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GIROUX

Fall 2020

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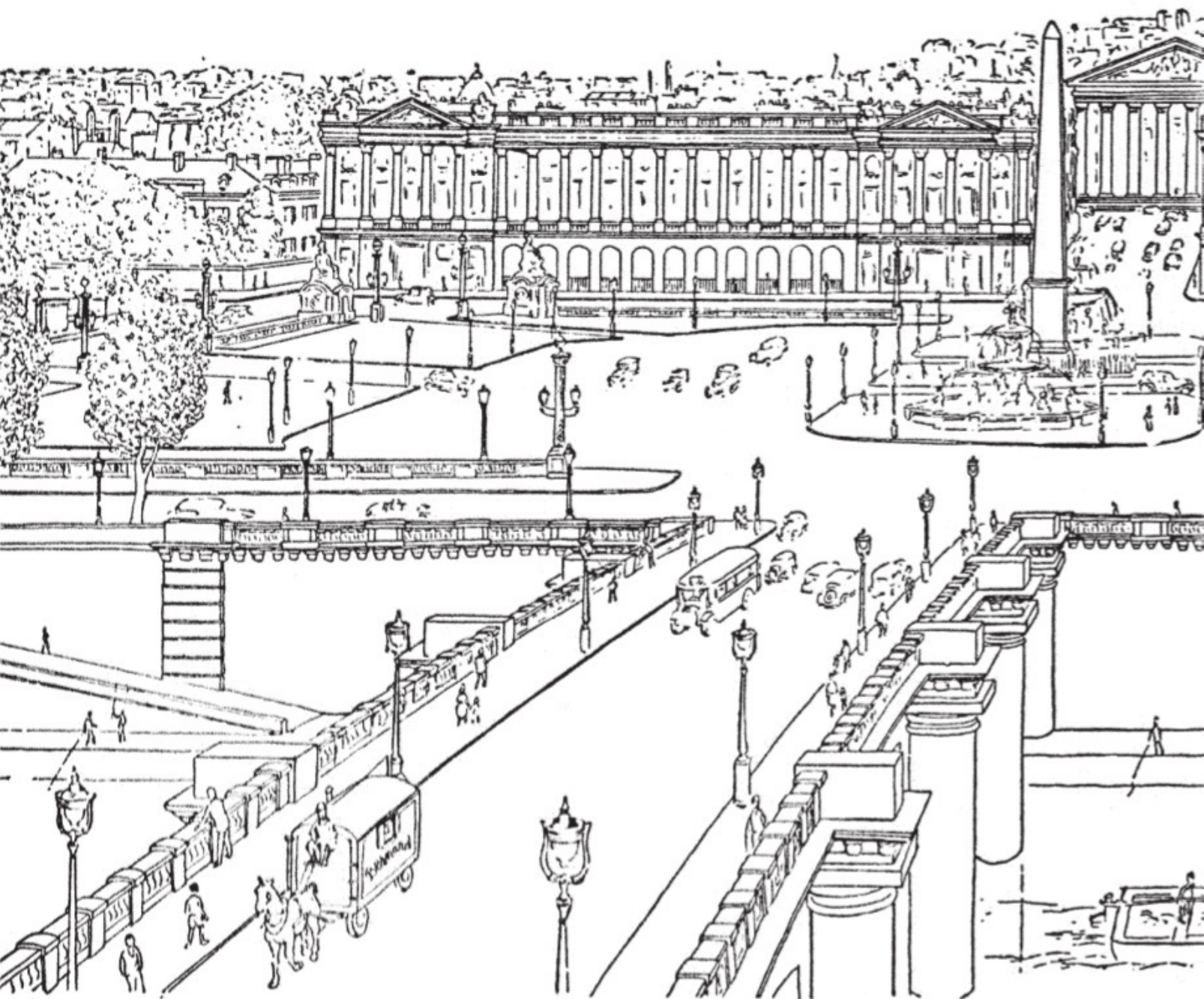
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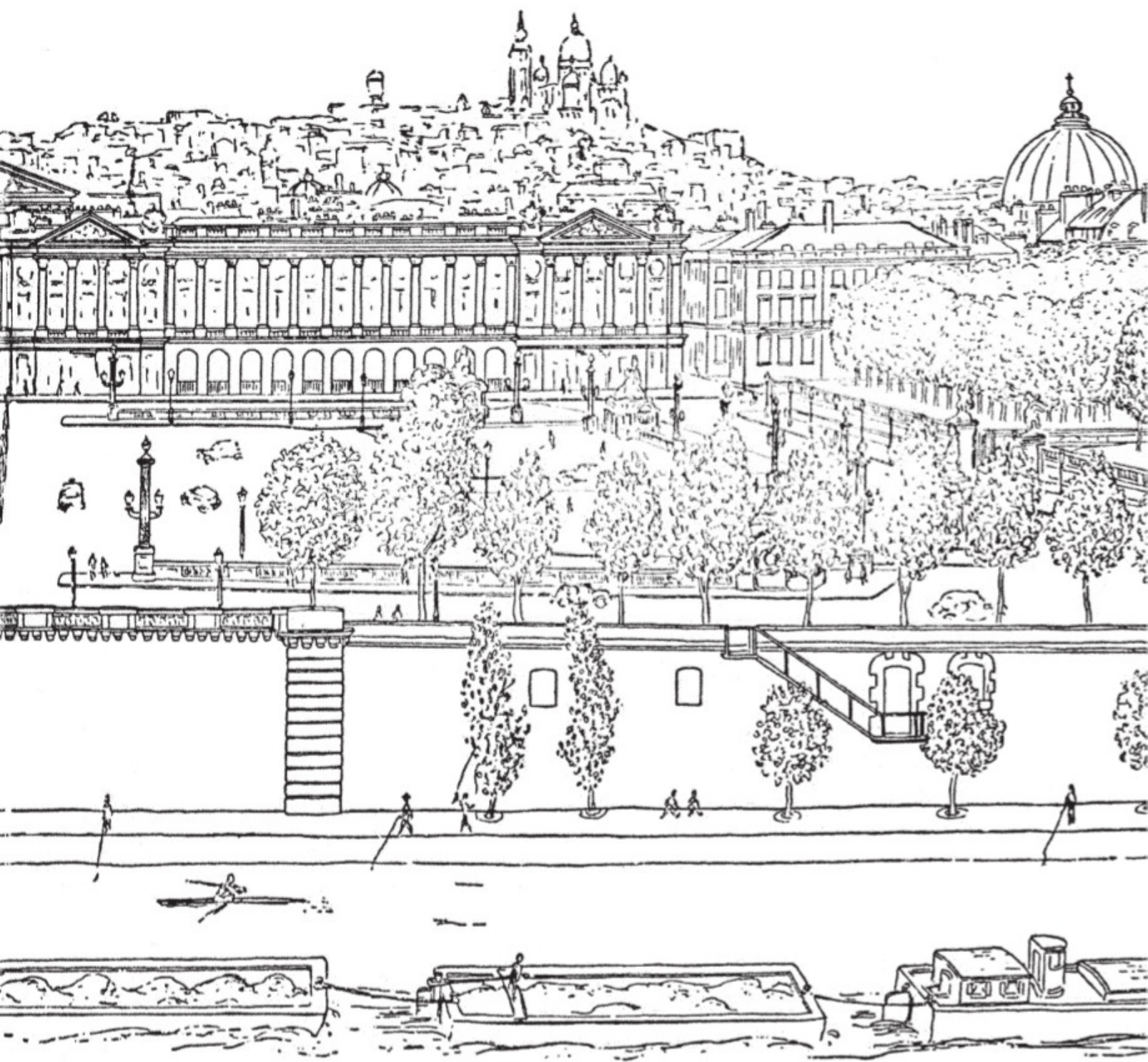
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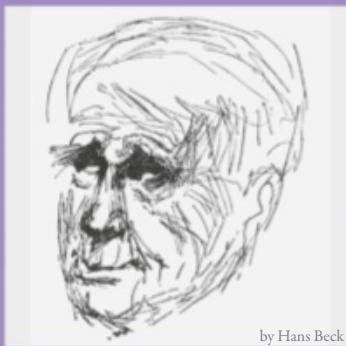
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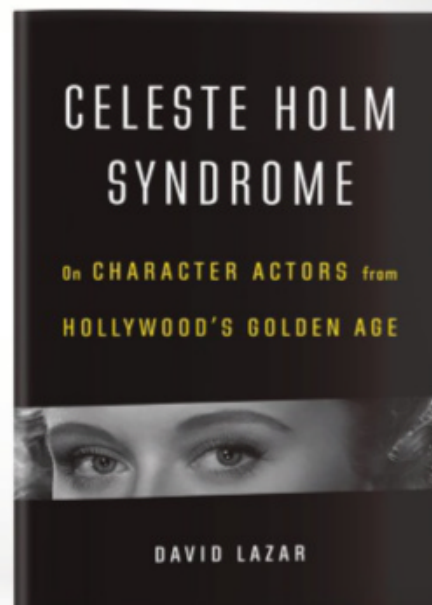
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The July War

RABIH ALAMEDDINE

In summer, our neighborhood quiets in phases. The quieting begins in May. Schools give their older kids, the seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, a month off to prepare for the baccalaureate exams. Following a ritual as old as our parents, the students retreat to residences out of town, to peaceful chalets and cabins away from civilization for communal study and living. As noisily as migrating birds, they return for the state exams in June. Then school ends for the year; a couple of families travel abroad, a few more leave for the mountains. An outsider doesn't perceive the slow but sure change in the neighborhood's population until Beirut broils in August.

In early July, our neighbors across the landing, the Masris, left for the mountains. They wouldn't return from their summer home till late September with its cooling temperatures. That was the summer I was promoted to the apartment's caretaker, taking

over from my brother. My father insisted that I look after the Masri home because he thought that at thirteen, I wasn't yet behaving as an adult should. I needed to become more responsible. I'd been receiving talking-tos, lectures with full arm waving and hand gestures, every day for a month.

In the mornings, in the bathroom, as my father in boxer shorts and T-shirt stood before the vanity mirror, words would bubble out of the snow-white shaving foam. "When I was your age, I didn't laze about all day doing nothing," he'd say. "Can't you find more mature friends? Do things that are more productive? You know, every action has a consequence, and the consequence of doing nothing is that you end up as nothing."

At lunch, in the dining room, as we sat around the oak table, "Sit up straight. Look at how Wajdi sits, like a man. Enough with this boyish slouching."

In the den, while watching television, he'd repeat the spiel, except after dinner he made it sound as if the thought had just occurred to him. "You should be thinking about what you want to do with your life," he'd say. His right arm, as was its wont every evening, held my mother in what I always considered a matrimonial embrace, and she regarded him with admiration, as though each word of his were a tumbling pearl. "It's never too early," he'd go on, his left hand wandering and questioning. "What do you like? Solving problems? You can become an engineer. Helping people? An attorney. You could raise your grades if you applied yourself. Consider your future."

I didn't mind taking care of our neighbors' apartment. My becoming-more-responsible chore for the summer involved little work: I had to open the windows once a week to air the place out and make sure that the two canaries were fed and their cage kept clean.

I SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the leather couch in Dr. Masri's apartment, reading an ancient Harold Robbins novel where all the action happened in the Middle East—and I do mean action. In the best scene, Leila, who as a child refugee was traumatized by both Jews and Arabs, sucked a guy's sumptuous dick in delicious descriptive detail. Her PLO boyfriend had persuaded her to fellate a fine-looking Mossad agent to extract valuable information. That was the first time I came across the verb *fellate*. I'd read Jacqueline Susann and Jackie Collins, so I knew about oral sex in literature, but this book was different. These were Arabs giving blowjobs and saying things like *their mother's cunt*, which would have worked had it been written in Arabic but sounded

utterly silly in English. Robbins was shooting for authenticity and ended up with anything but. Much fun.

I enjoyed reading a book from start to finish, unlike my brother, who read only the good parts. Wajdi would pick any book from Dr. Masri's library, new or classic, a Collins or a Robbins, and let it open to where the spine was most creased. His technique never failed to ferret out an act of coitus or fellatio, since it seemed that Dr. Masri concentrated on the same parts. My brother's interest in the books had waned the year before, when he turned seventeen and said he needed to concentrate on the real instead of the imaginary.

Dr. Masri's entire library was shelved in one piece of furniture in the salon, a breakfront that had been moved from the dining room; thick paperbacks had replaced china and silverware behind the glass, and every paperback contained at least one good sex scene. If, as my father advocated, being a responsible caretaker was the gateway to manhood, I was all for it—those paperbacks would be my Saint Peter.

I had reached the page where Leila gets recruited to be a terrorist when the doorbell rang. I tiptoed to the door, as quiet as a stalking Mossad, and didn't have to look through the peephole to know that it was Pipo, the bane of my existence. He had warned me to tell him as soon as the Masri family drove up to the mountains.

"If I don't hear from you as soon as they leave," he'd told me three days earlier, "I'm going to squeeze you with my hands like a little cockroach." It would have been funny, how he always used incorrect similes, if his threats hadn't usually been followed by unpredictable actions. I'd lied to the overweight monster and told him that Wajdi was the caretaker again this year—Pipo was afraid of Wajdi, who was the only boy in the neighborhood stronger and taller than the blob.

Pipo had this most annoying habit of talking to my face while lifting me by the collar of my shirt. That stopped when, during one lift, I told him I was wearing Wajdi's shirt—I lied then as well, of course, but it was looser than what I normally wore—and my brother would be terribly upset if the collar was crinkled.

"I know you're in there," Pipo said to the door. His tone was whispery and sinister; he couldn't yell because Wajdi or my father, ensconced in our apartment across the landing, would hear him. He rang the bell once more. "Open it."

I wasn't going to, for several reasons, one of which was ethical: I liked the Masris and wouldn't give Pipo the run of their home. I had no idea what his plans for the empty apartment were, but I could guarantee that they weren't savory. And I wasn't going to do what he wanted because I was going to get pummeled whether I opened the door or not. If a beating is inevitable, delay is always the better course of action.

"If you don't open the door," Pipo said, "I'll break Karl's legs."

"What?" squealed a damp voice. I held still, my back to the wall, resisting the urge to peek and confirm the presence of the traitor, my ex-best friend. "You can't break my legs. It's not fair."

"I will if he doesn't let me in."

"What if he's not there? He told me he has the key, but maybe he's reading in his room. You can't hurt me because the door isn't opening by itself."

I heard my father's voice. "What are you boys doing? The Masris aren't in." The sound of hurried footsteps—cowardly Karl rushed down the stairs. Pipo stuttered an incoherent reply. "I don't want to see you here, Philippe," my father said. "You're a man now. Start behaving like one."

THAT WAS KARL'S SECOND BETRAYAL in less than a week. The previous Monday, we were sitting together on the wall across the street from our building, our feet dangling below us. He was a couple of months older than I, but two 501 inches wider. When cars sped by, he pointed and yelled out the make and year. His favorites, which you could tell by the inflection of his voice, were the new BMWs. He watched the cars. I watched him, his pimply face, as if seeing him for the first time. I thought he was so funny with his hair that hadn't seen a comb in days. "Buick, 1998," he announced. I smiled and rubbed my shoulder on his arm. He smelled of deodorant and armpit. "Peugeot, 2006, the latest model." I laughed and rubbed against his shoulder again. "Nissan, 2000." Laugh. Rub. Laugh. I stopped, though, because I felt my father staring at me from our balcony across the street. Like safari prey, I had developed, and nurtured, a sixth sense—an ability to feel his disapproval across large distances.

You always heard Pipo before you saw him. He rumbled toward us, his face aglow with sneer. His shirts were always white and blue, the colors of Lazio, his favorite soccer team, but since their sky blue was difficult to find in men's clothing, he made do with other shades.

“Are you two sucking each other’s cocks?” he yelled.

Karl jumped off the wall, almost stumbled into a boxwood hedge. “It was him,” he pleaded, flailing his finger in my general direction. “He did it.”

Pipo whistled, not by puckering his lips but by folding his lower lip over his teeth in a manly way. He wiggled his black eyebrows, rubbed his hands like a sated housefly. “He sucked your cock, did he?”

I could feel my blood bubble. I slid off the wall, landing close to my tormentor. “Grow up, Pipo,” I said. Karl gasped, but I soldiered on. “You think we’re still in kindergarten?”

I turned and walked away. My father, still watching, probably had an unobstructed view of Pipo’s fist landing on the back of my neck and my falling forward. The bitumen rushed to greet my face at a dizzying speed before my hands broke my fall.

My father yelled at Pipo to stop. I lifted myself off the ground, looking neither back at Pipo nor up at the balcony, and marched to our building, knowing that my father would be waiting with a lecture on how men stood up to bullies. I allowed my eyes to see only the large bougainvillea, which sprinkled discarded bracts and faded magenta flowers onto our balcony.

NOONISH, THE SKY WAS BONE WHITE and shadows were still shortening along the sand. The sea whispered, hissed, and lapped. I balanced on one foot, trying hard to look inconspicuous and not succeeding. I switched to the other, almost tipped over—my imitation of a crane with a middle-ear infection. I wasn’t wearing my flip-flops and the sparkling sand burned my feet. In my hurry to spy on Wajdi and his new girlfriend, I’d forgotten how fiery the sand could get. I stood on my toes, hoping to see farther, but my brother was too distant. I hopped over to the shore.

The water temperature was perfect for swimming, but I wished it were a bit cooler so it could comfort my soles more quickly. It was a day to make angels smile and forgive. Indolent and somnolent, sunbathers basked all around. Everyone and their bottle of suntan oil was on the beach.

Wajdi and his new girl walked by me, close to each other but not holding hands like I’d expected. He was lean and muscled from years of swimming, his brown hair already sun-bleached on top. He ignored me, talked to the smiling girl. He shuffled his feet, looking both self-effacing and suave, as if he had spent the last hour soaking in a tubful of confidence. They parted and he

swaggered in my direction, chest puffed out like an iguana's. I was still standing in the water. He stopped before his espadrilles got wet.

"She let me touch her," he declared.

I rushed over. "Touch her? Touch her where?"

"Only a baby would ask such a question." He turned and walked away. I ran after him, bobbing and bouncing. He looked so urbane. I admired his long fingers as he lit a cigarette. He walked straight, held his head up high. "She said she liked that I'm not wearing socks."

"What do you mean? I'm not wearing socks either."

"No, you baby. She likes that I'm not wearing socks with shoes. I'll never wear socks again. Never ever again."

THE FIRST REFUGEE WAS MY SISTER, Nadia. After the Israelis bombed the airport, she and my one-year-old nephew, cheeks still swollen with sleep, arrived with three suitcases in tow. One contained her clothes and belongings, the second her son's clothes, and the third was bursting with disposable diapers. She lived only three buildings away, nowhere near the airport, but we knew it wouldn't take her long to come over. We didn't have to ask where her husband was.

"He can stay where he is," she huffed. "The Israelis have sophisticated weapons. I don't want to be there when one of their missiles finds him."

My sister had married a Shiite.

"You shouldn't be saying that," my father said. "Your husband is a good man, a wonderful man."

We all loved my brother-in-law, but Nadia found him annoying. She had been completely obsessed with him before the wedding, but not after. I found the situation, her constant irritation with her husband, somewhat confounding. He was decent, intelligent, and admirably gentle, not the most interesting man, one had to admit, but consistent, if anything. How a wedding could change her opinion so abruptly wasn't easy to explain. I assumed the intimacy and mundaneness of marriage had surprised her and she had yet to recover. It could have been worse, since he traveled quite a bit, being a commercial pilot. Still, she complained that he wasn't gone enough. My mother defended her by reminding everyone that she was a young bride and would grow up in time.

My sister rolled her suitcase into her old room, which she hadn't allowed anyone to claim when she moved out—understandably, since she still spent

most of her days in our apartment. I followed her, carrying my nephew, and put him on his cot, under its ever-circling wooden airplanes. I moved my sister's old stuffed toys around to create space for him. The walls were baby pink, the color of her nail polish and lipstick—she avoided dark shades, claiming they emphasized the puffy aspects of her lips.

“Watch him,” Nadia said. “I have to go hoarding.”

“Your brother should go with you,” my mother said. “He can carry. I’ll stay here, but don’t forget anything.”

THE ENTIRE COUNTRY was on the road. It happened every time the Israelis bombed Beirut—never when they shelled the south, which they did on a more regular basis. Bombing the airport during high season, though, meant that every tourist was driving out of the city and out of the country.

My father raged against the traffic, and when we passed a gas station, he banged his head on the steering wheel. After dropping us at the supermarket, he’d have to wait in line for at least a couple of hours to fill up the tank. Wajdi, who had taken my mother’s car, was probably stuck at a station already.

“I hate this,” my father yelled.

“Are you sure we need to do this?” I asked.

“The Israelis won’t stop. They never do. It’s the right of the privileged. They’re always the victims, which means they’re going to rain the demons of hell upon us.” He took deep breaths, trying to fill his lungs with calm. It rarely worked. “Bomb everything. Kill hundreds, thousands. Does anyone take any responsibility? Feel guilty? They blame everyone but themselves.”

My father’s heart found some relief in diatribes. He raged every time the Israelis attacked us, less at the actual casualties and damage than at their lack of concern. This time, my father was going to rage for quite a while.

MY SISTER AND I split up in the supermarket. I reveled in the excitement of upheaval, stacking my shopping cart with cases of drinking water, cartons of cigarettes for my father, sacks of flour, bulgur, and coffee. She would get everything else if we were lucky, since the market was emptying quickly. People had begun hoarding the evening before. The Lebanese had a lot of experience.

I was deciding how much rice to buy when I heard my sister shriek two aisles away. I rushed over, pushing my cart, finding her in the baby aisle. She

held a package of Pampers as a tall, better-manicured woman in a tailored gray day dress tried to snatch it away. The woman blabbered and kept jerking her recently coiffed head at two packages of Huggies in my sister's cart, as if she had a neurotic twitch. My sister's fingers had punctured the plastic. Several strands of her hair had escaped their barrette. Customers whispered, not bothering to hide their sniggering. The woman's Filipina maid in a baby-blue uniform watched the melee with her hand over her mouth. The maid and her mistress must have shared a hairdresser, because they had the exact same coif, the latter in a much lighter tone, of course. They both had sweaters tied around their shoulders.

Nadia tugged and pulled and screeched. The woman finally released her grip. "You have three packages," she said, shocked at not getting what she wanted. "Give me one of them."

My sister snorted as she put the last package of Pampers in her cart. She turned her back and pushed the cart away. "Let's go," she said when she saw me.

The woman whispered to her maid, who nodded, then rushed my sister's cart, grabbed a diaper package, and disappeared down another aisle, the blue sweater floating on the air like a hero's cape. My sister screamed, tried to swing her cart around to follow the maid's cooling trail, but other customers got in the way. The woman laughed, beamed. I expected her to shout, "Who's the fairest of them all?"

A WEEK INTO THE BOMBING, my father's rage was spent. That evening he wore the black pants he'd had on the day before, the same starched white cotton shirt. His eyes were red from alcohol. Holding his glass with four fingers, he drank, kept it tilted for a while, quenching a thirst. The fingers were long, wrinkled, and swollen. His lips had shrunk and paled so that I couldn't trace them. He sat staring at the water-stained ceiling, lost in inebriated thought.

"Sometimes," he said quietly, "I feel so tired."

"I know."

He conversed with me by way of the ceiling, not lowering his head.

"Your mother keeps going to bed earlier and earlier."

He couldn't get to work, and when he was unable to work, he got bored, and when he was bored, he drank, and since he didn't drink often, he was a sad, boring drunk.

THERE WAS A LULL in the bombing. It was a Club Med-weather day and Wajdi wanted to go for a walk. He'd been cooped up too long. He left the apartment and I followed. We reached the corniche above our favorite beach, what used to be a long stretch of white sand. When the Israelis started bombing, one of the first things they hit was an oil depot at the port, and the resulting spill turned all our beaches black. We looked down on the goo, stared at the slick dark carcasses of fish. The sea that once sweetly whispered now grumbled and burped.

My brother descended to the beach to get a closer look. "Are you coming?" I didn't reply. I didn't follow. I couldn't.

THE SECOND SET OF REFUGEES, the real ones, arrived two weeks after the bombing commenced. Dr. Masri asked that we open his apartment to two of his employees and their families, who had been left homeless by the ceaseless bombing of the southern suburbs. Our neighborhood had sustained damage but was now relatively safe. The bridge leading into the neighborhood had been blown up; the tall building two streets away, with a television antenna on its roof, had been leveled, but our area escaped the cluster bombs.

As the caretaker, I had to wait for the families. I'd expected children by the bushel, but there was only one, a taciturn boy of twelve. The two men worked in Dr. Masri's orchards in the south and had to return to the fields after they dropped off their wives.

"War or no war," the older man said, "we can't leave the blessings unattended."

Whereas a one-eyed man could tell that the men were brothers, their wives were a study in contrast. Both were harried and haggard, but the boy's mother looked as if she was ready to attend Friday prayers at the mosque, long skirt of brown and black, dusty beige shirt, and a dark blue chiffon scarf covering her hair. The younger, recently married, looked as if she was about to attend an afternoon disco party for the bad-taste crowd. Her slick skin was pale and white; her eyes, slightly slanted, were a light gray blue; and her wild blond hair was three shades to the left of peroxide, a spilled bottle. Black tights disappeared under a large white T-shirt infected with a rash of rhinestones.

As soon as I unlocked the door for them, the women toured the apartment, synchronizing their movements as if they had been refugeeing together all their

lives. I excused myself, but before I could close the door behind me, the older woman said, “Would you like to show Mohammad Ali around?”

He stood by his mother, staring at his shoes, looking smaller than his age. His chin almost disappeared into his concave chest, which made his head seem all hair—dirty and tangled hair, with strands reaching out like baby snakes. When he looked up briefly, he unnerved me. He had terrifying eyes, I thought—light, penetrating, like a wizard’s.

“I can’t,” I replied. “Maybe later.”

AGAINST FAMILY ADVICE, one morning my sister decided to go shopping up north, maybe as far as Tripoli, having exhausted the Beirut markets. The roads were damaged, but the Israelis hadn’t attacked the north in almost ten days. Neither of our parents was willing to go with her. My brother refused as well, so she forced her husband to accompany her. “Make sure to leave your Shiite GPS locator in the apartment before you pick me up,” she needled him. Usually my mother would have been needling her about her excessive cell phone usage, but the Israelis had destroyed all the landlines.

I’d spent the previous week telling her that she was nuts, AK-47 crazy, but she paid me no mind. My mother explained that every individual dealt with traumatic stress differently and one couldn’t predict wartime behavior based on non-bombing personality. As the Israeli missiles hit, my father drank, my mother cooked, my brother brooded, and my sister shopped for diapers. During non-bombing she was probably as rational as any Lebanese, but with each missile she grew more and more erratic. Her pink room brimmed with disposable diapers, four distinct piles from floor to ceiling; one diaper bag at the top looked like it was suffocating because it couldn’t fit between the ceiling and its brother below it. My sister had stuffed a dozen bags under the baby’s cot and at least twice as many under her bed. She had enough diapers to ensure that her son would be wearing them until he was six years old, maybe seven. When I pointed that out to her, she shouted, “Well, I might get pregnant again. It happens.”

But then this morning, we turned on the diesel generator to watch the television news and the announcer informed us that the Israelis had bombed the Johnson & Johnson warehouse the night before, incinerating everything in it.

“Why?” my mother asked the television.

My father looked at the bottle of scotch, but it was still early in the morning.

My brother sipped his coffee. "I'm sure terrorists were hiding between the shampoo and the Band-Aids. No more tears."

My sister beamed, seemed to have grown taller in her chair. "I told you we'll run out of diapers. Just you wait, they'll bomb the Procter & Gamble warehouse next." She was talking to us but looked as if she were addressing a large invisible audience. She pursed her lips and blew on newly painted fingernails.

I HAD TO SHOW MOHAMMAD ALI around. My mother insisted that I spend time with the sullen boy. She thought he looked like a haunted creature, that he'd seen much more than a child should. "He must be lonely," she'd said. "His house has been destroyed. His family is all over the place. The least we can do is be kind and neighborly."

I didn't know what to show him. The Israelis were taking a break and we didn't have to stay indoors, but he didn't seem to care about seeing the neighborhood—his head rarely tilted anywhere but down. We sat silently on the wall facing our building. His legs were shorter than mine. He wouldn't look at me, instead leaned forward, his knuckles turning white where he held on to the wall. He was a nail biter. I glanced at my fingernails, then quickly looked away. My father had told me that men didn't worry about their fingernails.

The quiet bothered me. "You're an only son?" I asked.

"No." His strange vowels identified him as a southerner.

I waited, hoping he'd go on, but silence was his preferred companion. "Where are your siblings?"

"Not here."

I wanted to smack him. I could have been reading one of the doctor's books instead of spending time with him.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" I asked, no longer trying to mask my irritation. "I could. It's no trouble. I'm just trying to be friendly."

He finally turned his head, his blue eyes measuring me. "Why do you want to be friends?" he asked.

"Because my mother said I had to."

A gold tooth shone way back in his mouth when he laughed.

"I have three brothers and two sisters," he said.

"That's more like it," I said.

"My eldest brother is in Nigeria, and so are my two sisters and their families. I have a brother who's a martyr. He would've been sixteen now, but he's dead."

I waited for a moment to see if he would go on. "That leaves one more," I said.

"He's fighting." He paused, sighed. "He's a man."

"Oh," I said. I leaned back and pretended nonchalance, as if it were every day that I talked about men fighting wars. "How old is he?"

"Fourteen."

"Hmm. Was your other brother a fighter, too?"

"I don't know."

"How could you not know?"

"No one knows who the fighters are until there's a war. I know that my brother is fighting now because he told me last week. He wanted me to protect my mother because he was going to kill the enemy."

"Oh," I said. "Fighting."

"You ask too many questions," he said.

"It's because you don't ask any."

"I'll ask," he said. "Why are you hiding from the fat boy?"

I didn't reply. I looked up at our balcony to see if anyone was there.

"You shouldn't be afraid of him," he said.

LATER THAT DAY, I heard my father laughing like a crazy hyena on the balcony. He sipped a beer and leaned over the waist-level concrete wall that separated Dr. Masri's balcony from ours. The bougainvillea's flowers lay crumpled at his feet. On the other side, the newlywed listened to him tell the story of my meeting the American ambassador, an oft-repeated tale. My father waved me over to stand by him. He tousled my hair, held me close, and went on with the story.

I was in kindergarten, some years after the civil war ended, when the American ambassador came to visit our school with an entourage of reporters and sycophants. The ambassador engaged a number of kids in conversation. He surprised me at the bottom of the slide, asking me directly in English, "How much is two and two?" Without pausing I said, "Are you buying or sell-

ing?” There. I identified myself as one of the Lebanese, who would sell their souls for a good profit, descendants of the Phoenicians, who apparently had. I also identified myself as the son of my father, a money changer.

My father finished the story and burst into hyena laughter once more.

The laughter settled into comical hiccups. “You were such a funny boy,” he said, caressing my cheek.

THE MORNING SUN found Mohammad Ali and me sitting on the same wall as the day before, still not talking much. We were there for about twenty minutes before the bully showed up.

“Who’s your friend?” Pipo yelled.

There was no escape. Mohammad Ali stared at his weathered shoes. My palms turned clammy.

“He’s not my friend,” I said. “His family moved next door because their house was bombed.”

“So you found a younger boy to suck your cock?”

Something within that younger boy was unyoked. He lifted his head up and glared at Pipo.

“Don’t look at me that way, you little—” Pipo’s eyes looked unhinged suddenly as Mohammad Ali lunged with a Swiss Army blade and slashed his sleeve.

“If you talk to me again,” Mohammad Ali said, “I’ll kill you.”

Pipo looked at the tear in his light blue shirt, put his finger right through it. There was no blood. “This is my favorite shirt,” he said. “My mother bought it for me.”

“If you talk to me again—”

This time it was Pipo who interrupted. For a fat boy, he was inordinately quick. He punched the younger boy in the face and sent him flying against the wall. That wasn’t enough. Pipo jerked him to the ground, sat on him, and began an unforgiving assault. Blood erupted, bones broke. Pipo kept yelling, “You think you can scare me with a teeny knife?”

I tried to stop Pipo, but he swung at me as soon as I got close to him. He was much too big. I screamed for help. I thought Mohammad Ali was already dead. I screamed so loud that practically everyone in the neighborhood showed up. Wajdi was the one who lifted Pipo off the unconscious boy.

Someone called for an ambulance. Someone else called his mother.

Pipo blabbered, “He stabbed me with a knife. He stabbed me. I’m going to tell my father.”

EVEN THOUGH WE DIDN’T KNOW his family well, my parents decided on the hospital visit as a show of support, and I was forced along. In the hospital bed, surrounded by machines and his watchful mother, he did not look like the boy of the day before. The contours of his face, its distinctive shadings, had been altered, as if I were looking at him in an aquarium. I couldn’t bear to look directly at him. My father stared at Mohammad Ali lying in the coma and shook his head as if what was in front of him was inconceivable, as if his eyes were betraying him. He shook his head with his eyes closed, opened them, then repeated the process. I thought we should return home. He needed his drink.

My mother, on the other hand, wished to stay at the hospital because she felt sorry for Mohammad Ali’s mother, being far from home without enough family around her.

I persuaded my father to take me home. As I followed him toward the car, the boy’s aunt, the newlywed, ran after us, her body jiggling in a loud leotard, asking if she could get a ride.

Sitting in the front seat, Mohammad Ali’s aunt chattered, couldn’t remain quiet, giggled nervously, didn’t seem worried about her nephew’s condition. Every individual dealt with traumatic stress differently. You couldn’t predict wartime behavior.

“JUST GO OVER THERE and fuck her,” my father demanded with emphasis, but not in anger.

He and I were alone in the apartment. He wore his white sweat suit, which usually meant he was planning a brisk walk. The slicked-back hair, however, and the intensity in his eyes, made him look like an Eastern European, a Romanian or Bulgarian, about to go to a nightclub.

The Israelis were bombing the southern section of Beirut again—no one was going for a brisk walk.

I stood before my father, unable to move, even though I wanted desperately to retreat into a book. My tongue tasted chemicals. My father wanted me to walk across the hallway that separated our apartment from

Dr. Masri's and fuck our neighbor, the boy's aunt. And he wanted me to do it right then.

"Get Wajdi to do it." My face flushed. How did one just walk over and have sex with a woman? What was the procedure? Was there a secret language between men and women that I was not privy to, an adult code of signs, of body hieroglyphs, announcing readiness to fuck? "Wajdi should go first."

"No, you. You're ready. Just go over there and fuck her." His eyes bored into me. Nothing else in his life mattered at that moment except this.

"I don't understand. How do I do it? How do you know she's ready to fuck? I don't know what to do." I whined like a baby, already defeated.

"She's ready and she wants it. There's no one else there and she's meowing like a cat in heat. Just go now."

"What about her husband?"

"She's not getting what she wants from her husband. He's a wimp. You can tell. Go over there and fuck her."

"Do I have to do it now? Why now? How do you know she's ready this minute?"

"Why not now? She's meowing. Go."

"I can't. I masturbated twice this morning."

Saved.

He raised his arms in exasperation and walked out. The sound of the closing door echoed in the apartment. I shut my eyes and concentrated on the afterimage. The white sweat suit turned black.

AN HOUR LATER, he sat on the sagging armchair in the living room, a light sheen of sweat covering his face. He was wearing the same Adidas sweat suit but now unzipped. His undershirt showed, a few chest hairs forcing their way through the thin fabric. His potbelly looked more bloated than usual, as if he had swallowed a globe. His hair was plastered to his forehead.

"I don't usually do this." He spoke in a low voice.

"Do what?" I asked, not wanting to believe what I was seeing.

"I don't usually screw around when your mother and I are in the same town. I have too much respect for her. But I wanted to show you the girl was ready to get fucked. If only you'd listened to me." He regarded me with some

compassion, but I was too stunned to utter anything. “She was meowing. I told you. All you had to do was go over there and you would’ve fucked her. She needed it. You could’ve had it. I didn’t want to do it, but you forced me. I had to do it to show you.”

The summer breeze slowly eddied the faded magenta flowers round and round the balcony like ghostly gowns waltzing at the ball. My father looked away from me, toward the window, toward the dance, toward Beirut, our city, falling apart.

Wyn Cooper

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

I close in on facts fine as sugar
poured from a bottle labeled SALT,
comprehend nothing.

I hear a knock, then another,
go to the door but no one's there.
I unlock it and leave it open.

When the bottle's empty a note pops out,
its paper faded as the globe
on my desk. It's unreadable.

I spin the globe to see where it stops.
It rolls off the desk and hits the door,
which closes so hard it opens again.

I spin the globe more gently this time.
It stops where a country used to be.
I am tired. I am so tired of this.

Nicole Sealey

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an excerpt from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure

City officials have frequently asserted that the harsh and disparate results of Ferguson's law enforcement system do not indicate problems with police or court practices, but instead reflect a pervasive lack of "personal responsibility" among "certain segments" of the community. Our investigation has found that the practices about which area residents have complained are in fact unconstitutional and unduly harsh. But the City's personal-responsibility refrain is telling: it reflects many of the same racial stereotypes found in the emails between police and court supervisors. This evidence of bias and stereotyping, together with evidence that Ferguson has long recognized but failed to correct the consistent racial disparities caused by its police and court practices, demonstrates that the discriminatory effects of Ferguson's conduct are driven at least in part by discriminatory intent in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Community Distrust

Since the August 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown, the lack of trust between the Ferguson Police Department and a significant portion of Ferguson's residents, especially African Americans, has become undeniable. The causes of this distrust and division, however, have been the subject of debate. Police and other City officials, as well as some Ferguson residents, have insisted to us that the public outcry is attributable to "outside agitators" who do not reflect the opinions of "real Ferguson residents." That view is at odds with the facts we have gathered during our investigation. Our investigation has shown that distrust of the Ferguson Police Department is longstanding and largely attributable to Ferguson's approach to law enforcement. This approach results in patterns of unnecessarily aggressive and at times unlawful policing; reinforces the harm of discriminatory stereotypes; discourages a culture of accountability; and neglects community engagement. In recent years, FPD has moved away from the modest community policing efforts it previously had implemented, reducing opportunities for positive police-community interactions, and losing the little familiarity it had with some African-American neighborhoods. The confluence of policing to raise revenue and racial bias thus has resulted in practices that not only violate the Constitution and cause direct harm to the individuals whose rights are violated, but also undermine community trust, especially among many African Americans. As a consequence of these practices, law enforcement is seen as illegitimate, and the partnerships necessary for public safety are, in some areas, entirely absent.

Restoring trust in law enforcement will require recognition of the harms caused by Ferguson's law enforcement practices, and diligent, committed collaboration with the entire Ferguson community. At the conclusion of this report, we have broadly identified the changes that are necessary for meaningful and sustainable reform. These measures build upon a number of other recommended changes we communicated verbally to the Mayor, Police Chief, and City Manager in September so that Ferguson could begin immediately to address problems as we identified them. As a result of those recommendations, the City and police department have already begun to make some changes to municipal court and police practices. We commend City officials for beginning to take steps to address some of the concerns we have already raised. Nonetheless, these changes are only a small part of the reform necessary. Addressing the deeply embedded constitutional deficiencies we found demands an entire reorientation of law enforcement in Ferguson. The City must replace revenue-driven policing with a system grounded in the principles of community policing and police legitimacy, in which people are equally protected and treated with compassion, regardless of race.

H. BACKGROUND

The City of Ferguson is one of 89 municipalities in St. Louis County, Missouri. According to United States Census Data from 2010, Ferguson is home to roughly 21,000 residents. While Ferguson's total population has stayed relatively constant in recent decades, Ferguson's racial demographics have changed dramatically during that time. In 1990, 74% of Ferguson's population was white, while 25% was black. By 2000, African Americans became the new majority, making up 52% of the City's population. According to the 2010 Census, the black population in Ferguson has grown to 67%, whereas the white population has decreased to 29%. According to the 2009-2013 American Community Survey, 25% of the City's population lives below the federal poverty level.

Residents of Ferguson elect a Mayor and six individuals to serve on a City Council. The City Council appoints a City Manager to an indefinite term, subject to removal by a Council vote. See Ferguson City Charter § 4.1. The City Manager serves as chief executive and administrative officer of the City of Ferguson, and is responsible for all affairs of the City. The City Manager directs and supervises all City departments, including the Ferguson Police Department.

The current Chief of Police, Thomas Jackson, has commanded the police department since he was appointed by the City Manager in 2010. The department has a total of 54 sworn officers divided among several divisions. The patrol division is the largest division; 28 patrol officers are supervised by four sergeants, two lieutenants, and a captain. Each of the four patrol squads has a canine officer. While all patrol officers engage in traffic enforcement, FPD also has a dedicated traffic officer responsible for collecting traffic stop data required by the state of Missouri. FPD has two School Resource Officers ("SROs"), one who is assigned to the McCluer South-Berkeley High School and one who is assigned to the Ferguson Middle School. FPD has a single officer assigned to be the "Community Resource Officer," who attends community meetings, serves as FPD's public relations liaison, and is charged with collecting crime data. FPD operates its own jail, which has ten individual cells and a large holding cell. The jail is staffed by three non-sworn correctional officers. Of the 54 sworn officers currently serving in FPD, four are African American.

FPD officers are authorized to initiate charges—by issuing citations or summonses, or by making arrests—under both the municipal code and state law. Ferguson's municipal code addresses nearly every aspect of civic life for those who live in Ferguson, and regulates the conduct of all who work, travel through, or otherwise visit the City. In addition to mirroring some non-felony state law violations, such as assault, stealing, and traffic violations, the code establishes housing violations, such as High Grass and Weeds; requirements for permits to rent an apartment or use the City's trash service; animal control ordinances, such as Barking Dog and Dog Running at Large; and a number of other violations, such as Manner of Walking in Roadway. See, e.g., Ferguson Mun. Code §§ 29-16 et seq.; 37-1 et seq.; 46-27; 6-5, 6-11; 44-344.

FPD files most charges as municipal offenses, not state violations, even when an analogous state offense exists. Between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2014, the City of Ferguson issued approximately 90,000 citations and summonses for municipal violations. Notably, the City issued nearly 50% more citations in the last year of that time period than it did in the first. This increase in enforcement has not been driven by a rise in serious crime. While the ticketing rate has increased dramatically, the number of charges for many of the most serious offenses covered by the municipal code—e.g., Assault, Driving While Intoxicated, and Stealing—has remained relatively constant.

Because the overwhelming majority of FPD's enforcement actions are brought under the municipal code, most charges are processed and resolved by the Ferguson Municipal Court, which has primary jurisdiction over all code violations. Ferguson Mun. Code § 13-2. Ferguson's municipal court operates as part of the police department. The court is supervised by the Ferguson Chief of Police, is considered part of the police department for City organizational purposes, and is physically located within the police station. Court staff report directly to the Chief of Police. Thus, if the City Manager or other City officials issue a court-related directive, it is typically sent to the Police Chief's

attention. In recent weeks, City officials informed us that they are considering plans to bring the court **under** the supervision of the City Finance Director.

—A Municipal Judge presides over court sessions. The Municipal Judge is **not** hired or supervised by the Chief of Police, but is instead nominated by the City Manager and **elected** by the City Council. The Judge serves a two-year term, subject to reappointment. The current Municipal Judge, Ronald Brockmeyer, has presided in Ferguson for approximately ten years. The City's Prosecuting Attorney and her assistants officially prosecute all actions before the court, although in practice most cases are resolved without trial or a prosecutor's involvement. The current Prosecuting Attorney was appointed in April 2011. At the time of her appointment, the Prosecuting Attorney was already serving as City Attorney, and she continues to serve in that separate capacity, which entails providing general counsel and representation to the City. The Municipal Judge, Court Clerk, Prosecuting Attorney, and all assistant court clerks are **white**.

While the Municipal Judge presides over court sessions, the Court Clerk, who is employed under the Police Chief's supervision, plays the most significant role in managing the court and exercises broad discretion in conducting the court's daily operations. Ferguson's municipal code confers broad authority on the Court Clerk, including the authority to collect all fines and fees, accept guilty pleas, sign and issue subpoenas, and approve bond determinations. Ferguson Mun. Code § 13-7. Indeed, the Court Clerk and assistant clerks routinely perform duties that are, for all practical purposes, judicial. For example, documents indicate that court clerks have disposed of charges without the Municipal Judge's involvement.

The court officially operates subject to the oversight of the presiding judge of the St. Louis County Circuit Court (21st Judicial Circuit) under the rules promulgated by that Circuit Court and the Missouri Supreme Court. Notwithstanding these rules, the City of Ferguson and the court itself retain considerable power to establish and amend court practices and procedures. The Ferguson municipal code sets forth a limited number of protocols that the court must follow, but the code leaves most aspects of court operations to the discretion of the court itself. See Ferguson Mun. Code Ch. 13, Art. III. The code also explicitly authorizes the Municipal Judge to "make and adopt such rules of practice and procedure as are necessary to hear and decide matters pending before the municipal court." Ferguson Mun. Code § 13-29.

The Ferguson Municipal Court has the authority to issue and enforce judgments, issue warrants for search and **arrest**, hold parties **in contempt**, and order imprisonment as a penalty for contempt. The court may conduct trials, although it does so rarely, and most charges are resolved without one. Upon resolution of a charge, the court has the authority to impose fines, fees, and imprisonment when **violations** are found. Specifically, the court can impose imprisonment in the Ferguson City Jail for up to three months, a fine of up to \$1,000, or a combination thereof. It is rare for the court to sentence anyone to jail as a penalty for a violation of the municipal code; indeed, the Municipal Judge reports that he has done so only once.

Rather, the court almost always imposes a monetary penalty payable to the City of Ferguson, plus court fees. Nonetheless, as discussed in detail below, the court issues arrest warrants when a person misses a court appearance or fails to timely pay a fine. As a result, **violations** that would normally not result in a penalty of imprisonment can, and frequently do, lead to municipal warrants, arrests, and jail time.

As the number of charges initiated by FPD has increased in recent years, the size of the court's docket has also increased. According to data the City reported to the Missouri State Courts Administrator, at the end of fiscal year 2009, the municipal court had roughly 24,000 traffic cases and 28,000 non-traffic cases pending. As of October 31, 2014, both of those figures had roughly doubled to 53,000 and 50,000 cases, respectively. In fiscal year 2009, 16,178 new cases were filed, and 8,727 were resolved. In 2014, by contrast, 24,256 new offenses were filed, and 10,975 offenses were resolved.

The court holds three or four sessions per month, and each session lasts no more than three hours. It is not uncommon for as many as 500 people to appear before the court in a single session, exceeding the court's physical capacity and leading individuals to line up outside of court waiting to be heard. Many people have multiple offenses pending; accordingly, the court typically considers 1,200-1,500 offenses in a single session, and has in the past considered over 2,000 offenses during one sitting. Previously there was a cap on the number of offenses that could be assigned to a particular docket date. Given that cap, and the significant increase in municipal citations in recent years, a problem developed in December 2011 in which more citations were issued than court sessions could timely accommodate. At one point court dates were initially scheduled as far as six months after the date of the citation. To address this problem, court staff first raised the cap to allow 1,000 offenses to be assigned to a single court date and later eliminated the cap altogether. To handle the increasing caseload, the City Manager also requested and secured City Council approval to fund additional court positions, noting in January 2013 that "each month we are setting new all-time records in fines and forfeitures," that this was overburdening court staff, and that the funding for the additional positions "will be more than covered by the increase in revenues."

III. FERGUSON LAW ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS ARE FOCUSED ON GENERATING REVENUE

City officials have consistently set maximizing revenue as the priority for Ferguson's law enforcement activity. Ferguson generates a significant and increasing amount of revenue from the enforcement of code provisions. The City has budgeted for, and achieved, significant increases in revenue from municipal code enforcement over the last several years, and these increases are projected to continue. Of the \$11.07 million in general fund revenue the City collected in fiscal year 2010, \$1.38 million came from fines and fees collected by the court; similarly, in fiscal year 2011, the City's general fund revenue of \$11.44 million included \$1.41 million from fines and fees. In its budget for fiscal year 2012, however, the City predicted that revenue from municipal fines and fees would increase over 30% from the previous year's amount to \$1.92 million; the court exceeded that target, collecting \$2.11 million. In its budget for fiscal year 2013, the City budgeted for fines and fees to yield \$2.11 million; the court exceeded that target as well, collecting \$2.46 million. For 2014, the City budgeted for the municipal court to generate \$2.63 million in revenue. The City has not yet made public the actual revenue collected that year, although budget documents forecasted lower revenue than was budgeted. Nonetheless, for fiscal year 2015, the City's budget anticipates fine and fee revenues to account for \$3.09 million of a projected \$13.26 million in general fund revenues.

City, police, and court officials for years have worked in concert to maximize revenue at every stage of the enforcement process, beginning with how fines and fine enforcement processes are established. In a February 2011 report requested by the City Council at a Financial Planning Session and drafted by Ferguson's Finance Director with contributions from Chief Jackson, the Finance Director reported on "efforts to increase efficiencies and maximize collection" by the municipal court. The report included an extensive comparison of Ferguson's fines to those of surrounding municipalities and noted with approval that Ferguson's fines are "at or near the top of the list." The chart noted, for example, that while other municipalities' parking fines generally range from \$5 to \$100, Ferguson's is \$102. The chart noted also that the charge for "Weeds/Tall Grass" was as little as \$5 in one city but, in Ferguson, it ranged from \$77 to \$102. The report stated that the acting prosecutor had reviewed the City's "high volume offenses" and "started recommending higher fines on these cases, and recommending probation only infrequently." While the report stated that this

The Sack of Silence

A Silence

- Haden

Hammering of nails "From Peru?"
"Peru? Vary." "Well, a spouse, mines
In cas, all that, Ruby not."
"Peru, Illinois" - General [Haden]. One
~~felt~~ The absence of a forelock. Dog.
Diagnosis, air conditioner. T.V. ^{less of} ~~word of~~ 40
Deaf old man. Hearing-aid makes
noise when I eat. Heater starts up, pending
strangled sob.

Talked of nothing else but the level
of the reservoir. Rowl to catch drops
beside sink.

"Lakeville" Journal.

Painting house mushroom pink.

But, yes for dandelions

beds unmade upstairs. Child comes
Historical society. Costumes etc. on
day

Sent of the clock [library]

Raccoons, woodchuck.

2-minute silence. Of cumulative ^{permanently} ~~clumsy~~ ^{he} ~~she
Dogs yapping. He aghast, speechless
with horror.~~

SHIRLEY HAZZARD

An Unpublished Story

INTRODUCTION BY

Brigitta Olubas

When *The Transit of Venus*, Shirley Hazzard's masterpiece, was published in 1980, the writer explained to the *New York Times*' Michiko Kakutani that she "intermittently kept notes—a bit of dialogue overheard, a quotation from Goethe found at random, a description of a potential character" in small exercise books, and that her fictions began from such notes. Some of these jottings, such as Giacomo Leopardi's "La sera del dì di festa," gave title and mood to a finished work; some provided an image or a moment almost unnoticed in the larger drama:

England late July 1972. Visit to
Wilton. A little curly mound of a
dog, like a chrysanthemum. A little
chrysanthemum of a dog...

Apartments in NY Building like cabins on great stationary ocean liners docked along the piers of streets.

“Incurable optimist”—as though one had not responded to treatment.

Hazzard’s distinctively aphoristic and lapidary prose was forged from such scraps—overheard or dreamed, then written down—to which she returned in the months and years that each novel took to write. (She told Kakutani that *The Transit of Venus* underwent “as many as 20–30 drafts per page.”) Many of the scraps and phrases led her to a story, and some of the stories themselves led on to novels. Her first novel, *The Evening of the Holiday*, began as a sequence of stories, while chapters from both *The Transit of Venus* and *The Great Fire* were published as stand-alone stories well before the novels were completed. Many of the scraps led nowhere, others only to narrative fragments that were never realized or completed.

During the summer of 1966, shortly after the publication of *The Evening of the Holiday*, Hazzard traveled to Rome with her husband, Francis Steegmuller, to visit his friend Alberto Moravia. She wrote in her notebook that Moravia was deaf in his right ear and “hard to converse with unless one makes some impact. Talks always intelligently, wants to get opinions on, above all, writing, criticism, ideas, but has no idea of allowing one to develop one’s opinion, show one’s personality in a cumulative way.” She observed a contrast in this with the reclusive English poet Osbert Sitwell, whom she and Steegmuller had visited earlier that month at his home outside Florence, the Castello di Montegufoni. Sitwell, stricken with Parkinson’s disease, “takes his time, is almost silent, although in perfectly kind and reassuring way, waits for one’s personality to manifest itself instead of making one feel pressure to make penetrating remark (pressure which diminishes likelihood of making it).”

In these notes, Shirley Hazzard was beginning to think through the ways silence makes genuine sociability possible, how it enables thought and poetry. A few weeks later, she began sketching out in her notebook a story she called “The Sack of Silence,” taking the phrase from W. H. Auden’s “The Cave of Making.” The story remained unpublished in Hazzard’s lifetime. Her attention was devoted at the time primarily to the interconnected stories that made up *People in Glass Houses*; then she turned to *The*

Bay of Noon, her second novel, after which she published only a handful of discrete stories.

Auden was important for Hazzard. She spoke of having grown up with his poems, and of later knowing him through shared circles. She would quote from her vast store of remembered poetry in conversation, and also in her writing, which worked fragments of poems and everyday idiom into description and dialogue, resulting in prose at once comic and consequential. The phrase Hazzard drew from Auden's poem invokes his friend Louis MacNeice. The poem begins in the poet's study, an alchemical space where "silence is turned into objects," and then reflects on their shared background and experience of the rupture of World War II, the point at which both young men "became self-conscious," when, as Rosie intones in Hazzard's story, they "watched with mixed feelings / the sack of Silence, the churches empty, the cavalry / go." The silence so carefully accommodated by the poet's study was itself the target of history, threatened, Auden insists, by "Stalin and Hitler," after whom "we shan't . . . trust ourselves ever again."

For Hazzard, too, the larger world of war, belief, and consequence weighs heavily on inner lives, and the domestic register is all-important. In "The Sack of Silence," the battle is all living rooms, banisters, televisions, and hearing aids. Even Peru, where the special nails come from, is not in South America but in Illinois. As daily life hammers and blasts about her, Rosie reflects on the lasting effects of disruption and demand on the possibility of inner life. Auden's churches and cavalry remain metaphorical within the story, but the modern, material world is inescapable: "Bang bang. We're alive."

The Sack of Silence

“WAIT TILL I TURN THIS OFF. NOW.”

“That noise. Whatever is it?”

“The Hoover was running.”

“How’s that?”

“I said, I was running the vacuum.”

“Not that. Outside. Listen.” Rosie leaned over the banister.

“Oh, it’s the bee, dear.”

“Bee nothing. A thousand woodpeckers working on tin.”

“The working bee. You’ll see if you come down.” Mrs. Peale opened the front door. “Hammering nails into the elms. The whole town.”

“For heaven’s sake.”

“You make a circle of nails round the trunk of the tree. It’s supposed to stop the elm disease.”

“I see.”

“Didn’t you get the circular? And they came round, too, door to door. But then, you didn’t get up here last weekend.”

“No, that’s right, we stayed in town.”

“Nice when you can come up here weekends and be quiet. Don’t trip on the cord.”

Rosie closed the front door and crossed the hallway. “Some coffee, if it’s ready?”

“Thanks, but I’ve got the kettle on for a cup of tea. I’m going over to make cookies for my daughter’s boys when I’m finished here.”

The percolator was drawing great labored breaths, like a patient in anesthesia.

“Must be growing up now, Mrs. Peale. They’re older than Teddy.”

“You remember them, they came by at Halloween.”

“I don’t think I saw them.”

“Oh, they were here all right. You must remember. One was the devil and the other was a skeleton. You gave them a bag of marshmallows.”

“Of course.” Rosie stood at the kitchen window, drinking coffee.

The kettle shrieked.

“Breast high.” Mrs. Peale poured.

“How’s that?”

“The nails. They’re driven in at breast height. Special nails, from Peru.”

“From Peru. Fancy that.” Well, of course—tin mines, Incas, all that: Why not?

“Yes, Peru, Illinois. If you’ll leave that cup. I was just turning on the dishwasher.”

Upstairs, Rosie had forgotten to make the beds. She pulled the sheets down, then up again, and thumped the pillows. The dishwasher pounded below, cars swished on the highway. Mrs. Peale turned the vacuum on again. The furnace started up with a gasp and throbbed lightly and quickly through the floor and walls, as if the house had had a bad fright.

All the time, Rosie thought, silence is being broken.

The silence, first broken when Rosie started school, was until then a long afternoon passed in gardens, or on beds where she held a doll and charted shapes in figured wallpaper. At school, however, her train of thought had been permanently disrupted. Voices, there, were sharp, always questioning, always demanding an answer—as if they, not she, were in need of an education. To the question, “What does that make?” she had replied, “Four,” and surrendered forever. Later she came up with other answers—“The Great Fire of London,” “The Treaty of Utrecht,” “Dryden”; or “I don’t know”—this particular answer was not unrelated to silence. She recited out loud the fruits of others’ silences. There were questions that gave answers, replies that were merely questions—a chain reaction of interrogation that sputtered along for years.

During that time silence was tolerated only when it had official sanction: “Silence, girls,” someone said loudly. One developed the ability to stare at a page, even to read, without breaking into one’s state of mind. Each November a morning assembly began with two minutes’ obligatory silence—the only silence into which no girl ever managed to giggle, growing up as they were in the shadow of the Great War and the Great Depression, and some baffled sense of shame that two such events had been allowed to come about.

Mrs. Peale turned off the vacuum. Rosie sat on her child’s bed. Her flesh tingled with the blows of the hundred hammers on the Peruvian nails. Two minutes’ silence. Why two minutes? Was that as much as anybody could be expected to stand, thinking about the First World War? Ought it to be cumulative, if intended as a tribute to the dead? In that case, by now should we not be permanently dumbfounded, speechless with horror?

But that wouldn't be silence, then, not really, Rosie thought in all fairness. The front door opened, and closed with a tight thud. "Well, darling," said Rosie.

"Sitting here. Thinking what?"

"How do you know I was thinking?"

"Just a clever guess."

"It was about the sack of silence."

"Sack in what sense?"

"Sense of ransack. Plunder. I read it in a poem. How our generation 'watched with mixed feelings the sack of silence, the churches empty, the cavalry go.' The cavalry's rather stretching it, all the same."

"I do remember horses, though, in towns."

"Well, so do I. Pulling drays. Clydesdales with huge furry feet. Always in pairs. The horses, I mean. What good times we had before the Industrial Revolution." Rosie leaned back, her hands clasped round her knees. "Where's Teddy?"

"With the Dunstons' boy. Playing Blast-Off."

"Listen, you heard about these nails."

"Not only. I was roped in. Have to hammer some right away so we can hold up our civic heads."

"They're from Peru."

"There must be mines, then, in that part of Illinois. Wasn't that where the Lead Rush was?"

"*Lead* Rush? As if a gold rush isn't ignominious enough."

A man's voice cried out, "*Inner peace, inner peace—*" It roared up at them, frantic. "*No other way—*"

"Bishop Sheen's got turned on."

"I said she could, she asked me as I came in."

"*Inner peace—*"

"I'm afraid it'll frighten Teddy."

"Not after Blast-Off. Nothing could."

"I heard the cardinal this morning. He was in the lilacs."

"Frightened out by the nails."

They were silent. Rosie said, "Where have we been silent?"

"Not here." He raised his voice to be heard above the noise from below. "Not much in town, either."

"Where, then?"

"Segesta, Olympia . . ."

"Bassae, Volubilis, Tarquinia." Rosie on her wedding trip had made the circle of the Mediterranean. "Ruins mostly. Places where the noise has had time to die down. The tumult and the shouting dies; if you live long enough. Woods at the foot of Stratton Mountain."

"That's not ruins. Not Vermont."

"No, but there was so much snow. Snow gives a sort of age. Silence is white."

"Silence is golden."

"There are leaden silences, too."

He stood up. "On to Peru."

"I actually heard the silence once. One night, in a garden."

"How was it?"

"Earsplitting." Rosie stretched out, her arms behind her head. "Do I give them tea when they reach this end of the green?"

"Lord, must you?"

"That's what I'm asking."

"Play it by ear. I'd lie doggo if I were you."

LYING DOGGO, ROSIE HEARD HIM go downstairs. Outside, he called, "Teddy. Teddy." Certain voices, certain sounds—music, laughter, the sound of the sea—were not infractions; had their own component of silence. Just as one spoke of silence as part of a natural condition: "I kept silent," "I remained silent." How many voices there had been—beloved voices, voices one had ached for, calling one's name, reading aloud on summer evenings, voices with inflections, accents, silences of their own. And all the other voices—impersonal, resentful, furious—and the metallic disturbances of office life: the clash of filing drawers, typewriters, telephones, buzzers, voices shouting "Going up," "Going down," "I won't stand for this" . . . So-and-so was a big noise, someone else a pipsqueak. And how many cars, trains, planes, loudspeakers, transistors—

"Going, Mrs. Peale? I'll be right down."

"I'm off now."

"See you next week then."

"All being well."

In the living room the television had been turned down but not off. A

pair of figures capered through a mime about breakfast food. You should be able to cover it, like a parrot, when you want it to be quiet, thought Rosie, twisting the switch and causing the mummery to be sucked back soundless into a pinpoint of white light. The dishwasher changed gear and dried up. The heating, like the Hoover, had long since ceased to run. Rosie lay down on the sofa with her book.

“Well, for crying out loud. Hiding in here.”

“Mrs. Lauder. I thought I heard the knocker. Come in. Mr. Lauder.”

“Quiet as a mouse, while we were hard at it. But we won’t squeal on you.”

“Tea and cake?” said Rosie.

“Perhaps a shot,” said Mrs. Lauder, “of something.”

“Mr. Lauder?”

“You’ll have to roar.” Mrs. Lauder leaned over, put her hand on her husband’s knee. “Dad. Have you got it turned on, Dad?”

“Not so loud,” the old man said.

Rosie splashed whisky into glasses, pierced at breast height by a high whistle as Mr. Lauder adjusted his hearing aid. “Soda?”

“A dash for Dad. Rocks for me. Last night, then, you arrived?”

“Late, yes, from New York.”

“I wouldn’t live there if you paid me.” Mrs. Lauder clashed the ice about in her glass. “We like a quiet life.”

Rosie shouted, “Crackers?”

The old man shook his head, tapped his ear. “Makes a noise when I eat.”

“Everybody’s hammering away,” said his wife. “It’s a scream. Even the General showed up and pounded for a while: just a couple of small trees, nothing to shout about.”

“And does it help the elms?” Rosie inquired. “Honestly?”

“Oh, they certainly say.”

“That big tree, for instance, at the end of the green.”

Mrs. Lauder reflected. “That’s a maple.”

Rosie objected, “But it’s got a disease.”

Mrs. Lauder drank, swallowed, shook her head. “Strangled root.”

“Unsound,” said her husband.

“Oh, fairly crying out for attention. No one talked of anything else at the cocktail party. Going to crash down one of these days.”

“Hits the spot,” the old man said, holding up his glass.

"It's been reported. But you have to din it in."

Rosie siphoned more soda onto whisky. "Now what's that? That noise?"

"The Big Vac, that's what it is." Mrs. Lauder listened. "Must have reached the Russells' property. You'll be hearing plenty of that this fall. I promise you."

"A machine for the leaves, is that it?"

"Why, just fabulous, the way it sucks them up. Whoosh, and it's all over. I'm saying, Dad—the Big Vac."

"What a difference. Eh, Mother?"

"Something," said Rosie, "that one doesn't hear of in New York."

"New York," the old man said. "I wouldn't live there if you paid me. Too much racket."

Mrs. Lauder broke a cracker in two. "Then you zoom back on Monday?"

"Early," said Rosie.

"Racket in both senses," the old man said, with a gust of laughter.

"Uh-oh. Get a load of that. Sounds like rain, Dad."

Rosie went to the window. "Teddy. Teddy."

A voice called to her, "Bang bang. You're dead."

"Children," said Mrs. Lauder.

"Teddy," Rosie said.

"Nice. But not restful. What are you *doing*, Dad?"

The old man had taken off his hearing aid to examine it. He fumbled with the lamp beside his chair.

"It's a pull, Dad. *A pull, Dad* . . . That's got it . . . Just listen to that. Thunder yet. We'd better be whizzing along."

"Which way do you go?"

"Turn up Roaring Brook Road, and shoot straight across from there. Home before you can say *knife*. Come on, Dad. Snap out of it."

"Lightning," said Rosie, at the door. "Why don't you wait?"

"Thanks, but no. Got to whip up something to eat. Friends said they'd call."

"Listen to that, though."

Mrs. Lauder waved. "The thing is not to get rattled."

"ROSIE."

Rosie ran downstairs.

"Didn't you hear me?"

“I was running Teddy’s bath. How did the nails go?”

“Those nails. What were the Lauders doing here?”

“Whooping it up. Oh—listen.”

“Let it ring.”

They sat together on the bottom stair. The furnace shuddered. There was honking on the highway, and a scream of brakes. Rosie said, “Bang bang. We’re alive.”

“What’s going on out there?”

“The Big Vac.”

“You haven’t told me about the Lauders.”

“They wouldn’t live in New York if we paid them.”

“Useless to offer, then. What did you say?”

Rosie said, “I held my peace.”

Three Poems by Rohan Chhetri

MEZZA VOCE

All summer the half voice lurked behind me
& I played deaf for days for to live
To not write about it to use my body
Part the river's flesh to operate
Machinery is human too to love
& for once stay awake through it all.
Now it comes like the deer sleeved
Out of the green in clean staccato
All corpuscle & hunger—No, not the deer
The ravens calling for the wolves to split
Open the light from the dead deer's belly
Jeweled in the dark purse of its pelt.
We are each given heaven for brief so heavy
We put it down dance small around it.

KING'S FEEDERY

After the rape & the bloodbath, the savage king
& his men retired to a long shed built in an open
field by a thin river fashioned for this lull in the pillaging
so the horses could rest. One by one, they scrubbed
blood off their fingers & faces & sat down to devour
a feast of rice & goat served by the villagers.

The legend remains only in the name of a lodge
built in the same place, which from the Bengali means
the King's Feeder, where the king took his meal.

We say Death stays here when it visits someone
in the family. The time it came for Grandfather, it arrived
late. Not at the wolf's hour between midnight & first
light, but late morning on the highway, siren blaring
all the way to the nursing home. As if punishing us
for what it botched, it hung around for a few
months at the Feeder, then came for my aunt. Young,
suffering in a marriage, she was taken straight by her weak
heart. I imagine them, father & daughter, sitting still
across a table, sharing a meal of steaming boiled potatoes,
& always in the afterlife that vague dream of salt.

Death takes in threes, they said. We feared it would
come for one of us. In the trashed room,
they found Death's ledger full of illegible scrawls
in a dark meter no one could understand.

Grandmother's devastation circled complete, that year
a channel of clear water began thrumming beneath
her skin. We heard it rumble whenever she opened
her mouth to speak. When I think of love,
I think of her weeping as I left, her swollen lip
grazing the back of my hand through the car window. Brief
& bright her long blurred life now summoned
with Death lurking at the borders again.

Married at thirteen, adolescence lost
weeping into a cauldron of chopped onions. She talks

of the flimsy wooden hovel perched on four
fraying stumps & in her telling it is always
how she saw it first, herself decked in gold
with that sinking dread: a preface. I think of love
& I think how when they lifted Grandfather's bier
she called out to him crying *My child*
my god my child

NEW DELHI IN WINTER

Those mornings in the last days of December,
as the smog deepened over the mausoleum
& the ghost of the emperor's first wife
lingered about the four gardens, weeping
over her dead child
until a solitary jogger tore the curtain of fog
with a flashlight, making her flee
through a chink in the heavy lid of the small red tomb,
I rose at dawn, washed my face with water
cold as needles & went to work, stomach taut
as deerskin stretched over the seat of a chair.
On the terrace garden above my office,
I drank coffee & smoked a long cigarette
as something unnameable loosened its grip on my neck.
I remember thinking then, This cannot be
the worst of my days, but mostly I remember
myself in some variation of afraid.
Why, I can't tell.
I had a job, an apartment,
& a woman who claimed to be in love with me
less & less each day. The city's gray tongue
licked the windows of our room & I knew
they would come for us soon,
that one of us would be called first
to initiate the slaughter, then later
led into a dim corridor to watch
through a one-way mirror the other
slipping on entrails, trying to clamber out of it.
At the parties, I got drunk & cursed everyone.
At home, I smoked anything the women
from the university brought me.
I wrote poems that went on for years into my sleep.
When we finally parted, the city shrank
down to the few bars, her dentist, the hospital

she drove me to where they treated
the third-degree burns from the hot oil
that jumped out of a pan one night
to grab the back of my hand.
The billboards outside the malls looked
vulgar, like my scarred hand in the yellow
light that fell on the pavement. But always
that serious joy in the drunken body
stammering home in the dark.
In the daylight I felt dizzy with fear
of running into her. This vast city
open to invaders & vagrants for centuries
now small for two.
A few things became clear to me then.
The body itself has no use for hope.
It hardens in grief to live beyond hope.
And the only real use of narrative is to cheat
that ancient urge inside us, pale animal
with its face resembling the inside of our death
masks, its long unheeded, persistent murmur
clearing into a deafening verdict: Leave.

Yusef Komunyakaa

WHEELCHAIR

Weeks on my back, counting
stars not up there, cutting quick
close corners in the wheelchair

Ralph kept moving true as oil,
questions silent in my mouth
after hearing a ragged sound

rattle loose from other souls
as if within my own body,
trying not to drag my foot,

& near misses in the hallway
pumped dares through blood
as we rolled into the elevator.

I can see my great-grandma
Sarah, as wheels of her chair
furrowed those chopped rows,

feet curled under her, a rake
or a hoe held in strong hands,
weeding corn, beans, & potatoes

dug to feed her hungry family
down in the Mississippi Delta,
& today it is not hard to hear

a moan rise out of black earth
where this woman raised hot
red peppers for her turtle soup.

A Way with Bea

SHANTEKA SIGERS

Bea walks into the classroom wearing the clothes she had on the day before. The Teacher understands that this is going to be a bad day. Bea's hair is uncombed, face unwashed. She arrives precisely twelve seconds late. Not so late that the Teacher *has* to make a big deal about it. But not on time. Bea walks like a prisoner forcibly escorted, snatching herself along, step by step, then pouring her thin body into the seat. She has no books, no pencil or paper. She drapes herself over the desk and waits for the Teacher to continue or challenge.

The Teacher rides the L two stops from the school and into an entirely different country. Chicago pieces itself together that way. The platform at her station offers a clear view of the rear deck of her condo and she always looks. Sometimes she hopes to catch her husband there with a woman, a stranger

or a friend, his hand invading the buttons of this woman's shirt, taking a fistful of her breast. This has never happened. She is relieved and disappointed. Occasionally she catches him grilling in the brown sandals she hates. She feels like a spy trying to decipher her own life.

The Teacher grew up in the country and has seen things die the right way. You can't die right in the city. There's no place to take yourself off to be alone with your thoughts and the last wind you will ever feel. In the living room, her husband reads a magazine with his ancient cat on his lap. She has told him that it is far past time for that cat. He was disgusted by her cruelty. She shouldn't have married a man from the city.

The Teacher dissects Bea as the girl walks toward her classroom. *She looks like a doll made for tea parties that was thrown outside to fend for itself.* A nobility lives in Bea's bones, an ancient, undiluted beauty that most eyes have forgotten. She grows in angles. The broadness of her nose and the wide, sculpted divot leading down to her lips and the deep, delicate hollows behind her collarbone. The disorder of her swarming hair, misshapen and dusty, but still a laurel.

The Teacher raises a glass to her friend the Engineer, who has been promoted. The Teacher can't afford this restaurant, but the Advertising Executive will pay. She always pays. They crowd around a laptop, perfumes mingling, to watch her latest car commercial. The waiters weave around the obstruction. Someone asks about the Lawyer's big case that has not been decided yet. The Other Lawyer handles lucrative but ethically disgusting cases that no one asks about. The Teacher knows how her friends imagine her in class, as sure as a mother goose, with students trailing obediently behind. Every gathering, she is sainted anew for her work. She regains a bit of purpose and savors it as long as she can, until it evaporates, processed into the air of the school.

Bea announces that the endoplasmic reticulum has been drawn in the wrong place. She walks up to the board, showing the class her fearless back, and wipes at the drawing of a cell. She rakes the chalk across the blackboard with the concentration of a doctor repairing a beating heart. This happens with these children. Every now and again, their bellies are full enough, a lesson hits them

in the right way, or they have paused their channel-surfing to learn about it in a documentary. The Teacher knows better than to get too excited. Next week, Bea will be hungry and fallible.

Bea's brother is Aldous. Which means her mother is Flora. Flora is regarded as less a person than as a familiar, chaotic fixture of the neighborhood. A tiny woman singing in a drunken chorus with men or a scabby statue sleeping soundly in empty lots. Bea doesn't have to bring home a report card. Ever. No one will make generic parental demands for better grades. The Teacher returns to herself at Bea's age and begins crafting infinite versions of her life. She wonders what terrible things such freedom would have done to her.

The Teacher considers asking Bea if she can comb her hair for her. *Girl, sit down and let me give you some twists.* The Teacher thinks of Bea arriving early in the morning. She will bring her own counter-size vats and silos of grease and gel. She will give her architect-straight parts. She will oil the girl's scalp, her finger pointing down each tender row. And then the girl will go to Stanford and then Flora will get off drugs. No. Too much, even for fantasy. The ask curdles on her tongue.

The Teacher stands in the laundry closet and fishes the net bag containing her bras out of the washing machine. Her gaze falls on the domed hood of the litter box and she starts. She has not seen the cat for days. In fact, she forgot that they even had a cat. Her husband jumps when she races into the bedroom. "Where's the cat?" she pants. He holds the information for a beat as her punishment, then points to his closet. Did this man put a dead cat in the closet? The fact that she has to wonder makes her feel such embarrassment for him that she turns away. She walks to the closet and unfolds the fan doors slowly, so as to not disturb sleep or death. On the bottom of the shallow closet the cat seems flat and shapeless like the discarded clothes surrounding it, an abandoned vessel that life no longer occupies. But the cat has looked this way for months now so the Teacher reaches out to gently, gently rub an ear.

Lately when the Teacher receives her most cherished compliment, a toneless voice in her mind responds with such swiftness that the words feel like facts. You're a great teacher. *Not as great as your grandmother, your great-aunt, or your*

cousin. You're a great teacher. Not as great as the National Teacher of the Year. You're a great teacher. You aren't even the best in this shitty little school. You're a great teacher. There is absolutely no proof of that. You teach science. There has to be proof or it can't be true.

Bea does not walk into the classroom and the Teacher is afraid. Bea only comes to school because it is a relatively safe place to be during the day. Girls who find other safe places for the day usually return multiplied into two people in one way or another.

The Teacher walks into her empty classroom and the urge to throw a tantrum is so strong her arms shoot up from her sides before she stops them. She had been so proud that she had made her classroom pleasing to the eye. She had been just *biblically* prideful that she had found a modern design that organized the chaos of the body into three colors and three harmonious fonts. Against Bea's empty seat, Bea's crisped edges, every lesson the Teacher has to teach seems trivial. The bell rings. The Teacher allows her arms to soften.

The Teacher puts down her fork and stares at her husband. A worn white tablecloth edged in lace tries to put her in the spirit of their honeymoon. But it is hard to remember the man who grinned at her across lopsided wooden tables in tiny restaurants in the Caribbean while looking at him here with his mouth only half lifted in a smirk. She leans back, withdrawing from him. "I am aware that teaching is not going to be like a made-for-TV movie or an after-school special, and fuck you," says the Teacher.

The next morning the Teacher feels a little better about herself because Bea has never brought her to tears. The English Teacher is getting out of her Jetta. Bea has wrung tears out of her, twice. As expected, the tears improved nothing for anyone. The Teacher's Blackness has given her the gift of mastery over her tear ducts. In her entire life there has been no benefit to expressing sorrow or anger or frustration or pain, so the Teacher offers Bea none. She understands that Bea cannot offer her any. They will have to find something else to exchange.

Bea walks into class without a look in the Teacher's direction. She wears clothes from the emergency closet. A pair of purple corduroy pants cut in a

reasonably popular fashion. A white sweater that has lost all its comforting softness. The Teacher wonders if Bea knows what it is like to find comfort in the things wrapped around your body.

The next day, Bea walks into class in a dress a size too small, with tiny yellow and green flowers on a bright blue background. It is a strange juxtaposition with her feline face. The impatience of her eyes. If other students do not answer questions to her liking, she raises her hand. She has the right answer or a sullen question that shows that she understands the complex interactions of the brain. When Bea's arm climbs into the air, the Teacher worries that the too-small dress will give and she will burst in the classroom, petals everywhere.

On the way to the train the Teacher speed-walks through the corner store to buy a certain thick, grape-flavored drink her husband loves. When her friends call it Ghetto Grape, the Teacher feels her face tighten. She moves through the store so fast that she almost misses Aldous, Bea's brother. Slow and ponderous in front of the Hostess cupcakes. He stares at the selection, brand new in their packages and already stale.

The Teacher and her husband wander Home Depot. Her husband loves Home Depot but she has no idea why. He is limited to sections he can choose completed items from, like plants, appliances, or grills. He buys nothing here that has to come from here. The Teacher walks away from him and into the aisles of more challenging equipment. The Teacher eavesdrops on the men around her, agreeing and disagreeing with their assessments of the best tool for the job. She touches the soft splinters in lumber, rattles a bin of nails, cups her palm around pipes. Her father and great-aunts taught her how to fix things. She finds her husband, tall and handsome, carrying a box of light bulbs and looking for her.

Bea has been confined in the Principal's conference room. The Teacher considers sneaking in but watches through the glass panel instead. The girl carefully unwraps a Hershey's Kiss. She uses a dirty nail with streaks of mucus-green polish to scrape the foil away, then tugs lightly at the branded ribbon still stuck to the chocolate. The Teacher feels a soul-deep respect for this girl's calm.

Down the hall, the faculty lounge crackles with some new sin. The English Teacher says, “Did you hear about Bea? She cut up a bird with scissors.” The Teacher pauses. Imagines a bird. Imagines Bea. Imagines scissors. Silver with lightly pockmarked black handles. She hears the metal open and close. She tries to turn it into a weapon. She can’t put these pieces together. But she can feel the teachers’ fear under the hissing indignation. She is embarrassed for them.

The clump of skin and tissue and organs smeared across a paper plate on the desk seems to demand that everyone in the Principal’s office remain standing as they discuss what to do about Bea. The Teacher pushes hard against people a teacher isn’t supposed to push against. “This thing has been dead for days,” she says. She pounds her fist on the desk and sends shame vibrating through them all. The featherless oddity bounces in agreement. “Did anyone see her kill it? Send that girl back to class.”

Bea is snapping her gum. The powerful cracks echo off the smooth surfaces in the classroom, incorrectly punctuating the Teacher’s lesson. For a while, Bea entertains herself by leaving the air empty and then firing off a round, making the girl next to her jump. This is a direct challenge and the Teacher gets angry. She has an unspoken agreement with Bea, built on respect that she is not at all sure is mutual. She is supposed to have a way with Bea.

Bea does not walk into the classroom and has not walked into the classroom for four days now. The Teacher closes her eyes, feeling her worth orbiting that one empty seat. She knows she shouldn’t be thinking this way.

The Teacher attempts to be honest with herself about why she sent Bea to the office five days ago. When she examines the moment, she hears the sound of Bea’s final snap of gum, as sharp as clapping hands. When she examines her anger, she detects the unprofessional residue of feeling betrayed. She assumes that Bea will not come walking into her classroom for a fifth day, but she does. Bea is so attentive in class that the Teacher is afraid the girl is setting her up.

For three weeks straight, Bea arrives on time. Her supplies are in a black canvas satchel with a flap over the top. It is the first time the Teacher has seen her hold anything close and carefully. It sits on her lap the entire class. She is

clean underneath a new, age-inappropriate veneer. Her hair has been seized and shaped into a stiff box of weave on her head, and cheap, bright pink lipstick streaks across her mouth. She has been cared for. The Teacher unearths another thought: she wishes that the girl's caretakers were classier. That evening on the L she brings that thought out again and again and lets it sit, stinking, beside her.

Bea waits for the Teacher in the classroom. The Teacher is shocked, shocked. Thudding heart. She has not thought out a play. She busies herself at her desk after a short greeting. They are alone for thirty long seconds. It occurs to the Teacher that maybe Bea has something to say and she lifts her head and raises her eyebrows, ready to receive. The moment is gone.

The Gym Teacher does not shake easily but she is shaken. She says, "I think that girl has an eyeball in her book bag. An *eyeball*." A laugh rises from the Teacher's throat before she can stop it.

Bea walks into class thirty seconds early without her prized black canvas satchel. Instead, she has a plastic grocery bag with a chorus of *thank yous* printed on the side. She comes to the Teacher's desk like a doe to a fence. Today, she wears clean clothes and the Teacher's wish has been granted. Bea's face is washed. There is no ridiculous weave.

The Teacher's husband has flown to the other side of the planet on business. His cat chooses four days after his departure as the day to leak shit on the carpet and die.

The Teacher knows of two ways to get animal bones so smooth and glossy they seem unreal, almost manufactured. She remembers her great-aunts, the unsentimental efficiency of their land, soft denim coveralls and a summer-time discovery of luminous little skulls. The life in good Alabama soil can do all the work, reclaiming the meat and polishing the bones. That's one way. The other is to boil them.

Aldous cups his hands under the brown running water and over and over he pours water into Bea's hair. He has placed a slightly sour towel across

her shoulders. He adds a gummy, clear hair gel that was abandoned in the bathroom by a girl who doesn't come over anymore. Most of the hairbrush's milky-blue plastic handle has broken off, but he clutches the stump in an underhand fist. He brushes until her hair goes limp across his wide fingers. He loops a rubber band around the handful of hair, suspicious of his work, wondering if it will hold. He steps away. Bea does not smile but she does not take it down. Both children slink into the morning.

The Teacher had offered Bea a window of time to pick up irresistible contraband, a biology textbook from a better school district. In preparation for the girl's visit, she has manufactured a number of coincidences. Inside her refrigerator ten sandwiches in wax paper form a sacred tower. The oaty fullness of good wheat bread, the sharp tang of mustard, the smooth paper with creases like gifts, all carefully conjured from her own childhood. She is practicing a casual, *I made too many for my nephew, you wanna try one? Take a few home?* A plump yellow timer on the stove will ting at the end of the lesson. *Would you like to stay for dinner?* In the closet is an almost-new denim satchel with a flap over the top. *Oh, you need something to carry all this stuff.* She gives last looks around her home, her classroom, the set. Everything is pulled taut and ready to snare.

The Teacher will tell her husband that she took care of his cat.

Elizabeth Metzger

THE WITCHING HOUR

In life
if I could say for sure

what I have loved
there would be

no tunnel needed
for any inner

or earthly transport.
Everywhere

I turned
there would appear

only the blinding clubs
of the sun

and when I thought
of escape

I would thank
a dead man

for my thoughts
and lick

through his navel
all my sweet unknowable

time. He would be lanky
and love and

unlove me.
I would not worry

about our undoing,
about survivals.

I would get up from bed
and be gone

with the kit of the careless.
In my confusion

I would have a child.
I already did. I did

him a fatal injury
bringing him here.

They handed him
out of my body

onto my body.
When he cried I misled him

with joy, beckoned
by something that knew

my hands better than I
toward the soft spot

of earth. It was not
childhood. I'm a mother now

and I can promise
under the grown breast

the heart is still changeable
that far down.

When I grieve
he plays with the salt.

He hangs on the
faulty edge

of my face. I have him uneven.
I have him to hold

my life open
like a towel

and take my pains
then feed me one star

on a fork and say
no big deal.

The Art of Fiction

No. 247

ENRIQUE
VILA-MATAS

The writing of Enrique Vila-Matas is marked by a dazzling array of quotation, plagiarism, frames, self-plagiarism, digressions and meta-digressions: an intense and witty textual delirium that has made him one of the most original and celebrated writers in the Spanish language. Born in Barcelona in 1948, he published his first novel—a single, sternly uninterrupted sentence—in 1973. Continuing his fidelity to the myth of the avant-garde writer, he then moved to Paris, living in a garret rented from Marguerite Duras, before returning to Barcelona, where he spent the next decade publishing novels, a story collection, and literary essays.

It was with his sixth book, however, *A Brief History of Portable Literature* (1985, translation 2015), that Vila-Matas transformed into a true

original. The book poses as a history of a secret society of twentieth-century artists and writers, including Duchamp, Walter Benjamin, Kafka, and others. Its reckless linking of real names to imaginary quotations and vice versa, its mingling of fiction with history, made him notorious—and represented a new moment in European fiction. Reality can only be apprehended through a comical, dazzling network of texts—that was the book's basic proposition, and its implications and complications are what Vila-Matas has continued to explore in wildly deconstructive novels like *Bartleby & Co.* (2000, 2007), *Montano's Malady* (2002, 2007), and *Never Any End to Paris* (2003, 2011), as well as in a series of what Vila-Matas calls *critical fictions*, including *Chet Baker piensa en su arte* (Chet Baker thinks about his art, 2011), *The Illogic of Kassel* (2014, 2015), and *Marienbad électrique* (Electric Marienbad, 2015).

Vila-Matas has won many grand awards (the Premio Rómulo Gallegos, the Premio Herralde, the Premio Leteo, the Prix Médicis, among others), but in person he is modest and generous, always solicitous toward younger generations—I first met him a few years ago through our mutual friends Alejandro Zambra and Valeria Luiselli. He dresses with elegant reserve, a disguise for a mischievous, fantastical soul. We conducted this interview over two prolonged sessions in Barcelona last summer and fall, speaking in a mixture of French and Spanish while his agent, Mònica Martín, offered interpretive aid and sometimes joined in the conversation. This polyglot mixture was transcribed, edited, then retranslated into Spanish and rewritten by Vila-Matas before being definitively translated into English. Its multilingual, multilayered history seems an accurate analogue to Vila-Matas's polymorphous style.

According to the terms of Vila-Matas's thinking, the real can only fully acquire a luminous existence when inserted into a prior network of words—even, for instance, a conversation. Both sessions of our interview took place in the gardens of the Hotel Alma in Barcelona. Vila-Matas chose the location partly for its peacefulness—but really, he observed, because it was where he set the final exchanges of his most recent novel, *Esta bruma insensata* (This senseless haze, 2019). The two conversations, one fictional, one real, could therefore gradually infiltrate each other—this was his hope—and reach their own separate level of truth.

After our final session, before we headed off for coffee at the Europa Café on Diagonal, Vila-Matas invited me over to his apartment and showed me

his small writing room, the bookshelves of which were filled with works by his beloved authors—Beckett, Kafka, Tabucchi, Duras, Joyce, Walser, and friends like Rodrigo Fresán and Roberto Bolaño. That space, I began to think, was the visual form of Vila-Matas’s literary philosophy—fragile, futuristic, and infinitely valuable: an idea of writing as a singular, patient process that can absorb and create the hyper world outside it.

—*Adam Thirlwell*

ENRIQUE VILA-MATAS

I warn you—no one believes what I say. I recently gave an interview, and after it was published, the interviewer mentioned to someone that he got the impression everything I told him was made up. I was surprised, because anyone who knows me knows I hate lying, but also because I’ve always thought that the history of literature is missing a chapter, the one that would tell the epic story of all those writers—from Cervantes to Kafka and Beckett—who fought heroically against any form of imposture. And I do mean fought. A plainly paradoxical sort of battle, given that its chief combatants were writers with their heads immersed in the world of fiction, and yet out of that battle or tension emerged the truest—and as such, to my mind the most interesting—pages in the history of literature, pages born out of the tension produced whenever fiction tries to approximate that which seems, a priori, the furthest possible thing from it, the truth. I don’t know, but perhaps what confused that interviewer was my “way of saying things.” Could that be it? I inadvertently lend an air of implausibility to things that really have taken place.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe it’s because you suffer from the malady of things happening to you that don’t happen to anyone else. Like the night you took a taxi and the driver said, Good evening, Doctor Pasavento, as if you were a character from your own novel. When I tell people that story no one ever believes me, but I was there! And you reacted as if it were perfectly normal.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, it was normal, as if at that moment I believed that the whole of Barcelona read my books. In those days I was always going out and I would take taxis from one end of the city to the other and chat with the drivers, and I think all those taxi drivers, at some point, listened to me talk about my books and—as unlikely and amusing as this sounds today—about whatever technical problems I happened to be having with them. I'd be crossing Barcelona in the middle of the night talking about Cyril Connolly!

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever worry that the true and what seems to be true don't always coincide?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, but it took me a long time to see there was a problem or really consider what it meant. It first dawned on me in 1988 when I published *Una casa para siempre* (A home forever)—incidentally *Mac's Problem* (2017, 2019) is the remake of this novel. In that novel from my early writing days—the unraveling, oblique biography of a ventriloquist—I write about a woman with a particular obsession for buying bread in every town and city she passes through on her travels. In real life, I'd visited various cities of Poland, Egypt, and Greece with that woman, and in every one she'd made a point of buying some bread, even if she had no intention of eating it. I was quite mystified by this hobby of hers, and she never did enlighten me. So, in *Una casa para siempre*, it occurred to me to include a woman character—the narrator's mother—who collects bread from all the cities she visits. And, well, when the book was published, the eminent literary critic for *El País* wrote that I was a promising young writer but obviously suffered from an "overactive imagination," as demonstrated by "the implausible story of the bread collector." That critic has since died, but when he was alive I used to keep an eye out for him at bookish parties and receptions in order to explain that story really had happened to me and even disclose to him that funny collector's name. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if this malady of yours is linked to something else that's always



Barcelona, ca. 1953.

struck me. I get the impression that you hide behind your texts. For example, I have no idea about your childhood, where you grew up.

VILA-MATAS

My childhood was entirely without conflict, a gray and happy childhood in a no less gray Barcelona, so there isn't much to tell. Perhaps that explains why I've worked very little on the theme of childhood in my novels. Just the other day I read something in Ricardo Piglia's *Crítica y ficción* (Criticism and fiction) that seems connected to what we're talking about. There was a sentence, something like, "I really like the first years of my diary because in them I grapple with the total vacuum: nothing happens, nothing ever happens in reality." I can't help Piglia's words taking me back to the days when I had nothing to say and no stories to tell. They were tough, those early years of youth, and then everything became worse, awful, if you did find a story to tell, because you knew you still wouldn't end up writing it, not with that

desgraciado Heidegger's words ringing in your ear, which I remember George Steiner quoting—"When you're too stupid to have something to say, you tell a story!"

INTERVIEWER

Could you say more about your childhood? What were your parents like? Were they Catalan?

VILA-MATAS

They were both Catalan, from Barcelona's middle-class bourgeoisie. And within the family—with them, my sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents—we spoke exclusively in Catalan. I spoke Castilian in school and only with a select group of classmates.

I've spoken about this somewhere before. I was born nine years after the end of the civil war, a brutal conflict that was never discussed but which you could still feel in the air. No one ever brought up the civil war, except when we kids didn't want to eat, because then, inevitably, our parents would remind us of the wartime hunger they had endured. The impression any child got in those days was that, not very long before, something terrifying and huge had happened—which reinforced the sense that I had nothing to say, because nothing ever happened to me and instead everything pointed toward something very disturbing having happened, about which no one talked.

All this reminds me of a line by Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a line I've mulled over for years. "The days when they told stories, properly told stories, must have been before my time. I never heard anyone tell a story."

INTERVIEWER

You say you worked very little on the theme of childhood, but there's that text called "La Calle Rimbaud" (Rimbaud Street, 1994) ...

VILA-MATAS

I wrote that because my friend Mercedes Monmany commissioned me, back in the nineties, to be part of an interesting volume she was putting together about the childhoods of some Spanish writers from my generation. I'd never undertaken the theme of childhood and at first I didn't know what to do, but

out of that came “La Calle Rimbaud,” an essay about the journey between my house on the Calle Rosellón and the Maristes La Immaculada school just off the Passeig de Sant Joan. A five-minute journey, one I’d made each way four times a day for fourteen years. I must have walked it fifteen thousand times!

INTERVIEWER

You once compared that childhood journey to Kafka’s condensed world.

VILA-MATAS

Kafka never strayed far from his personal Passeig de Sant Joan. He barely strayed from the reduced radius of Prague’s Old Town. They say that once, standing at a window of his house, looking out onto the main square of his city, he said to a friend while drawing three circles on the glass, “That’s where my school was, that building there is the university, and a little farther to the left is my office.” He paused, then added, “My whole life contained in the space of these three circles.” It’s the same for me. The Passeig de Sant Joan has become mythic territory in my literature over the years. That journey contained and still contains everything. Whenever I strayed from its path and walk south, although the city certainly did extend beyond the “territory of my childhood,” I would have the feeling I was walking in a barren place, a place with no history. In *Doctor Pasavento* (2005), for example, I invented a parallel world for that Passeig, the Bronx. And “my” Doctor Pasavento had two childhoods, one in Barcelona and the other in New York.

INTERVIEWER

I often think that if only our memories were more expansive, we could understand the complexity of things more easily. But for that journey between your home and school, memory functions very well! It keeps expanding infinitely.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, everything was there on the Passeig de Sant Joan. For example, the paving stones that my friend’s grandma smashed into when she threw herself from a fifth-floor window. She landed not far from the barbershop my mother made me visit twice a week—her way of keeping me out of trouble for a few minutes while she got on with her errands. And on the Passeig there was—and still is, of course—a kind of castle, the classic childhood fantasy, although

it wasn't actually a castle, or was only in my child's imagination, rather the Palau Macaya, by Puig i Cadafalch, which appeared vacant but was in fact inhabited by deaf children who were also, it seemed, orphans, and whom I discovered one day outside the palace. I was completely astounded by their signing—it was the first time I'd ever seen it. I was also astounded that those young people, who were around my age, didn't have parents and were the secret inhabitants of that strange building.

The Passeig was also the location for my initiation into sex—the young nurse whom I fell for, probably because of her uniform, beneath which I could only picture bare flesh—and into politics as well, in the form of my daily encounter with the humble Jewish storekeeper and his wife who sold magazines and comics, and who would occasionally talk about his dark past, a past it took me some time to piece together, ignorant as I was of the Nazis' barbaric history. In my memory, his store resembles Bruno Schulz's "cinnamon shops." Today, that mysterious and dingy place, which seemed like a dark, central European enclave of Mediterranean Barcelona, has become a vulgar and brightly lit bar.

The Passeig also boasted a movie theater. Cine Chile. A neighborhood theater that only showed two movies at any given time, and only those that had been screened a month before at the bigger theaters downtown.

INTERVIEWER

You loved the cinema?

VILA-MATAS

Even more than the cinema, I loved the movie stills on display in three glass cases in the Chile theater foyer, replaced every Monday—invariably the program was weekly. In the first vitrine would be images from the two movies showing that week. In the second, images from the two movies that would screen the following week. And finally, in the third vitrine, you would find—alongside a magical sign that read COMING SOON—the never-before-seen stills from the movies that, as soon as we reached the week's end, would be moved across to the second vitrine. The COMING SOON vitrine gave me a real thrill each Monday because, after what were always interminable Sundays, it represented the one novelty along the monotonous route from my house to school.

INTERVIEWER

Your relationship with cinema persisted, didn't it?

VILA-MATAS

Yes. In the seventies, I went to the movies twice a day. I was a big fan of the kind of cinema being made at that time. And in fact, on my twentieth birthday, in March 1968, I began working for a magazine in Barcelona called *Fotogramas*, which was the very symbol of the “in” scene, one of the most “modern” publications in Spain during Franco's dictatorship. I mainly watched what people used to call underground movies, and at the magazine I became an expert on that particular kind of cinema. Philippe Garrel and his actor Pierre Clémenti were my heroes. I wanted to be like them, above all physically. Indeed, as far as directors went I was more interested in Garrel than Godard—I felt a stronger connection to his work.

It was during that time that I discovered the freedom of auteur cinema. Little did I know, but the influence of this kind of free cinema from the seventies was going to be pivotal to my future writing. I remember going to see *Last Year at Marienbad* twenty-five times, basically because I didn't get it and kept wondering if perhaps I just lacked the intelligence to get what all the hype was about.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see any link, formally, between literature and cinema? There's a moment in one of your essays where you talk about Godard and his love of inserting quotations into his works . . . Is that something you borrowed from him? Does it function the same way—if Godard uses a quotation in a film and you insert a quotation in a novel, is the montage the same?

VILA-MATAS

I'd say the two things are connected, I suppose they must be. I watched all of those Godard movies, interrupted by silent-movie posters bearing eloquent literary quotes, and later, when writing, I wanted somehow to do the same. The ultimate decision to work with quotations from other authors came when Susan Sontag, in her 1985 prologue to *Urban Voodoo* by Edgardo Cozarinsky, praised “his lavish use of quotations in the form of epigraphs,” which reminded her of “the quotation-strewn films of Godard.” I think I



Vila-Matas (fourth from left) with friends, Mallorca, 1980.
“The only prospect of ever stopping writing would be if I immersed myself in life.”

took Sontag’s words as a kind of assurance that it was by no means abnormal, that *ansia* I felt to quote others.

INTERVIEWER

Ansia?

VILA-MATAS

Yes. Anxiousness. A need, I think, to find some vestige of culture in any old frivolity. I watched *Ad Astra*, for example, a few days ago . . . I couldn’t help but compare that space movie to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Brad Pitt’s character’s quest to find his father, lost somewhere in outer space—a search around which the whole movie is structured, just as my latest novel, *Esta bruma insensata*, is structured around a similar search and, incidentally, has its final scenes, a dialogue between two brothers, precisely in the bar of this garden where we’re sitting now—is similar to Conrad’s novel, in which everyone is always talking about Kurtz but Kurtz himself doesn’t appear until the end, and only to utter four stupid words. “The horror! The horror!”

But anyway, how did I get onto this? I’m sure there’s a perfectly good reason, but it’s escaping me. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

Why *are* we talking about this?! Ah, yes, you were talking about relating everything to everything else. But to return to your beginnings, there you were, watching two films a day ...

VILA-MATAS

And then a book came along that changed my life—*Locus Solus*, by Raymond Roussel. I discovered that it was possible to write differently from how people in my country had told me one must write ... It was then that I really started getting into literature. I felt I could see clearly what I'd already glimpsed in Cervantes—that madness, risk, and wisdom could go together.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you study? And even, what did you study?

VILA-MATAS

In the mornings I studied for my law degree, in those days an all-but-inevitable choice for the offspring of Barcelona's middle class, and in the afternoons for a journalism degree, which I found more interesting than memorizing laws I didn't even agree with.

INTERVIEWER

Who were you reading back then? What did the literary landscape look like?

VILA-MATAS

I read the Spanish poets of the so-called Generation of '27—Luis Cernuda, Federico García Lorca, Pedro Salinas—and at that point I had just dipped my feet into narrative prose, but only to read some Juan Benet, a difficult, Faulknerian Spanish novelist.

INTERVIEWER

Am I right that you did your military service in Africa?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, in North Africa. My military service was a lot like *Morocco*, that terrific Josef von Sternberg movie. Or at least I liked to think it was like *Morocco* so

as not to lose all hope, stuck on that dusty base on the edge of the desert for a year. I preferred to imagine I was living the life of Gary Cooper's character, and in the evenings I would stop at all the Arabian coffee shops I came across, always imagining I was being pursued by Marlene Dietrich.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you then?

VILA-MATAS

I turned twenty-three in Africa. And it was there, incidentally, that I wrote my first book, *Mujer en el espejo contemplando el paisaje* (Woman in the mirror contemplating the landscape, 1973). A book that was actually just one sentence, without any punctuation. If you tried to read it, you quickly realized that the book itself literally stopped you from breathing. I mean, you could suffocate. A fairly aggressive avant-garde detail, this absence of punctuation, don't you think? I wrote the book hiding out in a military convenience store where I worked as a clerk in the mornings and, in the afternoons, on the major's orders, I did the bookkeeping. In the process, also on his orders, I was to work out who was stealing the store whiskey supply. In the end I discovered that the one draining that establishment was the major himself.

Whenever I wasn't working, I would sit and write that first novel, which I had begun as a way to avoid wasting too much time during those army days, but never with the intention of publishing it. And yet when I returned to Barcelona, a friend sent it to Tusquets, the independent publishing house that Beatriz de Moura had recently set up, and she insisted on publishing it. I cried, I didn't want to, because all I wanted was to be a movie director. Well now, said Beatriz, clearly made uncomfortable by my outburst, precisely because you're crying like that, I'm definitely going to do it.

As you can see, for me publication was a form of punishment.

INTERVIEWER

You once told me that, as well as publishing your first book, on your return to Barcelona and the magazine *Fotogramas* you fabricated several interviews, including one with Marlon Brando.

VILA-MATAS

Unbeknownst to Elisenda Nadal, the director of *Fotogramas*, it's true, I did make up interviews with Marlon Brando—just terrible, the things I had him say—Rudolf Nureyev, Patricia Highsmith, Anthony Burgess, and others besides. I couldn't speak English and I was afraid Elisenda would sack me when she found out I couldn't even conduct those interviews, let alone translate them—it was my first job—so I decided to just make them up. I began with Marlon Brando and, being young, I had the nerve to make him say these surreal things, like, for example, that he hated hippies because “they only knew how to sleep in the tall grass.”

INTERVIEWER

Do you still recognize yourself in that first novel you wrote?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, because it doesn't traduce who I am. But I recognize myself far more in my second book, *La asesina ilustrada* (The enlightened murderess, 1977). Because *La asesina ilustrada* is a tiny taster—it's a very short book—of what I would go on to produce in the following years. It is also a novella with a strong poetic undercurrent, one that I haven't lost interest in over time. I wrote it in Paris, in Marguerite Duras's *chambre de bonne*, and while it really is a very short work, it took me no less than two years to write—not because I couldn't get the words down on the page, but because it took me so long to work out the murder plot. Although it's also true that I didn't know quite how to tell the story, because up until then I'd only ever read poetry and the works by Juan Benet I mentioned earlier. To put it simply, I had no idea how to narrate, and I wasn't really interested in novels. As a result, my two first books have a strong poetic undercurrent and very little, if any, novelistic force.

INTERVIEWER

I often think that true novelists hate novels and prefer poetry.

VILA-MATAS

Quite possibly. Without a strong connection to poetry, for me the novel doesn't exist.

INTERVIEWER

You've never published poems, though.

VILA-MATAS

No! Because I wrote poetry only until I was sixteen. I remember one title in particular that had airs of a Bob Dylan song. It was called—and this is entirely illustrative of my state of mind in those days—“*Juventud a la intemperie*” (Youth out in the elements).

INTERVIEWER

So what, for you, is this connection between poetry and the novel? A quality of vision?

VILA-MATAS

Probably. That quality comes from some writers' facility for what we might call perception, the art of perceiving what's going to happen. It's a skill, an art, that we see very acutely in Kafka, for example ... Literature is a mirror with the capacity, like some clocks, to run ahead of time. But we mustn't mistake perception for prophecy itself. Kafka loved that work by Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, with its assessment of how stupidity will spread, unstoppable, in the Western world. But Kafka went one step further than the rest. He went beyond his own sources of inspiration in that, unlike Flaubert, he described the very heart of the problem, the situation of total impossibility, of impotence, that the individual faces before the devastating machine of power, bureaucracy, political systems.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that the novelists we both love don't so much relate events as explore an image. When I think about Kafka, there's always this idea of a poetic situation he wants to explore or scrutinize.

VILA-MATAS

The kind of writer I like best is the one who appears to have taken the advice Barthes gave to a critic friend to renounce false objectivity and “join literature no longer as ‘object’ of analysis but as activity of writing.” In other words, the kind of writer I like best is the one who has, at some stage, been a critic, and



With Salvador Dalí, Cadaqués, 1978.

who at a certain point realizes that if he really wanted to honor literature he must immediately himself become a writer—step inside the bullring and prolong, by other means, what was always at stake in literature.

INTERVIEWER

And who could be defined as one of the “explorers of the abyss.”

VILA-MATAS

Well, yes, because the writers I love tend to be professional explorers of the abyss who have an inclination to dissect things, to reinvent themselves in lengthy digressions that cover all manner of seemingly anodyne details that just might give us the clue to something that we cannot see—perhaps for lack

of light—but that exists at the center of a “reality” that, in my opinion, is yet to be constructed. There is a Kafka aphorism, from one of the Zürau notebooks, that has become the motto for my own writing. “We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us.” In *Esta bruma insensata* I recount the life of a secondary figure in literature, and I tell it like a catastrophe in slow motion, with everything suspended, like “bullet time” in *The Matrix*. Simon Schneider is definitely infiltrated or contaminated by parallel dimensions. The whole novel seems to speak to the dominance of the interior world over reality, which takes place somewhere else, in negative territory ... We know about the positive, that’s been done to death. But I’ve found plenty of work to be done on the negative.

INTERVIEWER

That reminds me, before going to Africa you made two avant-garde, Daliesque short films, in Cadaqués ...

VILA-MATAS

The first was called *Todos los jóvenes tristes* (All the sad young things) and its whereabouts are unknown. It was based on a story by Ray Bradbury, the story of two fishermen who find a mermaid and don’t want her to go back to sea. The other was *Fin de verano* (Summer’s end). It was inspired by Pasolini’s *Teorema* and told the story of the meticulous destruction of a bourgeois family by a femme fatale.

INTERVIEWER

And that was the end of your career as a filmmaker?

VILA-MATAS

Yes. And, at the same time, the start of my career as a writer, because a few days after the film premiered, I had to leave for Africa, where I began writing the short novel that, after its publication, gave me the ridiculous idea that I was a writer, and as such led me to Paris, where I would try to emulate Hemingway’s life there, the life he describes in *A Moveable Feast*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know anyone in Paris?

VILA-MATAS

I knew Adolfo Arrieta, a friend of Marguerite Duras's, after meeting him in Madrid. Almost as soon as I arrived I got in on the underground movies he was shooting around the Saint-Germain quarter. It was a happy encounter, since Arrieta made the kind of cinema I would have liked to make, so it reassured me to know that someone was making it on my behalf. He was a walking camera. Today that is less extraordinary, because everyone goes around with their cell phone filming everything. But in those days, in 1974, it was a radical cinematographic proposition. In my mind, by filming everything Arrieta was cinema itself, and life was like a feature film of varying lengths. To accompany Arrieta on his walks through Paris was to constantly make movies.

INTERVIEWER

In *Never Any End to Paris*, you recount your time in the city and the writing of what became your second novel. Do you still feel a kinship with that portrait of a young artist in Paris, in Marguerite Duras's garret? Or would you now disown him and his concerns?

VILA-MATAS

I fully recognize myself in it! Today I know that the best thing about that whole experience was getting to know Duras. I arrived in Paris tired of "normal people," and tired, too, of all the prim, proper writers that proliferated at the time—not to mention these days, today there are even more. In Paris I confirmed that the writers who appealed to me were those like Duras, the kind who don't appear on school honors plaques and who are divisive, distinctly unedifying, full of defects, but show immense talent. I think that really terrible side of Duras—she was spectacularly brutal—had a great influence on me.

INTERVIEWER

Brutal?

VILA-MATAS

Brutal because her obsession with writing sprang from a genuine belief that she could transcend the words and reach another—inexpressible—reality. And in order to reach it she was prepared to do anything. She was, frankly,

scary. To put it another way, she was a writer on a mission. If I remember correctly, she described this process of reaching “the inexpressible” as “piercing the black shadow,” an “interior” shadow. I also remember that, given her belief that absolutely everybody possesses an inner shadow, she found it strange that not everybody wrote.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve said somewhere that you used to really enjoy acting, cross-dressing, and so on . . .

VILA-MATAS

My transformation into Marlene Dietrich, singing like she did in her final phase—barely moving, like an effigy—was a roaring success. In fact, I’ve only truly known success, what we call success, impersonating Dietrich in Arrieta’s hotel room. People would flock from all over the city to see me. I was really quite amazed to discover that you don’t have to move much to have success like that, such inordinate success.

INTERVIEWER

I remember you showing me photos of magnificent poses. Can you say a little more about this love for transformation, theater, gender deconstruction?

VILA-MATAS

I enjoy creating new realities. In that regard I haven’t changed. And I enjoy becoming another, male or female, living lives different from the only one it’s supposed I’ll get to live.

INTERVIEWER

Literature creates reality.

VILA-MATAS

It’s true. For me the most appealing thing about literature is observing how it can destabilize our existence, pushing the question of representation and language out in front. That is literature’s most thrilling aspect. Because language doesn’t reproduce reality, rather makes and unmakes it from an unappealable subjectivity, which drags its own political and aesthetic baggage with it. I think

this has been clear since the second volume of the *Quixote* was written. Plenty of intelligent people have told me that since *Bartleby & Co.* what I've been writing is a sort of automythography, something similar—notwithstanding the obvious insurmountable distances—to the metaliterary atmosphere of part 2 of the *Quixote*.

INTERVIEWER

And one could argue that, without part 2, there would be no history of the novel.

VILA-MATAS

Absolutely, there wouldn't. I couldn't agree more, and I'm really starting to think that you and I are quite alike.

INTERVIEWER

Valeria Luiselli once told me that there are two Latin American authors who aren't from Latin America—you and me.

VILA-MATAS

It's a very shrewd observation, I think, the proof being our shared admiration for the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who without doubt is most remembered in Latin America—maybe because, as Ricardo Piglia said, he was really “an Argentine writer.”

INTERVIEWER

How did you first encounter our Latin American tradition? You said you discovered Borges quite late, for example.

VILA-MATAS

At one point I planned to write a book about my relationship with Latin America, which would have answered your question. It all began when I read Bioy Casares and Borges, who blew me away. Incidentally, in my mind I saw them as two classic writers from the sixteenth century, in the sense that I never imagined them as being alive. I never imagined that I would end up having a friendship with Bioy. So that book I didn't write, but that would have answered your question, would have begun with me reading those two great Argentine

writers, followed by a decisive scene, the foundational scene of my connection to Latin American literature, the day of my first encounter with Sergio Pitol in Barcelona, around 1970. He was the first writer who paid any real attention to what I wrote, to my first babblings, and he gave me the confidence to stick at it. And whom should he have translated into Spanish but Gombrowicz himself. After a while, through my friendship with Pitol I was invited to visit Mexico, a country that has left a greater impression on me than any other.

INTERVIEWER

Which works do you love most by Pitol? *The Art of Flight*?

VILA-MATAS

The Art of Flight is the most important. But I really love a quartet of stories he wrote in Russia, *Nocturno de Bujara* (Bukhara nocturne), and the short novel *The Journey*, which is a mini masterpiece. In all these marvelous books there is a real need to travel and mix cultures, which is what he praises above all in Antonio Tabucchi when he says the Italian belongs to that group of admirable writers who, despite not having been born in bilingual or notably border regions, feel a personal calling to embrace different languages. The works of such writers, Pitol says, are both bridge and meeting point, and they consecrate the nuptial act of two or more cultures. Pitol put Tabucchi in that group, which also included Borges, Pessoa, and Larbaud.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a link here to Gombrowicz again, and other writers, like Musil—in their *mestizaje de géneros*, their blend of genres, of fiction and essay? Something that also explains the shared love among these writers of the journal as a form.

VILA-MATAS

There is a link there, yes. Undeniably. Few writers have combined fiction and essay better than Pitol. He was my maestro. Whenever I said that, he'd smile, as if he didn't believe me. [*Laughs*]

INTERVIEWER

And Bolaño? I feel like Bolaño represents another major Latin American encounter for you. How did you meet him? Was it here in Barcelona?



Receiving the FIL Literature Prize in Romance Languages at the Guadalajara Book Fair, 2015.

VILA-MATAS

In Blanes. Paula, my wife, a literature teacher, had recently started a job in that town on the Costa Brava. One day she said, 'There's a Chilean writer in Blanes. And I said, Okay, right. A Chilean. Is that all? Yes, that was all. But it was none other than Bolaño. We met him on November 21, 1996, in Bar Novo, which I remember as a nondescript, drab sort of place. I'd gone for an orange juice with Paula and had just ordered when he walked in.

Meeting Bolaño was key for me. There was something that really united us and that I didn't find easily with other writers, a passion for literature. He was also a great help to me at a critical literary moment, because I was writing *El viaje vertical* (The vertical voyage, 1999) and I was convinced that nothing special happened in the novel, and he wanted to hear the plot and when I told him he said I was mad, that lots of things happened in the novel. With those words I think he spurred me on to keep writing for the rest of my life. A year after that conversation, I began to write *Bartleby & Co.*, a book written under a rare kind of inspiration.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that *The Savage Detectives* showed you a new way of writing. Could you be more precise about that? In its composition?

VILA-MATAS

If I'm honest I can't overlook the fact that I hotly challenged Bolaño over the structure of *The Savage Detectives*. He was furious, but ultimately it was an argument that reinforced our friendship and thanks to which I discovered that he didn't want to retouch anything in the book at all. It also made me see that every last detail of the novel had been deliberated and that nothing was there by accident. The conviction with which he told me all this—he knew every word he'd written—greatly impressed me.

These days, when I look back on that disagreement, I realize that what Bolaño was really trying to tell me was that he knew exactly what he was doing and that he'd spent years in Blanes thinking about and writing that book. He'd also had problems with his liver for years, although no one really believed it, and certainly not that he would die so soon. But he was fully aware that he didn't have much time left and perhaps that explains why he wrote with such intensity in the final years.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk a little about your own intensity. You once wrote that you could summarize your work as a series of reflections on the art of writing. This concept, I think, is very visible in your way of incorporating quotes from other texts in your writing, as well as the names of other authors, and even characters from other texts. It becomes most noticeable in *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, but I kind of sense it in your previous works.

VILA-MATAS

It was already there, yes, but only sketched out, muttered. Where it appears for the first time in any kind of decisive way is in *A Brief History*.

INTERVIEWER

It's as if *A Brief History*, written in 1985, was your second first work—the first one where you play with real names.

VILA-MATAS

It caught people's attention that the characters of that "radical fiction"—that's what they called the novel in Mexico, and it surprised me because I'd believed every word I'd written—were familiar figures like Duchamp, Dalí, Picabia, Scott Fitzgerald, Walter Benjamin, et cetera. In Spain, especially, it surprised people because it seems it was unlike anything they were used to. Back then, Barcelona was European and Madrid was very provincial. When I think about it, what I wrote wasn't so unusual—after all, I'd very much had in mind the experiences of other writers doing the same. Like the extraordinary Peter Handke at the end of *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, in which a real person, John Ford, appears and has a conversation with the book's protagonists—a beautiful episode that had fiction and reality flirt in a way that was entirely new to me. I found Ford's way of speaking just brilliant. He spoke in the plural, like so many Americans. When Judith asks Ford if he dreams a lot, Ford replies, "We hardly dream at all any more. And when we do have a dream, we forget it. We talk about everything, so there's nothing left to dream about."

INTERVIEWER

Another aspect of the same game of yours is that you've also used real quotes and attributed them to different writers or characters.

VILA-MATAS

That began in *A Brief History*, a book written in a kind of unbroken euphoria that I still can't explain today.

INTERVIEWER

But there's something else in all this that interests me, something to do with an idea of literature and the anonymous, or the depersonalized. There's that line you love by Satie, "*Je m'appelle Erik Satie comme tout le monde*." I think what interests me is that you often use an I who is writing, a narrator who is you and not you, simultaneously, because it's an I that is also a collage of sentences by other writers. And when you use a person's real name, too, it's as if the name has been emptied out in some way.

All this reminds me of a moment in your Caracas speech, in 2001, accepting the Premio Rómulo Gallegos, where you argue that literature exists beyond its writers.

VILA-MATAS

We see this, for example, in Borges. Literature that loses itself to anonymity, literature that openly recognizes that originality doesn't exist in any form. Borges believed that writing is no different from transcribing and that all writers are essentially scribes. That literature is a great palimpsest, a mosaic of quotes in which authors and works are formed out of the authors and works that came before them. By this logic, the modern idea of artistic originality would be a sham. The amanuensis, the writer, never creates from nothing, but instead manipulates stories that have already been passed down. Or, to put it another way, modifies, intensifies, and distorts that which is already given.

INTERVIEWER

You like to borrow names of other writers, but characters more rarely.

VILA-MATAS

Yes, but I'm not sure why. Originally the process went like that thanks to my spontaneous selection of authors from my library. This is what would happen—I wouldn't know where the story of *A Brief History* was going, so I would leave my desk, for example interrupting my writing on a line that went, "And then, Henry Miller, turning to his friends, said ..." and I would blind pick any book from my library, open it at random, and the first or second sentence I read upon opening my eyes was the one I would assign to poor Miller. This, among other things, helped me resolve the problem of not knowing how to go on. If a line didn't fit, it wasn't an issue because I would just modify it myself, change it, until it did fit with the previous sentence.

INTERVIEWER

So you never suffered from the anxiety of not knowing where the story was going.

VILA-MATAS

Never, because any line taken at random can work within the story that I'm telling and drive the plot on. Ideas, too. It is, at heart, a method similar to that of Raymond Roussel, which he explains in his prodigious *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*.

Incidentally, *Esta bruma insensata* includes a subtle takeoff of my own

process, because the central character is an “expert in quotes,” a kind of walking dictionary of phrases, a man whose job is to apportion and sell literary quotes to other authors. An unusual trade, and little known, which explains why there isn’t a union of *hokusais*—*hokusais* is the name these quote artists go by. There’s an unexpected story in the quotes themselves that appear in *Esta bruma insensata*, because they wove together to form a plot that not even I had seen coming, and in which I end up involving none other than . . . Thomas Pynchon. Who, by the way, could just as well be right here in this garden. I only say this because the final exchange in the novel takes place in the very spot where we are now, in the garden of the Hotel Alma, in central Barcelona. A complete coincidence, I might add. But by this logic, you could very well be Pynchon and I just haven’t realized yet.

INTERVIEWER

I remember something Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster wrote about you, which I thought was wonderful. She said, “The scripting of a story through referencing events that occur in one’s life, or scripting events in one’s life so that they develop into a story, would only be marginally interesting if it wasn’t connected with a deep knowledge of writing. For Vila-Matas, this switching between his own life and the world of his stories is always mixed with his exploration of the giant library that the world has become.”

It’s as if the exploration you began in *A Brief History* has become more and more contemporary. Everyone now lives with a kind of portable library, an assortment of other people’s words and images.

VILA-MATAS

I loved Dominique’s piece, too. But then, I also had no idea what an impression I’d left on her when, talking about Fritz Lang’s *Secret beyond the Door* one day, I mentioned that I’d never seen the movie but had once bumped into Lang in the public restroom of the Hotel Maria Cristina in San Sebastián. Dominique doubted the veracity of my crossing paths with Lang and from this reasoned that all my writing must be based on fabrications.

INTERVIEWER

Something that interests me in the way you describe this problem of continuation is that it’s as if you think about literature in almost topological terms.



“I enjoy creating new realities. In that regard I haven’t changed.”

VILA-MATAS

Well, I hadn’t given it much thought, but it may well be true. In fact, now maybe I see it, the real core of the works by some of the writers I most admire often lies in a spontaneous gesture, for me very much linked to childhood, a kind of expression of surprise before the world and life, always followed by a buried desire to remain at the threshold, undoubtedly precisely in order to keep reinforcing that surprise at being in the world. We can only live trusting that new and agreeable surprises await us, and perhaps that is why we pause at

thresholds. I remember how Elizabeth Hardwick, near the beginning of her book *Sleepless Nights*, reminds us of one of Goethe's aphorisms—"Beginnings are always delightful; the threshold is the place to pause." I find that line utterly beguiling. In fact, it quite literally has the effect of making me stop whatever I'm saying, and pausing.

INTERVIEWER

I feel like in your writing this problem of pausing, of continuing, is both technical and also one of your fiction's deep investigations. As if the truth will have to take the form of digression—only expressed through what you once called "an indefatigably expandable prose."

VILA-MATAS

It would seem so, yes. I think it's a theme that speaks to many writers. I think a lot about the question of continuity when, for example, in an interview I'm asked about my working routine. I have a theory that it's a question that began to be frequently asked after Hemingway's *Paris Review* interview, in which he said, "You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again." The Hemingwayesque idea of always pausing when you know what will happen next caused a stir, and his advice became legendary. The practice—so widespread today—of asking writers about their working routine must come from there. It seems like an innocent question, but it masks another one, which is, how do you carry on writing when you don't know where the novel is going?

INTERVIEWER

I imagine that not following Goethe's advice, not pausing at the threshold, can lead into a trap, can't it? To continue the topological talk, you've often spoken about the problem of avoiding a trap or dead end—that every book leads you to the verge of not being able to write, or, as you put it, "Dead ends have been a central motor of my work."

VILA-MATAS

I did say that. Since *Bartleby & Co.*, whenever I finish a book my friends will ask me, How will you carry on writing now? It's as if I'd taken my stories to

the point of no return, to a cul-de-sac. Whenever I notice this happen, whenever I notice that my book has resulted in a terrifying dead end—I always exhaust my explorations of the abyss—I like to remind myself of something Bioy Casares told me in a plaza in the Recoleta district in Buenos Aires. He said, Intelligence is useful when, on finding yourself completely trapped, you are able to find the little hole from which to escape the problem trapping you.

Always, after writing a book, I have felt trapped in a cul-de-sac, with no obvious way to continue writing, and yet always, relying on intelligence, I have found the smallest hole from which to escape that trap. My novels and essays from this century have all come out of these dead ends. Perhaps that's why they tend to open with characters already in extreme situations, on the verge of a dead end, completely unaware that they can get into an even tighter spot.

INTERVIEWER

As if writing, for you, were the construction of the prison from which you later find an escape.

VILA-MATAS

That's a good way to look at it. And you're probably right, the proof being that when I finish a novel, when I'm not creating anything, I feel extraordinarily free.

This all helps me see that writing a novel is a wonderful adventure, but at the same time one always eventually realizes that the novel was born dead, because it's a genre that cannot represent reality. Of course this "manufacturing defect" and reflecting on it is precisely what makes the construction of the novel so appealing.

INTERVIEWER

There are multiple ways, in other words, of constructing what might be believed to be a truth?

VILA-MATAS

Absolutely. In fact, the writer only becomes the writer in the current sense of the word in the nineteenth century, with the discovery of different ways of writing, all of them incommensurable, and the ensuing decision of which to opt for.

INTERVIEWER

And in the twenty-first century?

VILA-MATAS

Whenever people bring this up, I always think of “the chats between the retired mathematicians” that Ricardo Piglia once mentioned to me.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of chats?

VILA-MATAS

Informal gatherings that Piglia himself used to join when he lived in Princeton. These get-togethers are attended by a select group of mathematicians of irrefutable talent, only that, at a very young age—as young as forty—they are already emeriti because they’ve discovered everything that needed discovering within their particular area. Brilliant types, Piglia would say, great enthusiasts of Western literature, expert readers of Joyce and his *Finnegans Wake*, of Samuel Beckett and Witold Gombrowicz, people as fascinated by Arno Schmidt as by Jorge Luis Borges. According to Piglia, there have never been such magnificent, incredible readers. They know they aren’t going to come up with anything new, that they’ve had their best ideas, no matter how much life lies ahead of them. So what do they do? They read. They spend months, for example, studying *The Divine Comedy*, one canto per semester. As evening falls they come together to sit around a table exchanging their impressions, discussing literature as if it were extinct. Just as I believe that literature in the future will become extinct, or already has. This image sums it up, sundown, a group of retired mathematicians, wise and trustworthy readers, discussing an old pursuit—the literary one—as enthralling as it is imperiled.

INTERVIEWER

Something I love in your writing is its dedication to writing as an absolute. And it makes me wonder about the relation of literature to publication. You’re not just a great fictionalizer of writing but also of reading, of what happens when writing reaches another person. Could you imagine a work that you would never publish?

VILA-MATAS

I can imagine it, yes. Floating above the story of universal literature! But I chose in favor of publishing everything when a childhood-friend-cum-foe accused me in a bar in Palma de Mallorca of “writing to publish.” His accusation—because I understood it was a reproach and an accusation—seemed very aggressive to me. Incidentally, I’ve never read anything he’s written. He’s never published. One day I asked him to tell me the titles of the books he claimed to have written and that he kept in a drawer in his desk, and he did. He sent me a piece of paper on which he’d simply written eight titles, which were all equally ingenious. Only, I’d have liked to see the corresponding covers, too.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you think this aggression comes from? It’s as if publication in some way represents the shame of literature, as if publication and literature are a contradiction.

VILA-MATAS

Perhaps, perhaps publication and literature are a contradiction. On the one hand I want to be read and admired, and on the other hand I want to be exposed as an impostor. I don’t like being noticed, but when I am I feel flattered ... I shouldn’t publish anything—deep down I’m very shy—but I do enjoy myself whenever I’m obliged to appear in public, et cetera. Maybe I’m hysterical and obsessive at the same time. And maybe my friend-cum-foe was even worse.

INTERVIEWER

And in the process of literature becoming a published work, how much do you correct or rework?

VILA-MATAS

In recent years I’ve edited myself a lot more than I used to. I edited less when I wrote *Montano’s Malady* and *Doctor Pasavento*, at the start of this century, probably because back then I didn’t strive in any way for perfection. Back then I wrote very uninhibitedly in the knowledge that if I messed up two or three books in a row, it wouldn’t be a tragedy and I’d always have time to redeem myself. I think I wrote more “freely” than I do now, and very much

with the aim of making the priggish stories of some of my fellow Spaniards look ridiculous. I recently read that freedom in writing is linked to a writer's younger years. Later, some of that freedom is lost and replaced by wisdom, thus improving his or her reflective capacity. But sometimes I think that if that's true—and I very much fear that it is—wisdom can really be a millstone for a writer. So everything has its pros and cons.

But going back to editing, these days I edit a lot. With *Esta bruma insensata*, my most recent book, I edited like mad. Sometimes, when I'm asked if I always write, I reply, I don't write, I edit.

INTERVIEWER

It sometimes seems to me that literary culture here in Spain—unlike in Latin America—can place a major value on sincerity. Is that accurate? But if so, what does that mean for this idea that truth, or the real, is always constructed?

VILA-MATAS

Yes, sincerity and the confessional are highly valued here. What people like most of all is when something sounds authentic. It's nonsense. They are constantly mistaking sincerity for good literature, which leads them to favor "reality"—it's not clear to me which—over fiction. As it happens, I was asked about this just yesterday, about the relationship between reality and fiction, and I quoted Wittgenstein, who, it seems to me, had some light to shed on this question. "Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot, and also a picture of steam comes out of a picture of the pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the picture of the pot?" And in Spain most people think it's all boiling. It's a strange country. Sometimes I bandy around a Nabokov line in which he jokes about this distinction between reality and fiction, always in the hope of triggering at least one minor crisis in the "nonfiction" writers. "Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth." Nabokov is spot-on there, and if you ask me it's nonsense to talk about writing non-fiction. Don't these writers realize that any narrated version of a true story is always a kind of fiction? The moment you organize the world into words, you modify its nature.

INTERVIEWER

Something I've always admired in your novels is your ability to disrupt the normal scale of things. Small things become big and others disappear altogether. It's as if a miniature had grown to full size. As if a small detail or quote had taken charge of an entire book.

VILA-MATAS

Less is more, and we know that throughout history the human tendency to take interest in minutiae has led to great things. I don't much care for all that is important, solemn, great. Kafka, in his moment, was a master at altering the normal scale of things. It was Piglia, actually, who explained this. In *Formas breves* (Short forms), he says, "Kafka tells the secret story clearly and simply, while furtively narrating the visible story until it turns into something enigmatic and dark. This inversion forms the crux of the 'kafkaian.'" Kafka, like Borges and Poe and Duchamp, knew how to take a narrative problem and turn it into anecdote ... This last one, for example, makes me laugh, because it sounds dangerously similar to what I would talk to Barcelona's taxi drivers about on my nocturnal journeys across the city.

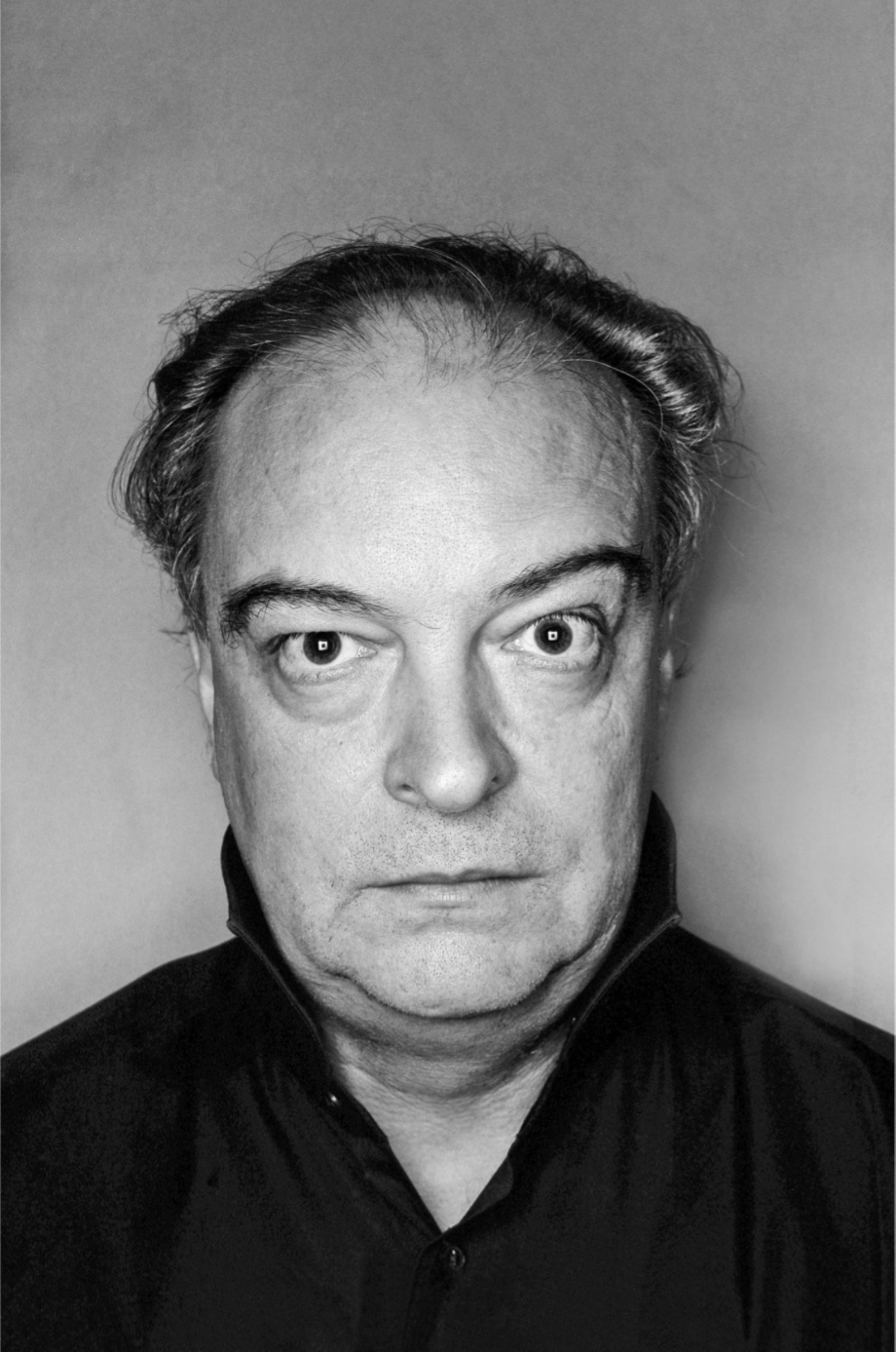
INTERVIEWER

Duchamp—especially the *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*—has had a real influence on your writing, hasn't he?

VILA-MATAS

He's always been there, that's all I can say. I loved the cover of the Spanish edition of those conversations with Pierre Cabanne, the front of which features *Monte Carlo Bonds*, the Duchamp readymade of a soapy face crowning the top of a casino bond for the Monacan roulette. But even more appealing to me than the front cover of that Anagrama edition was the blurb on the back, which began, "Marcel Duchamp was, according to André Breton, 'one of the most intelligent men (and for many the most annoying) of this century.' He was also one of the most enigmatic." The truth is, it's impossible to understand my work without *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*—my work, or even my life. I took it almost as "self-help," and some of Duchamp's comments to Cabanne had a profound effect on me. In that exchange, he wrote,

Paris, 2006. "The writers I love tend to be professional explorers of the abyss."



I hope that a day will come when we will be able live without having to work. I have had the good fortune to be able to dodge between the raindrops. At a certain point, I realized that it wasn't necessary to burden one's life with too many things, too many things to do, with those things people call a wife, children, a house in the country, an automobile. Happily, it is something that I realized very early.

Those words were the starting point for everything. It might all seem a little naive, but that's how it was, I saw an entire path or model I must follow. Dodging between the raindrops!

INTERVIEWER

Your *Brief History of Portable Literature* especially would be impossible without Duchamp—and, I guess, therefore, without the subsequent history and example of conceptual art.

VILA-MATAS

Although my actual involvement in the contemporary art world really began with a phone call to my house from Sophie Calle, asking to meet me. I didn't know her. Or, rather, I'd seen her once before. I had been due to interview her for *El País* but in the end was too frightened and couldn't even speak to her. I turned around and fled. Ten years later she called my house, completely oblivious to my earlier fear and flight, and we agreed to meet in Paris the following week. And there, in Café de Flore, she proposed that I write her life over a period of six months. She said that, with the exception of killing another person, she'd do anything I asked her to do. I accepted the proposal and, on my return to Barcelona, wrote the first chapter of the story I'd decided she would have to try to live out, on the Azores. But she never went to those islands, so the whole thing was abandoned. At the end of that chapter, she was supposed to discover and photograph my ghost, whom I'd situated in a derelict house on a cliff in São Miguel. But the whole thing went cold after a somewhat dramatic story, which I later recounted—as if it were fiction—in *Because She Never Asked* (2007, 2015).

INTERVIEWER

Tucked away inside her proposal it's as if there was an opportunity to explore if there could be a difference between what we call life and what we call literature.

VILA-MATAS

I remember being in a café with Carolina López, Bolaño's widow, and I filled her in on what was going on with Sophie, including the fact that Sophie still hadn't set off on the story that she'd asked me to write for her. In other words, that she hadn't gone to the Azores, which was crushing me because, all the while I waited, I couldn't write anything else. And at that point Carolina warned me, from one friend to another, that what Sophie had proposed was a dangerous game because it was very much connected to life but had nothing to do with literature. It goes beyond literature, she said. I swear I hadn't thought about this until that very moment. I think that was the first time I realized that there was something beyond literature. The fringes of literature and, as such, of language.

INTERVIEWER

And when did you meet Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster?

VILA-MATAS

It was after my meeting with Sophie Calle—and it was the exact opposite of my experience with Sophie. From the very start we understood each other extraordinarily well. Dominique didn't ask me to write her life, but to join forces to create something undefined that over the years has remained exactly that, undefined. Dominique is one of the most tirelessly creative people I've ever known, she lives in creation itself.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe all true creation has to be undefined in some way. It's like the way, in your own writing, two models of a future literature seem to jostle and overlap. There's an idea that a future novel will be hybrid, multiple, essayistic—a novel that does away with grand ideas like plot, or character, or unity. But also an idea that in some way the future work won't be literary at all, but closer to a gesture, or a practice.

VILA-MATAS

I'm very interested in the concept of the "readymade novel," which maintains that today's avant-garde writers aspire to be conceptual artists and that their novels should be considered contemporary art. Just as Marcel Duchamp asked if a urinal can be art, the readymade novel asks what literature can be, and what it should be in the future. Instead of trying to make sense of reality by means of many concrete details, or from a place of omniscience, or from multiple points of view, or anything else that we traditionally expect of fiction, the readymade novel sets out one idea or asks one question. The readymade novel is more interested in the concept behind a work of art—behind itself—than in its execution.

INTERVIEWER

All this reminds me that not long ago you wrote that, in the end, difficult art would have its moment and we'd see spectators and readers evolve into artists and poets themselves. And that more than once you've referred to a story of Petronius. "In other words," you write in *Bartleby & Co.*, "if *Don Quixote* is about a dreamer who dares to live out his dream, Petronius' story is that of the writer who dares to live out what he has written, and for that reason ceases to write."

VILA-MATAS

It suggests to me that the only prospect of ever stopping writing would be if I immersed myself in life, if I lived it to the full, without the need for writing.

INTERVIEWER

And what would "living life to the full" consist of?

VILA-MATAS

If I knew that, I'd already be doing it.

Good Boy

ELOGHOSA OSUNDE

I've always had a problem with introductions. To me, they don't matter. It's either you know me or you don't—you get? If you don't, the main thing you need to know is that I am a hustler through and through. I'm that guy that gets shit done. Simple. Kick me out of the house at fifteen—a barged-in-on secret behind me, a heartbreak falling into my shin as I walk—and watch me grow some real useful muscles. Watch me learn how to play all the necessary games, good and ungood; watch me learn how to notice red eyes, how to figure out when to squat and bite the road's shoulder with all my might. Watch me learn why a *good* knife (and not just any type of good, but the moral-less kind, the fatherlike kind) is necessary when you're sleeping under a bridge. Just a week after that, watch me swear on my own destiny and insist to the God who made me that I'm bigger than that lesson now; then watch my ori align. Watch me walk from that cursed

bridge a free man and learn how to really make money between age damaged and age twenty-two; watch me pay the streets what I owe in blood and notes (up front, no installments); watch me never lack where to sleep again. Second thing to know about me: I know how to make the crucial handshakes. Third thing: I no dey make the same mistake twice. Almost evict me from my place in Surulere at age x and watch rage stab me forward. Watch how in three weeks, I treat my own fuckup with not just a room but an apartment four times as big in Gbagada. The how is irrelevant. Fourth thing: I am serious about being alive. Because of this, there is nothing I can't survive. Anybody who knows me knows that; the rest na breeze. It is my God-given right to be here. This life? Me, I must chop am, and it must be on my own terms. What makes all this worth it, otherwise? Nothing. Someone I know joked just two days ago sef, that even if I end up in hell at the end of the day, I won't stop kicking, I won't stop reaching for something, I will insist on my space. In reality, I'm not the kind of guy who ends up in a place like that because fifth thing: I'm not the kind of guy who believes in hell, or in a god who imagines a lake of fire. I just can't see it—you have a mind that's wider than the sky and that is what you use it to picture? To me, that sounds too petty, too human, too undivine to be real. People sell all kinds of gods all the time. I know the One that moves me and it's not the one I was raised on. To me, you can't say you're love, choose to roast people for eternity, and then pretend it breaks your heart. Pick a side. Anyhow, the guy said the hell thing to make a point and it's true—luck finds my head, business competes with my blood on who keeps me best, and either might fail depending on the day. So now, I always wonder: What do people want to use my name for? It will not buy you anything. Name-drop me and they'll still redirect you to me. In that sense, it's irrelevant to know. I answer a first name only and it's for the people I know. But my story? Ah damn. Now, that? That, many people can do a whole lot with.

START HERE: I'm not inspiring. When I first moved to Lagos, I didn't come here with good mind. I came here with one mission and one mission only: to get a lot of money, so as to prove my popsy wrong. That's all. For me, blood family doesn't mean shit. Family is your spine dividing into four, hot metal in your back, red life shooting out of you in a geyser. It's you falling forward in slow motion, a yelp in your neck, whole outfit ruined in the air. You, reading this, you're here, alive, because your parents synced and you showed

up. That's it. Even if they planned for a child, it was still a raffle draw. A hand went in a bowl and picked you. The tree shook and a fruit fell down. If it pains you to read, then cry. It's deeper for your mum because she probably pushed so hard her body gasped, only for your ungrateful head to come out of it. But your father? Half the time, all he did was grunt and drop some bands. And on the way to where I am, what I learned is that anybody with money can drop money. And most men, eh? Can drop money. Even poor men. That's something I wish my mother had known so she wouldn't have *but-at-leasted* herself into the ground. Money loves circles and men run in circles stinking, adrenaline pumping. Money hardly goes to lone dots, unless you threaten it. And even then, believe me when I tell you it probably took a hundred-person team to execute that threat, most of them unnamed. The face of a thing is not the body of it. Even women with serious money—few and far between dots—have to pretend they don't have. There's a reason, you know? It's in the code; it'll take a new world for that to stop being true. Men with small money will still impress each other over beer, men with medium money will find ways to barter, and men with large money will slice this country like cake if they get sad enough, bored enough. Dropping money is all tied to pride and they taught us that we need pride. So for many of us, that act alone—of rescuing someone, of fulfilling a duty, of settling a debt—pumps blood somewhere specific.

WHEN I LOST HOME, my goal was simple. All those insults that my father used to be casual about, I wanted to erase them. I wanted to outdo him, so that when people called our family name there would be more to say about me than about the man who picked me up as a boy and stretched me into a man in the space of an afternoon. I was on the streets so fast it felt like I dreamed those memories of the Man reading a newspaper, the Head of the House watching the news, the Father petting the koboko like something safe. He beat the sound out of all of them, so those days when I used to play my mind back wondering if things could have been different, I met more bite than bark. But he hardly talked anyway, except to say things like *You won't amount to anything*, so it's not like I was missing much. He was furious a lot, which makes sense. People are like that when they hate themselves.

HE WAS WRONG about what he said, though. Embarrassingly wrong. What I have amounted to can buy who he was, at least twice. My father was

a well-educated man, a man who had a *should-be-so* for everything. The table *should be* set so, all family members *should be* at home by seven P.M., breakfast *should* always include eggs, a wife *should be* this way, a husband *should be* that. Dutiful, he never excused himself from his own hand. The one time he was unable to pay our school fees and our mother offered, the house did a headstand and blood rushed into our brains, I swear. We sat at home that term. That's what *should* can do. About me, he believed I should be grateful he still chose to raise me, having noticed my *softness* from early; he believed I owed him something and feared that if I didn't love the way he prescribed for me, I'd ruin my life. Funny, because his love tied his hands often; his love made an army out of us. That day when he walked in on me and my classmate, I saw him fight himself to the ground. What followed was what he thought he *had* to do. He questioned every feeling, tested it for fitness. If he didn't think it would suit a man his size, he'd treat it like a son, send it away with its head bowed. Rage was good, rage was a feeling with a hard core and some biceps. So, a beautiful rainfall of blows. What kind of weak father would have no problem with what he saw? What kind of weak man would see such a thing and let his son go free? *Look at yourself*, he kept saying, staring me down. *Look at yourself. You've destroyed the family name.* I dropped the family name after four years away. They can keep it. It stopped meaning anything to me. Any weight put on my name since then comes straight to me. Is for me. Just me.

HE USED TO SAY, *It's as you make your bed that you lie in it.* I sleep in a made bed every night. King size. It's someone else's job to make it. He also loved to say, *Any man who comes back home after seven P.M. is a thief.* Some days, I leave home to work at seven P.M. because I can. Na me get my life. I'm many things but a thief is not one of them. The easiest way to put what I do in context is to quote Jay-Z: *I'm not a businessman. I'm a business, man.* Everywhere you look around you, there are gaps in markets. I see them and fill them. That's what I do. I did some shady things in my earlier days, I can't front, but those ones are not for the books. When popsy first kicked me out, I went to my uncle's house—a pastor, and he housed me. I don't discuss those years for good reason. Let's just put it like this: everything that was "holy" in me left me there. Na there my eye first tear. So when I left, I worked with churches, supplying actors for dramatic miracles. I trained them from experience—taught them how to faint, how to roll their eyes into their heads, when and through

where exactly the spirit should flee. Pastors rushed it. Me and my guys got our first place in Opebi with the money we made. We paid two years' rent, cash down. I'm sure the landlord thought we were Yahoo boys, but why question cold cheese when you can just shut up and feed your family? After that, as a side thing, me and my guys used to move shrooms in on a steady. People went crazy for that. We opened a barbershop in VI briefly, but they shut it down when the queues became too long. They said we were doing illegal shit, but really, one of us was a therapist and many men needed somewhere to talk on a low. After that, I used to organize people for VIPs. My friend was a sitting politician's son, so he plugged it. As for how we run things, Wizkid don already talk am: *I know bad guys that know real bad guys, that know some other guys*. We made a lowkey app with photos and specifications—twins, triplets, dark-skinned, mixed race, BBW, gay men, drag queens, lesbians, kinksters, all sorts. All our clients needed to do was tap the screen and a fee would appear. Whoever they chose would be on the next flight in. It's not mouth I'll use to tell you how much money we pulled from that. It's not a small job to guard a tall gate. If you know you know. But over time, it became too heavy, because secret yato si secret, kink yato si kink and if you know anything about underbellies and darkness, you know their everlastingness. The deeper you go underground, the darker it gets, because the more they trust you with. And you know what? In life, you have to be careful who you allow to trust you; you have to know where to stop before life stops you.

NOW I RUN A SOUVENIR SHOP. I sell fridge magnets from all sorts of countries, for people who lie to their partners about traveling abroad for work. If you lie like that, you need supporting gifts. I woke up one day, saw the gap and did quick maths. We fly things in from all over, daily. We have our own duty free—everything from perfumes to whiskey to Montblanc to Swarovski to Crème de la Mer and La Prairie dem—you name it. Now, it's not just husbands and wives who use us. It's people who lie to their parents about what they do and how much they earn and how much they travel (and dem plenty). We found a guy who's a wizard with Photoshop, hooked him up. Now we also have a photography studio to complete the whole deal. We work with lowkey hotels too, for those who need where to hide until the lie expires. Just last week, we sorted out an influencer who wanted to turn her Instagram around but didn't have the funds for it. After she filled the forms,

our photographer took the pictures and placed her in multiple locations in all the countries she said she wanted to travel to. From this Lagos here, she was posting photos of herself on the plane, at the airport, in the cities themselves. Our plugs do the legwork and get their cut. In the photo I like the most, the babe is sitting in the Rock Zanzibar and there are prawns inside her mouth that she never tasted. In the next grid, her internet self is in Sandton Skye with a friend, eating risotto and drinking sauvignon blanc at the Codfather. They posted it from 1004 here. The week after, we dipped her Insta self in Lac Rose in Senegal. Come and see comments. Her leg has never touched there, the water doesn't know her skin, but who must know? She gained thousands of followers from that move, because image. Everything in this life is what? Image. These days, people always talk about getting a seat at the table, putting a foot in the door. Me? I make doors out of thin air.

IN MY LIFE, I have never put on long-sleeve shirt, lined my own collar with a tie, knotted it and pulled it up to my neck. I've never worn suit in this Lagos heat or carried briefcase to any office, and since I turned twenty, not once has landlord knocked on my door for rent. I know I'm lucky, trust me, but when people look down on me for being me I just know their brains are small. If you think it's only hard work, and not smart work, that will keep your life together in this country, then you're a fool now. Are you not? You're a fool. We started this thing last year. So far I've seen over two hundred clients and we don't charge chicken change. Why does it work? Because there's always a market for lies. It's the demand that makes the supply necessary. The other day, somebody asked me what I'll do after this and I told him I don't know. I always know; I just don't discuss my moves before I move. My next target market is already set. Never forget: wherever there are people, there are opportunities, and anything can be doctored so far you know who to call doctor.

ME AND MY PARTNER live in a six-bedroom house in Lekki, except for when we're at our beach house in Ilashe. We got this place when he moved from Jozi to come and be with me. He's half from there and half from here. When we got tired of the distance, we had to choose. In that his old apartment in Maboneng, all it took was one look at each other and K. laughed because he already knew. We didn't even table the question twice; his bags were here a month from then. Between me and K. we can afford to live nice on some expat

shit because he has never not earned in dollars and for him, work is a drug. If you step outside our front door, we have two Mercedes-Benzes parked in a line. Behind the Benzes a Bentley, behind the Bentley a Lexus convertible that was just delivered last month. We bought it together, tear rubber. All this and thirty is not that far behind me. Next is a G-Wag. K. doesn't know yet, I'm surprising him with it for his thirty-eighth and I know he'll cry. We like cars, both of us, but his own is different. He knows everything about engines and wiring and all. Me, I collect them because I can. In a way, your car is like a second outfit. My wardrobe is full of casual things, but I'm always making statements. Short, memorable statements. Clothes are just one way to tension streets. But a mad whip is a great way to say, *Don't fuck with me*, and here the streets need to hear that in pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, plus many other languages. For everyday things, we ride either Benz. Both are tinted, with customized plates. Police have not checked our license or car papers in years. To them, our names are *Chairman*, and why wouldn't it be when we're more government than their governor. *Here, this one for you. This one for the kids*. We keep them happy and they save us stress. For parties where there will be VIPs, we use the Bentley and leave with the right business cards. Me and K. wear rings, but people don't ask personal questions when they see what you've come out of. We bought that right to go unchallenged. It was not cheap. When I'm going somewhere chilled with K., we take the Lexus and drop the top. Still so new, it gives me what they call ... endorphins. Me and K. love watching sunsets like that. When he falls into his dark moods, I take him on long drives and he blasts the music until the mirror starts beating and we can't hear our heads. King of the aux, give him two songs max and he'll reset us both. I love those drives. Some nights when we're bored, after playing FIFA, me and my guys race each other down the Link Bridge at two A.M. with some Formula One energy. Whoever loses has to buy the next stash of loud. Sometimes, K. stays home and watches Netflix; other times, he comes with us, and I see how happy he gets with his head outside the window, wind beating against his face. That's an answered prayer right there. Before K., I'd never been with a guy who gelled with my friends.

YEARS AGO, we couldn't have imagined half the shit we have now, but it's real. To me, the joy of having money is in sharing it. Life of my dreams with the people of my dreams. Even though we all have our places, my closest friends have keys to my house, and I have keys to theirs. Sometimes, you

need a break from your normal. Right from day one, they didn't waste time at all—rascals, all of them—they claimed their rooms sharp-sharp. Maro picked the room downstairs that opens into the garden. Akin likes the guest chalet. You should've seen the rest fighting. It's their house too at this point, so they cycle in and out as they like. Some of them drive my cars out on dates. There used to be another car years ago—our first one—but for May's thirtieth, K. said we should give her the Hummer. It suits her, and babes love a dyke with a big car. Gives off the right message. Plus we'd outgrown our love for it and she was obsessed. Simple maths. Life is about give and take. I tell people all the time: streets na electric, anybody fit shock you. So when you find your people, the ones wey go ride for you till this world fold, commit to them like it's a religion. We live our lives like it is. Every other Friday, one of us will host games night. We rotate houses. Lagos Island this week, Ikoyi next week, Magodo upper week. We show up unless we can't.

SPEAKING OF MY GUYS? I'd put a bullet in any body for them if it comes to that. I always pray it never comes to it. But check this, some weeks back, one of them came to my house crying his eyes out. Way over three decades into his life. He has seen heartbreak, stabbings, jungle justice that involved fire with a body smoking, and this was the third time I'd ever seen him cry. The whys of the first two will follow me to my grave. But that day, I had to hold him until he could breathe again. His father had died and when he got the news, he said he could feel himself spinning. The last of all of us to become fatherless, he was on the street outside a restaurant where they'd been eating, and his person hugged him after he got the call, held him as he tried not to break down. My guy said he felt so much sadness mixed with fear mixed with relief mixed with shame; that instead of relaxing, he scanned the street and pulled out of the hug, but not before thumping his person on the back three times, code for No Homo, Bro. *Who does that*, he wanted to know, *no one was even there, just like two kids passing; I'm not even that kind of guy*. Me and Maro laughed out loud, then told him the truth. Maro and I have been friends for twelve years. Before we got free, you know how many times we made someone we love feel crazy in public, just to save our own face? It's enough to flood Yaba Left. But if you catch it, you can fix it. That's another thing about my life: Without my friends, I'd be dead. Without my friends, I wouldn't have words for things that need names to shift, I wouldn't have

ever faced things you need safety to confess. I know what else he was feeling, what he was saying under what he was saying: there's something about losing a dad whose life killed you, you know? There's no way to explain it. You either know the feeling or you don't, you get? You feel like you can finally breathe.

AT SOME POINT, I asked Maro, who knew his father was one of us, if he thought he'd be himself if his father had not died. He said, *No. He hated himself for it, so no. And you know what? If my popsy had as much as opened his mouth to say he needed me to correct it, or to say that I could solve his depression by marrying that Efua babe I was seeing, best believe I'd be on baby number three with her today. So as free as I am now, I'm only free to date whoever the fuck I like, fuck whoever the hell I want, because he never asked that of me.* I could see it. Maro's father never married, but he had a *best friend* who sometimes showed up to the house for weekends. Uncle H. had a wife he couldn't stop telling about business trips. Maro's father would set the table, shave his head in anticipation and then act surprised at the knock. Many times, they cooked dinner from scratch. *My friend, go and play with your own friends*, Uncle H. used to say to Maro, laughing. *Let me catch up with my own.* But Maro has a memory he talks about often, of his father looking at his skinny jeans with disgust and asking him, *Is that what you want to be?* They never talked about it again. He was drunk then. Maro's story is not as simple as mine—how can it be when there was a noose involved—but I sat there thinking: My god, one less death and my boy would not exist. My guy, my best friend whose love saved my life, would not exist. You know what I did? I hid behind my teeth and thanked God for it. Terrible, but I thought: We are fatherless boys now and sure there are big griefs in us, but at least we get to be us. At least we get to be us. At the end of that conversation, when we got drunk-drunk, we sang along to the song Akin wrote in five minutes while we were smoking. Genius man, that one. We sang:

If you know where people go
when they die
pardon me for assuming
for assuming you'll reach there before me
before us
tell our fathers they tried
tell them they made some good boys
made some good boys, in the end, out of us.

We all cried for real then. Whether it was the happy or sad kind, till now, nobody knows.

LAST LAST, all of us go still die. But if we must live, then why it only makes sense to love? At different times, we were terrified that we wouldn't find our tribe, we wouldn't find our people who would see us for us because of what we'd been told to hide. But here we are, all flavors of free. One of my guys has a boyfriend and a girlfriend. They live together. They said it's called a throuple. Me I cannot wrap my head around it. May dates multiple women at once and they all know. Some of the people she dates even date each other too. They say that one is polyamory. Me do I understand it? No. Another one of my friends does not want anything to do with sex. He has never tried it and he's not moved by it. I can't relate, but I've learned that you don't have to relate to give people the space to be. Me I'm in love and safe—imagine? I'm safe. So I confessed too that I don't think both my father and I could have stayed alive, in each other's lives, as our individual selves. Someone needed to become something else. So I did. I didn't fully become me until he was gone. I never thought I could voice those words. But you know what I like the most about all of us? Before we met each other, we all had lies we needed to tell ourselves and others if we were going to live well. Maro says there's already a term for that type of lie: necessary fictions. Looking at each other and saying: *This is my own lie, this is my own truth. No, that other part was a mask, this part here is my face.* It's a survival thing. If you know this country, then you know not to walk maskless. But let me tell you something, this love shit is holy. When it's pure and patient, the thing just bends your knees. It's scary—I shook so much the first time Maro told me he loved me. I didn't even know friends could say that without it turning into something else, so I thought he wanted something and I tried to reply with my body, just out of reflex, out of gratitude. He saw where I was going, stopped me and said, *It's me.* I remember that moment clearly: it was one tear at a time until I couldn't stop. He didn't run; he held me. When you meet real care, it changes you, it remakes you as you. It lets you take a deep breath; it turns your friend into your brother. It took me time, but I say it back to all of them now.

ANYWAY, YOU WANT TO KNOW what I said when I was at work one day and got a call to come back home because my father was sick—after

years of not hearing from him? I said yes. And I stayed there for two months. I took care of him and paid all the hospital bills. When he got well enough to say hello to me, my father followed the greeting with a request. *You're doing well for yourself*, he said, *and my life is going. There's only one more thing remaining. Won't you let me meet the woman you will marry? Won't you let me see you whole?* Now the difference between Maro's story and my own is that my father looked at me, even knowing I owed him nothing, and he still asked that of me. I held his hand, my heart capsizing slowly, and said, *Yes sir, you will see me whole.*

When? he asked.

Tomorrow just here, I said. For the anxiety that request dragged out of me, I planned to walk out of there and never return. Still I said, *If you're ready, then I'm ready. Tomorrow.*

Good, he said and closed his eyes. He believed he needed to bless my heart for love to work for me. Imagine that. A man I lived without for over a decade. A man who didn't know if I still had a beating heart wanted to meet the person I would love enough to start a life with.

I went home and cried on K.'s shoulder. It was both of us who pooled resources together to do what we could for my dad. For months, K. had been dipping his hand into his pocket for the man who almost made us impossible, the man who would hate him on sight. It was somewhere in that breakdown that I changed my mind. The next day, I took K. to my father's bedside. My person stood by me, watching us. *Where is she?* my father asked, ignoring the obvious. I stared back my response, no words involved, just eye to eye, man to man. I saw it click. He swallowed and then opened his mouth to talk. Nothing came out. I repeated myself with a closed mouth, hands in my pockets, staring him down. I felt K. turn to stone in fear. The money we'd both spent bullied my father in front of me, its knuckles ready for his teeth. *Do you understand?* the money asked him. He shrank and I almost pitied him. I reached for K.'s hand, and feeling how much it had been sweating, I lifted his hand to my mouth and pressed my lips to it before holding his palm to my chest. *Are you sure you understand, Dad?* I asked. By then, my voice was hot iron. No one, I decided there and then, is allowed to kill me twice. Using my child-voice he said, *Yes sir*, and using his dad-voice, I said, *Good boy.*

John Lee Clark

LINE OF DESCENT

Susannah Harrison, “Songs in the Night; By a Young Woman, Under Heavy Afflictions,” didn’t touch him, but Morrison Heady traveled by stage from Louisville to touch Laura Bridgman, who demanded that Helen Keller wash her hands. Helen would later touch many of us but wouldn’t let us touch her back. But Laura also touched Angeline Fuller, who touched Clarence J. Selby, who touched the whole world, first in Chicago and then in Buffalo. Whom shall we choose for next in line? John Porter Riley. We don’t know whom he may have touched. We know far more about his white classmate, but we hope that he touched Geraldine Lawhorn, perhaps at an Ohio Home for the Aged and Infirm Deaf Easter Dinner. Jerrie touched too many to number. Robert J. Smithdas, who was an elitist bully hiding behind poems so beautiful they opened checkbooks. May he tremble in peace. Richard Kinney, who joked that the armed forces wanted him. “The Army wanted me to join the Navy, the Navy wanted me to join the Marines, and the Marines wanted me to join the Army.” But his hands oozed nicotine. I instead claim Marjorie McGuffin Wood, “Dots and Taps,” who insisted she was no saint. She fought

until she touched every one of us
in Canada, including Mae Brown. But Mae
turned out to be Our Lady
of Untimely Death. So Marjorie kept on
touching until 1988. My father, Lee,
was then still in denial, so it was I who
would later touch him, not him me. For my father
I also name Leslie Paul Peterson, whose
poems tap my shoulders in autumn. I also
salute Melanie Kuu Ipo Bond, whom
Uncle Tim Cook called Momma Nature
because she was so down to earth. But she
called herself the Black Turtle Lady
because the race is not to the swift. It is to the
slow and sure, certain of who we are.





New and Recent Work

TROY MICHIE

Interdisciplinary painter and collage artist Troy Michie (b. 1985) was raised in El Paso, Texas, and his work reflects the complexities of growing up multiracial along the U.S.-Mexico border. Michie began his formal training as a figurative painter and quickly brought collage elements onto his canvases. A central motif of these compositions is the Black male body—nude portraits, excised from vintage erotic magazines, appear frequently, often with clothes drawn onto them. A recent series examines the cultural history of the zoot suit in the Southwest, while other new pieces focus on the mysteries of the erotic male form: “There has to be something that isn’t totally easy to figure out,” Michie says. While the politics of representation of marginalized communities are a persistent theme, present, too, are formal considerations: many of Michie’s canvases rely on a nuanced approach to abstraction and color, and he relishes in the technical aspects of drawing, citing

Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco's figurative work and Belgian painter René Magritte's representational canvases as influences. Below, the artist speaks about his artistic development, in a conversation that has been edited.

—Emily Nemens

The atmosphere that I grew up in has played such a huge role in the way I see the world. When you grow up in a border community, it's not abnormal to go to school with people from Mexico, or to speak Spanish, or to witness two cultures amalgamate, which ultimately I see as a collage.

I've been drawing since I was five. I was really interested in portraits, and I would draw my family, I would paint them. Meanwhile, a lot of my influences as a kid came from magazines—*Lowrider* and *People*—this was my view into popular culture. In undergrad it seemed like there was a division in disciplines, and I chose to become a painter. But I was always *doing* things to the paintings, which, I think, were notions of collage, I just didn't know that could be an art form yet. It was seeing a piece by Frida Kahlo, who's still one of my favorites, that opened my eyes. *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) features a clothesline with Frida's Mexican dress. I remember seeing that the bottom portion was collaged with cutouts from newspapers, and thinking, Oh, I don't have to just use paint. From there, artists like Mimmo Rotella and Jacques Villeglé introduced me to this idea of *décollage*. I was still making drawings, but then I'd glue them down to canvas and rip them off. There was something about adding my own history to the material and building up the layers over and over. It was liberating.

Many of my compositions seem a little formal, emphasizing geometric abstraction. I think a lot about delineation and boundaries. Oftentimes, when I'm crossing materials over another line or a grid that I've established, I'm considering the threshold of the border. But it's important for me that it's... I can't really think of a better word than *complicated*. The work has always been related to portraiture, but recently the figure has come back into the foreground. For me, it's a sort of a return to painting. There's such an emphasis now on young Black painters painting Black figures—I've wanted to be included but still push up against and complicate that conversation.

Recently, my work has had an emphasis on the centerfold and woven pages, and I was searching for another compositional element. I'd never really worked with fabric before, other than gluing pieces into my assemblage works. While



I'd been thinking about the possibility of stitching forever, I was just intimidated, mainly because I don't know how to properly sew—I still don't. A friend of mine had a machine, so I asked, Can you run this through the machine? And I was like, That's it, that's what has been missing in the work. It's almost alchemical. Stitching is a way to bring in the language of drawing, to turn off the analytical side and draw some lines and make some marks. And there is also something poetic about it, in that the stitch is an attempt to bring something together. The stitch can be really strong, but it also falls apart all the time. It's almost returning to this idea of the boundary—the created boundary—that is the Rio Grande, separating El Paso from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I think of this as another line, a stitch, a contour, a delineation, a boundary.

Previous spread and this page: *In the Margins*, 2019, cut paper, polyester thread, papier-mâché, cut clothing, leather belt, fabric, tape, graphite, ink, colored pencil, acrylic, and woven paper on stretched linen, 48 x 33 x 1". Next spread: *Three Men*, 2019, cut paper, ink, and wax pencil on woven paper, 14 x 21 ¾".

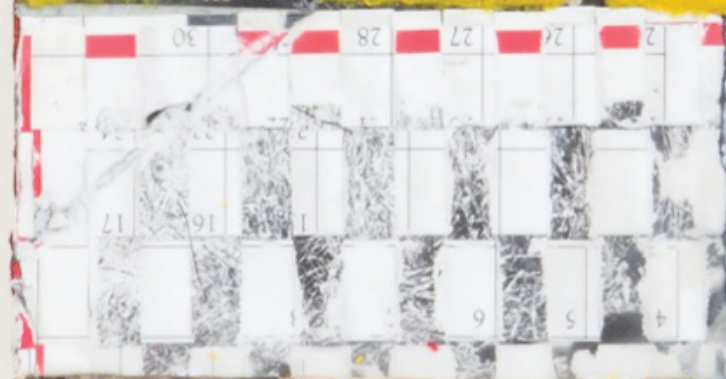


The most difficult thing to do at present is to get a good idea of the situation at the moment.





America Is Woven of Many Strands, 2019, cut paper, photograph, thread, papier-mâché, garment bag zipper, cut clothing, tape, cloth, graphite, ink, grease pencil, acrylic, and woven paper on stretched linen, 48 x 33 x 1".













Previous spread: *Jimmy's Blues*, 2019, cut paper, ink, clothing pattern, wax pencil, and graphite on woven paper, 17 x 23 ¼". This page: *Untitled (Standing Blue)*, 2020, ink, graphite, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper, 11 x 8 ½".



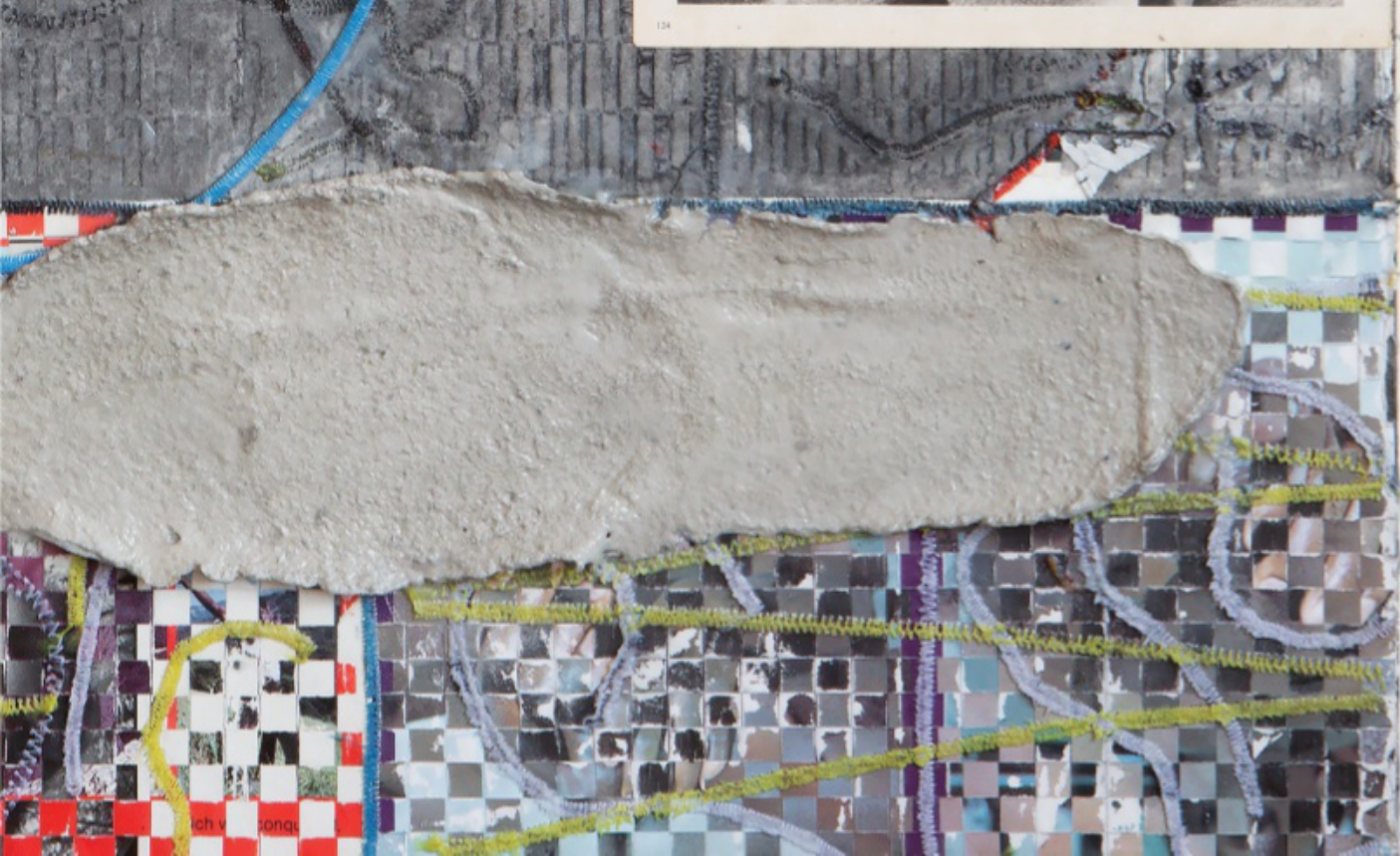
Distorted in the Interest of Design, 2019, cut paper, graphite, colored pencil, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper, 11 x 8 ½".



PUNTOS Y PICADOS



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Figure/Ground, 2019, cut paper, photographs, polyester thread, papier-mâché, leather belt, cut clothing, tape, graphite, ink, grease pencil, acrylic, and woven paper on stretched linen, 48 x 33 x 1".







Previous spread: *America Is Woven of Many Threads #1*, 2019, graphite, colored pencil, grease pencil, and polyester thread on magazine paper, 11 x 18". This page: *Oriente*, 2020, cut paper, photographs, polyester thread, papier-mâché, garment bag zipper, cut clothing, tape, graphite, ink, grease pencil, acrylic, and woven paper on stretched linen, 48 x 33 x 1".



Two Poems by Emma Hine

YOUNG RELICS

They broke into houses,
my sisters. The empty ones,
just built, where nobody had yet
tried to sleep. Little mounds
of sawdust still in the corners,
no floorboards loose.
I imagine them being the way
I've seen them be with horses,
hands gentle on the walls—after all,
a house must learn to hold a family
with all its quivering systems
of energy and grief. I once saw Sierra
with a colt that wasn't ready
to be ridden. She stood in the stall
and talked until his heart rate slowed.
All through our neighborhood
new houses were dark and panicking.
Enter sisters.
Bringing comfort where it wasn't
supposed to be, no key for entry,
no light allowed, just a ritual gift
for the rooms alone to remember:
hands on their painted flanks.
Voices in the eaves.

CASSANDRA

It's time to leave again. She unplugs the fridge
and watches until the orange coils on its back
have faded down to gray. She turns off the gas.
She papers the windows in layers from the outside,
because if she doesn't, the moon will reflect in the panes
like a lamp in every room. And then the house will still
seem lived in. And then how to move on?
The last thing she does, always, is go with them
one by one into their rooms and hold them up
to pluck the glow-in-the-dark stars from the ceiling.
They place the stars inside a wooden box. Which
is what they are, her children, little hinged boxes
full of a chemical that makes light out of nothing,
that glows all on its own. They're wearing coats
over their patterned pajamas. When the stars are away
the house is completely dark, and somehow the sounds
are louder, the final shut of the door, the porch steps,
the frogs like small rocks clacking in the trees'
throats. In the yard's farthest corner, she asks
her children what they can see. As always, they say,
"Nothing." The house could be invisible. It could
have shrunk to the size of a blackberry. The hill
could have grown up to swallow it. It might have
changed into a tree. She's relieved. She can still see it
so clearly, like the retinal burn of a light bulb long after
it's been turned off. Like all their other houses,
the already and the not yet, ranged like old flares
across the hills. She starts walking and her children follow.
They're kicking up moss in a trail for the night to erase.
They're mimicking a screech owl, then listening,
because if they call in the right voice something might
call back. Before long they'll be climbing the hill
to the new house, opening the unlocked door,

claiming bedrooms. Then waiting for her to reattach
the constellations, asking, “Is this a cat? A cave?
A sleeping bear? A little spoon?” And they won’t know.
And she won’t be able to correct them.
And soon she’ll unwrite the stars again, and they’ll go on.

Slant Six

THOMAS MCGUANE

It was a Friday at the start of summer when Drew stopped at Ace to buy Sheetrock screws and spackling. He had to fix the bathroom wall where he'd lost his temper after a conversation with Lucy about her mother. In the same aisle, he spotted his client Mike Khoury angrily fanning a wheel of color chips. "This bloody card lists twenty-seven whites!" he shouted at no one in particular. Mike was thickly built, with a windbreaker stretched over his chest, a Lakers ball cap atop his head. He was an eye surgeon.

"You can't go wrong with Colonial or French Cream." Drew knew these names because Lucy had just painted the bedroom in their rental, but he felt obsequious making the suggestion to a client.

Mike gave Drew a look as though Drew had butted in with this advice. "Do I know you?" He let his mouth remain open.

"I wrote the deed restrictions on Bluebird. I'm Drew Moore." Granted, he hadn't seen Mike since

last summer, and it was his wife, Carol, who had been in Drew's office daily. As they worked through the adaptation of the Khourys' title documents to Montana property law, Drew had noted their little bit of flirtation and also noted that it seemed a bad idea immediately.

"Oh, Drew, what's the matter with me? Of course I know you. The nouns are the first to go. I'm glad I got you—remember that character we bought the land from? He retained a right of interment on the contract. Did you notice that?"

"That's not what you asked me to look for." Mike's instructions had been very tight; Drew knew it was because he didn't want some local running up a bunch of billable hours. All he wanted was the title research and the easements.

"You might have given it a glance. The guy plans on burying family members on the property." Before Drew could say anything, Mike thumbed his collar and wandered off, still gazing at the color wheel. He looked back at Drew without seeming to see him.

Drew was waiting in line at the cash register when his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket and, seeing it was an 800 number, answered reluctantly. "With God, every loss is a gain. I would like to offer you renewal and restoration, garlands instead of ashes, and healed hearts. Disruption and sadness shall be banished. God will lift you up. Sixty-first chapter of Isaiah." He had started getting more of these since Lucy's mother, Kay, fell ill. Kay had been an unrelenting thorn in his side, raising hell way out in California, where she lived in a cut-rate retirement community next to an impoundment lot. When she had knee surgery, Drew bought her a walk-in tub, a brutish appliance that held a hundred gallons of water, and he'd upgraded the boiler to run the whirlpool. When his mother-in-law opened its door, letting out all the water, Drew had paid to replace the downstairs ceiling and its soggy, shorted-out electrical fixtures. When he had gently suggested waiting for the tub to drain before exiting, she replied, "How was I supposed to know *that*?" He objected mildly that she might have been electrocuted. She said that would make him happy. He knew Kay was about to die, but the slow pace of her illness was just wearing him out. Maybe she'd bought medicine online and given his cell number as a contact. In any case, the buzzards were circling like in an old Western. "Renewal and restoration," indeed. He longed to see Kay in a canister.

Drew and Lucy Moore lived on East Larch, past the green house with all the dogs in a poky little Queen Anne fixer-upper on a half lot. Next door to the Moores, an unhappy young couple had rented a room on the first floor of an ancient duplex, a house with debris in the yard that included bedsprings and shopping carts. When their dog barked in the middle of the night the young man came to the door itching his beard and called, “White dog, mellow out!” The couples shared a landlord, a bachelor and fitness buff named Jocko who lived alone with his parrot, Pontius Pilate. He was tall, lean, and Lincolnesque, with hollow cheeks and washed-out blue eyes. Drew called him Li'l Abner. Jocko dressed in bib-front overalls and T-shirts that bore slogans like SMASH THE STATE or were relics from antique rock concerts—Mott the Hoople, Captain Beefheart. Jocko and his never-seen mother owned most of the rentals in town. Sometimes Jocko mowed the lawns in a green thong, showing off a small dream catcher tattoo on his shoulder. One afternoon he was still in the thong when he came to the door and through a small opening told Lucy that the rent was past due. Lucy promised to pay up soon. Jocko leaned this way and that, trying to see in, but Lucy didn't budge—the young wife next door had told her that Jocko offered a rent discount with certain conditions, conditions that she'd decided not to mention to her husband, who “had a record.” There were times when Drew came home from meetings with the city council, the clinic board of trustees, or even a trial and found Jocko loitering around, kicking his hacky sack as part of his never-ending fitness program. Drew wanted to drive over him with his Dodge Dart. The fact that Jocko was their landlord seemed to stand for everywhere they hadn't gotten in life.

Nineteen miles west of town, Drew's client Mike and his wife Carol summered in a neighborhood of attractive homes along the meandering Bluebird Creek, formerly Bog Creek. The development was known locally as Snob Hollow. While the occupants were not all snobs, there was little time in the accelerated northern summer for mingling with locals, what Bluebird Creekers called “fraternizing.” But the Khourys were different, self-consciously inclusive, inviting often inappropriate local guests to their gatherings—gun nuts, fellow Pickleballers, smiling evangelicals, conspiracy theorists, and cabinetmakers—despite the likely awkwardness. Mike was fond of saying, “You can learn a lot by observing fish out of water” and “I admire their neolithic lifestyles and the curious pidgin with which they pour out their hearts.” So, Drew decided, he was a snob after all, though proud of his politics.

This was Drew's hometown, but it was not Lucy's. She was from Omaha and when she grumbled about Sweet Grass County, he would say that Omaha was nothing to be proud of. They'd met at the University of Nebraska, he in law school and she in the school of design, industrial architecture specifically: her senior project was portable helicopter hangars for exploration, or war. Drew had thought they were minimalist homes informed by Japanese design. And that was how they met. They had more than enough love for each other, but upon their settling in Montana, the detachment they felt from their surroundings was unhelpful and they worried they'd grown drab.

He'd had more social connections here once, but it was a working-man's town and him going to law school had converted those friendships into painful acknowledgments. Lucy said that getting somewhere among people going nowhere was a mistake, and she made no secret of her feeling that she was stuck—not only with his car (his last tidbit of continuity; he'd had it since high school) but with a town that she sometimes called, not unreasonably, a shithole. She wasn't excited by Drew's work, which was mostly small-scale real estate stuff, nasty divorces, fiery car crashes, and that one shooting at the Dollar Store with spent 9mm cartridges all over the skin care section. And while she wished she could leave her job in home health, here, you took any job you could get. So Lucy was studying for an appraiser's license, sheer desperation. Appraise what? Drew wanted to know. She was an attractive young woman and had only recently said, "I need to take this pulchritude somewhere it'll do me some good." Drew's eyebrows went straight up at that.

Soon after he set up his practice, Drew and Lucy had taken a two-mile stretch of I-90 under the adopt-a-highway program in its name. Nobody in this area was interested in the program and so they didn't have to compete for a stretch close to home. In fact, the last time they'd headed out, with their bags and safety vests, Drew had the sense they were seen as risible figures, that it might not have been the best advertisement for Moore Law. A cold wind was blowing from the east and the plastic bags had to be run down, wind sprints the motorists enjoyed. Beer cans made up most of the trash. From the window of a black pickup truck, a diaper was flung, narrowly missing them. Drew picked it up gingerly, remarking that it weighed a couple of pounds, and when he dropped the diaper into Lucy's bag, she exclaimed, "Oh, Drew,

we must think of our future. Let's freeze my eggs!" A big Greyhound flew by with tiny moon-faces in its many windows. They ducked into the following gust and gazed at their almost-full bags.

Jocko liked to watch Drew work on his Dart, but Lloyd Bell, the retired railroader who lived in the green house with all the dogs, was a skilled shade-tree mechanic; he had helped Drew replace the starter, the solenoid, the distributor, and the ignition cable over one weekend. Jocko seemed fascinated by all the parts of the motor, once complimenting the curves of the exhaust manifold. When Jocko was in the way, Lloyd pushed him aside saying, "Move over, pervert." In the days long before he met Lucy and still had all his town friends, Drew had filled the car with memories—avoiding pregnancy with dodgy strategies like Saran Wrap, fishing trips to the Bighorn River, away games with teammates. But since he met Lucy, she had been stranded in the Dart several times. She pleaded with Drew to get rid of it and seemed unsatisfied when he explained he'd never get another one. One morning, while she was making the bed, holding a sheet in outstretched arms, its middle pinned with her chin, she offered to have the Dart towed. "What can you possibly mean?" said Drew. "It's not on blocks!" What kept him hanging on to his old car was probably what kept him in this town, clinging to something that wasn't there anymore.

Not long after that, Kay got Drew on the phone and told him to work hard and get Lucy out of the house where she was "suffocating." "*I am* working hard," said Drew. She replied, "Yes, but in the wrong way. You'll lose your shirt." Whatever he said must have triggered obligatory counseling because the next day Lucy said, "I'm better off without you." The flat delivery killed him, but it wasn't quite the end. Together, they looked up "coequal agency," then said, "Fuck it." Their friends saw what was happening and suggested this, that, and the other: trial separation, talk therapy, microdosing LSD. Nothing was working as well as it used to, and they couldn't get off the plateau. Then Lucy's mother went into palliative care. Lucy flew to see her in Atascadero and got there barely in time for her to die. Lucy came back to Montana a few days later, and once her mother had been dead for a month or two, they were back to normal. It was not easy to realize that things had simply changed. "Mother was angry about dying. She was always angry about something, but death was something she could really get her teeth into."

THE WHOLE SUMMER had been about Kay's illness and death. Now it was September and they were heading to the Khourys' for a party, the first they had been to since Kay's passing. Drew thought Lucy looked great and told her so. "I spent extra time with the war paint," Lucy said. She wore a becoming yellow cotton dress that fit her figure well. She touched the tip of her nose with a finger and asked if he thought the car would make it. But the flivver was ticking along, reminding Drew of happy hours—leaning on opposing fenders under its hood with Lloyd, contemplating the Dart's latest ailment. Because of the Dart, the Moores had skipped a social event at Mike and Carol's last summer, and Carol, having once heard him remark that there was no better news than the cancellation of a dinner party, demanded to know why he drove "junk cars," which had given Lucy some pleasure. Now he guided the Dart through gentle sage-covered hills and grassy buttes into a setting sun. A band of antelope moved across the land like a cloud.

He wound down the Khourys' driveway, through a gorgeous old grove of linden, honey locust, and mountain ash. Each loop of the driveway produced an impassable snowdrift in winter, but by then Carol and Mike were on the coast watching waving kelp fronds from their living room. Today there was hardly a cloud in the bold blue sky, or only a few, anyway. The creek sparkled between brushy banks filled with birds and aquatic insects. By the time Drew parked among German cars, Mike was at the door of the well-kept mid-century modern house in gaucho pants and a sweatshirt. Mike shook Drew's hand while gazing at his car. "Still runs," Drew said dryly, and by then Mike's hand was in the small of his back moving him into the hallway. Lucy scooted ahead, knowing how welcome she would be, and indeed Drew heard the guests cry out at her arrival.

Mike trailed his finger over the hall table, checking for dust, as Carol appeared in the doorway to the living room, planting her palms on Drew's chest in assessment. She wore a loose cotton shirt, peach-colored shorts, and espadrilles, and had pinned her hair to get it out of the way. She wasn't young and she wasn't pretty, but Drew and everyone else found her attractive. Mike often said that were it not for Carol he'd be "down at Kaiser Permanente filling out Medicare forms." Once, with four mimosas under his belt, Drew had kissed Carol in the spot where the refrigerator blocked the view of the pantry. It had earned him a good-natured tap on the chest with a bright red

finger nail. "I think the subject's covered, remember?" She'd pointed through the door at her guests as though Drew could explain them. Now, she said, "Terrible about Lucy's mum," and averted her eyes. Drew knew Carol well enough to confide, "Good riddance." He strode into the living room and made a very conventional round of hugs and hand clutching. He knew everyone. It was the end of the season and it was easy to see they'd all had enough. Only Jarvis, the veterinarian who looked after Carol's horse, had tried Mike's edible marijuana, and it appeared as though his recreation consisted of rising mental problems. Mike pounded him on the back and cried, "It lasts five hours!" Connie, the pretty weather girl who'd married Jarvis, now studied his unresponsive face and asked, "Carol, do you have anything that wears this off?" As Jarvis struggled to speak, Mike patted him on the head and said, "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." Jarvis gaped in response. Carol frowned and said, "He's been fantastic with my horse."

Two dogs came into the living room to inspect the uproar, mutts from the reservation. Carol and Mike adopted only old dogs that no one wanted and none of them were around for long; Carol took the losses hard. These two dogs brushed against Christiansen, a lawyer in blazer and bow tie, and he leaned away from them, pressing his drink to his chest. When Mike and Carol floated the Smith River, Drew fed the dogs for them, producing another pantry moment when Carol showed Drew where the kibble was stored. He never expected or wanted anything to come of these moments; they seemed to have value all on their own. Mike showed Drew something on his phone that Drew couldn't make out, maybe an early typewriter. "It's an Enigma machine off a U-boat. In my house. Other things of interest. You must come, but first get me out of that provision."

Drew stiffened as Theo Wiggins headed his way. He was a middle-aged, strikingly thin man in a floral snap-button shirt that stretched over his gut and jeans with the belt buckle at his hip. He was always pleased to share unremarkable stories of his forebears in a signature hangdog style. It left an impression of the homestead era as a melancholy time of plodding people who lacked the energy to go elsewhere. Mike wheeled off, doubtless to avoid discussing the interment provision.

Jarvis bumped shoulders with Drew and, under the effects of his edible, muttered, "This is so fucking unpleasant. Would it be rude if I slipped off to the spare bedroom?" But he lost track of the thought and when Drew noticed

him again, he was staring at a piece of paper towel that had dropped from Carol's hors d'oeuvre tray.

Hal Cassidy arrived late and on crutches, but had obviously come from somewhere else and was really rolling as he brushed his way through the guests, explaining, "Bad tumble. Fucking hell." He made it to the bar and poured an extraordinary amount of gin into a glass. "Tasmania." Carol asked when he had been in Tasmania and Hal, deep into his first mood swing, replied, "I'll let you know." Carol returned to the group shaking her hand in the air as though she'd burned it on something. She glanced back as she heard Hal say, "What a bunch of phonies." It didn't seem directed at anyone, and she hardly let slip her look of exasperation. But she did ask Lucy, sotto voce, "Who the fuck wants to go to Tasmania? I hear it's awful."

Drew observed Carol guide Theo Wiggins to the bar, explaining that if he refilled his drink, he would no longer care that their home stood on the site of his great-grandfather's corral. Theo had come home from Iraq harmlessly maladjusted, and his day-to-day helplessness sent him ever further from his former wife and fed-up children. "Heritage is all I'm about," Theo explained as he returned to Drew and led him to the front window, pointing out where he planned to bury his mother. He mused, "You only have one mother. Your dad can be any son of a bitch in the world." Drew thought of raising the idea of cremation as a way around the provision, but his interest just wasn't there. Let Mike sweat it out.

With each glance around there were fewer people in the room, and Drew asked Lucy if they ought to think about heading home. But then Mike and Carol asked them to stay for a few minutes, and they did, sitting in the den, side by side while Carol nervously adjusted the books and pictures on the shelves. Mike said, "It's getting to be about that time, back to the slog, and it's not going to be a soft landing. I lost my best surgeon. First-rate, same-day kind of guy," he said. "Some nurse. I warned him: 'The buck stops at the perineum.' You know what I mean? Huh? Do you?" Drew noticed Lucy's sharper attention. "We haven't had a minute to depart in an orderly manner. Wiggins was looking after things, but frankly, he's not worth a shit. So, Drew and Lucy, I'm wondering if you could pitch in for us and get this dump winterized." Lucy's brow deepened. "And the mice, that's going to be an ongoing issue. Pipes, of course, and you're welcome to any of the food. There's a half pound of Black Diamond cheddar in the fridge. You could either forward the bills, or Carol

and I could set up a debit card. Carol, was it Colonial or French Cream for the sitting room?"

Drew said, "Couldn't one of you stay for the winter and see to that? Or alternatively, you could stay and empty the mousetraps, see to the pipes, and so forth. Then Carol flies in to spell you."

Mike said, "I guess that's a no." He studied his thumbnail.

Carol turned from the bookcase, her eyes blazing, and said, "Colonial."

Riding in the Dart under the stars toward home, Lucy said, "Carol looked like she was ready to blow sky high."

"At who?"

"That's a great question," said Lucy. As they climbed a washboard hill, a dying cottonwood at the crest with stars in its leafless branches, Drew said, "Do you suppose that's who we are?" Drew waited for an answer but Lucy tipped onto his shoulder and didn't reply.

Two Poems by Cheswayo Mphanza

AT DAVID LIVINGSTONE'S STATUE

for Harry Mphanza

We have changed a great many of our colonial place names since independence, but we have kept the name of Livingstone out of a deep respect. —Siloka Mukuni, chief of the Leya People

At the onset of my ingenious plan, the sun barely shone
through the mist.

I struggled with a name to identify the rushes
of water pouring beside me.

Half of my tongue saying Mosi-oa-Tunya—
“the smoke that thunders.” The other saying Victoria Falls.

And here is my complex. To shred the palette
of English lodged on my tongue. Its sheer civility.
Restraining all languages,

I snuck past two olive-sheened
security guards sleeping underneath the shade
of banana leaves to find Livingstone's bronze body,

to which I snickered: “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

My hand ran across the chiseled letters inscribed
below his body. What I read gathered all that was
lost in me, including the anger and sadness I learned as birthright.

[I come neither as saint nor sinner. I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward.]

And maybe more than this was the lush grin I imagined
so carefully plastered on his face, taunting history
beyond the grave. The recordings of his barren

solitude heated by poisonous winds, his treks through
the wild jungles infested by snakes and only roamed
over by a few scattered tribes of untamable barbarians.

I thought of my father's unmarked grave.

My weekly visits to graveyards in Lusaka,
imagining his body belonging to each bed covered with grass.

Small, cracked rocks gathered by children

to form an altar. My slow words grafting epitaphs against
airy headstones. I lay on graves imagining my father's funeral
and a decent headstone to give my name an origin:

I bet he was buried in a bed of blues.

*There must have been wailers;
the pangs of mothers. Women in droves moaning,
singing low songs, repenting the grave
and its folding soils.*

*Chitenges were worn, screams buried
in slow groans, incantations moaned.
Grave-dancers surrounding the casket,*

*limbs moaning
lost songs, folktales, and fables. The sun brushing
light on their rags, time they held.
My father's hand I wished*

*I could have held, rusted pasts and dreams
shaking in his palms.*

It's the same sadness I carry when I think of Lumumba's
exhumed and dissolved body. Pauline left to mourn
the imagination of him—

locating a compass of wounds. Our absence fitting
effigies for caskets. It was then I reached
into the duffel bag where I'd been hoarding
the mason jars of piss to shatter against

Livingstone's bronze-cast face.

The small hammer I brandished to crack the bronze
until I heard a wailing inside. (History's vowels maybe.)

And I was left to my own undoing, where I thought

of the savagery of monuments.

The emptiness of bearing one's flag.

Our profound yet hollow deaths in graves

where we can't locate our names.

These days I wake in the used light of someone's spent life.
I am often a stranger to myself;
I have no place of origin, no home.
I keep remembering everything in two time zones at once.
Who knows, maybe I myself am called something other than myself.
Not so much a name, but the result of a name.
It's a strange sensation to yell out: *This is me!*
In every place I've watched caravans of sorrow—
I run like all the other men, chasing my shadow down alleys.
Sometimes in the spaces, there is fear—
my mind deepens into them.
From calm to fear my mind moves, then *moves*—
in light part nightmare and part vision fleeing.
The voice rises on a storm of grackles, then returns—half elegy, half serenade.

JARRY Lopez Una geografia profonda -

cf linguisti

Rodi, Grecia orientale.

A volte le linee della mente si aprono senza sforzo lasciano entrare quello che c'è, una particolare roccia, il modo in cui una macchina si ferma sul ciglio della strada, il timbro di un verde opaco di una quercia. Qualcosa in te si assottiglia e iniziano giorni di guarigione. Viene stabilita una tregua, niente armi, niente parole, solo acqua, sole e questi cespugli di rose che ~~non pensavo ci fossero davvero~~. Profumi di rose, unguenti di rose, l'arrendersi alla strada, agli oleandri, ai brutti negozi che pubblicizzano la vendita di pellicce. Per tre sere di seguito ci convertiamo al rito greco, entriamo nella chiesa illuminata e gremita, sono le sette. Ci sediamo e ascoltiamo i canti maschili, fissiamo l'iconostasi, annusiamo l'incenso, siamo storditi, ci addormentiamo con la testa sugli scranni di legno, mentre la folla mormora e infila le candele nella sabbia. E' vero come scrive Ester Kinski, sola in una chiesa rumena: a destra le candele per i morti, a sinistra per i vivi. Alcuni si uniscono al canto che viene dall'iconostasi. Diventiamo quei suoni, raggiungiamo quelle voci, entriamo, scendiamo le note fino a un ipogeo della mente dove gocciola l'acqua di una cisterna, ~~Mingling~~.

(Romq)

Essere lesi significa non portare a termine un compito? Essere lesi significa perdersi nell'ascolto e nella visione di ciò che è trascurabile?

Chi è integro? Chi senza ferita? Adesso il futuro si restringe a un paletto infilato nella porta: semi-chiuso, semi-aperto.

Accade che le linee del cervello s'intreccino e aumenti l'entropia, che sia difficile prendere una decisione minima, che il movimento sia ~~errato~~ e l'errore lo domini. Non ~~amore~~ né compassione. Le tende del palazzo di fronte ~~hanno~~ un verde sbiadito, la primavera è lontana eppure c'è tepore. Non piove, solo nubi passeggiare. Il tempo è buono, l'aria è cattiva, le polveri sottili volano, la tosse scatta, la gola si chiude. Siamo a gennaio e sembra aprile, ora comincia il mese breve e bisestile, non più inverno ma inverno.

Rodi

Un'altra sera vediamo i pavoni, i maschi gridano e volano sugli alberi, le femmine corrono furtive dello stesso colore degli sterpi. C'è una strada che porta a un belvedere e il mare in lontananza con una luna incipiente. Tra gli alberi se si guarda bene ci sono i simboli della via crucis ma tra le foglie dei lecci sono quasi invisibili, sembrano altri tronchi su cui hanno scritto. Domani, ora sappiamo che possiamo dirlo, i corpi saranno immersi nell'acqua, esposti al sole e il caldo sembrerà curare le ossa ancora gelate da i mesi invernali. I risvegli sono buoni, scanditi da un ritmo, vivere in albergo estirpa le abitudini, o almeno le riduce al minimo. Modus est.

Un inverno. Una para settimana di gelo

è la Pasqua
auto do me

Shapiro e
de questa condizione
diventi
puola
sull'essere

SAMOS

Pingos
is not for

from

- Koumaradei

- ~~elo~~ quel clon

- to the river

DA - Amphelisis

Toto KAKI

ti mole le

costa turca

- Samos

Tempio di Eia
a linee 8. AC.

Io dei santuari

ionici

208
Eou la ma
fredda coda luminosa
il mare che cerca di
catturare l'altitudine
di una fiamma
in modo da trasmettere i
e quei delle sue
grande coda
luminosa.

The Art of Poetry

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ANTONELLA
ANEDDA

Antonella Anedda, born in 1955, is one of Italy’s most lauded contemporary poets. She writes with precision and delicacy, yet her work testifies to her vast engagement with human history and geography. Her six books of poems include her *Residenze invernali* (Winter residences, 1992), *Il catalogo della gioia* (The catalogue of joy, 2003), and her most recent work, *Historiae* (2018). Among her many books of prose are a study of details in works of art, *La vita dei dettagli* (The life of details, 2009), and *Isolatria* (2013), a survey of the history and geography of La Maddalena, her family’s native region of Sardinia. She has received numerous prizes for her poetry, among them the Premio Montale, the Premio Letterario Viareggio-Rèpaci, and the Premio Puškin. In 2019 she received an honorary doctorate from the Sorbonne.

Like many Italian poets, Anedda has worked as a journalist; she is also a scholar, teacher, and translator of classical and French literature. In the fall and spring she travels from her home in Rome to teach modern literature at the Università della Svizzera italiana in Lugano. She spends her summers in the archipelago of La Maddalena. After years of publishing with various national presses, her work now also appears in the prestigious Einaudi *collana bianca* series. These little paperbacks, with their plain white covers, make up the shelf of noted contemporary Italian poetry and poetry in Italian translation, from Samuel Beckett and Mario Luzi in the sixties to Jan Wagner, Patrizia Cavalli, and Mariangela Gualtieri today. Anglophone readers can survey twenty years of Anedda's poems in Jamie McKendrick's excellent translation *Archipelago* (2014).

This interview took place in November 2018 and October 2019 in Anedda's apartment in the Monteverde neighborhood of Rome. Her narrow four-story building is halfway down a hilly street that seems to tumble toward the Porta Portese flea market and, eventually, the Tiber. Her family occupies the third floor. The state built the structure in the fifties as housing for officials of the carabinieri, and Anedda's grandfather, a general, purchased their apartment at that time. Anedda and her husband, Flaminio Mormile, a pulmonologist at the large Gemelli Hospital, moved there in 1994 and raised their daughter, Maria Sofia, a historian of the French Revolution, amid the mementos, books, paintings, and upright piano of Anedda's grandmother.

We sat in the living/dining room, speaking in Italian and English. Anedda was recovering from a serious illness and our thoughts turned readily to the past and poetry's place at the center of our lives. As always, she spoke with both honesty and reticence; she avoids rhetoric in conversation just as she avoids it in her poems. The quiet and comfortable room, with its dark blue armchairs, fills with sunlight in the afternoon. A large map of Italy hangs on the wall.

I have known Anedda for more than a decade, and our paths have crossed in Oxford, Newcastle, Berlin, Naples, and Rome. We often get together in Trastevere and the city center to talk and read and visit bookstores. In the period between and after our meetings for this interview, we corresponded by email in both languages, with Anedda expanding on her answers in Italian. Any unmarked translations here are my own.

—Susan Stewart

INTERVIEWER

What is your earliest memory of poetry?

ANTONELLA ANEDDA

The first poem I ever heard was by Aleksandr Blok, on the radio in a small village in Sardinia. It's an early work that begins, "Carried on the breeze, / the Spring's music drifted from far, far away." The poem was about space and wind—how the wind breaks open the clouds to reveal a strip of blue sky.

INTERVIEWER

What was it that moved you?

ANEDDA

When I was seven, a member of my family, a person I loved, died in front of me. Suddenly her body was a thing without a voice. Listening to Blok's poem—I was thirteen or fourteen—I thought that perhaps poetry could create a relationship with absence, with death, transposing the present into another space and time.

INTERVIEWER

Does this relationship with absence remain the reason why you write poems?

ANEDDA

I write to intensify reality and at the same time to undermine it, as Emily Dickinson does when she says, "Bring me the sunset in a cup / Reckon the morning's flagons up." The miracle of this poem is the dislocation of the relationship between the domestic and the universal. The visible is there, but reimagined by the swerve from ordinary perspectives and scales.

INTERVIEWER

Is the visible, and its image as the visual, the most important dimension of the poem for you?

ANEDDA

Poetry makes reality reality. My pleasure derives from this kind of disposition, of being attentive, of being able to catch sounds, lights. I am a poet of "I have



Rome, ca. 1962.

seen it,” as Elizabeth Bishop wrote about herself, but I am also a poet of “I have listened to it.” I am a hare with a mathematical mind.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say a bit about your early work in relation to your education? Visual perception, sound and music, and even mathematics—your poetry is so enriched by your knowledge of perspectives and traditions.

ANEDDA

I studied from the ages of fourteen to eighteen in the kind of school we call in Italy a *liceo classico*. There, one studies Latin and Greek and also mathematics, science, history, philosophy, as well as Italian, European, and American literature. I believe that is one of the great merits of the Italian educational system, to allow teenagers to have access to the classics in the original. Even

today when I see a text in Greek or Latin, I am moved. At the same time, there are no rules for an education.

INTERVIEWER

Has oral tradition, too, influenced your work? Is it something you grew up with?

ANEDDA

I have it in my ears. Improvised oral poetry is a tradition in every region of Sardinia. From my parents and from the time I spent there as a child, I became familiar with these forms. One practice is the *cantu a tenore*—a song where four male voices respond to one another.

Gli attittos—the Sardinian funeral dirges—are part of these traditions, too. *Attittos* has an uncertain etymology. One suggestion is that it derives from a word for breastfeeding or nursing. According to Max Leopold Wagner, a scholar of Sardinian, an *attittos* was “an ancient song that was intended to inflame its hearers to revenge.” But the Sardinian verb *attittare* is not at all related to the Italian *attizzare*, which means “to stoke,” as in stoking hatred. Another scholar, Francesca Pittalis, studied the *attittos* in Bitti and Orani, in Barbagia. She says that revenge is never part of the *attittos* even when the singers are grieving someone who was murdered. Pittalis wrote that the old women of the village said that *attittare* means to sing a lullaby for those who have died. Another etymology links *attittos* to grief or weeping. This tradition has influenced me the most.

INTERVIEWER

In what ways?

ANEDDA

You could say that I found this tradition on my skin, as if the experience of an unexpressed pain had retraced something that had always existed. In the *attittos* grief urges on the lament.

Pittalis wrote that the women who chanted the *attittos*, even into the seventies, were mourners and poets. Efisina de Grimentu was the last mourner of Bitti. She sang and wept with the mothers of the young men who died in war.

One of her most moving songs describes those mothers holding cardboard portraits of their vanished children.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems seem to carry over so many aspects of ancient Mediterranean traditions—the ritual uses of song and lament, the agonistic “dueling” call-and-response poetry of shepherds, the improvisational, turn-taking, ensemble traditions of North African music and ritual, and the first-person lyric descended from Greek texts. But your work is also informed by more contemporary traditions. Paolo Fresu, the trumpeter and composer, has spoken about the influence of jazz records brought over by American GIs on Italian popular music. For you and other poets of your generation, did jazz have a great effect?

ANEDDA

For me, yes, jazz with its rhythm seemed to be near, or not far from, the aching grief of the *attittos*. In both of them there was an element of anxiety, of interweaving ancient rhythms, of breathing. Fresu recalled how important the experience with the *launeddas*—the Sardinian triple pipe with single reeds—was to him from a technical point of view. It’s the oldest polyphonic instrument in the Mediterranean. Jazz and *launeddas* are in dialogue despite the centuries between them.

INTERVIEWER

Your family has its origins in Sardinia, but for several generations now you have been Roman and have lived in this same building and neighborhood. Do you feel a dual sense of belonging?

ANEDDA

My parents were both born in Sardinia, while I was born and raised in Rome, where I studied and received my graduate degree with an emphasis on Modernist art.

After World War I, my grandfather stayed on the mainland. He was a career officer in the carabinieri and was often transferred. My father’s degree was in law, from Cagliari, but he practiced in Genoa and then in Rome. He became a judge and eventually the president of the Roman court, a dangerous



“I am a poet of ‘I have seen it’ ... but I am also a poet of ‘I have listened to it.’”

job at the time—this was the seventies, the *anni di piombo* or “years of lead.” We had to live under the protection of the carabinieri and we received death threats from right-wing and extreme left-wing groups.

My maternal grandmother lived in Sardinia. My mother was alone in Rome—her family remained in Cagliari. She wanted to work, to sing—she was a coloratura soprano with a wonderful voice. But she developed tuberculosis and spent a long time in a sanatorium. She never loved Rome. She felt suffocated here, as she did in the mountains that surrounded the sanatorium. My mother longed for the sea her entire life. In all of us the bond with Sardinia has remained strong, and paradoxically has become more intense over the years.

INTERVIEWER

Could you describe what the landscape and geology of La Maddalena have meant to you?

ANEDDA

I think I have this landscape in my DNA. Geology has made me aware of the insignificance of human presence, of the absence of an intelligent

design. The landscape of La Maddalena and Sardinia is harsh and barren and windswept. The vegetation is sparse, but also, often enough, scarred by arson, for humans have wounded the landscape as well. Since the early eighteenth century, when Sardinia was ruled by the House of Savoy, systematic deforestation was the policy.

At the same time I fully understand what Andrea Zanzotto means when he writes, “No, you never betrayed me, [~~landscape~~]”—his work registers an invocation that becomes painful when the landscape is wounded by greed and speculation. The strikethrough suggests how landscape has been scarred ... I’m not talking about arcadia or the world of idylls, but instead about the landscape that surrounds us and reminds us that we are not the masters of the natural world. It is an ethical condition. What is happening to the landscape in Sardinia and elsewhere is deeply worrying. Landscape has a relation, a spatial relation, to rhythm in poetry.

INTERVIEWER

How would you characterize that rhythm?

ANEDDA

Sardinia’s geography has certainly acted on the rhythms of my writing. The silence of the interior and the solitude of the coasts—two very different landscapes, one deeply contained by the mountains and forests, the other exposed to the sea. I hear that silence, stratified by time, pre-Nuragic, bound to the constellations, in the work of the conceptual artist Maria Lai, whom I greatly admire. It’s something archaic rather than mystical. The solitude has nothing to do with a hermit-like vocation, even less with the punitive and religious.

INTERVIEWER

In La Maddalena is your view of the horizon unimpeded? Can you see out to the sea? Is the sky very open?

ANEDDA

My view of the horizon is uninterrupted. On a clear day, I can see Corsica and part of Sardinia itself. From my balcony I can see the small island of Santo Stefano, part of the La Maddalena archipelago. The weather is very changeable and high winds are frequent.

INTERVIEWER

Wind is something you've spoken about often within your poems and prose and in other interviews. We began this conversation discussing the wind of Aleksandr Blok. I think of your poem "Vento. Essere nel vento" (Wind, to be in the wind), from *Il catalogo della gioia*.

Out of the steppe the wind runs over the earth without impediment
burns straight through without the barriers of mountains.
It is east of the body that crushes the thorns of shrubs.
It has Mongolian names, the sound of hooves cutting through space.
It lifts itself. It gathers itself in the highlands:
Caucasus, Anatolia, and Sardinia's sardonic kingdom
where they say there are traces of the Ark and the Cross.
It is a vision of a city of destroyed clouds
where a single icon shines with incorruptible
beauty though fractured by the kicks of horses.

Do you want to say more about the wind's place in your work and thought?

ANEDDA

When it is very exposed to these big winds, the human scale becomes puny, and again I think that perspective enters my poems. Wind teaches us the obvious lesson that nature is a great deal stronger than our little selves. That our illusions of dominating nature have catastrophic consequences. The wind is a metaphor, too, for the breath, but for me it is a reality. Sardinia is exposed to the winds, especially the western side, the one that looks to Spain.

INTERVIEWER

And returning to rhythm, your work contrasts the regularity of a calm, relentless sea to the wind, which is so inchoate. We don't know what the wind will do next.

ANEDDA

Yes, the regular rhythm of the sea. The rhythm of the water, the constantly changing winds, the tides, the storms coming from the Strait of Bonifacio, the petrels' flight. The different types of clouds. I am passionate about meteorology and observing the transformations of the weather. Roni Horn

has titled a series of her photographs with a phrase I really like, “You are the weather,” and it seems to be in long-distance dialogue with Andrea Zanzotto’s book *Meteo*.

INTERVIEWER

Both Horn and Zanzotto speak from inside the weather, questioning the limits of what we can know.

ANEDDA

In Italian we have only one word, *tempo*, for both weather and time. “You are the time” sounds prophetic. Just as we say “wind-driven clouds,” and just as *meteorology* was the word the Greeks used to indicate the rational analysis of high celestial phenomena that in the proper sense fall from the sky—as Lucia Bellizia has noted, we have μετέωρος, *metéōros*, “high,” and λέγω, *légō*, “I speak.” So “rational discourse around high objects.” This is the rhythm, the flow, that interests me. And, yes, there are various rhythms, too, that come with weather disturbances, the snow, the rain.

INTERVIEWER

I also think of your work’s engagement with the seasons. The autumnal aura of *Dal balcone del corpo* comes to mind. Or the start of your poem in *Historiae*, “Alghe, anemone di mare” (Algae, sea anemones), in a cotranslation here with Patrizio Ceccagnoli—

We see the world in the right amount,
no more no less than we can bear,
the head we immerse beneath the water is the only promise
of an afterlife, into the gray that shades every thought.
Algae waver reddened by sea anemones.
The mind doesn’t hurt, the seabed trembles
with an autumnal light.

ANEDDA

In January, *le secche*, the shoals, emerge. The tide recedes and you can gather sea urchins. The days are clear. The sea is so transparent that the profile of every rock and the seabed itself is exposed.

INTERVIEWER

Thinking about the influence of place, a related concern is the presence of the dialect, Limba Sarda, in your poetry. Do you hear the dialect under your Italian? Is it always there, haunting everyday language, or does it come through at certain moments of living speech?

ANEDDA

Limba is not properly a dialect. There is a dictionary, and it is considered more as a minor language close to Latin and Catalan. It stays as a condition that resists within the unfolding of poetic discourse—just as certain poplar leaves turn in the wind. Now they show a matte side, now they show a sparkling side. I always hear and feel the influences of the Limba under my Italian, and I think *haunting* is the right word for it.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes this local language, so personal to you, is replacing Latin at the origin of your Italian. It's as if you are displacing empire in general. In a poem from *Dal balcone del corpo*, "Contro Scauro," written in both Limba and Italian, you told a kind of origin story about the struggle of provincial Sardinians against the center of power. This is Jamie McKendrick's translation.

How can I write of Rome in one or seven days
—a glut of beauty, taste and linen tunics.
Maybe those Sards, 20 centuries ago, felt this
when they came to plead for justice against Scaurus.

"A truthless people . . . land where even the honey is gall"

Cicero said in his oration. But his name, now,
tiny and rapid, flits among the stones, and just as
then, witnesses die, the bee labours on.

Honey endures—a tongue of salt, arbutus, thistle.

You add a note—

In 54 BC, Scaurus, proconsul in Sardinia, was accused of extortion and of being the cause of the suicide of a woman he had raped. The Sards came to Rome to testify, but Scaurus had as his defence lawyer Cicero, who poured scorn on these

unkempt figures, covered with animal skins, bewildered among the columns of the refined Tribunal. Although apparently guilty, Scaurus was absolved.

ANEDDA

Displacing is right. It's a form of "illocality," in the sense in which Emily Dickinson uses the word in "A nearness to Tremendousness." "Its Location / Is Illocality." Perhaps it's through Latin, the audible feeling of Latin in Logudorese, that I've found a way of *dislocating* Italian into a zone for which a different language must be found, at a "slant." It's a way of signaling both the roots of the Sardinian language and its distance from Italian, and so it indicates a displacement from the linguistic perspective.

The name Logudorese—*logu* means "place" and *de oru* means "of gold," so "place of gold." It's close to Latin. So close, in fact, that in *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante says that the Sardinians speak Latin "like monkeys." Limba and Latin share principles of syntax, construction, and concinnity. I believe this minimalist syntax is present in my own Italian.

As for that poem's genesis, I had a commission to write something about Rome. I finished the poem the day after the due date. But I was thinking of Cicero's oration "Pro Scauro," for Scaurus. According to Cicero, Sardinians were not credible as witnesses and were not to be trusted.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

ANEDDA

Because they were considered savages. Cicero added that they came from an island where even the honey was bitter.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, he said their "honey is gall."

ANEDDA

But it's not true. It's not oversweet, but perfectly balanced between the bitter and the sweet. As poetry should be.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the Sardinians at that time? Were they native shepherds or were they settlers?

ANEDDA

Native shepherds in Barbagia. The traditional gender roles are clear—the men are shepherds and women hold the keys to the house. The women learned the art of weaving from the *janas*, the good fairies of Sardinian folklore. These beings live in caves in the rocks and weave with golden threads. The *janas* are an important motif in the textile work of Maria Lai, for example. Furthermore, the condition of women in Sardinia was quite different from that in the Italian peninsula. As opposed to the honor codes of Sicily, for example, Sardinian law seems to have been shaped by the more egalitarian fourteenth-century legal code of the woman judge and ruler Eleanora d'Arborea.

INTERVIEWER

What is known about Sardinia before then? What are the origins of the people and their culture?

ANEDDA

Sardinia is mentioned by Homer, who indicated that the idea of the *sardonic*—mocking, laughing, ironic—comes from the place. There was a very ancient culture in the area even before the Bronze Age. The origin of the Sards is an enigma. Of course Cagliari, Caralis, was a Phoenician harbor, but the interior, the part of Barbagia, so called by Romans to indicate “barbarians,” has never been really conquered by the mainland. The plain of Campidano was very fertile. The Romans used Sardinia as a kind of dump, but also as a granary.

INTERVIEWER

Was this kind of colonization true of La Maddalena also?

ANEDDA

No, I believe La Maddalena was deserted at that time. Until the seventeenth century it was just a place where Corsican shepherds grazed their animals and took them by boats to the neighboring island of Caprera, whose name came from *capre*, “goats.”

INTERVIEWER

In many of your poems Limba appears beside the standard Italian. In *Historiae*, you juxtapose the two, writing the start of the poem “Limbas” in two ways. First in Limba—

Onzi tandu naro una limba mia
da inbentu in impastu a su passato
da dongu solamenti in traduzione.

And then it appears in standard Italian.

Ogni tanto uso una lingua mia
la invento impastandola al passato
non la consegno se non in traduzione.

In other words,

Once in a while I use a language of mine
I invent it, kneading it into the past
I don't hand it over except in translation.

What has this duality meant to you? Which language, Limba or Italian, is the “translation”?

ANEDDA

Some of my poems have been written, indeed they have been “born,” in dialect and then translated. Others, in an experiment, have been translated back and forth between Limba and Italian. Trying this, the transition from Italian to dialect pushed me to create a synthesis. I was forced to remove myself from the process and revisit my work objectively. I also experimented with a kind of third way through the two languages, exploring the effect of first one word, then another, in Italian then dialect and vice versa.

INTERVIEWER

The dialect seems to be the centrifugal force of your work, but you also are so involved in the centripetal power of translation, beyond the exchange between Sardinia and Italy. What does translation mean to you?



"I also look for the architecture of a poem, where the words are like building blocks, so it's not only music but also structure."

ANEDDA

Translation is for me the deepest form of reading and at the same time the riskiest, implying the greatest responsibility. Translating a text is not just moving the words into another language. Paul Celan said the translation had to capture the "timbre" of the voice speaking in the poem. It should render its *quidditas*, its world. Perhaps it is the work of a lifetime—and perhaps a lifetime is not enough. But at the same time, it is right and courageous to translate and to reveal one's reading. And it is interesting to reread a text, even if one knows the original in one's own language. Each generation has the vital task of translating the classics again. In this way, the texts are reborn and rediscovered. To translate for me is to *ri-petere*, from Latin *petere*, "to ask." It is the need to question the text again. It is the work of the Midrash in Judaism. The Midrash eviscerates the texts, rendering them contemporary, close, alive.

INTERVIEWER

And to transpose the question, what are your thoughts on being translated?

ANEDDA

Being translated is an experience that is even more important than translating. You are naked, in a form of nudity, in front of your language. You see if you have taken shortcuts. It is a test of your honesty. You cannot take anything for granted. You have to cope with a form of failure, but it is okay, you learn to dispose of your vanity, to let go of your ego.

I must say that I have been lucky with all my translators into different languages. They all are poets whom I deeply respect, including Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, who recently translated my poems from Italian into Irish.

INTERVIEWER

For English speakers, the clarity and fixedness of vowel sounds in standard Italian, so different from English, seems, as the cliché goes, so musical. Your poems have a music that comes from echoing consonants and from the surprising changes in tone. How important is sound to you when you are composing poems?

ANEDDA

I am always looking for a music inside the poem but not a musicality that is conventionally “poetic.” Music to me is also the noise a car makes on the asphalt at night, or the sound sheet metal makes when it’s disturbed.

INTERVIEWER

Dissonance and even noise, then. Is this tied to the process of writing against a song tradition in Italian verse?

ANEDDA

I also look for the architecture of a poem, where the words are like building blocks, so it’s not only music but also structure.

INTERVIEWER

Our generation inherited traditional forms mostly through the twentieth century’s rejection of them. Yet they remain a resource. How important are these forms to you? Many of your poems, although written in free verse, have the dimensions and closing turns of thought of sonnets, for example.

ANEDDA

Traditional forms are very important. It's essential to know them, if only to break with them. I have written some sonnets, but usually I avoid rhyme and I'm more interested in the metrical effects of Latin poets. There are poets, like Patrizia Valduga and Emilio Rentocchini, who use traditional forms and whose work interests me, but the problem seems to me equivalent to art restoration. How should we intervene? What's to be preserved? Each of us decides the answers to that in our own way. Still, yes, of all the forms, the sonnet is one of my favorites.

INTERVIEWER

What has drawn you to it?

ANEDDA

I love its structure. I know and love the sonnets of Cavalcanti and I admire Anne Carson's reticent sonnets as well. Of all Cavalcanti's sonnets, one I particularly appreciate is his "Chi è questa che vèn ch'ogn'om la mira" (Who is this who comes, upon whom every man gazes). Cavalcanti and other early poets were disobedient to the form as they followed the form. I've just finished a new poem titled "Sonetto disobbediente" (Disobedient sonnet)—a rewriting of a Petrarchan device that hinges on call and response.

INTERVIEWER

As you are reaching to the distant past, you also are teaching at the Università della Svizzera italiana, an institution often singled out for its focus on cutting-edge technology. And in your recent books you've made several, often humorous, allusions to using computers: *salva con nome* corresponds to "save as" as a computer direction—which you turn into an enormous metaphorical allusion—and "the cloud" becomes an actual cloud again. What impact have changes in the technology of writing had on your material work as a poet?

ANEDDA

I was one of the first poets I knew here to use a computer. Even now I fondly remember my old Commodore 64, which was big, green and gray, and slow.



Left to right: Anedda with her aunt, grandmother, daughter, and mother.

I was happy to ditch the Olivetti typewriter. In those days I worked for the Roman newspaper *Il manifesto*. It was and is a leftist newspaper, although the founders were expelled from or forced out of the communist party after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I worked extensively in their culture section, along with Domenico Starnone, Rossana Rossanda, and Gianni Riotta. I remember often enough spending the whole night writing an article, cutting and gluing, arduously correcting.

Technology is important. The copy and paste function of the computer is a paradise. The silence is a relief and the keyboard convenient. Now I have a lightweight, brightly colored laptop. I like these words, *screen*, *cloud*, and the openness of *save as*. What do we save? Probably the unsalvageable.

INTERVIEWER

Could you describe where and when you write your poems? Do you have habitual practices of working?

ANEDDA

Where do I write? Anywhere's possible, but often in my kitchen. It's small, with good light, but it's far from being an image of domestic peace, more

likely the site of a hunting. I used to write in the evening. Now I write in the morning.

INTERVIEWER

And how do you go ahead to compose your poems?

ANEDDA

I can follow a sound or an image and then I jot down the words in a notebook or in the back of a book. I can and must write everywhere. I have a husband, a very old father, a very old aunt, a daughter. What I'm trying to say is that I cannot have "rituals" as I write. I work hard, as anyone must, but I take advantage of every time and place. I am at home in every moment of calm. I write, I read, I rewrite, I read again, I correct, I put up with my desperation, get through my desperation, get over my desperation. This all takes some time before moving on to the computer. I build up my courage, reread, make corrections. When I am exhausted, I deliver the poem.

INTERVIEWER

So poetry is not at the center of your days, but something you pursue whenever you can?

ANEDDA

Words give me a sort of authentication of what I live, of my experiences. We can say a lot of things about poetry, we can say we are artisans—of course poetry comes from the Greek verb ποιᾶν, *poieîn*, "to make"—but the only truth is, Does it work? The text captures different sounds, vibrations, views, but it is also a loom with different colors and densities.

INTERVIEWER

Your new poems have a forensic aspect that is almost posthumanist. *Historiae* is concerned with atoms, radiation, dust, debris, microbes, ashes, sand, and myriad processes that are below and beyond human perception. Can the poet find an alliance with the scientist in this moment of not only ever-growing inequality but also possible extinction?

ANEDDA

I don't see poetry as opposed to science. On the contrary, poetry and science should stay close and form an alliance to fight against ever-increasing inequality. There is a spontaneous alliance between astronomy and poetry, between geometry and poetry, between poetry and physics. We mustn't fight against science but instead against the collusion between some kinds of science and the profit-driven economy. It is obviously a very broad issue and full of contradictions. But it is the scientists who have sounded the alarm about the dire problems with the environment.

INTERVIEWER

What is it like to be writing as an Italian poet today? Is the experience of your generation a departure from the expectations that were brought to the work of Amelia Rosselli, Alda Merini, or others of the earlier postwar era?

ANEDDA

Honestly, I don't feel any strong sense of an Italian literary community, but I have felt a close connection with Amelia Rosselli's work. Rosselli introduced me to Emanuela Tandello, who has become one of my best friends, and to my British friends Jamie McKendrick, Bernard O'Donoghue, and Peter Hainsworth. I have many Italian friends who teach abroad, like Manuele Gragnolati, who works in Paris—he wrote several beautiful books on Dante, such as *Amor che move* (Love that moves)—and Nicola Gardini, a distinguished writer and Renaissance expert who teaches at Oxford.

Rosselli was, and remains, to some extent, a "stranger" in Italian literature. I admire her mind, her freedom, her genius in understanding and telling the truth about Sylvia Plath. In an important essay she had the courage to write against the univocal interpretation of Plath as being only a confessional poet. Rosselli made wonderful translations of Plath, and of several poems by Emily Dickinson, into Italian. Rosselli herself encouraged me and was incredibly generous to write about my first book, *Residenze invernali*. Perhaps my first true mentor was Augusto Gentili, with whom I studied the iconology of Venetian art at university.

INTERVIEWER

You were quite far down the course of becoming an art historian.

ANEDDA

I had an advanced degree in the history of Venetian art of the seventeenth century. I was awarded honors and a publication. In Venice I had won a scholarship from the Cini Foundation—I passed the specialized exams. In short, I had a “brilliant career” when, after a period of depression and eating disorders, I abandoned everything. I came back to Rome. These were my “dull” years. Then I slowly recovered. I worked in a museum and I started writing for newspapers. But I think that this kind of education was very important. It taught me not to take details for granted, to be aware of what is behind an image, the historical, religious, and economic context, the importance of the patron.

INTERVIEWER

As you look back on that difficult time, does it seem to have sent you to your life as a poet?

ANEDDA

I spent years struggling with a deep sense of inadequacy—not that it is going much better now, but I live with it—and with self-esteem problems, with an inaccurate perception of my body, with a profound discomfort in social relationships. I don’t know if I am healed now, but by putting aside my “I,” observing not myself but the world around me, I have learned to believe precisely in living. And to acknowledge the fact that I do not understand well when I have an appetite or not. My daughter, Maria Sofia, who has a very healthy relationship with food and loves to cook, played a fundamental role in my recovery.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if you feel, as I do, that thinking and writing can unlock the door, make a rough path, in moments of despair and anxiety?

ANEDDA

I think that the point, as Jenny Holzer suggests, is to become increasingly interested in the lives of others. Work empowers and strengthens. I slowly came to understand that writing also involves a body and therefore a mind capable of working. I tempered myself. I stopped thinking about an ideal image. I

reckoned with my fears. My “career” as an art historian has not gone on, but, who knows, maybe my career not having gone on was for the best.

INTERVIEWER

But you continue to write with an art historian’s eye. Readers have noted the Vermeer-like interiors of the spaces described in your poems. And you brought out a beautiful small book about details in works of art, *La vita dei dettagli*. The reader is provided small details from works by Giotto, Bosch, Cornell, and dozens of others, with facing-page prose texts, and invited to puzzle over the images one at a time before using the key to identify the artwork.

ANEDDA

Yes, as Elizabeth Bishop says, “No detail too small.” I am quite obsessed by details. This derives from my education in art history. I tend to recognize a picture from its small details, as I did in my book. The detail beckons us, calls each of us differently, from a picture or from that big picture that is existence.

INTERVIEWER

Visual art clearly has an influence on your poems beyond technique. Could you say more about its philosophical impact?

ANEDDA

There is a picture that I have always admired, and feared, by Magritte, *The Human Condition*. There’s always a frame and this frame is our tragedy. It’s the central issue of *Dal balcone del corpo*—we imagine that we see what is behind us. But in fact we see only frontally and peripherally. Cubism was the movement that dreamed of giving space to different points of view, but Surrealism is the reality of the nightmare and tells the truth about perception. The detail reminds us, then, that we are spectators who constantly excise ourselves. In *Notti di pace occidentale*, the poem itself arises from a detail that I saw on television, an image of a woman seeking shelter during the war in Bosnia. Obviously, I was not the reporter. I was not there. But language was my only tool.

INTERVIEWER

I gather that in contemporary Italian poetry, a kind of critique of the “I” has arisen. I am thinking of your poem “Nuvole, io” (Cloud, I), from *Historiae*, here cotranslated with Patrizio Ceccagnoli.

I would like to get rid of the I, just as the critics prescribe,
but I’m so poor a pronoun’s my only possession.
The most I can do is decline it in the plural. I say we
and feel falsely bighearted.

ANEDDA

It verges on obsession in the experimental sector. But there is a valid concern there. So without being rigidly theoretical about it, a suspicion about the use of the first person can be salutary. I simply wonder, given that the “I” is a convention and I am not at all sure that it exists, if this is not, in the end, the best state of affairs. The sense is that we have this tool and all in all it is less hypocritical just to use it. “I” has already shattered, always. The text you quoted takes up the debates, the disputes, the quarrels, about this famous “I.” In my text, there is no ideological polemic, but rather a desire to question the pronouns, to ask them, Hey, you, how do you function?

INTERVIEWER

The poem is a kind of declaration of independence.

ANEDDA

“Nuvole, io” is an interlocutory text punctuated by hypotheticals. I see it as an ironic poem about the obsession with the ego, the demonization of the ego, by certain critics. It makes me laugh, for they are taking a stance against something that doesn’t exist. I don’t exist, just as consciousness does not exist. These are constructions, evolutionary maps. It is strange how some “advanced” positions can actually be regressive and in truth far from science—in this case far from neurobiology. I am also thinking of popular books on the subject—for example, *Looking for Spinoza* by Antonio Damasio. When I write, “I with I hide myself,” I am thinking precisely of pronouns as a game. This is an underground citation that runs from Dante to Zanzotto. When we write we put into practice what Dante says in the *Purgatorio*—a music that “*fece me a*

me uscir di mente”—made me leave, lose, or go out of my own mind, in other words. The poem entertains this possibility, of letting me go out of, or let go of, my mind. There is a mysterious alchemy between detachment and investment. You can avoid the ego and yet still be rhetorical in the negative sense. Alternatively you can say “I” without excluding others.

INTERVIEWER

Especially since *Notti di pace occidentale*, you have written against the backdrop of endless wars in the Middle East. Do you see a decisive turn in your work with that book?

ANEDDA

Geography and history have long been concerns in my writing. *Notti di pace occidentale* was written in the shadow of the first Gulf War. The book is concerned with the situation of the West surrounded by apparently concluded wars and Europe living not in peace but under an anxious truce. So the title is ironic.

INTERVIEWER

Let's return to the speaker who stands on the balcony. To be on a balcony impedes action among others, and yet gives us a more expansive viewpoint than if we are on the ground in the midst of life. I am wondering if you believe that is the position of the poet.

ANEDDA

The title *Dal balcone del corpo* was suggested by Husserl's phenomenology. I was drawn to the idea that we are only able to see straight ahead of us. Not being owls, we cannot see behind us by turning our heads. We are obliged to have a frontal perspective. So the analogy was with the balcony ... because from the balcony you can listen to people's voices. You are linked to an interior, but also suspended in the void. It's an exposed situation. This leads me to the vulnerability of poetry that, as Paul Celan wrote, “*ne s'impose pas, elle s'expose*.” I was interested in this “exposure” and in the relationship between the body and space. We're not exactly prisoners of our bodies, but our perspectives are governed by our being confined within a body. So yes, the first idea was philosophical. But the image of the balcony is also linked to an

everyday phenomenon as well. In fact in Italy there always are people—often old people—on their balconies watching, listening. And finally, I had in mind at least two poetic references—Baudelaire’s “Le balcon” and Montale’s opening poem, “Il balcone,” from his book *The Occasions*.

INTERVIEWER

Baudelaire’s poem is an effusive, yet questioning, recollection of consummated love. Montale’s initiating “Il balcone” is a poem of regret and strained hopefulness. There, from the balcony, the speaker compares the viewpoint of an “I” and a “you”: the “I” stands questioning, uncertain, anguished with waiting, while the “you,” charged with an inner fire, seems alight with an incommensurable perspective.

ANEDDA

There is a relationship between the domestic and public spaces, one that is difficult to fill, for anyone—not only for poets.

INTERVIEWER

You have had a public voice through your work in journalism—not only in your writing for *Il manifesto* but also in your work for *Noidonne*, an important early feminist journal. And as a well-known poet, also, you have a public voice. Do these voices have different consequences?

ANEDDA

We all are living through a difficult time. I don’t think poetry has a necessary obligation to be directly committed to the public sphere. The poet has a different point of view. She speaks, but in an oblique way. I believe in personal political commitments, but I am not drawn to poetry that is propagandist. Here we find ourselves standing before the enormous topic of the relationship between words and power. As Osip Mandelstam said, “I was only bound childishly to the world of power.” In his “Conversation on Dante,” Mandelstam described Dante as a *raznochinets*, one of the poor, who traverses the space of the *Commedia* with the soles of his shoes worn away.

INTERVIEWER

You often have written about the pain of others by carefully tracing your own relation to such pain. I'll mention two examples from *Historiae*. One is your elegy for your mother, which seems to me so central to the book. Another is the moving poem about your grandfather and his suffering from 1915 to 1918. Would you like to describe the process of writing those poems?

ANEDDA

The elegies for my mother and my grandfather are only relatively autobiographical. I don't know if there is a privileged relationship with the mother tongue on my part. As I said, both my parents are Sardinians, and I was raised in an atmosphere of Sardinian cultural memories. As for the poem for my grandfather recounting 1915 to 1918, by going through him, I wanted to speak of those of that generation who, as Montale says, were overwhelmed by war. My grandfather was a young officer during the First World War, much loved by his soldiers but very strict with himself. He asked for no permission for leave even though he knew his child was dying. The story ends there, but out of his silence, even out of his detachment, there was a mute pain that reached me, too. When another daughter died at the age of twenty-seven, it was too much for him to bear. I was seven and he didn't love me. He couldn't. I have many photographs of him in the war—he was seventeen when he enlisted. There are notebooks with love poems in Logudorese, but it was as if he had never managed to turn those words into something living.

I wonder how many people like him there have been, how many private tragedies against the background of a greater tragedy. During the Second World War my grandfather was "lucky," because instead of being taken prisoner by the Germans, he was taken by the English. So in writing about my grandfather I reflected on the fact that he had survived two wars to see two daughters die.

As for my mother, I feel very reticent talking about her. She was an extremely intelligent person, fragile in an era when mental illness was not adequately treated. As I mentioned, she lived a long time in a sanatorium because tuberculosis was considered to be a shameful disease. The two conditions, one physical and one social, were intertwined. When she died, I tried,

Paris, 2019.



ARMANDVS · IOAN · RD · DVX · RICHELIVS · SORBONAE · P
AEDIFICAVIT · DO · XALTAVIT · TEMPLVM · S · DOMINO

in my elegy, to give a form to her pain and to her revolt. She was a fallen aristocrat—certainly not a bourgeois. In Rome we were misfits.

This has always interested me, the relationship between our lives, others' lives, and History with a capital H. I tried to say this in the title section of *Notti di pace occidentale*. What are the stories within history? What role does poetry have, if it even has one? Does it console us? I don't believe that. Certainly poetry does not console the writer, but perhaps she can try not to look elsewhere. To look destiny in the face and not escape—even by writing a sonnet, to do the best you can.

INTERVIEWER

As a poet you also have looked to historical coincidence, as in your use of Tacitus's own *Historiae*. There you point to the tragic contemporary aptness of his record in Book I.2. "*Plenum exiliis mare, infecti caedibus scopuli*." "The sea was full of exiles, the cliffs polluted with the corpses of the dead."

ANEDDA

I'm very interested in history, but I think, in accord with Tacitus, that it is a slaughterhouse. As he writes in Book I, "Everywhere were rapine and slaughter."

INTERVIEWER

In your poem "Lesbos, 2015," despite the date in the title, the scene described could be from any time in human history:

They could be gone hunting—but they don't carry rifles
they cautiously advance into the olive grove
if tired they sleep
leaning their backs against the walls.
The city collapsed, from here you cannot see the glare
between the houses—no longer stubble now fuses,
with red-hot clots, and tires on fire.

Here you were observing firsthand—not watching television.

ANEDDA

I went to Lesbos because I wanted to see the world of Sappho and also the museum of the painter Theophilos at Mytilene. And as well the flamingos

and the lagoon where Aristotle fled in exile from Athens and where he studied the remains of fish, inspiring his *Historia animalium*. I also wanted to see Eresos, where Theophrastus, the friend and disciple of Aristotle, was born. His treatise on compassion toward animals was known by Leopardi.

In short, I was in Lesbos for tourism and pleasure when suddenly a crowd of people appeared walking together there on a road. They were Syrians who'd arrived in Lesbos from the Turkish coast. They were walking because, as they explained to us, the police would not allow them to take taxis or buses. They were almost all young, walking at night, in the heat, behind someone carrying a flashlight. During the day mothers spread their babies' clothes on the bushes. It was a spectacle that, at least to me, coming from Western Europe, resembled all too clearly a page from Primo Levi's Holocaust memoir, *If This Is a Man*. However, these young mothers responded to our smiles and seemed relieved to have arrived at a place that was, perhaps at least at the beginning, not exactly welcoming but safe. Who would not feel that way, after fleeing war, and hunger, and what is called "collateral damage"? It is rarely spoken of, but many civilians are killed "by mistake." The poem is an attempt to reflect on what I had seen.

INTERVIEWER

The refugee crisis of the Middle East and Mediterranean has gone on to affect so many Italian cities, where Romani families and West African migrants, too, continue to seek shelter and a means of making a living. In a long poem, "Occidente" (The West), you address the intense moral crisis of homelessness in your own neighborhood, describing the poor who go through the garbage. One stanza explains,

This is why our aliens come at this strange hour
sometimes, they are women, often old.
They push a stroller with no baby,
as well as a shopping cart,
and in fact they are doing this, "at our expense"
adds the tenant.

ANEDDA

"Occidente" is a text that tries to decipher everyday history, here in Rome.



"This has always interested me, the relationship between our lives, others' lives, and History with a capital H." Antipaxos, Greece, 2018.

From my window I see the garbage cans. And for some time now I've been observing people who search through the garbage. Often they are elderly Roma women, looking for scrap metal to sell. Sometimes when I go down to throw out my garbage, we meet. There is a mutual shame. By this I mean above all I feel a sense of helplessness and I don't know how to help. We can offer charity, but charity is not enough.

On the one hand, we are there, with a job, a house, clothing that falls within the norm, et cetera—our apparently solid Western world. On the other, there are people without work, who live in fields and caravans. Who are we and who are they? I can't answer. I have no answers.

This is just the tip of the iceberg—the ever-deeper gap between wealth and poverty, between those who have and those who have nothing. At one time I had faith in a political response. I wrote for a long time for left-wing newspapers. I believed in militancy. Now I still think it is important to resist, to be on the side of the oppressed, of the forgotten, but I confess I'm often discouraged. For example, I was astonished—dumbfounded and also angry—when Sardinia voted for the Lega, the northern Italian anti-immigrant secessionist party. It was crazy to vote for something, someone,

that despises the south and Sards. I follow with sympathy the young people's movement called Le Sardine—a movement begun in 2019, organizing a lot of peaceful demonstrations against right-wing hate and racist language.

INTERVIEWER

Now on the other side of a “generation gap,” we look for common ground. And you recently returned to the world of university students to earn a doctorate in Italian literature at Oxford. Your dissertation work on Darwin and Leopardi seems to have had a direct impact on the themes of human and natural history in *Historiae*. I wonder if the dislocation of anthropocentrism in that research also has changed your work in poetry.

ANEDDA

The title of my thesis was “The mouse, the plants, the worms: Giacomo Leopardi and Erasmus and Charles Darwin.” Most likely this research confirmed my anti-anthropocentric vision and my interest in natural history. It also confirmed for me that Leopardi is far greater than the stereotype of the suffering poet, the Leopardi we learn about in school. He is a poet of thought, not a “spiritualist.”

INTERVIEWER

And what drew you to Darwin?

ANEDDA

I originally was taken with Mandelstam's admiration for Darwin and found that Darwin opened a clearing for me, too. I love Darwin's “self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration,” as Elizabeth Bishop described it in a 1964 letter. He offers an ethical and poetic lesson. I share his anti-anthropocentrism, his annoyance with dogmas, and I admire his fight against slavery. Studying the relation between Leopardi, Darwin's grandfather Erasmus, and Darwin himself made it clear to me that their thought has nothing to do with social Darwinism.

And reading the work of both Erasmus and Charles, and wonderful books about them by Patricia Fara and Gillian Beer, has affected my poetry. Studying them has only increased my passion for details, my observation of nature, my sense of doubt, my belief that science and poetry are in dialogue.

INTERVIEWER

How have your goals for your work changed over time? What did you hope for with your first book and at midlife, and what are your hopes for your next volume?

ANEDDA

I can't say, for I'm afraid I don't have goals and I can't think of writing as a "career." Instead, it is a responsibility, in the sense of a *pondus*, a weight. I don't have a plan, a program. My strongest commitment is, read a text together and understand it together. Perhaps in this there is a coherence uniting my first work with my most recent. There is a motto of the Gonzagas that I like, *Nec spe, nec metu*. "Without hope and without fear."

Margaret Atwood

WINTER VACATIONS

How quickly we're skimming through time,
leaving behind us
a trail of muffin crumbs
and wet towels and hotel soaps
like white stones in the forest.
But something's eroded them:
we can't trace them back
to that meadow where we began so eagerly
with the berry-filled cups, and the parents
who had not yet abandoned us
to take their chances in the ground.

Our tropical clothing's remorseless:
it fully intends to outlast us.
We're shriveling inside it,
leaking calcium from our bones.
Then there's our crafty hats:
we catch them sneering in mirrors.
We could afford new t-shirts,
daring ones, with rude slogans,
but it seems a waste:
we've got too many already.
Also they'd gang up on us,
they'd creep around on the floor,
they'd tangle our ankles,
then we'd fall down the stairs.

Despite all this we're traveling fast,
we're traveling faster than light.
It's almost next year,
it's almost last year,

it's almost the year before:
familiar, but we can't swear to it.
What about this outdoor bar,
the one with the stained-glass palm tree?
We know we've been here already.
Or were we? Will we ever be?
Will we ever be again?
Is it far?

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

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Layover

AYŞEGÜL SAVAŞ

Lara was supposed to have breakfast with Selin, a friend from middle school who had a long layover in Paris. It was eight thirty, and Lara was frustrated not to have the morning to herself before teaching in the afternoon. She loved the early, luxurious hours when she was free to do anything she wanted, which often meant making coffee and going back to bed to read.

She hadn't seen Selin in more than fifteen years, though they'd kept in touch a little over Facebook. Selin sometimes wrote out of the blue, having remembered an episode from their school years, or to ask how Lara was doing. Lara had moved to Boston for university, then to New York, before coming to France. Selin would write that she dreamed of visiting Lara in these places.

Lara didn't see Selin when she went back to Istanbul. Her trips were short, barely enough time to see her parents and closest friends. She had

nonetheless kept track of the general shape of Selin's life: she still lived in Istanbul; she had a boyfriend who resembled her, with a thick mop of hair and a cartoonish smile; she posted photographs of her handicrafts, which received enthusiastic comments from other crafters.

AT THE LAST MINUTE, Lara decided to put on lipstick. She walked down the stairs of her building and stepped outside. Sunlight lay bright and jagged on the scaffolded building across the street, where work had already started for the day. There was the clang of metal, a rhythmic thudding of sacks thrown on the pavement. The wind was sharp on her face and neck. She buttoned up her long coat, a bit thin for the season, and turned to walk to the bistro at the end of the street. She went there several times a week, mostly in the evenings after teaching. Recently, she'd had a date there with a man she met online. For a week or two afterward, they sent each other text messages. When Lara suggested meeting up again, the man stopped responding.

Selin would have to take the fast train from the airport, then switch to line 4. Lara had assured her over email that this was an easy trip, though she could certainly have suggested something more direct. Selin would be tired after her flight from the United States. She was on her way home from a craft workshop—she'd explained the technique in her message, which Lara could no longer recall. She was bewildered that Selin would bother coming all the way from the airport to see her, rather than walking the city alone for a few hours, maybe treating herself to a nice lunch, a souvenir.

THE BISTRO HAD GREEN MOSAIC FLOORS and an old-fashioned zinc counter, cluttered with baskets of bread, an orange press, newspapers. Behind the counter, a waiter was drying glasses with a tea towel. Selin would be enchanted by this place, Lara thought; she might even think Lara had picked it because it was so charming.

As far as Lara knew, Selin had only been to Paris once, with her mother, when they were in school. She came back from the trip with two pink Breton hats, for herself and for Lara, and stories of the boat ride on the Seine, the view from the tower, the trip to Disneyland. For the rest of the year, she talked about moving to Paris for university. But she'd stayed in Istanbul, saying that she didn't want her mother to be alone.

Lara took the table by the window and brought her book out of her bag. It was a history of an artists' commune in Paris in the sixties. The general subject interested her more than the specifics: letters documenting arrivals and departures, correspondence with suppliers, requests for funding from the Ministry of Culture. As she was leafing through the book, she saw Selin from the corner of her eye, crossing the street in a large duffle coat.

"Lala!" Selin shouted, entering the café. "La la la!"

Her hair puffed out in every direction. Her face, too, was puffy, as if she'd just woken up from a nap. She threw her hands in the air and scrunched her nose—her expression, Lara remembered, for anything happy or puzzling.

They hugged. Then they hugged again.

To Lara's relief, Selin didn't have her luggage with her. She'd imagined they might be scolded by the waiter for taking up too much space.

"Should we get the breakfast menu?" Lara asked, showing Selin the blackboard propped against the counter. "It's all the usual stuff, and an egg."

"I can't believe I'm here," Selin said. "Just like we always imagined."

Their breakfasts arrived on two pewter trays. Besides the egg, there was coffee and juice, glistening croissants, a pot of jam, and butter. Selin took a photo of Lara and the trays.

"Look at you," she said. "The Parisian."

"How was the trip?" Lara asked. "How was your workshop?"

"Absolutely perfect."

She'd only found out about it by chance, she told Lara. The instructor was a woman in West Virginia who ran workshops out of her home. She and Selin had become friends online. Last summer, the woman invited Selin to join one of her fall workshops, at a discounted rate.

"That's a pretty long trip for handicrafts," Lara said.

"That's what the others said! They couldn't believe it."

Selin rarely took offense, Lara remembered. She used to delight in people making fun of her, as if it were a sign of their affection.

She'd brought everyone gifts from Istanbul, Selin said, cute little evil eye bracelets—blue and green and silver, she chirped.

"Ozan keeps joking that West Virginia will talk about the arrival of the Turk for years to come."

"Ozan's your boyfriend?"

“Lala!” She’d been meaning to write: she and Ozan had gotten engaged a few months ago and would get married the following autumn, in Ozan’s grandparents’ garden on the Aegean. Lara noticed the gold ring on Selin’s finger, with a small green stone.

“You’ll get a proper invitation, obviously. I worked on a few ideas during the workshop. By the way, my mother sends a big hello.”

“How’s my role model?”

“Always the same,” Selin said. “Set on having things her way.”

She swirled the coffee in her cup.

“That sounds mean,” she added. They’d had a small argument recently, about the wedding. She knew that her mother was just being protective, but she was bothered nonetheless that her mother continued to ask whether she wouldn’t rather wait.

“Wait for what?” Lara asked.

“For someone she likes better.” She laughed, scrunching up her nose.

LARA AND SELIN BECAME FRIENDS in seventh grade, after Lara’s family returned to Istanbul from Geneva. Selin had befriended Lara in the first week of school. Selin wasn’t one of the of girls who sat in a pack—their voices rising and falling from whispers to hysterical laughter and back again—but she wasn’t picked on, either. She shared her homework with anyone who asked, warning them cheerfully that she might have gotten it all wrong. And there was her mother, who came to school for board meetings. She wasn’t like the mothers of the other girls, frilled and perfumed, dressed in the style of their own daughters and too eager to prove their youth. Selin’s mother was tall and thin and radiant. She wore high-waisted trousers and vests and smiled at everyone as if she were a movie star. Selin didn’t seem to notice her mother’s charm—another point in her favor, as if her nonchalance toward her mother was in fact a sign of her own charisma.

Lara and Selin had nicknames for one another—Lala, Solo—and a secret handshake. At lunchtime, they stayed in the classroom making drawings. They had sleepovers every week, mostly at Selin’s. Lara’s mother was a fussy host, strict about bedtimes, whereas Selin’s mother didn’t need prior notice for Lara to come over. She would ask the girls what they felt like eating, and cook something on the spot or order in. She sat across from them at the table, drinking wine. Sometimes she asked the girls if they’d like a sip as well.

“Mom!” Selin would protest. “We’re thirteen!”

Selin’s parents had separated the previous year and her father remarried soon thereafter. A perfect housewife, Selin’s mother said of the other woman. One time at dinner, when she’d ordered a bucket of fried calamari for the girls, she told them to count their blessings. “If I were a perfect housewife,” she said, “I’d make you stewed beans.”

Before Lara, Selin had been friends with the twin sisters from 7B, who were quiet, hardworking, and unopinionated. “Those poor girls,” Selin’s mother called them, for no apparent reason. She was delighted in her daughter’s new friendship, said that Selin had finally met her soul sister. She believed in such things—souls and the will of the universe.

“You were meant to find us, Lala,” she said. “The three of us are a gang.” At dinner, she would ask the girls questions: What sort of boutique hotel would they like to own? What pastries would they serve if they had a café? Which celebrity would they go on holiday with? Afterward, she told the girls her preferences, which Lara memorized, determined to one day make them her own: a hotel with a courtyard and blue mosaics; almond crostata; Daniel Day-Lewis.

Selin’s answers exasperated her mother, or made her laugh: a Mary Poppins–themed hotel, frosted cupcakes. “Oh, sweetheart,” her mother said, “don’t you think you’ll grow out of all that?”

THE SUMMER BEFORE NINTH GRADE, Lara went to a language school in the Loire Valley. Selin’s mother had wanted Selin to go as well, but Selin spent the vacation with her father and his wife at a resort. “A sure way,” Selin’s mother said, “to kill every last brain cell.”

At the summer school, Lara joined the other students after class to go to the village bar and drink lagers. In a matter of weeks, she’d grown tall and skinny. Her tanned shoulders were sculpted beneath the straps of her tank tops. One of the English girls showed her how to line her eyes. On her last evening, she and a boy from Spain kissed on the riverbank.

In the fall, the class split up for science and social studies tracks. Lara and Selin were only together for French and geography. Lara had become friendly with Defne, a member of the pack, and often joined her for lunch. She still slept over at Selin’s from time to time. At home, the girls reverted to the way they were before, making up songs, drawing fictional maps.

SELIN HAD FINISHED her breakfast and ordered a cappuccino.

"This café is lovely," she said.

"It's not too far from where I live," Lara told her, though she didn't say she lived down the street. "I thought you'd like it."

She pointed out the mosaic detail on the ceiling, the brass window knobs shaped like leaves.

"Crazy how you and my mother have the same taste," Selin said. "She would adore this place."

"Not so crazy," Lara said, "given that I basically copied her style."

She felt sudden tenderness for her friend, their familiarity. She asked for another coffee as well.

"She's still glamorous," Selin said. If there was anything about the wedding that excited her mother, it was the dressing up, and all the decorations she'd thought of for the garden.

"I'd want her to plan my wedding, too," Lara said.

But Selin felt uncomfortable about interfering too much. There'd been other weddings at the family plot—Ozan's younger sister and cousins. They'd all been modest events, occasions to host neighbors and family. Selin hadn't yet confronted her mother about it and imagined it would cause more tension.

"But that's my own problem," she said. "I just have to get it over with. Anyway what about you? What happened to that handsome man in your profile pictures?"

"He was a photographer. I mean, he *is*. It ended on its own, nothing dramatic. Honestly, I'm enjoying being single."

"Single in Paris," Selin said. "*That's* glamorous."

When they finished their coffees, Lara suggested going for a walk.

"What about your class?" Selin asked. In her email, Lara had written that she would have to teach later, without specifying the time, in case she wanted an excuse to leave.

"That's not for a few more hours," she told Selin. She was now considering canceling the class. They could walk to the river, get drinks.

She reached across the table and held Selin's arm. "It's so good to see you," she said.

OUTSIDE, TWO MAJESTIC CLOUDS were suspended in the sky, framing the sun. Lara and Selin crossed the boulevard, then turned to a side

street where Lara showed Selin the large blue doorway behind which was a Benedictine convent. Lara herself had only glimpsed inside, to the garden and cloisters. She'd heard that you could visit the grounds on certain days of the year, when it was open to the public, though she hadn't been bothered to look it up. The city was full of such places. Their inaccessibility had charmed her when she first moved here, as if it were an invitation to explore, to make the city her own.

She'd come to Paris with an artist research grant and met the photographer in the final months of her visa. They admired each other's self-sufficiency, their mutual lack of neediness. The photographer liked to tell Lara that he'd never had a partner before her who didn't rely on him for fulfillment. After her residency ended, Lara moved into the photographer's apartment. When her visa expired, they got married. Lara's parents came from Istanbul, and the four of them went out for lunch after the ceremony at the municipal hall. The relationship was over by the following summer. The end crept up on them, announced itself of its own accord; they accepted it without a fight. The photographer took a project in Estonia, to document abandoned sanatoriums. He and Lara agreed to remain married until Lara got her citizenship. Lara moved to a studio apartment, found work teaching and guiding private museum tours. Her clients on the tours were mostly older, wealthy couples who liked to show off their own knowledge. Lara complimented them on this, showed enthusiastic approval in the banal, repeated facts of art history—that Michelangelo freed the human form from blocks of marble, that Rodin had taken credit for the work of his lover, that Cézanne had truly paved the way to Cubism.

THEY HAD ARRIVED at the park of the observatory and stood watching the fountain of galloping bronze horses.

"I love seeing these places," Selin said. "From now on, I'll be able to picture you in your habitat." She suggested taking a selfie to send her mother.

They huddled their heads close, both of them squinting from the sun.

Selin showed the picture to Lara before sending.

"So cute," Lara said.

Within seconds, Selin's mother texted a line of colorful hearts. *You two haven't changed my darlings. Kisses and hugs.*

During high school, whenever she saw Selin's mother, Lara felt uneasy, as if she'd been caught being deceitful. But she also had the sense that Selin's

mother approved of her new social circle, her matured style. It seemed that this was what Selin's mother would have wanted for her daughter as well, and that Lara had made better use of her potential. One time, she told Lara that she reminded her of her own student years. Lara had cut her hair short and was on a drastic diet. "I had just your style," she said. "And your spirit."

THEY'D REACHED THE END of the park.

"How did you and Ozan meet?" Lara asked. "At university, right?"

"No," Selin said. "Ozan didn't go to university."

It was, of all places, at a summer resort, where she'd gone with her father and his family.

"Your mother hated those resorts."

Selin chuckled.

She'd noticed Ozan with a sketchbook and pen at the beach bar every morning. She went up to him one day and asked to take a closer look. The drawings were so intricate, of bridges and boats.

"I can't imagine you being so bold," Lara said.

"A moment of folly."

Ozan worked on a cargo ship and wanted to get a captain's license. For years, they saw each other once a month, sometimes not even that. The previous year, Ozan had moved in with Selin. After the wedding, they would move south.

"Closer to the sea?" Lara asked.

"Actually, he doesn't work on board anymore. But we'll be closer to his family."

Lara thought that she sounded evasive, and assumed that Ozan must be unemployed.

"What does your mother think about the move?"

"She thinks it's a waste of our youth."

She looked at her watch. "I guess I should get going." There was some place she wanted to visit before she went back to the airport, she told Lara. "And you probably need to go to your class."

"I could cancel that," Lara said. "We could have a drink by the river."

"That's so tempting," Selin said. "I would've loved that. We have to plan a proper reunion."

Lara asked where she needed to go.

A bookstore, Selin explained, that specialized in art books. She wanted to get a few for Ozan.

"I could come along," Lara said.

"Don't bother, it's across the city."

"You should have told me," Lara said. "We could have met around there."

"I loved seeing your neighborhood," Selin said.

"Can't you order the books online?" She was sad that they would be parting so soon, when it seemed that they'd just fallen back into their old rhythm.

"I guess I could, but I'd like to see them in person."

"I think," Lara said, "that you'd like to go for a festive drink."

Selin smiled. The bookshop, she explained, sold large-format books, with magnified details on every page. She spread her arms to show how big.

Two years ago, she went on, Ozan was diagnosed with early retinal deterioration. In front of his right eye was a black spot that was slowly spreading. He could still see clearly with his other eye, but it was a strain to look at things for a long time.

"But he won't go blind?"

"He will," Selin said. She was a step ahead of Lara now.

"I'm so sorry," Lara said, too loudly. "That must be very difficult. But it's so special that you stayed together. It's really wonderful of you."

They stood at a crossing, waiting for the green light. Selin looked at Lara but didn't say anything. Then, she pointed to the metro entrance ahead.

"I can probably get on at this stop," she said. "I'll figure it out."

As they crossed the street, she took a photo of the metro with her phone.

These metro entrances, she told Lara, with their green lamps, were among Ozan's favorite details in the city.

"Actually," she said, "Ozan and I came to Paris for a weekend last year."

She hadn't told Lara, because she wanted Ozan to do whatever he wanted in the short time. They spent a whole day in the Orsay and another walking along the river. That was also when they discovered the bookshop. At the time, Ozan protested that the books were too expensive, and, in the end, they didn't get any.

They stood by the metro steps, the green metal stalks of the lampposts rising above them.

"I loved our morning together," Selin said.

"Solo," Lara said. "I'm so glad this worked out. Let's get together when I'm in Istanbul."

They hugged. Then they hugged again.

Lara waited as Selin went down the stairs, and waved at her before she disappeared inside. Then she turned and started walking back. It was a glorious afternoon. When she was back in the park, she sat down on a bench.

Selin would be on the metro now, counting the stops until she had to get off. Lara would send her a text in a little bit, to thank her for coming all the way. She would repeat that they should get together, the next time she was in Istanbul. Perhaps she would visit Selin and Ozan in the south.

She wondered what Selin would tell her mother about their meeting. She might describe the café, say that Lara looked like a Parisian, with her red lipstick and long coat. Selin's mother would ask whether Lara had a boyfriend, and how she'd reacted to the news of the marriage. Selin wouldn't tell her mother what Lara said—that it was wonderful of her to have stayed with Ozan—because she didn't think like that, weighing and measuring kindness. That much Lara had understood, in her friend's silent reaction.

She took out her book from her bag, flipped through the pages, then put it back. It was too cold to sit outside and her coat was too thin.

Perhaps she would cancel her class after all. She might go home and read. She could always go back to the café for lunch.

Two Poems by Jeffrey Skinner

THE MANSION

I understand—the NO ONE CARES billboard
looms over the exit ramp; Nancy has lost her place
in her novel for the umpteenth time; the Lab
has dysplasia. Overhead, a species
of blank Midwestern sky falls
open like a journal you buy full of hope,
then leave in some drawer where it remains, blank.
The universe is bored with my questions,
finally. I knew it would happen
though one is nevertheless taken by surprise.
So many in real pain remain silent.
Lonesome thing in the forest, stay there!
Don't come out! You no longer fascinate.
I always begin by speaking
from exactly where I am. But then, you know—
the earth rotates, I am awash in lies
and pretension, waving a tiny flag at the moon.
If you make the song real it goes on
singing itself, someone said, and that alone
should be enough. Not like the repetition of money.
I buy the premise, but don't know where
it leaves me. Generally, we expect the poem
to circle back, to touch home base—
the breathless child crouching by the willow,
late-summer evening, shadow on the lawn enlarging
into a mansion. The child gets it, enters.

THE CLOUD

My mother's been dead for three months.
I don't know where she is now or how she got there.
I've heard all kinds of conjecture, and some
I believe. But firsthand experience comes last.

Soon, I'm going on vacation to Florida,
a state she lived in many years. She loved the sun
and would lie for hours in its glossy lacquer.
Later on she preferred to stay indoors.

Quatrains are useful because, as Creeley
said: Strong feeling wants a container.
At least, I remember words to that effect.
All words mingle, eventually, in the same cloud.

I also like Florida, the ocean more than the sun.
Being in waves reminds me of something
I once was, and maybe will be again.
But I have no idea, really, what I mean by that.

Six Stories

LYDIA DAVIS

AN INCIDENT ON THE TRAIN

I'm on the train, traveling alone, with two seats to myself. I have to use the restroom. Without thinking about it carefully, I ask a couple across the aisle if they would please watch my things for me for a moment. Then I take a closer look at them and have second thoughts: they are young, for one thing. Also, they seem very nervous, the guy's eyes are bloodshot, and the girl has a lot of tattoos. Still, it's done now. I get up and start moving back. But, as a precaution, I ask a man sitting a few seats back from mine, who is dressed in a suit and looks like a businessman, to please keep an eye on that young couple for me, because I have had to leave my seat for a moment and all my things are on it. I could just go back and retrieve my bag, giving an excuse. In fact, this is suggested by the man, who objects to being put in this position, the position

of having to stop what he is doing and watch a young couple who have done nothing wrong, so far, anyway. But I feel it is too awkward to go and get my bag, and even if I went and got my bag, I would still be leaving on my seat a valuable coat.

—Can't you wait? asks the man, though it's none of his business.

—No.

Then I have another idea.

—Maybe you could go sit in my seat while I'm gone?

—No, says the man. Then I'd have to leave *my* things.

He is not being very cooperative.

—But that lady across the aisle could watch them for you. She looks trustworthy.

The lady is old and she's sitting very still.

—She's asleep.

—You could wake her up.

—I wouldn't want to do that.

The old lady is sitting next to a younger woman. The younger woman is also slumped over, asleep, and the old woman is leaning against her.

—Just nudge her a little.

—No, I won't. In fact, I don't think she's asleep. She may be dead.

I think he's joking, though I'm not sure.

Our voices have been rising. Now the people around us are disturbed by our conversation and by me standing over him in the aisle. All except for the old lady, who really might be dead. Her mouth is open but I can't see her eyes.

—Can you keep it down? someone says. It's the woman on the far side of the old lady. She has woken up and is glaring at us. —My mom is sleeping.

I don't like her tone. Now I get a little aggressive.

—I thought she was dead, I say.

The woman elbows the old lady. —Mom, tell this goofball you're not dead.

The old lady opens her eyes and looks blankly at her daughter. —I'm not your mother, she says.

—Oh, brother, says the daughter.

Meanwhile, someone behind them is beginning to hum. It's a teenage girl, or maybe she's a little younger, maybe twelve. The humming is get-

ting to me, given all the commotion that is already going on. I'm sensitive to noise.

—Why is she humming? I ask the woman next to her, who seems to be her mother.

—It's you, you're making her nervous, she hums when she's nervous or people talk too much, when anyone talks too much, her mother says.

She stares at us, though peacefully, while the girl continues humming. Now I am interested. Some other people have turned around to look at the girl's mother. The old lady tries to turn her head, but she can't turn it very far.

The girl's mother continues to explain about her daughter. The girl is humming louder.

The old lady is becoming more agitated. She looks at each person around her and then glares at the woman next to her. —I don't know you from Adam!

I still have to go to the bathroom, though I had forgotten for a while.

Now the businessman, having lost patience, gets up. —All right, I'll go sit in your seat. Just be quick about it. Let's get this brouhaha over with.

I think that's a strange choice of words, especially for a businessman, but I don't say so.

He pushes past me and goes to my seat. I want to make sure he sits in the right one, the one on the aisle, so that he can guard the other one, too, by the window, which looks out at the river. He bends over, moves my coat, and sits down in the aisle seat. Now, through the noise of the old lady and the girl behind her, who is still humming, though her mother has stopped talking, I hear the young man with the bloodshot eyes speak loudly.

—Hey, man, there's someone sitting there.

The businessman says he knows, and that she asked him to hold her seat.

The young man is surprised.

—Why would she do that? he asks. The businessman is silent, probably thinking what he should say.

The young man waits. Then he speaks again.

—Really?

—She asked me to sit here while she was in the restroom, says the businessman.

—Why, man? That doesn't make sense, says the young man. He seems a little defensive.

The businessman is still silent. Finally he just shrugs.

—Oh, for Christ's sake, says the young man. For Christ's sake. Goddamn.

But he says it quietly. He is still saying it when I walk away down the aisle. And I'm feeling a little bad about making such a fuss, since, after all, now he is trying to defend my seat, so maybe I was wrong about him in the first place, him and his tattooed girlfriend. I didn't trust them, just because they were young. On other hand, his language was pretty bad.

THREE MUSKETEERS

The book *The Three Musketeers* comes in the mail. It is much larger than we expected. Early the next morning there is a strange, fluffy orange cat on the fire escape looking in the window. Its eyes are wide and frightened. We think it is just a strange cat passing through. It leaves the windowsill. But then another cat, this one gray and fluffy, comes down the fire escape. It, too, gets onto the windowsill and looks in the window. It has lighter gray tufts sticking out of its ears and is not frightened. We think that they are two young cats exploring the neighborhood. It leaves the windowsill. Then a third cat comes down the fire escape. It is fluffy and black. It does not get on the windowsill, but goes on down after the others. For a while, the three cats stay in the yard. We see two of them, the gray and the black, playing together. The third, the orange one, sits at the base of a tree, we think, watching. Then we see that there is no cat sitting there, only the sunlight shining on the orange wood of the tree. Later, the cats are gone. Across the street, in the field, there are three black cows. They are always there. Because we are new to this house, we have received gifts: three different friends have given us vases for flowers—one large, one medium, and one small. One is blue, one green, and the third mauve.

WHAT YOU CAN GET FOR SOME OF YOUR TURNIPS

During the week of October 24, 1846, George Holcomb's turnip harvest was at its height. With his family and others, he pulled turnips on several days, sometimes topping them and sometimes leaving the tops on. He also began trading his turnips for goods and services, including:

An unknown quantity of turnips to the tailor Jervins for the cutting of a coat and vest for son John.

Two bushels of turnips to Manuel Buten for his help in pulling turnips.

Two bushels of turnips to the shoemaker Tyler Ayers for 50 cents on account toward mending shoes.

One bushel of turnips to Henry Platt for 25 cents in cash.

Half a bushel of turnips to Henry Cranston's store for one pound of ginger.

Five bushels of turnips to Mr. Mason for a pair of boots for daughter Sarah.

Two bushels of turnips to George Clark for 25 cents each.

Three bushels to Benjamin Lord, value 75 cents, in exchange for the following goods at Charles Wheeler's store: one yard cotton velvet for a vest, 40 cents; one dozen buttons, six cents; two pencils, 2 cents; and three pounds of sugar, 27 cents.

Sixty-eight cents' worth of turnips to Lias Dike in exchange for him chopping George's sausage meat.

Half a bushel of turnips to Henry Lapum for a barn shovel.

TANTRUMS

She is feeling out of control and uncomfortable in her body (she is pregnant). He becomes annoyed: "You're always calling attention to yourself. I have a very tough week ahead of me." She agrees, but it is hard, when she feels this way. She can't just give up and go to bed. She has to go on trying to make dinner. But as she lifts four pieces of chicken on one sheet of tinfoil, a piece drops to the floor. "Damn you!" she cries out to the chicken. Much later, when they are about to go to bed, yet another call comes from his brother, who is mentally ill. She has to be the one to talk to him because, these days, she can usually handle it a little better. This brother has strange ideas about what they should all do together and also about carrying things: he thinks that everyone must carry a mental potato with which to get on in life, and sometimes thinks he is a turtle carrying a loaf of bread under his arm. But this time, after she talks to him, she begins to sob and pounds her fists on the walls. She can't stand his invasion into their life and she is furious at him, even though at other times she has been full of compassion and she knows the man is not responsible for what he says.

THE LEFT HAND

The left hand prides itself on being more *refined* than the right hand. Yes, it is in fact a little slimmer, the knuckles are not as knobbly, and the skin is even a little smoother. But, says the right hand calmly, think of all the work I've done that you haven't, over the years. Well, says the left, I've been there alongside you all the way, helping. But think of all the things you can't do that I can, says the right. Think of all the skills I've developed.

The left hand hasn't worked as hard as the right. It is usually the assistant. It braces and steadies the carrot while the right hand cuts. It braces and steadies the notebook while the right hand writes. It braces and steadies the whole body in a crouching position while the right hand scrubs the floor or digs in the flower bed. True, there are some things they do together in a balanced way. For instance, they play the piano together. But here they are not equal: the left hand is quite effective at repeating a chord over and over, even a broken chord, but not very nimble in the sixteenth note passages, not nearly as nimble as the right. The right hand points that out.

Now the left hand is hurt. Its fourth finger has always been especially weak and can't move very independently. The left hand has always been frustrated and ashamed of how clumsily it plays. Though in fact, the left hand is aware that by the highest standards, the right hand's own sixteenth notes are not all that even or fast.

The right hand apologizes. It says, Yes, sometimes you catch a thing that I've dropped. And you do turn off the water when I leave it on by mistake.

Don't forget, says the left hand, still hurt, that you may be more skilled than I am with a knife, but the other day you sliced some skin off the tip of my thumb. And remember that once you cut through my little finger so deep that I've permanently lost some feeling in it. That was years ago, says the right hand. Still, says the left. I'm the one you injure when you stop paying attention—I don't think you really care.

Both hands wear rings. The left hand is proud that it wears a ring all the time and that the ring is gold. But the right hand is proud that it wears a ring on special occasions, and that the ring was purchased in Europe.

Some things they do together with equal skill, such as washing each other in the basin—though it is true that the right hand is the one who reaches across for the soap while the left hand draws back, out of the way.

And, says the right hand, when we are rinsing, I make sure there is no soap under your ring. True, says the left hand, but on the evenings when you have worn your ring, I remove it while we are washing, I rinse it, I hold it while you dry it, and I put it away in the wooden box. But, says the right hand, I open the box. True, says the left hand. It is tired of arguing. It says to itself, Don't we work together? Don't we learn from each other? The right hand could keep going with the argument, it is full of ideas and energy for more, but the left hand is silent, so that is the end of it. For now, anyway.

IMPROVING MY GERMAN

All my life I have been trying to improve my German.

At last my German is better

—but now I am old and ill and don't have long to live.

Soon I will be dead,

with better German.

David Kirby

MY GIRLFRIEND KILLED JAMES BROWN

Guy walks up to me in the park and says, "My girlfriend killed James Brown," and I start to say, "Do I know you?" but I don't want to miss out on the story, so I say, "No lie!" and he says, "Yeah, I got bumped up to first class, and when I saw who my seatmate was, I went back to economy and told my girlfriend, and even though she had the flu, we switch places, and three weeks later, James Brown is dead." How'd you like that on your résumé? Or anyone's death, though that didn't bother the local woman who got life recently for murdering her husband because, according to the trial transcript, she didn't want to "suffer the shame of a divorce." Nothing good comes from murder. Well, if you murder Hitler, yeah, but suppose you murder Hitler and somebody worse takes his place? The girlfriend didn't mean to kill James Brown, though. Accidental death's a whole other kettle of fish. Imagine the girlfriend sometime later, on another flight, and she dozes off in the middle of a movie, and when she wakes, she notices everyone else is sleeping, including the flight attendants, and she rings the call button, but nobody comes, and she shakes her seatmate's arm, but he doesn't respond, either, and that's when she thinks, *These people aren't sleeping*, but the plane keeps flying, and it lands somehow, and she finds herself at an arrival gate and then a cabstand, and she doesn't know where she wants to go, though the cabbie seems to, and everyone is happy and friendly, if a little *distant*, she says to herself, *as though they're in this place but not really of it*, and here she is finally in a room with white walls and statues in niches and portraits of people she doesn't recognize and a floor that's lit from beneath, and people have cups of tea and finger sandwiches,

and they're ordinary people, for the most part, but Otis is there,
and Sam Cooke, and Aretha, and someone taps her on the shoulder
and says, "Try these," and she turns and puts her hand to her mouth

and begins to cry and says, "Oh, Mr. Brown, I'm so sorry I killed you,"

and he says, "That's okay, baby. I'm better now. I'm glad
I'm here. I feel good. Take a cookie. Take a macaroon," and she says,

"What about the jam thumbprints? Are they good, too?"
and he's saying, "It's all good here, baby," and she says, "I'll just
have one—I don't want to spoil my appetite. What time's

dinner?" and he says, "Baby, we don't believe in that," and she says,

"You don't believe in dinner?" and he says, "No, time. We stopped
that long ago," and she says, "Who did? How?" and he says,

"Fats did when he sang 'Walking to New Orleans.' Tina stopped
time when she sang 'A Fool in Love.' Buddy Holly did it with

'Not Fade Away,' same way Mozart did with that night music thing,"

and she says, "Mr. Brown, you know a lot more about classical music

than I would have thought" and then, "You wouldn't happen to
be familiar with a 1956 French opera called *Dialogues of the Carmelites*,

would you?" and he says, "Know it? I wrote that shit," and she
says, "You did not—that was Francis Poulenc!" and he says, "Time don't
stop for one person. One person stops time. Somebody comes

in contact with what you've done, they catch some of that. That's the way

it works. One by one, them sixteen nuns stepped up to the guillotine,
and one by one them revolutionaries cut their heads off, so there were

fifteen singing, then fourteen, then none. Silence can be louder than
anything, you know. The sound of silence," says James Brown.

"And what is 'It's a Man's Man's Man's World' if not classical?

Full orchestra score, dark tones, nuanced lyrics: that fat Italian motherfucker

knocked it over the center field wall every time," and just then a voice
says, "Who you calling fat?" and James Brown says, "Oh, sorry, Luciano.

Have a cookie. Okay, have all the cookies" as a man steps into the room

and says, “Brown, party of two,” and James Brown gives her his arm,
and they go in, but the dining room is the kitchen she grew up in,

and her parents are sitting at the table, her father in a jacket and tie
and her mother in a pretty dress and that bright red lipstick she adored,
and they smile and wave, but they don’t really seem to know her,
either, and she says, “Holy cow! This looks like the house I grew up in!
Is this the house I grew up in?” as Janis Joplin scurries through
with a tray on her shoulder and says, “Get up off of that thing, James,”

and James Brown says, “Take another little piece of my heart, sis”
as Janis disappears into the kitchen, and her parents look up again,
and this time her mother says, “Darling, is that you?” and her dad says,
“That’s her, Miriam. Here, honey, have a seat,” and she sits and says,
“Mom, Dad—how’d I get here?” and James Brown turns
back to the woman who killed him and says, “You never left.”

Gerald Stern

BARE BONES

Imagine you at the beginning of the
longest walk of your life, no thought given to
shoes, socks, toothpaste, hats, and the other
rip-rap, nothing of watches or water, sleeping
on the ground or in hay,
setting out for the east, for Padua,
for Venice, no knowledge of the churches you'd pass or the paintings
or frescoes inside, say Giotto, no friends anywhere
along the way, no phone numbers, not even a wallet
with a card inside for identity, not even your
passport as I recall, everything stashed at
Jeremy Gentile's, he of the small motorcycle,
of the stocks and bonds, he of the bad English cooking,
and the walk to Bologna, then Florence, all before the
long sleep in the Boboli Gardens, this was my
schooling, my graduate work,
my fellowship from God,
starting with a lake.

*Saint Cuthbert's
Incorruptible Body*

PATRICK BARRETT

In the year of our Lord 687, in cause of an early, wet spring, the body of Saint Cuthbert was laid in the ground to rest. On the tomb were figured angels and seraphim of plain but wonderful design. And among these flitted cherubs, like apricots set into the stone. Thus carved, the tomb was set upon a patch of ground a low word's reach from the road, where wild grass grew and flowering thyme.

But as is often the case with men and women of such holy incorporation, this was not the end of what God had planned. For not two weeks after the body was laid to rest, a certain woman passed by on the road that went through that place. Now, this woman had long wished for a child to cherish, and to dandle upon her knee, but never as yet had she been able to conceive. Passing by the tomb, she happened to murmur her wonted prayer, and went

her way. And by the time she stepped across her own threshold some four leagues thence, she knew a change in her body, and felt a quickening that had not been there before. And before the year was out, she had given birth to a daughter—whom she called Murmur, for that with the intercession of the holy saint, she had by a murmur been called into life.

But such is the power of those whom God has favored that this was by no means the end of what took place. For it happened that not long after, a young man, bald as an egg, and with no hair even where on another the eyebrows might be found, walked all the way from Lincoln in order to kneel at the tomb and pray. This being accomplished, at once a mustache began to sprout upon his upper lip, and so speedily did it grow and so full that the young man rose and hurried home for fear that it should become yet thicker and cause him to fall into the sin of Pridefulness.

Nor indeed was the power of the saint yet exhausted. For this young man had been delivered in the week of Lammas, and before Saint Martin's Day was come and gone, a little dog—lazy and intractable and altogether accounted a rather foolish dog and of little ability, so that none had a care for it nor wished for its service—chanced to stray by the place where the body was laid. Being lost, and night beginning to fall, the little dog leaped up onto the tomb all covered with angels, and curled itself up in a ball, and there fell asleep. And coming away from that place in the morning, the dog was able to sit and roll over, and to speak the French language, and to hover some inches above the ground before returning safely. All this though prior to that day it had been quite uninstrutable in even the meanest study.

Yet for all that these events were surpassing remarkable, greater still were the miracles concerning the body itself. For in the year 698, in cause of a widening of the road, the body of the holy saint was disinterred that the tomb might be lifted and removed farther off. But when the tomb was opened, the monks were exceedingly astonished to find the saint's body still fresh, and its clothes undecayed, and the joints still flexible as they had been in life, so that it appeared to be but sleeping there in the tomb.

In the year 708, the tomb was opened once again at the request of the bishop Eadfrith. And once again the monks had astonishment for their meat, for this time they found that the body gave forth a sweet odor as of champion, and was even more flexible than it had been before, and could touch the palms of its hands to the bottoms of its feet without taxing itself in the

least. It was observed, moreover, that the saint's beard had not ceased to grow, but had become full and luxurious, and of an alluring curl, so that though the body was to all observance that of an old man, yet there was to it a freshness not easily told. In 712, the eyelashes were seen to be long and full, and a handsome yet modest blush was observed in the cheek. In 718, the whiteness of the teeth could scarce be believed, and with no apparent effort could the body *sombresaut*, and spring backward, and stand upon its head.

And when, in 751, the tomb was for the fifth time opened, Saint Cuthbert's incorruptible body arose and walked out.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY looks left, then right, then left again, and starts out across the road.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY stands in the middle of a field, changing colors. First the color of the sky, now the grass, now the bluebells. Now the sky again, opening, bright.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY stands by the side of the road, waiting for a horse and cart to pass. A light rain falls, and when the horse in passing shakes its mane a smell of wet hay is thrown loose to mix in the air with the scent of dung. When the cart clears, a woman is standing there on the other side of the road, a heavy pail sloshing in the crook of her arm.

She starts across, her hip tucked under the load, rain and sweat beading on her brow. And in the low swing of her hips there is something like a prayer. Then she turns and goes a little ways down the road, pauses in front of a roadside inn to spit on the ground before toeing open the door and disappearing inside.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY sits at the long wooden table that runs the length of the inn's main room. In the hearth, a fire is sputtering to life, and the few other patrons droop silently over their mugs of ale like gargoyles rough-hewn into the eaves of some forgotten church. Beyond the dull crackle of the fire, the only sound is rain dripping from the glassless window and puddling on the sill.

Then suddenly, with a bellows breath, the door leading in from the kitchen swings open and the woman enters, arms loaded with bundles of freshly harvested herbs. She crosses to a butcher's block by the fire, sets down

her bundles, and begins to weed them fistful by fistful into smaller bouquets. Having laid these out carefully across the block, she rolls up her sleeves and starts to pound them with the heel of her hand, sending fragrant clouds of yarrow and purslane into the air. Again and again she brings down her hand, the color rising in her cheek and up the back of her neck, surrounding in a crimson blush the mole just beneath the line of her hair.

When each bouquet is sufficiently ground, she brushes them into a piggin waiting there on the floor, then gathers up the piggin in her arms and goes out again. The body's gaze remains transfixed on the space she has voided.

The innkeeper meanwhile has been leaning in the corner against the doorjamb of the privy, trying to guess at this stranger seated for two hours now unblinking at his table. By the odd grandeur of his dress, the tall hat embroidered with gold, the pallor of his fine hands, he ought to be someone important. And besides, there is in his aspect something noble, something almost otherworldly, as though the stranger's pale blue stare looked out on some infinity the innkeeper himself could not see.

Not taking his eyes from the body, the innkeeper unfolds his arms from his chest, pushes open the door to the kitchen, and speaks a few low words. The woman appears, flushed from work. She looks at the innkeeper, then at the body—seeming to notice it there for the first time. Removing a cup from one of the hooks on the wall, she goes to the hogshead, fills the cup with ale, and sets it down in front of the body. She and the innkeeper look on as the thin foam atop the ale spits and subsides, the body unmoved. The woman returns to the kitchen. The innkeeper watches a moment longer, then follows after.

When later they return, the bench is empty, the ale untouched.

FROM HIS EARLIEST YOUTH, Saint Cuthbert of blessed memory was accounted a person of unusual understanding, and one who was certain to do great service in the name of God. For among his playmates he was held to be kind, and never spoke in harshness nor dealt unjustly with any. As a young man, he was noted for his devotion both to his family and to each task set to him, which he completed with good cheer and no suspicion of complaint. And growing into a man and taking holy orders, he came to be accounted by those who knew him uncommonly wise, chaste, and ever devoted to contemplation of the things that God had made. For Bede tells

us that he was wont to be up before the other monks, reading or at prayers, and moreover was often seen to wander the forests and fields about the monastery, observing things great and small, in such wise that it was said of him that from his earliest youth he was “destined perfectly to know the Lord.”

THE PLOWMAN’S DAUGHTERS pause in their play to watch the tip of Saint Cuthbert’s hat sail by above the hedgerow like a toy boat on a green muslin sea. Later that day, the miller looks up from his work to see the body splashing intently along in the stream near the spot where the wych elm has fallen across it. Holding out his cup for more ale, a merchant passing through reports having seen the body bent over a puddle in the road, examining its reflection in the water. Near everyone in the village has spotted the odd perambulant somewhere or another—often, it is said, with an apparent air of puzzlement in its bearing.

Meanwhile, it is so often seen seated at the inn’s long table that the regular patrons have given it nicknames, and taken to calling it (some with affection, some with a snigger of malice) His Holiness or Tom Psalter or sometimes the Saint. Through all this, the body watches. The woman looks to be in the latter half of childbearing age, slender and yet strong in her haunches, hands rough, hair the color of late October. She keeps to herself. She does her work. She smiles, but does not laugh. And yet to the body in her every movement there is wonder. Sometimes she will carry a fluttering chicken in by the legs, snap its neck with one sharp turn of her wrist, and set to plucking it on the butcher’s block. Sitting down to peel turnips sometimes she will lose herself in an empty stare that goes on for minutes on end.

And when she sits at a freshly cleared table and rests her cheek upon her open palm, what mystery is there upheld? God’s mysteries are not solved but only made palpable by such, as one might from a great fire take a single coal and hold in the hand a small but perfect piece of that heat.

SAINT CUTHBERT’S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY stoops to examine a fallen leaf. Kite-crisp and yellow as a yolk, it trembles in the breeze like the lid on a pot just beginning to boil. The body reaches out its hand.

LEANING ACROSS THE LONG wooden table to wipe up the remnants of someone’s meal, the woman discovers a leaf left there—bright yellow, its

meandering veins shot through with a purple-brown ichor. Holding it up to the light, she inhales, chasing a hint of campion.

MEANWHILE AT THE TOMB, a queue has begun to form. For during that time when the saint was there interred, remarkable things occurred, such as had never before been seen in that place. And now consider whether it is possible that such things should escape the ears of rumor, or whether they would not rather provoke the curiosity of all those within that district and beyond, until many had come there to see exemplified the power of the holy saint, or else themselves to be healed of their afflictions. For this is indeed what happened. But those persons, having come, now find themselves confounded and becalmed, as it were, in that place. For Saint Cuthbert's incorruptible body having risen and walked away, the miracles at the tomb have ceased. And so day by day the line grows longer, snakes outward through the knapweed and gorse—a poor pageant of miseries. The faithful crane their necks to look for some movement ahead in the line, shuffling their feet and scratching their sores, avoiding each other's eyes. None dare to pose aloud the question: When will it all resume? None dare even in the quiet of their hearts to ask: Have I come too late?

SITTING THERE AT THE TABLE, the body hears many things. The daily village gossip. Rumors brought in by merchants and mendicants passing through. Then one day talk turns to the subject of the woman's past. Between sips of ale it is whispered, nodded, affirmed that she had had a life before. In another village, in another part of the country. That she had known love. That outside of the holy state of wedlock she had given birth to a child, and that the infant had died. That she had come here four years since, and worked that time in the inn, with no questions asked aloud, and no bother made, only silence papering over the wound of the past. The woman comes in from the kitchen and the murmuring trickles off into silence. The body watches with new eyes as she sets down a brimming pot, dries her hands on the front of her skirts, frowns at a passing thought.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY lies flat in a field of mown barley. Around him, hedge sparrows like little live wicks flick chittering from stem to stem in search of the harvest leavings. Their little bodies

are so small, their bones so fine, they are like the meadow's blinking eyes. Yet not even Solomon in his splendor. The body follows their every movement as they pick among the chaff, then lift all at once at some signal unseen and rise in one body heavenward.

Early the following morning, the woman emerges yawning from her quarters to find a fire built and purring in the hearth, and every plate and flagon washed and set out to dry. Nor has she ever seen them so spotless. Some time later, the innkeeper comes down from his room on the second floor to find her wondering at the well-scrubbed cooking pot, which for the first time holds her reflection in its cloudy tin.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY walks in long strides through a field still dewy from the night. The stiff brooms of heather drum on the skirts of its cassock, leaving on its mirthless white little fingers of purple and green. As the body passes, it flushes larks from their hiding places in the earth, sending them wheeling and swooping on the bright morning air.

AT THE TOMB, the line has grown long, and stretches out to hug the bare bone of the road for near half a league. No miracles having yet occurred, along its length have sprung up tents, lean-tos, wooden pallets, and in between them smaller stakes laid claim to by no more than a human shape worn into the grass. Invalids, the dispossessed, those with strange complaints, and the simply curious are all in one mass gathered, like a great sick animal belied out across the moor. Drawn like flies to this beast swarm fruit vendors, bird sellers, merchants with their carts full of goods. And in among these flit jugglers entertaining the throng.

Any day now, the pilgrims hope, the miracles will begin again. In the meantime, there are things that can be done. For a penny, you can buy a devotional poem inscribed for you on a piece of bark. For a little more, there are beads to pray on, talismans to slip into your shoes, genuine clippings of the holy saint's toenails ground up to dissolve beneath the tongue. Any sacred thing can be bought. Any profane thing is, too, on offer. So that between the boastful cries of the vendors, the laughter and the quiet weeping, the smells of fruit and wet wool wormed through by a sly whiff of rot, the whole thing has taken on a strange festival atmosphere—a seasick carnival spirit like that

of a fevered dream wherein the stage is laid and the trumpets have called for a beginning, but though the evening comes on and the people stand gaping in expectation, the players are nowhere to be found.

IN THE VILLAGE, the body has become almost a part of the scenery. While some still regard it with suspicion, the children in particular have taken to it. The littlest watch it wide-eyed from a shy distance, while the older and bolder might approach to tug at one of its long sleeves, or else come stand next to it as still as they can, squinting into the distance to look where it is looking. Sometimes a troop of them will fall in behind it if they spy it on walkabout, so that a little holy procession trails it over field and stream. But for the most part, the body walks alone.

On one such walk, the body pursues a breeze that first ruffled the hairs of its beard down by the brook and has since skipped trippingly across the fields. Coming to a halt at the low hedge fence that encloses the slop yard out back of the inn, the body spies the woman come out and sling a pailful of scraps to the pigs. But rather than going back inside, she turns the other way and disappears from view. The body follows, catching thorns and burrs in its chasuble as it squeezes awkwardly through the hedge, and then routes around the pigs that have come to investigate. At the other end of the slop yard, it finds the woman in the low enclosure that houses the goats, crouched next to one with a dappled gray coat. The body watches her move among them almost dreamily, taking this one's long face in her hands, running her fingers along that one's neck. Scooping up one of the baby goats to change out the hay beneath it, she lifts up its ears and lets them drop, blows gently into its face, and laughs when it blinks and flutters its ears. It is a laugh the body has never heard before. There is an ease to her in this place, a peace that the body has not seen—as though she had all this time been holding a breath and now let it go. All that the body thought it knew, and now this.

A GRAY, WINDLESS DAY. No birds in the sky. And inside the inn's main room, the stale air makes everyone restless. The body sits alone in its usual spot. Farther down the table, a group of men laugh and drink. Half-stifled snickers spark off in the body's direction. Comments are offered aloud to no one in particular tending to the overwhelming smell of campion in the

air. Now they call out to the body, ask it a question, laugh harder when they get no response. One of them raises an open hand to waft a slovenly sign of the cross in the body's direction before lifting his flagon of ale to his lips. Unfazed, the body watches the woman shave turnips at the butcher's block.

Noting the direction of the body's gaze, one drinker motions to the others with a roll of his eyes. An ogling comment is made. Another. The woman goes on with her work. Then the child is mentioned. The men look almost fearful as in the ensuing silence she sets down her knife and stares hard at the wall in front of her. But then a cackle escapes from one, and soon they are all in fits of choking laughter. The woman's cheeks burn.

But lo, when again they bring their flagons to their lips to drink, they find the ale within them turned and tasting of passed water, and in cause of this are thrown into the greatest confusion, hacking and spitting and blowing out through their mouths in the manner of apes that they might be rid of what they have drunk. But for that the taste of it they can in no wise expel, they flee cursing, hurling such oaths and imprecations as shall not be here divulged—save to say that Heaven never heard the like, nor is it like to, seeing how it is these men comported themselves.

Those few other persons in the inn, who witnessed this event and now look after where the men fled, turn back to where Saint Cuthbert's body had been, and find that its place on the bench is empty. But the woman alone sees that the cup of ale that had been before it has been drained to the dregs, nor does a solitary drop remain.

FOR THREE DAYS NOW, the woman has had a cold, and the body is rapt with wonder. Her nostrils are red and her upper lip worn raw from running the back of her hand across it. Every third breath flowers with a phlegmy catch. How intimate and strange is this eruption in God's creation.

Day by day, the body comes to know more. Day by day, its cup is filled and refilled with wonder. And yet there is a sadness, too, in this sacrament, which mounts with each refilling. For the more the body sees, the more it knows, the more it becomes aware of the impossibility of its knowing. The blessed Nicholas of Cusa holds that, God being absolute, He can never be fully reached. The relationship between our knowledge and God, he says, is like that of a many-sided figure inscribed in a circle. So that as the number of

sides of the figure grows, it comes closer and closer to the circumference of the circle.

But the figure and the circle will never be the same.

IT IS AT THIS TIME that another miracle of sorts occurs. For the innkeeper, being busied in sweeping the floor of the inn and putting things to order, notes from the corner of his eye the edge of the holy saint's robes disappearing into the privy and the privy door closing behind them. Seeing this, he does not stop but goes on with his sweeping, and sweeps the floor clean, and dries all the drinking mugs and sets them on their hooks, and restokes the fire, and then by and by makes his way to the privy and knocks upon the door. Folding his hands atop his broom, he leans forward upon it to wait. But as he receives no answer, the innkeeper lifts the latch and draws open the door to find the body seated there in its vestments, cheeks wetted and eyes ringed red as though it has been weeping. Beholding this, and bethinking him to leave the body in peace, the innkeeper closes gently again the privy door and returns to his work.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY stands beside a dun cow at evening. A sweet smell of earth, grass, milk, and filth hovers in the dusk. The cow's huge head drifts lazily among the brome grass and clover. It does not seem to mind the presence of the body there beside it as it browses. The saint's cassock, once gold and resplendent, is now threadbare in places. Small rents have bubbled up along the seams. The ends of its skirts are flecked with mud and beginning to fray. The eyes, still clear and bright, have a tiredness in them now. The body watches the cow's slow breathing, sees the animal's rib cage swell and subside with each intake of breath. Saint Cuthbert's incorruptible body reaches out a hand to touch. But it does not touch.

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY stands by itself on a roof at night, head tilted skyward, palms up in a gesture of invitation to wisdom. Just so in his youth, it was the holy saint's wont to stay up and watch by night when the other goatherds had gone to sleep. Awake and watchful on some high place, the breeze tickling at the down on his cheeks, the boy could feel the grass growing, felt himself become sensible of each and every particle of the air—and in this way came by degrees to begin his lifelong conversation

with God. Thus, it was his body that was the first to know the Lord, and the soul that followed after. And in following after took its rightful role of love and devotion toward the Lord, so that the body was left to but look on, as it were, and observe from close this great love of the saint's living days.

The body closes its eyes. It tries to feel the growing grass, to discern again the intimate gorgeous patterns by which God first had shown him that He, too, was awake. He, too, was keeping watch. But the body can feel only one thing now. One thing alone impresses itself upon the body's senses. One pattern unspools through its waking dreams. Though the body stands still, though it strains to listen, nowhere in the vastness of the night can it hear the voice of God.

THIS ONE'S NOSE IS CROOKED.

This one's skin is too tight.

This one's heart beats so fast she can hardly breathe.

This one has not had two nights' sleep together since her baby girl was drowned in June.

This one cannot stomach her mother's milk.

This one sees lights where there are none.

This one snores.

This one thinks that he is a lapwing.

This one is too shy to speak her own name.

This one, old, cries out in his sleep like a child.

This one, brought by her parents, will not say amen and will not stop singing.

This one bleeds more than natural.

This one loves where she should not.

This one's bird flew away in the autumn and has not returned.

This one has buried her husband, who now wakes her anight with his gentle weeping.

This one cannot stop eating straw.

This one suffers wind in the presence of clergy.

This one has a fear of her hands.

This one swears he will fight the moon.

This one has a boo-boo on her thumb.

This one cries and cries and does not know the cause.

This one suffers love for a holly bush.

This one cannot bear the sight of flame.

This one has a swelling—a limp—a rash—a toothache—a love that will not heal.

AS HE STARTS UP THE STAIRS for bed, the innkeeper notices the body sitting up alone at the long wooden table, staring into the hearth, the firelight dancing in its eyes. The innkeeper thinks about saying something, although what he does not know. He stands there a moment longer, then turns and goes up to bed.

Coming down the next morning in the early dark, still wrapped in his blanket against the cold, he finds the body slumped gently over the table, its forehead resting on the wood. The innkeeper unwinds the blanket from his shoulders and lays it across the sunken shoulders of the saint. Then he goes to the hearth, picks up a stick leaning there against the wall, and with it begins to sift through the ashes, looking for the living coals.

NO MIRACLES HAVING YET TAKEN PLACE at the tomb, the people grow restless, then doubtful. It is widely agreed that the angels are stone after all. And so the great beast that is the line of pilgrims shifts as rumor ripples down its bulk. And then it begins to dissolve—effusing its flesh and trailing away piece by piece, as the body of some spent leviathan sunk to the seabed is pulled apart in whispers by the sea.

Going away from that place, each pilgrim's heart caves quietly around the fable that was their hope. And like a rat in the rubble gnaws the question: What has it all been for?

SAINT CUTHBERT'S INCORRUPTIBLE BODY lies out full length in the slop yard out back of the inn. Pigs hunker in the mud around it, put off their foraging by the heavy downpour. Through the rain, the faint sound of bleating reaches the body's ears. Slowly, it raises itself and picks its way over the sucking muck to the goatfold, where it finds the woman on hands and knees, bent over a goat that has just given birth. The mother goat lies wild-eyed and spent, her breath coming in shuddering, shallow heaves. The hay all around is clotted with blood. The woman's hands and forearms are covered in it. And there by the woman's knees lies the body of a kid goat,

small and gray-dappled and still. The woman rocks back on her heels and stares at the lifeless little body stretched out in the hay. There is no anger or even sadness in her stare. Only weariness. She wipes her nose with her wrist. She stares.

Saint Cuthbert's incorruptible body steps forward and kneels beside her. It reaches out its hand, finding just enough room to lay three fingers on the belly of the kid. It closes its eyes. And does the wind blow a little harder? And does a hush yet seem to descend, to kindle like a candle flame and then spread and spread through the damp goatfold until they are all encompassed by it?

But the kid does not stir. It does not open its eyes. No breath swells within it to lift the saint's hand. Beneath Saint Cuthbert's fingers, the little body grows cold. Saint Cuthbert's incorruptible body withdraws its hand. A silence hangs over the goatfold. By and by the rain slackens, and the pigs resume their rooting.

IT IS AFTERNOON, and the inn is empty of all its usual patrons when Saint Cuthbert's body appears in the doorway. Its robes are tattered and streaked with mud. Its tall hat has been lost. A faint smell of the slop yard nestles in the folds of its garments. And in its arms it holds a kid goat, tiny and dappled gray, which blinks as the body crosses the threshold and comes out of the sun. And there the body stops. By the fireplace, the innkeeper and the woman stand close together, heads bowed. The body looks on as from his shirt the innkeeper removes a ring and holds it out in the palm of his hand. The woman takes it and slips it onto her finger. They both look down at it there, seeming almost amazed. He covers her hand with his hand.

See how the body sways as in a dance. Then sets the kid gently down on the floor and walks away.

AT THE TOMB, the peddlers have packed up their things and moved on. Even the most faithful have trickled away, casting a long look back—so that only the wind sighs now, and only the silence stands waiting when Saint Cuthbert's body appears once more at that patch of green by the road. Only wild grass, larkspur, red clover. And the thyme grown longer than the body could have thought.

It gets into the tomb and closes the lid.

Not long after, a little dog, fastidious and well-kempt in appearance, and though very old with a certain dignity in its bearing, came shuffling down the road. And stepping off into the green, it approached the tomb, and began to examine it in every part, appearing to squint at the inscriptions and look fondly at this or that angel engraved upon its sides. And having once circled the tomb, and seeming to have looked to its satisfaction, the little dog leaped with a great effort of its old legs onto the lid of the tomb, and, giving a little huff, lay down among the angels and there fell asleep.

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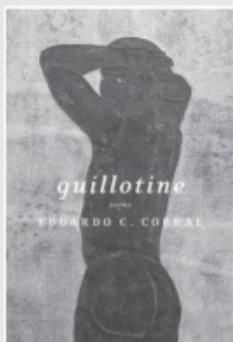
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