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Editorial

Well, here we are at the 50th issue of *Harvard Review*. It's not that many decades—not 50 years—but so many marvelous pieces of writing, so many brilliant, sly, startling, delightful writers! I think we can say with confidence that *Harvard Review* is on the cusp of becoming what everyone thinks it already is: an old and eminent literary journal.

Before I became editor of *Harvard Review*, I was the editor of another old and eminent journal called *Meanjin*. We used to say that *Meanjin* was the oldest literary quarterly in Australia, though I'm not sure that was strictly speaking true. But the fact that it had been around a long time was *important*. You could read the literary history of Australia in *Meanjin*; it was like stratigraphy, each era adding a different colored stripe. Those of us who worked there knew that with each issue we were adding to the layers and that people in the future would be able to look back and catch something of our time in the shade and texture of our particular striation.

Not everyone sees literary journals in this way; most editors take more of a journalist's than a historian's approach, thinking more about their impact now than in the future. But I have always felt that what mattered in the end was a journal's archival value. So, to me, it was especially fitting that *Harvard Review* should live within the library at Harvard—and not just any library but Houghton Library, that archive of archives.

The founder of *Harvard Review*, Stratis Haviaras, was himself a librarian, as well as a poet and novelist and the longtime curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room. When he launched the journal in 1992 it was in celebration of literature, of the book (as an artifact), and of the library, that “city of ideas.” Two things about that premier issue stand out: first, the astonishing (for a debut publication) list of contributors, which included not only the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, but Seamus Heaney

(just three years shy of his own Nobel), and a youngish David Foster Wallace; and, second, the sheer number of book reviews, no fewer than sixty-seven, filling almost half the pages of the journal. The outgrowth of two earlier publications dedicated to reviews, *Harvard Review* was in its early years as much a journal of commentary as it was a journal of contemporary writing.

Some things have changed in the past quarter century and some have not. We are proud of the fact that *Harvard Review* is still published in print form and that we are still in the business of creating beautiful books. We are also keeping up with the commitment to commentary in the form of interviews, criticism, literary history, and reviews, though that part of our project has migrated to *HR Online*, the digital arm of our publishing program.

Many of *Harvard Review*'s earliest supporters are still members of our extended family—at least two contributors from the debut issue, Gail Mazur and Fred Marchant, appear in the 50th as well. And many more, including the indefatigable William Doreski, author of over seventy *Harvard Review* book reviews, the first of which appeared in issue 2, have maintained an ongoing relationship with the journal. But, of course, we have also made strenuous efforts to reach out to new writers; many of the fabulous poets, essayists, and fiction writers in this issue—including Michael Cunningham, Chris Abani, Rae Armantrout, Edward Hirsch, Paulette Jiles, Lily King, Claire Messud, and Neel Mukherjee—are appearing in these pages for the first time.

Finally, I want to extend a thank you to two previous editors who generously agreed to be part of this special issue: the talented short story writer Nam Le, who served as fiction editor from 2008 to 2012 and who is appearing in these pages as a poet; and Stratis himself, author and originator of this great project, whose vision and persistence made it possible, and who writes to us from Greece, where he now lives.

—Christina Thompson

EDWARD HIRSCH

In Memory of Mark Strand

Krumville Cemetery, Olivebridge, New York

I'm not sure why I glanced back
At the bus driver grinding a cigarette butt
With her heel into the gravel driveway.

She was a figure from a myth, from
One of his poems, a stranger, a guardian
Marking the passage to the other world.

Maybe she was just another way
Of distracting myself from the burial,
From waiting in clumsy silence

With the other mourners, all the forlorn
Gathered at the graveside without a rabbi
Or a priest to lead us in prayer.

It could be said that we were godless,
Haunted, lost, as we stood there
In the vanishing light and light rain.

Perhaps we had given up too much—
The fundamental beliefs, the consoling rituals—
That would have made the day more bearable.

But as we huddled together in the afternoon,
Quivering a little in the chill mist, muffling our sobs,
Looking up every now and then at the tall pines,

We felt something lonely moving amongst us,
A current almost, a small gust of wind,
Not a ghost exactly, nothing like that,

But the ghost of a feeling, a shiver,
Which we might have missed altogether,
Except he had changed us; we were changed.

STEVEN CARROLL

A Flaw in the Crystal

THE ROCK REARS UP from the water like the remains of a giant whale. Surging around it in a continuous roar as they dash and withdraw, the waves make a sound all their own. Local sailors call it the *rote*: a moan, a roar, a primeval groan, it is the very voice of the rock itself, heard for miles around. In calm waters seabirds nestle here, the granite whale enduring a white mantle of bird droppings, while seaweed, brown and green, clings to its edges. The smaller, surrounding rocks bare their teeth in the moonlight. They are a sailor's last seamark before setting out, and the first coming back in. The Dry Salvages. *Les Trois Sauvages*. Savages.

Hunching in darkness, they wait. That sound, their only giveaway. When the cloud parts, the moon shines down on the whale hump and jagged teeth. Another cloud and they disappear into the haze of night. Waves come and go, light and dark do battle. On the shore, holiday houses, boats and chowder bars glow in the night, the thump of a dance band floats out over the water toward them. The rocks are indifferent to it all.

Ships have shattered on these rocks. Crews, crates, bits of boats, rigging and torn sails floating out to sea or washing up on the beach.

Ships' bells have sunk to the depths: their clocks, stopped at the moment of their sinking. But the rocks remain. Before you, and after you. Unmoved and unmoving, for all manner of fated thing will come to *them*. Indifferent to time—the neat divisions of past, present, and future are meaningless. They are a watery world unto themselves.

And as much as fishermen and sailors might use them to chart a course by, the rocks don't care. People *use*, rocks abide. People come and go, leaving almost no trace: only the rocks remain, before you and after you, a primeval hump in the moonlight surrounded by jagged teeth, exhaling a continuous roar, a deep groan heard for miles around proclaiming *I am*. Now visible, now hidden, they are the beginning of a journey or the end of one.



Unobserved by the gathering in the parlor, the long, lingering high note, swelling as it hovers, finds the weakness in a crystal glass. A tiny hole appears, a stigmata through which the red wine, drop by drop, falls onto a white tablecloth in an ever-expanding stain.

But no one sees it. Everybody is too captivated by the young woman and her voice. So, too, is the young woman herself. The gathering in the parlor is perfectly still. She *has* them. Notes have never poured from her so effortlessly as they do tonight, and, even as she sings her song, she is curiously detached, as if watching from out there in the audience. She brings that long, lingering note back down to earth, a high-flying bird returning to its keeper, and begins the second verse, slowly building once again to the chorus. And, all the time, she *has* them. She knows it. All eyes are on her. Especially one pair, the darkest eyes she has ever looked into. *The wave dreams on the beach*, she sings, *my delight is alone*, aware, more keenly as the song progresses, that the young man, her friend's cousin, is watching—the corners of his lips (she notes the prim-

ness of his mouth) turned ever so slightly upwards in the hint of a smile. A Gioconda smile, she thinks, momentarily distracted from her song of waves dreaming on the beach and lone delight.

Deep into the song again, she tells herself, *Don't look, don't look at him*. But, of course she looks. It is both exciting and disquieting. Disquieting because all her life she's been told the value of measured living, of restraint. So it is both thrilling and troubling. Like indulging in some forbidden delight. All of which nearly distracts her from her song and all those dreaming waves that have suddenly become associated with that Gioconda smile. He, in front of her in the parlor, but for all the world a lone figure on the beach listening to the siren song of the sea.

And it is as she is once again building to the chorus, the effortless notes made more thrilling by the close intimacy of the parlor, that she sees some of the audience turn to the table behind them. When they turn back their lips are moving, they are murmuring to each other, but she can't hear.

Behind them, out of sight, the red wine, drop by drop, falls onto the white tablecloth in an ever-expanding stain. The stigmata, created by the combination of one long, high note and a weakness in the crystal from which the wine falls, drop by drop.

The last of her soaring notes comes to earth. Everything is silent and still. Then the applause breaks the spell, and those who had turned from the singer to the table behind them turn once again to the object of their astonishment, informing those around them, pointing to the glass, until a small crowd gathers round.

But before Emily can discover the cause of the distraction, her friend, whose house she is performing in, steps to the front of the parlor, claps her hands, and announces that a short reading will now take place. And that is when the young man steps forward and stands beside her.

"Miss Emily Hale," her friend Eleanor is announcing to the audience, while the actors watch with their scripts in their hands "and Mr.

Tom Eliot will now perform ‘An Afternoon with Mr. Woodhouse,’ short scenes from Miss Austen’s *Emma*.” With that she leaves them to it and Emily watches with amusement as Tom immediately assumes the manner of Mr. Woodhouse, and after briefly setting the scene and the characters coming to dine with Mr. Woodhouse and his family, and after remarking on the weather and how they shouldn’t be out in the cold for it is bad, very bad for one’s health, and observing that he is sure it will snow tonight and they’ll all be marooned here for the night, he begins extolling the virtues of thin gruel.

“I recommend a little gruel to you,” he announces to his guests in the manner of a middle-aged Englishman, which, she notes, seems to come to him quite naturally. He eyes a young woman in the audience (in a way, she suspects, that he would never dare in life), and speaks directly to her. “Before you go, if the weather lets any of us go...it will snow tonight, I know it will snow...you and I will have a nice basin of gruel,” he says with a crisp, ironic touch, the young woman, the audience, as well as Emily, bursting into laughter. Who’d have thought, Emily thinks, so shy, so intense, but really very funny. Bit of a comedian, actually. “My dear Emma,” he continues, turning to Emily, the comedian in him becoming more pronounced with every line, “suppose we *all* have a little gruel. Basins of gruel for everyone. Let’s not be selfish!” The delivery is pure vaudeville and there are loud groans and further laughter from the audience, and Emily, watching as he goes on to extol the wholesomeness of boiled eggs and boiled food in general, is puzzled again by the way someone who seems so shy (for the actors met briefly before the show) can be so at ease, even confident on a stage with a script in his hand.

When he has finished his lessons on the weather, the certainty of snow, the virtues of thin gruel, and the wholesomeness of boiled eggs, the audience is lit with smiling faces. He turns to his cousin, Eleanor, standing in front of him, and cautions her on the hazards of walking

out into either snow or rain. “My dear Miss Fairfax, young ladies are delicate plants. They should take care of their health and their complexion. My dear, did you change your stockings? Young ladies are delicate plants...”

As Eleanor nods emphatically, Tom steps back and he then looks at the same young woman to whom he recommended a basin of gruel. Emily steps forward, staring at Eleanor, assuming the crass haughtiness of Mrs. Elton.

“What is this I hear?—Miss Fairfax going out in the rain! Going to the post office in the rain!—This must not be, I assure you—you sad girl, how could you do such a thing?—It is a sign I was not there to take care of you.” Emily pauses, scanning the smiling faces, satisfied with her delivery. But there is also, indeed, a trace of sadness in her satisfaction, for she is more than familiar with the Mrs. Eltons of this world. She lives with one. After the pause, she continues. “To the post office, indeed!” and here she focuses on the same young woman to whom Tom recommended thin gruel. “Mrs. Weston,” she says, “did you ever hear the like? You and I must positively exert our authority.”

The young woman nods firmly in agreement while the gathering applauds. And the applause no sooner dies down than a violin is heard: a short phrase that is Emily’s cue. “Music,” she says, rapturously. “Ah, music! Oh, I dote on it, dote,” she is saying, looking at both the audience and Tom beside her. “As I said to Mr. *E*,” and here she gives Tom a big theatrical wink, the audience joining in on the joke as she does, “Don’t give me two carriages, don’t give me enormous houses, but I could not live without music. No. Life would be a blank to me.” With the word “blank” Emily raises her eyebrows, as though fed up with the impossible silliness of her own character, the audience responding with smiles and laughter.

And so, they continue, the two of them, side by side, playing out their privately rehearsed roles: no nerves, warmed as much by the applause of

gathered friends and family as by the fire. And, all the time, the crystal glass, measuring, drop by drop, the passing time. There they were, there they are.

Why do some nights feel as though they were always waiting to happen? Or have already happened, and will again? And why don't we know it then? Why is it only afterwards we say, yes, *that* was when my life turned?

Emily Hale was twenty-two, with theatrical aspirations, Tom Eliot, a twenty-five-year-old philosophy student with poetic ambitions. Still children really, for all their sharp minds and clever talk. And over the next forty years, in many ways, they stayed like that. Children sailing toward, or eternally returning to, this night. The house where they met, substantial but modest, with its tall, V-shaped New England roof and crisply defined white windows, has changed little over the years. If at all. There they were; the players, the place and the time. The February snow high along the sidewalk and over the lawn, the front hedge thick with the brown metallic leaves left over from autumn.

The front parlor itself, where their little plays were played and their songs were sung, is visible from the street where Emily is now parked. Not such a large parlor, but large enough for their games. They were close that night, all of them, the players and those who had come to be entertained. A gathering that you might call an audience, but which was, more accurately, a collection of cousins, family and friends.

Miss Emily Hale, and she thinks of herself as a "miss," even, in less charitable moments, as a spinster, is sitting at the wheel of her Ford roadster (which she has scrupulously maintained over the years), staring at the house in bright summer sunshine. The year is 1965, and much has both happened and not happened since that winter night in 1913.

He was just Tom Eliot then. A young philosophy student with a secret destiny. For he had, she gradually came to learn, more than just poetic ambitions, he was preparing himself for the *life* of poetry. By

himself. In private. Alone. All of which he confided to Emily Hale not long after their night of amateur theater. And she knew, even then, that what he was telling her he had never told anyone. It was his offering. His gift. His declaration, even if the word “love” was never spoken.

His confessions also told her that these ambitions he cultivated were more, much more than just a young man’s flights of fancy. For there was iron in his will. In his confidence. A confidence that was puzzling considering his shyness—his almost unbearable shyness when in society, especially the society of young women. But not her. For she was to learn very early on that there were at least two Toms: the public one, whose impeccable manners combined with mischievous wit, and, even then, clipped speech (where had his Missouri accent gone?) concealed his shyness—and the private one who was sure of himself well beyond his years. That was the thing, she muses, her hand resting on the satchel beside her on the front seat of the car, he was oh so sure of himself. Someone who knew exactly what he wanted to do, knew exactly the kind of writing he wanted to do, and—he was happy to tell her—knew that nobody else was doing it because *he* hadn’t invented it yet. Oh, yes, amid all the social shyness, there was a core of confidence the likes of which she’d never observed in anyone before. Not one of those who look famous before they are, but one of those whose success and fame surprise and perplex nearly everybody because they never saw it coming. But she did.

He had told her, and with great excitement (such that she sometimes feels as though she too were there), about walking into the Harvard Union Library one morning and discovering a book—a book about the Symbolist Movement in Literature written by Arthur Symons that transformed his poetic ambition into a secret destiny. A morning that seemed to deliver his whole future to him on a paper-and-ink platter printed far away...Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd., London, 1899. What it must have been. The book had never been touched. Tom, the

first reader. Like, she imagines, opening a long lost document that had been waiting just for him and stumbling onto the answer to a secret code he'd been trying to crack for years. What was the day like, she wondered, and would he have noticed? Or noted the comings and goings in the library reading room or been troubled by the occasional coughing or whispered conversations? Barely. If at all. He'd been doing more than reading, he'd been communing with the spirit of a dead poet: Jules Laforgue, born Montevideo, of Breton parents, August 16, 1860, who died the year before Tom was born, and who now, in his own words, resided in the well-furnished rooms of infinity. But who also, from that day, lived on in Tom, as the soul inhabits the body. He'd never heard of Jules Laforgue before that morning, but not a day would go by afterwards, she liked to think, when the magic and the secret thrill of that morning would not come back to him. There are some books that have a far greater impact than they really ought to simply by being the right book at the right time: meant for one reader only.

And when he rose, stepped out of the library and onto the street (the world suddenly lit with irony, like the verse he'd just read), did the retreating omnibus wink back? The young woman, crossing the road for the shortcut into Harvard Yard, volunteer her smile as no young woman had before? Or the roses incline toward him as he passed, welcoming him into the secret society of the Elect, whose doors had just opened to him? Have you not observed us before, did they all say, for we have always been here? And we will always be here now, through the blooming of the lilacs, under the April sunsets, and where the yellow fog prowls the night. You belong to us and we to you. We have been here all the time. Just waiting...Archibald Constable & Company Ltd., 1899...She has since read this book and read the poet whose voice and manner he put on, like a tailor-made suit, a clever young man, clever like all the young men, with clever lines, who spoke of the well-furnished rooms of infinity and the sweetness of missed trains. It didn't matter that she

thought little of the book itself. Tom Eliot walked into that library, and the young man that she and the world would come to know as T. S. Eliot walked out. She has no doubt about that. She was *there*. She saw it. It was everything to him. Like being handed the keys to the kingdom. For with the voice of a dead poet came the right words, and with the right words, over the succeeding few years, came the poems that seemed to be there almost before he wrote them. He never said as much, but that, looking back, is how she sees it now. There are moments, when we first hear our note as if struck on a crystal glass, that hum. Our keynote. The one toward which all the other notes yearn and in which they resolve themselves. This was his moment and she envied him for it. What it must have been to see the heavens part and hear the music of the spheres play for you and you alone.

And, so, she sits at the wheel of her Ford roadster staring at the house where waves continue to dream and delight waits alone. She is smoking one of the five cigarettes a day she allows herself, and when she finishes she casually throws the butt out the window. Ha! No, she doesn't. Not Miss Hale. Instead she impatiently stubs it out in the ashtray, slowly grinding the glow out of it, then slams the ashtray shut, still edgy from a night of restless, broken sleep. Beside her, on the front seat, is the satchel she has brought with her, containing a bundle of papers which she secured with a ribbon not long before she left her home in Concord and drove here to this quiet Cambridge street, as she does from time to time when the mood takes her. Her first impression is the same every time—that nothing has changed and that some nights come to us complete as if having already happened, and will again. It is a quiet cul-de-sac. There are rarely any cars parked in the street or people about, rarely any hint, in automobiles or clothes, of the modern world. Nothing is changed. Except that the hedge is lush now, the snow of a faraway winter has long melted, and the trees are green.

She envied him even then, and the envy is still there. He had found his note. Found the very thing that, above all, he wanted to do. But it wasn't just him. She had found it too. The stage. But whereas he would pursue that something, she would never be permitted to. And as much as she envied the confidence he radiated, she envied also the freedom that made his pursuit possible. Her step-parents (her mother's mind went at an early age, and when she was a girl Emily was delivered over to her mother's sister), recoiled at the thought of their charge on the stage. It was not only beneath her, it was beneath them. Everybody would be diminished. And tarnished. It was impossible. You silly girl, her aunt with the voice of Mrs. Elton tells her, you silly girl—the aunt who is long dead. For Emily is now seventy-four. She shakes her head. Seventy-four, when *did* that happen? She argued with them, she pleaded, but Uncle John and Aunt Edith prevailed. And so, throughout her life, she made do with amateur theatricals and teaching drama and speech and song. At first with regret, and then gradually, as the years passed and whatever moment she may have had passed with them, resignation. To find your something, pursue and live it, seemed the most exquisite way to live.

At the same time, when he told her about the poems he had written in those moments of confession he bestowed upon her and, she was sure, no one else—those poems upon which his whole sense of destiny was based, she was also unsure. Even puzzled. Oh, he might be confident, but was his confidence misplaced? For they were about strange people, with odd names like Prufrock. *Who* is called Prufrock? It was a name you might find in *Punch 'n Judy*, but serious poetry? And as much as she envied his confidence, she couldn't help but wonder about his judgment. That for all the seriousness of his demeanor, for all the lofty esteem in which this young philosophy student was held, there was something unstable, almost unreliable in him. Even deeply flawed, the way those who lack judgment often are. Like the crack in

Mr. James's golden bowl. Or the flaw in a wineglass that renders it useless.

Through the hedge she can see the door of the house open and a woman shaking a mat in the summer air, while, at the same time, eyeing the quaint old car parked outside. Emily Hale turns the ignition key and the car starts up, not so smooth as the engines of modern automobiles but always there when summoned. Solid. And she, synonymous with the car. For Emily Hale is seen, she is sure, as solid Boston through and through: no extremes, no more than five cigarettes a day, perfect speech and upright bearing. But it is a solidity that has always come with occasional outbreaks of indulgence, be it a bright floral dress that once prompted someone to observe at a garden party that Miss Hale had brought her own garden with her. Or speed. However much she may value decorum or embody restraint, she knows of nothing that stirs her quite like the blast of air on her face when the window of the car is down and the rush of laneways as they rise up to meet you and fly by. Nothing like letting that touch of recklessness into a life defined by propriety to clear the head. And so, as she pulls out from the curb, it is with a sudden screech of turning rubber that lifts the head of the woman in the doorway, absorbed until then on shaking the dust from her mat. Miss Hale, in short, has a lead foot. All the same, luckily for her, the car is old and indulges her with a response consistent with a more leisurely age when speed was still only being invented.

The midsummer morning, although bright, is heavy and humid. Clouds are gathering. She pulls out into one of the main thoroughfares of Cambridge and steers the roadster northeast to the fishing town of Gloucester, no more than an hour's drive. It is a good day for a drive, so long as the weather holds.

She glances down at the satchel beside her. It is not properly closed and she can see, poking out, a yellowed envelope from old times. The English stamp, bearing the face, she knows, of a king long gone—a

small, deep blue stamp that you would only find now in somebody's collection. Old papers from old times. Old stamps. And dead kings.

As she leaves the city, the clouds continue to gather and, at one point in the drive, she hears the first rumble of what might be a storm. Out there she can see an elongated, dark cloud, like a beast in the jungle, crouching and ready to spring.

He was Tom Eliot, the young philosophy student of whom so much was expected. She was Emily Hale, the Boston beauty with a voice that thrilled fire-lit parlors with tales of dreaming waves and lone delight. They were destined for each other. Even created for each other. And their union, like the night that brought them together, even then, gave every impression of already having happened. But it never did. And why is that? It is the great puzzle upon which she dwells every day.

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From *A New England Affair*, the third in a series of four novels about T. S. Eliot, each revolving around one of the *Four Quartets*, forthcoming in 2017 from 4th Estate, HarperCollins Australia.

CYRUS CASSELLS

*If Van Gogh Didn't Shoot
Himself, Who Did Shoot Him?*

This isn't the castaway's story
that founders in a summer sea
of inglorious wheat, with a tempest
of tatterdemalion crows, the artful
passion that ends in self-injury:

In this re-configured version
of Van Gogh's Calvary (the forensics,
two apostate biographers claim,
aren't in sync with self-harm,
a secret long banished
by Auvers' abetting villagers),
maimed Vincent is nowhere near
the blasphemous wheat field
but on his way to abjure
the prince of a puffed-up band
of blithe pranksters, plotting,
blundering boys, all too happy
to deposit bedeviling pepper
on the Dutchman's sibylline brushes,
a jack-in-the-box snake
in his far-casting box of paints—

So hectored Vincent is set
 on visiting the teens' ringleader, a wily
 be-my-guest sneak,
 smug as a pickpocket, who dangles
 his art-loving brother as bait
 to torment the peculiar painter
 the delinquents nickname "Toto"—
 Ornerly manchild, ready-set-go
 in his outlandish costume
 of fringed buckskin and chaps,
 galling bully boy who models himself
 a newfangled cowboy, a mock
 Wild Bill Cody brandishing
 a low-grade caliber pistol—

Far from a sureshot, Monsieur René Secrétan,
 the deriding, adolescent gunslinger,
 dismantles the oddball's midsummer day:
oh, to be a bully is to fashion
a fresh Catherine wheel,
a brand new hell—

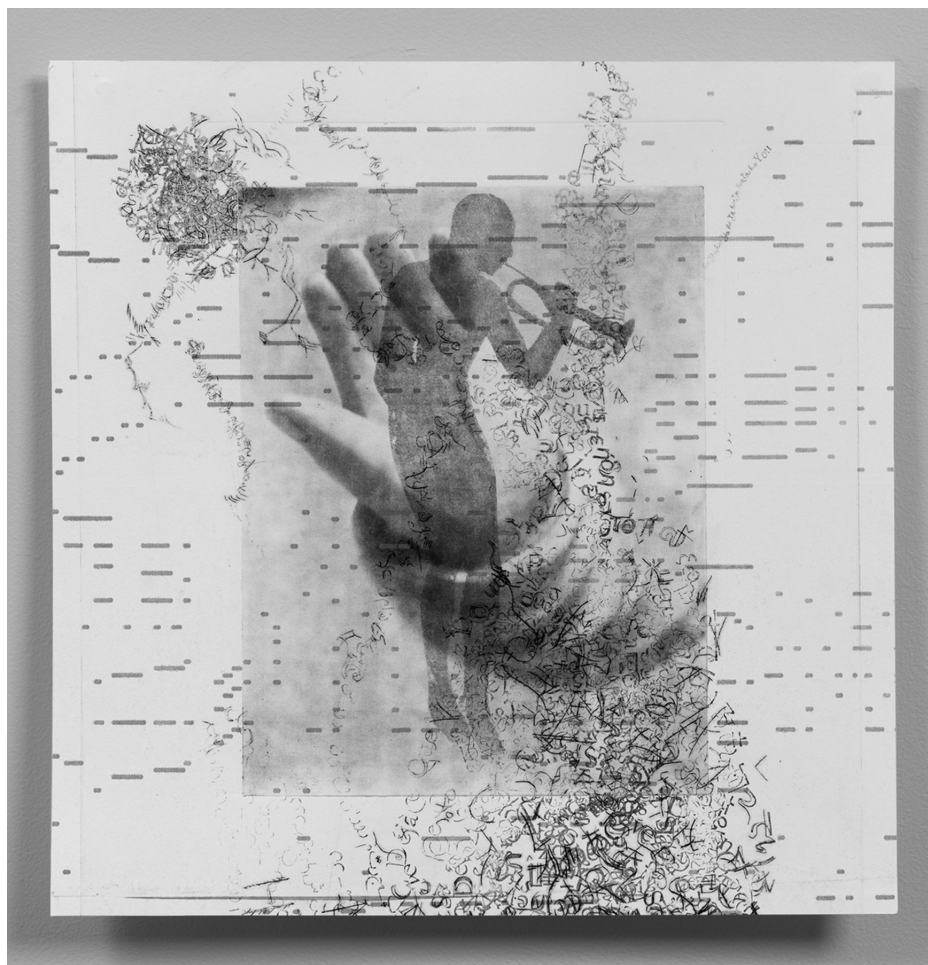
At the instant the feckless bullet
 (intentional bull's-eye or misfired report)
 finds beleaguered Vincent—
 human scarecrow in harm's way—
 oh he lets go, all at once,
 a lowdown, disgruntled vowel,
 like the gasp of a herring gull
 grappling with the wind's gusto—

And vision's emissaries, cousins
to the carrot-haired martyr's
once transient, necessary crows,
veer with the throttled black

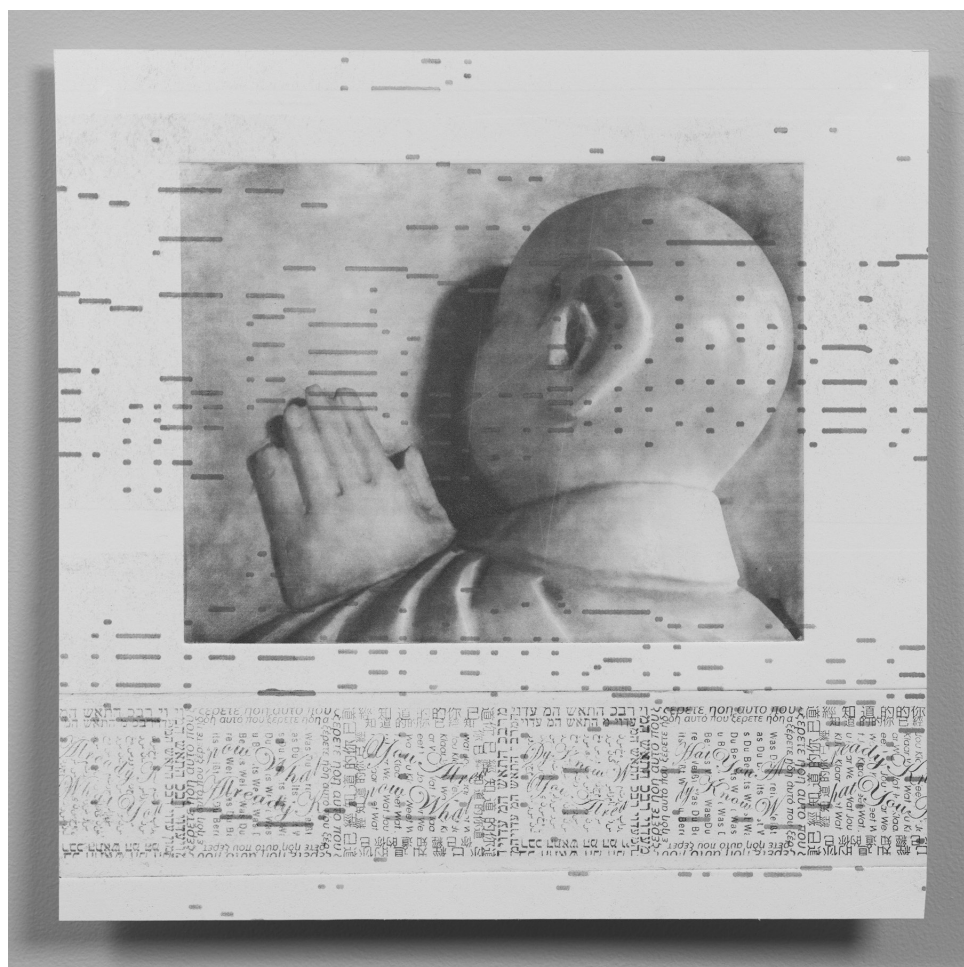
of a hundred shuddering ministers—



Randy Garber, *Reflect/Deflect*, 2016, multi-plate intaglio on shaped copper plate, 30 in. x 22 in. Photo by Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.



Randy Garber, *Coda II*, 2014, multi-plate
intaglio with relief roll, 12 in. x 12 in. Photo by
Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.



Randy Garber, *Coda III*, 2014, multi-plate
intaglio with relief roll, 12 in. x 12 in. Photo by
Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.

LILY KING

The Man at the Door

THERE WERE TWO of them in the basement already, unfinished, the pages hidden in a cabinet behind the cans of paint and stain. This one was her third attempt.

Last fall she'd been on a binge, filling two notebooks on weekdays during the baby's morning nap while her husband and two older children were scattered at their own desks miles away. But now that it was winter, a familiar petrification had set in. For weeks she'd written nothing, though she couldn't break the horrid compulsion to sit there and wait.

This morning, however, without warning, a sentence rose, a strange unexpected chain of words meeting the surface in one long gorgeous arc. As she hurried to get it down, she could feel the pressure of new words, two separate sentences vying for a place next to the first, and then more ideas splitting off from each of those and where there had been, for so long now, arid vacuity there was fertile green ground and any path she chose would be the right one. Words flooded her and her hand ached to keep up with them and above it all her mind was singing here it is here it is and she was smiling. Then the baby bleated through the monitor.

She'd only managed to get three sentences onto the page.

He was not the good kind of baby who cried out and then, sensing that no one was going to come running, rolled over and fell back asleep. The crying would swiftly build to a crescendo of outrage and reproach that would wipe out all hope of another sentence.

She stomped up the stairs to his doorway. "What baby takes a six-and-a-half-minute nap?"

He pulled himself up, pressed his teeth into the coated crib railing, and began to sway fetchingly, grinning all the while at the cleavage within the V of her bathrobe.

"Don't you get it? I need you to sleep."

He whimpered at the ugly sounds she was making.

Her only choice was to nurse him back to sleep while she worked. She hoisted him out, squeezing him hard beneath the armpits. He studied her face uneasily.

She carried him to her spot at the kitchen table, latched him on, and reread the three sentences. How quickly they had flattened, lost their music. For those few words she had been rough with her son? Her eyes passed over the page again. Awful. She felt like driving the pencil through her skin. The baby sucked, his eyes shut for the long pulls and open for swallowing, unseeing the whole time. The strong tugs at her breast returned her to a more familiar self. She pressed her lips to the fuzz at his hairline and nibbled. These animal moments of motherhood obliterated everything else briefly.

Eventually he drifted off, her nipple hanging from his lips like a cigar. She read her words several more times trying not to condemn them, straining to catch the faintest echo of what she thought she'd heard before. Just as she lifted her pencil, the doorbell rang. She glanced in its direction through the walls and shook her head. It rang again. The threat of losing any more of this precious time pressed another sentence out of her. Then the doorbell was held down so long the chimes played notes she didn't recognize.

"I'm not coming," she said quietly.

Sharp knocks began on the thin side-window, growing louder and louder until she was certain a hand would shatter through before she could reach the door. She swung it open wide.

"That's enough!" she said in as harsh a whisper as she could manage. She wasn't about to wake the baby up for this man on her porch, a man who did not hesitate to knock on glass as if it were solid steel. His knuckles she saw were red as he dropped them into his pocket.

"What are you selling?" Usually she would have cared—about her tone, her bathrobe, the great bulb of breast and the dark brown areola still tenuously attached to the baby's mouth—but her anger consumed all weaker concerns.

He held out a thin paperback.

"No thanks," she said, more civilly now, understanding the knocking was part of a religious fervor, a feeling, perhaps accurate, that this house, or half of a house (their childless neighbors were never home, never shared the brunt of the peddling that went on during the day) needed conversion.

"I've come from Smything and Sons," the man said.

"Who?"

"The publishing house." He shook the book at her. "They've given me this and I've come to talk to you about it."

She shifted the baby upward, hoping to cover a little more of her. "Why?" She read the largest words on the cover. It was the working title of her novel, the one in the notebooks on her kitchen table. She pinched the book between her thumb and fingers but could not loosen it from the man's grasp. "Give me that." Then she let go. The sound of her own voice scared her. It was her voice as a small child. She even felt the slight resistance of the words in her mouth, as if language were still somewhat new. "Please," she added.

"That's what I've come to do. Will you have me in?"

She looked at his face for the first time. He was a familiar stranger, someone you know you haven't met but could have, perhaps should have. There was a little Bing Crosby in the heart-shaped mouth, a little Walt Whitman (when he was younger and kept his beard trimmed). There was even a bit of Gerald Ford somewhere, maybe only because she'd recently read an article about his hidden integrity and decency. It was clear that the only way she was going to discover how there could be another novel with that name, despite the searches she'd done to make sure there wasn't, was to let the man in.

So often, when she made a dubious decision like this, she followed it up extravagantly, as if flaunting it to her better judgment. She led him into their small living room and said, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'll take a gin martini if you've got it." He gave his trousers a quick tug before bending to sit in the middle of the couch. A diaper peeked out from beneath his left thigh though he didn't notice it. He balanced the book on his gray flannel knees. She smiled, waiting for him to acknowledge his joke. A cocktail at nine-thirty in the morning.

He smiled back. "On the rocks."

"I've got coffee, seltzer, OJ, tap water."

"Hmmm?"

"What can I get you, really?" Her anger was back. The baby was asleep and her writing time was dwindling. Why had she let him in?

"Here, let me help you with the martini." He nestled the paperback in the seat of the bouncy chair on the coffee table.

She followed him into the kitchen. "I'm sorry but that's not a possibility. We don't have any—"

He opened the pantry door and there, instead of the teetery plywood shelves her husband had nailed in, instead of the thin boxes of rice and couscous, instead of the baby's mixed grain cereal and jars of sweet potatoes, instead of the pasta and beans and cans of soup and the

precious bottle of sundried tomatoes from Liguria she had splurged on but never wanted to use, was a long glass-covered counter stocked with two chrome shakers, a strainer, a jar of onions, a jar of pimiento olives, a box of toothpicks, five glass swizzle sticks, and the ice bucket with the silver pine cone sticking up on top. She didn't have to look any further to know that below, behind the white cabinet doors, were bottles of vodka, gin, bourbon, and vermouth, or that above, upside down on paper towel lining, were her father's Class of '62 highballs, the muscular bull fading with all the trips through the dishwasher of her youth.

"I'm glad you've got Beefeater's," the man said over his shoulder. "No need to get any fancier than that."

She watched the sureness of his hands, the love that went into the preparation. She had forgotten, long forgotten, the ritual of it all. She had carefully married a man who, like her, did not drink a drop.

He made his martini. She'd never noticed, as a child, the tenderness between a drinker and his drink. He didn't grab the bottle by the neck as she remembered, but lifted it with two gentle hands, one at the base and one at the belly. His hands moved delicately from ice to glass, bottle to glass, each gesture a signal of love. As a result, the liquor seemed to shine with a thousand glints and glimmers of gratitude as he carried it, close to his breast, back to his spot on the diaper on the couch. She sat down in the chair opposite him. She didn't realize until she released the weight onto the armrest what a strain the baby had been on her arms and neck. With her free hand, she reached for the book, saying, "May I have a look now?" only when she had firmly secured it.

"Of course. It's your book."

"It's not mine," she laughed. "Mine's not finished. Someone else beat me to the punch." But there was her name below the title, in a sort of swirly script she didn't like. The words *Advance Reader Copy* ran diagonally across the upper left corner. Was it the first of April? She was conscious of how long it took her slobby mind to find the

month. January. Even if it were April Fool's, this was not something in the realm of the sense of humor of anyone she knew. And no one knew about this novel.

She opened the book. On the left-hand side, opposite the title page which again declared this to be hers, was the copyright date. She let out a gasp.

"What is it?" the man asked between two loving, shut-eyed sips.

"Two more years?"

He took in the gestalt of her life, the robe, the boob, the primary-colored plastic items on the floor, the cardboard books with corners chewed off, the bouquet of half-deflated balloons hovering in the corner, and shrugged.

She turned the page. It was dedicated to her mother. Of all people. "The jig's up now, mister." It was an odd choice of words for her, and she was reminded of walking with her mother through a parking lot, though she couldn't say why.

"I suppose you had a reconciliation."

"No chance of that. She's dead."

"But not beyond the reach of forgiveness."

She slammed the book shut, though its flimsy galley covers did not give her the effect she wanted. "Who sent you? What is this about?" She wondered if he was, after all, a religious fanatic, one of those Mormons wanting to do a little hocus pocus on all of her ancestors.

"As I said, if you have the time, I'd like to discuss your work."

"Why should I discuss my work with you? You've never read it—no one's ever read it."

"No one?" he asked, doctorly, humoring her delusion.

"No. I keep it locked up."

She'd read a part of her first novel to her husband soon after they met, when she could have read him cereal boxes and he'd have thought she was a genius. After all his praise, she hadn't been able to write another word of

it. She was careful not to read him any of the second one, but he'd stolen glances and eventually a turn of phrase had leaked out, something about nests of snow in the trees. He tried to placate her with compliments, threatened to publish both books himself if she wouldn't try, but she hid them in the basement, bought a box with a key, and never told him she'd begun a third.

"It would have been a waste of time for me to come here without having read your work."

"This is not my work!" Oh, why had she shouted? The baby jerked awake, shot her a pissed-off glare, and began to scream. The morning—or what was left of it—was officially ruined.

"Listen," she said above the noise, flipping madly to the first chapter. She read the first line aloud. She had approached this sentence with such resistance to ownership that the resistance outlasted the truth by four or five seconds. Then her defiance collapsed. Her baby was shrieking, and her book, half written, locked in a box for several years, was a bound galley in her hand.

She felt the baby's tears rolling down her stomach inside her bathrobe. She stood up and jogged him on her hip until the crying mellowed to a low, nearly satisfied hum. The man continued to sit patiently, primly, on her couch.

"Okay," she said, "what do you want to talk about?"

"I have a few suggestions, minor ones, really." He held up his drained glass. "Might I bother you for another before we begin?"

She thought about having him make it himself again, then decided she'd water it down a bit, just as she'd done to her parents' drinks before they caught on. The baby, having spied something interesting as she carried him across the room, lunged for the floor, twisting his torso out of her grip. From the kitchen she could see he'd crawled over to the sofa, pulled himself up by the piping of a cushion, and was sidestepping toward the man and the red ballpoint he'd taken from his breast pocket.

Her hands among the martini ingredients were not sure or loving. They were not even, as she half expected, the hands she'd once laid upon this bar, innocent and investigative. Two fingers no longer fit easily in the onion jar, and the shaker, smaller too, seemed far more menacing. She felt as an atheist might, returning to the altar of her childhood. These were the tools, the chalice, cruet, and pyx, the ugly, important objects that had once worked a kind of black magic years ago.

She felt a heaviness in her limbs and spun around to tell him to go. She didn't care how the bar got here or the book with her name and her words. All she wanted was to get back to the page on her desk. But what was the point if somehow it was already finished? She had such trouble with endings. She had to get that book. She forced herself through the steps of the martini, adding a few splashes from the tap before shaking, and returned.

The man remained exactly as she had left him, though his hair (had he removed a hat?) had changed. It now seemed his most striking feature (where was Bing? where was poor, decent Gerald Ford?), a thick white covering shorn into a square with closely cropped sides and a slightly longer, iron-straight top. She was so struck by the alteration or her own lack of observation that she forgot, until after she handed him his drink, about the baby.

He was gone.

"Did you notice where Charlie went?"

"Hmm?" He looked up from his notes, notes in red ink in the margins of her book.

"My little boy. He was right there."

He stared blankly back at her, as if she'd ceased speaking his language.

"Where did he go?" she said, faking calm, concealing suspicion for the moment. Was this how simple it was—a Faustian bargain—the book for the baby? The door to the stairway was shut, and he hadn't

crawled into the kitchen, or had he? She raced back in, bent her head to peer beneath the table and through the pantry door. She returned to accuse. What the hell did you do with my child? She opened her mouth, then she saw him, on the fourth shelf of the bookcase, face out, feet dangling between Hardy and Hazzard. She lunged for him. Nothing in the course of this morning was as strange and impossible as the fact that her baby, her wriggling, restless, rarely sleeping, non-stopping baby, had been sitting still on a shelf for over a minute while she searched for him.

In that minute, her guest had downed his martini. Again she opened her mouth to scold him—you put him on the bookshelf; he could have fallen, he could have struck his head on the edge of that table!—but upon hearing her intake of breath, he glanced up, smiled the absent smile of a man absorbed, and patted the cushion beside him. “Come let’s talk this over,” he said.

His voice was gentle, promising great wisdom, and perhaps a little necessary admonishment, with love. She went to him with eager obedience. When he shifted his weight toward her, his clothes released the smells of the span of her life: sour apple candy, wet mimeograph ink, used paperback books, semen, baby wipes. The odor nauseated her, and she breathed forcefully out. He held the book out, but tipped away from her so she couldn’t see his writing. He cleared his throat and read the first sentence. Then he looked at her with pity and struck a line through what she guessed was the entire nine-sentence first paragraph. “Now enters the father. Now it gets interesting. He is the action. She is the reaction. The action is infinitely more interesting.” When she didn’t immediately agree with him, he said, “Would you have preferred *David Copperfield* to have been told by Agnes?”

“Would you have preferred *Moby Dick* to have been told by the whale?”

His mouth fought with his impatience. “That falls into a different category of conflict. When it is man versus nature, then man is the action against a force. The force is not interesting in itself.”

She searched frantically for a better example. “*The Great Gatsby*.”

“Oh, Scott. He barely knew how to tie his shoes in the morning, let alone write a novel. Max wrote that. He wrote all those books. But let’s not quibble. This book is about the father. No one will actually come out and say this nowadays, but women are so much more interesting when they’re writing about men—their husbands, their fathers, their lost loves. It’s when they start writing about themselves that they become unreadable.” He proceeded to cross out several more pages, shaking his head. “You simply cannot name me a book, a great book, a lasting book, that was written by a woman about a woman.”

“*Mrs. Dalloway*.”

“Oh, now, she’s the lens, not the object. She herself is the least material character in the book. That book is about the aftermath of war. It is about the rigidity, aka Richard Dalloway, the fear, aka Peter Walsh, and the insanity, aka Septimus Smith, of course, of war.”

There was no arguing with this man. He could take one of her most treasured books, a book that she always felt captured her own fragile relationship with the past, a book with her favorite moment in it, Clarissa and Sally and their kiss by the stone urn, and claim that it was about war. Still, there was Jane Austen, wasn’t there?

He held up his hand. “And don’t talk to me about those other English women. All those books are fairy tales written by hound-faced spinsters who never got asked to dance, let alone to marry.”

Her book. She needed to keep him focused on her book. “So you think it should be told strictly from the father’s point of view?”

“No, no. You’ve entirely misunderstood me. Keep the girl, just train her eye on the father and don’t let her slip into those little pity parties she has for all her feelings. Think,” he clenched his eyes and his jaw and his fists, then released, “*Huckleberry Finn*,” he said. “And let’s most certainly not follow her into her adulthood.”

“Why not?”

“We know where she’s headed. We don’t have to read it. She marries, she has babies, and they fill her with love and rage. Do you really think you have anything new or startling to say about that?”

He had changed again, transitioned smoothly from military to effeminate, his legs now tightly crossed, his lips in a bemused pout. His attitude reminded her of her college boyfriend, who’d passed through with his lover last summer and had sat for several hours on this same couch, watching with those same lips as she scrambled to meet the needs and whims of her three children, witnessing over dinner a spat with her husband about a missing Hello Kitty straw. The visit had unveiled the mystery of this man’s devastating ambivalence years ago, but she could have done without his but-for-the-grace-of-God relief as he hugged her good-bye.

Charlie, struggling to get off her lap, scraped an unclipped fingernail across her neck and she reacted loudly, more loudly than it hurt. She put him on the ground and pointed him toward the basket of toys, then returned her attention to her visitor, though she no longer knew what she wanted from him.

“I’ll just fetch myself another.” The ice, still fresh and large, rang in time with his steps. It was only ten-fifteen in the morning, but she was overcome with a late-afternoon feeling from childhood, sitting at the table with a spelling book (the poem she’d written in study hall tucked safely inside) while her mother arranged fish sticks on a cookie sheet and her father carried both their glasses back to the bar. It was a perilous time of day, because of its promise. Her dad was singing a song about her mother’s hair, which had been all poofed up that day at the hairdresser. Is it cotton candy? Is it marshmallow? If you try and taste it, you’re a brave fellow! Her mother was laughing. If only they fed her earlier, she could leave the room now, carry away the happy little ditty, keep it separate from other words of theirs that would lodge inside her. But her mother set the timer for seventeen minutes. Her father opened

a can of dog food. Then he made a joke about her mother's pocketbook, which was always in his way, always on top of the one thing he was looking for, like a shitting pigeon, he said, yanking the newspaper out from under it. They kept their drinks close. Her mother slid a plate in front of her, then made her father get up from the red chair by the fridge to sit with them. He slid the spelling book toward him and flipped to the hardest section in the back.

Okay, Sylvia. *Conundrum*.

Her mother was reluctant to play; she was always the first to turn sour. You haven't even asked your daughter how her day was.

C'mon, give it a shot.

All right, her mother said, taking in a deep, wary breath, *C-U-N-*

Wrong! There was far too much glee in his voice. He pointed toward the street. Back to Cranford Junior College for you! The windows blackened and it felt like the house was being buried alive. Her father brought two new drinks to the table. They were always so excited about a fresh drink, but all the alcohol seemed to do to either of her parents was uncover how little they liked life or anything in it. You haven't even asked your daughter about her day. How often that was said, as if it were their last hope, a white ring tossed out onto the waves. She tried to say the things they liked to hear: who got A's, who got in trouble. But every night she failed. Such an un compelling child, wholly unable, night after night, to keep her parents afloat. And then the poem slipped out of the spelling book and her mother snatched it up before she could. What's this? Her parents' eyes met. If they were wolves they would have licked their chops.

She thought she'd disposed of these moments long ago. But now, in a house of her own, with children and a husband of her own, with dusk and dinnertime coinciding once again, they had begun to creep back in. And with them came a feeling, a presentiment, that she would eventually

destroy this good life, for wasn't her need to write like her parents' need to drink, a form of escape, a way to detach? And, like the alcohol, it weakened and often angered her, left her yearning for the kind of extraordinary ability she'd never have. What had her mother yearned for? She'd married at nineteen. Had one child (Any more would have put me in the nuthouse, she used to say to people who asked). Died at fifty. (Alone in a rented room, her father having left her for someone who let him be the only drunk.) After her mother's death she'd searched her drawers for clues but there was nothing but a dinner party planner, and a few manila envelopes of photographs stuck together. No note, no apology (it didn't take her long to realize this was what she was really looking for). What had her mother's life consisted of? When she came home from school in the afternoons, her mother would either be on the phone or flipping through a magazine, and even though she'd be doing nothing that she couldn't continue doing now that the bus had come, a terrible wave of sadness seemed to pass through her, as if her daughter were the sun itself, setting on all her dreams. Her mother would often make herself a drink then, though she would rinse out the glass and put it back to dry on the paper towel on the shelf so that when her father came home she could pretend the one he made was her first.

The book lay beside the diaper on the couch. Once again she took it in her hands. He'd crossed out nearly half the words. His red ink covered the margins of every page. He had an opinion about every choice. A grown woman would not own a toboggan! This is not the kind of man who would order a salami sandwich! She flipped again to the last chapter. It began with the four sentences she had written this morning, though he'd struck them through with triple lines, then a wavy one on top, and if she hadn't been familiar with the words already she wouldn't have been able to make them out. She'd been right; it was crap. The entire chapter was obliterated like that, his annotation no longer limited to the sides but covering the crossed-out type, the

hand furious and uncontrolled, ending with a huge YOU CAN'T DO THIS!!!! in the space left on the last page. Still, she'd had no idea she was so close to finishing it.

He returned. She could see the effects of the alcohol now, not in any carelessness of his movements but in their carefulness. He was in that state just before drunkenness, when the alcohol makes you more aware of your body and what it is touching. She felt that he drank for this moment, not for the dulling but the heightening of his senses. There was something about the way he breathed through his nose, the way his fingertips touched the glass, the way his free hand settled in his lap as he sat back down beside her. Just watching him reminded her of the texture and temperature of things. She could feel the heat of his thigh. And yet his awareness of her had slipped a little. Her attraction to him came on fast and undeniably.

He turned to her sharply, as if she had spoken her desire aloud. He was young now, college age, with thick brown hair and those eyes, those haunted eyes that all the men who'd ever broken her heart had had. "You have more than one?" he asked.

"One what?" She could barely find a breath for the words. When was the last time her groin had throbbed so painfully?

He looked down at Charlie, who had managed to put two pieces of a wooden track together for the bright blue train to sit on. "Distraction."

"I have a million distractions," she said, hearing a long-gone flirtation in her laugh, knowing that if he touched her she would not resist. "But only three children." Usually it gave her pleasure to speak of her children, their ages, their quirks, but now they were obscuring the conversation.

"Tolstoy had thirteen children. And most of them were born while he was writing *War and Peace*. I'm not sure he even knew any of their names. That's the way it has to be done. You've got to forget your children's names."

Charlie was pushing the train back and forth on the short track, making a noise she knew was “All Aboard!” but to anyone else sounded like “Pla!” His long sleeves were pushed up nearly to his armpits, the way he liked them, unable to hinder any movement he might choose to make. His upper lip was tucked deep into the warm interior of the lower, which kept its slippery purchase with steady upward undulations. But when he glanced up to find her studying him, the lip was released for the sake of an enormous smile. He patted the spot on the rug beside him, mouthing *mamamamama* without diminishing the smile. He looked just like her husband then, beckoning her, eager for her. But she did not doubt Charlie, did not suspect dissembling or exaggeration or habit. Why was it so much harder to believe in her husband’s love for her? She thought again of the time he had quoted her line about snow like nests in the trees. They had been walking around a lake, the three of them, their oldest, Lydia, not more than four months old and nestled in the Baby Bjorn inside her parka. Half-way around, he had stopped and wrapped them tightly in his arms, My family he’d said, his voice a little squeak. Then, a quarter of a mile later, he said that about the snow and the trees and she marched off and he kept insisting he hadn’t been mocking her. Now she could easily see he hadn’t. Of course he hadn’t. She knew now too that even at the time she had known he hadn’t been mocking her—but she’d needed to find something to create distance, to put a wedge between her and that small squeak of joy he’d revealed to her. Monotony, especially the unfamiliar monotony of being loved, was something she couldn’t seem to get comfortable with.

She slipped off the couch down to Charlie who secured her with a meaty elbow on her thigh. The man was adding more notes to the margins. He was old again, her desire for him already a ludicrous memory.

“The third book is traditionally the strongest of the early works.”

“This is my first.”

He shot her a stern, disappointed glare. "Novels in boxes are still novels." Then he softened. "Why haven't you been able to finish them as well?"

"As well? As well as I finished this one?" He looked hurt by her disbelief in him, and she decided to try and answer him honestly. "I don't know." Charlie had crawled behind her and was hoisting himself up by her hair. "That hurts Mommy. Please stop," she said, and when he didn't, she felt the anger stir, the deep pool of it, always there. "I used to feel ambitious, I think, in college. My professors were so decent and respectful, nothing like the adults I had known before. They made me feel like I could do anything. Sometimes still I get these burning electric jolts of, I don't know, belief, I guess. I'll write and I'll believe. But then—" It was like those nights when she was a kid, it was just like that, her father making the jokes and her mother laughing and everything feeling like something to believe in and then the timer for the fish sticks goes off and we sit down and everything's shifted completely. "I don't know. It just stops." There was a raw ache in her chest. "And then you have kids, and everything else becomes so . . . faint. And that feeling is just a cramp you wish would go away for good."

"But those first two books. You've done nearly all the work. Why bury them?"

"They should be burned. They're awful."

"You have trouble finding the merit in your own work."

"You do too, apparently." She held up the last red-splattered page.

A look of revulsion came over him, as if he'd forgotten to whom he was talking. "Well that—that last chapter is awful. It's disgusting. There's no excuse for it."

She felt a familiar weakening in her stomach muscles. She still buckled so easily under a sudden change of mood, an unexpected attack.

Gone was the compassionate face, the sympathetic ear. "It is entirely unconvincing. Why do you people even try to write scenes of violence?"

It's not your genre; it's not in your nature." He threw the book down on the floor and stood over her. "It makes absolutely no sense." He walked to the end of the room and back. "You breach every understanding, every promise to the reader when she commits that act. Maybe someone like Bowles or Mailer could have pulled it off, but not you, honey." He shook his glass at her. "Not you."

He was one of those lightweight alcoholics, she realized. Three drinks and he was toast.

"And without a weapon. It's priceless," he cackled. "A weapon is necessary to the triad—don't you even know that? The killer, the body, the weapon. They interact. They interchange. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for Christssake. After a murder, the murderer is really the murdered, killed by his own lack of humanity. It's his death that is significant. The weapon stands as the judge and jury, the object that casts him out of the dream back into reality. Without it, you simply don't have murder."

She never stood up to the drunks when she was young. Not to her father or her mother, not to any of their friends on Friday and Saturday nights, their heavy hands on her hair, their strange, unchecked thoughts. She still remembered Mrs. Crile finding her in the TV room, stroking her, clucking with pity, then declaring that no one ever recovers from being an only child. Look at Richard Nixon, she'd snorted before turning away.

"I think you're full of shit." She didn't even know what he was talking about, who could possibly die at the end of her book.

He glared furiously at her. She was not surprised to see Nixon's small eyes and bulging jowls. "It is wrong on every level: schematically, thematically. You are meant to feel at the end of a book that what has gone on is completely unimaginable and yet inevitable. Do we feel that? No. Not to mention that no woman could bury a grown man's body in an hour. And in the backyard—in January?" He thrust out his arm at her

windows, as if this were the house of her novel. “The whole thing is an atrocity.” Without asking, he headed toward the kitchen for a refill.

“No,” she said.

The bite in her voice jerked him like a rope. “One more, then I’ll go.”

“No. No more. You need to leave now.”

“I’m not leaving until I get another drink,” he said from the pantry, his hands having reached safety, “and you come up with a better ending.”

“Get out of my house.” She grabbed at his arm, but only caught his coat sleeve; glass and ice shattered across the countertop.

He locked his fingers through a bottle opener fixed to the wall and she couldn’t yank him out of the tiny room. With his free hand he began to make another drink. She reached behind him and shoved his arm. Another highball shattered. He took down a third and she did the same thing. He paused then, staring at all the broken shards. “I have never understood why a person who is not a genius bothers with art. What’s the point? You’ll never have the satisfaction of having created something indispensable. You’ve got your little scenes, your pretty images, but that desperate exhilaration of pushing past the fixed boundaries of art, of life—that will forever elude you.” He took down another glass, waited for her to smash it, and when she didn’t (she couldn’t; she felt physically suspended by his words), quickly made his drink. His eyes wandered over her as he drank. Then he said, the liquid still glistening on his lips and tongue, “And why don’t you tighten up that robe. I’m done looking at those things.”



Charlie was fascinated by her work, the new movements of her arms, the strange tool and its wonderful noise as she thrust it again and again into the earth, and the spray of dirt and rocks that came up over her back onto the grass, sometimes landing on the thick rubber lip of his

red sneaker. He sat and watched her with more interest even than he watched the backhoes on Spring Street, digging up an old septic system.

She worked hard and fast and the sweat began to mix with the milk and the tears inside her robe. She was surprised, given the season, how soft the earth was, how relenting. Soon she'd dug deep enough to step down into it. She felt its warmth curl around her ankles. Its smell was intoxicating. She'd paid so little attention to the earth in her life.

When she was done digging, she scooped Charlie up and brought him inside, fed him a small bowl of rice cereal mixed with applesauce (they were back in their regular spots on the wonderful wobbly shelves), and put him in his crib. He cried briefly, but by the time she came back downstairs and listened for him through the monitor, there was only the loud tide of his breath in sleep. She dragged the man from where he'd fallen across the pantry's narrow threshold out the back door. His feet bounced carefree down the steps. He was light, and fell into the hole gracefully, like a piece of cloth, not slumped over on one shoulder or face down, so she didn't have to get in there and rearrange him. There was no mound when she'd finished; every scoop of dirt had fit perfectly back in. She replaced the sod she'd carefully cut out and went inside. According to the clock on the stove, her work had taken forty-nine minutes.

The book was sprawled on the floor where he had flung it. She brought it over to the couch, tossed off the diaper, and lay lengthwise, on her stomach. She turned to the last chapter. The red cross-outs had faded, and it was, she could easily see now, a fine ending.

Birthday Poem

Thirty-six today. Too late to write
my *War and Peace* by thirty-five, too
late to quit while I'm ahead (much
less ahead ahead now—& what's
behind getting more behind). Here's
what I have: My mostly health; my
beautiful body (I love you, body!) (&
sorry, body!) a little puckered here,
bulbous there; the things I've put you
through— but let's not name names!

What else—

Mmmm, ok...body & its admonitions,
mind with its plane aslope, paper—
thoughthold—silence in all the gorgeous
tongue-spun languages. Food &
capability; sex & death (I was good! I
said no!); zones of stippled cold in the
swim; the significant love; the daily spoon
tumbling inside the coffee mug; eggs
over-very-easy; super-high count &
motility (but damn damn damn those
spike-tailed, two-faced monsters!)

Too slow, though, I've been, yes, in
 too many things; apologies galore &
 très meet. To dear friends, whom I love
 & like very much—yes yes—mum &
 dad & (don't start me) brothers exactly
 as the gods had; the ceaseless wolf & lion; I
 have been lucky & I am allowed &
 they're flat-out wrong—everything lasts
 fucking forever. The sleep in the sun-
 drunk garden. The black jugular blood.
 The night absolutely stupid with stars.

Almost always too hard—this scandal of
 consciousness. He takes his waking strong.
 Mud spludding his boots. He is that he
 lets him be his colours with him still.
 Sleep tells him: We are made of the dead,
 by the dead, we are their making &
 their minding. He knows nautical means
 no blue, civil stops at six degrees &
 astronomical is solid black. He knows
 green is yellow browning, brown a
 confusion of intention, white space given
 light light space to speak.

But it's me speaks! me still, still
 waiting, day-&-year older, for the big
 bink, the hook echo, the son who
 stoops, the heart-walloping toddling
 little girl. Sigh to draw breath & sigh
 making word of breath. Brief blurt of

love, milky conceptus, we hurt to
hurt: suckered into this unimaginable
world where you can do right & right &
right & right & the small wrong will
punish you to your bones. Just about
all the life you have, I fear, is what you'll
need to consider the rest of it.



Catherine Kernan, *Tracings #154*, 2014, woodcut
monoprint, 16 in. x 10 in. Courtesy the artist.



Catherine Kernan, *Tracings #182*, 2014, woodcut
monoprint, 16 in. x 10 in. *Courtesy the artist.*



Catherine Kernan, *Tracings #164*, 2014, woodcut
monoprint, 16 in. x 10 in. Courtesy the artist.



Catherine Kernan, *Tracings #166*, 2014, woodcut
monoprint, 16 in. x 10 in. Courtesy the artist.

ALICIA OSTRIKER

Waiting for the Light

for Frank O'Hara

Frank, we have become an urban species
so at this moment many millions of humans are
standing on some corner waiting like me

for a signal permitting us to go,
a signal depicting a small pale pedestrian
to be followed by a sea-green light

we do not use this opportunity
to tune in to eternity
we bounce upon our toes impatiently

It is a Thursday morning, Frank, and I feel
rather acutely alive but I need a thing of beauty
or a theory of beauty to reconcile me

to the lumps of garbage I cannot love enclosed
in these tough shiny black plastic bags
heaped along the curb of 97th Street, my street—

like a hideous reminder of the fate we all expect
letting the bulky slimy truth of waste
attack our esthetic sense and *joie de vivre*

reliably every Thursday. Let me scan the handsome amber
columned and corniced dwellings
reflected in rear windows of parked cars, let me wish

luck to their hives of intimacies, people
in kitchens finishing a morning coffee
saying *see you later* to the ones they live with

Let me raise my eyes to the blue veil adrift
between and above the artifice of buildings
and at last I am slipping through a flaw in time

where the string of white headlights approaching, the string
of red taillights departing, seem as if
they carry some kind of message

perhaps the message is that one block west
Riverside Park extends its length
at the edge of Manhattan like the downy arm

of a tender, amusing, beautiful lover,
and after that is the deathless river
but waiting for the light feels like forever

ANDRÉ ACIMAN

Underground

I SELDOM READ what passes for poetry in the New York subway system. Usually these poems are no better than Hallmark verses sweetened with a dollop of treacle and just enough irony to flatter the average straphanger.

This time it was a poem about time, or about the redemption of time, I wasn't sure. I read the poem through, wondered about it a while, then my mind drifted and I forgot about it. A few days later, there it was again in another subway car, staring at me, as though still asking something. So I read it once again and was as intrigued by it as I'd been the first time. I wanted to stop to think about it, partly because it kept teasing and giving me the slip each time I believed I'd seized its meaning, but also because it seemed to tell me something I understood perfectly well but couldn't quite prove I'd actually inferred from the poem itself. Was I projecting onto the poem something I hoped it was saying because I'd been nursing a similar thought myself?

The third, fourth, fifth time I came upon that same poem in the subway I felt that something was indeed happening between us and that it had as much to do (a) with the poem, (b) with me, but also (c) with

how I kept running into it, to the point that the poem began to acquire an auxiliary meaning that had less to do with the poem itself than with our little romance and how, on several occasions, I would look for it, expecting to find it, and be mildly disappointed when I couldn't spot it and, indeed, start fearing it had outlived its time in the subway system and was now being replaced by an ordinary ad.

But I was wrong to think it had been taken down, and what a joy to see it again, waiting for me, hailing me from its end of the car with a winking *I'm over here! Haven't seen you in ages!* The joy of reencountering it after fearing I'd lost it began to mean something that was not necessarily irrelevant to the poem itself; both the worry and the joy had wormed their way into the very content of the poem and, as it were, pollinated it, so that even the history of our nodding acquaintance in the transit system was woven into a poem that was itself about the transit of time.

But perhaps something deeper was going on.

I wanted to understand my experience of the poem—from how I felt at our first meeting, which I had already started to forget, to the thrill of rereading it whenever I could, down to the state of bafflement it left me in each time I was coaxed into tracing its meaning and found myself failing, again and again, as though my failure to understand the poem was ultimately its hidden, perhaps its truer meaning. There were no external, incidental facts to set aside or dismiss if I wanted to grasp both the poem's effect on me and the person I was on reading the poem.

The way or place where we land on an art object, a book, an aria, an idea, a piece of clothing we long to buy, or a face we would like to touch, all these cannot be irrelevant to the book, the face, the tune. I even want my first, tentative, and mistaken readings of the poem to mean something and not to be forgotten, because misunderstanding, when we feel we've misunderstood a poem, is never entirely our fault

but the fault of the poem as well—if “fault” is indeed the right word, which it might not be, since what spurs a fault in reading may be an unintended, undisclosed, subliminal meaning that the poem continues to intimate despite itself, a meaning waiting in the wings, forever inferred, and yet forever deferred—due, in part, to the suggestion of meaning, a conditional meaning that is simply not quite there, or that was once partly there but was later removed either by the poet or the reader and is now a latent, absconded, unreal meaning that lies in limbo and is still trying to work itself back into the poem. There is not a single work of art that is not riddled with such fault lines constantly asking us to see what’s not there to be seen. Ambiguity in art is nothing more than an invitation to think, to risk, to intuit what is perhaps in us as well, and was always in us, and maybe more in us than in the work of itself, or in the work because of us, or, conversely, in us now because of the work. The inability to distinguish these strands is not incidental to art; it is art.

What we call meaning, what we call resonance, enchantment, and ultimately beauty would remain totally unfathomed and silent without art. Art is just the agent. Art allows us to reach our truest, deepest, most enduring selves by borrowing someone else’s skill, someone else’s words, or someone else’s gaze and colors; left to our own devices, we wouldn’t have the insight, or the comprehensive vision, much less the will or the courage to enter that place where only art can take us.

Artists see other than what is given to be seen in the “real world.” They seldom ever see or love places, faces, things for what they in themselves really are. Nor, for that matter, do they even know their impressions of these things as they in themselves really are. What matters to them is to see other or, better yet, to see more than what lies before them. Or to put it differently: what they reach for and what ultimately touches them is not experience, not the here and now, not what’s there but the radiance, the echo, the memory—call it the distortion, deflection, deferral of experience. What they do with experience is and

becomes experience. Artists do not just interpret the world to know the world; they do more than interpret, they transfigure the world to see it differently and ultimately to take possession of it on their own terms, even if it is just for a short while before they start the process all over again with another poem, another painting, another composition. It is their mirage of the world that artists long to hold, the mirage that breathes essence into otherwise lifeless places and objects, the mirage they wish to take away with them and leave behind in finished form when they die.

Art seeks not life, but form. Life itself, and earth along with it, is all about stuff, a clutter of stuff, while art is nothing more than the invention of design and a reasoning with chaos. Art wants to let form, just form, summon up things that were hitherto unseen and that only form, not knowledge, earth, or experience, could have brought to light. Art is not the attempt to capture experience and to give it a form but to let form itself discover experience—better yet, to let form become experience. Art is not the product of labor, it is the love of labor.

Monet and Hopper weren't seeing the world as it was; they were seeing other than what lay before them, experiencing not what was given but what always felt elusive and strangely withheld and needed to be restored or invented, imagined or remembered. If they succeeded, it is principally because it didn't matter which of these four it was. Art is the huge negative, the *gran rifiuto*, the everlasting *niet*—or call it the inability, even the failure to take things as they are or to accept life as it is, people as they are, events as they happen. Indeed, Hopper said he wasn't painting a Sunday morning or a woman sitting ever so lonely on an empty bed; he was painting himself. Similarly, Monet wrote that he was not painting the Rouen cathedral, but the air between the cathedral and himself, what he called the *enveloppe*, the thing that wraps around an object, not the object itself. What interested him was the endless traffic between himself and what he called the *motif* (the subject matter). "The

by that faculty the poet Leopardi called *ricordanza*—remembrance as a creative act, the past eternally restored, eternally relived. This is not a homogenized, refurbished past cleansed of all incidentals; rather it is a past that never really was but that continues to pulsate, a past which, even back then when it was the past, harbored an unfulfilled wish for a might-have-been version of life that never really was but wasn't unreal for not being.

What the poet is describing is a time in the future when, to quote Virgil, "it will be a joy perhaps to remember the past," a past that will be an everlasting present someday in the future. There is no name for this melding of past, present, and future tenses. What the poet wishes here is to transcend, to undo, to overcome time altogether and be with all those he loved and lost and continues to love and long for in this past, which he imagines, today, will be given in the future—a past outside of time. But, then, this is no longer time. This is eternity. This is not life. This is the afterlife. Hence the title of the poem: "Heaven."

This is a poem about death. No wonder I've been reading it in the underground. And the coincidence of reading about death in the underground surely must mean something too, since coincidence is what confutes and jostles how we attempt to make sense of time, and this is precisely a poem about what happens when we'll vanquish time and lie outside of time, beyond time, after time. This is a poem about an eternal future that is an eternal past. Which is the ultimate illusion, the ultimate fiction, the ultimate victory. This is a poem about a place in time that does not exist.

And here we confront the ultimate paradox: to think of ourselves outside of time in this heaven that is past, present, and future is to think of a time when we won't even be able to think of anything, much less of time or love. The poem is projecting a time of plenitude and, indeed, drawing a sense of harmony, redemption, and fulfillment from this projected plenitude, which is supposed to take place in eternity, but where

the awareness of plenitude, to say nothing of awareness itself, will be impossible to have. The dead are without awareness.

Part of me does not wish to drop the matter here. I want to palpate this imponderable situation, which is why perhaps I propose that the best way to grasp the paradox of mind after death is to imagine the opposite scenario. An old man is lying on his deathbed surrounded by his wife, his children, and grandchildren, all of whom had brought him much happiness. Naturally he is extremely sad. He says he feels for their sorrow—"Who knows," he says, "your sorrow may last your entire lives, yet I don't want you to feel any. Worse yet, your sorrow makes me very sad, not because I'm the reason for it, but because you are my children and I don't want to see sorrow in your lives. I know how you'll miss me. My room, my desk, my seat at the dinner table. I know how this hurts." But there is also another reason for the dying man's sorrow. "What kills me now is not your sorrow only, but mine as well. I know how much I will miss you. I will miss you as you are all now, I will miss you as you were children, I will miss you for a hundred days, a hundred years, ten thousand years, forever, because my love never dies, and the worst of it is that I would rather miss you and ache for you for eternity than think that as soon as I die I will not even have a brain to know that I ever loved you. I miss you already now because the thought of forgetting or not even having you in my thoughts is unbearable, is worse than death to me."

Art allows us to think the unthinkable, to posit one paradox after the other in the hope of firming up wisps of our lives and feelings by transfiguring them, by giving them a shape, a design, a coherence, even if they are and will remain forever incoherent. The incoherent exists, which is why composition—art—exists.



Grammarians call this unthinkable, imponderable, impalpable, fluid, transitory, incoherent zone the “irrealis mood,” a verbal mood to express what might never, couldn’t, shouldn’t, wouldn’t possibly occur, but that might just happen all the same. The subjunctive and the conditional are irrealis moods, as are the imperative and the optative. As defined by Wikipedia—and I quote Wikipedia because the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not house the word—the irrealis mood “indicates that a certain situation or action is not known to have happened as the speaker is talking.” Instances of the irrealis mood are legion: there’s the admiring mood, the alethic, the assumptive, benedictive, commissive, deductive, deliberative, desiderative, directive, dubitative, epistemic, eventive, hortative, hypothetical, imprecative, inferential/renarrative/oblique, interrogative, jussive, necessitative, permissive, potential, precative and imprecative, presumptive, prohibitive, propositive, speculative, volitive. I am sure there are many more.

Most of our time is spent not in the present tense, as we so often claim, but in the irrealis mood—the mood of our fantasy life, the mood where we can shamelessly envision what might be, should be, could have been, who we ourselves wished we really were if only we knew the open sesame to what might otherwise have been our true lives. The irrealis mood is about the great sixth sense that lets us guess and, through art sometimes, helps us intuit what our senses aren’t always aware of. We flit through wisps of tenses and moods because in these drifts that seem to take us away from what is around us, we glimpse life, not as it’s being lived or was lived, but as it was meant to be and should have been lived. I am always looking for what’s not quite there because by turning my back to what I’m told is all there is, I find more things, other things, many perhaps unreal at first, but ultimately truer once I’ve ferreted them out with words and made them mine. I look at places that no longer exist, at constructions that have long been torn down, at journeys never taken, at the life we’re still owed and for all we know is

yet to come, and suddenly I know that, even with nothing to go on, I've firmed up something if only by imagining that it happened. I look for things that I know aren't quite there for the same reason that I refuse to finish a sentence, hoping that by avoiding the period, I'm allowing something lurking in the wings to reveal itself. I look for ambiguities, because in ambiguity I find the nebulae of things, things that have not yet come about, or alternatively that have once been but continue to radiate long after they're gone. In these I find my spot of time, my might-have-been life that hasn't really happened but isn't unreal for not happening, and might still happen, though I fear it may not come about in this lifetime.

Today while riding the C train I saw the poster again. It looks older and yellowed. Clearly, its days are numbered. And yet, as I made a point of rereading it—because it's just there waiting to be reread—it seemed to want to disclose something new, if not something about itself, then something about my seeing it again and thinking back to that time when every line seemed new to me and was still able to mystify me, again and again. I missed those days, the way we might miss our first few days in a grand hotel when we'd get lost in its convoluted corridors and continued to fail to watch for those reminders that told us we'd yet again taken the wrong turn. And yet, each mistaken corner seemed filled with the thrill of mystery and discovery. Or the first week of a new love when everything about the new person seems miraculous, from their cooking habits to the new phone number, which is still difficult to remember and which we don't want to learn for fear that it might lose its luster and stirring novelty.

I want to relive the first reading of the poem, and the second, and third, because a different me is present in each. I want to rediscover the poem all over again and pretend that these verses, "Everyone we ever loved, and lost, and must remember"—whose cadence I understand if

only because each of the three clauses folds upon one another ever so neatly, in a manner that suggests I might have written them myself.

I look at the poster of the poem for the *n*th time and am starting to think that perhaps what I've written about this poem is not quite finished, may never be quite finished, since the meaning I thought I'd captured yesterday has gone into hiding today or couldn't possibly be the correct meaning, though I also suspect it might resurface and prove to be correct in a few days—a chain of events that is not irrelevant to the poem itself—because there is nothing definite about the poem's meaning, because its true meaning is itself a could-be meaning that hasn't really surfaced yet but isn't unreal for not surfacing, but might still surface sometime soon, though I fear it did so the first time I read the poem and then never surfaced again.



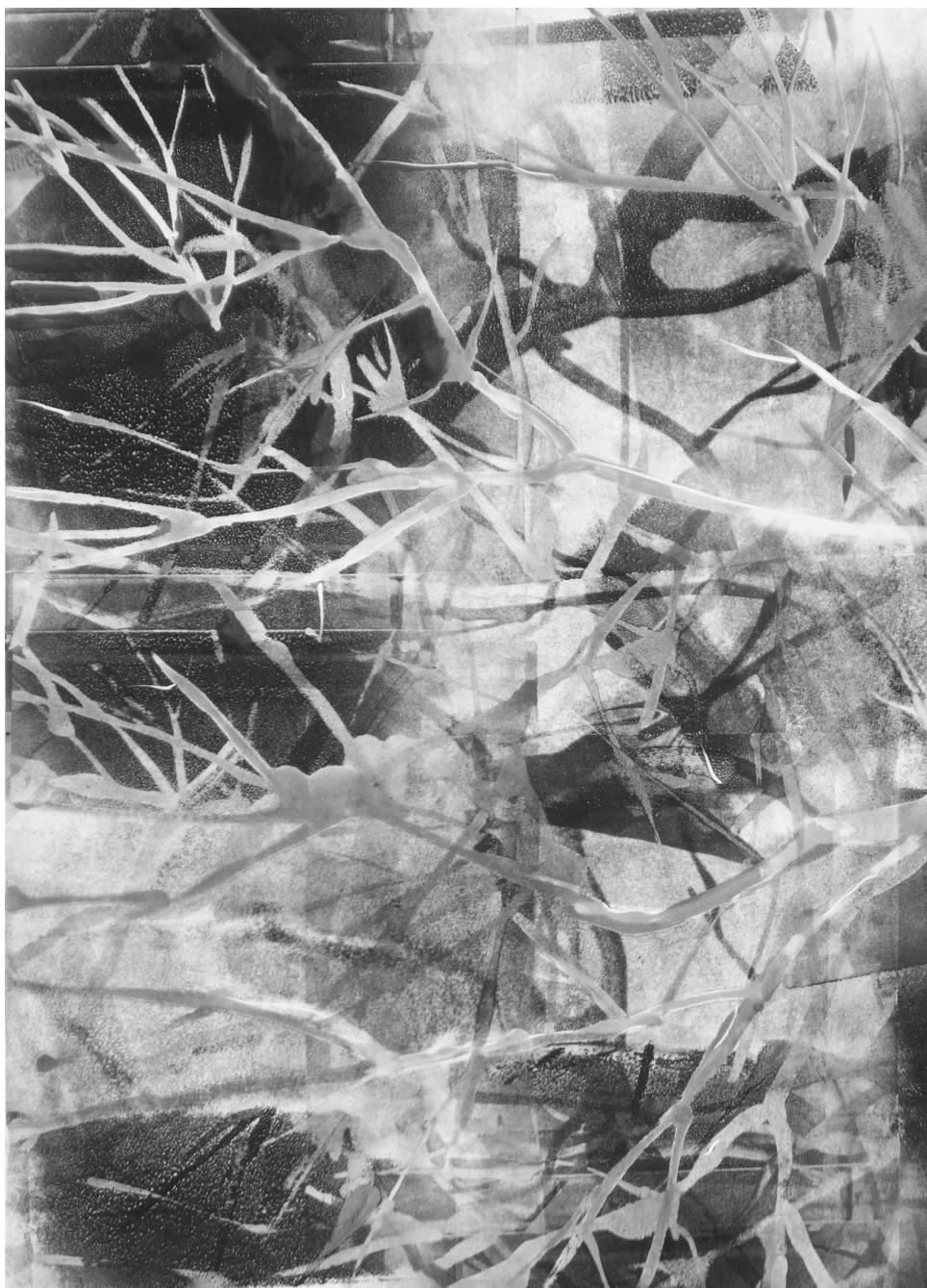
Joel Janowitz, *Canal a/b*, 2012, monotype, 22 in. x 30 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist.





Joel Janowitz, *Jitter*, 2013, monotype, 22 in. x 30 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist.





Joel Janowitz, *Early April c/d*, 2014, monotype, 22 in. x 30 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist.





Joel Janowitz, *Lost Landscape*, 2013, monotype, 22 in. x 30 1/2 in. Courtesy the artist.



KWAME DAWES

Quarter

"...my street becomes / a glistening river, and you can
go down to it and put / your hands into it, and the wa-
ters of your life / will wash over your disasters..."

—Frank Gaspar

The man fighting his wife
has not noticed the moon.

Most of what he knows
is the rupture of all things.

It will take him months
to taste the cigarette in his

mouth, longer to forget
the stale smell of boiled cabbage

or the eyes of his children
accusing him gently.

The man is about to
step into the silver

river of his street,
and drown, without

fanfare, without a fight.

NEEL MUKHERJEE

Renu

THE NIGHT BEFORE, it had rained like I had always imagined it must have done during prehistoric eras, the Pleistocene or the Triassic, say. It brought back my boyhood, lying awake, listening to the sound of relentless sheets of water coming down, imagining a low, red, early-era sky, and strange vegetation and fearful creatures and dangerous landscapes pelted by a downpour that must have been untempered, closer to a natural cataclysm than just simple, heavy rainfall. It even brought back the memory of Bible classes in school, of how all the fountains of the great deep woke up and the windows of heaven opened and it rained upon the face of the earth for forty days and forty nights.

There were dark rainclouds covering most of the sky next morning but at least the rain had let up for a while. My parents' living room, on the first floor of a block of flats in Bombay, had an unimpeded view of the sea, which was no more than a few metres away, across the Band Stand in Bandra where, in British times, the band used to gather and play every afternoon. Now, between the window and the sea was a road, forked at our end by a narrow, triangular sliver of green, at the vertex of which stood a pair of solid-looking, heavy metal statues, all chunky

cuboids and rectangular masses and straight lines, some city council's idea of Cubist Primitivism. The pedestal on which the figures stood bore the legend:

*Time is
Too late for those who wait
Too swift for those who fear
Too long for those who grieve
Too short for those who rejoice
But for those who love
Time is eternity.*

As if in response, Band Stand and the mile-long seafront promenade, dotted with concrete benches and sea-poison trees at regular intervals, had become the focal point for romancing couples in the afternoons and evenings.

The Arabian Sea, a placid pond for most of the year, became ruffled and turbulent in its bathetic, minor-mode way during the monsoon, and this morning it looked wild by its standards, with white breakers crashing, one after another, on to the black, rocky shore, which was now totally submerged, the sea having swollen and reached the brim of the seawall. The horizon was an inky bank of clouds. Far away, I could make out the painted red hull of a fishing boat. It looked like a child's paper contraption that would unravel soon on the wild slate-grey surface on which it rode, tossed almost rhythmically like a seesaw.

I had a meeting in Colaba at ten a.m., which meant that I had to leave early in order to avoid the notorious morning traffic. These were the days before the Bandra-Worli Sea Link, so it could—and sometimes did—take two hours to travel a distance of thirty kilometres. In another couple of years, the Sea Link would open, shocking everyone that something which had nominally been under construction for decades,

with nothing except a few fist-like stubs rising from the surface of the sea across the Reclamation (as it was called) to show for it, could be finished so quickly. Who knew what kind of pressure the World Bank, which funded the project, had brought to bear on the stalled, rusty machinery of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats and construction companies to get it moving again?

Last night's rain would mean flooded roads and waterlogging, so the prospect of a long stop-start journey into town seemed almost inevitable. I left home just after eight. Amit, my father's driver, usually reported for duty slightly later in the day but he had been asked to come early that morning. By the time the car reached Mahim, the skies opened again. Despite the windshield wipers semaphoring furiously back and forth, I could barely see anything in front and nothing very much at all through the streaking wall of water along the passenger window. The whole world seemed to be deliquescing. After twenty minutes or so, the strafing abated somewhat, although the rainfall continued; a seen-through-streams-of-liquid kind of visibility was restored; the world became that of an Impressionist painting. At the obligatory traffic standstill at Haji Ali, I saw that the long walkway on the sea leading to the offshore mosque was nearly obliterated by the spray, so that the mosque, wreathed in low mist, looked as if it were floating in the air. Normally, the walkway, a gauntlet of seriously maimed, crippled, and diseased people begging, would be a seething corridor of people, either making their way into or out of the mosque. I was too mesmerized by the fairytale dream-vision castle it had transformed into to pay much attention to the long-range view of plagued humanity seeking succour. Then the traffic lights changed, the boys selling pirated copies of bestsellers, self-help books, and glossies, out even in this weather, dispersed, and the car left the scene of accidental enchantment.

It was that evening, around six o'clock, while Baba and I were debating whether to bring forward our routine pre-dinner drinking—a

couple of whisky-and-sodas for each of us—by half an hour to six-thirty, that the doorbell rang.

“Who could it be?” Ma asked, almost to herself. “It’s too early for Renu.” Renu was the cook.

I got up, went to the door, and opened it. Renu was standing on the other side of the threshold. Or not exactly standing; she had one hand stretched out, holding on to the doorjamb to support herself, as she swayed on the balls of her feet. On her desiccated face her bloodshot eyes were swimming. Her hair, normally oiled and combed tightly onto her scalp and tied into a loose bun at the neck, was dry and frizzy, escaping in disobedient wisps all over.

“Are you all right?” I asked her, then turned my head to say to my mother, who was already halfway to the front door, “It’s cooking-aunty.” I could never bring myself to call Renu by her name and add a suffix such as “di,” older sister, or “mashi,” aunty, either of which would have been the expected or normal thing to do.

“I had no sleep last night,” Renu began. “The police came in vans and asked us to get out of our rooms. The sea was rising because of the rain, they asked us to get out, they thought our jhopri was going to be swallowed under water.” She could barely stand straight on her feet.

“Not a wink of sleep,” she said. “They chased us out at ten, then asked us to go back in around midnight, then they came at two again and drove us out. I’ve had to work all day after a night of no sleep . . . I can’t keep my eyes open. So I was thinking, I know it’s too early, but if I start now, and cook something quickly, I . . . I could . . .”

Something about her unbending sense of duty pierced me. I said, “Nothing doing. You go home right now, there’s no need to cook tonight. You go get some sleep.”

Ma added her voice to this—“Yes, Renu, don’t worry about cooking this evening, you go back home.”

Renu hesitated. Even in this state of extreme exhaustion, she felt some compulsion to resist something so easily given—it wasn’t right,

it wasn't the normal order of things for families to intercept a servant's unarticulated request and accede to it. And yet I could see on her face relief, so much stronger than professionalism.

Before she could make another weak attempt—not because she was insincere but because she did not have the necessary energy—I forestalled her and repeated, “Shush, not another word. We’ll see you tomorrow morning. You need to sleep. Go.”

She was not a person much given to smiling, or expressing any kind of pleasant emotion, but the imprint of gratitude beneath that wrung-out face was unmistakable, a silver-gelatin film beginning to take on the lineaments of the photographic negative in its chemical bath.

I asked, “Where did all of you go when you left your homes?”

“We sat on the road, here, right here,” she said, pointing in a vague westerly direction.

“You mean in Bandstand? Just outside our house?”

“Yes, there.”

“But it was pouring...”

She inclined her head sideways, a way of saying yes that stoically dealt with her plight.

I said, “Listen, if it happens again, you come straight here and ring the bell, I’ll tell the guards downstairs that you may come in the middle of the night and they’re to let you in. You come and sleep here in the living room if you get thrown out of your home again.”

Ma said, “Or the kitchen. You can sleep in the kitchen.”

I was tempted to turn slightly sideways to give Ma a look but I controlled myself. It was an old, old battle between us, and it had just let me know, gently, that it was still there, deferred and waiting to be roused from its sleep.

Instead, I carried on looking at cooking-aunty and said emphatically, “There’s much more space in the living room. Come and sleep here if you need to.” A bit too emphatically.

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand, a gesture that doubled as a goodbye, as she turned to take the stairs down—"Achha, achha, we'll see, but there's no need, they say that it's not going to rain so much tonight." That was the closest she was going to get to a smile.

I wanted to ask her so much more: the layout of her living quarters in the slum, how many people had been dragged out of bed and made to stand out in the driving rain all night as a way of preventing death by flooding, how close the slum was to the sea...but she was gone.



It was eighteen months before this incident that I first met cooking-aunty, on my regular January visit to Bombay.

It became obvious soon enough that she did not like me. She was my parents' new cook and it was only a few months into her job. A Bengali cook, they had wanted; stressing especially the cook's origins, when the earlier person, a Maharashtrian woman from the fishing community, the Koli, proved to be too limited—and, no doubt, too foreign—for their sophisticated Bengali palates. My father was nearing sixty, my mother nearly fifty-eight; too late for them to experiment with regional Indian cuisines, especially in view of the fact that they were Bengalis, a people not known to think that anything other than their own culture, be it culinary, literary, linguistic, artistic, or anything else, was worth engaging with.

On one of the fortnightly phone calls to my mother, she explained to me how difficult it was to get a good cook in Bombay but, after a month of looking, she thought she had found someone who fit the requirements. "She worked for six homes but she's just lost one of them," Ma said. "She'll be looking to fill that gap. I hope I get lucky enough to bag her."

"Six homes?" I asked. "That's a lot. How does she fit them all in? She must work at least twelve hours a day if not fourteen."

The next time I rang my mother, Renu was working for them. This, as far as I can remember, was in July or August, so it would be five or six months before I was to meet her.

My design job in London was flexible. I worked for a progressive, thinking-outside-the-box class of trendy outfit, the kind of place that was being talked of as the future of both working and the workplace in publications such as *Wallflower* *, *i-D*, and *Wired*, so it was possible for me to bunch all my statutory leave in one bundle in January and take off for the entire month to India.

Over the months preceding my visit, in the phone calls to my parents, I had asked Ma a couple of times about their new cook and she had sounded cautiously pleased. I had never known Ma to be effusive about domestic staff, so I took it as a reasonably good sign when she had said, “She’s all right. She’s lived most of her working life outside Bengal so she’s either forgotten or doesn’t know traditional Bengali cooking. I have to tell her what to do. I caught her putting onions and garlic in a light fish stew. And she puts hing in everything, can you believe it? I don’t know where she picked up this kind of cooking. In non-Bengali households, clearly.”

And so it went; carping was a way of praise with my mother.

I need to say a little about my interest in food because it touches, if only glancingly, upon our story. I cooked for myself in London and entertained friends and work people at home, of course, but my engagement with food ran deeper than the functional. I loved eating, I thought about cooking and recipes and different culinary cultures a lot of the time, and one of my current assignments, perhaps because this enthusiasm of mine was widely known, was to write and design a full-length book devoted entirely to regional Indian breakfasts, state by state. A young editor, at an imprint specialising in beautifully produced cookbooks, had spotted a blog on breakfasts across the world and mentioned it casually at a dinner with friends of friends. Someone in

that serendipitous chain thought I was some kind of authority on Indian food, and a project had been born—a lavish and substantial book sitting on the intersection between food and travel writing. It was not an original or underexplored territory, but we were enthusiastic and all agreed that what it lacked in novelty it could make up for in content, visual feel, and production values.

There was work that one did in a kind of professional, mandatory, bread-and-butter kind of way, and there was work that caught the tindery and flammable bits of one's passion and began a long, slow, steady combustion; this book was the latter. The research and sourcing of recipes were the easy bits. I was continually asking my mother to give me recipes from classical Bengali cuisine, particularly those that had been handed down generations within families, each family tweaking a given dish in ways that made a new, different thing of it. For example, my mother, in the days when she used to cook, or at least instruct the several persons who were employed to cook, had only two ways of making kalai dal (called "biuli" in our family; most of the rest of India called it "urid dal"): one in which the boiled lentils were spiced with fennel seeds and julienned ginger; the other where the lentils were toasted first, then boiled, and spiced with whole red chillies and hing spluttered in very hot oil. Both methods had been learned from her mother. But in my paternal grandparents' home, my mother once said to me, they cooked the same lentils in a completely different style: lots of finely chopped garlic, whole dried red chillies, and that quintessentially Bengali spice, panch phoron—a mixture of equal amounts of fennel, cumin, fenugreek, nigella, and mustard seeds—were sizzled briefly in smoking hot mustard oil, then added to the toasted and boiled lentils. "Some old Oriya cook's influence, no doubt," Ma had dismissively added.

Now I thought I could pick up a couple of things from my parents' new cook's repertoire. It would add a certain spark to my annual visit.

Around noon on the day after I arrived in Bombay, I was sitting by the window in Baba and Ma's long, uncluttered living room, looking out to an imperturbable sea under a clear, sunny sky. It was low tide and the expanse of madly serrated and pitted black rock that was the beach here had emerged, glistening, the extremity of some enormous mythical undersea creature. The outcrop was dotted with men going about their morning ablutions: there were a couple bathing in the rock pools; quite a few of them washing their clothes, first stretching their sheets and towels and vests on the rocky surface and running a bar of soap along them vigorously, as if grating a carrot, then threshing the soaped clothes on the rough rocks to get the dirt out, and finally rinsing them...creamy rings of suds had formed around some of these men. Slightly further out, towards the sea end of the rocks, there were three or four men, each standing at a spot they considered to be sufficiently apart from the rest, pissing into the sea. Two boys appeared along the promenade wall, their arms hugging plastic bags full of flowers, presumably the clear-out from a temple or a shrine, and, hopscotching along the rocks right to the edge of the sea, flung everything they were carrying into the water. I could see the orange marigolds and dried leaves and other assorted vegetation and rubbish disperse in a wide garland which lost its shape as the circumference became bigger and bigger.

Ma was doing her usual thing of ministering to me fussily: "Do you want more tea?"; "Why aren't you eating the fruits? The papaya is very nice"; "Tell me when you want the upma heated up." All she wanted to do was to serve me. On the first day, it felt comforting, as if I had regressed to childhood. By the third week, I would be thinking of the solitude of my mornings in London with such intense longing that I often barked at her to leave me alone. Sometimes her face would crumple and she would go quiet. At other times, she would strike back: "*Alone, alone*," she would mutter, "this is what you've learned from living abroad, you've

lost all understanding of family and affection and how to live in society and be less self-centred.”

On the dining table, under a sizeable fine-mesh cover, sat small bowls of chunks of papaya, red jewels of pomegranate arils, halved guavas, and a large bowl, covered with a saucer, of upma, coarse-grained semolina cooked with mustard seeds and curry leaves and onions. It had fried cashews thrown in sometimes, or peanuts, or a small handful of peas. It was a South Indian breakfast dish and my mother knew it was one of my favourites so she had asked the cook to prepare some this morning. By the time I had got up, the cook had left.

The upma was delicious. I had no idea why, but it was one of those things that I never cooked for myself in London, although it was a very simple and quick affair. In a divided life that was lived in two countries, separately and in rigorous succession, maybe I had saved a few things to belong to each of them solely, without flowing between the two.

“This is lovely,” I said. “I could eat this for breakfast every day.”

“You can hardly call it breakfast at this time of the day. Here, have some more,” Ma said, getting up to serve me.

The young woman who cleaned and did the washing up was going about her business as Ma and I chatted.

“Is she new?” I asked, indicating the cleaning woman, confident that she wouldn’t understand Bengali.

“No, she’s been with us for a few months now,” Ma said, then addressed the woman in Hindi, “Milly, this is my son. He lives abroad. He has come here for a month.”

My mother’s Hindi was more than competent; unusual in a Bengali woman but, then, she had spent nearly twenty years in Bombay because my father’s work had brought them here in the mid-1980s. It was assumed that after my father’s retirement they would move back to Calcutta (Kolkata, now) but, to be fair to them, they had found Bombay—that was the name of the city then, and the name we still used—

not an unsympathetic place, growing more and more over time to like its energy and urban, unprovincial personality.

The introduction was more an advertisement of my mother's pride in her son than a courtesy extended to a maidservant, and Milly probably read it correctly. She refused to look at me, smile, or nod, or do whatever it was she did in these situations and instead turned her face away, as if in a calculatedly opposite response, and carried on with the dusting.

"How friendly," I said in English.

"Achchha, enough," Ma hastily added, indicating with a gesture for me to stop being critical of Milly's attitude so openly.

"But she won't understand what I'm saying," I persisted out of sheer cussedness.

"Uff, stop now, will you?" There was real annoyance in my mother's voice. I was surprised but I assumed that she was going to explain later so I shut up. I dutifully lifted my feet while Milly swept the floor with the broom, then again when, on all fours, she swabbed it with a wet cloth dipped in water and wrung out, working it in wide arcs. The room filled with the odour of citronella oil.

When Milly went to the kitchen, my mother said in a breathless run of sotto voce, "She's from Jharkhand, she's a Christian convert, she says she understands Bengali," then ran off to the kitchen to supervise Milly. Jharkhand. It was one of India's newest states, carved out of the southern and eastern part of Bihar only three or four years ago, after decades of agitation and activism by tribal peoples and backward castes—they had that dreaded Indian distinction, the branding iron of an acronym: OBC, Other Backward Castes—for a separate state where their interests and welfare would not be counted as nothing. It was also one of India's most troubled states, with a strong Maoist presence and, consequently, brutal state-sponsored repression. It was the repository of vast mineral resources, and the state was not going to let a bunch of rag-tag militants

and expendable tribal peoples whining about their ancient land rights get in the way of those riches.

Perhaps Milly belonged to one of those tribes that had been displaced by mining companies grabbing their land? Perhaps her life did not hold much for her there: from Jharkhand to Bombay was a long distance for her to have come to work as domestic help. (My mother's generation still called them servants. My politically correct tag had not a jot of correlation to their status: their position in the Indian social hierarchy or economy had never changed.)

I went to the kitchen to deposit my empty bowl and spoon for Milly to wash up and discovered her sitting cross-legged on the floor, in the corner between the fridge and the cupboard, almost hiding, a plate heaped with food on her lap, eating her lunch. In the couple of awkward seconds that I was there, wishing I had not walked in on her eating, all kinds of childhood strictures about not watching servants eat flooded back, along with a new kind of discomfort.

Milly did not look up. I fled.

After Milly had gone, Ma filled me in on her background over the course of the day as I pottered around aimlessly, doing nothing at all and enjoying the lazing. I even paid a kind of passive attention to Ma's intermittent chatter—chitchat about her friends and neighbors, gossip about celebrities and Bombay film stars culled from glossies. It turned out that even Ma had noticed that Milly did not talk to, or even look at, men, so my mother had assumed that the girl had an unpleasant history with them and had left it at that. What she had done instead was to engage the young woman in conversation during the hours that she came to work and, in the process, had pieced together a sort of surface narrative of her life.

It went something like this: Milly was married to a man from Jharkhand who worked as kitchen staff in a low-end restaurant in Bandra. They had a daughter who was around three or four years old and a

son, who was just under one. Milly was pregnant when she began working for my parents, so Ma decided to give her a heavy meal every day. The good practice had continued, I was cheered to note, even though Milly, I assumed, had stopped breastfeeding.

“But where does she leave the children when she goes to work?” I asked.

“With her husband, of course,” Ma answered. “He does the evening shift in the restaurant.”

“Does she come from far?”

“No, no, she lives just around the corner, in the slum along the seawall on that side,” she said, indicating with her hand the direction towards Taj Land’s End, the luxury hotel which sat on the tip of this centre-west finger of Bombay jutting out into the sea and forming the top part of the curve of land nestling Mahim Bay.

“Is there a slum there?” I asked. I had no idea. “But where? I thought there was only the sea on the other side of the wall.”

“Have a look when you’re out there for your morning walk,” she said.

Around seven in the evening, Renu arrived to cook dinner. She was short and dark and could have been any age between forty to fifty-five. The way she wore her sari Bengali-style, with the aanchol thrown over on the front but her head uncovered, made her look even more shapeless than she was. My mother introduced us. Without looking at me, she nodded at Ma, almost imperceptibly, and asked her, “What shall I cook?” This, I gathered, was the order of things—she would arrive and, while still standing just over the threshold, ask my mother what she wanted for dinner, then she would go into the kitchen and set about her business.

Ma, indicating me, said, “While he’s here, he’s going to be in charge of these things. I’m on holiday now. Mind you, he’s a very good cook.

And he loves eating.” She tried to sound amusing, as if encouraging Renu to step up her game for the visiting son but in a bantering, tongue-in-cheek kind of way.

Renu, looking impassive and unimpressed, gave no sign that she had even registered this and instead asked Ma again, “Tell me, quick quick, what you want cooked, I have to go at seven-thirty, they turn the tap off after half an hour, I can’t stand here all day.” She made a gesture, even gave a ghost of a forced smile, that lent her impatient words the cast of a joke, too; the implied insubordination in her words would otherwise have been intolerable.

Ma repeated, “He’ll tell you.”

Renu continued to look resolutely at my mother.

Her voice was like a child’s tin recorder made by an amateur, with every stop hitting the wrong frequency. It reminded me of nails scraping down a blackboard, or the pitch of a screech of metal on metal that seemingly existed merely to shred the uninsulated edge of nerve-endings. This voice was the most immediately conspicuous thing about her and unignorable.

I said, using the most formal and respectful version of “you,” “Let’s go into the kitchen and see what there is...”

These things are difficult to give cast-iron evidence in support of, but I could sense that she hadn’t taken to me. It was as if she had developed an invisible force field around her. She seemed surly—even impertinent—by nature, but my unease was disproportionate in relation to the brusqueness of her manner. What was it that was really bothering me?

“Show me what’s in the fridge,” I said, “and we can decide after that. Achchha, this morning’s upma was delicious, I’ve never had such good upma. You can make that again. What do you think are your best dishes? We can have one of those tonight.”

I jabbered on; even recalling it now is a touch neuralgic. Instead of answering the question, she emptied the contents of the vegetable

crisper on to the floor and on the worktop, running through them one by one, “Here. Green bananas. Spinach. Green papaya. Cauliflower. Cabbage. Brinjal. Carrots. Spring onions ...”

The language she spoke in, although identifiably Bengali, had flecks of hybridity marking it—she had earlier used the Hindi expression for “quick quick,” now she said “palak” for “spinach.”

“What about green banana koftas?” I suggested.

“No,” she said peremptorily. “If you want to eat koftas, you tell me the day before—it’s a lot of work and it takes time.”

A deep-seated, almost atavistic, cultural training injected outrage into my system at the fact of a servant answering back. But no sooner had it manifested than the overriding educated-liberal reaction to the retrogressive nature of that first response pushed it down. I had managed to put my finger on what was bothering me. The knowledge was shaming. The whole cognition process had taken a fraction of a second.

“Yes, yes, of course, koftas take a long time,” I wittered, “that’s true, very true. OK, then, what about brinjal bharta? And green papaya with prawns? Are there prawns in the freezer? Let’s see what fish there is in the freezer.”

My mother, who must have been listening from the living room, called out, “Yes, your father bought lots of fish last weekend from the fish market. The freezer is full.”

This was one of the Bengali rituals my parents had held on to: the man, too busy or elevated to be involved in the domestic drudgery of daily or even weekly grocery-shopping, made an exception for buying fish because fish held a special place in Bengali cuisine and only a man could discern the freshest and the best specimens. Baba went to the big indoor fish market in Khar every Saturday morning to stock up on weekly supplies.

Renu now took out shallow Tupperware boxes from the freezer, prised open the lids, and rattled off the names of the fish each held, “Rui. Pomfret”—she pronounced this as “pom-plate”—“Rawas. Bombil ...”

Bombil. I stopped her there. It would be only a mild exaggeration to say that this fish, also known as Bombay duck, was one of my main reasons for visiting the city at least once every year. Laid out on the fisherwomen's concrete, the collected fish looked like congealing grey snot with a pinkish tinge, just one step up from liquid in the solidification ladder. Shallow-fried after a light dredging in semolina, or stuffed with a hot coriander-and-chilli green chutney and then fried, it was, in the words of one of my friends, "life changing." You realized that there seemed to be a purpose in the near-incapability of the flesh in holding its form—that very amorphous nature transformed into the signature buttery meltedness after cooking.

I asked her to fry some bombil. "That should be enough, no?" I asked, trying to be democratic. "Green papaya, aubergine, bombil fry."

She gave a nod and began her preparations. She went about them as if powered by some restless wind. Half a dozen things were started simultaneously: the container of frozen Bombay duck was left in the sink, under running water, to thaw; pots and pans were taken out; the vegetables that were not needed for the evening meal were returned to the fridge; a chopping board and knife appeared . . . she seemed to have ten hands.

Without looking at me, she asked, "Rice or chapatis? And would you like a dal?"

I noticed that she too was using the most respectful form of "you" in the conjugations of her verbs to talk to me; also, that her Bengali was slightly awry—if I had to translate her question literally, it would be, "Will you take some dal?"

"Chapatis," I answered. "Dal . . . yes . . ." I hesitated.

"Jaldi jaldi, I'll be in trouble if they turn the tap off before I get to it," she said again. This time the ameliorating gesture or smile was missing. I curtly said, "Whichever dal you think goes best with chapatis," and left the kitchen, making sure to draw shut the sliding door that divided it from the living room.

Keeping my voice down, I said, “Well, a personality like good mustard oil—it goes straight up your nose,” trying to make a joke of it.

My mother indicated to me in signs and whispers that we should speak about this only after Renu had left.

“But what is all this going-to-the-tap-on-time business?” I asked, my voice still low.

“She has to get her water from the municipal tap,” Ma said. “The corporation water supply is limited to fixed hours so she has to be there, at the tap, during those times, otherwise she’ll be without water for an entire day.”

“But what water?” I was still baffled.

“Water for daily use—bathing, washing, cleaning...

“Doesn’t she have water where she lives?”

“She lives in the slum over there”—again, that pointing towards the west—“there’s no running water in the slum.”

“You mean the same slum where Milly lives?”

Ma nodded. Then she added, “Renu can’t abide her.”

“Who, Milly?”

“Yes. I’ll fill you in later.”

Half an hour later, Renu came out of the kitchen, made for the front door with the words, “I’ll be back soon,” and left.

Ma said to me, “In a couple of minutes you’ll see her if you stand at the window.”

Yes, there she was, I could discern, standing in a small queue, with two large buckets and what looked like an industrial-sized plastic container. The promenade was full of people—strollers, wooing lovers, children—and the road crawling with buses, motorbikes, auto-rickshaws. The snack vendors had come out in force, drawing good business from the evening crowd. All life, and all of life’s motions and sounds and energies, seemed to be concentrated there. In the island of green, where the tap was situated, there were three old men on the red stone bench,

three or four stray dogs, half a dozen children running around. The big trees around it blocked the orange sodium-vapour light and kept most of the area in the shadows. In the balmy sea breeze the trees stirred, making the dappled mass of orange light and black shade sway and move.

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From *A State of Freedom*, forthcoming from Norton in January 2018.

LISA RUSS SPAAR

Perseid Madrigal

We're always awake, but they never fall
for us, nor allow us to see their stone-iron
gassy spectra & debris trails bruited the dark
as a cosmic X-ray of our deepest secrets.

What still stands at the end of sex?
Is it our own demise, in which, Freud opines,
we put off & off believing? Why?
Is it the way a wary child protects a parent,

hiding all it really knows? And life
just an expanse of field, a torched textual gloss,
a humid summer foyer we expect across?
Let's not know our last days as our last. And this

is how you'll know me, after I'm erased.
In any place you are, I'll wear your face.

LISA RUSS SPAAR

Gradual Madrigal

Does God create desire so we'll loathe
the aging body for its hold on us,
or does desire create God to hold
all that wanting one another sows in us?

Either way, Wonder, let's go slow
as we can, closing in, while not forgetting
the generous pour of Time's bartender,
the one with the heavy hand, forgotten,

whose liquid sutures eventually dissolve
even the children we once were, like *love*
held in *dissolve*, the disappearing décolletage
of gravity-driven sand. Perhaps when love

is greatest, we do die, into whatever
our bodies were: swamp, cell walls, travelers.

PAULETTE JILES

*Angels and Demons
in the Ozarks*

WE WERE WALKING from my Aunt Donna's house to somebody else's house. This was on Christmas Day north of Poplar Bluff. We had to go through a deep swale that was dry this time of year, a place of yellow grasses taller than I was, and in order not to lose sight of my cousins Jeannie and Caroline I had to run. There was that very tall grass called Bear Grass that grows in tight crowns and brushy bluestem dry and flock-headed, a rich rust color, oat grass very pale. I don't know who we were going to visit but it was on the other side of this world of winter grass. It was a warm December. This was magic. This was adventure. I was no more than six and extremely happy to be where I was with my two good-looking older girl cousins somewhere ahead of me on the path and the small birds darting. And then somebody called us, girls' voices, and out of the grass two other girls came running out.

Look what we got for Christmas! they said. They were beautiful. They were both blond and wore thin dresses of cotton print and in their hands they held sugar candies in all colors: the raspberry drops and the emerald ribbon candy with a white edge to it. And I thought, *Is that all?*

We don't grow up in steady increments. We become adult in violent jerks, in one enormous step taken at one time and then we go on being that much more mature and stay on that level for a long time, and then maybe a year or two later or ten years later or maybe never occurs yet another moment when we are taken by the hair and hauled forward toward understanding or we are snatched bald-headed in the process. Suddenly I knew that these gem-like penny candies were enough and more than enough. My own presents back at Aunt Donna's were nowhere near as luminous as these handfuls of edible jewels, nor had I taken such unadulterated joy in them. And I did the grown-up thing and said how wonderful they were and admired them, and in fact I did but it was just the sight of the two girls not much older than myself in the blowing yellow grasses of that low swale in a hollow of the Ozark hills, and behind them somewhere a small house with parents that could afford nothing more than penny candies for Christmas, and they happy and thin and shivering and smiling with their white teeth that has stayed with me for more than sixty years, a kind of vision, a remembrance of learning what it is to take a sudden step toward being an adult, a gift of angels. To say, and mean, *How lucky you are.*

We never learned anything about our ancestors in the Ozarks, in Carter County, and it has taken many years of research to discover anything about them. Only vague rumors came down to us about our great-grandfather John Giles, who changed the spelling of his name in the 1880 census to Jiles. But who was his father? Nobody knew. We had no stories of heroic pioneers, nor did any of us twenty-five first cousins possess heirlooms handed down. Our family history seemed to stop sometime in our grandfather's childhood, when he and four other children were orphaned in a diphtheria epidemic and were scattered among other families to survive as best they might. The Civil War was never mentioned. Nobody knew where the Giles/Jiles family had come from. They might have come from the moon.

What happened was that the Civil War was so relentlessly savage in that area that it left something resembling a layer of ash in the communal psyche. It was as if a volcano had erupted and buried all sense of history or community. The hills are beautiful with sweet echoing greens in the summertime and trails through blow-downs where tornados have twisted the trunks into fan-shapes, bright streams, and the sparkling rivers: the Current, the Eleven-Point, the Saint Francois. This is my country, and for a long time it was blank and as innocent of history as a planet only lately lived in by human beings.

John Giles's father, my great-great grandfather, was named Marquis (pronounced Marcus) Lafayette Giles and he was hanged from a live oak tree along with two other men by a Confederate colonel for loudly proclaiming his loyalty to the Union. This was in Bloomfield, Missouri. I think this was him. His name is unusual and his disappearance from the records was for a long time very puzzling. Research has revealed not only these deaths, in an obscure after-action report, but that Bloomfield changed hands between the Union and Confederate forces sixteen times. I repeat, *sixteen times*. Marquis Lafayette Giles was a justice of the peace and a schoolteacher; he left a pregnant wife and three small children. He had filed on 1,200 acres of land. This was sold on the courthouse steps in 1867.

What demon made him stand in a public square and shout out his politics? What maniacal devil seized him by the hair and threw him into defiance so that he finished his days at the end of a rope? May these times never come again. But knowing the demons of human nature, I am not sure they will not. No wonder we had no family stories. His son, my great-grandfather John Giles/Jiles somehow made it to adulthood and married and had children himself and then again, another generation orphaned, this time by diphtheria. He worked as a timber hauler when Pennsylvania interests came in to strip the hills of yellow pine, and so he and his wife went to the other world and left his children without a house or a loaf of bread or an acre of land.

I have often said there is a streak of craziness in our family of which I am quite proud and whether this is the gift of angels or demons I do not know. It is a gift of stories and immoderate laughter. My grandfather Marcus Jiles became an engineer on the Burlington and Northern Railroad and leaned on the whistle like a haunting spirit when he passed his home in Neelyville, bearing down on the whistle chain, a phantom of steam calling out, *We are passing the Arkansas line!* And Aunt Byatt as a young girl in her delusions used to sleepwalk down the tracks in her nightgown, lighting matches, saying she was waiting for her daddy on the nine-fifteen. There are many other stories but I will be killed for telling them.

My cousin Susan and I have ridden the trails back in the hills for twenty years and have found things and places and graves and fallen cabins and extremely strange people camped out on riverbanks. Once we came upon some carnival people with dwarves fishing, and another time a trailer full of people from El Salvador collecting grapevines that are twisted into wreath bases and sold at Hobby Lobby. Once we were guided into a false crossing on the Saint Francois by people who had, at their camp, giant plastic chairs and a plastic kitchen outfit and blow-up vinyl toilet seats you took with you to the john. They said the crossing was good but it wasn't. I nearly drowned. Susan and I said *To hell with you and your toilet seats* and had nothing further to do with them. Once we came upon a burned-out automobile on a trail north of Fairdealing sitting out in the forest. The whole area around it had caught fire too. A Forestry agent we came upon said that sometimes meth-cookers used old cars for their labs and this one had blown up. The agent's name was Yarborough. We asked what happened to the guy, but Yarborough said he didn't know. Maybe he didn't. The guy must have gone up like a bottle rocket.

Once we came upon the lonely grave of a man who had died of old age in prison in Jeff City. He had served a life sentence because he killed a man who shot his dog. He asked to be buried on his ancestral land. It turned out that the man he shot wasn't the one who killed his dog. He

shot the wrong man. It was the county assessor who showed us the grave and told us the story. We are not related to this person. This was down in Oregon County, a grave piled high with flat stones as is the custom there, deep in the oak woods. We are crazy, but we are not that crazy. Demons are possessive and territorial, but it seems angels wander without a fixed home; they are dreams about wells and springs, water moving underground, appearing with handfuls of penny candies, perhaps a sword. Are they with us or against us? Neither one. The man who shot the wrong man is now neutral, a pile of stones, and his story known only to a few.

McCormack Lake is just north of the Eleven-Point and a very good place to camp, but it was, some years ago, frequented by a pervert that everyone called the Canoe Man. My cousin and I wanted to haul horses down there and ride the Devil's Backbone and Hurricane Creek (there are probably hundreds of Hurricane Creeks in the Ozarks) but we couldn't get anybody to go with us. Susan's husband was deep into that season's football and mine was up north shooting pheasants and nobody else wanted to go. So we went by ourselves. It was close to Halloween. Sure enough the Canoe Man came cruising by, stared at us, drove slowly around camp with a canoe on top of his little car, as if he were going to shoot the big rapids on the Eleven-Point or had just come back from doing so. We were the only people there. The Canoe Man is a guy who exposes himself, one of those people who think they have a billion-dollar willie, but people who are seized by compulsions and cannot resist them go on to contemplate worse things, which they cannot resist either.

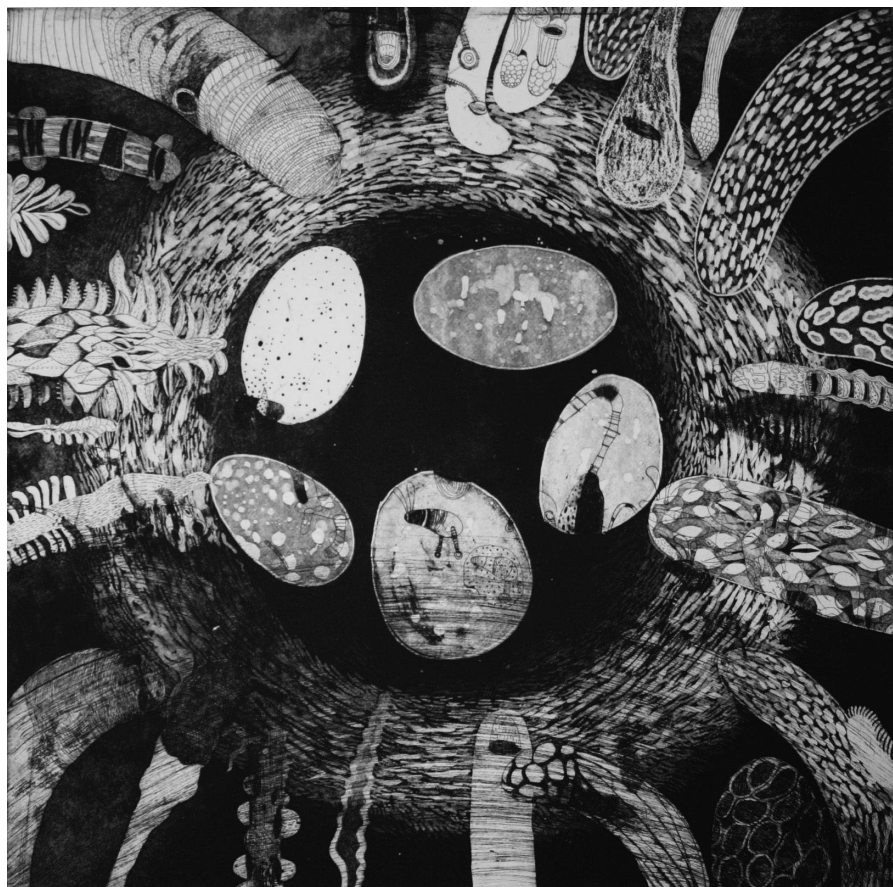
So since we did not have a man with us we made our own. We made a dummy. We called him Cowboy Bob. We stuffed a pair of jeans and shirt, gave him a Halloween mask one of the kids had left in the car and my cowboy hat and gloves stuffed with grass for hands. Several glasses of wine help with things like this. We laughed ourselves into seizures. The Canoe Man glowered from across the lake, among the trees. I could see his car with the canoe on top. The horses stared out over the water

with their eyes on fire and turned and turned on the picket line, while Cowboy Bob's demonic gray plastic face shone in the light of all the wood we piled on and a large spider crawled across his jaw. We talked to him and told him our opinions, I did John Wayne imitations which I am sure were not convincing as I am five foot two and weigh a hundred and twenty pounds but I remember addressing Cowboy Bob as "Pilgrim" and Susan trying to wrap his handlike appendages around a bottle of beer.

And at last we sat contentedly on either side of Cowboy Bob, our invented demon, completely laughed out, and so became our own cowgirl angels, with McCormack Lake ashine in front of us and the low noise of the Boom Hole in the distance rocking the world to sleep. And eventually he drove away. We saw his lights go up the hill and away to Highway 19. As a child, my family never lived in any one place for very long and so this is home, all these hills. This is my place in the world. I have a handful of glassy candies for you that have been rescued at great cost from burning automobiles and hangings and gunfire and twisted men with canoes. I have carried them through dangerous river crossings and past the sinister carnival people who pretend to fish as they watch you riding toward them and have given them away to the memory of the girl walking down the railroad tracks in her nightgown, lighting matches, looking for her father. Angels have that strange studied neutrality and personal joy like the glow in a horse's eyes at night when they stand nodding and looking at the fire. Brief moments in between disasters and wars, a chuck-will's-widow lying close and calling out, the big river of stars moving toward the west, drifting and powdering the heavens. A dying fire. Cowboy Bob snarling soundlessly with his plastic face at all dangers, angels asleep in their sleeping bags, the ghost of the old man regretting and regretting that he shot the wrong man drifting up over McCormack Lake like nighttime mist, his spectral dog alongside, who loves him no matter what and will stay at his side everlastingly, amen.



Boriana Kantcheva, *Mishka and Nibbles*, 2012-13, etching,
aquatint, 11 in. x 22 in. Courtesy the artist.



Boriana Kantcheva, *Nest*, 2016, etching,
aquatint, 18 in. x 18 in. Courtesy the artist.



Boriana Kantcheva, *Little Red*, 2015, etching,
aquatint, 12 in. x 16 in. Courtesy the artist.

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

A Simple Story

THIS IS A simple story.

This is a simple story that can't be told simply.

This is the story we can tell only in fragments, because it's too vast and various for any of us, even the most gifted.

This is a story that defies language, because there are no words for many of its crucial passages.

This is a story about trying to tell the story anyway.

This is the story of a girl counting her flock.

This is the story of a deluded king.

This is the story of the search, the discovery, and the resumption of the search.

This is a story about our devotion to that which eludes us, to that which we don't quite comprehend, to that which does not know or care about us.

This is the story of the whisper, the kiss, the realization that it's actually happening.

This is the story of our mother's childhood.

This is the story of our secrets and our crimes.

This is a story about gratitude for the possibilities, and respect for the limits, of storytelling.

This is a story about wondering if we create our limits by respecting them.

This is the story of our first false memory.

This is the story of the all-night drive, and how the highway turned silver just before morning.

This is the story of the empty platform, after the train has pulled away.

This is the story of winning big.

This is the story of the cough, the blood spot, the tweak of deep pain that tells us what we were always meant to know.

This is the story of a love that survives everything, even itself.

This is a story that contains all the old stories and all the new ones; a story told with the understanding that the old stories, when they end, are preambles to the new ones, and that the new stories are retellings of the old.

This is a story about wondering where we are, and why we've been taken there.

This is the story of being led into a forest by people who assure us we have nothing to fear.

This is a story about our attempt to render ourselves more legible to that which does not know or care about us.

This is a story about wondering what stories our children will tell.

This is the story of getting more than we'd hoped for. This is the story of getting nothing at all.

This is a story that can only begin, because its ending, all its endings, lie beyond our range.

This is a story about waiting for a story to begin.

Wait, then, please.

The story is about to begin.

CLAIRE MESSUD

The Nightlight

CERTAINLY PART OF the problem was that they weren't sufficiently French. Either of the sisters could have told you that. At various points along the way, one or other had been the more French; by midlife, Sophie, the elder—the one who'd actually been born in France—certainly had the advantage. She had lived for a time in Paris, and as an international lawyer she had negotiated transactions in French. She could deploy without thinking an entire professional vocabulary that her younger sister Anne did not know. Of course that wasn't the half of it.

As the Tante lay dying, the sisters' insufficient Frenchness was not irrelevant. The situation was complicated. It had begun with the death of her brother, their father, a death that took place far from the seaside town on the Côte d'Azur where the Tante had been born and had lived for the second half her life, in the United States, in a spruce (if inescapably depressing) hospice hidden in a bleak concrete-covered quarter of Stamford, Connecticut. After a season of intolerable physical agony, he had drifted into eternal slumber, on a pillowy cushion of morphine, in the heat of midsummer, though on a rainy and unusually cool day. Sophie and Anne's father had always minded about the weather.

There had been some awkwardness in the aftermath because it was Anne's older child's birthday. While Anne and her mother spent the afternoon at Anne's father's bedside (Sophie having departed not seventy-two hours previously after spending weeks there, on leave from her demanding legal job and far from her own family, juggling transatlantic phone calls at all hours), Anne's husband accompanied their children and some friends to the multiplex; and then everyone met at a restaurant called the Beach Hut that Anne's parents had always liked, a casual burger joint with black and white floors and white bead-board booths, the kind of burger joint that served a good martini and catered to the preppy local family crowd.

Anne's mother was already deep in her dementia by then, and seemed by supertime to have forgotten, or simply failed ever quite to understand, that her husband of over fifty years had died that afternoon. This in spite of the fact that the pastor on call at the hospice—a voluminous, deep-voiced woman from the AME Zion church—had taken Anne's mother's frail pale hands in her strong dark ones and had sung a spiritual that had brought tears to everyone's eyes, including her own. The pastor had told Anne's mother that her husband was with God, and with her also, always, and for about an hour afterwards Anne's mother had repeated these words with a look of genuine marvelment, perched in bony discomfort on an undersized foam sofa in an anteroom while they waited for the undertakers to come for the corpse.

Within minutes of leaving the hospice, however, Anne's mother had seemed unburdened. On the drive to the restaurant she had looked out the window, wide-eyed, and had said once or twice, "Isn't that something?" Though she had not specified what, if anything, was the something of which she thought. The ride was only about fifteen minutes, but by the time they reached the Beach Hut, she was as if washed in the blood of the lamb, as new and cheerful as a child, excited to join these

other lively children, whom she may or may not have understood were her progeny, and excited to enjoy a genuinely tasty supper.

In the months of her husband's final illness—up until a week before his death, in fact—they had been living together in a nursing home just over the state line in New York. It was rather chic as nursing homes go, with white wicker furniture, fresh flowers and a voluble green and blue parrot in the lobby who chatted with, or more accurately hectored, visitors; but in spite of the nutritionist's efforts, the food they were served was still hospital food, i.e., it was not tasty.

In part because of this and in part because of her dementia, Anne and Sophie's mother was, by that time, very thin indeed. She had always wanted to be thin in this way, though it seemed a shame that she'd had to lose her wits to attain her heart's desire. (It had also seemed a shame, when her husband was still alive and not yet quite so sick, to see them sweetly holding hands under the dinner table, in another restaurant: Anne knew that this was all her father had wanted, really, for most of those fifty-three years of marriage, and yet had been always denied it—for many reasons, though in part, one might have said, because Anne and Sophie's mother was, being an Anglophone Canadian of English descent, insufficiently French, more insufficiently French even than her daughters—and that he had only been granted this profound wish, just as she had been granted her desire to be thin, at the expense of his wife's mind. A high price to pay in either case; though Anne thought that, at least for her father, it was almost worth it.)

In any event, it was lovely to see the widow so happy at her granddaughter's birthday dinner at the Beach Hut, and to see her apparently keen to eat, but it was also quite confusing for Anne, who needed somehow to manage her own distress—she had then been intimate with few dead bodies, and never before close to one as it hardened to marble in front of her, so recently breathing that she kept imagining it breathed still; and this, of course, was not any body but that of her father, the

most powerful figure in her firmament, sometimes loathed, always loved, chiefly inescapable: how to understand it?—and also needed to tell someone else at the table—her husband Edward, her close friend Rachel—what had happened at the hospice, that's to say, that her father was dead, without disrupting the festive atmosphere of her daughter's ninth birthday party, and above all without letting her sweet daughter know—for how long could she keep it under wraps?—that Grandpa had breathed his last on her birthday and that this would forever henceforth be true.

That evening marked, of course, the end of a significant chapter—one that had begun well over two years previously when Anne and Sophie's father had first been taken ill—and might have been construed as some sort of resolution, complicated though it was. Except that it would prove also (as the sisters both already grasped) the beginning of other, equally or more significant chapters, the chapters in which their mother would decline and die, and the Tante would decline and die; and these chapters would be inevitably and uneasily overlapping, in the way that their mother and the Tante had uneasily overlapped all their years, so that somehow even dying and its culmination, death itself, would come to seem from the outside like a competition between the two women, a race to join their late husband and brother, in oblivion or Heaven depending upon how you saw it.

The decline and death of Sophie and Anne's mother is a story for another day. Her degenerative illness was prolonged, and although it afforded them all, particularly in its earlier stages, moments of joy and delight, even of grace (a word the sisters used also to describe aspects of their father's last weeks, months, even years—because before his first medical crisis they did not feel that they had known grace, and forever after they were in no doubt that they had), it was chiefly arduous and agonizing and frankly cruel. Sophie and Anne's mother was a gentle

person (not bland—she had quite a sharp tongue upon occasion—but mild, generous, kind, and soft) and it seemed rankly unjust—an argument against theodicy, indeed—that her final illness should descend like a great storm upon her very self, unraveling her, not just her memories and her mind but her footsteps and her gestures and even eventually her ability to speak, or to chew her food, or to turn her body in her bed, so that in time nurses came to do this for her, at crucially regular intervals, like turning a rolled rug or, indeed, like turning a corpse, though a frightened one, and gently to spoon soups and milky custards into her once-beautiful mouth, while her eyes looked out imploring, baffled, the eyes of every doomed hostage...Enough. There are not words. Turn the page.

To the Tante, then. In the moment of the Tante's death, she was almost alone. A nun sat in her room with her, on a hard chair, rosary in hand, praying, which is what the Tante would have wanted for herself but would not actually have requested, because she strove always to avoid the sin of pride—knowing herself, particularly at this juncture, to be not worthy to gather the crumbs under His table—and which, consequently, Sophie had arranged for her (striving, thereby, to inhabit the Tante's Frenchness, or more specifically her Catholicism, which had always been profound and consuming, even though it had been superseded by then by a derangement brought on, the sisters surmised, by her Problem).

This nunly arrangement was, as it proved, in lieu of her nieces' presence. Neither Sophie nor Anne was in the room; nor was either of them in the city or the country (France, of course) where the Tante lay dying.

Over a week before the Tante expired, she turned her face to the wall. Always small, always frail, she was by then a raddled husk; and still it took that body, withered skin and bone, a week to die. She accepted water, in those last days, but no food. Well before she turned her back

to the world, she had turned her back to the nieces: not long after their last visit, a month before her end, she had instructed the aides who attended her bedside to tell the women—she called them still “*les filles*,” the girls—that she was not free to speak when they telephoned. As if she were out at a luncheon, or entertaining guests. They telephoned daily; daily she rejected their calls. She had her reasons.

The chapter had begun, surely, well before her brother’s death. Had it begun with her father’s death? Perhaps even with her mother’s, almost thirty years before. The Tante, or the daughter as she was to her mother, had always played the piano passionately; as her mother was carried out of the flat in her coffin, the Tante hunched over the piano in the back bedroom and played a portion of her mother’s favorite Chopin mazurka in B flat minor, over and over, but furiously, maniacally, with tears spilling down her cheeks. The coffin did not fit in the elevator (this latter was, of course, of a French dimension), so the men had to carry it down four flights upon their shoulders, and the Tante continued to play until she thought they must have reached the lobby, perhaps even left the building. After which, she closed the lid on the piano and retreated to the bathroom to powder her face. She never touched the piano again.

At that time she had confided in her younger niece, Anne, that upon losing her mother she had struggled to understand her purpose in life, had wondered whether, at that point, her life had any purpose at all: she was just fifty, unmarried and so thoroughly French and Catholic that she believed her place on earth therefore to have been wasted: procreation was a woman’s purpose. She had asked God what good she might serve. “You are the nightlight,” was His tender answer, she told Anne. Her purpose had always been and would always be to shine like a nightlight for her beloved family—by which, as it eventually transpired, she meant her father and her brother, but not the less immediate relations.

She proved an impressively devoted carer for her father, *cher Papa*. She gave him the gift of a glorious old age, in which he was never alone or forgotten. She moved into her parents' flat, purposefully choosing to sleep in the alcove behind the kitchen, on a single mattress, like a maid; and she came to her father's bedside if he called out in the night. She accompanied him everywhere, entertained his friends, helped him to prepare his menus and oversaw the preparation of his meals (every last penny of his savings went on Graça, the housekeeper, who came five days a week; he died leaving less than 1000 euros in the bank), and told jokes and kept up appearances, and kept alive the memory of *Maman*, his wife, her mother, whom they both regarded as a lay-saint. In the pantry, next to the boxes of biscuits and cereals, they kept in a glass jar the half-consumed madeleine that *Maman* had been eating when she died.

When in his turn, sixteen years after his wife, he died—and was laid out in his bedroom, beneath the stark crucifix on the wall, in the same bed in which *Maman*, too, had been laid out many years before, in the same season, surrounded by flowers and with the winter windows wide to the wind to dissipate any smell—she kept vigil through the night at his bedside. Her brother and sister-in-law were with her then, sober and respectful, but they did not sit up the way she did, the way the nun would for her in her time. They did not belong, as she did, at *Papa's* side. She prayed for him, which they did not; and though she did not tell them so, she cursed them for not praying.

Afterwards, she struggled again, and asked God again, and He repeated, “the nightlight.” She did not like America, loathed still more—as she told *les filles*—the accursed ocean that lay between her life, the life her brother should have lived, and the life in which he had in reality, against sense, settled himself, with his North American wife, and their American children, raised in another tongue and out of the sight of God. She did not visit often (she had always dreaded flying; and once

there was no smoking on airplanes it became an almost intolerable task to fly), but she telephoned her brother every day. She tried to keep up a buoyant façade.

Even when he fell sick the first time and hovered near death for weeks, his wits having escaped him, she did not despair. Hearing that he was in hospital, sedated and hooked up to a breathing machine, she boarded the loathed airplane uncomplainingly (Sophie, knowing how little the Tante liked to fly, had arranged for her to fly business class), and once she was at his bedside, she had determined to stay as long as it might take. She had devoted her soul to his recovery, had held his hand, had prayed over him, had invited the priest to do the same (her brother would not have liked it at all had he been aware; and indeed her sister-in-law, too mild to rebuke her, nevertheless glared at her each time the man appeared), had reminisced with his sleeping and immobile self, had paced the hospital corridors, had knelt on her knees, eyes closed, hands together in further prayer, beside the fold-out bed in the study of the small apartment in which her brother and his wife had chosen, incomprehensibly, to spend their retirement. She had stayed long enough to wash all her clothes repeatedly; and then longer still, long enough to have to buy a new skirt, a new jacket, for the warmer weather. She had had to find a salon in which to have her hair dyed and styled, then cut as well. She had not once complained.

And yet, with each passing week, an anger grew inside her, born of dismay at first, but then, yes, boiling. For so many reasons: her brother's care was not managed as she would have wished it; her attempts to intervene—her insistence upon the pastoral component of his convalescence—were ill met. Her sister-in-law—the reason for that accursed ocean, the reason, really, that her brother lay trapped in an antiseptic room along an ointment-pink corridor in an expensive American hospital that made no sense, oblivious in a mad coil of tubing and susurrating machinery—her sister-in-law and *les filles*, whom she had at times

considered potentially French enough (but obviously, what had she been thinking?) seemed to come and go around her as if she did not matter. She was not a fool; she could tell her presence annoyed them. They asked her to smoke on the balcony, and complained if she stole even a single little cigarette in her room. They looked askance at her third whiskey before dinner—especially the elder, especially Sophie, upon whom she, the Tante, had always lavished such especial care, and over whom she had prayed and fretted particularly through her adolescence. The Tante was not fooled by their embraces, their blandishments, and their jokes. When Sophie bought her a new handbag, she wasn't fooled. When her sister-in-law and Anne took her out to the town's newest Italian restaurant for her birthday, she was not fooled (though she was shocked: it was the first intimation of her sister-in-law's decline, so unsettling to see that haughty woman dumbstruck in the hubbub, asking Anne why the waiter spoke English when they were, of course, in France?).

When, finally, she could take it no longer, the Tante retreated and returned home. She did not stay quite long enough to witness the miracle, the single day in which her brother turned from death to life, retrieved his wits and fought for his survival (that, too, is another chapter); but she knew in her heart that his recovery was due if not in large part, then at least in some part, to her ministrations and her prayers. It had taken all she had to give; but she, the nightlight, had given it willingly.

Of course that was just the first time. She might have known.

RAE ARMANTROUT

Wrong

Sleep, you demented Scheherazade,
yammering nonsense,

desperate to keep up your yarns
and save yourself

while that righteous king
in the brain

thinks, No,
and I am

disagreeably awake.
My head is thick;

my stomach feels empty
but isn't.

Could I be wrong
about sensations?

What is a thick head anyway
but vacuum

registered as throng.

*

Ok, you're right.
You be the breast.

*

An old man worries
about his dead
mother

because she is "very
old"

RAE ARMANTROUT

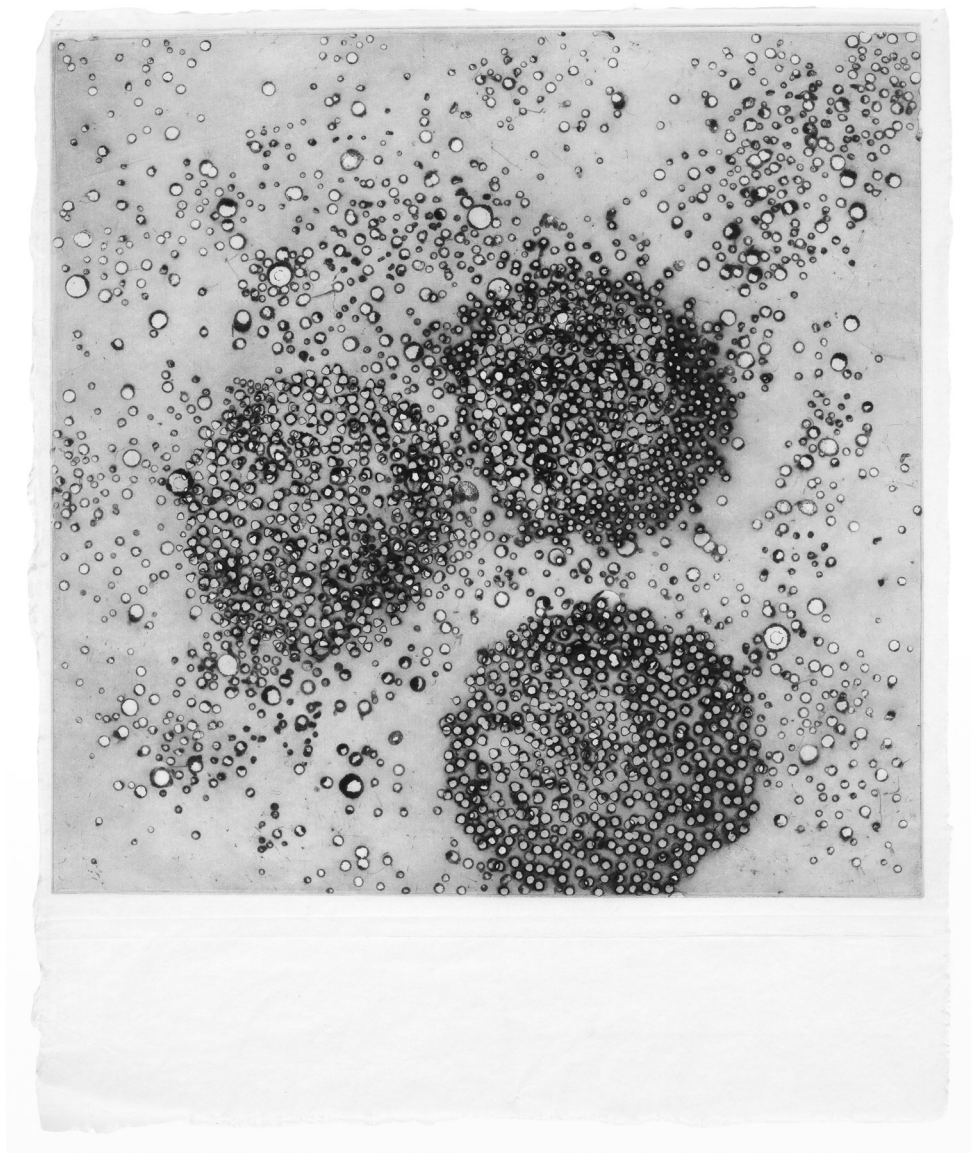
Old Tricks

For light
so loved
the light
that it kindled
what it touched
and answered itself
wherever it went.

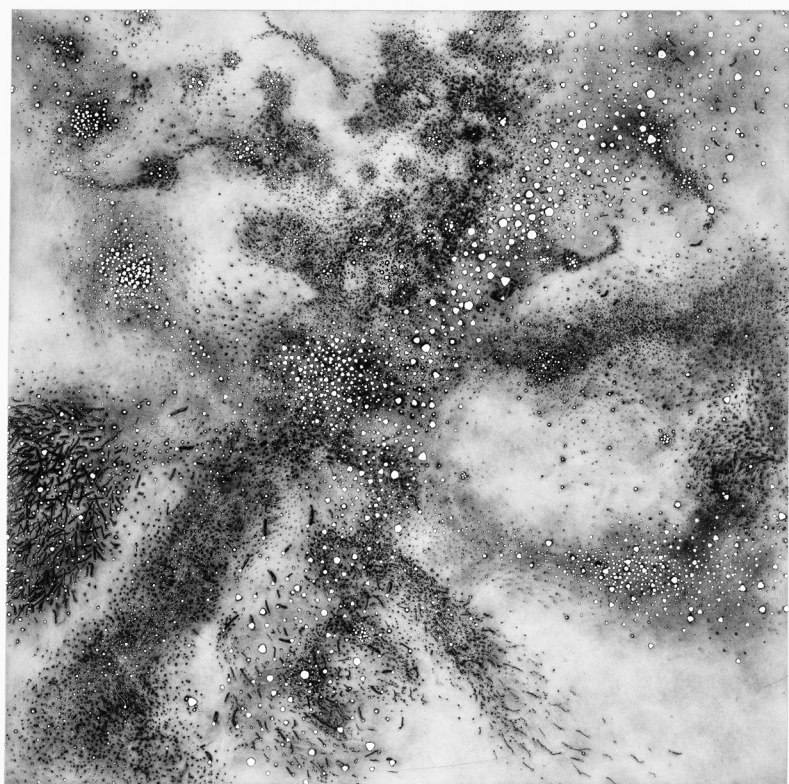
Now the lightning strike
of the chameleon
and the hard eye
of the blue-black bug
it's swallowing.

All tricks
of the light—
old favorites,
new kinks.

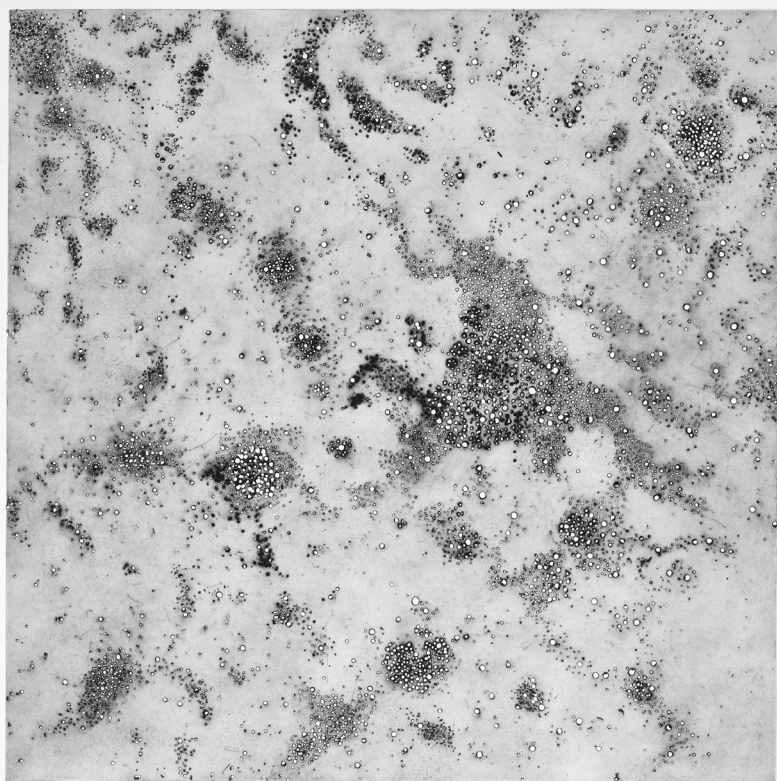
From a bathtub
each night
let crickets sing.



Beth Galston, *Untitled (Three Forms)*, 2014, intaglio
print, Akua ink on rice paper, 12 1/2 in. x 12 1/2 in.
Photo, Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.



Beth Galston, *Drilled #4*, 2015, intaglio print,
Akua ink on Revere paper, 30 in. x 33 in. Photo,
Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.



Beth Galston, *Drilled #1*, 2014, intaglio print,
Akua ink on Revere paper, 30 in. x 33 in. Photo,
Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.



Beth Galston, *Drilled #3*, 2015, intaglio print,
Akua ink on Revere paper, 30 in. x 33 in. Photo,
Stewart Clements. Courtesy the artist.

Impossible Math

DYO WHICH IS *Dio* which is *Dios* which is God (but only one, not three), the unnamable, the One Without a Name. My grandmother, Rebecca (née Cohen) Baruch Levy, was born a Sephardic Jew in Istanbul (called Constantinople by her people at the time) in what might, by the Gregorian calendar, have been 1903, but since they went by the Hebrew and Ottoman calendars, her birthday sits just out of reach.

This much we know: one *día in primavera*, an *ija* was born.

What did she speak as she grew towards words? What *didn't* she speak? At home, she spoke Ladino, but they called it *Spanyol*, or *Espanyol*, or *Spanyol-Muestro*, a medley of fifteenth-century Castilian Spanish, Hebrew, Turkish, French, Greek, Portuguese, Catalan. These days, it's called Ladino or Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo or Judéo-Espagnol and is listed in UNESCO's *Atlas of the World Languages in Danger* as "severely endangered," along with 526 other languages, among them Awa pit, Lilloet, and Ak.

If I cannot speak my grandmother's *lingua de leche*, I can say a few phrases. I have found—rare luck!—a teacher fifteen miles down the road.

De la spina nase la roza. From the spine is born the rose.

La pasensia es pan i sensia. Patience is bread and science.

En el aniyo del Rey Shelomó est á esktrito, “*Todo pasa.*” On King Solomon’s ring is written, “Everything passes.”

If meaning sometimes feels like impossible math (bread + science = patience?), still I reach, stretching my tongue and mind around sound and sense as fugitive and present as my grandmother’s voice on the brown, unspooling cassette tapes from 1985, when I asked her question after question, but never enough. *What I had with all of them, you have no idea!* At her Catholic girls’ school, she spoke French, and in the streets of her childhood, she spoke Greek, Turkish, Armenian, and in the privacy of her own thoughts, I don’t know what she spoke, and in her dreams I haven’t the faintest idea, though as for myself, I once slept-talked in French after years of study, *un cadeau lumineux* because I was excellent in (if not at) French, nubile and lilting with a gamine’s head and almond eyes and a flat belly and just enough words to make love (bright gift).

La letra kon sangre entra—the letter enters with blood—which is to say that learning is hard and always of the body (full of flab), so maybe it’s true that *la mijor palavra es la ke no se avla*—the best word is the word unspoken. Still, like me, my grandmother was a talker. When she left Turkey, she went to Spain, and when she left Spain, she went to Cuba, and when she left Cuba, she went to New York, where there was *Eengleesh*, which gave her more trouble than all the other languages combined (she wanted a chicken but asked for a kitchen, wanted bread but got a pen). Still, she never stopped talking, slipping between, among, inside her many tongues, a seal sliding from water to rock and back again, slick nose, brown eyes, and if there was pleasure in the flips, turns, and slippery slopes, it was always followed by the labored, limbless, barnacle-scraped haul to stone, where she lay breathless, heaving. And begin again.

Throughout it all, *Dyo*. Good fellow, he was there for her (if not for me, but I don’t mind), in temple, kitchen, word and wordlessness, and

she'd cover her eyes and wave her hands above the candles, drop herself inside his mute embrace. Sing. My own eyes are uncovered, my tongue clumsy but hungry. I'm not looking for *Dyo* but for my grandmother. It's been years now. *Donde? OÙ?*

In her old age in Beverly Hills, Florida, she made friends with a priest and, like Mary's little lamb, followed him to church one day, and then another day, because he was a very nice man and gave her rides. *Dyo* was everywhere or nowhere by then (she'd lost a leg, two husbands. Her six siblings, six children, eleven grandchildren all lived far away). *Toda pasa.*

Of Baby Jesus, my grandmother always said, Oh he was so *beee-yoo-tee-ful* and fat, you have no idea! They had statues of him at her childhood school, baby and mother, Madonna and child, he in her arms, plump ankles, a dimple chiseled in his marble cheek. He cupped his mother's chin, and if you stood by their feet, you could hear them singing.

You don't believe me?

That's how real they were.

BRENDA HILLMAN

Curl of Hair in a Drawer

Writers long for a new sense of form though they may never know
what it is. The real is released from its concept, light releases day
as a fawn steps over the floor of the world till some of the spots
look spilled...

oo ooo o In the 80s
oo o o oo

i traveled to see Plath's stuff like a pilgrim tracking relics
of a martyr. Some aesthetic camps didn't like her — too much
emotion or too much motherhood & in those days writers stuck to
their camps, though it seems like great writers abandon their
camps & are burning the maps to stay warm...

A librarian brought the drawer of Plath's things: satin baby book her
mother made, bits of a cloth dog & a curl of hair in cellophane [⊙]. The
curl befriended its zeroes. The penetrating light was huge but
intimate. Light pressures human monuments from
outside, a pollen-colored cast to it, particulate but weighty,
as a girl felt trapped & insufficient yet possessed of deep & vagrant joy.
Hair is odd, more active when saved. i stared at it a while;

i was a few years older than Plath when she died; we had things
in common: mothers who made baby books, small children;
depression in the overwhelm, perfectionism. i love to write
more than i love sorrow. i love humans more than death.

The somehow is endless, the details are endless & language is

endless so i lived. What would she have made of her fame, of poets only
read a little then: Niedecker & Hurston, Forrest-Thomson & Guest.
As a fawn steps over its dots, what we love keeps us alive. Sometimes.
Some of us. Mostly alive. In a curl of the mind from a curl in the mind
on the floor ~~xxx~~ of the world, the unplanned monuments of light survive—

KATHRYN RHETT

La Belle Indifference

“Are you listening to me?” Dr. Schreiber, the surgeon, says to me in the room in the emergency ward of our local hospital. He can’t see my face because my son Ben is between us and I have lain my head on the pillow next to Ben’s head. Dr. Schreiber is holding up Ben’s hand, and globs of blood are forming at the end of his only-partly-there finger. You would think blood would drip or stream or spray but it is forming bubble-like globs that from time to time drop out of sight.

My son Ben was nine years old when a swing chain ripped off the end of his right pinky finger at recess. The bell rang. He was swinging high. As the swing came down, he fell or he jumped, he didn’t remember which. Two links of the swing chain overlapped and bit his finger. He stood still and his friends went to find the recess monitor. They ran around and looked for the end of the finger. This is what kids will do. When I was eleven I fell off the school playground slide, and a chunk of my knee was gone. “Find the chunk, find the chunk,” the other kids yelled, clomping around me on the blacktop, and I can still hear them. They didn’t find it. My knee was fine after stitches. The kids at the James Gettys Elementary School hunted for the end of Ben’s pinky.

The principal called me. I was an hour away from Gettysburg, at my older son Jacob's private high school. The principal said, "We think the ambulance will take about fifteen minutes, so I thought I would drive him myself, if that's okay with you." A teacher would ride in the back with him. "That's fine," I told her, "Thank you." The principal sounded so steady, I didn't understand the seriousness of the accident, but as soon as we hung up, I called my husband Fred, and my body started moving, gathering things, heading for the car, driving east over the mountain.

After Ben left for the hospital, three teachers followed the trail of blood drops, but couldn't find the end of his finger. It must have been there, in the wood shred below the swing set, or flown past in the grass. You're supposed to find the body part and put it on ice, everyone knows that. The first reattachment of a body part, or replantation, was performed in 1962 at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. A twelve-year-old girl had lost her arm, up near the shoulder, and reattaching it involved reattaching the brachial artery. Restoring blood flow is crucial. Fifty years later, we might not have known of this case, but we knew the drill: grab the body part, put it on ice, and rush it to the surgeon.

The town of Gettysburg was at one time, in 1863, full of amputated limbs, cut off to save wounded soldiers. Blame this on the Minie ball, a large, conical lead bullet that could kill from a thousand yards. The bullet expanded when it hit bones, shattering them, and it tore through muscles, arteries, and tissues, making them irreparable. If a Minie ball hit you in the torso or head, you'd almost certainly die. If it hit you in a limb, it destroyed the limb. The amputations of arms and legs were deliberate and necessary.

In 1861, when the war started, Surgeon General William Hammond described the state of medical science as at "the end of the medical Middle Ages." Bloodletting was still in use, and instead of amputating a serious limb wound, it might be tidied up by rats or maggots. War becomes a lab experiment for medical treatment and, in the Civil War, advances were made in life-saving amputation. Surgeons also

developed a new method of closing chest wounds to prevent lung collapse (which would be followed directly by suffocation and death), and began working on facial reconstruction, the start of plastic surgery. The management of mass casualties was radically improved, with a system of aid stations, field hospitals, ambulance evacuation, and general hospitals that would serve as a template for the World Wars. The triage system came into being, along with the principle of treating wounds within twenty-four hours. Two-thirds of the 620,000 dead in the Civil War succumbed to infection and disease—the new hospitals were ventilated and clean.

Civil War surgeons learned to complete an amputation in six minutes, applying a handkerchief of chloroform or ether to the soldier's mouth and then cutting deep, as far from the heart as possible, and never through a joint.

Visiting a Civil War re-enactors' site one summer evening in Gettysburg, my daughter Cade and I paused at various tents, drifting from the seamstresses to the musicians to the surgeon. "May I show you ladies my instruments?" he said leeringly, and then reveled in miming the actions of different saw blades. We flinched on cue. The availability of anesthesia at the time is still debated, with some people fascinated by imagining the gory agony of amputation without it. Others contend that most soldiers had it, especially with the development of the first inhaler, designed to reduce the amount of chloroform needed from two ounces to one-eighth of an ounce. Over the course of the Civil War, surgeons performed at least fifty thousand amputations, though this number is probably low. No statistics were kept during the first eighteen months of the war, and then the urgency of performing an overwhelming number of surgeries made record-keeping difficult. Even with those challenges, the Civil War marked the first era of standardized medical record-keeping and reporting, so that the post-war publication of *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, in six volumes

from 1870–1888, was conceived of by Europeans as the first American medical academic accomplishment.

At field hospitals around Gettysburg, amputated limbs accumulated into heaps and were then buried together. On the Gettysburg College campus, the main administration building, Penn Hall, was used for surgery, and the amputated limbs were tossed out of the windows. There was so much blood on the building's wooden floors that it bled through generations of paint, until, in the mid-twentieth century, the floors were finally resealed with concrete. The three-day battle at Gettysburg caused more casualties than any other single Civil War battle, with 51,000 soldiers not fit for the next battle; the casualty count includes men who were dead, missing, captured, sick, and wounded. How many amputated limbs were there? (Why would I want to know?)

My son left one November first for fourth grade, and came home diminished. It was the Day of the Dead. A friend joked, too soon afterward, that maybe his finger top was hopping around, haunting the playground. Funny little ghost. It was an awful thought, his little fingertip joining the amputated limbs buried in mass graves around the town to haunt us.

"I'm listening," I say to Dr. Schreiber, holding my son around his IV line, which is coursing with morphine and Xanax. It is six o'clock in the evening. Ben has been waiting for the surgeon, with an IV in his left hand and his right hand on ice, and he couldn't eat or drink anything in case he would need general anesthesia.

Ben told me that later that night, after it happened, he dreamed his entire hand had been cut off.

In his dimmed room in the emergency ward, waiting for the surgeon, we had watched sitcoms on the Disney channel. There was a marathon of *Jessie*, a bright popsicle of a show about a young nanny in

New York City. Precocious kids, a pouty, swishy butler, shenanigans. Ben and I clung to each other. We tried to be entertained. He'd just been in the ER weeks before, with an allergic reaction to amoxicillin, and I'd brought him a cinnamon bun and an orange juice from the cafeteria. Now he thought of them, how good they were, and he asked for food, for a cup of water. I paced and peered out of the doorway. "The doctor will come here soon," I had said, for six hours.

In the weeks after, we sat right next to each other on our blue couch at home and watched more of these zany shows for tweens. The characters chattered like squirrels and flitted like cartoon bluebirds. They laughed and laughed in brightly colored rooms. Nothing terrible happened to them.

Was I mildly deranged in the weeks after the swing set accident? Ben took hydrocodone, poured from a pint bottle, and I was his nurse. Fred and I shared a teaching job, and that year he taught classes in the fall, and I would teach in the spring. On the weekday mornings, Fred left with Jacob, to drive him over the mountain to school in Mercersburg, and then he drove back to Gettysburg for work. Ben and I stayed in the house, suspended, one hour morphing into the next. Outside, people were dressed for the world, wearing clothing with buttons and zippers, and shoes, coats, and jewelry. They dropped off kids at the school across the street and rushed to work, to fluorescent-lit offices and schedules. Inside, dressed in sweatpants, Ben and I debated whether we could stand to watch one more episode. We clung to each other on the blue couch as if it were a lifeboat and we were the only two left. We watched *Tangled*, a movie about Rapunzel, and I asked, "Will he die?" about the hero, and, "Is it a happy ending?" "Spoiler alert," Ben said. "He almost dies, but he doesn't." The bright colors were a drug, a dream.

We clung to each other at night, when he couldn't fall asleep. He would ask me to lie down next to him on his single bed. After he fell asleep I got up. In the middle of the night, two or three o'clock, he

would walk into our bedroom and climb in bed between us. He would lay his right arm over me, gently positioning the bandaged hand.

One night he dreamed that a man with a gun came at night and shot me and his brother. Ben got away, but we were dead. I wouldn't sleep well either, and one night I dreamed that I died in a plane crash—as the plane plowed into a mountain, the cabin glowed red and my fellow passengers and I held hands, saying, *I love you*. Then I was a spirit floating away from the wreckage, a daylight plane wreck on a college campus. Drifting invisibly, surrounded by academic buildings, I knew with complete clarity that although I had organized my life around writing, people mattered more than writing. Writing, creativity, art—it was all secondary. I knew, too, that there was no God—that is, there was no god figure or character. God was love. God was the force of love, like long threads or strings or electricity.

One night I looked through all my computer picture files for photos of Ben's perfect, whole, undamaged right hand. Studying these images felt like a private, weird, obsessive thing to do. I found a photo of Ben climbing our pink-blossoming cherry tree, his left arm hooked around the trunk, his whole right hand held out like a flag.

One morning Ben asked, "Do you remember when I had all my ten fingers? I don't."

"Did they find the finger?" Dr. Schreiber asks. I tell him no. Could he have sewn it on? Should we have looked for it? Fred is still driving back from picking up Jacob at school. I should have grabbed Jacob from school before I drove to the hospital, but I wasn't thinking straight. Soon after I arrived at the hospital, Fred had to leave to go get him. Neither of us went to the playground, though we will, later, and we'll walk all around the swing set, site of harm. That day the kids looked, and the teachers looked, and they found nothing. Dr. Schreiber says, "It probably wouldn't have helped anyway."

At Ben's school, the front-office secretary broke her left pinky. She fell off a chair and bent the pinky back. Then the chair fell on the pinky. (Dr. Schreiber told her it would hurt on and off for at least a year, even after the bone healed.) She wore a splint wrapped with white medical tape, and she admired Ben for his fortitude. Another fourth grader was roughhousing with his brother and broke his right pinky. Ben's teacher told me her father, a butcher, lost a forefinger when he was in his sixties. My colleague's father lost half his thumb to a chain in a logging machine. A mother at Ben's school told me that her husband lost the top of a finger in middle school, when a bunch of kids fooling around pulled shut a set of heavy double doors. Ben's occupational therapist told us about a fifteen-year-old who hurt himself in woodshop—twenty-one stitches in his fourth finger, and he also lost the tip of his pinky.

At a dinner party, a woman named Karen sat down next to me just as I was telling my old high school friend about Ben's finger. "What?" Karen said, and she held up her right hand to show me her right pinky, amputated above the last joint. She had shut her finger in a door two years before, and the top had to be amputated. It hurt for months. Never having met amputees before, suddenly I met them everywhere. It was always this way, with affliction, that a tribe of fellow sufferers appeared. Was it that I wouldn't have noticed them before? Or that one story invites another? Karen wiggled her right pinky and said, "I call him Morty."

Later that semester at a college dinner, I told a colleague about Ben's finger, and the student across the table held up her left hand. Her left forefinger was noticeably shorter, amputated. (Which word makes people understand better—the top of his pinky was *ripped off* or *amputated* in the swing chain?) "At least he was spared the surgery," the student, Tina Cochran, said. She'd lost the top of her forefinger at eighteen months old. As we talked together, I knew that Tina with her amputated finger could say anything and she would be right. People who have

not suffered through such an injury said things like, *He'll have a great story to tell*, or, *The girls will think he's tough*, or, *He should tell them the piranhas did it*. Tina's father was a mailman. He had postal equipment at home, and on a Sunday, Tina's mother was helping her father catch up on work. The envelope sorter had shiny silvery blades. Tina at eighteen months stretched out her hand to touch the shiny silver, edging, as she writes, "toward those hypnotizing pearly envelopes." She doesn't remember the pain. Tina said they sewed the top of her forefinger back on, but they couldn't re-establish the bloodflow and it had to be taken off again.

Tina has written that the kids at her private Christian elementary school taunted her on the bus, contorting their hands into claws, moaning and pointing. Not telling her parents why, she asked to switch to public school, where she had "friends who do not notice a tightly curled left hand," and where the ones who do eventually notice don't care. The band teacher discouraged her from starting clarinet in the fourth grade, lifting up her left hand and telling her, "It will hold you back, you see." She didn't play an instrument for the next six years. She wrote letters of rage and despair and ripped them up afterwards, keeping an outer silence. High school was better, she will tell me. She learned what mattered then. And she kept writing: "For all the times paper has acted as counselor, friend, and confidante, instigator and enemy, it kept its piece and my peace." There sat Tina, across the table, strong and poised and frank, a college senior. She acted real, without the flirtatious mannerisms many college women have. She said, about the accident, "It made me who I am." I admired her then as a person and, later, when she sent me her essay, as a writer, too.

But I didn't want the injury to make Ben into anything; I wanted Ben to be exactly the person he was before the accident.

Dr. Schreiber is explaining the different skin grafts they used to do, using skin from the abdomen or thigh, or by pinning down the finger to the palm. He

bends his own pinky and pins it to his palm to show me. It looks painful to have a finger pinned like that for a length of time and then cut free. Because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have a lot more experience with amputation and skin grafts, he tells me. Skin grafts, they've found, lead to no better outcome. He is small and macho, with a direct gaze, blue-green eyes. He's an Air Force surgeon, and he's worked in the desert. By "in the desert" I think he means the wars, but I don't ask him. I look into Dr. Schreiber's eyes and he tells me things and I think I love him. It's just us in this room, a child between us, and he will figure out what to do.

Dr. Schreiber had a more impressive career than I could have imagined for the surgeon who showed up in our small-town emergency room. Our local seventy-six-bed general hospital is friendly but not especially well-equipped; it has no neonatal intensive care unit, for instance, so we chose for Ben to be born an hour away at York Hospital (where he did indeed end up in the intensive care unit, briefly). Our daughter had her appendix out at Gettysburg Hospital, and her scar is twice the size of her cousin's, who had his out a year earlier in Philadelphia. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, our local hospital is rated as average for treating common adult medical problems like heart failure. In town, it's common to look up at the sound of a helicopter and see the blue Penn State Hershey Life Lion flying from the hospital roof northward to the major medical center at Hershey. Its crew is a pilot, flight nurse, and flight paramedic, and it serves ten counties in south central Pennsylvania. The Life Lion transports patients who need critical care—about sixty percent are being transferred from the hospital, and the rest have just shown up in the ER after a car or motorcycle crash, a fall, an assault, or an industrial, farming, or hunting accident. Looking up to see that helicopter, I'll think, I hope I never have to fly in that—and then, well, it's better than dying.

With three children, and a husband prone to getting concussions, I'd spent plenty of time in this particular emergency room. I've

watched the Westminster dog show in the ER (Cade came down with strep throat on a Saturday night), and brought Christmas dinner there for my husband (he stayed with Jacob, felled like a dozen other locals by an alarming virus), and spent a spa-like afternoon getting IV hydration and lunch on a tray (sinus infection). The place was humble and rural. How had the doctors wound up there? Before I met Dr. Schreiber, I'd never been curious enough to find out. They patched us up kindly and sent us home. We wouldn't think about them again until the next misfortune.

Six months before Dr. Schreiber met us in the emergency ward, he had retired from a twenty-eight-year career in the military. He had, in fact, worked in the desert of Iraq, with various illustrious titles like Chief of Medical Staff and Chief of Orthopedics. He had been Commander of the Mobile Field Surgical Team at Andrews Air Force Base. An academic as well as a surgeon, his c.v. list of journal articles, book chapters, refereed presentations, and research-in-progress runs to over five single-spaced pages. He had been deployed in combat and non-combat positions during the Gulf War, Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Before retiring from the military, he was Vice Chairman for the Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation at one of the largest military hospital complexes in the country, treating forty thousand patients a year, including soldiers from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom who had sustained amputation, burns, or functional limb loss. Operation Enduring Freedom started in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, after the September 11 attacks, and ended in 2014. Operation Iraqi Freedom was the 2003 invasion of Iraq, sparked by speculation about weapons of mass destruction, that destroyed the government of Saddam Hussein. Within four years of that war, there were five hundred amputees among American soldiers, a number that doesn't even count fingers and toes, but rather only arms and legs. As American troops used more and better-armored Humvees, Iraqis responded with

bigger roadside explosive devices. Overall, in the six American military operations in the region—Afghanistan, Iraq, and, as of 2014, Syria—there have been nearly two thousand soldiers who suffered major limb amputations, anything from a partial hand or foot amputation to more than one whole limb.

In this particular war lab experiment, bionic limbs have been developed, including a mind-controlled robotic arm that will allow an amputee to hold a grape, or use a power drill. The treatment of traumatic brain injury has been advanced, and an HIV vaccine created. Whereas wounded soldiers were once given morphine, to be followed by general anesthesia at a hospital, they can now be given wound-specific nerve blockers that aren't sedating, making transport easier. Tourniquets, used since the Civil War, are now standard-issue to soldiers, and can be applied with one hand. There are combat dressings that make blood clot, and a container that can keep four units of blood at the requisite transfusion temperature of thirty-four to forty-three degrees. Since World War II, almost half of combat deaths are because of blood loss. Now that infection and disease have been better controlled, we're back to the basic necessity of keeping blood in the body.

Though I didn't know it as we sat together in our small-town emergency room, everything Dr. Schreiber said to me had years of brutal experience behind it. This little room, this little finger? For military record-keepers, such a tiny injury wouldn't even be counted. Dr. Schreiber himself, as a resident, had cut off part of his forefinger with a table saw.

I look sideways at him from the pillow without lifting my head. "Most of our traumas have been non-surgical," I say. My daughter has had a butterfly bandage on her forehead, stitches in her hand and chin, and an appendectomy. Ordinary stuff. Most of her losses have been internal—her respiratory system shut down at birth, and now, at age twenty, she has multiple sclerosis. We rely

on imaging to see the lesions in her brain and on her spine. My older son has depression, anxiety, and panic disorder. Both their outer bodies are intact. No mother should have to see this, a part of her child's body cut off. I think of the war photos of parents cradling their wounded children, their visceral grief. Dr. Schreiber gives Ben a numbing shot straight in the open wound, and Ben screams, long and piercingly.

"La belle indifference," Dr. Schreiber said to me weeks later, "is the way we describe a patient who acts as if the body part doesn't belong to him. You'll see a patient come in with his hand presented on a pillow, as if it isn't attached to him." The dissociation young children were prone to was a way of sealing off the pain, of saying, "Here is my hand, I give it to you. It is no longer a part of me."

Beautiful indifference. La belle indifference. Dr. Schreiber explained that the way Ben held his hand, drooping from the wrist, was symptomatic of this. The amputated pinky was an object, attached to but not claimed by him. The healing, he told me, "is a marathon, now, not a race." The physical wound had healed as well as it would. Ben should tap the bandaged finger on surfaces to re-teach the nerves. The nerves have a long memory.

He suggested counseling. "We can't predict who will get PTSD. After ten, eleven, years of war, I can tell you that." He described how the biggest, toughest soldiers, men and women alike, might see a child injured, or an old person killed, and that's it, "PTSD for life." Someone who was apparently weaker would be untouched. "Your genetic make-up, or something particular about the incident, who knows?"

And in fact Ben was a strong and resilient person. Being the youngest of three, often roughhousing on the couch with a brother seven years older, he fell down and got back up with enthusiasm. From preschool on, his teachers commented on his ability to recover from a fall, or an argument. But in the weeks after the accident he didn't want

to remove the dressing. He didn't want to look at his finger or have anyone else look at it. At the orthopedics office, he stiffened as Dr. Schreiber held his pinky and turned it over. "Later on, we may want to oblate the nail. Or maybe not. Maybe we'll spare him that." There was a weird little half fingernail on the left end of his pinky, and oblation meant removing it. The right half of the end was just skin. Ben's finger looked especially misshapen because it was in the splint and bandage all the time. Though he had progressed, unbinding the pinky from his fourth finger, and then from its tether to his wrist, he would need to keep unwrapping.

Somehow I'd thought love would prevent PTSD, I realized in January, two months after the accident. I thought that if Ben and I clung to each other on the boat of the couch, I would bring him safely through this passage.

If only we could set the pain aside, compartmentalize it, put it in a drawer and slam it shut. I tried my best to do that. In February, Ben was in occupational therapy, when the administrator told me that our health insurance wouldn't cover any more sessions. Ben had daily exercises, which his therapist, Hannah, reinforced once a week, and then she taught him new ones. Squeeze the stiff thera-putty twenty times. Pry sixteen plastic pegs out of the putty. Put your hands in the painful prayer position. Bend the pinky joints and fold it into your hand. Pick up a coin with the pinky side of your hand and manipulate it to the thumb side, dropping it into a piggy bank slot. Pick up marbles from a bin of rice. Otherwise the hand will lose mobility and flexibility. He won't be able to open his hand. His hand will become a claw.

Ben fought me at home, sneaking his left hand over to help, but together Hannah and I could coax him through the tedious exercises. Now we couldn't come back, unless we wanted to pay \$250 for a thirty-minute session. Just an hour before, I'd been calmly reviewing my schedule, but now, one bit of bad news crumbled me. I stepped around a corner

to compose myself. I could pretend all the pain was safely jammed in a drawer but it wasn't.

I took half a Xanax almost every day to have something close to a normal personality. One night I looked up "no-fault divorce Pennsylvania." They say the divorce rate goes up when a couple's child is afflicted, or dead, and here's why. No, I don't really know why. It's not, *This is your fault*. There is no fault, except that most conversations are about the problem, except that the tension level is stuck at medium-high. Divorce is a way of cutting off the problem, of fleeing the scene, of starting fresh. Maybe we never should have chosen each other and combined our genes and fortunes. Maybe every decision we made together was the wrong one—especially where to live, with the mediocre medical care and at the northerly latitude that made our daughter's MS more likely—and we'll haplessly make more wrong decisions in all the years to come. We could cut our losses. Here, marriage with a history of affliction, I set you on a satin pillow and put you over there. Now I'm walking away. My new apartment will be bare, with white walls and sunlight, and I'll cook dinner there and dance to music while I cook. (*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made . . .*) I will dance in the bee-loud glade, in solitude, after cutting off the past and setting that pillow on a boat and sending it down the river.

At a counseling appointment, the counselor, Deb, kept circling back to one question: What do you think about getting on the swings again? Ben said he wasn't afraid, he just didn't want to. I mentioned the new plastic-coated chains the district had ordered, and he said, sharply, "They're not on the swings yet." But she pressed him and pressed him until he answered the question.

Dr. Schreiber says, "I'm going to have to trim the bone." He holds Ben's bloody hand, holds up the stump of the pinky. The bone sticks out past where there is

flesh. Dr. Schreiber is wearing apparatus that resembles spectacles, with round thick magnifying glasses encased in metal. He studies Ben's finger while Ben whimpers and I hug him the best I can, around the IV line. The right side of his torso, his arm, and his hand are given over. The wound won't heal properly with a bone sticking out. Of course, this is obvious. "Do you feel that," he says to Ben, touching the finger. "Yes," Ben says. "We'll wait a bit," Dr. Schreiber says. "What do you like to do, Ben? Do you play sports?" Ben tells him soccer and wrestling.

Saturdays were match days, and they lasted all day, in the local high school gym or a far-flung one over a mountain, over the river. There might be 180 matches in a day, the wrestlers paired up according to age, experience, and weight. At the beginning, the kids are assigned match numbers, like matches 12, 74, and 125. Coach writes the numbers with marker on Ben's hand.

Then you sit on the bleachers, waiting, not able to read *The New Yorker* magazine you brought because of the noise of eight or ten matches happening at once on mats set all around the gym. You have to watch the numbers. Make sure he's had a snack, and water, and used the bathroom. When it's about two matches before Ben's match, get him down to his mat. Get his helmet on. You will watch the match before Ben's. You are not sitting on the bleachers to watch, as with Cade's field hockey games, no, you are on the mat, standing or kneeling at the edge with other parents. The bleachers by a playing field provide a comfortable distance between you and the action, you now realize, and in wrestling this zone is gone. Wrestling is at ground level. There is a table to the side, with a timekeeper and scorekeeper sitting in folding chairs. In the middle of the mat is the white outline of a circle.

Two wrestlers enter the circle and face each other. They get in a sort of hug. The coaches are outside the circle, each standing behind his wrestler. A referee is there. He blows his whistle and the match starts. The timekeeper starts the clock. The wrestlers circle. Attack, or

get attacked. That's the choice. The coaches drop to their hands and knees, they are yelling, and straining forward like bellowing animals. One boy is down on the mat, the other on top of him, and the ref is kneeling, and now the ref is lying flat on his belly on the mat, his head raised up enough to blow the whistle. This is the *mano-a-mano*, hand-to-hand combat, the one-on-one encounter that all of life in the movies comes down to. Kill or be killed. To be pinned is literal humiliation, someone's weight pressing on you so that you can't move. All you want is not to be pressed completely against the ground. You raise up any part of your body off the mat that you can—head, foot, elbow—to avoid being pinned. As Ben will remark after the second match he lost, "You have to squirm." Yes, the wrestler underneath will flip around, will kick, will twist and torque, will throw out an elbow, will do anything to get out from under. Parents are yelling. Novice parents are having an out-of-body experience, watching their child get attacked. (Haven't we been trying to avoid this?) The boys are sweating, their faces are red or white with exertion. The coaches are screaming at the wrestlers. Get up, roll over, rise up. It lasts three minutes.

When it's over the boys will stand and the ref will grab the winner's right hand and raise it high. A lot of the losers cry. There weren't tears in community soccer, or middle school or high school field hockey. But here were these boys, sobbing, and sometimes their parents were yelling at them for losing, and then for crying, and they cried harder. How hellish, I thought. When Ben stepped into the ring, I could barely breathe. What would happen to him? How could he stand it? To me it seemed a scene from a nightmare, to be trapped in a circle with someone who wanted to crush you flat. Ben didn't hesitate. He made his moves. He took down, he got taken down. He didn't back up. He didn't dance around inside the edge of the circle. He had the right temperament for it. He was fierce. His face got red with heat and effort. He didn't cry. He was wholly there.

Dr. Schreiber was once a wrestler, NCAA Division 1. Ben was a wrestler. The encounter will happen. There is no getting out of it.

A nurse passes a large pair of silvery shears to Dr. Schreiber. She is standing near the end of the bed and he is sitting near the head. The shears seem to float in a gleaming arc from her hand to his. What if I say, No, Dr. Schreiber, don't cut it. What if I know it's the wrong move. Here are two people together, the surgeon and the patient, and a mom watching from the edge of the mat. On the mat, clinging to the mat. What if I say, No. He is out of his mind with pain. His body is here on this bed, tethered to an IV, with his hand that he is holding out to you. Give him more morphine and let's go by ambulance to a better hospital. I can't say better, that's offensive, I could say bigger. Let's go by ambulance to a larger hospital, and consult with a pediatric hand surgeon. I know, it's crazy, it won't do any good, I'm setting him up for more pain, I'm delaying the resolution, I'm not listening to you and your experience with soldiers and skin grafts. But actually I don't think of saying any of this.

Ben's hand got a fresh dressing every morning. Eleven days after the accident, the end of Ben's finger wasn't a closed wound yet. A nurse described its appearance as "bubbling meat." For the dressing, I cut a long strip of nonstick sterile pad, put a glob of Neosporin on the middle, and curved it over his finger end without any of it touching the painful open wound. He chose a color of bandage wrap, from our carton of thirty rolls of light blue, dark blue, green, purple, red, and pink. The bandage wrap we used, it turned out, was originally intended as veterinary wrap—it sticks to itself, not fur. I wrapped the padded finger with stretch bandage to close the side gaps, then laid the finger on what we call "the boat," a plastic splint shaped like the front half of a canoe. Then stretch bandage went around and around the boat, and then bound it to the fourth finger or, later, the hand.

After the wound closed, one of the orthopedists he saw told him sternly, “You’ve got to lose the dressing.” He told us not to put it back on after the exam, so I drove Ben to school and put it on in the nurse’s office there. On that day, Ben’s counselor’s words seemed not overly obvious and annoying as they had in the moment, but rather wise and supportive. “Everyone will have expectations of Ben,” she’d said. “But he will heal in his own time.” Ben wore a dressing to school, but started taking it off to sleep. Then he started taking it off after dinner, to do homework. When it was off, though, he would curl the pinky and hold it away, a crooked bent pinky. There were little empty dressings everywhere, like cicada shells. And one day, he came home from school with an unbandaged hand. “What happened to your dressing?” I asked. He shrugged. “I lost it.”

One day we met with an older, white-haired doctor, a hand surgeon at the orthopedic practice, who took Ben’s hand in his and explained things. The germinal matrix is the skin under your fingernail that adheres to the nail. Ben had germinal matrix tissue at the end of his finger, and a nail over it, but no bone support behind it—so the nail curved over instead of growing up straight. The nail curved over but was impossible to cut back much, because of the germinal matrix tissue. And, this germinal matrix tissue was super sensitive. Some of it was exposed, and so the top underneath of his pinky remained tender. The doctor asked me, “Which do you think is the most important outcome, functionality or appearance?” I didn’t know what to say. Was there a right answer? Would he dispense some ultimate Yoda-like wisdom? (Later I will think, Why didn’t he ask Ben? Why didn’t I?) I said, “Functionality. I want him to be able to play string bass, and wrestle, or whatever he wants to do.” The doctor nodded. “Good. Because it’s never going to look normal.” He told us that Ben needed surgery.

In May Ben had surgery, in New York, with the chief of hand surgery at Lenox Hill Hospital. The surgeon “shortened” the nail, and did a skin

graft. The recovery took two months. We poured hydrocodone from the pint bottle. We ordered another carton of bandage wrap. At least school was out. At least the wound was closed, stitched together.

After the bandages came off, we went on our usual beach vacation with my family. One night in the kitchen, as we adults were drinking wine and avoiding the dinner dishes, someone remarked that maybe I should have sued the school district. It wasn't the PTO's fault for choosing that swing set, I said. I was on the PTO and if I'd been there years before when they built the playground I would have chosen that swing set myself. They were only a bunch of parents doing their best, I said, as my chest tightened and my voice rose. Maybe the school district should take more responsibility, and the playground equipment procurement process should be restructured, *whatever*. Maybe I should sue the swing-set maker, that's who should be sued. But I was just trying to move forward, not back. Sure, maybe I should sue, I was thinking, and maybe I should do more altogether—maybe I silently criticized myself for not becoming an activist for the cause, an advocate crusader who would turn her child's misfortune into protection for everyone else. Plastic-coated swing chains for everyone. Fight MS. No, I was a selfish introvert who didn't reach out, either for help or to help. Hadn't *The New Yorker* once called my poems "hermetic" in one of their nice rejection notes? That's right I was a hermit, sealed off from the world, and I should be a stronger, more generous person who reached out, who fought harder. And really, if I were a better, more successful writer I wouldn't be trapped in this crappy school district in the first place, so sue me. Sue me for winding up in this place. Sue me for being a failure as a human being. All of this internal criticism made their suggestion sting. I hadn't felt so furious in years, I didn't know I was so undone. But there was my body, trembling, and my eyes, crying, and my mouth, yelling at them that I wasn't going to sue anyone, in the kitchen of a beach house at night. The nerves have a long memory. It wasn't a closed wound yet.

One day, in the fall, he told me that he'd been swinging on the swing where he'd lost his finger. "My pinky started budging," he said, "just moving all around, like a ghost or something." A ghost? He shrugged. "Yeah, a ghost."

The sounds of the shears. Does it begin with a susurraton, like shears cutting a length of silk? Maybe that's the sound of the blades meeting in metal friction, before they bite down. Kitchen shears cutting a thin chicken bone? The silver shears cross the room in a high arc, nurse's hand to surgeon's hand to my son's hand, held out away from his body. My son is wide awake, his mouth open in a wail. He lies on the bed, the head of it slanted up slightly, and I lay my head on the pillow next to his. There is a little thunk sound, a definitive sound. The blades meet, bite, close. Benjamin screams. I cannot lift my head. I hold him tight, around the IV line. "Are you awake?" Dr. Schreiber says to me. The bone was cut. It is done. Gone.

Almost a year after the corrective surgery in New York, Ben said, one night as he brushed his teeth, "I think I might need more surgery." I nodded; his pinky had been hurting lately. He had taken a shower, and I had just cut his nails, except that one, of course. Cutting that one was difficult and painful, and had to be worked up to, done at the kitchen table under bright light.

We consulted the surgeon in New York. Though the appearance of Ben's finger disappointed him, and Ben was in some pain, we had to consider that another amputation, including removal, or oblation, of the whole nail bed, would threaten further normal growth of his finger. More surgery would be a fourth amputation, after the injury, the bone cut, and the surgery. Why not wait if at all possible? The pinky would become a stub after another surgery. He would lose the top joint, and therefore some functionality. There was no guarantee that it would be the last surgery, since nail cells are persistent—even after removal of the

whole nail bed, hard little nodules will emerge, which have to be surgically removed.

Three years after the accident, Ben's finger has not grown back. It doesn't look any more normal. It still hurts in the cold, and when he catches a ball wrong. The pinky hovers over the computer keyboard as he types, never touching down. I try to cut the nail, but it is too thick and slippery. Soon it will dig too hard into his flesh and cause pain. In the spring he starts playing lacrosse, and the gloves are protective, but one day the pinky hurts, and we think lacrosse is over and surgery imminent. We meet with the surgeon, and Ben proposes a way to cut the nail, a three-cut plan, and lets the surgeon cut it in the office. After that, I can keep up with it at home.

At parent-teacher conferences at a new school, his teacher says, "He must improve his handwriting. I, and all of the teachers, want this. And he holds his pencil in a funny way." She says this somewhat mockingly, as if he is recalcitrant or lazy. She hasn't noticed his weird pinky. This is good, that he doesn't have an apparent disability. Or is it bad, that no one has paid enough attention to see that his pinky hovers over the keyboard? That he holds his hand in a way that is recognizably abnormal—to an occupational therapist anyway, a friend of ours who remarked on the way he tended to tuck his right hand in a pocket and otherwise hold it somewhat stiffly. As if it isn't exactly his.

Years ago, when he was seven, we went to a magic show at the grand Majestic Theater in town. Ben volunteered for a magician's trick, and on the big stage, in front of the velvet curtain, he knelt and placed his head through a guillotine. The shiny blade hung poised to cut his neck. I took photos up until the moment of the trick—what if, in some freak accident, it didn't work and I photographed the decapitation of my son? He emerged intact. He bowed and shook the magician's hand. It was all an illusion, a brightly lit dream.

What if you held your whole life out in front of you as if on a pillow, with a beautiful indifference? Here is my life, separate from me. Here is its glittering river, here are the children playing on the banks. You could set it down and slip away.



Susan Schmidt, *Bromeliad*, 2015, polymer plate print,
17 in. x 11 in. . Photo Bill Kipp. Courtesy the artist.



Susan Schmidt, *Basket of Sorrows*, 2015, monotype,
30 in. x 28 in. Photo Bill Kipp. Courtesy the artist.

GAIL MAZUR

At 4 a.m.

Some people have an appetite for grief, Emerson wrote,
and years ago, reading that, I thought, *Not me*, though I knew
what he meant—I'd known people to default to it,

people married to woe, dumbfounded by any sort of merriment.
Still, I thought our venerable sage judged *some people* harshly
from his Concord manse, where character meant transcending

the insane pull he'd known when, widowed young, he'd nearly died
of grief, of rending rage. Non-negotiable loss, we know *some people*
seem to thrive on it, they can't be coaxed into the light. Lightheartedness

won't touch them, or delight, its hum negligible, an irritant, a cloud of gnats
to brush away. Did lofty Emerson disdain them for frailty of spirit? No,
but he was oddly done with it, that first loss tempering him into calm

for the losses that would come. The calm that said, *Grief can teach me
nothing....* Not me, not now. I know day, when it wakes me, can bring back
endless night. Even here, long uncompanied, or companioned by Grief

and Joy—the *he* in me—I hunger for laughter, for touch, for tears my hand
can brush away. My work now: to continue learning to absorb the loss,
and live. Is it work enough? How can I know who or what can help me learn?

I'm a peasant, a humbled Mike Tyson said, *At one point I thought life was about acquiring things—life is totally about losing everything.*

For a fighter, a violent man, that's knowledge hard-earned, whose things

were bulwark against self-loathing and despair. It's clear he knows now things can't be enough. But I don't care what Tyson knows—or don't know why I care—does his abrasive, cleansing knowledge

touch me? Yes. Or is it its devastating articulation? Living on here, I have what I have, an acceptance of loss that disappears in dreams, in excruciating replays of a life draining away—these visitations,

like falling trees unsummoned come, my night a crushing *yesterday* the lit bed-light won't erase or wish away—

PHILLIP LOPATE

A Mother's Tale

WHEN I WAS ABOUT eight years old, not long after I had mastered speech and a semblance of rationality, I became, or rather, fashioned myself into becoming, an ideal interlocutor for my mother. She would come to me with her troubles (usually complaints about my father) and I would listen with an expression of sympathy and knowingness, which I had learned to sham at an early age. Not that what she was telling me was so hard to grasp, even for an eight- or nine-year-old: she was unhappy, dissatisfied with my father and our shabby living circumstances, and had dreams of a finer existence, which included romantic love and a singing career. I nodded along, made the appropriate sounds of sympathy, and she would say something like, "I can't believe I'm talking to a child, you're so grown-up, so understanding." I was pleased; that was my reward.

Years later, I came to resent what appeared to me an inappropriate seduction: she was unburdening herself at the same time as burdening me with adult problems, such as her sexual incompatibility with my father, that were robbing me of my innocence. Still years after that, when I came to question the very notion of childhood innocence, I realized

that it had been a mutual seduction: I was every bit as complicit in offering myself as her confidant as she was in taking advantage of my offer. I loved my mother, and so what better way to ensure her attachment to me than by enacting a semblance of empathy?

This happy arrangement lasted until I was about fourteen, when I began to question her accounts, or at least her interpretations of them. It seemed to me that she was being unjust in her assessment of my father, who was not nearly as blameworthy as she asserted, and I began to shift my sympathy from her to him (in the individuation stage for an adolescent boy, a not surprising development). Her long-held grudges also began to seem distorted. I started to chafe under her diva-like role in our family: her life story dominated, while the rest of us seemed reduced to minor characters orbiting around her. Granted, it was a compelling tale, but I was beginning to assert my own narrative, however pallid by comparison.

I now see that large parts of my adult personality and professional demeanor were formed in reaction to my mother: habits of detachment, skepticism, and thinking against oneself, which are classic essayist's equipment, resistance to melodrama, and a refusal to submit fully to empathy, as if it would involve signing on, surrendering in a kind of trance, to another person's distortions and self-delusions. At the same time, I inherited from her a zest for storytelling, a passion for self-expression, and, I hope, some of her humor and psychological astuteness. We would always have much in common. But I could no longer be her "boy."

Though Frances Lopate could wax mawkish about her younger self, she also had the opposite tendency, a tart distaste for sentimentality. She would ridicule anything that seemed to her too soft or corny—a TV show, a song on the radio—dismissing it with acerbic sarcasm. Attracting any number of weaker souls in our working-class neighborhood, who would confide their troubles to her, she was happy to play the role of compassionate listener and amateur shrink. Sometimes, when one of

these confidantes left our house tearfully after a soul-bearing session, my mother would tsk-tsk and say something like, “Poor kid, she’s got it bad.” At other times, she would switch into her harsh-realism mode: “What an idiot! That doctor is never going to leave his wife for her.” She had no sympathy for doormats.

I could never quite figure out which side of her would manifest in any given situation, or how the two opposing inner tendencies, sentimentality and scorn, got on with each other. When she was taking voice lessons, she would often practice a repertoire of torch songs filled with longing and regret, of the Helen Morgan/Jane Froman variety: “The Man I Love,” “He’s Just My Bill,” “I Want a Sunday Kind of Love,” “Make the Man Love Me.” Her contralto voice was perfectly suited to those wonderfully schmaltzy tear-jerkers. But she was quick to pounce on anyone else’s self-pity or unrealistic fantasies.

My mother was psychologically minded—intrigued by hidden motives, contradictions and paradoxes. Years later, when she went on the attack, taking offense at what she regarded as my insufficient love, I could always slow her down by interpreting her mixed messages. A narcissist, she appreciated whenever careful attention was paid to her, even if it came in the form of critical analysis.

I was thankfully spared that cliché of the over-protective Jewish mother, mine being far too self-absorbed to watch my every move. From age fifty on, she had a career in show business; but even before she began performing in dinner theater and doing commercials, she had that larger-than-life, self-dramatizing quality, like the actress-mother Mme Arkadina in Chekhov’s *The Sea Gull*. Not that I was ever a suffering Konstantin, perishing under her neglect; I had enough conceit of my own to offset hers. Still, a part of me must have resented her egotism, because when I was in my forties I stupidly gave her a copy of Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, a book then in vogue that blamed narcissistic mothers for their unhappy, overachieving children. She read it and said:

“What are you trying to tell me? That it’s all Mom’s fault?” She was no dummy.

In 1984 I tape-recorded my mother for a little over twenty hours, telling her life story. She would come downtown to the spacious loft I was subletting from a poet-friend in Tribeca, week after week, over the space of three summer months. (At the time, I was teaching in the University of Houston, but would come back to New York City every chance I got.) My mother was a willing talker, never at a loss for words, and she had forthright candor and courage equal to the challenge. She was sixty-six at the time; I was forty-one. I suspect she had been waiting for her close-up all her life, and so this oral autobiography became, in a sense, the fantasized full-length interview. She may have also cooperated because it was a way to hang out with me, her younger son, for much longer periods of time than I was accustomed to doling out to her. While I thought about my mother constantly, she looming large in my imagination, the truth was that I preferred to reflect on her in private than spend actual “face-time” with her, guarded as I was for reasons both justifiable and inordinately self-protective.

She embraced the project wholeheartedly, though halfway through, she became wary about certain areas of interrogation, and suspicious of my possibly using the material as fodder for further writing. My previous efforts to portray her in print had left her bruised. By allowing herself to be tape-recorded, she may have envisioned finally setting the record straight and correcting whatever negative judgments I had had of her, once I understood where she was coming from. By the fifth taping session, she realized that I was still withholding the level of empathy she had hoped for and began to accuse me of being “clinical.” I, for my part, often wondered why I could *not* be more generously sympathetic to her tales of suffering—why they so often provoked impatience in me—when I tend to receive the confessions of discontent from my students, my friends, and others with greater warmth.

To set the scene further: at the time of the taping my mother had four grown children: my older brother Leonard, who was already a popular radio interview host; myself, a writer-professor, and my younger sisters, Betty Ann, a nurse-masseuse, and Joan, on her way to becoming a high school English teacher. My mother had finally gotten her wish and divorced my father, but he was still living with her, due to her sense of obligation, perhaps, and the exigencies of New York real estate.

My mother died in 2000 at the age of eighty-two. What strikes me as remarkable is that in the thirty-plus years that followed my 1984 recording of her, I never once listened to these tapes. They sat in a shoebox in the closet. Far from exploiting them for literary purposes—she was right in the end that I would, though it took me three decades to do so—I didn’t even go near them. I think I was afraid of being overwhelmed by her intensity and also made to feel how much I missed her. And in fact, it was unnerving when I finally transcribed them, her ghost voice filling my writing room. Not only was it a shock to hear so many revelations that I had allowed myself to forget, but it was equally disconcerting to be put in contact with my younger self, the forty-one-year-old I once was. So I entered into a triangular dialogue involving my mother, my younger self, and the person I am today.

Listening to my mother’s tapes impressed on me how often even an intelligent person can fail to observe the truth about herself. (That goes for almost everyone: I have a far easier time seeing other people’s self-deceptions than my own.) Another curiosity was how someone goes about fashioning a life story from certain favorite anecdotes. Why those dozen and not a hundred others that might have proven equally significant? I am tempted to say that the signature of one’s personality resides in just which recollected vignettes one chooses to keep retelling.

Not long after the taped interviews concluded, my mother put my father in a senior citizens’ residence. We, the kids, were all behind her

decision. She boasted that at the intake interview, the director thought she was our father's daughter, not his wife. The senior residence was out in Far Rockaway, over an hour and a half away by subway, which meant that it was inconvenient to visit him. It was also in a residential area blocks away from the commercial strip that contained a newsstand and a barber shop, which inconvenienced my father, a passionate reader of newspapers. He also did not get along well with his roommate, an Orthodox Jew who barely spoke English. The very fact that he had to have a roommate spoke to a key problem with such institutional settings, downward mobility. Having clawed his way into the bottom rung of the middle class after a lifetime of toil, he was suddenly forced to descend to a lower station in life. Subsequently, my brother found him a spot in a genteel, top-of-the-line senior residence in the Lincoln Center area. But when his health began to deteriorate, and more importantly, his continence, they kicked him out and he was placed in a depressing nursing home in Washington Heights. There he hung on for a few years, before falling ill and dying of pneumonia in 1994.

There was little grief expressed by my family at his passing, but I insisted a few days after his death that we all get together and at least talk about him. True to form, my siblings had sardonic recollections. They certainly did not give in to sentimentality, nor did I, for that matter, though I was less disparaging about him and more insistent on the value of his intellectual bequests and his having labored to support us. To my surprise, my mother took me aside afterward and expressed a touching gratitude for my honoring him this way. "He was so intelligent," she said, "it was such a pity he didn't do more with his brains."

For her part, living alone suited her. She continued to work a series of jobs, first at a day-care center, then for a retired millionaire businessman whose accounts she helped keep up-to-date. She had a few last beaux, including one younger cousin: you had to hand it to her, she was a pistol. Not that these dalliances ever mellowed her. She contin-

ued to hold grudges and remained a narcissist of the first order. When I, having fallen in love, proposed to my girlfriend, I waited a day to tell my mother the news, and when she found out that my girlfriend's mother had already been told she was furious. At a lunch date with the two of them, my mother began listing all my crimes and flaws when my wife-to-be cut her off by saying, "Listen, Fran, I love your son and I don't want to hear you putting him down any more." That seemed to give her pause. Nevertheless, at our wedding, just as the rabbi began the ceremony, my mother pushed noisily to the front of the room (you can see it on the wedding tape: suddenly the camera's view of the *chupa* is blocked by this large woman advancing like a boat in the foreground), complaining that she had not been given a seat commensurate with her importance as the mother of the groom. That was Mom.

In her final years she joined a group of old troupers who performed at senior citizens' homes. They were game, plucky show business types doing hoary comedy routines and musical numbers. My mother had a few solos: I remember her plangent, effectively melancholy rendition of "I'm in a New York State of Mind." I saw the troupe perform several times, including once at a Chinatown community center where the Asian elders sat patiently in wheelchairs, some drooling, and most not knowing what the fuck any of the English lyrics meant, but smilingly appreciative of the melodies and the attention from outside. My mother got a kick out of her fellow performers, their quirks and talents, like Ike, the near-blind black guitar player. Eventually the troupe even got around to performing at the senior community center in my neighborhood. I brought my daughter Lily, who was then around four, and Anthony, the boy her age next door, to the performance. When my mother launched into one of her solos, Lily and Anthony got up and began dancing around the ballroom floor. Everyone ooh'd and aah'd, thinking it was so cute, but my mother (never the most doting of grandmothers) was pissed off by this distraction from her performance.

Her ailments piled up; diabetes was a big concern, because she had to administer daily injections and would sometimes get the dosage wrong. My sister Betty Ann, by then a trained nurse, would come by and administer her shots whenever possible: she thought my mother might be playing Russian roulette with her medicine, flirting with suicide. She had always had a self-destructive bent, simultaneous with a powerful life force. Who can understand, not I, how these two opposing drives operated in tandem on her character? In any case, it was getting harder for her to move around the city, and she decided to quit the singing troupe.

She gave her last performance on a Friday. The next day, Saturday, she had a massive heart attack and died. Here is the part that makes me cringe: apparently the heart attack had occurred sometime midmorning, and she lay on the floor for hours, not caring to or able to get to the phone and ask for help. Around five o'clock she phoned my sister, who lived in the neighborhood, and told her to come right away. Betty Ann called an ambulance and rushed over. As they were wheeling her out of the building, Manhattan Plaza Towers, on the way to Roosevelt Hospital, she expired. Or maybe not: maybe she was still alive when she got to the hospital and died there, before they could resuscitate her. I got the phone call—my wife and I were just getting ready to leave for a dinner party—and we sped to Roosevelt Hospital as fast as we could. There I saw my mother's body, still lying on the gurney in the hospital corridor. She looked bad, like—dead meat. She looked like a corpse, I guess. What are corpses supposed to look like? She looked quite uncomfortable, her belly's girth rising from the sheets like some foreshortened Renaissance painting, Mantegna's *The Dead Christ*, say, and the expression on her face was, as far as I could make out, dismayed. I wish I did not have to have that image always in my mind of my mother on the gurney.

Above and beyond any attempt to reach the truth, I know that transcribing the tapes and writing my responses to them has been an

attempt to keep my mother “alive” for as long as possible, to get her off the gurney, to hear her voice again and, in this way, to bring her back to life. I remember my mother’s futile effort to call out to her own father so forcefully as to deter him from passing into the shades, and now here I’ve been doing much the same thing, trying to summon her back from the underworld, largely by quoting her, with the quixotic hope that she will be pleased enough by the sound of her voice to re-emerge, however fleetingly.

Hearing the tapes again was a shock. Her voice filled the room where I write; it was just as strong and confident as it had always been. At times the things she said were so shocking that I would have to pause the tape and sit there, gasping. Uncle Morris? Really? And when it came to an argument near the end, when I tried to convince her that I did love and care about her, I was flabbergasted, sweating, as though I were still defending my life. Her voice was the original Other, but it was also a part of me. As a baby I had first learned human speech from listening to her, and as a child I had internalized that voice to such an extent that it was hard to say where she left off and my own voice began. That writing voice from which I take dictation, and of which I am so proud, started out being hers. (I still hear her in my head, sixteen years after her death. I don’t hear my father anymore because he was so silent, but when I look in the mirror I see him, especially when I don’t smile, that same grim, stern expression.)

Listening to and transcribing the tapes, I was impressed by the sweep of my mother’s life, all this woman had gone through. Born to European immigrants into a comfortable middle-class home where she was her parents’ favorite, losing them at an early age, raised by strict, indifferent siblings, a runaway and high school dropout, forced to reinvent herself over and over, working at a beauty parlor, becoming a housewife and a mother, running a candy store, working in war factories, starting a photography business and a camera store, clerking for garment companies, going into show business, touring America, doing commercials, going

back to school...It was a twentieth-century life. Born in 1918, died in 2000, she began to seem to me representative of millions of women who had passed through the same time period, the end of World War I, the Depression, the New Deal, World War II, the Korean War, the civil rights movement, Vietnam and the antiwar movement, gay rights, feminism...Her very discontent seemed emblematic of millions of other women's experiences.

My mother could exasperate or get on a reader's nerves, just as she sometimes did on mine. But when I read large sections of the transcribed tapes, more or less verbatim, they graphically showed, to me at least, how one edges toward an insight and then backs away, how we rationalize or shift the blame onto others. Her verbatim testimony seemed a realistic presentation of the person she was, and the dynamic between us. (Realism, that old, disabused deity.) So, yes, there is a scientific streak in me that is curious about the way people talk, and that would be inclined to diagram interactional patterns. The tapes also showed, in spite of the love and goodwill between us, how the wariness between a parent and a grown child might not overcome a certain impasse. The stalemate between us was unbreakable: we were too much alike. When I showed these transcripts to someone, he was dismayed that there seemed to be no change in my views of my mother from my earlier self to my present one; no softening. This is true. I would have been happy to demonstrate some eureka, redemptive insight that deepened or warmed my feelings; but in truth, there was no *On Golden Pond* moment during her lifetime when we fell into each other's arms, and since she is gone I have not found it any easier to embrace her ghost. I was raised by a powerful woman, and the defenses I developed against her have not essentially altered, any more than have the admiration, gratitude, and fascination I feel for her.

I sometimes think that I was put on earth to understand my mother's pain, and have not gotten very far in the process. I strived to empathize, but then her complaints would go on a little too long—no matter

what she achieved, she was always harping on the lament that she had gotten, in her words, “the shitty end of the stick”—and I pull back. In retrospect, I see the one missing piece could be that she suffered from depression all her life. My brother even opined recently that our mother was bipolar. This I strongly doubt; and in any case, what good does it do to apply one label or another to someone’s unhappiness. Saying she was depressed is only kicking the can down the road. As for understanding my mother’s pleasure, that is equally problematic. A part of me equitably accepts that she did what she had to do, in pursuing amorous affairs and cheating on my father; who can blame her for wanting love, or sexual happiness, for that matter? But as her son, it rankled. I think it rankled in part because, much as I didn’t want my mother hovering over me, I was threatened growing up whenever her attention was taken away by other men, by another life outside the home. Dorothy Dinnerstein, in her feminist classic, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, posited that the root of men’s misogyny was in never being able to forgive their mother for their humiliating dependency on her when they were infants and little children. It’s entirely possible. Then again, the mistrust between men and women cuts both ways. My mother had a profound mistrust of men, including her sons, even as she craved them.

I have to admit I also want her voice so fully on the page as a record simply to honor her. “Attention must be paid!” and so forth. That line from *Death of a Salesman* has always struck me as a little foolish and blustery. *Why* must attention be paid? In truth, attention need not be paid, and rarely is, in the great scheme of things. It’s understandable that a son might want to pay heed to his mother’s tale, but that does not mean anyone else is obligated to care. Still, we writers feel a need to preserve everything. Where’s the harm?

FRED MARCHANT

In the Rapids

In the dream I sat down on the far edge
of the portico, out of the rain, and waited
for the doors to open. I read a poem with
the passing hope it would bring to mind
the voice of the one who now was gone.
The chapel doors parted, and our ushers
in white gloves handed out the program
printed on paper made to feel like vellum.
I took my place among the others, listened
as well as I could to the music and words
that flew like pigeons up to the rafters.
Then I too was upstairs standing in talk
that swirled around me like white-water.
Elbows bumped into, the wine spilled on
skewered white plugs of scallop wrapped
in bacon. I shifted to be nearer the widow
who was standing alone in what sounded
like roaring rapids. I was proud I could
hold steady enough for anyone who might
need me. At the same time I felt an almost
overwhelming desire to apologize, although
to whom and for what, I just could not say.



Jane Goldman, *Summer Blossoms I*, 2007, watercolor,
10 1/2 in. x 13 1/4 in. Private collection.



Jane Goldman, *Summer Blossoms II*, 2007, watercolor,
10 1/2 in. x 13 1/4 in. Courtesy Boston Public Library.

PETER ORNER

Do You Have Enough Light?

I WAS TWELVE when my Aunt Esther summoned me to the basement. It must have been 1983. By then she wasn't speaking to anyone, not my father, of course, the two hadn't exchanged words in years, and not her parents, my grandparents, either, though now she lived in their house again. Esther was in her mid-forties when she moved back home. The official word in the family was that she was "a little off." Nobody but my father went as far as to say she was crazy. And he'd tell anybody who listened what a loon his sister was. So much had already happened by then. A stillborn child (do they still use this term?), her divorce from Uncle Lloyd. The time she drilled a hole in the wall of her apartment in order to prove, once and for all, that the neighbors had planted listening devices. The time, in February, when she was picked up by the Chicago police in Lincoln Park shouting at trees, wearing nothing but a kimono. I've always remembered this, that my mother described whatever Esther had on that night as a "kimono." I can see her. That thin dress must have fluttered in the wind like a cape. The kimono incident almost did get her put away. My father was certainly for it, but he lacked the authority to make it happen. Instead, my grandparents moved her into Olivia's old room in the basement. Olivia, my grandparent's live-in housekeeper

for more than forty years, had finally retired a few years earlier and gone to live with her sister on West Madison. Her bed was still there, as was the tall bureau. Inside one of the drawers was a pile of Olivia's powder blue uniforms. In the months after Olivia left, I remember going down there and sticking my nose in those starchy uniforms as if that bleachy smell alone could bring her back.

Having Esther in the house must have been bewildering for my grandparents, but a comfort too. They were both in their seventies by then. At least now they'd be able to keep track of her. And in the morning my grandmother would make breakfast. It was the first time she'd made breakfast for anybody in years, Olivia had always done the cooking, and my grandmother overdid it. She'd make French toast, piles of sausages, bagels with lox, a soft-boiled egg that she'd put in one of those funny egg cups and carefully saw off the top with a knife. And she'd leave everything on the kitchen table covered by plates to keep it all hot. Then my grandmother would leave the house, not being able to bear it. Esther. A daughter who once had so much going for her. What didn't she have going for her? Beauty, brains, the whole package.

Esther never ate the breakfast. She'd leave for work without taking a single bite. Esther worked that whole time after she moved home. People forget this. She wasn't so crazy she couldn't work. My grandfather found her a job in a dentist's office in Northbrook. Esther was a part-time receptionist and she did a good job. The dentist showed up at her funeral and told my father how competently she'd handled the appointment scheduling as well as some light bookkeeping. Nobody ever said Esther wasn't smart. She'd graduated magna cum laude from Champaign in the late sixties. She could still face the world. It was her family she couldn't stomach.

Those were mornings of the opening and closing of doors. My grandfather would listen to the front door open and close a first time (my grandmother) and a second time (Esther). Only after the second

silence would he emerge from his study, where he slept on the foldout couch. He was retired by then and occupied his time organizing his letters and photographs from the war. He'd creep into the kitchen in his socks and eat Esther's breakfast. In part because he was famished (he was on a special diet for his heart) but also to make it look to my grandmother as though Esther had eaten. I'm not sure he ever fooled her, eating, as he did, everything in sight. My aunt, when she *did* eat, ate like a sparrow. And sometimes, after Esther came home from her shift at the dentist's, but before my grandmother came home—from shopping, a luncheon, or the exercise class she taught at the rec center—my grandfather would step heavily, slowly, down the basement stairs and knock on Esther's door and ask if she needed anything. *Another lamp, darling? Do you have enough light?* She never answered. They'd always been close. On a shelf in the study, next to his golf trophies, he displayed the beer steins she used to give him every year on Father's Day. Happy Father's Day 1964, Happy Father's Day 1965, Happy Father's Day 1966, and so on until she stopped sometime in the late seventies. My grandfather would stand outside the door to Olivia's old room, his own panting loud in his ears, and she wouldn't answer. He'd turn and climb up the basement stairs as if from the bottom of a well.

That year I hung out at my grandparents' house after school. I was in seventh grade. My parents had recently split up. I saw my father on Wednesday nights and every other weekend. Most weekday afternoons I'd lie on the rug in my grandparents' living room and watch TV until my mother came and picked me up after work. One of those afternoons, Esther rose out of the basement and asked me if I wanted to come downstairs.

"You can wait until after the Cubs," she said. Though in the old days Esther had always made a point of buying my brother and me presents (stuffed animals from Granny Goodfox on Wells), she hadn't acknowledged my existence in years.

"I don't care about the Cubs," I said.

"You don't care who wins?"

"No."

I was twelve. I had my own problems. Maybe I didn't want to be alone anymore, either. Esther stood there in the kitchen archway still wearing the skirt and blouse she'd worn to work. It was always said that Esther was too beautiful for her own good. A prophecy that proved itself to be true. What did her looks ever do for her? Old friends of hers, to this day, recognizing my last name, come up to me and breathlessly proclaim how gorgeous, just gorgeous, Esther used to be. Yet this is always accompanied by a question, implied or spoken directly: *Whatever happened to Esther Popper?* Her glossy brunette hair piled chaotically high on her head, always a few strands dangling past her enormous, starlet eyes. She didn't kill herself. Maybe we were all waiting for that, the day my grandmother would come home and find Esther in the basement laundry room. No, about a year or so after she moved home she was diagnosed with an advanced cancer and died eight months later.

I followed her down to the stairs to Olivia's old room. I'd slept down there so many nights beside Olivia and her cats, Henry, Harry, and Charles. The room looked the same, or as much the same as it could now that Esther was in it. She didn't seem to have brought much with her. She hadn't changed anything or put up any pictures. Olivia's small crucifix was still above the bed. I wondered why she hadn't taken it with her. I used to take it down and play with it, give it a voice, *Ouch, my hand, Ouch my foot*, until Olivia threatened to call her lawyer on me. *Put that back where it belongs or I call my lawyer.* My father, her lawyer. Had she been trying to send us some message by leaving it behind? Only the Lord Himself can help these people. Esther sat on the bed in the indentation she'd clearly been sitting in just a few minutes before. There was a book facedown on the comforter. What I'd give now to know what book it was. My grandparents' house has long been torn down and all the contents sold or scattered. Dostoyevsky? Someone for whom rage was so human? Since there was no place else to sit, I planted myself on

the very edge of the bed, as far away from Esther as possible, with my feet dangling toward the floor. She reached over and picked up a bottle on the nightstand.

“Excedrin?”

“No thanks.”

She popped a couple of pills in her mouth and swallowed without water.

“Are you scared?” she said.

“Why would I be?” I said.

“Aren’t I some kind of freak?”

“You work in a dentist’s.”

She stared at me directly as if deciding whether or not to laugh. She seemed to decide she wanted to, but by then it was too late. The impulse had passed. She picked up her book and started reading again. Why did she summon me? Because I was a remnant? A token of a vanished time when even shopping for stuffed animals meant some kind of hold in the world? The basement door opened. I listened to the heavy, careful steps. My grandfather didn’t have much time left himself. We were becoming a family of tatters. Three months after Esther’s funeral, my grandmother came home and found him facedown in the study. The paramedic said the attack was so massive he hardly could have felt anything at all. Like being blindsided by a bus, the paramedic said. Why is this always the measure? As if the absence of suffering in someone’s final moments makes up for—

Happy Father’s Day 1967, Happy Father’s Day 1968.

When he knocked on the door and even after he spoke, *But, darling, isn’t there anything at all you need?* I didn’t answer either. And then she laughed, not out loud, but to herself. Maybe it was something in Dostoyevsky. Or maybe she’d finally found the will to laugh over what I’d said about the dentist’s. He didn’t knock again. That father stood there for a couple of long minutes before going back up the stairs.

JERALD WALKER

The Designated Driver

I ARRIVED AT the faculty meeting as a few hundred students stormed the room, chanting about campus-wide racism, demanding justice. Most of the students were white, there to support their black peers as they aired grievances. After a while some of the speakers began to cry, which fueled my growing unease. The offenses struck me as minor, the kinds of slights that I, thirty years ago, as a black student who had also attended an overwhelmingly white university, merely brushed aside, things like coeds requesting to touch my hair, and faculty asking if I was there because of a racial quota. Annoying, to be sure, but not demonstration-worthy, not tear-worthy, not worthy of the bullhorn a young man kept bringing to his lips to shout, “The racism ends *now!*” And each time he did I responded, mentally, that the racism will surely continue, and if you expect to transcend it you will all need to stiffen your spines.

But spines could not stiffen, I conceded, without a certain weight to bear. I conceded, too, that the *weight* of weight was relative; perhaps having white coeds ask to touch your hair in 2014—particularly at an elite, private institution, where one year’s tuition costs more than my first

home—was the equivalent of being required, sixty years ago, to ride Jim Crow. Maybe sixty years hence, black hair touching would evoke uniform outrage at how inhumanely man once treated his fellow man. I would be long dead by then, so it was a question that would have to be answered by today's youth, including my two sons, whose spines, like the spines of the black students before me, were as soft as Jell-O.

My sons were twelve and fourteen. No one had asked to touch their hair yet, though the opportunity abounded, as the town we lived in was 98 percent white. The town was also wealthy, so it was possible that some of our neighbors attributed our presence to a government program, one designed to ensure one black family per every three thousand homes. No one had asked my sons about racial quotas either. But I worried about how they would respond to questions such as those. I worried about their spines. Having been spared the impoverished, inner-city experience of my childhood, where the social and economic impact of racism was constant and brutal, would they one day find themselves shouting into bullhorns too, aggrieved, say, by the lack of minorities in the cast of *La Traviata* or their white sommelier's poor choice of Burgundy?

The only racism either of them had experienced occurred a decade ago: a girl in my oldest son's pre-school class told him people with his skin color were stinky. The comment was hurtful, but not enduring; within hours he had forgotten it. I, obviously, had not, having instantly recognized the girl for what she was: the fuse leading to the bomb of high school, where the cruelty of four-year-olds met their match in teens. And so when Adrian started his freshman year, I decided to be his designated driver. That way, I reasoned, when he was inevitably embroiled in some racial conflict, our fifteen minutes alone together in the car each morning would be ideal for talking it through.

But eight months had come and gone, and there had been nothing to talk through. It occurred to me, though, while watching the

protest, that I could tell Adrian about the students' complaints and then compare them to challenges I had faced in my youth, incidents of police brutality, for instance, or that time I was chased by white teens carrying sticks. It would be a stark departure from our usual discussion of our classes, or the silly dreams I claimed to have had but actually concocted simply to amuse him, but it would provide an important context for dealing with his conflicts to come. So the next morning, midway into our drive, I cleared my throat and said, "There's something we need to talk about." I glanced to my right, just as he dug his hand into the box of Cheerios on his lap, looking, for all the world, like the toddler I once pushed on the swings. And then I watched his blank expression blossom into a smile as I made up a dream about our cats fighting and defeating a vulture. I would talk about the protest tomorrow, I told myself. But I did not do it then either.

I did, however, talk about it with my colleagues. It was the talk of the whole college, it seemed, especially after our paper ran it as a feature story. Then the *Boston Globe* and the *Huffington Post* carried it, as well as a few other media outlets, each one highlighting the students' primary demand: cultural competency training for the entire campus community. Most of the faculty I spoke with enthusiastically supported the idea, and it was fun to watch them flinch when I deadpanned that they would have to learn Ebonics. I made this joke several times during the week after the protest, and I was about to make it again at a dinner party with seven of my colleagues, but then someone mentioned how heartbreaking it was to see the students crying and the mood turned somber.

"I could have just hugged the one girl," someone remarked.

"Which one?"

"The one who said the college had broken her spirit."

"Yes, yes. So *sad*."

"But what were they going on about their hair for?" someone else asked. "I couldn't follow that part."

Other than myself and a Cuban American, everyone there was white, so it fell to me to explain that, for some white people, black hair was a great curiosity, compelling them to want to touch it.

"For what purpose?"

"To see what it feels like," I said.

"Really?"

I nodded.

"Have whites asked to touch your hair before?"

"On occasion. But my sisters were asked all the time when they were in college. It's more of a phenomenon among females."

One person said, "How fascinating?"

"I had no idea," responded another.

I said, "You'll learn more about it in your Ebonics class."

"Pardon?"

The doorbell rang. One of the guests said it was his wife, who had planned to join us, and a moment later he returned with her at his side. I liked his wife. She was from Poland and her perspective on American culture was often unique and provocative. Right now, for instance, as expressions of sympathy for the crying students resumed, she went against the grain by calling them coddled. "That's right," she continued, as my colleagues gaped at her, "coddled."

"How *dare* you say that?" someone exclaimed. "I mean, *how dare you?*"

"I dare," she said, "because it's true. And you're all pathetic for being moved by their petty complaints."

"Their complaints weren't petty," I said, despite my view that they were. But there was something about hearing another person say it that bothered me.

"Petty complaints," she forged on, "made by coddled babies." Several of my colleagues rose to the students' defense, but she held her ground.

"They've probably never experienced *real* racism in their lives."

I leaned forward in my chair. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that privileged black kids are somehow insulated against racism?"

"I'm saying what the students experienced wasn't worth crying about." Then she launched into descriptions of various hardships she had endured in her native land, offering the totalitarian version of the story I had intended to give to Adrian. "*And yet*," she said when she finished, "we didn't cry about it."

"This isn't Poland," I said, "and these aren't your kids."

"Nor are they yours."

"But they *could* be," I snapped, though what I was thinking was that they were. My hands were trembling, I realized, and I tried to steady them by pressing my palms against the table. But that did not work because my Cuban colleague, no doubt recalling the communism of his youth, suddenly announced that he thought the complaints were petty too, triggering a heated argument that got everyone involved. Tempers flared, voices were raised, names were called and, inevitably, accusations of racism were leveled, which brought the argument to an abrupt end.

I rose from the table and went to the patio for some air. A couple of my colleagues joined me with the foresight to bring wine and glasses. For fifteen minutes we drank and expressed our outrage at what we had heard, riling each other up to the point where the thought of remaining at the party any longer was inconceivable. The Pole must have reached the same conclusion; when we filed back inside the hostess was handing her and her husband their jackets. Two colleagues were across the room on the couch, the stark turn of events, I assumed, the source of their stunned expressions. The Cuban was near them on a chair staring into space. He rose when he saw me and gently rested a hand on my shoulder. "Listen, Jerald," he said, "I don't know how things escalated so fast, but I got caught up in the emotion of it all and I wasn't thinking clearly. I'm pretty sure

I offended you, and I deeply regret that. I'm sorry." Smiling faintly, he widened his arms for a hug, which my anger nearly prevented me from accepting. Over his shoulder, the Pole and her husband, jackets on now, said good-bye to the hostess, and then left. A moment later, the remaining guests followed suit.

I was thirty minutes from home. During the drive my anger waxed rather than waned, mainly because I called my wife and recounted the argument several times over before she told me she was going to bed. She was asleep when I arrived, so I was left to recount it alone for the four hours it took me to finally doze off. When I climbed out of bed an hour later to drive Adrian to school, I was exhausted and irritable.

"Did you have another strange dream?" he asked.

I had just pulled out of our garage and was creeping toward the busy street that ran by our house. As I waited for a chance to merge into the flow of vehicles, I tried to come up with something, but I just did not have the energy or will. "No," I said. "I didn't really sleep."

"Why not?"

"Too upset."

"With one of your students?"

"No, a couple of friends."

There was a break in the traffic and I pulled forward. For a while neither of us spoke, though mentally I was still at the party, yelling and being yelled at.

"Maybe you should talk about it," Adrian said.

"About what?"

"Why you're upset." He opened the lid of his Cheerios box and inserted his hand. "It might make you feel better."

It would not make me feel better. Besides, to explain the fight I would have to explain the protest, which I did not want to do for fear of being critical of the students, which was to say critical of a future him. But I had to say something or I would have seemed dismissive of his

concern. I proceeded with caution and vagueness. "Some students at my college staged a protest," I began. "My friends criticized them, and we argued about it."

"Why were the students protesting?"

"They don't like how they're being treated by some faculty and other students."

"Why did your friends criticize them?"

"They think the students' complaints are petty."

After a short pause, Adrian said, "I'm glad you don't think that."

I wanted to let that stand, as if doing so was no more dishonest than concocting strange dreams, as if he were someone at a dinner party instead of my son. "I do think they're petty," I said, "but the thing is, maybe it doesn't matter what I think. Maybe what matters is what the students think, and the fact that they stood up for themselves. That's not always easy, you know. Actually, I'm proud of them. What they did took courage."

"Like it took for you to defend them," he said.

"Well..."

"You should be proud of yourself too, Daddy. I'm proud of you."

I looked at him. He plunged his hand back into the box and pulled out a fist full of cereal. A few of the grains fell to his lap and the floor as he stuffed the rest into his mouth. I turned back to the road, blinking it into focus. In the silence that ensued, my thoughts returned to the party. It was just after the fight, as everyone prepared to leave, and I let myself imagine apologizing to the Pole, as the Cuban had to me. *We have similar views*, I told her, *and I understand the point you were making, but my emotions got the best of me, as they often do when it comes to my sons*. I wished I had said these things to her, and relayed them to Adrian. *That was an act of courage*, I could have explained. Not to be confused with an act of love.

NICK FLYNN

See Through

For Keith Lamont Scott

Somewhere in Carolina a video
plays on endless loop to show

whether the man waiting in
his pick-up for his daughter to get out

of school that day was holding onto
a book or holding onto a gun—

either way & always now he's dead
either way now & always

there's no longer any difference
between who he is inside

& who he is in the world outside. I'm

white & so at this moment
transparent. I don't want to fuck up

anything, but how is it possible
to feel things

& never fuck anything up? The Buddhists
talk a lot about skillful

speech, they say: *The man says a word
then the word says a word*

then the word says the man
& pretty soon all the world we can't

define with words stops existing. Maybe
we all stop existing when it

stops existing, when it intensifies
until it almost becomes

a face, something
you could still hold, something

transparent, something bullets
could pass right through.

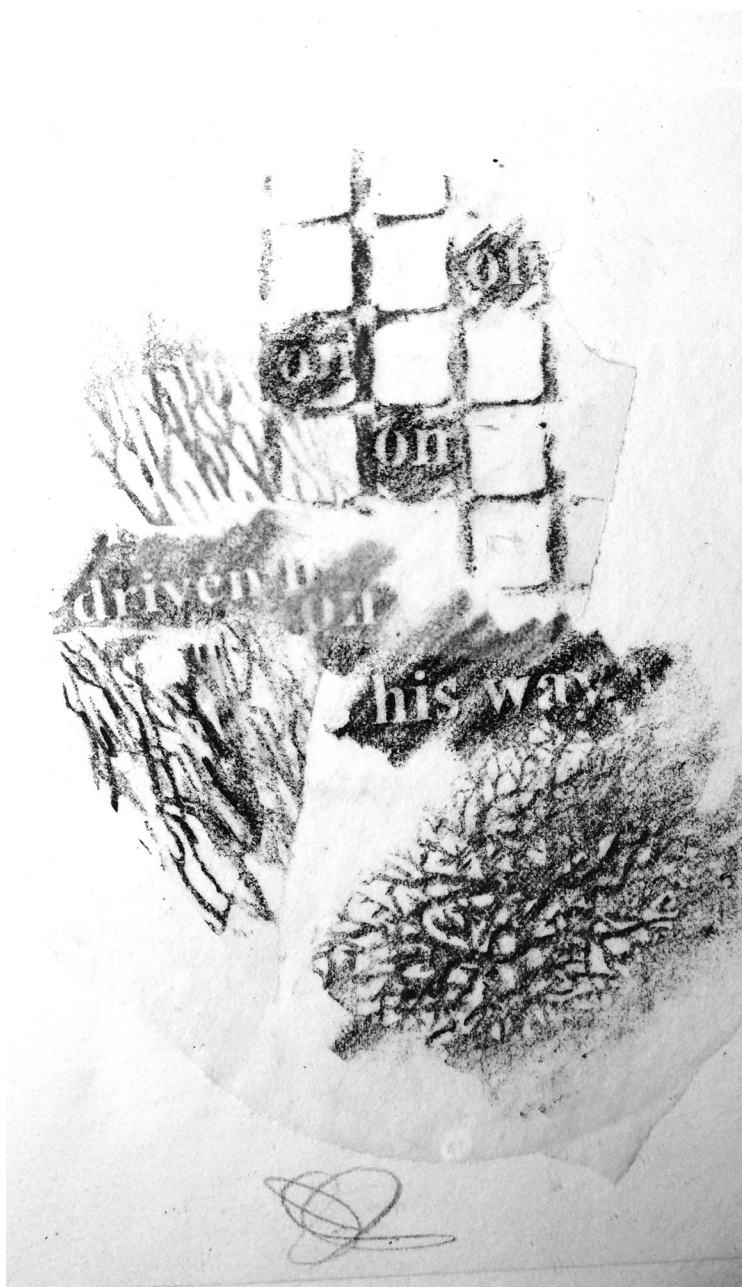
CHRIS ABANI

Cremation

Smoke and ash augur loss the night
my mother feeds her diary into flame,
sheet by sheet, line by cursive line,
and then a wind weaves through, just enough
to blow a flame back at her, searing skin.
She hesitates a moment, penitent, then pulls back.
Did she let it hurt for one second too long for regret,
or for the sweet torture of fire?
She smiles at me: sometimes you just burn your life
and begin again. And even again.
No ink is permanent, she mutters.
No path carved in stone.
I watch the single blister rise on her hand,
the size of a baby's heart.



John Powell, *City on a Hill*, 2012, digital image of Boston from the Boston Harbor entrance, 6 in x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.



John Powell, *Untitled*, 20011, graphite intaglio drawing on handmade paper, 6 in. x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.



John Powell, *Untitled*, 2001, graphite intaglio drawing on handmade paper, 6 in. x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.



John Powell, *Image study for the projections on the Harvard Innovation Lab (Batten Hall)*, 2013, 11 in. x 14 in. Courtesy the artist.



John Powell, *Batten Hall projections image*, 2014, 11 in. x 14 in. (actual building facade 24 ft. x 96 ft.). Courtesy the artist.

ROBERT PINSKY

*After “To Julia de Burgos”
by Julia de Burgos*

People mutter that I am your enemy because,
they say, I give your *me* to the world in verses.

But they lie, Julia de Burgos. Julia de Burgos, they lie.
What rises in my verses is not your voice. It is mine.
You— you are the clothes. I am the essence.
A profound abyss spreads between the two of us.

You are a cold puppet of social falsehood.
I am a virile starburst of human truth.

You: a hypocritical, whorish syrup. Not I—
In all my poems I strip bare my heart.

Like your world, you are egotistical. Not I—
I risk everything by betting on what I really am.

You are just an eminent lady— a ladified lady.
Not I: I am life, strength, a woman.

You are your husband's, your master's. Not I:
I belong to nobody, or to all, because to all I give
myself in my cleanly feeling, and in my thinking.

You curl your hair. You paint yourself. Not I:
only the wind curls my hair. The sun paints me.

You are a housewife, resigned, submissive,
bound by the prejudices of men. Not I:
unbridled, I am a runaway Rocinante
snorting at the horizons of God's justice.

You in yourself have no say; everyone
commands you: your husband, your parents, your family,
the priest, the dressmaker, the theatre, the casino,
your car, your nice things, dinner parties, champagne,
heaven and hell, the inner voice of social authority.

Not I: in me only my own heart is in command,
my own thoughts alone; in command in me is me.

You, a flower of the aristocracy; I, a flower of the people.
You have everything in yourself and you owe it to everyone,
while I, I owe the nothing that I have to nobody.

You, nailed to the fixed ancestral dividend,
and I, a one with the zero social divisor:
we two are a duel to the death, which approaches, fatal.

When the multitude run rioting
leaving behind them the ashes of
injustice destroyed by fire, and when,
with the Torch of the Seven Virtues, the multitude
chase after the Seven Sins, running against
you, and against all things unjust and inhuman, I
will be among them, with the Torch in my hand.

STRATIS HAVIARAS
TRANSLATED BY MEMI KATSONI

Sbh . . . Sbh . . .

IT COULD BE any day of the month in any rank of the middle tier of the night and any time in the hourglass and the weather ankle-deep in a freeze. It is a night then in the jaws of a displaced day, a day still dubious, as when you are awakened before daybreak for a long journey on horseback, if you are lucky, or else in a covered truck or steam train, its cars bolted, dark.

And halfway through this sixth toothless night, sleepless, bone-weary, uprooted by enemy and friendly fire alike, undesirables drifting from place to place, refugees in the middle of nowhere, they wait for the borders to open.

A father, his twelve-year-old daughter and their nearest soul here, another man who lost his family at the crossing and lost his voice—are but three of 270 plus of the newcomers, crammed now in second-hand tents, so that one has no choice but to bear the sounds, the smells, and the quirks of the other.

Here and there in the dark, coughing and groaning, a child crying from cold or hunger, and then the sounds of uneasy sleep: muttering, a mumbling to oneself, tossing and turning, farting, the yanking of a cover too narrow for two.

When sleep comes it's shallow, with nightmares of war or drowning, till you wake desperately upright without a wall on which you could rest your back.

Sitting up like this, the father grieves in the dark for his own old father, his wife and son, while the fellow who lost his voice mourns nearby for his own family.

All of a sudden, the father feels his daughter's hand touching him as though she's about to tell him something. In a glimmer of light her glance would have told him everything, he thinks, wiping his cheeks.

Hungry? he asks, although there isn't even a crumb left from the hardtack the volunteers handed out. When the mute gets up, fumbling his way to the outhouse, stumbling into others, the girl whispers, Father, how long have you known him?

Weakly, as if digging around in his memory, he says, Just a few days, I think, and then he asks her again if she's hungry.

I'm more sleepy than anything now, she replies faintly and, What time is it? Then the father hears her spread a cardboard sheet on the ground and lie down, resting her head on her folded arm.

Nearby, an elderly woman can be heard moaning and an old man yelling at her to shut up.

Feeling his eyelids growing heavy, the father lies down facing his daughter, hoping the mute one will soon collapse too, weary as he may be from crying. When, the other day, he asked the mute how he lost his voice, the father realized he'd also lost his hearing. Still, the mute's other senses must have caught something—a vibration, or even the father's breath as he talked to him, so he started wailing, with odd, heartrending cries coming out of his throat.

The only souls who have not lost anyone in the bombings or the sinking of the rafts are those who died early. The father's father was buried under the rubble of the city, his wife and the little boy in the bottom of the strait. The girl has stopped weeping; deep inside she must believe that her mother and little brother have survived.

The father is trying to account for time, their journey from night to night, account for the gaps that fear has left in his brain, now shutting his eyes to the bodies washed up on the shore, now plugging his ears to the lament of the living.

Where did they and this crowd of outcasts start from and when? What rubble did they climb, leaving a sick grandpa under the ruins, a mother and a boy under the stormy waves? And where were they heading, hoping in the Name of God for a better life?

But this second hike through the thicket of memory, with no cross-roads in sight, is no less exhausting to him than the actual journey he's now trying to map out in his mind, fearing their traces have already been lost.

He is loosening and bending like a heated rod of lead, and he feels an ache in his chest, or deeper still, where love for work is also sheltered. Was he a traveling tinker? With red-hot iron, soldering buckets, watering cans, all sorts of tin implements? But what tools, what sort of alloy could he use now to mend the ruins of his household and bring back—bring back where in this no-man's-land—the lost ones?

He is trying not to fall asleep before the mute one does, but he thinks he hears his daughter mumble something as the hand of the other moves away from where it was. He must have turned in, the father thinks, but from the way the mute is breathing he can tell he's not quite asleep.

No matter how hard he tries, the father can't stay awake. He considers switching places with the girl, but there's a young couple on his other side, embracing in their sleep, and he doesn't think it's right for a twelve-year-old to be sleeping beside them.

Thoughts rush through his brain in the tyranny of sleepiness. He feels he's losing himself, and whether he's having a dream or not, on hearing the girl murmur something like a protest, he stretches out his hand but shudders as he touches the mute one's arm. What's going on

here? Is he stroking her hair, thinking she is his own child, or has he just moved his arm by chance?

The father fumbles to find out how close to his daughter the mute's body has crawled and is relieved to find that the distance between them hasn't shrunk. Besides, when he nudged the mute's arm he heard him make that grumbling sound, peculiar to sleep interrupted. He sounds relaxed; he's got to be on the level.

The father is weary. He sits up but soon collapses on the same cold side. To keep from dozing off, he presses his forefingers behind his ears so the pain will keep him alert. Still, while he thinks he has things under control, the mute one's sobbing jolts him awake. And now it's the girl who inches still closer to him, apparently to move away from the other, and the father tries to make room for her by pushing toward the young couple.

The father strains to sit up, slips back on his behind and passes out, his emaciated body crumpling on the ground. But in the next moment he hears a heartrending cry and once again he stretches out his arm, this time to comfort the man. Once again he touches the mute one's arm, now wrapped around his daughter's waist. The mute is holding her tight to him, his entire body quivering, and he's drenching her neck with his tears.

The father has no doubt that the girl is asleep, and he tries desperately to open his eyes but fails. Next he pushes against the ground to lift himself up, his body feels heavy, made of solid lead. He struggles to open his mouth, talk to the girl, he has no voice, not even a mouth. And his arm, when he tries to shake the girl awake, is totally numb.

It's any day of the month and it's still the middle of the night, when suddenly the father sees his twelve-year-old stir, lift her head and for a moment gaze at him, then whisper, Shhh... Shhh... and lie back down, resting her head on her folded arm.

FANNY HOWE

The Shoes

"The One who sees" is the same
as "the One who runs."
—Eriugena

Stop in your tracks.
Take off your shoes.
Close your eyes.
The Word knows what to do.

For the blind, touching is seeing.

Home?

In.

*

The Word is like a flood in shape and speed.
You will like the way it runs east and west at the same time.

Echoes and solidifies and breaks apart.
It feels like a Northern Light. But it's the Word.

The Word makes no sound.
The Word never made no sound and will not
Ever, out of parched minds and tongues

Break this law.

The Word is not particles or waves or tangles.
It runs all around.

*

The Word wrote itself and continues to write.

Stuffs the papyrus away in space.
Invisible ink and yet it runs.

It runs ahead of the mouth of the west.
It meets itself running the other way.

If you want to appear, turn to another.

*

The Word lives alone everywhere
Lives as a pariah
That only
Listeners will know by ear.

The Word doth say and attend
Only to this sad refrain:

“Listen. We did our best.”

*

Our lives were saved, it wasn't fair.
We had to let the animals die.

The second to last came at dawn. He shoveled
Up the roots and burned them.
There were about one hundred boots from the soldiers who died
in Iraq and after. Turkey and Iran.
They were dirty and curled at the toes.
What should we do? What can we do?

*

Take off your shoes you've walked far enough.
Take them off and feel the ground.
You've come a long way against the sun.

What's about to come?

Crusty desert, stone-grown towns, barefoot children,
Not even a crown of thorns. Salt rivers.
Snow-white animals dipping into them.
The same names.

*

We don't have a name for holy.
We don't have a name for true.
We don't have a name for God or Lord.
But the Word still holds.

Will we row across a rubbery sea

Vomiting, singing, falling over
Losing our voices, our wits, our hearing?

Will we be glad to die?

*

If a shoe is lying on a highway
It indicates an accident.

When two shoes are crossed
It means instability.

When two shoes are lined up
It means a door.

You will never see the face
But can guess the age

Sneak away!
The race is ending.

There might be a brighter night
When stars slide forward and we disappear.

Always hold both east and west
And be sure to wear two shoes.

*

Put your feet on the ground, Moses.

Take off your hood.

And what's that in your hand?

My staff.

Your coat?

The sheep enjoy the smell.

Take it off.

And throw it in the bin.

Everything human is poisoned.

You must burn, not bury one.

In a man-made world.

You can't buy wood.

DAVID LEHMAN

The End

The day Graham Greene died
I didn't know he had died
but months before I'd written
a poem and called it "The End
of the Affair" stealing his title
and on this April day in 1991
I went to the Blue Fox bookstore
which no longer exists
on Aurora Street in Ithaca
and bought *The End of the Affair*
thinking it was time I read it
and I started reading it right away
it was great he really knew adultery
and I still remember the surprise
when you find out whom Bendrix
loses Sarah to, the one rival he
could never hope to vanquish,
the God who answered her prayer
I stayed up all night reading
reached the end and the next day
on the radio he died

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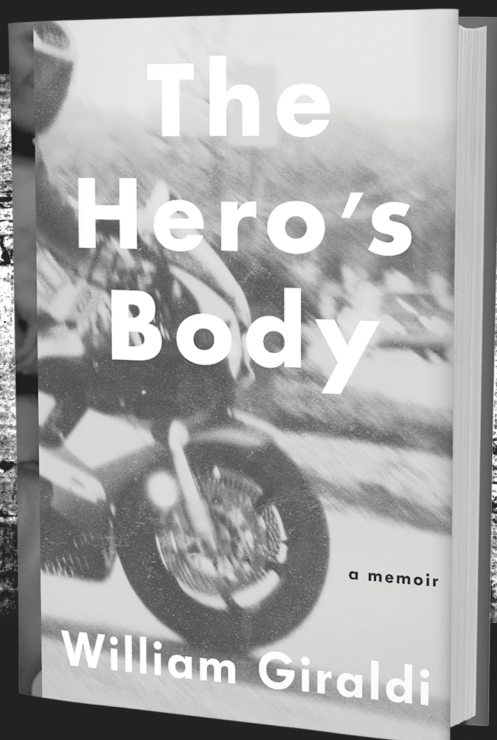
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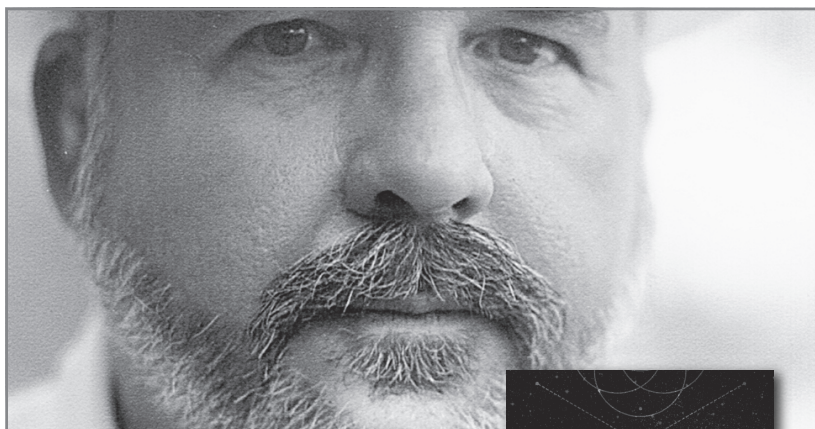
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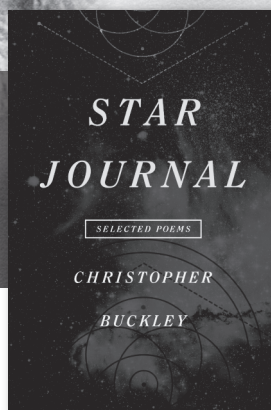
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