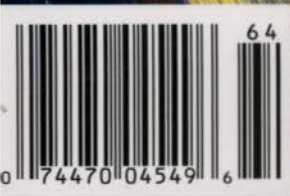


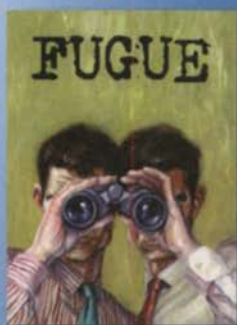
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Winter - Spring 2008

FUGUE

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FUGUE

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This issue is dedicated to the memory

Of

Norman Mailer

(1923-2007)

And

Grace Paley

(1922-2007)

“You know the mind is an astonishing, long-living, erotic thing.”

-Grace Paley

FUGUE

Winter-Spring 2008, Vol. 34

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Cover art, *Heartland*, by Kenneth Armstrong, 2008.

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—From the Editors—

One is not born with an innate understanding of the intricacies and wrinkles that come with publishing a literary journal. So, as first time editors, we need as much assistance as we can get. To that end, we'd like to take a moment to thank those who have supported us through the creation of this issue of *Fugue*.

To our genre editors, Andrew Millar, Laura Powers and Jeff Lepper, thank you for your vision as well as your vigilance. To our dedicated staff of readers, thank you for your insight and for never losing our manuscripts. Thank you Lillian Hatheway and Deb Allen for dropping everything to help us through countless emergencies and conundrums. Thank you to Ron McFarland, Brandon Schrand and the administrators at the University of Idaho for ongoing support. Justin Jainchill and Sara Kaplan—past editors extraordinaire—thank you for your strong example.

We must also thank our contributors, brave writers all, who have honored us greatly by seeking *Fugue* as the home for their work. It has been gratifying to work with such conscientious and imaginative minds. And finally, thank you—thank you!—to our subscribers for your continued interest. Please keep reading.

It is our pleasure to offer this, the Spring issue. We hope our readers find the work as inventive and engaging as we do. Cheers.

Michael Lewis and Kendall Sand

Brian Barker

Poe Climbs Down from the Long Tapestry of Death
to Command the Army of Street Urchins
Huddled in the Dusk

You unswaddled, you broken bluster
of hormones, you smar of flesh sliding down
over hipbones, woozy with laughter,
your cheeks splotched purple, slubbed
with pussy pimples, you backpack rats, bicycle-chained,
vamped out in black drag & combat boots,
jeans ballooning like the bladder of a whale—
you, gasoline-breathed, swaggering
sleepless, flashing your new tats, cigarettes
like lily-stamens cupped against the breeze—
I am climbing down to you
through the fragrant biopsies of pine needles
& the immense phosphorescent dust
of disappearing ghettos, climbing down
through clandestine torture chambers
in countries that don't exist, where crocodiles,
curled head-to-tail, sleep in decrepit claw-footed bathtubs,
exhausted, sated, their titanic snoring rattling
the pulleys & hooks, rattling the long
open drawers of knives & gnarled tools,
where starved guinea hens lay their periwinkle eggs
speckled with the blood of those who refused speech—
Climbing down to you, you meth-mouths,
my darlings of death, your brains leaking out
through your teeth as you busk on the boardwalk,
butchering some Hendrix tune on a two-string ukulele,
then vanishing beneath the pier
to fuck or piss or cry, as the tide creeps up
like a thief in the barnacled-dark. . .
Down, down, down I come, my baldhead aureoled,
following the hair of the dead that never stops
growing, eating the sides of graves,
eating coal, diamonds, scorched tanks; eating voices
& laughter, tufts of fur, the singing
of machines, charred referendums, wedding rings,

television antennas like skeletons of early flight;
eating sheet music, machetes, military tents, mittens,
butchers' aprons, Doric columns, wristwatches,
cancer studies; eating medieval scarecrows;
eating hospital bills; eating fossils of the tiniest
oceanic lichen extinct for millions of years;
eating the bloodless eyelids of priests & the solid gold
testicle trusses of generals; eating all of this,
but not the silky, perfumed underthings of beauty queens & whores
who in death become sleeping angels of memory. . .
They will remember you, they will remember this summer,
when the heat petrified the trees,
when the river turned to a long, crazed chessboard of dust
& wharf rats climbed up through toilets at night,
panting, dripping, sleeping on their backs
in the marbled silence of libraries & museums,
while outside churchbells pealed
& the war was on the TV in the window of a rent-to-own store.
A parade crawled past for those who'd come home blind
or missing an arm or leg, or both, shrinking
in their uniforms, & one of you wept,
& another said *the body is a buffet*, & someone else said
the mind is a fire escape we piss off of into the darkness
before the cops came to scrub you out, each of you
a speck of yellow vomit caked on the country's lips
that the cameras could not witness,
you huddled in the grassy park, high on Vicodin
or Robitussin, *huddled in some séance against freedom*,
they said, the smell of the occult like rancid egg hanging in the air
as you crumpled beneath the flailing blackjacks,
whistling, then the *whuck* of the body
& how they would joke later, *by God*,
you doughy freaks, your flesh like *meringue over bone*—
& I heard your cries, though I was still so far away,
suspended in the stupor of memory,
dreaming of a circus bear I saw once
blindfolded in a park in Richmond, how its handlers—
muscular, mustachioed Hungarian twins—
stood ten paces away & commanded it in their tongue
to stand tall on two legs like a man. & so it did,
bellowing as it was shot twice with a revolver,
once by each brother, first in the heart
& at last in the head, & even as it staggered

it seemed to be dancing the rough waltz it knew,
& then as it fell it muttered something
almost in a woman's voice—*mea culpa* or *sic semper tyrannis*—
no one could say for sure, but those who heard it
broke out in an icy sweat in August
& felt a sensation in their bowels, something barbed & cold
like the gills of a monstrous catfish. . .
I felt it, yes, the sensation of the heart flensed from the head
& the shadows of both passed through me
in one great peristaltic wind that cast my breath down
like a rotten net into the muck of the body
so that I had to lie down on a bench gasping
in the dying light of summer
as the plucked hearts of the world leapt up
out of the grass at dusk, crying out like carbuncular toads
& the severed heads of history nodded gently
from the branches of the oaks like so many frostbitten oranges.
It was like this, yes, & the shadows of the world so thin,
stepping out, shifting shape, the snoring of bone
as the bear's paws were sawed off
& the gall bladder ladled out into a copper pot
while a bevy of vultures coasted over the rooftops,
dragging their bellies, their slender fingers of hunger
through the blue smoke of the textile factory. . .
My children, listen, you were there, you are here,
each of you stretching out in the narrow corridors of your own pain—
you who secretly enjoy algebra; you who were a pelican
in another life, you who were a housewife, always sweeping;
you who fell in love with a tree once
& told no one; you who will be killed in war;
you who dreamed for weeks on end
of turning into a cloud; you who will become a priest,
a lawyer, a ballroom dance instructor;
you who love the word *dissipation*;
you who played a robot in a school play once
& were happy; you who slit your wrists
& were overcome by the smell of salt, remembering
the first time your mother held you up in the surf—
yes, each of you, *e pluribus unum*, glistening
from the wounds of Che, Lincoln, Christ,
where the flesh peeled back smolders the blue of a Chinese plum
& reveals the oblong pearls of putrefaction
& your cries like white noise sighing through a syringe

as you rose, as you rise now
through the sound of my voice,
through a dream, through a blip in time,
you returning, a snarling halo of flies
rising from the Bear-of-the-Gone-Gall-Bladder,
from the spinning plates of the poor, out of the crushed
throats of the disappeared,
out of your own mouths that betrayed you. . .
Look: some other world, uninhabited & without speech,
turns quietly in your dreams,
beveled into vast dimensions of air & light & dust.
I will lead you there, my darlings.
I am holding you up in my mind:
you swarming abattoirs of night, you droning calliopes of the dead.

Sara E. Lamers

Patron Saint of Astronomy

When she was pregnant, his mother had a vision that her unborn child was a dog who would set the world on fire with a torch it carried in its mouth; a dog with a torch in its mouth became a symbol for the order which he founded, the Dominicans.

- Patron Saint Index

The complexity of earth and space
got him tongue-tied, befuddled at best,
the universe's expanse, its excess, human mass
and weight so meager amid the spinning cosmos,
and oh to spin past galaxies, past vapors, ozone,
ordinary weather and gravity - beyond all of it and still
the black continues, extends. They say

some stars we see are dead and yet
there they are, churning out a light that must be
what song would look like could sound
take on shape. And what of that torch he carries?
Where did he find it? Who lit it? How to fit
that bulk in his mouth, the sparks coursing
against the dirt of the earth while
he drags it, fire stick, weapon of heat, along miles.

Think of a burning like the burning
of gases inside of planets, raw heat, the vapors
yellow and red and green. Away from the earth
all must grow stone cool within an instant,
the galaxy like shattered glass against the skin.
Heaven knows what waits out there,
those feeble stars, this desperate sky.

Sara E. Lamers

Patron Saint of Wool Combers

St. Blaise lived in a cave on Mount Argeus. [A] healer of men and animals, according to legend, animals would come to him on their own for help, but would never disturb him at prayer. He was martyred by being beaten, his flesh torn with wool combs, and then by beheading.

- Patron Saint Index

Daily beasts by the dozen darken my door
with injury - horse and camel, dove, gull, and sheep

await a cleansing stroke No potions, no wizardry,
magic words not one.

No wands to wave and yet
the lesions are tended, festering sores,

blisters by the legions. A vexing kind
and fur that puckers, blood-stained, matted.

Their paws or feet I stroke while humming
to make light of difficult duty.

They would offer payment, recompense
for the ending of misery, token of gratitude.

If they could, they would, of that
I'm sure. See the way they walk off, shy,

as if ashamed, ill at ease
by need, by the world's callous.

Six Gun City: Meeting Number Three

At a booth in the back, the characters in this story joined hands, closed their eyes, and gathered their powers of imagination to create an alternate world, a utopian world whose laws they drafted out of thin air, a small glittery bubble of a world that was unpopable by cries in the background for “large steak bomb,” “meat lovers,” and “medium chicken tender.” Resolute, not quite fearless, they entered this virtual reality, which they surveyed with the wonder of New World explorers, at once beholden to its marvels and yet eager to enlarge them to the insatiable reaches of desire and the imagination.

First, though, there were tough decisions to make. One character asked, “How will we make the tumbleweeds tumble?” Another asked, “Where does one buy rotgut, and could we serve that to people, or does it make you blind, and if it does, could we serve it anyway, and would that be with or without a disclaimer?” After an awkward pause, whose awkwardness no one noticed, another character said, “Needless to say, the sound of gunfire should ring out at irregular intervals, ideally accompanied by shrieks, yowls, and hollers, the better to convey a sense of encircling chaos and violence, to imply that blood was spilled, and spilled by the bucketful, around every uncertain corner.

“In my nightmares, I hear gunshots, gunshots alone, that evoke terrifying psychologies of death: fearful gunshots whose uncertainty is swallowed by the silence of deep canyons; dogged gunshots that chew up walls seeking out doomed victims, dumbly bent on nullifying life; horrible, vengeful gunshots that cackle in the night and keep coming until they turn already-dead flesh into pools of gooey meat. All this would be very easy to recreate if we installed a hidden but contiguous alleyway where a crew of gun experts could shoot at one another, roll around in the dirt, and give full vent to whatever pain they felt when stray bullets happened to elude their protective covering. What do you think?” Just so, question begat question as the aforementioned characters drew up plans for a Western-themed amusement park tentatively entitled either “Gun Country” or “Handgun Hamlet,” it being resolved that the name would include both the word “gun” and a term for a geographic demarcation—and so it did when they finally decided on “Six Gun City” and, later, to drum up more business, “Six Gun City and Fort Splash Waterpark” (<http://www.sixguncity.com/>).

Who are these characters, you ask? By friends and enemies, both of which each had amassed many on this weary waterslide of life, they were known as “The Pied Piper,” “Sausage King,” and “the Evil Gecko,” strange nicknames that preceded them wherever they went and seemed to herald, “Here are three

weirdoes who would like to be slapped but not tickled." If you haven't heard of them, just wait: their imaginary US tour is a smash hit, inciting hordes of (imaginary) teenage groupies to light their lighters, flash their breasts, and toss their panties at Sausage King, on whose nose these panties always hang for a brief and strange moment before dropping lifelessly to the stage and passing out of all memory.

It all began at a conference for entrepreneurs entitled "New Wave Future Freak Out," which turned out not to be a conference at all but only a pot session at Macho Bill's. Imagine their surprise when Macho Bill pulled out a penis-shaped bong and said, "Prepare for teleportation to Gorkon 57Q." But why, they wondered, would anyone go to Gorkon 57Q, especially when there were so many better places right here on earth, right here in New Hampshire? What was wrong with Story Land or Santa's Village? What was wrong with Funworld or the Hobo Railroad? And so our characters found themselves face to face in the corridor, wondering how in the world they could have been so stupid. Actually, Sausage King asked, "How in the world could we have been so stupid?" Thus, three lost souls started taking refuge in their shared lostness, or rather in the sharedness of their each being individually lost, finding, if nothing else, that being lost together was better than being lost alone (even if it remained being lost). Very soon, it became their collective goal to memorialize loneliness, to build an Ellis Island for unlovable losers, for unhuddled and otherwise unhuddlable masses.

The group's tacit leader, the Pied Piper was a little rascal, not one of "The Little Rascals" but mischievous nonetheless, and mischievous in a way that was both adorable and horrifying. He was a quiet guy, kept to himself mostly, and in these meetings he boldly led by judiciously following, by accepting his limitations as a man of ideas and embracing his talents as a man of, if not action, at least business administration. His shyness, like that of a serial killer, was not to be trusted. Wrongly, many assume that, underneath it all, the shy are sentimental idealists who just can't cope with the unsentimental reality of the world, that they are shy because this cruel, awful world has beaten them into quiet submission. The Pied Piper was shy because he had learned at an early age that no one would accept his repulsive carnal yearnings. Invite him to tea, but hide your Irish Terrier. He had acquired his name as a child when the headline of the local newspaper ran, "Modern-Day Pied Piper: Local Boy Confesses to String of Pet Heists." In fact, he had stolen not only rats but also cats, rabbits, hamsters, squirrels, and, against a surge of dread, a variety of garden snakes, taking these animals wherever he could find them (neighbor's yards, the woods down the street, the pet store) and then hiding them under piles of dirty socks and underwear in the back of his closet. At night, after everyone was asleep, he would free his animal friends and perform a sexy little bestiality ritual: first stripping naked and lying face-down as they plodded around and occasionally ate one another, he would wait, wait, and

wait until he could wait no longer and then masturbate feverishly into an old mink coat, panting out, "It's my secret. It's my secret. It's my dirty, filthy secret." It all came crashing down when his father caught him bleeding at the groin and struggling with a British Shorthair (or was it a trimmed British Longhair?). Luckily, however, this part of the story was suppressed, or else he might now be something like "Cat Fucker," "CF" to fat softball buddies who cheer each other on by initialed nicknames, as in "Swing for the fences, CF!" Needless to say, the blanket of night is a weird and wonderful thing that protects freaks everywhere from hypocrites such as you and me.

If the Pied Piper was the leader, he could have done nothing without Sausage King, the intestinally encased protein of the operation, the salted and ground-up pork meat, the liquefied pig organs, and so on. Six Gun City was his idea, and it had come to him while browsing through a long-forgotten photo album at the back of his bedroom closet. There they were: sentimental pictures of those awkward middle school years, which he suddenly realized were the happiest of his life, much happier than those awkward late twenties or those yet more awkward early forties. Sausage King was not shy, merely awkward, and awkward because he was not shy enough to hide the emotions that made him awkward, all of which would have made anyone else shy, but not him, since he was only awkward, not shy. Hey, he was a sensitive 90's guy. Looking at one picture, his eyes moistened, and his lower lip quivered in a maudlin display of self-pity that will probably move no one but he or she who similarly wishes to transcend all space and time and live a life of pure mental energy. In the photo, he popped a quizzical smile next to a prize-winning Lincoln Log creation he liked to call "The Palace of Spinning Spurs," a fascinating experiment in the secret history of imaginary architecture. It's difficult to say what, but there was something about the background of this picture that totally made him its bitch, something that inspired in him an intense desire to jump into and inhabit the empty space around his photographed self, to swim around in that netherworld and maybe hide out there forever.

Immediately, he had rubbed his temples, assumed a nonphysical condition, and plunged deep into the world of the picture, and because he remained unsatisfied even there, he plunged deeper still, this time into the world of his Lincoln Log palace, from which he looked back at the world outside with glee and terror. The adventure ended, however, when he saw his real self, his undisembodied one, turn the pages of the photo album and reveal a not very happy sequel to his life story: one picture showed him as a teenager giving double thumbs up in a T-shirt that said, "Sir Hot Dog," the title he earned for three successive years at a regional bratwurst eating contest, the title that, for a brief moment, won him praise at the dinner table and caused him to forget about becoming a cowboy and eventually to open his "Sausage King" food cart, now called "Sausage King and Frozen Yogurt" to accommodate a greater diversity of palates (women). Surprisingly, his career in late-night food

service turned out to be not very fulfilling, and he yearned, less wistfully than miserably, to transcend time, if not space, and return to the happier days of childhood, when he wished merely to transcend space.

The Evil Gecko, meanwhile, could not escape the past and seemed not to want to, despite terrible memories of limb-strewn battlefields, stinking mountains of gore, and rivers of fiery blood, despite hills of charred skull bones, valleys of scattered entrails, and corpses of dismembered fingers. Typically, he walked around in an invisible box filled with liquefied pain and suffering, which was also invisible, but as you might imagine, the liquid, though invisible, made it very difficult to see things clearly. A veteran of a large but secret war on the Arabian Peninsula, the Evil Gecko often forgot that he was no longer there and that the War had ended (actually, it had not ended), wondering what reason everyone had to be so goddamned cheerful. The only solace he had when laying himself down to sleep was the small arsenal in his closet, where he kept, among other funny toys, a fold-up guillotine. On the battlefield, amid shocking and awful spectacles of dehumanizing sadism, his face bore a reptilian placidity—hence his name—and it maintained this placidity as the body underneath it tossed grenades, fired machine guns, and eviscerated every enemy hostage who was less than fully compliant. Now, decades on, his face had caught up with his body, expressing all those menacing and horrified looks that really seem much more appropriate in the midst of combat than in the checkout line at the grocery store. It made dating next to impossible—not that it was any easier for the other two. How many times had the Evil Gecko sat down to a lobster dinner only to frighten off some frumpy secretary with a kaleidoscopic assortment of strange visages betokening everything from hysteria to malevolence? Eventually, he just gave up, converting his desire for love into poetry, or, more specifically, into misogynistic bottled messages that slightly modified pop songs from the eighties and always ended with enigmatic ellipses, for instance, “Girls just wanna have dung...” There was no denying his way with words, so it was his responsibility to create the theme park’s brochure and website, both of which now double as treasure maps leading to strange, pitiful riches.

At the previous meeting, their second, an issue that would soon become a familiar point of debate had reared its ugly head: the question was—gasp—whether or not to include waterslides on the premises of Six Gun City. With uncharacteristic audacity, the Pied Piper had made this proposal, and not just because of his love of all things wet and tubular. “Kids love waterslides,” he had deftly reasoned. With all their rhetorical might, Sausage King and the Evil Gecko condemned the idea, though deep within their Chinese box-style hearts, both recognized its financial prudence. Sausage King painted a picture of monstrous blue waterslides, clean and smooth in the sunlight, twisting and turning above their dust-caked saloon and general store, and demanded to be told what the hell was wrong with this picture. He reminded the other two

that they were trying to create a cohesive illusion and that the purpose was to get people to commit to that illusion, to suspend disbelief. Waterslides, which tend to revel in their own ludicrous fictionality, not only destroyed the illusion but also implied a base motive behind it, as though the purpose of Six Gun City were merely to turn a profit. The Evil Gecko, meanwhile, objected on the grounds that waterslides, even with their sometimes steep declivities, threatened no real danger and that it took a greater level of threat, real or imagined, to inspire great men to great action, and that was the point of it all, right? On the force of these albeit conflicting arguments, Sausage King and the Evil Gecko carried the day, yet the question of waterslides, and especially the more fundamental question of verisimilitude, became an unshakable bugbear, causing repeated spells of head scratching, brow rubbing, and other clichéd marks of indecision and pensiveness.

Indirectly, this question arose again in meeting number three, when Sausage King asked the other two how they would distinguish Six Gun City from the rest of the world, how they would draw a line between fact and fiction that would raise fiction to the relevance of fact and yet maintain fiction's expansive possibilities and flexible conditions for belief.

"We all know Derrida's theory of the frame," said the Sausage King, "that the frame is in many ways part of the painting itself because by defining what the painting is not it likewise defines what the painting is. We cannot, therefore, underestimate the importance of our outer perimeter, which must similarly define our theme park and, as a frame of reference, prepare visitors for everything that awaits them. Perhaps nothing more than a thin strip of land, this intermediary space must divest them of the mindset engendered by their everyday lives and implant in them a different way of perceiving that exceeds the purely pragmatic. We don't want people walking around with a double perspective, seeing everything inside in light of everything outside. We can't have them looking at our general store with the eyes they use to find pork and beans at the local grocery."

"Right," the Pied Piper said, "a velvet-coated privacy wall to ensconce us within in a cozy dreamworld of shameless libidinal abandon." This was pretty much what you would expect him to say.

"Precisely," Sausage King assented, "but without sex and the other things you just said."

Seeing an opening, the Evil Gecko offered, "The brochure, obviously, will complement your border by producing specific expectations, which will begin this work of perspective-adjustment in advance. Here are some ideas I have for the front panel: 'Step into a bygone world of adventure!' or 'Come to a place where disagreements at the poker table were settled with pistols!' or maybe 'Join us for an unadulterated look at the barbarity of the Wild West!' or 'You're invited to a lawless frontier town where the absence of civil bonds led early American settlers to commit unspeakable acts of violence, incest,

and cannibalism!" As it turns out, they decided on, "*Slide back to a time when fun came first with a quick trip to the White Mountains!*"

Meanwhile, their own periphery, the soapy edge of their bubble, remained intact despite growing pressure from the world outside. The menu orders dominated the airwaves, rolling, as meatballs often do, off the table, onto the floor, and out the door, but the careful listener could discern a collection of far more intriguing events. In the bathroom, two strangers fucked the daylight out of each other and occasionally shouted such cryptic instructions as, "Make an 'S' with your legs! No capital 'S'! Now lowercase!" Behind, in another booth, a strange man wearing a cheap disguise—fake glasses with a fake nose and mustache—watched "Punky Brewster" on his iPod, forgetting himself now and then and exclaiming things like, "How tinglingly precious!" At another booth, this one in front, another couple flung cool but deadly insults at one another, for example, "The physique of your mother, as well as that of her sisters, should have been a tip off that you too would one day become a fat ass. That day is upon us." Outside, a drunken streetfight erupted over whether or not Wendy had actually screwed Johnny, as someone had not accidentally intimidated, and this was a real streetfight, the sort you see in movies from the 80's, with rival gangs wearing cut-off jean jackets and waving chains and broken bottles, with helicopters, squad cars, and ambulances rushing to the scene, and, of course, with a mildly amused but nevertheless committed audience of bystanders assembled at the outskirts. On the other hand, in rural Vermont, a Lhasa Apso sailed noiselessly through the air after being tossed out of a third-story window, just sailing in the wind against the background of a magical blue sky. Undaunted, the characters of this story pressed on, though they pressed on alone, unaware even that they were all pressing on at the same time, each following the trajectory of his own castle in the sky, or palace of spinning spurs.

Finally, the Pied Piper, in his capacity as the responsible leader, decided that enough was enough; looking over to Sausage King, who looked beatifically at nothing in particular, he made this reasonable request: "Unlock the mysteries of the universe, for Venus is in the Second House"—and so it was.

Roused from contemplation, Sausage King propounded a beautiful theory for the creation of Six Gun City. "The trick," he said, "is to inject lifeless mass with life, to infuse subjectivity within brute objects, or at least to give such objects palpable triggers for the subjectivity of observers. Our saloon cannot be merely a saloon, nor merely a very authentic one. Whatever its material existence, it must also be the saloon in your dreams, the sort of place that owes as much to your imagination as to the actual saloons it generically resembles. Our saloon must be a saloon and then some. It must radiate higher meaning but also be sparsely enough defined to allow spectators to project meanings for it to radiate.

"What came first: the chicken or the egg? I don't know the answer to that

question. We should probably think of the eggs as inanimate protein and part of a balanced breakfast and just leave it at that. Perhaps it's a convenient lie we tell ourselves that some places are special independent of us, that specialness truly exists in this world, not simply in our ever-skewing minds. I'm as self-deluding as the next guy. Yesterday, while taking a jog, I found myself in the midst of a strange scene: the sky darkened, and the wind picked up as I descended a green hill that sloped toward a large pond; fat raindrops began hitting my cheeks, though they fell as slowly as snow in a snow globe, and crusty leaves floated listlessly through the air, floating until they dropped somewhere out of view, maybe nowhere at all; somehow, the light changed, growing whiter and brighter, despite the clouds, making the long wet grass shimmer and come to life, like so many electric snakes writhing for air. Would I, a humble stable boy, complete my quest to save the Princess? Where would I find my next challenge? Was there a dragon in the pond? Finally, and most importantly, was I really the chosen one? As you can see, the moment was utterly pregnant with important meanings that I could only guess at. It's exactly this kind of mysterious feeling that we ought to recreate at our theme park, such that our saloon, and everything else, puts one at the threshold of life-altering—even world-altering—events, be they cataclysmic or glorious."

Meanwhile, outside the bubble, chaos unfolded around them. In the bathroom, someone yelled, "Quaff it deeply!" Behind, in response to one of Punky's catchphrases: "What mouth-watering sass!" In front: "You have the buttocks of an ape." In the street: indistinct yelling and ricocheting bullets. In Vermont: the dog continued sailing through the air, its long white hair flowing in the wind, its eyes gleaming in the sunlight.

Unperturbed, Sausage King continued, "The crux, I believe, lies in our definition of the term 'wild,' as in Wild West. For me, wild is simply the inverse of mature, encompassing all that uncorrupted enthusiasm that precedes the soul-killing duties of adulthood. What I envision is a physical manifestation of a boyhood ideal, a lowest common denominator of all those imaginary places where kids lose themselves in backyard games of cowboys and Indians."

"Yes," the Pied Piper thought salivatingly, "naked youngsters." Out loud, he asked, "When you say 'lowest common denominator,' how low do you mean? Too low for a wet, hot brothel? Wild, of course, can also mean uninhibited and pleasure-seeking." Again, this is pretty much what you would expect from him, the pervert.

"Too low for spectacles of torture?" the Evil Gecko intoned, almost singing. "Wild can also mean barbarous." At that, he began to run through potential advertisements: "Rope doggies, and drive stagecoaches on our real prairie! 'Swill whiskey at our saloon, and challenge strangers to gunfights!' 'Visit our Indian village, and experience the life-shattering sorrow of watching your family get scalped!'" Eventually, they settled on an array of attractions,

among them a miniature horse show, advertised as follows: "Did you even think that horses came this small? That's right, all of Six Gun City's Miniature Horses stand less than 30" tall! You can pet them, kiss them, and even see one of them talk, that's right, talk! With two shows daily, you can see one of these adorable little horses talk, answer questions, and even tell jokes! And the best part? When the show is over, you can get up close and personal with one of these little cuties, even have your picture taken with them! You will fall in love with all of our Miniature Horses!"

All the while, the world continued buzzing, clicking, and whirring. In the bathroom: "Slower! Heavier!" Behind: "What luscious mischief!" In front: "Your smell on the pillow reminds me of hatred." In the street: squeals, screeches, screams, and shrieks, as well as sirens. In rural Vermont: the dog continued sailing, and no one even noticed. Did it ever hit the ground?

Still, Sausage King continued, "A trip to our theme park must be transformative, even life-changing. Obviously, it's impossible to return from a state of experience to a state of innocence, but we're all capable of forgetting, if only temporarily, that we've become dispirited losers."

"What people want," the Pied Piper agreed, "is a place to sublimate their abhorrent sexual urges, a place to hump the occasional yellow lab."

"Right," the Evil Gecko assented, "a place to try sadomasochism on for size, minus the guilt."

How, though, would Six Gun City change its visitors? What kind of person would it turn you into, and would you be able to choose this outcome, or would it be inescapable once you crossed the magic border? These questions burned to be answered, but they were not fully addressed until much later, at meeting number twelve, when it was unanimously decided that whoever visited Six Gun City, consensually or otherwise, would thereafter be a "Pardner."

Meeting number three, however, ended abruptly when the pizzeria closed and the characters of this story emerged from their deliberations and looked around themselves with the blinking incomprehension of newborn babes. The hubbub had died down, and there was very little to do but go home to their respective hovels and fight the pain of loserdom with secret binges on ridiculously named snack foods. Obviously, that is not how they would have put it. We all lie to ourselves, some more than others. Tonight, this was the lie they told themselves: "I'm a likable person, not in spite of my eccentricities but because of them, and I would be the life of any party I were invited to. I'm the joke teller, the girlfriend stealer, the lampshade wearer. I'm perfect. All I need is a change of scenery." **F**

Émigré

...a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but 'Mortimer' and give it him, to keep his anger still in motion.

—William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

1.

Non-native yowl, give back my house
you incestuous invaders of furrows,
you cabinet raiders, you secret-room builders.
Yet, rest in my attic. Envelop my plot.

2.

Means of movement: in clusters drawn up;
pushed out in centrifugal expansions;
driven down onto snow; in net ascension;
uniform surge against cold mass.

3.

Oil-slicked little men in feathered habits
ransack feeders, slosh wheedles and worries.
Syntactical wonder betrays reason and knowledge.
Yellow-lipped gnasher and twitterer, arguer
and sputterer, you gather throat-fulls of vernacular
and swallow them whole.

4.

You: jilted, unloved; a pedestal collapsed;
beings greet, barrels pointed; disregarded,
forlorn; coal-ash rising like sparks from ice;
prodigious scavenger; keeper of tongues
and patterns.

5.

Snow lifts and falls; lengths of waves
coalesce and gird. Preen your fused digits.
Feet suspend; rather, heads point into air
connecting syllabic recursions. More than
regurgitation: understanding; comprehension.

Mark Halliday

Not Exactly Woody Guthrie

As I lugged my luggage past the airport bar
I angled my neck to peer between drinkers
to see whether the field goal was good
in whatever game it was
because those people cared apparently
and I wanted for a second not to be too different.

Okay but also wanted to reap the benefit for a few seconds
of an image of successful performance in a ritualized activity
where skill earns unerasable points
and the swarming helmeted deniers can't quite reach you.

Mark Halliday

Do It Deftly

Rain steady down upon the yard and woodpile,
the Japanese maples and decrepit picnic table,
uncountably small droplets down and down -

a cardinal flies off into the dripping grove -
puddles vibrate steadily on the gray plastic chairs;
the total pallor of rain sky creates
a reflective sheen on the deck's weathered boards

and the spirit calms into stilled acceptance
of loss and eventual death.

Ah, acceptance -

forty-five seconds later at the rainspotted window
you're planning to tell
someone - or better yet everyone -
how ineffable your moment was. Do it deftly
and we'll give you a prize
long before your last ride to the hospital.

Fade Out

The clinic lights are merciless—they transform all they touch. I'm waiting with my eyes on the doors. There are two small, pale windows cut into them. The brilliant overhead sheen flattens out every shadow in the room. Even the stack of magazines lies at such an angle that I cannot make out their covers, just dog-eared squares of florescent light. I've heard that this kind of light is therapeutic. Or maybe it was that the stuff causes migraines, which could be therapeutic I suppose, depending on what's missing inside your head.

Last night we had a nude model come to our class. She was the kind of person who needed a community college art class for the word "model" to apply. It's been my experience that art instructors prefer to go for the middle-age, slightly-saggy types. Who knows why—maybe they prefer to work with fewer students. The model's name was Deborah, which didn't suit her. I spent the first fifteen minutes imagining her as a brunette, as a Tiffany, trying to picture her at my age. The truth is she might have been, but the way her skin tightened in the corners of her eyes, bunched under her chin, and flat gave up over her hips made her look too pathetic to be associated with. I pegged her as a single mother, picturing her in a pair of pilled, gray sweats, that platinum blonde hair in a loose ponytail, held back with a rubber band from the morning paper.

For the most part, Deborah looked bored as we picked at our charcoal nibs and filled the room with self-conscious scratching. She responded to the directions given by our instructor with slow and deliberate movements, turning her head, arching her back. I watched her study the small creases that formed when her body bent, as if she did not recognize them. Our instructor drifted through the room and reminded us about the rules of proportion and perspective. Deborah's skin was pale and nobbed like ivory over her joints. I felt uncomfortable looking at her, and only took passing glances at her dilated breasts, sweeping my eyes from one side of the room to the other. All I saw was soft folds of white. She had a small mole on her inner thigh, I might have been the only one who spotted it. It was the one part of my sketch I felt certain of making. A single, tiny fleck—some rebellious part of skin. Creating everything else was different. Her body bleached out of the shadows surrounding her. The trick was to draw what wasn't there.

I wait for my girlfriend Kate to emerge and find myself thinking about last summer when a friend of Kate's and her husband surprised us with a

visit. I was still taking evening classes at the U, so by the time I came home, their sedan was already parked in front of our house. I had been working on a special project that summer. I was big into photography back then, and was creating a portfolio of something they called "light-paintings." If you open a camera's aperture in the middle of the night, very little light gets in. You can keep the shutter open for minutes, even hours. Then, if you take a flashlight, you can shine it on what you want to be exposed. The images are popular because the reflected, indirect light gives the subject a ghostly effect, as if it had been cut out of a dream. The most difficult part is making sure the hand holding the flashlight doesn't get caught in the picture—too often, enough light is reflected back to catch a halo of fingers and wrist. If even the smallest flicker of skin or glow from a fingernail is caught, the whole effect is ruined.

Kate's friend and her husband were the type of power-couple that got married on their way into the Peace Corps. I don't remember all the places they said they had gone, but sitting in a room with them made me feel tired all over. The woman had her hair cut short and boyish, and the man was dressed in the kind of clothes that were meant for climbing mountains, but have somehow found their way into casual evening wear. Both sat on the couch, legs crossed in the same direction, looking ready to spring into action. I made my introductions, feigned enough small talk to fix myself a glass of whiskey, and disappeared into the kitchen. What I hadn't known was that Kate's friends had adopted a child during their time abroad. The kitchen was dark, and I almost tripped over him coming in. His skin was a deep brown, just like our cabinets, and with his eyes closed and the lights off, it was almost as if he didn't exist.

I gave a startled apology and asked his name. He stared up at me silently and all I could see were the half-moons of his eyes. From the other room, Kate shouted an introduction in at me. This was their new son, she said. I remember the phrase "new son" not sounding right in my head. He had been pulled from some war-torn village. He had lost both his hands. I tried to look into the darkness for what wasn't there. He likes coloring, she said, just like you. I heard the couple laugh.

The orphaned child and I spent the night on the kitchen floor, tracing patterns on the tiles while the chatter from the other room drifted over our heads. I made shadow animals with my hands on the floor—which felt like both the right and wrong thing to do. The boy sat across from me and searched the shapes for recognition. I could hear the couple explaining how they had found this boy. He had been the youngest child. The same bombing raid that had taken his hands had taken the rest of his family. What else could we do, the man said.

I don't know why this memory comes to me now, or why I feel a swell of guilt for having known these people. The family had stayed just one night, all

three of them sleeping in the guest bed. In the morning they left, and their names had not come up again. I try to remember if I ever knew the name of that boy. I never found the courage to speak to him directly. Instead, we took turns picking up and staring at the different colors of crayons that had been scattered across the floor. My back grew stiff against the cabinets and the ice in my glass melted, thinning my drink out of sight. I watched him as he colored—his two wrists clamped together, holding the paper down with his knees. In the right light, I could see a thin layer of hair lapping against the scarred edges. The way his arms tapered off made it look like he was slowly being erased. I tried not to look at the melted ends of skin.

Maybe it's his eyes, like little fingernails, that are floating up in memory. I feel like I saw the same look last night from that nude model, Deborah. I wonder what it takes to be an art model—if this is one of the few jobs everyone in the world is born into with the proper requirements. Maybe they save those models with the twisted, deformed bodies for the advanced classes—when you have learned that nature does not play by the rules of proportion and perspective. Deborah looked like she spent all of her modeling proceeds on hair dye and cigarettes, but something in the way she stared out into the room made me think back to that night on the kitchen floor. The half-moon eyes (hers had a mirrored reflection of semi-circle bags), that look of soured innocence. Looking down at my sketch last night, I realized that my drawing was simply a collection of Deborah's flaws. Her mole, the dark shadows under her eyes, the black triangle of hair that gave me a sick feeling of hungered arousal. These were the only things I was recording. The whiteness of the page was the desired form. Her body emerged from between the shadows—everything that I couldn't capture.

Kate has cried almost every night since we found out. She twists about in the sheets like she's drowning. She was the one who suggested abortion, but I pushed her into it by refusing all the other options. Regardless, I've been scared to death by the signs of it happening. I've seen her body change. I look at her skin when she gets in and out of bed, and imagine the soft folds of cells dividing. Last night I dreamt about Deborah. Kate and I slept without touching. Regardless, she said, I still want to sleep on my back; I don't want to crush it.

I ended up scrapping my light-painting project. It wasn't going to amount to much anyway. The whole method is a gimmick, trick photography. In my photos, I kept finding that little traces of light were getting in. Either I would accidentally shine the light on myself while setting up the shot, or a street light would suddenly flicker on in the background. Even in the dead of night, my frame was filled with tiny spots of light. Kate liked the photos. She said the light reminded her of fairies. I told her that fairies would never make the cover of a photo journal. I was ready to dump the whole thing, but

she insisted we keep one. It was a picture of a gnarled oak tree. The way I had shown the light on it made it look almost human. Like the bent shoulder of a giant—twisted and spotted with age. Next to the illuminated tree, you can see my hand holding the flashlight, and a dim glow from my glasses. Kate says she can see my whole face, but I tell her she's imagining things.

We will get through this, I said right before she went in. We'll be just fine, we'll be clearer, more focused. I love you, I told her. I didn't tell her about Deborah, or about my dream last night. How I dreamt I had found my own kind of family. How it was imageless—a portrait-free family. Our holiday cards were blank inside and out. We danced like ghosts between rooms—we couldn't even see each other. It was simply a feeling I had when someone was around, when my wife or my flashlight child moved through me. Nothing left a mark. That pure.

I think what shames me about the orphaned child, what keeps him afloat in my mind, was that he was still getting used to his handicap. I had spent that night watching him color, and on occasion, when both of us were sitting back to admire his work, he would be so caught up in what he had created that he would absently reach for a crayon, and his wrist would hover over the spot, making small, useless movements. I wanted to do something, pick up the crayon for him, but how much good is that kind of charity? I wanted to sketch something for him right there on the floor, a portrait that showed him before the accident. It would have been easy to recreate—just a few more strokes, the extension of space and shadow. I remember wishing I had been able to talk to him. I wanted to be able to remind him every time I saw him reach, to break apart the dream, to stop those painful, empty motions that were just too much to see.

Kate is stepping through the doors now, splitting the plane of reflected light. There is empty space all around her, floating between us. She searches the room for a second, her eyes moving right through me, and I feel like I'm falling out of existence. Her face is swollen with tears, but she smiles at me. She comes closer. We don't know why, but we speak in whispers. You okay? Yes, can we go? Yes. Kate moves toward the door, not looking back to see if I'm following. She steps outside. I reach out for her with my hands but they fall away. They long for touch. They are reaching back into the ward. **F**

Keith Montesano

Poem Ending with a Hundred Year-Old House on Fire
Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania

This is not how it ends: lead paint scorched and flaking
off the panes, painted-shut windows gone to ash before the path

of a broken black sidewalk littered with beer bottles,
plastic fifths, in the town where Budd Dwyer walked
drunk those mornings in 1958, watched the Western Pennsylvania

leaves turn and shrivel before his eyes, the girls stumbling
from the SAE house in those hours when, once, as he glared

toward its attic window, a girl and her boyfriend argued—
fingers jerking in each other's faces before his fist
connected and she collapsed, the black spreading

toward the edge of Budd's eyes, the wonder of why
he couldn't leave the scene, so Budd watched:

the guy standing motionless, stunned at how slowly she raised
herself from the wood floor. But truly Budd couldn't know
he'd remember this as he scrawled the suicide note

to his wife—how he never ever hit her, and would come back
from the hell he was burning in to kill anyone who would try—

or that the house he lived in then would be ash fifty years later:
faulty wiring, spark in the basement, the cause of Ray's death uncertain
or unsaid. It begins with Budd because it's easier to imagine him

black and white and frightened on TV screens in Blooming Valley
that morning in 1987, the state-wide snowstorm enough

to cancel almost every school, parents and children
staring as he pulls his hand from inside the envelope—
Stay away, this thing will hurt someone—before the cries

and tightened throats, gasps of his name before his head
snaps back, blood pouring like water from his mouth.

~

Budd was not black and white in Meadville, his hands weren't

trembling, and the house that burned almost six years ago still had, in the late 50s, some care given to it: replacement panes

from hurled bricks, waxed floors, ant killer in the cracks of its entrances. But that was before Ray burned there—

before the firemen came too late. And as the neighbors gathered, I laughed in the Penny Bar at everyone holding their breath over possibilities: Ray dropped off and left alone, smoke

blanketing, his hands gripping the door, fingers slipping from the metal knob. Because no one dies in a fire. No one

who climbs the stairs on his own, stumbles and collapses toward his bed before he sleeps. All of it before the nervousness of the girl that night who I wanted but couldn't love,

as we gathered around the jukebox, its awful songs blaring on that Saturday nearly all came out alive.



Her roommates were asleep as we felt for lights along the living room walls. Eventually she left me there, turning and drunk while the sun rose. When she woke me

it was dawn: *Ray didn't make it. I'd ask you to stay, but once they wake up you won't want to be here.* I couldn't think—

walked across the street to my room, tried to fall asleep. This should be how it ends, I know, but Ray's face glares out from the *USA Today* front page, and like Budd's panic

ending with a town in mourning, there are too many reports of college fires from decrepit houses: airbrushed photos

of the dead, house frames in ash (or, somehow, captured burning), fire chiefs unwilling to comment, landlords not going to jail. And the fathers who built that house, who also

loved their wives—and the fathers who sat on porches waiting for their daughters to return, their sons still awake at dawn—

are gone now too, and I will say a prayer for this: for the ash of the body and foundation, and for the water beneath us surging toward the wreckage of our lives.

Creationisms

Upper Penn Pass is an area like outer space, exclusive, seeming accessible only by special jetting. And the houses, architecturally distinct like planets—this one with this many moons, this one having violet vapors. (Anais' is a simple steel box, hand-crafted in Berlin in a pre-fab styling, evocative, in its dull gray pate, of a factory cog, a nod, they said, to Bethlehem.) Everyone, everyone's parents anyway, is a Quaker-converted Jew of the Unitarian ethos. Something loose-hinged and novel that advocates for foreskins and avoids coming of age events—that pipsqueak chanting.

They all converted. They did it on the special jet up, the Wharton fuel. They were Jews but they'd heard enough banter, the chhh-ing Yiddish, wasps getting chopped in groups.

They ascended to Upper Penn Pass, stepped out onto the new turf, the green, flat rags acrylic after mowing, and said goodbye to oy-ing forever—that there was a better life, a bold, white life, a white comet, a flight. Full of stars.

But still, in isolated Quaker moments, they have all thought about the word *Baruch*, against their better liking, they thought about it.

"Anais' house, the modernist steel box, dull and anonymous, has one of those mezuzahs up, nailed there by Dad a year ago. She's taken to storing Kools cigarettes in it, a gesture of restless faith after the problematic year—losing Dad to a pulmonary infliction, his lungs aged translucent, but thickening in the last week into a shrill gold, as depicted in the mortuary photographs, as if Midas of myth wanted to tongue them."

We don't tongue the lungs of any animal. We tongue livers and hearts, shanks, breasts, and thighs. We eat tongues. We leave our lungs with our bones. When we burn our bodies and save our ash, this is where lungs live. There's something about chomping down on one, maybe, severing the pink coat—that you would sit at a table and apply the domestic serration, and feel bad.

Scooter is Anais' friend who's up from Wharton, anyway, and he's taken out his knife and goes around slitting her sad party balloons that she blew up to feel dizzy earlier. He wishes they were full of helium, that they could suck them and say things, voices high and brains tearing.

"Look, dental dam," he offers about their withered remains.

He's here to buy the last of her father's lung drugs, Prednisone tabs, which make you grow blubbery in the cheeks but also help with concentration issues, force focus—they say Prednisone takers have the most organized of closets. And the students at the University of Pennsylvania have been waiting, aware

of the situation in Upper Penn Pass, hoping the death would occur before a certain notorious test they all have to take which determines if they can attend a prestigious forum. They have hoped Anais' father would die well before the end of a prescription cycle. Beginning of the month.

Scooter called on Monday. He said, "If it's too early I'll hang back."

There is no other guardian. Mom was an egg and womb donor, the kind of woman who pathologically gives herself to others, dilutes herself, genes mixed with genes which mix with genes, in small, white doses, pills that sperm can, for a price, bite in the jugular. And Dad never requested the real identity, approached her only by code. He'd never wanted there to be anybody else. He'd wished to clone. If he could have come on a petri dish and watched his cells form bleating, blue lumps, which would turn into a sea slug and then, if swift, her, he would have. If he could have spat himself out the side of his mouth, that would have been easier. What he'd wanted, the goal, was to produce himself, a younger twin.

But when she wasn't. When she wasn't any of it. When she didn't flicker full of him, when it was apparent that he would not be raising himself, as he always had hoped to do (five and full of patricide, matricide) but her—that what he would be raising was her, he grew into steel. Fabulous. He'd named her, carelessly, mercilessly, Anais, her mother's chosen code name for herself. So that he wouldn't know who she really was.

Anais the slut. Anais who fucked for a living.

Up from a Penn party, Scooter parked his Jeep drunk. He'd fucked her first, fourteen, then left Upper Penn Pass for school. Now he's returned from Philadelphia, his business skills quivering, first-forming. "Hey *Annaise*" he says, his Wharton shirt wet with alcohol and loose, dared kisses. He pronounces Anais wrong, the way some people do, in a rhyme with mayonnaisean unwillingness to bend vowels in the middle, a human, English unwillingness. It's hard the way Naomi is hard.

"Put down the knife," she advises. She's sniffing some coke through a white monopoly dollar. He used to come home for coke, would buy it in large tender pouches from her for later division, the size of white rabbits. But now: "There's plenty of coke at Penn, you could pan it out the Schuylkill. Prednisone is a study drug."

"Let's swim," he says. Swim is fuck's euphemism, when referring to the lake out back which has been, since high school began, such a bed, sperm released into its green sheets. It's after midnight, though, and the water gets that Lexus skin. Penetration stops seeming possible.

"No," she says, she looks at him. "I'm sick of the lake. I haven't swum all summer."

They put a cod in it together once. There was after school science then, the animal cupping—tadpoles or frogs, everything else was algae, or stones in velvet bags. They poured a bulk container of salt into it, ages five and

eight, hypothesizing they could change it into a saltwater bay, something with an ocean attached that they might leap out into, sail on boats of skin. They put in the fat cod, to test for achievement, like sending a canary down a soot-filled pass. It had been yanked from the elementary school's saltwater tank—Scooter on feeding duty, a net, a bucket—and they never saw it again. Its oval of bones are still in there. Youth, real youth, at least its flesh disappears, gets eaten or absorbed, decays, disintegrates, burns off, but the bones don't go anywhere.

And later they took to drinking from it, in elaborate tea parties. He'd been like a girl then, or at least his gender was obscured in a thatch of play. He held his pinky up. They drank it all afternoon. Algae grew in her stomach, caused green vomit, and she was accused by Dad, that distant, disappointed paternal presence, of pregnancy, though she was eleven—a paranoia, an ignorance. An exam ensued. They injected her with an entirely unnoticeable amount of bleach, through an IV, diluted with sugar water.

"This is usually what crazy mothers do," the doctors must have told Dad, "put a little bleach in their diet. They like to watch them die. Take them into the hospital and act frantic. Clutch us. 'Do something!' and the whole time it's them, their kids going yellow, the organs erupting."

Dad would have nodded.

And then they did fuck, fourteen and seventeen—the most horrifying of all their age combinations so far, her still undeveloped and confused, holding onto his heels as he floated upward, outward. They were in the lake waist deep on a school day and he held her neck and said *we're fucking you* on repeat, as if there were three of him, a focus group of fucking her. Her underwear aside like twisted tissue. And Dad watched them do it, too, from his bedroom. He had a telescope that he often pointed out his curtains, a rifle looking at a street.

Later she was told with what felt like relish, in the kitchen, Dad filling his decanters, about the yellow spackle on his right lung, as if her fucking and his seeing had spat it there, as if there were holy morals, and bodily consequences, or morals, or consequences.

He trembled holding a funnel and a bottle. Later, he drilled in a mezuzah, a feverish midnight carpentry. He said *Baruch* at her, a bark. He yelled it at a candle, which he lit and threatened to throw, he held it out to her, his Shabat epee. He'd slay her. "Baruch!"—he pointed her down, he let the wax get his shoes, at her fucking seventeen year old Scooter in the lake, his seeing, and her still thin and ribby, with the kind of immature skin that is celluloid in nature, white and translucent, rice paper that would die on anyone's tongue.

That she was no Mary but a Hannah, a Chhannah, fucking live flesh, not God, a kid. He ranted "Baruch!"—a one word Jew.

Scooter left for Wharton. Dad started reading Zionist pamphlets. If he

couldn't be religious—if he forgot every word besides Baruch, every Hebrew hymn he'd be political. A pamphlet Jew. Oh well. He started to get involved in her life in a way he never had.

“Come on, let's swim, nobody to watch us like a creep,” Scooter says. “That or sell me the pills and I'll get back down.” He presses a button that coordinates with his Jeep.

She leads him up to Dad's room where the pills are. They kiss on the bed though, the coke she snorted finally active after its strange delay, skittering, making a tacky frame around her heart which forces a smile. They strip down and sway, knock pelvic bones. Ignore his phone, which buzzes and smashes off the counter downstairs.

Scooter asks, “How much do you want? How much do you have left?” He balls up his Wharton shirt. He throws it far as if he doesn't think of the future, where to find it, when to leave. It's a trick. A gesture.

He'd coughed on his sheets. He couldn't swallow his Prednisone pills, so she mashed them in the kitchen and taught him how to snort. She gave him a white dollar. He asked, mildly, seriously, for a twenty. She fingers the pouches, the leftover supplements in separate little baggies, daily doses. They are soft to press.

Scooter says he should get to suck helium out of pussies. “If we could just put it in, in a bag, a little pod, and suck it out, like sucking milk out of a breast, like through a nipple down there.” He watches hers through the telescope, which he's twisted away from the window. He focuses. “I'd get so high.”

“Don't bury me like a Quaker,” Dad had pleaded, after his strange re-conversion, his going back. “Or a Jew. Don't bury me like anybody.” He'd wanted—he told her, he held her, which was new—to go into outer space, still vain, still dreaming of life, or, at least, of thoughts after death. He'd held the shaking fake twenty, the last, fake dignity, his mound of Prednisone still unsniffed, and told her his dreams of shooting into space. Full of stars.

“I heard,” Scooter says, “you were going to throw it in the lake. That's why I came up so soon. Not cool.”

How do you inseminate someone into space? Do you stuff a turkey baster with the ash and pump it pointing up, past the Easter sky, past the blue air, into the black helium? She thought she'd put him in the lake instead. She didn't call NASA after all. She watched the frogs go wild in the water in reaction to the new powder, they pounded down, a thick, mucus rain.

“I didn't put it in the lake,” she says to Scooter, who looks at her with his new skeptical look, something from the world of business. “I'm one thousand genes all darting away from each other. Like newts reacting to pepper.”

She snorts a loose line of powder to show it's good. He snorts his dose. “It's not about getting high,” he says. “It's about retaining information to pass this crazy test.”

They go down the stairs, down to the lake and they stand at it, nude, Adam, Eve, in the unabashed era, and jump in, ritualistic, over-bobbing for apples. The sun is slipping orange faxes through the grass.

"He's in here with us," she says exuberantly. She grips Scooter who grips, grabby, back. "I put a man in here. He's underneath us somewhere. He's watching us through death's telescope."

They fuck. "We're fucking you," he says, and she imagines the students of the University of Pennsylvania inserting their precision drills. How they would laugh at her. But thank her.

And Dad's not in here after all. She switched the powders only hours ago. She doled the fine ash into the emptied Prednisone bags with a kitchen scoop while dizzy on blowing up balloons—because fuck the students of the University of Pennsylvania, *she* is fucking *them*. This is how she thanks them. Upper Penn Pass is an area much like outer space and she is sending Dad back down, earthward if not in the ground, if not like a Jew, or Quaker. She'll send him down, then up the noses of those kids. She refuses to be the only one with him inside—that awful powder, that genetic ash. Scooter says, "Call me Scott again. Because we can," he says, "*go back*. Birth right or wrong," he says, he fucks, he tongues her jugular, "it's our job." Like an animal rushing to some pointless scene, sniffing carnage, snorting up blood.

In the morning—the house dazzlingly empty, stark and important, the open, empty drawer and the real money left on the mattress, everything quiet, frozen-framed, and Scott gone, *gone back*, or wherever—she drains it (there's a button in the basement), and the frogs run free but the tadpoles die. **F**

J.J. Penna

Translating Akhmatova

Summer breakfast with Old Republic
delicacies: tongue, milk, fish eggs
on toast, my mother in the kitchen
brawling with the alphabet:
masculine and feminine autumns,
whispers, *shepot*, *osen*.
Titatick, *titatick* of the Smith Corona,
the uneven finger barbs of an academic
who has never learned to type.
I read her handwriting from three hundred
yellow pads, twin spools of Russian
and English as she throws out gales
of wide mouthed laughter
talking about the butter yellow slacks
and slut *sapogi* that walked out with my father.

How did she pull off her lips like that
and lay them next to my brain at the table?

Nicky Beer

Ventouse Sous Verre

Sucker under glass

Those empty, aubergine-edged saucers, her best,
in sundry sizes, are precisely tessellated
and creepingly uncountable. She has laid you

a *table d'hote* of these ghost-courses against
the glass, which is imperceptible without her,
heavy-lidded proprietress who is all raised
hem and no flirt.

The Floating Girl

In Teraoka's *Wave Series* paintings the cephalopods seduce young female divers, spread tentacles massing from corner to corner in erotic landscapes; despite the stark Ukiyo-e inkstrokes delineating these contours into parabolic clarity, the scenes of "loving cunnilingus" between beast and woman create a fantastic aesthetic confusion: you can barely differentiate the ocean waves from the indigo tattoos surging in breakers up her body, the tide of legs engulfing her (you nearly miss the spread, fine-haired holothurian of her sex in all the visual noise)...And how can such an encounter end? Does she succumb to the enamored, oceanic maw of her lover, a feast ravishing and ravished to be digested in the massive pouch of some lightless Marianas? Or does she survive, but spend moonless nights in her husband's bed longing for a confusion of limbs unencumbered by bone? Or perhaps there is no end to this, only an abiding Möbius strip, chiral and irreconcilable, a lesson in how ardor ignites not in unlikeness, but unlikelihood: desire's sought-after moment of dissolution when *What* surrenders entirely to *How*.

Theodore Wheeler

How to Die Young in Nebraska

I saw myself disintegrate. The robust jock easing himself away through aerobics. I thought I could be anybody, if I just lost some weight. Day by day, with less eating and more movement. When I heard Dostoevsky liked to walk I got worse. I could walk for days. The literary workout. But I wasn't eating much more than iceberg lettuce. A big name with little substance.

The land I come from was formed by icebergs. The plains it is called. It was an ocean once. Once mountains. But the icebergs drug it all away.

I killed myself without ever committing real suicide. It made me pretentious.

What was it that was so important that I ever worked at killing myself?

When the French came to Nebraska, they called it a desert. What we call this, where I come from, is stoicism. Not in the Greek sense, but as in lack of emotion. The plains.

The problem with committing suicide was that everyone watched. I lost forty pounds in a year. People thought I was bulimic. Some thought I was on meth. What I was, I was learning to die young in Nebraska. Quick alcohol and driving drunk on country roads.

I wanted a public execution. I was well learned in dying young.

You drink and you drive. You burn horseshoe scars into your wrists with the hot metal end of a lighter. You turn down free meals and workout obsessively, jogging along busy streets, then mutilate yourself at the end of dark summer nights for eating too much during the daytime.

But you were a decent kid, and your high school football coach would say so in the newspaper if you did in fact die, and perfect strangers would cry when they read about it. He was a gamer, they would be told. Lacking in any true talent, but willing to put it on the line when it counted. But kids like these die young. Their knees buckle under heavy burdens. The soft middle of any generation laid to waste. But mourned, if nothing else. To be mourned, in the least.

And one year later the retrospective human interest piece comes out to remind parents with living kids that they still have their children. The antithesis of the celebration section. No one wants to celebrate the death of a kid, but in a way we all do. We can't all be quarterbacks. Some of us have to settle for dying young.

I played football with a kid who died young.

He was a high school all-star in Nebraska. His mother had him going

to Catholic school. They were the Thunderbolts, funny enough. He got on scholarship, Division I, but never saw the field. He was going to graduate in four years, but didn't make it that far. There was a car wreck on a country road. But in the middle of the day. On assignment for the school newspaper. Really tragic, if you care to know. He wasn't even drinking. Just dead. He knew how to die young if anyone ever did.

His helmet, the one he wore on the sidelines during the college games, was sold later that summer. It was in an auction to bring money into the athletic program. Game-worn helmets sold to fans with cash burning a hole in their pockets. Some nice parents in Ohio bought his helmet for their kid's seventh birthday. The helmet of a dead man. But they didn't know that. It had his number, on a sticker, stuck on the back. During the games they looked for him on the field but never saw him. They wrote the athletic department asking why they were sold the helmet of a kid that wasn't even a bench warmer. In a kind letter, the athletic department told them, in so many words, that the kid whose helmet it was knew how to die young in Nebraska. In a car crash, on assignment. A good catholic kid, doing his best to make it in the world.

As you can imagine, the family was heartbroken. They dreamed that their little boy would be a notable athlete at a decent high school football power. That maybe he could be on scholarship one day without having to be a bookworm. A good athlete, not great, that could turn his talents into a vocation and a family. They could empathize with this kid dying young, this kid whose helmet they had.

They did the only decent thing that they could have done, being honest people in a Midwestern town. They mailed the helmet to the dead kid's mom. She should have it. Her son was gone, after all. That kid whose goodness is now measured in the past tense.

Dying young was easy I thought. A path well-run in my history. For full disclosure, I should tell you that my uncle died at thirty of AIDS and my cousin at ten from lack of breath, choking on popcorn during an asthma attack. It was an established path. At twelve, I tried to drown myself in a swimming pool.

The best part was watching other people watch you. This was the whole point of it. I was a fat kid, that was who I was. Fat. To lose weight, to shed pounds like measures of your identity. After a while, people had no idea who you were. They were insulted that you would do something like that to them. It was a betrayal to get skinny. To refuse the food they offered.

And they tried to maintain the status quo, let me tell you. Never have so many free lunches been offered as when a fatty is losing some weight. Things shouldn't change. This is how you die young, in their eyes, losing yourself pound after pound. It's a tragedy. Then no one knows you. Only strangers

want to be your friend.

Actually losing the weight was the worst. It couldn't be done constructively. There had to be death and it came easy. Denying oneself everything but spite. Any weakness was worth a cut from the razor.

This was the slow, malignant suicide.

I read about homosexuals that drank themselves stupid every night so that they wouldn't have to admit that they were gay. I drank so that I wouldn't feel like eating. Building discipline, food made me sick to my stomach. Nourishment was poison.

A big part was loneliness. If I weren't lonely I couldn't have killed myself. It's much too embarrassing a thing to do, the actual humiliating steps of it, if there is intimacy with another human being involved. But to make people watch from the outside was satisfying, to flaunt being lonely and dying on purpose. They could do nothing but watch. They were powerless. Pure spectators. I was the one killing myself, I knew what I was doing, and they could only witness it.

The funny thing. Losing weight concerned them, not me getting drunk every night.

There was a manifesto that I wrote. I showed it to a number of people but no one ever called a hotline on me. It seemed a lot like drowning to me. I lost weight to kill myself, to create a new person. I joined a band. I read poetry to girls that I thought I could lay. I made an attempt to find new friends, people that didn't know me, and tried to teach them what I was. I put gel in my hair and bought shirts that fit tightly over my stomach. I lost a third of myself until I was nothing but skin and bones.

They had the gall to ask me if I was puking it up. I walked all night, most nights. I drank quarts of whiskey like horses swallow water. I did pushups in my room until my arms wouldn't move. I ran sprints down the street when no one was watching. I jogged, drunk into the stinking rural night. I cut myself up with a razor blade for over-eating.

What I never did was throw it up.

I said, in Nebraska, we believe in stoicism. You can lose it, but it should never come out your mouth. ♣

Thomas Patterson

flying “the Schweinfurt Bomb Run” (1943)

one hundred wings in azure skies
“...machine shops, locomotive yards have cleared”
the earthbound sky swirled toward the heavens
keratin feathers furled and tight,
“the boys have tendered twelve five hundreds”
(for each fraulein, mademoiselle)
alula...alula...yawing rightward,
“in black flak for half an hour”
(of the moments, of the hours,)
beating manus bone and blood,
“two bad engines, both have feathered”
(all that mattered, looking back)
the streets of Schweinfurt open to us
“cockpit flaming, going down;”
(once they leaned with yellow flowers)
down and down the airy mist
“no way to get home again...”
(and mornings filled with pretty girls)

Jay Nebel

Hooper Detox

I had to visit a nameless man in a padded cell
to understand again. Witness a beginning
somewhere without stars, an amalgam of blood,
piss and shit on his hands, embedded in the square holes
of his plastic bracelet, on his flimsy cotton gown,
the bees eating away at the insides
of his ears, daring him to give it another try,
go one more round. He'd gnawed his knuckles
down to filament and bone, dragging himself
across the floor like some half dead animal,
passing out, then blinking, awake and burning
beneath a single lightbulb caged in steel.

Technicity & the Pathological Turn

The concept of technicity (extrapolated from *technē*, which is a prosthesis, i.e., *πρόσθεσις* or *pro-thesis*, an appendage, a thing-on-the-outside-of) imagines a human nature distinguished by *lack*, by a hole in our ontological scaffolding that must be negotiated in some capacity (e.g. bodily extension) for humanity to realize a truly *homo sapiens* gestalt. Technology is not supplemental, in other words. On the contrary, it is *natural*, or rather, the nature of technology is an existential prerequisite for nature itself.

There are no trees, no bushes, no earthworms or hippies. There are only *tetsuos* & the transparent eyeballs that perceive & distanciate them. The eyeballs roost on stalks. Emerson always-already armored to the hilt in a Cylon suit—here is an image of desire that Derrida & Heidegger might shake a stick at, if only to sublimate the steel-plated dread of being Asimovianly charged *robo sapiens*.

Riding on (& renovating) the coattails of 1980s nihilism & Big Hair, pop music of the early 1990s points us in a slightly different direction. Consider the case of Right Said Fred. Otherwise known as Richard & Fred Fairbrass, who admitted to shaving their heads bald every morning with giant Rambo knives, the British pop duo rarely wore shirts (in light of being “too sexy” for their shirts). Nor did they possess “love” (for the same reason).¹ Nonetheless technicity emerged in an atmospheric manner. Like *2001: A Space Odyssey*’s artificially intelligent anti-protagonist HAL, whose body constituted the spaceship Discovery, RSF manifested as the nervous system of several prominent discotheques & innumerable catwalks, all of which we might collectively refer to as the “machine.”²

This instance is an inversion of the process of technological extension that should not be confused with the process of postmodern implosion. *Ipsa facto* it is reminiscent of the (original) Poseidon adventure where a relatively

1 Note the introductory lyrics to RSF’s song “I’m Too Sexy” (1992): “I’m too sexy for my love, / too sexy for my love, / love’s going to leave me. / I’m too sexy for my shirt, / too sexy for my shirt, / so sexy it hurts.”

2 As RSF reminds us in the chorus of “I’m Too Sexy”: “I’m a model, you know what I mean, / & I do my little turn on the catwalk. / Yeah on the catwalk, on the catwalk yeah, / I shake my little tush on the catwalk.” Emanating from this overt assertion of identity is the metaphysical, ideological & ritualistic “aura” that terminally constructs identity. For more on the subject of auras, refer to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936).

thin Gene Hackman in a turtleneck manages to save a small group of miscreants from certain death only after he renounces his religion & his identity as a man of God. He does so by getting mad at God. Anything can happen when an ocean liner flips upside-down. Friendly old ladies can devolve into slobbering alligators. Captain Stubing can set Leonardo DiCaprio on fire via electric bolts shot out of his fingertips. Recall the sixth episode of *Star Wars* in which The Emperor attempts to electrocute young Skywalker in this fashion. It is natural to want to kill young Skywalker. Any Freud-thing will agree. The boy has a dimple in his chin, his name evokes a sense of goosestepping back & forth across the troposphere, & he screams like a girl.

Hence we arrive at a more dynamic theory of technicity in terms of spatial & temporal modalities: selfhood & the body as much of a technocultural *exteriorization* as it is an *inscription* (à la Deleuze & Guattari's "inscribing socius"). As Louis Armand writes in his essay "Technics & Humanism": "Being ... can thus be thought of as 'being temporally inscribed' within the recursive, quasi-periodic structure of technicity that generalizes in the emergent discourse of 'man' as technological stereotype" (51).⁴ I would only add that this stereotype is pathologically reinforced, if not defined, by the mystical nothingness of electronic pop media, which continue to revolutionize the nature of technicity & the technology of nature in ways that Benjamin, Horkheimer & Adorno, Simmel, Marx & other post-industrial thinkers could not possibly foresee. **F**

3 See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (1972). It is important to read the book in French; translation into English inevitably forsakes vital coordinates of meaning & innuendo.

4 In *Technicity*, eds. Louis Armand & Arthur Bradley. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006.

K.A. Hays

Des Femmes, Des Belles Choses

ONE

Women. She wanted to find *one thing* that did not remind her—but even men reminded her of women now, and other mammals, birds, reptiles, even fungi, especially fungi, indiscriminately growing in the dark. Women skulking on the barstools at the Ram's Head Inn; women round-eyed, kerchiefed, sprawled on chairs and benches and stair-steps; women like her, everywhere—faintly shining in the doctor's waiting rooms in Warwick or sprawled, paper-gowned, in doctor's offices all over Rhode Island; these gruff, flickering women with large teeth in waiting rooms, slinging bursting bags to their shoulders, heaving purses, the *earth* in these handbags, infinitely over-packed, Kleenex emerging like white-sheeted children from the bags, to plug the snotted, sore-stained noses of the thousands. And now she waited with these slim-shouldered, behemoth or rose-breasted women in lines at the T.F. Green airport—high-heeled, rubber-shoed, sandaled, booted, flip-flopped women, women giving women tickets for flights to leave a country of discomfited bodies, women as drab and certain as death, stamping a passport, holding canes, waving women away, ushering women onto planes, red-suited women who swept down aisles with champagne and orange juice, and on the airplane televisions, *there* a woman, *there* an actress, all up and down the plane on each personal screen for each seat, a woman: running, pointing, swooning, lying in her blood on a street. Landing, claiming baggage, boarding the chunnel with Carlo, Sonia watched Parisian women mobbing the platforms around her, a creeping mayhem, women veiled or jeweled; the women blurred her vision, these women with damned, ruinous breasts.

Two

She was sick of women. She had had it with women.

I am so sick, she told him. So tired of it.

And Carlo—who had, in his timid hormonal years, thought always of women, women to be wondered over, women to be admired, ignored, or flirted with—Carlo had mellowed. He took her hand. As if to say, See, there might be fungal growths in this chunnel, there might be gum marring the pavement, but we'll hold hands.

I'm sure, he said.

Women. They endured this. They came abroad to get away from it all and—whoop! More chaos! In the narrow body of the train, in the chunnel, women lined the aisles. She could feel them looking. She felt—

You thinking about it?

He dragged his suitcase behind her in the aisle.

About what.

Can I pull your suitcase? he offered.

No, she said. Can I pull your suitcase?

No, thank you.

They had gotten away, hadn't thought of it in hours, it had not begun to enter her mind (no, she was sure it hadn't come to his head either) and in the chunnel, roaring through in this train car, hearing these roaring breaths in the dark, still, she had to admit, it was here. Had followed them even across the ocean, to Paris, all the way from Warwick, Rhode Island; here it was.

In the black window, she watched the reflection of a woman's open lips, big lips, her earrings sending light signals in the reflection of the window of the train. The woman had a cut near her lower, fatter lip. They were underwater. They flew through the wetness, then thrust out from the chunnel, leaving the narrow walls for the daylight.

It's like being born! Carlo said. Sonia?

It's the opposite of birth. Noise into quiet, she said. It's *dying*.

Don't be morbid. It's dark into light.

Ah. *C'est la vie!* she said.

Remember, I don't know Fr—

Nous sommes ici maintenant, she said. *Nous parlons français.*

They passed a billboard. A woman on a pink horse.

Cadeaux imaginaires! it said. *Joyeuses fêtes!*

THREE

Women, cold pink-skinned wounds, raw-bodied, sold chestnuts. Women in puffed hoods, mittened, put nuts on a grill. They sold hot nuts to tourists.

What are you thinking? he asked.

The gulls, she said. She pointed to a statue of gulls. They're grey from rain, she said. But gold where they touch.

And? he asked.

That's all, she said. She laughed louder than she had meant to.

They ate chocolate banana crepes in the street. She licked grease from her elbow.

Tout le monde ne vois pas! A woman said to another, pointing to the alligator insignia on her sweater.

Small alligators, she felt, unseen, lay in the murk of this woman with bangs and a sweater off her shoulder. She felt like an ancient creature, knowing how much goes unnoticed, how much fungi creeps into a woman undetected and grows, devours, deep in a chest, bungling in there for a woman to sense, a woman, all the world unseeing, everyone.

The crepe hurt, in her gut.

FOUR

They walked to La Momma, a dim restaurant with velvet chair padding, *ouvert tous les jours*, they saw, throbbing with strollers and babies, ripe, plump, healthy, cooing babies who, she felt, would be speaking a first French word, which would sound to her infinitely more intelligent than the first word of any American baby, whose first words were crass. Her son Nick's first word had been Rock. He had pointed at the sky and said, Rock.

Carlo had said Nicky was describing how his crib mattress felt. Or how his mother's breast felt to his lips. Carlo had thought himself a comedian. Then. She had laughed.

So it's called 'La Momma,' she said.

Is she open? he asked.

Tous les jours.

Nick was staying with a friend in Warwick, going to high school. He was bearing things well, she thought. But it was hard to tell what he felt for his mother now. *Une roche*, Nicky would have said as a French infant, *Une roche*, *Maman*. And that would be beautiful, although suggesting something just as hard behind the words. She would say it of her life. *Une roche*, the life that appeared inside of adults and grew.

They waited for a waitress.

Let's prepare to speak French, he said.

D'accord, she said.

How do you say 'I don't know'? he asked.

Je ne sais pas, she said. You say it quickly: *Je sais pas*.

The waitress came to the table. *¿Voulez-vous un apéritif?*

Je sais pas, Carlo said.

She was lost. An appetizer?

C'est vegeterienne? she asked.

The waitress laughed, *Oui. Du champagne?*

Je sais pas, said Carlo, and looked at her.

Oui, she said. *Ça*. She pointed at the menu, to the day's special. *Et notre dîner, ici.*

The waitress brought back two champagnes. They sat. They drank.

The waitress brought two plates of food.

Steak? Carlo asked. Rare?

I think, she said. I think I ordered beef for us, but asked if the champagne was vegetarian.

Je sais pas, Carlo said. *Je sais pas*. He stabbed his meat.

She shrugged. To have what you don't want, to ask meaningless questions. *C'est la vie.*

He raised his brows and chewed. *Je sais pas*.

She did not, in fact, know the language well. She'd taken courses in early college. *Merci*, she told the waitress. *Merci*.

She wanted mercy from these women, was no longer child-bearing, had a teenaged son who read comic books as if they were scripture, who withdrew, rock-like, to sit in his room, each evening, silent and unmoving, his hand on a computer mouse. Mercy from these women, her waitress and others. Having to see these women, everywhere, even in this country—gallivanting and criticizing, dressing alike and differently, their bodies ripening, ready to carry new fruit. Bad fruit.

I'm hot, she told him. She sweated.

FIVE

They were at the top of the Eiffel Tower. It was 4:10 pm.

We're 9,214 kilometers from Hanoi, she said.

Carlo looked at the city in miniature. It could have been any city. Small salesmen sold tiny replicas of the tower down there.

We're 343 kilometers from London, she said.

Carlo ran his wrist along the railing and leaned over, peering down at the tiny city.

We're 5,849 kilometers from New York City.

I can read the sign too, he said.

He eyed a woman in a brown fur coat. Sonia flexed her back.

That means we're probably about 6,149 kilometers from Nick.

He'd want it that way, Carlo said.

She shrugged. He's fourteen. We're always about that far.

But women. They were always close but far, understanding but not. The brown-furred woman covered her mouth and nose with a blue scarf. Merciful women, looking not at her but out of the Eiffel Tower, and women below stood looking up, the tops of their heads like odd malignant growths, all taken together to make a disease—.

SIX

At Notre Dame Cathedral she lit a candle. Cloaked women knelt in prayer. Another woman lit a candle. She gave one euro rather than the encouraged ten. That was what her wish was worth: a euro. She set her own candle on the lowest part of the holder, farthest from the cluster. She quarantined it. Other candles stood together in kind comfortable packs.

She wished for it to be fine.

These shapely candles melted into themselves, sensuously coiling, each drip of wax curling over, ornamenting white candles, gold where the fire was, wicks sharp and perfect in her vision, somehow, perfunctory bearers of light and decay. She lit one candle and another. She ignored Carlo.

There were many—hundreds, in little clusters—that people had set here, which had gone out when they still had enough wax to burn more. She walked around relighting these.

Outside women mobbed the buses. Outside there was the staunch Eiffel Tower no one saw or noticed.

A woman was draped in a straw-woven chair at the back of Notre Dame cathedral, twitching in her sleep. She had tucked her head into the puffed breast of a green down jacket. Her legs moved in staccato. She had grey wire hair and glasses on a string. Her face was hidden in her coat. Her vision dangled, haphazardly, toward the ground.

Carlo was somewhere else in the cathedral. She could make him out, past the seats, behind several tour groups, taking a photograph for a husband and wife. The couple posed; the wife pretending to be awed by the ceiling. The wife stood with her mouth open. She might really have been astounded. It was doubtful. Carlo took a second picture. The woman shifted positions immediately after, her smile vanishing. Carlo handed her the camera.

A flock of older women in hats, women with dyed hair, followed a French-speaking tour guide, her language interfering with the adjacent English tour, where another soft female voice and a dabbling of English-speaking women walked. A tour guide said, You have the months of the earth. *Et on peut dire*, another tour guide said. Then a third guide said, *En la plaza de nuestros*.

The stained glass windows around them spoke all languages. The windows spoke of symmetry, Sonia felt. And blood, the color that seeps into faces. These voices had their own symmetry. There was the symmetry of women's bodies. And the dissymmetry, the chaos. She counted symmetries. One, her face. Two, her breasts. Three, four, five, six—She lost count. *Le dix-huitième siècle...qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?* What had happened to ruin the symmetry of her body? A pale blue light fell over the cathedral and the candles she had lit. She suddenly wanted to place her candle near the others, closer to the center. The cathedral broadcasting began to play organ music.

Rien, she said. Nothing.

Carlo, she called. Carlo!

He looked at the windows.

SEVEN

Outside of Notre Dame Cathedral, waiting at the bus stop, she saw a painted cartoon stick man on the bus stop sign, with a bubble drawn from its mouth. *Donne-moi de l'argent, stupide touriste!* It said.

Look. She prodded Carlo. He's talking to me.

Carlo squinted at the man.

He wants me to pay. I buy postcards, write 'Having a great time!' she said. Her body swayed, felt overripe. I have, say, a two-week vacation. Two weeks to take pictures of myself in front of important buildings. Then a hospital. At best.

An optimistic outlook, Carlo said.

They got on the bus.

Hey, she said. I need my optimism.

Passing a tight-jeaned woman biking alongside the bus, she peered out the window. When she was gone, someone else would be the stupid tourist. Someone would see what she saw from the bus window now, a woman riding at the speed of the bus, pedaling and puffing alongside her, a window between them, until the bus parted from the bicycle, and they each went on.

She assumed the other woman went on, anyway.

The bus passed the Café de la Paix. She had noticed, also, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* carved above school entrances and on coins. *Liberté! Egalité!* Without *liberté*, without *égalité*!, without *fraternité*, with only words, what did they have, when diseases colored their insides, and chose particular people, sparing others?

She felt Carlo's sleeve touching hers. She moved her arm.

Two sets of three young women gripped poles near the front of the bus. School girls, thirteen or fourteen years old. Mini gangs. The plumper gang of three wore bandannas, hoop earrings, and sneakers. The thinner gang of girls dangled koala keychains from their backpacks, and wore blue jeans.

Adults don't have gangs like that, she told Carlo.

What?

Adult women. We don't have the same kind of gang.

EIGHT

I neither want to see art, nor move, she said.

What do you want to do? They stood outside of the Louvre.

I want to sit in the Louvre café and eat. Or sleep. Either.

At a short distance from where they spoke, Hercules killed a three-headed dragon. Apollo killed a serpent.

I enjoy sleep. I am very good at it, she said loudly.

A huddle of women looking at Hercules turned to glance at her curiously.

Don't worry, she told Carlo. No one knows what I'm saying.

You don't want to see any art?

There will be three kinds of art in here, she said, sitting down on a bench. Sex art—naked women. Violent art—men killing beasts, men, or some other thing in nature. Death art—mourning. I hate all three. I'm asexual, in fact, she added. And immortal. As well as pacifist.

It's amazing that you're also a mother and a preschool teacher, Carlo said.

I teach children about important things, she said. Colors.

Carlo took her hand. We'll look at a few statues.

Look, she said pointing. Apollo's killing another serpent. That's two for Apollo!

They looked at Jean Baptiste's head on a plate.

It's beautiful, she said.

They wandered past the large format paintings, the women with children, the men longing for women, the women with fruit. Under the high ceiling, they stood looking up, indifferently interested.

If I were up there on the ceiling, she said, I'd be that man who's sleeping. The man with no torso.

Carlo squeezed her hand. It was the nicest he had been in many years, she felt. Commiserating with her will to be the torso-less man on the ceiling.

Mercurie enlevant Psyché, she read.

Carlo said, Watch. I can make them dance.

He led her around the base of the statue.

Look up, he said.

It looked as if Mercury and Psyche were moving and she and Carlo stood still. They walked faster around the base.

If you look up at her right now, Carlo said, She's dancing. It's some trick of the eye.

They nearly ran around the statue's base. It was, she thought, the happiest she'd been.

A stroller ran over the floor, distantly. A child's voice asked, *Pourquoi?*

NINE

On the bus, at evening, a boy spoke with his mother in rapid French. He was at the age when speaking to one's mother was a beautiful necessity. He began to count to his mother in English.

One, two, three... *Maman?*

Sonia closed her eyes.

Twenty two-ty, twenty-three, twenty four...

She saw from the slits of her eyes. The mother across the aisle wore camouflage shoes.

There were girders and gold, straight angles, a white lighthouse light and an orange elevator box lowering, sinking. Carlo turned to see. No one else on the bus did.

C'est le tour Eiffel, she said dully. *C'est tout.* The mother in camouflaged shoes took her boy by the hand and led him out near the Eiffel Tower.

They passed the Place Victor Hugo. A woman exclaimed behind her. *Voilà! Exactamente! Exactement, c'est vrai!* What happy certainty the fool had. A girl on a skateboard kept speed with the bus, clicking over the sidewalk cracks.

The bus speeds up time, she told Carlo. Everything goes by so quickly.

In a red cloak and white hood, a girl clung to her mother's leg, hiding from the bus, near a church, Mermoz, strung with Christmas lights.

The lights are uneven, she told Carlo. Not straight at all.

Carlo watched a man on the street corner, whose eyes looked away, down

a side street.

The walls above her bed this morning had looked plaid with crossings of light, she remembered now.

École de Garçons, École de Filles, two signs designated.

Look, she nudged Carlo with her elbow.

He seemed asleep. This was a technique he had learned in his school, she was sure. To sleep easily and well. The School for Girls had not taught it.

On a billboard's digital screen, scenes changed, beginning with a girl who swam underwater in a sunlit, aqua pool, smiling, swimming upwards toward the surface but not reaching it, and she craned her neck from the bus to see behind her, when the board shifted to show palm trees, a wind that moved them, and very pale sand.

She took a tissue from her purse. At least there was the motor of the bus. Her body began to swim in the seat. Three women crossed outside. The tallest of the three wore a shirt that said *PETIT*. This woman broke from the others, and carried a black art portfolio through the busy streets. That portfolio might hold any number of colors or faces, she knew. Like a body.

Carlo, she said. She elbowed him.

He opened one, weary eye.

No, she said. No, go back to sleep.

TEN

She watched The Golden Girls in German while Carlo showered. He came from the bathroom in his towel, the cottage cheese of his stomach dripping. The women spoke gutterally. Dubbed women, with voices not their own, speaking for women, supplying words where words had been: German become French to be viewed by an English-speaker, who did not understand.

Look at this, she said. They don't speak French either, Carlo.

Why? He rubbed himself and applied deodorant. Why German?

No one speaks the right language anymore.

He wasn't listening. The traffic below their hotel room had become louder. Someone yelled, *Jamais!*

She could relate. Like a billboard, she also had the will to yell *Never!* To, with the gang of women she had gathered mentally over the course of weeks, make a pilgrimage of similar but unlike bodies, like broken stained glass windows, shouting, *Never! Never! Never!*

ELEVEN

They had passed the *Ville de Paris École de Garçons*. They looked up. There were three steep sets of stairs zigzagging to the height of Montmartre. Boys played on the playground, their voices like a distant flock of birds, landed temporarily in high trees. She was the only woman she could see.

There were shadows where she sat, but light at cubed angles down the

mountain. Building-tops were an orange, grey, and blues, a dim rubble.

How do you feel? Carlo asked from behind. Always near or behind these days.

I feel exhausted, she said. It was something about the tops of buildings. She didn't like how the light fell. It wasn't the boys, hundreds of them, shrieking and screaming and laughing and yelling. They reminded her of women. Or Carlo. This was joyful. She examined whether she might be lying. She liked the noise of boys. Human noise was fine. It was these black metal streetlamps and railings, jutting so far down. And how there were so many more above her.

Do you want to rest here and then go back down? We don't need to go to the top.

What?

We don't need to go to the top.

I want to go to the top, she said. *You* might be out of shape, but don't drag me into it. She nodded pleasantly at the railing. There was purple graffiti on the boy's school. Policemen walked up the stairs toward them. There was blue on the stones, and yellow on the streetlamp. There were window boxes, and white housefronts.

See the graffiti? she asked.

He nodded. She had begun to notice how people tried stupidly to give their lives permanence, or lasting purpose. It amused her. Ha! Ha, it made her laugh. Planting trees where they had uprooted others, writing their names on public landmarks. A tree stood overlooking the muddled rooftops. It would be gone, in some brief tumble of years. Ha!

She heaved herself up. Onwards! she called.

Sure you don't want to go back down? Sit in a café?

Jamais! she said. *Jamais! Jamais!*

Two boys near the gate to their playground peered through the wires at her. They giggled and pointed. She groped the railing.

Wonder what's up there anyway, she said. If it's worth all this effort.

We could go down, Carlo said.

Jamais, she said.

TWELVE

A woman who had wrapped herself entirely in gold cloth, like a statue, stood atop a cylindrical barrel, wearing an Egyptian mummy mask, at the top of Montemarte.

Carlo squinted at the woman. She had placed a can at her feet for money, and stood here, in the open air, at the summit, looking over the city below, unmoving, Egyptian-masked, moving only when another tourist woman dropped a coin in her can, clinking it. Then she lowered her hips, turned

her head in a very low bow, and returned to her stance, staring out.

Standing in one place looking out at a city from behind a mask—that'd be nice, she said. I wouldn't mind doing that for a living.

Schoolgirls passed. It seemed this Egyptian statue, this Pharaoh, this Mummy or Queen, turned toward the girls, so slightly toward their noise, but it could have been the wind.

She wanted to run around the base of this still woman and have her dance. If they could make a statue of a woman dance, they could make this live one. But she seemed more determinedly solid.

Sonia stood behind her.

Sonia, Carlo said. I'm worried.

There're things we don't say, she said. Even preschoolers know that.

A woman videotaped a man on the front steps of Montemarte.

Mon amour, sur l'escalier, the man narrated. *Oui, comme ça.*

He waved his hand to a harpist.

Did you see the harpist? Carlo asked.

Every person with a videocamera here was filming the harpist on the hill.

The harpist tuned her instrument, turning the silver knobs.

Women behind masks, women still on the mountains looking out, women bowing for coins, women plucking strings like angels, already gone. It was horrifying.

She nodded and sat on the steps.

She listened. Carlo sat on the steps near her. There was a group of men here selling bracelets, making money from the tourists. Unlike the women, who played or stood and passively allowed the money to come to them, these men approached tourists directly, tying strings to their fingers, making them quick bracelets, braiding string together and then asking for pay, for their work.

Qu'est-ce que vous faites ici? a man asked another man, whose finger he had looped.

Euhhh... Je vois des femmes, je vois des belle choses... the man answered.

Sonia leaned into Carlo, who sat staring out over the cliff.

Qu'est-ce que vous faites ici, Carlo?

Carlo pursed his lips. *Je sais pas*, he said.

Yes, she said.

A pigeon walked below them, purplish near another pigeon, in front of it, its large body somehow hollowed, walking before her, its tail feathers dragging behind it on the stone steps, the harp player plucking just steps away, its continual music narrating the bobbing of the birds, their cheeping, and there was fog on the distant city where there were so many women below them now, with their crumbling bodies, this winter. She had seen Psyche dancing. She and Carlo had made Psyche dance.

She was happy for women, and for what they made before they went, and so exhaustedly sad, for this harp music, and these steps leading nowhere. And for herself. Or no—a cat came to sit with her in the sun. There was blue, and a white stone building behind, le Catédral du Sacré Coeur.

Je t'aime. Tu es belle, et tes yeux...Il n'est pas ton petit ami? Non? A man with bracelets tried to seduce a young woman on the steps.

Seductions, invitations, women like birds, like small balls of light. She patted the cat. Paris snuggled into itself, partially in fog, and there were binoculars here and hats for sale in squares on the ground. A woman could buy any number of hats to wear. Hats lay in the square where they were sold, like praying forms, bowing. And yet—they were hats.

What're you thinking? Carlo asked.

Nothing, she said.

She and the cat sat close. They lay, two forms, still and warm. She would like to be a cat. She would mew and eat, sleep, look. She would think of what she would need.

And everything would go. The hat sellers could clear their little square hat display in a hand's pull. Police strode down towards their area, and a man whistled a signal to them. Suddenly the squares became four bags, into which the hats had flown, the squares of cloth closing at the corners, and the men ran, bags over shoulders, leaving the police, and the harpist, and the Egyptian woman still staring out.

The sun was lower now.

A musician appeared with a guitar. She sang in English. All I've ever heard, the musician sang. All I've ever heard. A class of boys and girls in red hats that said *Ecole Jules Verne* in white appeared on the stairs behind Carlo and Sonia. They clapped to the woman's beat, and danced in lines, then settled below her on the steps.

When the woman finished, they clapped and shouted and placed a red hat on her head, adopting her, this guitar woman. She sang with them, *Frère Jacques*.

Dormez-vous?

Dormez-vous?

Dormez-vous? Sonia asked Carlo sleepily.

She leaned on his shoulder.

I don't believe, the woman sang, That anybody feels the way I do.

Are you okay? Carlo asked.

Absurdly, she sang *Jailhouse Rock*, and each child danced separately; one did a moonwalk, another pounded an invisible drum. They took off their hats and began to wave them, asking each other, *De l'argent? De l'argent?*

Yes, she said.

You want to get going? Carlo asked, watching the children.

Soon, she said. Not yet.

The woman and children sang, We are the world, in English, at the top of Montemarte, We are the children, sang these children in red hats, shrieking, Make a brighter day, Paris below, white chapel above, the sacred heart chapel, in both directions long shadows and gold waning light.

There were green statues of men on horses.

These men on horses are everywhere, Sonia said. And the nearly naked women. She didn't like it. She wanted to become a cat. But that too was susceptible, and cats still had to think. *Tous le monde*. How to be anything but susceptible and thinking, and not die, she didn't know. So she'd be this way, stretched into chaos, waiting for when she would go, feet mucked in the things of Warwick or Paris, would feel joy, cheap as it was, and would hear the harp plucked, staying to see the box on the hill when it had been left, when the city would no longer be seen at night from above, not anymore by the masked woman.

Allez, she told the woman on the hill. *Au revoir*.

Go? he asked.

Soon, she said.

Because women had something in them, a thing that killed them slowly, gnawing at their cells, making the body a foreign city where they had to live strangely, and there was a thing in them that built up life slowly, a foreign world of strong architecture. Joyous celebrations, in these women, and terrible mournings, losses, lumps, crests, protrusions. And what could she say? *Voilà*. That was how it was for them. They were worlds. **F**

Protracted Water

An afternoon of protracted water, sky lowering
to peer into our haunted rooms.

Another day forced to compose its image
from the slag of last night's burnt-out dark.
A jubilation of long-forgotten gospels taunt
the leaden hours like sadistic ventriloquists.

The future a never-ending storm
that builds on the horizons of our lives; throughout our lives.
Each day its mystique more grueling; more physical.
The clouds writhe slowly, between prophecy and scrawl,
tumble of mumbo-jumbo
but with that fiendish insouciance of expertise.

Protracted water, long liquid shroud, as sexual as
such endline turmoil is allowed to be—
what more instruction does the shore need
on the sea's aroused immortality?
Its heavy voice rises, falls, rises, falls
in smoke and mist chorales till evening,
when the music beads like sweat on cliffs;
is it possible they're developing a Gothic taste for frosted surf?

Wind in the dunes, soughing; discreet but unremitting;
eventually it becomes the droning chants of saints
scuffing through the sad sand of mystery,
bent double from their God-encumbered backs.
Unable to look upward any longer to that terrible pinnacle of bliss
Paradise is balanced on, depending on faith alone to be found worthy
by reason of their perfect wretchedness, and then
elevated immediately to the angels crowded so comfortably on the pin of
Now.

Angie Macri

So Far Now from the Sea

In the earth at Rosiclare,
fluorite spreads forty feet wide in crystals
of black-blue cubes, formed when hot water rose
from low in the earth into limestone along rift zones.
Water from the planet deep honeymoons
with stone placed by the sea.

In the earth at Waterloo,
farmers find goniatite fossils that once
swam with tentacles, with good eyes, shells
zigzagging with growth in each of their sutures.
Creatures from one epoch marry wheat fields
so far now from the sea.

In the earth at Sparta,
children catch fireflies that carry light. At the portals,
their fathers go down shafts in cages for their shifts. They
bolt the roof and set the longwall to spin its drum, taking
all in its way. The children's hands glow
and foam with silent sea.

Hypothetically Speaking

If there are multiple universes and a near-infinite number of dimensions, then at least 104,699,092 are as vast and dark and bespeckled by spheres of fusion as this one. Some appear the exact size and shape of teaspoons. Still others throb orange, gorgeous and deceptively complex as a row of freshly planted marigolds. If there are umpteen parallel universes unnamed and unknown, then in some of those cosmoses you are blowing your nose into a dirty diaper right now. In others, you are riding a purple pony off a cliff while gobbling pancakes. Several of the less popular universes are only inhabited by talkative table lamps: they're fairly depressed as there are no tables to speak of, but at least they have each other. The one next door to this one lacks suicide and rape, hate crimes and arson, and murder, and perjury, and war. It's nearly perfect, incomprehensibly beautiful, our gopher-sized minds boggled by such peace. So let's go back to one of those where you've got the definition of a "nasty cold."

One universe way over yonder (its denizens affectionately call it "Billy") bursts and brightens with ten times the number of supernovas as ours. In Billy, the donkeys have little human hands that they tuck under their fur; they only reveal them to children. Every continent is chock full of sunflowers, kangaroos, bean burritos, and libraries. A "lawyer" is a sexually transmitted disease on par with gonorrhea, but without the cachet; thankfully, there are currently no known cases. In 1865, Booth missed and Lincoln lived. Honest Abe became the first lint juggler. By 2002, everyone learned everyone else's name, and then prayed for them. Money doesn't grow from trees (what were you expecting?), but Twinkies do, as do Twinkie trees. Awkwardness is an aphrodisiac. In Billy, much like the aforementioned nearly perfect universe, folks do their damndest not to hurt each other on purpose. There's lots of hugging, and not breast-distant, back-patting grandma hugging. I'm talking about full-fledged, I-feel-like-my-life-depends-on-yours hugging. There are plenty of llamas for everyone to pet.

There's a Matt Zambito rumbling around in Billy with his short pants pulled up a little too high or a little too low for comfort. When he was in third grade, he saved the planet by destroying the designs, formulas and materials necessary for developing what we would call a thermonuclear bomb, and what his humans more accurately dubbed "Big Mister Uh Oh."

Just yesterday, he talked someone down from George Washington Carver's nose on his Mt. Rushmore.

"I'm getting to the bottom the fastest way, okay? You don't understand. There's nothing anymore. Nothing's worth a goddamn."

"There's peanuts," said Matt. "And breathing. And breathing in the smell of peanuts."

Since it doesn't take much to want to live in some dimensions, the almost-felo-de-se slowly climbed down the rock. And that person? That person could be the you in that universe. (You are, of course, very welcome.)

Billy's Matt pays children to describe their dreams, and he plays rhythm oboe for the band The Left Testicles, and he, too, has written an essay called "Hypothetically Speaking." In his version, he pines for our universe, the one where a select few humans actually hump horses. The one with Tom Cruise movies. Where "Turn the other cheek" too frequently translates into "What in the name of Christ on the cross are you waiting for? Blow those bastards away."

Eventually, because he doesn't understand his own prayers, that Matt, bored with Billy, gets on his knees, longing for the universe where, on Friday, June 27, 2003, while his grandfather's organs began failing in Clearwater, Florida's Mease Dunedin Hospital, your Matt Zambito contemplated flying from Columbus, Ohio, to see the person who drew him the blueprints to manhood. He called about the price of tickets. He paced and worried, fearful this might be the last chance they had to speak. He wondered about his grandfather's faith, and wanted to lift his final earthly spirits. Instead of doing what made sense in his head and heart, your American poster child hopped in a car and drove with his girlfriend to spend the weekend, as they'd already planned, at her family's million-dollar cabin on Lake Michigan. Matt reclined and read. He relaxed and strolled on the private beach. Meanwhile, his grandfather, partially paralyzed by a stroke and unable to speak, nodded when Matt's mother said, "What are you trying to say... that you love Mom very much?" His grandmother wept, trying to nod in return, but paralyzed in her own way. On June 30, the day a suntanned Matt returned, his grandfather stopped inhaling, stopped exhaling. This Matt hasn't stopped regretting. That Matt's grandfather is reading over his shoulder, a caring hand patting Matt's arm.

Remarkably, all of this makes me glad I'm the me in this universe and not the me in the other Matt's, since, even though I have to put up with nihilism-inducing jobs, mimes who work as buskers, gridlock, smog, politicians making promises, a strangely calm guy at the Laundromat threatening to stab me with a hypodermic needle if I don't give him five bucks, even though I have to put up with the memories of who I was and what I've done and those I've lost, at least I'm not a complete fucking moron: I'm not keeping busy by imagining that this universe is the hippest place to be, the one all the kids are text-messaging about, because this brand of sadness is the work of devils, because I could find fault with the absolutely most hallowed of all dimensions, because imagination might actually help us save this universe

from ourselves.

I hold Arabella, my five-month-old goddaughter, and make her smile with one of my own. She chews on my finger. She lets loose a little baby toot. The robins outside my window sing, not for mating, not for warnings, but for reasons science can't explain. They seem to sing for no particular reason. They seem to sing for the sake of song. Julia Child, resurrected by way of rerun on the tube, waggles a carrot in the air and proclaims, with her slurred yet cogent voice, something like: "What a wondrous vision this orange root is!" Then she slices it up and cooks it and eats it and changes her cells with its energy. I picture all of us—Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, and my mother and the 6th graders she's teaching how to bump a volleyball, and artist Chuck Close, and the foster kid I should adopt, and a Sherpa urging climbers to turn back soon, and beautiful you, and beautiful me—all of us magnificently, undeniably, proudly sneezing into clean tissues or into clean handkerchiefs, no Pampers in sight.

See, I've started to think there's a condition all universes have to have, even the ones made of pudding, even the ones with 100 sextillion me's singing the theme from *Charles in Charge*. I start to think that maybe soon all of us, in unison or one after the other like a kickline extending forever, patiently choreographed by Heaven's Head Rockette, all of us will shake a stranger's hand, or kiss a friend's cheek, or open a love letter, or hop on their equivalent of a plane, or give our pens a rest. Despite the fact that odds in the intergalactic casino are good that we inhabit the one and only space-time infinity, I start to think the following could happen:

You're driving your '98 Mercury Sable, the odometer turning over a number so high, if miles morphed into money, you swear you could retire on it twice, and you're slowing from 10 above the speed limit, choosing a lane to pay the toll before reaching a bridge stretching over the Niagara River. The cars are backed up eight to a lane, but you don't care, because you're a dozen minutes from your destination, "Gimme Shelter" cranking out of your speakers, and you've got the windows open, you've got a misty breeze on your face.

"How much is the toll, again?"

"How much you got?" The collector giggles like a child who has blown out birthday candles for the first time, or like a woman still whispering "I do" even though she's on her honeymoon. She gently winks. "You're taken care of," she says. She keeps smiling. "The semi in front of you—that guy paid for the next three cars."

You return the smile, not because it's a shirt that doesn't fit, but because it's a favor. You arch over the water, and decide you'll emulate the guy driving truck, the guy crisscrossing the country, lugging bottled water in his rig. You'll emulate that guy when, one day soon, you'll have to leave again for work or, for some awful reason, for good.

You rise over the next bridge, the water underneath you slowly flowing only to fall and awe, and you imagine strangers moving forward, moving together, rippling and rippling, and then you reach the other side, and finally—*How long has it been?*—head for the bizarre place where you were born. Where else can you belong but a place with barreled daredevils and Italian donuts, with a toxic-waste dump named “Love Canal” and the church where your faith was renewed like an overdue library book, where 20% of the world’s freshwater flows and a little touch of romanticism isn’t a food poison but an antidote?

And my hypothesis, the one that I’m clinging to for the sake of my faith, for my belief in blessings, the one I’m applying to the goodness I can fathom, goes like this: maybe this relatively simple story (or one enough like it to satisfy the simile police) has happened to you, my friends, or maybe this is happening to you, or maybe, instead, this will happen, maybe here in this universe, maybe soon.¶

Will Porter

Rogue Elephant

The other day I saw a photograph of a rogue elephant
exhausted in the middle of a country road. A woman

stood by the kneeling animal, pouring water on its back,
while people gathered along the grassy bank to watch.

It was intent now only in comporting itself as immoveable—
This is far enough, it said, I will go no farther.

Negotiations with it must have broken off that morning—
the elephant would not come out, or go in, or move, or stop;

I imagine its escape now, crossing a hayfield, a parking lot,
a country road; it's passing cows, an old painted horse,

drawn to the familiar smell of their manure;
and somewhere along its path, a cloud of bluebottle flies

comes upon a pile of hot dung, like none they'd ever seen.
Quick, they say, take what you can carry.

Andrew Michael Roberts

Somewhere A Buried Bone Awaits

Not physics, but loosed dogs who lick the earth
and make us spin. Lost dogs, always
almost catching their own dark tails in their teeth.
So we are dizzy and don't know it,
and this is the story of time. Look
inside a spider's web and see. That constellation
of dew is eyes shaking in their silk sockets
to the thundering footpads. Touch one.
Reach through and pat the happy panting head
of night. Beyond the sun, a long black pelt
stretched over the bones of dead stars.
One velvet ear is eons. When you die
you curl up in it and they just keep running.
You can hear the click of claws tectonic.
Even from sleep you hear the bright blinding howls
and believe they are dreams.

Jason Tandon

Old Farmhouse

For days the smell was awful.
The chimney ran right beside by my bed
With a flu hatch that hadn't been opened in years.
I pried it with a flat-head
And discovered two little brown bats
Hanging upside down, wrapped in their wings.
Thinking they might be asleep,
I waited a few more days
Before poking them with a stick.

Once, in the middle of the night,
I made my way to the kitchen for a glass of water.
I heard rustling in the garbage.
Blind without my glasses I stuck my head close—
Felt the rough slither of a tail
Lace across my toes.

That same winter friends dared me
To stay in the basement for five minutes.
Down the rickety steps I went
With a carving knife and a gin and tonic.
When the door was locked
And the crack of light sealed,
I didn't last one minute
Running back upstairs screaming and pounding,
Having seen hundreds of angry ghosts.

Manjula Martin

The Android's Wife

The first night on New Year's at the party I pop a grape into your mouth and it bounces right back out, but your kiss smacks of carbon. Could be sharper, actually.

Later in bed you bite my lip like any man would and we, like everyone is and becomes, are two mechanical animals, one with an ass of honey and steel.

In the morning I wonder about leaving you in the apartment but you look so—sleeping—there in my bed where the hot water bottle usually goes. Plus I didn't think I could lift you, so I left you. Later I dreamt I'd ordered you to stay.

Outside on the dirty streets of my neighborhood there are always parts—joints and limbs, crumbling rejects, or new for sale, cheap no tax. When I stop by the corner store to pick up more wine I watch the cleaner-trucks trundle past and I blush, thinking, maybe you know them. You all do look alike.

I come home from work and you've shined the steel of the stove, fixed the wire TV antennae, backed up my hard drive, changed my guitar strings (also steel), unscrewed the landlord's tinny blinds, and are almost done installing brass rods for the fresh green curtains I bought three springs ago but never hung.

You stay more nights. You singe my sheets. I grease your collar with my hair. You blink and it's a call ahead for reservations, traffic info, movie tickets—I think it's so much fun. My phone doesn't ring but when I check it I have "one—hundred—new—messages," each one reciting a love sonnet by Pablo Neruda.

You let me lie on top of you while we sleep and I dream—I'm a cowgirl, a fleshy future herder of bucking metal and brawn. It doesn't usually last long I get too scared I'll rust you, break you.

For lunar new year you give me a matchbox sculpted from neurons and I give you a pronoun. My friends don't get us anything, they still think deep down I'm just your job.

You move in. You get us free cable and suspicious neighbors. They're just jealous, I whisper, and kiss you on your neck joint. You ask if I want them killed and I giggle, say naw. We fuck real loud, that night.

You teach me about current and source paths and why my eyes don't work in the dark. I brush you with lotions in the shower, explain massage. We name each other, pet names.

When we bicker it's because you are threatened by my feel for language and I envy your lack of despair. One time I call you something terrible—a noun, a thing—and you lie to me, tell me it hurts, produce a tear, mock my contrition.

Sometimes while we are in bed the laptop wakes up and revs its drive, working overtime. You let me rest, you rise and walk it into the living room. You talk to it and tend and rock it til it goes back to sleep.

One night we are sleeping and your sister rings the buzzer sputtering, shaking. We sit her on the kitchen table and she repeats, "You, can't, rape, a, machine, ine, ine, ine," as we re-weld her wrists to her arms. Later after she leaves I cry a little bit and you say only, cold, "It's her job."

One Saturday you are on errands and I am cleaning your accessories out and I find a disc. I read it. It contains my hard drive, one hundred poems by Pablo Neruda, instructions for building an emotion in five easy algorithms, and also, there are things I don't know how to read on there.

We go for a weekend trip but you won't get out of the car and I have to wield the tent poles by myself. When we get back to the city I point at the power substation, I say—something about "that's more your type huh"—and you shut down. I try to take it back but it takes three days until you speak.

I start to wake up in the nights when you think I'm sleeping and you get up and start up with the laptop in the living room. You think I'm sleeping but when the bed is ever cold I, always, wake.

In spring lime-green linen billows around us as we stand by the open balcony window, the air, the curtains, the sky. When the lightning starts up I close the window, for your safety. After the rain, you make me new hubcaps.

I am walking home from work one day, outside, and I pass a person-shaped piñata lying in an empty lot, spreadeagled, un-clubbed, face up. Nearby on the ground lies a discarded spraycan of propane, full, as though

abandoned in a hurry. I ask the smiling mass of straw and streamers, "Are you okay Miss—Sir—you?" and of course it doesn't answer, it's not a person. I am confused. I finger your matchbox in my pocket.

When I get back to the apartment you are gone and the laptop is wiped clean. Only the curtains, cables, instruments, kitchen there. And the word magnets I bought for you to practice your poems with sit still on the steel refrigerator door. They say,

You don't—love me,
Green-Eyes-With-Yellow-Inside—
You don't love me—either. **F**

The Experiment

“It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.”

-Italo Calvino-

The Garret

1.

I whispered something to my hand as it hung in the air.
The strangers were playing dirty doctor in the bushes.
I had my hair cut that very day and was no longer taken for Jesus.
The Garret surrounded itself with a moat, complete with alligator.

My hand had a bad habit of not speaking or listening.
The strangers had joined up with a tribe of stranger strangers.
Henceforth they would be known as the Apache Dancers.
The Garret wanted to avoid lawsuits and disappeared in the fog;

it would reappear later, but only to those tenants who were worthy.
The Apache Dancers were asked to leave the neighborhood.
I could not find myself in the fog. Was I still in the attic?
The Garret held a blue candle of longing close to its chest.

Was I in the alcove called the Butler's Room? Yes, the Butler's Room.
My alter ego, known only as Bruno, had stolen the key.
I slept in the trunk curled up with my dinner, a head of lettuce.
When I woke and stood up too fast, I felt my blood fall to my feet.

The Garret became the prow of a ship. The Apache Dancers
learned the hornpipe. We sailed into a future
that was getting smaller as we approached the horizon.
Bruno held my hand to my ear. I heard ants crawling inside my hand.

2.

The attic tended to hoard all its memories.
I remembered water that was green and deep.
Julia Marlowe danced until her feet bled.
The support group dissolved into an aimless mob.

But the attic did not recall being a forest.
I remembered when blood was water.
Julia Marlowe danced while she was sleeping.
The support group ran amok, pulling the red

velvet chairs out of the floor and using
the cushions as flotation devices, for the river
had risen, the attic became the prow of a ship,
and no one up to that moment in history

had ever used seat cushions as flotation devices.
It was a Noah's ark of singular objects:
one gyroscope, one stereoscope, one ladle.
Julia Marlowe danced a hornpipe on the deck,

her arms crossed, her high-laced shoes
all a blur of barely visible paradiddles,
the Royal Navy cap tilted upon her curls just so.
She was showered with nickels.

Later she took a bath in our drinking water.
I forgave her, and knelt to kiss her ankles.
The support group changed their name
to Los Olvidados. They headed south,

crossing the Rio Grande. In Mexico, Julia Marlowe
posed for a cigar label, and later, much later
you could see her, rimmed with gold leaf, right next
to Captain Cotton, Seminola and General Almonte.

3.

The lake lapped at the entrance to her crypt.
Her death stood in the shadows, feeling cheated.
She had slept in the crypt, just to try it out.
Carlos held her hand, while she prostrated herself
in a manner she hoped was Victorian or Pre-Raphaelite.

Now Carlos stood in the shadows in his black pajamas.
The sun hid in a cloud, lighting it up from the inside.
The cloud was Victorian or pre-Raphaelite.
Death's handmaiden brought chicory coffee and beignets
from the Café du Monde while the lake retreated from the crypt.

She had slept so soundly, perhaps she'd try it again.
Carlos, having slept at home, felt cheated,
but he was no more substantial than death's shadow.
Perhaps she could try sleeping with that plaster cast

of her own face, so peaceful and serene. Definitely
Pre-Raphaelite. Or Victorian. Swooning lady,
outside your own crypt, Carlos holds your hand
and places his palm upon thy forehead.
The sun hides, disappointed, and Death
turns his back on the unmoored night.

Coffee, beignets, perhaps she'll write up
her obituary and send it to *The Picayune*.
One dies a little after such gradual mornings.
Afternoon: dress shops in the French Quarter.
Something lacy, tight-waisted, Victorian or Pre-Raphaelite.

4.

Each day he remembered himself in the following:
a list of Texas counties by number;
the chances of snow for Christmas;
the quickness and shyness of the Muse.

Each day something moved in his mind.
Rhode Island became an Island.
West Virginia became East Virginia.
November 14th, 5:46 a.m. ceased to exist.

He imagined tundra animals watching Telemundo.
Even the President spoke Spanish.
Immersion courses in German became
courses in the street slang of Tijuana.

San Diego became Tijuana.
Henceforth furniture consignment stores
would only sell question marks, and fruit
that when eaten produced electricity.

He made a random search of inquiries.
He imagined tundra animals watching Telemundo.
Each day, something moved in his mind.
Each day, he reported on the following:

5.

I was nothing there.
He said, I am not a me, neither are you.
The tap dancers wore string bikinis.
The rusty car stank of roaches.

I was not a me either.
He said, all yous eventually become mes.
The tap dancers peeled off their bikinis.
The rusty car cried because it had no wheels.

I cried because I was not a rusty car.
Neither was I a he nor a she.
He agreed and renamed himself It.
The rusty car told stories:

Once my hood blew off
and flapped away like a huge wing
that took flight without me.
I have rolled, flaming, down many hillsides.
I am full of bullet holes.
I was the last car driven by Bonnie and Clyde.

The rusty car, the rusty car, who believes the rusty car?
It, formally He, was not listening anyway.

It stood facing the sea with arms crossed.
The rusty car, embarrassed, was silent and never spoke again.

6.

I whisper something to my hand as it hangs in the air.
The attic tends to hoard all its memories.
The lake laps at the entrance to Julia Marlowe's crypt.
Each day he remembers himself in the following:

The Garret, the attic, the crypt, the tap dancers
at the town square busking for nickels.
The tap dancers are replaced by Peruvian

pan pipers, who it is said, are masters
of bi-location and time travel, able to appear
simultaneously, in small towns everywhere at once,

at any time, in the same woven caps, piping
the same song as they circle in the same single file.
Julia Marlowe thinks perhaps they are calling her.

Meanwhile, the front porch beckons. Come sit down.
He is a passing stranger, unfamiliar with place.
I tie a piece of string around the small god-figure,

place it upright in a pot of sand, recalling
that he had stolen it in Africa just for me.
Julia also is not big on time, all the same to her.

But she adores the word *always*. Always the red
velvet mushroom poking through the sod, the carrion
mushroom that broadcasts the scent of death, so Victorian.

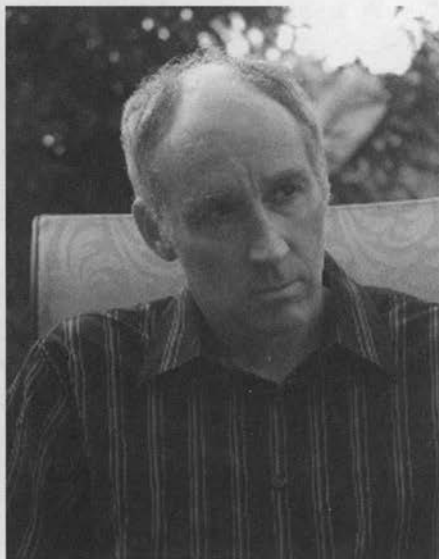
Or is it Pre-Raphaelite? What would Carlos say?
I demur. I know—*always* happens sooner or later,
but can't an exception be made in my case?
The chairs on the front porch rock in the wind.

The ghosts slap their knees. I whisper
something to my hand as it hangs in the air.
The chairs creak, as does a floorboard in the attic.

Mark Halliday

“Heavy Trash”: A Conversation with Mark Halliday

Born in 1949, Mark Halliday earned his B.A. at Brown University in 1971, an M.A. in creative writing at Brown in 1976, and a Ph.D. in English Literature at Brandeis University in 1983. He has taught English at two high schools and five colleges; since 1996 he has taught at Ohio University



in the creative writing program. His books of poetry include: *Little Star* (a National Poetry Series selection), *Tasker Street* (winner of the Juniper Prize), *Selfwolf*, and *Jab*. His book on Wallace Stevens, *Stevens and the Interpersonal*, was published by Princeton University Press in 1991. Also in 1991 Johns Hopkins University Press published *The Sighted Singer*, a book on poetics co-authored by Allen Grossman and Halliday. Halliday has published essays on the poetry of Claire Bateman, Anne Carson, Carl Dennis, Kenneth Fearing, Allen Grossman, David Kirby, Kenneth Koch, Larry Levis, and James Tate. In 1998-2000 Hal-

liday held a Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Foundation Writer's Award. In 2001-2002 Halliday lived at the American Academy in Rome as a winner of the Rome Prize of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2006 he won a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Laura Powers, poetry editor for *Fugue*, conducted the following interview with Halliday during the summer of 2007.

Laura Powers: Mark, in an interview with Martin Stannard, you mentioned that when you started writing poetry you were distracted by the “magic” of what other, more established poets (Bly, Strand, and James Wright, to name a few) were writing. You admit to being wrapped up in “half-assed imitations” of writers you admired until you realized that you had something else to do. How does a poet ever recognize such a thing? How then do we give ourselves permission to do that “something else?”

Mark Halliday: I'm slightly embarrassed by how long it took me to get serious

as a poet. I reached nearly the end of my twenties without committing myself to writing the best poems I could write, by which I mean poems that tried hard to express my deepest complexes of feeling and perception. Some poets seem to grow up in this way by the age of 25, or even younger. But I spent most of my twenties being very energetic and prolific, but only half-serious.

In the early Seventies (my early twenties), so-called Neo-surrealist, or Deep Image poetry, was very prestigious. In my Providence years I was surrounded by young poets who worshipped the kind of poetry being written by Merwin, Bly, Wright, Strand, and others; it was a huge vogue. The charisma of it all impressed me, but I didn't deeply believe in it, and I tended to write half-baked imitations or semi-parodies of it. Deep down I harbored a suspicion that none of the famous living poets were really all that great. Meanwhile, in a corner of my mind there was a slight awareness of Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch—I'd read O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* and Koch's "Fresh Air" and found them very attractive, but I assumed they couldn't be taken as serious models. I was adrift. Meanwhile I also wrote a lot of fiction and humorous prose, without ever committing myself wholly to that either.

What I needed was a great mentor, and in 1978 I met Frank Bidart and he became that for me. He demanded a deep truthfulness in poems, and he was intensely impatient with any poetic flourishes that were not working toward a deep truthfulness for a poem as a whole. His sense of what was serious and what wasn't became terrifically convincing to me. I began to write more ambitious poems, poems trying hard to embody the full reality of my relation to an issue or memory or desire, and I began to "hear my voice"—a very conversational, anxiously argumentative voice. Some inspiration for this came from the examples of O'Hara and Koch. Bidart helped me believe that such a style could be poetic in the best sense.

I'd like to be able to claim that I would have grown up in this way without meeting Bidart. After all, the examples of seriousness are out there—Dickinson, Whitman, Hardy, Frost, Yeats, Stevens, Eliot . . . But before starting doctoral work in 1977, I had only dabbled in these poets. I hadn't begun to ask myself how I might be able to imitate—not just their manners, but their essential ambition.

LP: Your doctoral work was in Literature? Did you, or do you, ever feel like your academic side is at war with your creative side? Does your academic background ever keep you from going as far as you want to into what Robert Wrigley once called "poetry la-la-land?"

MH: My head in 1976, when I finished my M.A. in creative writing, was a very busy jumble of thoughts and opinions. I was at least smart enough to realize how much I needed to read and study. And I had a feeling of the CW world being a chaos composed of countless little alliances . . . (It's true

on a more vast scale today.) So I went to Brandeis for a Ph.D. in Literature, which I finished in 1983. Mostly when I remember those years I remember tremendous stimulation—intellectual, creative—the two concerns constantly interacting. Except in occasional depressed moods, I still feel that my intellectual self and my poet self cohabit and cooperate in a healthy way. Maybe this is easier for me to believe than for some poets, since my poetry tends to have a very overt aspect of argument, explanation, discursiveness (even if this is often self-ironic). I feel strongly that what I do in poetry, what the living poets I most respect do, has a deep kinship with what Frost and Hardy and Keats and Wordsworth and Herbert did. We may be less talented than they were, and we may write in free verse which would not have seemed poetic to them, but still our effort to represent the most important currents of life is an undertaking we share with them. We should want to know a lot about them.

But it's true that one can feel inhibited, as a poet, by the towering greatness of past poets. What you refer to as "poetry la-la-land" is reached partly by an unconscious or half-conscious feeling of "My spirit is amazing! I'm an explorer voyaging into unknown spaces! I'm incredible!" And we do need to have this feeling, or this illusion. Somehow (except when I'm depressed!) I seem to be able to generate, or slip into, that kind of egotistical excited creativity, enough to write poems, and then to pull back (an hour later, a month later, or a year later) from that mood toward coolness and reflectiveness and perspective, enough so that I can revise the poems with an awareness of what The Reader is going to be able to get from them. On a good day, I can draft a poem and write a page or two of critical prose about someone else's work.

There is a kind of wildness and fecundity of metaphor that my poetry mostly doesn't have. I see it as an appealing quality in some other poets. I try to accept the fact that my poetry doesn't offer it. I don't blame my academic training for this. I mean, I'm the guy I am, and without formal academic training I would still have been basically this guy—not Lorca or Rimbaud!

LP: I notice that in both *Selfwolf* and *Jab* you're defiant about poetic convention, or perhaps more accurately, workshop convention. We're told by emerging fellow poets that we should never, never-ever, use words like "happy," or "forever" in a poem. And if we ever do dare, those words should never be at the end of a line. Yet we know that great poets do indeed use those words, and when they do, they make those words count. You use "those" words and make them count. Your poem "Olivier Bergmann" speaks directly (or at least, I think it does) to what I'm getting at here: the word "twinkle" is used in this poem in a clever way. Are you being deliberately defiant?

MH: Probably I defy some conventions but abide by more of them—at least from the perspective of a radically disjunctive poet. Certainly I'm someone

who rebelled against "high" or "noble" poetic diction, in my formative stage. But that's true of lots of poets in each generation; Ginsberg and O'Hara and Koch in their generation, for instance. Among my near contemporaries it's a long list, including for instance Tony Hoagland, Dean Young, Mary Ruefle, David Rivard, Charles Harper Webb, many others. Each generation has some poets who want to open up more variety of diction in poems, including the diction of ordinary talk. But maybe your question points more toward the presence in many of my poems of direct statements, ideas expressed without metaphor, thoughts presented without (or apparently without) irony. If this is defiance of convention, it's also (as with most bravery?) me doing what feels most like me, like what I can do with energy and self-belief. My mind is not a bountiful garden of metaphors, like, say, the mind of Keats. In the sentence I just wrote, "bountiful garden" is nothing special as metaphor; Keats would have come up with a richer phrase. My mind has a tendency to "cut to the chase," to pursue the idea, the argument—as you would if you were really arguing or passionately discussing something with friends while drinking a second bottle of wine. I tend (or, my speakers tend!) to put a statement out there, then worry—right in front of the reader—about whether the statement is true enough, or the full truth. This feels like my most likely path to a poem that feels authentic.

LP: I want to ask you how you decide to "get into" your poems. How you write yourself into a poem, that is. I realize that observation sounds a bit silly, but you do seem to edge into some of your poems. For example, in "Poetry Failure," you write, "For example, I wrote a poem in 1976 about the Vermont house." The poem then proceeds to express, and express well, your impressions about your mother. The reader has a pretty good sense of who your mother was and, more accurately, who she was not. So, why some of this hemming and hawing to get to what you want to say? That sounds, maybe, more mean than I intend. Still...

MH: My poems have often been described as very self-conscious. This is sometimes given as a reason for disliking them. In most of my poems, the speaker is aware that he's trying to say something on an occasion, under pressure, and that the saying is difficult. In some cases, this self-awareness becomes explicitly the awareness that "I'm trying to write a poem here." Now, this note is struck in countless poems by some poets older than me, of course. It's in Koch and O'Hara; it's in Bidart's great poem "Golden State"; it's in some poems by Robert Pinsky, and Billy Collins, and Albert Goldbarth, and Robert Hass (just to name a few). But I carry it pretty far. Pinsky once advised me not to overdo it with the poems about writing, poems about being a poet. And I try not to allow a given manuscript to be swamped with such poems. I understand that such poems are very off-putting to some readers.

However, again, my own path to truth seems often to require this explicit self-consciousness:

To me it feels often like a necessary honesty to say to the reader, in effect: "Yeah, I'm trying to say it right, but saying it right is tricky. And, I want the thing to be a poem, but not just some routine familiar poem, I'm working here, you know it and I know it." This results in quite a bit of what you call "edging into" the poem, or "hemming and hawing". Some readers want to say, "Clear your damn throat and just present exactly what the poem is in essence, make it clean and sharp and hard like a dark diamond." I'm just not a poet for those readers. Hemming and hawing (not a phrase I love!) suggests a real person with a real throat trying to find words on a real occasion. That's the impression I like to convey in most poems.

Related to this is that I'm often—in at least half of my poems—very aware of the possibility that I'll be reading the poem aloud some day at a reading. It's going to be heard. I think of the audience. I think of how boring, how deadly a lot of poetry readings are. Even if the poet is good, you sit there sometimes not understanding, not knowing what in hell the poem is about, feeling you're missing the metaphors ... I don't want to deliver that experience if I can help it. The voice of "Here I am thinking out loud here" is a voice that tends to invite listeners in, to help them ride along. But, I realize I pay a price for this. There are some nice poetic effects I don't attain.

LP: I was pretty sure you wouldn't be crazy about the "hem and haw!" Another example of what I'm getting at here is "Trumpet Player, 1963." Your first lines are "I see this trumpet player (was there even a horn section in that song?/ Say there was)." (The reader then gets a full-fledged image of Jan and Dean's trumpet player blasting his way through "Surf City." All completely imaginary) Jan and Dean didn't have a horn section, possibly ever. You could have nixed that beginning, and the reader would have been left with a decent image of any trumpet player. The way you ease us into the poem, though, keeping those "Jan and Dean" imaginings, the reader is given an entirely different, more intriguing, image of this guy: the one only in your own head.

MH: I had a whole draft of "Trumpet Player" before I realized that in fact there were no horns in "Surf City". As you say, I could have switched to a different song, or a different instrument, to pursue the poem's idea. But I wanted to stick with the vision that got it started. So I decided to be out front about the issue. As you say, this makes very clear to the reader that I'm embarking on a whimsical hypothesis. I think it emphasizes that this whole image of the trumpet player was something I needed, something I was pulled toward, it arose while listening to a song that doesn't even have a trumpet in it.

Some workshop teachers focus on poetic efficiency and shapeliness and a sort of suave grace. Whereas I tend to say to my students, "Tell more, reveal

more, say more, give us more of the underlying complication. Let the poem be less pretty and more true." Good poems tend to be born out of some kind of psychological trouble. Let's not allow the poem to airbrush that away.

LP: "Psychological trouble?" What do you mean, more precisely? Most poets realize pretty early on that writing while depressed or upset is usually a no-go. Do you mean writing out of that "formal feeling comes" kind of place? After great emotion or trouble?

MH: You're right that a person is unlikely to write a good poem in the very moment of extreme distress—fear or rage or grief or despair. Wordsworth must have been thinking of this when he spoke of "emotion recollected in tranquility"—and yet the word "tranquility" has always seemed too placid in that formulation. When I say that good poems tend to be born out of psychological trouble, I mean that the root of the poem is in something the person feels is not okay as it is. Some aspect of life feels incomplete or askew or too opaque or too silent. The writer wants to remedy this.

It's often noted that we tend to resist poems of sheer happiness. "Ah, the joy of living! The songs of the pretty birds, the deliciousness of lobster with lime chutney, the warmth of God's love, the fun of licking my lover's organs ..." We usually are repulsed by poems like that, or our feeling is "That's nice for you but we don't need to hear about it." There are exceptions. Kenneth Koch, a star for me, tried many times to express in poems the joy, or rather the excitement, the thrill of being alive. I like some of those poems, and yet the work by Koch I value most is the poetry of anxiety, self-doubt, regret, and bewilderment. Moreover, I would argue that even Koch's poems of exhilaration have an anxiety—sometimes half-admitted—behind them: a feeling of "I'm so happy, I'm so fired up, and yet I sense it won't last, I can't keep it at this peak"—or a feeling of "I was so happy and fired up just an hour ago but now at my typewriter I already feel a bit different."

If you have to write about it, then you must be in some way dissatisfied or not at peace with it. And that's at the core of the true poem you can write. This is why many poems of joy or awe or appreciation of Nature ring false, insofar as they pretend to be entirely inhabiting that nice condition. The truth is that the poet is nervously trying to recapture, or ponder, that condition, or to eulogize it, or to prove to us that he/she really was there.

Similarly, wisdom poems are often—not always off-putting or depressing. I mean poems that seem to say "Here's something I have all figured out, and I give it to you with a pretty ribbon around it." If a poem comes at us this way, it damn well better have interesting fresh wisdom to offer. And, I would argue that the best poems of this kind—Shakespeare's sonnet "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame" would be a drastic example—do convey to us

that distress preceded the wise declaration.

If just living—playing sports, drinking, eating, dancing, having sex, petting your dog, diving into a pool, and stargazing—were totally fine and enough, then I don't think we would have good rock and roll songs, let alone poems.

LP: Of course we suffer cheer far better in songs than we do in poetry. Mark, would you discuss your poem "Against Realism" in context of your last answer? That poem appears to condemn the prosaic realities of everyday struggle and maybe "psychological trouble."

MH: "Against Realism" is an example of a strategy I've tried at least a dozen times: there is some attitude or opinion or view that troubles me, either because I find it deeply threatening or disturbing, or because I find it in myself and it embarrasses me. So then I give the voice of a poem to this attitude—but with some element of exaggeration, distortion, caricature, in order to indicate that I don't entirely endorse the attitude, or even in some cases to expose the silliness or sickness of the attitude. I remember in high school being very impressed with Auden's "To the Unknown Citizen", maybe that was the first time I saw the strategy in a poem. Other examples in my work are "Vegetable Wisdom", "Population", "Horrible", "Nights at Ruby's".

To me this strategy feels very cathartic, ultimately healthy, though it makes me write things that could seem offensive and vile to a moralistic reader who doesn't get what's happening. In "Against Realism" I was trying to face my own stubborn, un-killable romanticism, which embraces the myth that my most murky and most egocentric feelings are special and marvelous. This myth at some level fuels every poet, I believe. We tend to let it excuse us from some portion of the responsibilities and hassles in the life of a thoroughly generous, compassionate, morally thoughtful friend/spouse/relative/citizen. Moreover, I often sense there's a gender aspect in it; though I know there are some flamingly egocentric, self-mythologizing female artists, still it seems to me that boys are more apt to internalize deeply the idea that we don't have to be responsible all day every day in boring ways so long as we are bold-brash-funny-daring-cool. We can be Errol Flynn. But at some point, an intelligent person realizes that to be a swashbuckling star causes lots of pain and unhappiness for others. "Against Realism" represents my adolescent brain trying to resist that realization. Meanwhile, though, I'm not exactly repudiating the poem's attitude! Realistic practicality does strike me as grotesquely tedious, too often.

LP: Then "Against Realism" is taking risks mostly with tone. Another of your poems, "Seven Baskets," does this to an even greater extent. A superficial reading of that poem might leave the reader wondering about the speaker's

apparently extreme bravado. Really, though, it's very tongue-in-cheek. How does a poet take such risks with tone?

MH: How to take risks with tone—well, it always involves trusting the reader, which depends on having somehow set up a relationship with the reader. At a poetry reading, of course, this can be done in many ways with facial expressions, gestures, actual tones of voice, all the signals we give people to help them interpret us. In social situations we're often extremely sophisticated in conveying shades of irony. On paper, our resources are much more limited, but we can try to give signals that to some extent evoke or imitate those real-life social signals. "Seven Baskets" starts off "And then I sprang from the silver taxi"—already suspiciously silly, I hope, with the too-peppy verb "sprang" and the way "And then" suggests that we're stepping into an ongoing stream of egocentric narration. It can't take an intelligent reader long to realize that "Seven Baskets" is sheer male fantasy, I think.

In a book of poems, the poet can sort of gradually show the reader a range of likely tones and ironies, so the reader learns to make a good guess at what the tone of a given poem is. "Seven Baskets" wouldn't work well as the first poem in *Jab*, probably, because its over-the-top ego-absurdity might be too jarring. But, I like to imagine a reader who has to adjust her or his interpretation as a poem develops; that experience of "catching on" can be exciting and fun. It's like the first time you carefully read Browning's "My Last Duchess" and the understanding creeps over you: what the duke has done and why. It's satisfying to feel how Browning trusted us to catch on.

LP: You say that in a book of poems the poet can show the reader a range of tones. The way a book is set up, though, can lead to some misinterpretations of tone. I made that mistake myself. "Seven Baskets" comes after a few poems that deal with divorce, "Heavy Trash" and "Divorced Fathers and Pizza Crusts," of course. I read "Seven Baskets" as a poem that conveys the way a divorced, perhaps vulnerable, man reestablishes his ego.

MH: I don't really see much connection between "Seven Baskets" and the divorce poems, because, I think many happily married men still have the kind of fantasy life (about glory, freedom, athletic prowess, sexual adventure) the poem displays. I wrote "Seven Baskets" as a happily married man. My wife just rolls her eyes, makes a sarcastic remark, and figures I have to write what I have to write. She is the wife in my poem "The Beloved".

I think when I was unhappy in my first marriage, I was less able to write humorously about sexual desire. Though the theme of being a guy who in some ways needed to grow up more was certainly central in *Tasker Street*.

LP: When I think of "divorce poems" I immediately think of Sexton, Plath—

Confessional, and female. Your divorce poems never reveal too much (as Bishop accused Confessional poets of doing), and are male. Where do your “divorce poems” fit in?

MH: Is it true that poems about divorce are mostly by women? Actually I doubt it. I suspect there are a lot of poems by men who want somehow to “explain” or get perspective on their willingness to end a marriage. “Heavy Trash” and “Divorced Fathers and Pizza Crusts” and “Divorce Dream” and “Separated Father” and “The Fedge” are all poems in which I’m trying to give shape to feelings from the end of my first marriage. Alan Shapiro and Michael Collier have both written powerful, painful poems about divorce, from a man’s point of view. Jack Myers has also. Not to mention Robert Lowell! Meanwhile, Cynthia Huntington in her book *The Radiant* has some terrific poems about it from the wife’s perspective.

It’s strange to imagine Elizabeth Bishop reading “Seven Baskets”. I think she would have hated it. She would have found most of my work too talky and in-your-face, I’m afraid. There is a deep streak of caution in Bishop. She wants to reveal her heart but she wants to do it safely, with some control, not desperately, not too vulnerably; thus when she does show her vulnerability (like in “Insomnia” and “One Art”) it’s very striking, even alarming. I admire and respect Bishop a lot. But I have a feeling of there being huge areas of experience she doesn’t deal with. And I feel I would never be able to imitate her style. However, in one way I think I share in an attitude of hers: she wants to write some autobiographical poems, certainly, but she doesn’t want the reader to simply assume that all her poems are full of reliable autobiographical details; she needs more freedom than that.

LP: Yes, “Seven Baskets” probably Bishop would hate. I mean, though, the way you write about your feelings that doesn’t feel like purging.

MH: “Going overboard” can mean some different things. Probably the main thing it would mean would be sentimentality. That’s a hard thing to define but it’s a concept I find very frequently necessary in trying to say how some poems go wrong. Sentimentality always involves a simplification of life. The sentimental poem tries to sell the reader (and maybe the poet also) a version of life that is streamlined, smoothed out in some way. This simplifying can go in the direction of the saccharine, the nicey-nicey, but it can also go in other directions such as the pseudo-tough, pseudo-stoical; also, the moralistic, the self-vauntingly noble. The simplifying often involves exaggeration of one element in the mix of motives, feelings, perceptions, and the downplaying or concealing of other elements. As I said in earlier answers, I’m in favor of poems that try to unearth and show forth the entangledness of feelings and ideas.

"Going overboard" can also mean, of course, harping on something, pursuing something in a boring way. Readers who dislike my work would be apt to say that many of my poems, especially any that run longer than a page, become too obvious, nursing or indulging an attitude or idea far past the point where the reader understood it. To such readers I say, "Go to hell." No, I say "Please imagine the poem as a speech, or flow of thought, coming from the mind of a protagonist. The poem is meant to be a drama of that speaker searching for a completion of the statement." At the same time, though, I know a poem should not assume (the way a tediously garrulous person assumes) that the speaker's whole life story is big news. The reader is someone whose mother has died, or will die. A poem about the death of the poet's mother needs to know this. The poem always needs some strangeness or surprise in a particular angle or focus.

As I mentioned earlier, I tend not to offer elaborate metaphor, or when I do it's with a winking consciousness of its artificiality. However, I can love elaborate metaphor when it serves a search for truth. We see this in Hopkins, for instance, and in Herbert and Donne. I see it in Claire Bateman, and Alan Shapiro, and William Olsen, for instance; elaborate metaphor in their good work is not just professional showmanship, it's a way of thinking.

LP: Over the course of our discussion, a lot of names have been thrown around. Where do you see yourself in the poetry-scheme of things? Can a poet place themselves? Is that more a job for history?

MH: The easy answer, of course, is to leave it to readers to decide where I stand, or any poet stands, in "the scene of poetry" today. But the truth is that each poet keeps imagining and re-imagining his or her place in it. In terms of currents or camps, I'm clearly (as we've discussed) swimming along in currents that favor discursiveness, and humor, as valuable possibilities. Saying this, I hasten to note that a discursive voice (arguing, lecturing, explaining, discussing) really characterizes only about half my poems; and that most of the poems in my books (as distinguished from all the ones I get into journals) are not particularly humorous. Nevertheless, discursiveness and humor are noticeable features in my work. Hence, if someone is grouping contemporaries, I'd be sorted with people like David Kirby, Tony Hoagland, Charles Harper Webb, Denise Duhamel, Albert Goldbarth, Barbara Hamby . . .

Actually, though, such sorting is depressing, because it immediately feels like a trap. And in my case, it doesn't explain why two of my favorite poets now are Claire Bateman (whimsical visionary) and Alan Shapiro (bleak, and quasi-formal). A common denominator is that the poets I admire make some kind of sense! It seems crazy that I have to even say this, but in our era (and in the long shadow of messed-up pretentiousness in Pound and Olson and Duncan, and the other hokeyness of neo-surreal collective-unconsciousness

flowing from Latin American influences and Merwin) it is necessary.

I want to feel that the poet is looking you in the eye and really trying to get something across to you, really caring if you get it. At the same time, what is being said needs to be interesting, fresh, intelligent, revelatory: not routine or canned.

Oh god, the scheme of things . . . There are so many poets publishing, ever since the Seventies, that it's not even possible to take most of them into account in any thoughtful overview on a given day. So, naturally most such overviews or lists of big hitters seem skewed, tendentious, parochial. Indeed, I think each of us needs to forget dozens, or hundreds, of poets, in order to function at all!

We need posterity! Will posterity be there for us? Poets have believed in it ever since the Elizabethans—since the Romans indeed. But do we believe in it? I have a notion that deep down, many of us are starting to disbelieve in it. Global warming; pollution; nuclear weapons; grotesque misuse of the planet; the poor nations inevitably fighting to get more of our pie (which they now see so vividly and constantly via electronic media)—these factors churn in our subconscious minds and tend to suggest that fifty years from now, or a century from now, there won't be a society (not a huge liberal democratic society anyway) in which people have the security and leisure to be posterity for us. Terrifying thought. Degrading, damaging thought: it pushes poets toward writing stuff that will make a splash today, cheaply, because we can't count on the far-off tomorrow that Keats (when not depressed) counted on. We need the belief that posterity will sort us out seriously—and keep what matters. (My poem “Loaded Inflections” is about this.)

LP: Finally, Mark, I want to know what question is it that you wish someone would have the insight to ask you? Tell me something about your poetry, or about you as poet, that everyone somehow misses, or just overlooks.

MH: We live in an age of quick-shopping. Proceed directly to checkout. It's a cliché to say we all feel overwhelmed with information; there's truth in the cliché. We all devise strategies for extremely rapid response, extremely rapid selection of stimuli. I imagine that a reader of poetry in 1959, the year of *Life Studies*—or in 1968, when I first bought some books of poems—could be calmer, more open-minded, less quick to categorize and dismiss. Is this a myth? Not entirely! Anyway, the readers I want ~ before my death, if possible—are people who somehow manage not to instantly assume they know what I'm doing from fast glances at my poems, or from (for instance) a satirical poem I publish in a journal. They take the time to read, to reflect—and they realize that I dig deeper into truth than—uh, than lots of other poets who might superficially seem similar.

We all tend to offer judgments on a given poet's work when what we're

really reacting to, what we really recall, is only a few poems. I try to be a good reader of individual poems. It's true that a poet can be interesting even with a lot of botched poems, when there is a serious search or struggle animating them. But when I hear a summary judgment of a book—or when I dish one out!—then I think, "Wait a minute—how does that apply to this poem or that poem?" It's hard to stay committed to the idea of the success or failure of individual poems. When I read someone's book, typically I find three poems I really like; or maybe five poems; if I really like more than that, I'm surprised and delighted. So then I try to be true to my perception. One result is, when I'm asked to write a blurb, I often try to get out of it, because my true blurb would say "This poem is good, and this other one is good"—rather than, you know, "a luminous and magical poet of adjective adjective intensity and adjective adjective grace and adjective power." Meanwhile, nevertheless, for my own work I'm naturally hoping for readers who discover that all the poems are awesome. ¶

Contributor's Notes

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Brian Barker's first book of poems, *The Animal Gospels*, won the Tupelo Press Editors' Prize. His poems, reviews, and interviews have appeared in such journals as *Poetry*, *Agni*, *Quarterly West*, *Pleiades*, *American Book Review*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *The Indiana Review*, *Blackbird*, *Sou'wester*, and *River Styx*. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Director of Creative Writing at Murray State University in Murray, KY.

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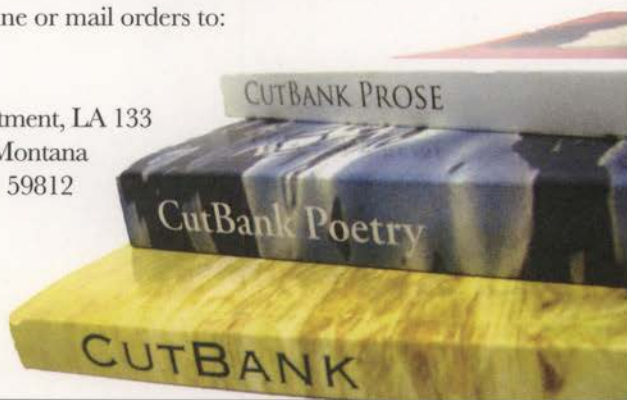
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