dumpsters. He cut the ignition and stared at Annie. She glanced at him, smiled politely, then turned and peered out the windshield, even though it offered only a view of the back of a restaurant. She seemed to be counting the cement blocks. His eyes fell upon her wavy, dark brown hair, and he thought of an untraveled forest, rich with exotic life. He leaned forward so that he could gaze at her eyes, a pretty purple, probably due to colored contacts. She had plump lips, and he thought they might taste like ripe nectarines. Annie’s jeans were torn at both knees, and the pinkish knee skin below looked to be freshly made. Her breasts were tart apples with the stems still attached, Carl decided. He marveled at her aliveness, and when he started to touch her she nervously popped spit bubbles between her lips.

Carl ran a finger along those lips, wet with bubble drool, and he reverently touched her cheeks, nose, and eyelashes, causing her to blink. He then awkwardly reached to stroke her feet and toes. She was wearing sandals, and her toenails were alternately painted black and silver. “I like the Oakland

Raiders,” she explained, still looking straight ahead. “They kick ass.”

His hand slowly spiraled up and down her leg, as if polishing it, and when he rested his hand on her knee he instantly remembered the hundreds of blue and black butterflies that fluttered in the meadow behind the Gulf service station, the first week of every August in the Ohio town where he grew up. They would appear suddenly, as if born out of the air. He almost cried with joy.

Annie jerked with surprise each time he touched her. Carl wanted to know and didn’t want to know if he was the first to step foot in this verdant forest. When he ran his knuckles along the silky hair of her arm she giggled and said, “You’re giving me the goose tickles!” He wanted then to be eighteen and crazy in love with her.

“Are you almost done?” she said. “I have to get home.” He was rubbing her hipbone through her jeans, but stopped, retrieved his wallet, and handed her two twenties.

She asked if he wanted her phone number, and he nodded. Annie found a pen in the glove box and wrote her number on one of Irene’s maps, along with her name and an explosion of exclamation points. Carl peeled off the section of paper containing the number and tucked it inside his wallet.

“Hey, can you still get me a pack of Camels?” she asked. “And a six of Budweiser and a frozen Snickers?”

“Sure,” Carl said. He reached for the ignition and was about to turn it, until Annie told him that there was a grocery store just around the corner.

“Go down that alley and turn right,” she said, pointing. “I don’t think we should be seen together. Sorry. How old are you? Like sixty?”

“Forty-nine,” Carl said, chopping three years off of his true age. Exiting the car and starting down the alley, he noticed a strange, almost happy hop to his step. He took a right at the intersecting alley, strolled to the street, turned, and saw the grocery’s entrance, its automatic doors awaiting his next step. Carl glanced up at the store sign: “Forrester’s Market: Milk, Beer, Sundries.”

“Oh no, oh Christ, no,” he said, collapsing to the sidewalk. From there, he watched the world burn whiter and whiter. The brick and glass of the store, the signs proclaiming outrageous deals on Carson’s Potato Chips and Hire’s Root Beer, the people inside, the shelves and coolers of groceries, were all being painted over by a strange, milky whiteness. *Death is a lot like moving out of an apartment*, he thought. *Whatever you did to the apartment, however you lived, life just paints over it. The only important question: how many coats will it take?* He noticed that his heart was opening branch offices,

beating wildly in his belly, feet, hands, neck, eyes, and elbows. His breathing was like an unrequited love: much more was going out than was coming back. He waited for the whiteness to tell him what it wanted.

Soon a dot of blue, from the smock of a store clerk who was hovering over Carl, corrupted the white and the colors of life began to restore themselves. “You okay?” asked the boy clerk.

Carl gazed at his pimpled, imperfect savior, and nearly told him that he was extraordinarily beautiful, a miracle. But the editor that lived in Carl’s brain was already back at work, had scratched those lines out.

“You better come inside,” the boy said. “Whenever someone falls I have to fill out a stupid incident report.”

“I just can’t,” Carl said.

The clerk helped Carl to his feet, and as soon as he felt that he had control of his legs he walked quickly down the alleyways and to his car. Annie, sitting cross-legged on the Chevy’s hood, greeted him with a frown. “Where’s my stuff, man?”

“Sorry. I got the willies when I went in the store. Like you do.”

“I don’t get them that bad. You look like you seen a house full of ghosts.”

“I did.”

Annie shrugged. “Don’t sweat it. If my brother’s home he’ll give me some of his smokes. Menthol. Blech!” She peered up at the sky in an almost expectant way, then looked at Carl and asked, “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Charles Wentworth the Third,” he fibbed.

“I’m Annie Givens the First,” she said, laughing. She then slid off the car and tramped away, waving off his offer of a ride home.

Carl watched her walk, and wondered if his romp through the forest had in any way harmed the forest. He hoped not.



Back at the motel, Irene had started reading the police files. The first pages detailed what the first officers on the scene saw, such as Jonathan lying in the parking lot, face down in the snow, and the old lady sprawled dead on the counter. Jonathan, known as John Doe early on, had a weak pulse when the cops arrived, but none when the paramedics showed up four minutes later.

Words like *subject*, *victim*, *DOA*, *caliber*, and *trajectory* stabbed at Irene. She’d read until tears blocked her vision, then she’d set the papers down and get up and open the door and look out at the day mechanically playing itself

out. Yes, that's the way trucks sounded when they let out their brakes, and yes, that's how birds skittered and pecked in the grass. When was the world going to start surprising her?

It was during her fourth reading of the papers that she came upon a detective's report that she probably wasn't supposed to see. An anonymous tipster had told the police that shortly after the shootings a local man named Martin Givens had left town for a few days. The report noted that Givens had prior offenses: two arrests for disorderly conduct and one for receiving stolen property. No public record that he owned a .38 caliber gun. In a messy scrawl at the bottom of the report the detective had written, "Subject claims he was on a weekend bender but can't remember where. Keep an eye on this guy."

Irene sprang up from the bed as if tugged back into life by a crane. "This is the son of a bitch that murdered my boy," she said. She wanted to simultaneously hug someone and destroy something. Anger held hands with hope, an uncomfortable pairing. She wished Carl were there. He'd be so happy, knowing that the police might be nearing an arrest, even though the report was dated five months earlier.

The passing of a few minutes slowed down her thoughts. Irene knew that Carl couldn't handle the news, not yet. He was at the edge of something, something she couldn't name, and this might push him over. Which was worse, thinking that the cops were scouring the world for the killer but hadn't found him, or knowing that they had the guy but didn't have enough evidence to charge him? She'd have to handle this herself.

She called for a taxi and told the driver to take her to the address listed on the police report. Once there, she had him park across from the house. "The meter keeps ticking," the man said, before beginning to read a dog-eared copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Irene stared at the suspect's house, a single story rectangular structure painted olive green and looking like a park outhouse with extra rooms. There was only one tree in the yard, infant-sized and leafless, and secured to the earth by three straps.

She shifted her eyes to a girl in tattered jeans, dancing down the sidewalk toward the taxi. The girl started jogging then suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, began to skip, and then engaged in a drunkard's walk. The girl captivated Irene, how she seemed to be writing her life as she went along. How will the girl move her body forward next, Irene wondered? In a narrow line, the girl chose, cautiously placing one foot after the other as if walking on a plank over a den of snakes.

The girl sauntered into the yard of the suspect's home, knelt near the

tiny tree, said a few words, and touched a frail stem. Irene looked away.

About five minutes later an El Camino came noisily down the street and pulled into the suspect's driveway. A lanky young man with an oval face and curly brown hair got out of the car and started toying with the driver's side windshield wiper. Irene curled the fingers of her left hand, forming an O, and looked through the mock riflescope at the man. "Bang, bang," she whispered. The girl with tattered jeans came into view and started searching the man's pockets. She found a pack of cigarettes, took one and stuck it up her nose, and handed the pack back to the man. The girl then ran toward the house, arms flapping. "Hayseeds," said Irene, unfurling the hand scope and telling the driver to take her back to the Howard Johnson's.

Carl was sprawled on the bed, watching a movie about the friendship between a trucker and an ape, when she returned. He hadn't looked at the reports. "Hey, where you been?" he asked.

"You're right," she said. "This room has no air. You pick up any beer?"

"Sorry, forgot."

"It's okay. All I want to do is sleep."

‡ ‡ ‡

The next day, after a quiet breakfast at the motel restaurant, they drove to Forrester's Market. They parked across from the store and watched people go inside, buy an item or two, and leave. "I'm having terrible *déjà vu*," Irene said.

"Me too," Carl said, waiting for the world to bleach white again.

"Maybe *déjà vu* isn't the reliving of your own experiences," she said, "but living an experience that someone you loved had. Our Jonathan was right here. Maybe I'm seeing through his eyes."

"Could be," he said.

"Why did this have to happen?" Irene asked urgently, grabbing his wrist and digging her fingernails into his skin.

Carl didn't have any comforting words to offer his wife. Saying that Jonathan's death was random was just as cruel as saying that it was part of God's plan. "Ouch," he finally said. Irene let go of his wrist.

‡ ‡ ‡

They returned to their town and to their lives. Carl went back to work at the municipal water plant, and Irene to her part-time job at a card and gift shop. They yearned for normalcy, so Carl said he understood when

Irene told him she wanted to go out with the girls on Tuesday and Thursday nights. On Tuesdays she'd watch her bowling league friends knock down the pins, she said, and on Thursdays she and her pals would play bingo at the American Legion hall.

On one of the Thursday nights Carl was cleaning out his plump wallet when he came upon Annie's number. Without much moral hesitation he phoned the girl, promising himself that he'd talk only about ponies and ships.

"Hi," he said, when she answered the phone. "It's Charles..."

"Charlie Wentworth the Third!" she said. "Oh my God. I was hoping you'd call. I'm all out of money. Oh wait, I didn't mean to say it that way."

"It's okay, I'm here to help in any way I can," he said. They did speak of ships and horses, but he was also able to glean what she was wearing. By his third call to Annie, always on Tuesday and Thursday nights, they had worked out an arrangement where he would periodically send her \$100, and that would entitle him to five calls where he could ask or say anything he wanted. Often, the first part of the call was spent in chitchat, the girl talking about school, her lazy boyfriend, or her goofy, prankster brother, "Marty the Farty," but eventually Carl would ask about her clothes or her experiences with boys.

Before long, Carl started sending Annie scripts along with the money. They would act out various scripted fantasies, or she was to say things like "you make me so hot" every few minutes. Sometimes this would have the desired effect, sometimes not. Annie was a bit of a ham and would come up with variations on the planned dialogue such as, "You make me hotter than a girl who fell into a volcano." She'd then laugh hysterically.

Irene also made a few phone calls to West Henderson during those months, to Captain Lewis. "No news yet," he'd said. Each time she inquired whether any locals were suspects, and each time she heard back that a few names had surfaced but they were cleared.



One night in early December, Carl came home from work and found a note from Irene taped to the fridge. It said that she had headed to her sister's place in Cleveland for a few days to clear her head. "I need this time by myself," she wrote. "Don't call me. I'll be back before long. Love, your dearest wife."

"My *dearest* wife?" Carl mumbled. "How many wives do I have?" At first he didn't mind much that Irene was gone—he could stop the "husband

progressing with his grieving” routine and just be his miserable self. But soon he felt lonely and abandoned. Irene had never left for Cleveland without talking it over first. He needed a comforting voice. He phoned Annie.

“Hey! What’s up, man?” she said. “You’re calling on a Monday.”

“Tell me you love me,” he pleaded.

“Umm, I should probably only say that to my boyfriend,” she said.

“Please,” Carl begged. “I’ll pay you a bonus.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Annie sang. “Love you with my heart, love you night and day, love you when life is...smelly, love you like peanut butter loves jelly. Hee! Love you, my stinky rat!”

“Could you say that one more time?” he asked.

The next day, Carl repeatedly thought about Annie, her voice, her sweetness, and her apple breasts. At the plant there were reports to review—particulate levels were up, or down, some change—but he spent most of the day on the observation walkway, imagining that Annie was wrapped around him as they watched water flow into the massive intake pipes where it would find its way to the twenty-some thousand homes and businesses hooked up to the lake, and the treated water flow back out. He’d point to the seagulls, diving into the warm effluent, but tell Annie that no fish could be found there, that that part of the lake was a dead zone.

As soon as he returned home Carl phoned Annie, but there was no answer. He let the phone ring a dozen times, then waited a few minutes and called her back, but with the same results.

Annie didn’t answer the telephone because she was in the front yard, crying next to her brother, who had been shot six times in the belly and chest. A paramedic was trying to call back fading vital signs with hand pumps over the heart and with demanding words: “Keep fighting, Marty! You’re not done yet!” Captain Lewis and two patrolmen were also in the yard, as was Irene Bradshaw. Held in handcuffs and with eyes as emotionless as painted stones, Irene kept babbling, “I did this for Jonathan.”



Since Annie’s brother Marty was the man Irene had murdered, Carl had to avoid his wife’s court hearings. What if Annie leapt tearfully into his arms in the courtroom? For the arraignment he told Irene he got lost, and for the pre-trial he claimed to have blown two tires on the Chevy. Carl had no idea, yet, how he’d be able to skip the possibly lengthy trial.

Irene seemed untroubled during their first jailhouse meeting. She told of buying the gun and practicing at a shooting range on Tuesdays

and Thursdays, telling herself that it's a dangerous world and she needed protection, but always imagining the droopy face of Martin Givens on the silhouette target. She'd shoot the target in the head and imagine gray matter flying, in the heart and think of clocks stopping. Afterward, she would sit in her car and tremble, hoping that when she got home there'd be news that the police had arrested Givens, that the final chapter on Jonathan's murder had been written without her having to write it. Carl and Irene then touched hands, as much as the wire mesh screen that separated them would allow. She asked for his love and support, and he promised unending supplies of both.

At the arraignment Irene pled innocent to murder in the first degree. Her attorney had told her they might be able to play on the parental feelings of some of the jurors and get a conviction on a lesser charge like manslaughter. He doubted that she'd be acquitted. "You thought you were offing the person who killed your son. People understand such passions," he said.

"I did shoot the man who murdered my Jonathan," she said.

"Maybe. I don't know how much the cops told you, but they're looking pretty closely at this pair out of Lincoln. Hopefully they won't make any arrests until the trial is over. That would hurt us."

"No, it was him, Givens," she said. "I could see it in his face. A mother would know."



Carl hadn't spoken to Annie since the killing. But whenever he was in West Henderson to see Irene he would drive by Annie's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. One of the times she was out front, shoveling snow away from the little tree. He wanted to stop the car and run to Annie and roll in the snow with her, but he kept driving.

Three days before the scheduled start of the trial Carl finally phoned her.

"Oh, Charlie," she said. "I thought you didn't like me any more."

"Sorry. Been busy with work."

"Something terrible happened. My brother got shot dead."

"I know. I'm so sorry."

"You know?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"You did? Why didn't you call me?"

"I thought you'd want to be left alone."

"I never want that."

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but it double sucks because Marty was raising me. I told you my mom’s in jail for bad checks and my dad left us when I was little? My aunt’s here, but I don’t know what’s going to happen to me.”

“But you’re eighteen, right? You can raise yourself, legally.”

“That don’t mean I’m ready for life. Are you still married?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Never mind.”

“No, tell me.”

“I was just thinking that we’d be good together. Maybe not married, unless you wanted to, but living together. But never mind.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“I dumped him. He can’t handle it when girls cry.”

In his mind Carl saw himself living with Annie, on a sunlit farm where she could ride ponies all day. They’d have a tomato garden, and a decorative pond stocked with frogs and lily pads. He’d work eighty hours a week, if necessary, to support her and the farm. “The future’s wide open,” he said. “Even if we don’t want it to be.”

“So there’s a chance?”

“Perhaps a chance.”

“When are you coming to Nebraska?”

“Soon. Look, maybe you should get out of town for a month or two. Our little secret. Where do you want to go? I’ll send you money.”

“I can’t, not yet. The murder trial’s about to start and I’m going to be there every day to make sure that bitch fries.”

“I understand.”

“Cool. Hey, can we not talk that certain way much tonight? It would be too weird.”

“That’s fine,” he said, canceling plans to ask about her clothing.

“So, what do you want to talk about Charlie, my man?” she asked.

Irritated by Annie’s youthful, trusting voice, Carl set the phone down and stretched his arms. The house was almost pitch black, but the darkness was a kind one in that it helped to hide the many messes. To straighten things up would mean accepting the fact that Irene was gone for good, or for at least ten to fifteen years. He swiveled his chair toward the front door, waiting for his wife to come through it and yell at him for living like a pig, or for Jonathan to bust through that door and say, “Hey Pop, I’m home.”

Carl stood up, found his way into the kitchen, and pushed down the toaster lever. Coiled firelight lit up the room. “Maybe I’ll blow off the trial and go to the ocean,” he said to the towers of dirty dishes in the sink, “live

out Jonathan's dream. Be his eyes, like Irene said back in West Henderfuck." The dishes didn't protest the plan.

He dropped bread of questionable freshness in the toaster, readying to make cinnamon butter toast, a childhood favorite, when he remembered Annie. He returned to the living room in time to hear her squeaky "Hello, hello, is anyone there?" He picked up the receiver and thought pleasantly of Annie, his brokenhearted girl with painted toenails.

"Sorry," he said. "I was lost in thought."

"What an awful place to get lost in," she said. "That was a joke. So, anyways, did you think of something you wanted to talk about with me?"

"Yes," he said. "My love, I want you to tell me about your sadness."

"What, what did you say?"

"I said...I said have you ever seen the ocean?"

THROUGH, IN*Andrew Shields*

This is a picture of glass.  
 The slightest streak of sun  
 on a windowpane.

Through the glass,  
 what's outside, visible because the glass  
 is invisible. No wonderland. Cars  
 in a parking lot. Two trees  
 and a blur of leaves.

In the glass,  
 where there are shadows outside,  
 what's inside. A porcelain bowl  
 in a car in the street, the folds  
 of a gauze curtain touched  
 by the ends of branches.

Glass,  
 seen through, seen into, seen.

(The glass in the picture,  
 through which the street,  
 in which the room.  
 The glass of the lens,  
 with which the window.  
 The glass in the frame,  
 through which the picture,  
 in which the room.)

SAPPHICS IN SNOW

*Moira Egan*

Ice is melting, suddenly I can see through  
long-fogged windows' icily raggy patterns.  
Outside snow is covering all the houses:  
    beautiful roundness.

Falling hours, gracefully fallen dancers,  
snowflakes individual, so they tell us,  
just as we are. What of the psyches merging  
    into the pile-up?

Sines of whiteness softening jagged angles.  
Is it really part of our human nature  
handing over that which we grasp so tightly,  
    self-definition?

Some days I would easily flow into you,  
others I would freeze in the cold air choosing  
lonely over losing my stubborn reasons.  
    I know the ice floes.

**MUTE REMAINS***Cynthia Sowers*

Nothing to discover  
 (Apart from the measure  
 Of sound traveling out  
 And away—  
 Parenthetical to the event itself,  
 Which no one saw  
 Or could see).

Sound was the messenger  
 From witnessing darkness:  
 A sequence of strokes  
 In solemn procession  
 Eventually passing through—  
 A silent fan stirring a few hairs  
 Across the floor;  
 Shards of flesh seeking  
 A fugitive corner.

IN CHAINS

*Cynthia Sowers*

The presence of stone is some consolation:  
The sheer turning away  
And mineral depth of refusal is there  
Perfect, natural, sacred.

The gods turn away from sacrifice  
And prayer in immortal freedom.  
To Artemis' altar many have clung—  
Cried "Woe!" And wailed in vain.

Jeweled eyes see from another perspective,  
A power incomprehensible,  
To encompass and swiftly pass by  
Momentary skin and bone.

A maple leaf or golden spears of ash  
Frozen, then warmed in the casual play of fall,  
Leave a dark print even there;  
A supplicant hand pressed against  
The elemental wall.

DIALOGUE ON ASCETICISM*Cynthia Sowers*

1.

The most delicate of lines  
 on a blue page:  
 indications of measurement  
 and dimension.  
 Perfect specificity;  
 the edifice of perfection itself,  
 built to withstand  
 all rude power.  
 An allusion in the uneven fold,  
 in the sequence of lines,  
 to the break—a mark—a mark—  
 most subtle;  
 interpretable as humility.

2.

Three stones  
 roughly square  
 set one atop the other:  
 tumbled by a grain of sand;  
 scattered by a raindrop;  
 the departure of a cloud.

## THE VISIBLE

*Michael Heller*

at Port Bou has been insistent, as though some god  
or a god's talon were clawing at the occiput.

The sea, and its blue-green water seen from almost every street.

He might have looked one last time from the window of the hotel.  
His grave in the cemetery on the hill faces out.

There are lures, siren calls if you like, that secure the self from rocks and selvages.

There are lighthouses.

Others hear the lost who bestrew the littoral with their voices or stand keening  
in the rocky fields above the wave tips.

*Enormities*, they cry to their taloned gods, to swirled obscure objects  
as if that same god had plowed under what can be named,  
or mischievously hid it in another of the sea's furrows.

\*

One fears each word is a narrowing to a lightless and sea-depth pursuit,  
in touch only with its own hardness, with itself.

Water softens rock, that is love, and seabirds have beaks that crack shells.

Port Bou harbors its sleek white yachts.

There are lighthouses.

On this coast, stone is impermissible and sun unpersuasive.

FATHER (A PARABLE OF RICHES)

29.VI.2003

*Michael S. Harper*

I'm wearing your fedora  
which is like your father's

you are both young men  
(sometimes I turn up the brim)

then I put a mandolin in one hand  
flute in the other

then I walk down town to meet my friends  
(they are not friends you say)

soon I'm standing on the river  
on as opposed to in because of the float

in all fingers are the melodies  
I will need when things go bad

they are bad now because of **fd**r  
he's a king who's never known poverty

he marries his cousin  
both families give estates to the state

orphans come from the five boroughs  
people south of Kingston set up camp

I'm still wearing the hat  
but down river on a raft

there is no Huck and no Jim  
the civil war is now on film

you are born that year (1915 but not Dutch)  
a mob who knows your family

approaches the porch  
I start to write the poetry of our clan

**MANHATTAN BEACH***Michael S. Harper*

August 29, 2004

Two hours before the setting sun in the west  
 (one has to be reminded which coast is coast  
 when you have set your father's ashes into the sea  
 where your brother and mother have gone before)  
 you are in the arc of the beloved angel on earth  
 and she has your jacket around her around you  
 you think of Rumi's sacred geometry in Konya  
 you feel the sketch of the sufi at cards  
 who restores the cloak of the archangel  
 his power drifts over you both skimming  
 the darkness as a shroud finally withdrawn  
 in her deft arms you might sing true  
 with the fire restored you waffle no longer  
 about the meaning of her flesh what stands  
 behind her such faith spirit music glow  
 the void only she can fill remind yourself  
 in the low zones of repression she is light  
 shared lovingly this has always been so  
 'you are in the service of the beloved,  
 why are you hiding?' this is her answer...

**HARDY AT THE HARVEST SUPPER**

*Floyd Skloot*

I know before I wake that something's wrong.  
 The morning light that should be just above  
 the tallest fir is blazing through a grove  
 of oak that isn't there. I hear a song

adrift within the breeze: wren or trilling  
 flute? Then a fiddle's long sustaining note  
 that seems to come from morning's open throat,  
 and the sharp swish of summer leaves filling

in the background. I've been reading about  
 Thomas Hardy all week, going back through  
 the details of a life I thought I knew  
 from years of study, and I have no doubt

that the music I hear is his. I went  
 to sleep in Oregon and woke somewhere  
 in Dorset. Hardy plays his fiddle there,  
 at a harvest supper his father sent

him to, carrying the family songbook.  
 The flute is played by his uncle, the swish  
 of leaves is dancers' breath, and Hardy's wish  
 is that the song would never end. The look

in his eye is the look of a man gone  
 beyond time or place, and his smile is real  
 as a window. His song becomes a reel,  
 and Hardy closes his eyes, moves beyond

sight. The music fades. Swaying fir limbs grow  
 still outside my bedroom window. My wife  
 stirs beside me and sighs, bringing my life  
 back into focus. We're here, and I know

Hardy's song was the song she played before  
we went to sleep, her fiddle giving voice  
to the book I was reading, to the choice  
Hardy made to leave Dorset once and for

all. Art and life were transformed into dream,  
and the dream absorbed time and place.  
This must be what Hardy hoped when his face  
turned away from home, when he caught a gleam

above the heath, a flickering of first light  
that might save or blind him as he followed.  
For luck he touched the crook of a hollowed  
tree and marched off into the dwindling night.

## LAST STARS

*Corinne Demas*

My brother's house, the small house he bought to retire in, is set high on stilts. From the veranda you can look out over the neighbor's grape vines and watch the sea. In the distance, off to the East, is Evvia, the island the English call Euboea, which runs along the coast, a breakwater against the Aegean. My brother's house is the fourth in a row of seven. Seven houses with walled gardens posted along a dirt road a developer cut into a vineyard. At the end of the street is the beach—not sand, but smooth stones the size of pigeon eggs. My brother and I are the only people who swim there during the week. On Sundays people come up here from Athens and the cove is crowded with boats and bathers.

We eat all our meals on the veranda, and in the evening we sit out here until it is time to go to sleep. It is so quiet I imagine I can hear the jasmine unfolding its scented blossoms, the bougainvillea shedding the petals of its oldest flowers. The stars here are unchallenged by the lights of any city. I've been here, staying with my brother, for several weeks now. I don't know how long I will stay. Nina is out of college now, working in New England. The people we were once married to live far away. I'm not even certain if Nicholas is still alive. What is the same are the stars in the sky, the stars he and I once tried to tame by learning the names of their constellations, the way you try to claim a tree or a songbird by identifying it, calling it by name. My brother and I talk very rarely about the past, but the stars remain implanted in the sky, threaten me with memories.

My brother sits beside me, smoking. I watch the glow at the end of his cigarette.

"Time for bed," he says. He reaches down and taps his cigarette on the marble tile floor, extinguishes the light.

"I'll sit out here a little while longer."

"Are you all right?" he asks me.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Something on your mind?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, goodnight, then," he says. His hand rests for a minute on the side of my head. Then he is gone and I am alone with the stars.

‡ ‡ ‡

The day that Nicholas got married again I'd taken Nina off to what seemed to me almost the opposite side of the world, as far away as I could possibly be. It wasn't something I had planned that way on purpose, but as our bus pulled up in front of the hotel, its semi-circle of faded flags waving their welcome, I understood what I had done.

The flags were set out like the flags in front of the United Nations Building, advertising, perhaps, the national diversity of the guests. Years of exposure to the unrelenting sun and wind had nearly erased their identity, with the exception of the Greek flag, which was twice as large as the others and which had been given unaccustomed prominence in the center. From a distance the flags had seemed like the heralds of a lively and prosperous resort. Up close the impression they gave was more like the place itself, which had been constructed in the fifties and hadn't been spruced up since. The pool was green with algae; the loungechairs had broken slats; the volleyball net that was strung across the yellow lawn had holes large enough for the ball to pass through.

Our bungalow was the one farthest from the main building, at the end of a path that ran parallel to the beach. There was a bedroom with two narrow beds and a covered porch where swallows nested in the eaves: three insatiable baby birds and two parents who relentlessly brought them food. I would have been content to live out of my suitcase, flapped open on the closet floor, but to please Nina I unpacked. She'd put her clothes in the two bottom dresser drawers, leaving the top ones for me. On the desk she laid out her comb and brush, her toiletries, and her diary, which she wrote in once or twice a day, forbade me to touch, but read aloud to me selected sections now and then. Mostly it was long catalogues of everything we had seen and eaten. But sometimes she wrote what must have been more personal passages, cupping her hand to hide them from me while she was writing.

We'd spent a week with my brother and his wife in their elegant apartment in Kolanaki Square, and they'd taken us on daily excursions to sites near Athens. My brother was in the foreign service then. His wife, Priscilla, despised the Greeks, but she professed an interest in antiquity and read aloud to us from guide books while my brother chauffeured us around in his air-conditioned car. She was incredulous when I said I was going off by bus to the other side of the Peloponnesos with Nina. My brother's wife had scrupulously avoided any mention of Nicholas, but my brother had taken me aside the first night I was there and asked me what was up.

"He's getting married," I had said, looking my brother squarely in the face.

"To that same little—?"

“No. A different one.”

“When?”

“Next week,” I said. “Next Saturday, in fact.” And I had ducked off before my brother’s hand could descend on my shoulder.

The last night we were there, my brother asked me to go out for a walk with him. Priscilla would stay with Nina, who was already asleep. We walked all the way to the Plakka, not saying much. My brother was smoking, something which his wife did not let him do in the apartment. It was a warm and moonless night. There were stretches of light in front of tavernas and shops that were open, but parts of the narrow streets were dark. My brother took my hand as we made our way from one pocket of light to the next. I hadn’t held his hand for years, perhaps not since we had been kids, and it seemed so large to me, like my father’s hand had seemed to me when I was a child. We stopped at a cafe where there were vines trained up and around the awning. The vines looked real, but they had been decorated with clusters of green plastic grapes.

My brother ordered coffee and dessert for us. His Greek had gotten very good. He’d developed a way of talking using his hands. After years of inhibitions they were now able to move freely, and they spoke better than he did. When the dessert came they were fancy ice creams with little flags decorating the tops.

“I don’t understand why Nina isn’t at the wedding,” he said.

“Nicholas didn’t want her to be,” I said. “I’m sure it had something to do with the honeymoon. They’re leaving for parts unknown right after the reception. If Nina went to the wedding what would they do with her then?”

“I see,” said my brother.

“I didn’t want to sit around at home with Nina. I wanted to do something special with her this summer, too. Is it all right that I didn’t explain it all when I wrote and said we’d like to come?”

“God, yes,” said my brother.

Our conversation had relieved him. He set to work on his dessert, eating it with relish like a little boy. To please him, I ate mine also. Then he looked up at me suddenly.

“I still don’t understand why you went and made these plans to go off, just you and Nina. We could have all driven there together. I can take the time off. Those buses—do you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

It was so warm that night, and so much didn’t seem to matter.

“I’ll tell you,” I said, “but I must be crazy to say anything.”

“No, not crazy,” he said.

“Well, the truth is, I can’t stand Priscilla for very long.”

My brother looked at me, eyes round, then he broke into laughter. “Thank goodness it’s that,” he said, “I was beginning to be afraid it was me.”



The day that Nicholas got married—his day, our night—the hotel had what they called a native festival. A big sign by the bell desk announced the fact. The sign board was white plastic letters on a black felt background and Nina and I laughed over the English rendition of the text, either the result of someone whose spelling skills were anything but proficient, or else someone working under the constraint of not having enough of the proper letters and having to make creative substitutions. Spelling was Nina’s worst subject in school, as, I had told her many times, it had been mine, too.

It seemed like a good omen for the day, the fact that we had found something in common to laugh about, though I did not think it possible that Nina would forget about what day it was. On the engagement calendar propped up by her bedside she had written “Call Daddy” in letters too large to be contained by the box designated for August 3.

The native festival had been designed to give the vacationers a taste of the Greek village life which they had, by coming to such a resort, managed to pass by. A stall had been erected in the hotel lobby, and a variety of over-priced Greek crafts were laid out. In Athens, Nina had spent a day in the Plakka, going from shop to shop and had already spent her allowance for the trip, but this stall with its inferior wares was still enticing to her. I ended up buying her an embroidered blouse which she had gotten into her mind she loved, even though it was too big. Then we went out to swim. There was no lifeguard on the beach, but the water was shallow a long way out, and Nina was a good enough swimmer so I trusted her on her own. I’d gotten her a mask and snorkel and she liked to paddle around looking for fish. It seemed to me to be a stretch of ocean curiously barren of life. Perhaps these seas really had been fished clean centuries before—but Nina was content. I could lie on a chaise and read, and just look up now and then to check on the little black stovepipe of her snorkel.

A man and a woman, barefoot, but dressed in heavy old clothes, came down to the beach. The man had a garden spade and two large plastic pails. The woman stood beside him while he shoveled beach stones into the pail, then she hoisted it onto her head, with a folded cloth as padding underneath, and carried it up the hillside to the hotel. When she came down again the man had another pail of stones ready for her. They did this a

dozen times. The man filled the pails quickly and then chatted with a waiter I recognized who had strolled down to the beach. The waiter, I knew, spoke English, so I asked him what the stones were for.

"The festival tonight," he told me. "Souflaki. We roast a big lamb. We build a big pit for the fire now."

"Why don't you just get a wheelbarrow and fill it once and wheel it up."

The waiter shrugged. "What can I tell you?" he said.

"And why is it the woman who's doing all the heavy work."

The waiter laughed, translated my comment for the man with the shovel, who laughed too. "That," said the waiter, "is the way it should be."

When Nina was ready to go back to our bungalow to change for lunch, we stopped by the hotel first and saw where they were building their outdoor barbecue. The man and the woman were gone and two boys, under the supervision of the cook, were arranging the stones. By the end of lunch-time a lamb was already roasting there, its little body pierced by a spit, and two chefs in high hats that were less than perfectly white were taking turns rotating it at intervals.

At night, after the lamb had been eaten and the tables had been cleared, a group of dancers came to perform. The diners were instructed to pull their chairs into a semi-circle, and the floor was swept clear. There were three different dances and the women changed costumes between them with remarkable speed. The last dance was from Epirus and the women wore white stockings, black pumps, and black skirts. Their frilly blouse fronts were crisscrossed with chains strung with fake coins, as they would have worn their dowries. Nina had a doll dressed just this way, which my brother had sent her as a Christmas present one year.

"Did you have a dowry when you married Daddy?" she had asked me.

"It's not a custom with us, honey," I'd said. "I don't think even the Greeks do it today."

What had been, in a way, my dowry, was the car I had owned then—a hand-me-down from my brother—and the furnishings of my graduate student apartment which included an upright piano I had bought from the previous tenant, a rocking chair, and a four-poster bed. I still had the rocking chair. The silver and china that had been given to us as wedding presents, mostly by my parents, we divided up between us. We each took four place settings of silver and dishes. Of the crystal, only three wine glasses had survived, and Nicholas had left them with me.

"Will I have a dowry when I get married?"

"No, sweetheart." I had kissed Nina's forehead. "My face is my dowry, sir," she said.

The last dance of the night was the men's handkerchief dance—filled with the kind of passion and energy I'd never seen American men show on a dance floor. These dancers, in their tight fitting black pants and white, billowing blouses, seemed not to be performers at all, but real men caught up in their own dancing—at the same time intimate and public. When the dance was over and the applause began, they became performers again. They reached out to the people in the audience and invited them to join the dancing. I nudged Nina.

"Go on, honey," I said.

"Isn't it time to call Daddy now?"

"No, not for another few hours. Why don't you dance in the meantime. It'll be fun."

"Then why don't you do it?" she asked me.

"All right," I said. "We'll both dance." I got up and took her hand, but she pulled away from me.

"Leave me alone," she said.

I joined the dance: the clumsy tourists, the nimble dancers with their paid smiles teaching them simple steps, pushing them along to the music. When I looked back at Nina, hoping she would relent and join me, she was sitting on her folding chair backwards, her legs straight through the back, her chin resting on the back rest. There was no point in my dancing alone, but one of the male dancers had me firmly by the hand, and was swinging my arm, forcing the dance on me.

"Whoopa, whoopa!" he cried. He smelled of sweat and something else—ouzo, perhaps?

How long was it since I had really danced? Ten, fifteen years? Probably not since I'd been in high school. The only time I danced with Nicholas was at our wedding, that first dance in the center of the rented country club dining room, a stiff fox trot to the theme song of some popular movie which we had never seen. His shoulder smelled of dry cleaning fluid from his rented morning jacket.



Nicholas had given me, with considerable reluctance, the telephone number of the home of his new in-laws, where his second wedding was to take place. We'd agreed that Nina could call him sometime after the ceremony and before he took his new bride off to a honeymoon. I did not listen to her call. The phone on the desk in our bungalow, we discovered, was for local calls only. To place an overseas calls we had to go to the switchboard

behind the main desk, and Nina had to use one of the telephone booths in the hall. I stood by the switchboard operator who was working frantically over her plugs and wires like a nurse in an emergency room. She'd been at it like this, I gathered, all night. Once I stole a look at Nina, her head pressed against the glass-fronted door so her nose and forehead were flattened, white. When she came out I tried to find out from the switchboard operator how much I owed for the call, but she just shook her head and copied down the number dangling from my room key. The call would be charged to me, put on my room bill, she said, an explanation she had memorized intact and repeated in Greek, then German, then English in quick succession. It turned out that it never was. Some other guest had no doubt ended up with that call on their bill and either hadn't noticed or else had entered in a long and probably futile fight with the management to have it removed.

As we left the main building, the dining room lights were still all on and a few young boys were there, cleaning and setting things up for breakfast. They worked with the absolute certainty that there would be a next day, that it would come just as it always did.

We walked back towards our bungalow by the path along the water. Nina kept her head down; she would not look at me. We walked along the beach past our bungalow, the last lights for a distance. The path of cement stepping stones had ended and it was hard to walk along on the beach rocks. Nina stumbled, and that brought her tears.

"I should have been there," she said. "I should have been there with him today."

We kept walking.

She picked up a rock and threw it towards the water, where it fell short. Then she turned to me, crying still.

"You took me away here so I'd be far from him, so I couldn't be there when he got married. You didn't want me to be with him."

I let her hurl the words at me, as she hurled the stones at the water. This was, I told myself, a test of my love. I couldn't say anything to Nina. I loved her more than I loved the truth. Someday, perhaps, I thought, she'll know, but even if she didn't, I knew.



The light in my brother's bedroom goes out, the rectangle it marked on the veranda is erased. The room that I will sleep in lies in wait for me, in the dark.

I stand at the railing and look out to the sea. It is impossible to tell

where the vineyard ends, where the water begins, just as it is impossible to tell where the sea ends in the farther distance, where the sky begins.

As for my own heart, that day that he got married, I made no time for it. I concentrated instead, on what it was to be a mother. I looked back down the beach and saw in the distance the yellow light near the swallow's nest on the porch outside our bungalow, the place then that had become for me an idea of home. I did not look up at the last stars of the night.

NO NEWS IS THE NEWS I NEED*Samuel Amadon*

The kitchen of the South Green firehouse caught on fire when a pot of water boiled away & the cutting-boards left inside burned while the firemen were at a middle school. A parking attendant called it in but didn't speak English & later said *He no believe me*. Down on Park Street a SUV flipped over the curb & smacked into an apartment building. The woman inside told reporters *This is the second time this has happened*

*since we moved here. We need to move somewhere else.* But no one ever moves somewhere else & everyone should stay inside & not answer the door ever even for trick-or-treaters who sometimes carry guns in their costumes & shoot people in the face like Juan Rivera who neighbors say *wore baggy jeans but wasn't into thuggery*. Rivera was only the sixteenth killing of the year down from forty-four

last year which probably doesn't include the sixteen-year-old drug-dealer who got shot by the cops outside my apartment the week in August when I was already kicking myself for staying in Hartford that summer. I never stay for the summer & I usually don't manage to stay away through the winter but this year it seems I'm gone & not coming back except maybe for Thanksgiving & I'm already worried

about who I'm going to run into at the bus station that day. I've been burning as many bridges as I can remember crossing & I don't want to end up reconstructing with ashes. It just takes a little boredom & a drive through downtown for me to have a shot with someone I really shouldn't be shooting with & to start talking about changing my address back. You see someone you haven't seen & you only remember why you started

seeing them. That's why I'm better off just reading the Courant & not calling for news from what friends I have left. I'm hooked & want to be home when I hear *Stefan was in the hospital after forty-five minutes in Las Vegas because he tackled a palm tree* or *Rico got fired three times last night & still made a good two-hundred dollars* or *Murder walked in on Dicky alone in a hotel room pouring a bottle of Dom Perignon*

*on his head while singing a country song.* The paper I can put away when a story of one fire makes me say again *Only in Hartford* & the nostalgia can't catch me away from the city when I remember that other fire where I waited in traffic outside the burning nursing-home & watched snow falling slowly over the elderly piling out into the street in a long line which blocked a stream of cars that all started honking.

**APRIL 11, 1778: AAARAN**

San Diego Mission, California

*Jill McDonough*

*Los indios de Pamo* pulled back and aimed  
their flaming arrows at the tule roofs.  
Their songs called priests *demonicos*, and claimed  
they'd stolen land, controlled the rain. Fresh troops  
arrived to guard new tile. Aaaran was bold  
and unrepentant, busy trying shafts,  
stockpiling clubs *por los cristianos*. He told  
the soldiers to "come and be slain," planned fresh attacks.  
*Por insolencia, conspiradad*  
four men were sentenced to public deaths. Two days  
in jail, and then two bullets each. The sad  
priest charged with each man's soul was told to save  
Aaaran by Saturday, make him repent  
and die with Christ. Or not: *y si no, tambien.*

OCTOBER 8, 1789: RACHEL WALL

Boston, Massachusetts

*Jill McDonough*

The woodcut illustrating *Life, Laft Words and Dying CONFESSION, of RACHEL WALL*: a child's dark awkward house, a ladder slanting toward three figures, hanging above the crowd that piled onto cobbles to watch three robbers hang, and one a woman. The picture's clumsy. Still, her petticoats, small bodice are portrayed in detail. She said she never robbed that girl, but did admit that she deserved to die: the gold she stole from *under the captain's head*, asleep at *Long-Wharf. Sabbath-breaking*. The lie that got another woman whipped in her stead:

*I declare the crippled Dorothy Horn  
innocent of the theft at Mr. Vaughn's.*

**JANUARY 31, 1945: PRIVATE EDDIE D. SLOVIK**

St. Marie, France

*Jill McDonough*

Twelve riflemen with loaded rifles, lined  
across from Private Slovik. One of the guns  
is loaded with blanks, but they all take aim to find  
him in their sights, blindfolded, shocked in the sun.

The priest has pinned a target to his chest.

*Deserter. Coward.* He'd written his C. O.  
that he was left behind in France, confessed  
*I'LL RUN AWAY AGAIN IF I HAVE TO GO  
OUT THEIR.* The men he deserted thought he'd get  
let off with prison time, dishonor. When  
the twelve heard they'd been picked they never thought  
they'd really kill him; they hadn't killed their men  
since '64, but in '45 they'd start:  
a firing squad, too stunned to hit his heart.

## FIRST SETTLERS

*Peter Nohrnberg*

Many mistakes and errors of judgment  
were made in that country after landing.  
Where a lighthouse might have stood—to signal  
to those who would one day follow—they built  
a windmill. And where a well was needed  
they set a Maypole, though it was July,  
with water scarce. And once winter approached  
they discovered that they had not laid down  
sufficient provisions; in December  
they burnt their boats, and in February  
they had little choice but to kindle books.  
And that first spring, for reasons they never  
quite understood, housing was limited,  
though office space was easy to come by.

Yet this all changed, so that when the next wave  
of settlers came they found merely a wind-  
mill, keeping time slowly along the coast,  
grinding no wheat, but a stone into sand.

**DECISIONS**

*Peter Nohrnberg*

When was it we decided  
that the rambling message on the machine  
would discourage even local callers,  
that the string of mailmen would give up,  
keep our catalogues, return our bills?  
When did we begin to leave  
the CD player on infinite repeat,  
the radio searching for ever more distant  
stations, decided to keep the winter tape  
along the window frames,  
the sagging plastic pane left up for good,  
to use up all those frequent flyer miles  
on one round-the-world vacation,  
flying non-stop in first class  
from where we are to where we once  
wanted to be?

**OPEN AND SHUT***Peter Nohrnberg*

Some people said it was a toy factory,  
and other people said it was a chemical weapons plant  
while a few suggested it was a school or a prison.  
Those who came in and out on a regular basis  
only wished to comment that the florescent lights  
were dim, that the punch card clock ran slow  
and that the doors on the fire exits, when they opened, opened  
the wrong way.

ON THE OUBANGUI

—(for Ben)

*John J. Ronan*

Guides poled and guests paddled,  
 The bare-backed crew working currents  
 As the rest of us stroked slowly,  
 Wake and water snakes trailing  
 Our canoe on the broad Oubangui, border  
 Of Congo and a former French colony,  
*La Republique de l'Afrique Centrale*,  
 Five desperate degrees above the equator.  
 The shortwave radio crackled static:  
 'Snow in the Dakotas,' 'season's greetings,'  
 And on Christmas, 'Dean Martin has died.'  
 Tourists toasted with palm wine  
 The voice, the Rat Pack, Vegas—  
 A fond belief in booze and crooning,  
 Remote as we were, on a river in Africa.  
 The first morning we'd pushed into mist,  
 Splash followed by the splash of crocodiles,  
 On the tributary Mboumou. Second morning,  
 A portage past rapids and the start  
 Of a week on the big river west  
 Of Kemba, mud and a mile wide.  
 Many hours passed without hailing  
 Another dugout, then suddenly dozens  
 Would appear near the next village,  
 Where we'd stock up on water and wine,  
 Either bank of the bending river—  
 Or if the radio warned of rebels in Congo,  
 The next north, hugging the Republic.  
 A post office and goats, gusts  
 Of children, chickens, a mosque and a mission,  
 Animated gab in the taverns, our topics  
 Christmas, *Amore*, and small arms.  
 The guides would buy cassava bread

And fish and bake the fish on the bank,  
Saying grace by day to *Le Seigneur*,  
By night in Sango to mahogany and the moon.

**DYING ASIDE***John J. Ronan*

It's the adjustment to any death, really—the doubt  
 and denial, the questions. Entitled self, inflicted:  
*Just who do these white cells think they are?*  
 Even as the news becomes fast fabric, the day  
 sly and subtle science coldly prognosed:  
 dead as the dickens—sooner than (your fervent hope)  
 much, much later. The dark day  
 you acquired anxieties worthy of your talent. The day  
 your hard-on for sorrow and the canopic classes ended—  
 Hem in Ketchum, Wilde witty in Paris,  
 death as metaphor much, much flatter  
 in a suddenly molested present, the desperate day,  
 or such remaining days as you've got, that grace.  
 You could do with a little distance. Now,  
 borrow naps from the past, afford boredom,  
 or dying aside, the feet-up feel of eternity!  
 In cold crescendo, calm, correctness, and regret,  
 vis-a-vis the great scolding notion.  
 In truth, you taper gracefully, decorum come  
 with a cost-effective, early-bird conclusion.  
 Bone-tired, pre-deceased by pride  
 and green desire, you turn finally to the disguise  
 of piety and claim that dying made you wise.

**AT THE CENTER, AT NIGHT**

*June Frankland Baker*

She could not sleep,  
was walking the long halls  
through the night, dimmed light  
soft on sharp angles  
of floor and wall, the doors  
of residents closed  
for their nightly retreat,  
that solace among the reassuring  
blankets and pillows of their lives.

It seems she needs to pace  
all these uncertain corridors,  
shadows by the lounge,  
corner to a nurses' station,  
route to her dining room,  
repeat, retrace  
this maze she has found herself in,  
trying to discover a past life  
that does not live here.

SOUTHERN INDIANA, IN THE THIRTIES

*June Frankland Baker*

He remembers the childhood walk  
up Smiester's Hill with his mother:  
north out of town, past the fummy,  
grunting sty when they hurried  
"Don't breathe. Don't breathe."  
Into the dairy field where tumblebugs rolled  
their balls of survival, and up  
to the time of the painter, her easel  
and brushes looking over that descending  
light to the town. Almost shuttered  
by trees: converging forks of the Whitewater,  
that held where he'd been, between them:  
brown-backed streams that trembled  
and then went on toward  
ocean and war and years later.

## THE SKY RANCH

*Russell Working*

The morning was hot, and the drizzle, which had spattered the windshield as Judith Kettler drove, grew faint and then ceased altogether by the time she reached the Zenith Sky Ranch. The trees shifted almost imperceptibly beyond the airstrip, but high above, a strong wind pulled apart the cloud ceiling and shuffled swatches of humid blue. Judith waited at the door to the hangar. It occurred to her that she was holding her breath. Everyone was looking for Ray Sikorski, the skydiving instructor.

“He’ll be your tandem,” someone said. “He’s great. He’s just a little late sometimes.”

The wait annoyed her. She had gotten up at five-thirty, left her husband, Charlie, asleep in bed, and driven from Chicago to this airstrip near Genoa, and suddenly she wanted it to be over and to be on her way home. Judith was a former maternity ward caseworker assigned to visit homes after babies were born, but she had been jobless since the move from her Columbia River hometown earlier this summer. She was tall—over six feet—and had a ruddy Scottish face that blushed easily, in blotches, and ears that glowed red when she was nervous, as now. Lately she had given up the look she had carried, with small accommodations to changes in style, since she had gotten her first job out of college a decade ago, in 1978—stylish skirts or suits, colorful blouses, shoulder-length hair—and in her unemployment she affected a less formal and possibly more forbidding look: jeans, frumpy blouses, black leather boots. She had also had her hair cut short and stopped dyeing it to hide the early threads of gray. On the small of her back was a kanji character that a tattooist in Lincoln Park had insisted meant “chaos” but which a Japanese at the YMCA’s women’s self-defense class had translated as “gathered in a group,” to Judith’s embarrassment. The character had caught her eye because she and Charlie had honeymooned in Japan, and it angered her to get it wrong in such a permanent way.

Judith sat at a picnic table just inside the hangar, where the women had laid out submarine sandwiches and a box of fried chicken and a portable salmonella factory in the form of a bucket of sweet macaroni-and-onion glop that someone had bought at a gas station deli in Genoa. The rafters were decorated with streamers of red, yellow, blue, white, and green, as if someone had run an elementary school’s flags-of-the-world project through a lawn mower. Several people were checking the lines of the multicolored parachutes stretched out on the concrete floor. They sometimes glanced at

Judith; apparently the Zenith Sky Ranch was a clannish organization that did not often draw strangers.

When she had tried out the idea of skydiving on several new acquaintances in Chicago (it could not yet be said that she had friends after only six weeks in Illinois), everyone said, “Whoa!” and “You go, girl,” and had stories of past adventures to tell, about bungee jumping or paragliding or being towed behind a boat in Acapulco while hanging from a parachute. Charlie, however, had set down the front section of his Sunday *Tribune* when she mentioned it to him last weekend and regarded her with alarm.

“Why skydiving all of a sudden?” he asked. He did not say, as he once might have, teasingly, “Are you mad, woman?” He was a careful and considerate man, and he had taken to weighing his words in her presence as one tests a rickety chair before settling into it, a sign, if she needed one, that she was still fragile. “Judith, I’m sorry, but I don’t have any interest in jumping out of a plane.”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want.”

“Well, of course I have to.”

“Why?”

“I can’t just let you—. No. Start over. I don’t mean ‘let you.’ What I’m trying to say is, I’d want to support you in whatever you decide to do, within reason, I mean, short of—. But, honey, this is dangerous. Besides, you can’t just drive out to O’Hare some afternoon and jump out of a plane. It takes months of lessons and leaping off platforms and learning to roll and all that. So I’ve read.”

“You’re wrong about the lessons. This is tandem jumping. No lessons are required because you’re harnessed to an instructor and he or she pulls the ripcord. And yes, I think I’ll pass on jumping out of jet airplanes at America’s busiest airport, since there’s this Zenith Sky Ranch, they call it, over near Genoa. Somehow I liked the name.”

Charlie asked her for more details, studied the ad she had found in the aviation newsletter left on the treadmill at the YMCA, and said nothing more about it until later that afternoon when they took Cecil, their Rhodesian Ridgeback, for a walk in their Andersonville neighborhood. They were admiring the leafy streets and the mix of brownstones and brick condos, still strange and attractive to their eyes, accustomed, as they were, to wood-frame houses over-loomed by tumors of pulp-mill steam, and to orienting themselves by the green, serrated ridges beyond the rooftops rather than to the black tombstone of the John Hancock Center. A drumbeat sounded somewhere nearby. She assumed it was a panhandler pounding on a plastic tub and hollering, “Spare change?” But then they rounded a corner,

and the noise resolved itself into something wooden and ancient, Japanese drumming, coming from behind the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. Prayer flags fluttered on the walls, and the beat was deep and heartrending. Judith recalled their visit to Sado Island during their honeymoon, the oyster-eating contest, the bright sea, the middle-aged women dancing in their blue kimonos, the men in headbands banging on enormous drums hanging from frames as ornate as Korean temples on wheels.

Charlie steered her into an alley where she would not be seen by two families heading toward the temple. "Give me the dog. The dog! Are you all right? Why don't we go home?"

She blew her nose. "No, I'm fine. Just remembered Sado."

The dog tensed as a squirrel scurried up a tree, and Charlie said, "Cecil!" and tightened the leash around his fist. "I won't ask you to give it some thought, because I'm sure you have and you will. This skydiving plan of yours. But you should be careful, that's all, and it's obvious you don't need the stress."

"It isn't stressful. It's just something to do. I'm bored."

"I think you don't need this right now."

At once the squabble over something as ridiculous as skydiving made her tired. "Maybe you're right."

But all week the thought of falling—simply falling in silence—gnawed at her, and this morning, a Saturday, she willed herself to wake at five-thirty a.m. without an alarm, and got up to drive to the Zenith Sky Ranch.

Before departing she wrote a note on a sheet of perforated paper torn from the printer and left it on the kitchen table for Charlie: "Out for the morning. Back by 1. Love you." But then a terror seized her—a certainty that she was going to fall to her death—and on a second sheet she scrawled a farewell letter, just in case, to be read posthumously. She told Charlie she loved him and thanked him for being so wonderful and supportive, especially during the nightmare of this past year; it was hard on him, too, she knew, especially the way the trial had ended, but he had been a rock for her, and he should know that she was not unhappy with him—nothing he could do would make her unhappy—but simply had reached a point where she needed to do this. She slipped it in an envelope on which she scrawled, "To be opened only in the event of my death." For a moment she considered where to leave it: somewhere Charlie wouldn't find it this morning but also would not fail to discover it by the end of the day should she leave a Judith-shaped hole in a cornfield somewhere. She settled on the mailbox: he would not check the mail until late afternoon, when the postman came; and assuming she survived she would be home long before then.

Now, as she sat at the picnic table in the hangar, a yellow plane buzzed overhead like a wasp and excreted a number of specks. Judith followed the others outside to watch. Rectangular parachutes opened across the sky and drifted earthward with surprising speed, but one chute did not fully open and the skydiver corkscrewed in the air as he fell. Everyone gasped as the parachute broke free and drifted away like a handkerchief flung into the wind, and the diver sped up. His reserve parachute opened, an old-fashioned hemisphere, red- and white-striped like a beach umbrella or a circus tent. He disappeared in the trees beyond the field.

Several men jumped into two pickups and raced to the field where the divers landed. The first truck returned within minutes; it was followed sometime later by the other vehicle, where a skydiver was sitting in the bed, his face scraped and bruised and with an armload of nylon in his lap. He was barefoot and his feet were red and swollen. His shoes lay beside him.

The driver told the people who gathered, "Had to cut him out of the trees where he was hanging like Absalom. Tore his reserve all to hell."

"The reserve don't matter," said the skydiver. "It's the regular chute I'm worried about. Five thousand dollars. It drifted across the highway."

Someone tugged at Judith's elbow—a fat, bearded pilot who introduced himself as Spook; she was not clear if this was merely a nickname or something he would sign in the presence of a notary. He wore cutoffs that left his plump, hairy legs exposed, and high-top tennis shoes on which he had drawn skulls-and-crossbones with a permanent marker.

"I found Sikorski," he said as he led her around the hangar. "Sorry for the delay. He was in the trailer. I checked earlier but I didn't notice him on the floor behind the bar. He had a bad day yesterday and I guess he was just sleeping it off. His son was supposed to jump with him, but he chickened out."

"Oh?" Judith sang in a modulating voice that revealed her nervousness.

"Not like I'm trying to scare you off. See—"

But by now they had arrived at the trailer, and Spook said, "Anyway, Sike's a great guy. I'll see you out at the plane."

Inside she met Sikorski, a silver-haired truck driver and former paratrooper whose face was scarred with a bad case of rosacea. He sat at the bar drinking a beer. He reminded her of her father, a paper mill supervisor, until he spoke in some kind of Chicago mobster accent that pronounced *this* and *that* "dis" and "dat." He had a black eye and swollen lip, and the carpet had imprinted a fossil pattern on his cheek.

"Sorry for the delay." In an attempt to make himself presentable, Sikorski roughed up his hair. "Took a little catnap this morning. Late night."

Sikorski gestured for Judith to sit in an easy chair across the room, then plugged a cassette into a video player. On the screen, a man with the chest-length beard of a bum or a holy fool explained that tandem jumping was experimental and that a mishap could result in serious injury or even death.

“The novice may back out at any point and still receive a full refund,” he said. “No one is forcing you to jump. As soon as you set foot on the plane you consent to this stipulation.”

As the video ended, Sikorski stared at Judith’s feet, and she shifted uncomfortably before realizing he was in fact eyeing the contents of the handbag sagging open on the floor. She zipped it shut.

“You know how to use it?” Sikorski said.

“Wouldn’t do me much good if I didn’t.”

“Bully for you. But you know you can’t take it in the plane.”

“Of course not.”

“Not trying to insult your intelligence. We just get all types here, is all. So: I’ve got the legal hocus-pocus for you to sign, and we’re good to go. Oh, and it’ll be ninety dollars in cash.”

The document Sikorski gave her promised that neither the signatory, his/her relatives or friends, or any other person he/she knew or did not know now or in the future would ever sue the Zenith Sky Ranch (hereafter known as “the Provider”) should the signatory in any way suffer injury, emotional trauma, or loss of life, whether or not the Provider should be determined to be at fault through equipment malfunction, negligence, or both. It was ridiculously overbroad, and with some amusement she signed on behalf of the entire population of the earth, past, present, and future. She handed him the paper. “You left out extraterrestrials. They could still sue on my behalf if I die.”

Sikorski searched the document for the loophole. “Goddamn lawyers,” he said.

From an overhead cupboard he pulled out a set of blue mechanic’s coveralls and tossed them at Judith.

“If you need to, you can powder your nose at the ladies’ Porta-Potty out back, then slip these on. We’ll reconvene at the hangar in ten.”

Judith locked the trailer door behind him and donned the coveralls, clean but stained with black grease like a roschach test, then headed out to leave her purse in the trunk of her Celica. Inside the hangar, Sikorski handed her goggles and a rubber helmet that resembled a stout shower cap, then showed her how to strap on the harness. Moving behind her, he hitched the straps so tight they hurt her thighs and seemed to compress her spine.

“I tell the guys to get their nuts out of the way, otherwise it can get

mighty painful as you hang there. But you don't have to worry about that."

She turned in an attempt to read his expression, but he said, "Hold still," and adjusted a strap on her back.

He led her out to the airstrip, where Spook was gassing up a yellow Cessna Skylane 182 A at a 1950s-era pump, and they stood under the wing as Sikorski reiterated several points he called "absolutely essential, so listen careful now," but Judith was too nervous to attend and simply said, "Yes. Yes, okay," whenever a response seemed to be called for. The fuel pump clattered away but the price never registered; the zeros dithered, as if anxious to surrender their places to ones and then twos and then threes, but alone among all things living and dead they remained trapped in time, clicking, clicking, clicking, never changing, while a swath of sunlight crossed the runway at leisure and shimmered across the cornfield beyond.

Sikorski closed in, chest to her back, and hooked his harness to hers. "This is how we'll be," he said, his hands on her waist. His breath smelled of mouthwash gargled to cover malt liquor, and she gagged, remembering the way Oakes had been sucking on breath mints after drinking, to render himself presentable as he pressed a knife to her throat. Now, a year later, she felt the sinking in her gut, as if she were free-falling many miles toward concrete.

Judith removed Sikorski's hands from her sides. "Don't."

She would not skydived had she known it would be like this, compressed into one dense space with a stranger; somehow she had envisioned hanging from a tether, yards below him. But now it seemed too late to back out. She wanted to fall.

"We don't have to go through with this," Sikorski said in her ear as he unhooked the harness. "You can back out at any moment until we jump. Full refund."

"It's all right."

She held her breath as he explained one last time that she would climb out first, like so. Then, when he rapped her on her helmet, she'd let go and tuck her arms and legs into almost a fetal position as they dropped away from the plane. When he rapped a second time, she would spread her arms and legs like an X. This was the one thing to remember, even if she forgot everything else.

"If we buffet, it's because you're not doing the X. Arch your back and spread your arms and legs. If we run into trouble, I'll stop the free-fall by pulling the ripcord. I'll remind you how to land once we're in the air."



The airstrip ran slightly downhill, toward a grove of shingle oaks and a pasture beyond where cattle grazed, traumatized and milkless, she imagined, because of the buzz of planes passing a few yards overhead every weekend. Spook gunned the engine, and for a horrifying second Judith feared they would not clear the trees, but they wobbled up over the grasping branches with their trembling green and gold leaves, and ascended above the Illinois landscape, so flat to a Westerner's eye, yet pastoral, peaceful. Through bug smears the horizon rose and fell—mostly fell.

Spook occupied the only seat in the cockpit, and Judith sat on a wooden box set on the floor beside him. Sikorski sat on the same box behind her, with his back against hers, and through her coveralls she felt the bulk of the parachute. She slid forward a little. An aerial photographer was lounging in back holding, in his lap, a helmet with a camera attached to the top. Whenever Spook pulled back on the controls, a parallel set thrust out at Judith. Her scalp was growing hot in this idiotic rubber helmet, and a trickle of sweat stung her eyes.

Sikorski stumbled to the back of the plane to speak to the photographer, and Spook glanced over his shoulder before shouting at Judith over the drone of the engine.

“Anyway, I didn’t finish telling you about yesterday. About Sikorski?”

Judith glanced back at the skydiving instructor, who was thumping the photographer on the shoulder. Obviously they couldn’t hear.

“His kid, Brad, is an ex-con, and not exactly the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree. Tried to rob a strip club in Gary after making use of its, shall we say, lap-dancing services, and he ended up getting shot in the leg and doing time for both robbery and solicitation. Ha, ha! Anyway, he’d never skydived before. Suddenly, he decides to turn over a new leaf, mend fences with Pop. He was even talking about getting qualified as an instructor. But when he got up in the Cessna at ten thousand feet, he froze up. Happens sometimes. Sikorski was not a happy camper. He goes ape-shit, tries to throw him out of the plane.”

“Jesus. Was he trying to kill him?”

“No, not like that; I mean, while they were harnessed together. Which, don’t worry, he wouldn’t do anything like that to you. If you have last-minute thoughts and decide not to, no shame at all. Full refund, no questions asked. But because this was his son, Sikorski took it personal. They’re, like, hooked together, and Sikorski’s all struggling to get to the door while Brad hangs on for dear life and screams, ‘Dad, what are you freakin’ doing?’ Only he didn’t say ‘freak.’ Big tough guy who’s done time in prison. I’m like, ‘Cool it, you yahoos, we’re going to crash.’ That settled them down,

and Sikorski unhooked their harness. But when we landed, Sikorski up and slaps Brad's face. Smack! So of course Brad hit him back, twice, three times, beats the shit out of his own father, right there on the landing strip, which is why you probably noticed the eye. Sikorski won't press charges, though. His son." Spook mused for a moment, then said, "Skydivers are crazy. Go figure. I wouldn't jump. You'd never get a pilot out of a plane."

Sikorski returned and sat with his back against Judith, and Spook fell silent.

Sikorski said something inaudible, and she smiled. He nudged her and said, "You don't, do you?"

"Good girls don't," called Spook.

She looked out the window. Sikorski tapped her shoulder.

"Ignore him, he's an imbecile."

"So I gather."

"Did you hear my question?"

"I'm sorry, the noise."

"You don't have that Makarov on you now, do you?"

"No, it's in my purse. In the trunk of the car. The only reason I carry it is a friend of mine was raped last fall. Shook me up. When I heard about it, I mean. So I got a gun."

"Don't get me wrong; it's always a pleasure to meet a red-blooded, fully armed American woman, but I don't want it going off when we jump. Bullet through both our hearts. Interesting choice of a firearm, by the way. Russian make."

"I got it cheap."

"The V.C. carried them. The officers, commissars. Their sidearm."

The plane droned higher over the rumpled quilt of pastureland and alfalfa fields and ponds, squared off by roads and marked with the mushroom growths of small-town water towers. Sunlight filtered through the voluminous miasma of a grass fire in the distance. She could see the line of the highway through Genoa and a woodland beyond. A pond glimmered on a farm beneath them. At nine thousand nine-hundred feet they brushed the underside of the clouds and passed through a wisp of fog.

"Can you drop her a hundred feet, couple of hundred?" Sikorski asked, and Spook nodded.

Sikorski lurched over and opened the door of the plane, and the air that rushed in was surprisingly cold. Then duck-walking around, he helped Judith scoot on the box to face the door. He straddled the box behind her, like an ape preparing to mount her, and clipped their harnesses together. Then he tugged the box out from under them. They wriggled closer to the open

door. She was practically in his lap, smelling his liverish breath in her ear.

“Last chance to change your mind.”

“I’m fine.”

“Good girl. Wait a minute. Hold on. Okay—now. Go on. Step out on the wheel. Go, go, go!”

But somehow she could not move.

“Never mind,” said Sikorski. “We’ll try again after that other plane’s out of the way. You sure you want to do this?”

“I think so.”

“No shame in backing out. My pay’s the same either way.”

“I’m not backing out.”

The plane circled around, providing a view, across the fields of Genoa, of brick houses and wooded streets and railroad tracks, and far away across the prairie, she saw the towers of Chicago and the white expanse where Lake Michigan merged with the sky. One’s eye kept trying to turn white forms on the horizon into mountains—Rainier, St. Helens, Hood—but they were not glacier and rock but mere particles of airy water that would dissolve into new cloud forms in an hour.

“All right,” Spook called. “We’re back around.”

Judith stretched her legs out the door and stepped out onto the wheel into the wind, and Sikorski followed her. The plane bobbed. He was panting and sweating. She was afraid she would knock her teeth out on the arm supporting the wing if she let go. Then suddenly they were falling into a hurricane.

Tucking into a fetal position, Judith saw the plane recede at an astonishing velocity as the photographer dove out after them. Sikorski thumped her helmet, and she remembered to arch her back and spread her arms and legs in an X.

The winds tugged at her helmet and yanked a leather glove from her hand; and, although she wanted to watch it fall alongside her, it was gone. The pastures below, separated by what resembled miniature hedgerows, were broken continents of light and shadow, and bright with summer mustard. They were buffeting, and she thought, This is it. I’m going to die.

Then a hand covered her forehead. She had almost forgotten Sikorski was here. A hand on the forehead—was she supposed to do something? The chute opened and their fall jerked to a halt. In her harness she hung below Sikorski. Suddenly the air was warm and still. She whooped.

“Grab the reins,” he said.

She hooked her hands through a set of loops. The harness pinched her groin and armpits. Far below, another skydiver swooped in his parachute. It

was the photographer.

“How did he get down there?”

Sikorski did not hear her. “Look up,” he called.

The rectangular chute, red and blue, billowed with air, resplendent in the white void. Again she whooped.

Her arms, however, began falling asleep as she held them overhead.

“Aren’t we falling a little fast?”

“No, this is normal.”

“Where are we landing?”

“We’re shooting for that field, just past the arrow. That shows the direction of the ground wind.”

Then Judith saw it: a huge wooden arrow, painted white. He talked her through the landing—“If you need to, tuck and roll to your side”—then, “Fine,” and there was nothing more to say to each other.

For a time they were silent. The air smelled smoky, but she could no longer see the grass fire. Her eyes stung as if somebody had been slicing onions.

A question came from above and behind her: “So I gather Spook told you about my kid?”

It was awkward responding when she could not see his face. “Brad sounds like quite a guy.”

“He’s an asshole, a complete asshole. Just like his old man.”

“Oh, that’s not true.”

“Why else would he do that in front of all my friends?”

They drifted over a dirt road and an alfalfa field covered with hay bales like squarish vitamin tablets laid out on the faded felt of a pool table. The fields were no longer lined in hedges, but trees; nor was Lake Michigan visible. The branches and the leaves trembled in the sunbeams slanting through the sky.

“Got any kids?” Sikorski asked.

“Someday. Not now. I don’t know.”

“Someday you’ll know. Because, when Brad was a baby, he couldn’t sleep unless I sang to him and rocked him for a while in the dark.”

He sang with an Irish lilt that sounded strange on his Chicago Slavic tongue:

“I played a wild rover for many a year,

And spent all my money on whiskey and beer.

“Stupid songs like that. They work, though; you’ll see. It was the best feeling I ever had when he finally gave a little sigh and fell asleep. And so as a dad, you think they’ll remember. Not really remember. Know it in their

bones. What you did for them. Diapers. Tickling him when he hid behind the curtains. Taking him to see the Sox before he could walk. Then again, I probably was an asshole, made him play Pop Warner football when he kept coming home in tears. ‘It hurts.’ ‘Well, hit ’em back, dummy. You got to be tough.’ You, Judy: you’re tough, that I can tell. Your gun, I mean. You’d’ve made a great football player, if you were a man. To play football you’ve got to know how to absorb and deliver pain.”

For a moment they said nothing.

“This friend of mine,” Judith said, “she got out of a Library Board meeting, and this guy pulled her into his van and raped her in the parking lot. Then later she messed up the first time she viewed the lineup, picked the wrong guy. Stupid. When she saw the guy in court she knew it was him. But he had an alibi, it turned out. Of course, the alibi was his own kid, but all this was enough to create doubt.”

“So he got off.”

She nodded. “So I figured, next time I’ll kill the guy. I mean, if that ever happened to me. I’d shoot him, and if I couldn’t manage that, myself.”

“You know, Judy, I like your style. Okay, pull on your right strap. So: was she married, this lady you know? Boyfriend?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“So why didn’t her guy kill the son of a bitch?”

She shook her head and felt the back of her helmet thump his abdomen. “You’re an idiot. You don’t know the first thing, don’t understand what it does to both of you. Anyway, you wouldn’t kill anyone.”

Laughter tumbled down. “Pull, pull, pull. The right one. Yes, I have. Have killed someone. Many someones. I was in Khe Sanh. And I would, they touched my wife. I’m not saying this is right, it’s just me. I got a temper. Now, listen up for a minute.”

Sikorski directed her through several swooping turns. “Pull left. Good. Ease up—easy, easy, easy. Good.”

They crossed the trees—too low?—but by the time she had entertained the thought they were clear. A space opened between the bales, and the field came up to meet them. They landed lightly, on their feet, but then Judith fell over and brought Sikorski down beside her.

He disconnected the harness, then stood and wound the cords around his arm, elbow to palm, while she squatted and plucked foxtails from her socks. The parachute swelled like a jellyfish and tried to billow away. She ran over and held it down for him.

When Sikorski had wound up the cords, she gathered the chute and stuffed it into his arms. She hopped and gave a gleeful kick, almost a dance

step.

“Great landing,” he said.

Judith began laughing. Hugging herself, she sat on a hay bale and laughed till she was breathless.

“You all right?” Sikorski asked.

“It’s nothing. Nice of you to say so. About the landing.”

The pickup that had brought back the injured skydiver approached on the dirt road, whipping up a tail of cork-colored dust. Then she saw the dark Volvo following it. Charlie’s. Both vehicles stopped, and he came running across the field and hurtled a hay bale. Then she was in his arms.

“My God,” he said. “I saw you come down. Are you crazy?”

“Yes, absolutely nuts.” Then Judith saw how angry he was, and her gaze fell.

Sikorski approached with the chute bunched in his arms.

“Who’s this, the little man? Glad you caught the show. Ray Sikorski. Pleased to meet you. She done good. Better than my son yesterday, that’s for sure. She’s a natural.”

“Good for her.”

“Listen, Annie Oakley, you keep up that target shooting. Don’t do you no good if you flinch when you fire, which, not to be sexist, but most women do. Novices, anyway.”

As the Kettlers walked to his car, Sikorski got into the back of the pickup with a wad of blue and red in his arms. The pickup turned right, but Charlie headed left, eastward, toward Chicago.

“We’ve got to return my coveralls and harness,” she said.

“Mail them back.”

“My car. And my purse is in the trunk.”

Charlie braked and swerved onto the shoulder, rattling gravel against the undercarriage.

“Stupid me,” he said. “I saw it. I stood there with my hand on the hood while some guy on crutches told me I was too late, you were already up in the air, and by the way, he’d just broken both of his feet. After I found that note of yours. You scared the shit out of me. I thought you meant to kill yourself.”

“Oh, Charlie, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you’d find it before I got back. And if I didn’t make it, I wanted to say good-bye.”

“I just find it incredibly selfish that you would do such a thing without telling me. Did you think I’d handcuff you to the bed if you were intent on going? I told you the choice is yours.”

“I thought you’d talk me out of it.”

Charlie pressed his forehead against the steering wheel as if studying the sun-cracked vinyl of the dashboard and the slow clicking progression of the second hand on the clock. A wasp was buzzing about inside the car, bumping against the windshield and circling over Charlie's thinning pate, and Judith rolled down her window and brushed it out. It managed to return twice before she got rid of it.

"Charlie, have you ever wanted to kill someone?"

They never uttered Oakes' name, but his eyes blazed as if she had reopened an old argument.

"That, and do other things," he said. "Every day. In a way, I think I've become a disturbed man, a shrink would probably say; I'm always having these fantasies of mutilating him. If I cut off his nose and ears, the way the tsars used to punish disloyal subjects, would it be a sufficient recompense for what he inflicted upon you? If he were shunned, stared at, despised for his disfiguration even when he drops that fucking kid off at school or goes to 7-Eleven for a pack of cigarettes. But yes, you're right, killing would be the most efficient, the most just, somehow, the least soiling of the one who dispenses the punishment. You know, I actually saw him in downtown Longview one day a few weeks after the trial, and I followed him. He bought a some sort of engine fan in that junk shop on Commerce and then drove down to a tavern on Industrial Way. I followed his goddamned van, the one where—. And—"

Charlie floundered. Now the wasp was trying to reenter the car from outside the windshield, head-butting the glass.

"And, see. The point is—. Focus. I went in and sat down at the bar a few seats down from him and ordered a beer. He had a pitcher in front of him. He didn't recognize me; his back had been to me the whole trial. Tried to talk about the Mariners. I just glowered at him, and although I've never been in a fight in my life, never drawn my fist against anyone, he looked afraid and turned away. The bartender, this woman with a low-cut neckline that he kept drooling over, she was slicing turkey breast for a sandwich, and when she went back into the kitchen for something, she left her knife within reach. I wanted to plunge it into his throat. Every day in my mind I do it. Other things, too. Like, waiting outside his house after work and shooting him in the eye. I actually planned the whole thing out. Drove by his house. It's green, flaking paint. No porch light. He owns it, name is on the title. I watched that lying little shit, his son, sitting on the porch, throwing a pocketknife at the lawn, retrieving it, throwing it again, while sipping from a cup with a couple fingers of apple juice or something. His dad is on at C-shift at the mill, by the way, which means today he's on graveyard. Gets

off at six-thirty a.m. Broad daylight at this time of the year. Darks barking. Mill workers coming home off graveyard.”

For a time she absorbed this. “So why didn’t you do it?”

“Because I’m not so stupid as to think I could pull off the perfect crime. I mean, come on, I’d be the first person the cops would interview as a suspect. I’m not an actor. They’d see the guilt in my face. The jury would sympathize with me, sure, but they’d send me down for life. Why shouldn’t they? Murder one. Or even if it was eight or ten years, you ask yourself, ‘What’s the point?’ Separated from you. That I couldn’t take. Losing you.”

“You never told me this.”

“What’s to tell? Your husband has rage issues. You knew that.”

Judith touched his face, traced the whorl of his ear, which always was sprouting dark hair no matter how often he trimmed it. Somehow she found this quite sexy. Kissing his cheek, she tasted salt on his skin. He reached for her leg but then hesitated, gripped the gearshift. She stroked his knuckles.

The light shone on the fields, on the wisps of camel hair grass and shimmering corn. Far ahead, smoke billowed from a burning field, and she had the strange sensation, as if from a former life, of falling through the scumbled light toward the crosshatch farmland of someplace she did not know.

“It still could be done,” Charlie said. “Killing him.”

“No. You’re right. I need you. He’ll suffer for what he did. I believe that. It’s his karma.”

“What the hell is burning out there? There can’t be forests around here, this flat goddamned country. Isn’t there a rural fire department?”

Somehow in this mindset the topography itself seemed to be an outrage against him.

“Fields,” she said, reassuringly. “They burn off the stubble, I think. You can see it better up there. From the sky. Maybe we both should try it sometime. We’ll tandem together.”

For the first time in many weeks, he laughed, and shook his head, as if to say, *You’re hopeless, you know that?*

Charlie U-turned back onto the road and headed back toward the airstrip. Judith clutched his hand as he shifted gears. No plane was visible, but suddenly a line of parachutes opened up where nothing had been, and drifted in the haze like seed pods released in a fire.

MISERY*Jeff Schiff*

Ultimately the air  
 Is bare sunlight where must be found  
 The lyric valuables  
 —George Oppen

It begins there: in see-through praise  
 in the shuttlecock back & forth  
 with your twenty year wife

about what constitutes lovely  
 a lavender *rebozo* or red lace-ups  
 Or perhaps it is codified

just then  
 on a punky Sunday in July  
 on the fringe of a pool

outside of Santiago de Querétaro  
 under drench-me cumulus  
 and traipsing stratus

among entire Mexican families  
 bobbing  
 in the comfort of holiday disregard

It begins there  
 and you hope it will not end  
 with back-peddle

& running head start  
 with the distraction of Inca Doves  
 and phainopepla

god's own faux crow  
 picking and pulling at something  
 it cannot see

picking & pulling at the desiccated ground  
over there  
way over there

WHAT THE CHAMULAN DEAD KNOW*Jeff Schiff*

Likely as little as we do  
     stacked upon each other  
         boxless

uncle upon in-law  
     in the same grave  
         an indigenous economy

feet northward  
     head deep in the arrogance  
         of prefiguring eternity

Making toward the scorched church  
     you must walk on them  
         walk or straddle the mounds

many at a time  
     the width of a morning's work  
         those charged with burial

already drifting  
     toward their various elsewheres  
         love or pain

after the first shovel  
     full  
         hits moldering flesh

## A HISTORY OF WAR

*Wayne Miller*

Then the fields buckled into earthworks,  
breastworks, and the men dug deeper

into their ground. Of course, once  
the trenches were cut, they could not

be moved—, so the men adorned  
the bunkers with card tables, slicked

the walls with posters, poured rum  
into mugs they'd brought in from town.

Each morning, they stood-to, glared  
down their rifles, through the nets

of barbed wire, the craters and corpses,  
the litter of branches, footprints

and shells. Across the way, bayonets  
just like theirs pointed back, as if

the parados propped mirrors, as if  
their own blackened faces were hard

set against them. Over there, just  
as here, the color guard raised the flag,

the captains sloganeered through  
their bullhorns. Everyone could hear

the echoing, and everyone growled  
and roared, because such words

were the river that carried them deeper,  
that kept them from sinking. Then,

as was the ritual, at nine, the men  
climbed down from the firestep,  
  
shot craps on the duckboards, read  
treatises in the dugouts on passion  
  
and Passchendaele. Anything to kill  
the time between assaults, to black  
  
out the instants of losing. And lose  
they did, the escadrilles circling over,  
  
those night-cries from the fence  
blotted slowly by death. Valor just  
  
a mask they wore—just something  
to warm their faces when sleet  
  
pricked the gas clouds, when friends  
burst like wineskins, when  
  
three days' rain turned their fingers  
all spongy and white. Meanwhile  
  
in the fortresses, behind the glacia,  
the casemates were full of generals,  
  
tapestries, old statues of justice  
with her tottering scales. Each scale  
  
a trench, each a trench full of men  
peering through periscopes. So  
  
when reporters found evidence  
of napalm at the front, the producers  
  
changed the name to Mark 77,  
and when the food supply ran out,

politicians filled the news  
 pushing barrows of turkey and ham.

And the folks at home cheered, said  
*look at our wealth*, said *we will surely*

*carry the day*. Still, in the trenches,  
 the men boiled leather for nutrients,

learned to eat rats—the same rats  
 that had eaten their fallen. And then

Our Side won on the widescreen T.V.,  
 so the leaders took shots and cigars,

and when the last man officially  
 was killed, they changed the channel.

Yet, on the field, our now-protagonist  
 crossed the no-man's land, waded

into the wreck of the enemy's trench.  
 There, in the bunkers and dugouts,

he collected posters, records, pins,  
 dictionaries, vacation brochures—.

And from the backpack of a body  
 half-sunk in the mud, he pulled

a blueprint for a small summerhouse.  
 At first, he wasn't sure—it wasn't

a typical spoil of war—but then  
 he pictured the house on his empty

subdivision plot, and so he pocketed  
 the plans. As he imagined his life

in this stranger's rooms, he sensed  
what felt like fear. But focusing  
  
on the house itself, with its beautiful  
skylights and strange, foreign  
  
details, he could see how glad  
he must be the man had been killed.

DECEMBROS

*D. E. Steward*

Low sun, cold afternoons, long shadows

Chilled dawns

Short brown days

Winding down

Toward the bottom, the solstice and its deadening cold

Congo brown is Antwerp brown

A dark grayish yellowish brown, yellower and darker than seal, redder than sepia brown

On the December Rhine above the French-Swiss line are gray herons, gossanders, coots, water rails, mallards, pochards, mute swans, moorhens, red-necked grebes, great crested grebes, black-headed gulls, herring gulls and mandarin ducks

Feeding in the deep backwaters well downriver from the Schaffausen Rheinfall

At the bottom corner of what is the southwest of the profound depth of Germanic Europe, at Basel where the river bends toward the North Sea

Tilman Riemenschneider, b. ~1460, d. 1531, slender expressive figures carved delicately

His *Altarpiece of the Holy Blood*, 1504, in Rothenburg with all its panels still in place

Riemenschneider was also Bergermeister of Würzburg, he was jailed and tortured in 1525 for his part in the Peasants' War

(Zwingli backed the peasants' reasonable demands, Luther condemned the movement and soon after that it collapsed)

And after taking his radical stance, Riemenschneider never had another commission

His work is out of the same early humanism as Veit Stoss's wood-brown *Death of the Virgin*, carved in Kraków a decade and a half before Riemenschneider's *Altarpiece of the Holy Blood*

Stoss, b. ~1445, d. 1533, whom the Poles claim as Stosz, came from what would later that century become Durer's Nürnberg

Stoss lacks Riemenschneider's beatific refinement but almost has his keen expressiveness

Drurer, b. 1471, d. 1528 – his *Wanderjahre* to Colmar, Basel, Strasbourg and Italy – was Riemenschneider's exact contemporary but was so absorbed with Italy's Renaissance that often he was self-effacing about his own work

Mathis Grünewald was probably born in Würzburg ~1475, a dozen years or so after Riemenschneider and *Altarpiece of the Holy Blood*

Grünewald painted his spectacular *Isenheimeraltar* in the years around 1512

Riemenschneider, Stoss, Drurer, Grünewald, the same years, the same squares and churches, the same valleys and towns

Interlocked cogencies living in the same brown world

They met each other in the same inns and public houses

On the same paths and roads

What happened in their realms in the late 1400s and early 1500s, Colmar to Kraków and from the Rhine to the Vistula, was neither detached nor abstract

It was within the reality of Grünewald's plague-terror greens

Riemenschneider's serene marble busts' perfection

Stoss's vivid realism

Durer's etched lines and self-portraits' profound browns

In middle European, early humanist, pre-synthetic colored, rich leather, wool-stuff, fur felt linsey-woolsey rough cloak weathered earth and sandstone codpiece brown

On their wander ways, Nürenberg to Würzburg to Strasbourg to Colmar to Basel, the artists forded streams and passed sunny pathside banks of bear's ear primose, *Primula auricula*

Sheep and goat nuzzle, shepherd and pack train ways over which they tramped with perhaps a panniered donkey bearing folios, pigments, carving tools and their kits

All had well-established hierarchical guild workshops back home

And a little flimflam about them, with wretched communications, tight guild restrictions and sanctions, physical wellbeing and longevity a matter of health and luck

Nürenberg to Kraków via Pilsen and Prague

From Basel on the Rhine, south across the Gotthard into flower-resplendent Lombardia

Auricula purple dark reddish brown-tending purple, redder amaranth or raisin purple

"Darkness kindled back into beginning"

And then still again – after Bach, Beethoven, Brahms – from 1936 on again it was Germany steering Europe on its way

The first saturation bombing at Guernica, the first urban terror bombing with the Fire Raids on London, the first gas-oven death camps, the first multi-front invasion of nearly every country on the continent, the first mass urban starvation at the Siege of Leningrad

"Beginning crumbed back to darkness"

Frozen ground and snow for only a few days until only bare-ground thawing earth again

Cobalt violet, also called thistle, is a purple redder and duller than heliotrope, redder, lighter and stronger than amethyst, redder and not as strong as manganese violet, redder and stronger than mignon, and redder and deeper than lilac

Hérons and egrets, especially in winter, squawk indignantly when surprised

Arnold Bax's generously expansive Third Symphony, with its heraldic brass and dramatic narrative spreads and ebbs is like the Upper Rhine's strong currents

Off the glaciers, then the rush to the Rhine Graben and the Alsatian alluvial spread

The rich green of pomelos with their strong pink longitudinal citrus sections. Shaddock is their name in nature

Of all colors and sizes

Wisteria is redder and paler than average lavender, bluer and lighter than phlox pink, and bluer, lighter, and stronger than flossflower blue

Lilac is a moderate purple that is redder and paler than heliotrope, paler than amethyst, and bluer and paler than cobalt violet

GLOW-BOX*John Peck*

A hundred meters from Maple Hill Road through my night vision  
 I stood in broad day over a snowshoe pole: October Vermont  
 on a road past the village I had not visited in years, that pole  
 pointing along a gritty new fork toward the mountain.  
 In a house on Maple Hill Road a woman in her nineties lies dying in fact.  
 One pole from Hermes of the Ways,  
 staff with wrist strap from Saint James of Compostella,  
 solo, not yet the push on twin sticks over white caving crust.  
 And for that woman the Phowa prayer for the dying,  
 its light falling over her from Yeshua of Nazareth being my pledge to her daughter  
 to help remove obstructions and purify with agony  
*to benefit all the dead and the living* that too in fact.  
 I studied my autumn boot in the factual grit and discovered a pale spread  
 of tarsals and metatarsals, my eight-year-old foot in the x-ray box  
 allotted by the late 'forties to post-Hiroshima shoe stores.  
 The boot hazes around the ivory stems of a fan.  
 John Rush lets me do this while he crouches  
 uncasqueing product from tissue, leathery aroma,  
 former chemist conversant with curies and roentgens,  
 two years later propped eyes-shut in a wing chair, arms regal on its arms,  
 the first dying person I have seen. John made weapons-grade explosive  
 in the Allegheny National Forest near Torpedo  
 but left that for shoes in Cambridge Springs and woodsy Tidioute,  
 mineral-spring hotels and late-Vicky remnants of the first oil boom,  
 English Cam on slow French Creek, Seneca "oxbow" in the boonies,  
 right livelihood in leather instead of cordite  
 and right long drives between the two establishments,  
 his route paralleling the Randolph Township run  
 that John Brown made when resupplying his tannery.  
*Torpedo* no bowie knife of Abolition, *Tidioute* no lubricant of so-she-lizm,  
 and the roentgen revealer no footprint of mind.  
 The old Hindu rishis say that one act of truth  
*satyam ucur* sets a footprint in the mud holding the sun in its water.  
 That diddly box frame on the fitting-room floor and my eight-year-old eye  
 ghost the pilgrim's scallop shell badge,  
 the Palmer's ensign on cap or coat for Santiago, Big Jimbo

over the mountains and away.  
 Little glow-box, you beam right through the obstructions  
 to the weird benefits,  
 with idiot risk from the fathers, dereliction in their decades of fear management  
 spuming the continents with strontium isotope and wanhope,  
 verily a long route. My beech staff improvised with jackknife for a day's length  
 cannot match that, I leave it against trunk or boulder,  
 I scrutinize my boot: a legacy from the bad factor,  
 corner-cutting steward in Yeshua's wily teaching,  
 the awkward parable which the commentators try on numberless feet  
 and then rebox for reshipment.  
 The light that radiates from Yeshua over the headboard of the dying  
 slowly takes them up into itself in the Phowa box,  
 but in his story a dissolving urgency is the only point:  
 the steward's disreputable selling-short and sundry other shortcuts  
 he holds up for emulation in what matters most:  
 take what you put into making it, give that to your awakening, and see where you go.  
 John Rush abandoned munitions  
 for a dog's life in shoe leather north of Brown's tannery  
 and walked himself out of bondage to his tribe's self-enslavement  
 as a night-vision becomes the day's long truth,  
 its life my death as the back side of a carpet reads the bright chemistry  
 of the upper weave stitch for stitch but inversely.  
 His propped-up ashen dying benefited  
 the Chinese emperors whose frontal array on their thrones,  
 papery brown, his posture too composed, for  
 he faded in his chair not as one who loses  
 but as one who grasps the brass ring and holds to it  
 though not in my seeing until now.  
 I begin. Blue snowshoe pole in hand, I watch  
 a yellow school bus swing this way out of Maple Hill Road,  
 elementary education for an advanced task  
 for really we are all the same, and I flood with resolve,  
 radiation shower dissolving me and taking me up  
 into the swing down a Pennsylvania trail, its trough glassy with rain,  
 needles flocking the rim, miniature log jams  
 in a titanic footprint puddled with sky and inverted pines  
*satyam ucur*. Single needles unmoor and set out  
 into the grass-writing of Ryokan's death poems

going for open water and burning cloud, buoyed  
by gulleying surface tension along their razory length,  
on out into the float.

## SIGNS OF INTRAUTERINE LIFE: AN EXPECTANT FATHER'S NOTEBOOK

*Dimitri Anastasopoulos*

I wanted to have a baby. I knew, of course, the basics of *making* a baby, but I was mostly ignorant of the process of *having* a baby, that is, the decisions one makes (and by one, I mean, myself) after I—enthusiastically, energetically, athletically—undertook the basic initial act of making a baby. Conception happened, and I was there. After conception, the other body involved in the baby making process was naturally given priority as the central site of baby growth, the site of production and, also, the site of a certain magic and wonder. Like many expectant fathers, especially first fathers, I felt I had to educate myself about the birth process. I needed to read books, seek out doctors, talk to friends. And so I began an activity of information-seeking together with the baby-grower. In fact, the baby-grower's constant presence in my information-seeking activity only emphasized to me that my own knowledge of the stages of the birthing process were dictated by the rhythms of the baby-grower's birthing cycle. This secondary position afforded to the male should be accepted without hesitation (if one wants to be an ethical partner in the baby-making enterprise, that is) although this does not preclude the male from considering the various psychic and bodily impressions which impact the male exclusively. One must begin, first, by acknowledging that there is very little scientific information about the male's physical and psychological experience of 40 weeks of pregnancy. Granted, there are words of advice for expectant fathers, self-help books and the like, though none of these address the physical and pathological effects of the birth process on the male. So I set out to discover them on my own. Early on, I began to consider—in addition to a range of intuitive or instinctual reactions to the fact of fatherhood—certain bodily reactions as well, and through research (mainly found in the archives of the Cantabridge Health Institute's Genomics division) into several case studies involving male participation in birth—informatics assessments of meetings with obstetricians, to child-birth classes, and especially the actual birth itself—as well as films of zoological experiments on expectant ape fathers subjected to a Klett-Sumerson Photoelectric Colorimeter, I gradually began to accumulate notes which have evolved into this expectant father's notebook.

### *Phase One: Conception to Embryo*

At the Royal School of Medicine in Edinburgh, a study linked the geo-

metric shape of certain common forms of architecture to the spatial conditions of the womb. According to Dr. Jean-Gilles Ballard, “The right-angle spiral of a stairwell reminds us of similar *biases* within the chemistry of the biological kingdom.” Obviously, Ballard is referring here to well accepted visual reconstructions of DNA patterns in the form of spiraling staircases. But Ballard goes beyond this to state that the space between each stair of the spiral—not unlike a gill slit when viewed from below—appears as the primitive precursor to the embryo: that is the last human structure to preserve perfect symmetry in all planes. Ballard states, “Our bodies may conceal the rudiments of a symmetry not only about the vertical axis but also the horizontal.” Ballard—citing Goethe’s sacral skull in which the vertebrae and the pelvis correspond to the form of the skull—considers the bodily symmetries of lung and kidney, eyes and testicles, nose and penis, as examples of asymmetrical separations which proceed directly from single cells inside the blastosphere. If one accepts a translation of the body into geometry and therefore the architecture of the world around us, then thinking through the embryonic origins of the human body may give us insight into the rudimentary forms we inhabit outside the body.

In my own experience, the photoplates I downloaded from MedPix.com which reproduced cellular division in the blastosphere stage had a profound effect on my impending fatherhood. I examined the cells of the blastosphere as though looking down the cone of a kaleidoscope, albeit a broken one whose colorful and symmetrical crystals had hypostasized under the lens.

Initially, I considered that the cells in the photoplates represented the last form of a cellular symmetry that would eventually evolve into a soft jelly-like tadpole replete with axolotl eyes and tail. This is, after all, how we begin as human beings, I thought: first out of nothing, then into a perfect symmetry, which then finally explodes in a mininova that has macrocosmic impact on the rest of the baby’s life. We move from harmony to chaos, in such a manner, I thought. Eventually, however, I found film footage of blastosphere growth in which the symmetry in the static photoplates was gone. In the film it was evident that the cells were dividing asymmetrically from the start. Burbbling pockets in the northeast quadrant of the microscopic lens were not met with similar burblings in the southwest quadrant, as one might have expected.

What then of my metaphor of harmony and chaos, a metaphor influenced by Dr. Ballard’s research at the Royal School of Medicine in London, which sought to cast all human life in terms of a residual longing for the harmony of the blastosphere, for a perfect Amniotic Return? This nostalgic vision was only possible, I realized, when scientific information was cast in

its static form. Beauty, under this lens, was only possible when beheld under the broken kaleidoscope—whereas the film version of the blastosphere spoiled the symmetrical paradise. The scientific information provided in the film was always in the process of becoming, never fully available for observation that could be authenticated and verified in the terms I wanted: in terms of harmony and chaos. I wanted to know, relative to each cell's microcosmic existence, what accounted for asymmetric spasmodic movements. But microcosmically, each cell was always changing, and the mortal macrocosmic blastosphere could never forgive the relative immortality of each of its cells, because the blastosphere's very existence depended on each cell's becoming. Looking at the films and the photos, it was immediately evident that my intervention in the baby-making process after conception would depend on information that always arrived too late, information that, once authenticated and verified, became practically useless for my purposes. If I privileged a life inside the womb, a life immediately after conception, I could only do so with the greatest force of imagination possible, an act of imagining fueled by nostalgic chemicals. I was the father who recognized that the child was never innocent (in the symmetrical sense, that is not the moral sense), and that the baby's next stage of growth couldn't be entirely anticipated.

In the midst of studying the blastosphere, I met—together with the baby grower—the obstetrician. This initial meeting in which the doctor regarded the baby-grower as an incubator, and the male—that is, myself—as nothing more than a dolt, was quite productive in that we were allowed to observe the doctor manipulating his imaging technology all over the site of production. By first rubbing a transparent blue jelly over the abdomen, he began bombarding the embryo with high-pitched ultrasounds that resonated on a monitor above my head. Though studies have shown that these high pitched ultrasounds within the first two months after conception may cause blindness and deafness in the fetus, the doctor did not inform us of this. (Later, when the doctor performed his ultrasounds during Phase Two of my childbirth experience, he also did not inform me that he was potentially damaging my child's chances for giving birth to her own children; that, were my child a female, he could be destroying her eggs with the high-pitched sonic pulses). But for the purposes of this notebook, I am not so concerned with the potential harm the doctor may have caused to the embryo or fetus. I would rather attend, for the time being, to my own physical and psychological reaction to the actual images on the monitor itself.

*Phase Two: Embryo to Fetus*

As I looked at the monitor, I was told to disregard the fetus (its tiny heart

beating) and to focus instead on the amniotic sac around the shell, the uterine wall itself, and the chorionic shell surrounding the fetus (the chorion being the last remnants of the egg). The doctor informed me that the fetus' entire future depended on the complete fusion of these three concentric rings. As the doctor explained, "The inner portion of the placenta is the chorionic plate, and a fusion of the amnion and chorion must take place. They are artifactually separated there." "Excuse me," I interrupted the doctor. "But according to Dr. Scoober at the University of Georgia Medical Center, the chorion need not fuse until 16 to 18 weeks after conception, so this information creates a host of expectations if it's indeed true that this fusion will determine the fetus's viability. Can you explain to me all the possible permutations of membrane to membrane to membrane fusion? What if the amnion fuses to the uterine wall, but not to the chorion? What if the chorion fuses to the amnion but not the uterine wall? What if the chorion penetrates the amnion and fuses to the uterine wall? What if the amnion fuses to the chorion prior to its fusion to the uterine wall? What if the amnion fuses to the uterine wall prior to its fusion with the chorion? What if the chorion penetrates the amnion and fuses to the uterine wall prior to the uterine wall fusing with the amnion? What if the uterine wall fuses with the amnion prior to the chorion penetrating the amnion and fusing with the uterine wall?"

The doctor answered with an answer that was not an answer at all, but rather a new range of variables that proliferated and expanded the possibilities. "Between chorionic plate and basal plate are placental villi in various planes of section," he said, "each with a vascular connection to umbilical blood vessels in the chorionic plate. The placenta has a fetal portion, composed of the chorionic plate and villi, and a maternal portion, the decidua basalis." As he spoke, I wrote everything down, and assured myself that I would consider the entire range of possibilities over the next several weeks. I subsequently filled seven notebooks with all the possible variations which the fusion of part to part to part to part might undertake, and I intended to present my considerations to the doctor.

When the next visit came in the sixteenth week, the range of possibilities which I had sketched out were all rendered irrelevant since the chorion had indeed fused to the amnion and the uterine wall. There were no longer any distinctions between the three shells. It was literally impossible to determine from the ultrasound whether chorion had first fused to amnion or to uterine wall or which of all the other possible permutations had occurred first in this chain. Complete fusion had happened, and this fact had a way of blunting all my speculation. From that point on, any consideration of the

fusion process only served to pique my intellectual curiosity. Moreover, the doctor was quickly moving on to other matters thereby mooting the deliberate descriptions I had jotted down in my notebook.

“Look at the face,” he said, as he pointed to the monitor where a skeletal negative of a child stared directly at the viewer complete with tiny hands on either cheek, dark eye sockets, calcified nasal formation, long jawline: the fetus resembled Munch’s homunculus without the angst, though a father could be forgiven if he read terror in the dark eye sockets, frustration in the rapid grinding of the jaw. My first look into the baby’s eyes left me cold and without fatherly feeling. Father *to* a homunculus. It was enough to make an expectant father reconsider the depiction of intrauterine reality through imaging technology—a reality which was previously only accessible through an act of the imagination. In black and white, in silvery negative traces, the baby was not represented as the sweet being I knew it actually was.

“Look at that,” the doctor exclaimed. “You see the large organ directly under the chest?” he asked. “That’s the bladder. Your baby has an enormous bladder, and it appears to be grossly efficient.” Those were his exact words.

I began to imagine a grossly large bladder inside a normal human body outside the womb, and though the idea of a large bladder seemed positively grotesque, I was mollified and impressed that my child’s bladder was also highly efficient, if not grossly so. That must be a good thing, I thought. Soon enough, everyone in the room, the doctor, a nurse, myself, as well as the baby grower, witnessed a movement that shook me straight. We saw the fetus’s jaws open wide, like an alligator’s—to use a common metaphor—then close quickly, open wide again. “What is it doing?” I asked. The doctor answered that it was swallowing rather large amounts of amniotic fluid. “Does that explain why its bladder is working overtime?” I asked. “Perhaps,” was the doctor’s only answer.

When I went home that evening, I researched this process by which the fetus swallows amniotic fluid and I found that the process of swallowing inside the womb was largely superfluous since the fetus derives its necessary nutrients through the placenta. In fact, I was mortified to discover that amniotic fluid consists largely of the fetus’s own waste products, mainly urine. The fetus apparently delighted in swallowing waste, and also in processing the waste in a grossly efficient manner. Did I still long for an amniotic return? Not after this discovery. My insight into this uterine existence, garnered through technology, emphasized the primitive capabilities of the fetal body, and highlighted the infinite regression of the womb itself. Even as the womb served as the site of production where the baby was made, the baby itself was already operating as a machine without consciousness or morality

of any kind, unless I were to assume there was a quantifiable pleasure in the swallowing of amniotic fluid. Indeed, in a female fetus, eggs were already developing that might one day repeat this act of mechanical reproduction.

In order to distract myself from this vision of my child as a rudimentary machine, I tried to search the web for information which would explain or otherwise contextualize this form of crude ingestion. I combined the search terms “swallow” and “excrecence” and was immediately lead to a page I would rather not discuss (although I should point out that the word “excrecence” returned a more literary set of sites than it might imply) but through persistence I eventually discovered that the earliest forms of life on earth, some of which still exist in their almost pre-evolutionary form, relied on the ingestion of waste for survival.

One might draw a straight line from the hagfish (whose form hasn't changed for several hundred million years) to the human fetus in its sixteenth week, to the prisoners of Masada who ingested nutrients and then processed those nutrients which they ingested again and again for the length of the siege. The hagfish, likewise, feasts on decomposing animals, on sulfur fumes at the bottom of the earth's oceans—which is to say, on waste—and it secretes massive amounts of slime as a defense mechanism. Because females tend to produce large eggs in small numbers, their large population sizes suggest a low death rate. They tie themselves in knots, and slide easily into and out of such knots. They sneeze to unclog their nostrils of their own slime. Newly hatched hagfish look just like the adults, but have both male and female sex organs. When they mature, they will be either male or female, but have the ability to change from one to the other if the population numbers demand it. In Korea, almost 5 million pounds of hagfish are consumed each year. Elsewhere, hagfish skin is processed into “eelskin” boots, bags, wallets, purses, and other products. In short, the Darwinian continuum between the hagfish and the fetus machine in the baby grower was *perhaps* traceable, but this tangent on the hagfish had been taken initially as a simple distraction, and I continued to treat it as such.

The important thing to remember is that my absolute exposure, my absolute susceptibility, to the rudimentary images of the fetal machine—through imaging technology—had forced me into a curiously scientific if detached relationship to the baby still growing at the site of production. My will to understand the birth process, to become more informed, had succeeded in emphasizing the evolutionary and mechanical facts of human gestation. I was not prepared for this. In fact, I was deeply troubled by it. I wanted to build a sentimental attachment to my child. I wanted to adopt the caring and responsible father's demeanor: I wanted to learn to love the

child *prior* to its birth. Instead, the more I thought and learned about the child, the more detached I became. In the past, I had often made appointments with my psychotherapist in similar times of distress, and so I resolved to visit her immediately. As usual, we talked through my concerns, and as usual, she put me in touch with a support group which might demystify my particular anxiety. Since so few expectant fathers in the Buffalo area were honest enough to admit the psychic damage they had suffered after viewing medical imaging technology, this support group (known as UM: Uterus of the Mind) only met with some regularity on-line. There were seventeen members in the group, twelve Americans, a Brit, two Canadians, and two Australians. I often tried to join them for live chats but a simultaneous virtual meeting was almost impossible because of our different time zones. Instead, I signed onto the listserv and was soon enough receiving both words of wisdom from the other members, and an actual study which addressed our illness—yes, the group considered the expectant father’s absolute susceptibility to imaging technology an illness.

As I read the conference report of the MTAM gathering at LAX airport in January of 2006, I was inducted into the world of pathology informatics which, on a general level, involved collecting, examining, reporting, and storing large complex sets of data derived from studies performed in clinical laboratories, anatomic pathology laboratories, or research laboratories in order to improve and enhance the understanding of patient-care. I was mostly interested in the work of one radiography team from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which concerned itself explicitly with the production of so-called “good images” that depicted the conditions of intrauterine life in “the best light possible.” The Milwaukee team’s seminar, in addition to defining proper radiologic procedures and illustrative techniques, was the first to focus attention on the work environment of the obstetrics radiographer, by offering methods of handling the psychological impact of working in this field. Curiously enough, the imaging specialists were most concerned with assessing the impact of imaging technology on the medical professional himself. They completely failed to address the impact of imaging technology on the expectant father. Nonetheless, the men in the support group were savvy enough to simply substitute the words “expectant father” wherever the word “radiographer” appeared in the text. It soon became evident that the radiographer’s solution to the psychic impact of imaging technology would become *our* solution. Because the radiographers resolved to present only colorful images of the fetus with a new imaging machine capable of producing a 3-dimensional portrait—which would once and for all rid us of the dark sockets of the homunculus—we too decided that, from then on, we would

insist on a 3-dimensional representation of intrauterine life. Although this option was not immediately available to me in the Buffalo area, I made plans to transport the site of production to New York City.

In the end, however, I wasn't able to resolve my anxiety, nor cure my illness, for two reasons. First, the baby-grower refused to subject the fetus to a continual bombardment of now even more powerful and ultraspecific sonic pulses. Second, I was forced to sign off UM's listserv after receiving a few rather alarming emails. One arrived from a Canadian member, Robert M., who requested that we meet at the SkyDome restaurant in Toronto to discuss our impending pregnancies. When I refused, he reported to the other members that I was an elitist who would not make an hour's trip north to commiserate with him. I was roundly vilified even by members from halfway around the world. I naturally apologized to the members and tried to explain my hesitation (which, honestly, I didn't understand myself). I only knew that I was not in the mood for human contact. I had come to the support group in search of information, in search of facts which would complement what I already knew of my impending fatherhood, facts that would open up into a range of loving possibilities to come. My hopes were dashed, however, by other messages I received from the listserv by members who had remained anonymous or hidden until then. The emails were blunt, if somewhat opaque, as they simply listed a range of seemingly unrelated key words. The words needed more context, and luckily the authors had provided links to other websites thereby affording me an opportunity for further investigation. Unfortunately, after I clicked the links, I landed on web sites which allowed only one means of input from myself. These sites accepted only one form of feedback into their information system. I *had* to complete virtual shopping carts. I *was* to purchase medication that would address my despair.

*Phase Three: Fetus to Freeze*

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, at 5 pm, the baby-grower was well into labor and was perhaps an hour from giving birth. The nurses had injected the baby-grower with pitocin, a drug that induces labor even though it exacerbates the pain of each contraction. The doctor had already performed an episiotomy, which is the slicing of the perineum, the fold of skin between the anus and vagina. The baby-grower had asked for a drug and had been given nubane, which I later learned does not dull the sensations of pain at all. Rather, it produces a dull feeling similar to alcohol intoxication. A corkscrew had been inserted into the baby's forehead as a means of monitoring its heartbeat. An hour later, the baby was pushed into the world; and immediately, its eyes

were salvaged to prevent blindness in case of an undiagnosed STD. At that moment, the doctor turned and asked me, “Do you want us to freeze the umbilical cord for the possible future harvest of its stem cells?” This was the first I had heard of the frozen umbilical cord option. In all the literature I had read, in all my discussions with medical professionals, not once had the possibility of freezing the umbilical cord ever been mentioned. I was simply stunned by the doctor’s question. How could I possibly answer? I needed to do research, I knew that immediately. I needed more information. What were the benefits of freezing the cord? Right there, I needed to arrest the ticking of the clock. Even while the baby’s umbilicus was shrinking, even as its life was springing forward, a decision had to be made, and this decision relied on finding the *right* information—as soon as possible. I briefly thought to ask the doctor, “Can we simply freeze the baby as well?” I needed more time. Yes, time would afford me the kind of information that could be verified. I needed to foreclose on the doctor’s question, to disregard any form of information which relied on speculation, on my subjunctive moods, or on saccharine issues of morality. I needed to obliterate information that always deferred to a not yet verified future, and which therefore anticipated a future that would never ever arrive. I needed facts, no feedback loop at all.

WYCLIF PLACES HIMSELF, HIS ROOM WITHIN THE  
TEN CATEGORIES OF ESSENTIAL BEING

*Thom Satterlee*

1. *Substance*

My most general genus is this: *substance*,  
from which I descend through many  
subaltern genera—corporeal, animate, animal—  
until the word *mortal* separates me  
from the angels and I fall  
with pigs, oxen, horses, and birds,  
all my categorical companions, till we reach  
the *rational*, where I must break from them  
and join my own, my specific species,  
which is called *man*.

2. *Quality*

I contain such accidents as are called  
inseparable: my skin, white; my eyes, blue;  
my nose, the shape of an isosceles  
triangle tipped on its side. To these are added  
more passing traits: my age, eighteen years,  
three months, twelve days; my hair,  
shorn in a circular fashion about my bald head  
and indicating my station, clerk-student.  
Also transitory is my hunger, which dinner  
(I hope it is soon) will soon vanquish.

3. *Place*

I am in the world God made  
in the stench-hole called Europe  
on the island of England  
in the town of Oxford  
within the walls of Balliol.

I am not inside my father's home.  
 I am not in Wyclif-on-Tees.  
 I am in England  
 in the stench-hole called Europe  
 in the world God made.

#### 4. *Time*

March 17, 1347, the Feast Day  
 of Saint Joseph of Arimathea,  
 patron of gravediggers. All buried today  
 are buried in Christ and rise  
 three days, three years, or three centuries  
 from now. No one knows the day  
 or the hour. In similar fashion  
 the mealtimes here at Balliol Hall  
 remain hidden. Reports have been made  
 of a beef stew, but so far these are only rumors.

#### 5. *Quantity*

Five students with heads bowed  
 over books. Five books. Two  
 tables. One window. Three  
 ceiling beams. Two vertical  
 posts. Three dogs lying  
 on the floor. The students belong  
 with the books. The tables belong  
 with the posts. The beams belong  
 with the dogs. But the window  
 is in a category all by itself.

#### 6. *Position*

I am sitting at a table with a book  
 in front of me. On my left  
 is Geoffrey, and on my right

is an empty chair. Under the table  
 there is a dog with its muzzle  
 on top of my feet. We are  
 all of us underneath the ceiling,  
 itself underneath the sky. Behind me  
 is a door that leads to the kitchen.  
 I keep turning around to look.

### 7. *Relation*

I am a son, a brother, a nephew,  
 a cousin. In relation to this book,  
 I am its reader. In that sense,  
 I am related to all who read it before  
 or will read it later. We are book-brothers.  
 The author who fathered these words  
 is then my uncle, his words  
 are my cousins. The books he read  
 are the ancestors we tell tales about  
 around the fire and sigh for our lost ones.

### 8. *State*

He gives as an example of this,  
 “to be wearing a cloak.” Coincidentally,  
 I am. It’s cold, and so I wear  
 a black cloak over my grey robe.  
 And yet, why wouldn’t clothing  
 be to the person as an accident  
 is to *substance*, thus categorized  
 under *quality*, subcategory separable?  
 I’m confused. And what is confusion  
 but a *state* every being wants out of?

9. *Passion*

It's better and worse than I imagined.  
 Confusion, it turns out, is a *passion*,  
 as, for instance, paper when it burns  
 is said to be undergoing a *passion*.  
 Anything something outside of me  
 causes me to be is my *passion*.  
 The definition extends to acts  
 of privation. Cold, hunger, loneliness—  
 these, too, are my *passions*, my many *passions*.  
 I am full of *passions*.

10. *Action*

This one is the simplest of all.  
 I stand. I pick up my book. I walk  
 past the table and up the staircase.  
 I enter the bedroom I share  
 with three others. I set my book  
 on the straw mattress where I will  
 (sweetest *action* of all) sleep tonight.  
 Then I walk back down the stairs,  
 sit down at the table, listen to the Steward  
 say grace, and (finally!) dip my bread in stew.

## A VISIT TO LUTTERWORTH

*Thom Satterlee*

1.

On a chain-link fence outside the city limits  
a sign handwritten on a piece of cardboard:  
“Any person who cuts the manes or tails  
of these horses shall be prosecuted.”

It was after one in the morning. We had stopped  
to check the map on our way to Wyclif’s church  
when our headlights fell on this warning.  
In the quiet car, with only the courtesy light on,

Kathy spoke her first thoughts of Lutterworth:  
“This place is evil.” Somewhere  
in that field we couldn’t see, horses  
must have slept with one eye open

and one nostril flared to scare marauders,  
while the farmer sat in his kitchen  
with the light on, his coat on a hook,  
and his boots pointed like double barrels at the door.

2.

We tried but couldn’t find the church  
that night. Instead we found a group of men  
loud, drunk, stumbling on the main street.  
One held another’s head

pinched between his arm, and someone shouted,  
“Hit him! Hit him!” We agreed  
not to ask them for directions.  
Back at our bed and breakfast

one press of a button opened the gates.  
We drove through, our tires crunching gravel  
and stirring two horses, who turned their heads  
and watched us through their stable doors.

3.

I thought I knew Wyclif's church  
 from pictures on the Internet. It has gravestones  
 leaning over, almost falling, as if the dead  
 who don't pay rent, but can't be evicted

are doomed to watch their homes collapse  
 slowly on top of them. I didn't know  
 that every church in England has the same stones  
 and the same unflinching landlord.

And so we waited in front of the wrong church  
 for twenty minutes before we realized  
 we waited in front of the wrong church. It took  
 directions from a paper boy, an illegal turn,

and a side gate that mercifully wasn't locked  
 for us to make it in time for the service.

4.

We entered through a heavy wooden door.  
 Inside was silence and stone walls  
 set in place seven centuries ago.  
 A man gave us programs and pointed

to the smaller sanctuary, just beyond  
 a fresco of the Doomsday.  
 We only had to look up to see the dead  
 come out of their graves,

some with one foot still in the ground.  
 Above them, Christ sat on a rainbow-bridge,  
 his bare and still-wounded feet  
 dangling over the edge.

5.

I knelt for the Prayers of the People.  
 It must have been the Rector's voice

or jet lag that made me imagine  
my pew lurched forward

and hovered over the chancel  
where Wyclif had been buried.  
But I could also believe in bones,  
even a chip or trace

left behind when the Bishop's men  
dug Wyclif up, tossed his remains  
on a wagon and drove off  
to the River Swift.

Whatever moved me felt real  
as a dream, and brought me  
the closest I've ever come  
to communing with the dead.

6.  
After the service, small talk.  
Where we're from and why we've come.  
From Indiana. For research.  
The Rector and my wife find common ground

in Colombia and the story of missionaries  
kidnapped and killed. It takes the smallest crack  
and the dead enter our conversation,  
like that other fresco, the one we didn't see

coming in, but looms over us now:  
"The Three Living and the Three Dead"  
it's called from a French legend  
where three kings encounter

three skeletons. "We were once  
as you are now," the skeletons say  
and the kings flee. Their words  
hang in the air above our words.

I listen and nod.

THE FIRE OF LONDON*Dana Roeser*

Thomas Farrinor (or Faynor), a baker in Pudding Lane, just north of Billingsgate fish market, failed to put out the fire under his oven. His house caught light. Flying sparks fired the Star Inn on Fish Street Hill. A Thames Street tallow-chandler's went up in flames, which were fanned by a strong east wind.

Roy Porter

*London: A Social History*

In this bottom bunk, under  
the white wire mesh of my  
husband's bottom,

I try not to panic. Stalactite  
plastic wallpaper, a dirty cream-color, to  
my left. *Those rats in the*

*underground, under the tracks.*

It is summer and I can't  
decide if my favorite

is the man playing the  
kazoo on the first leg of the straightaway  
that leads to the Northern

or the one in sunglasses  
in a crook in the tunnel  
at Tottenham Court Road.

He plays jazz on his  
electric guitar, has his drum  
machine set at

a good snare  
pace. The effect is liquid  
late Santana. He doesn't

look angry, bitter, in those  
mirrored sunglasses, or even  
unhealthy, at the end of the

people-sized cylinder  
where it turns left  
and shoots us down a quick flight

of stairs to the platform—  
the track headed west to  
Notting Hill Gate. Right before the turn

for the stairs, facing you, is  
a large black and white poster, advertising  
meditation—how?

At St. Martin-in-the-Fields,  
the chamber orchestra plays  
Hayden, Mozart's Clarinet

Concerto, Requiem. It is  
so sonorous/gorgeous, it doesn't seem  
like music. Certainly, no relation

to my hacking attempts  
at reading notes, keeping time on the  
piano. St. Martin-in-the-Fields,

three-hundred-year-old  
bottle of wine, acoustics so perfect, they  
cannot be replicated, so

all of the recordings are done  
here, a strip of numbered tape along the backs  
of pews to assign seating.

It only happens, can happen,  
here, that sound—and the orchestra  
members, the chorus, down

in the “Café in the Crypt” in the  
interval, sipping wine and eating  
salmon pie, casual as you

please. St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
is under renovation, but you  
can bet they won’t touch

the sanctuary, sacred decanter.  
This hotel room weirdly  
smells like fire and I

remind myself it is simply  
the sloughed skin of many hostel  
dwellers before us, their stench.

Directions posted on the wall:  
“Attack the fire with the appliances  
provided,” and if that doesn’t work,

“Find the ‘way out.’” No,  
of course it’s not the fire of London,  
the cloven tongues

of fire over the woman’s, Shelly’s,  
and the man’s—Duncan’s—  
heads, at the 12-step meeting

in Chelsea—those little  
Pentecostal hell flames. She  
attempted suicide two days

ago—yes, she knew it wasn’t  
advised to get involved  
with someone in the program. And Duncan

said he got so bollixed up  
trying to figure out whether  
or not to say an official goodbye

to his children and what  
method to use (and whether he'd  
have to drink again to pull it off),

he duly reported his confusion  
to his rehab counselor, who calmly  
referred him to a printed list of “relapse

triggers,” in which his behavior  
could be found. Edward Hopper  
was fascinated with light,

was convinced the light  
on the second story of a building at sundown  
was different, more ecstatic, than

on the first. At a retrospective,  
at the Tate Modern, I see each Hopper person—  
the woman at the diner counter

in “Nighthawks,” picking  
at something (a piece of paper, a tea bag?),  
the pensive man staring out a

window, smoking, in “Hotel  
by a Railroad”— struggling  
in her/his own personal

hell flame, grappling with her/his  
hamartia, the death they are  
destined for: death by

disappointment, resignation,  
prostitution, compromise, death by  
suffocation. Achilles’ and Hector’s

heroic deaths at the British Museum,  
with Athena behind  
and Apollo turning away, respectively,

as preordained. Or the other vase, on  
 which the warriors fight  
 nude, exposed as Hopper's

"Woman in the Sun." The miniature  
 cat-sized sarcophagus in the British Museum  
 with sculpted cat head, startled

cat face, above. The sand-blasted  
 2000-plus-year-old human corpse in a  
 fetal curl, repositioned

as in a tomb with its  
 important, sacred, everyday objects around it—  
 vases, drinking cups, grooming tools,

beads, coins. Even the horrifying  
 masks suspended from the ceiling in the "Living and  
 Dying" exhibit, meant to keep

away the horrid devil—still and  
 kinesthetic at once—contain the breath and  
 power of the Holy Spirit.

The statue of Albert, Prince  
 Consort, dipped in gold, slumps above Bayswater,  
 the known world at its base.

Tableaux representing "architecture,"  
 "commerce," "engineering," "agriculture." At each  
 corner, three-dimensional Asians

on an elephant, Africans on a  
 camel, Americans on a buffalo, Europeans  
 on an ox. And above

him: Victoria, of course, Greek  
 gods and goddesses, Jesus, Mary, their God,  
 and numerous seraphim. The dull-

eyed guard at the hostel, from Ghana,  
 all day standing by the cement steps.  
 Immigrant men in their

immobilizing sandwich boards  
 on Queensway, one hawking McDonald's  
 chicken sandwiches, the other, computers.

This fetid room: it hurts  
 to breathe the air. At St. Martin-in-the-Fields,  
 candles lit all over the sanctuary—

the fire of London started  
 this way, a wick and a flame. (How glad I was  
 to hear them speak, at the

meeting, of suicide. Shelly.  
 Duncan.) In one Hopper painting, "Excursion into  
 Philosophy," originally called

"Excursion into Reality," a man,  
 clothed, sitting bedside, staring down at a panel  
 of sunlight on the carpet, a book

(Plato, his wife says in the  
 catalogue notes) downturned beside him, woman  
 behind with her back

to him, her skirt hiked up,  
 her naked bottom—like my husband's  
 pajamaed rear-end close to my

face in the reeking London House  
 Hotel room. Hopper's goal, to follow Goethe, to  
 reproduce "the world that

surrounds me by means of the  
 world that is in me"— the philosophy, the  
 flame of it.

THE MATTER OF THE PEARS*For the poet K.G.**Mira Rosenthal*

When I said the seven pear trees,  
 the ones I had just shown her,  
 when we had just walked beneath  
 their branches going dormant  
 at summer's end, a few leaves  
 flagging the orchard's bearing  
 where we circled, looking  
 for last berries of the season  
 where stubborn vines persisted,  
 but we were late and there were none,  
 so we sat on the grass by the stump  
 of the evergreen that died last year,  
 that used to hold a swing  
 where we twisted and untwisted  
 till we were high when we were young...

When I said the seven pear trees  
 give us so much new fruit,  
 we don't know what to make  
 with bins of pears that rot  
 and you know when one goes,  
 the tendency to ferment  
 catches the others' flesh  
 like fire, like flames consuming  
 succulence, before you can preserve  
 brandied pears or pear butter,  
 the whole batch is gone,  
 and she sat there leaning forward,  
 listening and smoking  
 like she already knew the eager  
 fleeting nature of flavor.

And it was simply about the seasons  
when I said the seven pear trees  
give us so much new fruit  
that we fail to cull the essence  
before it goes to mold,  
and it was a simple metaphor  
when I said flesh catches  
like wood catches fire –  
before you can act, you're gone –  
and she leaned back like a smoldering log  
thick enough to withstand the smoke,  
then, *Just like vice*, she said,  
and I was nervous and jealous,  
wishing I had thought of that  
when speaking of the trees.

4 A.M.*Mira Rosenthal*

Being good, I lie there and reason in the manner of the healthy:

maybe it's only heartburn,  
 this feeling that my skin is taugth against a knife that somehow  
 I have swallowed whole.

It pierces  
 and everything else seems less than what it could be  
 compared to such a sting.

It pierces  
 and the white petals on the plum tree out the window  
 are streaming from branches in the wind  
 the way I imagine skin detaches from the carcass of a cow in the Ganges river  
 because I've read that they throw the holy in  
 full-bodied without having cremated them:  
 the babies, the devout old men, and the cows.

I'd like to go and see that place,  
 those forms washed clean and skeletonized,  
 go beyond the saying *getting my day started*  
 because a saying is felt more strongly in struggle  
 than what's said

and starting never ends.

The dying come from all over the country and wait,  
 walking around in that town year after year  
 in their white gauze of widowhood, shrouded  
 like I am now under this white sheet.

But they aren't dead,  
 not yet.

An acute point of pain from which everything radiates.

And their wish to be buried in a holy place  
is simply a waste of life.  
The beginning. The ending.

Why not start from the middle:

this is a knife,  
a knife inside my chest.  
I will live by cutting myself out  
from the inside.

## STORIES ABUELITAS TELL

*NoNieqa Ramos*

### I

“So, you gonna wait for me to ask you questions? *No tienes preguntas para mi?*” Abuela said straightening her fifty flights of spine.

Actually, he didn’t have any. Not a single-one. Dag! He looked outside for a triceratops or someone inventing the wheel. Nope. This was the twenty-first century, and Abuelita didn’t have a television. “Please tell me *el television* is upstairs!”

“What do you need *un television*—for a boy like you? You have all you need to see. Is that what you city people do? Go to each other’s *casas* and watch each other’s televisions? Is that how people socialize these days?”

“Okay, okay. Got any *comida* in this place?” With the whole television deal, the boy wondered if they were going to have to catch their food, on top of everything else. “Forget food. How bout comics?”

Abuelita planted her behind into her rocking chair like a squatter building a house, daring the sheriff to kick her off the land.

“Comics? Like stories? I got stories. *Sientaté*. See—”

Uh-oh. Not a- “Oh, I didn’t mean like olden day stories! I meant—” Dang! He never noticed Abuelita’s eyebrows looked like bats, especially when they knit together like that. “You know, I, I have questions. Okay, like about PR.” Yeah, Mami said to ask her about Puerto Rico. That should keep those bats from sucking his *sangre*.

“I moved away from PR when I was eleven. As I told you, we had a tin roof growing up, and whenever it rained, it sounded like bullets were spraying from the sky. We would cover our ears with pillows, and my mami would always say, ‘See, the meek shall inherit the earth!’—and Nivea and Marta and I would look outside after the storm for diamonds and pearls.”

“And what would you find?” the boy said, hungry for pirates and treasure.

“Well, to answer that, I will tell you a story. There are these beautiful *señoritas* in the sky. When the sky was cloudy, they liked to wear diamond necklaces that trickled down their shoulders and backs like a waterfall. The necklaces were gifts from their Father, who has no name, for the time when the *señoritas* came of age. When Junio and Julia were presented to Brother Wind and Brother Cloud for courtship, the two men could not decide between them. Brother Sky knelt and offered a golden ring. Brother Wind

offered a blue pearl. The *señoritas* made their choice.

“Junio liked to wear her golden ring every morning when Julia slept. Julia waited her turn and wore her blue pearl at night. By taking turns, one might not be more beautiful than the other. The sisters got along well— most of the time. One night, the Sky rich with darkness, Julia could not find her blue pearl. She searched for it frantically in the caverns of Io, in the hidden chambers of Mars, but to no avail! Finally, she flew to her sister Junio to ask her if she remembered where Julia last wore it. However, Junio was too busy to notice.



“There on the rings of Saturn, Junio was flirting with Julia’s beau, Brother Wind! She had not waited until the proper time to wear her ring. And on her left hand, she was wearing Julia’s own blue pearl. The men on earth cowered in fear as the sun merged with the moon. Meanwhile, Junio and Julia had a terrible argument, ripping and tearing at each other until Junio’s necklace spilled across the sky, christening it with the fiercest diamonds. Junio wept in repentance at having let a man come between them. Julia wept at her sister’s tears, and forgave her, and together both their tears mingled, flooding the earth. Brother Cloud, in his grief at losing Junio, had fiercely wept, and in hopes of winning her back, presented a new necklace of his tears.”

“What happened next, Abuela?” the boy said, hungry for blood.

“Their father came, taking the rings and setting their stones free to roam the sky.”

Sister Sun and Sister Moon, the boy thought. “What happened to Brother Wind?”

“Father banished him forever to the earth. A father must protect the honor of his brood. He asked the girls what they might do to seal their pact that they never allow vanity get in the way of their love for each other, again.”

“But, Abuela, if they never fought again, how could there be diamonds every time it rains?”

“Ay, *mijo*, how much time have you spent with your mami and *su hermanitas*? What women do you know who could go a week without a good argument?”

The boy smiled remembering all the midnight phone calls between Mami and her sisters. “Not bad, Abuelita. No bikinis or B2 bombers, but not bad. So what else?” the boy said, hungry for gossip.

“What else? What do you mean?”

“Blockbuster got over 10,000 titles. TV’s got 120 channels.”

“Okay. I don’t have titles and channels, but I can give you money and blood.”

“A family of *Taino* Indians once dwelled on a tiny paradise. Angél and his wife Leticia lived happily with their small children Lucy, Carmen, and Samuel. *El Mar* was an angel that ascended to *la luna* and spilled back to earth before every morning. Their life was simple. Their gods gave them *pityjaya* and cassava and sugarcane and asked for nothing in return. On the wings of the blue angel, their gods delivered them the coconut with which they made their *bebidas* and *postres* and tonics so that the women gleamed ageless skin, even in the relentless Caribbean sun. They did not erect terrifying pyramids or invent great calendars. They had no need to measure time. They had no need to look for heaven. They gave freely and took freely. They believed in god, and set aside their best rum for him. They believed in god-dess and saved her their best tobacco.

“Every morning the island gave them milk. The children descended into *las montañas* until the sun only whispered in the caves. Samuel, Carmen, and Lucy filled their buckets with the sweet broth from the ancient springs. They took what they needed. Then they left. The children carried the broth home. They passed underneath the clouds. The sky understood them, and they understood the clouds. They walked barefoot on the ground. The earth understood them and they understood the earth. Lucy stopped by the ocean to wet her toes.

‘Look, Samuel, the gods! They send us gifts!’ Lucy said, pointing at the sea.

Samuel shaded his eyes, gazing at the horizon. ‘Gifts that great may be a curse. We better tell Papi.’

The three children sped home, spilling half of the milk in their haste, something they had never done before.

They relayed the gifts of the gods. ‘They are great fish with fins whipping in the wind. Will they swallow us up?’ Carmen said.

‘No, no. The gods have no reason to be angry,’ Leticia said, talking to Angél with her eyes. She had lost her fourth child in childbirth. She knew the gods could give and the gods could take away. His eyes would not answer.

‘Let’s go out to shore,’ Angél said, ‘and be thankful for what we’re given.’

The family walked to shore, shivering in the sunlight.

‘Those are not fish, Angél,’ Leticia said, looking out to sea, her hair

whipping at her mouth. ‘Those are men.’

‘If they are men, we will make them a place at our table,’ Angèl replied, wrapping his arm around Leticia’s hips. ‘If they are gods, we must give them our best tobacco and our best rum.’

“And were they gods, Abuelita?” the boy asked, hungry for war.

“You be the judge of that,” Abuelita said.

“It was strange that the gods didn’t speak their tongue, Angèl thought. Maybe gods had their own language, superior to that of men. Perhaps the gods had come to teach their heavenly language to them.

“Brine-smelling and salt-roughened, the gods swaggered draped with cloths that concealed their genitals, hooped like goats and hiped with silver tusks. What kind of animals had lived and died in the land of gods? Samuel thought.

“Carmen cried because she did not know if fathers could protect their daughters from the gods. Angèl chided Carmen. He bid Samuel and Lucy to show the men the island. Leticia displayed for them the riches of her table: *sopòn de polla arroz* brimming with pumpkin and creamy white and yellow *yautias* and bubbling with *ali li monjili*, *echòn asado* glistening in *jugo de naranjas*, and plaintains roasted over stones and sugared *con el sol*. The children showed them the secret hidden between the mountain’s clasped hands. The men seemed very interested in the gleaming broth. It seemed they had tasted nothing like it.

“The bear-faced man called Cap Tin gestured to *las montañas*.

‘Yes, there is more,’ Lucy said, mentally counting the crumbs in Cap Tin’s beard. ‘But this is all we need.’

“Lucy had never been pushed by anyone but her brother, whom she could push back. Sucking the blood on her skinned knee, she wiped her tears with her hair. The men dragged Samuel by the elbow and pointed to the caverns below.

“For the first time Samuel’s heart strangled with fear. He had never gone this far into the mountains. He didn’t understand what the strange men wanted.

They ventured forward, the gods slashing their passage into the *la tierra*.

“Did they find demons? Ghosts? Vampires?” the boy said.

“No. Inside they found a girl. A girl milking her cow into the riverbed that flowed throughout the island. The girl offered them milk, but they refused. They wanted her to teach them how to milk it. This she did, gladly. They wanted the girl to lead the cow out into the light. But, this she refused. The men noosed the cow and the girl and dragged them out of the cave. They forced the children onto *la playa* where their father stood gazing

distractedly, for by now Angèl had discovered the men were carrying vessels sparkling with empty cages onto shore.

“On shore, Cap Tin’s men, gritting gold teeth, yanked the cow’s udders, but she refused to provide. Angèl could not comprehend. How can men who make gold in their mouths not be gods? Leticia had a different perspective. She knew she was not a god, though she could bear babies and her husband could not. As a girl of fourteen, she watched with amazement as her children drank greedily from her breasts until her nipples ached and toughened, and learned they were not evil. Things were not always what they appeared.

“The pirates flung the milkmaid from the caverns onto her knees and forced her to milk the cow. Day after day, and night after night, the girl drained the udders, until at last there was nothing left for the cow to give. The cow collapsed, exhausted, and died.

‘Maybe, now, the gods will leave,’ Angèl said.

“The gods loaded their ship with pineapple, sugarcane, cassava. They loaded cages with parrots cursing like infuriated rainbows and crates of coffee bean. And off they sailed from where they came.”

“Did the men return? What happened to the girl?” the boy said.

“They took the girl with them.”

“But why, Abuelita?”

“They took the girl with them. And they did return. With more goat-hoofed men and slaves whose eyes shone like kingfish in dusky lagoons. They put Angèl, Leticia, Carmen, Samuel and the slaves to work. There were no more cows to be found. But there was sugar cane and coffee bean and pineapple, and *Los Tainos* and the blacks harvested from star of sun to stars of moon. And they cursed the gods for giving them so many gifts that they had to return.”

The boy snatched an umbrella and stabbed the air. “Why didn’t they fight back?”

“How do you fight against gods?” Abuelita said, looking through the window at a flag drooping in the heat, like so many seared summer flowers.

“One day Angèl was harvesting a new crop of plantain. Cap Tin and a man claiming to be the milkmaid’s husband prepared for a duel. After they had chained her aboard the ship bound for Spain, the milkmaid slashed both her cheeks with a broken shard from a soup bowl. But she had not succeeded making herself ugly, and Cap Tin’s men joked he had yoked himself a real tigress, for she looked even more beautiful now with her stripes. Under the coconut trees, Cap Tin shot down his adversary, who fell down dead while his tigress paced from the window. Seeing that her captor had

succeeded, she leapt through the window earning her body stripes, and ran bleeding into the mountain. Some say you can hear the roar of that tigris, deep in the heart of *Boricuas* still.

“Angèl and Samuel knew anger for the first time, the anger that comes from impotence. That’s when Angèl devised a plan. He and Samuel, now grown, snuck into the great white house and captured the bear-faced man. They dragged him to the shore. Cap Tin struggled as Samuel paddled to a lagoon they had not revealed to the invaders. Cutting Cap Tin’s bonds, they dumped him into the lagoon and prayed that their suffering would end or be justified. After flailing for a few moments, Cap Tin sank, biting the ripples like a dog. He rose with the moon and spread out like *una guava*, the arachnid that can skitter across *El Mar. Por tres dias*, Samuel and his father fasted and waited. The man did not resurrect himself. These creatures were not immortal. They were men, not gods! It was then that they decided to revolt.”

“Did they chase the invaders from their land?” the boy said.

“The island people knew nothing of weapons,” Abuelita said closing the shades. “They came with rocks and the invaders came with swords. And when they learned to make swords, they were no match for guns and cannons.”

“What kind of story is this?” The boy punched the air. “Did any of them survive?”

“Yes. We have survived the Spanish, and the British, and the French. We live under the protective wing of an eagle. *Los Estados Unidos*.”

“Why do we need the United States? Why can’t we be left alone?”

“Because if a fruit hangs on a vine long enough, someone will take it. So we are told.”

This was not the story he wanted. This was a story of pirates and treasure and blood. But it was his blood. And the blood of ancient fathers and mothers bleeding into his veins.

“So that’s it? This is who we are? A conquered people?”

“No, *mijo*, we are survivors.”

The boy wondered, was that enough?

## II

SECRET OF THE SEER

“I will start from the beginning. I was six years old,” Abuelita said to the boy at her feet. Sitting on his knees, he thrust his wrists through the smoke-rings of her cigar. “Smoke poured from the caves on the beach, two nostrils of a dragon buried up to his neck in the sand. *Mami, su bisabuela* Gloria, said the dragon was emerging out of the bowels of the earth for his hundred-year flight. When this dragon breathed, swimmers drown, men lost their way in the mountains, and boats disappeared at sea.”

*“Niñas, we have to pray that the angels will cry,” Mami said. This will smother the dragon’s fire.”*

“That night, white dragon wings blindfolded the stars. *Mami* and *mis hermanitas* thought of a hundred sad things to tell the angels so they would cry and smolder the dragon’s fire. We told them about Mrs. Melendez’s girl, born without her left foot, Mrs. Arce’s boy, run over selling tee shirts in Manhattan, Mr. Garcia’s boy in Queens who wouldn’t permit his kids to speak Spanish. Our prayers rose through the smoke as a mountain rises out of the sea. Then we retired to our cots. I knew how to sleep through thunder. It wasn’t lightening or the thunder that held off sleep. A blood curdling mewling, a hair-raising whisper, made me stir. I knew to stay in my cot because the cold ground would grip my ankles, goose-bump, and shudder my spine. But I could feel it. Mami was gone. The door opened-shut, and a conch shell rolled across the floor. I cried because Mami must be dead, and I woke my sisters to mourn. Rain battered our tin roof, pounding until heaven and earth were drained of all sorrows, except our own.

“That morning the sun rolled across the sky, and we stepped out, the light, a boulder resting on our backs. The heat licked the earth clean, and we waited to be swallowed. Out of the mist a shadow came, an angel with eyes swollen like bruised fruit, *mi madre*.”

*“Senora Carmelita’s niño didn’t make it through the night,” Mami had said. “It was like he breathed through quick sand; I couldn’t take him to the springs in the rain; there was nothing I could do. Leave me. I need some peace.”*

“Mami told us to stay and sweep away the debris from the storm. But I didn’t want her to leave my side. I insisted I would be a good companion and not speak a single word. We walked in silence. She spread her blanket on the sand, and sleep tucked her into a private darkness. I wanted to tug at her skirts, but I had promised. There was the conch shell inching across the sand! *Mijo*, it was red like God’s first rose and white as the first cloud He

breathed into the sky. I plunged into the choppy water coveting that shell of sky and fire in my hands. My little legs scissored through the waves, but it kept slipping out of reach. Finally, victory was mine! The shells heartbeat roared against my breast. I turned to shore. My mother suddenly appeared very small, a grain of sand on an endless beach that I could never hope to find. I kicked furiously to reach her, but my side cramped, and my body, which had been deprived of proper rest, demanded sleep.”

“Did you die?” the boy said, on his back, reading the dragons from the cigar smoke as clouds.

“No, I didn’t die. Your grandfather,” Abuelita signed the cross and kissed her thumb, “had been keeping an eye on me. He swam out and carried me back to shore on his back like *una tortuga*.”

“I bet you needed to strap a pillow to your backside for a week after your mom found out!”

“No, no,” Abuela laughed. “My mother never knew. Your grandfather returned me, clutching the conch shell, to *mi madre*. She was still asleep.”

“Is that why you say Abuelo is a seer? Because he kept an eye on you?”

“No, *mijo*. That would be too simple. I heard someone digging outside of my *casa* that night and snuck outside. My sisters and I had played with the conch shell and buried it in the brush. I followed your grandfather to the beach. He rocked the conch shell in the moonlight.”

*“It belongs to me, you thief! Give me back what is mine!” I cried to your grandfather.*

“But he ran off with it. Then he laid it in the tide, and the wind rocked the conch shell and carried it like Moses across the sea. I tore after it, but he lifted me up, and I rained fists on his chest.”

*“Listen niñita; open your ears. Look. Open your eyes. A child shouldn’t be so blind,” Encarnacion said to me.*

“It was like realizing there are stars in a morning sky. There was the conch shell, but not a shell at all. I knew the secret.”

“Tell me the secret, Abuela!” the boy cried facing her.

“Don’t you know? You are a seer. You tell me the secret,” Abuela said cupping his chin.

His eyes, two horizons, sunk into a black sea of clutter-mind. What would he see underneath the surface? Talons of fear clutched his heart and threatened to drop it down a ravine. But he could not deny what he saw. Juan had been a fish out of water. The air to him was like quicksand.

“It was Baby Juan’s crying you heard that night, Abuelita, wasn’t it? He had already died. His ghost had crept across the stone path between Senora Carmen’s *casa* and yours, trapped by the storm.”

“*Si, mijo*. The angels were too busy fighting the dragon to help him find his way to heaven.”

“So you are a seer too, Abuelita! You and grandpa.”

“No. Your grandfather saw. He knew what to do. I only caught a glimpse. Before long, I forgot what Baby Juan looked like, and I forgot how to see the dead. All I could see was *Los Estados Unidos* and houses with tar roofs. *Su abuelo* never forgot *los santos*. His canvas lifted the veil of heaven.”

Could the boy’s eyes see through such a veil? What would it be like to see the stars before they shined?

“Abuelita. Was Abuelito blessed? Am I?”

“Time told whether Encarnación was blessed. Only time will tell for you.”

DAFFODILS*Mary Quade*

An emanation—the yellow by the road,  
 each flower, an announcement. No one  
 could plan this show. Even my own  
 swaths shock me—  
 is this what I meant,  
 what I buried in the fall with my trowel,  
 that stout accomplice? Somehow,  
 clumps appear in unmown fields,  
 by isolated stumps in plain woods—  
 shadows of intentions.  
 Even beside a Chicago expressway,  
 among the sheddings of cars,  
 the burned-out flares, I saw  
 their petaled horns blowing—  
 all debris of accident.  
 Narcissus didn't mean  
 to look into the pool—  
 to be broken by such beauty.  
 Sometimes, there is no choice.  
 Along the house, beaten down by rain,  
 muddied blooms—I cut  
 and wash; it seems a shame  
 not to listen—though the bud, delicate,  
 is only voice. The source,  
 poisonous and hard, hides deep below.

**BIBLIOMANCY***(divination by opening a book)**Michelle Detorie*

Close your book. There needn't be  
 a wedding today. The letters  
 like eyes close upon themselves.  
 Lips to lashes, the letters  
 kiss. Eyes pale with candles' sweat, dark  
 locks clasped to a neck—the spine  
 of the book, the weft of the wed.  
 Sewn hips flossed with sex. Sail-sex  
 lifted like a satin mast—sail blue  
 with the sea weave—mist-strewn  
 and glossed with text. A mane  
 of frozen ash. Salt spilled like  
 a sentence-veil down  
 her back. Torn halves re-  
 paired—darned  
 together by the whale's bone-needle.  
 Vellum-lipped and flap turned,  
 a tome reforms—unfastened, voluminous  
 lexis. Hands in the unfolded  
 lap rejoicing, fingers  
 deciphering the taut script—  
 that charged charming—  
 the ceremony—the mating  
 of slippery, uneven markings.

DAPHNOMANCY

*(divination by listening to laurel branches  
crackling in an open fire)*

*Michelle Detorie*

There where the woods rub  
themselves—pale  
tree trunks spark —

bark to bark—laced  
so that the smoke  
slips out. Two woods

rubbed—yellow leaves  
smite—heart shaped  
lights trapped

in a glass jar. There  
where the woods rub  
and there is only

a slender gust of silver  
smoke—the shape  
of a woman's slender dress.

Slender slip  
of a silver ghost.  
There where the woods rub

out the bright—smoke gray ash  
shot through with light—feather-dust  
wreaths—tight nests wound

in the tight trees—whorled  
up where the wood whorls  
in its outside glass.

The woods  
refract. Light scattered  
amidst the wraiths.

## WHEN POETRY MATTERED

*Askold Skalsky*

At Syracuse in 414 BC they herded  
 the remnants of the Athenian army—  
 the ones the Assinarus stream-bed  
 hadn't churned to bestial filth and butchery—  
 into the granite-quarry outside Tyche gate,  
 hinged path to the imperial goddess  
 who had dragged down that bumbler Nicias  
 with his fastidious regard, always dutiful  
 toward the omen-riddling rituals,  
 now sending him a last sign,  
 the dreadful thud of stone on his flesh.

He ended quicker than his men,  
 seven thousand of them, packed  
 between the strictured walls, nothing overhead,  
 half a pint of water and a bowl of meal a day  
 in the rough chill of Sicilian mornings.  
 They shit wherever they could  
 among the corpses, adding stench to stench  
 in that bear pit, while the Syracusans  
 jeered from above for ten weeks.

Whoever survived they branded on the forehead,  
 like horses, enslaving those who had come  
 to enslave but weeding out the literati captives—  
 tutors for their children, and themselves,  
 Greek hinterland aristocrats hungry  
 for the beauties of the Attic tongue.

They liked Euripides the best, and would give  
 some extra fish soup or a barley cake,  
 anything for a few fragments,  
 like the iambics from *Hippolytus*—

*Now the disaster of fresh evil is fulfilled.  
From fate and from necessity there's no escape.*

## RECURSIVE GLOOM

*Askold Skalsky*

Boltzmann claimed time for everything  
 in a perpetual universe: improbable  
 configurations arise to interrupt  
 equilibria with the random jiggle  
 of atoms, iron pellets in a cosmic pot.  
 Light turns transient and suffers  
 the indignity of eternal repetition,  
 becoming a temporary excursion  
 from the normality of steadiness,  
 prosaic rounds of anticipated motion.

This was his version of the Eternal Return,  
 the text that terrorized Nietzsche  
 with its appropriation of truth, heat death  
 of the universe, fact if ever there was one,  
 heaviness yoked to immutability, unmediated  
 by any transvalued nihilistic bliss.

Boltzmann killed himself, and Friedrich  
 conducted a thought experiment  
 for the last twelve years of his life:  
 Across a rope stretched between two  
 abysmal rocks, the high-wire acrobat  
 crosses from one cliff to the next—  
 and back again, while the people go home  
 to their sea-level suppers after which  
 there is nothing more to interpret, just  
 the same old circus, still itself, a circle,  
 having failed to satisfy, once more,  
 with dexterous, predictable complexity.

**IN HIDING***Jay Rogoff*

They've ferreted out an angle  
 in the great green garden,  
 assuming its geometry  
 to hide from the angel  
 or minister calling  
 in that black bullhorn basso.  
 The stern hand of heaven  
 is loving as a tree  
 whose blushing has begun,  
 its shameful leaves falling.

He once stood guard personally,  
 kapo of the compound,  
 wagging a father's finger.  
 Cruel trials of surgery;  
 nightmares for anesthetic.  
 Experiments no longer.  
 He's withdrawn. Clouds abound,  
 through which his fluids water  
 a thirsty firmament.  
 Eden has shrunk.

Adam and Eve crouch  
 cold as amphibians,  
 though Adam's thickened thigh  
 and the fulcrum of his crotch  
 attest he's no frog  
 with a jewel behind his brow:  
 the trembling of his leg's veins,  
 the twitching of his eye.  
 Eve lays her arm on Adam's  
 like fuel, log on log.

What price for knowledge  
cruel as the grave  
and cunning as ripe fruit?  
Harvest is luscious carnage.  
It cloys, but spurs our wants,  
a dull thud at the heart,  
stupid as a knife  
sawing a tree at the root.  
We kill ourselves for love  
and eat the evidence.

Eve shields her virginal face  
from the gnostic radiance.  
Her palms are scored with lines  
like a chimpanzee's;  
her twisted mouth cries *Stop*.  
In the passionate embrace  
of the fatherland they squeeze  
into their coffin space  
behind some barbarous trees.  
In time they will burn up.

THE GOLDEN CHAMBER*Jay Rogoff*

They found the girls buried  
 outside Cologne, creating  
 a sensation. Before long  
 strange stories spread.  
 Of course they were girls  
 no longer but skulls and sticks,  
 flesh, gowns, and curls  
 long dust by 1106.  
 A slipped pen in translation  
 confirmed St. Ursula  
 and her eleven thousand  
 sister virgin martyrs  
 breasted the Rhine in eleven ships  
 to be slaughtered by  
 poleaxe, sword, crossbow,  
 faint smiles and the kiss  
 of Christ upon their lips.  
 Eleven thousand virgins  
 yield a lot of bones;  
 The newfound martyr lode  
 (though many bones were men's)  
 boomed the relic trade  
 yet piled up many a cartload  
 to stock St. Ursula's shrine.

How do you articulate  
 the bones of eleven  
 thousand skeletons?  
 A scapula can't recite  
 whose shoulder fleshed it once;  
 even skulls with jaws  
 keep silent intercourse.  
 A mystic had a vision  
 of virgins by the dozen,  
 each floating from the mist  
 to offer up her name,

but none published a claim  
for her kneecap, rib, or wrist.

The head's a reliquary  
for the skull, the skull  
for the brain. Artisans  
carved elegant wooden  
reliquary busts  
to snug the unfleshed  
crania: young women  
born of the cut live tree,  
modeled on the living  
daughters of Cologne,  
their delicate wood hair  
curling like the Rhine  
framing painted faces  
we might mistake for angels',  
betraying subtle smiles  
as if a virgin's innocence  
housed the hoariest knowing,  
the way the softest skin  
provides a smooth disguise  
for understanding bone.  
On the Feast of St. Ursula,  
October 21st,  
the daughters of Cologne  
would each take up a bust  
to carry around the church  
and out through all the town,  
hundreds of murdered virgins  
miraculously reborn,  
the same golden dresses  
and wise, shy smiles,  
the same gold tresses,  
the same violent Rhine.

And the wooden girls return  
to their ornate gold niches  
in the Golden Chamber  
where today their smiles burn

a hole in the heart like a small  
death. The upper  
walls of the gold room glitter  
with rustic herringbone stick  
patterns as on Adirondack  
great camp friezes.  
Then the illumination:  
they're bones, thousands of bones  
horizontal, upright,  
slanted, stacked, piled,  
sorted by shape and size,  
tibia, fibula, rib,  
the bones of hundreds of virgins  
raised to ornament  
this gilt and gruesome bower,  
a grand memento mori,  
a golden charnel house  
bequeathing us a foretaste,  
bones blissfully composed,  
articulate at last,  
chanting a cappella,  
spelling VRSVLA.

DELTA WEDDING*Robert Bense*

Negotiating dark purple night  
 first, the green terrain a groaning  
 board for nutrias, and the left turn lane  
 loud and truculent with loose shoats  
 on the way to the summer landing  
 the couple speeding, their skeletal  
 language of love already engraved  
 from cabin entertainments, backlit by  
 lantern lightning in the west tonight  
 fireworks shooting cobalt  
 cochineal, cadmium, chrome  
 the grump of tuba, other bass follow  
 each a party to night's detailed specifics  
 guests dressed to match  
 only the scrutiny of the amber light  
 at the courthouse square hyped  
 with repetitive cautions  
 a purely functional cake knife  
 jars of white lightning, rummed  
 cokes, all blades  
 to be left at church door  
 the couple swaying in  
 in red light, holler and call traded like  
 pork bellies at bidding, a feeling  
 like time waiting, deferred:  
 this is the delta, a goat  
 noodling the hog in a yellow pickup  
 and three cars fender bent at the four-way  
 stop. Down the road is unclear  
 though black night returns  
 the world to blue starry morning.

VICKSBURG*Robert Bense*

Helmeted Athena, eyes surveying  
 from the templed hill  
 a violent portent coming on  
 in drifts, clouds large as  
 the continent, an elemental force  
 Grant, his seven wounds healing  
 seeming at a loss what to do next  
 doing what he did best  
 believing in what he did  
 always without umbrage  
 tenor of war deepening  
 gothic lines of war's architecture  
 the crenellated sheets of fire  
 on an improvisational note, a forty-day  
 siege, Old Testament weather  
 bluffside tunneled and caved  
 river and desert trading places  
 daily, the cannonade repeated like  
 temptation always returned to  
 as if by instinct  
 the customary calamity  
 spring nights of bayberry, lilac  
 early summer hickory  
 Corinthian smokestacks  
 of steamers, columns belching black  
 into the muzzle flash of falling stars  
 over the templed houses  
 night river flare in the Palladian glass  
 a garrisoned young city awakening  
 to its old age, to the gnaw of defeat  
 tasting of mule and rat  
 sphincter of war's cloaca  
 scabies, dysentery, death  
 sulfuring the downwind  
 for the Fourth of July  
 a city of aftermath, graves, granite

markers, broken architraves  
a city like Troy, if only in predicament  
now on its own:  
what to do with war  
—victory, defeat  
what to remember, forget.

LOS DESDICHADOS,  
OR CIVILIZATION'S DISCONTENTS

*Teresa Iverson*

Alternately clutching and stabbing, fingers  
stut-stuttering a knife over the bottle's neck  
to slice the umbilical cap, crying  
“Hell and death, what's the *matter*  
with this thing?!” then urging—twisting,  
tugging—the firmly buried cork:  
“Why won't you come OOOUUT!?!”—who

earlier, libating his daily *quarto*,  
a colleague, oiling along the corridor would pause  
to approve “How *civilized*, at lunch...”

For whom language once sizzled  
and bucked, divine afflatus  
sourced through a lightning  
rod, Hölderlin's *Weinstock*—

now, more and more, *spirits* inveigling Spirit,  
daimon deflating to *demon*—

“I can't be bothered,” the slack, mid-life  
refrain, become old age Necessity,

Now without the nightly pill:  
claustrophobic despair, White Night incubi,  
threads of a frayed sleeve ravelling,

the mind's Anapurnas still glimpsed  
from afar, crying: "I've lived far  
too long," and "Before many more days,  
all the windows will shut.."

"D'OÙ VENONS NOUS, QUE SOMMES NOUS, OÙ ALLONS NOUS"

*Teresa Iverson*

Bullfrog nesting on the solar plexus  
 lion roaring in the pelvic cave  
 set, the heart in a vegetal nexus  
 octagonal ribs criss-crossing a nave

His Feminine:

Tree-trunk legs, straight waists  
 olives, fox reds, bronzes, tropical gold.  
 Finding Her lost, he would re-invent  
 each as a Tahitian primitive—  
 Mary, Europa, Parvati, Eve—  
 too many modeled for too few sold.  
 Only Hina, moon goddess, survives their descent,  
*Oviri*, Destroyer-Creatrix from scratch  
 aligned with his canine perversity  
 clutches a wolf cub to her crotch:  
 in earthenware, azure paint of divinity  
 the "monstrous magnificent" his taste.

Lower left, a bird claws a lizard,  
 tail furled, a peacock's sleeping eyes,  
*Noa, Noa* flit *ignis fatuus*-, firefly-  
 fashion, like spirits of the dead that terrify  
 his lovers—those illustrated words  
 powerless to shape or prevent  
 critiques back home, Parisian bêtises  
 over language "infantile," art's indulgences  
 and death, his too-willing sacrament.

\*\*



## SEEING BUTTERFLIES

*Wallis Wilde-Menozzi*

The butterfly was as small for a butterfly as I was tall for a woman. What I mean is that the orange-winged creature that zigzagged to my shoulder on a May day in Parma, Italy, where I was talking to the postman, was not much bigger than two of my unpainted fingernails. I was as tall as the lilacs in our yard or the hibiscus, as tall as any of the willowy plants that had hungrily reached up over the fence to get beyond the fence, beyond the dark of a shaded yard. Of course, I had not grown because I was looking for light; my American parents long ago attributed my height to my father's statuesque ancestors on the Baltic Sea. But my inner world, that silent story which tells itself to us, felt very much like the bent and slightly deformed plants that found a way to receive what they needed in another yard. My neighbor enjoyed the blooms: the double mauve lilacs, the hibiscus with saucy tongues.

What still brings sharp tears to my eyes, when I think of what happened next, is how life occasionally rustles, as if the every-day is caught and thrown back by a curtain's deep folds. The mind finds itself touching reality beyond ordinary dimensions. The butterfly, whose exact name I have never keyed out in a book, landed on my shoulder on the tenth anniversary of my son's birthday. My infant son, whom I found early on a California morning in his crib, cold, dead—I carried him wrapped within. I also carried that terrifying instant when life unveils its unconditional swiftness: the moment when I cradled him and knew there was no going back. He had been taken in his sleep, and I, as though an eagle had snatched me in its talons, had been dropped on a frozen mountaintop to face death. I had been left to find a path down, while all around me magnificent peaks and beautiful valleys murmured.

The butterfly landed on my shoulder.

The postman and I went on talking but all of my attention took the butterfly's stopping into my consciousness, my need, my anniversary. The postman knew nothing. He saw no candle burning on my shoulder. He felt no mystery or wind. We talked about a *sciopero*, a strike, the way Italian workers are treated with little regard.

Then, ever so gently, I brushed the butterfly off.

I said good-by to it. I did say good-by and thank you in my heart, silently. Although I am married to a scientist, who would find it strange, silent inner speech flowed. I was talking to the butterfly. I loved the specificity

of its coinciding touch on what would have been my son's tenth birthday. Warmed, I walked down the street to the house. Key in the lock, the phone started to ring, so I ran.

The door was open then. I left it open.

Whether it was a crack or half open or wide open, the fact is that it was left open. I don't know how far. I hadn't yet thought that the inner lilacs in me had felt near light and were pulling with all their might. To keep the door open? I don't know.

While I chatted on the phone, the butterfly, the orange fellow with a few dots and black parts, (I'm sure it was the same one) came in. It went fast like a tiny toy plane, in little circles, passing my back and coming around to the front where my eyes noticed it circling as I talked. Then it fell to the floor. As if I were watching a trapeze artist who misses the swing, I gasped. I excused myself and hung up. In order to find the tiny insect on the marble tiles, I fell to my knees.

The butterfly flew or it leapt. The language is mine. I found it in my hand. The creature I had worried was injured settled in my hand and then it turned; moving away from the middle finger, it walked each one. I started to weep. My son's birthday, the butterfly's non-passive touching of my fingers opened my mind in pieces.

The butterfly stayed. It stayed until my tears were raining so hard on it, that for all I knew, it could have been thinking it was outside on a lilac bush in the rain. It didn't leave and for more than an hour I had what was an open door from inside me to its presence.

Finally I told the butterfly that it had to go. That thought went against the confused, intense, shockingly beautiful mystery I was in. The irrational impulse to pull back and break the spell was unbearable. As difficult, in a different way, as having been left on the mountain the first morning when I found my son in his crib. Outside in the garden, I held my hand high to the sky and waited for the butterfly to lift. By then the anniversary tears were a large flowing river. They were a peaceful river that Buddhist monks have written about. They were fountains that have been called "the still waters." The butterfly didn't budge. I told it so many things I can't tell you, readers, because they were meant for him, and for the place he had reattached me to. I didn't want him to go, but I knew he must. And eventually, he flew, zigzagging up and up, leaving me—in a beautiful and frightening way—to touch my empty palm.

‡ ‡ ‡

This very personal story is indestructible. Yet its intricate fabric, for it to remain itself, needs a context of silence and attention, as much as if one were in a house of prayer. Why I have decided to write about something so personally precious is because I cannot do less in this moment when words are being treated like mercenary soldiers. Words have been hired out and are contributing to—or worse—creating some of this young century’s confusion. In this painful and troubling time of bombing, killing and denial, deciding to tell stories about this butterfly and other ones might seem bizarre, sentimental, almost like a dream. Yet they began rustling in my memory because I lived them as real events leading me to experiences of life’s sacredness and, if such a thing exists, a sense of scale, dimly perceived, for an individual’s power. The butterfly moments began pressing to be told.

Good writing is often a matter of letting material mature until telling a story becomes a necessity. My experiences with these winged insects stirred as our world—where more than six billion people have beliefs, points of view and wishes to live them—seemed in peril. The butterflies caught my attention as I searched for reasons why patience, astuteness, knowledge are swept aside by the noise and appeal of manipulated emotions. It felt imperative to free the butterfly images, to let their intriguing energy, so redolent in myths over centuries, quicken in this moment by using my stories.

The power of narrative is mysterious. Once its reactions are set in motion, like the butterfly’s landing, what is perceived and transpires might be unending free re-combinations of attention, experience, expectation and memory on the beholder’s part. The page holds patterns the writer wants us to know and other patterns that the reader brings. Narrative takes on its own life. The purpose of a fictional story should be to create a convincing world. In fiction the artful illusion is what really happened as the reader becomes convinced and moved. The consequences of suspended disbelief are different if transferred to the realm of non-fiction, factual essay, journalistic and scientific arguments describing and testing reality as “real.” The point of being convincing has different claims and boundaries. If fact and fiction become interchangeable in these latter forms, the pictures, ideas and emotions created are manipulations with deleterious consequences for benchmarking truth. The butterfly stories began beating in my attention as a need for certainty in society (a constant without consensus) hardened after September 11th. It seemed that belief and wish (constants, too, without consensus) were becoming more valued than the arduous business of reliability in narrated truth. The butterflies and their relationship to spiritual experience were both small and infinite. It was as if focusing this and its relevance was why I was suddenly driven to write out the links I had experienced between

butterflies, words and consciousness. Perhaps I even needed to remind myself that those instants, so easily put aside, were more than enough to give one a way to enter the world's shouting matches.



After the May butterfly came into our house through the open door I received many. A dark one, with an intricate mosaic pattern as fine as tan and brown grains of sand laid in lines, stopped in the *tinello*, which means family room in Italian, a room often tinted by the smell of burning logs or ripening summer fruit. When I first noticed the winged creature against a wall in the room, a set of gongs went off in my head. I heard nine, nine, nine swoosh past me until I could hardly hold my head up. The day was September 9, 1999. That butterfly, hanging like a miniature crucifix, didn't move until the following morning. This is to say, after the finger-walking butterfly, their appearances often joined in my mind to metaphysical experience. And they often transported me.

A few hours before my husband's mother was to be intentionally but, I believe, wrongly deceived about her cancer, I jumped back in front of a hairy butterfly, with orange spots as intense as bull's eyes, hanging, wings spread open, on our white bedroom curtains. The dark primordial creature, large as a full hand, looked like a warning. I wanted to photograph it but my husband rushed in, pulled the curtain off its rod, crumpled the large moon wings in the billows of linen and rushed to the basement to release it. I never saw it again. My mind fused the unsettling event with an annunciation.

One July day, I saw an entirely black butterfly on our bedspread. It flew up over my shoulder. I noticed it over my head when I was looking in the mirror. I saw it as a reflection casting a fine veiled shadow on my face. I felt that the shadow and its color were one. By the time it appeared, butterflies' mythical, ancient links to souls and death seemed close to my mind. Its blackness was the unknown, even in the room. Its shadow was like the moon half-full.

Then there was the stunning yellow butterfly hidden, tucked flat, in the pages of a book of my poems with yellow bees on its cover. I had just picked up the first finished copies from the printer. It was January, which is cold in Parma, cold and humid. I opened the first page and out flew a yellow butterfly that had been resting, or trapped, inside. My daughter was standing with me. We were preparing to attend a memorial Mass that afternoon for a dear friend's son. As non-Catholics we had been talking about the mean-

ing of prayer in a memorial Mass. Even today putting down these words, the jonquil-colored butterfly's appearance from a poetry book and its flight into a conversation on prayer stun me. Its presence touched me far more profoundly than a feeling of surprise. Against the window, illuminated by the sun, its wings became transparent like a single golden pane in a stained-glass window. It, too, eventually left the glass and rested in my palm. My daughter photographed it in my hand. Fountains of feeling welled up, making us weep. We went to the Mass and when we returned it was resting on the window. When I would swing the window wide, it stayed. It left a sticky streak on the glass and then settled. When finally it flew out into the freezing January air, twenty-four hours later, my husband asleep in his chair, absented from our mystical fixations, the creature flew straight up. I hesitated before giving the photo to the boy's mother.

Another moment lingered and expanded differently; yet it, too, linked up to souls. The Natural History Museum in Parma announced the addition of a permanent collection of ten thousand butterflies donated by a priest. He assembled them, without scientific provenance, as evidence of God's perfect design. Sent by missionaries from his order in Latin America and Africa who were paid to say Masses for the dead, he developed a system to offer the Masses in the home mission, with the proviso that the missionaries paid him with a butterfly for each one said. Ten thousand examples were dried, slipped flat into envelopes and mailed. So the last room in the Natural History Museum—which, along the way, displays a few snarling local foxes and dusty falcons, plus some of the reptile treasures the Italian explorer Bottego brought back from Ethiopia when whites combed Africa for their own interests—explodes with line after line of vibrating colors in similar and dissimilar designs. Twenty thousand wings. Ten thousand deaths. The last room, which has no scientific merit because of its lack of system, is a wall-to-wall fresco of butterflies—contractually and literally, as prayers.

Again recently, another, far more intense yellow butterfly, with two black dots and black edges lining its wings, appeared on the floor of my husband's study. He delicately passed the exquisite dead creature to me—so unseasonable for April—a few hours after the friend whose son had died in the car accident phoned to announce that a grandchild had been given their son's name. Should I tell you that I live in a house whose basement was once a consecrated Catholic church? Does that add or subtract from the theme of souls? How could I not begin acknowledging associations with these startling cracks that flick open across my life and mind? The Zen story of the butterfly that flaps its wings in Parma and stirs a Tsunami on the other side

of the world is something I've felt brush my skin as a life-changing effect. I have experienced butterflies as a living story.



But butterfly stories have no end, because the door between consciousness and unconsciousness is a matter of attention. It can always swing open. Each of us has been given a mind with which to receive and explore, where inner and outer can meet and metamorphose. In Geneva, where I see an analyst maybe three or four times a year, I discussed a dream in which I wandered in a large empty post office where I was hoping to retrieve a gift from my father. "What could it be?" she asked. Still thinking about the dream as I stepped off the commuter train, two minutes from my writer friend's home, I decided to walk another path to her house. I stopped in front of a very plain Swiss chalet. I noticed nothing except—yes, you can guess—a white butterfly, chasing another near the door of the house. I did see one, but that was not the real discovery. Slowly the tree I was standing in front of eased into my consciousness. It was thick with butterflies. Hundreds of butterflies—black, yellow, white and orange—flickered and fed. I had been standing directly in front of them, blind and unaware of their swarming numbers. After so many years of relationships with *lepidoptera* I still cannot tell you their species names. The tree, someone explained, had been bred specifically to attract ravenous flocks. Surely, this was the gift mentioned in the dream: seeing crowds of butterflies. And the gift was not only the perception of butterflies but of the match and join, the melt between waking and dream.

The next time I was in Geneva and hoped to see the tree, not even its flat stump remained. Gone. Had the owner grown tired? Had there been hundreds of butterfly bodies to collect like dried leaves? Who knows? The shock of seeing an empty space, as if it had never been, as if the vision of so many butterflies no longer had life, no more claim to being a symbol than any other day, any other breath, any other exchange remained. I felt the switch from abundance and assumed meaning to stark extermination and emptiness. The hubris of thinking that I had understood and could extrapolate widely from one event left an impression. Finding the butterflies, the implicit meaning I snatched as a gift, was hardly direct. Blindness was part of the story. Wishful thinking. Transience. Crystalline coldness. Death. Others. I had seen both the fullness and the equally powerful emptiness. With the tree's disappearance, I felt I had witnessed reality from two sides, and neither was stronger.



So perhaps I can now suggest the direction of the narrative: a sense of its long whisper. The first butterfly made me feel a curtain rustle strongly. But the story would have been different had it stopped there. The on-going instants when my life and butterflies intertwined were netted by my growing consciousness, letting me chase one puzzle and then another in a partially filled-in puzzle. They occasionally left a door open to an experience of a world beyond my life or knowledge. They often seemed to appear along a border where there was great pain and longing for a sign. The butterflies got my attention and from there my mind, with its limits, found or received shapes and patterns that brought me face to face with awe: some absolute moments when time changed dimensions. More real than anything I can explain, including the specific transfixing experience of presence, they came and went, inching me often towards facing death. The lilac in me kept growing, trying to get over the fence, for no reason except that it responded to light—light I began to silently mouth as part of God’s name. A sense of God grew as I re-learned many times that the fence was not my neighbor’s but was inside of me.

This light is something I seek to uncover in words. I don’t see light automatically in words; I often see texture, darkness, more like bark and boles. I see suffering in faces. I am drawn to sadness. Injustice. But also beauty and laughter. I have always felt the mission to write until a reader smiles and then begins to feel his belly shake.

When I was a very young and very skinny girl I used to give speeches in public. One time speaking before a group of several thousand young women I stirred them with my words until they were chanting and crying: “A-mer-i-ca. A-mer-i-ca.” No such intention lay in my words about freedom and liberty for what was the Soviet Union, then. “Charisma” was the word given in praise of that speech. But for me, I sadly discovered the horror of agitating people. Their hysterical reaction erupted into a storm of patriotism because my words triggered powerful emotions, simplified to rhetorical intentions. My sentiments were sincere feelings about nations’ common ground, but the connecting tissue of knowledge, background, context got lost in over-simplifications and the young women’s need to feel bonded at that moment. Words, like potent chemicals, if mixed, must be handled with attention and care. The way religion and political institutions are being joined in public discourse, in many parts of the world, including the US, tends to give preferential space to fear and ignorance. As a reaction to uncertainty, rhetoric

encouraging a sense of belonging to the right group guided by supernatural authority holds many predictable dangers in term of irrational responses.



Narrations of all sorts are moving at super-electronic speeds. As often as not, politicians, religious figures, broadcasters, and marketers use them for mass messages. Purpose in a global communication world will remain carefully directed ideas of specific targets. More like arrows or bullets, words in this blunt simplified sense will define communication. As words whiz above our heads as weapons for power, money and influence over ever larger masses, butterflies can remind us as writers about how to continue as custodians of their purpose and innate power. It is not consoling but perhaps a breath of bracing air to remember that words can use us as much as we can use them. They open doors. Sublime doors. Or dangerous doors or false ones. Or entertaining ones. Fiction or non-fiction? Plaintiff or defendant? Tortured or torturer. Writers need to know the difference. Like butterflies, words mimic. Like arrows and bullets, they fly long distances. Words serve any wizard or master. As writers, we must serve words. They are the deepest wells from which human beings can draw as they make their journey on earth. Their waters can be polluted and poisoned. They can also carry the most beautiful subtle distinctions. Curiosity, desire, and critical interest in reality are needed in order to open to a butterfly's mystery. To use words with their full radiance and power, *idem*.

It was in Switzerland, too, that I saw an exhibit of Nabokov's butterflies. I saw his triangular net, his round glasses, and the worn notebooks in which he recorded his chases. The experience of his careful notebooks classifying species and place, the authentic search that can be verified by others doing the same work—was a beautiful sign for a writer. Nabokov's reflecting, mirroring interfaces set a high standard for the infinite number of stories to be told about butterflies. He identified their singularities and recorded their habitats, rigorously expanding their territory of marvel and identity. Butterflies caught by different minds give back different angles. His view and the Mass-saying priest's, overlapping but widely separate, are two of billions of quantum waves in whisper.

In Geneva, on another visit, I took an afternoon to attend the plenary session of a UN conference on the Spiritual Power of Women. In song, film, speeches and paintings, the power of purpose was linked to peace; the spirit was celebrated by projects for saving the water, working for just judiciary systems, linking neighbors in Israel and Palestine, educating women, start-

ing businesses, protecting children. Actual work carried out among high profile women like Jane Goodall, Aung San Suu Kyi, Justice Nasira Iqbal, and the Maori convinced, but not dogmatically so, that spirit is indomitable and belongs to everyone.

The extraordinary energy circulating in the conference poured into the street. Fluttering, small, exciting steps by women forming lines kept opening room for all. By small steps, I don't mean the humiliating steps that have been imposed on women and so many billions of people through domination. Accepting our great energies and finding room for all suggested to me the scale for an individual's power. As we zigzagged down near the lake in Geneva, a man leaned from a helicopter to film us. He must have seen bright, varied, moving creatures displacing the air, our arms up and opened like imaginary wings.

‡ ‡ ‡

One more butterfly appears as I look back. It was created by using my thumb and my first finger. Opening and closing them, they became that volatile creature on a train where I would descend in Florence and it would wind on to Sicily. In the stuffy compartment for six, where my husband and I sat, a mother was abusing her child. Hitting her, slapping her hard at every independent move. It was unbearable. What to do, when that life would go on, most likely in that context of violence and deep disturbance. One impulse was to change compartments. Instead, I coaxed her from the mother's arms, and the child grabbed my hair and pulled with all her might. "I am afraid, *ho paura*," she said. That is when the butterfly reached my mind. The intuition leapt out. As I took her thumb and index finger in my hand, the words, their purpose and power, assumed form. Not from me, but from the vibrations passing through me.

"Put them together, your fingers. You see. It's a butterfly. Open. Close. *Ecco*. Thumb. First finger." Her mother's hawkish vigil stopped as she nodded off to sleep. "The butterfly's a friend," I said, holding the child's bony body. "It wants to give you kisses." I took her hand and, with mine, too, I touched her thin, bruised arms. "Look the butterflies are kissing you." She was too tense to smile. "Remember, it will always be with you." She put her two fingers to her cheek. She opened them. "Again," I said. She rubbed the spot where her two fingers had been. "Again. The butterfly lives in your hand. Any time you want, it will give you kisses."

And that narrative raises many questions. Isn't the first a cry to know if the child was touched? Did she ask the butterfly for kisses? Has she grown

up or was she broken apart? What if my story is only another half-fiction to soothe a fleeting glimpse of an innocent's pain? Doesn't asking for truth ground the reality of what happened to the child? Where *is* her *farfalla*? Starting from the butterfly that walked my fingers on what would have been my son's tenth birthday, does it matter how I identified, put context and scale to the subtle experience of a living story?

**ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ: TWO PHOTOGRAPHS**

*Thomas O'Grady*

I

Notice how even a happenstance snap—  
Budapest, 1920...a couple

peering, utterly rapt, through a knothole  
knocked in a fence topped by a tent's striped flap—

draws the mind's wandering eye to focus  
on that alluringly unseen swirl spread

beyond the man's straw hat, the woman's scarfed head:  
the whirling world of a touring circus.

II

*There are none so blind...*Not quite the gospel  
truth, but in shutter-stopped time where melody

rings mute as muck-caked streets in Abony  
(note those ruts, tumbrel-cut in parallel),

that sightless fiddler, a barefoot urchin  
his guiding light, imprints—proof positive—

a candid glimpse of art's imperative:  
that we come to our senses, one by one.

METABASALT*William Doreski*

A lumpy metabasalt layer  
 washed by a brook near Conway  
 betrays a sub-oceanic  
 origin associated

with volcanic action deep  
 in the Early Paleozoic.  
 Biotite, feldspar, and quartz  
 grew so finely grained they melded

into one aggressive matrix.  
 I admire the rounded cleavage,  
 the eroded upthrust cut  
 across graceful lengthy folds.

Potholes of brook water float  
 yellow leaves. The smaller holes  
 formed when the lava bed cooled,  
 fixing the rhythm of the flow.

I admire this rhythm even  
 in a static mode, the bulge  
 and rounding almost flesh-like  
 although not at all sexual.

Hard to believe this mountain stream  
 flows over a former sea-bed,  
 but the ripple generates  
 a counter-rhythm to remind me

nothing's static, nothing's as fixed  
as it seems when stalled in my gaze.  
The black rock's still evolving,  
but slowly now, eroding

maybe half an inch an eon,  
yet retaining in its folds and thrusts  
the vigor of a world too young  
to burden itself with myth.

ROCKPOOLS*Brian Swann*

Morning's glass. Finally.  
 After weeks of fug.  
 The wind shifts. That's  
 all it takes. And silence  
 slants in too, sharp.  
 Along the shore waves  
 erase themselves. Birds  
 answer. No wave. No  
 call. Waves. Calls. You get  
 used to things being  
 like this, their way of  
 shaping things, being lucid,  
 while I sit here and gaze  
 into those crystal rockpools  
 with a child's eye, absorbed  
 in a model world of tiny lives  
 in which water is simply  
 sky, blue, blue, nothing  
 in it, which is why it's blue,  
 unless at night there's a moon  
 that's come alive with a human  
 glow, a cold empty heat  
 that could come from inside you,  
 floating as well in sea as sky,  
 a kind of promise that drifts  
 toward you and then drifts off  
 in a sky that keeps sweeping  
 the mind clear, then clouding  
 it up, to become something  
 like a shoreline of rockpools  
 you thought you had forgotten.

THE GIST

*Brian Swann*

The water gives up  
nerve, taut & bright,  
  
as its world spins away  
over stones & rock, then  
  
calmer among reeds, turns  
gray, a ghostly outline,  
  
a ghostly separation, as  
if something's waiting for me  
  
in my own story, but what,  
lost in its reflection, one  
  
bird with two bodies,  
going back and forth,  
  
never less or deflected  
as it stabs right through  
  
itself, then waits, to do it  
again until, stock-still, looking  
  
across the stream, it seems  
to change his mind and,  
  
already somewhere else,  
rises like a hollow sound,  
  
a cold wheel over its own  
abandoned shadow, hesitates,  
  
maybe to return, then  
strikes out, its answer  
  
action, the gist of its going.

WORDS FOR MOVING WATER*Christopher Sindt*

Bounded by willow, as is  
 the way in field guides: the river  
 channeling, ebbing, as a story

returns, roaring more, then  
 less, cascading and flattening: or,  
 between: the place

of a story: a man fishes, swims, falls  
 into, speaks from: or  
 a kind of mirror, found in pools

beside eddies, the other side of  
 the canyon rising, to view  
 the black phoebe as it skims

the surface, the hawk's distorted  
 arc: you are so clearly  
 in or out of the river, entirely

missing something that is  
 underneath, or even, in:  
 in other rivers, there might be

a god or headwater to speak  
 of, or a raft, or danger or  
 solitude: it may lead

somewhere: you may know it  
 in your words: *cataract*, *back-*  
*flow*, *anabran*; or float

through rapids or toward  
 a dam: the dusty smell of  
 blackberry, grey pines

softening the hillside, standing  
beside for an instant, this one:  
coming to an end, attainably:

my river doesn't roar,  
it opens to its own  
gravity, its exit, listens for  
the slight gasp  
in time, and fills—

LESSONS IN CLARITY*Christopher Sindt*

If you stand next to the lake  
 you will soon be losing

your voice. Rosy-finches lift  
 their aging heads and say nothing.

Say nothing, seize the water as  
 their own. Your urge to speak

forgets its message. Something about  
 being *in contact with me*.

Are you in contact with me?  
 You want access to the mysteries,

the revelation of speech come to tease  
 the hunger of arms and legs? You're

next to the Lake of Our Dreams  
 not in the Lake of Our Dreams, again,

and in the morning the hissing  
 chemical warmth of the camp stoves.

Beside the ponderosas you're bristling  
 with nothingness, the needles beneath

your feet like an undertow, the land  
 of sides and the black hole of ins.

Down trees all around like backdrop, granite  
 framing the lake like a choke-collar.

Why is the promise of clarity  
 the wrong promise? Clarity is  
 a garment. The urge is elsewhere.

APOLOGY

*Rebecca Hazelton*

I thought—I thought the world  
a lovely garden.

I was wrong  
to think I lived a temperate life.

Frost crept in  
and the trees unskirted died,

the roses  
broke into red glass.

As in a fairytale  
in which work signals virtue,

I swept and swept  
to make myself worthy

of the proper ending,  
but still my feet bled

and always there  
was more.

FROM LOOM*Rebecca Hazelton*

The girl in the red velvet swing pauses for a photo.

Despite dark energy, the universe. Or because. The design  
*is* explicable, says Hawking. The older languages reorder

dark and indistinct. The spirit moves over the waters.  
Prozac in Britain's supply. Not LSD.

On Masada, they consider. A body catapults and hits  
the fortress wall. Malnourished women bear daughters.

A Ziegfield girl is 36-26-38. Autism up in Maryland.  
Deceptive primates have larger brains. Chronic fatigue

is all in the mind. If you think in English your children  
might not. The borders of the language are never filled in.

Freud counsels Dora to relax. Women who believe  
they'll live long give birth to sons. Human stem

cells adapt faster. Smaller planets orbit a nearby star.  
We're still alone. 154 Sonnets.

Avian flu in Chinese pigs. Undetectable HIV.  
Leukemia deaths higher near AM broadcast towers.

A broken glass at a wedding appeases disorder.  
Spooky action at a distance, says Einstein.

Troy, a seven acre village. The oldest letter, O.

ONE MORNING

*Emmy Pérez*

Yellow pines No ever no green except  
where stems brown needles green I walk

on the wooden train The fall's water you swam in  
one cold morning What you braved That ice

path A horse fence Where fences are horses  
with long hair I braid the tale the fall of stables

Four paws touch dirt stirring  
a flirt of sky a bundle of rare You bundle

into stables I open with sandy tongue  
taste the grain of barkwater

I look at myself in  
a mirror of weather

Rain trenzas Dirt cups us We drink

& spin like tornillos A swallow's nest like an adobe  
tornado Shit & mud & feathers & forming pitchfork claws

Eggshells gone We rest in the ocean smalls  
the pink throat

The back door is also the front The only  
smoke hole Feathers rise  
& we follow

LOOK AT YOU*Emmy Pérez*

My boy, let me look at you  
 My boy, let me look at you

Slide these lampoons away for good

Remove these nets

Sappho will keep you here  
 As an experiment

Steal the musk herd  
 Box their whines

Go kissing for dorsals with spirals

I am *muy* conquistadora

I'll still wear your cashmere  
 You're too guapo to swap you

We reach a safe rush

September annexes the sky's reed  
 We reach for its hook

May we show no one  
 This maelstrom

May we show no one  
 May we show  
 no one

**THE UNQUIET VIETNAMESE:**  
**PHUONG PAST PYLE AND FOWLER**

*Anis Shivani*

**a.**

On rue Catinat, shoppers for tomatoes  
at noon look skyward, and pause: no returning  
French bombers whistling sky tunes, and God knows  
the Americans have waited for this turning.  
I have heard the Statue of Liberty  
is of French design. If so, skyscrapers  
near it must remain smelling of asperity  
of a kind unknown to English drapers.  
One thing becomes absorbed into another.  
Of the four brothers in a room, always  
count on the one who tears up, to smother  
his conscience, to win. Expect delays  
in fountain-square explosions, don't bother  
finding little girls' arms in the litter's haze.

**b.**

Finding little girls' arms in the litter's haze  
is what my sister does for kicks. I foretell  
by the pool of coals in Fowler's first gaze  
of the day if Pyle will now ring the bell.  
I am made to relate the plots of movies  
and plays in minute detail, as if memory  
were a trapdoor in use, as if honey bees  
buzz in high pitch only to melt emery.  
But Pyle is a boy in search of a mother  
who values the art of self-knowledge.  
And Fowler thinks it too much of a bother  
to pull the scribbling Grangers off the ledge.  
It leaves me to charm my country as other  
than what I sinned against as moral hedge.

## THE LAST WEEKS OF GEORGE ORWELL

*Anis Shivani*

Old Huxley stole a march on me, Sonia:  
he knew the simpler way, drugs and diet,  
not tripwires and megaphones; insomnia  
conquered, the hoary complaint held quiet.

When England next burns with missionary  
zeal, lease the thumbed-up Bibles to football  
hooligans, for they'll be charmed to carry  
the queen's arms all the way to Albert Hall.

Sometimes, a man like Auden, nude and sealed  
into American rhymes, deaf Berlins  
on the California coast, will be peeled  
at his core by surgeons, blessed free of sins.

To be gay will be Byronic chic, leaped  
ahead of socialist health, dunes of time  
ever sternly waving, like Martians seeped  
into movies for the need of our prime.

Surely automobiles on autobahns  
will be the way poor India'll want to go;  
the ones to rope in the ruse will be clowns,  
free thirty days after cooling death row.

It won't do to be down and out in Paris  
or Fez, nor come up for air in Sussex:  
a spire of sad Krishnas rides Mercedes  
leant by sex-touched mothers sniffing Windex.

I will be the soul of each telecast  
of world spectacle, dean of tautology  
retired on digestive biscuits, long past  
ruminative bouts to louse theology.

**MY LOVELY ASSISTANT**

*Jody Rambo*

You would have to break my ribs to get to the heart  
of the longing. To unbury it from below the bone.

The sooner you know this the better. No use keeping  
hope astir. That, too, could kill you. Or so I thought.

Being a girl, I could beg off, or bite back, gray out the face  
of the boy who pinned me beneath him—say one fretful word.

These, all circus arts.

Once I saw a woman, suspended by her hair alone,  
swing in large circles thirty feet from the ground. That night,

the scene turned dark, she would fall—a cupped petal descending  
in the airy filaments of my dreams.

It's no magic to disappear. Just a figuration of the body into air.  
Here—saw in half the box I'm lying in. The light will

pass through me like a complex wound.  
I'll never feel a thing.

THEL'S LAMENT(William Blake, *The Book of Thel*)*Jody Rambo*

I am to myself a wilderness of fading things, shepherdess  
of shadows in this vale of vanishments. Even walking tonight

in the verdant grass I hear no voice, seek alone the secret air.  
My soul's chimera is to wear a yellow dress. To feel the wind

that opens, one by one, the petals of the pasqueflower in a flame  
of deep red, & know it a thing not to be feared. Why not accept

embodiment? Lean in upon the turnstile of desire?  
I wander this garden perpetual as it's clothed in such

bodily light, touch each lily fed with morning manna  
only to taste the nothingness of heaven in my mouth.

Yet I take shelter here. Among the root bound. Where perfect  
movement is a mere brushing through branches, where the body

itself, dark and pining from afar, is left wanting—  
water, cloud, dew—every perishing part of me.

CALAMITY*Ellen Wehle*

Our sun rose and they were here  
 Coal-scatter dragon's spine boulders  
 Washed up at our door  
 Extending the shore far out to sea  
 In strips the paint peeled while the painter slept  
 For no further reason  
 Nobody could stand the thirteenth fairy at the feast  
 Lobbing her curses apple-high  
 Let's leave it unsaid  
 Household poisons perform swiftly  
 Gas pedal jammed at sixty still we wondered  
 What that keening meant  
 Each time smoke alarms wobbled  
 And me half-asleep unplugging the phone  
 Astronauts orbiting Earth  
 Claim roofless space has an odor  
 Acrid as burnt metal all those unheeded prayers  
*Give us a sign* flying like photons  
 Was this the nail  
 For lack of which our kingdom would be lost

COLLECTIVE HISTORY VERGING ON MY SLEEP*Ellen Wehle*

Heifer dark of eye  
 Abandoned at the altar steps  
 Anguished and lowing  
 If there were only some governing order  
 If DNA would codify our nature  
 Braiding helixes the way  
 Equal signs started  
 Life as a glyph for water  
 Synchronous scullers glide their oars  
 In the beginning every outcast  
 Star crowned in fire  
 Waltzing round the black hole's rim  
 Body's telegraph frantically  
 Tapping my life sheet  
 Lightning that strikes not-quite-me  
 Girl as faraway shore  
 Thus the Garden before pruning  
 Naked by flood of evening whoever sits  
 To whet my shears  
 Who turns the grinding-stone

## ENCOUNTERS

### Saul Bellow

*Heather Treseler*

“STYLISTIC ORGY!”

These were the stern red words stretched across my page. I never found out if it was Saul Bellow, the novelist and Nobel Laureate, who had written this reproach on my term paper, or if it was his graduate assistant, a mysterious twenty-something who looked, in his day-old beard and suede vests, like he had recently sprung from a ranch in Wyoming. But whether Bellow had issued this angry red ink himself, or if his rodeo grad student had served as his amanuensis, I took these words to heart. I never again wrote that *The Great Gatsby* “was a great bilious roar from the lion-throat of American ambition: the self being born from its own ahistoric platonic envisioning, announcing itself nosily into being.”

Oh, it was enough to make Sartre nauseated. And Bellow had caught me: he’d identified that infection peculiar to young academic writing, which tries desperately to distinguish itself, to put a ribbon on its mortarboard and insist on its literary-ness. That semester in 1998, I was a 16-year-old senior at an accelerated high school. I had petitioned, several times, for a spot in Bellow’s Boston University class, “Men on the Make.” Some loophole or margarine-hearted administrator had eventually let me in.

Bellow, then 83 years old but in some ways still “on the make” himself, kindly put a tourniquet on my adolescent prose-poetry. “Remember that 2-cent words often work as well as the \$500-dollar whoppers,” he said in class the following week. I was sure that he was staring straight at me when he explained that one needn’t have a *myocardial infraction* to have a heart attack. One needn’t be *perspicacious* or *sagacious* to be insightful or wise. As we read Balzac and Dostoyevsky, Fitzgerald and Dreiser, Bellow showed our class that a muscle-bound adjective could not make up for a weak-armed verb. Indeed, like any true Chicagoan, Bellow found an endless supply of metaphors in baseball. The predicate, for instance, had to be the fat-cat pitcher on the “team” of each sentence: all the dramatic play began with the spring of its arm. It was delightful, Bellow’s high-low range of diction: he was not below Hegel or above the Chicago Cubs. And I liked the idea that you could organize your grammar into a competitive team, all eight parts of speech playing in their assigned positions.

Like any dutiful student, I tried to do Bellow-homework while I took

his class. My grandmother, Margaret Treseler, who earned a bachelors degree in literature at the age of 65, had introduced me to *Henderson the Rain King* while I was still in middle school. Now, I was reading his other novels and trying, desperately, to wrap my small head around the author's complex legacy. I was intrigued by Bellow's 1976 acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, in which he confessed a Whitmanesque affection for American variety.

It is as a writer that I am considering their [Americans'] extreme moral sensitivity, their desire for perfection, their intolerance of the defects of society, the touching, the comical boundlessness of their demands, their anxiety, their irritability, their sensitivity their tendermindedness [sic], their goodness, their convulsiveness, the recklessness with which they experiment with drugs and touch-therapies and bombs.

Good fiction, Bellow preached in class, was a mixture of philosophy and poetry, history and invention, unifying two impulses—to worry the human predicament and to lyricize it—into a symphonic whole, into the psychology of a narrative voice. The psychologies Bellow chose to narrate his novels were, by and large, Jewish male intellectuals less equipped for life as for thinking about living. They get caught up, none-the-less, in daily predicaments trying to woo and win women, make and hold onto money, and fit an artistic, philosophic vision around a fallen world.

Bellow's epic works, which include *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Humboldt's Gift*, also have an anthropological, Balzacian quality, as the narrators travel among socioeconomic classes, ethnic groups, and intellectual schools looking for their place in society. It wasn't surprising to learn that as an undergraduate at Northwestern, Bellow took honors in sociology and anthropology. He was clearly interested in the mechanics of success: what ambiguous combinations of education, family money, street smarts, grit, and wily charm might propel some robustly upward, others into dissolution, and a few into the sideways tilt of neither. His characters, while having some advantages, often have the tragic flaws of too much introspective intelligence, sensitivity, or a generalized neurosis about the everyday. When his characters derail, they gain costly self-knowledge, an ironic sense of triumph, or—at the least—genuine *jouissance* for the ride.

Indeed, in Bellow's broad limning of American personae, there's often a trace of what he called *animal ridens*, or man's primitive and necessary laughter. It's at the heart of his oeuvre: a laughter that finds its mirth in—and despite of—its experience of hardship, isolation, and the other, nearly ineffable concerns of the soul.

It seemed that the soul was the real, phantom subject of Bellow's

literature class, particularly young, ambitious, feckless souls like ours (the average age in the classroom was 18). Although the class was titled “Men on the Make,” we did, to my relief, study one Woman-on-the-Make. Early that February we read Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, a novel about an ambitious female actress who makes a Faustian bargain for a chance at wealth and success. Its realism broke my heart even more than the tragic play-acting in *The Great Gatsby*. And I think that was what Bellow was anticipating—that one of these classics would work its time-tested magic and give us, his twelve disciples, reason to pause: not something that often happens in our “wired” high-speed generation. I think Bellow wanted us to ponder why we should be ambitious (life is difficult; it’s wise to press all your talent and hope against it), but also the price of unchecked ambition and the dilemmas we might find in choosing a profession, a manner of living, a style of love.

I also began to think that Bellow’s class could have been subtitled “Books you must read so that you can better *read me*.” And this was part of Bellow’s program: to train a small corps of students to care about the fate of American literature. In teaching one class of freshman, hand-picked by the University each year, Bellow had the chance to recruit acolytes to his literary religion while we were still new to academia, while we were, for the most part, uninitiated into the often bloodless cult of literary criticism, or what Bellow tenderly called “the racket.”

So I don’t think it’s stretching the truth to say that Bellow saved me—a future literature major—from death-by-theory or some other ignominious end. Without his class, I might have become a perfunctory American history major and, finding comfort in its strict facts, gone on to teach them at some high school named after a former president or Western explorer. In my early taste of University literature classes, I had been disheartened by Marxists who read poems’ politics before they looked at the meter or rhyme scheme; by feminists who found mimicry in stones; and by a historicist who wanted us to read moral theory into a 19<sup>th</sup> century cookbook. There was too little pleasure, too little truth, too little heart in it for me.

But then Bellow taught me how to read. I don’t mean to be facetious. I had enjoyed, at that point, 12 years of formal schooling with extensive training in the alphabet, phonetics, and the basics of the Western canon. By age 16, I had two years of college courses under my belt. I had been privileged to study with several unusual scholars, including a classicist who liked to declaim Cicero’s orations to the squirrels outside our classroom window. But that spring, Bellow showed us a slow, interpretative, associative reading style that seemed to invite the whole mind—both Jungian halves—to traffic both into a text and from it. It amazed us, initially, that Bellow would spend up

to an hour on a mere 4 or 5 inches of text—about 1-2 longish paragraphs of a novel. One time he spent our entire 3-hour class on a single page of *Crime and Punishment*, focusing on the paragraph in which Raskolnikov murders his landlady with an axe.

Bellow made us look at the minute particulars of the scene: of how Raskolnikov dehumanizes his victim, seeing the helpless woman as a rat-like creature, small, slovenly, and docile under the blows that he gives her skull. And Bellow would extrapolate—from the manner of this crime, from Raskolnikov's cool malice and manic desperation—the plight of the urban underclass in his native Chicago, the collusion of desire and hopelessness that can instigate the most insane violence. To Bellow, the passage also seemed to represent—in microcosm—the human perversion that would allow for the horror of the Holocaust. In Raskolnikov's aggrandizement of his own worth, in his Nietzschean claim on another's life, and in mistaking himself for a blameless instrument of natural logic, he does indeed murder like a Nazi.

One might expect that someone with Bellow's sensitivity and commitments would appear wizened, wounded, beat-up by his intimate knowledge of suffering and the morbid underside of Western history. But he strode into class each Wednesday—a narrow, upper room on the fourteenth floor of the Theology building—with mild ebullience, with his young (and fifth) wife, Janis Freedman, and with a manila folder of notes. Typically, he was dressed in casual Oxbridge attire: khakis, a dress shirt, and a tweed jacket or dark sweater. Some afternoons, he wore a fresh silk necktie that bloomed up, between his neck-wattles, like an oddly placed Hawaiian flower. Otherwise, he looked like an advertisement for the dignified, well-decorated literary lion.

Indeed, at the age of eighty-five, when most seniors are circumscribing their activities, their acquaintances, and their ambitions, Bellow was writing new books and would soon (about a year later) father a child with Freedman. I was intrigued, of course, by this unusual and much-discussed match: Freedman had been Bellow's graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late-1980s. She looked no older than 35 and was indeed 44 years his junior (at the time of our class, she was 39). Bellow introduced his wife as a Montaigne scholar. I think we were all charmed by her long brown hair, her natural air of gentility, and the genuine affection she seemed to have for this genius who was old enough to be her father. Bellow, to his credit, had the full youth of brilliance and charm—it sparkled just as warmly from his brown eyes as it might from a debonair 20-year old. According to his biographers, Bellow had long attracted a mobile crowd of disciples: zealous students and intellectuals, members of the Russian, British, or publish-

ing nobility, present and prospective loves. All were eager to be near to his mind, his fame, or his legendary appetites for conversation and sex.

Our seminar class often had “visitors,” or non-student guests who came to watch the Wimbledon event of Bellow’s dialogic lectures. I was utterly intrigued by a tall, statuesque redhead who came to about half our classes. She wore a dazzling menagerie of suits, shoes, and heavy baroque jewelry that could have funded a small village’s water supply for at least a year. She must be a philanthropist, I thought, thinking I had seen others like her in the society pages of the newspaper, women whose cool facial geometry, whose precise triangular shadows of eye color and perfect ovals of gloss and rouge spoke of prelapsarian calm. A Cambridge lady with a furnished soul and unflappable sense of infinitude. Lady Redhead sat in the back right corner and hardly said a word all semester, but she and Bellow would nod at each other occasionally, as if they alone shared the neighborhood’s dark secret. In her comings and goings, Lady R. had a New York air of efficiency. I imagined that she hydrated her plants with Icelandic water (quickly, once a week, with a predetermined amount of water) and owned a Siamese cat that never shed its hair.

The counterpart to this silent icon was another woman we called “Lady Lavender.” Unlike the mysterious Manhattanite, the Lady L. had a lot to say, and it all sounded terribly smart with her accent and “*Wouldn’t you know*” tone of bemusement. Lady L. humbly sat with us students, her purple cashmere elbows brushing our cotton sleeves, her gray headdress of Susan Sontag-esque hair towering over the seminar table like ceremonial topiary. Indeed, Lady L. graced our classroom the way Queen Elizabeth might dignify a pool hall.

For a while I was almost as taken by this Circus-of-Bellow, this secondary audience of colorful women, as I was with Bellow himself. Sixteen, and sitting within inches of one of the great American luminaries, I spent the semester generally scared out of my socks. My nervousness manifest in a perpetually runny nose, such that I was obliged to bring a box of Kleenex to each class. I feared that Bellow might think I had some strange nasal disease, when really I was just mildly allergic to him, to sitting that close to literary fame. Through my father’s work in professional sports, I had met Olympic champions in most dry-land events. Although shy by nature, I had never been intimidated to the point of muteness by any of my father’s contacts. But Bellow was different—he represented a whole other echelon of prestige.

So in those four months, I hardly spoke a word. When I did give a presentation on Napoleon, I talked at such a breakneck speed that I probably sounded like the Jabberwocky on cocaine. After I finished, Bellow kindly

told me that I had done a “very fine job.” It took the remaining 2 hours of class for my blush to work down to a respectable pink.

I don't think Bellow had any idea that he, as a prophet of Logos, was enlightening me to the spiritual mechanics of language, and to what I might do with my life. He couldn't have known because—besides racing through the biography of one petite French dictator—I never said more than a sneeze.

So Bellow had no way of knowing anything about my personal life. He didn't know that earlier that year an accident and subsequent surgery had closed out my first ambition to be a professional runner. He probably didn't recognize my last name, or know that my father was an Olympic-level track coach and that I, from a young age, had trained in the sport with all a daughter's passion. That plan, that professional trajectory for my life had come to a halt in December, a month before Saul's class began. The orthopedic surgeon, the pioneer of hip replacement surgery, had come into my hospital room looking like some garish, Alice-in-Wonderland rabbit. I remember staring at his bright white mustache and the white hair poking out from under his blue surgical cap, wondering if the drugs were making me hallucinate as he explained, with antiseptic calm, that I would not run again.

In a talk that Bellow gave that year to a general audience at the University, he spoke of being dangerously ill when he was a child. At one point, he was hospitalized for an infection for over six months. After the extremis of the pain and the fever had passed, he began reading a Bible that a Christian volunteer had brought him. Bellow reported that it was his first encounter with the Gospels. Surrounded by death—other children in the ward who died at night were removed by flashlight—and with a newly-scarred belly, the young Bellow was moved by the account of Christ. He described it as a literary-spiritual moment, if not a religious one. Reading, Bellow explained, had always been a part of his life: it was a tradition, in his parents' house, to read aloud after dinner. As a teenager, he saved up his pennies to buy paperbacks from the local bookstore. And later, as a college student at the University of Chicago and Northwestern, he rode the El with the novels of Joseph Conrad in his lap, copying out Conrad's sentences and trying to improve upon their style.

There was no denying that books had defined Bellow's adult life in the most profound and daily ways. There was even the intimation, in class one day, that they had played an important part of his romantic life. One afternoon, as he looked for a passage in Rousseau's *Emile*, Bellow found an oak leaf pressed between two pages. It was perfectly preserved, in its autum-

nal color...all the brash red and gold of a New England season. “Do you remember when?” Bellow asked, turning shyly to his wife. “Oh yes,” Janis said with a knowing smile and I pictured them picnicking in the Luxembourg Gardens or in a chic Chicago café. Maybe they had debated theories of *tabula rasa*, the formation of conscience in young college freshmen, or man’s tendency to be wolf to man. Perhaps they had read Rousseau in bed together. I didn’t want to think about that part too much.

But I did want to remember everything I could of that bittersweet spring, that semester I sat near Bellow and let my nose do all of the nervous running. The novelist had reminded me that books were—in their reassuring heft, in their license to other worlds—a reliable love. In time, it might outstrip my first infatuation with sport, with all its heady rigor and adrenalized performance. The tragic-comedies of “Men on the Make” helped abbreviate the pain of my own lost plans. It reminded me that books had, from my earliest years, cured my boredom and forced questions on my protected, suburbanite, anti-bacterial childhood.

Now that physical velocity was out of the question, I needed a new religion. I had grown up watching my father train, inch by bodily inch, the physiques and minds of Olympic and World Champions. I knew what a hamstring was and how to stretch it before most kids know how—or why—to tie their shoes. But now, with adulthood around the corner, I needed to find a vocation that would likewise require almost all of me, the way running had.

It would be years before I had the stamina—and the physical strength—to pursue literary work. I would have to leave school and American civilization for a while—like Huck, lighting out for the territory—to win back my health and the desire to try hard again. But Bellow’s lessons were wrapped around me like a cleverly knotted necktie. So when I came back to school, to writing (with the help of a few orthopedic chairs), and to the career-start of a doctoral program in literature, Bellow was sitting up there in my head, his thin legs crossed, his veined hands resting on his notebook, as he warned against schoolgirl nervousness, stylistic orgies, and doing something that did not require concrete, spiritualized mechanics—or a Saul-like race after soul.

## Lance Olsen

*Renée E. D'Aoust*

Lance Olsen received a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin (1978), an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers Workshop (1980), and an M.A. (1982) and Ph.D. (1985) from the University of Virginia. He is the author of seven novels, one hypertext, four critical studies, four short-story collections, a poetry chapbook, and a fiction-writing textbook, *Rebel Yell*, as well as editor of two collections of essays about innovative contemporary fiction. His short stories, essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in a wide variety of journals and anthologies, including *Fiction International*, *Iowa Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Village Voice*, *Time Out*, *BOMB*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Best American Non-Required Reading*. His novel *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award. A Pushcart Prize recipient and former Idaho Writer-in-Residence, his work has been translated into Italian, Polish, and Finnish. For ten years he taught as associate and then full professor at the University of Idaho; for two he directed the University of Idaho's M.F.A. program. He currently serves as Chair of the Board of Directors at Fiction Collective Two, one of America's best-known independent alternative presses, and lives with his wife, assemblage-artist Andi Olsen, in the mountains of central Idaho. His eighth novel, *Nietzsche's Kisses*, will appear in the spring of 2006. He was recently awarded a 2006 NEA Literature Fellowship.

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The following interview took place during the summer of 2005 on the deck of Lance Olsen's log house. Lance and his wife Andi live on the edges of national forest, surrounded by mountain meadows full of wildflowers and hills of enormous ponderosa and lodgepole pines. The threat of wildfire is present every summer. The winters are long and snow-packed. The natural beauty is a contrast to Olsen's avant-garde writings, which often disturb the most jaded urban sensibilities. When I told a fellow writer I had met Lance for the first time at AWP, Vancouver, 2005, and asked him if I could interview him at his home in Idaho, she exclaimed, "Ask him about the grotesque!"

Olsen is one of the most approachable writers I've met yet, his writing is some of the most disturbing I've read. His ideas stay with me, and as I mull them over, they become a new way of looking at the world—a way of looking at what's underneath all our skins. In that sense, for this interview, the

setting of a wilderness both full of beauty and of potential wildfire is most fitting. Our words were accompanied by birdsongs, the occasional snorts and whinnies of a nearby elk herd at twilight, and an owl that flew right through the interview.

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*Let's start with the &NOW Festival. You presented and read at the first &NOW at the University of Notre Dame in April 2004. I understand it's going to be a traveling festival, and I wondered if you could tell me about that.*

I can't say enough about how energizing I found it. &NOW is the only conference around where innovative writers working both in print and digital forms come together to cross-fertilize, share work, think aloud about what matters to them. It feels a little like a congregation of the last members of a species rapidly going extinct. As I understand it, the plan is for the festival to be an annual happening. Notre Dame will host every other year. In 2006, Lake Forest College will do the honors. The proceedings will be published by Chiasmus Press, a funky new press based in Portland.

*I wonder about the labeling of writers and of their work, and in particular the labeling of innovative writers. I've seen your work described as avant-garde, speculative, science fictional, hypermedial, cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, transgressive, avant-pop, magical realist, critifictional. I'd call the whole thing conceptual.*

Freud's teacher, Jean-Martin Charcot, once reminded us that theory is good, but doesn't prevent things from happening. The same, I suspect, is true of labels. They are very helpful, except when they aren't. But I like your suggestion of thinking of my work as conceptual fiction—that is, if I understand you correctly, fiction that embraces ideas, including those about its own processes.

*But I still feel rather lost at how to categorize what I read, particularly in the academy where older texts are often privileged over newer ones. You've worked as a creative writer, a critic, and a theorist. What do you think about all these labels?*

Labels, I think, function as a kind of periodically useful shorthand. They help us understand, in very general terms, the traits of certain kinds

of texts by taking the equivalent of aerial snapshots of them. The result is that a lot of important, detailed information gets lost. Labels are not about subtlety or nuance. Valuable as they are as ways to make a text's initial acquaintance, generate a taxonomy among a constellation of texts, it's probably a good thing to recall that labels concern themselves with stepping back from books. They are about the process of not seeing closely and caringly.

That said, I confess there's a part of me that's always been charmed by them. I used to feel a certain degree of power using them because they create the illusion of being in control—of texts, of ideas, of worlds. These days reading for me has become less about the mechanics of textual management and more about learning how to give myself over to the pleasure of a particular page.

*Does some of this labeling help you when you are reading works as part of FC2's editorial board?*

Oh, I want to say not at all. [Laughs.] Although that's probably an exaggeration. When I'm reading as FC2 editor, my goal is to try opening myself up to the text before me, keep preconceived notions about what it should or could or might be doing at bay for as long as possible, let the codes of how it wants to work and be read reveal themselves in their own time. I wait for manuscripts that—how to say it?—for manuscripts whose architecture I can't easily pilot. Works that jam predictability and comfort. Ones I can't talk about fluently. Those are the fictions where something vivid and bright is most likely going on, and those are the ones FC2 are interested in publishing.

*And those are the ones that haven't been labeled yet?*

That's what is so enjoyable about them. You feel you're in uncharted territory, that you've left the interstate called The Mainstream.

*I just saw an owl! He just flew across ...*

[Laughs.] He's gorgeous, isn't he? His job is to look majestic and keep us sleepless three nights a month.

*Does your exploration about what is real and what is imagined, which forms the basis of Girl Imagined By Chance, continue in your new novel, Nietzsche's Kisses?*

I first came across Nietzsche in an undergrad course on existentialism back in the seventies. It was love at first bite. I read and read him. I met him again several years later in a graduate theory seminar in the guise of major precursor to poststructuralist thought. We then went our separate ways for another decade and a half. In 2000, I happened to teach my own graduate seminar comparing the European frame of mind in the 1890's with the American one in the 1990's, and I rediscovered him with shocking force—above all, perhaps, for his ruminations on the fragile nature of language and its relationship to things. Once upon a time, sentences were thought to function as linguistic photographs. Nietzsche laid bare the idea that, as it were, language *does* indeed function as photograph—only that a photograph is comprised, not of a mimetic mirror, but of a certain affiliation among light and salts, a set of culturally dictated conventions, a system of codes and chemicals. We have come to take for granted his insight that language is all slip and slide and defect. *Beautiful* slip and slide and defect, mind you, but slip and slide and defect nonetheless.

Which is a horridly wordy way of saying, yes, *Nietzsche's Kisses* is an extension of my obsessions about the real and the imagined I mined in *Girl*. Most of my novels are, at some stratum. Even my first, “Live from Earth,” where a dead husband, or a live memory of him, or maybe both, visits his mourning wife repeatedly.

*Language is an interpretation of the world.*

At several removes and deeply subjective. Nietzsche's take on it is emblematic of his vigorously contrarian mind, which I adore, the brutally brilliant way he has of boring into a culture's suppositions and troubling them, dismantling them, following strings of social assumption to their minotaur moments. But what puts a hole in your heart is learning how that mind slowly unspooled. Fritz had apparently contracted syphilis at a brothel as a teen. It lay dormant for decades, then came back to undo him.

That undoing provides remarkably rich narrative terrain. It was a haunting joy to research, retracing his life steps through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, imagining his last mad night on earth locked in a small room on the top floor of a house in Weimar, discovering the vast breach between his celebration of strength and disparagement of consciousness in his writings, and, in his day-to-day life, his frail, hyper-sensitive, hyper-self-conscious intensity. His titanic ego was suppressed, squelched, sealed up within him, unrecognizable to his few acquaintances, fewer friends, and

family members.

Among the latter was his sister, Lisbeth, who married, much to Nietzsche's chagrin, one of Germany's premier anti-Semites. They traveled to Paraguay to found a kind of Aryan Nations colony that failed miserably. Lisbeth's husband committed suicide in shame at almost the same time Nietzsche began to evince the early symptoms of madness. Sane, he had been wholly overlooked by his culture. He had to publish the last section of *Zarathustra* at his own expense and give away seven copies just to make sure someone would read it. Incapacitated, Nietzsche could be made famous. Lisbeth saw her opportunity, fashioning something lucrative and powerful out of her older brother's distorted image. In a sense, she set out to shape one of our culture's first pop-cultural icons by carefully taking control of him and his manuscripts, rewriting passages, losing others, generating a dark chauvinistic fiction called Friedrich Nietzsche that would appeal to the rising anti-Semitic movement. She succeeded in creepy, poignant spades.

*I have to ask, because it sounds so fantastic, for clarification. In your research to see if someone had written a fiction about Nietzsche, you found that Nietzsche's sister had created a fiction called Nietzsche?*

That's a great way of putting it. Lisbeth used to invite people from what had transformed from the anti-Semitic movement into the proto-Nazi one over for dinner, wheel poor crazed Fritz down from his attic room, and sit him strapped into his chair at the head of the table where he'd babble and burble to himself. She claimed her guests were witnessing the embodiment of the Übermensch, a bridge from merely human into an advanced form of consciousness. Everyone bought it. So much so, in fact, that by World War One each German soldier was shipped to the front with two books in hand: a copy of the Bible and one of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Lisbeth was a very good writer. It's just that her texts happened to exist in 3-D, in freakish flesh and blood.

*You've written that writers have the power as well as the obligation to continuously disturb. Is this a book, particularly, that you think ...*

No. [Laughs.] I think this is a book that will be continuously forgotten, but it disturbed me to write it. In a good way, naturally, an illuminating one, one that I enjoyed immensely.

*It disturbs me to listen to you talk about Lisbeth. But you've given voice to*

*Nietzsche's unraveling at the end of his life. We know that Lisbeth has brought him to this point, but she doesn't figure in your novel?*

Lisbeth isn't in any way solely responsible for Fritz's situation. She contributes, yes, yet she isn't the cause. She figures heavily in the novel, but only through Nietzsche's memories and hallucinations. In a sense, I suppose, he gets the last laugh on her because he turns her back into *his* fiction. Unfortunately, no one is privy to the turning, not even fracturing Fritz himself. Well, maybe the reader. You see, *Nietzsche's Kisses* takes the form of Fritz's cleaving consciousness. He is trying to think about his life on his deathbed, but is having an increasingly difficult time because his mind is coming apart. The novel's structure mimics a backbroke "Zarathustra" in that there are four major musicaloid movements. Each is made up of three sub-sections: one told in first person, one in second, one in third. The first-person sub-sections are meant to suggest Nietzsche's real-time attempts at thought when thought is no longer possible, the second-person ones his rambling fever dreams, the third-person ones his failing attempts to narrativize and make sense of his past. In the best of all worlds, the reader will function as synthesizing nexus for these cubist shards and invent his or her own Nietzsche.

*I don't know if you know this, but your book Hideous Beauties was used as a text in an M.F.A. workshop class at Notre Dame.*

I didn't, but I'm very flattered. That collection evolved, by the way, out of an M.F.A. workshop I sometimes teach called Narratological Amphibiousness. The idea is to create a possibility space in which fiction comes together with other arts and modes of writing. The questions this space gives rise to are these: How might fiction become richer by living commensally alongside, in, and/or among several forms and genres at once? What might happen at the intersection(s) of fiction and photography, music, video, theory, poetry, hypertext, drama, sculpture, painting, or, on a more local scale, at the intersection of mainstream realism with science fiction, mystery, the Harlequin romance, magical realism, metafiction, detective fiction, pornography, surrealist games? It's in that abrupt interface where something can occur that both surprises and teaches. As I say, the idea for "Hideous Beauties" came to me in the midst of one of those workshops: taking artworks that for one reason or the other have always spoken forcefully to me, putting me in front of them, and seeing what happened on the page.

*There's a strong element of the grotesque in much of your work, particularly in Hideous Beauties. I'm thinking especially of the collage pieces done with your wife and sometimes-collaborator, Andi. I'm interested in how you work in that disturbing space.*

The tension between our culture's obsession with external beauty and its various internal deformities has always fascinated us. I'm reminded of that astonishing signature opening sequence in *Blue Velvet*: the pan through the perfect, happy, buoyant suburban neighborhood, on the one hand, set against the zoom into the insect-ridden grass, on the other. The space of cultural disturbance, of seeing what really goes on behind all those picket fences, beneath the feet of a content man watering his lawn, is an important one to investigate because it tells us something profound about what we must repress in order to remain whole and functioning as a society.

Much mainstream fiction and nonfiction in the last decade or two has conceived of itself as an art of consolation and solace, concerned with making the reader feel at the end of the day cozy, complacent, satisfied. But the texts that interest and engage me most have always been the ones that impede easy accessibility, move us into regions of disturbance, make us feel the opposite of comfortable. It's there that we can begin to think and see in ways we may not have thought or seen before. It's in the topography that lies just on the far side of our comfort zone that we start to sense change within ourselves, recalling that our books, our lives, and our worlds can always be other than they are.

I can't imagine a more important role for writing. Wake up, wake up, wake up, the more important of it says.

*An excerpt of your new novel 10:01 appeared in the &NOW/AND THEN issue of Notre Dame Review [Number 19, Winter 2005]. The novel is about a number of people waiting for a movie to begin in a theater. One character, Zdravko, remembers his old living room and the way his wife, who's suffering from Alzheimer's, knits, "only backwards": "With each stitch she undoes, another memory drops away from her, a tuft of glassy milkweed." Here's the classical myth of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, only used in a postmodern way. Does postmodern work really break so far away from the classics?*

Oh, my goodness! Where to begin answering that one? Okay, I should probably say right off I'm a movie addict, and one of those who still believe the most powerful, most resonant experience of film is to be had in the theater. In large part that's because the scale of such imagined spaces allows you

to fall completely into the spectacle, to become, in a sense, the show. But in large part that's also because at some deep-structure level the experience of watching a film, as opposed, say, to the experience of reading a novel, is a communal act, a social celebration of what feels like, when you're in the midst of a potent celluloid reality, transcendent timelessness.

What intrigues me about the communal event is how when you're in it you're surrounded by an ocean of others. I've always suspected that their secret histories are much more emotionally and intellectually appealing than what's usually blowing up on the screen. That suspicion led me to write the print version of "10:01," which is set in an AMC theater on the fourth floor of the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota—that is, smack in the heart of the American Dream. The narrative drifts in and out of the minds of forty-some-odd moviegoers, one mouse, and one cat during the ten minutes and one second before the feature begins, nestling into various narriticules behind what appears to be *The Narrative*, but isn't.

Novels mine psychology in a way that films can't. Films are all about surface and speed, novels depth and taking one's time. What other art form allows you to live inside another person's consciousness—a theater full of other people's consciousnesses—for days or even weeks on end? So much of the satisfaction for me in writing "10:01" was using one genre [the novel] to explore the limits of another [film].

About halfway through writing the print version, I got the idea for creating a complementary hypermedia one—a version that isn't simply a digital adaptation, mind you, but a rethinking that through its hypertextual form opens onto questions about how we read, why we read, what the difference is between reading on page and reading on screen, between reading and watching, about which text is the more "authentic," and so forth. Tim Guthrie, an extraordinary assemblage and web artist, had approached me about a year before with the suggestion that we collaborate on a project someday, and "10:01" seemed the perfect occasion to do so. In the gap between the print and hypermedial versions of "10:01," I want to say, exists a third virtual version that's the most worthy of note.

Now on to the other parts of your question. To be a serious, cultivated writer, I think, it's fiercely important to be aware of texts from the past and attempt to understand what they're doing, how, and why. After all, the art of fiction is an extended conversation across space and time. If one isn't familiar with that conversation, one is almost certainly doomed to repeat what's already been said, interrupt, speak in monologues, assert in vacuums, reinvent narrative wheels and anti-wheels, and generally embarrass oneself. So I urge all us writers to read as much as we can, learn to love as much as

we can, continuously read outside of our comfort zones. Samuel R. Delany once pointed out that one's writing is only as good as the best novel one has read in the last couple of months. That seems very sound advice to me.

Given what I've just said, it's fair to assume I don't think postmodern work represents any sort of clean break with the past. Rather, it represents both a complex and conflicted rupture with yesterday and affirmation of yesterday's persistence. That is, postmodern fiction is intensely versed in the past, which it continuously appropriates, manipulates, makes it its own in ways that reveal the present, the present's relationship to history, and history's relationship to fiction. Postmodern fiction attempts to surpass the past by forever failing to surpass it. What's enlightening in the passage you quote about Zdravko is how his wife's mode of knitting is a postmodernization of the gesture. If Penelope tries to maintain the memory of Odysseus, Kosa unweaves herself and her memories as she proceeds.

And, to invert Milan Kundera's observation, forgetting is also a form of remembering.

*Well, let's define the obsession: memory, the un-doing of memory.*

Memory is an act of simultaneously doing and undoing. It strains to pin down a past, yet all it will ever be able to conjure with any accuracy are certain narratives we've come to associate with it, never the thing itself. So in a sense the past both doesn't exist and exists as something irretrievable.

*You mentioned at one AWP conference panel (Vancouver, B.C., 2005) that the novel you're currently writing, *Pleasure: Theories of Forgetting*, which you describe as a collaboration with Kafka and his *Metamorphosis*, has been one of the most enjoyable book projects for you in a long time. That's an incredible statement for an author who has written over fifteen books. It's hard to imagine all that writing as preparation for true enjoyment, but is that the case?*

Well, no. [Laughs.] I lied. I suppose something closer to the truth is that almost every act of writing I do is the most enjoyable for me at the time. As a fortunate rule, I don't share the forehead-slapping angst about composition with late out-riders of Romanticism who find the practice fraught with existential isolation and dread and hardship. I just really like living in language every morning. I like thinking about how words and narratives function. I like inhabiting characters' consciousnesses in what amounts to the ultimate travel writing. I thrill to discover a venture that leads me into new fictive terrain, gives me new problems and people to

explore.

For me, as I implied earlier, fiction is a possibility space—an assertion, ultimately, of human freedom. In it, everything can and should be considered, attempted, and challenged. What’s important about the results is not whether or not they ultimately “succeed”—whatever the dominant cultures may mean when they speak that word—or “fail.” What’s important is that they come into being often and widely, because in them we discover the perpetual manifestation of Nietzsche’s notion of the unconditional, Derrida’s of a privileged instability, Viktor Shklovsky’s ambition for art and Martin Heidegger’s for philosophy: the return, through complexity and challenge—not predictability and ease—to perception and contemplation.

Right now I’m in the process of engaging with the lacunae in Kafka’s miraculous novella—borrowing and transfiguring lines, scenes, and characters from the original; adding my own; composing *with* the text’s plot, universe, and suppositions, while simultaneously composing *against* them—in ways that allow my own rendition to become, I hope, not only a collaboration, but also a celebration, a complication, an exploration, an evaluation, an education, an interrogation, an augmentation, an elaborate and devoted erasure, and, ultimately, a kind of remembering that is also a kind of forgetting that parallels and appraises the Samsa family’s own slow forgetting of their beetle-backed son, and our own culture’s almost-forgetting of Kafka himself early in the twentieth century.

One of the reasons I write books, I’m learning, is to show other books I’ve cared deeply about them, that they have made a difference in who I am and what I have thought and felt. Our present Culture of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder has come to believe that what is happening externally, spectacularly, quickly, and extensively is where the money is. But for me, for the dwindling members of that species I mentioned at the outset of this interview called innovative writers, the movement that counts, I want to say, has always been the one of the mind in motion.

## AS IF AN IDYLL IS POSSIBLE

John Kinsella. *Doppler Effect*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004.

*Brian Henry*

Introduced by Marjorie Perloff, this hefty volume comprises an essential alternative to the 2003 book (*Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems*) edited and introduced by Harold Bloom and published by W.W. Norton. Although full of excellent poems, *Peripheral Light* omits much of what makes Kinsella an important poet.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on Kinsella's more overtly experimental side, *Doppler Effect* fills in the gaps. While neither *Peripheral Light* nor *Doppler Effect* accurately conveys Kinsella's full formal and thematic range, *Doppler Effect* provides a worthwhile service by collecting poems—some of them book-length—quite difficult to find, especially outside Cambridge and Australia.

*Doppler Effect* begins with *Syzygy* (1993), a 33-part poem that many see as the arrival (or invasion) of Language Poetry in Australia. The poem is more notable for what it does—yoke the lyric and the anti-lyric, revel in parataxis, eviscerate grammatical, syntactical, and typographical custom—than for what it says. Because the poem is intent on being non-representational, it does not deliver a coherent or consistent message, which is in itself a political statement.<sup>2</sup> Reading *Syzygy* for message yields frustration (even though certain moments—e.g., “Morality / stinks, we keep it in buckets”—are lucid and memorable); reading it for strategies is more fruitful. As the poem progresses, its textual surfaces become increasingly resistant, until we reach the four variations of part 23 (“23 Narrative,” “23 Na(rra)tive / *chapelle ardente*,” “23.5 Pantoum,” “23 Lift”):

Up in the hills / closer: week (end) tours  
not the building you'd think  
[though] they've made  
the right moves in the foyer. The  
predicate fails to leave, we assume  
via adjustin gth efoca llen g th  
that he's always been (t)here! Zeiss  
optics.

Despite the tricks with punctuation and spacing, this is easily parsable. But the style of the passage announces the more committed adventuresomeness that follows. Thus, “23 Na(rra)tive / *chapelle ardente*) opens

Syz-23-key: uh oh  
 fetish or frou-frou  
 aza labels & ers on  
 artifice the case

Elsewhere, “logos / go go / & presuppose a % of / an \*”; and toward the end of the sequence, stanzas, lines, and phrases get boxed off or partially erased.

Perhaps Kinsella’s most controversial book, *Syzygy* seems controversial for the wrong reasons: critics and poets (not only in Australia, obviously) feel much more comfortable debating the place of the “I” in contemporary poetry than they do debating veganism, pacifism, aboriginal land rights, animal cruelty, etc. Yet somehow *Syzygy*, smacking as it does of Language Poetry, has done more to convince leftist experimental poets of Kinsella’s radical bona fides than anything else he has written. Kinsella probably would prefer someone engage the ideas presented in his more overtly political/less overtly experimental poems than the technique.

Yet *Syzygy* is clearly important to Kinsella. The poem appeared as its own edition in Australia in 1993, was reprinted in *The Undertow: New and Selected Poems* in 1996, and then again in *Poems 1980-1994* in 1997 in Australia and in 1998 in England, occurring toward the end of both of those volumes. By opening *Doppler Effect* with *Syzygy*, Kinsella not only follows chronology but refashions the sequence as a beginning—i.e., his first substantial foray into work heavily influenced by Language Poetry—while asking readers of *Doppler Effect* to measure everything in the book after *Syzygy* alongside or against it. *Syzygy*, then, becomes a hinge.

As important as *Syzygy* is to Kinsella’s career, the book seems less genuinely ground-breaking than the three chapbooks at the center of *Doppler Effect: The Radnoti Poems* (1996), *Graphology* (1997), and *The Benefaction* (1999), all published in England by Equipage.<sup>3</sup> *The Radnoti Poems* includes some of Kinsella’s most advanced counter-pastorals. The sublime figures prominently in several poems, such as “Field Glasses”: “I am enlarging in the self / of reflexivity, threatening / self preservation / sublimely.” This notion re-appears throughout “Bluff Knoll Sublimity,” most forcefully at the beginning:

The dash to the peak anaesthetizes  
 you to the danger of slipping as the clouds  
 in their myriad guises wallow about  
 the summit. The rocks & ground-cover  
 footnotes to the sublime.

Against such a backdrop, writing a poem is merely “a matter of embellishment.” The self, too, becomes diminished: “Here the I redefines its place / and splits itself as process.” In “Poems Without Radnoti” Kinsella further examines the lyrical “I.”<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges “this talk of intrusion & the I / as another, as if you see / from inside the poem,” and asks “what am I doing / in the story.” Further on, “I witness to their demise.” This I/eye//I progression culminates in the last of the Radnoti Poems, “Radnoti Quarantine: Razglednicas,” which graphically quarantines the “I” by boxing it in.

*Doppler Effect* presents the ten cantos of *Graphology* and, toward the end of the book where “Recent Poems” are collected, adds three more installments.<sup>5</sup> With handwriting as its primary subject, *Graphology* also examines forgery—and thus authenticity, originality, and value—and how “technology squeezes / out the guts of the twentieth century” and “exactness” allows “ponderous / deliberations / of bureaucracy.” The forger “altruistically / ... considers / the hungry readership,” while “the recovered text” becomes “a dialectic of greed.” At the end of the tenth canto, the poem shifts from type to handwritten text; this change occurs after “The post-script / extends,” and the handwritten material yokes graphology and landscape, “as hypotactic // syn-tax / logically + metrically / contrasting // with the paraphrased / compositional hypo-products / of the New Lyricism // in a field where / dis-engaged ploughs / will not engage // or share / even the tenuous / topsoil— // unable / in times of drought / to free // the left margin / of the field, / to strike out // across / the dusty paddocks / where // the possibility / of moisture / declares itself.” With “the hand chaotic, agitated,” the newer sections of “Graphology” drop the tercets that shaped the first ten, opting for stanzaless free verse and more disjunctive surfaces.

A book-length poem divided into a prologue, three passages, and an epilogue, *The Benefaction* juxtaposes landscape, language, and imperialism. Based in part on a journal of “expeditions of discovery in North-West and Western Australia during the years 1837, 38, and 39, Under the Authority of Her Majesty’s Government, Describing Many Newly Discovered, Important, and Fertile Districts, with Observations on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Aboriginal Inhabitants, &c. &c.”<sup>6</sup>, *The Benefaction* is a *tour de force*—as formally radical as *Syzygy* but with more resonant subject matter and a more convincing structure. Although he uses these materials ironically, he does not allow irony to mar his tone. Consider the opening lines of “Prologue”: “They claim to preserve / the species from extinction.” That first line colors everything that follows.

Fortunately, what follows is enthralling. Kinsella mixes journal language with various modes of the lyric in 14-line sections, producing in effect a

sonnet collage. (Even the prose passages occupy 14 lines each.) His explicit dual focus on language and landscape allows him to confront these two concerns from unusual perspectives. In “Passage One,” bird call finds itself in conflict with poetry: “those trills / of evocation that resist // this prosody, this fringe / of grizzled vegetation.” And a beautiful scene is undercut by the specter of human presence:

Sunrise slices the gorge  
open to the basin,  
  
as the conversation  
of parakeet and cinnamon hawk  
  
soothes the green ants’ sting,  
the opening forest  
  
of pandanus and wild nutmeg  
emphasising the absence  
  
of media speculation

Throughout *The Benefaction*, language becomes as ubiquitous as nature, but remains problematic because it conveys human presence. Kinsella offers “the vernacular isotropic,” riverbeds “dried by parody,” “phonemic rock-paintings,” “navigational parataxis,” and “a magnificent river” that “drives forward like narrative intrusion.”

Language and landscape interact, of course, via imperialism: “It’s a busy morning naming.” To name is to claim, as this passage demonstrates:

In the name of Her Majesty  
and her heirs forever  
  
the flag is hoisted.  
Within the gesture  
  
a signal lurks, a pluralism of the surface,  
the monad fear, the parrot’s feather,  
  
contextualising the midnight revels  
of fairies by fountain and forests-side,  
  
the machine of emancipation. I say  
he says he understands the question:

but what gender is this land?  
Reconnaissance is protection.

Violence also extends, inevitably, to aborigines—these “men crazy with despair” nevertheless “feel confident of defending [themselves] against the natives”—and to animals, as the land becomes “noble grounds for game.” The ending of *The Benefaction* makes especially clear the violence of imperialism:

Though thirsting for an immediate return  
I heed advice to rest, to discuss my aims

and prospects with Governor Stirling,  
to prepare for another expedition

to the rim of the Interior,  
to bless it profitable

in the name of Her Majesty,  
to proclaim the dominions

of Chance and Integrity,  
to carry the scales of justice

over the grotesque body of savagery  
to enact its becoming

to donate its skeleton  
to the Royal College of Surgeons

The European sense of superiority and entitlement eventually ends with the autopsy of mass murder, “the grotesque body of savagery” itself dead and laid out on a table.

Poems such as *The Benefaction*, and others in *Doppler Effect*, call into question the supposed division between Kinsella’s ‘traditional’ and ‘experimental’ work. As Perloff notes, “the division between ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ is, in Kinsella’s case, largely arbitrary.” “Emending context flash-floods,” for example, pursues a free verse built on mostly normative syntax, especially the present participle; a set of brackets and a few em dashes are the extent of its typographical distraction. The ending of the poem seems resolutely lyrical in its push toward epiphany:

The backbone rests  
... singing  
whiplash against the painted rocks,

the fossils of its failures,  
 detractors from its triumph  
 on a continent of infinite variety  
 where civilisation is a dead bird that flies  
 against an inland ocean.

Several poems in *Doppler Effect* (“Skeleton weed/generative grammar,” “Bluff Knoll Sublimity,” and “Of Writing at Wheatlands”) also appear in *Peripheral Light*, further complicating the traditional/experimental divide.

Almost all of Kinsella’s poems arise from a sense of urgency, and their different modes and styles and forms seem geared toward bringing his views to the widest possible audience. If he can write well-wrought lyric poems that Bloom admires as well as anti-lyrics that Perloff, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian respond positively to, then why not do so? Kinsella’s work with an enormous range of verse forms (and non-forms) casts into doubt the convenient and conventional poetical/political alignment—i.e., formalists are politically conservative, experimentalists are liberal. What connects Kinsella’s various modes is content—and commitment.

Because this commitment is so prevalent in his poems, the frequently expressed view (by American critics, at least) that he is an ‘impersonal’ poet seems curious.<sup>7</sup> Can a poet so passionate about so many things really write impersonal poems? Does a poet need to write about oneself directly to be considered a personal poet? Is this impersonality/personality consideration simply post-Romantic detritus? What is an impersonal poet, anyway, and how much personality, autobiographical detail, and displays of emotion must a poet exhibit to end up on the personal side of the personal/impersonal scale?

Kinsella’s poetry is rife with autobiographical information and political views: his readers know where he grew up, what he did as a child and as an adult, where he has traveled, and what his political and ethical beliefs are. What, then, leads some readers to consider his work impersonal? Kinsella’s poems do not offer a comforting presence, and the poems lack the manifestation of a consistent personality.<sup>8</sup> Kinsella’s poetry seems reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ work, which offers a set of viewpoints—personal and spiritual, mainly—but not much personality. Unless one can equate intensity with personality, Hopkins must be considered an impersonal poet (and if one does equate intensity with personality, then Kinsella would qualify). Hopkins’ masterpieces—“The Wreck of the Deutschland,” “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves,” “God’s Grandeur,” “The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection”—offer little in terms of personal details or presence. One reason is that

Hopkins is far more concerned with God than with himself; Kinsella, too, focuses outward—on language and the natural world, mainly—rather than on himself. In this post-confessional era, when so many poets trawl their psyches and personal lives for poetic fodder, a poet less concerned about his inner world than about the world at large should be welcomed, not frowned upon.

One of Hopkins's primary editors, W.H Gardner, speaks of the poet as "one of the most powerful and profound of our religious poets" as well as "one of the most satisfying of the so-called 'nature poets' in English." He also refers to Hopkins as "one of the few strikingly successful innovators in poetic language and rhythm," a poet who "succeeded in breaking up, by a kind of creative violence, an outworn convention." Gardner does not discuss Hopkins's (im)personality in the poems. Yet his assessments of Hopkins, sweeping as they are, point to some of the most essential aspects of the poetry—its depth of religious feeling, its profound attention to nature, its stylistic innovations. Minus the religious element, these characteristics also apply to Kinsella. The two also share a fascination with—simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from—violence, particularly the relationships between physical, psychological, and linguistic violence. Kinsella and Hopkins both acknowledge the violence of the natural world, but Kinsella is determined not to celebrate the relationship between humans and nature; instead, he insists on highlighting not only the violence in the natural world itself, but the often gratuitous violence inflicted by humans upon the natural world. Where Hopkins sees grandeur, Kinsella sees wasteful death. Where Hopkins praises (in "Pied Beauty") "landscape plotted and pieced," Kinsella rails against human encroachment on nature. If the nature poem is "an outworn convention" exploded by Hopkins, it has been re-exploded by Kinsella in his counter-pastorals.

A passion shared by Kinsella and Hopkins, the bird serves as a totemic animal for both poets—usually as an emblem of Christ or of "Man's mounting spirit" ("The Caged Skylark") for Hopkins and as something ineffably spiritual, yet nonreligious, for Kinsella. In "The Sea and the Skylark," Hopkins writes:

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,  
His rash-fresh, re-winded new-skeinèd score  
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour  
And pelt music, till none's to spill nor spend.

To Hopkins, the bird and the sea "shame this shallow and frail town" and "ring right out our sordid turbid time, / Being pure." Kinsella shares Hop-

kins' reverence for birds, but his tone is almost always more mournful than celebratory, perhaps because he has seen the negligible effect of sanguine attitudes toward nature in preserving nature as well as an additional century's worth of devastation. Still, Hopkins eulogizes his "aspens dear ... / All felled, felled" in "Binsley Poplars," exclaiming "O if we but knew what we do / when we delve or hew— / Hack and rack the growing green!" Yet faith remains to solace the Jesuit, whereas Kinsella is more inclined to see such violence as final and irredeemable.

At 400+ pages, *Doppler Effect* will appeal less to the casual reader than a shorter volume like *Peripheral Light* would. The book seems designed as a major marker along the trajectory of Kinsella's career<sup>9</sup> as well as a way to bring some hard-to-find material to a wider audience. Released shortly after his Norton book, *Doppler Effect* seems intended, in part, to reassure Kinsella's readers that he has not gone over to the dark side or signed up with "the School of Quietude." To that end, there is little in *Doppler Effect* that would appeal to readers who favor Norton over New Directions, Mary Oliver over J.H. Prynne. *Doppler Effect's* primary service, as a book, is bringing together chapbooks in an accessible format; the idea of a volume of "selected experimental poems," or a "selected poems" that shadows the Bloom book, seems secondary (and perhaps unnecessarily divisive). Kinsella has published so much—well over 1500 pages of poetry—that two specific kinds of books are now needed: a John Kinsella Reader that samples his poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction, and a truly representative and selective Selected Poems that integrates the editorial visions of *Peripheral Light* and *Doppler Effect*.

## Notes

1. See "Bloom's Kinsella: The Politics of Selection in *Peripheral Light*" in *Jacket 27* (2005).
2. The poem begins ironically: "And how did you feel."
3. *Doppler Effect* also includes the relatively long poems "Sheep Dip" and "Annotations," *Erratum/Frame(d)*, poems from *The Echidna Project*, the chapbook-length poem "The Cars That Ate Paris: A Romance," Kinsella's half of a collaborative project with Tom Raworth ("Alterity"), five 'Ern Malley' poems, and more than a dozen other recent poems.
4. As well as "the lyrical eye," which "is blind with this light."
5. A much-expanded version of *Graphology* will appear in 2007.
6. This document, written by George Grey, Esq., the Governor of South Australia, is available online through Project Gutenberg at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).
7. Critics who have discussed Kinsella's impersonal style include Perloff in her introduction, Emily Apter in *Boston Review*, Stephen Cushman in *Versé*, and Jordan Davis on his

blog.

8. In this regard, Kinsella resembles Hayden Carruth. And in this regard, they both avoid the pigeon-hole, the market branding, the trap of the signature style.

9. The others are *The Undertow*, *Poems 1980-1994*, and *Peripheral Light*.

## TENTER GROUND

*Poems*. J.H. Prynne. Fremantle Arts Centre Press (Western Australia) and Bloodaxe (UK). Distributed in the USA by Dufour, 2005.

*John Wilkinson*

When Devin Johnston reviewed for this journal an earlier issuance (to adopt its author's terminology) of J.H. Prynne's *Poems* in Summer 2000, he consciously was introducing the work of a writer "whose readership in the United States has been miniscule" but which "included a devoted following among experimental poets".<sup>1</sup> The situation had been little different in Prynne's native England, although the degree of obscurity needed to render a poet invisible is a nice judgement. Small press editions of Prynne's writing sold below the radar in quantities which would not have disgraced a major publishing house for any but school curriculum adopted texts. But the substantial Bloodaxe *Poems* (collecting all besides Prynne's relatively conservative first book)<sup>2</sup> obruded the name Prynne on pages hitherto closed or innocent, even a *TLS* reviewer asserting that 'Prynne presents a body of work of staggering audacity and authority such that the map of contemporary poetry already begins to look a little different'.<sup>3</sup>

This judgment was echoed by reviewers in several prominent journals; but it was Prynne's apparent canonization in the volume of *The Oxford English Literary History* devoted to the period 1960-2000 that sparked a media kafuffle in England, whereby harmless professors were invited by the press to offer views on whether his poetry was 'better' than the alternately sainted and demonized Philip Larkin's.<sup>4</sup> The only way for the practice of lyric poetry to be made comprehensible in media terms is to identify its sociological constituency; if this poetry wasn't identifiable as women's poetry, black poetry, Northern poetry or simply deranged (and professors would not be trapped into anything resembling a value judgment), then it had to be intellectual snobs' poetry. When other taxonomies falter, in England class caricature never fails.

In the forefront of such splenetic response were tenured professors of creative writing, furious at the effrontery of a writing seeming to disdain self-expression: surely this restraint evinced a superior attitude, both to ordinary humanity and to the expressive gift whose cultivation embodies resistance to all Bad Things—liberal economics, environmental devastation, child sexual abuse and unhealthy eating.<sup>5</sup> The politics of such a response are not inherently ignominious, despite the ironies of institutionally profitable

courses and prize-winning ambitions; and the new edition of *Poems* might serve to bring a set of political and poetical questions into sharper relief than Professor Don Paterson's animus could achieve. This is because the seven sequences added to *Poems* 2005 (six of them published previously as chap-books, and the first four collected as *Furtherance*, published in the United States by The Figures in 2004) include writing at once unfeasibly imbricated and politically vehement.<sup>6</sup> While Prynne's poetics differ fundamentally from those sometimes ascribed to American 'Language Poets', both face a dilemma of political instrumentality encapsulated by the American poet Chris Stroffolino in calling impishly for a political and artistic practice bridging John Prine (a blue-collar singer/songwriter) and J.H. Prynne. The age of theory had for some while seemed so decisively and convincingly to have displaced political engagement into textual and conference 'interventions', that artists in any media engaged in political (or 'cultural') struggle, notably feminist, felt driven into theoretical practice, a phrase revealed only slowly as an oxymoron.

The present climate amongst radical artists feels explosive with disgust, as before and during the First World War—even if the tactics of the Cabaret Voltaire must be discounted as the box of tricks of indulged pranksters like Damien Hirst. A reaction against the hedonistic prescriptions of the post-modern has seen a powerful revival of documentary film and led to audible talk of class and poverty even in the United States; but for those working in the modernist and post-theory context, a return to realism is not a credible option. The extent to which Prynne's recent poetry might propose a late modernist poetics of resistance to neo-colonialism outside its immediate curtilage is hard to predict, although the move of politically activist young Prynnyans in the UK into performance, promoted by the brilliant young theatre director and poet Chris Goode, marks a notable break with late modernist queasiness (especially in Cambridge) around personal display and publicity, and a determination to take highly challenging writing into the anti-war, anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements. In the same vein CDs have featured collaborations with avant-garde musicians working at the intersection of electronic dance music and improvised jazz.<sup>7</sup>

Such considerations are abetted by the appearance since the 1999 edition of *Poems* of high octane critical writing on Prynne, whose apogee has to be Kevin Nolan's 27,000 word internet essay 'Capital Calves'. Subtitled 'Undertaking an Overview', this is where all critical writing on Prynne must now start, and indeed it is tempting to suggest that any serious writing on contemporary poetics must deal with this astonishingly erudite (and infuriatingly unfootnoted and sloppily proofread) conspectus not just of Prynne's

formidable oeuvre, but of philosophical poetics through Longinus, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno and Levinas (to name a few).<sup>8</sup> Alongside Nolan's essay, a recent book by Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*, offers a provocative thesis on the persistence of a suppressed modernist lineage adhering to the arcane and sacred beyond those quarters where it is admitted (for instance in Robert Duncan), a provocation both supported and blunted by close reading and detailed scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Taken together with *Poems 2005*, these two critical texts assist in considering how Prynne's poetry (and that of younger British late modernist poets, notably Keston Sutherland) differs from Language Poetry, and the implications of such difference both for theoretical poetics and for the practice of writing poetry in the Haliburton age.

The questions raised by Mellors are closely akin to debates which have surfaced recently among reflective poets in the United States, for instance in a fascinating discussion of John Ashbery's work on *Silliman's Blog*.<sup>10</sup> How far have seemingly revolutionary modernist and postmodernist adventures in poetry really disavowed the romantic elevation of lyric poetry to a divine discourse? A couple of centuries of repeated proclamations of a break with ontology (Mellors cites imagism as the model instance) seem scarcely to have dispelled the numinous vapours attending any conception of poetry as a securely-fenced linguistic activity. Unless circuit-breakers and dampers are introduced with conscious ingenuity, poetry's obscurity and separateness resonate with those tantalizingly just-beyond-hearing echoes which Westerners find definitive of spirituality; anti-modernists like Don Paterson are right to detect an anti-humanistic and hieratical tendency in this tradition of transcendent un-transcendence.

Such questions acquire greater historical irony in the United States than in England, since every American child learns that once the cultural and religious elitist T.S. Eliot found his proper destination in foggy London and clouds of incense, the modernist home field was occupied by the rudely democratic descendents of William Carlos Williams. Even John Ashbery has come to be praised routinely for his 'democratic' love of Americana and of the ambient discourses which he so brilliantly (and a little too easily) turns into silk purses. In the United States, the contemporary reply to the anti-idealist challenge, is that American 'progressive' poetry has become democratically 'open', whether an open field or a jostling downtown.

Gerald L. Bruns' recent book *The Material of Poetry* exemplifies this faith, taking a cue from Lyn Hejinian's celebration of poetry's freeing from professors and elitists, and its potential for undermining *all* undemocratic and unnatural hierarchies—both Bruns and Hejinian seeming serious about

this potential.<sup>11</sup> Expatiating on Hejinian's 'The Rejection of Closure', Bruns writes: 'For Hejinian ... "open" means more than open ended, playful, aleatory, or nonlinear; it also means open to what is outside the poem. (Imagine a porous poem.) She writes: "The 'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. ..."'<sup>12</sup>

The proposition that the open text 'speaks for writing' exposes the naïveté of this program; it is not so easy to avoid exercising authority, and the anti-hierarchical but unpublished writer may well question by what process of privileged selection *this* writer's demonstrations of relinquished control are packaged and distributed, to be further consolidated as authoritative texts through the attention of distinguished critics. She might also question whether *one* reader has ever been incited by such texts to engage in political action; this before examining the texts and considering their claims to 'openness'—sustainable only through quasi-Trotskyite imputations of false consciousness to the non-professional and baffled reader. On the other hand, the idea that a writer's 'relinquishing control' will remove the bad spell sustaining authority must count as magical thinking at its most liberated.

By a fortunate coincidence, Kevin Nolan in 'Capital Calves' seizes on the same essay by Hejinian: 'Writers like Lynn [sic] Hejinian can twitter on about the 'rejection of closure' all they need to, sweetly unaware that 'closure' is merely relocated intact from a textual component into a mirror image of the voluntarism that pre-selects it ('rejection').'<sup>13</sup> The contemptuousness of Nolan's phrasing should not obscure the serious point: if 'closure' or 'authority' are to mean anything besides minor stylistic choices for poets, if they are to bear any relation to the authority of Haliburton or KPMG or the Catholic Church or 'patriarchy' or the institution of Medicine or the State of Slovakia—then the notion that a poet can simply decide one day that she will abolish them, must be preposterous. In fact, *this* is a religious conviction, comparable to a conversion experience: suddenly everything looks different! And Bruns' lectures proceed to riff on the way in which certain uses of language can stimulate a reader or audience to question the ontological status of the linguistic work; this poetics of encounter is what he means by a 'philosophical poetics', and it is definitively postmodern.

But the forces at work in language cannot be reduced to this dismissible thing, 'closure', nor can the writer free herself with one bound from the

economic, social and linguistic orders within which she has negotiated her position during her development—*she can never be free and neither can any reader*. The historical irony is that the open text looks very like the would-be autonomous text, and appeals to exactly the same constituency; it is nothing but the would-be autonomous text in denial. Such denial makes for hectic runarounds and attention-grabbers—zany parody, stand-up routines, anything which might lure on board the charmingly innocent reader then whip the floor away from under her: now you try the trick on your own, my dear! To enlist poetry in energetic revolt can be rewarding; but revolt tends to precede a settling down—either the depressive reckoning with economic and social reality, or a persistence in childishness. The more strenuous the commitment to naïve conceptions of openness, the more conservative becomes the undertow, freighted with nostalgia for childhood and its romanticised freedoms.

By contrast, the interrogative resistance to the delusions of autonomy in selfhood and in poetic text conducted in Frank O'Hara's 'In Memory of My Feelings' and pursued in his later conversational poetry, resistant also to the consolations of childhood which are Ashbery's compulsive and career-long resort, remains an important precursor to Prynne's ferocious rebuttals of the desert temptations of freedom. Kevin Nolan's essay can be read as an admiring protest against the scorched-earth poetics which are O'Hara's surprising legacy in Prynne: 'But far from deploying poetry as the armature of a counter-Weberian strategy designed to pit 'institutional rationality' against a variety of literary estrangements, the very notion of autonomy itself has in Prynne's work become, increasingly, the site of attrition. [...] Yet the idea of autonomy may be ineradicable, not least because the dream of its eradication is the first evidence for its continuing presence amidst the debris of self evidence. [...] Some minimal and undiminished conception of autonomy is necessary if human personhood, even when relegated to authorship, is to continue, and for this to be ethically possible, some notion of resistance has remained formally central to much contemporary poetics besides Prynne's own.' Here Nolan alludes to radical poetry's role in resisting the systemic goal-orientation, the positivism exemplified in the Thatcherite proclamation and Blairite acceptance that There Is No Alternative to the rational interests of global capital, which individual fantasies of home-coming whether to God or to identity, serve merely to perpetuate. The danger lies in too comprehensive an articulation of the individual as the creature of ideological forces, a thoroughgoing deconstruction leaving the category of the human agent empty, a twitching puppet.

Nolan's protest is evoked especially by the seven books added to *Poems*

in the 2005 edition. I shall discuss two of these, and save discussion of *Triodes*, which I find the most gripping poetically, for another occasion. The first new book is *Red D Gypsum*, a text of thirty eight-line stanzas already the recipient of a critical analysis centring on the thematic of trekking.<sup>14</sup> This work takes its place in a lineage of Prynian anti-pastoral whose earliest full expression was *High Pink on Chrome* (1975), the titles announcing the affinity. Chemical treatments, plant breeding, genetic manipulation: these are the countryside pursuits of our day which *Red D Gypsum* hybridises with financial instruments, specifically the hedge funds of which Lillian Chew, source of the text's epigraph, is a theoretician—thus the appearance of 'ferox' in the final stanza nicely unites a cannibal trout (such trout grow to monstrous size) with the name of a hedge fund.

Hybridity, not subordination, is the mechanism at work here, and this also is the principle of the text's manufacture. To call *Red D Gypsum* a text is to respect its self-reflexive cluster of terms for textile—pasture becomes a rug, turf is reduced to fibre.<sup>15</sup> Even food can now be woven, the mycelial meat substitute Quorn being the best example. The dense weave of these stanzas is determinedly non-hierarchical in their plying of social, political, financial and scientific languages, but also formally their composition resolves into bands, strips and slats, with a modularly extended syntax whose sub-clauses or routines are often not clearly demarcated from the main clauses. With the exceptions of *Pearls That Were* and of *Triodes*, these new texts share certain characteristics with memory boards: that is, they consist of flat modules in non-hierarchical arrays, each intricately etched, polycentric and with switchable polarity. Such fretwork or mesh is the common term between textiles and electronics. For each text the stanzaic module is set and uniform, so in *Red D Gypsum* for instance, nine-beat lines compose eight-line stanzas.

Furthermore, the cadences of these texts are flattened. Consider the beginning and end points of the material added in *Poems 2005*, the first stanza of *Red D Gypsum* (1998) and the last stanza of *Blue Slides at Rest* (2004):

Now trek inter-plate reversion to earth buy out  
 as waters buried or get carrier up ready put  
 across gypsum branch effaced, as root planed  
 for don't now look to demand new birds in talent  
 from turf stripped to fibre. Rip brace out here  
 on the fringe reckless bestowing taint by the mart  
 chosen, tamper nickel token lunge to bite you may  
 cover down over, a flawless glucose shimmered sky.

*Poems 2005*, p435

Go down in earth like a feather, front brace. Left over  
 unrightful semblant will punish devoted machine knit  
 parapet. Nip and tuck miniature grounded so. Into this  
 world of darkness, of a kin deducted justified reprov'd  
 to end without, companion hooded unseen. Attempt thus  
 cut down as had never. Go with me. Within segment floss  
 honour bright missing, on foot. Ignorant paramount will  
 cadge a ride cranky dope appeal months and years, tell  
 in mish-mash certainty head to black on. Better broken  
 keep house yielding softly gnomonic cataract depressed  
 inwardly sent away. In care from hers avoidance transit  
 accept in strong wardship, order holding trace and lock.

*Poems 2005, p. 575*

Apart from the conventional abjuration ‘Go with me’, addressed to a ‘companion’ who is ‘unseen’ or ‘missing’ in the second piece, this is a writing almost without pronouns. Without pronouns the residual sense of autonomy viewed by Nolan as the last resort of human political agency, is all but extinguished. Pronouns also are the chief grammatical element around which poetic cadence is organised, as they are the figures of delivery and reception, of agency and of yielding. Fundamental emotional and psychic movements of give-and-take, projection-and-introjection, and sadism-and-depression, govern poetic cadence, and they are associated with the development of a sense of self (comprising both autonomy and managed dependence) through language. True, a pronoun is implicit as the object of the injunctive verbs which govern eight of the twelve sentences in the two pieces, and the reader can hardly avoid taking this personally. Although at first the injunctive impact feels like an unjust berating, within the poems’ weave the injunctions contribute to the sense of a world internally articulating through devices of devilish intricacy, or perhaps through computer programs—‘buy’, ‘get’ and ‘put’ being instructions in computerised market trading programs where decision-making cannot wait on human reflexes.

The absence of pronominal agency contributes to an almost robotic verse movement, further reinforced by the dominance of single-syllable verbs and nouns. This is ‘turf stripped to fibre’ in the earlier stanza, ‘machine knit’ in the book’s last. But single-syllable words are nodal in Prynne rather than essential; they are knots in the mesh’s reticulation. Thus ‘talent’ is linked to ‘nickel’ and ‘token’ in a financial node, as well as to desire or partiality—but these attributes of will can now be expressed only in terms which re-animate the King James biblical sense of ‘talent’ as coin. The word ‘brace’ as used in the first stanza not only refers to some kind of support, but evokes in connection with ‘waters buried’, ‘gypsum branch’ (gypsum leached

from fertiliser use), 'new birds', 'cover' and 'glucose shimmered sky', perhaps a rough shoot in a fen landscape, a living off the land now implicated with the language of commerce—'buy out', 'carrier', 'demand'. 'Lunge to bite' tightens these scenarios through a single phrase uniting the raptor with the corporate raider.

The reticulations of this verse knit the components of a flattened landscape and a short-pile universe. In *Red D Gypsum* a root is 'planed' and the sky's glucose contributes to the same economy as the fen's major crop of sugar beet. All activity occurs 'inter-plate' (surely a pun on 'interpolate'), the sardony of 'flawless' exacerbated in a space with neither floor nor ceiling, neither roots nor sky. 'Bestowing taint' becomes the prime human activity in this flattened world, once all disposition and structure ('brace') have been ripped out.

Readers of Prynne have come to expect the closing passages of his works to perform a gesture of recognition towards the still uncorrupted or the ethically habitable, to allow some horizon which if not transcendent (and even in *High Pink on Chrome* it can sound nearly so) offers a little breathing-space; and *Red D Gypsum* does end with 'vocal folds glowing deep unwinding', a space reminiscent of late Beckett but whose intense lyricism reconfigures flattened nature into a habitable room: 'Vivid strips | of tree bark circle the room'.<sup>16</sup> Although the tone of *Blue Slides at Rest* is almost vernal after the spoliations of *Red D Gypsum*, the closing passage cited above insists on its 'machine knit' in a flurry of puns—'left over | unrightful', 'nip and tuck'—and the room in which it comes to rest seems like a resort to maternal care, the only companion into the 'world of darkness' being the internalised *holding* structure which the poem has gathered from the 'paramount' she who oversees the poem.

Here then is the notable exception to the pronominal dearth in late Prynne: female pronouns dominate *Blue Slides at Rest* and *Triodes* as they did *Her Weasels Wild Returning* (1994), and the worlds of these poems are structured (or 'braced') by paramount women, there being no explicitly responsive male principle unless the entire texture of corruption is to be gendered as male (or has been male-engendered). The She of *Triodes* is Pandora, a Pandora whose political hopes are blocked at every turn in a Game Theory nightmare where state terror and the freelance terrorism of the dispossessed (for the setting is Palestine) have etched all possible pathways; while Nolan argues persuasively for the She of *Her Weasels Wild Returning* as a Penelope awaiting 'a bloody new antistrophe in the history of conquest, marital and martial.' The maternal presiding over *Blue Slides at Rest* permits a lyric inflection which rides an almost prelapsarian landscape (although what crosses

the placenta can be fearful): strikingly, ‘Downy finish is | hers to ask after, the swan’s road into Palestine not | yet level.’<sup>17</sup> When Prynne read this poem at the first Pearl River Poetry Conference in Guangzhou, China in July 2005, he instructed the audience to close their eyes and to regard each word as a pinprick of light in a black screen, switched on and extinguished.

It is hard to reconcile such an instruction with the poem’s ‘machine knit’ of pre-birth, birth and early infant activity, with its still-insistent hybridity:

Care taken, took into by a glance. Her hair loosened,  
cheek more red, plasma lactic acid dropping utter spread  
like raid to her knee, so freely downwards. Entranced  
restricted cub in this tunnel, lissom case notes asperge  
crevice woeful did they either.

*Poems 2005*, p. 573

The connections are tightly plied between bodily and linguistic processes (‘lissom case notes asperge’), and the child to which the poem adverts is no untrammelled sprite but a nipple-chewing Kleinian awaiting the language to propel him into his inheritance of hormones, gasoline and shamefulness. Still, the suggestion is that death can be—indeed, can *only* be—endured as a prospect through the deep but occluded psychic structure precipitated from the mother/child dyad and its intramural exchanges. This psychic chamber may also resound in response to particular poetic cadences, and even the most compressed of late Prynne poetic texts are rife with bitten-off and damped-down memories of earlier writing whose cadences felt deeply compelled. These residual, highly individual resources, which may be immune or at least resistant to contamination but are more likely to have become inaccessible to many who have been flattened in the most forceful vernacular sense, re-pose the political question: how are such resources to be made available politically, collectively?

The celebration of the ‘open’ too often welcomes back the transcendent via the cult of ‘the body’ as the home of authenticity, performing a manoeuvre now familiar on the post-modernist terrain, by re-installing pre-linguistic voice (expressed for Bruns in sound poetry) to summon the world back into substantial being. As often, Artaud provides the avant-gardist with a licence for such recidivism, but the logic is impeccable once the phenomenology of the encounter becomes the organising principle in the media welter, and Bruns’ position is consistent. The abstraction of financial flows, signed off in automated trading, accompanied the rise of minimalist art: at a certain point of complexity, management becomes more important

than the manifest of goods. The more 'theoretical' its 'concerns', the more art relies on the encounter—no longer is the viewer the connoisseur or the would-be home decorator, but she asks: what are the designs of this object on me, what is it doing here, and how am I supposed to respond? Just so the open text becomes an *environment* within which the reader performs her free response, in a zero-gravity space of indifference, a Buddhist world where designing languages have been neutralized. All is at play. Only the suffering body's screams, grunts, ecstatic yells and groans rip open the veil of appearances. Given every toy money can buy, the Western child throws tantrums and expects praise for them.

Prynne's attack on body sentimentality has been remorseless, starting with *Wound Response* (1974). Like William S. Burroughs, he conceives of the body as soft machinery and biochemistry interspersing silicon and soil and gabble. Hence, as Nolan contends, there can be no 'home' to which Penelope can return. Indeed Nolan argues that a writing which from the start has refused such home consolations, basing its claims on an ethics of responsiveness, rather than the usual politics of representation attended by elegiacs for the loss of presence, necessarily was driven to seek an autonomy whose relation to experience then became principally one of shame. How could it be otherwise? Whatever autonomy poetry secures or claims, shames the author complicit with the historical and material conditions required for such relative independence; and whatever distance from corrupt discourse is asserted by the lyric text, its embedded cadences, its connective tissues, have been cultured in the factories of the human genome project—and patented for use. For Nolan, Prynne's late writing has fallen into an impasse of autoimmune struggle whereby the stuff from which it spins its network of resistance, is the very stuff which threatens its putative integrity; every agent has been 'turned' in advance.

This is the autoimmune dynamic. The system always threatens to eat itself; but how preferable is this risk to the nostalgia which has poets of oppressed ethnicities casting their laments for the homes to which they were never admitted, into the trophies of 'diversity' that *The New Yorker* admits to interleave the elegiac poetics of advertisements for sports cars doomed to queue at freeway toll booths? Here is a galloping consumption indeed.

Does *Blue Slides at Rest* offer a way out of Prynne's impasse? Only at the personal and poetic level, only by side-stepping the pileup which has preceded it. What are the alternatives presented by contemporary poetry in English, that is poetry which takes its poetic vocation seriously, more than the creation of pretty baubles? The alternative impasse of open poetry has been spelled out: it is based on an ahistorical and childish fantasy,

destined to revert to the body or to metaphysics. Happily it practiced what it preached only for one historical moment and then fitfully, so now a pleasure of reading Lyn Hejinian's poetry is its 'chatty asides, exclamations, digressions, gossip, confidences (all bedside mannerisms)', as that of reading Charles Bernstein's is its elatingly improvisational wit.<sup>18</sup> Such poise and charisma permit a continuing independence from the blights of spirituality and empathy; but the poetry attracts for the kind of qualities admired in *people*, and it surely must be troubling that what still is known academically as Language Poetry has found an audience through the attractiveness of its authors' personalities. But then, the politics of this poetry always had licensed the poet to do exactly what he or she liked.

By strict contrast, the politics of Prynne's poetry have afforded him little room for manoeuvre. A reader who can bear an unremittingly clear-sighted exposition of the full ethical and political implications of Western citizenship at the turn of the millennium has nowhere else to look: for at every other turn, issue politics offers its implicit and pitiful assurance that *once* equal opportunities are real, *once* animals are no longer slaughtered, *once* the carbon economy is replaced by a sustainable way of life, humankind will be back on track—even if most activists recognise they are engaged in a struggle without end. But after all, these are not separable ambitions. There is no imaginable version of contemporary British or American society which would not depend on organised exploitation. The very texture of Prynne's recent poetry is manufactured from these double and triple-binds, and outrageously the fabrications can be beautiful. But what then? *Blue Slides at Rest* feels like a revision of *Into the Day* (1972), an earlier birth song where 'the compounded blood | and light makes lustre swerve in the dream', but now seeking any interstice for 'the natural child' in the fabric of comprehensive corruption, even if only the grave. What if when you open your eyes, the lights have gone out?

## NOTES

1. Devin Johnston, 'Prynne's Poems', *Notre Dame Review* 10, Summer 2000, downloadable from the *Notre Dame Review* website.

2. Although in both British and US reviews this edition is universally credited to Bloodaxe Books, a UK publisher, the primary publisher of both editions is Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Western Australia. As for sales, the first edition of *Poems* (1999) sold 2028 paperback and 341 hardback. This figure excludes sales made by Fremantle in Australia. Once it had sold out, the book was unavailable for

some time because the Bloodaxe contract was for one printing only. However, while the author was not willing to agree to a reprint, he was willing to allow an enlarged second edition to be published later. For this second edition under review (2005), the Bloodaxe contract permits them to print 3000 copies in paperback and 500 in hardback, and they may reprint a further 3000 paperbacks. Thanks to Neil Astley of Bloodaxe for this information.

3. As quoted, unsurprisingly, on the Bloodaxe webpage devoted to the new edition.

4. Ed Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England? The Oxford English Literary History Volume 12 1960-2000*, OUP 2004. The spat can be followed through a series of articles accessible via the Books section of *The Guardian's* website (<http://books.guardian.co.uk>) by typing in the search term 'Prynne'.

5. The representative figure here, excoriating the 'postmodernists' and 'academic' poets on behalf of a conference of the comfortably tenured and subsidised, is Don Paterson. Andrea Brady's article 'Meagrely Provided' (*Chicago Review* 49:3/4 & 50:1, Summer 2004, pp396-402) has his measure, and how! The following issue (*Chicago Review* 50:2/3/4, Winter 2004/5, pp377-379) contains a thoughtful letter from Andrew Duncan reviewing the politics and sociology of this poetry war.

6. The style 'Poems 2005' is adopted throughout to prevent confusion with the two earlier books by J.H. Prynne entitled 'Poems': *Poems*, Agneau 2, Edinburgh & London 1982, and *Poems* 1999.

7. For instance those issued by QUID magazine: see [http://www.geocities.com/barque\\_press/quidcd.html](http://www.geocities.com/barque_press/quidcd.html)

8. Kevin Nolan, 'Capital Calves: Undertaking an Overview', *Jacket* 24, <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/24/nolan.html>

9. Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*, Manchester University Press 2005.

10. <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>, with no competitor for the most tireless, constantly intelligent and provocative English language poetry blog.

11. Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics*, University of Georgia Press 2005.

12. Bruns p29.

13. There is a real problem in referencing lengthy internet texts with no internal divisions. The only way to find passages in 'Capital Calves' is to use a browser's search function.

14. Jay Basu, 'The Red Shift. Trekking J. H. Prynne's *Red D Gypsum*,' *The Cambridge Quarterly* Vol.30, No 1, 2001, pp19-36.

15. The dedication of the *Furtherance* collection, opened by *Red D Gypsum*, is to Marjorie Welsh, author of *Begetting Textile* (Equipage, Cambridge 2000).

16. The signal exception to the redemptive tone of the Prynneian closing stage comes at the end of the utterly bleak *Down where changed* (1979), whose parting tribute to hospital food is 'stuff it'.

17. *Poems* 2005, p572.

18. The line is from Lyn Hejinian, *A Border Comedy*, Granary Books, NYC 2001, p127.

## KEEPING IT STRANGE

Roy Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It: Poems 1955-2005*, Bloodaxe Books, 2005.

*Peter Robinson*

A reader familiar with Roy Fisher's publishing history might imagine his contract for this new edition containing a rider that the book has to be distinctly different from his three earlier "collected poems" volumes. Certainly Fisher has come up with a gathering of work that is his most complete to date (though by no means a Complete Poems) and one characteristically non-definitively open-ended. The words "collected" or "complete" are nowhere to be seen; the book's main title, *The Long and the Short of It*, alludes in one of its meanings to the literal fact that the volume contains all his longer works (his two Oxford collected volumes did not include "The Cut Pages") as well as the vast majority of his shorter, short, and very short pieces. Fisher's work ranges from the five-line joke poem called "Epic" to the short epic called "A Furnace". The book is by no means a complete Fisher, because it pointedly excludes a number of poems that have previously been collected ("Occasional Poem", on the death of John Berryman, or "To the Supposed Dancer") and other possible candidates for inclusion that have been published in pamphlets or magazines ("Three Early Pieces", "Abraham Darby's Bridge"). It also steers clear of any approach to the fairly large body of early, uncollected poems—such as the elegant "The Lemon Bride"—cited and discussed by James Keery in his chapter from *The Thing about Roy Fisher: Critical Studies* (2000). The book collects for the first time a few early poems that had got away ("Kingsbury Mill"), the completed text of "The Dow Low Drop", which had appeared in abbreviated form in the 1996 Bloodaxe *New and Selected Poems*, and quite a number of shorter, occasional, or elegiac poems written during the last decade or so.

The book is not as reliable as it might have been, containing an unhappy peppering of minor misprints and typos; and Fisher had long ago issued a statement on such textual slippage in "Irreversible": "The *Atlantic Review* misspelled Kokoschka. / In three weeks he was dead." This book's fine cracks, which by no means diminish the importance of its publication, are further sign that for the poet it is not one of those graveyards of performance described in "Five Morning Poems from a Picture by Manet" as "splinters of fact stuck in the earth's fat rind." As the poet notes in the Acknowledgements, "These poems no more amount to a biography than I

do” and thus “an arrangement that seemed chronological” would be “false”. This effectively damns the two Oxford volumes (1980 and 1988) to falsity, for some such rough arrangement—with the exception of “The Ship’s Orchestra”, put at the back in an appendix—appeared to have been tried there. In *The Long and the Short of It* “nothing of the kind is...attempted”, and the resulting rearrangement of his works will provide an intriguingly coherent deployment of texts both for Fisher’s long-time readers and those fortunate people who, coming upon his work for the first time, can encounter its uniqueness afresh. For the chronically chronologically minded, Fisher has added dates of composition after titles in the Index (though the mysterious dates ‘0000’ after “City” and “Interiors with Various Figures” must—for the time being—stand as either collapses in the face of a too complex chronology, dada jokes, or merely production slip-ups). Fisher kindly acknowledges my “help in the preparation of this book”; for the record, my contribution involved no more than an acted-upon suggestion about what to do with the poems that didn’t evidently fall into generic categories, plus a few pleas for inclusions, in some cases of which the poems’ defense council was overruled by the presiding judge.

Even for those who know Fisher’s work well, this book offers revealing and refreshing encounters and conjunctions. The texts have been ordered into nine sections, of which five could be described as “generic”. The first contains long works such as “City”, “The Ship’s Orchestra”, “The Cut Pages”, and “A Furnace”. The third is made up of comedy poems like “A Modern Story” about poetry competitions, “Paraphrases” about the weird epistolary life of a poet with an international reputation and no books in print, or “The Poetry Promise” about keeping the customer satisfied in these market-driven days, or “The Nation”—written before the institution in the UK of a “National Poetry Day”, but a perfectly judged mockery *avant la lettre* of such superficially populist, culturally retrograde antics. The fifth gathers poems dedicated to other writers and artists for festschrifts, memorials, or from no occasional prompting, such as “Staffordshire Red” (for Geoffrey Hill), “Emblem” (for Lorine Niedecker) and “Songs from the Camel’s Coffin” (for Gael Turnbull), its title borrowed from Turnbull’s own “For a Jazz Pianist”, in which he describes “(a camel’s coffin?)” as “a black / and polished upright / slotted box”. The final section of Fisher’s poem records his arrival in the USA for a visit that included a reading event at Notre Dame (where he was photographed playing one such camel’s coffin, a photo subsequently printed in a university yearbook, captioned in the manner of “Irreversible” as a picture of John Cage):

Born in the middle of the island and never leaving it  
 in fifty years, then startled  
 on stepping down to the battered tarmac of O'Hare  
 to discover that the air above it,  
 the entire medium of elsewhere,  
 wasn't as I'd guessed it would have to be, a heavy  
 yellowish fluid tending towards glass,  
 towards mica. Why in all that time  
 had nobody said?  
 I'll never be sure, that's for certain.

Such lines as these casually instance Fisher's uniqueness—his ability to preserve a remarkable freshness in his encounters with the world, which we can then encounter too, refreshing our sense of the lived. This is not exactly a Russian formalist “making strange”, because to Fisher the thing, in this case the air above O'Hare, is strange anyway. Fisher's art is about processing experience without lessening its strangeness. It is about “keeping it strange”—and this has required his never being “sure” and “that's for certain.” Section VII of his book is devoted to the sequences and series of shorter writings, the “Interiors with Various Figures”, the “Texts for a Film” about Birmingham that Tom Pickard produced, the “Seven Attempted Moves”, “The Six Deliberate Acts”, “Five Morning Poems from a Picture by Manet”, the four poems “To the Memory of Wyndham Lewis”, or the “Three Ceremonial Poems”. Last of these generic groups, section VIII, is given over to collaborations with artists—such as “Correspondence” with Tom Phillips, “Also” with Derek Greaves, and the many others with Ronald King. Missing from this section though is “Cultures”, a collaboration with King (helpfully described by Ralph Pite in his chapter from *The Thing about Roy Fisher*) but one whose arrangement defies publication in a book of this kind.

While these five sections are the volume's reinforced structure, built upon the grounds of compositional habits and preferences, the other four sections—gatherings of poems that don't fit any of those generic categories—are, as far as the organization is concerned, the book's most revealing. These mid- or short-length poems tracking individual moments of inspiration contain borderline overlaps with other sections. “The Thing about Joe Sullivan” might be thought Fisher's most dedicated poem, in that it expresses an overwhelming fascination with the psychology and aesthetics, and indeed ethics, of this white Chicagoan jazz pianist's style; but it doesn't appear in section V, presumably, because these two musicians—Fisher has also worked as a semi-professional jazz pianist—were not personally acquainted. Similarly, “One World”, a poem reporting on an early teaching experience with a remedial class at a school and reflecting on the unlikely-

hood that such pupils could have come to be readers of little magazines, might have appeared in the comedies section—since it was first published in one of the pamphlets of such work issued by the late Richard Caddel's Pig Press. Yet its account of teaching a class of severely underprivileged children is not, properly read, a joke at all. So the fascination of these more apparently ad-hoc sections lies in their prompting a reader to think about how and why specific works have found their way into each of these four and, further, why individual texts placed there have become neighbors.

Section VI, for instance, appears to be made up of poems that variously address without satire Fisher's evolving awareness of his own aesthetics. Born in 1930, and not in 1885 or thereabouts, Fisher, though willing to give interviews, has felt no inclination to write manifestos, whether group or personal, or indeed to establish his "poetics" by means of academic, critical, or hortatory prose—and especially not before the fact of having written attempts at pieces of literary art. Thus, "For Realism", "A Poem Not a Picture", "The Lesson in Composition", "Of the Empirical Self and for Me", or "From an English Sensibility" come together with other relevant pieces to define, however obliquely and inconclusively, what Fisher has thought and felt he has been up to all these years. Nor does this section, since it is the occasional work of decades, pretend to offer a single, coherent aesthetic position. No sooner have we read the close of "For Realism" ("A realism / tries to record, before they're gone, / what silver filth these drains have run"), than we encounter the six-line epigram "It is Writing" which ends: "I mistrust the poem in its hour of success, / a thing capable of being / tempted by ethics into the wonderful." It is hard to believe that the latter, from 1974, has not been placed thus on the same page as a tacit comment on the former, written in 1965, and made a moral meal of by Donald Davie in the chapter "Roy Fisher: An Appreciation" from *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973).

But why, then, asks the doubter, isn't "The Thing about Joe Sullivan", with its tacit ethical-aesthetic commentary, or "The Memorial Fountain" with its "thirty-five-year-old man, / poet, / by temper, realist, / watching a fountain"—why are these poems in section V, and not alongside "For Realism" or the "Lesson in Composition"? One pragmatic reason is that the various mid-length poems must not be lined up by overt or obvious similarities. If you put "For Realism" next to "The Memorial Fountain", for instance, you allow a misleading statement to form, one which appears to imply that Fisher is, despite appearances to the contrary, really a realist. So, in these sections, there is un-simplifying variation and contrast too; and there is conscious avoidance of any chronology (even the generic works are

shuffled so as to display pointed-ness but not evident thematic or biographical continuity. This is surely why the first section begins with “Wonders of Obligation” with its classic account of Fisher’s reluctantly associative art “We know that hereabouts / comes into being / the malted-milk brickwork” and its, understated for the most part, values: “The things we make out of language / turn into common property. / To feel responsible / I put my poor footprint back in.”

Fisher, “never sure...for certain”, has stated in an interview that there is still such a thing as “honest skepticism”. He said it in the hey-day of that post-modern skepticism which, since it multiplies doubt to infinity, haplessly drops skepticism out of the equation—allowing its proponents to flourish mechanical rejections of justifiable assertion (about what truth is, for instance) that in practice leaves everything precisely as it was. Honest skepticism, I take it, means allowing doubt its place in an understanding of the world, both natural and human; doubt then functions as a means to further apprehension and understanding, not as a device for short-circuiting any such gains. Fisher has never believed, as Charles Tomlinson emblematically did with the title of his second collection, that “seeing is believing”. He too has been, as he put it in “City”, a poet who lived “so much by the eye”, but he did so to address the processes by which the world takes shape around us, breaking up, and reconfiguring its solidities, altering the angles of sight, or focal length, so as to access a knowledge of change and evolution. “A Furnace” proceeds by enacting the life of energies, powers, forms, or evidences not only to access knowledge of change, but to assist it. Fisher’s skepticism about poetry with a moral attached has found its role in defining his field of operations, since on its right flank were the social moralists of the 1950s, Larkin, Amis, Davie, and, in the Tomlinson of the 1960s and 1970s, an epistemological moralist of international distinction.

However, to live outside the law you must be honest; and Fisher’s skepticism means that he is not without beliefs about aesthetic, literary, poetic, and therefore social and political conduct—beliefs that might be identified in the differences between overtly propagated rules of behavior with a social flavor, and complexes of learned practices about relations with others that, for one thing, would be betrayed by imposing them on others, by boasting about holding them, or by announcing that you have just acted in accord with them. In “The Lesson in Composition”, Fisher writes of how “Whatever I start from / I go for the laws of its evolution, / de-socializing art, diffusing it / through the rest till there’s no escaping it.” This is a prosaic poem responding to the oppressive social demand that the marketplace has, mysteriously, imposed on poetry over the last few decades. I say “mysteriously”

because you would have thought that the marketplace has so little real use for poetry, it not making much money for anyone, that it could have been left in peace. The thorough marginalization of the art some time before the rise of our current version of market economics should have found it well positioned to resist such demands. Yet such is the power of ideology that poetry's more socially adaptive operators have felt compelled to sing from the same stock-exchange hymn-sheet. Fisher's poem approaches its end by describing the British version of this problem. "Art talks", he writes,

of its own processes, or talks about the rest  
in terms of the processes of art; or stunts itself  
to talk about the rest in the rest's own terms  
of crisis and false report—entertainment,  
that worldliness that sticks to me  
so much I get sent outside  
when the work wants to start.

I'm old enough to want to be prosaic;  
I shall have my way.

The sense is that art offers its benefits to individuals and, through them, to the society at large, only if it is allowed to follow its processes without the imposition of formulated social demands—whether they are promulgated by a national union of writers, or as a requirement from publishers and their allies in newspapers and award bodies to address the immediate interests of imagined consumers. Fisher's skepticism about identity and the idea of the discontinuous self, the role of body sensations, of ontology in epistemology can also be related—paradoxically it might seem—to Jazz and the life of the performer. Yet this is not pop music; and Fisher became interested in his music at a point just before the moment when it was to be pushed aside. He has, as a consequence of that marginalization, accompanied distinguished American performers on their tours of the British provinces. This is slightly different from the kinds of relation to an audience of readers that many writers will take for granted. The latter is slower, more cumulative, based upon two separated activities that take place within the privacy of the writer's or reader's conscious minds—and one that is only supported, or sometimes even hindered, by encounters with the poet in performance. The musician who performs on a nightly basis needs an internalized sense of what a good performance will be that pays only slight attention to what the audience may or may not have thought. Fisher is thus complexly placed both to understand the way in which art is necessarily a matter of presenting its products to informed people who appreciate that art, and of knowing

how to preserve the autonomy of the performer from audience demands that can in so many ways prove to be art's ruination.

The doubt about being able to know ourselves, a first step on the road to such self-knowledge as may be granted us, naturally extends in honest skeptics to the knowledge of others. The limited access allowed to the rest of the world then requires a process of acquaintance, a repeated returning to and reconsidering of phenomena. One limit in Fisher's work is the locating of experience in shared relationships between people. The works that might seem at first most to qualify such a statement ("Interiors with Various Figures" and "The Ship's Orchestra") only tend on closer acquaintance with their strangeness to reinforce it. This limit might seem to be escaped from by the comedy poems of section III. Comedy requires a relation to constituencies and social groups. The poet's relative lack of ease with such situations of identification and provision, may account for some of the weaknesses in that section. "Sets", for instance, was inspired by the quarrels between various groups and sub-groups of poets about who precisely should control the UK Poetry Society. Beyond the more "committed" inner circles of such writers and their support teams it might be expected to reverberate with rather less force:

If you take a poem  
you must take another  
and another  
till you have a poet.

And if you take a poet  
you'll take another, and so on,  
till finally you get  
a civilization: or just  
the dirtiest brawl you ever saw —  
the choice isn't yours.

What saves this from being a faded joke about a shrunken corner of a lost world, is the crispness and clarity not only of the writing, but also of the double disappointment it dramatizes through, for example, the workings of unobtrusive rhymes: "poet...get", "so on...civilization", and "saw...yours". Equally, the way that "or just" breaks up the resolving rhymed close on the word "civilization" is a perfectly judged ruffling of high-minded high hopes. So the poem first describes a process that we who admire and enjoy this art have all experienced—the growth of a learned and then fed fascination that can access some of the finest productions of highly sensitized minds, and then marks a precipitous slide into isolation, conflict, and the total loss of

anything like art or control. Many of Fisher's poems dedicated to other poets could be called counteractive moves in this cultural destruction of poetry and the conditions for its best production. "You Should Have Been There", written for Peter Riley in 2000, is exemplary in its acknowledgement of just how essential imaginative collaboration is in this most personal, and often most isolate, of arts: "you should have been there / to make two of our sort / too many for the territory / I'd split the shift with you", he proposes, "while the broad- / bodied waitress in black with the ominous eye / stalks by".

Roy Fisher's is then a poetry of skepticism, one that includes a healthy skepticism of poetry. It has been protected from the canceling to nothing of moralized minimalism—by accepting a need to grow loquacious and to address with ever greater reach the implications and ramifications of its congenial, not to say congenital, modes first intuited through exposure via Gael Turnbull to American writers such as W.C. Williams, Denise Levertov, and Cid Corman in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is what Fisher's lesser known, and by some less appreciated, work of the 1980s and 1990s has been about. In "A Furnace" and elsewhere his "honest skepticism" has tacitly defined a complex social and political agnosticism—addressing, for instance, the survival of ancient religious modes for giving significance to mortal processes, while criticizing established religion's expropriation of death, and the role of the dead in our lives. Since the end of the 1970s, Fisher has published work that takes carefully calibrated steps in the direction of the social, while simultaneously keeping the time's overweening social demands in their place. He has put his "poor footprint back in". The first part of "Texts for a Film" (1991) begins "Birmingham's what I think with" and over more than fifty years this poet has found evolving means for turning that thought into art. I first encountered his poetry on a library shelf some thirty-five ago. If not quite "what I think with", Roy Fisher's work has nonetheless contributed substantially to what and how I think—and, *al que quiere!* (to those that desire), it can do the same.

## MICHAEL HELLER IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Uncertain Poetries*. Michael Heller. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005.  
*Exigent Futures: New and Selected Poems*. Michael Heller. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2003.

*Benjamin Goluboff*

To this fond reader at least, everything most notable about Michael Heller's imagination comes together in his extraordinary poem "For Uncle Nat," appearing first in Heller's 1989 collection, *In The Buildded Place*, and again in Heller's New and Selected volume from Salt: *Exigent Futures*. *Futures* is joined just now by *Uncertain Poetries*, a collection of Heller's critical prose from the end of the eighties to present. The appearance of the two volumes together is certainly a watershed in Heller's career, as well as an opportunity for his readers to reconnoiter even well-remembered poems, like "Uncle Nat," in light of the poetics laid out, with powerful and erratic intelligence, in the volume of criticism.

"For Uncle Nat," an elegy inflected Jewish-American, locates itself on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan where the speaker and his companion are passing Congregation Zichron Moshe when a man beckons from the doorway: "May I, / he says to my companion, borrow this / Jewish gentleman for a moment." The Congregation, which we may imagine as vestigial and relict, needs a tenth adult male to make a *minyan* (the quorum for reading the Torah). Borrowed so they can open the Ark at Zichron Moshe, our speaker determines to borrow his uncle (from death, from memory, from family lore?) and to talk with him once more:

May I borrow you for a moment, Nat. We'll celebrate  
 By twos, the world's an Ark. We'll talk in slant  
 American accent to code the hidden language of the Word.

The trope of borrowing recurs in the poetry collected in *Exigent Futures*, charmingly in "Fifty-three Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth," a poem of house-sitting whose speaker, a sort of seated *flâneur*, squats among borrowed possessions and seeks to exercise a borrowed language.

Reading the essays in *Uncertain Poetries* lends dimensionality—a sense of the variety of his project—to Heller's borrowings. Borrowing for Heller always means Jewishness. This is perhaps by way of Paul Celan, a figure who informs Heller's instructive essay "Diasporic Poetics" and who reminds

Heller that "...the Jew has nothing which is not borrowed, least of all the name Jew." Borrowing also registers Heller's engagement with a series of familiar problems in poetics and literary theory. The poet's language, Heller likes to remember, is "exilic," or "displaced from the object it refers to." The poet's language reveals always a division at its root: language as form and language as sign. In "Diasporic Poetics" Heller writes that "...to be a supplicant before words ... was to gather two intimacies at once, that of the things words named... and that of a renaming; that construct of the poem that collocated all these names of things and yet held them in some new order...." These difficulties of language are explicitly at issue in one of the few new poems in *Exigent Futures*: a bravura comic performance with the tautological title: "We can only wish *valeat quantum valere potest*." They are also the terrain that Heller explores through his variations on borrowing in "Uncle Nat" and elsewhere: the borrowings of the exilic word.

Now in one way it is faint praise to say that equipped with the volume of essays, readers of Heller's verse are propelled (his word) into problems of literary theory, into what in "Fifty-three Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth" he calls "the century's textual warpings." Poetry that sits so snugly adjacent to theory as this is not the poetry that claims my first attention. Heller's perseverating at these "warpings" is also dismaying in light of his affiliation with the Objectivist tradition. Indeed, some of the richest essays in *Uncertain Poetries* ("Poetry without Credentials," a guide for the ephebe; "The Uncertainty of the Poet," autobiography cum manifesto by way of de Chirico; and the loving memoir "Encountering Oppen") are those where Heller draws upon Objectivist poetics. Certainly some of the sharpest passages in Heller's prose occur where he sets out the positions and practice of Reznikoff, Oppen, Rakosi, and Zukofsky. Heller's mentors revere "the impingement and penetration by the world into our would-be discursiveness, our self-involved chatter." Heller remembers that Oppen calls the poet a "realist" only if he is "someone concerned with a fact outside of himself which he did not entirely create."

The Objectivists, Heller cautions the ephebe, illustrate the distinction between expression and communication. Objectivist communication is "without bias because it has sprung from an actual lived world, unconditioned by any *a prioris*, and is continually undercutting the conventionalized constructs and arrangements of our normal thought patterns."

I do not argue that Heller's poetry is expressive rather than communicative in this sense, or that it is self-involved. One of the distinctions of these poems is their freedom from the intrusions of a highly characterized persona. Another is the high emotional equanimity with which Heller's voices

articulate their worlds. And I can't quite bring myself to claim that facts of the "actual lived world" are absent from Heller's verse. What I do claim is that these facts, when they swim into view, are not fully themselves, not palpably available. The facts in these poems have a detachment or translucency. We might say that Heller's facts are under alibi because they are animated first by an intention toward abstraction and theory.

One feels the abstraction of Heller's facts most sharply in those verses about the poet's Manhattan: "In Central Park," or "Palestine," where a defamiliarizing snowstorm collates Manhattan with "Judaea." Heller's Manhattan is too often merely *donnée* for one or another theoretical excursion. Heller's Hamptons are a stylized and abbreviated place, a kind of Hamptons in the head. A charming exception to this rule of abstraction is the attentiveness of these poems to birds. That Heller is an informed and careful observer of birds is evident throughout *Exigent Futures*, from the early "Paragraphs" to the faux-taxonomic "In Elegiacs, Birds of Florida." Perhaps more than city or memory, birds engage the Objectivist in Heller. A great moment in "Being at East Hampton":

On the island opposite,  
Two mute swans we could have dreamed  
Beat about each other  
Like mad Japanese ghosts.

One final discouraging word about the verse before I move on to remark more fully on the essays of *Uncertain Poetries*. Sometimes, indeed rarely when you remember that these two volumes represent work of two decades, Heller's ear fails him. There is no sense in multiplying examples; I'll just register that in two of the poems I like best Heller offers usages that bring a dubious music to his line: "enclaved" in "For Uncle Nat," and "patina-ed" in "Fifty-three Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth." Grammatically unstable and hard to say, these usages and others like them, mar the sound of poems otherwise pleasing to hear.

The essays range widely through twentieth-century poets and poetics. They rarely fail to persuade and invariably demonstrate the depth of Heller's learning and the fine clarity of his intelligence. It may be that Heller's critical powers are at their most distinguished when they are exercised on the micro level. Addressing a single figure and working close to the text, as he does in essays on Stevens, on David Ignatow as parabolist, and on Lorine Niedecker's "Wintergreen Ridge," among others, Heller is an illuminating guide. Consider, from his Niedecker essay, Heller's fine receptivity to the difficult music of "Wintergreen Ridge":

“Wintergreen Ridge” does not simply withhold closure, but, as well, throughout its length, uses the possibility of closure as one of its devices, almost shutting down or end-stopping itself in places, only to move on, spilling out beyond the tercet backdrop as it enjambes both sound and idea from stanza to stanza.

At only one point in *Uncertain Poetries* do Heller’s critical abilities seem misdirected. This is an essay, originally given as a talk at the Ezra Pound Centennial Conference, entitled “The Narrative of Ezra Gorgon Pound or History Gothicized.” This wrongheaded game of Compare and Contrast collates *The Cantos* with Poe’s *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* in order to include both in an underdetermined category Heller calls American Gothic. The essay is irksome to me. I don’t know whether to be more distressed at the way it diminishes Pound or at how it dignifies Poe’s *Pym*, a work that simply does not repay the attention that Heller, among other credulous souls over the years, has given it.

Everywhere else in *Uncertain Poetries* Heller’s intelligence is luminous and his erudition deep. To illustrate his conviction that in these late chapters of the tradition it is “the first duty of the writer to resist violently the culture’s language games,” Heller offers two early exemplars of such resistance: Lucretius and Blake. However remote from one another with regard to cultural surround and poetic project, each poet, Heller makes one see, replaces his own culture’s discourse with an invented personal idiom. Heller draws adeptly on Basho in “Poetry Without Credentials” to urge the beginner to consider “that poetry could be rooted in acceptance of our state of mind as it is rather than in some abstract subject we think poetry ought to be....” On Rilke, Mallarme, William Bronk, on the credos and watchwords of contemporary M.F.A. mainstream poetry, on the “propellants” of the contemporary avant garde, Heller’s opinions are deeply informed and persuasive.

Often in *Uncertain Poetries* Heller turns his attention to intersections between poetics and Jewishness. Here, sometimes, Heller seems to engage in special pleading for the secular Jew’s qualifications to speak of such things. What results is a kind of agnostic muddle in his language, as where he writes of “a non-theological theology of language” or “a phenomenology of near-secular spirituality.” Such niceties and needle-threadings impair the clarity and force of the essays.

Where such considerations don’t intrude, however, the Jewish essays carry themselves with considerable authority. “The Poetics of Unspeakability,” reflections on language and atrocity occasioned by an anthology of verse by second-generation Holocaust survivors, offers a moment of pointed

frankness when Heller declares himself “irritated by the simple-minded yoking of Auschwitz and contemporary politics or socio-cultural issues such as feminism or the ambivalences of assimilation.” “Diasporic Poetics” sets out, among other things, to clarify just what was Jewish about the Jewish Objectivists. You may believe I came to these remarks with a fair measure of skepticism; I came back from them quite persuaded. Of course Heller claims nothing essential or transhistorical for the Jewishness of Oppen, Zukofsky and company. He finds in them a “diasporic consciousness...one created by the dis-ease and difficulty with which they approached their heritage and by the cultural and poetic apartness under which they worked.” The Objectivists’ Jewishness is manifest for Heller “in their textual practices, in their love of visible objective fact and, most significantly, in their questioning relationship to a Jewish God and Jewish dogma.”

Quite apart from its value as companion to the new and selected poems of *Exigent Futures* (and by the way, I would have preferred more new and no fewer selected) *Uncertain Poetics* is a useful and engaging guide to contemporary poetry and poetics. Together the two volumes confirm that Michael Heller is a very significant person of letters.

### THREE WAYS TO TOUCH THE WOR(L)D

Mary Jo Bang, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon*, Grove Press, 2004. Beth Ann Fennelly, *Tender Hooks*, W. W. Norton, 2004. Pattiann Rogers, *Generations*, Penguin, 2004.

*Jayne E. Marek*

“We see by being seen. We are never  
alone where we are.”  
—Pattiann Rogers, “Seeing What Is Seen”

It is always a pleasure to read the work of authors who are confident of their poetic vision and deft in their techniques. Here, readers find three volumes written with assurance—two by established poets and one by a relative newcomer. Rogers adds another impressive volume to her oeuvre, and Mary Jo Bang puts her startling creative powers to work in a volume of ekphrastic poems. Beth Ann Fennelly, in her second book, develops her acute observations through deceptively simple lines. Read together, these three books evoke a sense of mindfulness about the powers of spirit, of desire, of perception, and of relationships that both sear and fulfill.

The most accomplished poet in this set, Rogers offers the greatest consistency of effect and the fewest surprises. Rogers’ many readers will find her usual style in *Generations*, where observations about the seasons, animals, a few humans, and homely quotidian truths provide a means to “contemplation” that “grows receptive to complexity.”

From the first poem, “Generations,” the anonymous persona seems to look backward and forward at once, noting rituals of growth and succession (“They have been walking from the beginning, / through the foggy sponges of lowland / forests, under umbrella leaves.... They walked / through the words *let there be light* / more than once....”). This inexorable march of existence emblemizes humanity’s moral position in the universe: “their walking / was constant, unmoving, invariable, / and the seeing of the people was ever / present, immutable, liberation.” The flow of Rogers’ diction tends to lull the reader, who must remember to notice the metaphysical reach in Rogers’ Eliotian paradoxes (how can “moving” be “unmoving?”). Sounds and ideas shimmer on the page. Rogers generally holds to her characteristic stanzas of similar lengths, shaped by internal rhymes, and adds texture with a handful of poems in tercets, quatrains, and free-verse forms. These gently formed patterns allow for a satisfying play of thought within flexible bound-

aries.

Repeatedly envisioning ascent and descent, the poems in this book's six "story" sections evoke aspiration and vision as well as a persistent turning toward one's deeper nature. "I climb around / and around almost circling myself / in this narrow space, almost / meeting myself face to face," the persona muses in "Aspiring, Now and Then." Images of flying seeds, falling leaves, feet circling on bicycle pedals, flocking birds, and swirling water serve as emblems of the metaphysical unity underlying all change. Rogers' recursive meditations on presence and absence, potential and persistence contain many sharply drawn moments, as in "Tabula Rasa":

The landscape in this country is entirely  
bare and blank, undistinguished  
by any feature, except for a stitch  
of swallows appearing and disappearing

above the sky-smooth lake, in and out  
through the portals invented by their own  
journeys....

The relaxed observation of everyday life is suddenly pierced by a sensation, a Woolfian moment of being, in which the poem and unidentified persona each simultaneously achieve their own "reality."

Occasionally, Rogers provides glimpses of a more personal intertwining of self and other. "Truth and Falsehood," for example, tenderly recalls "last night" with "the stars falling" and "the snow falling," leading into the metaphorical realm of a couple in an ambiguous but sustaining intimacy: "as naked as light, neither // beckoning, neither denying, both ancients / broken and unchronicled, // both out of the pit / into the instant and back... the way things were for awhile last night." "The Match," on the other hand, reimagines a pair (of lovers? of children?) who "struggle, sweaty, grimacing / and cursing... One heaves / and lifts the other on her back, off / her feet... Clinging body to body, / they fight to choke each other at the ribs, / encircling arms squeezing tight." Such broad strokes can seem comic, or violent, and are atypical of the book as a whole.

Despite a consistent delicacy of effect, Rogers' poetic techniques do not invariably please. Sometimes her rhythms fail and neologisms jar, as in "Interdisciplinary Studies" ("These interdisciplinary studies / are being assembled by those venerated / experts responsible for discovering / and translating heretofore lost / beetlescrolls, sanddunedocuments, / the ritual anthems of tumbleweedchoirs..."). The most appealing aspect of Rogers'

work is the apparent effortless with which she can invoke faith and mystery in the movements of the natural world, although this approach can lapse into vagueness (“In bed asleep we might approach / a settlement of inner union where / it exists in a thousand definite / coordinates around the earth”). When Rogers maintains her characteristic balance among rhythm, vocabulary, and a sense of immanence, her poems achieve a richly satisfying expression of spiritual awareness and the interpenetration of all aspects (and senses) of “nature.”

Bang’s book is the most creative and elliptical of these three. Any fan of modern art will be curious to see what Bang has done in this collection, titled as it is after an Odilon Redon print of—yes—a huge eyeball aloft, carrying what may be a balloon gondola. Bang’s poems here create a dimension well beyond the empathetic, descriptive responses that one may expect of ekphrasis. Although several of the artworks are recognizable simply through Bang’s passing references to titles, figures, or visual details, often no overt connection is made. Instead, the original piece seems to provide inspiration as an ethos or expressive force that guides Bang’s tone.

In the title poem, placed quite late in the book, Bang’s poetic voice makes a series of surrealist vernacular statements that evoke not the image of Redon’s eye-balloon but a sense of existence as constant flux, continually evading both description and understanding:

We were going toward nothing  
all along. Honing the acoustics,  
heralding the instant  
shifts....

Always asking, Has this this been built?  
Or is it all process?

Molecular coherence, a dramatic canopy,  
cafeteria din, audacious design. Or humble....

Looking up  
at the billboard hummingbird,  
its enormous beak. There’s a song that goes...  
And then the curtain drops.

Bang’s language recreates the conceptual and visual dislocations of avant garde art. For readers, the effect is dizzying—both exhilarating and anxiety-provoking. In good reflexive fashion, the poems revel in as they enact their difficult surfaces: “The intelligent remove (art is text) / is the distance we

desire,” claims the opening poem (“Rock and Roll Is Dead...”).

A number of pieces, such as “Mulholland Drive,” effect a suitable congruence between Bang’s technique and the ostensible source-texts. “The narrative coexists / with certitude for just a few seconds,” this poem declares. “The characters play games / in a circle at some remove / from the world.... The object is conscious / awareness.” For most of the selections, however, links between the visual art and the poem are oblique at best—appropriately enough, since Bang draws from symbolist, surrealist, Dadaist, and decadent artworks and includes installations, pieces of furniture, sculptures, photographs, interactive pieces, and films. Many moments delight by their sly play with cultural literacy, for example “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living...”: “Another nightmare / in which an antigravity theory falls / off the bell tower and looks for all the world / like a limp Kim Novak in *Vertigo*. // A thriving scene and was seen turned lifeless....”

Readers entertained by the challenges of surrealist texts will enjoy the potential of Bang’s short, nonsequential sentences. From “Blue Thought Circle”:

A statement followed by an “oh,”  
perfectly equally matched to an “and.”  
Was it as simple as that?

And *now* what?  
The clock stopped and restarted.  
Chemicals coursed

through a bloodstream  
slowly pouring a pitcher  
of bright yellow....

Such apparently objective statements do not cohere into explanation or analysis but rather make dramatic quantum leaps among ideas. Bang recontextualizes her source-texts while retaining familiar (post)modern themes—the illusory nature of perception, the impossibility of fixing meaning. Her management of rhythm and rhyme is masterful; it usually carries even those poems in which theme has been overly obscured.

Bang’s vocabulary provides constant explosions of surprise, calling to mind the innovations of language poetry and precursors such as Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath. Bang’s heavy use of modifiers can drain energy from her verbs, however, and her relentlessly elliptical technique can make a poem full of fine observations seem ultimately unsuccessful. *The Eye Like a*

*Strange Balloon* is the kind of idiosyncratic achievement that will strike some readers as impenetrable, others as profound; certainly this book highlights Bang's ability to toy wittily with ideas of representation. (For readers who wish to savor the interlocking references created by ekphrasis, Bang appends a list of the artworks that correspond to her poems.)

Fennelly, on her part, probes deeply into the complicated emotions of close relationships, particularly those prompted by the birth and growth of her daughter. Nuanced, funny, and occasionally disturbing, Fennelly's poems describe the "tender hooks"—the private, sometimes embarrassing, and certainly conflicting responses—that hold mother to child, spouse to spouse, and friend to friend.

In the book's first part, the recurring image of nursing an infant suggests a closeness that can prove uncomfortable on several counts—for what the poetic voice learns about herself as well as for the residual pains of child-birth and the child's bites and pinches. Fennelly's approach deftly balances moments of irony and sincerity, as in the opening poem, titled "Bite Me," that transcends the shock of its title by literally rendering how the one-year-old greets her mother ("This month you've left your mark on me / through sweatshirts and through jeans, / six-teeth-brooches that take a week to fade / from my collarbone, hip, wrist"). This minor but persistent pain reminds the persona of the physical punishment she endured giving birth ("finally I burst at the seams / and you were out, / Look, Ha, you didn't kill me after all"). Another poem about nursing characterizes the "Strange Country"

where I lived with my daughter while I fed her  
 from my body. It was a small country, an island for two,  
 and there were things we couldn't bring with us,  
 like her father. He watched from the far shore,  
 well meaning, useless. Sometimes I asked  
 for a glass of water, so he had something to give.

Fennelly's awareness of the complexities of devotion allows this book to speak to fathers as well as mothers; it characterizes the intense inward focus of a new family, the jealousy of each parent wanting the infant's attention.

Other poems return to lingering physical effects—hair loss, stress incontinence, flab—and celebrate both the joy of new life and humanity's animal nature. Some readers will find the poems' overall effect too casual, considering the strength of the emotions being recollected. At times, Fennelly's language provokes visceral responses that will baffle or repel some readers. While a certain degree of shock may be expected in order to depict child-birth's rigors, there are occasional distracting lapses of taste ("my asshole

turned inside-out like a rosebud,” “Yes, I wanted to soul-kiss my daughter”).

The central portions of the book shift to memories and adult musings about faith and friendship. Part II immediately explains the book’s title—“that’s how she came to understand growing up: erosion. She was all edges, on *tender hooks*, which is what she thought the expression was,” one persona says (“Waiting for the Heart to Moderate”). The poems in these sections display more formal experimentation and a greater range of topics, although Fennelly’s scope and style seem less urgently engaged with these themes. One persona claims, “I’m tired of the hip cynicism / of atheists, tired of metafiction, / of winks at the camera, / of poems using dinner knives / to check for spinach in their teeth. // I want to reclaim the optimism / of the grand old religions, I want exclamations, / exultations, belly laughs, shaking fists, / tears for all my friends, tears on the house!” (“Telling the Gospel Truth”). A more serious long poem addresses an apparent miscarriage, a surprise that deepens the celebratory effect of the earlier poems.

Part IV returns to the child Claire, although to milder effect, for while this final section includes refreshing variations in formal development, the shortest poems seem unfinished. The most notable piece in this closing section of the book is the playful, free-form “Having Words with Claire,” which again shows how processes of change refresh one’s view of the world:

Magnificent new word I trace into pollen on the car hood  
because all is spring and budding through the beds  
of your gums are two new teeth....

word that grows siblings,  
they tumble in your wet mouth....

words like waves, like sand, like spume, like salt  
in wounds, on rims with limes,  
with crumpets trumpets O strumpet spring

words that make nothing happen

others that make too much....

Invoking the little girl’s word-play helps Fennelly build toward the closure in the last poem, as the speaker claims that she will remember and treasure the shocks and discoveries of early parenthood—“I’m writing everything down.... I want everything back, every blessed thing,” the voice declares in “The Gods Tell Me, *You Will Forget All This*.” In its open form, alternately chastening and confirming, this final poem reiterates the fierce devotion of

the book's first section and concludes with a promise: "I'll have another."

These three poets surprise readers in distinct ways—Rogers, through experimental word combinations and inspired blending of style and theme; Bang, through the imaginative tension between abstract statements and concrete imagery; Fennelly, through intensity of emotion that breaks past everyday language. The range of achievement in these volumes indicates that contemporary poetry by women is, indeed, in robust good health.

## **POET AS LIBRETTIST: WORDS FOR MUSIC** **BY LANG-PO AND NEW FORMALIST POETS**

*Nosferatu: An Opera Libretto (Based on the Film by F.W. Murnau)*. Dana Gioia. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001. *Shadowtime*. Charles Bernstein. København & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2005.

*Joe Francis Doerr*

If one were to accept as true W.H. Auden's contention that the job of the librettist is "to furnish the composer with a plot, characters and words," then one could acknowledge poets Charles Bernstein and Dana Gioia as having fulfilled the librettist's most basic duty by supplying their collaborators with each of opera's main ingredients. It is only when one considers the rest of Auden's assertion (that "of these, the least important so far as the audience is concerned, are the words") that one begins to question the poets' motives for attempting libretti in the first place. After all, as Mr. Auden has further insisted, "a poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language," a statement that begs the question why someone in love with language would be content to have the product of his or her passion take a back seat to music, plot, and spectacle.

Make no mistake; there is no doubt that both Bernstein and Gioia are passionate about language. As poets and critics each has well-established credentials, but as librettists their work is more or less unknown. Furthermore, of the two, only Gioia is a relative newcomer to the genre. *Nosferatu* debuted in 2001, while Bernstein's first libretto *Blind Witness News*, dates from 1990. Bernstein, clearly the veteran librettist here, has since gone on to write four more libretti: *The Subject* (1991), *The Lenny Paschen Show* (1992), *Café Buffé* (1999), and *Shadowtime* (2005).

Both Gioia and Bernstein have different reasons for attempting libretti, and, perhaps not surprisingly, their particular works serve as distinct examples of the differences between these two poets, their writing styles, and philosophies. The critic Charles Foley observes that Gioia is a poet who offers us a kind of aesthetic, "dark" Catholicism. He points out that behind Gioia's interest and status in "The New Formalism," an aesthetic movement in poetry that advocates a return to traditional meters and forms, there lies a profound interest in ritual—specifically in the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. Gioia, a self-proclaimed "Catholic" writer who does not believe in God, validates Foley's claim when he explains in *The Irish Review*

I'm interested in darker subject matter... The basic *donnée* of the Catholic writer is to examine the consequences of living in a fallen world...The dissonance between those two realms of experience, the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, is the fundamental tension of Catholic poetry.

Gioia readily admits that the appeal of opera, for him, lay in its ritual elements. "Music," he writes, "allows the audience to experience the words not intellectually but physically, emotionally, and indeed unconsciously." He contends that under such conditions he was able to explore ways of writing that were quite different from those he might use on the page.

Beyond this admission, Gioia explains that he was led to opera by a fascination with the archaic genre of verse tragedy, opera being the only living form of verse tragedy and the only surviving form of contemporary tragic theater. Interested in experimenting with verse tragedy in his own work, he quickly discovered that there are only two practical alternatives available to the contemporary poet: translation of the classics or writing for the opera house.

Gioia's approach to the art of writing libretti seems to be no different from anything else he has attempted; that is, he appears to have a tenacious single-mindedness when it comes to mastering subjects that capture his interest. This is, after all, a man who established a major literary reputation writing at night and on weekends during what must have been a grueling fifteen-year career as a business executive, one that culminated in his eventual promotion to Vice President of General Foods, no less. In 1992, he left business to become a full-time writer. Since 2003, he has been chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts—and a damned effective one at that, having actually gotten a sizable increase in his agency's budget from a tight-fisted, conservative congress.

His writing reflects such tenacity, exhibiting something of an obsessively methodical reliance on form and structure as is evident in the following passage from *Nosferatu* entitled *Aria: Nosferatu's Nocturne*

I am the image that darkens your glass,  
The shadow that falls wherever you pass.  
I am the dream you cannot forget,  
The face you remember without having met.

I am the truth that must not be spoken,  
The midnight vow that cannot be broken.  
I am the bell that tolls out the hours.  
I am the fire that warms and devours.

I am the hunger that you have denied,  
 The ache of desire piercing your side.  
 I am the sin you have never confessed,  
 The forbidden hand caressing your breast.

You've heard me inside you speak in your dreams,  
 Sigh in the ocean, whisper in streams.  
 I am the future you crave and you fear.  
 You know what I bring. Now I am here.

The structure, too, of *Nosferatu* is steeped in tradition—it follows the conventional operatic format for the old tried-and-true tragedy in six acts. Furthermore, Gioia's libretto is nothing if not populist—it is based on F. W. Murnau's 1922 silent vampire film of the same name (a work which borrowed heavily from the Bram Stoker horror classic *Dracula*) and tells a now familiar story. A young man, Eric Hutter, newly wed and living in poverty in the town of Wisborg with his pretty young wife Ellen, is sent to Hungary by his new employer to sell a local property to the Dracula-esque Count Orlock. During their initial meeting, Orlock becomes transfixed by a small portrait of Ellen in Hutter's possession. Orlock feeds on Hutter, drives him mad, and vows to make Ellen his own. Meanwhile, Ellen has been having nightmarish visions alerting her to her husband's peril and the true nature of the Count. Orlock arrives in the town of Wisborg to make good on his plan, and leaves a trail of grotesque and mysterious deaths in his wake. Hutter returns from Hungary, but is confined to an asylum for the insane. He believes that he has become wealthy from his business venture with Orlock, and begs Ellen to join him in their new mansion (the asylum). Ellen devises a plan to destroy Orlock and save her husband from madness. She invites Orlock to her room with the intention of keeping him with her till dawn. Ellen prolongs their tryst as long as she can, but just as the first rays of sunlight enter the room Orlock realizes Ellen's ruse. He has just one chance to escape, but Ellen bares her neck and he chooses to embrace her instead. As the Count crumbles into dust Ellen dies in her bed. This is pretty stock stuff.

Gioia's libretto was written for the neo-romantic composer Alva Henderson, whose music, though certain to please on the popular level, sometimes comes across as simply typical—thrilling at turns, but not surprising. The printed libretto is framed by two essays: Anne Williams "Listening to the Children of the Night: The Vampire and Romantic Mythology" and Gioia's own "Sotto Voce: Notes on the Libretto as a Literary Form." Both are well worth the read, especially Gioia's well-written piece on the tradition

of writing libretti. Here the reader will find that perhaps the most useful information is Gioia's eloquent assertion that a libretto, dependent as it must be on music, cannot be considered or judged solely by literary standards, but rather how well it functions in the completed work of art. The implication is that one requires a well-developed sense of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or, synthesis of arts (that melding of *phanopoeia*, *melopoeia*, and *logopoeia* as Pound would have it) when considering any libretto.

If Gioia's offering is an aesthetic, "dark" Catholicism, then Bernstein's is a kind of secular Jewish response—albeit one that is likely derived from the Jewish mystical tradition's insistence that everything is holy—that steers poetry away from the allegorical, the high literary, and the religious, and more towards the simple details of the ordinary. This is a notion present throughout *Shadowtime* and quite evident in the following passage from Scene VI:

These stones are the bread  
of imagination. Reading the notices  
on the urinals, *things withstand my  
gaze*. Such joy in the mere act  
of unrolling a ball of thread. One becomes  
tender, fearing that a shadow falling on  
paper might hurt it. It's too noisy here.  
I must note how I found my place.  
Seeing only nuances. As when  
the intensity of acoustic impressions  
blots out all others. The solitude of such  
trances works as a filter. Yet I am disturbed  
by a child crying.

Unlike Gioia, Bernstein has always been much less concerned with using poetry to explore the consequences of the fallen world, and more interested in poetry's social context, or what it becomes within the process of what he calls "doing" poetry. As he explained to one interviewer:

Poetry's social function is to imagine how language works within its culture, while pursuing a critique of the culture; this suggests that poetry can be a countermeasure to the reinforcement of cultural values at the heart of both popular entertainment and consumer politics. At the same time, poetry's aesthetic function is to refuse even this "value" in the pursuit of what Louis Zukofsky calls the pleasures of sight, sound, and intellect.

One need look no further than Bernstein's evocation of Zukofsky as a stark indicator of his differences with Gioia's brand of poetics. In his essay "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles

Reznikoff,” Zukofsky expands on the basic principles of Objectivist poetics stating that in sincerity “writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody,” and that objectification relates to “the appearance of the art form as an object.” While this position echoes Pound’s belief “in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (from the 1918 essay “A Retrospective” which was a major influence on Zukofsky), much of Bernstein’s technique is derived from the tenets of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which is often perceived as being more stilted than sincere. That said, although Gioia is more than willing to write with the “three *poeias*” in mind, he still seems much more at ease in his role as librettist in the tradition of conventional opera. Conversely, it is Bernstein who seems much more comfortable with breaking opera’s rules and stretching its limits and possibilities. Much like Pound in the role of “librettist” (see “Out of Key and of This World: Pound’s Musical Ambition,” *NDR* 20), Bernstein is content to allow the words to lead him to new discoveries that break with tradition and forge something unexpected. Nonetheless, one wonders when all is said and done with *Shadowtime* whether one is witnessing an opera or “song cycle.”

Rather than being arranged in acts, *Shadowtime* is divided into seven “scenes” that explore in very experimental language some of the major themes in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, for those readers who need reminding, was a dynamic German-Jewish philosopher, essayist, and cultural critic who combined ideas of Jewish mysticism with historical materialism in a body of work which was an entirely novel contribution to Marxist philosophy and aesthetic theory. He allegedly committed suicide in Port Bou at the Spanish-French border, while attempting to escape from the Nazis, when it appeared that his party would be denied passage across the border to freedom. Bernstein’s libretto, clearly the product of great respect for and interest in the life and work of Benjamin, is purposely disjointed, fragmented, and difficult. It lacks all of the familiar, populist appeal of *Nosferatu*, and, while *Shadowtime*, like Gioia’s libretto, possesses more than a modicum of “darkness,” it is a darkness that is strictly and unsettlingly psychological rather than Gothic, and therefore all the more terrifying when experienced.

While my focus in this review is on the libretto for the two operas in question, I should note that *Shadowtime* had its North American premiere at the Lincoln Center July 2005 to audiences that exhibited impatience if not open hostility to the two-hour, intermissionless performance. Critics’ reports tell of everything from mass exoduses in some performances to constrained applause at the opera’s close. One reviewer went so far as to

describe it as the concert experience that brought him closest to physical pain. Rather than accepting such a remark as being merely flippant, perhaps one would do well to consider it in terms of Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Just as Artaud believed that the text had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, a theater made up of a unique language halfway-between thought and gesture, Bernstein advocates one capable of containing

the intertwined natures of history, time, transience, timelessness, language, and melancholy; the possibilities for a transformational leftist politics; the interconnectivity of language, things, and cosmos; and the role of dialectical materiality, aura, interpretation, and translation in art.

Bernstein and his collaborator, composer Brian Ferneyhough, were shrewd to call their project a "thought opera," simultaneously performing a preemptive strike against negative criticism, and playing up to what one can imagine as Bernstein's audience's personal sense of being open-minded and poised to recognize the aesthetically valuable—even at the risk of offending the traditional sensibilities of the opera aficionado. Be that as it may, it is not surprising that *Shadowtime*, with its studied concern for words and word-play (guess how many anagrammatic permutations of the phrase "I'm a lent barn Jew" it's possible to set to music) may appear to many observers to verge on the pretentious.

Walter Benjamin spent much of his career exploring the notion of critique as *Ergänzung*, the "fulfillment" or "completion" of the work of art. He claimed that critique was immanent to art itself, and is therefore less something contingent to art than it is something that acts as a necessary supplement. As I understand it, Benjamin's claim is that there would be no art without criticism, not because criticism has priority over art but because the work of art is itself unfinished and thus already critical from the start. To this end, it is ultimately possible to perceive both *Nosferatu* and *Shadowtime* as works of criticism: one as perplexingly incomplete as the life and work it celebrates, and the other even more so, critically and immediately, incomplete because it is simply the latest installment (permutation?) in an enduring line of delicious twee: an opera based on a screenplay based on a novel, which was based on several literary precedents all based on a body of folklore which was, and is, a treasure trove of psychological investigation masquerading as a whole hell of a lot of fun.

## EDITORS SELECT

John Engels, *Recounting the Seasons: Poems 1958-2005*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. This book, beautifully produced by Notre Dame Press, is effectively John Engels' collected poems. Running to almost exactly 600 pages, it is a testament to the poet's life-long dedication to his art. Engels, who grew up in South Bend and attended Notre Dame as an undergraduate, dedicates his book "to the memory of [his] friends and teachers"—Richard Sullivan, Ernest Sandeen, John Nims, and Frank O'Malley. This is a book to own and live with. In his Foreword, novelist David Huddle writes that "the sheer range of this work is one of its distinguishing qualities—long, short, easy, difficult, philosophical, casual, despairing, joyful, silly, bawdy, heartbreaking, angry, affectionate, uplifting, abrasive, sexy, chaste, polite, and bad-mannered poems now inhabit a volume that finally allows us to take measure of this most completely human poet's achievement." We will review the book at length in a future issue.

Books by and about Geoffrey Hill: Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes from Comus*, Penguin, 2005; *Without Title*, Penguin, 2006; Andrew Michael Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, Northcote, British Council, 2004. We will also review these books at a length in a

future issue but want to recommend them now. *Scenes from Comus* is in part a dialogue with Milton, *Without Title* a dialogue with Montale (and includes a beautiful version of Montale's *La Bufera*). Although both books contain cycles, Hill has now evidently finished his phase of writing very long poems (the trilogy including *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!*, and *The Orchards of Syon*). While still written in what has become Hill's rather unsettled later style, some of the shorter poems in *Without Title* might provide a new reader with a place to begin reading his work. Andrew Roberts volume in the *Writers and Their Work* series is also recommended to the new reader. This brief and very readable study is also surprisingly thorough. Roberts discusses both the early and later work with equal sympathy, which is unusual. As with early vs. later Auden, many critics (and general readers) seem inclined to choose between the work written before or after *Canaan*.

Five books by *NDR* contributors. Again, we will review these volumes in a future issue but want to recommend them now. John Peck, *Red Strawberry Leaf*, University of Chicago Press, 2005; Laton Carter, *Leaving*, University of Chicago Press, 2004; William Logan, *The Whispering Gallery*, Penguin, 2005; Brian Swann, *Autumn Road*, Ohio State University Press, 2005. Robert

Gibb, *The Burning World*, University of Arkansas Press, 2004. John Peck's book is a selection of shorter and middle length poems written between 1994 and 2001. It is perhaps his most accessible book and a good place to begin reading his formidable body of work (which is every bit as substantial as Hill's or Engels'). We have published Peck's poetry or criticism in almost every issue of *Notre Dame Review*. He is one of the regular contributors who most exemplifies our ambitions for the journal. Laton Carter is a young poet who has made much of a poetics adapted from the work of his teacher, James McMichael. His book will be reviewed in the next issue along with McMichael's own new volume. William Logan's book is particularly recommended for the twenty-six poems of a cycle called "Penitence". It is a fierce and disillusioned look at an individual life, the state of contemporary culture, and certain defining moments of Western history. The continually prolific Brian Swann's most recent volume contains poems which, argues Hayden Carruth, "may well engender a new American poetics that all literate people must take into account." Robert Gibb's fifth book deals with the "burning world" of Homestead, PA, and the loss of family and a way of life in a world of steel mills, ash and stone. Maxine Kumin has called Gibb the best "working-class stiff" to write poems

since Philip Levine. Eavan Boland chose an earlier volume, *The Origins of Evening*, as a National Poetry Series winner. Gibb writes elegant, formal poems about our common human experience as it is revealed, again and again, to one person in one place. He is the kind of poet who ought to reach a large readership.

Seven chapbooks by *NDR* contributors. Reginald Gibbons, *Fern-Texts*, Hollyridge Press, 2006. This is a formally innovative poem of thirty-four pages in which quotations from and meditations upon the journals of Coleridge blend with and generate autobiographical material. Written in a combination of prose and syllabic verse, the subtitle is "Autobiographical Essay on the Notebooks of Young S.T. Coleridge". The "essay," in fact, is one of Gibbons' most ambitious poems. Richard Burns, *In a Time of Drought*, Shoestring Press, 2006. Burns' poem is about the same length as Gibbons' *Fern-Texts*, but written in sets of four couplets plus a refrain. It is a dense and learned poem based on pan-Balkan pagan rainmaking ceremonies. Twenty-four pages of postscript fill in the backgrounds that most readers will require in order to appreciate the poems. Mike Smith, *Small Industry*, Stepping Stones Press, 2006. Readers of Mike Smith's experimental anagram poems in *NDR* may be surprised by the

formally conservative poems in this chapbook. But Smith is a formalist by training and inclination. Kwame Dawes, contest judge for the South Carolina Poetry Initiative Series, says that Smith's "shifting intelligence could leave us bewildered, but we are dealing with a fine craftsman who finds ways to turn rhyme into a dynamic rhythmic thing that enlivens his poetry." Kymberly Taylor, *Extravagant Captivities*, Aralia Press, 2005. Taylor's best poems usually have an erotic charge, as in the title poem and "Long Legs." These seven poems represent work by a careful but by no means cautious poet, and also introduce us to "Y," the speaker of poems in part based on bird song that readers of NDR will remember. F. Daniel Rzicznek, *Cloud Tablets*, Wick Poetry Chapbook Series Three, 2006. Mostly prose poems, Rzicznek's chapbook is part of an ambitious and handsomely produced series from Kent State University Press. Deborah Pease, *At Ease with Mystery* (2005) and *Heart Flight* (2006), both from East Side Printers. These two chapbooks extend and complete the elegiac sequence for Niccolò Tucci begun in *The Crows at Appleton*, which was listed in NDR 21.

Books by Bruce Beasley, Brenda Hillman, and James Wagner. Albert Goldbarth has said he'd love to see the history of neuroscience wedded to the spirit of cutting-edge

poetry. He's blurbing a book that attempts this: Bruce Beasley, *Lord Brain*, University of Georgia Press, 2005. There really was a Lord Brain, about whom Beasley writes a poem and upon whose neurological work he draws. David Wojahn finds the book "an effort at healing the post-Enlightenment rifts between art and science, intellect and passion, faith and skepticism." Typical poems have titles like "Aphasic Echolalia," "Melancholia Oracles," "Phase Transition," "Brain Slices", and "If Religious Beliefs Are Simply Neurocognitive Processes That Reduce Anxiety Concerning the Dissolution of the Sense of Self ..." Some of them read like inspired notes for an Oliver Sacks essay. Since *Loose Sugar*, Brenda Hillman has been working on a tetralogy of books dealing with earth, air, water, and fire. *Cascadia* was the earth book, *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, Wesleyan, 2005, is the air book. Like Bruce Beasley, she grapples with scientific ideas in poems like "String Theory Sutra", which is written in a form parallel to the title poem, perhaps the best in a generally strong book. If Hillman brings off her water and fire volumes with the authority of her first two, she will certainly have produced a major work. Like Beasley and Hillman, James Wagner is extravagantly experimental, but in a more single minded way. His book, *Trilce*, Calamari Press, 2006, is a "homophonic" translation of

the seventy seven poems of the real *Trilce*, by César Vallejo. Homophonic translation, with its source in Louis and Celia Zukofsky's *Catullus*, is an attempt at finding something in English that renders the sounds, but possibly nothing else, in a source text—in this case Vallejo's poems. It has become a popular writing workshop assignment in recent years, but to my knowledge has never, except in the Zukofsky experiment, been pursued on this scale. It's an interesting combination of genius and madness, nonsense and play.

*The Chimeras of Gérard de Nerval*, Translated by Henry Weinfield with Monotypes by Douglas Kinsey, Spuyten Duyvil limited editions, 2005. *NDR* advisory editor Henry Weinfield's rhyming and metered translation of Nerval's masterpiece is accompanied by thirteen gorgeous color monotypes by Notre Dame artist Doug Kinsey, one for each of the twelve sonnets plus a frontispiece. Not so much a book as a portfolio, each 11" x 17" page contains one poem and one monotype, and is suitable for framing. The quality of reproductions is excellent and the pages have a glossy surface and strong backing. Sets are available from the author or translator directly, or from the Spuyten Duyvil web site.

Four more by *NDR* contributors. David Wojahn, *Interrogation Palace:*

*New and Selected Poems 1982-2004*. Wojahn's two hundred page selection from his seven previous books is an important mid-career stock taking. It contains a substantial number of his popular rock and roll sonnets, "Mystery Train," and his unnerving interrogations of history (an "Interrogation Palace" being, one supposes, a memory palace run by a tough detective) from *Late Empire*, *The Falling Hour*, and *Spirit Cabinet*. Brian Henry, *Quarantine*, Ashahta Press, 2006. Paul Kane reviewed Henry's *Graft* in the last issue. The new book is quite different, deriving from a long session of more or less improvised writing that yielded a text, "Quarantine," that was revised so that the narrative (the author says) "turned on itself" and then suggested the last third of the book, "Contagion", "a vandalized mirror image of the original." John Mateer, *The Ancient Capital of Images*, Fremantle Arts Center Press, 2005. Two sections of the title poem appeared in our last issue, so readers will be familiar with Mateer's work. Advisory editor Kevin Hart says that "no one writes like John Mateer. No one makes such a singular knot of Africa, Asia and Australia, and no one combines observation and metaphysics in quite the way he does." Michael Coffey, *cmyk*, O Books, 2005. Three of Coffey's "Sonnet Sonnets" appeared in our last issue. The new book contains more of these, made from bits and pieces of

Shakespeare, Ted Berrigan, Bruce Andrews and Jackson Mac Low. On facing pages appear numbers rendering the binary code of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro". It's that kind of book. Coffee has another style, utterly different, on display in his 1999 volume, *87 North*. One now waits for a book in which the two styles will begin to interrogate each other rather than being segregated in separate volumes.

Keith Tuma, editor, *Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*, Miami University Press, 2006. This anthology derives from a conference on "Diversity in African American Poetry" held at Miami University in 2003. The poets include Wanda Coleman, C.S. Giscombe, Kim Hunter, Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, Natasha Trethewey, Tyrone Williams, and *NDR* contributors Anthony Walton and Reginald Shepherd. The volume also includes ambitious essays by Evie Shockley, Aldon Nielsen, Kathy Lou Schultz, and the late Lorenzo Thomas. The anthology encourages the reader to ponder "diversity within diversity" rather than, as Jerry W. Ward says, "the usual binaries."

Melissa Fraterrigo, *The Longest Pregnancy*, Swallow's Tale Press, University of West Alabama, 2006. *NDR* contributor Fraterrigo's short stories, the winner of the Tartt Short Fiction Award and her first collection, are,

as Wendell Mayo puts it, "bold, thoroughly entertaining fictions about people whose ever expanding desires, dreams—or nightmares—come true. These stories glimmer." To which, we add our enthusiastic assent.

Kass Fleisher, *Accidental Species*, Chax Press, 2005. Imagine an evolution where each generation sets up an expectation for the next, which in turn satisfies in unexpected ways, and you'll get some sense of Kass Fleisher's new book. At the level of the sentence, it evokes the prose poetry of Gertrude Stein; at the level of the story it is a chimera of personal and public, past and present, where men and women, mothers and daughters, tread leadenly, each wondering why the other is such a strange animal. At the level of a book, it is a constantly surprising collection that word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, story-by-story, generates a picture of what we are by exposing grammars we live in and unwittingly reproduce.

Ralph McNerny, *I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You: My Life and Pastimes*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. McNerny, one of the few living professors to be able to claim fifty years here at Notre Dame, offers this instructional and breezy memoir, capturing both the

changing Notre Dame, and the American scene in general, over the last five decades. McInerny, the author of books too numerous to count (as he writes), is best known to the wider public for his Father Dowling mysteries, the rights to which McInerny sold to the TV giant Viacom, an experience that taught him the power and greed of giant corporations. But, throughout, he retains his good cheer, recounting a full life as writer, teacher, scholar, and Catholic intellectual activist.

Russell Working, *The Irish Martyr*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. The winner of the 2006 Richard Sullivan Prize in Short Fiction, *NDR* contributor Working's new collection, is, as author Douglas Glover has written, "powerful, brave and dangerous." Novelist Erin McGraw asks, "Is there any life that Russell Working cannot imagine?" and continues, "In these powerful haunting stories he explores the private lives of Egyptian adolescent girls, a North Korean woman sold to a Chinese farmer, a Russian doctor whose child has been stolen—victims of every time and place, always with singular compassion. This book looks at hard truths, and they will linger in the thoughts of its readers." The Sullivan Prize began in 1996 and has had a remarkable run of outstanding short story volumes, this one especially carrying on that tradition. To learn about

the Sandeen/Sullivan series and its entry guidelines visit: <http://www.nd.edu/~alcwp/sandeen.html>.

R.M. Kinder, *A Near-Perfect Gift*, The University of Michigan Press, 2005. *NDR* contributor Kinder's second collection of short stories, the winner of the Michigan Literary Fiction Award, places all of its stories in and around a small Missouri town, one with an eatery called The Good Food Cafe. Echoes of Sherwood Anderson abound, as Madison Smartt Bell takes note, blessing the volume's "passionate insight," as well as judging the stories "extraordinary in what they wring from [their] unexceptional situation." Near-perfect they are and Kinder's prose is as sharp and detailed as her tales' world is spare and exacting.

Doug Hoekstra, *Bothering the Coffee Drinkers: musical fiction and poetry*, Canopic Publishing, 2006. Hoekstra's debut collection of short stories (and two essays) is a quieter version of his main preoccupation, music making and performing. But the stories retain enough of the lyrical bounce and beat of his highly infectious tunes. Life in the slow lane, moseying out of Nashville toward other musical Meccas.

Two first novels: *Whiteman*, Harcourt, 2006, and *Wolf Boy*, Shaye Areheart Books, 2006, by recent graduates of ND's creative writing

program, Tony D'Souza and Evan Kuhlman, have been gathering great praise, especially D'Souza, whose novel was named by The Wall Street Journal as one of the most anticipated novels of 2006. Part of *Whiteman* appeared in the *NDR*, part in the *New Yorker*, part in *Playboy*, a literary trifecta if there ever was one. Kuhlman's novel (note his story in this issue) is another wonder and, as Valerie Sayers has pointed out, equally "beguiling." Its author, she says, "has boundless empathy for all his characters and his wonderful protagonist Stephen is, in turn, boundlessly inventive." So much so, there is a graphic novel within the text that functions as a subplot, stretching, as they say these days, "the limits of the conventional novel."



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Seth Abramson** is the co-founder and poetry editor of *The New Hampshire Review*. Recent and forthcoming publications include *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, *AGNI*, *Colorado Review*, *Pleiades*, *Verse*, and *Antioch Review*. **Samuel Amadon's** poems have appeared in such journals as *American Letters & Commentary*, *APR*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *TYPO*, and *Verse*. He is the co-curator of the FREQUENCY reading series in Greenwich Village. **Dimitri Anastasopoulos** is assistant professor of English at the University of Rochester where he teaches Fiction and the Contemporary Novel. His first novel, *A Larger Sense of Harvey*, was published by Mammoth Books, and he's now at work on a new novel, *Life Preserver*. **June Frankland Baker** lives in Richland, Washington. Her poems have appeared recently in *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *The Hurricane Review*. **Robert Bense's** work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The New Republic*, and is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Sewanee Review* and *Jabberwocky Review*. **Angela Burchett** lives in the Windsor Crest Heights neighborhood of Davenport, Iowa. The poem in this issue is one part of a larger narrative entitled *The Busted Apparatus of Angela Burchett*. **Renée E. D'Aoust's** essay "Graham Crackers" won an AWP Intro to Journals 2005 nonfiction award, and she is completing "Body of a Dancer" based on her years as a professional dancer in NYC. Publications include *Brevity*, *Canoe & Kayak Magazine*, *Kalliope*, *Mid-American Review*, *Permafrost*, *13<sup>th</sup> Moon*, *Touchstone*, and elsewhere. D'Aoust attended the University of Notre Dame's M.F.A. program on a Nicholas Sparks Fellowship. **Corinne Demas** is the award-winning author of two story collections, two novels, a memoir, *Eleven Stories High: Growing Up in Stuyvesant Town, 1948—1968*, and numerous children's books. She is Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College and a Fiction Editor of *The Massachusetts Review*. **Michelle Detoire** is the writer-in-residence at the Katherine Anne Porter House in Kyle, Texas. Her poetry has appeared in *Chelsea*, *Verse Daily*, *Typo*, and *Diagram*. **Joe Francis Doerr** lives and works in Austin, Texas. His book *Order of the Ordinary* is available from Salt Publishing. **William Doreski's** poems have recently appeared in *The Alembic*, *Four Corners*, and *Asphodel*. His new book is *Sacra Via*, a sequence of poems about Italy. **Kevin Ducey** has a book, *Rhinoceros*. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin. **Moirá Egan's** first book of poems is entitled *Cleave*. Recent work has appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Passages North*, *Poems & Plays*, *Poetry*, *Smartish Pace*, *32 Poems*, and *West Branch*, among many others. Her work is also featured in the anthologies, *Kindled Terraces: American Poets in Greece*; *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on*

*Poetics*; and *Sex & Chocolate*. **Benjamin Goluboff** is assistant professor of English at Lake Forest College. His work—essays, articles, and stories—has appeared in *New England Quarterly*, *Northwest Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Samizdat*, and elsewhere. **Michael S. Harper** is University Professor and professor of English at Brown University, where he has taught since 1970. He has published fifteen books of poetry, including *Dear John*, *Dear Coltrane* and *Images of Kin*. His latest book, *Use Trouble*, will be out next year. **Rebecca Hazelton** is currently in Florida State University's PhD program in Creative Writing. She is a graduate of Notre Dame's MFA program. She has been published or is forthcoming in *Salt Hill*, *Chattahoochie Review*, and *Puerto Del Sol*. **Michael Heller** is a poet, essayist and critic. His most recent books, *Uncertain Poetries*, a collection of essays, and *Exigent Futures: New and Selected Poems*, are reviewed in this issue. He has new work in *Stand*, the *Jerusalem Review*, *Boxkite* and *First Intensity*. He is a recent recipient of an award from the Fund For Poetry. **Brian Henry's** most recent book is *Quarantine*. He teaches at the University of Richmond in Virginia. **Teresa Iverson's** poems, translations, and other writings have appeared in *Agni*, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, *Boston Review*, *Delos*, *PN Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The New Criterion*, *Orion Magazine*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere. She is a co-editor of *In Time: Women's Poetry from Prison*. **Evan Kuhlman** is the author of the novel and graphic novel *Wolf Boy*. His stories have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Salt Hill*, *Madison Review*, and other publications. He lives in Ohio. He has an MA in creative writing from Miami University and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Notre Dame. **Jayne E. Marek** earned her MFA from the University of Notre Dame. She currently is associate professor of English at Franklin College, teaching literature, writing and film studies. She has published articles, poems, stories, and also writes plays. **Jill McDonough's** poems have appeared in *Slate*, *Poetry* and *Threepenny Review*. She is currently at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cllman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. **Wayne Miller** is the author of *Only the Senses Sleep* and *What Night Says to the Empty Boat*. He teaches at Central Missouri State University, where he co-edits *Pleiades*. **Peter Norhrnberg** is assistant professor of English Literature at Harvard University, where he teaches courses on Irish literature and Modernism. **Thomas O'Grady** was born and grew up on Prince Edward Island. He is currently Director of Irish Studies and a member of the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His book of poems *What Really Matters* was published in 2000. **John Peck's** recent books are *Collected Shorter Poems 1966-1996*, and *Red Strawberry Leaf: Selected Poems 1994-*

2001. **Emmy Pérez's** poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *New York Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and in her poetry chapbook *Solstice*. She lives in El Paso, Texas. **Mary Quade's** collection *Guide to Native Beasts* won the 2003 Cleveland State University Poetry Center First Book Prize. She lives in northeastern Ohio. **Jody Rambo's** poetry has appeared in such journals as *Quarterly West*, *Verse*, *The Seattle Review*, and *Meridian*. She holds an MFA from Colorado State University and has received a Jerome Foundation Literature Grant and an Ohio Arts Council Artist Fellowship. She lives in Springfield, Ohio, and teaches creative writing at Wittenberg University. **NoNieqa Ramos** is an English Language Arts teacher and the coordinator of the Creative Writing Program at a middle school in San Antonio. **Peter Robinson's** most recent poetry books are *Ghost Characters* and *There are Avenues*. Two volumes of translations are published this Fall: *The Greener Meadow: Selected Poems of Luciano Erba* and *Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni*. *The Salt Companion to Peter Robinson*, a collection of essays on his work edited by Adam Piette and Katy Price, and *Talk about Poetry: Conversations on the Art* will appear soon. **Dana Roeser's** first book, *Beautiful Motion*, was published as winner of the Samuel French Morse Prize. In 2005, she won the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award for her book. New poems have recently appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Northwest Review*, *Shade*, *Sou'wester*, *New Millennium Writings*, and other magazines. **Jay Rogoff's** books of poetry include *The Cutoff* and *How We Came to Stand on That Shore*. He has recent work in *Literary Imagination*, *The Paris Review*, *The Progressive*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. **John Ronan** is a poet, journalist and filmmaker. His work has appeared in *New England Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Threepenny Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and other publications. His non-profit film company, American Storyboard, has won national awards and is now producing a documentary on women in horse racing. **Mira Rosenthal's** poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Seneca Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Harpur Palate* and elsewhere. For the past two years, she was a Fulbright Fellow in Poland researching contemporary Polish poetry, and she recently selected and edited a special issue of *Lyric Poetry Review* on new Polish poetry in translation. She holds an MFA from the University of Houston and is currently a doctoral student in comparative literature at Indiana University. **David Russick** is the Director/Curator of the Herron Galleries at the Herron School of Art and Design at IUPUI. He is also an artist having received his MFA in painting from Northern Illinois University in 1996.

Russick's paintings have been the subject of a dozen one-person exhibitions in Chicago, Milwaukee and New York City. His work has also been included in over 100 group exhibitions and reviewed in several of the nation's major art journals including *Art in America*, and *Artforum*. In 2004 he was awarded an Efroymsen Fellowship Grant. His most recent one-person exhibition was in 2005 at the Byron Roche Gallery in Chicago. **Thom Satterlee** won the 2005 Walt McDonald First-Book in Poetry Competition for his collection *Burning Wyclif*. The poems in this issue appear in his book. Thom teaches creative writing at Taylor University. **Jeff Schiff** is author of *Anywhere in this Country*, *The Homily of Infinitude*, *The Rats of Patzcuaro*, *Resources for Writing About Literature*, and *Burro Heart*. His work has appeared internationally in more than seventy periodicals. He has taught at Columbia College Chicago since 1987. **Andrew Shields** lives in Basel, Switzerland. He recently published the chapbook *Cabinet d'Amateur* with German translations by Ulrike Draesner and photographs by Claudio Moser, as well as his translation of selected poems of the German poet Dieter M. Gräf, *Tousled Beauty*. **Anis Shivani's** poem in this issue is from his collection, *Treasonous Times*. Recent poetry, fiction, and criticism appear in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Iowa Review*, *Pleiades*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Hollins Critic*, and elsewhere. **Christopher Sindt** directs the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Saint Mary's College of California. He is the author of a chapbook, *The Land of Give and Take*, and his work has appeared recently in *Swerve*, *nocturnes*, and *Pool*. He lives in Oakland, California. Originally from Ukraine, **Askold Skalsky** has published poetry in numerous small press magazines and journals. His work has also appeared in Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland. The last two lines of "When Poetry Mattered" in this issue are from Rex Warner's translation of "Hippolitus." **Floyd Skloot's** most recent books of poetry are *Approximately Paradise* and *The End of Dreams*. He won the Pen Center USA Literary Award for his 2003 memoir, *In the Shadow of Memory*. **Cynthia Sowers** is an Arts and Ideas lecturer in the Humanities Program at the Residential College of the University of Michigan. **D. E. Steward** has work recently in *Denver Quarterly*, *Iowa Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Chelsea*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Gargoyle*, *Natural Bridge*, *Gulf Coast*, *Quarter after Eight*, and others. "Decembros" is a month in a project that runs serially month-to-month with better than half of the 220 months published. Sampling credit in "Decembros" to Dylan Thomas's "Ceremony after a Fire Raid." **Brian Swann's** latest books are *Autumn Road*, winner of the Ohio State University Press/*The Journal Aware* for 2005, and *Snow House*, winner of the 2005 Lena-Miles Wever

Todd Poetry Prize. **Heather Treseler** is a doctoral student at Notre Dame. Her poems have appeared in *Timbuktu*, *Clerestory* and *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. **Ellen Wehle** lives near Boston. Her poems appear in *Poetry International*, *The Iowa Review*, *The New Republic*, *Southern Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Grove Review*. She was writer-in-residence last year at The Poetry Center of Chicago. **Wallis Wilde-Menozzi's** essays have appeared in *Best Spiritual Essays 2002*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Agni*, among others. Her memoir, *Mother Tongue: An American Life in Italy*, is in paperback. **John Wilkinson** is Writer in Residence at the Keough Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame. His new collection of poetry is *Lake Shore Drive*. His work has been recognised with a 2006 Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Poetry. **Russell Working's** fiction has appeared in such publications as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Zoetrope*, *The Paris Review*, and *TriQuarterly*. He is a past winner of an Iowa Short Fiction Award, a Yaddo Fellowship, and a Pushcart Prize. He is the 2006 Richard Sullivan Prize winner for his collection *The Irish Martyr*, and lives in Oak Park, Illinois.

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