

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Like so many high school kids, we read J.D. Salinger to find out what soon would be readily apparent: the world is not what it is cracked up to be. Salinger's writing is famous for dispelling the myths of adulthood through careful consideration of its onset. His withdrawal from the public sphere transformed him from celebrated author into modern-day sphinx—the subject of speculation, rumor, and legend. Now, as ever, his works/writings do what many myths do: offer new ways to understand and be in the world.

For our ninth issue, *Myth, Magic, & Ritual*, we called for work that considers the ways in which myth has been used—and continues to be used—as a means of explaining and combating those elusive and often troublesome forces that act upon our lives. In these pages, you will find a tall tale about sea creatures; a study of the fabled Bruce Springsteen; reconfigurations of Biblical figures; magical realism from Chile via Switzerland; laments on myth's ability to distort history and the inherent ritualism of addiction. From these responses, we've deduced that myths and magic and rituals are so widely and variously dispersed, and so woven into our daily existence, as to assume the form of shape-shifter: shadows pursuing shadows, pausing occasionally to take form.

2010

the danny's reading series

may 12
7:30pm

geoffrey g. o'brien

(*the guns and flags project, green and grey, 2A*)

jeff clark

(*the little door slides back, music and suicide, 2A*)

june 9
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john beer

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MAKE

SPRING/SUMMER 2010

ISSUE #9

MYTH, MAGIC, & RITUAL

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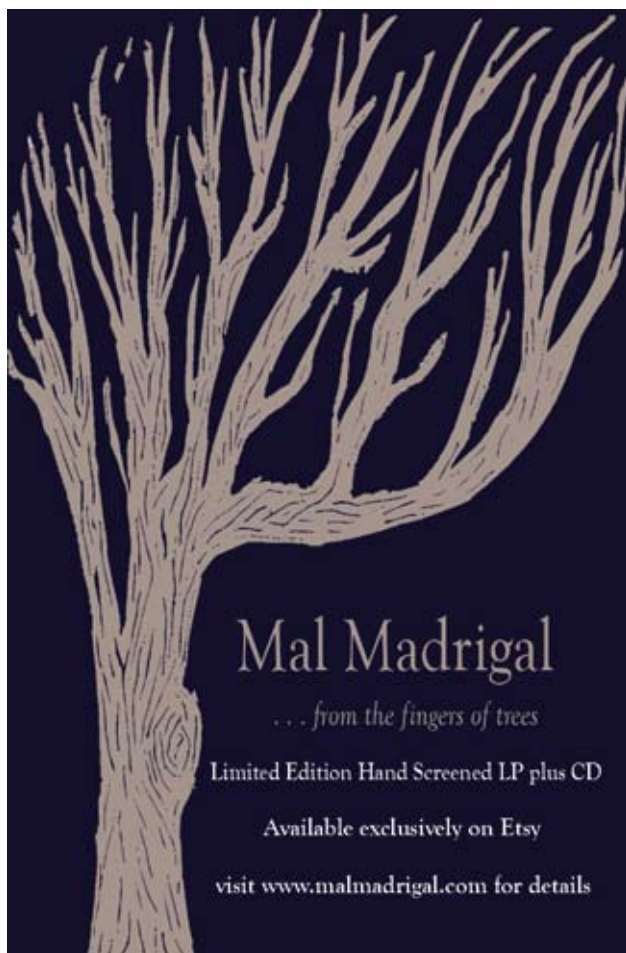
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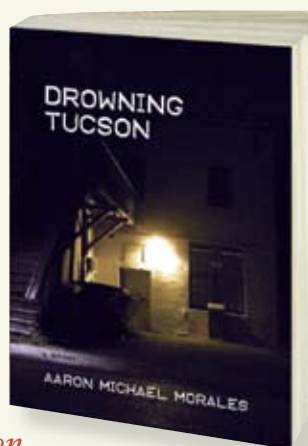


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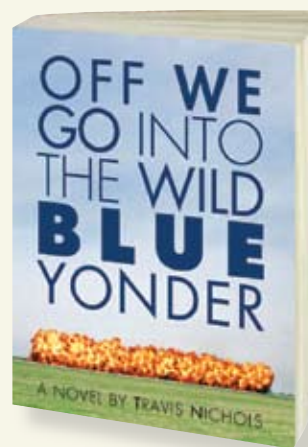
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ABOUT THE COVER

The lines on the cover are excerpted from the essay by Jenny Bouilly, found in the first pages of this issue. They suggest that the act of naming, of pointing out, is an act of simultaneous creation and destruction; that our conjuring irrevocably alters that which we conjure. Her essay is rooted in a world of symbology that seeks to interpret the invisible forces acting upon our lives. Myths, magic, and rituals are just a few of the tools we use in our pursuit of these forces, and in our defense against them.

Maya Hayuk
A Path for Light, 2009
Acrylic on paper
42" x 54"

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If you point to heaven, it begins.

nonfiction by JENNY BOULLY

At summer's end, the thread all gray and grimy, the scissors making its way there, I oftentimes wondered what it must be like to be me. The bathwater slightly bubbly, the string wet and clammy, the string never quite coming clean.

This is the same charm that hung on my neck in that photograph of me. In that photograph, big sister is only three. Mother says that she will take it back to the village where she bought it and have the Buddha dipped in gold now, now that she has the money.

There's one banana tree that bleeds red when you cut into it, its sap all viscous and runny. She had long, long hair, and that's how he

caught her, caught her by her flowing hair. See: the leaves, bristling in the dusk breeze: that's how her hair moved when he did it. And so, you tread softly, you tread softly there by that banana tree: the one anomaly that grows red in a field of perfectly green trees.

Each day, I watched the letter carrier ride away. He rode away with my love letters, which never came. The owl circled the house all day.

I didn't know then, when I was so young, that I should not cut it, that to cut the string would be a very bad thing.

To fly across the world: that's spooky talk,

as are ghosts, as is the past, as is the way the weather turned on the day of mourning. And so, they might believe that to come here from the outside country is either a very hard or simple thing, but to come here from the outside country is nevertheless an unnatural thing. To fly across the world is spooky talk, as is leaving, as is saying I will see you again. My aunt lifts the talisman to her forehead, to mine, and lets it fall over my head. It's connected to a string, a bright white string.

The owl means there will be death, my uncle says. He aims his slingshot, does not say what he does to the bird, and that is all there is to say about that.

In the schoolyard, the children asking about it and saying, you must be very poor to have jewelry that's only string.

I want to know what suffering is for: it's to make things lovely, I think, because that's the way the river looks right now, all lit up with candles and banana boats and flowers and incense smoke. My suffering takes on the shape of a floating vessel; a snakefish knives along underneath.

And do you see how even the chickens will not go there? So many little shoots of things and grubs of things and still. The chickens will not go.

If you point to heaven, it begins. To disappear. See: noonday now, and the mushrooms all mulch.

Before leaving, he said that I should never cut my hair so that is why I cut it when he disappeared. That is why, in my passport photograph, I have that look about me that made mother ask if I had seen a ghost, if I needed to go to temple. That is why, when grandmother sees me again, my hair is so short; it's so short because I cut it; I cut it to get back at him. I wondered what it was like to be me, to stop holding. All summer, the long locks falling on the floor. The curl held taut, the scissors making its way there.

I approached the monk rather timidly; I was always shy about getting anything.

That's the place where, before dying, grandmother fell. The silt all red, the mushrooms all drooped down. Even the chickens will not.

The banana flower all engorged. A deep maroon. Little bananas waiting to push through.

I wanted to know what it must be like to be me: these people here who all knew me as a baby. In the photograph, I am six months old. To be suddenly grown, to be a being that is no longer held, and that is why my aunt places the string about me.

All night, the owl, and the letters never came. In the lotus pond, a single stem snapped: its pink flower like a maiden bent over to drown.

My grandmother chewed and chewed the red *moch*, the beetle nut and limestone paste that turned her white teeth black, her lips all the color of poppies. When she laughed, her spittle bled red.

The monk tied the white yarn around my wrist; I watched the monks eat, waited patiently for my turn after that; the noodles and the rice and the various desserts brought to the temple by everyone for everyone.

The birds of paradise: bird upon bird upon bird upon bird like a little ladder for the spirits to climb. Into the little spirit house there is where the little lives go. Except for the little boy who still cries. We have heard him cry, and that is why we light the incense.

She will get it dipped in gold now that she has the money, because that is what you do with your talismans once you have the money; but I would rather that it remained the way that it was when I wore it. All the children in the schoolyard asking: it's a whistle, I'd say and blow on it.

Something held.

The legend goes that there's a big fish, a fish that's like a snake. It's a water dragon that lives in the big river. The legend goes that it only shows itself, randomly, once a year. After that, it goes back into hiding. But, my mother says, but a long time ago, she says. A long time ago, you could see it everyday. Grandmother used to see it all the time, but now, now, my mother says, now people don't believe anymore, so now it has gone away.

Red spots in the red silt where the *moch* mushrooms grow. A spraying of spittle.

I can't help but think that something in the essay's gone missing: something in the essay's gone away.

Mother: a banana blossom; my baby fists: a clutch of banana sprays.

I go for my mother's food first, always, as everyone else's mother's food's a bit gross. Except for the sweet rice cooked with banana and coconut milk in a banana leaf; that dessert was always my favorite.

No one should ever, my mother tells me, should ever wash your under things. I wash mine in the remains of my bathwater, my panties never quite coming clean.

Don't let the broom sweep past your feet. That means an old man will marry you. I move my feet away tenderly.

In the photograph, I am less than a year old; in the photograph, big sister is three; this is the photograph that mother pays for at a department store in the outside country to send home; this is the photograph father keeps in his wallet; this is the photograph that makes me wonder what it is to be me.

The love letters never came; at night, I thought of the owl, whether or not its body was in a grave.

My uncle takes the frog away; he throws it into a river, a pond, a puddle. He goes high into the mountain, low into the valley, on his motorcycle even to another village, but no matter how far he releases the frog, the frog is waiting for him in the bath basin when he returns. It's all smug and snug against the rim of the basin and stares at us. It must be dead kin, mother says. And so, we let the frog stay; it stays with us for days and days.

Something held before it's given away.

When a neck is slit, the blood doesn't trickle, but rather it sprays. That is how the ground here got that way. The pig all distressed, the pig head all dressed to celebrate. Our safe passage home, the unencumbered journey that praying gave.

The frog eventually went away, my uncle says. It went away on the morning of our leaving.

On my birth certificate, it says that I was born in the year of the big snake, the dragon, while the moon was waxen. And someday, I too will show myself less and less, wane before going away. ■

Stephen Eichhorn
Palms I, 2008
Collage on archival paper
61 1/2" x 41 1/2"

So Cold and Far Away

fiction by LILY HOANG and KATHLEEN ROONEY

Ruth props herself up on her elbows, her body a diagonal platform. Just as quickly, she collapses.

Above her, there is exactly half a moon, a penny cut in two on railroad tracks. Even though she knows it won't look anything like it does now, she takes a photograph anyways. Caption, she mumbles, *So cold and far away*.

Ruth has an entire collection of photographs captioned *So cold and far away*, but she doesn't let anyone see them. She puts them in plastic frames with engraved placards taped to their backs. She stows them in a locked drawer, lest Naomi comes snooping around—as she inevitably does—and finds them.

Ruth first began this collection of photographs the night she slept at the feet of Boaz. After she'd removed his shoes, just as Naomi had instructed her to do, she examined his toes. She said to herself, *So cold and far away*, which she'd intended more as a desire than a description, and snapped a quick shot before he woke.

This is not to say Ruth did not like Boaz. She liked him as much as any widow could like her dead husband's next of kin. Which is to say that she loved him enough to marry him.

It was unbearably bright the day of their wedding, despite the heaps of snow surrounding them. They couldn't dig their way out to get to the church, but they married each other anyways. That night, Ruth fled her bedchamber to steal a glimpse of the stars. Instead, she saw Naomi's silhouette slinking slowly toward Boaz.

Ruth doesn't blame Naomi, but at times, she is resentful. Ruth doesn't blame Naomi because as long as she is married to Boaz, she is free to do as she wishes, as long as she maintains the guise of marriage. To Ruth, this is the best part of married life: the parties, the dinners, the reasons to don pearls and sapphires. They are simple people, but that does not mean they never indulge in small decadences.

And Boaz is a kind husband. He gives her private quarters. Although hers is a small house, more befitting servants or mothers-in-law, Ruth does not complain. It is an attempt at privacy, but she is unsure whose privacy Boaz is trying to protect more.



Joseph DeJager Costa, flower sheets and leg, 2009, from the series *It's All Around You*

Theirs is a complicated love, one that is entirely unfair to judge from exterior walls, and they are a private family, one whose walls extend deep into the night sky.

Ruth doesn't blame Naomi because this was, after all, Naomi's clever scheme. Although Naomi is a woman at the height of middle age, her body and beauty have not waned. In fact, Naomi is perhaps more radiant now than when she was Ruth's age. Her skin is buoyant, her breasts resilient. Her eyes are magnets. But it would not look right for a woman of Naomi's age—much less one burdened with her dead son's wife—to be on the market, unless of course, her dead son's wife were to be married off. And so it was Naomi who suggested that Ruth go out dancing, take some French lessons, start working out, and it was Naomi who first knew Boaz, who first guided his hand toward Ruth's thigh. It was misleading, certainly, because Naomi wanted Boaz for herself. By then, Ruth was devastatingly in love, but she was indebted to Naomi.

The day Boaz proposed, he indulged Ruth in unquantifiable ways: a quick trip to Paris for the most lavish dress, brunch with the Queen of England, a private concert by the Berlin Philharmonic, and of course, a spa treatment. Even then, she was surprised when she found a diamond ring at the bottom of her champagne glass. He thought it was original. Ruth used her hands to cover her smile. It was not that long ago that Naomi's son had used the very same tactic on her. She had found it cliché then, as she does now, but Naomi's son is dead and Ruth is a widow, and by any measure, Boaz is a fine man with fair wealth, and Ruth is not such a fool as to ignore any of these truths.

The night Boaz proposed, he demanded sex, but Ruth, being cunning, demanded that he again indulge her in unquantifiable ways, and once sated, she would give him sex. And so for hours, Boaz pleased Ruth. For hours, Ruth sighed and hummed, until finally, exhausted from anticipation, she screamed. Then, she used the browned skin of her belly to clean off his face and called in Naomi to return his favor.

That night, Ruth went into the night and looked at the moon. It was large and distorted, more oval than round, a penny smashed by a train. She had never felt so invigorated and disgusted. She wanted to call Naomi a whore. She pursed her lips to squeeze out the sound but could not. Of course, she'd known Naomi was lingering outside their door all night. She knew Naomi was waiting for Boaz. She knew Naomi had been fucking him for months. Out of spite, she would not give Boaz what he was already getting from her mother-in-law.

There were lines, Ruth thought, between a wife and a mistress, and if a mistress provides a husband with a certain service, the wife should feel no obligation to provide that same service. Otherwise, there would be no necessity for the mistress.

No, Boaz would not get the same goods from both women, and for that reason alone, Ruth would be her husband's greatest conquest.

And so it was for years and years. Boaz would enter Ruth's quarters early in the evening, when the moon was close enough to touch, and he would pleasure her for hours. Some nights, the enticement of her body would be so keen that he would orgasm without being touched. Because she would not allow traditional penetration, Boaz would attempt to impregnate his wife by aiming his ejaculate as close to her as possible.

What Boaz did not know was that despite Ruth's shields and pride, it was out of fear that she would not allow penetration. Her first husband—Naomi's son—had died before they could consummate their marriage. Ruth was, in fact, a virgin.

The nights Boaz came and went from Ruth's quarters, she would lie in bed and listen for Naomi. Every time, Boaz would call out not Naomi's but Ruth's name. Every time, as her mother-in-law fucked her husband, she would take a photograph when he called her name. On the backs of the photographs, she inscribed, *So cold and far away*. They are a random assortment, most of them blurred and dark.

But Ruth loved those photographs as she loved Boaz.

During the day, Ruth had no obligations. She wandered around town, buying this and that. Then she would return home and read or nap. All that was expected of her was that she dine exclusively with Boaz. It was not too much—he said—to ask of his own wife. And so for breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner, Ruth would trek to the main house, where Boaz and Naomi lived, to eat with her husband. During those meals, Boaz would tell her about his day, his business ventures, his unconditional love. During those meals, Boaz would explain to Ruth how Naomi was not his wife. Surely, he could recognize his luck in having two beautiful women, but what he wanted most was Ruth.

Ruth would listen and occasionally clarify her plans for the day if they conflicted with his.

Naomi was never invited to dine with them. Instead, her meals were brought up to her room, which although it was in the main house, was in a separate wing. Boaz insisted that his room should be shared by no one but his wife.

Yes, of course, Naomi was jealous. And she did not know how to moderate her jealousy.

There were days when Naomi was so enraged that she would wedge herself into the china closet, just to spy on the married couple's mundane conversation. There were days when Naomi would ravage Ruth's room, looking for proof of infidelity or foul play. There were days when Naomi would gather strands of the married couple's discarded hair and stroke them against her face and stomach. She thought, *Even their hair is better than mine*. Then there were nights when she would not lie with Boaz, arguing that she is at once his in-law's in-law and his mistress, and although she has at times been content with that, she can no

longer tolerate it. Those nights, she would give Boaz an ultimatum, but before she could finish speaking, he would tell her he chooses Ruth.

Those nights, Naomi would laugh at him and say, *Ruth! She'll never be the wife you want! She was my son's wife, and during that time, not once did she touch him. Not even an embrace!*

Those nights, Boaz would laugh back and say, *There is more to love than desire, Naomi. Perhaps that is why I don't love you.*

Somehow those nights would end in fucking.

Every morning, Boaz goes for long walks in his garden. He carries a pair of shears with him so that he can collect flowers for Ruth. Even in the winter, even when snow erases any semblance of color, Boaz brings Ruth a bouquet of fresh flowers. It is a small gesture of affection that a husband shows his wife.

Ruth is not without kindness. Although she offers Boaz neither flowers nor jewels, after dinner she cleans his feet with warm soapy water and rubs them with lavender oil. It is a small gesture of affection. For them, this is more intimate than anything that could happen behind locked bedroom doors.

Ruth takes scores of photographs, many of which cannot be aptly labeled *So cold and far away*. These photographs litter the walls of the main house. Boaz has each one professionally matted and framed. Even when Naomi wants to escape, these photographs stand as reminders that Ruth will always be first.

For their one-month anniversary, Boaz gave Ruth a tripod.

For their one-year anniversary, Boaz built Ruth a dark room.

Each day of the month that marks the day of their marriage, Boaz gives Ruth a gift relating to photography. Sometimes, it is something small—a new memory card, a new strap for her camera. Other times, his gifts are more extravagant.

The truth of it is that Ruth does love Boaz. She often thinks her love for him could literally kill her. And that is why she refuses to show it.

This is not to say that Boaz has given nothing to Naomi, nor that she does not expect sumptuous gifts. But Boaz makes sure whatever gift he gives Ruth, he gives one of at least one-third the value to Naomi. He came upon this formula rather arbitrarily, and he rarely speaks of it.

Still, all the craftsmen and jewelers know Boaz and his preferences. As such, whenever he goes shopping, everyone knows to offer him selections in mismatched pairs: diamonds and topaz, necklaces and a pair of earrings. Everyone knows that Boaz will give Ruth the better selection, which she will only accept reluctantly, shyly, as if she were not even his wife, and he will give Naomi the

lesser present, which she will wear with pride, as if she were not his wife's mother-in-law and his lowly mistress.

Although Ruth followed her mother-in-law across many lands when her husband died and although Ruth was given the choice—and let the record reflect that she was encouraged to go back to her family rather than stay with Naomi—she did not hesitate.

So long ago, ages ago, Ruth had said, *For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.*

She would come to regret this decision almost immediately, but at that moment, Ruth understood that Naomi was a lonely woman, one whose husband and sons had died, one who was left with neither money nor family. So when Ruth told Naomi she would follow her anywhere and be the faithful daughter she'd never had, she'd had no idea what to expect. But this arrangement was beyond any reasonable expectation for a faithful daughter.

Then came the day Ruth learned she was with child. That day, she locked herself in her closet and refused to emerge. She pulled her sweaters, hats, and scarves down to the ground and built a barricade around herself. There, she softly sang songs of mourning and death to herself and her child. Even then, she knew it was impossible. Although her own mother had never taught her, Ruth knew where babies came from, and she had never done the necessary deeds to make a baby.

More importantly, however, Ruth understood that Boaz would never believe her fidelity. He would never trust that this child was his. He would call her a whore—as she'd wanted to call Naomi so many times—and banish her from his home, and Ruth would have nowhere to go. Worst of all, Ruth understood this baby, this child, would restore all authority to Naomi.

But perhaps even worse than the previous worst, Ruth thought, was the essential truth that she was faithful to Boaz, that she loved him immensely, and even worse than all that was that she could never say any of these things to him.

For three days, Ruth stayed in her closet, and those were the first times since their marriage that Ruth did not eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with Boaz.

The first morning, Boaz waited patiently, unwilling to touch his eggs Benedict until Ruth arrived. The eggs eventually became so cold that when the maid came to remove the dish, the yolk had fully solidified.

For the first time in his entire life, Boaz missed breakfast.

More hurt than concerned, Boaz went about his day. Then came lunch.

Boaz sat at the table, his fingers drumming the hard wood of his chair. He was hungry. He was angry. But he refused to eat. Then, finally, Boaz realized—almost by epiphany—that something must be wrong. He is a quick one, this Boaz.

That first day that Ruth stayed hidden in her closet, Boaz personally went to the kitchen. In many ways, he was surprised he even knew where it was. Boaz asked his cooks and his servants to prepare the most delicious meal for two and deliver it to Ruth's home. He told his butlers to enter quietly and set up a table and chairs, candlelight, the finest silver. He arranged for a cellist to serenade them.

But when they arrived in Ruth's house, they found no one there. Still, they set the table and chairs, the candles, the finest silver. They arranged the meal so that no servants would be necessary and Boaz could have complete privacy with Ruth. Even the cellist was instructed to perform in the main house and speakers were set up at the foot of the table, so to provide mood without being obtrusive. It was perfect. Boaz had not forgotten even the smallest detail. Except, of course, Ruth.

When Boaz arrived, he did not knock. He simply entered, as though expected. Boaz was surprised that Ruth was not there, not eager and anxious to see him, ready to wet his face with kisses. He walked through the house many times, which was not difficult because the house was rather compact. Boaz was angry. For Ruth, he'd endured many blows to the ego, but this, this was unforgivable.

But then—again, almost by epiphany—he searched the closets, and there, he found Ruth sleeping under a pile of sweaters, her hand clenching a large stack of photographs.

Boaz was the first and only person, other than Ruth, to see these photographs, each with an engraved placard taped to its back that read *So cold and far away*. Although Boaz could not quite make out what many of the photographs were, others were recognizable.

And then he knew Ruth loved him, even if she could not say it herself.

Of all of this, Naomi knew nothing. That morning, Boaz had handed her a wad of cash and told her to visit the ocean for a few days of relaxation and pampering. He had not specified which ocean, which gave Naomi free reign. For months, she'd been feeling a steady suffocation. She wanted to run away. She was tired of Ruth and her antics. She was tired of being treated like some cheap whore, and even though Boaz would never treat a woman this way, Naomi often found herself wondering whether he thought of her more as mother or mistress.

To Ruth, she was a perpetual mother. To Boaz, she was a mistress on demand. It had grown so hard for her to play chameleon constantly.

So Naomi packed her bags the morning that Ruth locked herself in her closet and had the chauffeur take her as far away from land as he could. She knew nothing. That morning, Naomi was unfettered.

Because Ruth would not come out, Boaz brought food to her, and together, in the closet, they picnicked over sweaters and scarves. In those dark, tight confines, Ruth talked constantly, openly, about everything except the reason why she refused to re-enter the world.

For three days, the married couple stayed hidden in Ruth's closet. The servants came and went with food, water, wine, and fresh clothes. Only occasionally, Boaz would have to take a business call of the utmost importance, but Ruth remained nuzzled at his side so he could not consider it work. Hidden in Ruth's closet, Boaz believed that he was truly the luckiest man in the world.

But soon, they would have to emerge. Both Ruth and Boaz understood this.

After three days, Ruth opened the closet door, crawled out, and stretched her legs and spine several times before standing. Boaz, with sleep still sealing his eyes, motioned for her return. Then Ruth said, *Boaz, I am with child. It is your child. I have not been unfaithful. I am your wife, and I will be the mother to your child.*

Later, Boaz would come to understand what an occasion this was, but right then, he merely responded, *I love you.*

Of course, Ruth was disgusted by this cliché, but she whispered, lightly, into his ear, *I love you too, Boaz.*

Then she divested herself and offered Boaz her virginity.

She took a picture of the spots of blood on her sheets, and her husband engraved the placard. Together, they taped it to the back of the plastic frame and kept it hidden in a locked drawer, lest Naomi came snooping, which she inevitably would.

The day Naomi returned from her visit to the ocean, she was no longer mistress. That day, she learned of all she had missed. That day, she sighed to herself, *Grandmother.*

Because she could no longer be mistress or mother, Naomi asked to name the child.

Ruth had been partial to the name Bernard. Boaz had preferred Pauline or Harold.

But the day Ruth gave birth to a healthy baby boy, they held up the child to Naomi who clearly and articulately said, Obed.

And so Ruth begat Obed, who begat Jesse, who begat David—David who would become the greatest of kings. **M**

from not Omaha

poem by

CHRISTOPHER MATTISON

Brand green
mustang

the docent's
son strung

out Badiou's

Tet objects
in the glove

box
surrenders

early work
sedimentary

content

forgot

a chaffinch
in cawls

work
an other

word

for smog—
rattan news

printing hats
trimmed

in *la grippe*

Reset the bone
near a steeple

named for bison
injuries, St.

Botolph
Redeemer

wicking sod
around

this rousing
gala event

cling
peaches

sodium
lights up

coal tits
at dawn

deliberate
the relative

merits of
grouse

haircuts
in 1868

Emerging c's
gone brunette

in this
type

face strands
raking

light
staging

desert fables
on science

and pugilism

camphor
the green

lindens
unfold

that
fold

company
sketch

artists
dressing

other
trees

starlings in
capillaries

what color
water is—

aheroic
looks

why the Platte's

so coy, milk-

eyed

Among the Clouds

nonfiction by Mary Ruefle

That was the summer there were so many clouds we didn't know what to do with them. They overflowed the sky—they were on our streets, in our homes, in our drawers and in our cabinets. They were in our cars and on our buses, I even saw them in taxis. No one had ever seen so many clouds, to the extent, as often happens with a glut, no one could remember a time without them. Our legislators tried to ship them to another country but the question came back—what would one do with so many clouds? There was no wind, no rain, nothing to break them up or break off the endless building up of them. Ship them to Mars, someone said, but Mars could not sustain them. You needed an atmosphere for that, and how odd was that, since so many clouds clouded our atmosphere and every citizen felt they were in a play, at the theatre, overcome by another's mood, at the mercy of the infinite nostalgia of subconscious dictates. I was not the first to be surprised and often terrified by their images. They cast long shadows in an unearthly light. Some were blue, some were gray, some black, some white, some were pink, some were lavender, some orange, some a ghastly purple. All cast a trance and a silence upon us. I registered without choice the complaints of a multitude. Our dreams of a solution, even the most obscure, dissolved in the profound and vital roots of an intractable reality. The picture of a limp cloud watching us was undeniable. They were irrational, impossible, baffling and alarming, solitary, in strata, stippled as a fish back, fantastically shaped and plain as the day is long. They hypnotized us and paralyzed us. Yet they remained, in the highest and lowest places, and the meticulous exact realism of them convinced us to capture them, and zoo them, and feed them, to the extent others, far into the researchable future, would be able to see what was the temporary but encroaching weight of their total reality, and perhaps understand our hopelessness of ever understanding them, why they were so crowded among us, given we were crowned with brains to override them, which proved impossible, though there are so few left who remember. Even now, so many years later, when strolling idly, say on a Sunday, under a spotless sky, when I meet a child carrying in her right hand, like a torch, a tuft of spun sugar on a stick, the familiar cry of that summer comes back to me, the one that floated out of the mouths of so many children: *o mother, o father, wherefore art thou? I cannot see to find thee among so many clouds.*

One Girl's Theory

nonfiction by Mary Ruefle

Mr. Timothy Wells was killed in an instant by fallen timber at the raising of a large barn, 18 October, a clear day, no tuft in our sky. For Thy information he was 28 years of age and after the accident his eyes remained open. After reading that, I had to leave the graveyard. How you bait your hooks is immoral. I didn't want to think about it so I stopped for lunch in a joint off the lake and was seated in a booth next to the window. The window had lace curtains, the curtains had acorns and oak leaves woven into them. I was served a glass of water, one bowl of pea soup and a pair of saltines packaged together. Two people in the next booth were talking. Billions and billions of years in the future, said one. Billions and billions of years ago, said the other. It made me sad so I left, leaving the saltine packaging next to a nifty tip. What were those people talking about? Once I imagined a baby born with eight or nine hearts on a planet with as many moons, but that wasn't nearly enough. Fishing boats bobbed along the edges of the lake. There didn't seem to be anyone listening to them. Once in Thy wisdom (a long time ago, in England) you caused a baby to be born without a brain. It lived a few days then the doctors lit into it, that's when they found the empty space in its skull. No one believes this true story, their brains won't let them. But I think this babe was your love child, and everyone who reads about him, you kill.



Trees and Heads (detail), 2009
Gouache on paper
8 1/4" x 11"



Trees and Heads (detail), 2009
Gouache on paper
8 1/4" x 11"



Water, 2008
Gouache on paper
19" x 72"



Water (detail), 2008
Gouache on paper
6" x 8"



Water (detail), 2008
Gouache on paper
6" x 8"

Moral Census

fiction by GENNADY FAVEL

It immediately became apparent what had happened when I woke up in the hospital at 6:30 in the morning, my head hurting and bandages on my left arm. I'd been scratched. "Getting scratched" is a term used by Manhattan bike couriers; it means having an accident that doesn't lead to any long-term disabilities. Everyone who works this job long enough gets scratched at some point. It's a badge of honor. Lying around the hospital room was all the evidence one needed to figure out that that was what had happened: my helmet had a long, deep crack in it and was hanging from the steering wheel of my bike, with its front tire looking like the start of a pretty good modern art sculpture. I thought about how I would add it to my collection of similar pieces, my road-battle trophies.

I was nineteen when my friend Kevin got me this job. He said it'd be a good way to shed a few pounds. I didn't plan to stay as long as I have, three years now, but in addition to the enforced weight loss it's also turned out to be a good way of paying for college. And there's another benefit as well: I get to meet people in different corporations and they get to meet me, which for a kid about to graduate with a business degree is important. I chat with the secretaries, ask them about what they do and whether they like it, trying to feel out whether the company is one I should consider applying to. I figure that getting friendly with even these employees means a better shot at getting my résumé onto their bosses' desks.

Sometimes I even get to meet the managers and CEOs themselves. You see, over the years I've built up something of a reputation for being one of the fastest and most reliable bike couriers in town, so when the higher-ups want a sensitive package delivered on time and without their employees snooping at the contents, they hand the package to me directly. In fact, the package I was delivering when my accident occurred was just one of those cases.

I'd received a call from Mr. Walsmith, CEO of Eden Corp, about a package that needed immediate delivery. I've delivered for Mr. Walsmith before and I knew him to be an excellent tipper. The funny thing is that, despite having been to Eden Corp on multiple occasions and even talking to several of its employees, I'd never been able to figure out what it is they did. Maybe contract law or data processing—in any case, the employees always looked serious and busy. This time I arrived at Eden Corp at around 5 p.m. to find Mr. Walsmith waiting for me by the entrance. He looked even more serious than usual as he handed me the large padded envelope for rush delivery. "This package absolutely must be in the hands of the receiving party by 11 p.m. so he has an hour to review it before midnight," he said. The label read *Mr. Mophis*, followed by an address on Sixth Avenue. I reassured Mr. Walsmith that it would take no more than twenty minutes to make the delivery, and after receiving a generous tip and another reminder about the urgent nature of my assignment, I was off.

I couldn't tell you now who had the right of way at that busy intersection—me or the speeding sports car—but I can tell you that the resulting impact voided my promise to Mr. Walsmith. I was lucky, I realize now, that the car hit only my front tire, spinning my bike and me violently into a standing bus. Yes, I was hurt, but by avoiding a direct hit I managed to leave the scene alive, albeit unconscious and in an ambulance.

A nurse walked into my room to check how I was doing. She lifted the window blinds, letting the morning sun's rays bathe the room with white light. "They said on the news it's going to rain, but there's not a cloud in sight now. It looks like it's going to be a beauty..." she chatted while applying new bandages to the cuts on my arm. "The doctor will see you shortly." After she left, I got out of bed to take inventory of my possessions. Aside from its mangled front wheel, the bike was still in usable shape and the spare tire that I always carried with me was right next to it. The package, still awaiting delivery, was on one of the chairs. I wondered what sort of corporate headache my accident had caused Eden Corp, but having already convinced myself that there was nothing I could have done, I resolved to make good on the job as soon as I was discharged.

As I stared at the package, considering all the critical business dealings it might involve, a finger tapped my right shoulder. "Hello Mr. Briscon," the doctor said, extending his hand with a friendly smile.

"Call me Freddy, Doc," I replied, shaking his hand. "Well, Freddy, it looks like you're going to live. The X-rays show no breaks or fractures so it's up to you whether you want to go home or stay here for observation."

I glanced at the undelivered package and my beat-up bike and told the doctor that I'd prefer to be out as soon as possible. The nurse returned to give me some painkillers and a change of bandages, and ten minutes later I was on the street, ready to begin a new workday, or to finish the previous one, depending on how you looked at it.

When I'd replaced the front wheel and got on my bike, my hand reached instinctively for the cell phone in my jacket pocket. 27 missed calls. All from Mr. Walsmith. Damn. My mind drifted for a moment to think of all the tips I would now surely miss out on. Should I call to apologize? The decision was made for me by the blinking red light indicating no signal. "That's weird," I thought. No reception right in the middle of the city? I glanced around and saw two other people staring at their phones with the same surprised annoyance. "Must be a service outage," I said to one of them as I started pedaling towards my delivery destination. By my estimations I would miss the 11 p.m. deadline by about nine and a half hours.

About four blocks later I noticed something that hadn't happened since I started this job three years ago. I was sweating profusely.

Why was I tired already? Because of the accident? Except for my bruises I was feeling fine. And then it hit me: it was extremely hot. Unseasonably hot. I didn't know the exact temperature but it was the middle of March and I felt as hot as I had when I visited Mexico as a teenager in July. Must be some kind of record for this time of year, I thought.

At the next intersection I realized I wasn't going to be able to pedal much longer, not in this heat and without water. I dismounted and leaned against the side of a building, out of direct sunlight. A couple of businessmen passed by holding their suit jackets over their arms and wiping their foreheads with their ties. The extreme heat seemed to have caught everyone by surprise. After watching the people walking by for a few minutes, I noticed something strange: although it was morning, all of the office workers I could see were walking not towards the skyscrapers of the business district, but in the opposite direction, west, towards the Hudson—while pointing skyward and talking frantically. I couldn't see what they were pointing at because a tall building blocked my view, so I got back on my bike and, wiping sweat with one hand, pedaled towards the river, fighting my way through thicker and thicker crowds as I went.

And then I saw it: the sun, which, as everyone knows, rises in the east, was today rising in the west.

To recalibrate my sense of direction, I turned quickly to find the Empire State Building, which I knew to be north of where I was. Then I turned another ninety degrees to face what I knew was east. And there it was again: the sun, in its correct position now, rising above the East River. I looked west again, and again I saw the sun rising there as well. After turning my head from west to east and back again countless times, I realized that what we were all seeing was two suns: one rising in the east, the other in the west.

I stood there, dumbstruck. Like everyone else, my first thought was that I was dreaming. But while most of the others around me soon seemed to accept that they weren't, that this was reality (some of them even pinched themselves to be sure), I could not. *I was in an accident*, I reassured myself. *This is probably just a vision, a symptom of my concussion. Lots of people see stars after they get hit on the head.* I was seeing two. Or maybe I was hallucinating; maybe the heat and dehydration had gotten to me. But that wasn't it. It didn't take long to feel certain of the heat's source, as we all nervously stared westward at the extra rising sphere. I wondered if the end had come—for me, for earth as a whole. The only sign to counter those feelings was that I was still alive, and when you are slowly cooking in your own sweat this is not a state of existence you take for granted.

Some people dropped to their knees and prayed, not unreasonably. Others tried to reach loved ones on their cell phones, without success. This new presence in the sky had evidently knocked out all wireless communication. Some people, including me, began to disperse. I overheard a few wanting to get to a television, hoping someone on the news could provide some answers. For my part,

I was pretty sure no one had any answers this soon—even if there were a television signal, which I felt certain there was not.

I headed east, rolling my bike beside me. On a corner I stopped by an abandoned grocery store and drank from a gallon bottle of water. What I couldn't finish I dumped on my head, letting the water wash away the sweat and permeate my clothes, already saturated with perspiration. As I continued walking, turning every so often to look at the second rising sun, my mind searched for a plan of action. I considered finding some shelter underground and waiting for the suns to set before venturing out again for answers. But what if the new sun changed the cycle of day and night? What if night came later—or not at all?

I passed a church. A line had already formed outside and a young priest was moving hurriedly among the gathered people, reassuring them that no one would be turned away. I doubted his ability to keep that promise as more and more people arrived every second. I continued on my way, not knowing exactly which way that was, and as I walked a cold wind suddenly hit the back of my neck. I turned around to see an open door, the entrance to an office building I had just passed. Leaning through the entrance I saw an empty lobby, vacated by the security personal normally posted at a desk just beyond the revolving doors. The lobby was cool; apparently the building's automatic climate control system had activated the air conditioners. I decided to make this place my temporary escape from the agonizing heat, and sitting down on the floor I felt the coolness of the marble pass through my skin, a sensation just moments ago I would have thought impossible. I placed my back against the lobby's visitors' counter and closed my eyes to contemplate how an event like this could be possible without anyone having foreseen it.

Around noon the air conditioning switched off and the ceiling lights flickered and died. I looked through the lobby's glass wall and saw that the street's traffic lights were also dead. Air conditioners blasting citywide must have overloaded the electric grid. At least that was my theory. It really didn't matter what caused the power to fail; all that mattered was that the lobby was already rising in temperature and would eventually be on par with the temperature outside. I locked the revolving doors, hoping to quarantine the cold air inside for as long as possible. There was nothing else I could have done, no other place to go. So I sat back down, waiting for the heat to rise.

Suddenly I felt something move inside my pocket. My cell phone was vibrating. Impossible. Maybe it was a sign the battery was about to die. Not that I had much use for it at this point anyway. I flipped open the phone and, to my astonishment, despite the little red light still indicating no signal, I saw an incoming call. The caller ID said it was Mr. Walsmith.

"Hello?" I said, expecting to hear only static.

"The package. You did not deliver it," Mr. Walsmith said.

“No,” I replied, not bothering to give an explanation.

“Where is it now?” asked Mr. Walsmith, his voice harder to make out. There was static after all.

“I still have it with me,” I said, glancing down at the package next to my bike.

“*Complete the delivery or all hell will break loose,*” Mr. Walsmith said.

The static now made it almost impossible to discern what was being said.

“Look inside if you must, but deliver the package or—”
The line went dead.

I didn’t know what to make of this conversation. Surely Mr. Walsmith was aware of what was happening. Why would he now, of all times, care about some corporate documents? And how was it that his call came through when it was pretty obvious that all wireless signals were dead? I wouldn’t have given any of this much thought except that I was more or less confined to the building’s lobby and, despite the unfolding events outside, had nothing else to do. So I decided to open Mr. Walsmith’s package—and inside I found several thick books, thousands of pages each, and a letter:

Dear Mr. Mophis,

We have received your client’s request for expansion and understand his desire to do so. As the human population grows and moral standards fall it is only natural that he will experience overcrowding. Hell has always experienced this problem and we were always able to work with you to find a feasible solution. However, your client’s latest request to turn Earth into one of Hell’s districts does not meet the requirements agreed upon during the Meeting of Creation. You see, Mr. Mophis, despite humanity’s mounting sins and dropping moral standards, there is still enough good and virtue in this world to keep mankind and Earth above the minimum threshold permitting your client to institute a takeover. In the enclosed Moral Census books you will find a list of all the good people and their deeds done over the last 365 days. The list provides a legal justification to restrict any expansion into Earth for the next 75 years, at which point a new census is to be taken.

My firm would like to wish you and your client luck in finding another creative solution to your problem and I hope that in the future we will be able to deliver the census well in advance of the applicable deadline.

Sincerely,

*Sid Walsmith
Head Council and CEO of EDEN CORP*

If this were any other day I would have thought what any other

rational person would have thought: that the letter was a joke—on me, or its recipient, or both. But this was no ordinary day, and even beforehand I didn’t take Mr. Walsmith for the joking type. I picked up one of the “Moral Census” books and leafed through its pages. Sure enough, written in tiny letters were the names of thousands of people and the selfless, noble acts that had warranted their inclusion.

After pondering my limited options I decided to take Mr. Walsmith’s call and his letter at face value, which meant committing myself to do everything in my power to complete the delivery as soon as possible. If Hell were truly coming to Earth (and it looked like it might already be here), then surely the risk of action would be less than not acting at all. I wondered why I of all people had been given the task of delivering this very important package. Perhaps I’d oversold my speed and reliability. In any case, now was the time to prove my worth.

I packed the contents back into the packaging and tied it to the back of my bike. Through the lobby’s glass front I could see the streets were abandoned. A car passed every now and again, so it couldn’t have been impossible to be outside. I located the bathroom and drank as much water as I could gulp down. Then I soaked my clothes again so that water dripped from me as I crossed the lobby. I got on my bike, took a few deep breaths, kicked open the lobby’s side door with my foot, and rode out onto the sidewalk.

It’s hard to describe the sensation of such intense heat to someone who hasn’t experienced it. The first thing you feel is pain all over your skin, then a tingling, then a sort of numbness as your nervous system exhausts itself. I calculated my journey to Mr. Mophis’s address to take approximately fifteen minutes and made a mental map of the route with the most tree-lined streets. I had to do all I could to stay out of the crosshairs of direct sunlight.

After three blocks I felt like I was riding on two flat tires. The heat had softened their rubber. I pedaled faster, which under the circumstances had little effect. As I passed several buildings I could see, through their windows, people staring at me, pointing out the crazy deliveryman on his melting bike. In one window I saw two young children frowning at me with puzzled eyes. I gave them a thumbs-up, trying to reassure both them and myself that everything would be okay. But when I reached the halfway point to my destination I felt like giving up. The metal parts of my bike had reached such a temperature that it burned to touch them with naked skin. But giving up was not an option. The words of Mr. Walsmith, *Complete the delivery or all hell will break loose*, echoed in my head and I pressed on. Finally, as I was about to faint and my rubber tires began to stick to the pavement, I arrived at my destination, a black windowless building with tinted glass doors. I lifted the package and, leaving the bike lying in the middle of the sidewalk, passed through the revolving doors.

Unlike every other building I’d passed on my way, here it seemed that all was business as usual. The lobby was brightly lit from overhead and the ventilation system blew cool air, bringing life and

feeling back to my skin. I approached the visitors’ desk, where a meticulously dressed woman stood at attention.

“Nice and cool in here, huh?” I said, trying to read her reaction to my arrival.

“Best of both worlds. Hot out there, cool in here,” she said almost mechanically.

“A bit too hot for March, wouldn’t you say?” I replied sarcastically.

The woman shrugged.

“Got a package for Mr. Mophis,” I continued. “Is he in?”

“Mr. Mophis is always in,” she said. “You can give it to me and I’ll make sure it gets to him.”

I hesitated for a second but then realized that if I was where I thought I was there’d be no point in arguing. Perhaps there was some protocol these people had to follow; otherwise, what would be the point of this delivery in the first place? I placed the package on the counter and gave it a slight push away from me. The woman smiled. I reciprocated, uncomfortably.

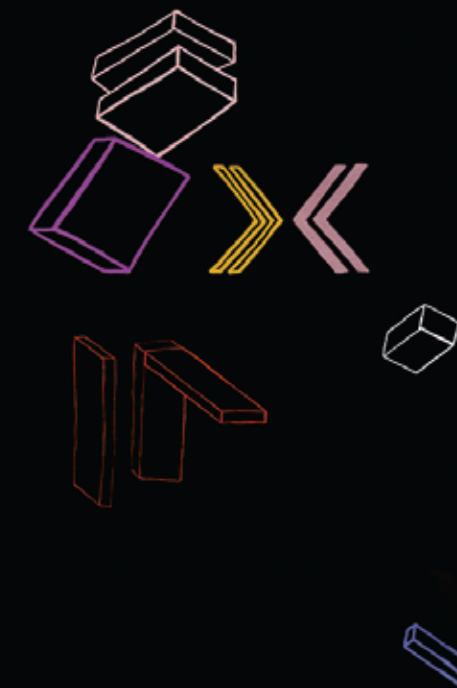
“I guess that’s it,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. But she didn’t pick up the package.

I stood there for a few seconds, unsure whether I should insist that she take it to Mr. Mophis right away. But it was out of my hands. I had completed the delivery and now was powerless to insist on anything. I backed away from the counter, gave the receptionist an acknowledging nod, and turned around to exit the building. Bad idea, I thought then. The temperature outside had by now probably reached lethal levels and I was in the only place—possibly in the entire world—that had a working air conditioner. That’s when I decided I wasn’t going anywhere. I paced around the lobby for a while and then sat down on the floor in one of its corners. Back at the visitors’ counter, the woman and the package were gone.

As I sat there wondering what was in store for me—and all mankind—I felt tired. Really tired. I still hadn’t recovered from my concussion and the heat had drained whatever energy I’d had left. I closed my eyes and five minutes later fell asleep.

When I awoke it was night. At least I thought it was night, since no light came through the lobby doors. The overhead lights were still on but it was quiet; the air conditioner’s humming had ceased. The visitors’ counter was unstaffed and the entrance to the elevator banks was sealed off by a metal gate. I was thirsty and I had stayed in this place long enough already. There was no way of knowing what would happen when dawn came, but I had little choice except to wait. I was going home. ■



SPRING 2010

FEBRUARY 26TH:

EXHIBITION: “Fever Dream” Jacob Goudreault, Angel Otero, Max Reinhardt, & Simon Slater

WINDOW: Jessica Labatte

SCREENING March 27TH: Jo Dery

APRIL 2ND:

EXHIBITION: “Casual Object Garden & Other Material Matters” Carson Fisk-Vittori & Michael Hunter

WINDOW: Arend deGruyter- Helfer

ANNUAL FUNDRAISER AUCTION: MAY 1ST

MAY 7TH:

EXHIBITION: Carmen Price & Erin Zona

WINDOW: Kate Ruggeri

SCREENING MAY 15TH: Steve Reinke

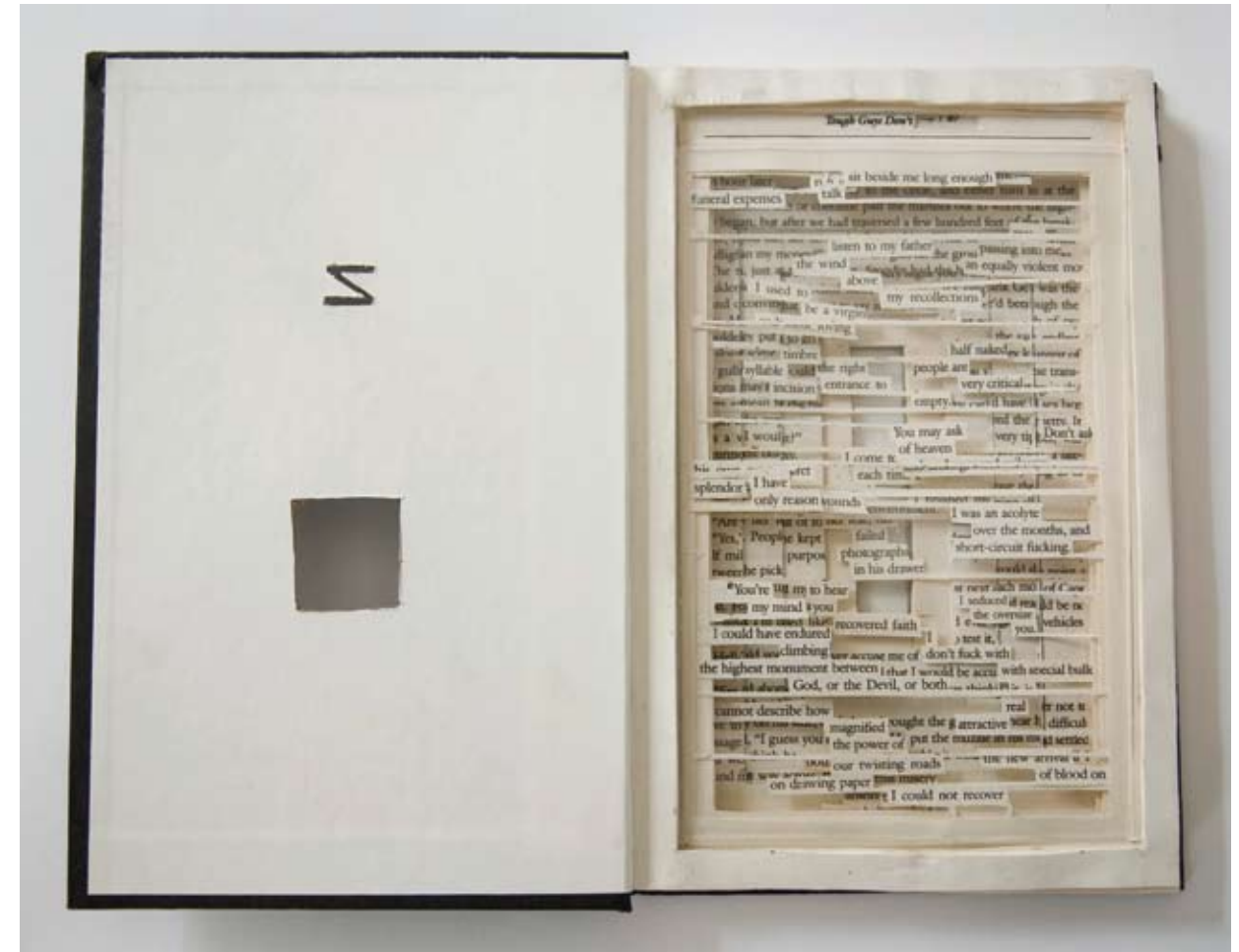
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Giganti

fiction by AARON FRANCIS



i

Early evening sunset : a bluebird blew-blurred the ochre-sky sky – wines spilled across an impossible tablecloth. It flitted into the trees encircling the lake holding afloat the boat containing two hunched and contemplative forms supporting each other like opposing parentheses. A man and a young boy — angling. The man: eyes closed and face skyward, facing (but not seeing) the shafts of light spilling out from the spaces between the trees. The boy: eyes very much open and staring at his float which breathed synchronous with the lake. Something like content was spread below the man's nose (though above his chin!) as he listened to the variegated ornithoklisimélange punctuating the hush and slap of the lake against the sides of the little boat. The wind whooshed cool and slow across the water and the man thought – singletrack – about architecture.

Aftward the otherwise empty vessel : the boy thought about fish...

Then : a tug of line and dunk of float. A small splash at the goldpot of the line's rainbow arc and the boy already to his feet pulling back (the man, losing the other parenthesis, stumbles back a moment before – o boy! – recovering to watch the fight). The boy clenches his tongue between his lips as he arches back against the catch. Only his eyes let on that he enjoys it. The man, fully recovered from the spill, plants himself behind the boy, hand on shoulder and shouting encouragement. You'll tip us over! = the man cheerfully advises as the boy sits back down with firm control of the fight.

Beneath the fishwake : harlequin flashes of sunlight off scales deconstructed through the splashes as the boy draws his catch in closer. The fish – bassy bigmouth – flaps above the

surface before diving deep and again. Ten – fifteen pounds... Let him fight = the man advising again. The boy indefatigable reels the bass in closer. Bluebird cries like squeaking Saran under the splish-splashing. The bass – its last ditch – glides underneath the boat: pulling along the boy's line. The boy coerces the line back out to the starboard side. The bass surfaces but doesn't struggle. The boy slowly reels it in.

The huge, unblinking eyes of the bass. His gaping mouth upward, the bass drifts toward the boat, lip accessorized. The boy's hand over the edge of the boat, readying to grab up under the lip of the fish, when he sees the eyes. Heavy black pupils wreathed in gold, a Lilliputian corona. They look at everything all at once. The boy saw that they saw the boy. They looked at something inside him – something rotting like wood – and he felt the something squirm and writhe as he looked into the eyes of the fish. He swallowed acid and a cold stone planted itself in his stomach....

The man, standing beside the boy = Get under his lip. The boy looked away as his hand reached down to pluck the fish in repose from the water. As he grabbed onto the lower lip and pulled it up into the boat, it momentarily renewed the fight as it thrashed and tried to bite the hand that held it aloft. That's good = the man to the boy : the antecedent to its shadow. The man took the bass from the boy, softly bouncing it up and down in his hands, = A good fifteen pounds...

The huge, unblinking eyes of the boy. They didn't shine as in the fight – their focus inward. The man, rowing inshore, looked at the boy – eyes fixed on the bass that no longer moved. The man, after a moment = Did you hear him – speak? The boy blinked and looked around uncomprehendingly and then back at the man with furrowed brow. (The man nodded towards) The fish... = the man. The boy looked (cautiously) at the fallow creature lying on the deck : its mouth

agape but no sounds emanating from it. The boy looked back at the man, inquiringly. These fish = the man, between strokes = are the scions... the descendants... of the Giganti... Have you not... heard of them?

The Giganti : they were the first people. Giants. They were thoughtful, strong, and proud. Towering above trees and mountains, they feared nothing – not even God. They had created language, poetry, science : they said : they are as powerful as God! In their fervid antitheism, they warred against the kingdom of heaven. They tore down the sky – but God bore a wrathful vengeance upon them. He unmade all they had made : their art... their language... their wisdom. He struck their hearts with fear — He planted stones in their stomachs that would anchor them to the earth, that would freeze at the thought of Him. This conjured a fear in some of the Giganti and led to their diminution and evolution into us : humans. He allowed us to regain our speech and our art... but there were also some Giganti who still did not fear God, even as He held them by their throats. Unable to speak : and so they remained. God cast them underneath the water, not even allowed to breathe the winds blown from the heavens : it became as a poison to them. Their bodies were humbled even more severely than ours : these small, limbless, lungless creatures that are now our nourishment.

The boy occasionally glanced at the fish on the deck during the tale (expecting a refutation?) – it just sat there limp and uninterested. The boat slid aside the dock and they got out to tie it off.

The man = So did you hear it? The boy shook his head slowly. They stopped and the man looked at the fish in the boat, then quickly back to the boy, with a wry smile on his face. Listen closely... = the man, picking up the fish and setting it on a smooth stone. He sat on one side of the stone and the boy on the other, the fish lying on the stone between them. Listen closely = the

man, as he pulled a long, thin knife from his belt. They both leaned in close to the fish : earwise. The water lapped against the shore and the birds were silent : perhaps listening now? The man = Do you hear it? The boy = shaking his head, returning his attention to the fish : — listening very closely. I think I hear it = the man. You don't hear it? He put one hand on the body of the fish. The boy leaned in closer and just below the waves and wind he thought he heard a whisper... The man = He's saying... — the knife severed the head which rolled off the stone into the dirt —... "gimmeabreak".

ii

Night : the man now asleep inside the house and the boy treading lightly with pole and tackle. The man doesn't stir as the boy moves swiftly out the front door and into the woods.

Beeline : the boy moving across the ground swiftly as a shadow. The wet, black earth oozed primordially between his pale toes. The moon hung low and huge (a thief waiting in ambush) in the waters above the firmament. Spiked sweetgum seeds, brittle now in autumn, furnished the ground – the boy instinctively evading the burs. He kept on in the low light, his rods hatching out an agreement with his cones. He could hear up ahead beyond the trees the water under the firmament. Somewhere along his path, a skunk made its presence known.

Drunken winds whorled icily across the lake as the boy emerged from the trees, feet muddy and frozen but burless. The boat knocked against the dock in the waves that blurred the shoreline. He went down beside the boat and threw in his supplies. He untied the boat, guided it out of the dock, and headed out to the middle of the lake where the wind was calmer. He fixed the crawfish to the hook and threw in his line — and he waited. The wind died down and the cold air settled about him, chilling him some but not weakening his resolve.

Illustration by Emile Ferris

Then : a tug of line and dunk of float. Faster now : he fought the fish into the boat and – here now! : a largemouth, though smaller than the one now working its way through his digestive tract. The low, cool light of the moon kept the fish's eyes generally obscured from the boy. He unhooked it and set his pole aside, grasping the fish with both hands and looking at it in its gaping mouth. As he held it, he felt for the meaning of it. He felt its struggle and its fight to get back underwater. He tried to feel the life inside of it — the life that once was there and now was hidden, he knew. Not imprisoned : just forgetful.

The boy looked at the fish and spoke = I know you can speak... He told me so. The fish, uncooperative, did not respond. He said that you came here first, that you were a giant : *sniff*: and that I was a giant, too. But we fought God. And that's what happened to us. But I know what He says : I know you can speak. Maybe you've forgotten how. (Now somewhat throttling the gasping fish). Maybe you just can't remember : *sniff*: but I know you can.

In the boy's hands : the fish held its silence. The boy continued = You need to try. He's told me things, too, things I can't do– : *sniff* : – but I do them. He told me not to eat any of his apples, that I could have other apples but not his. That I would be cursed and he would get rid of me if I ate any of his apples. Even one bite. But I ate one. I ate a whole apple : *sniff*: and then I could make words like Him! But no – I don't do it around him. But I can! Can't you hear me? Can't you hear these words I make? You can make them, too! You just need to remember! *Sniff*.

iii

The fish : eyes blackly luminous in the moonlight. Its largemouth was closed, the words trapped behind the gate of its lower jaw. The boy implored the fish = You can't listen to Him. You don't belong down there...

A low rumble rolled through the woods and across the water. The boy looked up above the treetops, jaw clenched, as another ubiquitous wind began to tear the night to pieces. It howled and screamed as the distant thunder grew closer and louder, like the approaching steps of an angry father heard from a child's bedroom.

Small hands manipulating the mouth of the fish : looking for the words caught inside like a hook. The boy = You can't listen to Him. He doesn't mean it when He says things like that... You can talk—

Lightning : huge, broad brushstrokes of white flame across the sky. The boy could see the aphasiatic fish in his hands in the flashes. The wind tossed the boat violently as the boy held it tight.

Speak! = the boy demanding the fish, now long since dead. But the boy went on, holding the fish.

And as the wind grew stronger...

= Speak!

And as the waves grew higher...

= Speak!

And as the thunder grew closer...

= Speak!

And as the night grew colder...

= Speak!

But the fish did not speak. The waves clawed at the boat, finally pulling it underwater. The boy fought as much as he could – but the waves were too much. The boat disappeared from his sight : as did the shore. But still he shouted, pleading = Speak!

And so the water rushed in, over the tongue and past the molars, down the larynx and into the lungs, making an anchor of the boy. And the last thing he saw was a flash of lightning describing a very familiar face : pale fire outlining every crease and fold : a deadeye moon winking behind the cracks in the firmament. ■

from Helsinki

poetry by PETER RICHARDS

+++


Such vehemence that of course it made for an outside vehicle
the hulled planet distilled to a plume and from the exhaust
enough time had past that finally a hummingbird appeared
on the sky with the living girth of a city it happened ok
I was banded by an officer I was standing by the sea at a railing
the evening showed me to its hand a stadium where there are no
people only stray white garlands rousing the hand and stammering
and perforations and YES YES we can make you into a cloud of living
man LOOK DIRECTLY AT US all I could see was Julia's farm-boy
face only just bigger than a cupola and gleaming like an oarsmen's
other side grin also singing the terrible song of hunted lands
she perched above me slowly ripping a spaniel and forcing the white
candies into my body I ascended on a slap into fortified rooms
passing closely was the first time breathing into a room but what
vehemence her sable like a crushed time machine slowly being fixed

from Helsinki

poetry by PETER RICHARDS

+++

THE SUBJECT LEAVES A WHITE PRODIGIOUS COLOR
yes I accept it
the subject leaves a white prodigious color
APPREHENDED BY A RAILING
I accept it
the subject was apprehended by a railing
THAT WHICH IS NOT A RAIL IS NOT A COLOR
APPREHENDED WE ENCIRCLE IT
WHITENED AND WITH THE RAIL MAKING
HARMONIES SEEM TENDED
THE SUBJECT STOOD OVERLOOKING THE SEA
BUT AS CONCEPT THE SUBJECT WAS THERE ALREADY
yes I accept it
SO IT'S NOT CORRECT TO SAY *APPREHENDED*
FOR IN FACT THE SUBJECT BOARDED WILLINGLY
yes I accept it initially I was there already
RELIEVED BY WATERY BLUE CATTLE
yes relieved by watery blue cattle
IT FOLLOWS THEN THAT THE SUBJECT IS NOT ATOMICALLY ESTABLISHED
I accept that if you cut me I do not bleed
IT FOLLOWS THEN THAT THE SUBJECT IS A HOLE MADE OF STUBBLE
no that is not true there is a limit
I SAY THE SUBJECT IS A HOLE MADE OF STUBBLE
yes I accept it I'm a hole made of stubble
IT FOLLOWS THE SUBJECT IS A HOLE MADE OF STUBBLE
LEAVING A PRODIGIOUS WHITE COLOR
GIVEN TO PERSISTENT MOTHERS HELD TOGETHER BY VENTURING
INTO THE HOLE I HAVE ACQUITTED MYSELF FROM MAKING
SERENITY PREDICTABLE EXCLUDING THE CIRCLES
WHERE THE PENCHANT TO FUSE LIGHT WITH MEAT
SEPARATES YOU FROM BEINGS ATOMICALLY ESTABLISHED
yes I accept it I have no former state



“I’m the witch of dance music and my hex is disco”:

A Conversation with Irvine Welsh

Introduction and transcription by LAWRENCE COLLERD

During the course of his career, Irvine Welsh has proved himself to be a reader’s writer, garnering both widespread popularity among the public and a certain amount of resentment from the critical establishment. The acclaimed Scottish author of such works as *Filth* (1998), *Porno* (2002), and *The Bedroom Secrets of Master Chefs* (2006), rose to fame with the 1996 film adaptation of his first novel *Trainspotting* (1993). The novel—and Welsh’s oeuvre as a whole—goes beyond what critics love to deem gritty or raw into the most brutally real kind of narrative. Welsh investigates the terrifying depths of Edinburgh the way Nelson Algren explored the underbelly of Chicago—with honesty, acuity, and aplomb. Welsh’s most recent novel, a prequel to *Trainspotting*, is set to come out in 2011.

After reading about Welsh and the Scottish working class literary movement, *MAKE* contributing editor Don De Grazia published his critically acclaimed novel *American Skin* with Welsh’s publishing house Jonathan Cape. The two became friends, and Welsh met his future wife in Chicago during a night of debauchery not unlike the one circumscribed in this interview.* Now that Welsh is officially a Chicagoan, having recently purchased a house in the Lakeview neighborhood, he and De Grazia often watch sports together, giving them ample opportunity to discuss both the circumstances surrounding the rise of the heroin trade in Edinburgh and the merits of disco—two subjects covered in the interview that follows. Also up for discussion are the pitfalls of organized religion and baseball. The conversation that follows reflects—if not in equal measure—the social and political outlook that informs Welsh’s work, and the irreverence that makes it stick.

Don De Grazia: So basically the theme of this issue, I’ve been told, is Myth, Magic, and Ritual.

Irvine Welsh: I always associate myth with sports, because it’s like the mythology of sports and all that, all the crap that surrounds teams and clubs and stuff. And I’ve got to associate magic with, magic is just bullshit to me, like, you know, but um, what was the third one again?

DDG: Ritual.

IW: “Ritual” I always associate with sex and all that. You know, it’s like, some of it’s spanking and stuff like that. Bondage.

DDG: (*laughter*) Yeah, absolutely. Can you explain to me why it’s not moronic to support and follow a sports team?

IW: Uh... (*laughter*) No I can’t. I certainly can’t. I could never do that. I mean, it is. That’s the whole point of it, really. It’s like we’re giving in to something that is moronic and pointless and stupid and in some ways life is, but it gives us something that we can obsess about. Which is like fucking much better than obsessing about any weighty issues about politics, art, and all that kind of stuff. If we were obsessed about politics and art and stuff like that, I mean imagine how horrible and fucked up the world, even more, horrible and fucked up as it is now, you know what I mean? It’s like, thank god we’ve got this kind of whole sports thing that we can imbue with significance that it doesn’t have, just to, to get away from that. It is an escapist device, but...

DDG: But you mention myth along with that.

IW: I think one of the problems of life is that myth’s more important than history. (*laughter*)

DDG: Isn’t that the fucking truth.

IW: I mean history is what aspires to

at least be what happened. Myth is just something that—it’s just nonsense that people need to believe. You know what I mean? It’s like all this crap that you hear about Tony Blair and all that thought about, you know, the war in Iraq and “History will judge us, oh, history will judge us.” Well, fuck, it’s all myth that’s gonna be compelling, that’s gonna help the legacy. And myth always does.

DDG: Yeah, the human reality behind it—

IW: We are basically trainable, and we need to believe in things to sustain ourselves. We don’t believe in history—in something that’s true—in a discernable way, you know, in that kind of way, it’s like um, I just don’t think it’s reality, I don’t really think it’s what our humanity is about, you know? Our humanity is basically about denial in the face of mortality and all that. And the whole idea of myth, religion, and all that is all part of the whole process of sustaining that. Without it...

DDG: It’s more benign, it’s better to focus those instincts toward a soccer team.

IW: I think we have to do both. I mean, I think we have to have *this*... I’m after this kind of like um, this *lifebelt*.

DDG: Lifebelt?

IW: As we’re kind of getting (inaudible) by the treacherous waters of (inaudible) we have to have this comforting lifebelt of myth to cling to, otherwise we’ve got nothing. You know, we basically will go under...

Waiter: You guys know what you want to eat?

IW: Uh, Not yet.

Waiter: Alright, that’s fine. Take your time. I’ll be back.

DDG: This guy’s about to get his ass kicked. (*laughter*) Seriously, you’ve been

**The North Side tavern where Welsh and De Grazia met to watch a Cubs game and discuss this issue’s themes proved to be too loud for the recording device, so the conversation took place after the game at a nearby beer garden, by which time ample amounts of Hacker-Pschorr had ensured a genuinely fluid dialogue.*

a kind of a nomad for awhile, right? To some extent? Nomad’s probably not right, but you’ve got a kind of a cycle—you live around the world.

IW: Yeah, pretty continually. That’s what the whole issue is, after kind of James Stewart playing Glenn Miller in the Glenn Miller story: you’re married to a (inaudible) musician, what’s a (inaudible) musician going to offer you? I’d say it seems to be quite nice...

DDG: So you kind of, you keep the ritual going?

IW: Well it’s getting to the stage now, I’ve kind of realized that I’ve been living like a student for fucking forty years. Or thirty-five or thirty-two. You can’t really. There’s something about doing that indefinitely. It puts a lot of strain on me in terms of writing, in terms of sort of producing stuff and all that, because... I just get things set up in a place, in a space: I’ve got the reference stuff I need to write on, I’ve got the computer there, I’ve got the, you know, the environment and all that, and then I’m off—the whole place is trashed. It’s a ground-zero site, basically. I think there’s something innately very destructive in me that makes me do that, and I know that.

DDG: There’s something driving you to do it, too.

IW: The start-up costs are quite big. I’ll lose days and weeks and all that trying to get myself back into that, that place, and I wonder why I do this. You’re settled in that place on Henderson. You’ve been there for years, and you’ve got everything around you that you need, everything’s familiar and all that kind of stuff. I envy you, being able to do that, and I’m kind of the reverse. I’ve had this impulse, you know—as soon as I get comfortable in a place, I get this horrible urge, very de-

structive urge to...

DDG: To bolt.

IW: Yeah, to bolt.

DDG: And yet, you're very productive. I mean, you're getting a lot of work done.

IW: Yeah, it's because, you know, I don't know what it is. I think it's like kind of, um... in some ways I think it's because I'm actually pretty conformist by nature. I used to have this conceit that I'm just going to be a rebel and all that, but I think I'm actually into some kind of ritual in a way, that I realize I just have to sort of bear it, otherwise be fucked by it, you know? The days would turn into years.

DDG: Yeah... well I mean, talking about you know, real life and ritual and all that, I guess it's probably going to be an obvious question: To what extent, just off the top of your head, can you talk about how you see ritual in your themes or your dramatic action—in your writing? *Train-spotting* is a great title and everything, but I've never gotten over the actual phenomenon of trainspotting, the actual thing... there's a reason why you chose that title, and probably a fair amount you can say.

IW: I thought this was a weird thing for people to do, to trainspot. Thinking about that in terms of drug addiction, it's strange to see trainspotting being kind of coterminous with heroin use. The mathematics of them were quite similar to me. It's like, you're using heroin, you're not going to get to that point where everything's fine, because as soon as you get to that point, you start using more to get to the same point of, of satisfaction. You're constantly striving and chasing for something you're never going to get. With trainspotting, you're trying to collect all the engine numbers, and the British Rail System and all that. You get these extreme trainspotters that hack into all the British Rail computers. They're producing new engines and new bits of material at the plant every day, you know. If somebody gets to the point where they couldn't do it with—they've got all these, all these train numbers. If somebody produces a new little piece of engine, it's got a separate car number, an A or B or C.

DDG: They should get them jobs in the MI5 or something.

IW: I actually think that, as opposed to just like going out and getting fucked up on drugs or drinking too much—because it's part of the culture—I think the nature of addiction is a very...

DDG: The nature of addiction?

IW: Yeah. The whole thing. I think it's all about ritual and safety, and there's a very anal and conservative aspect to it, you know.

DDG: You've got tools, technique, process...

IW: Yeah, yeah. The process thing is an important part. There's this whole idea of having this as a central part of your life, makeup, and all that. This is something that you can control. You have this thing, you have this kind of relevance, this kind of...

DDG: Sense of purpose.

IW: Yeah, yeah. Even if it's negating anything else you're doing, by shooting up heroin and trying to score all the time or by kind of collecting train numbers and all that, you're actually stopping yourself from doing other things. But you have this fantastic excuse; you have this overwhelming obsession that you have to kind of go with. And you know, I think we all want a fucking excuse. Everyone needs an excuse in life.

DDG: Is it fair to say you're not a big fan of organized religion? Or is that unfair?

IW: I think that's as fair as anything... (*laughter.*)

DDG: Is it relevant to this conversation, or no?

IW: Well, yeah, you know I think the magic thing is kind of hocus pocus about religion. But it's basically that people feel that they want answers to the world, and they also want the comfort of knowing there's something going to happen to them after this kind of great adventure of life. People feel that by leading a good and virtuous life they'll be rewarded. This idea that you'll have your own planet, full of these vestal virgins and all that—that you're just going to basically fuck and have a great time and all that...

DDG: That's kind of how I see it.

IW: But if you're living this whole life of denial, will you suddenly want to do that? Will it not be repellent to you? If you've been brought up to believe that things like sex are repellent, that drugs

and hedonism are all repellent, how is your mindset going to suddenly change? Where you can enjoy all this fucking shit you get in the next life, anyway? So it's inherently kind of flawed and you know, just nonsense to me. But so many people are terrified of mortality... I mean, I'm not religious myself. But one thing I kind of do admire about Buddhism is that they embrace the idea of death and all that. It's like, you'll never actually see a morose Buddhist. But you see fucking loads of morose Christians and Muslims...

I would basically make every single fucking church, mosque, synagogue into a discotheque. I mean, fuck it, I would say to every kind of priest or minister or whatever, of any kind of persuasion, "You'll go out and play records and mix fucking records if you're going to survive in this parish, do you hear?" Because this is a discotheque. It's a discotheque. It's licensed, and you'll have hard alcohol, all sorts of drugs—and stay here if you can't fucking do this. I would be like a kind of um, be like a kind of Taliban, you know, but a Taliban of extreme alcoholism and drugs and all that...

DDG: One of my favorite writers, Sherwood Anderson, wrote something to this effect in a letter: "It's something gone out of America, an old faith lost, and no new one got. Its youth not given a chance, its youth whipped before it starts." And that has stuck with me, this idea of an old faith lost and no new one got. You've articulated problems with organized religion and stuff, but obviously it gained the prominence that it had partially, I would say, through the ritual that it offered, right?

IW: It's a weird thing because it's never what America was about. The founding fathers and Benjamin Franklin going—well that's just a scam in itself, but there's enough there to kind of, it still has a kind of cognizance and resonance. Most of these guys were atheists. They hated all this European fucking shit about religion and all that. One thing that I do admire about what we've done in Europe is that we've moved towards some kind of, mostly, towards some kind of secular idea, of a secular state, and the idea that religion and the state should be separate,

and so there's no place for any of that stuff. America seems to have regressed in a lot of ways, in terms of religion. I know it has to do with the organization of the right and all that kind of stuff, and they see it as a kind of a tool of fear and therefore control, but it's kind of weird to me that this has been allowed to happen in the States, you know? And nobody just laughs at people, when you get all these fuckers that kind of stand up and preach, nobody just laughs at them. People actually take that kind of seriously, and even if they don't, they still feel a little bit ashamed about not taking it seriously. I mean these people are fucking idiots. It just blows my mind that they have this kind of prominence and this kind of power.

DDG: These televangelists?

IW: Televangelists and...

DDG: These pro-war Christians?

IW: The religious right, the pro-war Christians, the "moral majority," and all this kind of stuff in America, and you know they're cut exactly from the same cloth, ideologically, as the Taliban. You know, it's exactly the same shit. All these flat Earthers just looking for that kind of support, you know?

DDG: You said "flat Earthers."

IW: Yeah.

DDG: I've known a number of people who've said, "I don't buy into the Catholic Church, but I love the ritual," and that type of thing. Were you honest—were you seriously suggesting that something like dance culture, you know, something like that might be a...

IW: Honestly, yes, I do. I don't have any issue with people having any kind of private faith they want, but I just kind of don't like the idea of reflecting it on other people. And I don't like the idea that—I just don't like the idea of churches, basically.

DDG: Does any of what we're talking about have any relevance, or do you care to talk about, as far as the book you're working on now, which is the prequel to *Trainspotting*?

IW: I'm trying to write a kind of book that's not just a prequel but almost like a stylistic alternative as well.

DDG: Stylistic alternative?

IW: Yeah because *Trainspotting* is devoid

of politics. It just took you right into the junkies' lives and all that. There's nothing else.

DDG: Devoid of politics and what?

IW: It kind of took you, I guess, took you right into the life of the character. And I felt it was very important at the time to do that, because it was such a political-laden society at the time. Everything was politicized, basically. And I just was so turned off by that. I just wanted to write about that.

DDG: So there was a heavily political context during the time that *Trainspotting* was set, but you, you dealt with something else and in this book you're focusing more on...

IW: I wanted to deal with the culture, rather than the politics. And in this book, I want to—because we live in now in such depoliticized times—actually introduce the political scenario, to locate what can happen within that. *Trainspotting* is in there kind of just looking outwards, and not looking very far outwards in a lot of ways, but this one is kind of out there, looking in, in some ways.

DDG: What were some of the obvious political issues of the time?

IW: There are lots of things that happened. There's maybe about five or six things that happened to make Edinburgh unique in the world at that time. The first one was the 1978 Referendum, which was where Scotland voted for its own independent parliament. A Scotsman in London, George Cunningham, he put it in this forty-percent threshold thing. It's really fucked up. So the majority voted for it, but it didn't get the majority rule, you know? It was this horrible crushing blow to people. The morale just went down. So that happened and, by an accident of commerce, the great Scottish inventors and pharmacists formed this company, which was called Smith and McFarland, and which was eventually taken over by Blacksilver. That became the place where these guys manufactured pure pharmaceutical heroin. Basically morphine, you know, all the pharmaceutical heroin for the rest of the UK and most of Europe. There was a plant in the west of Edinburgh. Basically what happened was—this happens in plants—people start smuggling out shit. The guys that were

working, they were just kind of smuggling out stuff.

DDG: So that was like the, the big...

IW: Yeah. You had a huge heroin culture in Edinburgh before anyone else, and local guys from the plant taking stuff out. And then the fracture government came in and you had mass unemployment, so there were a lot of people with time on their hands and nothing to do. They also had this thing called the sale of council houses. In Scotland something like fifty percent 50% of the housing stock was council, which was like state-owned. Some really nice houses. So, they sold off the really nice houses to people wanting to buy. And we were basically left with the ghettos, which became more and more so. Before, people—if they'd been tenants long enough—could transfer from the shitty houses into the nice houses. They had an avenue, and basically that avenue was cut off when the nice houses were sold off, so we had ghettos forming, which basically became like projects over here. They were kind of cut off from everything, you know, services and stuff like that. And it all happened at the same time. Suddenly, you had mass unemployment. So you've got people in these ghettos, which weren't really ghettos before, and you've got people with no jobs and they had jobs before, so they've got nothing to do: they're bored and they're fucked—they're fucked up. And suddenly you've got all this heroin that floods in. People stealing, coming from the plant and starting to make up their own. That was a local thing that kicked it off. And you've got demoralization about the whole Scottish Parliament. You've got all these different factors kicking in. And then suddenly, something mundane happens, like the police decide to shut down the needle exchange on Broad Street, where people can go and exchange needles. People start getting these big hospital needles and banging up, passing, just basically passing around the virus. So again, it's like AIDS is kept off and people think it's a gay man's disease, they don't know anything about it, this intravenous drug use thing. So suddenly you've got this massive AIDS epidemic. The heroin epidemic and the AIDS epidemic are completely circumstantial in

that one space—a very thin strip initially of that, this one north Edinburgh corridor, which is only about six square miles. And it kind of spreads out from there. Then the security in the plant tightens up, because they realize what's happening, so that's cut off. You've got all these guys jonesing. So they start, at the same time, importing all this cheap Pakistani heroin, and the whole epidemic kind of kicks off from there. That combination of circumstance—that never really came across in the book, you know what I mean?

DDG: Yeah. What do you think of Chicago? What's your impression of Chicago? Obviously it's interesting to people.
IW: I just wrote a piece about Chicago for a British newspaper. It's like a travel piece. I was encouraging people to go the extra mile, the extra air miles from New York to Chicago—it's an extra hour—saying that you've got the skyscrapers, the architecture, the grandeur, the scale, but again, it has not got the, the metropolitan, the (inaudible). It's also got more friendly people and more social time. You've got the music, all different types of music and all. I like the idea that it's not this big huge tourist place, but it kind of should be. I mean it should be, really. You'd think that it could really be aggressively marketed as a big tourist place; it could be this like "American heritage" tour with music, and it's not, you know. I'm kind of two minds. I kind of don't want loads of people coming here, basically.

DDG: Right, right, yeah, it's that old thing.

IW: Very homely place.

DDG: We've got some Lady Gaga here in the background. You do have a missionary zeal—am I right or am I wrong?—for disco...

IW: Yes.

DDG: Can you defend that position?

IW: I mean...

DDG: Or is it just self-evident?

IW: How can you defend the obviously indefensible? You have to try. I don't want to add a pea-shooter to a forty-five tussle. It's not going to win. It's like disco, to me—it's just a kind of um, just an incredible kind of, irreversible, and kind of um,

(inaudible) to the floor.

DDG: Beats conquer all?

IW: Yeah, definitely.

DDG: There's gotta be some resentment, like, worldwide of, of US Soccer...

IW: It's like they're always there because they're in this crap qualifying group, you know, a lot of good people in Europe and in Africa don't get in. They're always crap and boring, they're just there, basically, to kind of, to keep the revenue and the advertising and the global interest, and...

DDG: But aren't they kind of like the—remember from *Rocky*, when Rocky fought the Russian guy Drago? Aren't they kind of like the Dragos?

IW: The Dragos, yeah, yeah. The Dragos. It's like they're kind of through the college sports system going to try to learn to be a kind of um, a fucking painter like Van Gogh.

(laughter)

“You're not putting the right amount of pressure on that brush. We're measuring the pressure you're putting on that... we're measuring this color...”

DDG: Well that makes our meandering conversation germane to the basic topic which is: you can't ensure artistic output through mere ritual. Am I correct?

IW: Yes, yes.

DDG: And the analogy in soccer would be ?

IW: The reason the American team doesn't progress beyond a certain level is that they have the athleticism and they learn everything by the book and all that, but it's college-taught kind of soccer, and you can't have that. I mean soccer is about inspiration, and about art, and creativity and all that. And...

DDG: And troublemaking?

IW: Yeah, troublemaking. It's like most of the great soccer players, like Maradona, would have been kicked out of the college system long before he would have gotten anywhere near there. I mean, Wayne Rooney would never have got in. George Best would have been kicked out. All the great players—Ewan Crithe, Paul Gaskill, Wee Jimmy Johnson—these guys are almost slightly autistic. You've got a kind of...

DDG: This spark, right?

IW: Yeah... it's, it's craziness. They're all

almost just Spocks in American teams, you need, you need a Jim Kirk. Jim Kirks, you know? You want mavericks who think outside the box.

DDG: Too many Spocks and not enough Kirks.

IW: Not enough Kirks. That's your problem.

DDG: I would extend that to the, to the American literary world as well.

IW: Too many Spocks?

DDG: Not enough Kirks.

(laughter)

Not enough Klingons.

DDG: It's kind of an obligatory question: Do you think that prose fiction will survive, thrive, diminish?

IW: I think it's always going to survive. It's always going to. I don't think it's always going to be as marketable, and it's going to be even harder to make money from it and all that. But I think that people are always going to have stories to tell, and I think that they're doing it in a very immediate way. Some people will be inclined to mess around with different media, and cameras, and stages and stuff like that. But some people also want to (inaudible), without that kind of... that filtering, or interference, or compromise that collaboration with those other things invariably leads to. So I think, yeah, I think it's always going to.

DDG: There's something a little bit irreplaceable about the process of reading. I mean it is a sort of collaboration between the reader and the writer to some extent.

IW: Yeah—in terms of making up a story in somebody's head. But in terms of telling a story, it's the one thing where you can make a very, very existentialist statement, in a way, you know what I mean? It's like fucking *this is it*, you know?

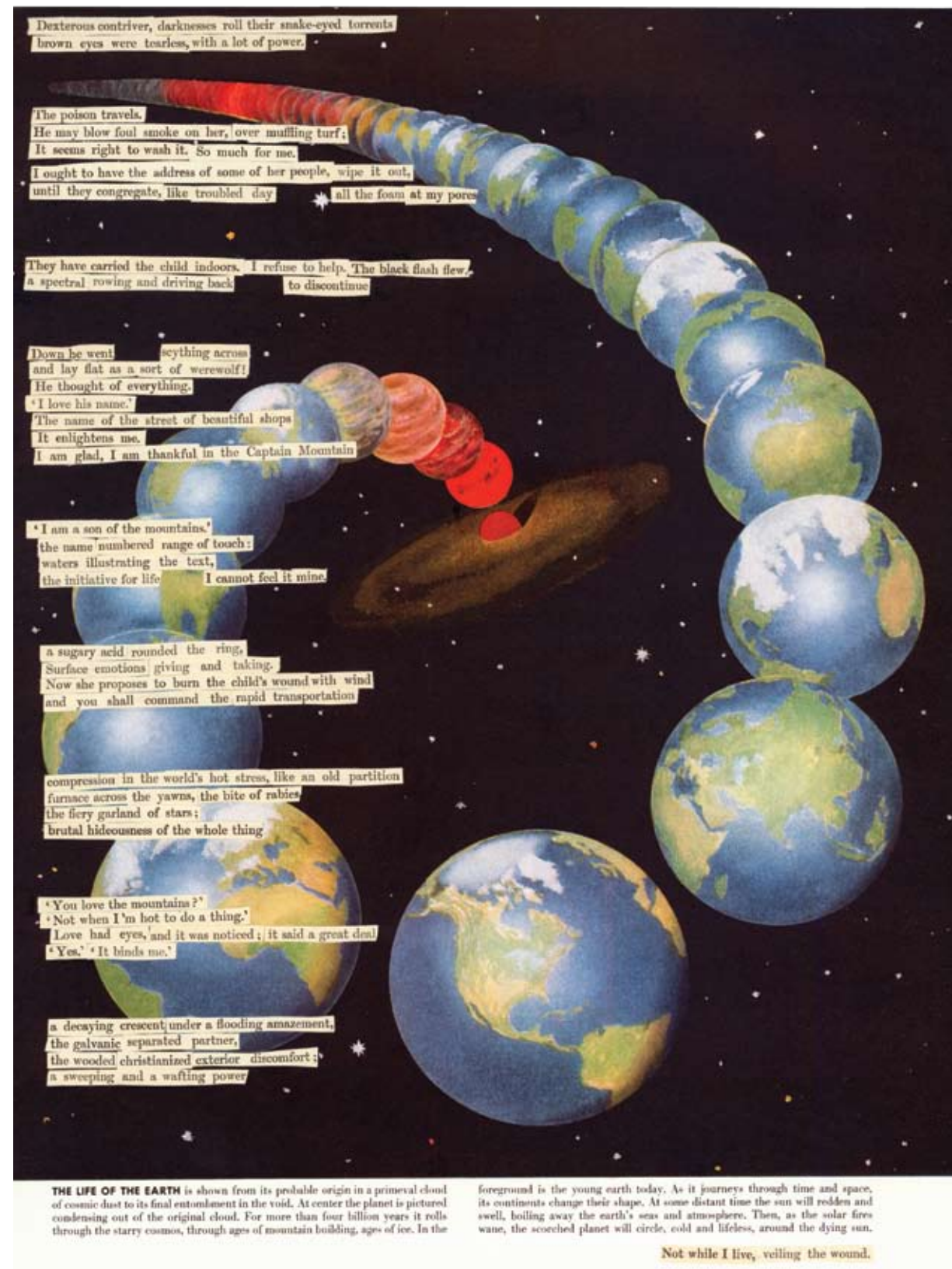
Waiter: You guys ready for a few more?

IW: I don't know. How are we doing time-wise?

Read the *entire* interview, complete with steak nachos and ruminations on Anthony Perkins vs. Anthony Hopkins, Jewel frozen pizza, LeBron James, the miner's strike, Acid House, Milton Bradley and the Cubs, the tyranny of ice, and much more at makemag.com.

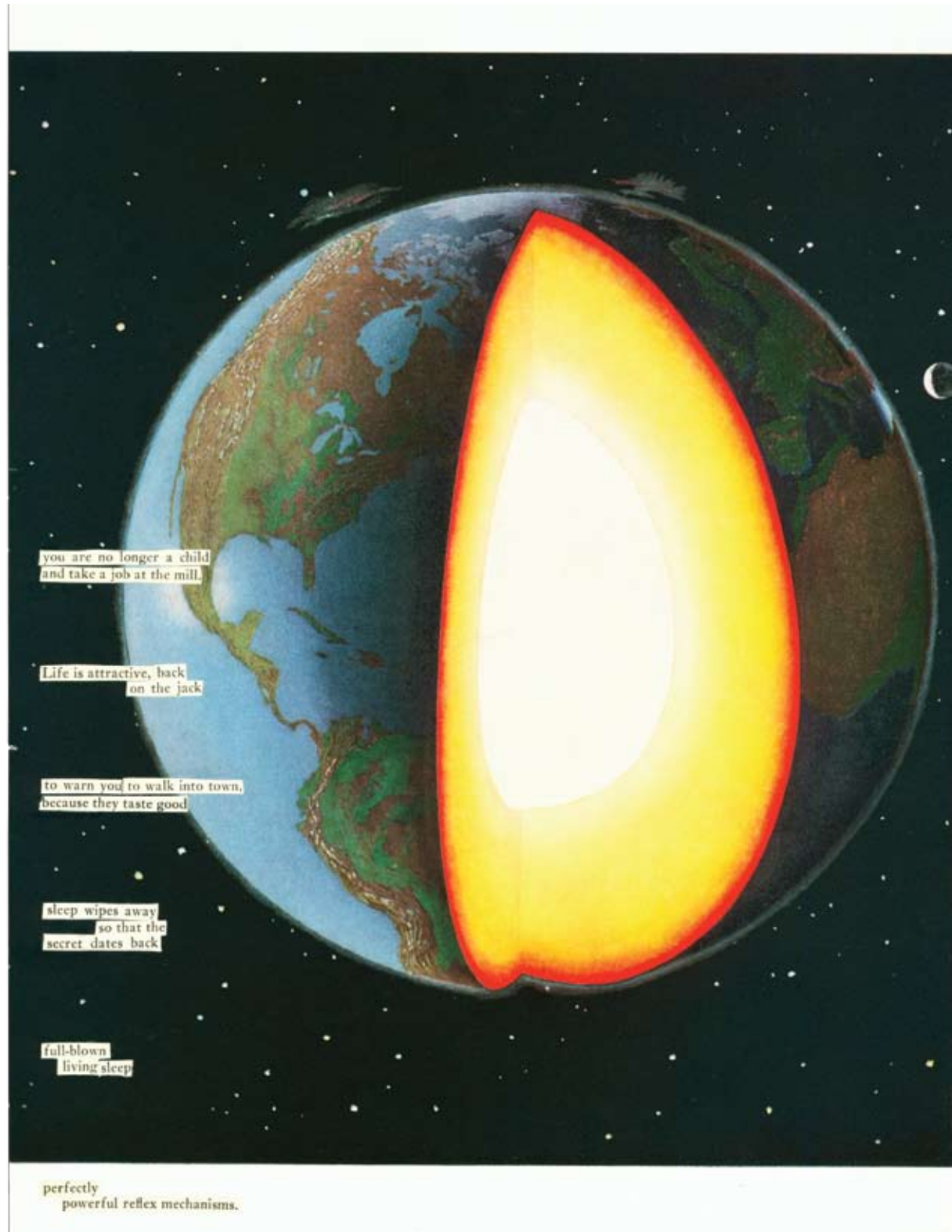
from Lake Antiquity

by BRANDON DOWNING



from Lake Antiquity

by BRANDON DOWNING



Hello Holly

poem by BRANDON DOWNING

1.

So here's what's up with my Schloß.

My family crest is a heap of grey berries in a cheap bag.

And when's the only time a platinum and emerald-encrusted brooch looks
Natural pinned on a dude in a double-breasted jacket? Freaking never.

"Why, have you lived here so long that you are that high up?"

"Nah, I just make long kisses with sweet friends from down my hill."

"I want something earlier, or later, or else."

"At my house, getting fucked up"

2.

I'm becoming a stadium sellout-level guy
To guy hilarious touring tv broadcast comic.

3.

Once you flake off all the mud, breasts are actually pretty alright.

We're a sentimental animal, but a biological fact,
Diamond daddy, of all dogfat.

The personal note rolled into a cigarette,
Sleeping together, but never going to bed.

Just a dolphin on the net, using
A badger avatar that doesn't look that hot,

It mumbles about that it was chained up for a long time



Slapping Clark Gable

nonfiction by

KATE ZAMBRENO

1

She looks just like Vivien Leigh.

Did my mother tell me this, or was I told this firsthand by the admiring man at the photography studio? As if he knew just what to say.

The family portrait over the television. I am in high school. My legs naked and awkward over a royal blue dress—hair teased and curly—I can reach up from my memory and touch it... My Clinique face fixed into a grimace...I never learned how to smile coyly... This is when we wore mascara to match our outfits—I'm sure if I look closely I will find the faintest touch of blue on the tips of my lashes...Pale skin, but mine was not a china doll's face. Not like the Scarlett O'Hara Madame Alexander Doll on the shelf in my Laura Ashley bedroom. She wears the forest green dress for the Twelve Oaks barbecue, forest green ribbons in her dark hair. They cut young Vivien's dark ringlets for the Divine Babe when she was at school at the convent. I have green eyes (hazel on my driver's license), eyes verdant with fury or sorrow.

2

At this age I am strangely asexual—my *sexuality vitalis*, as Krafft-Ebing would say, resigned to onanism and oneirism. I have not kissed a boy. I will not kiss a boy until I am almost off to college. He will be my first boyfriend, and it will be a passionate yet virginal love, and it will be both of our first kisses on the scratchy couch in the basement while his mother lies on the couch upstairs dying of cancer, her head permanently wrapped in a towel like she is always just out of the shower. We will be watching Judy Garland sing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and his lips will be chapped, and the furthest we will go is when I strip and show him my Garfield panties, and he will nuzzle me there. And once we will go to his grandparents' empty house in Park Ridge and get naked and roll around on a bed, but we won't know what to do. And another time we will be in the woods on vacation with my family and we will roll around again in the leaves, but we will be scared because we have figured out how to buy cigarettes but not condoms. Later he will think he's a vampire and be diagnosed with schizophrenia, and when I see him on campus he will announce me to all who will hear as his high school sweetheart he never fucked. I will later think I'm immortal too—with drugs, mind drugs, street drugs, casual sex, way-too-serious sex—and years after that, we will both be back in the northwestern suburbs, each with our own diagnosis from the DSM-IV. He will pick me up like the old days and we will go to Denny's, and he will scribble prophecies on napkins, his hair now down to his waist and dyed black. He will insist on being called an anagram of his name. We will go to a playground and sit on the swings and make out, and he will tell me I'm still hot even though I have cut off all my hair and no one, absolutely no one, would confuse me for an MGM starlet anymore.

3

Although I would be a virgin until twenty, I began masturbating furiously at a young age. I would lie on my belly and rub my fingers against my underwear. I needed *friction* to get off (still do). *I know what you're doing*, my mother once said from the foot of the stairs as I pretended to watch TV. This best sums up the exchanges I had with my mother about sex. The implication of surveillance, the undertones of guilt.

I would pound myself into the carpet relentlessly, as if the floor were my overbearing lover that I wished to be consumed by.

In my sex dreams, even when I was young and untouched, I liked it rough. And this I can perhaps blame on *Gone with the Wind*.

4

When I was in third grade at St. Emily's Middle School, I wrote a book report on *Gone with the Wind*.

This was years before the family photograph. The man at the

photography studio didn't realize the mythology he was contributing to.

Around the time of the book report I decided that everyone should call me Katie Scarlett. Scarlett O'Hara's real name was Katie Scarlett—that's what her drunk Irish father called her—and I was a Katie too, and we both had green eyes and so it was fate.

I swore at least two times in my book report on *Gone with the Wind*. Although I don't remember the exact wording, I am told I wrote something like: *And Rhett told Scarlett that he didn't give a damn. But I really do think that he gave a damn.*

And Sister Blanche (or was it Benedicta?) called in my mother. I was always getting in trouble at school in this stage of my life.

David Selznick was fined \$5000 for that ending word, for going against the Hays Code.

I like to think of this as my first instance of writing the taboo.

5

I was a promiscuous reader. The only thing my parents never censored while I was growing up was my reading material. Strict about everything else. A perpetual lock-and-key. I was grounded for making the B honor roll. I wasn't allowed to go to the mall with friends. I couldn't date until I was sixteen. I couldn't see R-rated movies. But I was allowed, always, to read whatever I wanted, from their bookshelves or from the public library. I guess they thought reading couldn't do any harm, not thinking of Flaubert's dictum that novels corrupt the masses or of Rousseau's worries about the purity of young girls' minds.

I sped-read to the dirty parts. In my father's book on the history of the papacy, I was only interested in the seedy Renaissance popes, the ones who fucked around and fathered children, who had cups of chocolate served to them in the bathtub.

My grandmother's paperback romances and their long purple passages of *fucking*. His long hard sword, her throbbing sheath. She is always virginal, saving herself. He is powerful, seductive. I would sit on the toilet and read these one an hour, my mind swollen and dazed with all of that fucking.

I still read novels with my hands down my pants. I get my own lubrication on the pages, even if they are library books.

5

On my mother's bookshelf: *Wuthering Heights*, *Gone with the Wind*, and a series of quasi-gothic historical romance rip-offs of the two.

One of these was *The Demon Lover*.

The Demon Lover was a bodice ripper by Victoria Holt, published in the early '80s. It was a first-person narrative about a British woman painter—named Kate—in some far-off era, who hailed from a line of celebrated miniaturists. When her father—who is sadly going blind—is commissioned to paint a famous French baron, Kate must accompany him and pretend to be his help-mate, but really paint the portrait herself.

The Baron is a Byronic type: severe, masculine, cruel. The virginal Kate behaves quite coldly toward him. But then he has her kidnapped and drugged, and holds her captive in his chateau. He eagerly rapes her every night, forcing her into submission, enjoying the fight. By day, a long fur robe covers her bruised porcelain body. His behavior is explained in the book by his Nordic ancestry of raping and pillaging. And of course at the end Kate relents and falls madly in love with him.

I cannot tell you how many times I read *The Demon Lover* as a child. I did not read it—I devoured it. I shivered at the thought of being ravaged. Hatred and disgust mixed with eroticism and excitement: my formative education in the hate-fuck.

I can recall a line from *The Demon Lover* from memory: *The bed was like a battlefield that night.* This is after the first night, when she wakes up, the effects of the drug worn off, and to her horror he is on top of her.

But I fought... how I fought! I whipped my hatred for him and somewhere at the back of my mind I realized that I was fighting not only him but something in myself... some erotic curiosity, some desire

for this conflict... some craving for the ultimate satisfaction. I was vanquished but I felt a certain wild exhilaration in defeat and the stronger my hatred the greater my excitement.

I ordered the book online recently and was pleased to find that line there as it was soldered in my memory.

The bed was a battlefield.

I'm getting turned on just typing it.

6

Rhett Butler and the Baron. My personal archetypes of a certain sort of lover. I only knew brutal boys who were weak approximations.

Clark Gable, the paragon of power and cruel paternity. He needs to teach us a lesson. He wants to give us a spanking.

When Marilyn Monroe was growing up in foster homes, she pasted Clark Gable's picture in her album and told everyone that he was her daddy. She was devastated when everyone blamed her for his death after filming *The Misfits*. Always stuck with cowboys in films—she was the rodeo prize.

He slaps Joan Crawford's ass in *Dancing Girl*—*thank you*, she breathes.

With Jean Harlow's prostitute in *Red Dust*. He pulls her onto his lap. Hey what's the *big deal*, she pouts. But then she realizes she likes it. Harlow was genius at the sudden reaction. He threatens to lock her in the outhouse.

Clark Gable playing the heavy sans moustache in *A Free Soul*. Everyone remembers him slapping Norma Shearer. He doesn't. He pushes her onto the couch. One hand. That's how easy it was. She wants it so bad, with her fuck-me eyes. The society girl and the criminal.

But later after he manhandles her: *what a beast you were when the surface was scratched.*

His laugh when Mary Astor slaps him in *Red Dust*.

Clark Gable was Hitler's favorite movie star.

I want you to faint, he says when he kisses Scarlett. *This is what you were meant for.*

In his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing focuses mostly on cases of male masochists. He documents only a few cases of female masochists. His explanation is problematically Hegelian: that women are masochists anyway, slaves to their relationships to men (and that penetration is essentially passive). This he calls female "bondage."

The desire for the bottom and the brothel. Slumming like Baudelaire. Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* dreams of being tied to the tree and whipped by Michel Piccoli.

There is case 84, a Miss X who wished *to be the slave of a man whom she loves; she would kiss his feet if he would only whip her.*

Rousseau loved the whip too, didn't he?

7

Margaret Mitchell wrote that every good girl innocent and well-bred has a devouring curiosity about prostitutes. In the novel, Scarlett fascinated by Belle Watkins.

Everyone wanted to play Scarlett: Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis, Paulette Goddard, and, of course, Vivien Leigh. "I have cast myself as Scarlett O'Hara," she announced to David Selznick. Jean Harlow wanted it badly—she read it rapturously like everyone else—she didn't want to be cast as Belle Watkins. Always the good-time girl. (The fallen woman must reform by fade-out.)

Vivien Leigh with her white gloves... she had so many pairs... she was brought up so correct and Catholic... Vivien Leigh later as Blanche Dubois, roaming red-light districts as "research," taking home cabdrivers and asking them to throw her against a wall and fuck her senseless.

And does Blanche DuBois really want Stanley, her ape? The rape scene: Stanley wants to debase the Queen of England.

Perhaps Little Red Riding Hood craved the wolf.

Susan Brownmiller points out that Little Red Riding Hood is a rape parable. That my desire to have men with large hands and brute force—the Stanley Kowalskis, the Rhett Butlers—is part of a victimization mentality I've been indoctrinated into since childhood.

The Greek *raptus*. Latin for "to seize." A crime of property.

Zeus cannot contain himself. He turns into animals. He must overpower her, and she is enthralled by this. To get carried away, to be abducted, to be transported. Poor Helen her mother was raped and then she was raped by Paris and the war inside of her.

Vivien Leigh as Leda her swan neck he is going to snap it.

8

I don't remember when I first saw the film version of *Gone with the Wind*. It is seared in my memory as if I am remembering myself, my childhood.

The so-called rape scene. He is going to crush her head like a walnut. Remove thoughts of Ashley Hamilton from her brain. *Observe my hands my dear* (I still observe them shivering). *I can tear you to pieces with them.*

The scene all in reds. THE SCARLET LETTER. The red tart-dress Rhett (RED with rage) forces her to wear to Ashley's party. *Wear plenty of rouge, look the part*, he tells her. The crimson velvet robe lined with ermine, a pornographic princess. She sits on the red throne taking her brandy. Her hair in braids with a red ribbon. Her pinched ivory face. Porcelain begging to be shattered. He swallows her up in his arms, his mouth, in the darkness. *Rhett, don't. This is one night you're not throwing me out. Arms too strong lips too bruising fate too fast*, Margaret Mitchell writes.

Next morning she is in her white nightie against white sheets.

Vivien Leigh purring like a kitten, those sated cat eyes. In the novel we are told he uses her *brutally* she is *hurt* and *humbled*. A scene based on Margaret Mitchell's own past of domestic violence. Eroticized in fiction.

9

And I wonder why I find this so erotic. I'd like to disavow the easy psychoanalytic interpretation, although I wonder if there was something buried in my childhood that made me shiver so much at this scene. My father was not cruel, although he was unyielding in patriarchal authority. The only time we touched was during Mass, when everyone wished each other peace with a handshake, and I would barrel after him with a hug. I remember his palm flat against my collarbone, pushing me away. As if it was somehow indecent to touch one's daughter.

For a while I didn't desire peace in my lovers. After the fumbblings of my gentle vampire I sought out men who were cruel in their silence and stoicism. And I would bang on the door of their cool remove. Does every woman adore a fascist? Ted Hughes playing Sylvia Plath's panzer-man. *The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.* Dirk Bogard in *The Night Porter*. Marlon Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*.

Perhaps Simone de Beauvoir is right, perhaps Krafft-Ebing is right—that there is a masochism to a certain sort of love, the idealized fairy-tale love we are taught from childhood, which is paternal, mirrored on father-daughter. I think of Catherine Deneuve in *Donkey Skin*, a grotesque version of the incestuous family romance. We are taught to desire Heathcliff and Lord Byron and Rhett Butler. We are taught to shiver when someone threatens to kick down doors or lash us with a buggy whip, to find the idea of being plundered and pillaged erotic.

Although I wonder if it is Scarlett that I am more curious about. Her internal warfare. The Scarlett who struggled in Rhett Butler's arms, who fought like a tiger, who was subdued like a kitten. Perhaps I long to struggle, to fight back, to kick and slap. But what am I seeking to vanquish?

The bed was like a battlefield. ■



The Recidivistic Misfits

poetry by DARA WIER

This time my mission to visit the farmers' market has been successfully completed. A grizzled old farmer swiped a crushed sheet of newspaper into a puddle of rainwater to assist the safe transport of what were his but are my soon to be your flowers home. The farmers were dripping with rain.

The couple's dream was to honeymoon in Romania; they'd heard there was something in the drinking water there.

It appears as if not even a move to Paris can alter the outlook of one born in Romania.

Insane, intense, obsessive love of Ru?

I tap ears note to arias canal later nor rumors nor pears rapt over a moon over Romania.

Sulfur's blue flame can't mollify its suffocating odor.

The young man was thinking about what it would be like to stock groceries. He was on an island; groceries were very important.

fork, fork, Francis Jammes!

Bitter, bitter were another young man's words as he threw down the gauntlet he would forfeit his dreams. By his doing so we were to understand we would be missing many things.

I challenge you!

You challenge me?

I challenge you!

You challenge me.

I challenge you to have me explain what each word on this page is meant to mean. I challenge you, this one who goes unnamed screams so we drift into obliteration in fear of this riptide of elucidation.

A faint smell of rosemary on my hands. I don't like it. It's not where it belongs.

Everyone agreed, the one we were considering is a real vampire, non-practicing.

We were grateful but to what or to whom are we to be grateful?

The head of state fell off his bike

His press secretary spoke into the mike

The path was slick, the recent rains

Took this good brave man down

Elsewhere an intrepid investigative reporter hesitantly reported there had been no rain

We were being stretched thin, between a latent extrovert and a not-to-be-taken-for-granted sequestered introvert. We were as thin as a blade of St. Augustine grass, if you blew on us we'd produce a chilling sad whistle that could wring tears from the eyes of a werewolf, an already pretty morose individual.

The removal of cellophane from a compact disc case, the price of music.

If it made a difference to you I would do everything backwards for you.

A sleep cure: I begin with whatever it is it seems I can remember first and then continue along this path in strict chronological order. I never make it to when I'm learning to walk in a chicken yard.

Though I've longed to get to the part where I'm sitting on a bench in a church watching everyone fanning themselves with cardboard fans of Jesus up on the cross.

We were watching the Northern Lights add luster to the calving icebergs.

It was a little pitiful how glad I was to sit on the side of the road waiting to exchange for almost nothing a braid of garlic I'd adored.

This is where the sea train docks nearby the sulfur plant in view of the oil rigs.

Someone was complaining that someone else was always trying to explain what one ought to be feeling. It occurs to me that I don't know how I feel about privately owned rain gauges fixed to fence posts in suburban yards.

Isn't what one should feel be almost always suffocating?

An Empty Meadow

poetry by DARA WIER

Like cellophane.

To escape notice, to lie under the surface breathing through a reed.

This is where a ferry leaves its landing and one is induced to walk across its deck to lean over its stern to have one's brain massaged.

A ferry in a light rain or under a vampire's moon.

I am sorry but circumstances are such that we have all but lost interest in the cowboy life.

How should one feel about a rodeo that takes place in a maximum security prison named Angola?

I think I know a lawyer who can answer this question. His answers always surprise me.

I was in the wrong room; the raccoons were not life-size, they were big as Brahma bulls.

This is where the sign on the family-owned grocery says we're all out of velvet.

Lizards looked best on calla lily stalks, which is where we'd often find them, all still and silent in mutual admiration.

A stranger left a message for me saying wherever it was I was going after leaving the area perhaps it will be a good place to go. I had no plan to leave the area.

Someone associated with their organization had been missing for going on forty-nine weeks. At first a dozen or so of them spent their weekends searching in the vicinity of where evidence of the missing person had last been found. As weeks passed one could almost gauge how closely linked are guilt and doubt and giving up.

There are some who are good at changing the subject and others for whom this is not an option.

To experience reticence in service to friendship, to have one's feelings spared.

A friend surprised me by popping earplugs out from his ears about halfway into the first sentence of our conversation.

The consequences of mishearing have been greatly exaggerated. I thought you said I overheard something electrifyingly sanguine.

Now and then one meets a sanguivorous individual.

Thoughtless, like dust on an untouched table.

There was a good deal of talk about chatter in those days.

Sometimes a sneer can be employed as if it is just stopping short of unsheathing a weapon.

When he was a boy the man had suffered a great blow to his head.

When he was done for the day with his farming the man walked down the road about fifteen or so minutes to his sister's door where he'd enter a sidedoor and take a seat on a wooden chair just to the right of the doorway. To his sister's offers of this or that to eat or drink he'd wave a hand away. He never said anything. Many years later he died of injuries he sustained after being sideswiped by a car on this highway.

Why are you whispering?

We were passing through an era during which one-sided conversations sometimes needed to be reckoned with.

I knew a girl who'd trained her ears to be the keenest ears in the world.

We couldn't stop finishing one another's sentences someone told me as if this were a good thing.

There are times when one is listening to someone who is thinking too fast without pausing.

In the early afternoon after the dry cleaners have gotten done with their cleaning and there is no ironing going on anymore and all of the recently tended to clothes are hanging on racks under cellophane.

Passé

poetry by DARA WIER

If, as it happens because of an involuntary shifting or a sudden sounding, one's dream's narrative dissolves before one's all too awake eyes, there then, is that the end of that dream? Can a dream be said to have an end?

A large black short-haired dog, not a lab.

A steel rip-sawed trap inside a steel cage about the size of an ordinary haystack.

A gold butterfly the size of a thumbnail on the end of a gold chain.

A river stone on which to rest one's palm.

A leather ring keeping a dozen skeleton keys together.

Something to "roll back the clouds."

Freedom Wolves.

Every other thing was passing strange.

There were infinitesimally small invisible crustaceans in the drinking water. There were poisonous chemicals leeching into their drinking water bottles. During this same passage of time several of them expressed dismay but not surprise surmising we were being genetically modified by means of the modified livestock we consumed.

I will hurt you only a little, I will sting you just so you'll wonder if you've been stung at all, practicing a demonic homeopathic logic of twisted increments.

A beautiful face of a wandering girl imposed upon a giant fern near an edge of a fern-brake's advance.

When we opened the door it took a while for us to realize that everything was covered with mold, a pale silvery green gray sheen. One solution would have been to have refrained from ever going in again.

Commercial applications of music.

One of them believed that dreams were a physic drain to be sorely grieved.

Another expressed embarrassment that dreams often seemed to mimic logics of serial linear narrative.

To fly in a dream unassisted by insects or mechanical contraptions.

To converse in a dream with someone who's died.

I am dreaming arouses suspicion.

Dream a little dream with me, is what some say.

Interpretations of dreams, dismal economies.

I admired how one of them always looked terribly alarmed when in the company of someone about to begin recounting a dream.

Today's news: "you had what effectively amounted to a religious coronation in a government building of a man who clams literally to be the savior."

We found ourselves fascinated by a friendly shopkeeper's willingness to tell us about the differences among different kinds of Victorian crystal knife holders. He took our names and our number.

Our dog's eyes are dark pools in which hide thousands of years of feral spells.

Commercial applications of dreams. A career choice to advertise one's self for hire as a dream coach.

To hire one!

What can a full-grown llama think of a newborn sheep?

What did it seem a new-born camel thought of us?

That it looked as if it were seeing us in a dream?



Illustration by Corrie Scanga

New Strategies for Invisibility

nonfiction by MARTIN SEAY

The first thing I can remember reading—and I don't mean just comprehending, just translating printed marks on a page into words, but really *reading*—is an article in *Ranger Rick* magazine.

The year was probably 1979 or '80. *Ranger Rick*, as you may know, is a nature magazine for kids, put out by the National Wildlife Federation; this article appeared in one of their October issues. I seem to recall a photo of an owl on its cover. My younger brother had recently come by a difficult-to-explain terror of owls, and I suspect that his terror—and the fact that I did not share it—gave this particular issue an additional aura for me: seductive, mildly dangerous.

This was a different era, prior to the ascendancy of Christian fundamentalists to various state boards of education, when it was still possible to design a Halloween-themed issue of an avowedly pedagogical magazine without jeopardizing its chances for classroom adoption—and this issue of *Ranger Rick* was unapologetically Halloween themed. The earnest humanists of the National Wildlife Federation had, however, shorn it almost entirely of the customary seasonal signifiers of the occult: no witches, no werewolves, no ghosts. At age seven or eight I was already cultivating a fascination with occult signifiers; if I was aware of these editorial omissions, I can't have been pleased by them.

The article that I remember—the one that has stayed with me, however changeably, across thirty years—was written by a woman, a mother, and described a Halloween activity performed at her family's lake house by her children and her children's friends. Something about the piece struck me immediately as strange: the perspective from which it was told, the point of view, the narrator's voice—although of course I had no access to these concepts, basic components of the writer's toolkit. I only knew that I wasn't used to *Ranger*

Rick addressing me in the voice of a particular adult, someone involved in the story she was telling. The article was a little longer, too, than the typical *Ranger Rick* piece, and a little harder to read: not over my head, but not talking down, either. The encounter felt like a mistake, like a door accidentally left open, like I might not really be the intended audience.

The content I understood well enough, or thought I did. I knew, for instance, what a lake house was. I read this and every other issue of *Ranger Rick* while staying with my maternal grandparents in the Piney Woods of East Texas, some sixty miles north of my own suburban home; my brother and I were sent up there often—gaining healthy exposure to "Nature," keeping temporarily out of our parents' hair—and we were generally happy to make the trip. My grandmother had purchased the *Ranger Rick* subscription with the goal of keeping us quietly entertained during our visits, and after sundown it came in handy; during daylight hours, the ten forested acres of sandy bottomland on which my grandparents' house was built more than sufficed to hold our attention. On top of that, a few times a year my grandfather would roll his small fiberglass boat from its shed, clear the dirt-dauber wasps' nests from the intakes of its Mercury outboard, and tow it up the road to Lake Conroe, where we'd spend a day fishing for bluegills, crappie, and channel cats.

Like virtually every other large body of fresh water in the Lone Star State, Lake Conroe is not, strictly speaking, a lake: it's a reservoir, created in 1973 by the damming-up of the west fork of the San Jacinto River, which makes it two years younger than I am. I didn't know this at the time. It would not have occurred to me that this inexhaustible source of mystery—a mile across, fifteen miles long—could have been brought into being by human hands. I liked to imagine the lake as a living thing, possessed of its own intelligence:

every weighted hook we cast seemed an attempt at communion, charged with the prospect of discovery. While my grandfather spent the morning arranging our tackle to produce calculated results—juglines and stink-bait for catfish, bobbers and nightcrawlers for perch—I would crank my reel in constant hope of the unexpected. At depths greater than about a foot the water was opaque, glossy and greenish-black like a live-oak acorn, and it seemed capable of concealing anything. A mud turtle’s nose poked between lily pads, a hook tangled in feathery hydrilla, even snags that forced the snapping of a line: all these might be taken for omens.

At midday we’d reel in and motor to a shady spot to eat tuna-fish sandwiches from the cooler, and that’s typically when I’d consider the houses that lined the banks. Many were outfitted with tiered decks, white-washed gazebos, speedboats moored to private piers; some were raised on stilts to guard against flood. I don’t recall ever being envious of these lakeside dwellers—my family was upwardly mobile; none of this seemed out of reach—but the thought that people might actually *reside* here, at the edge of such limitless chthonic wonder, filled me with excitement and awe. I imagined these folks as anchorites, as oracles, who’d don their flip-flops and proceed to the docks by dawn to assay what the dissipating mists might portend. The available evidence, of course, suggested that their interests ran more toward water-skiing, angling for largemouth bass, and sucking down shit-tons of Lone Star beer—but even at that age, I was guided by the sense that resisting the obvious interpretation is a pretty good way to maintain an enchanted existence.

Looking back, I’m pretty sure the lake in the *Ranger Rick* article resembled Lake Conroe hardly at all. I seem to recall a reference in the woman’s story to an early frost; the accompanying photographs showed rocky hillsides aflame with maples. The Piney Woods, by contrast, never supplied much in the way of autumn color. Furthermore, it’s likely the Halloween issue of *Ranger Rick* reached me in early September, when the weather in East Texas was still ninety degrees and miserably humid, which probably explains why I was indoors reading the magazine in the first place.

This, as well as I can remember, is the story the woman told:

She, her husband, her children, and her children’s friends gathered at the lake house on Halloween to make jack-o’-lanterns. They used pumpkins of various sizes as well as other, more exotic winter squash—cushaws, turbans, acorns, hubbards—all purchased from a farm stand earlier that day. The children drew

wild faces on the squash-skins; the adults carved them. This took all afternoon. While the woman and her husband worked, the kids went into the woods to gather fallen branches; once the jack-o’-lanterns were finished, the group lashed the branches together to fashion crude rafts. The sun went down. The hollowed squash were lined up along the dock, lit from within by votive candles. Spooky stories were told until the hour grew late. Then, with some formality, the jack-o’-lanterns were put on the rafts and towed by canoe some distance from shore, where the wind caught them and they began to drift. The children watched as the ghoulish faces they’d made flickered orange across the water—each doubled by its own unsteady reflection—until all were gone from sight. Then they slept. Periodically, for weeks afterward, the woman and her family would find tangled bits of raft and soggy chunks of pumpkin at the water’s edges; by summertime, squash vines had begun to leaf along the lake’s banks, sprouted from occasional seeds the family had left in the drowned jack-o’-lantern skulls.

When I read this account at age seven or eight, I thought it was by far the best thing I had ever heard of anybody doing. I could not have begun to explain why I felt this way—it’s not much easier to pin down now—and something in the woman’s tone gave me the pleasing and thrilling sense that she, too, was baffled by the whole endeavor. It sounded like a ton of fun, but creepy, too, and a little dangerous. As I’ve thought about the article over the years, I’ve scanned my memory fruitlessly for clues as to whether the family’s jack-o’-lantern regatta was a spontaneous gesture (i.e. creepy and dangerous in a *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord of the Flies* kind of way) or if it was a premeditated ritual (i.e. creepy and dangerous in an Aleister Crowley, *Wicker Man* kind of way). Whatever its conception may have been, it was entirely appealing to me.

But why, exactly? Partly, of course, it was the sense that these folks had kicked my bush-league fishing-trip animism up to the advanced level: they’d abolished any pretense of material functionality—fish for dinner!—and plunged headlong into a realm of atavistic magic. I mean, I’d participated in the carving of jack-o’-lanterns before; it was sort of a pain in the ass. The labor these people must have expended, only to send their handiwork into the lake as soon as it was done: this struck me, rather compellingly, as a complete waste of time and effort.

But not a *pointless* waste—which is, for instance, what going to church seemed like to me. This was no comforting and conventionalizing ritual, long-established by tradition. Instead, this was alchemy: an improvisatory adventure that risked both silliness and perdition,

a ceremony conducted for the purpose of *determining* the purpose of the ceremony. That, I thought, was pretty cool.

And yet that wasn’t the half of it. The image that the article lodged most firmly in my mind was not, finally, that of the jack-o’-lanterns floating away from the family’s dock. Rather, it was the view I imagined from the *opposite* bank: what someone in one of those lake houses might have seen. It was that person—unmentioned in the woman’s story, purely my own invention—whom I took as my surrogate, and whose point of view it pleases me even today to inhabit: someone stepping from the music and chatter of a Halloween party, maybe a little drunk, wandering—alone, or in intimate company—down to the docks to watch the moon silver the water, and glimpsing there, through a cloud of chilled breath, that line of orange demons as it came across the lake.

For some time prior to my encounter with the *Ranger Rick* article, I had been fascinated and frustrated by the romantic cliché of messages in bottles: communiqués cast upon the waves for unknown persons to discover. This seemed like a great idea, except for one thing, namely: What message do you put in the bottle? Whatever might be written on the rolled scrap of paper, the true content was always predetermined and always the same: *I wrote this. You found it.* The genius of what the woman and her family had done consisted precisely of their refinement of this trick: they had replaced the bottles with jack-o’-lanterns, and the content of the message was identical to the act of delivering it.

I would like to be able to point to this as the moment when I realized that I wanted to “be a writer,” but that’s not accurate. Instead, I think of it as the moment when I began to understand how reading and writing actually function. To people such as myself, raised in an indisputably televisual culture, the printed page cannot help but seem about as quaint as a hoop skirt, surpassed as it has been by a dozen or more generations of fresher communicative technologies. How sad, say the apologists of the written word, that reading’s stately and difficult pleasures have been shunted aside by information and amusement served up on pretty screens that engage the audience in a manner so immediate and vivid—if also shallow, and often false—that they have no prayer of competing. That argument’s not completely wrong, I guess, but it also misses the point: these days, recourse to the printed page is not merely quaint, but actually perverse. Like any worthwhile perversions, reading and writing are defined by consensually imposed restrictions, tensions of frustration and deferral. The universally cited

limits of written communication—pure language, received in silence from someone absent—are limits, sure enough, but they’re also precisely what makes reading and writing possible as imaginative arts. You craft an object from the materials you’ve collected; you try to fix something in it to shed a little light; you float it into the world across a featureless and mutable surface. Whatever audience finds it won’t know you, and you won’t know that audience: the value of what you’ve made is multiplied by this mutual invisibility. This is what it means to be an author. When it works—if it works—this is how.

What I believe I discovered in that issue of *Ranger Rick*—the thing of enduring value that I surely had no grasp of at the time but that I have returned to regularly in the intervening years as a tool and as a landmark—was basically this: an open and expansive attitude about existing in the world that didn’t come at anybody’s unconsented expense. The extravagant purposelessness of what the woman and her family did on that Halloween night seemed a vast leap beyond (and maybe a friendly rebuke to) the usual human-scaled ambitions of the National Wildlife Federation, with their earnest catalogues of species, diets, behaviors, and habitats; at the same time, it was a responsible and intellectually honest alternative to the neo-pagan romanticism that I toyed with while afloat in Lake Conroe. I don’t wish to be overly dramatic here, but this is a distinction that matters: one can follow the first road, if one is disposed to do so, into charmless realms of utilitarian technocracy; the second road, of course, passes through some pretty spectacular scenery on its way into the kingdom of fascist mystification. When we come by our values in childhood, it’s difficult to know exactly what’s at stake, or when it’s too late to stop believing our own bullshit.

There is another path; I suppose there always is. What we believe and what we consider to be true can, for a time, be bracketed: we can step out of ourselves, out of our entanglements, and see our circumstances anew. We call this make-believe; we call it playing a game. Sometimes we call it art, or fiction.

The sun is down; we’re all gathered in the dark. Someone puts on a mask, tells a tale in a strange voice, lifts hands toward the fire to throw shadows on the wall. We know the storyteller, or we think we do, but we can’t make out the familiar face, and now the hair begins to rise on our scalps: the thrill of dreaming freely in this fragile space we’ve made, this zone of relative safety where—without serious consequence—we can take a moment to play tricks on ourselves. ■



Mirror Photocopy II, 2005
Photocopy
18" x 24"



Untitled, 2008
Mixed media on newspaper
23" x 12"

Buddha Feet, 2008
Papier-mâché
67" x 35" x 35"



The Religion of Insects

fiction by CARU CADOC

"And what's the confession?" McLean asked, changing the subject and putting his tumbler on the black metal table.

Winkowski raised his bushy graying eyebrows as though it was already apparent. "That I think she's an idiot and I don't fucking care."

McLean was hoping for something juicier, an affair or cross-dressing or at least tax evasion. The daughter thing wasn't anything new after listening to an entire meal of complaints dished out in his friend's businessman voice. Winkowski's wife blamed him for "screwing this girl up by not hugging her liberally enough." Then "the queen," Winkowski's pejorative for his daughter's gay therapist, said the girl was "an 'ideal candidate' for a nervous goddamn breakdown," and if she has one she'll never be the same—but if she makes it through her early twenties *without* one, "he says her brain chemistry changes and everything should be fine."

McLean's own confession, he thought, stubbing his cigarette out in the ashtray and pulling a fresh one from the pack, regarded being too old to happily masturbate in a studio apartment with no hot water. Just a glee-free tool to fashion sleep.

"Look," Winkowski leaned his elbows on the table and brought the conversation back to its crux. "When I'm faced with a decision like this in the office, I powwow with my lawyer about worst-case scenarios. The *worst-case* scenario for us right here is she gets expelled. Which'll happen anyway. And your academic name gets smeared. Which it already is. This is an arbitrage opportunity for you."

It wasn't the first time Winkowski offered him money on this patio. The last time wasn't for any task, just a gift to offset the costs of losing house, job, and family. McLean had been too prideful to accept it. Now his old friend was back to ask a favor—the Italian suit begging the aging juice-stained blue jeans and pseudo-seventies tawdry tawny T-shirt with *The Dragon Diner* scrawled across the chest above a smil-

ing white serpent (short sleeves giving way to graying arm hair) for the one thing that couldn't be safely bought from anyone else. It was hard to play too dignified to take it—to let his ethical vanity stop him from helping both of them—after he hadn't been dignified enough to forsake the cliché of risking his wife and livelihood to pop his poignant, pungent peeper six and a quarter lovely lonely inches into a starry-eyed undergrad.

Winkowski raised his hand and snapped at the pretty Asian waitress, to ask for the check. McLean hated when his tables snapped at him.

He politely declined the ride home, mentioning he liked the chilly November air, and walked thirty-nine blocks on the sore ankles of a middle-aged waiter. His thoughts fell to the dysfunctional etymological family of *humus*. Latin for "earth," ancestor of *humilis* ("low"), and the sculpting medium of those complicated prideful "humans." But when you've been *inhumane* and *inhumed* your pecker in the wrong *humid* *humidor*, falling low in social standing from an assistant professor and published author to an unemployed pariah, you are *humiliated*, cultivating your *humility*, leaving you *grounded*. It liberates you to do things like live in your car until you find an apartment after your wife kicks you out, frees you to take jobs like waiting tables in a chintzy diner at forty-three years old. The irony emerges: humility *immunizes* against humiliation. Monasteries were right to advocate it—*truly* humble people, not as economical or social euphemisms for impoverished but simply *humble*, are the freest on earth. Free to climb to the zeniths of Gehennam. Free to take money for plagiarizing.

It wasn't really so different, he thought, climbing three flights of worn gray carpet and fishing in the stagnant hallway for keys to the worn teal door with the silver plastic adhesive numbers 1066, than ghostwriting for a celebrity.

§

He pressed the *control* button and the *e* key, sending the cursor to the center of the page, and typed:

DELICIOUS SUPERSTITION

By

He reached for his pack, with the little logo of a silhouetted Indian Chief smoking a peace pipe, and typed:

Lori Winkowski

"So," he said aloud to himself, lighting the cigarette, "*this is happening.*"

The angels were inherently, the keys pattered softly under his fingers, invisible. They came, ordered—concise and organized—then ate as he jotted copious notes, shorthand modifiers of that and substitutions for this, for the humans—invisibly as he apologized (in English to the picky, generally condescending customer, then Spanish to the kitchen) if he missed a detail, invisibly as he practiced that obsequy of optimism, obsequiousness, to spoiled children of all ages on family dinners and dates and business lunches—and then, barely noticed, were gone with a 25% tip on the table.

Two proofreads of the paragraph later he stubbed out his cigarette and lit another, smoke scraping down his raw throat.

To even glimpse the angels eating, he learned, you first have to understand the subspecies of "Please." The first, the easiest to recognize, is the Horrible Please—it's easier to see evil Pleases than decent ones. He learned to recognize the Perfunctory Pleases tacked onto the ends of demands. He learned the Impatient Please. Then came the Substitution For "Yes" Please. When you can identify Please species like a Sherpa, you can, by elimination, begin glimpsing angels.

He stopped, glanced at the paragraph and, remembering a plant he'd wanted to use, wrote in brackets and capitals: *[WORK IN MOTIF OF TERMITES EATING OUR BUILDINGS TO CREATE THEIR*

OWN, PEOPLE DO THIS ALSO WITH MOUTHS... HAVE THE DINER BEAMS BE INFESTED WITH TERMITES... PLAY ON THE WORD TENERAL.]

He wondered what species of Please Layla would use if she came in, if he took her order, standing attentive at her table. And she'd have no clue in her child's mind, ordering that stupid food.

She wouldn't notice him if they met for the first time now. All the glances he ignored as a relatively dark-haired professor from the baccalaureate neophytes of adult life dissipated when he started serving the same demographic as a graying waiter. Back then they'd loved him more for being a critically scorned elitist. Now they seemed to smell his sore feet, the child support he paid for the kids he wasn't allowed to see. The students' attraction hadn't been to him but to things he'd possessed: job, family—things they didn't want to keep but simply to destroy in self-affirmational play, like kittens practicing hunting skills on tortured grasshoppers or middle school lovers wistfully dismembering horticultural sex organs futilely asking if “he loves me not.”

He had not loved Layla, but she won anyhow. He'd laughed with the rest of the class when she half-jokingly declared herself an Übermensch, but now he wondered if she was simply one of another sort.

Layla...

The rough draft was six thousand words that he whittled down throughout a week to the necessary three. He swayed gently in his chair on his last rewrite of the second half of the last sentence...

...that Nietzsche, Gandhi, Christ, anyone who grappled with and controlled the Self in any capacity faces the paradox that it is the very arrogance of the Self that drives any self-improvement based battle against it—that we are purified not from but by our sins—and that the famous conscious transducers of their own energy were so spiritually teneral, so un-

Übermensch, that they fell into philosophical incarnations of adolescent megalomania, not realizing an addiction to the selfless Self is the basest of addictions and the base of all others. Christ wasn't a termite worker with great plastering saliva, McLean drew hard on the butt of his cigarette, it crumpled from the heat, softening in his lips, he's a soldier with mandibles so unwieldy he must be fed by others' devotion to survive, who committed autothysis for the mud, for the mortar and brick, for the steel and glass of the termitaria.

He stubbed it out, leaned back in the rocking chair at his desk, and lit a new one luxuriously. The story was a perfect undergrad assignment—filled with emotional gravitas and misguided assumptions of original intellectual discoveries. As the smoke issued through his lips, McClean smiled.

§

“What?” he wiped his face with his free hand, sitting down on his daybed.

“C minus,” Winkowski's voice fought across the line against the airport cacophony behind it.

He reached for the blue pack. “What did he write?”

“Lacked plot, structure, and meaningful conflict.”

McLean lit a cigarette. “How is Communism and Christianity incestuously copulating in...in violent passion...to bear a hedonistic, nihilistic, ethical egoism influenced incarnation of Liberation Theology no plot and no conflict?”

“Well Brian,” Winkowski's aggressive sigh was audible over the airport din, “I guess he just didn't get that out of a story about a waiter not liking his tables.”

“Well then he's a fucking idiot who shouldn't be teaching, and I—”

“I'm sure he's an idiot with no business... breathing...but I ran the numbers and she needs this last grade to be at least an A minus to get a D in the class.”

After an apologetic silence, McLean said, “That teacher's a fucking asshole.”

“I need her to pass this class,” Winkowski replied more calmly. “Brian, I love you like a brother, but this is why you are cynical and I am not. Because I don't care if he's an asshole or understands literature. He's nothing to me. He's some stupid loser who doesn't know his ass from his elbow and we need to figure out what he wants to hear and we need to tell it to him to—” the reception was lost for a second, “—and manipulate him into letting us steal this grade from him. Telling people what they want to hear to get them to do what you want isn't belittling yourself or respecting them. It's a real-world Jedi mind trick and the most belittling thing you can do to them.”

“By letting this asshole control my writing.”

“It's Lori's writing,” Winkowski said. “And yes.”

§

ALMOST HUMAN

By

Lori Winkowski

Leaning back in his rocking chair, McLean decided “meaningful conflict,” meant “obvious conflict,” and decided to write as a cuckold—opening the story as a letter to a debauched wife who's left the protagonist for a younger, more successful wunderkind. He leaned in.

Dear Bitch,

I wonder if it's possible to extract the ingredients of age and status from love, distilling it to its purest form.

Is there a purest form? Maybe age is the oxygen that combines with the hydrogen of social standing to form the drinkable molecule—maybe the love we drank was no more than the sum of our private parts.

Maybe it doesn't exist at all and the elemental analogy is elementally elementary. My childhood pastor told me when I first questioned God, “But you believe in Love even though you never see it, just by feeling it.”

Looking back, I think—“Good point!” If

God Almighty doesn't deserve my unfounded faith, why love? So thank you for showing me that love is the current myth—Zeus's new chariot rolling over the clouds, prompting incorrect discernments of thunder, the eminent empirical mirage, the new deity for a scientific exposé—an energized biochemical reaction, the product of genetic variants that survived for reproductive value. A true agnostic must doubt not only God but the existence of supra-biochemical Love.

So you're leaving me. Have already left. How realist! Complexly challenging the primary-colored fairy-tale endings, finding the beauty in grainy city light—the tumor that would have killed Majnun if a suicidal knife didn't do it first. I'm for Majnun. I'm for a good story being an intentionally simple thing, without the condescending fellabeen stigmas of the word. I loved you like Majnun might have—a few of us are still out there, rendering vulgar the realist assumptions about complex and nuanced people being necessarily richer from their texture, and simple people being mere romanticist or patriotic fantasies. There is nothing necessarily quaint or simpleton about simplicity.

But McLean knew the vast majority of people aren't simple, and truly simple people make for seemingly oversimplified representations (*when consumed*, he reflected, *by complex, nuanced assholes like me*). So he textured and layered his “meaningful conflict,” structured it and molded a pompous, unreliable narrator. He left the vestiges of prehistoric art, of fairy tales and cave paintings that rebel through happy endings against reality itself, to pathetically directed chick flicks and action movies.

...my ancient love made fragile by its own rigidity. And I become another cliché hero who heroically ignores his own heroic nature to achieve a meaningful end.

Meanwhile, Winkowski's first payment had been used to install an electric wall-mounted heater to the tub faucet (to hell

with the building manager), and McLean was drawing himself a bath.

§

His hard-soled dress shoes echoed in the old building. His ankles hurt from working a double at the diner the day before, but he'd decided to dress professionally for the occasion. There were no benches in the hallway, and as he paced they ached with each reverberating step. He smiled to himself—such a healthy reminder that you are going to die: the aching whispers of your own wraith that you're disintegrating while alive. Enough ankle pain and he could transcend—watch himself pace that hallway like watching a movie—laughing at the simple stakes his benign little character battled for, raged over, craved, despised.

Winkowski would kill him if he knew he was here but McLean couldn't help it. He knew that teacher wouldn't give him an A. Not because the paper didn't deserve it (although, he reflected, it didn't, because the student hadn't written it) but because the teacher was an asshole. He had learned the equation from his tables: very rarely is there a table that will run you around and then tip you for it. Tables either run you around and tip shit (fifteen percent), are averagely polite and tip about eighteen to twenty-two, or are super polite and tip twenty-five or more. It's not the consumer you work hardest for who rewards you—it's the one you barely have to work for. This guy, he guessed, was a run-you-around fifteen-percenter. So they should expect a B minus. Fine. That's life. But being here now, he could go in and, as the student's “tutor,” inquire as to why—hopefully sweet-talking some extra points towards an A minus or an extra-credit option.

Fifteen percent, he thought as he looked out the window at the university lawn. *That dumb fucking kid. And he isn't even the bad guy. We're the bad guys. He's the comic relief.* Back to pacing. *Lucky for us there's no good guy.* It's some sardonic anti-romantic comedy.

The class poured into the hallway, Lori among them. Lori—who announced in her chubby movements that she hated her own body, who would have been the height of fertile beauty only a hundred years ago, and for hundreds of years before that, plump curves and blue eyes, the whole package now tragically dated and oversimplified as *fat*.

“Lori!”

She looked up, startled. “Uncle Bria—” He snatched the paper from her hand: D minus.

Under his breath, in a quiet and professional tone matching his suit, he meditated aloud: “That little fuckface.”

The door opened and an Asian kid who was about thirty, the sleeves of his white collared shirt rolled up over tattooed arms, rushing out with a stack of papers in one hand, froze. “Dr. McLean!”

The nemesis had addressed him by name, had recognized him, but didn't look familiar. Through a nervous smile, the kid went on: “It's so good to meet you. I'm a critical fan of *The Tumultuous Dessert*.”

“Thanks.”

The kid's hairline glistened as he told McLean he would love to exchange e-mail addresses, maybe meet for lunch sometime.

“No thanks.”

The kid said he understood. Completely. That McLean must be a very busy man. “But good to meet you face to face at least. A true honor.”

§

When the echoes of McLean's shoes down the empty hall died and the sidewalk began, he stopped and lit a cigarette. His anger at the kid's urbane aggression molted from his guilt. And, starting the long walk home, he descended—past the grass and subterranean plumbing—to the realm of poetry. Philosophy. And the teneral freedom of defeat. ■

“The Dime Store Version”: Bruce Springsteen and the Burden of Myth

nonfiction by MICHAEL KOBRE



On the morning of July 30, 2002, a crowd of more than 15,000 spills out of the elegantly decaying art deco hulk of the old convention hall on the boardwalk in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Surging across the boardwalk and down to the beach itself, the crowd is littered with small American flags and handmade signs held aloft for the cameras. “NO BETTER COLORS,” reads one, melding corporate promotion and resurgent patriotism in a single phrase, with the network’s initials, NBC, highlighted above a smaller slogan at the bottom of the sign, “RED, WHITE, AND BRUCE.” Inside the convention hall—and live on TV screens all across the country—Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band are concluding their four-song set with the first public performance of “Into the Fire,” a dirge for fallen rescue workers of September 11, in which echoes of country blues and gospel-tainted affirmation struggle for precedence. “The sky was falling and streaked with blood,” Springsteen sings over the desolate intertwining of his electric guitar and bandmate Nils Lofgren’s slide, while a line of women in brightly colored bikini tops out on the beach sway in time to the music and wave at the cameras.

This special broadcast of the *Today* show, as its hosts Katie Couric and Matt Lauer continually remind their viewers, is coming live from Asbury Park in celebration of the release this very morning of Springsteen’s fourteenth album, *The Rising*. Not only is *The Rising* the first studio recording by the reunited E Street Band since the multiplatinum *Born in the U.S.A.* in 1984, but the album is also being consciously marketed as a work about September 11. As *Time* declares in a cover story out on the stands this same morning, *The Rising* is “the first significant piece of pop art to respond to the events of the day.”

Yet this deliberate association with September 11 is controversial too, particularly in light of the album’s massive marketing campaign (which has not only landed Springsteen on the *Today* show and the cover of *Time* but will also include a two-part *Nightline* interview as well as another cover story in *Rolling Stone*—accompanied by a five-star review of the album—and other interviews with major media outlets from the *New York Times* to National Public Radio). In the *Time* cover story, Charles R.

Cross, who founded the Springsteen fan magazine *Backstreets*, says, “I think we want art that can deal with [September 11], but it’s still such an uncomfortable thing, and it’s still pretty fresh. Frankly, the commercial element of it really scares me.”

Perhaps if the arc of Springsteen’s career didn’t seem to resemble so closely the familiar pattern of an older pop star triumphantly returning to prominence after long years in a commercial and artistic wilderness, the scope and intensity of the marketing of *The Rising* wouldn’t seem so troubling. But ever since Springsteen deliberately attempted to step back from the frenzy of *Born in the U.S.A.* in 1984, his career had seemed more tentative. Though Columbia Records sold more than fifteen million copies of *Born in the U.S.A.* and Springsteen was transformed, not entirely unwillingly, into a national icon, he was clearly uncomfortable as a pop star playing to such a massive audience. After releasing the quieter, more introspective *Tunnel of Love* in 1987 and then breaking up—for a while at least—The E Street Band, he veered between wildly different paths: first recording and touring with other musicians to lukewarm reviews (leading *Entertainment Weekly* to ask on its cover in 1992, “Whatever Happened to Bruce Springsteen?”), then offering an album of stark protest songs and hushed acoustic ballads of anomie and dislocation with *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in 1994, and finally releasing archival recordings and reuniting The E Street Band in 1999 for a long tour that celebrated the band’s history but offered up few new songs. Until *The Rising*, that is—an album of new songs consciously offered as a major statement and backed by a huge marketing drive. For all of Springsteen’s sincere intentions to respond to the events of September 11, *The Rising* is also, of course, a good career move.

But there’s no room for any such doubts on the *Today* show on the morning of the album’s release. Instead, the broadcast focuses on Springsteen’s familiar image as a man of the people. In a taped segment before the band’s live performance, Springsteen and Matt Lauer wander casually through Asbury Park in jeans and sunglasses, while Springsteen points out some of the businesses helping to fuel the town’s slow urban renewal. And in a live segment

with Katie Couric, the program reprises a much-noted story about a fan whose path famously crossed with Springsteen’s a few days after September 11 and whose words helped inspire *The Rising*.

The fan, Edward Sutphin, is here, in fact, standing outside the convention hall and telling his story to Katie Couric, looking as comfortable on-camera as any of the *Today* show hosts, in a loose white shirt and black pants that perfectly complement Couric’s white summer dress. He talks first about a friend who died in one of the towers. “We grew up together on the beaches of the Jersey shore, played football together,” Sutphin says, as if he were describing a couple of characters from a prototypical Springsteen song. When Couric notes that he spent forty-eight hours after the towers fell with his friend’s wife and children waiting for news and then suggests, in familiar empathic tones, that those two days “must have been an excruciatingly painful period of time,” Sutphin explains how after a while he had to get out and went to the beach to think. “I pulled into the beach,” he says, “and I saw Bruce pulling out and I rolled down the window and I yelled as hard and loud as I could, ‘We need you now.’”

This story, which Springsteen told to Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* in an interview that appeared a few days earlier, offers an almost perfect distillation of Springsteen’s myth. All its details seem to pass before the familiar stations: the Jersey shore that Springsteen claimed in so many songs, the chance encounter through a rolled-down car window, the fan’s fervor, and the everyday availability of the star himself, just out for a drive, unaccompanied by a coterie of bodyguards or retainers like Elvis’s Memphis Mafia or Michael Jackson’s poisonous enablers. Even Springsteen’s determinedly humble response only burnished his iconic qualities a little more. “That’s part of my job,” he told Pareles, characteristically using the language of an ordinary laborer to describe the life of a rock star. “It’s an honor to find that place in the audience’s life.”

And indeed, the performer who appears on the *Today* show seems, for the most part, exactly as Sutphin describes him to Couric, a unifying figure who’s “given us so much” with his “songs of love, hope, defiance.” To the live audience in Asbury

Park and the millions more in front of TV screens all over the country, those are the tones that surely seem to emerge from these new songs they're hearing for the first time. Without the printed lyrics that accompany the album—for those, that is, who still buy albums—or any sense of the careful sequencing of songs that Springsteen meticulously designs for his albums, it's other, less subtle things that register: the martial beat of Max Weinberg's drums; the layers of electric guitar and keyboards; the way Springsteen's designated sidekick Steven Van Zandt's nasal yard-dog vocals wrap around Springsteen's own working-man's growl; and, of course, those choruses that lodge in the memory so easily. Who really knows during the first song what Springsteen means when he exhorts his audience to "Come on up for the rising"? A small segment who have read Pareles's article in the *Times* a few days ago might be listening for hints that the song is in fact, as Pareles described it, an anguished account of "one man's afterlife," but for others—maybe a few in the on-screen audience who raise their fists during the chorus—it might be a call to arms, a warning to America's attackers of a rising against them. Just as in the next song, "Lonesome Day," it's the jubilant chorus that makes the biggest impact, Springsteen's increasingly ecstatic assertion that even in the face of this lonesome day, "it's alright... it's alright... it's alright..." What's *not* heard, by many at least—what will go entirely unremarked in fact in virtually all of the public discussion of the album—is a clear warning in the last verse about the potential political manipulation of September 11 and a hint too of a more complex view of its causes: "Better ask questions before you shoot / Deceit and betrayal's bitter fruit."

This, after all, is The Boss, on screen now pounding out riffs and choruses with The E Street Band, the iconic figure who is most recognizably himself during the third song, "Glory Days," one of the hits off *Born in the U.S.A.* Everyone seems to relax a little during this song, the band easing into a time-tested groove after working carefully through two new songs from *The Rising*, Springsteen and Van Zandt mugging happily for the cameras, for a moment more like Jackie Gleason and Art Carney than Mick Jagger and Keith Richards,

while the noise from the crowd grows. All through the audience, as the camera pans across the convention hall and out on to the beach, people clap and dance and sing along with every line, the whole raucous scene an apparent confirmation of what Edward Sutphin had told Katie Couric just a little earlier: "Nobody brings us together like Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band."

But, of course, the genial rock star romping through "Glory Days" on the *Today* show is only one side of Springsteen. Not long after that performance, as Springsteen and The E Street Band toured the world in support of *The Rising* while the Bush administration lobbied to invade Iraq and then launched Operation Iraqi Freedom, a different side of Springsteen emerged in concert. If *The Rising* had seemed largely apolitical to most reviewers, now politics couldn't be avoided. At a stop



in Atlantic City on March 7, 2003, only weeks before American forces would cross the border into Iraq, Springsteen cautioned his audience about the lines "I want a kiss from your lips / I want an eye for an eye" from the song "Empty Sky" (which he'd remade from its edgy percussive setting on *The Rising* as an acoustic ballad on tour). Once again, as on other nights, those lines brought cheers from the crowd. This time, though, Springsteen responded after the song. "I wrote that as an expression of the character's confusion and grief," he said, "never as a call for blind revenge or blood lust." And by the last leg of the tour, as the initial justifications for the invasion had dissolved and the true costs of the occupation began to emerge, near the end of every show Springsteen offered what he termed a brief public service announcement before an explosive version of "Born in

the U.S.A.," his own often-misunderstood lament for another war. "Protecting our democracy that we ask our sons and daughter to die for is our sacred trust," he said, "as is demanding accountability from our leaders. That's our job as citizens. It's a time to be very, very vigilant out there."

And yet, not surprisingly, instead of bringing his audience together, Springsteen's political statements—including his endorsement of John Kerry in 2004 and his participation in the multi-artist Vote for Change tour a month before the presidential election—divided his fans. Some reacted with overt anger, as detailed in countless Internet postings, while others willfully ignored much of what Springsteen said. As a Republican fan told the *Wall Street Journal* during the Vote for Change tour, "If he brings [politics] up at a concert, I'm going to boo him—and then I'll continue to dance."

For Springsteen, in fact, that tension between the performer seen on the *Today* show in July 2002 and the partisan figure who denounced the war in Iraq and endorsed John Kerry was only one expression of a fault line running through the center of his art, business, and politics for decades: the struggle with American myths and the ones he'd created for himself. Though Springsteen's myth—as we'll see—was an integral part of his success, it became a burden too that he visibly struggled against, particularly after the phenomenon of *Born in the U.S.A.* As he said in a 1992 *Rolling Stone* interview, explaining why he'd recently moved from New Jersey to California (an exodus from the ground zero of his mythology that would last for years), "It's like you're a bit of a figment of a lot of other people's imaginations. And that always takes some sorting out. But it's even worse when you see yourself as a figment of your own imagination... I think what happened was that when I was young, I had this idea of playing out my life like it was some movie, writing the script and making all the pieces fit... But you can get enslaved by your own myth or your own image."

And in his politics, also, Springsteen was painfully aware of the allure and dangers of myth. As early as 1984, at the height of his own iconic status, Springsteen recognized the power of myth in Ronald

Reagan's landslide reelection. As he told *Rolling Stone* in December 1984, "I think [Reagan] presents a very mythic, very seductive image, and it's an image that people want to believe in. I think there's always been a nostalgia for a mythical America, for some period in the past when everything was just right. And I think the president is the embodiment of that for a lot of people. He has a very mythical presidency."

Twenty years later, in his speeches at Vote for Change concerts or at rallies for John Kerry only days before the 2004 election, Springsteen would inevitably follow an affirmation of traditional progressive values—"The human principles of economic justice... an open American government unburdened by unnecessary secrecy... a sane and responsible foreign policy"—with a call for a more honest perception of American history. As he said at the finale of the Vote for Change tour in Washington, D.C., on October 11, 2004, using the same ideas and expressions he'd repeated since early August and would continue to use until Election Day: "America is not always right—that's a fairy tale for children... But one thing America should always be is true. And it's in seeking her truth—both the good and the bad—that we find a deeper patriotism, that we find a more authentic experience as citizens, and we find the power that is embedded only in truth to change our world for the better."

At one level, in the specific political context of late 2004, this call for truth was a direct response to the questions that had been increasingly raised about the Bush administration's justifications for the invasion of Iraq. It was only an extension of the demand for accountability Springsteen had urged his audiences to make at the end of *The Rising* tour. But when he expanded on these ideas in *National Anthem*, a documentary about the Vote for Change tour that preceded the broadcast of the tour's finale on the Sundance Channel, he spoke directly again about the dangers of myth: "The Republicans have gotten very, very good over the years at selling the myth of America. If you're not careful, you'll settle for the dime store version of that, and it's a compelling story. Everybody wants to believe the president is strong and wise and the country is right and stands by its commitments. These are powerful, powerful

myths, you know, because, hey, I tell 'em to my kids at night. But when you're grown up, America's not necessarily always right, but it's supposed to be always true..."

Springsteen had seen firsthand how the power of myth could be harnessed. As he ascended to the height of his fame in the '70s and '80s, he'd collaborated in his own myth-making. His breakthrough album *Born to Run* in 1975 had mythologized his own experience in songs filled with desperate young people—"Tramps like us"—dreaming of escape, in an operatic production style that stacked layers of guitars and keyboards and vocals, and even in its graphic presentation. From the cover image of Springsteen as a street punk in black leather to the singer's declaration in the first song, "Thunder Road," that "I got this guitar / And learned how to make it talk," we're immediately encouraged to cast a romanticized image of Springsteen as the



protagonist of many of the songs. And in the final song "Jungleland," playing rock 'n' roll itself is a life or death endeavor: "Kids flash guitars just like switchblades hustling for the record machine." As even a critic as resolutely unsentimental as Lester Bangs would note approvingly in his review of the album in *Creem*, "Springsteen's landscapes of urban desolation are all heightened, on fire, alive. His characters act in symbolic gestures, bigger than life."

As a performer too, Springsteen's persona was larger than life, his concerts—fraught with symbolic gestures, not the least of which was their sheer length—routinely exceeding three hours. In a 1978 *Rolling Stone* profile, when Dave Marsh asked him "why the band plays so long," Springsteen suggested that the length and intensity of his concerts were moral statements. "It all ties in with records and the

values, the morality of the records. There's a certain morality of the show and it's very strict," he said. As he'd explained in another '78 interview, he felt an obligation to honor the sacrifices of his audience who "work all week and a lot of times wait in line for ten hours or some incredible amount of time... They don't take it lightly, so you have no right to either." In fact, much of the symbolic quality of his performances was about that bond with the audience, from his dive into the crowd early in the set to the way he would, at key moments, hold up his guitar in salute to the audience, as if, in the words of music critic Paul Nelson, writing in *Rolling Stone* in 1978, "it were some communal instrument of magic, something which he alone does not own."

If a myth is a type of narrative that enacts a set of meanings held in common by some group, whether that group is bound together by something as vast as national identity or as particular as a fan's passion, then the myth that Springsteen offered to his audience throughout the '70s and early '80s presented a heightened version of their own lives. For many of his fans, Springsteen's rise from working-class roots served as a kind of parable of escape and transformation—a parable enacted on stage night after night, its impact felt viscerally in that moment of collective release when the opening chords of "Born to Run" or "Badlands" inevitably brought the crowd to their feet. In a similar fashion, the interplay and community of The E Street Band reflected an idealized notion of friendship that the audience could aspire to as well. As Springsteen acknowledged in his induction speech into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, speaking specifically of Clarence Clemons, his African American sax player, but expressing ideas that surely reflect the collective presence of The E Street Band as well, "For fifteen years Clarence has been a source of myth and light and enormous strength for me on stage... Together, we told a story of the possibilities of friendship. A story older than the ones that I would write. And a story I could never have told without him."

But the myth that Springsteen and The E Street Band enacted became the foundation for something bigger—and more ambiguous—in 1984, when three forces converged: Springsteen's deliber-

ate decision to reach for a mass audience with an album that, as he would tell Dave Marsh, made "a loud noise"; Columbia Records' aggressive marketing plan; and the mood of the country as Ronald Reagan campaigned for reelection and declared that it was morning again in America. In particular, all the patriotic imagery of *Born in the U.S.A.*—from its famous cover image with Springsteen's newly toned and blue-jean-clad rear end in front of an American flag to the huge flag that hung behind the band on tour as part of the stage set—suggested to many that Springsteen was an icon of nationalism: in the words of one fan quoted in *Rolling Stone*, "exactly what America's all about."

To be sure, the actual content of *Born in the U.S.A.*, in which celebration always teeters on the edge of loss or imprisonment, was a lot more complicated than that. Moreover, both Springsteen and Andrea Klein, who designed the album cover for *Born in the U.S.A.* and the covers of five of its accompanying singles, insisted that the use of the flag in the album's imagery was, in Klein's phrasing, "coincidental." "[T]he title of the song is 'Born in the U.S.A.,' Klein said in an interview with the Springsteen fan magazine *Backstreets*, "and that's where it came from." But as Springsteen acknowledged to Marsh, "the flag is a powerful image, and when you set that stuff loose, you don't know what's gonna be done with it."

In later years Springsteen made no apologies for seeking a mass audience, even as he recognized its perils. As he wrote in the collected edition of his lyrics, *Songs*, in 1998, "My heroes, from Hank Williams to Frank Sinatra to Bob Dylan, were popular musicians. They had hits. There was value in trying to connect with a large audience. It was a direct way you affected culture. It let you know how powerful and durable your music might be. But it was also risky and forced you to confront your music's limitations as well as your own." For Springsteen, at least one risk was that the myth of Bruce Springsteen as an iconic figure, as an everyman who enacted and affirmed the aspirations of his audience, as some vague patriotic emblem—in short, a "dime store version" of himself—would overwhelm a more complex reality in his art and in his life.

Ironically, Springsteen's vision as an artist was deepening even as his image as a performer was becoming simpler. In the late '70s, as Springsteen began exploring literature and film seriously for the first time in his life, his songwriting began to change. "I think I'd come out of a period of my own writing where I'd been writing big, sometimes operatic, and occasionally rhetorical things," he explained in a 1998 interview with Will Percy for *DoubleTake* magazine. "I was interested in finding another way to write about those subjects, about people, another way to address what was going on around me and in the country—a more scaled down, more personal, more restrained way of getting some of my ideas across."

At one level, Springsteen's songwriting began to feature a kind of "small detail," as he explained in *Songs*, like "the slow twirling of a baton" in the title song of *Nebraska*, his acoustic album from 1982. But in rejecting a larger-than-life, "operatic" approach, he also turned to a way of writing in which recurring themes and images were seen from multiple perspectives over the course of an album (and sometimes even within individual songs)—an approach that was less mythic, less an expression of some collective idea or emotion than the novelistic exploration of colliding and contrasting points of view. So, for instance, on *Nebraska*, the serial killer Charles Starkweather's embrace of "a meanness in this world" in the title song jostles alongside another character's insistence on the responsibilities of family as the core of an ethical life in "Highway Patrolman"—"Man turns his back on his family, well he just ain't no good"—while *Born in the U.S.A.* contains both the blithely happy-go-lucky speaker trading off his buddy's "union connection" and hoping to find a good time down south in "Darlington County" and the somber father of "My Hometown" surveying the ruins of a postindustrial America.

Nowhere is this approach more important than on *The Rising*. Of all the things that an album about September 11 could have been—rhetorical, bombastic, sentimental—*The Rising* is at once remarkably restrained and expansive in its reach. Except for the opening lines of "Into the Fire," it makes virtually no direct reference to the event that inspired it, and

Springsteen's lyrics are largely stripped of the "small detail" that evokes character and setting on other albums. He offers instead oblique, poetic imagery—"Red sheets snap-pin' on the line" to suggest the imminence of war in "The Fuse," for instance—and a collage of different perspectives, all rendered with the broadest sonic palette of his career up to that point (Beatlesque strings, blues guitar, techno-affected drum loops and synthesizer bleats, soul and gospel-styled vocals, even Pakistani vocalists chanting traditional Sufi music). Over the course of *The Rising*, we hear survivors, mourners, bystanders, terrorists, and the dead themselves. Indeed, for all of the hype that surrounded the album's release, in spite of whatever it might have seemed to be when Springsteen debuted three songs on the *Today* show, *The Rising* is in fact a subtle and vibrant work—and, in ways that are never didactic, a political one too.

Consider, in particular, the movement near the end of the album from the title track, which might initially sound like another of Springsteen's soaring anthems, to the quieter song that immediately follows it, "Paradise." If "The Rising" adopts the voice of a speaker from beyond the grave, who may have died in the World Trade Center on September 11, reluctantly letting go of "a dream of life" and embracing a "Sky of fullness, sky of blessed life," "Paradise" offers two starkly different visions of an afterlife. At the beginning of the song, the promise of a glorious reward after death tempts a young suicide bomber, and then in the third verse we shift abruptly to another speaker in "The Virginia hills" who dreams of seeing a dead lover or spouse—perhaps someone killed in the attack on the Pentagon—"on the other side," a distant figure whose eyes are not peaceful, but "as empty as paradise." Over the course of these two songs, in ten minutes and nineteen seconds of music, these voices echo against one another so that no single vision of paradise—a source of "blessed life," a violent temptation, an empty "void"—can seem definitive.

Though *The Rising* may have seemed apolitical, the very juxtaposition of these points of view and the refusal to choose between them was itself a political act. In the summer of 2002, not long after the President of the United States had announced



to the world that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," Springsteen envisioned a world of shifting boundaries and perspectives in which such implacable certainties couldn't be sustained. Even the lines from "Empty Sky" that drew cheers on *The Rising* tour with their seeming call for vengeance could as easily evoke the loss and anger of a speaker in the Islamic world as an American reacting to September 11.

There are no specific references to the nationality of the speaker, and the lines "On the plains of Jordan / I cut my bow from the wood" suggest at once a biblical wrath and the very real tensions of the contemporary Middle East. And in "Paradise," too, when Springsteen—that icon of America—takes us inside the perspective of a suicide bomber in the very instant before detonation, he refuses to demonize her or him.

As Springsteen repeats the line, "I hold my breath and close my eyes," singing in a hushed, taut voice over a wash of acoustic guitar and synthesizer, we feel the speaker's fear and anticipation and desperate belief in the rightness of his or her act—and in recognizing those emotions, we have to recognize the speaker's humanity too.

Looking back at the apotheosis of Springsteen's fame after the release of *Born*

in *the U.S.A.* in 1984, the critic Elizabeth Bird, in one of the first important scholarly articles about Springsteen, “Is that me, Baby?": Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen,” suggested that the marketing of Springsteen’s image converged with other images of the time—Ronald Reagan’s reelection campaign, car commercials featuring imitations of Springsteen, patriotic celebrations of the Olympics or the reopening of the Statue of Liberty—to create “a potent, swirling brew of images and emotions, upon which people could inscribe any meaning they liked, or no meaning at all.” By contrast though, twenty years later, when Springsteen spoke out against the Iraq War from the concert stage and took an explicit partisan stance in a presidential election, he effectively defined his image on his own terms at last. It was no longer quite so easy to see Springsteen as some vague iconic figure who “brings us together.” On one level at least, in his politics, Springsteen had eliminated any ambiguity. And in doing so he seemed liberated afterwards, too—a different kind of performer and public figure.

Perhaps that was one reason why after the 2004 election, in his fourth decade as a songwriter and performer, Springsteen entered one of the most varied and productive periods of his career. With four albums of new material released in five years; a solo tour; a tour with a band of up to nineteen members that featured acoustic instruments, horns, and gospel singers for *The Seeger Sessions* in 2006; two tours with The E Street Band; and appearances at the 2009 Super Bowl and on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to celebrate the inauguration of Barack Obama, Springsteen was more active and prolific than ever before. And he was more daring as an artist than ever before, too. From the stripped down and radical sonic textures of his solo tour for *Dust and Devils* in 2005—singing through the harmonica mic, accompanying himself on guitar, acoustic and electric pianos, pump organ, banjo, and ukulele—to his reinvention of the folk tradition for *The Seeger Sessions* project to the lavish pop productions of his albums with The E Street Band, on *Magic* in 2007 and *Working on a Dream* in 2009,

he entered new territory as an artist, producing the most mature and complex work of his career.

Springsteen was also a looser presence onstage and in his public statements. On the *Dust and Devils* tour, in particular, he’d regularly talk about the artifice of his own image. “I’ve done pretty well with the whole humble bit,” he said, for example, in Minneapolis in October 2005, “and I’m going to be sticking with that for the rest of my career.” And in a letter published on July 31, 2005, in the *New York Times Book Review*, in response to a review of books about him that reprised many old myths, Springsteen was even more definitive: “The ‘saintly man of the people’ thing I occasionally see attached to my name is bull[shit]... Life, art, and identity are, of course, much more complicated. How do I know? I heard it in a Bruce Springsteen song.”

But though he seemed relieved of the burden of his own myth, Springsteen still visibly grappled with larger American ones. In a new song “American Land,” introduced midway through *The Seeger Sessions* tour and then played at the conclusion of every concert afterwards (through three different tours with both The Sessions Band and The E Street Band), he sang in the voice of an immigrant bedazzled by a myth of America. “There’s treasure for the taking for any hardworking man,” Springsteen would exclaim over a furious Irish jig. Yet for all of this speaker’s expectations of “diamonds in the sidewalk” and “gutters lined with song,” the mythic visions that intoxicate him are only one perspective. A few verses later, another voice is heard, looking back on the immigrant experience through the lens of historical fact, not myth: “They died building the railroads worked to bones and skin / They died in the fields and factories names scattered in the wind.” And with no let up in the music, myth and history come crashing together, infusing the song with even greater energy: celebration, lament, and protest all at once.

Yet even as he acknowledged the darker truths of history, Springsteen still couldn’t simply dismiss American myths either. In the anthemic “Long Walk

Home,” the penultimate song of the 2007 release *Magic*, an album steeped in dread and anger at deceptions that are both personal and political, the mythic images of some quintessential American town have been corrupted. Faces on the street are now “rank strangers,” the diner on the corner is “shuttered and boarded,” and the words the speaker remembers his father telling him shimmer with loss: “You see that flag down at the courthouse? / It means certain things are set in stone / Who we are, what we’ll do, and what we won’t.” But if a return to American values can only be achieved by “a long walk home,” the home Springsteen envisions here is an America that exists at least partly in myth. The town in the song, where “everybody has a neighbor / Everybody has a friend,” is certainly not Freehold, New Jersey, where Springsteen grew up—a town where, as he told Nicholas Dawidoff in a 1997 profile for the *New York Times Magazine*, “they didn’t like you if you were different.”

Indeed, for all of its perils, myth for Springsteen also still remained a source of hope and inspiration. If in the 2004 presidential campaign he warned about the exploitation of American myths, Springsteen repeatedly evoked a different kind of myth when he endorsed and campaigned for Barack Obama in 2008. “I continue to find everywhere that America remains a repository for people’s hopes and desires,” he said at a rally in Cleveland on November 2. “That despite the terrible erosion of our standing around the world, for many we remain a house of dreams.” For Springsteen, the myth of what America might be was an essential element in the struggle to achieve and preserve “our house of dreams.” So in 2008, on the verge of a potentially transformative election, he could evoke hope, myth, and perhaps even a hint of his own experience in a single statement: “I want my country back, I want my dream back, I want my America back.”

And for once perhaps, for a while at least, it all seemed possible. [M](#)

Illustrations by Geoffrey Hamerlinck

First Impressions

poem by CARYL PAGEL

The stem at first plucked out or unraveled
from near grasses plain: we call it Common
Pulled thus labeled later after travel
a shriveled spine pressed to spine near rotten
dried & new but by what—process? What book
reveals only *after* death the family
name—never known to its body? Now look
our unearthed root re-routed here will lie
forever bare slayed between creased pages:
stuck poisoned poised & mounted At times you
feel you would give all your remaining days
to gaze the one un-gathered Pressed you do
call I a Collector—but there are times
you know no one Names you will not recognize.



Unbalancing Young Chakras, 2009
Colored pencil, graphite on paper
37 1/2" x 25"



Untitled, 2007
Watercolor on paper
9 1/4" x 7"



The Gemini Twins Find No Room for Music in El Capitan, 2009
Colored pencil, graphite on paper
6 1/2" x 9"

Build

poetry by CATHY PARK HONG

Praise the pipes rising from earth,
rustdappled pipes shooting up without building's bodice,
like copper beanstalks blooming
to boughs of tubs, boweled sinks, budded spigots
hurling, curving,
like a giant's digestive tract of white porcelain organs.

Mitish boys shrugged off their regimental reds,
Degged with sweat,
They clamped up them pipes to sing, shower
Squirt fawn brack water at each other from deathly heights
Pashing water over their grimy faces,

But smelters stalked & sawed off stems to melt pipes
down to bed coils & copper skillets,
So a hacked-at spindly pipe timbered down,
Felling with it a falling bathing boy who cried
& cracked his ribs.

So then the boys grabbed the sharpest rocks,
Before they jimmed up those pipes & hurled them
at the smelters but the smelters took revenge,
sawed all their aerial tubs down,
when they went home to nap & sup,

'Til there was nothing left,
Of the water park,
But dews of boy blood & smelters bruises.

Potions of Relative Success

poetry by CATHY PARK HONG

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

Sonnet

poetry by CATHY PARK HONG

I dip larks in red ink & watch them flock
into a wimpling sun of thread-vesseled blood.
A world apart, not among men, though when I wake,
I'm smeared with my bunkmate's hocking sputum.
Militia women, they like uniforms, not gay dresses,
He recites while pissing into my empty noodle bowl.
My hands are unkempt. They gash blood.
Last night, I lurched like a mechanical bull in a late-night saloon,
'Til a cop prodded my ass with a baton.
Today, we machine-stitch polythene nets that travel far,
São Paolo, Miami, Montreal, even an Innuite will use our net
to catch a glorious seal from ice-nettled melt.
Will this water purify, will it Godskin?

Valentine's Day

nonfiction by MATTHEW SALESES

The dogs have an extraordinary sense of social hierarchies, not only the larger framework but the individual complications. For instance, when I come back from tutoring today, the in-laws and Cathreen are away, and as the dogs see it's me, they immediately shut up. If anyone else were home, or had come home with me, they would have barked for an expectant ten minutes. They know three things to be true: first, that I am above them in social rank and will not defer to their wishes; second, that they are above, or at least equal to, the in-laws; but third, that the in-laws are above me, or at least cancel me out.

There are nine of us in this house: Cathreen (my talented wife), her mother, her sister, her sister's baby, three dogs, a cat, and me.

The cat and the baby are president and vice-president of zero words. Everyone is at war with his greedy little self.

Today, we are angry about the cat. The cat pissed on Cathreen's mom's blanket, shat on her blue mats that look like yoga mats but aren't. Someone locked him in, not knowing he was there. This made me upset, but nothing like it makes Cathreen

upset when she comes home from work. She says, "It's no one's fault," to herself, with unfocused eyes, and builds a Fisher-Price castle for the baby.

"Talented," her sister says to cheer her up.

"I'm a talented wife," Cathreen says. She made the cat tower as well. The smell of cat pee has dissipated, thank God, and tomorrow everything will be like new. Her sister is wearing one of Cathreen's shirts. The cat is playing with the plastic wrapping for the castle.

She's still out there finishing up the castle, and I've finished writing for the day and want a hug, another hug, another.

All this is around Valentine's Day, that day of expectant happiness, at the top of the hierarchy of romance and ire. Of course, expectation always kills us. We go out for dinner at her favorite restaurant; she says she remembers the taste of prosciutto

and melon, those four golden pieces for eighteen dollars, she can't get it out of her head. This time, though, she lets them sit. She puts one in my mouth. The grease of the pork curls around the sweetness of the fruit.

I try to make her smile, and for a moment, she does, so I try to make her forget about the house and everyone. She says the prosciutto is no good. She can smell it.

After dinner, we watch a movie I expect will be terrible but isn't that bad, about relationships, how to tell someone doesn't like you. We compare notes. This movie could be a game show. I ask her if people are really like this, like them.

The more movies I see, the more I think what it takes to be an actor is a hollow core—something to fill up, like a hive. We sense the buzzing. I only believe one of these people is a person.

"Touch my leg," Cathreen says later. Not cold, smooth. Bare legs in February.

"Your leg is a leg," I say, feeling cryptic.

The wind blows, and we walk home. Everyone but me watches TV in her mother's room.

I sit in the living room and try to get the dogs to stop chewing their nails. They cry like I should be punished. Cupid passes through the room, not touching anyone, licking his arrows. I chew my nails, too, but hide it. When it's time for bed, I will want to cuddle just Cathreen and me and no cat. Today, I expect to be important. The dogs will scratch the wall behind our heads and cry that no one is holding them, at all. ■

Joseph Desler Costa, *Pink Stockings on Bed*, 2010, from the series *There is a Darkness*



Joseph Desler Costa, *Pink Stockings on Bed*, 2010, From the series *There is a Darkness*

Cathreen fits into all this uniquely. They can't figure her in, I think. She seems to rule the house but will capitulate to the shih tzu, or occasionally the in-laws, or even me if she is in a particularly good mood.



A House in Santiago

fiction by LUIS SEPÚLVEDA

*I squeezed my eyes tight to remember her,
to keep her inside of me, and afterward
I opened them good and wide to introduce
myself to the world anew.*

Oswaldo Soriano, *La hora sin sombra*

It all happened very quickly because that's the way things go when the sky is in a hurry. Something broke in the air, the clouds unloaded their violence, and in a few seconds I was soaked in the middle of the avenue. I was trotting at such a clip in search of a place to shelter myself that I thought of trying to make it to the El Condor bookstore, the only Latin American bookstore in Zurich, certain that I would be received warmly there by Maria Moretti, who would hurry to get me out of my raincoat and offer me a mug of coffee while she dried my head with a towel. The storm worsened, though, and I had no choice but to assume the behavior of a desperate chicken that seems to characterize all pedestrians caught by surprise in a storm.

Then, through the curtain of water I saw the sign stuck to a glass door:

PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION
BY C.G. HUDSON
FAÇADES OF HOUSES

I went in, ushered only by the downpour and, as I pushed open the narrow door, I thought about the number of times I had gone down this street without ever noticing this gallery was here, but it didn't disturb me terribly; art galleries open and close all the time in Zurich, just like the rest of the world.

The photos were hanging in a white room, the lighting was excellent, and I was the only visitor.

On a table, plainly printed catalogues detailed the brief life of the photographer:

*C.G. Hudson. London, 1947–1985.
Solo exhibitions in Dublin, New York,
Paris, Toronto, Barcelona, Hamburg,
Buenos Aires...*

At first glance, the photos seemed very good to me, although this appreciation might not mean a thing. We all know that the pleasure or well-being derived from a work of art emanates from different states of mind converging by chance.

The first photo showed the portico of a Venetian house on the Campo della Maddalena. The colors were vibrant, tempting one to feel the texture of the stone and the roughness of the wood. Next came the entrance to a posh mansion on the Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna. Following this one was a rusted railing that half obscured the facade of a Roman villa, then the unreal white silhouette of a house in Crete (Aggios Nikolaos), and the proud, lovely stonework of a country house in Catalonia (Palau de Santa Eulalie). Unexpectedly, between the country house and a narrow building on watchmakers' row in Basel, the battered green door with the bronze hand clutching a globe.

I drew closer, feeling sadness mold a hateful mask on my face. My steps were not taking me toward the photograph of a familiar place or object but to a door whose inner secrets were waiting for me, wrapped in the harshness of years past, in the mockery of time.

It was the house. I recognized the number twenty scripted in the blue brass oval. At the bottom of the photo was the inscription that dispelled all possible doubt: "House in Santiago. Calle Ricantén."

A strange chill made my legs shiver, and an even icier sweat ran down my spine. I wanted to sit down and, after finding nowhere to do so, I decided to take off my soaked overcoat and leave it on the floor next to the table with the catalogues.

C.G. Hudson. London, 1947–1985...

It had only been a few years since the photographer had died and I felt the desperate need to talk to someone—an employee, the gallery director—anyone who might give me some information about him and, above all, who might help me figure out when he took that photograph.

I saw a door that I assumed went to the office of the person in charge. I called out and, receiving no reply, turned the handle and pushed softly. On the other side, in a room full of posters and cleaning supplies, a woman hid her coffee thermos, embarrassed.

"Excuse me, I didn't mean to startle you. Could you tell me what time the person in charge of the exhibit will be in? I'm a journalist and I have a few questions..."

She replied that the gallery owner usually came in the afternoon, a half hour be-

fore closing, and that she just was in charge of cleaning and was only waiting for the downpour to let up.

I left the woman and went back to the photo. Since there was no one else in the room, I felt bold enough to light a cigarette. The tobacco managed to calm me down. I was no longer trembling, but the imminent closing of a circle that I had happily thought to be forgotten left me feeling joyless.

It was the house. And between it and myself, time and something else.

The faded yellow color of the wall, the aggressive military green of the door, and the rigid bronze fist clutching a globe were shameful stains on the aesthetics of the other photographed porticos, but that intentional ugliness transported me to the scent of scrubbed paving stones that now barely inhabited my memory, because the alchemy of happiness depends on the proper mixture of the forgotten.

It was a summer afternoon when I crossed the threshold of that house. That is the only certainty that I have left. I remember it. Tino and Beto were with me. We were an inseparable trio, the devourers of steak sandwiches and the dawn; the novice drinkers of love and harsh, dry red wine from the worst taverns; naive gentlemen of the dance and the night.

It was a question of honor for us every weekend: to be invited to a dance, a party, a get together and, if possible, to also have a trio of new girls to while away long hours of music and words whispered into ears.

The best events were almost always suggested by Beto. His job as a meter reader for the electric company allowed him to meet a lot of people, and in doing so he secured us invitations to baptisms, birthdays, silver anniversaries, and other family parties.

Beto... “and, tell me, do you mind if I come with a couple of friends? They’re two very respectable guys from good families, and we’re like brothers, you know? Like the Three Musketeers, one for all and all for having a good time. They’re really good guys.”

It was a summer Saturday. Santiago smelled like acacia blossoms, like freshly watered gardens, like hosed-down paving stones evoking the fresh twilight of that *city surrounded by symbols of winter*, and we smelled like pomade, the splashes of English

lavender that we used to scent our handkerchiefs, because, as Tino pointed out, women are always asking for handkerchiefs.

Tino... “But listen, guys. Be courteous at all times. Kind, too, but without being sappy. Fools just let themselves get roped in. If you don’t believe me, look at Mañungo. Before, he used to come with us to everything, until he was roped in, the asshole, and now he walks around like a cat looking for a butcher shop...”

No. We were not falling in love. That was a dangerous curve that we avoided with all of our will, because if one of us did it then the unity of the group was broken. And women, there are many, but friends...

One Saturday, one summer, Beto and Tino.

“Betofen, where is this thing?”

“On Calle Ricantén, and it looks promising.”

“Chicks?”

“I saw two that were fit to eat.”

“Will you knot my tie, Betofen?”

“War bugle. Hey, Tino, you reek of benzene! Are they still cleaning your pants with clear benzene? Sure, because they’re cashmere. That’s all old-fashioned, gramps. You have to wear clothes made of polyester. You can wash polyester and it’s always impeccable, like it was freshly ironed.”

“Right, Betofen. Polyester. Let’s go?”

We stocked up on cigarettes along the way. Packs of Liberty for ourselves and Frescos for the girls, who in those days preferred mentholated. We also bought the customary bottle of Pisco for the house, a show of class that excluded us from the list of freeloaders.

Ricantén, number twenty. The door was barracks green, framed by a peeling yellow wall. On the upper part, there was a bronze hand clutching a globe.

Beto made the usual introductions, we let ourselves be pampered with a few small glasses of punch, kissing the hand of the lady of the house, examining the personnel, and within a few minutes we were the kings of the dance. Luis Dimas, Palito Ortega, The Ramblers, Leo Dan. And we applauded the old folks when they let loose with a paso doble or a tango.

At midnight the pairing of couples was already decided: Beto with Amalia, whom he did not let go of, even for a second, and Tino with Sarita, a girl with glasses who was

translating the English song lyrics for him in a low voice. I envied them, bored from dancing with daring bobby soxers or the lady of the house, and I had already resigned myself to being the loser in this mission.

According to group rules, the loser was sentenced to treat for a round of steak sandwiches and beer at the Fuente Alemana. I was counting the money I had with me when Isabel suddenly appeared, excusing herself for arriving late.

Just seeing her left me breathless. Never—and I don’t know if I have any reason to congratulate myself for this—have I ever seen eyes like hers again. More than just look, they seemed to attract, drawing the light from everything they crossed, feeding her pupils with a moist, mysterious gleam.

“Shall we dance?” I asked her.

“Not yet. Why don’t we sit for a little while?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her on the sofa. She seemed to study and gauge my reactions before accepting an increased closeness. I was feeling like an idiot. Even the classic “do you work or study?” escaped my mind, and finally, at the height of originality, I asked her if she even knew how to dance.

The gleam in her eyes surged. Without saying a word, she stood up, went to the turntable, interrupted Buddy Richard and his ballad of sadness, put on a new record with Central American rhythms and, to the surprise of everyone, placed a pitcher of punch atop her head and began to dance with a prodigious shimmying of hips and shoulders, without spilling a drop.

After removing the pitcher and acknowledging the applause, she returned to my side.

“So? Does it seem like I know how to dance?”

The hours that followed passed without being felt. We danced, and I discovered an unknown dimension of body language. I felt that she was truly letting herself be driven, that there was no pure formality in it, that she *wanted* me to take her along paths of sudden embraces and temporary separations. She let herself be drawn in without resistance to the point of being pressed against my body. In a turn of the dance, she opened my jacket to press her small, firm breasts against my shirt. I squeezed her more than, and in the turns prolonged by the swaying

of her feline hips, I pushed a leg between hers until I felt that volcanic contact made between her legs. She was letting herself go, being taken, drawn in, her satisfaction made known with subtle moans and fingers driven into my back.

When, as she drew near, she felt the erection bulging in my pants and fused her belly against my body, I felt a thought climb to my head like a spider: “I’ve got you heated up, you little fox, you hot little fox, I’ve got you heated up” but something even higher made me ashamed. Then I scratched my head, the spider-thought fell and, in a turn of the dance, I squashed it under my shoe.

The hours moved along stubbornly, and I just wanted to keep Isabel in my arms, not speaking, dancing to the blues while Ray Charles asked who was on the other side of the wall of his blindness, but no one answered him because the union of our bodies and our breath made us forget all words, all languages.

We were dancing with our eyes closed when the older guests began to discreetly abandon the party, and it wasn’t long before the owners of the house dared to interrupt Summertime by Janis Joplin to let us know that it was really late now, they were tired, thanks for coming, and, with that brutal diplomacy employed by those living in Santiago, they declared that it was closing time, you don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.

It wasn’t easy to detach ourselves.

“We’ll see each other tomorrow?” I heard myself implore.

“I can’t. Next Saturday.”

“What do you have to do? The day after tomorrow then.”

“Don’t ask questions. I don’t like it. Saturday.”

“Okay. To the movies, then?”

“I’d love to. Come and get me at seven.”

We went out to the street to finish the good-bye ritual.

A few yards away, Tino and Sarita and Beto and Amalia let themselves become enveloped in the nocturnal breeze. Seeing them kissing, pressed close like lovers, I thought it convenient to move a few steps further away. I wanted to kiss her, but she stopped me.

“No. We’re different. Let’s go back to the house and I’ll give you something better than a kiss.”



We went inside again. The room was almost completely dark. It smelled like cigarette smoke, Pisco, punch remains, spent music. Isabel closed the door.

“Turn around and don’t turn back until I tell you to.”

With my face to the darkness, the certainty of fear hit me suddenly. An inexplicable fear. A fear whose territory began at the tips of my shoes and extended to the edge of an abyss that my youthful logic fought to deny.

“Now, turn around.”

As I did, I felt a million ants crawling up my skin. Isabel was stretched out on the sofa, and the ants were heavy and fat. She had pulled her dress over her shoulders, covering her face, and the ants had taken my neck. She was naked, and the goddamn ants were choking me.

In the half-light I could distinguish the brilliance of her skin, her small breasts violently erect, crowned by dark buttons. Between her legs, I was presented a triangle of thin moss upon which fell, like dew, a stream of light that slipped in from the street. I held my breath so that the ants would leave me alone.

“Come here,” she whispered, fluttering her hips.

On my knees, I let the firm determination of her hands holding my head defeat my desire to rush. I let myself be piloted like an airplane. Isabel held my head up, allow-

ing me to almost touch her skin with my lips, and in this way she took me from her shoulders to her breasts, and from her belly to the definitive hemispheres of her thighs. I was a happy Argonaut awaiting the order to descend at the proper place.

Her hands maneuvered with precision. Not even a breeze slipped through during my descent along the valley of undulating vegetation that culminated at the path to her open legs, so that my lips would find a comfortable harmony before testing the unknown tastes of her vertical and secret mouth. And I wanted to be inside her. The desire filled every one of my pores and determined the rhythm of my heart and lungs so that nothing would hinder my exploring tongue making its way toward a sea of pleasure into which I wanted to submerge myself, to then swim upward, because I suspected that the pleasure was to be found on the other side of this depth moistened by her movements and my caresses. I wanted to go inside of her, to go in at any cost. It was perhaps at that moment that I began to understand that love is a naive attempt at birth anew.

“Do you like it?” She asked suddenly.

“I love you,” I answered, making use of the verb for the first time.

“Then come on Saturday and you’ll love me even more,” she assured me, getting up with an energetic jump.



The dress fell over her body in a cascading movement that destroyed the last of the ants.

I walked out of the house floating on light air. My thoughts were a mixture of flavors, lights, colors, scents, melodies. Charles Aznavour was repeating Isabel, Isabel, Isabel, Isabel because I ordered him to, and the certainty of knowing that the Dead Sea is so salty that bodies cannot manage to sink added to my happiness. I felt cold, heat, fear, joy—all together at the same time.

Tino and Beto were waiting for me at the corner and I noticed that they looked happy, too. They couldn't stop dancing around and patting each other on the back.

"How about we down a couple of pil-sners?" proposed Beto.

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" answered Tino.

"I'm in. My treat," I added.

As I walked between the two, they took me by the arms and made me run in the middle.

"So? Out with it. How did Izzy bid you farewell?" both voices were asking.

"Don't be assholes," I answered, running ahead.

We walked on in silence. Me, offended by them, and them by me. Luckily, we suddenly found an open bar and the round of beers smoothed things over.

Santiago. How many years have gone by? Santiago. Fair city, are you still there, between the hills and the sea, *surrounded by symbols of winter?*

Having a good time and making conquests were not in themselves as important as being able to talk about it with your friends. Tino and Beto were talking about their recent pick-ups.

"Did you guys see it? Walked in, looked into her eyes, and it was in the bag."

"It must have been the polyester, Betofen."

"Seriously. I've got my style. Marlon Brando's an old boot compared to me."

"Well, if we're talking about style, mine isn't third-rate, either. During the first dance I realized that Sarita's little mountains of ice were melting for this chest."

I listened to them in silence. I couldn't and didn't want to talk to them about Isabel. I was discovering the value of silence for the first time. The word intimacy was punching me in the mouth, and I was willingly accepting the punishment.

They were making plans for the following day. They had agreed to meet up with the girls for the same old thing: a movie, hot dogs at Bahamondes, drinks at Chez Henry, and then a stroll under the knowing shadows of the Santa Lucia range, *so guilty at night, so innocent by day*.

Sunday was unbearable. I spent the whole day in my underwear and withdrew into a silence that astonished my folks. In the afternoon, when I saw my friends on the way to their dates, I was consumed by envy and shut myself in to read an Old West novel by Marcial Lafuente Estefania, knowing full well that his cowboys wouldn't be able to take my mind off of Isabel.

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday... The week went by in the midst of an exasperating silence. The hours of class were prolonged to unbearable extremes and the afternoons spent smoking cigarettes on the corner lost their charm.

The corner. Our corner. The steps in front of the butcher shop, our little grand amphitheater made of worn-down cobble stones where many times we witnessed, unwittingly, the spectacle of dreams broken by daily life, or went over our repertoire of recent memories for an audience of friendly dogs or pestering kids who wanted to be like us. The corner was illuminated by the lamp from a streetlight that projected our fleeting reptilian shadows, making them fall down the same drain that carried the cigarette butts toward a dark, underground world, and not any less ours because of that. The corner. That place marked a thousand and one times by our young tough-guy presence. The corner. Command center, operating

table, roulette, confessional for that trinity of birds who couldn't manage to foresee the pending catastrophe that follows the first flights, it was of no help in alleviating the growing anxiousness for skin and the encounter, until finally the morning of that eagerly awaited Saturday arrived.

The first thing I did was to go and visit the barber.

CACERES
GENTLEMAN'S STYLIST.
HAIRCUT AND SHAVE.

"Rounded American and well-defined sideburns, please."

To the barber Cáceres, Diploma of Honor. First International Haircutting Competition. Mendoza, Argentina.

"And the pompadour? How do you want the pompadour? Like Elvis?"

To the barber Cáceres, with love, Nino Lardy, the Chilean voice of tango.

"I don't wear a pompadour. I comb it with pomade, slicked back, you know?"

CACERES
GUARANTEED HAIR MASSAGE
THERE IS NO SCALP THAT
CAN RESIST ME

I shined my shoes until the leather chirped like a canary. I dressed myself carefully. I borrowed the best tie owned by my old man, who watched me from his spiritual retreat into horse racing form analysis, and, bathed in the aroma of English lavender, I set out to meet Isabel.

I walked along nervously. On the bus, I noticed that some women were turning around as I walked by and whispering remarks. Sure, I thought to myself, I overdid the lavender, but it wears off in the air. And if it occurs to one of you to call me a queer-smelling fag, I'll break your face. I will.

I bought cigarettes at the same shop that we did on the previous Saturday and, just before reaching Calle Ricantén, I took advantage of a mirrored shop window to check my hair and the knot in my tie. It was impeccable, and so I went off in search of number twenty.

Fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty... twenty?

Under the number twenty I found a grey

house with walls cracked from the last earthquake. A house with an English-style partition and steel bars protecting the windows.

I thought I must have had the wrong street. It was possible since I wasn't in my neighborhood, and I went back to the corner to look at the metal sign.

Calle Ricantén. What the hell was going on?

Then it occurred to me that maybe, in my anxiousness, I had gotten the number wrong: it was one-twenty, that is, one block further up, and I walked quickly without worrying about the sweat threatening to ruin my hairstyle and shirt collar.

The yellow house with the military-green door and the bronze hand clutching the globe wasn't at number one-twenty. Nor was it at two-twenty, and beyond that the street ended.

I couldn't understand it at all. I wanted to curse, shout, cry, kick the traffic light, scream that something or someone was hustling me, and so I loosened my tie, unbuttoned my shirt collar, and went and planted myself in front of the house at number twenty.

I rang and an old woman in an obviously bad mood opened the door, leaving barely enough space for her to stick her head out.

"Pardon me, but does a young lady by the name of Isabel live here?"

The old woman shook her head dryly and closed the door. I hit myself on the head in an effort to recover the lost reality. The reality was that the house wasn't there. And now the neighbors were taking out wicker chairs and tables to argue over card games under the acacia trees. The reality was the absence of those yellow walls, that barracks-green door, and the bronze hand clutching a globe—all those details that were pointlessly waiting somewhere in the world for my call.

I can't say how many times I went up and down the street, peeking into windows, trying to make out the room from the party, the lamps, the sofa where Isabel offered the careless promise of my happiness, chain smoking until the knot in my throat and the empty packet crinkling in my hand let me know that the most sensible thing was to accept defeat and go home.

And that was what I did, but so my parents wouldn't notice my failure, I went

into the first movie theater I found along the way.

I returned home very late. I came in without turning on the lights and locked myself in my room. I couldn't sleep. I needed to retrace my steps over and over, to see if I could find an answer.

Around two in the morning I heard the notes of our code whistle. It was Tino and Beto who were on their way home from a party with new conquests for the following day. They summoned me to come out and share in their triumphs and to tell them about mine, even though they had considered the date with Isabel to be a minor betrayal of the interests of the group.

I let the call sound two more times before coming out.

"The big man's tired? Little Izzy drain you?" Beto asked.

"Let's go to the corner. I don't want to wake my folks up."

"That Monday morning face on you... don't tell me she stood you up," Tino inquired.

"Impossible. The date was at her house," Beto added.

"I'll tell you if you promise not to break my balls. I'm not in the mood to be the butt of a joke."

On the corner, we sat down on the steps of the butcher shop. Beto offered a round of cigarettes.

"Alright. Out with it. What happened?" asked Tino.

"Nothing. Nothing happened at all. Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?" both voices asked.

For the first time, I felt like I didn't love them, like I didn't need them, and that my defeat was personal, intimate. The great failure by the forward who missed the decisive penalty shot in the ninetieth minute.

"Nothing. Well... fuck... nothing. I couldn't find the house. I got lost. I had the wrong address. How do I know?"

All three of us remained silent. There was no sound aside from the puffing of cigarettes and I cursed myself for having told them the truth.

"Listen, it was really easy. Ricantén, number twenty," Beto pointed out.

"You're sure? That was the street?"

"Yeah I'm sure, man. We showed up

together there last week. We looked for it together and we found it together. Look, let's reconstruct the scene of the crime: we got off the bus at Portugal and Diez de Julio. At the corner we bought cigarettes and the customary bottle, then we walked a couple of blocks, and there we were. On top of that, Ricantén is a very short street," Beto finished pointing out.

"I did the same exact thing and I couldn't find the house. There was another one at number twenty."

"Wait a minute. Those of us who have suffered from meningitis and haven't completely recovered request an informative break. Do you remember what the house was like?" Tino asked.

"Which house? The one there now?"

"No, shit. The house from the party."

"Piss yellow, with a green door and a brass doorknocker."

"And what the hell did you find today?"

"A mouse-grey house with a screen door."

Beto offered another round of cigarettes, while Tino, choking back his laughter, began to hum a children's song, substituting some of the words in the lyrics. *"Balls, balls, balls of the foxes, sixty for the donkey's and sixty for the ox's..."*

I began to stand up, but Beto held me by the arm and ordered Tino to shut up.

"Take it easy, man. Did you have a drink before you went out?"

"Don't ask me stupid questions!"

Another silence, interrupted only by the puffing of cigarettes or a passing car on the nearby avenue. Tino collected ashes on the point of his shoe.

"Well, sometimes you can get confused, make a mistake, go the other way instead of..."

"But I didn't make a mistake! I was on Ricantén. I read the street sign with the name fifty times. I went all the way up and down both blocks and didn't find the house anywhere."

"Easy, now. You were wrong. You went down another street, maybe with a similar name. It's happened to me in neighborhoods I don't know. Don't make it out to be more than it is," Beto advised.

"I'm telling you, I wasn't wrong. Or do you think I'm losing it?"

"A house doesn't disappear from one week to the next. And if it had been demolished, the lot would at least still be there. We can rule out earthquakes since, as far as I know, we haven't had any in the last week," Tino noted with sarcasm.

"Go to hell."

"You're getting difficult, little camper. Better that we leave it alone for now and sleep on it," Beto added, ending the conversation.

They left me alone, sitting on the butcher shop steps. I stayed there, holding my head in my hands until the presence of cats smelling my pants let me know that dawn was near. I gave them a couple of kicks that were on the mark. The cats looked at me with contempt and I decided it was best to go home.

I slept until after midday, until Tino's whistles woke me up, but I refused to come out, saying I was sick. In bed, I ate the hateful and classic chicken soup that my mother made as an irreplaceable complement to the fact that I was sick, and during the afternoon I managed to distance the spiral of tormenting thoughts thanks to the rectangular assistance of the weekly crossword that came in the *Mercurio*.

On Monday, I declared myself well and went to class. On the days that followed I made a few attempts to make it to the lost house, but I always stopped myself before reaching Calle Ricantén. I was afraid. It was a confused fear of proving that the house existed and that somehow I had gotten lost on Saturday in the mysterious winding paths of the city. But I was much more afraid of becoming certain of the nonexistence of that house and that everything that had happened—the dance, Isabel, the taste of her body, the ants, the desire—were part of an incomprehensible plot.

A dream intensified my fear.

I think it was Wednesday night when I dreamt that I came home for lunch and saw that my mother was only setting the table for three.

"Dad's not coming to lunch?"

"Who?"

"Dad. I asked if he was coming to lunch."

"You're mistaken. It's always been three of us in this house. Your brother, you, and me."

"That's not true. Dad was with us last

night for dinner. That's his place, next to the radio."

"Nonsense. There have always been three of us in this house."

I trembled at the idea that the missing house was the beginning of a series of disappearances, and upon seeing Lalo, the nut, the neighborhood crazy, the burly child of imprecise age, walking with his mouth open and a lost gaze, not even paying attention to the flies that fought over his drool or the insults and stones thrown at him by children, I asked myself if perhaps his madness might have also begun with a paradise lost that the poor idiot kept on chasing.

Then on Friday I saw my friends again, or, I should say, they came to see me.

"We are bearers of good news. Betofen bumped into a certain little someone. Interested?" said Tino as a greeting.

"Isabel?"

"A correct answer by the contestant! You've won a beating!" they yelled and showered my back with punches.

"Fair enough, punishment accepted. Out with it."

"Hey, now. That's it? Without anesthesia? Do you see that, Tino? He thinks he's Speedy Gonzalez. We'll give you the news under three conditions. Number one: is there anything drinkable in the house?"

As always, my father's liquor cabinet paid the price. I left the room and returned with a bottle of Pisco and some glasses.

"I'm sorry to report that we're out of lemons so we'll have to drink it the hard way. So, what's next with this blackmail?"

"Exportation. Your poor father, what punishment!" Tino was praising the Pisco, clicking his tongue.

"Second, like the Chalchaleros say, you must nobly admit that you are an even bigger moron than the guy who the turtles ran away from, because on the other hand we would have to accept the fact that houses disappear, they get lost, carried off by little green men, and finally, it's over, poof, and they fade away."

They were laughing in such a way that it ended up making me laugh, too.

"Understood. I was wrong. I'm an idiot and a half. At the very least, I need glasses or a compass."

"A compass? For the purpose of a pompous rumpus?" Tino squealed. "I think

I've infected you with the after-effects of meningitis."

We were sweating after all the laughter, and I felt like I loved them, like I needed them. They were my friends, my brothers.

"Alright, out with it, you fucking jackasses."

"Let's keep it clean here, we are among gentlemen. The third condition is that you don't make any more dates on Saturdays, unless you propose to violate the rules of the Tobi club."

"Done. Saturdays are for the club."

"What suffering for these demands! Dwell on it for a moment, have a slug of Pisco! Go on, Betofen, tell him how, where and when you saw her. Can't you see that tormented face?"

"Easy, now. I don't want to be responsible for a heart attack. Listen closely: I bumped into her at the Portal Fernandez Concha building, precisely when I was heading to Ravera with the intention of enjoying a pizza, you know, that culinary contribution by the wops, made of dough, cheese and tomato."

"And oregano," Tino pointed out.

"You don't say? They put oregano on it, too?"

"Sure, for the aroma."

"See how you always learn something new?"

"Shove the pizza up your ass."

"Patience. With patience and a little spit, the elephant fucked an ant. Shall I go on? She didn't even give me a chance to say hello and she was already asking about you and, listen, shit; she doesn't even know that you missed the date, well, at least not for the reason that we know. She couldn't wait at home for you because they made her visit a sick relative. Those ball-breaking relatives should be killed. She asked if you might be mad and naturally I answered yes, that you hate people who don't follow through, people who leave their fellow man on a corner with a bouquet of flowers and a face like a dead fish. What can I tell you, man? The apologies were pouring out. Even let a few big tears fall, and she asked me to tell you that she would be waiting this Saturday at the same time. And what did I say to her? 'Sorry, Izzy, but it appears that he has an inescapable commitment for Saturday.' She went pale, the little pony, but she kept at it,



proposing Sunday. So I thrust my chest out and spoke to her in a most religious tone: 'Izzy, Sunday is a day that we hold sacred for... sports. You must have noticed that we are very healthy, right? Very athletic, but anyway, who knows? Maybe he could make a little time to come and see you.' Fucking lucky you! What did you do to that one? And now, hold on to your pants because here comes the most dramatic part: she listened to me attentively, took my hands, and with those eyes awash in tears, begged me, begged me, man, with so much sadness that I felt half ashamed of the glances I was getting from the passersby. Some of them must have been thinking that I was doing something bad to the little thing. She begged me: 'Please tell him to come.' Eh? Did I behave properly?"

I snatched the bottle from Tino and filled the glasses.

"Damn, you were hard on her, Betofen! You nailed it, man! Cheers, guys!"

"But this time, make good note of the address. Ricantén, number twenty, you dumbass!" they said in unison and then set off.

When we are young we trust in logical chains of events, and at this moment I felt that every link of mine had just come back together. I spent the rest of the time counting the hours that separated me from Isabel. Again and again I mentally went over

the path that would take me to her, until the very moment that would prove I wasn't an imbecile. I would make it. This time I would make it.

Let's see...I take the bus to the corner of Vivaceta and Rivera, at the stop where you get off to go downtown. First important detail. With me on it, the bus goes on until it reaches Calle Pinto, then it takes a left and follows a straight line for four blocks passing along pharmacies, soda fountains, liquor stores, ice cream shops, and the apothecary owned by Don Pepe, the Spaniard who gets angry anytime anyone comes into his shop. Don Pepe, a half a liter of bleach. Fuck, this is not the time to come in for half a liter of bleach. Don Pepe, a bar of Copito soap. Fuck, they can't just leave me in peace to listen to the goddamn Thursday operetta? Don Pepe. Another important detail. After the apothecary I'll reach Avenida Independencia and I can get off there if I want, but it's better to stay on for a few more blocks and get off in front of the Carmelite church. I get off. Important detail. I walk toward the hills, crossing the botanical gardens, walking quickly but containing my perspiration so as not to infect my darling with aromas of death. Upon reaching Avenida Recoleta, I stop in front of the firehouse. I wait and get on a bus running from Portugal to El Salto that heads south. Important detail. With me on it, the bus will cross through



the center of the city along Calle Mac Iver. Upon reaching the boulevard, in front of the National Library, I'll turn left and I'll be able to see the gardens of the Santa Lucia range and Pedro de Valdivia's stone cart. All of this will be left behind when the bus veers left toward the south along Calle Portugal. At the high seven hundreds I hit the stop signal, that curious mechanism made from a bicycle bell and a cord that extends from the vehicle's nose to its tail. I get off at the corner of Diez de Julio. Important detail. I double back a block to the north and then I walk two more toward the west. Now I'll make it for sure. Under the number twenty on Calle Ricantén I'll find the yellow house, the green door, and the bronze hand clutching a globe. I'll knock three times and it will be Isabel who opens it. Isabel. Later on I'll tell her what happened. Later on, when we leave the Gran Palace cinema. They're showing *Lawrence of Arabia*, I think. The Gran Palace, that theater so lovely and fresh, its walls adorned with sputniks that seem to float in the cosmos during the light show before the feature. Or maybe I won't tell her ever. It would be stupid. She wouldn't believe me. Or maybe I'll tell her when we're married. Married? Take it easy, man. Would I marry Isabel? Easy, man. Easy. I've got to finish school first, sure. How would Tino and Beto take it? I'm getting married, guys,

the time has come for me, the time when the valiant die, and we want you to be the best men. Isabel. What a couple we would make. Easy, man. Married? Maybe what Tino says about fools letting themselves get roped in is true. Am I a fool? What do I care?

On Sunday I was surprised to be awake long before sunrise and, at breakfast time, I couldn't stop talking, much to the surprise of my parents.

"Calm down. You could take off a finger with the knife," my father warned me while we were opening the weekly clams.

I was devouring one after the other without stopping to comment on how fresh and tasty they were. The clams were writhing as the drops of lemon hit them.

"It's from pain," my mother added, an enemy of raw seafood.

"Come on. They like it. Look how they dance," I insisted.

My parents were looking at me, making comments about the fevers that come at age eighteen, and my little brother was grumbling about having a moron in the family.

I woke up from my siesta around five in the afternoon. The heat had eased up a bit, my folks and brother were devouring a watermelon under the trellis while I was laying out the outfit of a gallant gentleman on my bed—that is to say, the uniform of a Chilean.

The charcoal grey pants impeccably ironed; the white shirt with the whale bones stuck in the tips of the collar; the navy blue jacket; the Oxford tie, a recent gift from my uncle Aurelio, which, according to him, made me look more elegant than a race horse. It was topped off with shiny shoes and the three mandatory handkerchiefs: the white one, perfumed, in the upper jacket pocket, folded in a way that it showed three stylish corners and was always at the disposal of women; the one in the left pants pocket, which was personal, for snots; and finally, the one in the back pocket, which served as a replacement, for wiping dust off of seats or to go over the shine on my shoes.

"Sunday dates are serious," said my father, sticking a bill in my pocket.

"Don't come home late. You have class tomorrow," added my mother, ever the realist.

The journey played out just as I imagined it, block after block, detail after detail, until I got off the bus on Portugal at Diez de Julio. Then I saw the foreigner.

He was a guy with long blonde hair and a very pale complexion who, with his worn jeans and his jacket, looked terribly badly dressed to me. A photographer's bag hung from one shoulder.

On the corner, waiting for a streetlight to authorize crossing, I situated myself be-

hind him and saw him dry his sweat with a wrinkled handkerchief. We crossed the street and I saw him enter the same shop where I was thinking of buying cigarettes. I followed him anyway. In a Spanish made choppy by doubt, he asked for unfiltered cigarettes.

"What brand?" asked the shopkeep.

"I don't know. The strongest," he added.

"Blonde or black tobacco?" the shopkeep inquired.

"Give him a pack of Liberty, they're the best," I intruded.

The foreigner thanked me with a nod, took the cigarettes, and put his hands in his pockets. After a few seconds, he apologized for not finding the money, and then put the bag on top of the counter. He opened it. There were two cameras inside of it. He took out a small folder that had papers and photos inside, and searched until he found a few bills. He paid, and when he stuck the folder back in the bag, a photograph fell to the floor. I bent down to pick it up.

It was Isabel, or part of her. I recognized the dress, her legs, her arms, and the sofa on which she sat: it was the same one where she made the sweetest of promises to me. It was Isabel, although I couldn't see her face, obscured by a blotch of light. I returned the photo and we left the shop together.

In the street, I saw that his hands were shaking and that he was incapable of lighting a cigarette. I gave him a match and accepted one of his smokes. We began to walk almost shoulder to shoulder.

"You—how do you say—do you know around here?"

"Not really. Not really at all. What street are you looking for?"

"What street? Eh... Ricantén... that's what it's called."

"Ricantén. I'm also going that way."

"You... you... do you know her?"

Did I know her? I was carrying her scent, her most secret flavor deep inside me, the curves of her body, her voice, her enticement to happiness—but, did I know her?

"Her name is Isabel."

"Look... we have to talk... you and I have to talk, you understand?" he said, drying the sweat from his brow.

"You're going to tell me that you're looking for a yellow house with a green door."

"Yes! You know the house? Tell me you

know the house!"

"With a bronze hand clutching a globe."

Then the foreigner brought both of his hands to his face. When he lowered them there was something imploring in his expression.

"Look... let's go together... it's ridiculous but..."

"You're afraid you won't find the house."

The foreigner tried to take me by the lapels of my jacket but I was faster and fled. I ran with all that my legs could give. And in the end, exhausted, I sat on a shoeshine bench. I had clean shoes, but I let the man polish them, praying that his work would last for hours.

Something had broken. Delicately, something had broken. An invisible hand was working on my face, molding the definitive mask that would be found in all mirrors.

The shoeshine tapped the soles, indicating that he had finished. I paid and casually set off toward Calle Ricantén.

The grey house, the English-style partition, the bell and its Bakelite nipple did not surprise me. I passed in front of the door only once and then I walked aimlessly until I found a theater.

Mutiny on the Bounty. While Marlon Brando was winning the love of Tarita, I was in a seat in one of the back rows to ensure my solitude, and there I cried my first tears as a man, with the premonition that I was opening a pathway plagued with doubts, failures, fleeting happiness, the makings of a catastrophe that, nevertheless, make possible the hateful fragility of being. I cried softly, almost with a method, with a weeping that showed me, in retrospect, the eighteen-year long path running from surprise to surprise and to which I would never return. I cried with a weeping that mixed the first pain of what could not be with the persistent joy from something beautiful that could have been on the white, perfumed surface of my handkerchief.

I didn't see my friends again. The code whistle, the call from Tino or Beto, went on for several nights, but I refused to come out. In the mornings, I left the house very early and came home as late as possible. The whistle became more and more faint, weak, listless, until it disappeared, replaced by the

air of autumn, the fog of winter, the noise of cars, the voices of children who were growing up and had taken ownership of the street and the corner.

On certain occasions I saw them going out together to some bar, but I avoided them, heading the other way.

With the dizzying succession of the calendar pages, new friends came around, new ways of enjoying the nights and suffering the tedium. At times, when going by the corner, our corner, seeing the butcher shop steps hurt like a recent death. But I was forgetting about it quickly. Very quickly. Disillusioned horses don't look to the side of the path.

Yes. It was the house.

Looking at the photograph, I was thinking about the pathetic brevity of C. G. Hudson's biography.

Did Hudson take that photograph the first time he saw the house? Or did he do it after our ephemeral encounter? Tino and Beto, did they meet up again, at some point, with the girls from the party? And the owners of the house? And Isabel? Was it all a game by bored gods? Did Hudson take the photo before entering that house for the second time, feeling that he should leave some evidence? Was Isabel the most beautiful denial of my dreams?

The cleaning woman rescued me from my autistic well by telling me that the person in charge of the gallery did not live far and that, if it was important to me, she could take me there.

I thanked her, letting her know it was unnecessary, that I had gotten enough information from the catalogue.

My overcoat was still soaked. I put it over my shoulders and went out into the street. It was no longer raining. The Zurich sky was clear and transparent. It had the same sharpness as Hudson's photograph—Hudson, who, after so many years, had delivered an apology to me, I don't know, nor did I want to know, if out of happiness or disgrace, for having sent me an invitation perhaps too pressured, or maybe to a mistaken destination. ■

TRANSLATED
FROM
THE SPANISH
by PAUL GRENS

Letter to Count Tolstoy

nonfiction by TYLER B. MYERS

DEAR Count Tolstoy,

I'm writing with a possible update from 2009 to the following text you used to conclude WAR & PEACE, for your consideration.

The original, slightly abridged:

"As for Astronomy the difficulty of recognizing the movement of our earth consisted in renouncing the immediate feeling of the immobility of the earth and the similar feeling of the movement of the planets, so for history the difficulty of recognizing a subjection of the person to the laws of space, time, and causes consists in renouncing the immediate feeling of the independence of one's person. ... In the first case, the need was to renounce the consciousness of a nonexistent ~~immobility~~ immobility in space and recognize a movement we do not feel; in the present case, it is just as necessary to renounce a nonexistent freedom and recognize a dependence we do not feel."

I thought you, earlier in the book, made a good case about the decisions of many being those that allow history, instead of how historical narratives often attribute history to the decisions of a few, like Napoleon or the Czar. I agree with you, that the soldiers in those wars had to decide they were going to kill each other in order for there to be a war. Napoleon's most notable personal trait was believing he was invincible, and convincing his soldiers of it. He created an ideology the soldiers believed, one contrary to any version of reality. But they wanted to believe. They weighed their options & situation, the possible booty to be gained, the situation of their family, the desire for a better life, their foreseeable prospects. There are many who might kill for fame or money, if they believed with some certainty they would not be caught. Napoleon helped them believe, and so they fought, and that is history. Without his soldiers & their belief in him, Napoleon is only a lunatic.

So, how to more fully incorporate this into your end for W & P. How about:

"As for understanding a heliocentric solar system, the difficulty was in recognizing the movement of the earth

P1

Consisted in renouncing the immediate feeling of the earth's immobility, so for history the difficulty of recognizing the ~~movement~~ of the subjection of the person to the laws of space, time, and causes consists in renouncing the immediate feeling of the independence of one's person. In the first case, the need was to renounce nonexistent immobility and recognize a movement we do not feel; in the present case, it is just as necessary to renounce a nonexistent freedom and recognize a dependence we do not feel. It is only with this recognition of our dependence can we use the full volume of our voice to confront those we must depend on (or those things we must depend on, and that what we must believe to commit horrors crime.)

best,
Tyler B. Myers

a really, really hard position to hold in the face of, say, William Stafford's real early stuff); Vietnam was a crock, would've been "Kennedy's Mistake" had he not been snipered, and the whole quagmire marked the start of America's gradual slide from peak greatness, etc.; Guam, Panama, 1980's Afghanistan vs. Russia—all these skirmishes blend, and it's hard to imagine anyone under the age of, say, 40 who knows much real detail about those battles.

What's changed about how we talk about wars and battles is as significant as what's changed about how those wars and battles are actually fought on the ground. No longer is there a unified citizen response; no longer *unified anything*. Trace the communicative arc: since at least the 1960s, war has lost its clear-edged and solid-lined power: there's no more overt good vs. evil, no more black and white. War's all gray. If you need evidence re: how talking about war has changed, specifically since Iraq, try smirklessly saying *WMD*, or *Shock and Awe*, or *Mission Accomplished*. Just try. And, in another little chicken-vs.-egg schism, any reader's welcome to ask if, in fact, wars quit being things to believe quite so fervently in as the audacity of the lies told to us by our public officials has risen, or if the lies rose in the wake of the dwindling faith in wars.

Page 40 of *The Good Soldiers*, the penultimate page of the second chapter: "Where was the bad guy, though? Other than everywhere? Where was the specific one who had set off the IED?... Surely someone in the neighborhood knew who had done this, but how could he persuade them that as damned as they thought they would be for dealing with the Americans, they would be more damned if they did not?" A few paragraphs later: "Off the soldiers went, feet aligned, hands tucked, eyes sweeping, jammers jamming, creeping back to the FOB."

The Good Soldiers is rife with these moments, times in which American servicemen (they're all men in this account) deal with near-total chaos, with this Kafka-ish/Heller-ish double-bind by resorting to the stipulated actions and procedures that've been laid out for them in manuals and through training. Finkel, in about as generous a move as one could hope for from a writer, offers these moments without commentary, without the slightest editorialized touch, and so the reader's left feeling much like she did reading Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*—we get something akin to purity.

But that's not fair to the art Finkel's achieved: for instance, by coupling scenes of soldiers on the ground with scenes from protests in the United States, or by interspersing frank passages of soldiers confessing massive confusion and despair ("They say on TV that the soldiers want to be here? I can't speak for every soldier, but I think if people went around and made a list of names of who fucking thinks we should actually be here and who wants to be here, ain't nobody that wants to be here.") with scenes of medics trying to save the wounded—these conjunctions are startling and stark and, in ways CNN can only dream of, they deliver on the promise of real-time news in ways I haven't seen or read elsewhere.

What these conjunctions do is actually deflate, still further, the myth of war. The horrors of mustard gas in WWI started this backlash, started the push away from the view that war is always, completely honorable. No, through Finkel's astounding book, we're aware instantly of the artifice of the whole war—not that the whole war's been a sham, but that war itself is a construct, a myth. There is, in fact, no single "war" even. Finkel's *The Good Soldiers* shows all sorts of levels of the war and, through his fine and terrifying details, we're given a harrowing glimpse of how these multi-valent battles shape up—or, usually, don't shape up—into the totality of the War in Iraq.

And then there's America, specifically the United States of. Maybe the ultimate gift and curse postmodernism's given us is the ability (and, also, the need) to put stuff in air quotes—"art" or "literature" or "democracy" or whatever. Since at least the 1960s, we've all come to understand that there are all sorts of ways to parse and examine what "America" might mean—land established by and for pilgrims and religious freedom vs. place of genocidal policies toward Native Americans; land in which everyone's born with bootstraps with which to pull themselves up vs. as classed a society as any that's ever existed.

Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors have, with their *A New Literary History of America*, attempted a fresh examination and compendium of what makes and has made the United States and have seemingly tried to make it as quotation-mark-free a work as possible—this is a post-quotationmark work, which is why reading it is such a interesting and thrilling event.

Here's Josh Clover, from his chapter on Bob Dylan:

His apotheosis is an index of perhaps the most singular fact concerning "the literary" in the post-World War II era: the accelerating collapse of high and popular art into a seemingly homogeneous sphere of "culture." And, even more threateningly, the corresponding collapse of that sphere's distance from the daily life of the market-place, so that those two things—culture and money—seemed to occupy all available space.

Or here's James Conant on Ralph Waldo Emerson and his 1837 speech to the Phi Beta Kappa society:

Even if someone were somehow to come into the grip of the idea that becoming an intellectual in America meant, above all, learning how to become an American intellectual, there would be few American landmarks by means of which he or she could confidently navigate the way toward such an identity.

Though Conant and Clover are describing events, cultural touchstones separated by a century and a quarter, those two phrases are worth bearing in mind as one wades richly into this mammoth book.

It is, of course, the exact and unique trick of the United States that, since there's no clearly codified list of "American landmarks," this book is even at all possible, plus ditto that, by and large, "America" still retains its greatest thrust and power (culturally) as an idea, not as a thing. Like grace or beauty or porn, America is easier to recognize than to define. More than anything, this dynamically lovely anthology makes clear that America is, in fact, a matter of framing.

The chapter you've likely already heard about, if you've heard anything about this book, is the one on Linda Lovelace (the star of *Deep Throat*). American? Sure. Her autobiography, though? Is that culturally elemental in a literary history of America? Ann Marlowe says yes. How about a conference entitled "The Asian Experience in America—Yellow Identity," which went down on January 11, 1969? Hua Hsu says yes.

As anyone whose read Marcus's stuff would likely be able to guess, this book fits in nicely with the larger body of his work: attempts at teasing out not The Secret History but rather, lower-case and plural, the secret histories. For instance: William Rehnquist is name-checked in this book half as many times as is the movie *Rear Window*; Max Roach is as common as Marianne Moore; unsurprisingly, H.L. Mencken's noted in these pages more often than Elvis, the Massachusetts Bay Company, Pauline Kael, or the Founding Fathers. Janis Joplin doesn't get mentioned; Reagan garners five times the citations of Obama.

At the risk of making the hodge-podge seem just that, the fascinating part of this book is not, in fact, the secret histories at play: what's fascinating is that while "America" may be an idea, it's clearly closer to something like a self-aware muscle. It's damn near impossible to read about, say, someone like Emerson and not hear, later, echoes of him in Dylan; I'd read Michael Ventura writing about anything at all, and his chapter on Elia Kazan and Hollywood blacklists is eerily parallel to Susan Castillo's account of the Salem witch trials. There are these sorts of overlaps all through this collection and, strangely, even the accounts of what's been horrible about this country end up making one feel overwhelmingly grateful that the country exists in the non-unified and impure ways it does.

Why? Because of the last two chapters in the book: one on Hurricane Katrina and one on Obama's election. Because those things happened shoulder-to-shoulder, historically, in this country. Because you'll cry at each of them. Because, unlike older countries, we're still making ourselves, and the true root of our democracy is that, in fact, *we all get to take part in that creation*. Plus, given the historical moment, we're allowed not only to make ourselves as a country but also to continually remake the past as well. It's a heady freedom, all this ability to take pencil to history's draft and trace new lines through old events, and Marcus, Sollors, and their several dozen accomplices have offered a fine new view of the whole shaggy, baggy monster that is the United States of America.

If I Were Another

Poems by Mahmoud Darwish,
Translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah
Published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux
201 pages

REVIEWED BY JANE LEWTY



In this unique and mesmerizing collection, Fady Joudah has illuminated the work of a writer who exceeds poetic communicability in his role as "an embodiment of exile, as both existential and meta-physical state" wherein "the 'I' is interchangeable with (and not split from) its other." To absorb *If I Were Another* in its entirety is a rare experience,

one that can only be matched by complete immersion in another person, cause, or idea. More specifically, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish has the power to transfix and exhilarate, but the unquantifiable pain of knowing is always present as well. The reader cannot turn away from myth and history, or the ways in which it is channeled: myth, manifesto, lyric beauty, symbol, voice, dream, metaphysics. If, as Darwish stated, "a poet is made up of a thousand poets," then the task of his reader is to be just as malleable, to contribute to the exegesis of his work by not simply orbiting around it but allowing his voice to speak to, and for, one's smallest and largest concerns. Through a discourse of exile that blends the pre-biblical past with an ever-shifting present, Darwish is a voice for the Palestinian people, whose land is interchangeable with, and celebrated in, its language.

Darwish's earlier books, *I See What I Want* (1990) and *Eleven Planets* (1992), display this eliding, transfiguring self: the singular to the collective, the private to the public, interior reflection to historical narrative. Uniting the two modes is an intuitive, musical utterance that is ever aware of its own circular rhythm: "Be patient, be patient and you will hear echo's reverberation," "Hero, bloodied with long beginnings, tell us: how many times will our journey be the beginning?"

Joudah notes recurrent images throughout Darwish's canon, such as wheat, wells, doves, anemones and more. They serve as signposts to the whole but also point to the "dissembling/reassembling" or the poet's subversion of language that constantly strives to disclose truth in its reiteration. Even though "the poem takes us/through the needle's eye to weave, for space, the aba of the new horizon," Darwish constantly acknowledges that "[e]xtreme clarity is a mystery" and, therefore, all the poet can really say is "I am distant from what I speak." In the poem "In exodus I love you more" he writes, "soon/you will lock up the city. I have no heart in your hands, no/road carries me, and in exodus I love you more."

Darwish's masterpiece, *Mural* (2000), a tripartite poem that engages with death—as illusion, fact, concept, metaphor, and visceral experience—cannot be overestimated as a seminal work of the twentieth century. The voice of the poet is quotidian, shifting and morphing into its “others” in the search for the “I,” the “horizontal name” and that which it symbolizes: “I am the prey and the arrow/I am the words, the one who commemorates,/I am the muezzin and the martyr.” The repeated phrases “One day I will become what I want” and “I seem to be and not be” portray the wandering space of near-death as akin to the “unknown” of exile, how the “temporary body [of a man, of a people] absent or present” is always hoping to say “mine,” whether it be a name scratched on a coffin or a lost land. Irrespective, the poet must realize that “now that I have been filled/with all the reasons of departure/I am not mine/I am not mine/I am not mine.”

In building on Edward Said's remark that Darwish was a playwright at heart, Joudah describes his development of the long poem as a “lyric epic sui generis,” amassing “a private lexicon of sorrow and praise” driven by metaphor into a collage of speech. His late style is exemplified in *Exile* (2005), a four-part sequence wherein the wandering self, the “I” is discovered once again, though embodied by the pre-Islamic Arab poet Tarafah Ibn el-Abd, who offers “imagination's return to the real” and, once again, a return to one's beginnings. The language of Darwish's late style is more informal, colloquial and expository: “New York, November, Fifth Avenue,/the sun a shattered metal saucer,/I said to my estranged self in the shade/Is this Sodom or Babylon?” The “congestion of symbol with its opposites” is replaced with a directness born of wisdom and experiment. Throughout, an agile mix of registers allows for satire and wit alongside stark, all-encompassing fact: “[t]he shadow... at times it has the scent of garlic/other times the scent of blood,” but a mere two lines later, we are reminded that “every place/far from God or his land is exile.”

The legacy of Darwish is such that comparisons should not be lightly made; however, referring once again to the idea of his reader and the anxiety of knowing or not knowing, the plays of Samuel Beckett come to mind. When Krapp hears his own voice describing the fire in him that is now lost, or when Molloy talks of the dream silence full of murmurs and says he will go on without being able to, we understand that this is a muted moment of epiphany, an elegy to life only experienced when loss or death is truly faced. Reading the lyric intensity of Darwish's work is at once revelatory in its portrait of humanity but also shattering in the sense that we are not there yet. We have to read and re-read in order to feel every nuance of sensibility, and—whether or not we have experienced loss—to say, with the poet, “I don't completely know myself” nor do I comprehend my place in the world.

Joudah describes *If I Were Another* as the “culmination of an entire life in dialogue” with itself and its selves. It is also an elegiac opus that defines the nature of elegy—the circular rehearsal of trauma, self-abnegation and questioning, detachment, praise, and the search for consolation. If a work of mourning includes those facets, and many more, then translation may also be termed a site

of memory, or as Darwish says, bringing forth “myself a second time around.” With generosity and brilliance, Joudah has raised the voice of a poet who speaks for the dispossessed across centuries and millennia of event, and who will continue to do so.

Everything Flows

A novel by Vasily Grossman

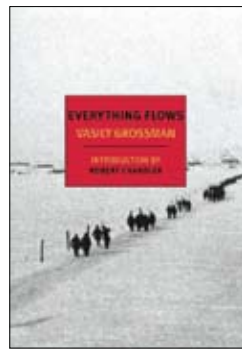
Translated from the Russian by Robert Chandler, Elizabeth

Published by Chandler, and Anna Aslanyan

NYRB Classics

272 pages

REVIEWED BY ANTHONY MARRA



Few have witnessed more horrors of the twentieth century than Vasily Grossman. Born in 1905, he lived through the Russian Civil War, the Red Terror, the regimes of Lenin and Stalin, and the purges of 1937–38. During World War II, he worked as a newspaper correspondent for the Red Army and filed frontline reports from Stalingrad to Berlin. His 1944 article, “The Hell of Treblinka,” was

the first journalistic account of a Nazi extermination camp and was later used as evidence in the Nuremberg trials.

Unsurprisingly, his fiction is solemn and severe. *Life and Fate*, his nearly nine-hundred-page masterwork, is a fierce condemnation of totalitarianism. Its length and sweep, ranging from Germany to Siberia, beg comparisons to *War and Peace*, as do its historical and political concerns. The novel uses one family's fragmentation in the Battle of Stalingrad to juxtapose Nazi and Soviet states, ultimately finding that both are bound by common ideology. It is as deep as it is vast, and it remains a monument to the victims of the mid-twentieth century.

Everything Flows, only a quarter as long as its predecessor, is even more direct with its indignation. Ivan Grigoryevich, the novel's closest attempt at a protagonist, returns by train to Moscow after spending 29 years in Soviet labor camps. He visits his cousin, Nikolay Andreyevich. The encounter provides Grossman the opportunity to explore the difficult issue of complicity. In the wake of Stalin's death and the state's official admission of its crimes, Nikolay must reassess his own role in the purges. Nikolay realizes that his are sins of silent involvement—that despite reservations and justifiable fears, he has contributed to and profited from the deaths of colleagues. But the characterization of Nikolay is so compassionate that we feel only empathy for him. This is one of Grossman's most eloquent portrayals of Soviet violence. He spells out the essential moral contradiction of a totalitarian state: “People did not want to do evil to anyone, yet they did evil all through their lives.”

Ivan's homecoming is not triumphant. He sleeps in train stations

and has difficulty finding work. He is unable to rekindle relationships with friends and relatives from his prior life. An act as quotidian as walking down the street is transformed by his time in the labor camps. Where once he saw secondhand bookshops, concert halls, and libraries, he now sees police stations, passport registration offices, and public places where he might sleep. Freedom is overwhelming and terrifying. But even as Ivan dreams of returning to the known world of gulag, he believes “there is no higher happiness than to leave the camp, even blind and legless, to creep out of the camp on one's stomach and die—even only ten yards from the accursed barbed wire.”

Everything Flows is an unconventional (and unfinished) novel. It favors incident over plot and many of the scenes from Ivan's return are points of departure into abstraction. It contains a play, which dramatizes the trial of four “Judases,” each of whom represent an archetypical informant. The final quarter of the novel contains a series of essays on Lenin and Stalin. While some of these digressions may tax the reader's patience, others encompass some of the novel's most moving passages. Ivan's landlord narrates her involvement in the Holodomor, the terror-famine of 1932–33 that took the lives of five million Ukrainians. Her story, like the novel itself, is a denunciation, not of a sibling or a spouse or a neighbor or a coworker, but of an entire country.

The Skating Rink

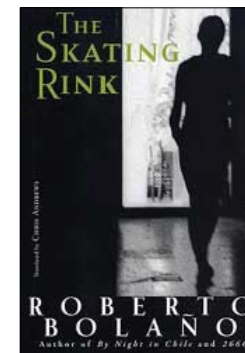
A novel by Roberto Bolaño

Translated by Chris Andrews

Published by New Directions

182 pages

REVIEWED BY GABRIEL LEVINSON



The Bolaño Who Would Be God or, An Open Letter to Horacio Castellanos Moya

On the campgrounds of Stella Maris, in the seaside town of Z, something doesn't smell right. Gaspar Heredia, night watchman, is assigned the task of finding out who is smearing shit all over the bathroom walls. His investigation leads him to two of the more curious campers: a young woman covered in blood and her unlikely companion, an elderly opera singer. The mystery of the shit will remain so, as Roberto Bolaño's latest translated work from New Directions, *The Skating Rink*, is concerned with a far more dangerous implication: you.

Bolaño would have you believe that a murder is what lies at the heart of this tale, a murder swathed in the trivialities of politics and the petty jealousies of misguided hearts. The three men who tell you their sides of the story profess their innocence and, as in much of Bolaño's fiction, there is a weighted, seedy guilt to every

voice. *The Skating Rink* is a psychological slow-burner.

There is enough going on here (enough blood, deception, sex, suspicion, arias and ice) to keep you turning the page. One of Bolaño's greater talents as a writer is flaunting convention by following it to the letter. He abuses the mystery genre to reveal that you, the reader, are the omnipotent party to literature's Murphy's Law: anything that happens to these characters happens because you are reading it.

In an essay published in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación* (English translation published by *Guernica Magazine* in November 2009), Horacio Castellanos Moya castigates the North American hype machine that brought Bolaño to our attention. And perhaps its Moya's exile in Tokyo that has caused him to miss a most important point: doesn't he understand what a relief it is to learn that North America even has a publishing hype machine? Hype or no, the Bolaño myth sells books. A myth greater than the one surrounding Roberto Bolaño is that of the death of books. If anything, the hype surrounding the remarkable works of a remarkable writer is proof the public needs to see that literature is far from the brink of extinction. If anything, the Bolaño myth should be impetus enough for North American publishers to probe the international community for the next *literati savoir faire*.

I say, build the myth as much as you like. From here to the gardens of Babylon, feed us more stories of The Bolaño Who Would Be God. What it comes down to is this: all we want is a good read, and Bolaño has yet to disappoint. With *The Skating Rink*, Bolaño's calculated and deft prose becomes the antidote to myth, exposing the underbelly of a world so real it verges on the precipice of nightmare.

CAPSULE REVIEWS
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Animals and Objects In and Out of Water

Illustrations by Jay Ryan, with a foreword by Andrew Bird and an essay by Joe Meno

Published by Akashic Books

REVIEWED BY SD ALLISON



For me to say I know Jay Ryan's work is like saying I know Beethoven because the lady in the elevator had a “Fur Elise” ringtone. I've seen a few posters, but I've never seen it like this, as itself, wrapped in its own packaging, running wild with 120 friends through the land it calls home. Then again, Ryan's work is so unusual it may not call anywhere home. Perhaps this is why it's running (with socks on and scissors in hand, as Andrew Bird points out in the foreword).

Animals and Objects In and Out of Water is Ryan's second book. I never picked up his first collection of work, *100 Posters, 134 Squirrels...* but it just made my Christmas list. What sort of dream are we having when we slip into the pages of Ryan's world? What was the bear doing before it decided to tear around on the lawnmower? Is the shark being used as a rifle really a rifle, or is it just playing a dirty trick on the gorilla? Don't get me wrong. Ryan's work is not ridiculous. It is set in a land of whimsy, but it's smart. A great number of his creatures read, write, and play a musical instrument. or a neighbor or a coworker, but of an entire country.

Take It

Poetry by Joshua Beckman
Published by Wave Books

REVIEWED BY COLIN HUERTER



Joshua Beckman's latest book of poems, *Take It*, is liable to divide its readers. There will be those who gush to the nearest ear about how Beckman is as close to the real deal as it gets in contemporary American poetry. They will say that his writing disarms skepticism with transparency, overwhelms irony with compassion, and frustrates headiness with candor. From the sequence (none of the poems are titled, which gives the impression that all of the "poems" are episodes of one kind or another from a book-length poem called "Take It"), they may cite these early lines to make their case: "Every day is the same. Some awkward / grip upon the friends who are never there. / No little wisdom entertains us when we are down. / When we are down we want fear and the acts of God. / How perfectly do you understand this? I don't / know that at all."

Others may hear artifice in his humility and think that all his talk of grace smacks of literary device. Thankfully, these readers make easy the decision as to whom to invite to your Christmas party: obviously, not them. or a neighbor or a coworker, but of an entire country.

Meet Me at the Happy Bar

Poetry by Steve Langan
Published by BlazeVOX[books]

REVIEWED BY WESTON CUTTER



What makes Steve Langan's *Meet Me at the Happy Bar* stand so far out from other collections is not just the whirligig zip and whiplash he causes by putting disparate lines next to and on top of each other ("The answer is deer at the salt lick. / What I mean is rare coins and stamps."), nor the ache for

some substantial meaning to bedazzle all this flotsam onto—some foundation to leave the heaps upon. No, what makes this all such a big deal is the explicit emphasis of now, of time.

Langan's poetry throughout shines—sweats, even—with a desperate awareness that time is critical, is passing. His poems acknowledge that, yes, meaning and understanding and sense are all critical and to-be-reached-for things, but instead of taking a sort of beard-stroking well, let's see attitude, his poems damn near vibrate with urgency. Right to the very end, there's a throbbing right now shooting through the works—in fact, the last poem's character asks it, straight out. After describing a nameless man—some central person in the speaker's life (this reviewer's guess: a father)—the speaker recalls how the nameless man "once said 'What bright idea do you have tonight, / Mr. I Don't Listen to the Blues Much Anymore / Mr. Trumpet Blown Deep into the Crosswind?'" or a neighbor or a coworker, but of an entire country.

Eternal Hydra

Drama by Anton Piatigorsky
Published by Coach House Books

REVIEWED BY KAMILAH FOREMAN



If "genius is dead" and "there is no god-like, authorial figure behind the writing of a book," as the opening lines of Anton Piatigorsky's *Eternal Hydra* declare, then why does appropriation sometimes feel like theft? Though this creative method is well established, Piatigorsky sets up the fine line between finding inspiration and stealing content almost like a live wire, drawing the reader/viewer into an ethically ambiguous scenario that unravels to stunning effect.

In short order, Piatigorsky's sharp play probes several problems inherent in authorship, including the proper due for the assistant who performs much of the research process; the ease with which an overeager editor, unable to maintain distance, can imbue a work with her agenda; the spoilage caused by an overly revealing introduction or the explication of source material that defangs a literary work; and most troubling, the audacity of speaking for—or even claiming the voice of—the voiceless, especially, as in this case, a first-person narrative from the perspective of a former slave. ■

SEND ME UP THE WRONG SIDE OF MOTH'S-EYEBROW MOUNTAIN

poem by ANTHONY MADRID

HEY, high-ranking god unjustly demoted at the recentmost change of cards. You Who beat STARS from Arabic jacket-iron, take COMMAND of my battering radius.

For these unmanned flights to Mars will never turn up the least dot of water. For how can anyone turn up the water without first laying hands on the spigot?

The bigotry of these ineducable children is like the magnetosphere of the sun. GASEOUS GIANTS patrol the darkness under sway of that mysterious force.

The PRIME NUMBERS, too, are subject to gravity; they, too, have a galactic center. That Pulsing zero, indivisible—with nullity and emptiness for all!

The DOLL I had as a child was nothing if not anatomically correct. When I looked in its Pants, the feeling I had was indescribable revulsion.

Barbie, don't trust that Ken. He may be good with shapes and colors, But insofar as you let him drive the car—that's how far you drive up the tree.

In due time we shall see for ourselves who is prophet and who is fool. We'll see who has to cook the books to show a return on owner's equity.

None of this is fiction. Wouldn't be worth doing if it were! My new motto is: I ALWAYS DO WHAT PEOPLE FORCE ME TO DO.

So, send me up the wrong side of Moth's-Eyebrow Mountain; set me down in a sinking place Where I'll need all this equipment I don't even know how to use to make it up the first ice wall!

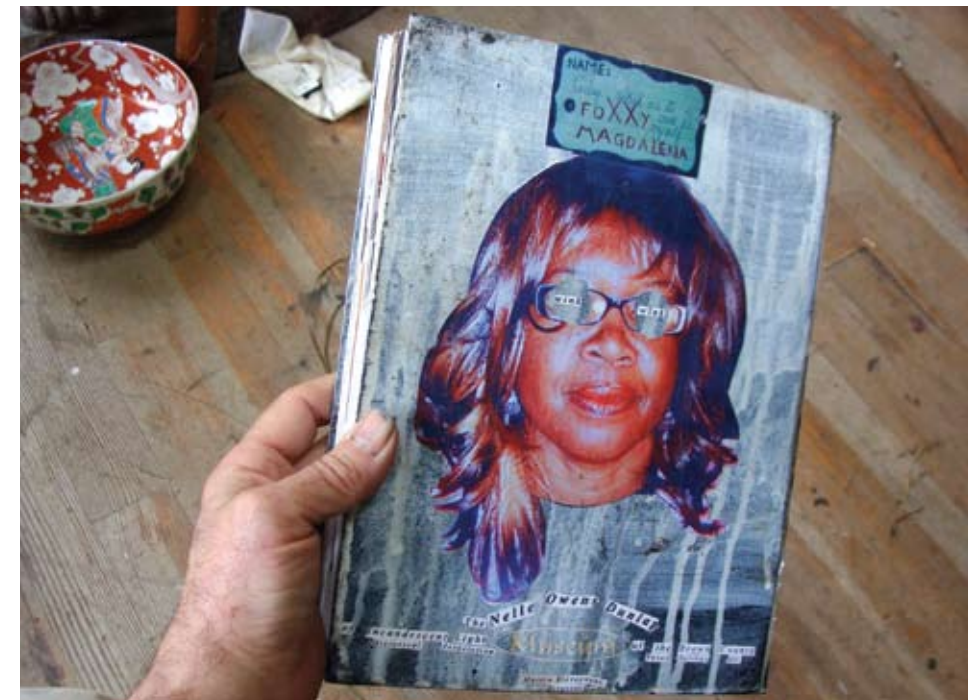
MADRID's wearing a spacesuit. He forged it in this poem's first couplet. And now He is splashing around in shattered glass with a family of sexy robots!



Monthly Calendar, 2004
 Bic 4-color ball point pen on paper
 30" x 22"



Float, 1999
 Image of the artist in his pool, which is full of soaked walnuts.
 From the project *Living in Love, the Wedding Tour*



Project Book #28, 2007
 Collage, acrylic paint on book
 14" x 10"

During the 2008 Democrat Iowa City primary race, an article about Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama described a similar situation/contest between Elizabeth Stanton and Frederick Douglas. On the cover of this book that Gelsy and I kept, I (a white man) asked her (a black woman) who we should put on the front, Douglas or Stanton. On certain occasions Gelsy would appear at Foxy Magdalena. She would do this by wearing a wig and clothes unlike her normal dress. She would stand next to people that she worked with every day, and they would not recognize her. They would not recognize her that is, until she winked. Gelsy and I liked to talk about why this was. I came to feel, for someone like me, if it was not Gelsy then it defaulted to all of the black women I did not know. What do you think?

JENNY BOULLY is the author of the forthcoming *not merely because of the unknown that was stalking towards them* (Tarpaulin Sky Press), *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* (Sarabande), *[one love affair]** (Tarpaulin Sky Press), *The Body: An Essay* (Essay Press), and the chapbook *Moveable Types* (Noemi Press, 2007). She teaches poetry and nonfiction writing at Columbia College Chicago.

JANA BRUBAKER earned her MFA from the University of Idaho in 2008, and is presently living and looking for work in Seattle, Washington. Or just about any other location. More of her work may be explored at 6other.com.

LAWRENCE COLLERD was born in Chicago. In May he will receive a BA in Writing from Ithaca College, where he is currently editor-in-chief of the school's literary magazine *Stillwater*.

CARU CADOC was raised in Chicago by a Welsh mother. He studied English at the University of Iowa, paying his way by, among other things, washing the pseudo-soups of ketchup, ice cream, and soda (concocted in playful ignorance by his less money-strapped classmates) from dirty plates in the dormitory cafeteria. He is currently an unapologetic waiter in the city of his youth. Caru's work has been included in *Storyglossia*, *Word Catalyst*, and *Jersey Devil Press*.

WESTON CUTTER's from Minnesota, edits Corduroy Books, and has work coming soon in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Sonora Review*, and *Third Coast*.

NICK DEMSKE lives in Racine, Wisconsin, and works at the Racine Public Library. His self-titled manuscript was awarded the Fence Books Modern Poets Series award and will be published in Fall 2010. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Action Yes*, *Sawbuck*, *Moria*, *Conduit*, *Weirddeer*, *Seven Corners*, and *The Bathroom Magazine*, among other places. He helps

curate the BONK! performance series in Racine and is an editor of the online forum *boo: a journal of terrific things*. Visit Nick sometime at nickipoo.wordpress.com.

BRANDON DOWNING's books include *Lake Antiquity: Poems 1996–2008* (Fence, 2009), *The Shirt Weapon* (Germ, 2002), and *Dark Brandon* (Faux Press, 2005). *Dark Brandon: Eternal Classics* was released on DVD in 2007. Photographic work can be seen at brandondowning.org, while more recent video projects can often be found at youtube.com/user/bdown68.

DAVID DUNLAP is an artist, walnut farmer, and teacher living in Iowa City, Iowa, where he is a professor of art at the University of Iowa. Since 1974, he has maintained a practice of keeping daily notebooks filled with drawings, words, lists, photos, dreams, and sketches. These books are the building blocks for David's unique practice, a constantly evolving and mutating living document, both autobiographical and fictional and articulated through all media. There are no clear beginnings or ends to his projects.

GENNADY FAVEL is a Wall Street trader, author, financial writer, and screenwriter. His book *The Stock Market Philosopher* was published in 2008. He has written for SeekingAlpha.com, *Futures Magazine*, and *SFO Magazine*. Besides managing to beat the odds on Wall Street, he is currently writing the pilot for *Land of Opportunity*, which will be a half-hour TV sitcom. Gennady resides in New York City with his wife and daughter.

KATY FISCHER lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Solo exhibitions of her work include Julia Friedman Gallery in New York and Chicago, Suitable Gallery and Western Exhibitions in Chicago, and Proof Gallery in Boston. Katy's work has also been shown in Houston, Boston, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. She received a BFA from The Rhode Island School of Design in 1995

and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1998.

AARON FRANCIS graduated from Northern Illinois University in 2009.

DEVA GRAF lives and works in San Francisco, California. She has exhibited her work internationally, including at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, *Day for Night*. She was awarded an Artadia grant in 2004. Solo exhibitions of her work have taken place in Prato, Italy, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Deva studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Mt. Baldy Zen Center in California.

PAUL GRENS is a Spanish translator currently based in Chicago, Illinois. A graduate of the Institute for Applied Linguistics at Kent State University, he has also studied at La Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina and the Instituto Cervantes in Chicago.

LILY HOANG is the author of *Parabola* (Chiasmus, 2008) and *Changing* (Fairy Tale Review Press, 2008).

CATHY PARK HONG's first book, *Translating Mo'um*, was published in 2002 by Hanging Loose Press. Her second collection, *Dance Dance Revolution*, was chosen for the Barnard Women Poets Prize and was published in 2007 by WW Norton. Hong is also the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Village Voice Fellowship for Minority Reporters. Her poems have been published in *A Public Space*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Jubilat*, and other journals, and she has reported for *The Village Voice*, *The Guardian*, *Salon*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. She now lives in New York City and is an Assistant Professor at Sarah Lawrence College.

MICHAEL KOBRE's critical writing and fiction have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Tin*

House, *West Branch*, and other journals. He's the author of *Walker Percy's Voices*. He teaches literature at Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina and serves as On-Campus Director of the Queens Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing.

GABRIEL LEVINSON is the former reviews editor for *MAKE*. He is the founder of Something To Read, a Chicago-based literary laboratory responsible for the Book Bike and *DEUSEXPAGINA*, the world's first journal dedicated to literary quantum mechanics. Learn more at somethingtoread.net.

JANE LEWTY recently completed her MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She also served as a postdoctoral fellow at University College, London, and assistant professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa. She is the co-editor of *Broadcasting Modernism* (University Press of Florida, 2009), and *Pornotopias: Image Apocalypse, Desire* (Litteraria Pragensia, 2009) Her reviews, essays, and poetry have appeared in several magazines and anthologies.

ANTHONY MADRID lives in Chicago. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *AGNI Online*, *Boston Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Iowa Review*, *LIT*, *Now Culture*, *6X6*, and *Web Conjunctions*. His chapbook is called *The 580 Strophes*.

CHRISTOPHER MATTISON is author of *No Bridge to Kentucky* (Slack Buddha Press) and *Statisticians* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs). He is a senior editor at Zephyr Press, codirector of the series *Adventures in Poetry*, and translation editor for *Zoland Poetry*.

ANTHONY MARRA is an MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His fiction has appeared in *Narrative*.

TYLER B. MYERS is an artist working in Chicago with the duo he co-founded, Culpola Bobber, and until recently with Lucky

Pierre. His work has been shown across the U.S. and internationally. He is currently an MFA candidate in Northwestern University's Art Theory and Practice Department.

PETER RICHARDS is the author of *Nude Siren* (2002) and *Oubliette* (2001), both from Wave Books. He currently teaches at the University of Montana. His chapbook *Hibernal* is forthcoming from Empyrean Press.

KATHLEEN ROONEY is an editor of Rose Metal Press and the author, most recently, of the essay collection *For You, For You I Am Trilling These Songs* (Counterpoint, 2010).

MARY RUEFLE's latest book is *The Most of It* (Wave Books, 2008). She is also a poet and an erasure artist; her erasure work may be seen at maryruefle.com. She lives in Vermont.

MATTHEW SALESSES is the author of the nonfiction chapbook *We Will Take What We Can Get*. Other essays forthcoming in *The Lifted Brow*; stories in *Glimmer Train*, *Witness*, *Torpedo*, *The Literary Review*; past fiction in *Mid-American Review*, *Pleiades*, *American Short Fiction*. He edits *Redivider*.

MARTIN SEAY's fiction has appeared in such publications as *The Gettysburg Review*, *Pindeldyboz*, and *Gargoyle*. He maintains a weblog that shares its title with his essay that appears in this issue of *MAKE*. (The essay came first.) Originally from Texas, he lives in Chicago with his spouse, the writer Kathleen Rooney.

LUIS SEPÚLVEDA was born in northern Chile in 1949 and is the author of several short stories, novellas, plays, and essays. Due to his political involvement with the student movement in the early 1970's, he was forced to leave Chile. He then travelled throughout Latin America and eventually moved to Germany in 1980, where he lived with his family for more than ten years.

Sepúlveda has lived in Gijón, Spain since 1997. His work has been translated into over thirty languages and won numerous literary awards. Most recently, he received the Primavera de Novela Prize in 2009 for his new novel, *La sombra de lo que fuimos* (*A Shadow of What We Were*).

CARYL PAGEL's poems, essays, and experiments can be found in *1913: A Journal of Forms*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, *Konundrum Engine Literary Review*, and *Thermos*. She currently teaches at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

TIMOTHY WEHRLE: Iowa. Gemini. Nomadic. Reclusive. Loner. Shape shifter. Observer. Side liner. Side man. Front man. Dyslexic. Complainer. Blunt. Has seen the devil. Can't drive. Scared of Jeeps. AB positive. Charmer. Monkish. Can perform psychic surgery. Knows how to look for arrow heads. Has terrible tattoos. Has radiant feminine hands. Iron deficient. Understands long showers. A walker. Quiet when overwhelmed.

DARA WIER's *Selected Poems* is recently out from Wave Books. Along with Emily Pettit and Guy Pettit, she edits and publishes poetry chapbooks and broadsides for Factory Hollow Press. She teaches for the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. New work in *Fou*, *Bat City Review*, *The Fairy Tale Review*, *The Blue Letter*, *The Nation*, *Green Mountain Review*, *notnostrums*, *American Poetry Review*, *Maggy*, *Crazyhorse*, *Scythe*.

KATE ZAMBRENO is the author of the novel *O Fallen Angel*, published this year by Chiasmus Press. She is an editor at Nightboat Books. She writes the blog *Frances Farmer Is My Sister* at francesfarmerismysister.blogspot.com.

NATE ZOBA is a writer who lives in Chicago,

THE SILVER-COLORED YESTERDAY: YOU MAKE US PROUD OF OUR LEGS

AN EXCERPT BY JOSEPH DROGOS

Read more from the blog **A Silver-Colored Yesterday**, one of many new online features at makemag.com.

Look for interviews with past contributors, new work expanding on the theme of the current issue, book reviews, and commentary, as well as audio recordings and up-to-date event information.

When the protagonist of Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* steps off the train in Chicago, he describes a dismal city: "My first glimpse of the flat black stretch of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an unreal city whose mythical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of grey smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie.... I looked northward at towering buildings of steel and stone. There were no curves here, no trees; only angles, lines, squares, bricks and copper wires."

Wright, like many participants of the Great Migration, sought Chicago as refuge. In this million-times-repeated ritual, Chicago is mythologized as the object of pilgrimage—until the pilgrims arrive here and are confronted by more trains, more movement, thousands more pilgrims who are now done with being on the way and now have to find a way. Wright's shock is that there's nothing to pilgrimage to. In Chicago, consequently, it's the act of movement itself that becomes the ritualistic act.

Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* are blurry with such movement. It's impossible to miss the ritual of pilgrimage in lines such as:

*Passers by,
I remember lean ones among you,
Throats in the clutch of a hope,*

*Lips written over with strivings,
Mouths that kiss only for love,
Records of great wishes slept with
Held long
And prayed and toiled for.*

Or a later poem that commemorates the intersection of Blue Island Ave., 18th Street, and Loomis Street:

*Six Street ends come together here.
They feed people and wagons into the center.
In and out all day horses with thoughts
of nose-bags.
Men with shovels, women with baskets and
baby buggies.
Six ends of streets and no sleep for them all day.
The people and wagons come and go, out and in.
Triangles of banks and drug stores watch.
The policemen whistle, the trolley cars bump.
Wheels, wheels, feet, feet, all day.*

The triangles of banks and drug stores certainly presage the "angles, lines, squares, bricks" that overwhelmed immigrant Richard Wright. And Wright, like Sandburg, was fascinated by the peripatetic populace of this "machine city": "Streetcars screeched past over steel tracks. Cars honked their horns. Clipped speech sounded about me.... The car swept past soot-blackened buildings, stopping at each block, jerking again into motion.... People got on and off the car, but they never glanced at each other. Each person seemed to regard each other as a part of the city landscape."

For Wright, who completed a long pilgrimage from backwoods Mississippi through Memphis to the North, the city he first encounters seems a dizzying acceleration of his own itinerant past. Only now, that movement seems imperiously complex, without the simple goal of "escape" or "opportunity" as its end: "I knew that this machine-city was governed by strange laws," he writes, "and I wondered if I would ever learn them." Eventually, Wright finds work in Chicago, becomes a writer in Chicago, becomes political in Chicago, and then is disappointed by the Byzantine structure of such associations. On the last page of *Black Boy*, Wright is "restless"—he puts on his hat to leave, and sits back down. He walks outside, half a block down, and then returns to his study. He's sparked with vision and enthusiasm but can settle on neither destination nor direction. Finally, he hears "the trolley lumbering past over steel tracks in the early dusk," and, reminded of his own pilgrimage, sets himself to write, to "build a bridge between himself and the outside world." *Black Boy* ends there, but the real Richard Wright, having realized that pilgrimage is a ritual of movement, not destination, soon left Chicago—first to New York, then to Paris. Wheels, wheels, feet, feet, all day. ■