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# HARVARD REVIEW

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# HARVARD REVIEW

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# Contents

PAUL HARDING	<i>Editorial</i>	7
STORIES		
REGINA PORTER	<i>Halsey Street</i>	10
MATTHEW NEILL NULL	<i>All Was Fine</i>	71
BEN SHATTUCK	<i>Edwin Chase of Nantucket</i>	86
SARAH BRAUNSTEIN	<i>Authority</i>	140
MAGOGODI WAMPHELA MAKHENE	<i>The Virus</i>	163
TIM HORVATH	<i>The Ship of Theseus Sextet</i>	204
ESSAYS		
BEI DAO		
TRANS. JEFFREY YANG	<i>Smells</i>	48
ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN	<i>The Container &amp; the Thing Contained</i>	108
MARGOT LIVESEY	<i>Nothing Is Simply One Thing</i>	116
ERICA FUNKHOUSER	<i>One Salt Marsh, One Hawk, One Swimmer</i>	193
POETRY		
JENNY XIE	<i>Lunar New Year, 1988</i>	38
A. E. STALLINGS	<i>Shattered</i>	46
ADRIENNE KENNEDY	<i>Forget</i>	58
AFAA M. WEAVER	<i>Immortal City, Immortal Heart</i>	61
CATIE ROSEMURGY	<i>Poem That Blames Narrative</i>	68
COLIN CHENEY	<i>Wyeth House</i>	84
EMILY FRAGOS	<i>Théâtre de l'Odéon</i>	103
LAUREN BROZOVICH	<i>The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers: Delamination</i>	112

SUSAN NISENBAUM BECKER	<i>Belly</i>	158
CATHERINE WING	<i>14 Devastating Consequences</i>	160
STEFANIA HEIM	<i>2:31 pm</i>	190
	<i>10:41pm</i>	191
BRUCE COHEN	<i>Snow Paradox</i>	201
ELIZABETH POWELL	<i>The Repetition Game: The Moment Is a Tricky Fucker</i>	210
HALA ALYAN	<i>Afra</i>	220
YI LEI		
TRANS. CHANGTAI BI		
AND TRACY K. SMITH	<i>from Love's Dance</i>	221
DAVID R. SLAVITT	<i>Full Count</i>	224
ART		
YIFAT GAT	Four Paintings and an Installation	41
ETHAN MURROW	Five Drawings	62
MIRA CANTOR	Four Drawings	104
GONZALO FUENMAYOR	Six Drawings	134
GERRY BERGSTEIN	Four Paintings	184
SHARON BUTLER	Three Paintings and Six Images	214
CONTRIBUTORS		225

## Editorial

Being invited to curate the prose for this issue of *Harvard Review* is a thrill. Christina Thompson was the first person to publish my fiction, in *Harvard Review*, in 2002 and again in 2007. For years, while I wrote and tried and failed to publish my first novel, those two stories—those two issues of the review in my bookcase, the one spine bright orange and robin’s egg blue, the other two shades of slate purple—were the only evidence I had that I was a published writer, that I had work with my name on it in print which, as writers know, is practically the same as saying that they were the only evidence that I existed. Those two issues contained, as it were, my collected works. So, when Christina asked if I’d be a guest editor, I was especially gratified and humbled. It felt like my roots as an artist in *Harvard Review* were striking even deeper, now that I had the chance to find space in it maybe for some younger writers just beginning to publish, as well as for more familiar voices.

I hope that this collection of stories and essays has the same prismatic effect on the reader has on me. It was such a pleasure asking teachers, friends, colleagues, students, authors I admired from afar, for some of their writing and receiving in response a kaleidoscopic variety of work—radically various in aesthetics, sensibility, style, but also when read alongside one another hanging together with a kind of coherence that I believe originates in the common humanism of the authors.

Magogodi Makhene’s story, “The Virus,” is a dense, scorching, vision set in post-apocalyptic South Africa. Elizabeth McCracken’s essay, “The Container & the Thing Contained,” is a somber, sober, and typically gorgeous reflection on the death of a family member. Erica Funkhouser’s essay, “One Salt Marsh, One Hawk, One Swimmer,” takes the occasion of a swim in a tidal creek in Essex, Massachusetts, and unfolds it into a

pastoral transcendentalist meditation. Margot Livesey parses Virginia Woolf's aesthetics, with her jeweler's eye for nuance and meaning, and to the benefit of every practicing writer who comes upon it. Tim Horvath's story, "The Ship of Theseus Sextet," is like something you'd find in a lost collection by Julio Cortázar—surreal, funny, fractured, and knowing. Matthew Neill Null and Ben Shattuck's stories feel deeply embedded in history. Null's "All Was Fine" offers a Pentateuchal elk hunt—dark, primeval, bloody; Shattuck's "Edwin Chase of Nantucket" captures that weather-swept island and the souls that lived on it in the early nineteenth century. "Authority," by Sarah Braunstein, seems like it could be happening right this moment across town. Regina Porter's "Halsey Street" intimately renders place and family and feels like an entire novel perfectly distilled into twenty pages.

And that's just the prose. The poetry in this issue offers just as rich a feast as the fiction and essays, from Tracy K. Smith and Changtai Bi's translations of sections of Yi Lei's "Love's Dance" that read as if taken from an atlas of dream, to Lauren Brozovich's "The Ware Collection of Glass Flowers: Delamination," in which she "peels back" each layer of those glass flowers until she arrives at the human soul that made them, there is a treasure of verse in the following pages as well.

For the range of subjects and settings, language and artistic disposition, all this work shares a fervid solicitude for and non-negotiable loyalty to the human heart. It also shares an unabashed love for literature, for reading. Every piece here is transparently involved in a dialog with the writer's own favorite authors, her influences, her inspirations. The idea of the "anxiety of influence" has always seemed like junk ideation to me, the kind of notion that would only occur to and be persisted in by someone who did not make art himself, who held art at arm's length, perhaps, in his mind, above. But let us not cast aspersions. I don't mean to mount a critique of the idea, only to use it as counterpoint to set in relief a quality I find common in the present work and in so much

successful literary writing, namely the very great privilege of influence. Will any good reader have, say, the sense of Emerson floating alongside Funkhouser—and object? What of a glimpse of Melville across the field in Shattuck, or a whiff of Faulkner’s pipe (not to say bourbon) in the woods on Null’s hunt? What thoughtful reader will not savor such moments where today’s art engages with that of its literary forebears, precipitating one of the greatest effects in all art, namely, recognition.

At the risk of drifting into homily, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote somewhere that human beings are “ordained to fellowship.” It’s fair to say that every work of art deserving of the name is a gesture of fellowship, whatever its idiom or method. It needn’t—it shouldn’t—merely sooth the reader’s conscience. It may—it must—unsettle, haunt, truthfully and thus beautifully describe human experience, and in such descriptions effect recognition, which strikes the reader as revelation of our common humanity. It is in such moments, so particularly the province of art, that we find ourselves in that fellowship to which Barth rightly claims we are ordained.

So with that, fellows, welcome to issue 49 of *Harvard Review*; I hope you are as surprised and delighted by these wonderful writers as I am.

—*Paul Harding*

**REGINA PORTER**

## *Halsey Street*

HALSEY STREET? Halsey Street. Have you been to Halsey Street? Come with me down Halsey Street. We'll eat Nutella crepes.

Halsey Street. Halsey Street. Some shit went down on Halsey Street. My mom was young on Halsey Street. A fine sweet egg.

Halsey Street. Halsey Street. I was born on Halsey Street. A claw-foot tub on Halsey Street bears my imprint.

Halsey Street. Halsey Street. I kissed the girls on Halsey Street. I tilled their fields on Halsey Street just for the thrill of it. Susie Q with Jheri Curls dripping down her neck. *Why we got to be under your folks' fig tree like this?* A fig is not an apple and an apple's not a quince. Halsey Street is many things, but it's no damn Eden.

Halsey Street. Halsey Street.

Poor folks fold on Halsey Street.

Rich folks stroll on Halsey Street.

My parents still live there.

*Royal Applewood*

Up the street and down the stairs but still very much caught up in the vagaries of his big damn head. What? That's right. Royal Applewood slipped the key into his parents' front door and slinked into their brownstone with one thing on his mind. Today was Friday. Three days a week—Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays— his father traveled from Brooklyn (Bed Stuy) to midtown Manhattan to chug a vital organ drink, kidneys purified, slaked, dialysis. And since his old man never went anywhere without his wife, Gladys, by his side, because senior citizen love forges on despite being tired, Royal was sure to have the brownstone to himself.

Precious glade. Glade, *the precious*. The ground floor reeked of *Glade*, one of those sickly sweet artificial plug-ins whose fragrance lingered in the brain long after you retreated for fresh air. Later a headache would sneak up on Royal, and he would do his level best to tamp the headache down with a late afternoon nap, all the while pondering the wheres-and-whys of it, the what-the-fucks of it? Something he'd eaten, perhaps? Dehydration? The emotional tinge of a slate blue November day? Memory would not let him trace his way back to the true culprit—Starlight Garden Glaze—a fragrance that smelled like no garden he had ever tilled or whiffed or plundered.

Royal strolled through the wide hallway toward the wider living room, leaving behind ebony columns and ebony shelves and a floor-length mirror that caught his reflection. Everyday is not a good day to see one's reflection. Something told Royal he ought to duck and jump. And that's just what he did. It was a good jump too, landing him in the heart's center of the living room. He loved the living room. A candle burned atop a 1969 Magnavox stereo/TV console: proof that his parents were becoming careless in old age. Ah, dotage. Futility. Decrepitude. *Imbecility*. Royal blew out the candle but made no wish.

The console ran the length of the living room and opened onto a turntable with a collection of Levi and Gladys Applewood's favorite LP's: Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, Lou Rawls, Bobby Blue Bland, and B.B. King. Endless. When Royal was on speaking terms with his parents—right now he was not—he would spin their old records for hours on end and think, *These young bloods out here have no idea. They just don't know.* Royal could see that in his absence, Levi Applewood had gone back to listening to LPs too. Music was good for the old goat. Next to the turntable, in a small plastic basket, there was a preponderance of medication: GluControl for diabetes; Lorcet for pain; Benicar for hypertension; and the water pill, Lasix. Royal checked the expiration dates, as was his habit, before sitting down in his father's gray La-Z-Boy recliner. So. Fucking. There. He loved the way the recliner made room for a man's behind, adjusted itself like a piece of putty along the shoulders, neck and back to tease him with the possibility of rest. As a boy, he'd often sat in his father's lap and blinked away tears caused by smoke from Tampa Nuggets and King Edward Cigars. Cigars shipped North, express mail, from relatives in Georgia. Care packages that included red cow peas for New Year's Hoppin' Johns, dry green lima beans for any other Sunday, Rogerwood Smoked Sausage, and scrap iron liquor that could make a bad weekend feel like a joyful month. In this chair, Royal's father would entertain him with tales of Brer Rabbit in a southern dialect that would later bring Royal deep shame, like the old man's penchant for Old Spice cologne and polyester suits and ties bought on sale at the Fulton Street Mall.

"I shouldn't be here," Royal mumbled. And then he did what he always did when he was alone: he talked out loud to himself. "I have *every* right to be here."

Last Sunday at dinner, his parents had asked him to return the key to their brownstone. Royal suspected, no, was certain his baby brother,

Daryl, had put them up to the task. There was no way in hell his mother or father would have asked him to turn over his key without some maneuvering from Daryl, especially since Royal was the one who dropped by every night between taxi shifts to check on them. Sure, he sometimes helped himself to the food in the fridge while he was at it. Meatloaf. Potato Salad. Macaroni and Cheese. Smothered pork chops and turkey wings. All the shit his father wasn't supposed to eat anyway. But he never touched the tossed salad or the fruit. The healthy stuff. And, sure, he sometimes picked up the stray cash, a five or ten, they left around the place, but he was always good for it, always broke even, when payday rolled in.

Royal kicked off his Adidas and rubbed the heels of his feet together. The socks were causing his feet to itch. They were black woolen socks that Daryl's wife, Jocelyn, had given him last Christmas. Jocelyn was the only human being who could give someone a pair of wool socks for Christmas and get away with it. This killed Royal. The way Jocelyn would wrap woolen socks with the Patagonia price tag sill attached in antique wrapping paper with pink tissue and arrogant lavender bows and then offer them to you like she'd just given you a laptop or flat screen TV. And then while you sat in a stiff-ass wood chair unwrapping the tautly wrapped gift and smiling politely, she would proceed to lecture you on the merits of good socks, how they cushioned the soles of the feet, and could be worn in the depth of winter with sandals, *and* were great for long nature walks. When the hell did he ever take a nature walk? He barely jogged anymore, and he used to be a serious long distance runner. When Royal was in sixth grade, middle school, his teachers had advised his parents to put him on Ritalin. Said he was highly intelligent, but borderline hyperactive. So prone to movement that concentration seemed almost anathema to him. Anathema was the stuff of high language to Levi and Gladys Applewood, but concentration was a word they could readily comprehend.

His mother and father had sat down at the dinnertable, in front of the velvet painting of Jesus Christ, which was where they carried out serious family business.

“The boy just needs space,” Levi Applewood said.

“Where’s there safe open space around here, Levi?” Gladys wanted to know. “This is Bed Stuy. This is Brooklyn.”

A week later, Levi Applewood plucked the cheapest running shoes he could find from the bargain bin at Modell’s and began a routine of morning laps, 5:30 a.m. around Prospect Park with his son. One lap turned into two and two laps turned into four and four laps turned into six. Once Royal took to running there was no stopping him. He would lope around the neighborhood in shorts during summer and in sweatpants and sweatshirts in the coldest winter months, always with some advertisement: Packard, later Bronx Science and BAM, a goodwill talisman so that cops would know he was a black boy neither dashing toward a crime nor away from one.

He rose, instinctively fighting the urge to throw open all the curtains. Yes, as usual, the curtains were drawn throughout the house, giving a permanent shade of evening to a crisp autumn morning. His parents kept the curtains closed for fear that someone would look in and peep their business. He understood this bit of strangeness for what it was—a holdover from old Jim Crow. Memories of escape from nightriders seen or crudely imagined. Ghosts they rolled up in quilts, tucked in suitcases, knapsacks, and cedar trunks as they navigated North. The ghosts still ruled the show.

“They want their damn keys,” Royal said. “They’ve got their damn keys.”

Royal deposited the brass house key in the little plastic basket alongside his father’s medicine, where they were sure to find it. His bare feet led him across the cold oak floor through the French pocket doors into the dining room, and there on the dining wall, in a gold leaf frame,

the painting of Jesus Christ waited for Royal. His mother had won the painting years ago at a church raffle. He would never forget her coming home flushed and excited like she had won something important. The painting seemed almost to wink at Royal and say, “You got a problem with me, son?”

He looked at the white man, for he had never been able to call the painting Jesus, much less Christ. Royal considered Jesus’s flowing white robe, hair the color of shucked corn, and eyes like cornflowers, cornflower blue. The face turned slightly upward, beseeching, talking to God, to his Father, perfectly manicured hands folded in prayer, a dead ringer for a young Val Kilmer as Jim Morrison in *The Doors* movie. This image—this man—set against clouds you wanted to pull down and eat like fluff or marshmallows. This painting had been on the dining room wall for as long as Royal could remember, and when his mother had been burdened with one problem or another, a prickling, her prickling of guilt, she would talk to this Man, sit before him at the dining room and say, “Jesus, help me. Lord, you know all things.”

“I already did what I came to do,” Royal muttered to no one in particular. The painting seemed to wink at Royal again and call him a flat-out liar.

### *Marjorie Quentin*

Dwarf asters and petunias, creeping zinnias and fuchsia dangle from Marjorie Quentin’s window box ledge. Marjorie is the president of the Neighborhood Watch Committee, thus the sign outside her door: Keep Bed Sty Clean. She is a watcher. Every neighborhood has one: a man or woman, usually retired, occasionally unemployed, who tracks the comings and goings of every moving object on her block. She will trade you gossip for tea or coffee and tell you which real estate agent isn’t worth your time. Bedford Stuyvesant is no longer the ghetto. Like

Park Slope, Boerum Hill, and Fort Greene before it, Bed Sty has already happened, already arrived. Those poor souls hoping to get it in on the bottom up are now limping toward that other Jerusalem known as Bushwick. East New York and Brownsville will come next. In New York, there is always a next. It is now quite common for architects to give tours in front of buildings where crackheads once paused for a quick hit. Breakfast options are no longer limited to breakfast plates and sandwiches on the go; you can sit down at your leisure and enjoy savory or sweet crepes at Le Paris Dakar, the neighborhood creperie. The '80s, were they a nightmare? Marjorie woke up one morning and didn't just live in Bed Sty, but Stuyvesant Heights, Bed Stuy proper. She takes this all with a grain of humor, if not salt, but not so much salt that she won't run at anyone who comes offering her a million dollars for a brownstone appraised at twice that amount. "If it's worth that much to you," she tells the speculators and real estate agents. "How much more is it worth to me?" The housing stock in Bed Sty was never meant for the poor, so the poor must go. Majorie is banking on the day when her daughter, Susie Quentin, will move home from Chicago and live in her brownstone. This new generation of young black professionals need not just rent but own. Sadly, some things are beyond Marjorie Quentin's control. Looking after her block is not one of them. And so, after the city workers are finished sweeping the block, she leaves her stoop to survey their handiwork. And who should she see directly across the street but Royal Applewood, oldest son of Levi and Gladys Applewood, looking tacky as well as bad. What, she thought, is that poor boy doing? The texturizer on his head had turned into a straight out 'fro, fine for one of these hip twenty-somethings on their bohemian diets, but Royal was well into his thirties by now. And metamorphosis—change—where was the firm runner's body? He had gone soft around the middle and the thighs—in acid wash jeans, no less. Jeans too light for winter and too

tight for a man who no longer had it going on. Marjorie didn't even know people wore acid jeans anymore. Oh, well, she thought. *You win some. You lose some.* There was no telling with children. Marjorie made a mental note to call Gladys and Levi Applewood to let them know that Royal was making off like an afternoon bandit with what looked like a faded oil painting of Jesus Christ.

*Daryl Applewood*

They return from the clinic, Levi and Gladys Applewood, escorted by their son Daryl. Daryl is a corporate lawyer. He worked for a white shoe firm on Madison Avenue. Had not yet made partner but was primed to do so next year. Lunch with his mother and father has been abandoned, aborted. A cute little café on Dekalb Avenue in Fort Greene. A former liquor store that served paninis and soul food nouveau. On the drive from the clinic to the restaurant, his father tilted over the backseat and said, "Get me home, son."

But there was no accounting for afternoon traffic along Nostrand Avenue and by the time they reached the brownstone on Halsey Street, a steady stream of yellow piss was working its way down his father's pants legs. Levi Applewood had refused to pee at the doctor's office. He had a thing about using restrooms in public places. Daryl stood outside the bathroom door and listened to his father cuss a blue streak about not being able to do for himself.

"Keep still, Levi," Gladys said. "You're not making it easy for anybody here now. Daryl took the day off so he could spend time with us."

And while Gladys washed her husband with a warm, damp washcloth, Daryl tried not to imagine his mother leaning before his father. No, he preferred to imagine that his father's back is turned to his mother; that his father's hands are gripping the antique basin. Daryl was most uncomfortable leaning against the bathroom door and so

made himself useful in his parents' bedroom. He removed from the walnut wardrobe a pair of gray slacks and a plum sweater, an outfit his father would be able to slip into easily enough, and maybe the day would be salvaged and a late lunch enjoyed. The bedroom was the only room with carpeting in the house, a cream-colored shag, and Daryl added removing the carpet to the list of household projects to be completed next year, or more likely, when his father passed away. As executor of the estate, Daryl will encourage his mother to restore the bedroom's hardwood floors, an investment that will add an easy thirty grand to the overall value of the house. He will renovate the tenants' apartment upstairs and adjust the rent to accommodate his children's private school tuition. He laid his father's clothes on the pink and blue string quilt, a series of strands woven together in triangular patterns that reminded him of childhood and cotton candy. The quilt was made in his mother's Sunday afternoon quilting class at Concord Baptist Church, a few blocks west of Marcy Street. His parents had been members of Concord Baptist Church for over forty years, though his father, along with Royal, Daryl, and Daryl's wife and kids, attended only twice a year: Easter Sunday and Christmas Jubilee. It might not be the worst thing in the world to go to church on Sundays with Jocelyn and the kids. Church outings brought back family gatherings and happy memories. Daryl considered taking a pair of boxer shorts out of the dresser drawer for his father, but decided against it. At the very least, a man should be able to choose his own underwear.

Gladys Applewood was efficient and Levi Applewood stepped out of the bathroom in a flannel robe, a monogrammed L. L. Bean tartan number gifted to his father by Jocelyn.

"Help your father get dressed," Gladys said.

"I don't need help," Levi insisted.

Gladys went downstairs for a glass of water, but Daryl knew she was going in the dining room to pray. It must have been hard for his mother

to see her husband, a retired Con Edison worker who once scaled long trees and untangled electrical wires, reduced to a childlike existence. Daryl watched his father get dressed, the swollen fingers fumbling with the zip of his pants. He could think of nothing to say. Conversation between the two of them had never come readily.

“Think the Mets will get it together this year, Pops?”

Levi Applewood shook his head. “I’m hopeful, but I don’t see it happening.”

“Maybe in the spring we can catch a game?” Daryl was actually a Yankee’s fan with access to season tickets, box seats—compliments of his firm.

“Spring?” Levi Applewood snapped. “Let me get through fall and winter.”

### *Gladys Applewood*

When Gladys Applewood prays, she sits in quiet meditation. She is Lot’s Wife. A pillar of stone. This stillness terrified Daryl Applewood when he was a young boy. Scared him worse than the old women at Concord Baptist Church who thrashed the floor with the Holy Ghost. One morning Daryl, no older than five or six, had come down before the sun had cast its first light on the day and found his mother sitting before the painting of Jesus Christ. Remnants of cracked eggshells were scattered in front of her on a small breakfast plate. She sat perched on her chair in a trance. Daryl had called her name but his mother had stared straight ahead through bloodshot eyes and did not seem to hear or recognize him at all. Thinking he must do something—what to do?—he had retrieved a glass of water from the dining room table and thrown it in his mother’s face. Just like the deacons in church did when their sisters were caught up in the Holy Ghost. His mother had reached out for Daryl then, twisting her body so sharply that Daryl had retreated instinctively, pulled back.

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t drown Mama, baby. I see you.”

The tenderness in her voice lulled him forward again. “Mama, you think Jesus looks like that?”

Gladys had laughed and hugged Daryl tightly. Water pooled on the rug around them. “No, darling, this is my starting point. Sometimes, I stare at this painting and my mind goes all kind of places.”

“You’re pretty when you smile,” Daryl said, studying his mother. For her smiles were rare. Her dimples seldom seen.

Gladys looked down and began to pick at the eggshells on her lap. “If you *must* know, I think Christ looks like a camel with two humps on his back.”

Over time, his mother’s stillness had become a source of comfort for Daryl, even humor. Sometimes now, he would come to visit and sit in Gladys’s chair to remove himself from a world of things: the stress of the mortgage for the house in Rye, private school tuition for his daughter and son, and a work environment that left him so spent he didn’t even know how to rest during vacation or play with his own kids. Jocelyn was always getting on him about that. *You don’t play with the kids enough*. But in his mother’s chair, a trick of the mind’s eye would occur, as he looked past the painting of Jesus for a camel with two humps on its back. So far, he had not gotten farther than the humps, but one day he would move past the humps into the desert. For Daryl knew that there could be no camel without a desert and no desert without an oasis. And in that oasis was the serenity his mother had already found. The serenity he was still looking for.

### *Levi Applewood*

A shriek stretched into a wail—only to dovetail and become a swan-song, a dirge. Gone *and left me*. The dirge belonged to Gladys. The old man, who had managed somehow to gracefully put on a fresh suit of clothes, turned to Daryl, “Get my bat.”

Levi did not wait for Daryl to respond. He moved down the stairs toward the ground floor so swiftly that Daryl was momentarily dumbstruck. Levi was thinking burglar or—his heart raced here for fear of loneliness—that Gladys Applewood had taken a bad fall or that Gladys had checked the answering machine only to learn that another relative, cousin, sister, friend—had gone over to the other side. They were in their sixties now and dropping like flies.

Levi found his wife sprawled out on the dining room floor.

“Gladys?”

“Gone,” she muttered.

“Who? Who’s gone now?”

Gladys sat up and pointed to the dining room wall. There was a hook where that damn silly painting had hung. Tears drifted from Gladys’s eyes and danced down her face past her chin directly to her chest. Gladys’s chest had always been flat, unlike the rest of her, which was well pleasing, a bounty of curves.

Daryl came into the room gripping the bat. He glanced at the wall and backed out of the room. “Royal?”

“Who else?” Gladys said. “Nobody but Royal.” She considered her husband and cut her eyes at him for good measure.

“Why you looking at me like that?” Levi said, struggling now to get up off the Turkish rug where he had knelt down beside her.

“He tells you everything,” Gladys said.

“Since when?” Levi said.

“Since forever,” Daryl chimed in.

Levi locked eyes with his second son. His voice dropped a half measure. “Shut up and put down my bat.”

In Levi Applewood’s presence, Daryl Applewood would always be an infant. He lowered the bat and disappeared from the room.

“I’ll find Him, Mama,” Daryl said on his way out.

“I want my Jesus.”

“Woman,” Levi said. “I can’t help you there. I had no hand in it.”

“This is about us kicking him out of the house.”

“Well, Gladys, this is where he was born.” Levi was getting antsy, cagey— explosive. “You make a painting feel more welcomed than your own blood.”

“I want my Jesus!” Gladys stomped her feet.

It enraged Levi to see his wife stomping in front of him so. “*Everybody wants Jesus, but Jesus ain’t here.* He ain’t been here in quite a while.”

Sometimes Levi Applewood wished he was deaf. Sometimes he wished no play of words could come to his ears. No complaints either. Sometimes, he hated Gladys for her tender fried chicken and her candied yams and the two servings of cheddar grits and the crab cakes and the red rice and the greens smothered in smoked ham hocks and okra gumbo and every damn thing that he gave her money to buy and cook. Sometimes he woke up at night roasting in his own sweat and thinking about the sweet potato pie he ate a third of and the fact that his kidneys were punishing him for working hard all his goddamn life and having the nerve to want to enjoy it. To have a man’s appetite. Sometimes, he thought he should have moved to Shaker Heights, Ohio, with his big brother, Reuben Applewood, years ago. Reuben, who would become a big shot at the university there. I can find a position for you, Reuben had said. Straighten out that nephew of mine too, for Royal Applewood’s real name was Reuben, in honor of the big brother who had always had Levi Applewood’s back. It seemed to Levi Applewood not so long ago that the country had voted in its first brown President, and the first brown President had learned the hard way that diplomacy didn’t mean shit when people disliked you. While Gladys sat most evenings talking to Jesus, Levi lay in bed talking to his brother Reuben, who had stood alongside him on the Great Mall that bitter cold January morning when Barack became President. He can still see Reuben so clearly, so proud, clutching his son Gideon’s

arm, and Gideon standing there with his blond husband, and Reuben's wife Charlotte, and their daughter too, Lonnie, hands all linked, while Daryl and that wife of his, Jocelyn, kept asking Lonnie if she could work it so their kids could get into St. Ann's because Lonnie's daughter was already there. And Reuben calling Jocelyn out in his own dignified way, saying, *History is being made and this is not the time*. And then, turning to throw his arms around him, Levi, like he did when they were mere babes. So that Levi could not help but wonder how he could love his brother so much and his own two sons . . . Royal hadn't even come to the inauguration. And Gladys was a hollow shell. A week after the presidential inauguration, Levi went from a celebration—a brilliant feast of color—to a ceremony in black, flying to Ohio for Reuben's funeral. Aneurysm. Snapple. Pop. Just like that. The shit that happens. The way shit happens. Now Gladys was in his face going on about Jesus. *Bitch, I want my dead brother*. My wants are endless. That's what Levi Applewood really wanted to say. But he was an Applewood man and Applewood men were blessed with smooth tongues and light hands. They did not cuss their women or rebuke them with physical force, and if the inclination came to do so, they sought release on other avenues.

Levi crossed to the console and lifted a set of car keys from a hook on the wall behind it. His eyes fell on Royal's key in the plastic basket and an additional pang wafted through him.

"I need some—fresh air."

"Levi, where you going?"

"Away from here."

"What if you have one of your diabetic attacks?"

"No worries, old lady. Your old man's alive tonight."

"I'm not fucking old," Gladys said, for when she looked in the mirror she did not see an old woman.

Levi whistled at his wife. "Heat. It's been so long. And unfamiliar."

“You go on then,” Gladys said, following her husband as far as the front door. Gladys had worked at the Brucci lipstick factory for over thirty years. Her job was to name the lipstick that women wore on their lips. Even now, when she rode on the A train or walked down the street she had to stifle the urge to stop random women and tell them that their choice of lipstick was all wrong: too much pigment; too little pigment. Gladys was a firm believer in eye cream and moisturizer. Just because she cleaved to Jesus didn’t mean she’d given up being feminine.

“Go on—” Gladys said, “Seek out your women.”

Levi Applewood donned a fedora and turned it at a most rakish angle. “In your time, Gladys, I suppose there were no men?”

### *Royal Applewood’s Promise*

For years Royal told her that he would take down the Christ painting. He said this when he was a junior in high school, a straight A student at Bronx Science, and later, while on the Dean’s List at Tufts. He said this when he came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas break, and when he graduated Tufts in the midst of the mid-nineties recession and took a temporary position as an accountant in the hotel management department of a swanky hotel in Tribeca, despite his younger brother’s advice to wait the recession out in grad school. (Daryl was at Harvard.)

“Only figs on that tree outside, bro. Mom and Dad got you in college and I just finished up. I think not,” said Royal.

Trouble began brewing in the closet that passed as Royal’s office when he couldn’t account for the hotel’s missing funds. He calculated the numbers and recalculated them, but consistently, weekly, the numbers failed to match up. Royal told his supervisor and his supervisor said, *Tomorrow. We’ll deal with it tomorrow.* Royal approached his

supervisor again, because if the shit hit the fan, Royal knew it would blow back on him. His supervisor sat Royal down and showed Royal the power of numbers to move across a computer screen and tango on a ledger. *Numbers are like spoiled children*, Royal's supervisor said. *See? These numbers are having temper tantrums all over the place.* Royal had never seen numerical figures behave so brazenly. Either they were headed to juvenile detention or he was headed to jail. Jail was one place Royal didn't care to go. He resigned the following day, but his supervisor wouldn't accept his letter of resignation. He quit the day after that and his supervisor showed him the door, but not before asking Royal why he felt the need to appropriate funds. "A bright, young man like you need not steal, Mr. Applewood. You could have anything you want."

Royal took the hint. "Man, my lips are sealed. But I expect good references. And a letter of recommendation. That's what I want."

Neither was forthcoming. Royal gave up his apartment in Harlem and moved back to Bed Stuy to live with his parents. Levi Applewood had connections with the City and offered to help Royal find a part-time job. Royal told his father that he could make his own way. Gladys and Levi were both confused and vexed when Royal showed up one day in an MTA bus driver's uniform. He hadn't even thought to tell them that he had secured a job. They would see their son once a week, even though he lived on the top floor of their brownstone.

"I'm just keeping a low profile. Giving you two lovebirds space," Royal would say over Sunday dinner. And then the Christ rants would start.

### *Levi Applewood Talks Trash*

All the Applewood men are fond of cars. Levi drives a powder blue Cadillac convertible. Daryl drives a gray Mercedes-Benz. Royal drives a

black Town Car for Eastern Car Service. Three men driving; all going in different directions—just like the thoughts in their heads.

*I should have made him take out the trash more often*, thinks Levi Applewood as he heads toward East New York to his old girlfriend's place. He's not even sure if Shirley lives there anymore or if she'll even be at home, but he needs to put some distance between himself and the house on Halsey Street.

That was the thing I didn't do, make him take out the trash. Then again, when Royal was little, he would say, "Daddy, when I grow up I'm going to sit on your lap until I'm thirty years old."

Friends would come over for Sunday brunch after church and shake their heads, "Well if it isn't the Royal prince himself! You going to be something sorry if you stay on your father's lap too long." And there it was. Royal had pretty much been on Levi's lap since then. This boy, his heartstring, the one Gladys had given birth to in a claw-foot tub because the ambulance didn't pull up on certain Bed Stuy blocks in a timely fashion back then—the one he and Gladys had bragged on—the one who at two started picking out words and reading to himself—the one who waited after work for Levi and wrestled him tired while Gladys set food on the dinner table while that other one—Daryl—crawled around bumping into things. How was it that the son who did not walk until he was eighteen months old, who did not speak until he was two—the son who showed no real interest in books at four or five or six, how was it that *he* had somehow gotten his act together? Not that Levi Applewood didn't love Daryl. But how could a father deny his first-born? If Royal had been around when Levi had peed on himself, Royal would have said something funny, taken the edge off with a laid-back smile, yelled for Gladys to make a chicken sandwich quick-like while he got his father straightened up. And while helping him clean up, Royal would have taken out the *Jet* magazine that he always kept rolled up in his back jean pocket and said, "Dad, man, check out this centerfold?"

And Levi would have slipped Royal two twenties for spending money, and things would have been better than fine. But Daryl—God bless him for being such a good damn man—had given Levi Applewood the kind of space that told him the boy would know just the right thing to say in the receiving line at his funeral. *Dirt*. Levi's grave had not yet been dug, but he could feel the black dirt tickling his face.

*Royal's Passenger*

The Christ painting rode in the passenger's seat alongside Royal. Its head could just see above the dashboard where an Eastern Car Service decal compromised what would have been an otherwise first-rate view. If the picture could talk it might have told Royal to remove the decal or at the very least not to drive so fast. Once or twice, the black Town Car stopped short in the crosswalk and the picture toppled forward.

"Oh, why don' you keep your ass still?" Royal said, reaching over and buckling the Christ painting rather roughly into its seat. His first impulse had been to toss the picture in the first trash can that he could find, but wouldn't that be just the thing—for Daryl or his father to comb the neighborhood and rescue Him? Royal's second, stronger impulse was to take out his Swiss Army knife, fashion the tip into a paintbrush and let it rip in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, but the very act struck Royal as keenly psychotic, exactly the kind of behavior his family would expect from him. Besides, he didn't want to *destroy* the Christ painting, only to see it erased—like a mathematical equation on a blackboard. It occurred to Royal that he had all the time in the world and a little hunger pang too, so he circled the neighborhood, slowing down to check out a little enoteca and a gourmet food shop he could have sworn hadn't been there two weeks ago. Didn't that used to be a ninety-nine-cent store? Or one of

those African hair-braiding salons where the women braided the hair so tight you ended up with no hairline at all?

Royal parked his car and dipped into a West Indian restaurant on Fulton Street in time to hear the black Muslims announcing their afternoon call to prayer on the loudspeaker. The restaurant was a nonchalant hole in the wall, its main decorative features bullet-proof glass and a rusty red foldout chair and table for those who didn't catch the meaning of the words: takeout joint. Royal had a taste for jerk chicken, but the owner, who had clearly been out partying all night and was positively feeling no pain, said, "Jerk will be ready this afternoon."

"Man, it is afternoon—past two p.m."

"Try this evening then." The owner looked over Royal's shoulder to the next customer.

"That's some shadiness. What else you got?" Royal complained but ordered chicken roti and ginger beer anyway. When his order was ready, he slid back in his Town Car, maneuvering his way out of Bed Stuy along Vanderbilt Avenue to Park Slope to pick up his girlfriend Soraya's little boys Manny and Luis. He ate as he drove, rubbing the roti into the thick yellow curry sauce and thinking, *that dude's one lazy son of somebody but baby can he burn.*

Manny and Luis were waiting for Royal at their lower school—the teachers had the class lined up in the school playground for dismissal. Royal picked them up every day at half past two. Royal spotted Manny and Luis before they saw him. How could he miss them in matching Spider-Man costumes and backpacks? The boys had gotten the costumes for Halloween but refused to let the day go. Royal signed his name on the teacher's signout sheet and watched Luis and Manny as they raced to the car. Manny, the little one, the one who went twice a week for speech therapy, unrolled a blow pop before hopping into the car. The kid was a class A candy fiend.

"Manny, dude, do you have money for the dentist?" Royal asked.

Even though Manny liked to joke that Royal was his personal chauffeur, he never sat in the backseat for long, always moved himself right up under Royal, like Royal might disappear any second. He squeezed between the Christ painting and Royal.

“Papi,” Manny said, “it’s my first today.”

“He’s lying,” said Luis. “Manny ate five already.”

“You ratting out your brother, Luis?”

Luis shrugged. “Yeah, he didn’t give me one.”

“Go on, Manny,” Royal said. “Rot the teeth out your head. When you grow up, Luis is going to have the girls and you’re going to have the dentures.”

Luis looked at the painting of Christ, which was taking up a lot of room in the front seat. “Who’s your friend, Papi?”

The whole Papi thing had started out as sarcasm and blossomed into a kind of endearment when the boys realized that Royal wasn’t even trying to replace their father. He was comfortable being a temporary fixture in their lives.

“Boys, this is the ‘Papi’ of us all,” Royal winked.

Manny shrugged, twirling the blow pop in his mouth. “No, Papi, that’s a white man.”

Royal tousled Manny’s hair. He had a soft spot for Manny, who reminded him of Daryl. When they got along. Back in the day.

After dropping the boys off for a playdate, Royal felt a headache coming on and wondered if maybe something funky had gone into the roti. He decided to head home to his apartment in Sunset Park to take a nap and watch old Whitney Houston DVDs. He often wept over the tragedy that was Whitney Houston’s life. He didn’t even like her songs or her music. But the DVDs lulled him to sleep sometimes. Later on, around six o’clock, he would pick up the boys from their playdate and Soraya and baby Selena from the preschool in Brooklyn Heights where Soraya worked as a teacher’s assistant. There was a dumpster across the

street from the preschool in a plaza where a farmers' market was held three days a week. It seemed somehow fitting that the Christ painting should have its final resting place there.

*Daryl Applewood Saves the Day*

Royal and Soraya lived in a one-bedroom floor-thru apartment above a twenty-four-hour donut shop on the corner of 39th Street and 4th Avenue in Sunset Park. Daryl had never been there. He missed his big chance when he and Jocelyn begged off an invite to join Royal and his ready-made family for what they deemed an All-Day New York Marathon Ball. Daryl had not intended to offend his brother. He had simply wanted some quality time in Manhattan with his wife—taking in the Jacob Lawrence retrospective at the Whitney, renting a nice hotel room in Manhattan, something they liked to do every now and again to mix up their routine and keep the heat simmering. Daryl loved the city and had never really adjusted to life upstate in Rye. After his parents died, he could imagine making the move back to Brooklyn, living comfortably in his parents' brownstone on Halsey Street. Jocelyn was also warming to the idea, coming around, as his father would say, "bit by bit."

Daryl parked his car between 38th and 37th Streets and put five quarters in the meter just in case some meter maid with a quota to fill felt like taking out her hostility on the Benz. He could feel his shoulders locking, tension spiraling down the back of his spine, and he wanted nothing more than to get the damn painting, return it to his mother, and make his way over the Brooklyn Bridge toward home.

He walked past the donut shop, eyeing a rainbow coalition of policemen taking a late afternoon coffee break at the counter. With any luck, his brother's woman and kids would not be in the apartment. Daryl had nothing against them personally: they just seemed like

another extension of Royal's ongoing train wreck. First, his brother steals money, yes, Daryl knows for a fact that Royal appropriated funds from the hotel management company and fucked half the female staff too—and then when Royal gets by with a slap on the wrist, he resigns, moving back home to mooch off their mom and dad. He had begged the jackass to take classes, please go to grad school, but what does Royal do? He becomes a bus driver. *A bus driver.* How is that for a life of the mind? And if coasting wasn't bad enough, the moron decides to be a gentleman in Brooklyn on a hot August afternoon when rudeness is a given, civility a crime. While navigating the B35 bus along Church Avenue and Flatbush Avenue—Daryl's personal notion of hell—he argues with a bunch of ignorant teenagers who won't stand up for a pregnant Mexican woman who rides the bus everyday. Instead of doing his job and paying attention to traffic, Royal rolls over a jaywalking pedestrian, turns the man into yesterday's pancake. And wins a prime spot on the local news, WPIX. Daryl was coming out of a board meeting when he went into the secretary's lounge and who should he see on the flat screen TV but his brother? Royal's situation would be rich, if it wasn't so damn sad. And wasn't he building on it even now, taking up with the pregnant Mexican woman Soraya because she went with him to the hospital. That's what Royal told their father. *I killed someone and Soraya sat in the waiting room with me, her stomach drooping down in a way that told me it was going to be a girl. She sat in the waiting room and said, "It wasn't my fault." And I said, Fault? Whose fault? No fault.* Well, that's love for you: his brother's concept of a new lease on life.

Daryl is about to ring the buzzer when a Domino's Pizza deliveryman comes out of the building. They brush elbows and Daryl pushes his way into the lobby and up the flight of stairs, two steps at a time. His Bruno Magli shoes dance along the steps with a *rut-ta-tut-tut*. In retrospect, Daryl thinks he played right into Royal's hands by not going

to his marathon party. He should have realized that Royal never did anything purely out of the kindness of his own heart and had used the “family” celebration to appeal to their parents’ goodwill, hinting that the rent was going up in the apartment, which was infested with roaches despite monthly visits from an exterminator, pointing to the two boys and the baby in the baby carrier.

“Kids need space.” Yes, Royal had worked the charm all right while Soraya whipped up tamales and chicken mole and, to appeal to their father’s sweet tooth, *flan*.

“We could rent from you and set up a monthly payment plan,” Royal told his mother and father.

Gladys, who confided to Daryl in all things, had said. “You can’t expect us to be comfortable with you living above our heads in sin?” But even she, looking around at the Diaper Genie, the exercise bike, the books and toys, and room bulging out of itself, had called Daryl that night with a softness in her voice. “He is trying, Daryl. He is trying to do right—riding taxis on the side to keep food on the table.”

Daryl had nipped the situation in the bud, reminding Gladys and Levi Applewood (in that order) that they did not really know what was going on with Royal to make him live the way he did. Without necessarily saying it, Daryl insinuated that there might be some substance abuse issues going on. Something Royal’s parents had often thought themselves.

“Are you sure there’s not something you want to tell us, Royal?” His father asked over their last supper.

“Not that I can think of,” Royal said.

“Well, there might be *something* you don’t know about . . . maybe when it comes to you . . .” Levi had let the conversation drop.

“What your father’s trying to tell you, Royal—” Gladys’s fingers twitched as she sipped her chamomile tea. Her eyes glanced up toward her painting of Jesus Christ. “Is that we don’t feel right having you and Soraya and her kids living with us just now?”

“How come?” Royal blinked.

“Son,” Levi leaned over the dining room table and cupped his son’s hand, “we can get you help if you need it.”

“That’s what I’m asking for: help. Let us move in and kick the fucking yuppies out upstairs,” said Royal.

“We think it’d be better for all involved if you gave us the key to the house,” Levi said with finality.

“*Now?*” Royal was stunned.

Gladys took another sip of chamomile tea. “By the end of the week, anyhow?”

“You have something that belongs to Mama,” Daryl said. Royal and Daryl had abandoned the formality of small talk long ago. Royal let his baby brother into the apartment, where the painting of Jesus Christ was propped in plain view against the leg of a coffee table with a glass top. The apartment was bright and sunny, but otherwise exactly as their mother had described it: magazines piled high to the right of a sofa couch, a bassinet to the left of that, toys, books, a small shelf of cacti, a stationary bike, Pampers, furniture crowding the corners. Just standing in the front room (there were only two) made Daryl claustrophobic. He wiped an invisible swirl of sweat from his brow.

Royal yawned, not the least bit surprised to see Daryl and glad to be roused from a nap that was limping toward a nightmare.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Royal said, and disappeared behind the door of the apartment’s only bathroom. Daryl heard what sounded like an endless flow of piss hitting toilet bowl and thought, *I have stood outside doors twice today with men who cannot control their bladders or their lives.* Daryl moved across the lopsided parquet floor and lifted the painting from the glass table, but the painting repelled him, a corner of the frame, a recently broken jagged edge, snagged the pocket of Daryl’s leather jacket, leaving a deep, ripe hole.

“Goddamn,” Daryl muttered. The coat was a recent anniversary present from Jocelyn, plucked off the sales rack at Barney’s.

“Now, now, Daryl, Mama wouldn’t be happy hearing you talk like that.” Royal had returned to the room with a tub-sized container of texturizer and a pink Afro pick. He began to apply liberal doses of the texturizer to his hair. Daryl looked at him. A tall man in a T-shirt and jeans with his pants unbuckled. Stubble clung to his face and chin.

“Why don’t you buckle up your pants? You look like . . . I don’t know what you look like.” Daryl felt a sudden wetness come to his eyes. A particle of dust. He averted his attention away from Royal and examined his torn leather jacket. He would take it to be repaired or buy a new one before Jocelyn found out.

“Tell me something, Daryl.”

“What do you *want*, Royal?”

Royal had always had the advantage of height over Daryl, but Daryl now had the advantage of a strong body, a neat build. Five times a week he went to the gym. He could take Royal easily.

“I want to know where Mom and Dad got that painting,” Royal asked.

The answer is simple enough. In the Applewood family, it is the stuff of lore: a dining room suite purchased on Layaway from Muller’s Furniture on Dekalb Avenue. Their parents’ first real piece of furniture. A step up from the brown folding table and chairs Gladys and Levi Applewood had borrowed from the local funeral home. They wanted to leave something behind for their boys, and material things meant very little to them, but a dining room table was important. It is the place where meals were shared, where grace was said and stories told. Levi and Gladys Applewood were delighted to now be at a point in their lives when they could buy something new, if not on a credit card, then layaway will do. As Levi Applewood would say, “If you can’t own it outright, see if you can get it little by little, bit by bit.”

“The owners of the furniture store gave it to Mom and Dad when they made their final payment on the dining room set,” Daryl answered.

“You sure about that?”

“Of course, I’m sure. I was asking Mom about the furniture just the other day.”

“Well, if you’re so sure, why were you asking Mom?”

Daryl’s patience was waning. “It’s good to be able to tell our children the history of things.”

“The history of things?”

“Their origins. Where they come from. How Mom and Dad busted their ass and started out with nothing. I don’t want my kids to grow up feeling sorry for themselves—entitled,” Daryl cleared his throat.

Royal nodded. “Okay. *And so*. I got you. I follow.”

“Great, Royal. I guess we’re done here.”

“One thing—brother—one more thing.” Royal reached out and placed his hand on Daryl’s shoulder.

“*What?*” Daryl stepped south of his brother’s touch.

“Your facts are wrong about the painting.”

Daryl laughed. “I think Mom would know better than you.”

“That painting was given to our family by an insurance man who stopped by our house every day.”

“No insurance man comes to the same house every day.”

Royal twirled the pick around in his hair. “He does for a cup of sugar.”

“There’s not that much sugar in the world.”

Royal pursed his lips. “A fine young egg.”

Daryl spun around and waved the painting of Jesus Christ wildly at Royal. Royal ducked and jumped back. He was still an excellent jumper. Jumping was the one thing he still had.

“You are a confusion-maker—and a liar. I won’t stand here another minute. I *won’t*.” Daryl lowered the painting and huddled it to his chest.

Royal crossed to the front door and opened it. “By all means, leave brother. Keep our legacy. It’s yours. Like everything else.”

Daryl bolted out of the apartment into the dark hallway and was seized by a carnival-like panic, a claustrophobic groping along the narrow walls. Royal called after him. "Watch your step now, Daryl. Watch your step."

*Christ's Song*

I am your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. See me shake. See me rattle. Flat objects cannot roll. In a few minutes, I will hit the bottom of a flight of stairs and shatter, splinter into four or five different pieces to be carted off by the brother with hands like a crab. He reaches for the railing, and I, in turn, fall. It is not the most dignified way to leave this world, but neither is dying on a cross. Good-bye, Halsey Street. *Good-bye.* I saw a lot go on in that house on Halsey Street. What will they tell the brown woman with the lovely dimpled face? She takes her coffee black and always eats a hard-boiled egg in the morning with freshly sliced tomatoes. She greets me with, "We made it through another night. And it's good to see the day." She waits for her head to settle down before telling me about the only man she has ever loved. He lived across the street and is survived by his nosy old widow. She and the man attended the same church. He, a deacon to her deaconess. She tells me about the time when a "feeling got hold of her." A feeling close to the Holy Ghost and nothing like it at all, a feeling that made heat rise off him and jump on her back, so that when they looked at each other in church, they knew something had to be done. You would think that two people in the same church on the same block would have an easy time finding a moment, a little corner of the world to slip away into and do their thing, but everything seemed to conspire against them, until one day, when the boys were both laid out with mumps in bed, she had called him and said, "Come now," and he had left the office where he worked as an insurance man. While the

two boys slept, she and her lover had dipped upstairs and discovered each other in such a way that when the boys came banging, “What’s going on in there? Mama—Daddy—let us in?” the spirit would move her neither away from her lover nor toward her children. So great was her bliss.

**JENNY XIE**

*Lunar New Year, 1988*

Doors plastered with red paper cut-outs  
so that the oncoming year passes these houses by.

Sweep out the insistent winter.

Make what you will out of ritual—  
the relative with the steadiest hands cuts the hair of her cousins.

•

Grain alcohol in a thimble glass.

A wife bleaches out the urine smell from the bathroom tile  
while suffering the clean cuts of an insult.

And the husband?  
He's out in the yard sucking on his cigarettes  
and pondering prime numbers.

This year, a cluster of buildings in Hefei grew to more buildings.

•

Everyone likes a story of plenty.

The husband and the brother-in-law remove every item from  
the refrigerator  
and arrange it all on the old card table for a Kodak photo.

It's the first point-and-shoot in the neighborhood.

The iron-rich spinach and clementines loose in their skins.  
One bottle of artificial mango drink for show.

How soon a photograph can erase all labor.  
It says: we are sated, but the watercress and the pork are unending.

Frugality and daily rationing cropped out.

The camera neuters the present, so what becomes past cannot breed.

•

Envelopes arrive from a university overseas,  
a new life activated.

The husband will go first. He purchases the family's only suitcase.

Giddiness in thick sheets.

He knows when he boards the plane  
this city will appear small, as will his life.

And his clothing will mark him, shamefully,  
as someone who had to earn his way.

•

Even what hasn't yet come into being  
can at anytime open and cast out a shadow.

The whole neighborhood comes out at dusk.

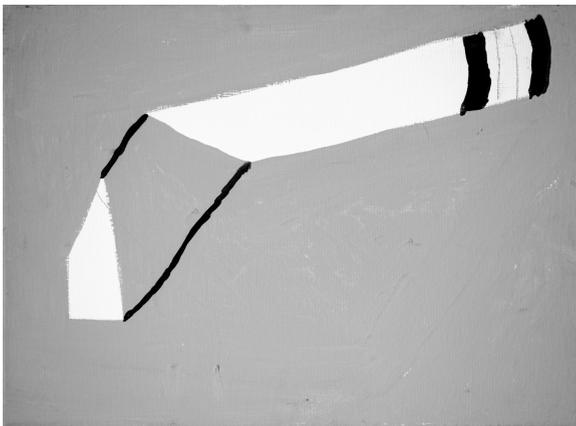
Wakefulness drawn from the red applause  
of firecrackers.

In the alleyway of my childhood home,  
you can see I'm covering my ears.

The years ahead, strangely lit.



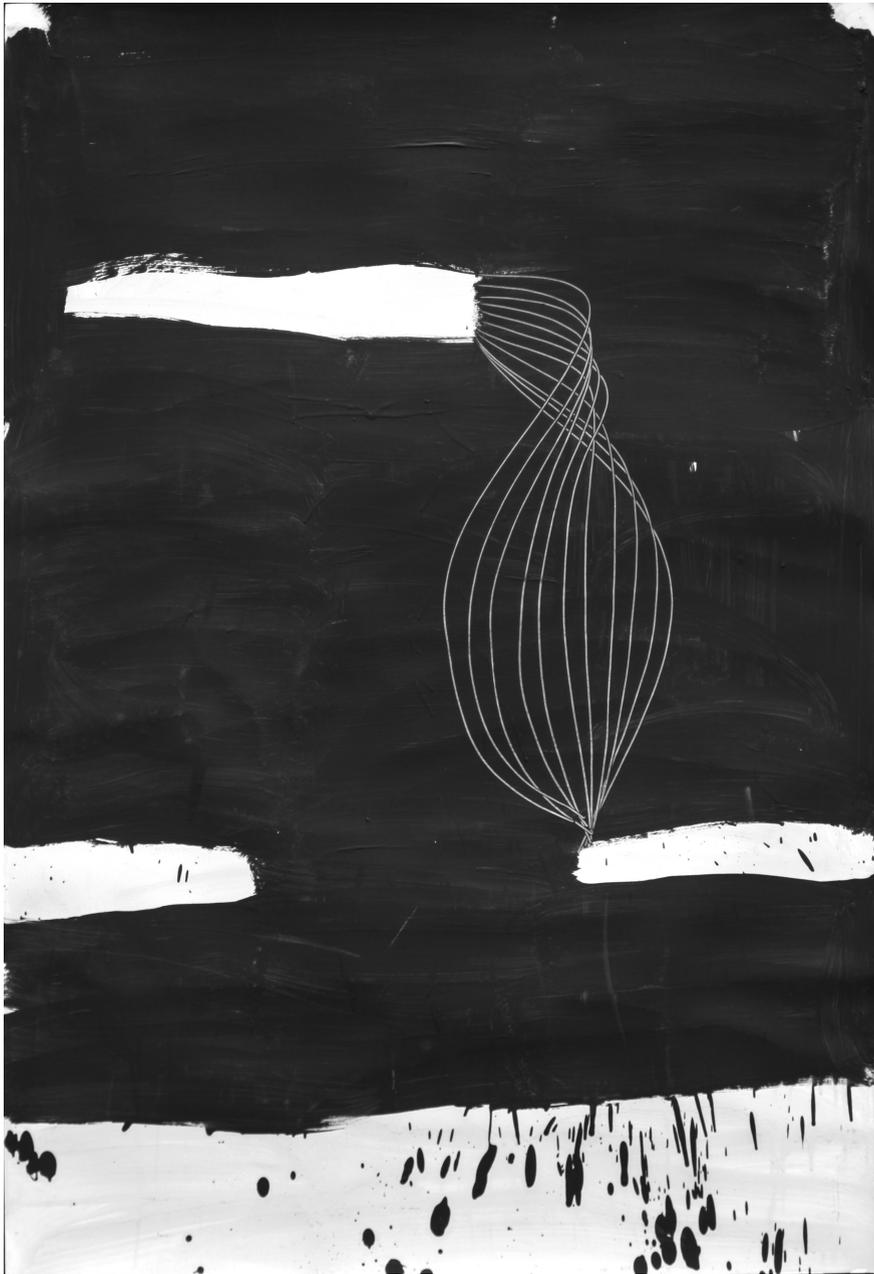
**Yifat Gat**, *Nina*, 2010, oil and acrylic  
on 300 g paper, 40 in. x 27.5 in.



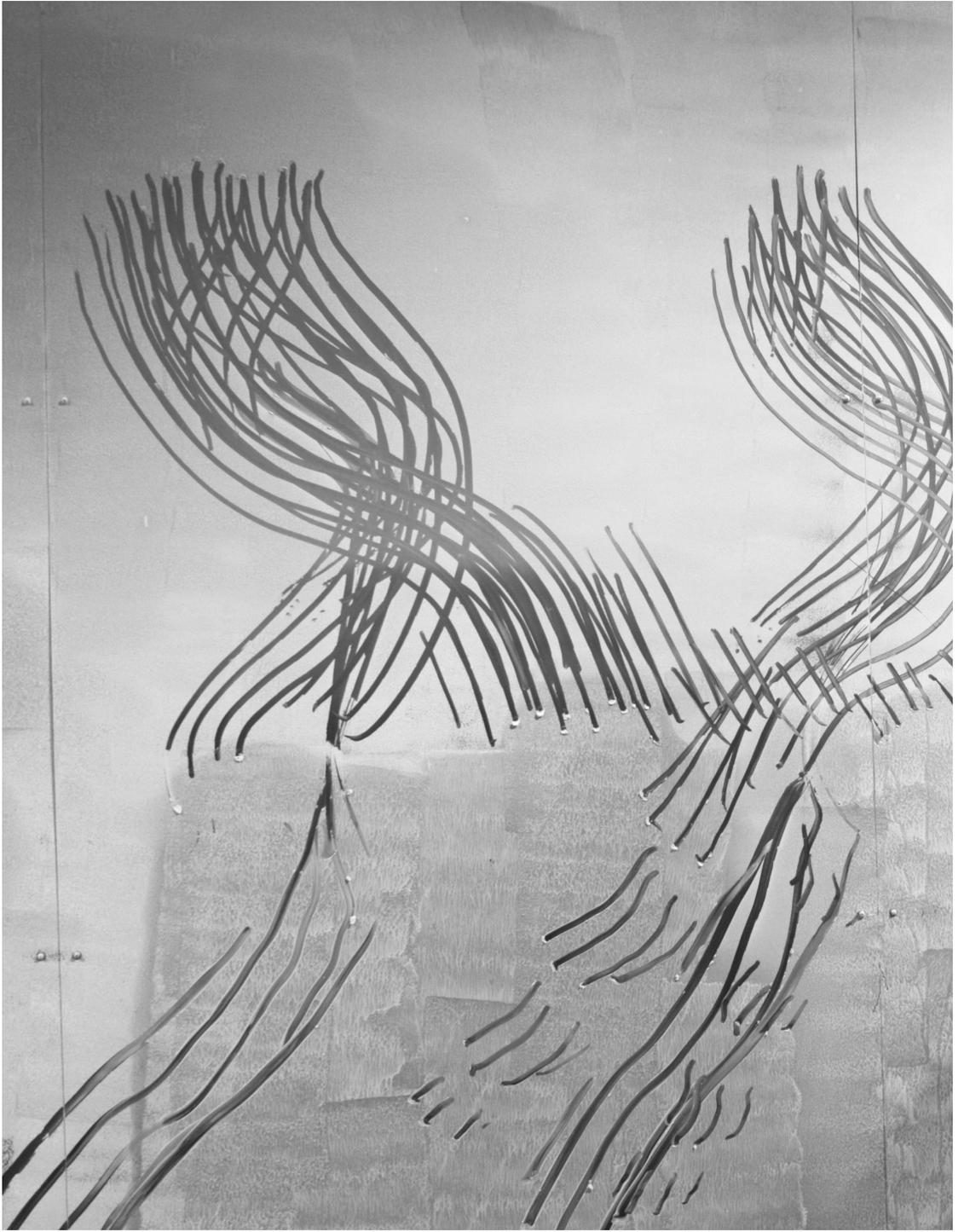
**Yifat Gat**, *Tilt*, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 16 in. x 12 in.



**Yifat Gat**, *Pants*, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 20 in. x 20 in.



**Yifat Gat**, *Swirl*, 2010, oil and acrylic  
on 300 g paper, 40 in. x 27.5 in.





**Yifat Gat**, *Big Whale*, 2012, marble dust on aluminum, 355 in. x 100 in. A.I.R. Gallery, Dumbo Art Center, NYC.

**A. E. STALLINGS**

*Shattered*

Another smashed glass,  
wrong end of a gauche gesture  
towards a cliff—compass-

rose of mis-direc-  
tions, scattered to the twelve winds,  
the wine-dark sea wreck.

Wholeness won't stay put.  
Why these sweeping conclusions?  
Always you're barefoot,

nude-soled in a room  
fanged with recriminations,  
leaning on a broom.

How can you know what's  
missing, unless you puzzle  
all the shards? What cuts

is what's overlooked,  
the sliver of the unseen,  
faceted, edged, hooked,

unremarked atom  
of remorse broadcast across  
lame linoleum.

Archaeologist  
of the just-made mistake, sift  
smithereens of schist

for the unhidden  
right-in-plain-sight needling  
mote in the midden.

Fragments, say your feet,  
make the shivered, shimmering  
brokenness complete.

**BEI DAO**  
**TRANSLATED BY JEFFREY YANG**

*Smells*

I.

WHEN I THINK ABOUT Beijing, the first thing that recurs in my mind is smells, smells that change with the changing seasons. In this respect, the human species reminds me of our canine friends. Why else do those elderly Chinese emigrants, upon returning to the motherland after so many years, look blankly around, slack-jawed, a whiff to the east, a sniff to the west, desperately trying to find those precise Beijing scents in their memories.

The smell of winter white cabbage. When the year reaches the nineteenth point on the solar ecliptic marking the start of winter, a temporary vegetable stand appears outside the entrance to each grocery shop—white cabbage is heaped into a hillock, long lines form from dawn to dusk. Each family buys at least a few hundred catties, piling them onto a flatbed tricycle, or child's bicycle, whatever means to peddle them home, neighbors helping one another with transport, particularly those solitary elders who have difficulty getting around. The cabbage is first peeled open and sun-dried, then stacked below

the hallway window by the balcony doorway and covered with a grass curtain or old cotton quilt. Through desolate winter winds and snow, the cabbage desiccates, withers away like a mummy, emanating forth pungent waves of mold-scent that call attention to its hidden existence.

The smell of coal smoke. All the neighborhood furnaces burning coal cakes and honeycomb briquettes for cooking and heating look like chain smokers with their flue pipes sticking out the window, puffing out clouds, spitting fog. Coal tar oozes from the pipes and drips to the ground, forming sticky lumps of black ice. On windy days, a strong gust swiftly swivels the elbow of a furnace pipe—thick smoke reverses causing family members to choke in tears and snot while coughing uncontrollably. Better to not bring up that sinister coal air: it catches you off-guard, kills you off gently, softly.

The smell of dust. Take a shade of iron gray and add a hint of ocher: the essence of Beijing's winter color. Dust is the commander-in-chief of all odors, making one's mouth parched, tongue dry, throat a smoky soreness, mood foul. It borrows the northwestern winds and grows even more terrible, an army of ten thousand soldiers and horses, *concealing sky covering earth*, invading rooms through cracks around doors and windows, no place to hide no place to flee. In those days if you didn't wear a dust mask, venturing outside meant getting a mouthful of grit.

It's understandable that Beijing residents survive with little patience, caught in a swirling snowstorm that suddenly shrouds the whole city. In the middle of the storm drifts a cloud of peppermint scent; its presence, upon stepping outside, so strong in that first gulp of air—a cool, refreshing softness. With shouts and hoots, children rush outdoors, tossing away dust masks, flinging down gloves, white breath puffing out while throwing snowballs and piling up snowmen. Where the mud on the road dirties the ice, the children slide, squat down as inertia takes over, and, as an old man slips on a pad, end up flat on their backs.

My home wasn't very far from Houhai Lake. Children often went there for the "wild ice," bringing their handmade skates, sleds, and skis, crowds of kids howling and screaming, powder spraying up in bursts, wind blowing it into faces, tongues licking it as if grains of sugar, a sweetness born from nothingness. Workers chipped pieces of ice off the lake with an iron hook, then took the wood-plank path to the shore and on to the icehouse at the north side of Li Guang Bridge. When no one was looking, my classmates and I would sneak into the icehouse—a dim murky chilliness, a fishy watery smell mixed with the scent of dried grass. Chunks of ice were stacked on a multi-level wooden frame, each level of ice separated by a bed of straw, and then covered on top with another layer of straw, wooden planks, and dirt. Come summer the ice would be used to keep produce and other perishables fresh. I imagined myself as a fish frozen to the bone inside there.

Winters lasted forever, people grew anxious and irritable, children gazed restlessly toward spring. Then May Fourth arrived and the willow trees along the banks of the Houhai suddenly turned green, branches velvety, issuing forth a subtle, pungent scent. The melting lake ice resounded with sharp rupturing cracks, snow-water dripped down the eaves, the lumps of frozen coal tar flowed away like ink. Our cotton-padded shoes changed shape, turned flat as a toad with a grinning mouth, and smelled like salty fish.

Nearly every year the narcissus my mother bought would silently bloom around the time of Spring Festival, its fragrance billowing out sub rosa, brightening up the oppressive air inside. Outside, the apricot trees bloomed earliest, swiftly followed by pear lilac peach blossoms, wind sweeping along the flowery bouquet, a fragrance so intense it made people dizzy, luring them to sleep. An oft-repeated saying during my childhood days went: "Spring brings sleep, autumn exhaustion, summer's for napping, don't wake for three months in winter"—apparently, no one knew enough about hay fever back then to complicate the spin.

By the time the pagoda trees bloom it's summer. Pagoda trees have a northern temperament, their beauty evoking a kind of fierce, unrestrained wildness. By contrast, their pale yellow blossoms flower with an ordinary banality—a passing wind and the petals fall like raindrops. The fragrance of their blossoms, though quite faint, can travel great distances like the notes of a *xiao*-flute.

Nevertheless, the scent of their flowers carries the haunting “ghosts of the hanged.” Inchworms suspended in midair by invisible threads rise and fall, blocking off walkways. To pass through the “ghosts of the hanged” phalanx is like passing through the gates of hell—once they dangle from face and neck, it's nearly impossible to get rid of them; the body breaks out with goosebumps, screams difficult to suppress.

Summer marked the year's happiest season, largely because of summer vacation. We regularly went to the Chinese Association for Promoting Democracy (CAPD, or Min Jin, “people's progress”) at the Drum Tower to watch TV and play Ping-Pong, or to the sports facility in the Shichahai district to swim. As we swam, we'd bob up and down in the smells of formalin, bleaching powder, urine, bob up and down between the boisterous din of people and a moment's serenity underwater.

Torrential rains seemed to burst forth from an inner pressure. When the heat reached an unendurable critical point, thunder and lightning recurred with earth-shattering intensity, and the agitations of puberty could find a certain measure of release. Once the rain stopped, children rushed into the street gutters, trampled through the water, shouting and singing: “It's raining *lah*, it's bubbling *lah*, the old turtle's wearing a straw hat *lah!*”

I'm not sure why autumn is often associated with sadness, though it might have something to do with the start of school: freedom surrendered. Yes, autumn has come to symbolize the mechanical rhythms of the school system, its systematic order. Chalk dust flies into the air

as words and numerals on the blackboard materialize, then fade away. While above the foul stench of the reeking feet and rude language of boys floats the overpowering essence emanating from the bodies of girls, wisp upon wisp, causing bewilderment and confusion.

Autumn rains fall in bursts, leaves turn and whirl away, damp, then soaked, the bitter aroma of strong tea, over-steeped, gives way to the aroma of fermenting mold. Which, in mutual correspondence, is soon succeeded by the aroma of stored winter white cabbage.

2.

Considering the senses, besides the olfactory, the gustatory is naturally involved. Taste's memory being even more innate, and thus more enduring.

The taste of cod liver oil awakens my earliest childhood dream: deep behind the doors and windows of a paper boat cutting, lamplight glows, bearing a fishy odor. That lamplight must be interlinked with my early experiences of cod liver oil. Before my parents' solemn faces, I took it regularly, as if it were medicine, swallowing it down with an instinctive vigilance.

When cod liver oil passes through an eyedropper to the tip of the tongue, a sharp chill quickly fans out, filling the mouth with its flavor. This oil extracted from codfish brought the loneliness of the ocean's abyss to me. Eventually I learned that the theory of evolution supports this experience: our ancestors can be traced back to fish. As I grew a little older, the loneliness amplified into the inner roar of puberty. Then the eyedropper turned into a capsule and cod liver oil turned into a kind of candy for me—the antipathy disappeared. I'd first bite open the capsule, wait for the fish oil to leak out, and then delicately chew the gel, which had the texture of Cowhide Sesame Candy.

The taste of White Rabbit Milk Candy—surely the King of Candy, foremost for its semitransparent rice-paper wrapper that dissolves on

the tongue, triggering delight's anticipation. White Rabbit milk is extremely potent: they say that seven pieces equals one glass of milk, and so all malnourished children thirst for it. Sadly, it went through some difficult times when it became known as "high-class candy," a perfidious jingle spreading through the ether: "High-class sweets, high-class candy, high-class old man clammers onto the chamber pot"—this "high-class saying" clearly had nothing to do with the common folk. Some years later in Paris a French friend of mine reunited me with the White Rabbit, offering me a piece; my heart skipped a beat, deep emotions stirred within me, and from then on I would always carry a few pieces with me, as I joined the ranks of "high-class old men."

During that torturous period as my body matured and transformed, I secretly started to eat anything in our house, from the chlorella algae in the fishbowl to the viscous lecithin doled out by my parents, from calcium tablets to dried wolfberry, from mustard tubers to soybean paste, from dried shrimp to scallions . . . my parents tried to *fortify the walls and raze the fields* but couldn't hinder my appetite, which expanded with each passing day. Whatever I ate, I devoured with monosodium glutamate. Much later in life, after settling for a period in America, whenever I dined at a Chinese restaurant with foreigners, they said, "Please, no MSG." Each time this happened, their words ringing in my ears, my heart would ache like a motherfucker.

I took a pinch of MSG from a jar and sprinkled it into the hollow of my palm, licked it with the very tip of my tongue, firing off the taste-bud nerve clusters, impulses shooting through the brain layers and triggering an electrifying buzz—as if savoring the vast ocean refined and purified, that sensory sensation called "umami." I gradually increased the dosage, the high continuing to rise, until the umami taste completely faded. Finally, I just dumped the half-filled jar of MSG into my mouth, causing the signals in my cerebral cortex to misfire or short-circuit, leading to dizziness and nausea; I collapsed headfirst onto my bed. I suppose this must have been similar to a drug trip.

“Who spilled all the MSG?” Father and Mother complained.

Right outside the walls of the playground at my primary school stood a peddler who always tried to lure innocent souls with his hawking shouts. Like a magician, he would conjure all sorts of candy and snacks from his knapsack. From a classmate’s recommendation, I fell in love with cinnamon bark. Cinnamon bark, commonly used in herbal remedies, comes from the inner bark of the cassia tree, its spicy flavor suffused with a delicious sweetness. Two *fen* could purchase several pieces, which lasted longer than candy. I’d wrap the bark up in a handkerchief and, during class from time to time, sneak in a lick. Truthfully, besides the taste of cinnamon bark, the rest of my education in those days made no lasting impression on me.

One night, Guan Tielin and I were walking home from school when we happened upon a peddler carrying his wares with a shoulder pole, singing out: “Stinky tofu, fermented tofu . . .” I had never tried stinky tofu before and, egged on by Guan Tielin, I spent three *fen* on a piece, took one bite, gagged, and threw the rest onto a roof. When I got home, Qian Ayi (“Auntie Qian”) shouted out that something stank, as she sniffed to the east, sniffed to the west, determined to track down the source. I rushed into the bathroom to brush my teeth and gargle, then slipped into the kitchen and scooped two spoonfuls of sugar into my mouth, pasting it shut. But Qian Ayi’s nose still twitched like a police dog’s as she continued to search and search every which way.

3.

One summer morning, Yifan and I set off from Sanbulao Hutong No. 1 and headed for the CAPD at the Drum Tower Square Brickyard, 98 Xin’anli Lane—that political party a testament to the organized labor of my parents’ generation. As usual during summer vacation, we’d go there to play Ping-Pong, passing a wild pear tree along the way from which we’d pick some of the little sour pomes.

Leaving Sanbulao via Denei (“Inner Virtue”) Street—my primary school across the way in Hongshan Hutong—the small sundry store on the northeast corner emitted its invisible signals and the conditioned reflex in my brain switched on its red light, causing a secretion of saliva in my mouth; walking to school, I’d often waste two *fen* on candy there, pressing the pieces into the bland corn-cone buns to spice up breakfast.

Continuing along Denei Street south a hundred or more steps, across the next intersection, I’d arrive at Liuhai Hutong market. Outside, the vegetable stand overflowed with seasonal tomatoes, four cattles for one *mao*; salted beltfish, one cattie for three *mao* eight, attracted a swarm of flies impossible to swat away. Yifan and I wanted to buy two juicy tomatoes, so we pooled all the coins in our pockets, gulped down our drool, and rushed off with our booty.

Heading east toward Liuhai Hutong, then turning north onto Pine Tree Street, just past a large, new hutong, we stopped at the public toilet off the roadside there, the salty stench of piss in the pit-pools assailing our nostrils so that we couldn’t even open our eyes; it was as if we were training to hold our breath underwater, and only after fleeing faraway could we take a deep, deep breath, the fragrance of flowers seeping into our heart and spleen, a field full of blooming pagoda trees. It had rained the night before; a small puddle of water reflected the sky light tree shadows.

Turning north onto Willow Shade Street, the neighborhood changed into stately mansions and spacious courtyards—rumor had it that the official residence of Marshal Xu Xiangqian, one of the founders of the People’s Liberation Army, could be found at the northern end, behind enclosed walls. Beneath the shady trees we bought red bean pops, two for five *fen*, saving us one *fen*. But these ready-made red bean pops were soft and droopy, on the cusp of melting into nothingness; thus powerless to savor the delicious icy red bean bits at a leisurely pace we inhaled them in two bites, craning our necks, bending back, faces to the sky, stomachs rumbling.

Emerging from Willow Shade Street to Houhai, a bright expanse suddenly opened out. Houhai Lake is one of the three lakes in Shichahai, a neighborhood that dates back seven hundred years to the Yuan Dynasty when Beijing was known as Dadu, or the Great Capital. The northern terminus of the Grand Canal ended here, the area once a flourishing commercial district, as colorful as a brocade. Around each bend enormous pagoda trees spread upward, and beneath them, concealed in the shade, people play what's called *xiangqi*, "the figures game," or Chinese chess. Some strapping lads dig for clams in the lake, each taking a deep breath before leaping into the water and diving down, feet sticking out, treading open air, their laughter infective. Clams pile up on shore, the largest ones as big as a pot lid. They give off the strangest fishy smell, as if issuing humanity a final warning.

We followed the path south around Houhai, banging willow branches against the iron railing that ran along the lake. The wide expanse of the water abruptly narrowed and a stone bridge linked the two sides of the shore, none other than the famous Silver Ingot Bridge. From the bridge, the view across the lake of the western hills is renowned as one of the old Yanjing capital's Eight Landscapes of scenic beauty. Beside the bridge stands Ji's Mongolian Barbecue, an establishment over a hundred years old whose name has been raised to the heavens and whose very existence presents an excruciating test for my impatient nerves: the smell of roast mutton, the smell of charring coal, the smell of myriad spices comingling in the breeze, stirring our stomachs, reminding us that lunchtime approached.

Like a wisp of smoke, we slipped along Slanted Tobacco Pipe Street and reached the bustling Di'anmen Avenue, crossed the road and walked south, passing the Gate of Earthly Peace Shopping Mall, where we read this pasted announcement: "Handouts for Leftover Sweets (an assortment of leftover sweets for sale)"; we churned into a whirlwind and hurried in, and a whirlwind hurrying out, "leftover treats" actually

referring to “those looking for love”—too bad our coupons and coins were so limited.

Continuing on Di’anmen Avenue, we turned left into Brick Factory Hutong, where they used to make bricks for the imperial palace, then skipped along Xin’anli Lane and arrived at our destination. The sign for the CHINA ASSOCIATION FOR PROMOTING DEMOCRACY NATIONAL COMMITTEE hung in the air, imposing and grand, and yet however one looked at it, it looked like a reactionary slogan.

Yifan and I first charged into the Ping-Pong room and battled out three games, then, stomachs rumbling like a windlass, we decided to go pick some sour pears to ease our hunger. The pear tree wasn’t tall and grew in a corner where two walls met—three to five little dusty gray pomes drooped down from the highest branches. After climbing onto Yifan’s shoulders I shimmied up the middle of the tree and headed for the tallest branches. Just as I spied a pear and reached for it, the back of my hand felt a sharp jab—a “foreign stabber” had ambushed me, one of those spiky slug-moth caterpillars.

I climbed down from the tree and sucked the stinging red wound, though felt no relief, the stinging refusing to ease. I fished out a few little pears from my pocket, wiped one on my pants and took a bite, the taste as sour as tart could be, my mouth swelling with a hard-to-swallow mush. The lunchroom bell rings out—a savory whiff of pork cabbage stew wafts over.

**ADRIENNE KENNEDY**

*Forget*

I met my white grandfather a few times.  
of course he lived on the white side of town.  
he sent his chauffeur who was black and his name was Austin  
in a black car to

my grandmother's house to get us.  
my mother wanted my brother, herself, and me to walk  
but he insisted.

we went to his house.  
his white wife wanted us to go in the back  
door  
but he insisted we come into the front.

full of contradictions,  
he sent my mother and her half-sister to college,  
bought them beautiful things

but still maintained the distance. they called him  
by his surname and he never shared a meal with them.

we sat in his parlor twice.  
he was slightly fascinated by my brother and me.  
he said something like you all have northern accents.

he was interested in our schooling in Cleveland.  
he was interested in the fact that people  
said I was smart.

at that time, the thirties, and before the WAR  
he owned a lot of the town

and had three children by black women.  
my mother's mother was fifteen, worked in the peach orchards.

like the South itself, he was an unfathomable.  
mixture of complexities,  
these are two generations of white men  
removed

who went all the way to Africa to get SLAVES,  
quite mad.

I was lucky enough to spend a day and evening in his  
and his family's house. built about 1860  
where he was born . . . his father was the town's first bank owner.

the house, white, wooden in weeping willow trees  
down a long archway.

by 1940, when I visited, the house had one usable  
room, the rest all boarded up  
and was lived in by black COUSINS  
of his Negro family.

despite her Atlanta Univ education and marrying a Morehouse man  
and making a nice life in Cleveland,

my mother found it impossible to say her mother's name.  
and impossible to call her father by anything but his  
surname.

she used to say to me when I was a child,  
Adrienne, when I went to town to get the  
mail they would always say  
here comes that little yellow bastard.

AFAA M. WEAVER

## *Immortal City, Immortal Heart*

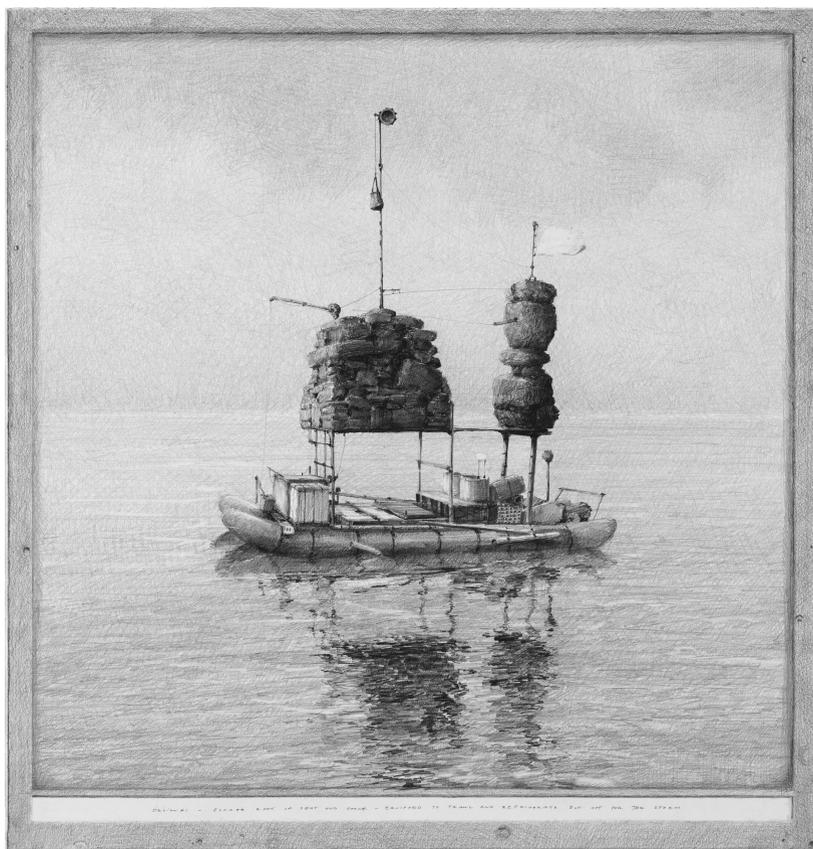
The hiss of air brakes on trucks slowing down  
to turn into Key Highway, around the bend  
under the cannon that kept Baltimore in the Union,  
cinnamon and paprika sifting across the black harbor  
from pots that made spice in the McCormick's plant,  
sandwiches from Jack's Corned Beef in brown bags  
beside slices of fruit cake in January, the holiday  
a turn in the wheel with new fittings on packing units  
to make way for spring and Arabers with broken ponies.

The mornings are old preachers who moonlight  
as bookies and sing about how the gold is in the hand  
of God, and God sings about the gold in the wrapping  
of the sun setting over West Side high rise projects  
to rise in China where Buddha is a chance, while  
sons of bookie preachers study a dead Bruce Lee,  
beat their hands on bean bags in basements to make  
palms of iron and break unbreakable barriers to rip  
apart myths that hold the sacred arks of blackness.

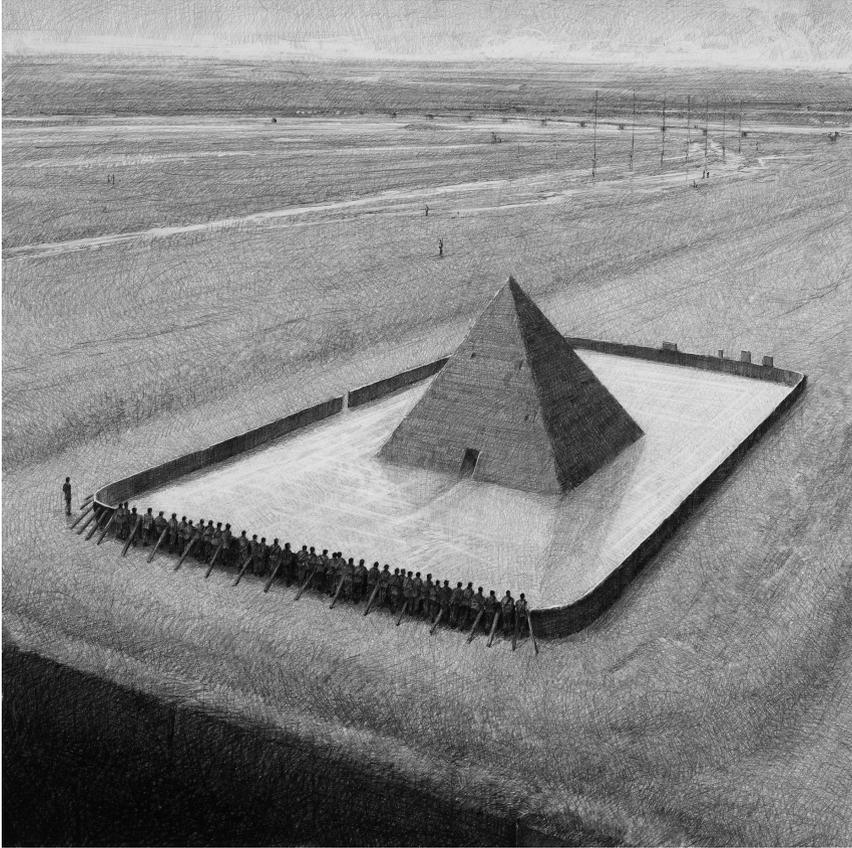
Baltimore like a woman with a crusted oyster knife  
made in Ireland, O City of the Great Good Lord,  
come, bless us in our soft place so we will not die.



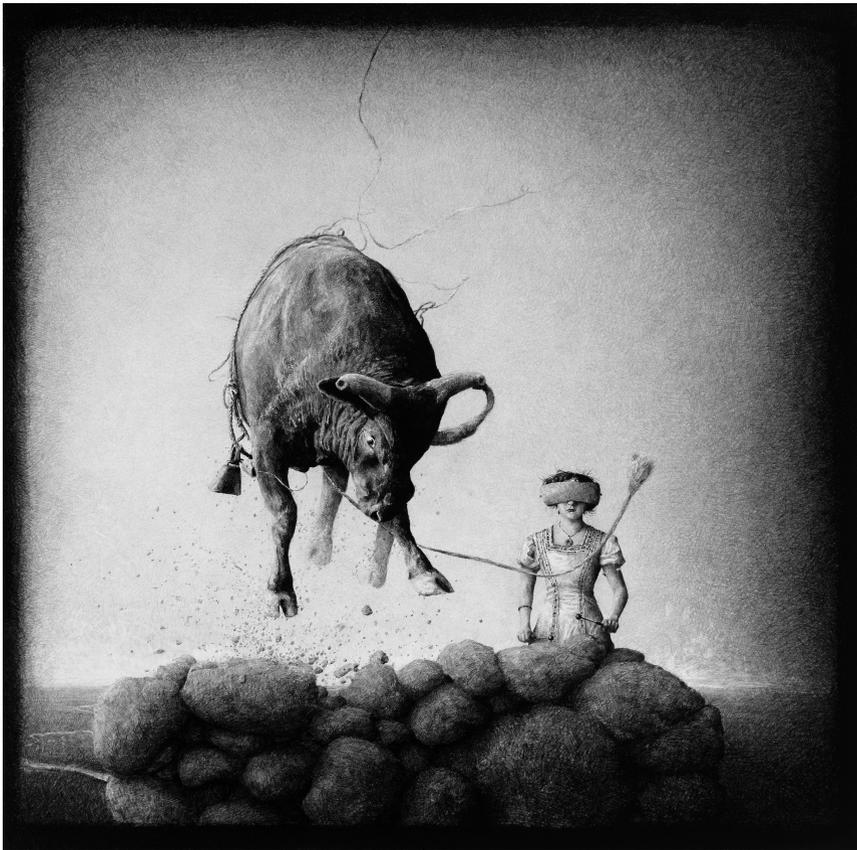
**Ethan Murrow**, *State of Massachusetts*, 2014, graphite  
on paper, 48 in. x 48 in. Private collection.



**Ethan Murrow**, Raft Design #1, 2002, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 16 in. x 16 in. Courtesy of Slete Gallery.

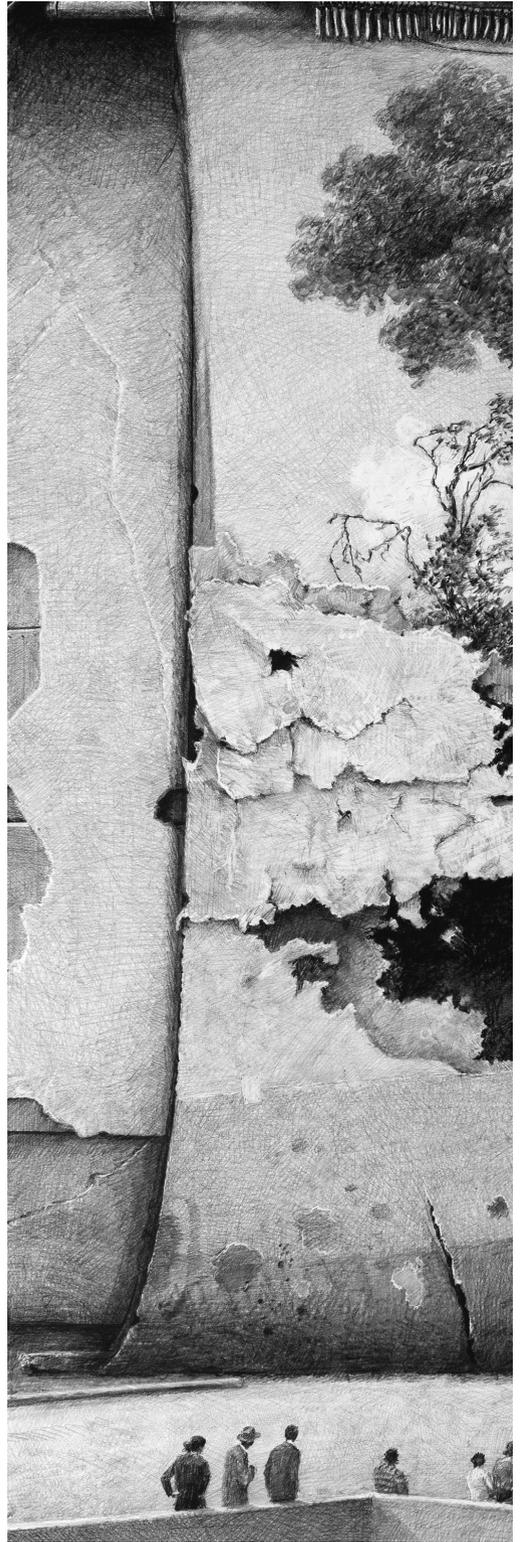


**Ethan Murrow**, *Casino*, 2015, graphite on paper,  
36 in. x 36 in. Courtesy of Slete Gallery.



**Ethan Murrow**, *State of Nevada*, 2014, graphite  
on paper, 48 in. x 48 in. Private collection.

**Ethan Murrow**, *Commonplace*, 2015, graphite  
on paper, 44 in. x 44 in. Private collection.





**CATIE ROSEMURGY**

*Poem That Blames Narrative*

And then the town burned. The girl ran.

When they make me say what happened next, I say, finally.  
Finally, the earth confessed.

It opened up and revealed it was covered with cuts,  
cuts that glowed. There was going to be a long time  
between the need and the healing.

What?

Well, the real heat and its superior colors roared right in,  
the big blood of outer space.

I tell them that the ground called to its mother,  
but they want to know what happened.

The sky became dirt, another muddy road,  
except it shoved itself down your throat.

But what happened?

The girl ran.

Her body moved her and then threw her and then wet her down.  
The situation hovered over her with all the moisture it had sucked  
from far away leaves.

Why did the moisture from distant leaves come and care for her?  
I don't know.

Someone once kicked her in the shin  
until she gave up a small, gold ring.  
He insisted that the gold and the ring be parts of her body.

There are layers, and she got pressed between them,  
a plain, little clover that wouldn't dry.  
You can see her there, pressed face down.

Then what?  
Her feet stopped.

No, what happened next?  
Brush was cleared away and dried in piles so there was room  
for the new people to live.  
Every one of them was given a wooden house.  
A girl laid down and formed a sign that labeled  
a part of the woods as unreal,  
her own hand a creature safe asleep in her hair.

You mean the land had been cleared?  
Yes. The land had been cleared many times of many things.  
Often the things were people.  
We may have turned the earth into a slate we can clean.  
Now everything slides off as soon as we put it there.

What next?

Several others running through the clearing.  
Maybe if you step back and keep off the burned ground,  
something can grow,  
or are you a seedling?

MATTHEW NEILL NULL

*All Was Fine*

THE ELK SHIVERED and bucked, loosening parasites from its coat. Its shadow danced and leaned on bluegrass and mingled with those of clouds. The elk, not small, not huge, had a back-flowing tangle of antlers and a heaving rut-swollen neck. It emitted a nasal howl, causing birds to flush and startle, but it was no more than music now: all its prospective mates had been snared and shot, chased by dogs, hung in smokehouses in sheets of flesh so thin you could see through them. The elk raked antlers on the ground and scythed the plants—a gesture of frustration. It made the mistake of showing itself. The sun was moving now.

The field shone like a pale scar on the mountainside. Flaming azaleas nodded in the wind. The ministers didn't know where these bald pastures had come from or what they suggested. They were scattered through the ridge lands northeast to southwest, a few acres here and there, like the paw-prints of some mythic animal. Some thought Indians had cleared the trees, or that lightning had, or the lost colony of Roanoke, or misplaced Israelites, or a trick of drainage and shale. But most considered that God in His wisdom simply wanted to comfort the animals with open grazing in that stony country that troubled the hoof

and paw and wagon wheel. After the logging was done, about 1910, fire swept through and the mysterious balds disappeared.

There. Carmichael motioned with his hand, and Devil Jack Jonathan fell into a crouch on the skid road. At first they thought it was the horse they'd come for, a draft gelding gone mad in that place, rolling in its traces and tangling. Devil Jack had had to tie it to a tree. Devil Jack was a famously ugly man, with a rope-burn-red face and a creased forehead, but in camp he was a rare man with wife and children tucked away respectfully somewhere off the page. "I don't understand it," he'd told Carmichael as he led his sane horses back to the stalls. "Thing acts like a foamy dog."

"Was white flowers around?"

"No. Don't look at me like that. Hell, I don't know, Raymond. There's all manner of plants up there."

"I told you, don't let them eat on the clear."

Devil Jack cried he did not.

"They go mad. You know what they call milk sickness?"

"Oh I know." Devil Jack was weary of Carmichael's lectures.

"It killed Abraham Lincoln's sainted mother." Raymond Carmichael had lifted his stale tick and pulled out a smokeless Colt pistol from under. It was Army issue. "The captain knows I has this, now. Don't go telling people on it."

Now, they watched the sand-and-chocolate smudge move against the bald. Those antlers! High grass swooned in the wind. Carmichael's shirt was a size too small, and he tugged at the collar. He said, "I never thought I'd see one."

"My wife's dad killed one in Kentucky in 1867. He took out a rifle and said, 'See you in the happy hunting ground, you big son-of-a-bitching deer.' He made a pipe out the jawbone."

"You know what the Indians called them?" Carmichael asked.

"Well, no."

*“Tshi-wata-giti?”*

“What’s the meaning of that?”

“It means big son-of-a-bitching deer.”

They laughed in their throats. Carmichael fished three bullets out of his shirt pocket. No veteran, he wouldn’t tell you where he’d gotten the pistol; it was too much gun for a poor man. At this distance, he might have been able to hit a train car, which, thankfully, the elk was a fifth the length of. Again he counted the bullets. He could hit three-fifths of a train car—maybe. Carmichael eased open the cylinder and slid them in.

In the sun, you could perceive the elk’s thin halo of flies. Carmichael motioned Devil Jack forward. These men knew how to pick through the woods. The mottle of leaves and deadfalls seemed to slither from their approach like a fearful copperhead. It met their boots with a respectful silence.

Light poured through a breach in the clouds. The elk turned to the table of grass and took fodder into a grinding mouth. The jaw moved in tight circles.

Devil Jack and Carmichael settled on their haunches. They were close enough to see the bloom-bright tongue.

Carmichael whispered he’d hold two foot high. “It hangs a little to the left.”

“Nothing better to eat than that?”

“You had one?”

“Dad said so.”

“We’ll cook up the liver,” Carmichael said, “and call the fellows come quarter it.”

“You take aim. I don’t like butchering him till he’s on the ground.”

Carmichael took a rest on one knee, knocking the hammer. The sight settled behind the elk’s shoulder: heart, lungs, cradled there in the vee. It was a top-heavy gun, hard to hold.

A foreign scent on the wind, their buttons winking in the sun. The elk turned its white ass to them and burst through black timber—it ran with its head held high, a showboating posture, to keep from tangling itself—and the pistol bucked, again, again. The bullets tossed up clods of earth and small clouds like handfuls of flour. Shots rolled down the valley. The elk was gone. A squirrel began barking from the trees.

Carmichael picked the spent casings from the cylinder with his nails. “Shit fire!” They burnt his fingertips, which he popped in his mouth to suck. “Shit fire save matches.”

“So much for tenderloin.”

“So much for liver. The thing’s got a liver could *feed* men. It’s bigger than a baby.” Carmichael looked at his gun. He turned it over like a coin, playing light on both sides. “Ain’t shot right,” he said, “since I clapped someone on the head with it.”

“Guess I’ll have to clap that foamy horse.”

“Forget that horse.” For the light began its leaving now. “Captain Ketch is rising early tomorrow.”

Carmichael had never seen a bolt-action rifle and watched its workings closely. “Tight as a Swiss watch,” said Captain Ketch, thumbing off the safety with a crisp click. Carmichael didn’t know about Swiss watches but reckoned them quite good, watching the bolt-action work. They crowded round it in the captain’s office. A canny railroad agent had diverted a crate of .30-40 Krag rifles meant for the Spanish-American War. Each one had an elaborate peep-sight, factory bluing, and a silky action. Captain Ketch and the agent kept back a pair of rifles each and sold the rest to rich hunters. Captain Ketch delivered one to Senator Baxter at the company office of Cheat River Paper & Pulp, leaving with a twenty-dollar gold piece extra for his efforts, and would tell the story again and again—the grand anecdote of his life so far. He handed a spare Krag with a full magazine to Devil Jack, a single-shot twelve-gauge

of indiscriminate make to a favorite called Goddard, and nothing to Carmichael.

“I seen the thing!”

“You got that Colt. Go fetch your bullets.”

“I only got one more!”

“Shoot straight and that’s all you’ll need.”

“I want that liver,” said Carmichael. “I got a tooth for it.”

The cook, who wore a woman’s dress and wiped his nose on the hem, promised a great supper if they brought him an elk. Guns were banned in the camps of Cheat River Paper & Pulp, so three dozen men assembled with ropes and brush-hooks, hatchets and crude cudgels. Others bribed the cook’s helpers to borrow pots and pans to drive it. Captain Ketch’s hounds came rumbling from under porches. The party made its way down the Chesapeake & Ohio grade, dogs lunging against their leads and men snapping them back. The pack followed Captain Ketch and his scent-dog, Drum.

The timber men weren’t allowed dogs in camp, but this was far from the Cheat River offices, an outpost, where they felled spruce and oak till the ground was clear and then moved on, disassembling their bunks and cook-house and smith, stacking them on train cars, and reassembling in a similar site upriver, always clinging to the Cheat, for the cooking and wash was easy there and the boilers of Shay locomotives demanded a thousand gallons a day. In this place without women or children or comforts of home, the dogs gave the men something to do, Captain Ketch reasoned, filling the crude bunkhouses with the familiar smell of rain-wet fur and the skittering of claws on puncheon floors. A pink tongue in your palm could be a comfort. A home. They wandered breedless into camp to gorge at the trash pile, and Captain Ketch wasn’t above trading for finer hunting dogs from mountain families or the Syrian peddler. Sure, they were motley. One had the curious habit of chomping lit cigarettes. This was no gentleman’s

pack. When an inspector appeared unannounced, Captain Ketch explained that not one of the seventeen dogs belonged to him. They're a nuisance but what can you do? Smells and society draws them, said Captain Ketch, and when the inspector suggested he shoot the nuisance dogs, Captain Ketch reminded him that guns are not allowed in camp and it would be needless cruel to brain or drown them. He would never ask an employee to do such and didn't have the heart to do it himself. "You are my superior," said Captain Ketch. Leading the inspector to the block, he tried handing the man a five-pound sledge. "I'll hold them still if you want to mash the heads. Let's start with the bigs before we tire, they're hard to hold. You want to borrow an apron? Let's go to the kitchen. That's too good a shirt." The inspector's hand began to shake.

So today, the timbermen moved in a cloud of nonexistent dogs.

The only improvement on this day, Devil Jack claimed, was if they had a drop taken. Someone put a pint-bottle in his hand.

Devil Jack tipped it back and sputtered. "Damn," he said and dabbed his lips. "Teenagers wouldn't drink it. I wouldn't pour it on a snakebite."

Indeed, the fluid tasted of green copper and would turn in his belly like a soul in what Catholics call purgatory. He handed the pint to a fresh-faced boy, saying hide it from the captain, for alcohol was one thing he would not abide.

"Careful," said Devil Jack. "It bites back."

The boy, Ronald, said, "I found the right camp! People feeding me drinks on the job! The right camp!"

"Yes boy, we run elk every Saturday whether we want to or not. Now be quiet." Devil Jack wasn't a bad man, but was called this to set him apart from Preaching Jack, a pious logger who spoke of a Sunday. Devil Jack looked at the shambling mess of dogs. "We're on the move."

By the time camp assembled, the elk was three miles and two ridges away, lapping at some water.

The bald. Dogs bayed, men fingered their weapons. Drum was led through the meadow. Already there was grumbling that Carmichael, a joker, was taking them on a wild chase. Carmichael just likes a spree . . .

A head teamster got used to backbiting. You had to. Gray funnels of spiderweb stood in the grass. Carmichael crushed one with his foot. "There! There's his track!"

Everyone looked, grinned, offered opinion. A hand-sized print, played like a deer's, but three times as deep. Or was it an ox's? No, an ox must be oxen with a buddy beside. Drum caught the scent and the lead was cut. Drum's huge ears billowed, driving the stench to his nose like a set of bellows. He went burrowing through laurel.

"You see?" Carmichael asked the skeptics, but was not acknowledged. They had already forgotten. But Goddard, a weird man who wore tiny glasses that looked like a child's, sidled up when the captain wasn't looking and gave over the shotgun to Carmichael and the sack of paper shells, saying he preferred the pistol if you please.

"That's not a good trade for you. I got one bullet and it's old."

"Take it," Goddard told him.

Far off, the singing of hounds came downriver, the sound riding the waters as it does. Hooves rasped in river gravel and the elk turned.

Hours, thorns, walls of laurel. The hounds moved on lean pumping haunches, and when the leads tangled Devil Jack freed them with a bright knife. Captain Ketch hollered to fan out. Staggered in rows, they worked like a currycomb through the rough pelt of mountain-side. The rhododendron was crazy, an insult. Drum caught a fresh trail and ran rip-sawing through the brush; a thoughtful, tentative worker, he had reddish fur that flickered through the trees like a shy wildfire. Yet there was no sign of elk. Captain Ketch threatened he'd chase it to Nod and back if he had to. This made a few groan. They crossed one ridge, then another, dropping into a knife-sharp hollow. Men fell away

and wandered back to nap in their bunks. Devil Jack complained of a soft knee. The party winnowed itself to seven or eight. They found themselves following the Shaver's Fork of the Cheat, a trout stream that a man could ford only in the dry. This forest was scheduled to be logged in May.

Where a creek mouth poured in the river, the hounds wanted to part ways. Drum and four others insisted on a lonely hollow, but the redbone bitch and another two ran upriver. The men took advantage of the confusion to drop to their knees and drink.

Captain Ketch could barely speak for panting and had to hitch up his trousers with a free hand. Finally, he said to Carmichael, "Raymond, let's follow that bitch. The rest of you all keep on." So Carmichael and Captain Ketch left after the redbone.

Henthorn and Devil Jack, Ronald and Goddard picked their way up the rocky hollow, bleeding from a hundred scratches. Devil Jack had the good Krag rifle slung over his shoulder on a piece of baling twine.

Ronald cried, "I see him! Shoot! Shoot!"

Devil Jack lifted the rifle and glared down the peep-sight. Then he lowered it. Dogs leapt at his insane horse, its eyes rolling and shot from snakeroot flowers, strings of blood running down a frayed rope that dangled from its neck. The horse's side had broken out in muddy red patches from dog bites. Devil Jack had forgotten all about it. Drum was hanging off the horse's tail and standing on hind-legs. Devil Jack shot the horse four times when once would do, just to feel the bolt working and watch the cartridges fly from the chamber. It looked like science. He couldn't believe what he held in his hands.

When Carmichael finally saw the elk, it was swimming across the Shaver's with three hounds trailing behind it like streamers. Their heads cut deltas in the water. Each time a dog tried to take a bite, the elk would bob under and come up gasping. The elk hit the bank, struggled onto

the mud, and was overcome. It turned, swiveled his dirty antlers, and gored one of the silt-blackened hounds through the belly.

Captain Ketch was too stunned to shoot, for he'd never seen a deer that size but walking through his dreams. So Carmichael pulled the trigger, but they were too far away and the buckshot sprayed the water. The old gun broke open with an unhealthy crack and he slid a fresh paper-shell into the breach. Captain Ketch finally shouldered his rifle. The bullet skipped off the surface of the Cheat, ruffling the waters. He worked the bolt again. He was too fat to be doing this and couldn't hold his breath long enough to squeeze the trigger.

The redbone clamped onto the elk's neck while her fellow cried on the ground, pinned there, the blood welling out as if the dog had been uncorked. Bawling, the elk unpinned the poor thing and tried to shake the redbone from his neck. Carmichael heard the deep *plonk* of a slug striking meat before the gunshot caught up to the bullet. Captain Ketch had hit his own dog. He shouted blasphemies. The redbone bitch tried to gnaw it from her own belly and then was very, very still.

Somehow the gored dog, wretchedly strong, managed to hobble after the other.

Suddenly more dogs went flying past. The others were catching up and the elk scrambled on the mountainside, a shadow drifting through timber. Elk and dogs made for a shelf of outcrops that overlooked the valley.

Carmichael found a place where teardrop islands sliced the river into channels. The chill water set him gasping when it hit his crotch. He held the shotgun overhead, palms ocher with rust. The hounds sang and bawled. One had a fine treble.

"They got him now. Got him treed?"

"You can't tree an elk," Carmichael told the captain.

"You know, damn it, they got him bayed?"

They made the second island and pitched into the last channel, the deepest, a glacial blue. When Carmichael made it across, he flicked a

look back and saw the other men through the trees. Deciding whether or not to cross, they finally eased themselves down the bank one by one. They came up gasping through beards and swam stiffly, like cats. On a mossy rock, Devil Jack slipped and went in all the way. The water swept him downstream and he grabbed a handful of reeds and dragged himself onto the bank. River water poured from the Krag's barrel. Carmichael laughed at him and his wilting hat, then hurried on. Devil Jack wouldn't forget that. Years later, when Carmichael was begging on the street, Devil Jack would recall it and laugh himself and shiver with guilt. Carmichael, with one sleeve pinned over a missing arm, telling you about the high ghostly camps, whispering of elk and mills, asking you for a dime, a nickel, a dollar, wrapped in the webbing of the past—Devil Jack threw him a dime.

A red mouth bloomed, full of teeth. Elk spun and dogs fainted in one body. It was the last elk east of the Mississippi and they had it closed in a fist of briar; they merely had to pry open the fingers and take. The dogs backed it against a fallen red oak. The only way for it to escape was to run crashing through them and over the outcrops. The dogs, weary now, circled the elk clockwise with black lips curling, sharking in now and again to nip at the hindquarters.

The bull elk turned broadside and Captain Ketch shot off-handed. The firing pin snapped with a cold metal click. It reared back, cocked to lunge through the dogs. Captain Ketch had forgotten to pull a bullet into the chamber.

Carmichael caught the elk in the face with a round of buckshot. A white spray of antler flew and stung the dogs and made them whimper. The animal, blind now, heaved to the ground and fell with horrible groans, legs kicking. Carmichael's hands were shaking as he tried to fit a fresh shell into the breach.

"Don't shoot him again! You'll ruin the meat!" Captain Ketch pulled out a knife. He thought of leaning in to carve a red smile into the neck,

digging for the big vein. Let the meat free itself of blood all over the earth. He paused, remembering what antlers had done to his hounds. The blind animal bawled again and tried to rise on unsteady legs, ghastly, destroyed. Hounds nipped cruelly at its flanks.

Carmichael hollered for him to kill the damned thing.

Tottering, the elk gathered itself and charged. The men could only step out of the way as one bedlam—elk and hounds—went skittering off the cliff. They broke tree-limbs and howled and bawled and tangled as they fell into that swallowing sea of green.

At the base of the outcrops, the timber men quartered what they could salvage and shook their heads over all these dead dogs. One had fallen on a diamond-shaped rock and split like a sausage. Be awful quiet about the camps, they said, but then Ronald and Goddard appeared with the stragglers, all of whom back-stepped and sidled from their dead kin. The treetops had slowed the falling elk in a curious way and kept most of the meat from outright ruin. The antlers' main-beams splintered, making them, to Captain Ketch's eye, worthless. Dogs dragged off the legs to gnaw, fighting for them, and Carmichael knocked a few yellowed teeth from the jaw with the rifle butt.

"Give them to my grandkids. Show them what was." He slipped one to Goddard.

This was the best day. No other ever was like it. An hour and a half to render the meat with all hands working, gloving themselves in blood. They sliced the raw liver, purple and smoking, and passed out slivers. Where the strength comes from, Carmichael claimed. He was in a giving mood, like a successful candidate on Election Day—he believed in the rightness of the universe, every corner plumb. He had seen the venture through. He snuck Devil Jack an extra fine piece for his efforts. The oily liver slid down Devil Jack's throat, more liquid than flesh, too rich. Captain Ketch wanted to make a jacket of the hide, but the dogs had torn off patches of skin so it resembled the mangy felt of a Helena

billiard table. "We'll see," the captain kept saying. "We'll see. I think I can get a good bolt of leather off the right. Shear it right off." The others were too polite to dissuade him.

"Kill your dogs, did he?" Goddard said.

"Cept them stragglers. The ones keen on running mad horses."

Goddard grinned. "It happens."

"You lose the best," Captain Ketch allowed, scratching his nose with his least bloody finger. "I lost some in one go on a bear but nothing like this."

The living dogs rolled and groveled in the blood. Captain Ketch tossed them pieces of elk heart, which they caught in midair. Carving back-straps off the bone, Goddard asked, "Why are you rewarding them? They pursued that crazy horse?"

"Because they lived. That's the trick of it. That's the test."

Dogs slid tongues into their bloody hands, tails a-wagging. Goddard cast them a withering look. "Them things would lick lead paint off a chair." He slapped one back.

Carmichael cleaned his palms on leaves. "There was a war battle here. A great one fought by General Allegheny Johnson."

"This where it was?"

"Yessir. My uncle was here. He killed three, or four."

"Raymond Carmichael," said Goddard, swaddling a raw haunch in muslin to keep the flies off, looking all the while like a disreputable schoolteacher in his tiny glasses. "Always got him a big fish story."

Carmichael dropped the elk's hind leg. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"And I'll tell you more. Uncle Pen was a guide to the owners when they come back along after the war. Judge Randolph, particular." Carmichael was speaking of the founders of Cheat River Paper & Pulp. "When they come to Whitmer, Pen helped them meet his people and buy up

timber, block them deeds. They give him a matched set of good Italian sidelock shotguns on account of it. They burnt up in a house-fire. You might not believe it.”

“Who did?”

“No! The guns.”

“Your uncle,” said Goddard, “played a role in history.”

“That he did.”

The rendering done, they packed up and left, carrying bundled meat upon their backs. The dead elk fed Camp Five a single night—the kitchen went through twenty-six cows and twenty-six hogs a week. “Barely made a dent,” the cook said, watching his helpers swab tin plates. In the end, they had to bring out a side of beef to stretch the meal. Someone handed the cook a dead grouse. “It all goes in the pot,” the cook said, taking the grouse in hand, toying with the rich brown feathers of the ruff. “You waste a bullet on him? I kill them with rocks.”

The elk’s meat gave off a strong smell, as all rutting animals do. Not unpleasant, though, and a challenge to the monotony of their meals. The timber men ate of it and all was fine. They slept less fitfully that night than most.

And while they slept, possums found the filth, and with first light, hopping crows and buzzards. The kill was bright against the mountainside. It caught sun and wore a shawl of flies, and then was gone, cleaned by maggots and rain, ground into the common earth but for a smear of fur. Mushrooms broke with red buttons within the month, fly agarics that drive men insane, that reduce one’s liver to ash. It looked like any other piece of ground. So much so, that when the timber men returned in May, whip-saws in hand, pale from winter and dull with spring, no one could remark upon it. Not even Carmichael. That would come in time.

**COLIN CHENEY**

## *Wyeth House*

Entering her room  
dead flies, sucked sea lavender  
I see myself  
in panes tidal with salt:  
a revenant, fetch.  
Gust, and the curtains flood  
the attic with skeleton birds and I  
see you pulling yourself through grass sea.

Paint with the unborn of hen:  
a field's mow and thatch, swallows' leaving  
and falling back to their eaves, the house  
waiting to hold you inside it  
like periwinkle shell, like wasps' nest.

Beneath the window, a cairn of shells  
to be fed back to their hens.  
Gulls above the salt marsh.  
Another hung in the field: violence  
allowing fruit poured from rake to pail  
to be winnowed clean by wind.  
This the planet I've been preparing for you.



**BEN SHATTUCK**

## *Edwin Chase of Nantucket*

WHEN MY FATHER and I were younger, he taught me how to count the days in a month. Put your fists up like this, he said, side-by-side. January is the first knuckle, the peak. February, the valley. The peak has more days. The valley, less. January has thirty-one. February, twenty-eight. And so on. Down to double-knuckled summer. I must have been ten or eleven when he showed me that, a few years after we'd moved to Nantucket. I lay in bed that night, searching for other timepieces. I touched twenty-four ribs. The daily hours. Eyes, nostrils, mouth, and ears that made seven. The week. There might be moon phases down my spine; days between the equinox and solstice somewhere in my feet. I could be made of three hundred and sixty-five bones.

May is a knuckle. I know that without counting because on the 31st, 1796, a man and young pregnant woman—carrying between them nothing but a satchel of clothes, two sketchbooks, bottles of turpentine, paints, and brushes—arrived unexpectedly to our farm on Coskata. I was twenty when they came.

It had been raining all morning. Puddles held in sand. Winter had been long, April ended in a blizzard, and snow still lay in ditches and in

the house's shadow. So much of my day then was shaped by the sky—the way a cloud gathered itself up and fell in rain or snow or sleet. Most days on Nantucket start and end with weather. Which way the wind was blowing and why. What clouds meant.

This was over a year since Dad died. He had left in the morning to cut ice from the Pinkham's pond. The blocks he carted home sometimes held duck feathers, hairs of green winter growth, a brown and bent rush. As if the ice were inscribing itself with feathers and stems. The evening he disappeared, I found his coat folded in the grass beside the pond. I took his coat home, told my mother, Laurel, that he'd probably gone on one of his walks, and then we went to bed. It wasn't until I crossed the pond the next day that I found him, out in the center, face-down, under the ice. His shirt had ridden up over his head, so that when I stood over him it seemed that wind was blowing across his back, or that he was undressing. One shoe was missing. I retrieved the saw. Cut him out. His gray hair was thick with ice. The skin on his face looked tauter. So much was still there, but more missing; his deep voice; his quietness; his limp from the leg broken twice over in the war. I sat on the ice with him for most of the evening before bringing him home on Sadie's back. I couldn't figure out how he'd gotten all the way out to there under the ice, to the center of the pond. Over the next few months, I watched the ice shrink to a palmful, and then to nothing.

When Will and Rivkah came—though I didn't know their names then—Laurel and I were by the shed rubbing oil on Sadie. Her fleas had been bad that winter. I should have kept her stall cleaner. Before fleas it was thrush—the bottoms of her hooves smothered with white rot. All horse's maladies are poetry, Dad said, like bog spavin or seedy toe. Our old horse Julius had moon blindness. Both corneas dyed milk-blue. We led him through the dunes and along the beach for exercise on our evening walks because he was scared into laziness by his cloudy eyes.

Sadie stepped back and turned her head when she saw them. That's the way it always is—an animal noticing first. Gulls crowd in the sheep pasture before a gale, songbirds fly into the chimney. I try to think of the day before they came—if our cow was giving bad milk.

They were in the middle of the sand road that nobody used. We were ten miles to Nantucket town, and the only building beyond our house was the lighthouse, a mile away at the end of the point. Nobody came to our house. The only prints on the path were made by me, Laurel, mice, and the birds. The punctuation of our solitude—commas and periods in the footsteps of animals, the pauses between us and town.

“Who's that?” I said to Laurel.

“What?” she said, looking up at me. She used the back of her wrist to brush her hair from her forehead. Oil dripped from her fingers.

She was thirty-seven then. That makes her seventeen when I was born. My father had been much older—somewhere in his late thirties. The bones in her face were severe in a way that might have been ugly. A straight nose, thin lips, narrow face, deep eye sockets. But it happened that everything was placed well, beautifully even, and she could easily have remarried if we weren't all those miles from town. Two suitors did ride to our farm. One was John Throat, the butcher, whom I met twice a year at the end of Coatue. He came for Laurel cleaner than usual, with a bundle of meat tied to his horse. My mother was polite, fixed him tea, and then asked him to leave. Since then, each time I walk a hog down Coatue to meet him, neither of us mentions his visit. The other suitor was Uncle Amos, who stayed for two nights in the upstairs storage room. On the third day he told us at breakfast that he'd been mistaken in coming, apologized, and left. I haven't seen him since.

“Behind you,” I said to her then. “Down the road.”

She turned.

“Oh,” she said, stepping back. “Yes.” She touched her hairline. “Or—no?”

“What?”

“I thought it was—but no, there are two. So I suppose not.”

“Suppose not what?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s not Paul?” She turned back to Sadie, and poured another ladleful of oil. “And Maggie?”

Paul Pinkham was the keeper of the Great Point Lighthouse, that mile north. He lived there with his mute wife, Sarah, and their daughter Maggie—a few years older than me and to whom I was engaged. Most importantly, Paul had white hair and a beard bigger than his head that you could see from a long way off. And he wouldn’t have been walking like that, the way these two were separated.

“No,” I said. “And that’s not Maggie behind him.”

Laurel turned again. Put her hand up to her forehead to block the sun.

“I don’t know, Edwin. I guess we just have to wait and see.”

In those minutes of watching the two hobble forward through the wet sand, there were the sounds of gulls screeching, of the wind passing over our house and the dune grass, and of the sea feeling the land, saying to it with each wave, *here you are, here you are, here you are.*

Our house was a sacrifice to the wind. The wind rattled the fireboards and casements at night. The wind threw sand on the windows and guided it through the siding, no matter how many times I resealed it. Sand came down the chimney. Pooled on the hearthstone. Snaked over the floorboards. Banked up on all sides of the house. Collected at the feet of the table. It came in on my clothes, in my hair, under my fingernails, and filled my bed. I dug it out of my eyes before I fell asleep. My shoes were shovels. I swept the house every day, and still. “At least we won’t need to dig the graves,” Laurel would say, “when we’re buried here.”

Dad left us from 1780 through 1783, when I was seven. He came home more wordless, disappeared for long walks, swept the house in the middle of the night, talked to himself. He pried up floorboards by the chimney and front door and put hexes under them—one of his shoes by the chimney, an eel spear by the door. He took off his hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes one morning shave. Laurel drew on eyebrows with charcoal. Then there was the pond. Then me and Laurel living alone beside the Pinkhams. Then me, every summer, mucking out marsh mud to better the soil in the hot beds for our vegetables, loading the ground with seeds, and scything marsh hay and piling it on the saddles. Me, asking Laurel if she was sick, and her saying “It’s nothing.” My life then was comfortable, I think. Secure. I would have enough tea for a few cups a day. I would marry Maggie. I would see John Throat a few times a year. I would help Paul Pinkham paint the lighthouse every year. My mother might get sicker, though maybe not. My father would continue to not come back from the pond. Sadie would get fleas again. The sheep would lamb. The seals would continue to stare at us from the waves. This might last another sixty years.

I saw that Will, almost at the fence, held his boots. Plodding through the sand. On his shoulder it looked like he was carrying a small, dark sack. A cat. A brown cat with its tail crossing his neck.

“Should I get the gun?” I asked Laurel.

She was breathing hard. She smiled to herself. Coughed.

“That’ll be better,” she said, running her hand down Sadie’s neck. “No. I know who it is.”

She untied her apron, wiped her hands, and draped it over her shoulder. She tucked her hair behind her ears. That was a habit of hers—always touching her hair, brushing her fingers across her forehead.

The cat’s tail batted Will’s chest. He opened the gate, walked through, dropped his boots, shrugged off his satchel.

“Jesus,” he said. “You live at the end of the world. My legs feel like they’ve been beaten.”

He lifted the cat from his shoulder, and put it on the sand.

“I was going to quit three miles back.” He waved behind himself, to Rivkah. “But she wanted water even more than she wanted me dead.”

He smiled, cocked his head to the side. “Hello, Laurel?”

I stepped around Sadie.

“Look what I found,” he said, pointing to the cat rubbing itself on my mother’s leg. “For you. Whatever’s the opposite of a welcome gift. She’s that.”

“You’re here,” Laurel said, folding her arms.

“I am,” he said. He threw his arms up. “Sorry.”

She stepped forward and hugged him. He shelved his head on her shoulder. They parted.

“This is Edwin?” he said, looking at me.

Sadie shifted, and I avoided her hooves.

“Yes,” Laurel said. “Edwin, this is Will.”

He squinted. Blond hair. A thin beard. Blue eyes. He smiled, and long, crescent dimples appeared.

“I haven’t seen you since you were this big,” he said. He sank his palm close to the ground.

“Three,” Laurel said.

“Is that so?” he said. “You look like your mother. More than your father.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

Will looked at Laurel, and when she didn’t say anything, he said, “A friend of your mother’s.”

Laurel touched her hairline. “Yes,” she said.

The gate clapped shut. We all turned.

“Finally,” Will said.

Rivkah's pregnancy came first. Her dress swept over her legs. Her coat parted over her stomach. Her steps were heavy and short.

"Who?" Laurel said.

"Rivkah Seixas," Will said.

She didn't come to us, but sat in the sand by the fence. She touched her stomach.

"Not what you think," Will said. "Or who you think. Not mine."

Long, black hair covered her face and shoulders like the wing of a great bird.

"Who is she?" Laurel asked.

"She's from Newport," Will said. "A patron's daughter. I'll explain later."

Rivkah put her elbows on her knees. She was heaving.

"Is she sick?" Laurel said.

"Just tired, I imagine," Will said. "From the long march."

"Why didn't you get her a carriage from town?" Laurel said.

"Why did Silas build a farm about near Portugal?" he said.

I hadn't heard my father's name spoken aloud since Paul Pinkham would come around the house asking for him. To my mother, it was "your father." To hear it was like seeing him suddenly.

"You're from Newport?" I asked.

"Edwin," Laurel said, "could you get some water for the girl?"

"No," Will said. "She's from Newport. I was painting her family portrait last fall. She found me as I was on my way here. I'm sorry, Laurel."

She hesitated. "I'm glad you're here," she finally said.

"Good," Will said. "I'll explain it all in time." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Any food with that water? We haven't eaten in some time."

"Of course we do," Laurel said.

"Or, if you have milk," he said, "that would be better."

When the English occupied the island, they first stole our sheep. Laurel was afraid they'd take more from the house, and so one day she and I buried our silverware, dishware, and the little paper money we had beside

the marsh. I felt like gathering everything up and burying it then, when I walked inside for water. Like going to my room for the poetry books, into the kitchen for the pans. The two chairs angled toward each other by the fire where Laurel and I sat every night.

I filled two cups from a jug of our cow's milk, went outside, and put one in the sand beside Rivkah.

She didn't look up. Her thumbs were making circles over blisters on the tops of her feet. Embarrassed, I turned away. Yellow puffs of wood dust were falling from the edge of the barn roof. One of the carpenter wasps kicked away sawdust as it dug further. They were everywhere that spring. Digging hundreds of round holes in the barn and house, and I didn't know how to get rid of them. Laurel suggested smoking them out. I'd nearly burned the barn down when I held flaming grass under the roofline.

"Thanks," Will said when I handed him his cup, and gulped down the milk that our cow had made from dead grass.

"Darling," Laurel said. "Why don't you get us a duck. I've seen teals landing in the marsh all week."

"Duck," Will said, handing the cup back to me. "That would be something. I haven't had one in some time." His hand wandered over Sadie's ears.

My job was simple then: introduce a ram, double the heartbeats every year; then reduce. That might be the story of the living. Pull a fish from the sea. Take milk from a cow. Cut peat from the ground. Shoot a duck from the sky. Take a little bit of everything from everywhere. At the end of the year I'd pray I'd added more than all we'd taken to stay alive. In the winter, if a late flock of geese landed on the pond, I shot as many as I could and hung them to keep frozen on the laundry lines between the shed and house.

Rivkah still hadn't moved. I stepped between the two fresh sets of footprints going the other way.

\*

Mallards slid everywhere across the black-watered marsh. An egret's oversized wings gulped air across the grass. Laurel's teals were rafted by the far edge, just below the small windmill of the saltworks, the drying vats of which I'd covered in the past week because of the storms. Coots, buffleheads, and redheads landed on the sandbar. More circling overhead.

I sat in the grass, waiting for one to paddle close enough so that I wouldn't waste a shot. Toward Wauwinet, two hay staddles stood like wardens over the marsh. Paul's dog barked in the distance.

Weather painted the horizon. There was the smell of rain like wet stone, and of the marsh. Bits of quahogs and seaweed spread over the sandbar, which would soon sink under the incoming tide. If there was a day when the tide didn't stop, when it washed through the spartina, lifted and toppled the cut hay from the staddles, when it crept through the bayberry, pushed wavelets onto the dunes, touched our floor, mixed our fire's ashes, rose through the chimney, and over our house, this would be the day. One hurricane, I saw an upright barn float lazily through the marsh, hay paying out from its loft.

I put my gun under my knees, and tented my body with my jacket as the rain began to fall.

There had been unexpected arrivals in the past. After the war, packs of dogs roamed the island looking for food. That was one bounty, for dogs' heads. Then there was the half-wit who lived in the dunes for a week, until my father walked him to town. There was Maggie's former husband, who I'd seen walking past our house, near running past our house, to, I found out later, try to talk her into moving back in with him. There was the shipwreck carrying horses. The captain, gun in hand, sat beside two dead horses with broken legs. Paul had put a blanket over him. At least I could figure out the scene when I came upon it. The storm, the man, the gun, broken legs, the dead horses. Cause, effect, and the blanket to finish it.

Nothing like this, though. Nobody we knew.

I looked up, and there was a duck, right overhead. When I shot, it folded from the sky and slapped the water beside me. I could have been an animal then, I suppose, smelling the wind, logging details. The tide. The arrangement of ducks on the water. The grasses. The weather. I cut the bird's neck and started home by way of the beach, to find whatever had washed ashore. A dead animal's heat makes me uneasy.

I stood in the sand to watch the wind draw a thread of shorebirds between waves. Everyone was migrating. Soon it'd be summer, and then winter. And then a year would have passed. In the pond, a swan struggled to lift into flight, leaving a long white track. I cut handfuls of rushes from the shore.

The rain had passed, and the clouds over the house looked like pieces of the sun. Sparks washed out the chimney.

When I passed through the gate, I saw Rivkah in my bedroom window, bent beside a candle on the windowsill. When she saw me, she lifted the candle from the windowsill and sank back into the room. I went around to the peat shed and tucked a few bricks under my arm.

Laurel's feet were in Will's lap when I opened the door. There they were by the fire, she in her chair, he in mine, which he'd moved so it was opposite hers. A stack of driftwood was violently aflame beside them. She kicked her feet up, sat up straight, and touched her hairline.

Dad had carved a clock into the floorboards just inside the door—an arc of numerals. During the day, the doorframe's shadow kept time on the floor. At night, the numbers were caught useless in the wood.

"The hunter returns!" Will said, reaching down for a bottle of cider on the floor. The cider was halfway down the pear.

"Any luck?" Laurel said. She rose, and touched the fire with a poker. Sunlight leaving the wood, my father said of fire.

I held up the duck, shut the door, and then hung my coat on a peg beside Will's satchel.

The cat Will had brought was flattened by the fire, ticking its tail.

“Why are you using the wood?” I said to Laurel, nodding at the fire.  
In the summer, we only used peat.

She said, “We’re celebrating.”

“Bit of a chill in the air tonight, isn’t there?” Will said. “You’d think the sky was wrung by now.”

Laurel picked out a hazelnut from the basket, peeled it, and threw the husk into the fire.

“Was that her upstairs?” I asked.

“Rivkah?” Will said. “Yes. Tired.” He cracked a hazelnut with his teeth and spat the shell into his hand. “Bed.”

“I thought you could sleep in my room tonight,” Laurel said quickly. “For a few nights. Will said he’d sleep in the storeroom.”

“With a sack of flour for a pillow,” he said.

I filled the kettle, and put it to heat on the chimney crane. I put the duck in a pot, twisted its neck so the whole thing fit, and then poured in the water. It braided and parted on the duck’s feathers.

When the duck floated, I pushed it down with a spoon.

“If you save some of those nuts, I’ll make a cake,” I said to Laurel.

“Oh, yes!” Will said. “I hear you’re a cook.” He reached around his seat, and into his coat pocket.

“I found these in town,” he said, holding out a small pile of peppercorns.

“Thank you,” I said to him, and then put the peppercorns in my pocket.

I hung the duck on the chimney crane, and singed off the rest of the feathers. A skin of fire stretched over the body.

“What a painting that would make,” Will said.

“Are you planning on painting?” Laurel asked.

“Yes. I wanted to make landscapes. I love those huge stacks of salt hay in the marshes. Maybe you can help me, Edwin.”

I nodded. Untied the duck, and laid it on the hearthstone.

“Is that what you’re doing here?” I said. “Painting?”

“In a way,” he said. “And I haven’t visited Laurel, well, ever.”

I’m sure my presence had locked some silence over their conversation. Laurel produced stitching. Will went to his satchel for his sketchbook, and with a nub of charcoal from the fireplace began drawing. The only other sound was the occasional creaking of floorboards upstairs.

I looked outside, at the sea—which is how I spent so much time. Light from the fire made a reflection of my face in the window.

Cooking is a funeral. Most of the recipes I know I learned from Laurel, before she stopped cooking. The butter and grapes I rubbed on the duck that night was its rite. I wrapped cubes of potato in bacon, stuffed cornmeal into the cavity of the duck. In the kitchen, rosemary, thyme, garlic, hyssop, yellow docks, mint, drying on the ceiling like an inverted, withered garden. On the counter, pickled vegetables, cucumber, beans, beets, and onions. I crushed one peppercorn, and sprinkled it on the duck. I piled the pot with embers, and waited.

“Why is it that you do all the cooking here?” Will said, the smell of the duck filling the room.

Because my father had started lining up his fingernail clippings on the mantel. Because he’d sometimes walk outside without shoes. He became paranoid of God. Because he’d leave me and Laurel alone for hours while he walked. I followed him a few times. Mostly he’d just go until he found a spot out of the wind, sit down, and do nothing, miss dinner. She, at first, went looking for him. But then, one night, she said to me when I returned from the saltworks, “I don’t care what you eat, but I’m not cooking anymore.” She put her mother’s cookbook for me on the table. She might have a pickled beet for dinner. Or a boiled egg. A handful of nuts. So I started cooking, I think mostly as a distraction from the night. In Dad’s long disappearances, I improved my recipes. Under the storms battering the house, cooking was the

one thing I could control. Everything changes for the better with heat and time: onions go sweet with butter; potatoes soften. Of the raking, mucking, harrowing, it was the hours inside, out of the wind, in the kitchen, where I felt the weight lift away. Under our feet, in the cellar, with blocks of ice from the pond, I kept cheese, a bushel of quinces, apples, dried cherries, pears, a side of dried venison. Turnips and potatoes. And, depending on the season, I put berries into pies: gooseberries, strawberries, meal plums, cranberries, beach plums. When Laurel retreated to the bedroom early, I improved my dessert recipes. I made custards, cranberry tarts, ginger and treacle cakes, pound cakes, bread pudding, and hazelnut cake. All of it cooking under certain heat; every meal replacing Dad's long walks. I'd leave him a plate on the table for when he returned.

"Because I like the warm kitchen," I said to Will then.

"I've never heard of a boy your age spending so much time over the fire," Will said. "But I won't complain."

If cooking is the funeral, eating is its burial. Grace, the eulogy. I served the duck onto three plates. Laurel and I always ate in our chairs by the fire.

"Should I tell Rivkah to come downstairs?" I asked. "Is she hungry?"

"No," Will said. "Let her sleep."

"I'll leave a plate for her," I said.

We sat in silence for some time, eating slowly. Will shifted in his chair, grunted.

"I should tell you—" he said. "I should tell you two about her."

"Tell us if you want," Laurel said. "Some things are best left alone."

He smiled, nodded at her.

"Perhaps," he said.

"Paul's wife, Sarah, has delivered babies," she said. "She used to do that in town. She can help. Edwin, you can tell her?"

"Paul?" Will said.

“The lighthouse keeper,” Laurel said. She pointed out the window. “I’m sure you’ll meet them.”

Will nodded. “How do you get this thing out?” he said, holding up the bottle and flicking it. His fingernail pinged on the glass. He was referring to the pear in the bottle.

“You have to break it,” I said. “But that cider needed another year to mature—I’d like to refill it.”

“We’ll do everything we can to make her comfortable,” Laurel said.

“She’ll be fine,” Will said.

My father said that every story is a confession if you listen closely enough. Will had done nothing but confess, in some way or another, since he arrived—but somehow I still didn’t know him.

Even without Will there, Laurel would have stayed up to watch the fire go out, until the logs broke to ash. Sometimes I found her still in her seat by the fire in the morning.

“Good night,” I said, after dinner. I packed my pipe and walked into my parents’ room.

How familiar, a house. I knew every mark on the floor, the color of each stone of the chimney that I’d stared at for years. But a parent’s bed is a private, unknowable thing. I only took off my shoes. I sat up in bed, smoking, watching the ceiling. I heard the poker touching the firedogs as Laurel snuffed the fire. Banking it up, covering it with its own ash to insulate a heart of embers ready to light the next morning. Closing up the night. How long had that fire been going? If we tended it correctly, weeks—the last ember of the night to light the peat of the morning’s fire. In the winter, it could be a month before we used the tinderbox. Somewhere, spread in the field, were the ashes of hundreds of fires. Maybe sucked up by a root, added to a vegetable, cooked again.

It had gotten cold that night. I concentrated on the bowl of my pipe.

They stood just outside the bedroom door, telling each other “Good night,” back and forth. “Good night Laurel.” “Good night Will.” “Good night Laurel.”

I inhaled, and held in the smoke.

“You’re still up?” she said, closing the door behind her.

She’d undone her braid. All these daily rituals I never saw. Her standing there, pulling her hair out of its braid, getting ready for bed. And then braiding it back up before starting the day. Her hair was longer than I expected, far past her shoulders. It made her look younger.

“Close your eyes,” she said.

I did, and heard her change into her nightgown. She got under the covers, as far away from me as possible.

“Have you always done that?” she said. “Puffing away up there?”

“Some nights,” I said.

“I’m surprised you didn’t suffocate yourself.”

I closed my eyes, and let the back of my head rest on the wall. The sand in my hair crunched as I turned it from side to side, massaging my scalp on the knots in the wood.

“Who is he?” I said.

At first, she didn’t say anything from under the covers.

“I knew him before I knew your father,” she said.

“In Concord?” I said.

“Yes.”

She didn’t say any more, and I didn’t know what else to ask.

“How long is he staying?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But some time. And I don’t know what we’re going to do about the girl.”

I doused the tobacco with my thumb. Out the door, a still-warm fire. Around the house, sand dunes shifted one grain at a time.

\*

Rain crackling on the roof woke me. Wide awake. Pure awake. The wind punched the windows. The bed shrieked when Laurel moved. Rain gurgled through the shingles. Waterfalls pounded the ground in a constant whine. It was like a wet wind had found our roof and was gnawing at it.

I hadn't been sleeping for a long time anyway. It started the summer before, when I'd wake in the night and stay up nearly until sunrise, when I became so exhausted that I'd nod off in the garden, in the barn, against the side of the house. I might make tea and walk down the beach. In the summer I weeded the gardens. On my hands and knees under the stars, picking grasses. It made me feel good, to wake in the morning to a pile of uprooted weeds by a patch of cucumbers, for instance. It was like I had gained a short, dark day nested in the night. Laurel never noticed, or at least never said anything.

I left the bed. The fireplace still glowed from under the ash. From the cellar, cider barrels plugged with cloth bungs hissed. When winter came, I'd roll a keg outside to freeze out layers of ice, night by night, until all that was left was the alcohol that coldness couldn't pull any ice from.

I lit a rushlight and took Will's satchel from the peg by the door to my chair by the fire. The bottle with its trapped pear were still at the foot of Will's chair.

I laid out the contents: a shirt; string; a razor blade; paint brushes. I piled them on the floor. Under that, small glass jars. One was a jar of sticky brown substance, almost like beeswax. Under the bottles was a notebook. Not the one he'd been using earlier that night. It had a soft leather cover with a worn, peeling spine. Overstuffed with papers. I lit another rushlight, and opened it on my lap.

Stretching across two pages was a drawing of a breaking wave. Then, a juniper branch full of berries. A cloud passing over the landscape. A shadowy copse of trees. A woman floating in the water, her hair fanning from her head. And scattered throughout, pages of the same woman.

Then one of a man hanging from the gallows. And finally, near the end, before the book's gasp of blank pages continuing to the back cover, a stack of loose papers. Letters.

If it weren't for her handwriting, I wouldn't have believed they were Laurel's. The first one I read was about wanting to see him again, that she missed him. The next one was blunter. The final letter confirmed what I knew in her sweat and her eyes. "I am unwell," she wrote. "Edwin is fine—so it's deep in me somewhere. You will not be sick if you come. When you come." I held those two letters side by side. One dated a few weeks after the other. Like two sides of a scale. I am unwell. Come. Please, she'd ended one letter. Please. Comma. Laurel. As if she were pleading with herself. The date, on the upper corner, two months after Dad drowned.

We rarely sent out mail—mostly to my grandparents in Concord who came twice a year. When we did, we gave the letters to Paul, who would row our parcels and his family's to town. I wondered when she'd given the letters to him. Or if Paul had kept the responses hidden from me. She might have walked down Coatue, hailed a boat, and handed them off herself.

The rain had started again on the roof. One night, when the wind stopped, I watched snow falling straight down the chimney.

I stacked the letters neatly in the back of the notebook and retied the twine. I waited for the flame to finish its path down the rush while I listened to the rain. Our roof was a drumhead out there. The black twig the flame had eaten through curled.

I replaced the notebook in the satchel. Footsteps scraped sand on the floorboards upstairs.

EMILY FRAGOS

*Théâtre de l'Odéon*

I could not rise from the dark and go out into the cool,  
night air of that beautiful city,

could not get on with my conniving, young life.  
What had been smooth and good became impossible, slowly,

mechanically, placing one foot in front of the next, so that legs,  
as if buried in snow, might inch along the river

and the alleys with the clochards and the cats,  
and I might seem a bright young thing again.

And all this before the shock of loss, the dying, who linger  
with their weak bodies and blank faces,

and my own stupid share of human harm  
inflicted upon the innocent,

and long before Time, that asp,  
started laughing, *laughing* at me.



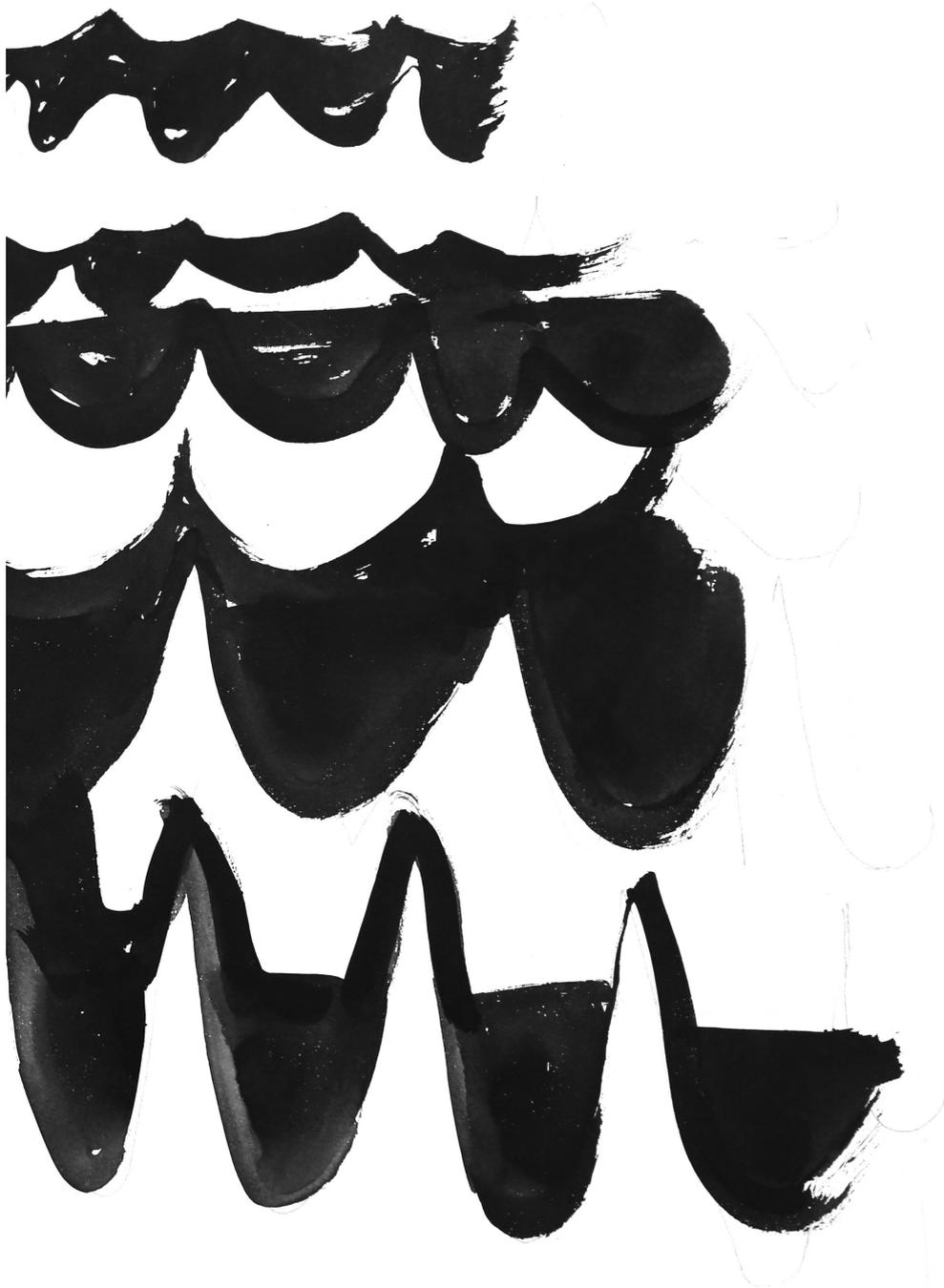
**Mira Cantor**, *Gust*, 2016, ink, 22 in. x 30 in.  
Courtesy of Kingston Gallery.

**Opposite (top): Mira Cantor**, *Spider*, 2016, ink and collage, 22 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of Kingston Gallery.

**Opposite (bottom): Mira Cantor**, *Deep*, 2016, ink, 22 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of Kingston Gallery.







**Mira Cantor**, *Water Wall*, 2016, ink, 22 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of Kingston Gallery.

**ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN**

*The Container & the Thing  
Contained*

COINS THAT HAVE BEEN SITTING in an open container send up a plume of dust when you dump them out, a little numismatic wraith. What's it made of? Plaster, dander, dead skin cells: the soul of the house and household. What does it weigh? Impossible to measure. A cup of coins is a mausoleum, in other words. Ashes; metal monuments of the great and the royal to mark the ashes: profiles, three-quarters. Straight on, and you just look like the Quaker Oats Quaker.

The container I'm speaking of is a plastic jar shaped like a fishbowl, round with a narrow opening at the top, which I found on a high bookshelf at my parents' in the days after my father's death. It was only one of many coin receptacles in the house—elsewhere were the give-away coffee mugs, the heirloom Tupperware heaving with pennies—but it had been left upstairs, where neither of my parents had been in a while. It might have once held pretzels. I picked it up. Change, when it collects, is heavy, and after someone dies it's nice to bear a weight you know you can get rid of.

First, though, I drove my parents' station wagon to Magni's, the neighborhood funeral parlor, where my brother forty years before had

attended cub scout meetings in the visitation room. We were having my father cremated, his immensity reduced to pocket change.

“They do it right in Newton Cemetery,” Mr. Magni, the old funeral director, told me in his office. (His wife had been the cub scout leader.) He had assessed me correctly: one of those morbidly curious bereaved. “They just installed a new facility, for the obese.”

“My father might need that.”

“Big boy, was he?” said Mr. Magni, who had not yet met my father’s body.

“Six-foot-three and probably 300 pounds,” I said.

“Oh, he’s *fine*,” said Mr. Magni. “I mean for the 500, 600 pound people. No, 300, that’s nothing. Your father’s small.”

“Well,” I said. “Good.”

Though how could that be? My father was the great repository. He received and contained. Deep-fried oysters, biographies of Samuel Morse, crab cakes, train schedules, sniffers of Drambuie, encyclopedia entries and how they varied from edition to edition. His motto, when you paused to decide whether to order a glass or a bottle of wine in a restaurant, was: Prudence favors the bottle. For my father, prudence always favored *more*. Even his blue eyes were gigantic, big as Kennedy half dollars, even his white goatee was halfway down his chest.

He remembered everything; it gave him pleasure. He was shy, but if he loved you, during a meal he’d lecture on any one of the subjects he was an expert at. The meal he spilled on his shirtfront, but he never misplaced a fact; never, ever lost his train of thought. “Speaking, as we were, of Millard Fillmore’s second wife,” he might say, though only he had spoken of her, and only glancingly, and an hour and a half before.

Good as he was with facts, he was lousy with things. Collected is the wrong word: he attracted objects, loved them, broke them. Coronation mugs by the dozens. Cameras by the hundreds. Books by the literal thousands. All these figures are literal. For a while he got rid of some

books by renting a storage space for them. When I announced to my mother, after his death, that I wanted to shred some of their old financial documents, she reported that he had bought a shredder but had lost it somewhere in the house.

He didn't collect coins, exactly, though he didn't do anything to stop them from collecting. He broke a bill every time he ever bought anything with cash. Counting, he thought, was a waste of time.

When he died, it was a bank failing, a big one. And all the coins—the facts—gone. Some of them existed in the world but not in that order, never in that order, and some were just gone for good, the way coins go: rolled far away, melted down, rubbed flat from use. What was amazing was how long they stayed perfect, down to the year and place of their minting.

“Now then,” old Mr. Magni said. “Urns. Is Mom going to display? The package they come in from the crematorium isn't bad. It's a box, wrapped in parchment. Here,” he said, and he went to a closet and pulled out just such a box covered in lilac paper. “Let's see,” he said, reading the label on the side. “Helen Doherty.” He set the box in my hands. “To give you an idea,” he said.

I weighed it. An idea of what? Helen Doherty, reduced, had an unsettling heft, like fruitcake.

Just then Mrs. Magni, the former cub scout leader, walked into the office. “Oh!” she said in a pleasant voice, pointing at the box. “Is that Dad?”

“This is Mrs. Doherty,” I said, and then, to explain myself, “We've only just been introduced.”

Back in my father's car I noticed months of fallen coins: on the floor, in the cupholders. I scooped them up and added them in the plastic jug from the house: I meant to be thorough.

I'm not an orderly person but I went to library school which means I like to put things in order when I can. Sorting them by denomination

was only the most obvious arrangement. They could have been organized geographically, depending on country of origin or mintmark. Or stacked by date. Or by condition: poor to mint. Encrusted to mint: some of those pennies looked as though they'd been in a shipwreck. I took them to the machine at the grocery store.

The loose change of the dead! Impersonal because you'll never recognize your lost one's change, once it has (unlike your lost one) gone back in circulation. But what's been in your palm, what's ridden in your pockets, surely knows your secrets. Felt, jingled, worried, taken for granted—all those pennies my father never counted out or passed along. At Goodwill months hence a shopper might wonder what large person had last owned this stained red cardigan; at the library book sale, who had so badly dog-eared the biography of Bismarck. But the coins would end up in somebody else's pocket, matter-of-factly, without provenance.

In the end, my father's ashes took up two of those lilac-wrapped boxes. Two fruitcakes.

The grocery store coin-counting machine had a perforated tray that sifted the grit from the coins, though I still had to handpick out the detritus: paper clips, toothpaste caps. Or maybe that's just my family. Maybe in other families, there are only coins in the coin collection.

How are people not careless? With change, I mean, flying away. I always break a bill, too.

I dreamt then, I'm still dreaming, of a kind of afterlife, a machine that would redeem not just the coins it recognized but everything. Give us something for our fallen buttons, our safety pins, our boltless hex-nuts. Don't spit that ruble coin out. A dime's a dime, machine: let's not be snobby about Canadian immigrants. The coins in the tub must have included my father's DNA, having shared the house with him so long. Mysterious feather, old campaign button, fingernail clipping: machine, I gave you these things because I thought you could put them to use. We saved them for you.

**LAUREN BROZOVICH**

*The Ware Collection of Glass  
Flowers: Delamination*

As though half-partaking of the nature of our being,  
some of the glass flowers are suffering  
from a degenerative process called delamination,  
the peeling back of each glass layer,  
sheared off, mica-like, from layer....

The ephemera were not supposed to be themselves  
ephemeral. The medium was supposed to remain  
invisible. Who would have thought that the glass  
flowers were comprised of layers upon layers, were kinds of  
vitreous palimpsests....I touch my fingertips softly to my  
lips, smooth as the pale petals of Satiny Calochortus,  
trying to quiet my soul sufficiently  
to contemplate the end. Or, I should say, an end. An end  
of another kind. Not the end towards which the teleological  
arc of the flower's shape of purposiveness strains—the Slender Day-  
flower, the near-translucence of its stem of the liquid  
greens of tsavorite garnet, irrelevancies of color infused  
into the crinkled edges of a corolla,  
blue-lavender in a matte finish—  
my mind flickering knowledge, non-knowledge, knowledge,  
non-knowledge, as it collides  
with this chromatic declension of the inscrutable,

with this crossing of the physical with the metaphysical.  
 Because the flower taken as whole  
 was supposed to remain just that: whole.  
 For, even as they code for loss,  
 these heightened enamelings tilt  
 forward presence, so that the museum exhibit itself  
 becomes, in its silences, a place in which one can be  
 alone in the presence of presence,  
 the mind opening to ever-widening apertures....  
 We want to be out of the frame of reference.  
 We want to be in relation to the end.  
 We want to experience consolation,  
 to see and breathe in the non-photosynthesizing presence  
 of consolatory forms. For I have thus far omitted  
 a crucial fact from the record: the glass flowers  
 stemmed from grief but were the natural signs of  
 consolation. In a film made by the Corning Museum  
 of Glass, over a slow montage of filmic stills, a few frames  
 of subtitles read: Leopold Blaschka “had two  
 enormous setbacks / early in his life. / Firstly,  
 he lost his wife / during a cholera epidemic. /  
 And two years later, his father died. /  
 He was heartbroken. /  
 He sought consolation in the natural world /  
 sketching the plants in the / countryside around his home.”  
 He was heartbroken, infusing his breath  
 into snowberries, snowballs, snowdrops,  
 into snow-on-the-mountain with its glassy-haired pistil  
 throughout the frigid winters of Dresden....  
 The consolation is that the soul has been given a body—

but the body is not lasting, is not even pure.

Overheard in the exhibit: *C'est rigide mais avec de la fragilité.*

The first trial specimens, after having been shipped from Dresden, were badly damaged in Customs, leaving only

fragmentary remains—broken models of strawberries, crystallized fritillaria, moccasin flowers (otherwise known as showy

lady's slippers), star-flowers. Both Goodale and the Wares, however, were entranced by the models, even in their half-shattered state,

and commissioned the Blaschkas to create the Ware Collection of Botanical Models to fill Harvard's

"sequence of empty rooms." Safer means of transport via steamship were devised: "The original packing box, used in

1894, shows a finished model wired on firm cardboard

and cushioned by tissue paper. The sturdy cardboard model boxes

were surrounded with straw padding

and packed together in a large wooden crate."

I have always thought of each species as

a kind of prime number, a kind of chemical element

(chromium, cobalt, cadmium), in an isomorphic mapping

between the real and the ideal—something indivisible and

therefore beautiful, incapable of being subdivided into

constituent factors, once extinguished, extinguished

absolutely....this almost a possible, embodied definition

of the beautiful in this quickly unraveling world....

For some reason, I love to breathe in the

non-photosynthesized, dehumidified air

in this exhibit, wish to spend

so many of my finite moments in the presence of

these glassy, life-like specimens, do not mind

supporting the weight of my own body

LAUREN BROZOVICH

as I am leaning perpetually forward,  
do not mind being torn between numbers and words,  
or even the strain in my eyes induced  
by the elegantly diminutive print.

**MARGOT LIVESEY**

## *Nothing Is Simply One Thing*

She always had the feeling that it was very,  
very dangerous to live even one day.

—Mrs. Dalloway

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS after her death in 1941, Virginia Woolf remains, as she was in her lifetime, a household name among writers and readers. She has one of the all-time best author photographs, the title of a famous play contains her name, and *A Room of One's Own* is part of the feminist canon. She is regarded as one of the great Modernist novelists, indeed one of the writers who helped to invent Modernism. All of this might make us forget that for thirty years after her death she was seen as a marginal figure and that even now, I would suggest, her name, outside of college classrooms, is mentioned more often than her pages are read. *To the Lighthouse* is widely regarded as her most significant novel and remains a stubborn, radiant, difficult, and truthful book, one that I believe repays our attention and to which many writers, know it or not, like it or not, are indebted.

As in much of Woolf's best work, *To the Lighthouse* combines deeply autobiographical material with a clear aesthetic agenda. She is—it cannot be said too often—one of our foremost stylists; her sentences and paragraphs have much to teach all practicing writers. But it is, I think, from examining the way in which she explains her aesthetic principles

and then uses these to shape her material that we can learn the most. Every writer has a set of aesthetic beliefs, often not fully articulated—but very seldom do I hear myself, or my friends, cite these beliefs to defend or explain our work. Most of us, I suspect, have not taken the trouble to figure out what we are writing against. Nor what we are writing towards. We are writing, more or less, in the tradition of realism. Does anything more need to be said? I would argue the answer is yes. We have much to gain from figuring out, as Woolf did in her letters, essays, and reviews, what our beliefs are and how we can more fully embody them in our work.

Perhaps the word “aesthetic” has a daunting ring, so let me suggest a more pragmatic approach. Let us follow Woolf’s example and ask ourselves four questions.

1. Which writers, past or present, can teach us the most, and give us the best tools, for our own work?
2. What makes characters real for us as readers, and how, as writers, can we create such characters in our work?
3. What is new in the world that we need to capture in our novels and stories?
4. How can the answers to these first three questions help us to shape our intimate material in a way that rescues it from the dangers of mere autobiography?

Woolf spent much of her writing life asking, and answering, these questions. Her journey to the lighthouse required her to resolve various intellectual challenges as well as her relationship to her family history. No wonder ten years have to pass before Mr. Ramsay finally jumps ashore.

Virginia was born in 1882 into what she described as “a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth cen-

tury world.” Her father, Leslie Stephen, was a writer and literary critic. The year she was born he embarked on the *Dictionary of National Biography* which, in 1902, would earn him a knighthood. Her mother, Julia Duckworth, was a famous beauty (when that seems to have been a full-time job) and related to the famous photographer Julia Cameron. Julia and Leslie began their marriage with four children—each had already been married and widowed—and had four more between them, of whom Virginia was the third. In their busy household, Virginia later wrote, she could hardly remember ever being alone with her mother.

Her childhood was divided between their large London house and the house they leased in Cornwall. Every summer, the entire household moved down to the seaside town of St. Ives for several months. This annual migration ended abruptly with Julia’s death in May 1895, when Virginia was thirteen. The idyllic house, with the sea nearby and the lighthouse in the distance, became even more idyllic by virtue of being forever lost. Leslie widowed for a second time, mourned his wife with desperate tyranny. No one else was allowed to mourn her; no one else was mourning her sufficiently. Virginia learned early to scrutinize her emotions—and often to find them wanting. Her half-sister, Stella, took over the running of the household, but in 1897, only a few months after her marriage, she, too, died suddenly. “We never spoke of them,” Virginia wrote. “I can remember how awkwardly Thoby avoided saying ‘Stella’ when a ship called Stella was wrecked.” (Thoby, her older brother, died in 1906.)

While her brothers attended school and went on to Cambridge University, Virginia and her older sister Vanessa (later the painter Vanessa Bell) were educated at home and given the run of their father’s library. Although Virginia famously wrote in her diary that if Leslie hadn’t died, there would have been no novels, no work, he nevertheless took his daughters seriously and gave them unusual intellectual

freedom. After he died from cancer in 1904, the four siblings moved into a house in the neighborhood of London known as Bloomsbury. Henry James, a long-time acquaintance of the family, was particularly appalled by their Bohemian lifestyle. Virginia began to publish reviews and Thoby and Adrian, her younger brother, brought their university friends to visit. Among these young men was Leonard Woolf, whom Virginia finally married in 1912—the same year in which the *Titanic* sank, Captain Scott reached the South Pole, and Thomas Mann published *Death in Venice*.

The year after her marriage, Virginia finished her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and had a nervous breakdown, her third, during which she made a suicide attempt, her second. Woolf's biographer, Hermione Lee, whose wonderful biography I'm indebted to throughout this essay, writes that Leonard made Virginia's illness one of his life's works. "He documents her illness," Lee writes, "with the same scrupulous integrity, exhaustiveness and attempt at objectivity that he would apply to the minutes of the Labour Party's Advisory Committee on International Relations." He tried to keep Virginia from becoming overly stimulated, or overly tired, both of which sometimes led to the episodes of madness (her word) that she experienced throughout her life. It was his decision that they should not have children. On March 28, 1941, driven to despair by the voices in her head, Virginia walked into the River Ouse with stones in her pockets. She was fifty-nine years old. Leonard survived her by more than twenty-five years. In 1965, he went to see Edward Albee's play—he had given permission for the title—and noted how moved he was by *George and Martha* and the theme of childlessness. With admirable if infuriating discretion, he never divulged exactly how he and Virginia negotiated this question, or many others, during their long marriage.

I mention these details not to pathologize one of our most productive writers, but because Virginia's relationship with her own consciousness,

her acute awareness of moments of being, and her struggle to find language in which to convey those moments, along with her mental and physical states, lies at the heart of her aesthetics and informs all her mature work. Here she is writing in her diary in 1937, shortly before the publication of *The Years*.

I wish I could write out my sensations at this moment. They are so peculiar & so unpleasant. Partly T of L? [Time of Life] I wonder. A physical feeling as if I were drumming slightly in the veins: very cold: impotent: & terrified. As if I were exposed on a high ledge in full light. Very lonely. L. out to lunch. Nessa has Quentin & don't want me. Very useless. No atmosphere round me. No words. Very apprehensive. As if something cold & horrible—a roar of laughter at my expense were about to happen. And I am powerless to ward it off: I have no protection.

According to her nephew Quentin Bell, Woolf could not bear to record her mental state during her breakdowns; what she mostly spoke of were the physical symptoms—the drumming, the cold, the lack of atmosphere—that accompanied her illnesses.

Despite Virginia's ill health during the first years of their marriage, she and Leonard became companions and helpmates, sharing work and a wide social circle. By the time she published *To the Lighthouse* in 1927, she was forty-five and had, as she herself acknowledged, more freedom than any other writer in England. This was due not so much to her fame, although she was becoming better known every year, but to her work being published by the Hogarth Press, which she and Leonard had started in 1917 and ran together. If Leonard approved—and he did—then the work was published. In 1922 he thought *Jacob's Room* her best work, a work of genius. In 1925 he thought *Mrs. Dalloway* her best. In 1927 we find Virginia writing in her diary, "Well

Leonard has read *To the Lighthouse*, and says it is much my best book, and it is a ‘masterpiece.’ . . . He calls it entirely new—‘a psychological poem’ is his name for it.” It’s hard not to wish that every writer could have her own Leonard.

Woolf not only had unusual freedom as a writer; she was also unusually prolific in four genres. As a fiction writer, she wrote novels and stories. As a critic, she wrote close to five hundred reviews, essays, and lectures. She kept a diary, which she was always railing against—why am I writing here again? she asks repeatedly. And she wrote many, many letters. All of this material has contributed to her reputation and gives us a remarkable degree of insight into her methods as a writer. Moreover, through the Hogarth Press, through her friendships and her reviewing, she was deeply involved with other writers and acutely aware of what was going on in literature and art. Despite her productivity, her early work was not particularly precocious. It was not until she was nearly forty, working on *Jacob’s Room* in the aftermath of the First World War, that she felt she had begun at last to find her voice, her vision.

In her famous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” first delivered as a talk to the Heretics Club in 1924, Woolf offers a strong argument for her aesthetics. In doing so she describes three groups of writers: the Victorians whom she by and large admires; her immediate predecessors the Edwardians—Mr. Bennett, Mr. Galsworthy, and H.G. Wells—whom she by and large deplores, and herself and her peers, whom she calls the Georgians, and whom we now call the Modernists. Among these Woolf numbers E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce (the Hogarth press rejected *Ulysses* because it was too long), and T. S. Eliot (whom the press briefly published before he took his work elsewhere). The list includes no women but, by implication, Woolf includes herself, Katherine Mansfield, and Elizabeth Bowen. At the end of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” she writes, “I will

make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature.” In fact, by 1924 there was nothing rash about the prediction. The great age was fully present.

Like *A Room of One's Own*, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” began as a talk, and like that iconic work it retains the freshness of her speaking voice. She begins by making two assertions—everyone in this room is a judge of character and, more debatable, “on or about December 1910, human character changed.” This was the year that Edward VII died and was succeeded by George V, but the specific date is commonly taken to refer to the exhibition of Impressionist paintings organized by Woolf’s friend, the painter and critic Roger Fry, which opened in London in November 1910. Impressionism has become so familiar, almost a cliché, that it’s hard to remember how revolutionary it was to think of art as not being representational. A rose was a rose was a rose. Now, suddenly, the subjective—who saw the rose, how they saw it—was as important, sometimes even more important, than the actual flower. When, in *To the Lighthouse*, the painter Lily Briscoe asks what Mr. Ramsay’s work is about, his son Andrew says, “Subject and object and the nature of reality; . . . And when she [Lily] said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. ‘Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you’re not there.’”

At the heart of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” is an argument about character: what it is and how, at the deepest and most truthful level, it can be conjured onto the page. Woolf’s main objection to the Edwardians, what she is writing against, is their obfuscating didacticism which she claims conceals rather than reveals character. She and her colleagues are the new realists, the writers who are trying to portray the shifts in human nature and in the contemporary world. Only a few years later, in 1927, the German physicist, Werner Heisenberg, published what became known as the uncertainty principle, but Woolf was already aware that uncertainty was going to be one of the ruling principles of her

century. Near the end of *To the Lighthouse*, one of the characters thinks, “Nothing is simply one thing,”—a sentence that could stand as a motto both for the life of this complicated writer, and for the experience of reading her fiction.

Woolf returns over and over in her work to two pressing questions: how to capture the simultaneity of experience and, increasingly as she grows older, how to capture the sensibility of women. She herself worries that no one likes her hat and that no one likes her novels. Can she include both kinds of worry in her work? This is the writer who refers to having her hair “bingled,”—i.e., cut short—as one of the great events of her life; from behind, she says, she looks like a partridge’s rear. She is also the writer who claims that women have to invent a new syntax and yet write androgynously. She hoped *Mrs. Dalloway* was a masterpiece and was thrilled that it earned enough money for the Woolfs to have an indoor toilet installed at their country home. (She and Leonard enjoyed showing guests how well it flushed.)

On May 14, 1925, the day *Mrs. Dalloway* was published, she wrote in her diary about her idea for a new novel.

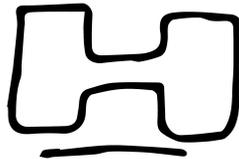
This is going to be fairly short: to have father’s character done complete in it: & mother’s; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death, &c. But the centre is father’s character, sitting in a boat, reciting *We perished*, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel—However, I must refrain. I must write a few little stories first, & let the Lighthouse simmer, adding to it between tea & dinner till it is complete for writing out.

Later she would tell her sister Vanessa that the Lighthouse had come to her all at once, in a great rush, as she walked round Tavistock Square near her home in London.

Note that word “complete,” used twice in the above paragraph and an important term in Woolf’s aesthetic vocabulary. For her, a good novel is a complete novel; we can hold it whole in our minds and when we get to the end of it all we want to do is re-read it, to understand it more deeply. As examples she gives Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and the work of Jane Austen. “When you think of a great novel,” she claims, “you think of a character and then you think of all the things you think of through that character’s eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul.” The job of the novelist, she contends, is to show us character and the world through character.

For the next few months, after having her rush of ideas, Woolf gathered ingredients for the novel, waiting for it to “simmer,” to “thicken.” “The sea,” she writes, “is to be heard throughout.” She was worried that the theme might be sentimental—to her one of the great vices and a charge one reviewer had brought against *Mrs. Dalloway*. And she pondered whether *To the Lighthouse* would really be a novel, or should it be called something else, perhaps an elegy?

By August 1925, she knew that the novel would be in three parts—part I would have “a sense of waiting, of expectation: the child waiting to go to the lighthouse: the woman awaiting the return of the couple.” Joining parts I and III would be “an interesting experiment . . . giving the sense of ten years passing.” She also records that the emphasis has now shifted from Mr. Ramsay to Mrs. Ramsay and includes a little sketch of the new work: “Two blocks joined by a corridor.” The corridor, the middle part where ten years pass, was going to contain all the lyrical passages she wanted to write so that they wouldn’t interrupt the narrative elsewhere.



Woolf's planning of the novel fills me with admiration. Like many writers I know, I do not (so far) outline my work in advance. I begin a novel with a destination in mind but the route is shadowy. Any attempt to map the journey will, I worry, render the unwritten novel artificial and ridiculous. But Woolf is fearless in setting up goals and markers for herself. I wonder if she knew of Henry James's notebooks in which he famously worked out the plots of several of his great novels, going back to them in entry after entry until the psychological arc was finally clear.

One more thing we need to keep in mind as we approach *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's objections to the Edwardians. They want, she claims, something from their reader; their books are incomplete and they force us to go outside the book. "I believe," she writes in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "that all novels . . . Deal with character, and that it is to express character,—not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved." Much of the essay describes a short train journey from Richmond to London and Woolf's observations of two of her fellow passengers: a woman in her sixties whom she calls Mrs. Brown and a man in his forties, whom she calls Mr. Smith. From the details of their appearance and the exchanges she overhears, she invents a rich inner life and a dramatic history. On first reading the essay I assumed that much of this was fictionalized in tranquility, but Nigel Nicolson with whose mother, the writer Vita Sackville-West, Virginia had a passionate affair, gives a vivid account of Virginia entertaining him as a small boy by making up stories about the strangers they met.

*To the Lighthouse* surely does strike some readers as "clumsy, verbose and undramatic." As an early reviewer remarked, it is a novel in which nothing and everything happens. Each of the three parts is narrated in the third person, in short numbered sections—some only a few lines

long, some a dozen pages—and each takes place in the same location, a large house by the sea. Woolf describes the house as being in the Hebrides in Scotland but she makes almost no effort to disguise her beloved Cornwall.

Part I, “The Window,” follows one evening in the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their eight children, their guests, and their, for the most part, conveniently invisible servants. From the opening page, which describes Mrs. Ramsay sitting with her youngest child, the six-year-old James, while he cuts pictures out of a catalogue, the point of view moves fluently among the various characters and occasionally invokes an omniscient narrator. The reader, especially in these opening sections, must sit at attention as Woolf ignores the normal boundaries and transitions and gathers facts, thoughts and sensations together in long, sinuous sentences. Yes, if it’s fine, Mrs. Ramsay tells James, they can go to the lighthouse tomorrow. But Mr. Ramsay, walking in the garden, overhears and announces, quite crossly, that the weather won’t be fine. James wants to gash a hole in his father’s breast and kill him.

In the hundred and twenty pages that follow, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay argue and are reconciled. We are shown Mr. Ramsay’s doubts: is he a genius? In the alphabet of knowledge will he ever get past Q? Will his books last? We are shown Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty and her insight into her husband’s frailty. She believes in protecting men, all men, and she believes that everyone should be married. She thinks about the couple for whose return she is waiting: Paul and Minta, two of the younger guests, who have gone for a walk by the sea. Meanwhile in the garden, Lily Briscoe, a single woman in her thirties, struggles to paint a picture of the house, including Mrs. Ramsay seated at the window. Other guests—Mr. Ramsay’s acolyte, Charles Tansley, his colleague Mr. Bankes, and Mr. Carmichael, a poet—come and go.

The zenith of the evening is a wonderfully Proustian dinner of *Boeuf en Daube*. The whole company, save for the youngest children,

assembles around a table in the dining room. At first the dinner seems headed for disaster. “Nothing seems to have merged,” Mrs. Ramsay thinks. “They all sat separate.” But by a valiant effort, and with the help of Lily Briscoe, the candlelight, and the delicious food, she brings everyone together. Paul and Minta arrive late, “horribly late,” Minta exclaims, and Mrs. Ramsay knows at once that they are engaged. Just for a moment the chaos of life is averted and everyone is caught in a golden net, merged and complete. This kind of unity is what Lily’s painting promises and what Mr. Ramsay is seeking as he struggles to get past Q. Woolf described the scene as one of the best things she’d ever written, a triumph of her method. “The Window” ends with Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay alone in a room together, reading. Mrs. Ramsay refuses to say she loves him but acknowledges that, yes, he was right about the weather. It was going to be wet tomorrow.

Part II, “Time Passes,”—the corridor—begins the same evening with the characters extinguishing the lights and heading to bed. Woolf purposefully echoes Lord Grey’s famous remark on the eve of the First World War: “the lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.” The sixteen pages that follow cover ten years, during which Mrs. Ramsay dies and also two of the children, Andrew in the War, Prue in childbirth. The deaths are dealt with briefly and factually; they are, literally, in parentheses. Here is Mrs. Ramsay’s death. “(Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.)” “We never spoke of them.”

Most of “Time Passes” is devoted to the house, which, for nearly a decade, is almost overwhelmed by wind and weather only to be rescued, when the family announces their return, by two stalwart women. Woolf wrote this section during the general strike of 1926, which brought London to a standstill and which, as people waited anxiously, in darkness,

for more information, reminded many of the war. She herself noted how the strike had crept into her work: the stalwart women can be read as representatives of the stoic working people.

Part III, “The Lighthouse,” like “The Window,” takes place within a few hours. Mr. Ramsay, some of his children, and some of the guests have returned to the house. Finally, the long-delayed voyage occurs. The narrative alternates between Mr. Ramsay in the boat with two of his children, James and Cam, sailing towards the lighthouse, and Lily Briscoe in the garden, once again struggling to paint a picture of the house.

As she paints, Lily attempts to sort out her thoughts and feelings about Mrs. Ramsay who, in death, looms almost as large as she did in life. “Think about a table when you’re not there.” Or when it’s not there. The descriptions of Mrs. Ramsay are informed both by Woolf’s memories of her mother and by her affair with Vita Sackville-West, which was then at its most passionate. Meanwhile, not far from Lily’s easel, Augustus Carmichael, the poet, sleeps and reads—a silent guardian, or perhaps a witness, to her struggles with art and memory.

The novel ends with Mr. Ramsay arriving at the lighthouse—“He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, ‘There is no God,’ and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock.” In the garden Lily and Mr. Carmichael both sense his arrival. Lily takes up her brush and “with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” The last sentence of the novel, like the first, begins with the word “yes.”

The sentence above describing Mr. Ramsay’s arrival, which moves between James’s point of view and Cam’s, and also that of a more omniscient narrator, is a good example of the demands Woolf places on her

reader. Then too, sometimes without warning, the narrative darts into the past. Woolf did not believe in traditional exposition and we learn little about the history of most of the characters. Rather, she plunges us into the sensations of their lives. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” she takes the Edwardians to task for their approach to creating character. “I asked them—they are my elders and betters—How shall I begin to describe this woman’s character? And they said: “Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of the shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe—”

She goes on to explain the tremendous efforts that the Georgian writers, she and her friends, have made to tell the truth, and the struggle to do so, given the outmoded tools they have inherited. James Joyce, she writes, is like a man who breaks the window in order to breathe. “We must reflect,” she continues, “that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition.” Several pages of the essay are devoted to the contract between writer and reader. She urges readers to be more demanding. “Your part is to insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown . . . But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her.”

Woolf, when she gave this talk, had not yet embarked on *To the Lighthouse*, but her words offer a helpful insight into her view of the role of the reader. Readers need to demand beauty and truth, but they do not get to demand that novelists take care of them, or make things easy. In a letter to her brother-in-law, Clive Bell, Woolf perceptively remarked, “I feel I have so few of the gifts that make novels amusing.” The opening pages of *To the Lighthouse* in particular demand a lot of the reader, but they do so because Woolf believed that this was the only way to present the complexity of experience.

Her aesthetic agenda also makes clear why her best known novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, cover such short periods of time; a single day in the former, and a handful of hours, plus ten years, in the latter. In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf wrote, “The present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else.” She does not have time for conventional plots that require the passage of days and weeks. For her the excitement and importance of the novel is the depth to which it can allow us to enter into the consciousness of a character, and to see the world through that consciousness. How can prose, which is linear, hope to convey that everyone, at almost every moment, is experiencing simultaneously so many things?

Many of us, as writers, probably need more external story than Woolf offers in her major fiction. She has almost no interest in conventional plot and suspense, but she is very interested in the larger seismic shifts of society. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” she claims that, “All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature.” In her efforts to portray these changes, she shows us how to be ambitious for our work. While writing in our own very different forms we can share her goals of creating deep, contradictory characters, of portraying a new sensibility that reveals the new reality, and of writing sentences that might elicit the kind of admiration that Clive Bell offers to hers. “What is Virginia doing now,” he writes, “at half past three o’clock. Moulding one of those delicately tangible sentences which remind me of nothing so much as a live bird in the hand, the heart beating through tumultuously.”

In workshops and in private conversations my students seldom appeal to a larger aesthetic vision to justify their choices. Indeed the most common defense of fiction remains the oxymoron: this really happened.

It's easy to imagine the first thirty pages of *To the Lighthouse* faring poorly in a workshop discussion, and not through any fault of the workshop; the pages are difficult, confusing, and demanding. But it's also easy to imagine Woolf defending the pages, pointing to what she thinks fiction should accomplish, showing how her sentences fulfill these demands. Here she is, in 1926, in the thick of *To the Lighthouse*, writing to Vita.

Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words . . . Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (Which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it.

Given this amazing ambition, to make a wave in the mind—"the sea is to be heard throughout"—one might even argue that Woolf's style is surprisingly simple.

I find the argument that Woolf presents in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" very persuasive, but it is interesting to note that a large part of the essay is a beautiful and very conventional character sketch of Mrs. Brown and her interactions with Mr. Smith. We see Mrs. Brown with her tidy threadbare clothes and clean little boots; we hear her speak; we speculate about her thoughts, her feelings, and her history.

"Can you tell me," she asks Mr. Smith, "if an oak-tree dies when the leaves have been eaten for two years in succession by caterpillars?"

She spoke quite brightly, and rather precisely, in a cultivated, inquisitive voice.

Mr. Smith was startled, but relieved to have a safe topic of conversation given him. He told her a great deal very quickly . . . While he talked a very odd thing happened. Mrs. Brown took out her little white handkerchief and began to dab her eyes. She was crying.

Paragraph after paragraph, the descriptions build and deepen and complicate in smoothly written prose. But Woolf herself claims that Mrs. Brown has slipped through her fingers; she has shirked the arduous task of getting her on the page. In *To the Lighthouse*, the narrator seldom presents her characters with such clarity. She refuses to sum them up but instead enters into them at the deepest, murkiest level. We are wading through the rag and bone shop of the mind and heart. We see them as they see themselves; we see them as others see them. Forget the Impressionists and think of Picasso depicting a woman's face, fractured, from several angles.

The idea for *To the Lighthouse* may have been suggested to Woolf by the shades of her dead parents, but she was adamant that she did not want to write fiction that was solely biographical or autobiographical. The novel had to be about something more, something larger—an elegy not only for two individuals but also for Europe before the War. And, in the figure of Lily Briscoe, an artist and the main observer of the struggle between Mrs. Ramsay's intuitions and Mr. Ramsay's reasons, she was also able to question the whole notion of representation and of how experience is conveyed from one person to another. Woolf thought the novel was the best thing she ever wrote, and when it was done she noticed something remarkable. From the ages of thirteen to forty-four she had been obsessed with her mother, but after writing *To the Lighthouse*, her mother disappeared. "I no longer hear her voice," she wrote. "I do not see her." The novel turned out to be not only an elegy but an exorcism.

If she were alive and writing now, Woolf would surely be pondering the many shifts in consciousness that have occurred since the Second World War. She would be writing and arguing about what it means to write in a time of such interconnectedness, when news flashes around the world in minutes, when many more people feel free to experiment with the shifting nature of sexual identity, when issues of race, class, religion, and citizenship are more complicated and vexing than ever before, when nature and climate can no longer be safely taken for granted. She would be teaching us how to resist the platitudes of thought and feeling that we sometimes succumb to, and to keep questioning the gap between lived experience and the page. Now more than ever, when so many writers are at work, it behooves us to figure out what we value in fiction, what we are writing towards and against, and how our work can more accurately capture the chaos of experience in the golden net of consciousness. “Nothing is simply one thing.”





**Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Vanities of Ambition*, 2014, charcoal on paper, 40 in. x 26 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.

**Opposite: Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Apocalypse VI*, 2013, charcoal on paper, 80 in. x 45 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.



**Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Carmen Cornucopia*, 2013, charcoal on paper, 77 in. x 52 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.



**Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Carmen Floral*, 2014, charcoal on paper,  
68 in. x 29 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.



**Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Gringoland*, 2014, charcoal on paper,  
60 in. x 52 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.



**Gonzalo Fuenmayor**, *Blank*, 2012, charcoal on paper,  
22.5 in. x 22.5 in. Courtesy of Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami.

**SARAH BRAUNSTEIN**

## *Authority*

SHE'S LOVESICK in all the ordinary ways. The field in her stomach is fallow. The moon in her head cloud-covered. Well in her throat dry. On and on. Can't sleep, can't eat, can't speak his name. Yes, she knows the world is full of people like her. But she, alone in the world, is suffering the loss of this man.

She goes to a café, drinks cup after cup of coffee. Coffee is the only comfort, rattles her, touches some part of her body that's no longer being touched. The café is called The Grind House. On its walls are the lurid, half-witted paintings of a local artist. If the artist were developmentally disabled, if this were one of those charity things, proceeds to a homeless shelter or social service agency, she'd purchase the huge acrylic of the blue-skinned man with snow-white pectorals. She would hang it on her wall, over the mantel above the defunct fireplace, and she would tell her guests that the artist was blind or brain-injured. An *outsider*. But the artist's statement makes it clear he's just pompous, untalented, inflated by the praise of his community college art teacher, Mrs. Jean Lazlo, to whom the exhibit is dedicated.

She is disappointed that the artist is not brain-injured. He deserves a brain injury.

She is terrible. She is mad with grief.

At The Grind House one finds hipsters, retirees, parents wearing babies in batik slings. One finds a man who is none of these things, who doesn't belong. He is typing on a computer, beating on it, his jaw set. He keeps looking up from his computer and trying to catch her eye. She lets it be caught. Tall, barrel-chested, bald, he wears tan Carhartt pants and a red fleece jacket. His eyes burn with ability. A wide face, clear eyes, pale white skin. His head is fiercely bald, gleaming. He is bald by choice, one of those men who takes his hair situation into his own hands. His head shines. In all ways he is in control of his body.

And he has a gun. When he gets up to refill his coffee, she can see the gun in a holster at his side, nestled there, a lump, hidden by the fabric of his shirt. She can't stop looking at it.

The other man, the man for whom she is pining, doesn't carry a gun. His weapon is the whip of his intellect, or the switchblade of his low, clear voice. "I've become involved with someone else," he said one day, without apology or ceremony. No, his weapon is his self-control. Yes, that. It is a goddamn bazooka. His voice did not shake a bit. He did it over the phone.

But this man has a real gun, and they have been eyeing each other, and now he has come to her table and introduced himself. His name is Oliver. He's newish to the neighborhood. Can he sit for a moment? He can, she says. She tells him her name: Lorrie. They commiserate about the weather, exchange sighs of longing for spring. Then he says, "This art, huh?" They laugh at it, the blue man, the neon pink dandelions, knock-off Van Gogh hallucinations. "Terrible art," he says, "abysmal." The subtext is this: he looks like a thug, yes, but she can trust his aesthetic sensibilities. The subtext is: see how he knows the word *abysmal*? It doesn't fail to reassure. He tells her he's divorced, has two sons in their early twenties. He gives her a look that means it's allowable for her to show surprise that he has twenty-something sons. She says, "You look too young to have twenty-something sons."

“I was a kid when Jimmy was born. Only nineteen.”

“Ah. That is young.”

“Jake at twenty-two. Those were rough years, but I wouldn’t change it. Not for anything.”

His phone rings. He lifts a finger, constructs a face of exaggerated impatience, and answers. Then he is speaking Arabic. She recognizes the language; many of her clients speak it. He goes on for half a minute. He hangs up.

“Sorry,” he says. “Work. Never stops.”

“Was that Arabic?”

He checks his watch, takes a sip of coffee, and smiles. “You want to go for a ride, Lorrie?”

She does not. She does. She does not. She feels reckless. It feels at once impossible to go home alone. He has a gun. Somewhere, in some pocket, she’s sure there is a badge. He is official, it’s everywhere on him, though she knows that doesn’t make him any less dangerous.

The ride is a dark blue pickup truck that starts with a roar. The cab smells like a Christmas tree. He says, “Tell me about your life.” A benevolent request, but she doesn’t want to talk about that. What can she say? I am the kind of lawyer who isn’t rich. I work on behalf of poor people and refugees and prostitutes. I have a father who says: Are you allergic to money? I am allergic to shrimp. I am in love. I have been left. I am in grotesque, mindless, abiding pain. I am curious about your gun.

Before she can answer the phone rings again. This time he speaks English: “I don’t know ... tomorrow? Tuesday latest ... Well if that sonofabitch can’t subtract five from fifty he better go back to first fricken grade.”

He hangs up. They are driving out of their small, safe city, leaving it behind.

“Work,” he grunts.

“What kind?”

He thinks. He says, “The kind that never ever stops.”

The sky is white-gray, an old bed sheet. The heater blasts, bakes the piney smell into something more chemical.

“Where are we going today?” she asks, as if this is their ritual Sunday drive.

“Where do you want?”

“I don’t know.” Freedom swells in her stomach. “Bermuda? The moon?”

“I’ll need gas.”

“How about Mars?”

“The red planet. Good choice.” His hands are meaty, his nails clean and trimmed, glossy white, like mother-of-pearl buttons. He holds the wheel at ten and two.

The sun continues its descent. She closes her eyes. “This is nice,” she says. She feels she is being lifted away from something. They are one mile out of the city.

“I’ve seen you at the café before,” he says. “In your yellow hat. I always noticed that yellow hat. The earflaps. And how big your eyes are. My kids had eyes like that when they were five. I wish my kids could’ve kept those eyes.”

He bought the hat for her, the man who broke her heart. She touches her head. She’s always wearing it.

“You always look kind of sad,” he says. “Are you sad?”

“I’m tired,” she says, her throat catching. “Even after all that coffee.” She leans her cheek against the cool window. Two miles out.

“I couldn’t imagine getting tired of you.” He says it matter-of-factly, almost meanly, so it doesn’t feel like flirtation.

Three miles.

His phone rings again. He answers, says, “Damn.” Says, “Be right there. Damn.” He hangs up.

He says, "I have to go back for a minute. Just a minute. Then we can head to Hallowell. That's where I thought we'd go, if you're game. To my place in Hallowell. You ever been up there? I've got a cabin. Piles of DVDs. A vat of ancient whiskey. It'll change your life. Perfectly preserved two-thousand-year-old whiskey"

"Jesus whiskey?"

He's laughing, pulling off the highway, changing direction.

"It'll give you religion, I promise you that. And great DVDs. You want Mars? I've got that new movie about the Mars settlers. Randy Cox and Chloe what's-her-name. You've seen that? You game? We can drink whiskey and watch it, but first I have to go back and check on something. Work. Never stops."

"*Red Storm Rising*," she says. That's the name of the movie. It's exactly what she wants, an alien landscape, slow-mo explosions, silver contrails, space suits that highlight the actresses' cleavage. She says she's game. She could ask about the gun but she decides not to, not yet. The movie, the gun, appeal to the twelve-year-old boy inside her. She has the urge to throw her yellow hat out the window. Why is she wearing that hat? Why are her eyes so big? She doesn't want anyone to admire her eyes except him, the man who's left her. She doesn't want to drink Jesus whiskey with anyone but him, in his garret apartment atop a faded Victorian house in Boston, only him, cross-legged on the wood floor, the two of them in their underwear, facing each other, looking at each other as the afternoon dims and his cat pukes in the other room.

"I guess I am sad," she says.

"Whoever he is, he didn't deserve you."

"Dupont," she says.

"That's his name? The bozo?"

"The actress. The actress is Chloe Dupont."

"Right," he says. "Pretty girl."

“Did you see her sex tape?”

“I did,” he admits, so she admits it too. Everyone’s seen it. She can’t think of one person who hasn’t.

It’s a kid they’ve gone back for, practically a boy. Oliver’s truck, idling at a corner, makes a low, efficient hum. He says, “This’ll just be a second.”

She knows who they’re watching. Not the old guy in a plaid jacket fixing his fence. Not the mom pulling a toddler along by the arm or the ruddy Mainers huddled at the bus stop. They’ve come for a kid, twenty-five at most, sitting on the stoop of an apartment building. He’s talking on a cell phone, gesticulating with his free hand. He wears jeans, a loose-fitting leather jacket, shiny black shoes that belong with a formal suit. Middle-eastern—she can’t be more precise than that. His hair is short, neat, oily like ink. He has a handsome face, narrow, thickly browed. It calls to mind an irritable puppet; it owes a debt to Bert. He is talking on a cell phone, animatedly, fiercely. They watch in silence.

Oliver leans across her, opens the glove compartment. He retrieves something small, black, and gleaming. He holds it up near his face, and for a moment she thinks—Another gun! He’s going to kill this kid!—but there’s a soft *click* and she understands, no, it’s a camera, a slim camera. *Click click click*. That’s it. Then they’re gone. He pulls away, drives back to the interstate, and while he drives he makes another phone call. Arabic again, but his voice is lower, more relaxed. He hangs up.

“All set,” he says. “Sorry about that.”

“Arabic, right?” She wants him to confirm it. She turns to look at him.

He only says: “It never ends.”

“Is that kid—guilty?” She doesn’t fully know what she means.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes it’s Arabic. Learned in Kuwait. Got a real ear for language, turns out. Never knew how good an ear until Kuwait. I ended up tutoring my buddies.”

“Kuwait,” she says. “You’re in the military?”

“No,” he says. “Are you?”

He is mocking her ignorance, her choice to get in the truck with a man she knows nothing about. He’s right, of course—she’s ignorant, this is bad judgment—but it’s not his place to tell her. She should get out before they’re back on the highway. She should go home to her apartment, thaw some dumplings, watch a show about hoarders or middle-aged virgins or the urban gardeners of Detroit. But she’s too curious, too tired. He keeps driving.

The man she loves, who’s broken her heart, is Indian. He looks not unlike the kid Oliver has covertly photographed. The man she loves has walked down a street even in his progressive university town and people have said things like *terrorist mofo* and *sand nigger*. Worse.

She asks again: “Is that kid guilty?”

“No one is guilty.”

“Just brown. Guilty of being brown?”

“Slow down, sister.”

“You’re right.” She squeezes her thighs. She is not in her right mind. “It’s not my business.”

“I’m sorry you saw that. I don’t know what to tell you. My work—it never ends.”

“What exactly do you do?” She sits up straighter in her seat. FBI? CIA? She can’t say these letters without feeling like a child.

“Right now, nothing. I’m officially off the clock.” To prove it, he chucks the cell phone onto the floor by his feet. “I’m sorry I’m acting like such a goddamn mystery. I’m naturally the most blabbering dude

in the world, but I've learned not to bore people. It's dull work, what I do, years of dullness, and then one thing happens, maybe happens, *could happen*. We're just watching. That's all. Dull, dull, dull?"

"Oh," she says. His ease makes her feel hysterical.

He says, "I find the dullness can only be fixed by whiskey and Mars."

How can you make your body willing? How can you banish loyalty? How can you suspend pain for just one moment in order to allow a new experience inside? She needs something to change.

She wants to go to the brown man on the stoop and say: They're onto you. You're not safe here!

But she remembers that the hijackers began their day in this city. Two of them did. She woke in her apartment on Beckett Street; they woke at the Comfort Inn on Maine Mall Road. She and those men breathed the same briny air; they made their morning tea from the same tap water; and then she went to get her eyebrows waxed by the Vietnamese lady at Oasis Nail & Spa and they killed three thousand people.

But fuck that story! They were the exception. She has said this a hundred times and meant it most of them.

"So," Oliver says. "What do you do for fun?"

"Nothing much."

"God you're tough! You want me to use my interrogation skills on you, Lorrie?"

This is a joke; for some reason it softens her. She says, "I'm taking guitar lessons from my upstairs neighbor. That's sort of fun."

"You any good?"

"Not really. No, I'm not. My teacher—he's this obese man with two ferrets, Cheech and Chong. Chong is sick. He's dying. And my teacher is worried about living with Cheech alone. It'll make no sense, he says, one ferret named Cheech. The meaning of one depends on the other. That's what he says."

“Ferrets are repulsive,” Oliver says. He shudders.

“I can play one Neil Young song. He taught me that. ‘Heart of Gold.’ That’s about it.”

Oliver hums it, taps his hand on the wheel.

She is a terrible guitar player but Diego is kind, insists on her potential, sometimes leaves encouraging notes in her mailbox. The guitar was a gift from her love before he left her for the girl, who happens to be in a band. Everyone is in a band!

She says, “Are you in a band?” He stops humming to laugh. “I look like I’m in a band?”

She doesn’t answer.

He says, “You hungry? I’m hungry.”

“OK.” Her breathing slows. She just needs to eat. She needs a good meal, a little flirting. “How about you? What’d you do for fun?”

Oliver says, “You’re seeing it.”

“Which part? The picking up women or the racial profiling?”

“Jesus. You don’t pull any punches?”

She can’t help it. Something has taken command of her mouth. Self-righteousness. She cannot flirt.

“I’m a lawyer,” she admits. “I deal with racial profiling.”

He nods. Says nothing.

In the firm where she works, in her pressboard cubicle, a Somali couple called Ambro and Awaale appear once a week to report that their home has been egged. She loves Ambro and Awaale. She loves Minoo, from Sudan, with her plaited hair and uncannily straight gaze, a child who could have stepped out of the Norman Rockwell painting, a Ruby Bridges facsimile. She thinks of the terrible things that have been said to Minoo since the girl arrived in this new, safe place. And thinking about this always takes her to the security guard—the mall cop—who followed her love into a Macy’s when he went to buy cufflinks.

The signs on the walls of the train station where she used to spend so much time: IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING. She was always seeing something and there was never anything to say.

Who wears cufflinks anymore? *Who?* That's what she wants to say! And who leaves a grown-up woman, a professional woman, a woman you said you planned to *marry*—what kind of person leaves her one day, no warning, for a twenty-year-old rockabilly hipster who wears earrings made out of matchbox cars?

He says, "You know what I think?" He takes a long, thoughtful breath. "I think that anyone—*anyone*—can do something terrible. And it's my job to watch."

The words send shivers up her spine.

"You might be right," she admits, and admitting it makes her sense of freedom bigger. It is like a sponge, freedom, will absorb anything, will take what it can get.

"You want a hamburger, Lorrie?"

She does.

"It'll be the best hamburger you've ever tasted."

Probably her love is eating a hamburger with that other girl right now, sharing a hamburger with the other big-eyed, guitar-playing girl at the shining counter of Johnny Rockets, that fake old-timey diner at the shopping mall. A simulacrum, all of it, diner and girl, an echo of an echo. Sometimes they ate there and then went to the video game arcade next door and played war, shot dusty men in the desert with ironic vehemence, or sometimes they sucked together at Skee Ball. Sometimes they skipped the arcade, just went home to his garret, tired and mustardy, and fell into bed.

Disgusting, isn't it? Lovesickness, in the face of all other horrors of the world. She will see nothing, say nothing. The world is only brutal. Let it explode. She wants a sexy spacesuit and Jesus whiskey. She wants only the things that obliterate sensation. Only the kind of sex

that obliterates sensation. She's never had that. She feels she might be nearing it.

She says, "You make the world a safer place, don't you?" Wanting to believe it, knowing how badly he wants to hear it. It's the first moment of foreplay.

They eat in the empty parking lot. The food is delicious, like he promised. It came from a sort of low-rent McDonalds, cracked linoleum, soda in big Styrofoam cups, fries in wax paper. No tables, so they take their hamburgers out to the truck. "Cheers," he says, and their lettuces touch.

She finds herself getting hungrier with each bite she takes. She finds herself getting more curious. For instance: what, precisely, does he do with his gun when he takes off his clothes? Where does he put it? Will he lock it up? Will he leave it out? Does he ever let a woman hold it?

She wants to ask this but instead she says, "So, what's Kuwait like?" He chews, swallows. "Same as Afghanistan. Same as Iraq"

He might as well have said: same as India. Everything in her tightens, and she hates it. Why can't she keep the lawyer out? Why can't she fall into this dream with him? He eats a French fry, licks salt from his fingers, repeats. He's a tidy eater—in this way he reminds her of a cat. He will not be ruffled. He is hungry, imperious, sure.

"No Grind House in those places," he says. "No girls writing poems in yellow hats, that's for sure."

"I wasn't writing poems."

"I mean it's not *safe* to write poems in those places. Lack of safety is the common denominator. It decimates everything different. Hate makes those places the same."

"But there are plenty of poets in Kuwait!"

"Yeah? You a fan?"

"And in Iran. And in—"

“Yes,” he says, placatingly, sounding tired. “Of course, of course.”

Her hamburger is so good, full of pickles. It’s almost gone; she has to slow down.

“We have hatred here too,” she says, but she wants to stop. She has to stop. She must get back to flirting. How does she do that? She knows perfectly well how she sounds to him—shrill, a bleeding heart. She sips her cola. She says, “This hamburger maybe saved my life.”

“Their hatred goes back to the Big Bang,” he says. “Ours is new.”

He takes a final bite of his, chews, and exhales richly. He is satisfied. His authority is total. He wipes his mouth. He looks at her carefully. Leans forward just a hair. Is he going to kiss her?

He is not.

He says, “Our hatred is for the dude who got the last pair of special-edition Michael Jordans. Ours is for the blinged-out welfare mom. Capitalistic hatred, economic, versus the primitive kind.”

She winces. It sounds racist. *The primitive kind.*

“I don’t know about that.”

“Because you’re safe. You’re *here*. You’ve never been there.”

“Isn’t safe relative?”

“Biggest myth since Eden. Biggest myth since Eve fucked the snake.”

“She didn’t *fuck* it.”

“Sorry. They made love.”

Her nipples. She feels a sensation in her nipples.

He drives back to the highway. “The cabin will be cold, but I’ve got a good heater. It’ll warm up fast.”

A silence. The longest yet. She takes off her yellow hat.

“People get crazy about sneakers,” she finally says, conceding something.

“Michael Jordan,” he sighs, and shakes his head as though the athlete is at fault.

They are driving deeper into wilderness. She wants to see his badge.

“Look, I understand where you’re coming from,” he says. “I know your politics. But trust me, kid, I’ve seen stuff that would make you stop believing in poetry.”

“I never said a single word about poetry.”

The fact that he called her kid, she can’t help it, arouses her.

“There’s no solution,” he says. “That’s my belief. I’m a realist. There’s no solution, but I’m closer to a solution than the other side is. I’m doing the best I can do.”

It makes sense. It’s what she tells herself too. Though lately she’s been wondering what would happen if she stopped being part of the solution. What if she started being a lawyer who made money? What if she bought a West End condo and a Danish dining set and gave up her rental with its mousetraps and no dishwasher? What if she hired someone—whoever was cheapest—to clean her new condo once a week? What if she didn’t care anymore about brown people? Name one brown person who cares about her.

From near his feet his phone buzzes. He doesn’t answer. The buzzing goes on for a long time. It pauses. Starts again. When it finally ends, she feels calmer and meaner and readier.

She says, “Can you teach me something in Arabic?”

He nods, taps his fingers on the wheel, and she can tell he’s pleased by her request.

“*Anti hayaati*,” he says.

“What’s that mean?”

“You are my life.”

She must struggle not to cry. She says, “I want that whiskey.”

“We’re almost there.”

He gets off the highway, takes a few turns, until they’re on a shadowy, rutted road that will bring them to his cabin. A light snow begins—the wipers only smear the glass, so he turns them off.

She knows without a doubt, knows without question, that the brown boy on the stoop with the fancy shoes is no terrorist. She could tell from

his face—she could tell from the turn of his mouth as he talked on the phone, from the fearful watery bigness of his eyes. The moment she saw him, she knew: he was begging a girl to take him back.

“*Oreedo an araaki fii kolli makaan.*” Oliver says, but won’t tell her what this means. Then they’re there.

He is a liar or else misguided about booze. He pours it from some ancient-looking clay container but it tastes like Jim Beam. She sits in one of those round chairs on a wicker stalk; she holds her glass, sips, her legs tucked beneath her, her heart racing like a bird’s. Their shoes sit together by the door. His are much, much bigger. Bigger in a way she finds a little frightening; she’s never been barefoot with a man whose feet are so big.

She’d expected a *man cave*. Isn’t that what people call such places? Beer cans, a pool table, the smell of socks. But what she finds is immaculate and spare. It’s like an army barrack but with sheepskin rugs and lamps from Ikea. In the mint-smelling bathroom a water glass holds a toothbrush. His soap has flecks of something in it, stems and seeds for exfoliating. The walls are white, free of photographs or art or hunting trophies. Simple flax-colored panels cover the windows. It’s neither masculine nor feminine. It’s perfect. She says so. He’s clearly pleased. “My ex-wife didn’t even have a hand in it. She was gone by then.” He smiles. “It was all me.”

He opens a gray metal cabinet and shows her the flat-screen TV. The only place for them to both comfortably watch is on the bed, so that’s where they go. He keeps the whiskey nearby, on a metal side-table, on top of a TIME magazine. The opening credits of *Red Storm Rising*. A montage of horror: nuclear plumes and acid hail and gas line ruptures. It’s all grim and nonsensical. She can’t follow it. She drinks more, waits for the requisite shot of the Statue of Liberty being flooded or smashed or raped. And there she is, Lady Liberty on her side, decimated by graffiti, all of the graffiti red, red to foreshadow the red planet, because that’s

where they're going, Randy Cox and Chloe Dupont, our heroes, who'll start off hating each other, at each other's throats, two gorgeous hard-edged NASA astronauts butting heads who'll end up making love on the top of Olympus Mons in order to create the last human fetus. The End.

They don't watch for long. They start to kiss. Her heart hurts. And so she kisses him harder, works her face against his big face, hears a moan behind his face, a new moan, kisses the moan, wills her own moan, her own sounds, wants to make her own sounds sound new, a moan in a new key, a whimper where once she purred, a gasp where once she panted. On the TV someone is screaming. Rockets. Solar storms. "Take my helmet!" someone cries. Oliver stands up and takes off his clothes. She watches. He drops his fleece jacket and his shirt on the floor. Then he removes the gun. "Let's split this broken world," the TV says. Another voice, "You got it, brother." Oliver sets the gun in its holster on the TIME magazine, next to the whiskey.

He says it again, those same words: "*Oreedo an araaki fi kolli makaan.*"

"What does that mean? Tell me."

"It means: 'I want to see you every place.'"

"Yes," she says. "Fine with me."

When she wakes up in the middle of the night, the TV is blue and silent. Oliver is snoring, sweet pattering snores like a grandfather's. She rolls over. Next to her, on the side table, is the gun. There isn't time for her heart to race. She sits up, plants her legs on the floor next to the bed, and picks it up. It's heavier than she thought it would be. So heavy. She holds it in two hands, looks down into it the way a person gazes into a well. Her hair makes a veil. She feels like a fortune-teller. She feels like a murderer who can't remember the crime. Oliver rustles. She puts the gun down again, slides back next to him. Then he's grabbing her around the waist, on top of her, kissing her. She kisses him back, hard. In the middle of it, when he flips her over so she's facing forward,

she sees—how did he do that? where did it go?—that though his hands have never left her body, the gun is gone. Relief. Disappointment. She is panting. She is making new sounds. The gun is gone. Disappointment? Relief? She can't decide, he won't let her decide, he is obliterating her deciding parts with every stroke. She doesn't have an orgasm. Nothing that simple. It's just that her cells have stopped warring for ten minutes.

In the morning she wakes before him. She dresses, brushes her teeth with her finger, and washes her face with his exfoliating soap. On the back of the toilet, she finds something that surprises her: a book. The poems of Hafiz. When she emerges from the bathroom he's standing there, holding the sly little camera to his face. "Smile," he says. She freezes before the lens. She can't smile, won't, so he takes a picture of her clean, dour face. Another.

"Stop," she says.

"You're beautiful." But his voice is flat. Click click click. He's solemn, focused, disinterested, like it's his job.

She says, "Are you putting together a file on me?"

He drops the camera to his side, shrugs. "Maybe I am."

Gooseflesh on her arms, on the back of her neck.

"It never ends," she says. "Is that right?"

His smile shows his teeth but doesn't reach his eyes. His mouth is red, swollen. She had been biting it, sucking it, she realizes now. Only now does she realize how hard.

"I should go home."

"Yeah, I'll take you home. We'll get a breakfast burrito on the way. And hash browns. I know a place. Best hash browns this side of the Mississippi."

No lover is waiting at her curb. No lover has driven up the coast to decry his error. No bouquet of flowers. He is never waiting at her curb, and yet

every time she comes home she hopes. Disappointment is not a knife or a gun but a bomb, reaches every part of her. She says good bye to Oliver, closes the door to the truck. He lifts a hand, nods, and drives away. She stands in front of her house. Her body after sex feels clamped, tense, her spine compressed, like the moment you get off the roller coaster and must readjust to the regular world, its gravity and order. She won't go inside. Instead, she starts to walk. She walks down her street. It's cold. The air is dry, hurts her nose. She walks. Faster. She runs. Then she's running down her street, down Beckett to Congress, down Congress, gaining speed as she descends the hill, as she passes the gas station, the social service agency, the tattoo parlor. She runs all the way to the corner of Second and Washington, where she stops. Her heart thuds, blood hammers in her ears and neck. She stands before the apartment building: brick, three-storied, with putty-colored shutters and a crumbling driveway of bleached concrete. She's out of breath, cold and hot. He's not on the stoop. The door is painted green. Next to it, a series of three rusty doorbells are set in a tin plate, and since she doesn't know which is his, she rings them all. Waits. No answer, so she knocks on the door. She knocks; she pounds. She feels, despite her pounding fists and heart, calm.

She will warn him. They're onto you. You're being watched. You are not safe.

The door opens. There he is, the boy. In jeans and his dress shoes. Now he's not wearing the leather jacket but a black, long-sleeved shirt with a Nike swoosh on the breast. They look at each other. He creases his brow. He opens his palms to her—"yes?"—but she can't find any words, simply can't. He is confused. Stares at her. Finally she says, "Be careful, yes? Be careful?" She can't say anything else. "Be careful," she says again, slowly, loudly, as if he's deaf. "OK?"

He says it back, repeats the message, but he doesn't speak English, or not well, and she can't tell if he's parroting or if he understands. "Be care-ful," he says to her, a tuneless staccato. "Be care-ful."

She turns away. And then, with low, clear intensity, he says: “You be careful.”

She turns back.

“You,” he says. “OK?”

He opens the front door wider. He doesn’t speak again but shifts his body, turns slightly into the dim room. With his right hand, he makes a cupping gesture, lifts the cupped hand to his mouth. It means: You want to come in? You want something nice to drink? He is so handsome. He is so sad. His brows are the richest black, like mink. His eyes say: Come in. Please. We will be so careful.

SUSAN NISENBAUM BECKER

*Belly*

I buried them both—old woodchuck with scarred flank, clipped ear,  
teeth crowded like he had a mouthful of crackers,  
and the squirrel whose body was one lean muscle that burst  
into a lush, brush tail—buried them each in a hole  
under the bamboo stand where the earth was easy  
to open, where they'd busied themselves, and I saw their bellies,  
fur thinned so the skin shone through—tender, a surprise—  
and the squirrel's belly button and imagined the mother,  
pregnant, then birthing, chewing his cord, nursing somewhere  
in my yard, perhaps in the four story pine from which I guessed he fell,  
and I thought *bellies* and *belly up*, *bellyful*, *bellyache*, *fire in the belly*,  
and remembered the bomber, his hairless boy-belly  
maybe not yet touched by a lover but his shirt lifted  
by the hands of a man, searching, his belly concave,  
a valley between skinny hips, after he'd been a map  
of light, after he'd been taken from his dry dock refuge,  
the boat that went nowhere—not forward, anyway, more stuck  
in reverse, or stalled, becalmed—he on the ground,  
hands cuffed behind, his ribcage arched up—  
I noticed every bone—the way he'd worn his jeans slung  
low beneath his navel and boxer's waistband, I thought,  
he fell from a promising height, thought in that night's velvet  
cake of air, in that ocean of lawns, houses and people

SUSAN NISENBAUM BECKER

busted out from sheltering in, the stars would never point  
him home again, how in the name of some holiness  
this boy had fashioned an unholy dark, and was the center  
of countless in-pulsing and out-pulsing rings of misery.

**CATHERINE WING**

## *14 Devastating Consequences*

It sounds like a poem again.

The toad has drowned in ammonia.

The milk was spilled so many times that it gradually discolored the floorboards underneath the table.

Passive voice.

The dog ate the bathroom garbage and then on his next walk slowly shat a tampon while you were making neighborhood chit-chat with the mailman.

It could not be ignored.

The industrial palette you refurbished and use as your living room coffee table smells of gearbox oil, not quite enough to move it but enough to notice for the rest of your life.

Another goddamn poem-sounding poem.

Your molecules are expanding and dissipating into the atmosphere,

resulting in a scatteredness and repeated loss of personal effects that you cannot seem to control.

You blame this on your two-year-old son.

The poem it sounds like was not written by Wallace Stevens.

You're tempted to steal ideas from your students.

A VHS copy of the 80s movie *Vision Quest* (a movie you never saw or even wanted to see) appeared in your car three years ago and you still have not moved it.

The Elmo your son refers to as "Little Elmo" is currently living under your sofa.

A mask of death watches over you all. Literally.

Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott has a category he labeled "the good enough Mother" which was in fact good enough and not devastating for a child.

Sadly, there is no good enough poem.

Your live math skills do not extend to counting beyond ten.

It's from the Dia De Los Muertos and it sits on a cross beam in your attic. On the right night, if the lights are on, you can see it from your garden.

You spent the last twenty minutes looking at then-and-now pictures of the cast of *The Breakfast Club*.

Poor Judd Nelson. He was a good enough actor.

It's snowing again, was and going to, which means again you will have to brush off the car.

**MAGOGODI WAMPHELA MAKHENE**

## *The Virus*

YOU ASK HOW it was when this thing started? Well. Have you ever seen a late summer flock before flight? I mean, yes, I was there. But what you're asking of this ou kerel is like naming the very Book of Names. It just always was. Unless you read Genesis. Then you know that in the beginning were the children of God. The serpent's seed spawned also from the beginning, but from disgrace, which still marks the bobbe-jaan making themselves Baas nowadays. And it's the same between the simple kaffirs out here and the big ones that speak with you only in English.

Do you know I once heard a man who'd gone out there on some line of business, way out there—to some bush country in Africa, where civilization never made it past the birth canal—anyway this man told me life was so cursed out there they even have a sort of rabid disease that attacks you merely by speaking its name. I mean, if that's not God having something to say, then I don't know what.

But back to your question. Yes. I remember. We were used to a certain kind of visitor then, after the fall of the Republiek. Americans mostly. Some Australians. They all came here looking for something,

something snuffed out wherever was home. To tell you the truth, I think a lot of them came here to puff out their chests, to look at old verkrampte Boers like me and feel themselves a more upright man. The rooineks were the funniest. They would stand behind the cameraman, stepping back there between takes, on the prowl for this thing they have in the head about the veld and the Boer: irreligious kaffir-enslavers that we are, ploughing an open sea of arid farmland, blowing our noses through thick skin on bare fingers.

Then would come the questions. Statements really, alluding to our dying language and hopeless cause.

—A stand-alone Boer Republic? they would repeat.

—In *South Africa*? they'd ask again.

No, jou dom donner! In the moist warm farts of your Royal Highness. Dries Van de Duidenstee got so uptight with a reporter like this once, he marched the Englishman and his crew to the border of our town without even a water bottle between them for the whole trek back to the nearest dorp. We didn't see a visitor like that again for another while. Not until the Steenkamps sent an emergency signal, calling for help. They thought they were under attack.

You will laugh now when you see the man mistaken for an attacker, but it was nothing to laugh about in those days. The bobbejaans were out to finish the last white indigenous tribe of Africa, farm by farm. And there was nothing to stop it. Nothing. So we armed ourselves. Just like the old days. And we learned our people who the enemy was; how to finish him. We weren't laughing when we heard the Steenkamp's signal, my friend. Not with that news about Bertie Bezuidenhout already. About how it went with his family.

Bertie Bezuidenhout's hands weren't wide enough to go around a sack of mielies, but believe you me when I say it—that little undertaking of a man had oxen blood sweating through his pores. The other boys used to tease him when they all started smelling themselves, but

young Bezuidenhout was already the quiet sort. He would just lean against the wall, thin arms crossed over chest, saying less and less out of his mouth as his opponents grew longer and boxier beside his frame. It took maybe three or four dom kops a good and wholesome donner before word spread wide among even the older ous: Bertie Bezuidenhout was nobody's eight-toed tortoise. He had pure unfiltered Afrikanerdom beating through his heart. He could take any man.

And unlike the others, Bertie came home. He found him a capable girl in Potchefstroom and fetched them here—on the same land the Bezuidenhouts have tilled since our grandfathers' fathers lost heart at the Slag van Skionskop. Bertie extended the old house to make room for his family. He even added a flushing outhouse for the competing rugby teams his farmhands seemed hell-bent on brooding. That's just how Bertie Bezuidenhout was. A Christianly good man, as the Dominee would say.

He was only twenty-nine when those bastards wasted him. Cowards, these assassins. Five men to one. Laying low in tall grass like dogs. Bertie on his knees in the Lord's House. Mouth open wide, receiving the Holy Body, while those dogs stole onto his farm. A growth on Bezuidenhout land. First they did to his earth what they later did with him. Tied down in the dirt we found him. Ploughed into soil. We found Bertie Bezuidenhout's panga standing right there, next to him, feeling very sorry for what had been done with it. His garden boy ran out soon as he seen Bertie's truck back from Kerk, tried to warn Bertie, Turn around Baas, not safe here. Turn around. But the tsotsis were quick, the land already surrounded.

At least he didn't die on his knees, we said, seeing two of the dogs lying there, one of which we finished ourselves. Lying, lifeless. In wait. Waiting for police who always come only after, to stand around.

—Ja, the policeman said, Almal dood.

—No, says Bezuidenhout's wife, Not Bertie.

But he *was* going home. Unsoiled in his spirit. We found him with the Holy Body still in his. On his tongue the Dominee had placed it. Bertie Bezuidenhout had swallowed the entire thing. Unbroken. His wife and klein kinders were with him to his end. Watching.

The man the Steenkamps mistook for an attacker turned out the first cyvivor, as we call them now. We went from dismissing him as a crazed American bloated on too many McBurgers, to something of a never-ending Vakansie Man. Then, eventually, after news reached us in the papers, we took a real interest in this Cyberwar Refugee. But the cyvivors always resisted that name. Sounds too much like Africa, I suppose, even though the government said Africa, having never really been inter-webbed, is the one true refuge. There are lots more safe towns, they said, but without the creature comforts the cyvivors crave. And further, way out there. Up, past the hippos of Limpopo, past Zim, Vic Falls, the man-eating crocs of Mozambique, beyond all that. Real bushman country. And I told you already what is what in those deep jungles farted straight out a blind bat's bum.

Leon Steenkamp—who ran away from his land, leaving his poor vrou with a man then taken for an attacker—later told us the story he got from this American. It went like so. The man was from America. I already said. From one of its big cities where people live in skyscraper buildings so that your kitchen and toilet don't have any windows and your neighbor can be a man living with another man as his wife. Leon Steenkamp didn't ask our American friend if he lived in such arrangements, had such neighbors. If he knew what filth they did. But we of course get a general sense from things the TV says, from similar nonsense on the radio. Steenkamp did ask him what kind of gun he favors, since we all know carrying is a natural fact of his culture. The American was a funny one though. Steenkamp told us how soft putty he got around a simple 9mm even a child knows to handle. Leon Steenkamp was so tickled he cocked the empty pistol to his own head—it was only

in fun—but not before the American took off into the dark without even a proper Goeie Nag.

The thing Steenkamp asked when he started this story was how much we knew of viruses. Well, many of the kerels didn't like this at all. They took it as insult, asking a farmer who carried the tribal memory of rinderpest in his stoop, a man who nursed his kraal through bluetongue virus, lamsiekte, Rift Valley and everything else in between. Asking such a man: What is the meaning of a virus? It was just the last of Steenkamp's nerve.

—What is a virus? Lennie Jaeger yelled. It's the three letter certificate your daughter brought home from her high living, my friend.

Of course, Steenkamp's face reddened, but he just tucked his warbling wattle into his chest, managing a slight flare of his nostrils. It was cruel, Jaeger dragging up the dead girl.

When she grew her womanhood we all pretended a healthy boredom. But on Sundays during prayers or weekdays, watching girls' matches sully the rugby fields, we all wondered with our eyes how grazing the back cleavage of her knees would feel.

She returned home to die. Killed by ferocious gossip or the ugly and fleshly things they say she did in big towns. That shut Steenkamp right up. But you know how it is with a leopard and his spots. It wasn't long before he found something new to know about. That man just has a way with living skin—he always crawls under its weight. So you can understand Jaeger's callousness. Not undeserved. It just sped up the curdle in Steenkamp's story. He spoke simple and quick after that. But I read it in the papers what Steenkamp was trying to say:

American authorities have issued a statement urging the public not to panic. The situation is under control. The City of New York remains without water. The Department of Environmental Protection confirmed that attackers gained root access to their computer systems and issued a series of commands, shutting all water valve chambers

throughout the metropolis. A spokesperson could not be reached for further comment or to provide an estimate of how soon New Yorkers could expect running water.

It was a regular shit show out there. I mean, you read these things wanting to shake your head and suck your teeth a bit, feel a decent level of sympathy for these sorry bastards. But instead you ended up with stiff laughter choking your throat, imagining the world's so-called superpower being run by generals who considered a few weeks' toilet pileup a legitimate war attack. Imagine where we'd be if General de la Rey or Paul Kruger cried war against the Brits every time a few chamber pots overwhelmed our nostrils, or if the Brits orchestrated a giant enemy pileup so high even the Oranje Rivier refused to swallow.

Of course, cyvivors didn't like this kind of talk. No, my friend. Not one bit did they like it. To them it was full-on war, this thing. And it is true they were thirsty during these water holdouts. I heard a man say he paid a scary sum to a petty overlord for a few liters from the local park, when their money still meant something. His wife then boiled that piss-water for their baby, who couldn't do on strict rations.

Another early cyvivor, looked like a tender little girl, recalling how the cyber-drought shut his family restaurant down.

—Four generations, he whispered. A great-grandfather started the eatery in his great-grandma's name, using this oumagrootjie's recipes. On the last day of service, the little water they had was knocked over accidentally.

—We cooked that shit in wine, he said, thumping the table with big, useless hands. Bottles and bottles of fine Italian wine. Never tasted anything better. We tried fighting back. But there is no fighting an enemy you cannot see. Nothing you can do but walk away . . . We walked away. Four generations and just like that—he snapped his fingers. We upped and walked away.

Into Africa.

They came almost by truckloads after that first Steenkamp American. Smuggling themselves into Mexico and high-jacking docked cruise ships. Bribing pirate carriers, some UN flights even. The Italians and Spaniards, we hear, even reverse-engineered the Mediterranean fucked-fish-in-a-rowboat routine. I mean, picture that on the high seas—a bunch of sunfried Diegos and Ave Marias sardined into a sinking raft, praying their way from Sicily to Libya. It really was as late summer flock—each one pecking about, as if forever—until they seemed to understand through some giant cobwebbed birdbrain: winter is here, only flight will save us.

By then, nobody found these First World refugees in Africa queer. Especially not with all the bribecrack they'd brung—heirloom seeds sewn between hemlines, Cuban tobacco leaves and medicine packs glued under second shoe soles. Even rare carpets and diamonds stuffed into soft children's toys. That shameful spazashop, the one Coenie's widow barely propped up, even while sitting on all the money three husbands left behind, finally found some legs to stand on. The old maid was even talking about adding an addition to the place.

—An addition? I asked. What would you sell in an addition, Tannie?

A milky glare followed that question, so I knew to take my tobacco from the counter and head straight out the same door I came.

The next time I'm in the shop, the widow has lined the shelves with glass jam jars wearing silly hats when regular canned All Gold would do just fine. Black coffee can't be plain good brew anymore, it has to be God's own beans imported from the killing fields of Rwanda. I know better than to ask the skelm old vrou, What is all this kak about? And is it just me wondering what is what with all this birdfood? With the cheeky prices?

That's how it was in the beginning. A temporary inconvenience, we told ourself. A now open and just now-now finish pitstop, while these First Worlds sorted theyselves out. Or at least that's how we thought

things were, until it came out, and I can't remember who pulled the snot out the rot, but it came out Steenkamp should have bliksemed that American with his kak-stories first chance he got.

Remember how Steenkamp found him farting around his plaas? How he spoeked the jiggle out Leon Steenkamp's arse so that Steenkamp hit the panic button and ran off for help, fat flying all over the place? Well, my friend, turns out that's all the time it took for the American to make his move on Steenkamp's wife. That old visvrou might as well have sprouted bird wings on her fishscales, so full she became of this American's nonsense—this and that he could do for they land, stars and such as he could grow with his hands. She was half near trading Steenkamp's farm for Mr. America's applesauce and pie in the sky. Of course we didn't know this then, when we first showed up at Steenkamp's farm, guns at the ready.

You should have seen Steenkamp, still panting from the effort lugging hisself, now-now realizing the thing he just done to his wife: leaving her standing there with what very well could have been a blerry kaffir with a gun; now also catching the thing on her face that asked without speaking, *What man are you, Leon Steenkamp? What manner of man fetches others to call man, to do for his wife what he can't hisself?*

—There, Leon points, pointing out the foreigner. That's him. Shoot him!

We laugh seeing Leon's supposed attacker, hold our guns at ease. Steenkamp eventually shakes Mr. America's hand, orders his wife pour us a round of spoek and diesel.

Speaking of action, there was finally enough to this cyber thing to actually grow a hard-on. Our town was overrun with sissies, moegies that imagined living with a week's pile-up hardship. But suddenly we started getting volk a man could understand. A power grid blew up, killing thousands of civilians within the hour. The big guns was beginning to doubt a bunch of ululating beards hiding under turbans could

pull off a remote control war on the U.S. and her bedfellows from some cave in What-not-stan.

Fingers wagged. Korea? Syria? Khomeini? Who else was auditioning to play the Terminator? China? Russia? I didn't know all the what is what, but I do know my one plus one: youngsters in a pride take their chances when the alpha shows weakness. I never seen a musting bull take kak from a dying olifant. Babylon was a plump worn whore, ripe for the taking.

Chinaman mastermind or not, real volk were dying real deaths in the cyberwars. Piet Niemand and his family took in a girl whose life dissolved in waters that drowned her house. A flood ran straight in from a dam enemy malware raped. The water swam off with her mother. And she was one of the better ones. The fog-heads that came after her were worse than anything I seen on the South West-Angola line. And those were some blerry bosbefok ous. Situation Normal All Fucked Up, we called it—SNAFU.

Back then, back in the '80s on the South West Africa border line, we had one ou couldn't get a word out of him that wasn't singing. And all kindergarten rhymes. Those of us felt sorry enough learned the funny nonsense he'd sing:

*Mary Had a Little Lamb*—Armed enemy approaching  
*Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall*—Ambush ahead, landmine  
*Two Little Birds Sitting on a Tree*—Civvie spies out sussing  
*Old McDonald Had a Farm / And on That Farm He Had a . . . Gook!*  
 Civvies hiding gooks

I admit, there was something vroulike about him. Smith, they called him. Ian Smith. Always managed to eat from his dixies with both the fork and the knife. Patted his mouth clean with a small white square he hand-washed nights, even out in the bush. The desert dyed it that pus-rust color which bled through sunsets; sunsets that seemingly choked the sky they were so overwhelming. Like swallowing dust.

But you could always leave it to Smith, seeing something there was nothing to see. Saving a grace, where no man lived. I got into more than one fight with the thicker skulled parts of the platoon defending Smith. The cheapest kak was the obvious—punishing him for his Rhodesian namesake’s busted nuts. Crooning about the monkey parade Smith handed Rhodesia to. President Canaan Banana! That’s who the kaffirs elected when Ian Smith cowered. I mean, what sort of illiterate half-bakes? You can’t even cook up such kak. A President Canaan Banana? But that’s what the kaffirs wanted. So our Ian Smith, poor ou, became the cow’s arse in all these laughing farts about Ian Smith selling out old Rhodesia, Ian Smith bending over for a black banana.

—Raped by the Black Banana, they’d taunt a already bush-fucked Smith.

He’d try ignore. Was all he could do. But me, it bothered me. Stirred rattling dis-ease in me. It couldn’t be because I was just. I’d be lying if I thought myself just. Plenty goodly Christian volk wouldn’t speak to me still today, I suspect, accounting who and what I was, back at the border. And who could blame them? It wasn’t that. More the madness of the thing. Posting a blerry stamping of manhood like Smith into the border, not barely a man-child. It bothered me in the strange way things come outside you and you don’t have words for the things, just feel their rage in your fist, taste their thick thirst, seeing blood. They knew to leave Smith alone on my platoon, but I couldn’t say what happened after his callback to another unit. Couldn’t say what Smith made of it all, if he made it out at all.

The bush fucked you. Made you FUBAR. Somehow, all of us—we was totally Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.

No sleep five days straight.

I’d lie under nights, closing my eyes that were theirs, but they refused closings. Stiff eyelids died unshut. I couldn’t close them. Shut my

ears, face in elbows. Heard strange cry. The bush enjoyed this. Making jackals laugh. Vultures sing.

Breakfast was ostrich eggs. They threw in stale brake-shoe biscuits that morning. Chomped down. Read Ma saying she'll write. Told Pa to say, to write, Bly Sterk My Seun, and to say also she'll write. The letter arrived 336 hours ago. Folded. Refold.

Read the familiar writing, dribbling yellow yolk on the same page Ma must've eyed over Pa's shoulder: Ma standing over Pa, tin teacup in hand. In the kitchen. Wearing that pale green pinafore with frilly shoulders, deep pockets. Stroking Pa's neck. Trying not to worry. I'll write, she says. Tell him I'll write. Smell the cinnamon under her nails, lingering in her pores from the melkkos on the table. Pa spoons a mouthful. Plops the milky custard on this paper. Finger the stain where I fold it again. Place under my thoughts. Lying awake.

—*Whu-whu-whuuu . . .*

—*Whu-whu?*

—*Whu! Whu! Whuuu!*

What is that? Ostriches?

A small nomadic herd used to circle our farm. Ma hated full moons. They'd come out, the ostriches, pecking about. Deep gobbling. Naturally, we kids wanted out too. Chasing wild ostrich. Have you ever done that? I catch one as I wake, grateful for first sleep.

You got used to it. To dust lining your gum. Elephant virgins on bread, no butter. You even got used to taking a shit in go-karts, the ou in the next buggering you for a fag. It was put to us that we were making advances on the rooi-gevaar, that twenty-man dugout pileups and lust in our nuts was worth it. We were winning the war.

But Listen, Kommandant said. Luister. Rooi-gevaar is dangerous. It is a wild, unwieldy thing. You have to get it into your head. You *will* be fighting the enemy, but with good kaffirs on your side. You will be fighting with black South Wests on your side. They are natural trackers, natural

bushfighters. Our blacks must help us track the enemy. The black man is not your enemy. I looked to my left, then tried out for the right. We men from my unit stood listening, mealy-mouthed at Kommandant.

It was a first. And for me, the last. The quarters were small. Two open showers. Twenty-four men. One mess hall. Twenty-four men. Around the camp on quiet days. Keeping guard overnight. There was nowhere else to put them, so there we were: all twenty-four bodies stripping naked. Soaping. Washing off soiled blood. Twenty-four mouths moving, chasing down dog biscuits with the same disgust and relish. All our arses plastered to the go-karts when cooks fucked an order, so we all, each of twenty-four, suffered as a unit from leaky gypo guts. It rocked us, understanding this thing. Who was us? Who was them? The terrorists was secreted in the land. A man could understand that. Our job was to finish them. Wipe the land clean. Of rooi gevaar—commie alert. Of swaart gevaar—black terrors. But. And nobody can stand there now, saying I got weak. But struzebob. God as my witness. My blacks—the blacks in our unit—it was because of them. Land and duty were no longer simple things.

I see now the '80s was simpler. Looking back I see black and white. Any blind fool could show you that. But this thing these First World know-alls have they dicks smothered in? Viral computer infections blowing up dams? Root commands raping entire intelligence systems? What does a soldier suppose, to fight such a thing? How is a man suppose to protect his property—vrou, farm and kinders—except to pack it all in and leave? You left no choice but you pull the plug. Literally. That's what people who know more than even the know-alls are now-now advising the States and the States' chommie-countries. But you know what houtkop is—hard-headed. They still talking Situation Normal, Under Control; not from how we seen it. Everyday, the cyvivors. They keep coming. Doves of them—human droplings out Babylon's rear.

And what started small—the cheeky spazashop prices, the harmless halfway stop our town became, even our Samaritan welcome and goodly cheer—seems to me a growing cancer. Can't step out a day without hearing another story of cyvivors outsmarting a Boer his entire farm—flock, stock, and bride. At first, a fur coat traded for a little patch of earth, then suddenly the kraal also for some hardy heirloom seed the foreigner hisself once tended, until entire farms switch hands for a few cases of rum, some rare ammunition and a kak promise, leaving Boer families squatters in their own fatherland. The situation is bad. Made worse by spineless Boers arse-creeping 'round the refugees.

Even Johannes Van de Merwe, I heard him say he don't mind them. But Johannes, I say. You mean to tell me you can't see what's really going on?

—Like what? Says Johannes.

So I drop it right there, counting him out of the laarge.

I know what's got the balls of good men like Johannes. It's not just the flash of fur and nifty little shiny things. The cyvivors came spinning all sorts of sugared smoke and technicolor dreams they'd build for the goodest Boers. Just lend us an ear, it started. OK, now share us your wife. You're a good man, but if you want that pie in the sky we're baking, if you really want the kind of special kak only our glittered promises can afford, let's talk about this land. You know we may have lost everything, but these seeds we brung, they like magic beanstalk seeds. We can grow this thing together. In a single year, your yield could triple.

And the Johannes Van de Merwes of this world—good, Christianly dense man that he is—it wouldn't occur to his likes to doubt. To read the signs. Van de Merwe I know for a fact signed papers making his land they silly experiment. Like the big-dicked manchild he is, he goes around believing these cyber-fucked Americans want what's best for his land. That they share his dream. I even hear they promised him, if they can ever flush their shit again, a trip to the lights and lunacy of New York.

Van de Merwe thinks he's the only one heard of New York? The only one dreamed of another life? That's just the problem with the Van de Merwes of this world. They never seen it coming when it comes. I knew a luckless bastard like this once. Left him right where I found him. At the border.

Enoch Omugulugwombashe could tell you feral stories buried in the bush. Secret things, laden in the land. Just looking at dirt, he could tell. Sifting sand between fingers, he'd point out evidence of a scorpion the night before, a wood dove that dawn, or where a pompilid wasp drugged and buried a dancing white lady spider after impregnating her with wasp eggs. He once showed me fresh spoors on the track. Pointing, he detailed to a hair—the sex, size, and weight of a kudu. Knew exactly what it was feeding on, how far to expect before reaching it. I wasn't surprised at the fat bok we braaied that night, feasting for a change on sweeter meat than tin stuff and dog biscuits.

Enoch was our tracker. A natural tracker. Natural bushfighter. He told me he was a schoolteacher before the war came. Spoke clean Afrikaans, English, and German even. Also his kaffir taals. I kept my distance at first. But in the bush, like I say, a man is only as strong as his unit. And Enoch grew on you.

Out on our jaunts tracking gooks, you couldn't even tell who was who. With my Black is Beautiful smeared on good and lekker, and Enoch already born in camouflage, all you seen is four eyes above, sixty-four teeth below. Even on days off sometimes I'd wear the black face, just for shits and giggles with the puzas at the local shebeen.

Once, we was driving supplies between camps. Me, another bloke, and Enoch. The gooks planted landmines everywhere, so you drove off-road. I don't remember why, but we wasn't in a casspir that time. Anyways, there we is. Me and these two ous. We'd just flushed a Terr-stronghold out, so we expected the enemy about—on defense.

We come to a clearing with no shoulder. There's nowhere else to go but inside the road. So we steady the vehicle and drive. Slow. Kick

up some dust. Enoch is our eyes and ears. A natural manhunter with a nose like a dog. Sniffs landmines out like a Soek-steek-stok on steroids. More than once Enoch shifted my arse in gear, saving me from a blast, even as I fingered that Soek-steek-stok into the ground. Anyways, we are going-going, nice and easy on the road when sudden as sin, Enoch calls for a piss parade. We tease him—the bladder of a knocked-up visvrou on this one—but come to a stop. He dismounts to let his leak. I light up and have a piss myself. Driver still at the wheel.

Without a word, Enoch walks back to me and motions I finish. Danger, he whispers, Make fast. Obvious, I cradle my gun. No, he shakes his head, Not Terrs. He waves me with his hand. I follow. Standing in our path—body lifted, head high to the heavens, all dressed in neck flap now spread wide—a black mamba. Jirre-God! I bite my tongue. A foken blerry snake? Seeing the serpent, its black mouth hissing death, I know we could be done. Even if the Tampax Tiffies came quick with the meds, a man has under an hour before that venom expires him. Just my blerry luck, I think, reading the moggie epitaph:

Killed in Action. Fell to a Bush Snake.

Enoch motions again, Get in the vehicle. I hop in. Keeping hisself facing the devil-snake, Enoch walks back. Painfully slow. I tell the driver by now, so he starts the engine. Still, the snake standing. Enoch turning. Finally inside.

What happens next is we drive forward, toward the snake. But instead of grinding the mamba, rubber to reptile, Enoch insists we curve around its path, a wide girth to the snake. The driver is reluctant, and I'm getting annoyed. But Enoch persists, We don't kill mamba, he says. Bad luck. Killing Mamba? Very bad luck. We hiss and we tease. Kaffirs and their witchcraft. Enoch laughs also. Strange, isn't it? How funny it was—just three ous in a bakkie, laughing stupid along the border.

Enoch had three little ones. Still remember they names. Helvi, Martta, Maria. His dream, he told me, was going home after the war, getting God to finally bless him with a son. I don't have kinders. But I

knew what it was for a man to bring his family to you out in the bush. So I told Enoch the one truth with any meaning for me. He is the only man I ever tell my dream.

I wasn't supposed to. Pa would have blixemed me if he found out. News they were coming spread mouth to mouth. Even Dominee seemed to know what day they would be in our town and the sordid things this promised for his flock. So we were warned. I snuck out only because the herd needed tending winter nights. I put on my stepping-out Sunday shirt and slacks underneath the weathered coat I always wore. Hoped nobody noticed instead of veldskoene, I'd repolished my school shoes all afternoon. I slipped out after dinner, as expected, but in place of the kraal, I headed for the big tent.

It was windy. And true to our town that time of year, a cold night. I gave the man all my money saved from odd jobs and he handed me a ticket. Inside the tent the show was already on. The painted elephants and talking monkeys we had plenty of in those parts, I wasn't interested. The funny little dwarfs were so weird you had to laugh. You have to remember television wasn't a thing for us back then. All we knew was the radio, and even that kept everything Dominee-dusted.

We didn't know exotic, nevermind you freakery. The bearded fat vrou so space-eating she had to be carted to stage enticed our wonder, her roly-poly arms and legs threatening to tip the wheelbarrow. The snake charmer with his strange song deserved our applause, we thought. And those mooilike girls with naked bellies, dancing like inside them lived a snakepit—they alone would have been worth my money. Except, I seen that night this man they call Ring Master.

He had on a tall impressive hat and those bowtie suits with a big smooth waistband. He held his stick very sure of hisself. Without him the whole thing would have crumbled. It was stupid, I knew it even then. As soon as I seen him, he was my dream. Pa would've moered me. But when I told Enoch my plan to head for die Kaap or Jo'Burg

maybe, after we left the border—that I wanted to wear a tall hat and learn the circus—he didn't laugh at me. I was shy about it, he could see. But still. He made me feel the stupid thing I wanted was maybe not so stupid. Why not put the Kommandant and his snakes in your show, he teased?

Kommandant fetched live ones out in the bush every chance he got. Stuffed them in a plastic bag he hung in the sun. The writhing bastards were kaput without fail by 1200 hours. From heat exhaustion or lack of hydration. I don't know. We clinked beer bottles, laughing to this. To life after war.

After the war, the fighting went on. We pulled out from the border, but you know how it is with kaffirs and their tribal wars—like a spineless beast chasing its tail.

Here, back home, things slowly grew stranger. Hairy. Fucked up, beyond any and all recognition. On the final end of the Republiek, in 1994, I remembered the thing the Kommandant had spoke: The black man is not your enemy. Nobody said this when we were discharged, unthanked for our service. Our leaders made their dealings with kaffir kings, while we were left standing under the flag, trying to fly marred colors. The black man is not your enemy. That's how the leaders justified handing our fatherland to the enemy they learned us, the same enemy they fetched us to the border to finish. None of it made any sense. And when you stood up to ask how this thing should be remembered—what were we doing at the border? That rainbow kak was forced down your throat. The same ubuntu gobbledygook these American cyvivors and related refugees are now-now singing to better pull the wool over our eyes.

Of course, everyone would rather deny it, pretending the likes of this old Boer a conspiracy theory, but the ordinary truth of the fact is that while this cyberwar goes on, confusing the world, American cyvivors and they friends is busy colonizing the last white indigenous tribe

of Africa. Why you think these cyvivors is here, kidnapping our land? Why you think they fill the shelves in our shops with food a Boer can't pronounce, and force Afrikaans out of our kinders' classrooms because there's so goddamn many of them, suddenly here to stay?

Yes, my friend. The Americans is here to wipe us. I wouldn't be surprised if the African National Cronies is behind the whole thing with them. Paying the Americans, even. People think I'm going foggy in the brain, pointing out the obvious. I hear they monkey chatter, whispered behind my back, but you mark my words. And I'll tell you another thing. There will be no cyvivor-style walking away from here. Our names is written in the ground. Like I said that day to Johannes Van de Merwe: We will be fossilized in this here earth. It dranked our fathers' blood. Our fate is this land.

Anyway that's not what you really want to know, asking all innocent and official how it all started. You're here arse-creeping for what happened that day. About what is its why.

Well, it was just another braai at the spazashop celebrating our tribelessness. Nobody marks Van Riebeck Founders' Day anymore. Or remembers how, on the Day of the Vow, the Lord made good His covenant with us, delivering the Zulus to our oupagrootjies' barrels. Instead, we are hostage to everything foreign-born, pulling out all stops for they blerry Bastille Days and heathen Halloweens. And since the new addition, and what with her enabling customers, the old widow feels herself way up in the sky—a fat kite, flying thin on they high life.

Everybody came from our town and beyond. The Big Five already sizzling on the grill: Boerewors. Porkchops. Chicken. Steak. Mutton cuts. Enough Castle beer to row these blerry cyvivors back over the seas. Even some respectable and lethal mampoer—the widow still brews it on the sly. We make normal kak-talk, How's the wife? Which Springbok is gonna moer what's left of the All-Blacks? What new direction is the government pissing in these days?

Somebody taps my shoulder, like we did in Standard One. They duck their head when I pass a look back. Grown men playing games. I turn round. But it's a mooilike lady when I seen who it is. Up from die Kaap, she says. Smiling. Real friendly. Welcoming tits in my face. I smile back. She's some Boer's daughter. I've seen her around. But they grown up so quick. Trying to remember, whose daughter is this? She's talking-talking:

—Brought somebody I want you to meet, Oom. She says.

*Wish now I'd said no.*

—This is Themba.

*Or cleared my throat maybe, just walked away . . .*

—Themba Ngcobe.

I extend a hand. He's standing right beside her.

—He was there also, Oom.

—There? *Where, I want to know?*

—Told him about you. How you were also at the border.

I feel the man's hand. It isn't hard like a soldier, like what you expect. Not smooth either. Deep ridges run there, like Kimberley's Groot Gat is carved in his palm. I let go his hand, but can't with his gaze. The girl keeps yakking, saying things I know just undressing his eyes: Gook. They stare back at me. Gook. Her voice trails into wind, sweeping up around us.

Gook, The wind answers.

"Foken Terr?" I hear myself shouting, barking so loud dust bites down my tongue. The eyes stare back at me. Accusing eyes. Inside this Themba Ngcobe are Enoch's eyes. I tell myself that's kak talk, Enoch died many years ago at the border. But I keep seeing him—Enoch staring back at me with unbelieving eyes. Already dead eyes. Or deadened.

That day at the border, Enoch's eyes begged for no plea. Prayed no mercy. Seemed only to mirror me my own unblinking fear. Staring through me. Kommandant stands akimbo, beside me. The entire platoon, twenty-two men—a bosbefok laarge—stand around us.

Enoch had been a man of the Bible. Learned me verses he knew in German. During contact with the enemy, it calmed me, speaking them. Inside my head, I'd say them to myself. Hear Enoch correct me. *Tea-re*, he'd say, slow. Gurgling the *re*.

*Und ich werde die bösen Tiere aus dem Lande vertilgen, und das Schwert wird nicht durch euer Land gehen.* And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land.

When I asked Enoch, why? Was what Kommandant said really true? How could he betray us to the Terrs? How could he betray even me? Enoch brung me his family again: Helvi, Martta, Maria. And his wife. He said he couldn't watch them bow they heads forever in they own land. Couldn't let us do with them and they children's children what we'd done with his father, his father's father. I listened because I thought he'd say I'm sorry. That Kommandant must be blerry bosbefok calling him a enemy spook. After all the times he saved me? The many mines he saved us? But Enoch spoke nothing of sorry. Denied niks nie. And when he brung up the wife and his daughters, that he couldn't be a man watching them bow they heads like his mother and his father, I feel my head fog up again. The bush fucked with you, made you feel you almost understand why Enoch made hisself a poison in your own platoon. Kommandant shouted the order. My hand shook. Enoch watching my eyes flood, blank, drown.

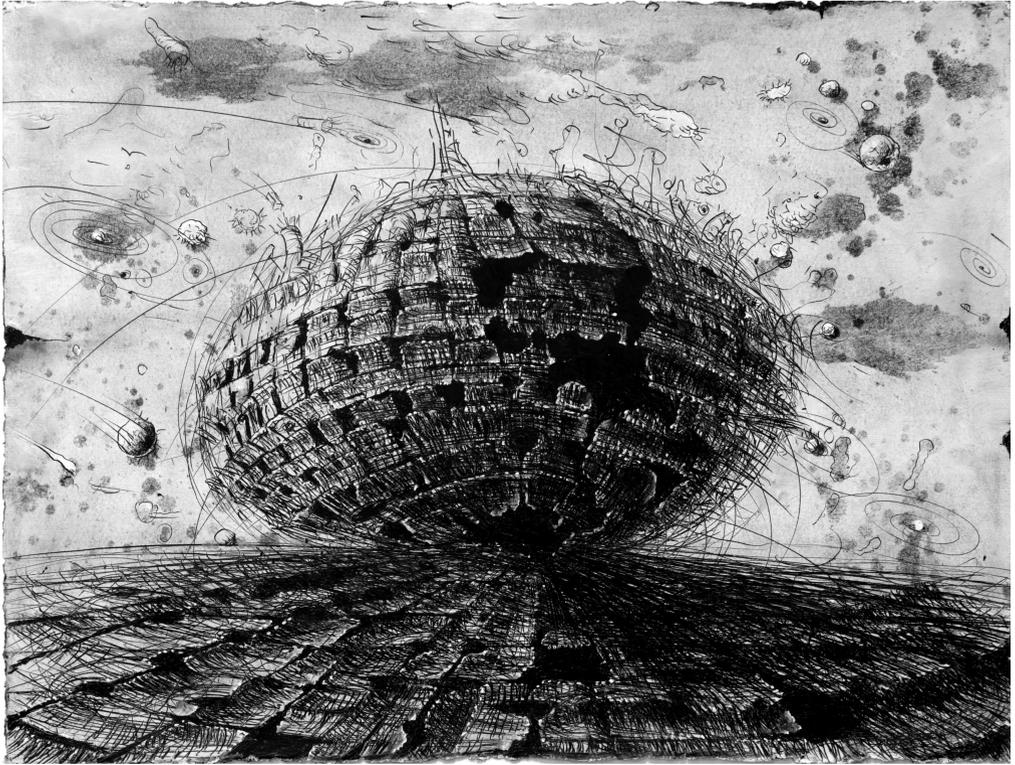
I didn't hear myself speak the German Bible. Enoch was so close he heard me. Before I pulled the trigger, I tripped on the same word I always did. *Tea-re*. Enoch corrected me. His eyes remained fixed on me, even after. They refused to close.

The man with Enoch's eyes, Kimberley's Groot Gat mined into his palms, says nothing when I walk away. The Boeremeisie he came with, the one with a healthy chest, she calls out. I walk past my car and the others' cars. Turn down old streets. Streets walked all my life—the

known world I returned to after the border. I pass the same leafless kokeboom that surely witnessed my birth from this earth. Remembers the founding of our town, how naked bushmen received my ancestors underneath its shade. I pass the few houses. Lights on. Hear alien tongues spoken inside Cape-Dutch homes. I reach my house eventually, begin the effort of stilling myself. Kommandant used to say power is not aggression. It is control inside calm. I sit. The television watching. Lights still off. Heat gathering in my palms. Before I finish reciting, remembering the verse, I wall my hand against my mouth, rushing for the toilet.



**Gerry Bergstein**, *Babel*, 2002, ink, 60 in. x 40 in.  
*Courtesy of Gallery Naga.*

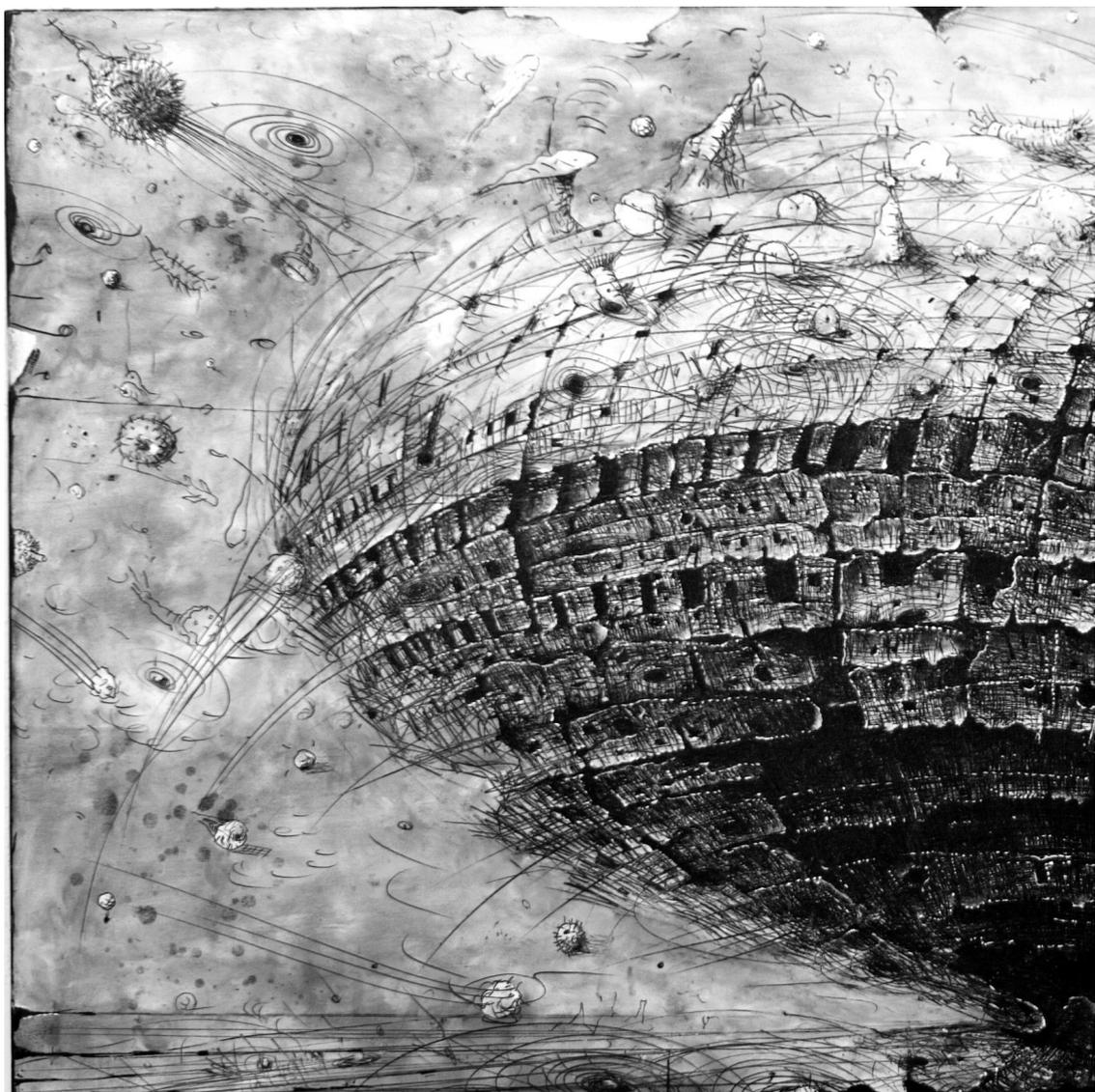


**Gerry Bergstein**, *Orb*, 2002, oil on paper,  
30 in. x 22 in. Courtesy of Gallery Naga.



**Gerry Bergstein**, *Book 3*, 2004, oil on canvas,  
21 in. x 34 in. Courtesy of Gallery Naga.





**Gerry Bergstein**, *Location, Location, Location*,

2004, oil on canvas, 21 in. x 34 in.

Courtesy of Gallery Naga.



**STEFANIA HEIM**

*2:31 pm*

Near window, cut  
the thing from itself. Experiment  
in intention. Not hand

but bird over  
page, bird across glass. As it swoops  
a double follows only

half the arc.

From here  
the trees seem grasses—bottom

bound, prehensile. Stop  
to physically remember the singing child once  
nested in my chest. And after only

moments the clouds  
are sad, stately shapes,  
bier-bound, macabre.

Story  
with a  
ghost.

STEFANIA HEIM

*10:41 pm*

At one a.m. she wakes  
for day. She hears  
the bells and tries to know  
their message. These bells  
say sleep? For her time  
is a signal  
for behavior. The bells just  
mark. We read  
them for her like we would  
in the fields if we were working.  
One long now, and one short.  
Two short and then three.  
Two long. They will say  
everyone gather  
around your various tables.  
In this place of concentrated  
association, time is coded  
for prescribed communal  
use. Now eat. Now rest. And  
when the sun has set walk  
slowly up and down the roads  
of winding houses. Walk  
to where the lights

stop and the darkness is sudden.  
A dog across the hills  
sounds close, another,  
farther, calls more menacingly back.

ERICA FUNKHOUSER

*One Salt Marsh, One Hawk,  
One Swimmer*

ON THE WAY TO THE CREEK I spot a hawk, a Northern harrier. More precisely, I am spotted—not surprising for a creature who sees about eight times more clearly than I do. The hawk’s discovery of me drives him down from his perch on an oak branch toward the shimmering marsh grass. One act of discovery leading to another. This is the eye-for-an-eye symmetry that settles me, almost instantly, when I leave my desk and go out into the natural world. Is the world of my writing desk unnatural? In a way, yes.

Back there, every word is dependent upon and ruled by my anxious mammalian imagination. By my reading and writing habits, by my range of experience, energy and intelligence, by the limits of my curiosity and confidence and judgment. By what I do not want to know, as well as by what I long to discover. By my hunt for words. My own moods are dependent on those words, just as the words themselves rely on my moods to select and shape and avoid them. Everything begins and ends with me—the necessary imperialism of creation, which must afflict even the most modest writer. I feel it as keenly now, at sixty-five, as I did as a twenty-year-old.

At my desk, a single word can throw me off the track for a whole day. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I was drawn into writing word by a phenomenal word. When I was ten years old, in the fifth grade, I acquired a pen pal through a program advertised in the back of the *Highlights for Children* magazine given to us in school. “Looking for something to do this summer? Get a pen pal!” I forget my correspondent’s name, but she lived in Panama; I’m sure I picked a Panamanian because I’d read about the terrible losses to malaria while the Panama Canal was being built. That mosquitoes had had such power over human endeavor fascinated me. In any case, my pen pal and I started up a rich correspondence. One August day, I biked into town to mail a letter to her—the fact that airmail letters required a paper so thin that it was nearly transparent added to their excitement, as did the special envelopes with their border of barbershop red and blue. Each time an envelope was addressed, I would inscribe AIR MAIL in all caps at a carefully isolated spot to the left of my pen pal’s address and below my own. Moreover, an airmail letter had to be weighed before the right stamp could be purchased. How could any correspondence be more important than one requiring a scale?

At the post office I handed the letter over to the clerk. He was an older man, someone I recognized, but I couldn’t have told you his name. Square face. Square teeth. Buzz cut of a scoutmaster. He looked at the letter and then looked up at me. “Who do you know in Panama?”

“My pen pal! I found her in *Highlights for Children*.” The postman glared at me. I recognized this look; it was the same look my mother gave me when I said “equestrian arts” rather than “horseback riding” or “perspicacious” rather than “hawk-eyed.” “She’s really nice,” I chimed; “She sent me a postcard of the Panama Canal!”

“Don’t you have any friends here in town?”

“Of course, but—” I wasn’t allowed to go any further. The postman leaned closer to me, his arms folded on the counter.

“Do you know what Emily Dickinson had to say about friendship?” I had no idea who Emily Dickinson was. The postman cleared his throat and continued, as naturally as if he were giving me the price of the stamp,

“The Soul that hath a Guest  
Doth seldom go abroad  
Diviner Crowd at home  
Obliterate the need.”

As I paid for my stamp, quickly affixing it to the envelope and handing it back to be mailed, I could think of only one thing: *obliterate*. Whatever it meant, it was the most spectacular thing I’d heard all day. It rang in my ears like fireworks. The postman had said other words I didn’t recognize—“soul” I’d come across before, but always with explanatory companions, as in “dear soul,” or “poor soul,” referring, usually, to orphans. And “divine” was something of a mystery to me unless it was applied to a dessert. People said my mother’s apple pie was “divine,” to which she would respond, “Thank you. It’s just pie.”

*Obliterate* was something else. The postman had flung the four syllables across the counter as if they were his own teeth. All the way home on my bike, a trip of about four miles, I said the word over and over again, trying to picture how it was spelled so that I could look it up in our dictionary. When I did, I found out its meaning—“to blot out, to erase”—and that it came from two Latin words meaning “against” and “letters.” I must have understood that this meant the letters of the alphabet, but I felt sure that the postman intended me to understand that letters written to pen pals must be obliterated. He had given me an icepick of a word, a word that led me to Emily Dickinson and the first poem I ever memorized.

The marsh grasses shimmer, already gold-tipped in late August, their roots submerged in the exceptionally high tide of a full moon. I can hear the tidal waters, just turned and beginning to recede. They

bubble beneath my feet, almost conversational, as they back away from the muddy roots they so recently embraced. One of nature's many wordless conversations: you hear them when flocks of migrating birds suddenly switch direction, or when the wind arrives at a poplar grove and turns the delicately serrated leaves into a mesmerizing chorus.

As far as I can see there is marsh grass. The grasses conceal nothing, I suspect, of interest to the hawk. He's a hunter of small birds and mammals, and he's more likely to find them along the narrow country road from which my arrival has driven him. He'll be back. I'm just passing through, on my way to the end of the road, where I can dive into the tidal creek. As soon as I turn the corner, he'll find his way back to the branch in the oak where I've spotted him before. I scanned the tree out of habit, knowing I might spot him there. Hawks may have their own visual habits, but their eyesight is so powerful that it's more of a weapon than a tool. Their large eyes let in more light than ours do, and they have fewer blood cells in their retinas to scatter the light as it enters the eye. They also benefit from a neuromuscular adjustment that allows their eye to alter its lens curvature rapidly, thereby making it possible for the hawk to remain focused on a quickly moving object. This feature is called *accommodation*. When applied to humans, the word "accommodating" may imply either a harmonious cooperation or adaptation, or a tendency to give up too easily one's own desires. Where hawks are concerned, accommodation is entirely physiological and indicative of superior hunting skill.

Alone in the creek, I swim upstream toward a beautiful public golf course. I have never played golf, but when I'm swimming in the marsh the sport takes on a certain interest for me. I suppose I'm always looking for Will Barrett, the depressed golfer who falls into a sand trap in Walker Percy's marvelous novel *The Second Coming*. Barrett's fall sets off a series of events that will rattle him back to life, for better or for worse. As he lies on the ground, he experiences not the expected amnesia, but

its opposite—an ability to remember everything. And everything he remembers reminds him of something else—the “whiff of rabbit tobacco in North Carolina reminded him of Ethel Rosenblum and a patch of weeds in Mississippi”; an “odd-shaped cloud in the blue Carolina sky reminded him of a missing tile in the Columbus Circle subway station. . . . The tile had been broken out except for a strip at the top, which left a grayish concrete area shaped like Utah.” These may be the most interesting sentences ever written about events on a golf course.

From a distance, I watch today’s golfers, most often in pairs, as they take turns hitting and then following their white balls. They pull carts behind them, or they ride on electric carts. They stand close together—discussing their shots as a pair of birds might discuss the scarcity of earthworms—and then, also like birds, they suddenly leave each other, one walking uphill toward a level green, the other walking down toward the marsh. Perhaps he sliced his ball into the creek. The golfers are too far away for me to hear what they’re saying; I can’t even tell the males from the females. All golfers, at least on this course, seem to dress in shorts and polo shirts.

I swim until I can’t swim any more, or until the creek is either too narrow or too shallow for me to continue swimming. Most days, I time my swim so that I start out swimming upstream, against the outgoing tide; once I turn around, I’ll be swimming with the tide, which gives me a free ride home.

What’s out here? Two or three docks whose gangways lead to summer cottages. Rowboats and catboats, beautifully adapted to sailing in the shallow waters of the marsh, and a few larger motorboats. If the clambers are not yet home from their low-tide digging out on the flats, their pickups and boat trailers are parked in the sandy fringes where the road ends and the marsh begins. One electrical line crosses the creek where I swim; at different times I’ve seen dozens of starlings perched on it, or a single kingfisher.

Downstream, in the opposite direction of the golf course, lies an island artificially planted to spruce. Why? Because a rich man saw that his bride, a young woman from Maine transplanted to this spruce-less stretch of Massachusetts coastline in the 1930s, missed her native trees. His solution was to cover the island visible from her bedroom window with spruce saplings. Now a wildlife refuge, the transplants have thrived. To a swimmer, they have the effect of turning the island into a dark blue hump; it looks like the overturned boat of a Viking god.

In the water, my companion is the sky. I float on my back to see as much of it as I can, for as long as I can. It's more beautiful here than anywhere I've ever been, in part because there is so much of it, uninterrupted. In Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Crusoe in England," Crusoe remembers his island as "a sort of cloud-dump." Not so here, where all the clouds are passing through, unconcerned with residency. Floating in their separate elevations, moving tirelessly, but casually, they seem to be as indifferent to one another as if they were different species. A toad displays this kind of indifference to a passing fox. Even traversed by dozens of types of clouds—wispy curlicues of cirrus and plowed furrows of stratocumulus and white confections of cumulus—the sky, from the point of view of a lone swimmer, seems to be one thing, not many things. A sky. The sky. The sky above.

Like every young adventurer who reads *Huckleberry Finn*, I set about building a raft the moment I reached the end of the novel. I had a river to explore, and I had things to escape from but, unlike *Huckleberry Finn*, I had no Tom Sawyer to sail with, and no Jim to give the journey a greater purpose. Nor did I long for these companions. The rickety raft of my childhood, whether or not it ever left the bank of the river, was mine and mine alone. I didn't yearn for company on my way out to the territories; I would have the sky. I remember having that thought when I was nine, before I'd read any poetry, while I was collecting odd bits of driftwood from the river and scrap lumber from my father's toolshed.

I felt confident that the sky would accompany me, even after reading about Huck Finn's often terrifying adventures. Remembering that now, I think I must have spent a lot of time looking at the sky as a child; I must have felt that I knew it, knew what its different clouds and textures and colors meant, and that, therefore, it must know me. This is a common vanity of childhood: what I pay attention to will pay attention to me in return. Of course, what's obvious to me now, all these years later, is that I could entertain this illusion about non-human elements in a way that was impossible with human beings. If I told myself that the sky was my companion, then it was—something more difficult to accomplish with my mother or my father.

Once I'm out of the water, the sky becomes a backdrop. I concentrate more on the prickly marsh grass at my feet, the mud oozing through my toes, the feel of the wind against my wet skin. Is the air colder than the water today, or vice versa? I listen for the rapid *ke-ke-ke* of the hawk. Nothing. The effort of pulling myself up out of the water and toweling off puts an end to the rejuvenating solitude of my swim. I begin to think of what I need to do next. Calls. Work. The garden. Groceries. Schedules. Town. Country. World. Climate. Here's where I wish I had the intellectual and emotional equivalent of the hawk's gift of accommodation, his ability to shift quickly from foreground to background without growing dizzy. I reel as concerns small and large, personal and political, immediate and long-term rush in to fill the beautifully restored channels of my mind. A tide of connectedness. A gift, yes, the sense of purpose provided by family, work and community, but an onslaught nevertheless. Even Montaigne, one of the most gregarious writers in the world, said, "We must reserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude." The marsh is my back-shop.

The freedom that comes from being happily alone is difficult to describe. Traveling on her own in Spain at the age of eighty-two, the

writer Mary Lee Settle wrote, “To be alone by choice is one of the great luxuries of the world.” It’s also potentially embarrassing. Describing it, I risk sounding self-absorbed, elitist, aloof. Nevertheless, I go on. In the marsh, swimming alone, a kind of protective atmosphere forms around my body. Not a shell, not a garment, but something more like a form-fitted air bubble, an energetic privacy that protects, restores, and enlarges me. I carry it the way a honey bee carries her pollen or Saturn carries her rings. If someone were to see me when I’m swimming alone, I’m sure they’d see more of me than shows up when I’m in the company of others. The marsh, the marsh grass, and the sky add to me; my beloved siblings and friends, even my long-time lover and my own children, and now their children, somehow diminish me, perhaps because when I’m with them I’m thinking about them, listening to them, and forming words on their behalf, trying to find the right words to contain—sometimes to restrain, sometimes to enlarge—our shared experience. I love them, and with love comes responsibility, self-consciousness, worry, doubt, and innumerable chores, in addition to all the obvious pleasures of loving and being loved.

The interior life—in my case shy and secretive and guarded—closes down while the exterior life is in ascendance. It must, for there’s much in the exterior life that I treasure. But when I’m alone, especially when I’m swimming alone in the salt marsh on a hot August afternoon, my solitude protects me from my extroverted self and allows the interior life to flourish. Breathe and stroke and kick as I do, I’m alone in the richest way imaginable. If I weren’t alone—if, perhaps, the harrier were looking down at me with his superior vision as he glided overhead—what would he see? A moving body in the moving water. That’s all.

BRUCE COHEN

## *Snow Paradox*

If you are to ever intuitively comprehend snow  
You must reconfigure the geometrical crystals  
Through their own drama.

It's fortunate there are machines,  
Artificial snow-making machines  
Churning out identical flakes.

The destructive distillation of snow  
Is the moment you come to grips  
With whether a solitary light bulb has burned out  
Or if the entire neighborhood is blacked out.

If you have to relate to snow to understand it  
You'll never comprehend the language of snow.

The comfort of the snowplow  
Scraping asphalt is not the discomfort  
Of the driver startled by the midnight  
Phone who must flop from his bed's gravity  
& slide on snow pants over his pajamas:

The opposite of a man impatient for passionate sex.

Or like a librarian who never un-creases  
The binding of a single volume because the books  
He dreams of reading have yet to be written.

Try as you might to fit snow into your life  
Snow has no hidden meaning or it does.

The snowplow driver's pillow revises itself  
A hundred times per night, never repeating

Shapes, unlike the snow machine.  
Your life cannot be paraphrased; nonetheless,  
You make duplicate keys,  
But they, too, are locked inside your life.

Conversing with snow is really different  
From talking to snow. Will you be diminished  
By a lack of news from the outside world?

Some days your sons don't call back  
& you excuse it as a new form of evaporation.  
Tomorrow you think: tomorrow.

One day this, too, will not be true.

Rule # 1: like love, only talk snow before  
& after snow because the agenda of snow  
Is to quietly nudge you into paying attention.

You cannot reread snow.

BRUCE COHEN

Snow, upon contact with preexisting snow,  
Packs intent & meaning obtuse,

Like the futile frustration you feel when a snowplow  
Piles a new snowbank at the foot of your driveway  
After you spent your entire adult life clearing a path.  
For a moment you were delusional; you thought the snow was beautiful,

Like kissing a stranger because you thought  
She was someone you knew.

TIM HORVATH

## *The Ship of Theseus Sextet*

THE ENSEMBLE had been scheduled for a performance of moderate length at a small non-denominational church whose stained-glass windows depicted commonfolk chiseling, sweeping, piling wood. The first part of the show was supposed to be a lesser-known piece by Demetrius von Hessen, “The Dockworkers,” rarely performed thanks to the von Hessen estate’s notorious stinginess about granting permissions. They had scheduled a fifteen-minute intermission, but they always took twenty so the clarinetist could make his phone call. Once wrapped in his call, he was unreachable, might as well have been in another country—it was impossible to make eye contact to let him know it was time to resume. He was having an affair with the violist, and whatever the current state of their ever-shifting relations—steamy, tepid, lukewarm—he would use the intermission to call his wife, who erroneously suspected him of seeing the violinist, the idea of which was laughable to him, for she was gaunt and equine. *How smart I am*, he thought, *to have made myself friendly in such an egalitarian way with the whole ensemble, thus ensuring that my true motives are utterly opaque.* By “egalitarian way,” he meant that at social gatherings at which his

wife was present he would expend almost the exact same amount of time with every person in the room, not excluding the caterers, as though he were a political candidate doing the rounds. When his wife wasn't present, all of this was out the window, and he spent his time in rapturous conversation with the violist in the middle of the room, forcing others to squeeze around them as around a stalled car on an exit ramp.

In this performance, though, before they could reach the intermission, the flutist had a charging cadenza that brought "Dockworkers" to its close, and instead of the resolution that one might have expected, which she could always be relied upon to produce, she simply went on playing. Every time it seemed as though she was coming to some point of closure, some end note for which applause was the only logical reply, she twirled and pinched the note until it metamorphosed into another, a tentative, fluttery one that could not possibly be the last. The flutist was the one they trusted the most in the ensemble—level-headed and forthright, she doubled as their manager and booking agent, plus she balanced the expenses at the end of a tour and made sure everyone got paid fairly. She was, in short, neither to be trifled with nor ignored. Why she was persisting in this fashion was unclear to the rest of the ensemble. She was, it had to be conceded, a bit of a mystery. Her private life was never discussed; it was understood that she compartmentalized ruthlessly, as though between her personal life and her onstage world there stood a curtain the cords of which had been cut so it no longer parted. Watching her teeter on the notes, they threw her looks that were part hint, part plea, part expression of mounting frustration and outrage. She shrugged into the flute, and her shrugging altered, fundamentally, the timbre of what she was playing. And so she blew right through the intermission, like someone going through a red light without speeding up in the least, as if utterly sure of the rightness of their way, daring an officer of the law, a judge, to find wrongdoing in it.

And so instead of taking their first set of bows, which would have had the diffidence of first-act bows, letting it be known that there would be more rather than diving into them, the ensemble stretched their legs a little bit and plowed back into the music, which still had its roots in “Dockworkers” but had also departed a bit and become something altogether distinct. They could improvise together with the best of them, had known one another to spend hours doing so in rehearsals, even though the trumpet frankly found the improvisations to be minutes of his life that he wouldn’t get back, and discretely recorded them on timecards that he’d pilfered from his day job, actually a night job doing security at a small manufacturer of electronic components and lithium batteries. It was his small rebellion, the larger rebellion being his manner of playing the trumpet, which was full of spit that he “tuned” by taking little swigs of different liquids covertly that he kept in vials and swore altered his intonation in subtle but unmistakable ways. Soy sauce, ginger beer, wheatgrass juice, Tempranillo—each in a vial on a holster beneath his shirt. The clarinetist contended that it was more “vile” than “vial,” at first accusing the trumpeter of drinking on the job, sure that he was carrying nips on his person, till the trumpeter proved it otherwise by sticking a shot of Worcestershire right under the clarinetist’s nostrils, to the latter’s chagrin. He’d seen his share on the assembly line fall prey to heroin, and here the clarinetist, this effete two-timing Yalie, was going to challenge him?

But in spite of this uneasy history, they were all improvising together now. The violist had been creating a sort of a movie in her mind about “Dockworkers” that accompanied the playing, and she knew where to introduce certain strokes when she got to a certain point in the film. There was, for instance, one moment where she pictured the workers carrying crate after crate and one of the crates burst open, revealing glorious, multicolored birds that came out of the box like racehorses, their panoply of colors prismsing the air, their brightly hued feathers

scattering on the gray dock like some deranged but luminous painting. At this point she knew that she had to deliver a series of fast, harsh upstrokes while she imagined untangling a stuck comb from gnarled hair, and as the notes emerged they twined around the trumpet, which itself had been growling but now would drop to something more like a purr. In her mental film, the dockworkers were gaping, pointing, were faintly squealing, because how could these avian wonders have been what they were lifting all the time, something so light and buoyant, cargo that would have lifted itself, if only they had allowed it, if only they had known. And as the ensemble continued—for they would not stop playing, not for months and months—she would continue to map out the film in her mind. One dockworker for the first time would leave the dock, stowing away on a ship in the harbor and facing the grim throat-clamp of the hold, then winding up in a strange tropical land, from whence the colored birds came and where they were hardly even the foremost marvel. And the movie continued, became, in fact, many movies, because it would sometimes take a peripheral character and depart with that character and pursue his or her life elsewhere, sometimes building on whatever was in the news that day (they had the news delivered daily to their performance space, something the flutist had insisted on as their manager, using it both to keep up with the world and to mop up the trumpeter's spit). Soon they were in the paper—one at a time, they would go aside for interviews, and they quickly became infamous and famous at once, their fame growing wide and wild, till the world grew bored with them. Interest spiked again several months later when the wife of the clarinetist swallowed a whole bottle of pills and announced in a note that her husband had been in love with the violinist. This news (that of the suicide) came not via the newspaper, but via her own father, who'd never liked the son, never trusted him, never found his pursuits to be anything other than lackadaisical, but who had developed a certain degree of admiration for him once they had been

playing for one, then two months—the endurance, the stamina, the dedication, the history-making, all had the effect of winning him over belatedly to his son-in-law. And so it was with both an extremely heavy and embittered heart that he came on stage to explain, as unobtrusively as he could, that she had ended her life. They grieved together, limbs interlocked in embrace, the music forging on around them.

The ensemble had exhausted their entire repertoire several times over, and learned new work; new pieces were commissioned for them even as they continued to play. They won grants, but were mainly supported by online donations from a public that was eager to be a part of sustaining them. A set of conspiracy theories began to develop, a sort of quasi-religion. If they were to stop playing, the world's days would be numbered. They were playing at a particular resonance that matched the pulse of the earth's own electromagnetic fields. They were serenading extraterrestrials who would wreak havoc on our world if the music stopped. They were playing directly to God.

There was no shortage of volunteers, reinforcements who came to relieve them. They came to be known as the Ship of Theseus Sextet, and this title clung to them so insistently that whatever their name had been formerly, it sloughed away like so many dead cells. Once replaced, the violist in particular never returned, and the clarinetist, betraying no explicit acknowledgment of their torrid affair, simply played on with what one critic said was a “newfound melancholy and longing to which no abyss was equal.” Some said that his own instrument sounded these days more like a viola than a clarinet.

There were a few stylistic innovations—electronic patches were rigged up, making their sounds torque and thrum. But even more impressive were the practical details—how did they manage to feed themselves, to bathe themselves while continuing to play (did the trumpeter bathe in his own saliva, as one late-night comedian quipped)? Accountants came to help with taxes, dentists to do regular cleanings and fill

cavities with the occasional root canal (the oboeist, whom we have not mentioned but who had long indulged a sweet tooth), and all while they kept playing, years going by, hairlines receding, children growing up, mortgages paid off on houses only vaguely recollected. There were silences, of course—silence, after Cage, was not only expected but considered downright quaint, like slipping “Frère Jacques” into the middle of an otherwise severe, atonal piece. It was impossible to know how it would end, only that it must one day—in fire or ice, in shrapnel or looming ocean, in metastasizing cells or in a gradual withering of gray matter, leaving the slag of forgetfulness in its wake. Or maybe one day they would simply shrug and stop, stand and bow to anyone who was still paying attention.

**ELIZABETH POWELL**

*The Repetition Game:  
The Moment Is a Tricky Fucker*

In the repetition game you repeat what I say. Sometimes you change it, and then make me repeat it until we are joined in moment.

*Hello: Hello.*

*Goodbye: Goodbye.*

In this warehouse loft, windows are as tall as walls. Outside the trees repeat each other's call to the sky. Their roots bank their secret messages in the earth. I am your spontaneous responder, and you are my spontaneous responder. We go on like this until one of us needs a sip of water.

We came here through the old neighborhood, took three lefts. There is a crack in your lower lip that bleeds out a truth you won't repeat back to me. Our poetic problem is to enact a relational philosophy of each other. This is how beings can be made.

We both want to be whole, so the story can be told. We are engaging in a kind of process theology with each other, like others engage in sex or eating or drinking.

This is where our intention is to make this a prologue exercise that defines the trajectory of our story, as if we have always been together not merely as characters.

*I am Willy Loman's Reckless Daughter. (I repeat).*

I'm a doppelganger, step-sister, bitch, bastard- the roofied one erased from the storyline. (You repeat).

*I've got stage fright, which is a kind of trauma of having to be born again. (I repeat).*

I hear footsteps on the fire escape, but it is only our voices reverbing against the mirror behind the ballet bar. A speckled green vase on the farmhouse table painted black yelps for admiration by the door.

THEOTHERWOMAN / Our Mother always asking (off-stage): "Are you paying attention to what I am saying?"

You say: "Are you paying attention to what I am saying?"

So, I say it. My double, my sister: We are engaging in an energy event. I am disassociating into you. God is an actor acting on us: You are inventing me and I am inventing you. Where have you been? I say. Where have you been? You say.

"Your hair's a mess: Brush it!"

"Brush it!" (THEOTHERWOMAN / Our Mother says off stage).

A little brown starling on the sill. A zigzag of scratches on this old pine floor.

Our poetic problem is to enact a relational philosophy of each other. This is how beings can be made.

Sails can be heard clinking against masts in the harbor behind us.

We both want to be whole, so the story can be told. We are engaging in a kind of process theology with each other like others engage in sex or eating or drinking.

“Here’s the brush.”

“Do you want the brush?”

We have no trigger words. All words are trigger words, that’s how we like it. Real.

“Don’t brush your hair by the food. I’ll give you the brush, then you’ll cry.”

A fruit basket encased with plastic wrap by the industrial sink: green apples, navel oranges, an unripe pineapple doesn’t solve our hunger. The mirror is our dining table, pull up that black metal chair.

*Are you paying attention to what I am saying? I’ll give you the brush.*

This is where our intention is to make this a prologue exercise that defines the trajectory of our story together, as if we have always been together not merely as characters. We know where the typewriter is. (It is hidden in the closet.)

*Is there something you want to tell me?*

This is where we might read our Alfred Whitehead philosophy grandfather gave us and say: “Your creating makes no difference to God’s existence, only to God’s of me.” But after you repeat me, you say:

*I want to have a Godsperience.*

So, I'm writing a ritual to bring back our father in some form because God is an actor in our story.

THEOTHERWOMAN / Our Mother (still off-stage) says: Are you listening to what I am saying?

You call to me, and I repeat what you say.

*I've got stage fright, which is a kind of trauma of having to be born again.*

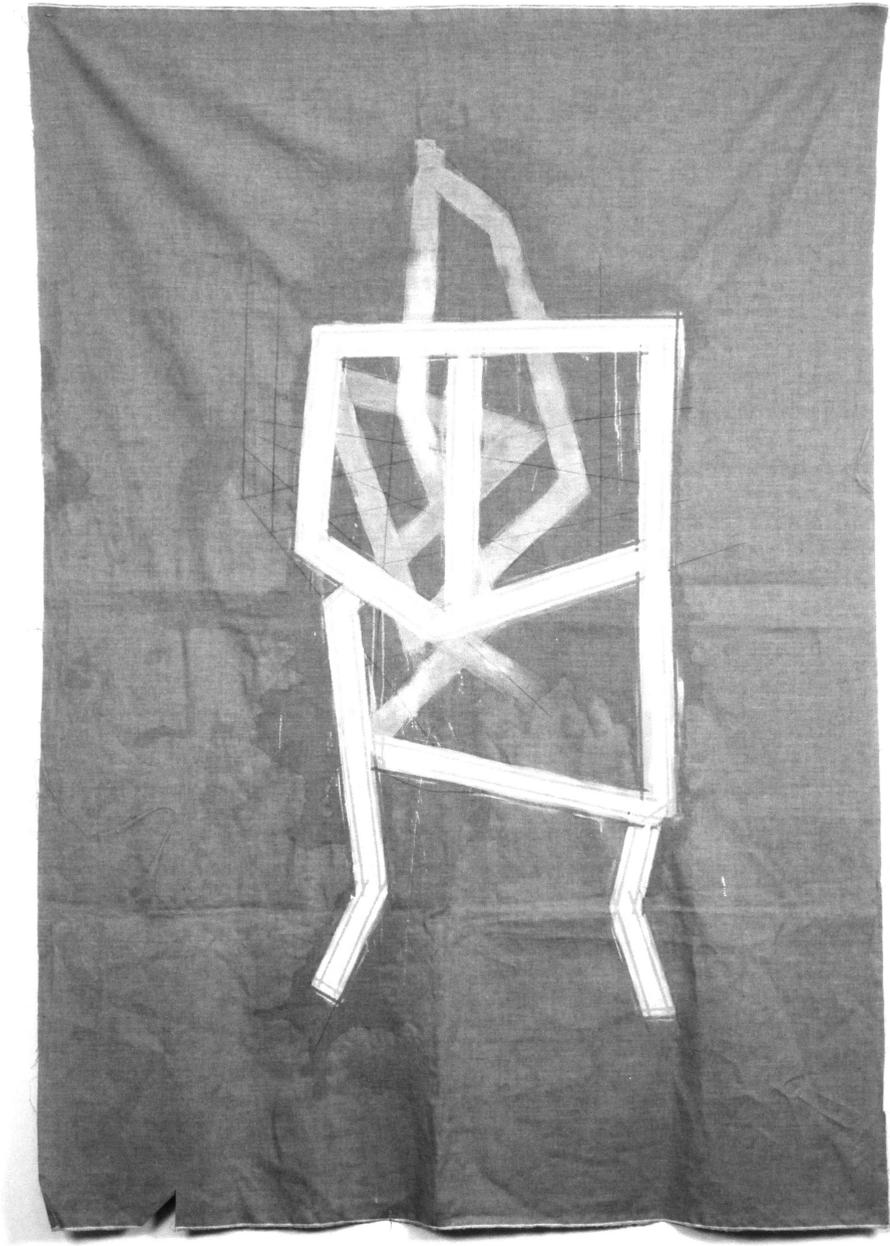
You bite a green apple vigorously. I open the window to prove myself to the wind. *We are listening.* It is autumn again. Five minutes ago it was spring.

*You don't impersonate a character you personate a character.*

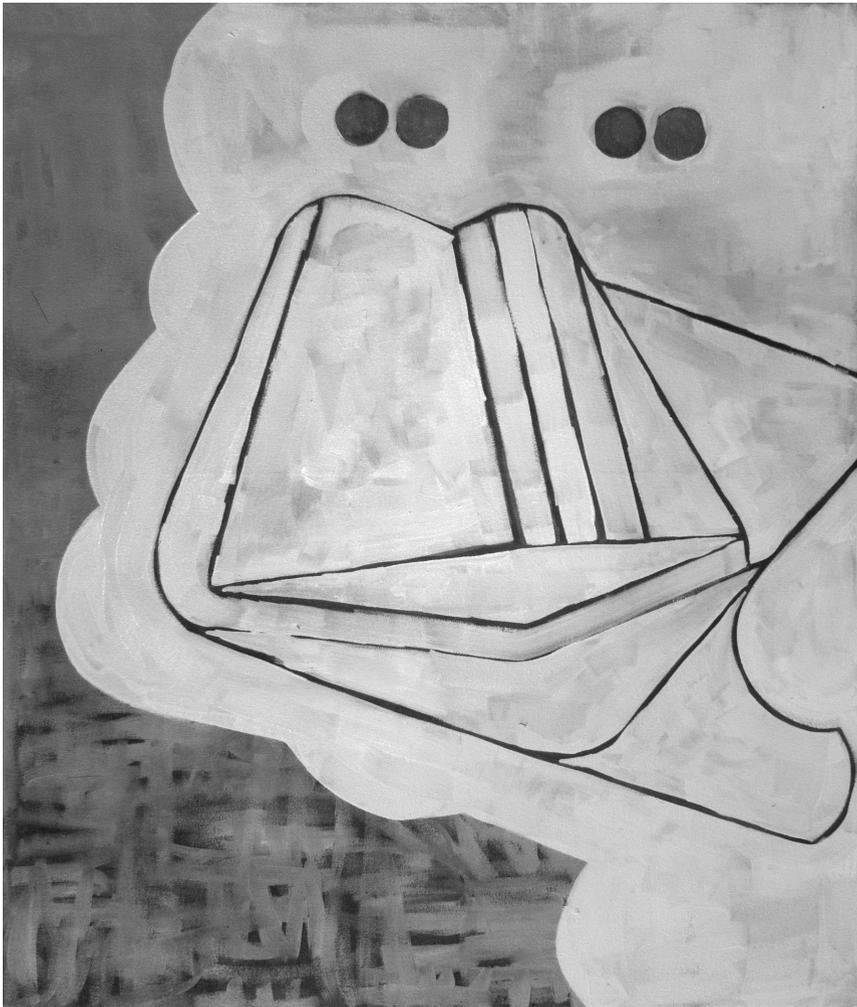
I want to be whole again, so I begin *living truthfully under these imaginary circumstances* with her.

I am the stranger in the mirror in conversation with my doppelganger.

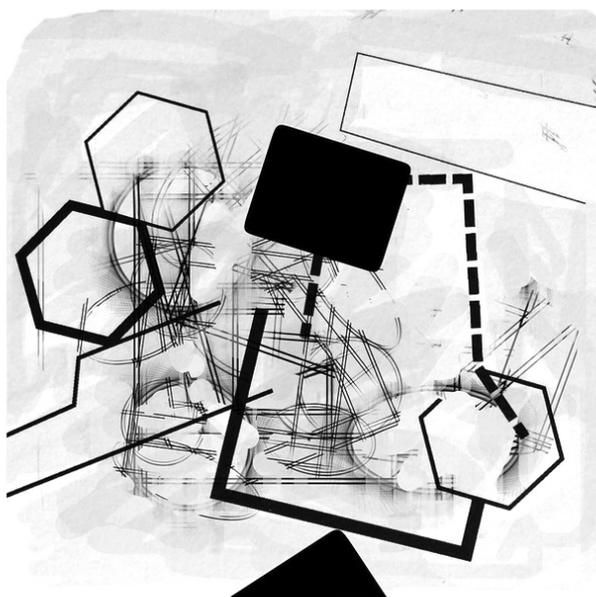
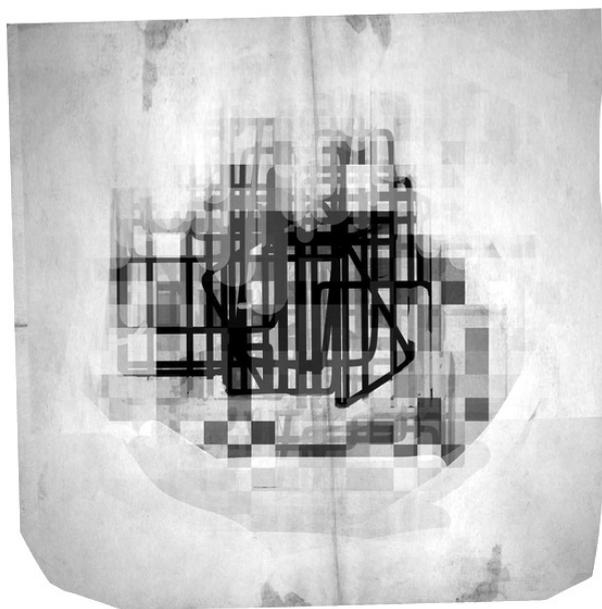
We proceed to the next exercise.



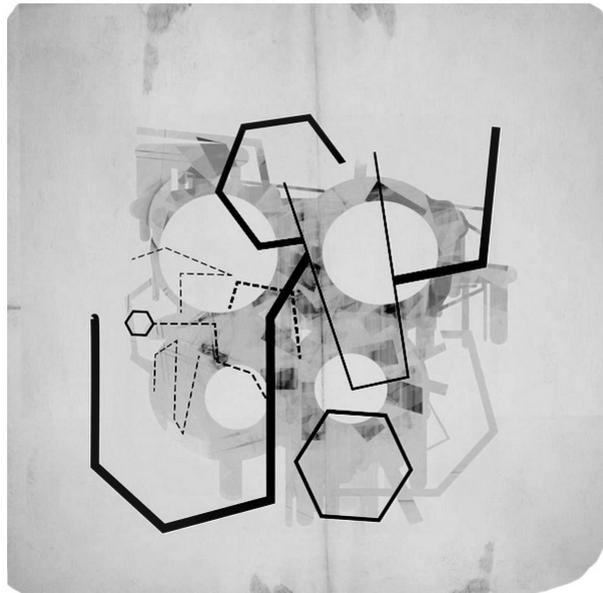
**Sharon Butler**, HVAC on Legs, 2012, pigment, binder, stretchers, on linen, 40 in. x 60 in. All images courtesy of Theodore:Art.



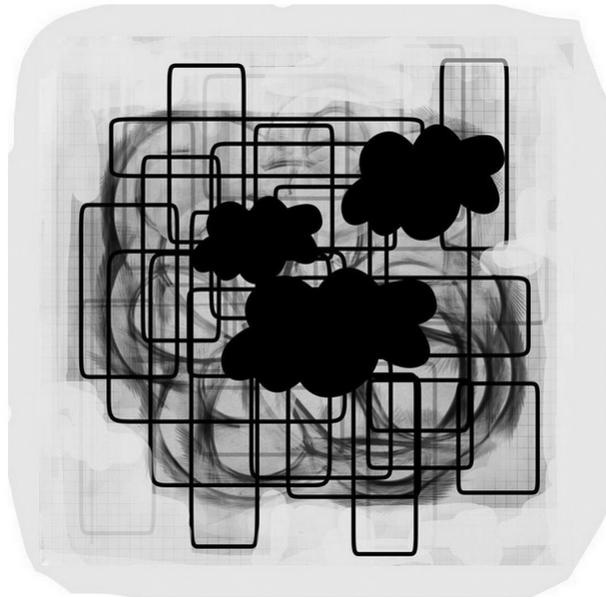
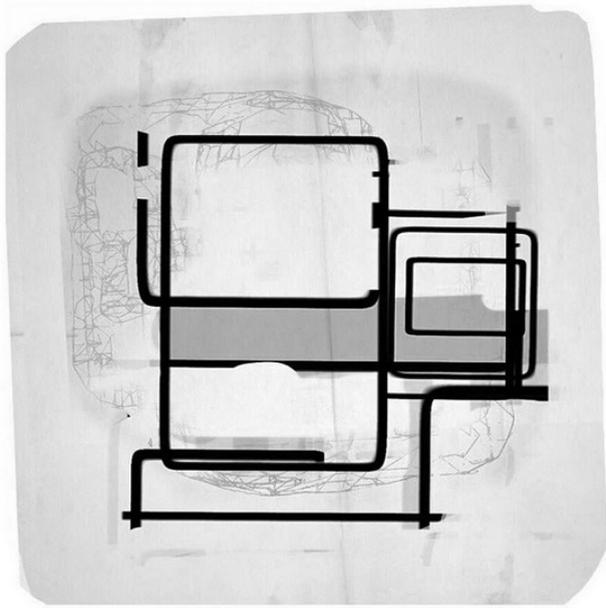
**Sharon Butler**, *July*, 2016, oil on canvas, 38 in. x 32 in.



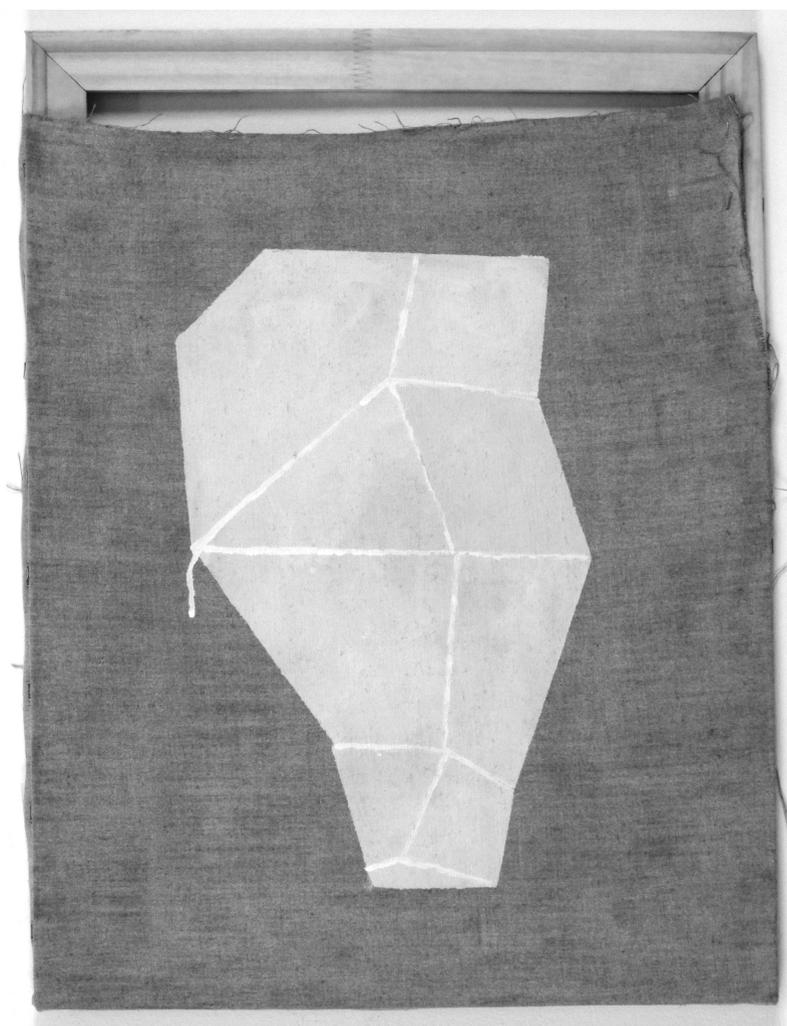
**Sharon Butler**, (top) May 8, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.  
**Sharon Butler**, (bottom) May 9, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.



**Sharon Butler**, (top) April 18, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.  
**Sharon Butler**, (bottom) April 20, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.



**Sharon Butler**, (top) May 19, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.  
**Sharon Butler**, (bottom) May 2, 2016, Instagram digital picture, size variable.



**Sharon Butler**, *Cement Mixer*, 2012, pigment, binder, stretchers, staples, on linen tarp, 20 in. x 16 in.

## HALA ALYAN

### *Afra*

Dear S.,

They're burning tanks again.  
In the airport custody room they asked me  
where I came from and I said yes.  
I let them open my suitcase, rifle through  
the skirts and sandals, that pillbox  
your mother left me. No, I said nothing  
when they asked of you, wanting to know  
about Mosul and the seven afterlives,  
I only said you were dead. Aren't you?  
(In Tigris, a rumor. In Istanbul, gospel.)  
I never asked you, how could you bear it?  
The shepherding and return, loving a man  
everyone wanted to see slain.  
I know what you'll say. That I'm flimsy,  
of girlish stock. (You never forgave how  
I set those geese free.) But you're wrong.  
I can recite you every word Cain told Abel.  
(Come home, *habibi*. I never said I'm sorry  
and I am.) I kept the stones you left me.  
You've no idea what a temple I built.

YI LEI  
TRANSLATED BY CHANGTAI BI  
AND TRACY K. SMITH

from *Love's Dance*

I.

It was bewitching, your open hand  
Motionless, mute, but resolute,  
Commanding. Of course I followed, past  
Lights first dim, then sordid—bright  
As a marquee of the underworld.  
Your animal heat. Your heart in full gallop.  
I gripped you with my heels, fingers  
Knotted into your hair. I saw my blue coat  
Transformed into a dune-colored cape.  
Day and night. That urge and charge. Then  
I got down on all fours, accepted the bit.  
I, for whom solitude was as vast as the prairie!  
Loving you shed light on the catastrophes of history.  
Still, certain questions continue to saddle me.

3.

Music falls measure by measure  
To the floor, but desire is a striptease  
Performed in reverse. The heart's ore  
Buried miles deep, and for what?  
I shrink even from myself. I wish  
I could get out from under the sky,  
Which handles me with an infuriating  
familiarity. But that day—your hand—  
What happened deep in the mountain of me.  
And then the mine in collapse. The shaft  
Choked with smoke. Voice burying voice.  
An absence of air, preponderance of pitch.  
I don't want to know, or understand, or be restored  
To reason. In the wake of that treason, I am still  
Domitable, a claim in wait. I am still  
Possessed of my depths. I am still willing.

9.

I am on my way, on my way to you,  
Striding the earth, it seems, the tundra  
Between us, though I am nearing you now,  
Nearing the tropics of your chest, that island  
Around which the water roils and swells.  
I am closer now than before, though time  
Gapes wide like a cavern, a jittery fault I'm  
Afraid to cross. I want you seismographically.  
I fight with me, with my urge to heave myself  
Like a pitched ball at the distant wall  
Of you. And like a dog, I am yanked back.  
By time, is it, in some jealous, sadistic fit?  
Me, I'm moth-minded, livid in my need  
For shock, for heat, for the piercing electric  
Screech of you. I was so angry once, a bay  
Of hostility. What if I stop now, and let myself be  
Lapped against like a barrier of rocks? Not  
The sharp edged gnarled ones that wink  
Out beyond the borders of safety, but  
The gentle ones that seem to sleep here  
Chastely in a little heap.

**DAVID R. SLAVITT**

## *Full Count*

It's Breadloaf—who knows how many years ago—  
and they're playing baseball. Why not?  
On one team, the pitcher is Robert Frost,  
and on the other side is Daniel Aaron.  
Does that deserve some comment? Does it need one?  
No one remembers who won, but now, years later  
whom do I root for? The Poets? The Scholars?  
One has a pretty good sinking curve; the other,  
a decent change-up. But enough, enough.  
Just let them have their innings, even now,  
remembering that there is no time in baseball.

# Contributors

**HALA ALYAN** is a Palestinian American poet and clinical psychologist whose work has appeared in numerous journals including the *Missouri Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Columbia Poetry Review*. She is the author of *Atrium* (Three Rooms Press), which was awarded the 2013 Arab American Book Award, and *Four Cities*, recently released by Black Lawrence Press. Her latest collection, *Hijra*, was selected as a winner of the 2015 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry and will be published by Southern Illinois University Press.

**GERRY BERGSTEIN**'s work is represented in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MIT, the DeCordova Museum, the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, and many others. He has been on the faculty at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for over two decades.

**CHANGTAI BI** was born in Tianjin, China, and is a lecturer in English at Binhai School of Foreign Affairs of Tianjin Foreign Studies University. He was responsible for the first draft of the English translation of *Selected Poems of Yi Lei*.

**SARAH BRAUNSTEIN** is the author of *The Sweet Relief of Missing Children* (W. W. Norton), shortlisted for the 2011 Flaherty-Dunn First Novel Prize and winner of the Maine Book Award. Stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *AGNI*, *Ploughshares*, *The Sun*, and other publications. She teaches at Colby College and in the Stonecoast MFA at the University of Southern Maine.

**LAUREN BROZOVICH** is an assistant professor of English at the University of Houston. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly* and *Volt*.

**SHARON BUTLER** is a painter and arts writer, widely known as the publisher of the NYC art blog *Two Coats of Paint*. She has received grants from Creative Capitol, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the Pollock Krasner Foundation, and a 2015 Patricia Highsmith-Plangman Residency at Yaddo. She was an artist-in-residence at Counterproof Press at the University of Connecticut.

**MIRA CANTOR**'s work is in the collections of Simmons College, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Rose Art Museum, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Center in Honolulu. She is a professor of art at Northeastern University and is represented by the Genovese Sullivan Gallery in Boston.

**COLIN CHENEY** is the author of *Here Be Monsters* (Georgia University Press, 2010), a National Poetry Series selection. His work has appeared in publications such as *AGNI*, *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. He has received a Pushcart Prize and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship. He is an editor of *Tongue: A Journal of Writing & Art*, and the creator and co-host of the podcast *Poet in Bangkok*. He lives in Thailand.

**BRUCE COHEN** has published four volumes of poetry: *Disloyal Yo-Yo* (Dream Horse Press), which was awarded the 2007 Orphic Poetry Prize, *Swerve* (Black Lawrence Press), *Placebo Junkies Conspiring with the Half-Asleep* (Black Lawrence Press) and, most recently, *No Soap, Radio* (Black Lawrence Press). His new manuscript, *Imminent Disappearances, Impossible Numbers & Panoramic X-Rays*, was awarded the 2015 Green Rose Prize from New Issues Press and will be published in 2016. A recipient of an individual artist grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, he joined the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Connecticut in 2012.

**BEI DAO** is the most distinguished Chinese poet of his generation. He was one of the foremost poets of the Misty School, a group of Chinese poets who reacted against the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution. Bei Dao's books of poetry include *Unlock* (2000), *At the Sky's Edge: Poems 1991-1996* (1996), *Landscape Over Zero* (1995), *Forms of Distance* (1994), *Old Snow* (1991), and *The August Sleepwalker* (1988). He is also the author of the short-story collection *Waves* (1985) and two essay collections, *Blue House* (2000) and *Midnight's Gate* (2005). His work has been translated into over thirty languages.

**EMILY FRAGOS** is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry, the Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, and the 2015 Witter Bynner Poetry Prize. She has published two books of poetry, *Hostage: New & Selected Poems* (2011) and *Little Savage* (2004), and she has selected and edited six anthologies for the Everyman's Pocket Library, including the letters of Emily Dickinson. Emily Fragos has taught at Yale and currently teaches at New York University and Columbia University.

**GONZALO FUENMAYOR** was born in Barranquilla, Colombia, and currently resides in Miami, Florida. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Minuto de Dios in Bogotá.

**ERICA FUNKHOUSER**'s most recent book of poetry is *Earthly* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). She teaches in the Department of Comparative Media Studies and Writing at MIT.

**YIFAT GAT** was born in Tel Aviv and now lives in the south of France. She studied at Tel Aviv University and the School of Art Hamidrasha at Beit Berl College. She has exhibited at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art in Tel Aviv, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Museum of World Culture in Gutenberg, and more.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**STEFANIA HEIM** is author of the poetry collection *A Table That Goes On for Miles* (Switchback Books, 2014) and translator of Giorgio de Chirico's Italian poems, selections of which have appeared in *A Public Space* and *Metaphysical Art*. She is a poetry editor at *Boston Review* and a lecturing fellow at Duke University. In the spring of 2016 she was the Richard Hugo Visiting Poet in Residence at the University of Montana.

**TIM HORVATH** is the author of *Understories* (Bellevue Literary Press) and *Circulation* (sun-nyoutside), and his work appears in *Conjunctions*, *The Normal School*, and elsewhere. He teaches in the BFA and MFA programs at the New Hampshire Institute of Art and is working on a novel about contemporary classical composers.

**ADRIENNE KENNEDY** (b. 1931) is a three-time Obie-award winning playwright whose works have been widely performed and anthologized. Among her many honors are the American Academy of Arts and Letters award and the Guggenheim fellowship. In 1995-6, the Signature Theatre Company dedicated its entire season to presenting her work. She has been commissioned to write works for the Public Theater, Jerome Robbins, the Royal Court Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and Juilliard, and she has been a visiting professor at Yale, Princeton, Brown, the University of California at Berkeley, and Harvard. She lives in New York City.

**YI LEI**, born Sun Gui-zhen in Tianjin, China in 1951, is one of the most influential figures of contemporary Chinese poetry. She was a reporter for the Liberation Army and a staff member of the newspaper *The Railway Corps*. Yi Lei studied creative writing at the Lu Xun Academy, and earned a BA in Chinese Literature from Peking University. She has published eight collections of poems, among them: *A Single Woman's Bedroom*, *The Love Poems of Yi Lei*, *Women's Age*, and *Selected Poems of Yi Lei*. A recipient of the Zhuang Zhong Wen Literature Prize, Yi Lei's work has been translated into English, Japanese, French, Italian, and Russian.

**MARGOT LIVESEY** was born and grew up on the edge of the Scottish Highlands. She is the author of a collection of stories and seven novels, including *Eva Moves the Furniture*. *The House on Fortune Street* won the L. L. Winship/PEN New England award and *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* won the 2012 New England Independent Booksellers' Award in fiction. She lives in Cambridge, MA and is on the faculty of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her eighth novel, *Mercury*, will be published in September 2016. In July 2017, Tin House will publish her book about the craft of fiction: *The Hidden Machinery*.

**MAGOGODI WAMPHELA MAKHENE** is a Soweto-made soul. Her essays and stories have been published in *Salon*, *Guernica*, and *An Ethical Compass: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, a Yale University Press anthology edited by Elie Wiesel. She holds graduate degrees from NYU, where she was a Reynolds Fellow for Social Entrepreneurship and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow.

**ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN** is the author of five books, most recently *Thunderstruck & Other Stories*. She teaches at the University of Texas, Austin.

**ETHAN MURROW**'s recent solo shows include La Galerie Particulière in Paris and Brussels, Slete Gallery in Los Angeles, Winston Wachter Fine Art in New York City and Seattle, and the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences in West Virginia. He is on the drawing and painting faculty at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

**SUSAN NISENBAUM BECKER**'s first book, *Little Architects of Time and Space*, was published in 2013 by Word Press. Her poetry has appeared in many journals including *Salamander*, *Comstock Review*, *Consequence*, *Lumina*, and *Calyx*, and she has been awarded residencies at the Banff Center for the Arts, Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, the Ragdale Foundation and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her work was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize. She is a psychotherapist living in Dedham, MA with her partner, Alan Albert.

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**REGINA PORTER** is an award-winning writer whose works have been presented at Playwrights Horizons, The Joseph Papp Theater, New York Stage & Film, The Woolly Mammoth Theater, and Horizons Theater Company. Her plays have been anthologized in *Plays from Woolly Mammoth* (Broadway Play Services) and *Scenes For Women by Women* (Heinemann). She is currently an Iowa Arts Fellow in the MFA fiction program at Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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