

235

*the* PARIS  
REVIEW

SUZAN-LORI  
PARKS

and

EDWARD  
HIRSCH

two interviews

DAVID ADJMI

KIRK LYNN

CLAUDIA RANKINE

new plays

RITA DOVE

JACK LIVINGS

DANTIEL W. MONIZ

NATALIE SHAPERO

ERIN O'KEEFE

a portfolio

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the saddler's spirit







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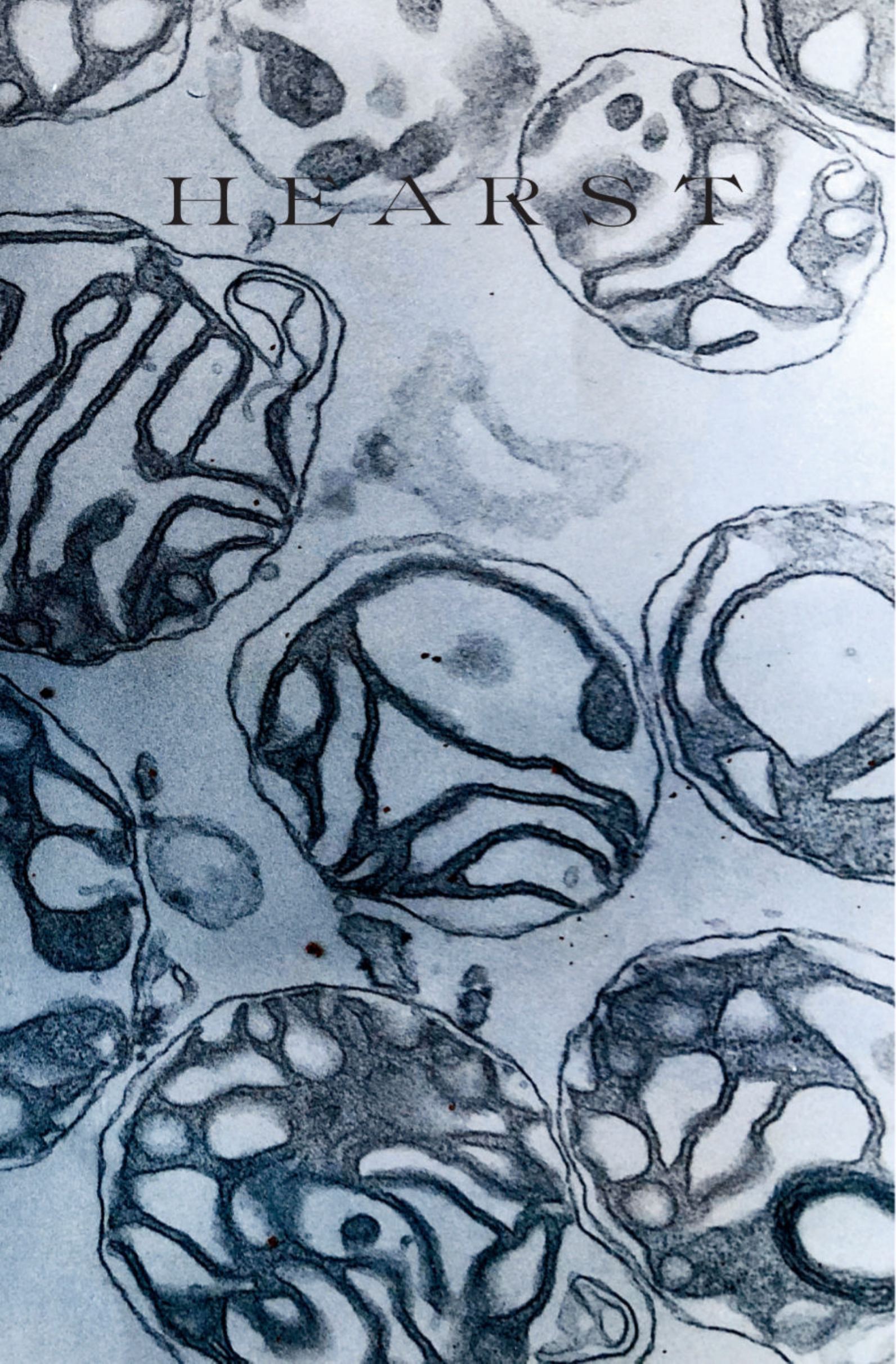
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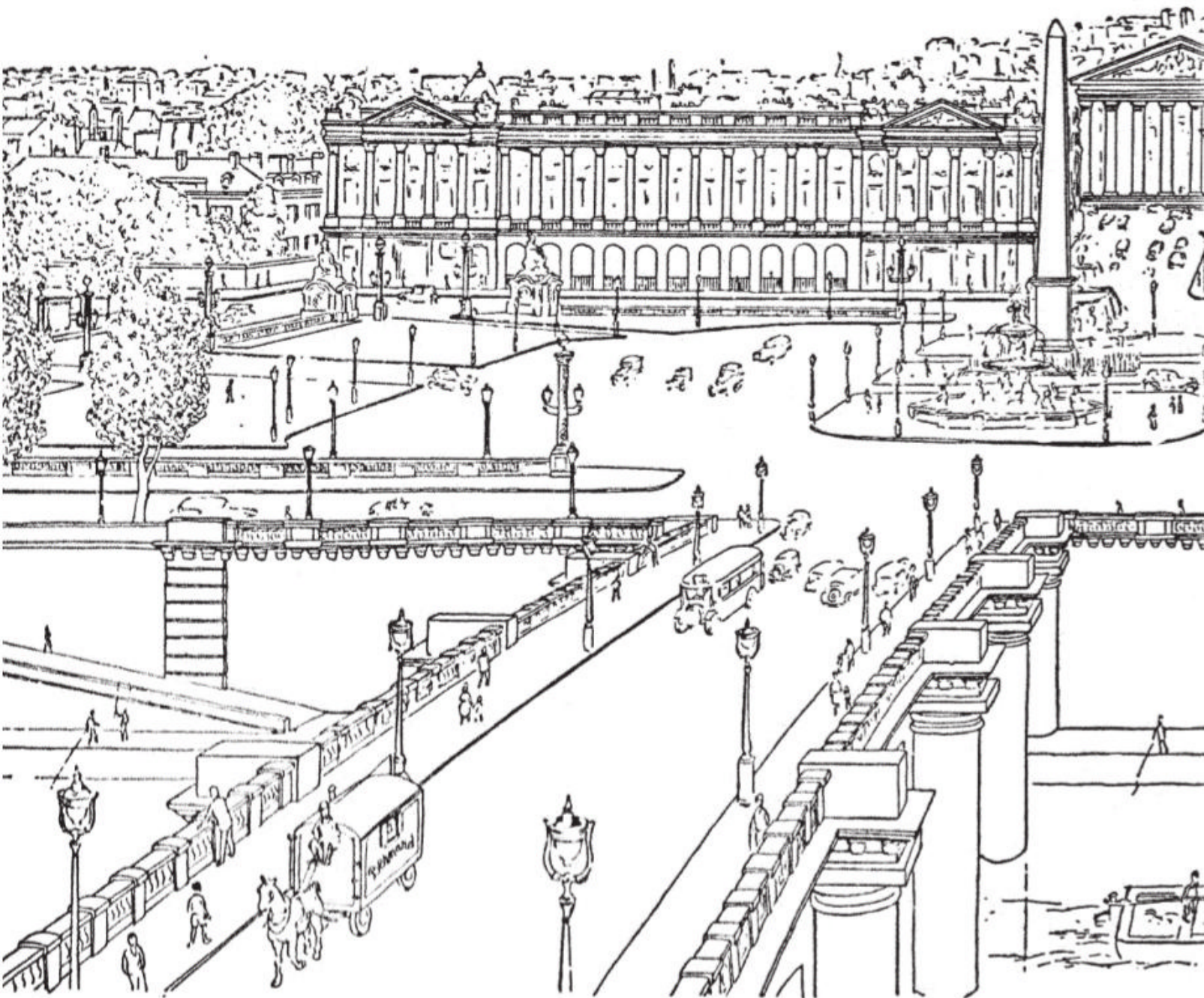


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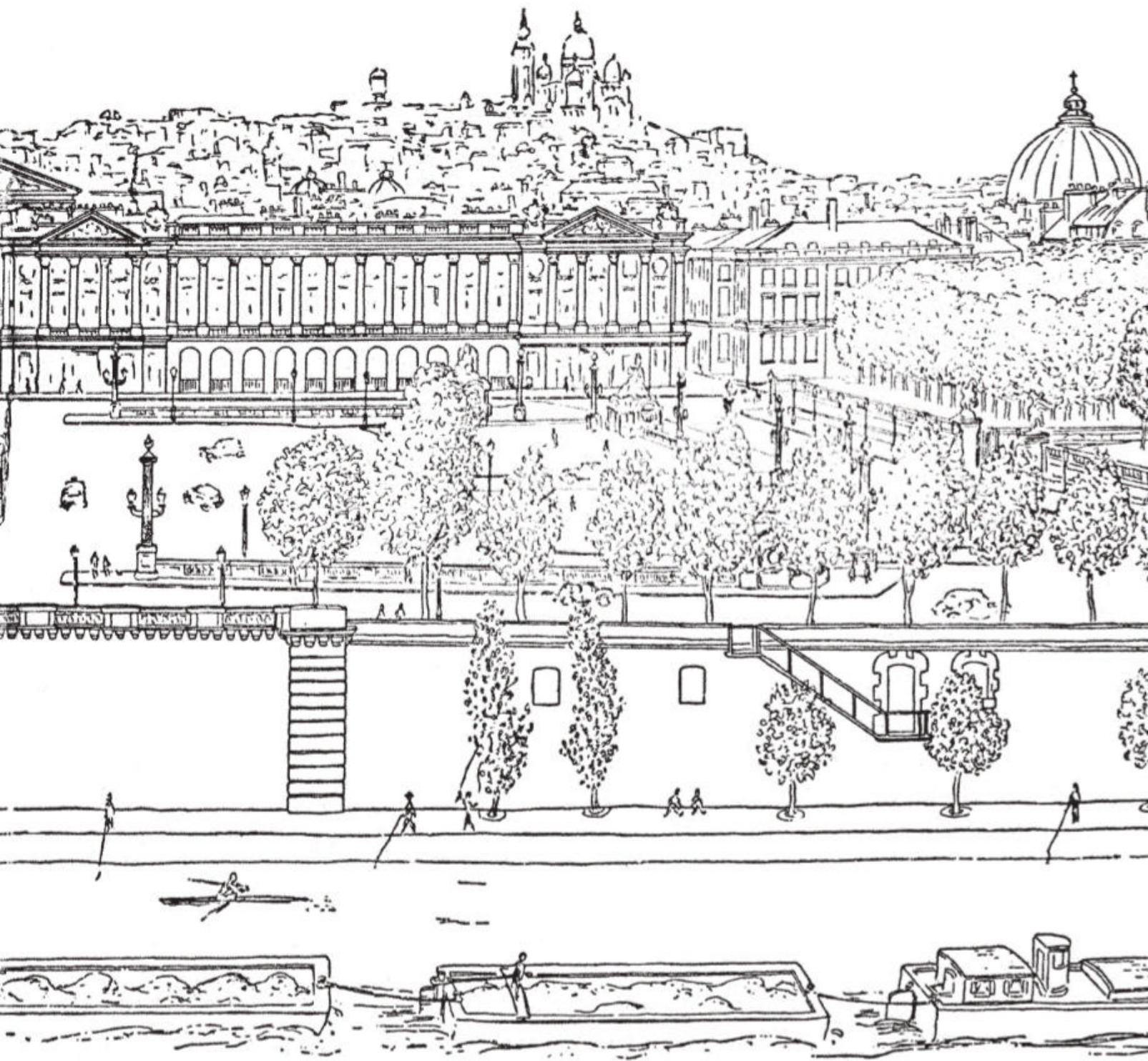


# *the* PARIS





# REVIEW



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# the PARIS REVIEW

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DEAR READER,

Months before world events made 2020 a remarkable—and remarkably difficult—year, playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and I had a conversation about something that happened in 1997. That year, *The Paris Review* dedicated its Spring issue to the theater. The team assembled a tall stack of Art of Theater interviews and held a contest for verse drama. (According to George Plimpton, plenty of submitters were unaware of the verse stipulation, but the editors considered their work all the same, and lucky for us: one of the winners was a young Martin McDonagh.) They published three plays and five interviews, and a magazine that fairly adamantly avoids themed issues had, if not a theme, then an organizing principle for the quarter.

As 2020 began to take its unfortunate shape, I called Branden again. While *The Paris Review* went remote with relative ease, I could not help but worry for our peers in the performing arts, groups of creatives in NYC and elsewhere for whom the new workflow of VPNs and videoconferencing meant their work couldn't flow. Though a magazine can't replicate the experience of the theater or protect our dramatic peers from the pandemic/recession, we can reaffirm and support this admirable art form, in the way we know best: by publishing it. George had worried that "often the lines of a play feel flat on the page without the agency of actors to give them life." We, too, encountered plenty of brilliant plays that will need actors to truly sing. But these three excerpts—of a verse drama about race in America by Claudia Rankine; of a shape-shifting, time-erasing "ghosting" about the musician Oscar Levant by David Adjmi; and of Kirk Lynn's latest, which animates the threat and beauty of the natural world—hold their own on paper as bold, compelling pieces of literature.

This bounty of plays and the completion of Suzan-Lori Parks's Art of Theater interview (after several years of conversation) signaled that a sequel to the '97 theater issue was finding its form. Then the auspicious alignments started: Erin O'Keefe's photos evoke the joyful sleight of hand so often apparent in set design; the protagonist of Jack Livings's "River Crossing" is a playwright. These resonances and others felt equal parts coincidence and kismet. So, with a respectful nod to *TPR's* history, and a hopeful one to the future when actors can take the stage again, we hope you enjoy the issue.

EMILY NEMENS







AN EXCERPT FROM

*Help*

---

CLAUDIA RANKINE

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

*Writer, professor at prestigious university, fifties*

WHITE MEN 1–20

*Men are all wearing some kind of suit*

SETTING

Liminal spaces of airports and airplanes

TIME

2020



ACT I

SCENE I

*The Narrator speaks to the Audience.*

NARRATOR

I'm here—not as I—

but as we—

a representative of my category—

The approximately 8 percent of the U.S. population known as Black women.

Within this category, there are a lot of names for me. In fact, Hortense Spillers, a Black woman and friend to all Black women, said,

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows  
my name.

"Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother,"

"Aunty," "Granny,"

"God's Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at  
the Podium."

Ultimately, whatever name you use, all of them begin with the letter *n*.

*Neighbor* could be one. *Nominal* one. *Miss Named* another. *Miss Nomer*.

Now, what are you thinking? All that was another century?

Any other day besides today?

Today, behind me, are representatives of the *other* category.

You've joined us here in our liminal space, a space neither here nor there,

a space full of imaginative possibilities,

a space we move through on our way to other places,

and I want to tell you how I came to have

brief conversations

with white men.



Because yet again, we're going to have to swerve for some white man, at  
some time,  
and I'm thinking back,  
trying to remember when it actually occurred to me  
that I should be talking to them,  
given the impact of their fantasies,  
or is it their actions,  
or is it . . . given the reality of our lives?

And since our present moment is never an accident but a choice,  
I'll begin a while back—

WHITE MAN 8

What number are you?

NARRATOR

I was standing in one of those Southwest airport lines  
where you're organized numerically,  
apparently the fastest way to board a plane for non-first-class travel.

WHITE MAN 8

I'm number eight and I don't want to accidentally get in front of you.

NARRATOR

Thanks. You're fine. I'm ten. We're all good.

*(to Audience)*

He said he loved airplanes:

WHITE MAN 8

No phones. No news. Can't stand the news. Nonstop these days.

NARRATOR

*(to White Man 8)*

You shouldn't have voted for him.



*(to Audience)*

I didn't give it a thought.

WHITE MAN 8

It's—not—just—him.

NARRATOR

*(to White Man 8)*

No, it isn't,

*(to Audience)*

I agreed.

But in that second, the space for agreement and friendly banter was over.

This man turned his back to me.

I understood.

I'd brought the world into our liminal space, his free zone.

I knew I shouldn't tell anyone  
what they should or shouldn't do,

unless they're about to step in front of a speeding train.

But what if they had just pushed someone else in front of a speeding train?

What was one supposed to do then?

Eventually number nine arrived and he stood between me and number eight until we boarded.

What could I have done to get number eight to regret the arrival of number nine—



not feel tethered to the imagined ones pushed in front of the train,  
or across the border,  
or into detention camps,  
or the ICU, or the morgue,  
even as we are all tethered to number eight's choices?

Number eight eventually turned and looked at me. I held his gaze but neither  
of us spoke.

What was he thinking?

WHITE MAN 8

How the fuck does she know who I voted for?  
The audacity of that woman.

NARRATOR

Or is it “the audacity of that Black woman.”

Did he think I owed him an apology?  
Sixty-three percent of white men who voted supported our impeached  
president—  
I had almost a two in three chance of guessing right.

But I wasn't playing the odds,  
I was playing the man.

Did you hear the one about the white man who walked up to a line,  
tried to make conversation,  
only to enter the same reality as a Black woman?

WHITE MAN 9

Don't essentialize yourself.

WHITE MAN 2

You're not just a Black woman,

WHITE MAN 1

Not only a Black woman . . .

WHITE MAN 10

You're, you're . . . what's your name again?

NARRATOR

*(deadpan)*

Help help.

Today, I wouldn't be able to pick number eight out of a lineup.

*(taking a long look at White Man 8)*

Why am I thinking of you as a criminal?

Are you a criminal?

If number eight could hear my thoughts and asked,

WHITE MAN 8

*(fantasy)*

What am I doing in a lineup?

Whose reality is this?

NARRATOR

Would I need to define the lineup?

That's the majority of the Senate, the majority of the Supreme Court, that's just a boardroom, it's just the police force, it's the Founding Fathers, it's an insurance company, it's a line of surgeons, it's a line of historians, a line of bankers. It's an entire West Virginia correctional officer 2019 class photographing themselves.

*The Chorus re-creates each of the groups as she names them, ending with re-creating the photograph of an entire West Virginia correctional officer class making the Nazi salute. As they walk to re-create the photo, they sing, "It's not just him."*



WHITE MEN

*It's not just him*

*It's not just him*

*It's not just him*

*It's not just.*

NARRATOR

It's not.

I'm not demonizing, I'm historicizing.

Am I wrong to understand all of us, including number eight (*smiles at White Man 8*),

to be subject to the afterlife of slavery?

Not—just—him.

There are no individuals here.

Black women. White men.

Caught in these categories.

Is it ever simply just me and him?

WHITE MAN 8

*(to Narrator)*

When is someone going to see me for who I really am?

When is someone going to ask me what I need?

NARRATOR

*(to White Man 8)*

Exactly. Haven't we all

been invented by white men

for the public assistance of white people?

Can we agree on this?

*(to Audience)*

Or should I, the Black woman, just get on with the program of  
accommodating white men,  
their lives, their lies, their lines?

SCENE 2

*Narrator stands in line waiting to board a flight.*

*As she speaks, White Man 13 steps in front of her in line. He is with White Man 17.*

NARRATOR

*(to White Man 13)*

Excuse me, I'm in this line.

*He steps behind her.*

WHITE MAN 13

*(to White Man 17)*

You never know who they're letting into first class these days.

*He and White Man 17 stand in the line behind her.*

NARRATOR

*(to Audience)*

Is his commentary a defensive move meant to cover his rudeness and  
embarrassment,

or

are we sharing a joke?

*Narrator turns to White Man 13. Suddenly they are replaying the scene that just  
happened as a joke.*

Have you heard the one about the white guy who steps in front of a Black  
woman  
onto an auction block?



The Black woman says, It's okay, you can go first.  
Ba-dum-chhh!

*(to Audience)*

Was the white man's comment a sly reference to that fuckery—  
the joke that isn't a joke?

Later, I discussed this moment with my therapist.

WHITE MAN 12 *as* THERAPIST

You didn't matter to him. That's why he could step in front of you in the first  
place.

His embarrassment, if it was embarrassment, had everything to do with how  
he was seen by the person who did matter: his white male companion. He  
made a mistake in front of his companion. You are allowing yourself to have  
too much presence in his imagination.

NARRATOR

*(to Audience)*

Should this be a comfort?

*Was* my total invisibility preferable to a targeted insult?

Doesn't she understand

my outrage is witness to my existence?

Did I mention my therapist is a white woman?

*(to Therapist)*

I want a new narrative, one that doesn't demand or require, or make, or  
expect, or want

my invisibility. I need a narrative that includes your whiteness as part of the  
diagnosis.

*(to Audience about Therapist)*

There's nothing I know that her white unconscious doesn't already know,  
even if she refuses to know what she knows.

THERAPIST

The limits of his world are his world.

NARRATOR

But what he won't see  
still doesn't make me invisible.

*(to Audience)*

She must not know what it's like always to be unexpected,  
unless I am fulfilling a service role—  
nanny, nurse, nutritionist,  
  
neurosurgeon, neurologist, ninja ...

WHITE MAN 13

Nonsense.

NARRATOR

*(takes in White Man 13, then makes a joke)*

You never know who they're letting in—

the old script leaves unacknowledged his whiteness, or his behavior, or his  
ordinary whatever ... disturbance. His ordinary disturbance.

WHITE MAN 17

Listen, when I do something stupid, like accidentally cutting in line, I might  
say, Jeez, they'll let anyone in here. The joke refers to the speaker, recognizing  
their mistake. It's self-deprecating.

Is it possible that his comment to you was meant to be self-deprecating?

NARRATOR

*(to White Man 17, thinking: What the fuck?)*

Anything is possible  
but a rude man and a rude white man have different presumptions.



You never know who they're letting in—

*ALL LIVES MATTER sign lights up.*

NARRATOR

Seeing him fully meant I understood my presence to be an unexpected  
downgrade for him.

And though it was too bad if he felt that way, he wasn't the first. He  
wouldn't be the last.

This culture had made him, I mean them.

And I understand I could never unmake him, them—certainly not the ones  
I travel with, this random and ever-changing sameness, but also not the ones  
I work with ...  
not even the one I married.

Given, with single and celebrated exceptions, *he*, the white man, is president,  
boss, my other boss, husband, colleague, my seatmate, accountant, lawyer,  
my waiter, oncologist, physical therapist, my friend, assassin, my, my,

how could I not be invested in understanding him?

Are our lives, his life and my own, not inextricably tied together?

Doesn't my whole life exist in his hands? If so, could it, would it,  
help me to know him better?

How much better?

Still, I wondered, what is this "stuckness" inside racial hierarchies  
that refuses the neutrality of the skies?

It's a real question.

I have friends, Black women friends, women of color friends, white women  
friends, queer Black men friends, all kinds of friends, many of them  
married to white men themselves,

who say, Why even bother with them? What do you care? Do you have time to waste?

Step—away—from—the—white—man.

*Don't you understand they've thrown you into a false fight for your humanity?*

I understand avoidance of him is one mode of survival.  
But I just want to talk.

Are conversations fights?

I don't think so.

In any case, these friends are not all wrong, but imagine that after I said to number eight,

*(turning to White Man 8)*

You shouldn't have voted for him,

he said,

WHITE MAN 8

You can stand in this line with me, but you'll never be in line with me. That's why I voted for him.

WHITE MAN 17

In my profession and in my personal life, I have been able to achieve  
everything

I have ever set out to do, with little resistance from anyone or anything. This is my reality.



WHITE MAN 2

I can thoughtlessly open a bag of snack food off the shelves while at the supermarket, confident I will not be charged with shoplifting before I can pay for it at checkout.

WHITE MAN 3

People and the police are mostly not suspicious of me in public places, like airports or shops, because of their contextual knowledge of who I am.

WHITE MAN 7

If the cost of my way of life is your life—that's not my concern.

WHITE MAN 12

That's why we voted for him.

NARRATOR

*A five, a six,  
a five-six-seven-eight—*

[...]

SCENE 4

NARRATOR

Just the other day while waiting for a flight I saw a video of a police training seminar on the news. The police were discussing the treatment of transgender people. Trans people are three times more likely to be victims of police violence than non-trans people.

*White Men become the characters of a police diversity training in Plainfield, Indiana. Scene below is a transcription from video of the interaction. Instructor stands there in the middle of presentation. Capt. Scott Arndt, Police Chief, other White Men, and Capt. Carri Weber are all seated watching the Instructor's presentation.*

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(responding to statistics of violence against trans people presented by instructor)*

That's not even accurate, because if you can't have a basis for where the number comes from or what the situation is that, that puts them in that situation—

INSTRUCTOR

Mm-hmm.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

I mean, are they more likely to be in this situation than somebody that's not transgender?

INSTRUCTOR

Mm-hmm. Yes.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

Which I don't know what that is—I'm just saying ... my life has never been ... part of police violence. Most of the people that I know ... have never been—

CAPT. CARRI WEBER

*(mumbling, inaudible)*

'Cause of your white male privilege.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

accused the police of violence. So I guess I don't get where that statistic comes from.

CAPT. CARRI WEBER

*(from audience, off camera)*

'Cause of your white male privilege, so you wouldn't know.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

I'm sorry?



WHITE MAN 18

I'm sorry, what?

CAPT. WEBER

Your white male privilege.

WHITE MAN 6

I am sorry?

WHITE MAN 4

Wow.

WHITE MAN 15

*What?*

WHITE MAN 14

I'm sorry?

WHITE MAN 15

What?

WHITE MAN 4

Wow.

WHITE MAN 15

WHAT?

WHITE MAN 18

What?

INSTRUCTOR

Let's bring it down a notch.

*Instructor crosses to make room for Police Chief, who is now in front of the room.*

CHIEF

Let's keep it safe and professional.

*White Men react to this.*

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

It's not!

CHIEF

That's my—

*White Men's reactions continue.*

CHIEF

*(continuing)*

role and objective. So I don't—

*White Men react in the room. Capt. Scott Arndt hits a table.*

CHIEF

*(continuing)*

want to focus on the statistics—

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(interrupting)*

Chief,

CHIEF

*(continuing)*

because quite frankly—

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(interrupting)*

you gonna let them get away with that?



CHIEF

No.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

Seriously? I'm asking a legitimate question here,

CHIEF

Let me help you.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(continuing)*

and I'm getting taught white privilege?

CHIEF

I wo—

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(continuing)*

Are you serious? *(yelling)* I find that extremely offensive ...

CHIEF

Okay.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(interrupting)*

And I'm, I'm—trying to be as professional as I can—

WHITE MAN 15

*(to Capt. Scott Arndt)*

You've got—

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(continuing)*

and learn.

WHITE MAN 15

*(to Capt. Scott Arndt)*

You've got someone that's trying to talk. Please sit down.

CHIEF

Please. All right. Hold on a second.

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

No, I will leave. And I will file it on your desk.

*Capt. Scott Arndt walks toward door. Other White Men in the room are talking and whispering to one another.*

CHIEF

We're not talking about white privilege here.

*White Men talk among themselves.*

CAPT. SCOTT ARNDT

*(louder whispering)*

I can't listen to that.

I can't listen to that.

I can't listen to that.

*White Men are still whispering.*

CHIEF

Anyway, we're going to move beyond this. *(to Instructor)* If you could go to the next slide.

*End of police station reenactment.*

NARRATOR

*(to Audience)*

After uttering the phrase "white male privilege," Captain Weber was put on paid administrative leave, and a reprimand was placed permanently in her file.

I felt a little naive for feeling shocked.

If white women can get reprimanded for calling out the system of white male privilege, I should be more terrified than I am of my neighbors, colleagues, and seatmates, terrified of white male rage. A rage that refuses response with a knee on Black people's throats, designed to stop their hearts.

It's as if all the *f*-words—

fury

fucked

fascism

fatal

—exist simply to gun down all the *n*-words.

This is why to stay alive, forget thriving, I need to negotiate the white man.

His proclivities are the definition of the Black woman's lack of possibilities.  
And possibilities.

Can we have the luxury of living in this reality, even if nothing changes?

Can we agree that white men get to exist, they get to live their lives, unless  
they're unlucky;  
hell, even if they're unlucky?

Can we understand *that* as their privilege?

(*to White Men*)

Black women on the other hand have a lot of structural shit going down  
before luck comes into play.

Isn't this at the center of the misalignment?

Isn't this the reality we are constantly tripping over?

Isn't this the reality Renisha McBride walked into in the early morning in  
the fall of 2013,  
or is it the reality Breonna Taylor woke into in the spring of 2020?



WHITE MAN 9 *as* NEWSCASTER

Renisha McBride, a young Black woman, was shot to death by a white man  
when her car crashed and she knocked at his door for help.

Breonna Taylor, a young Black woman, was shot to death by police in her  
home.

WHITE MAN 8

You know who you are little missus.

WHITE MAN 12

She's a miscreant.

WHITE MAN 10

A misdemeanor.

WHITE MAN 1

Misfeasance.

*Potentially a movement moment here. Maybe Narrator falls back into the  
memory of the deaths of McBride and Taylor, and White Men carry her like  
a coffin.*

NARRATOR

Why do I have to die in order for you to live?

WHITE MEN *who are carrying Narrator*

*(singing)*

*Amazing grace!*

*How sweet the sound*

*that saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found;*

*Was blind but now I see.*

*I can be poor and alive,*

*rich and alive,*

*alive and a murderer,*

*alive and a savior,*

*no one's savior and alive,  
alive and alive, alive.*

*Narrator is standing again.*

NARRATOR

The sustained stress of a day-to-day negotiation of white dismissal, white fragility, white defensiveness, white presumptions, white perceptions, white stereotypes, white power, white racism is its own bullet, even if it takes fifty or sixty years to kill me.

Mama, being able to just breathe can't be taken for granted despite the fact that we're all standing here in line.

SCENE 5

NARRATOR

When I immigrated to this country at age seven, my mother said, Don't trust white people.  
It was that simple. Don't trust white people.

Everybody's Black mama had something to say to her children going off into a life where the rancor of all the *n*-words was running rampant.

A friend told me his mama told him to be "twice as good" as he entered his first-grade class.

My mother apparently already felt things were out of my hands.

She didn't quote W. E. B. Du Bois saying, "But what of Black women? ... I most sincerely doubt if any other race of women could have brought its fineness up through so devilish a fire."

She didn't quote Lincoln.

WHITE MAN 12 *as* LINCOLN

While [we] do remain together there must be a position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything. I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife.

NARRATOR

She didn't quote Jefferson.

WHITE MAN 13 *as* JEFFERSON

Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the Blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

NARRATOR

My mother didn't say anything about exterminations, racism, or slavery. Only trust.

There were white people and there was me, and I didn't know when or how, but, as a Black girl, no, *for* a Black girl, days were a thing to be negotiated around the inhumanity of these people who were apparently also untrustworthy.

Even as a child, I found myself watching my white teachers—what were they up to?

As we get older, how has distrust in all of us reformed itself into pain?

What pain are we hoarding?

That pain that develops into resentment, where does it live?



And despite white people wanting to call others racist for calling them white—

WHITE MAN 12

I'm sorry.

WHITE MAN 17

WHAT?

WHITE MAN 3

WHAT?

WHITE MAN 19

Wow.

WHITE MAN 1

I am sorry?

WHITE MAN 7

I am sorry?

WHITE MAN 10

What?

WHITE MAN 8

Wow.

WHITE MAN 9

What?

WHITE MAN 13

What?

WHITE MAN 11

Wow.

NARRATOR

—what are they really feeling beyond the defensiveness and rage?

I share spaces with white men all the time,

or, rather, I share nonspaces  
on our way to and from our destinations.

Given that their fantasies are tomorrow's legislation,  
shaping so much of what we can imagine,

would it kill me  
to ask them about white privilege?

WHITE MEN

*(singing)*

*The audacity of that woman*

*The audacity of that*

*Black*

*Woman.*

ACT 2

SCENE 1

*Narrator is seated with her luggage. She overhears a number of conversations.  
White Men are seated and just talking. Maxine Waters on the floor of the House  
of Representatives is on the TV at the gate.*

WHITE MAN 6

Fuck, dude, that was brutal. I am out.

WHITE MAN 3

Oh my God.

I am exhausted by her talk.

WHITE MAN 6

I hear you.

Where are you from?

WHITE MAN 3

Georgia.

WHITE MAN 6

Stacey Abrams territory.

WHITE MAN 3

Stacey Abrams? Oh yeah, yeah, I was prepared for Abrams, but I don't think  
Georgia was.

You got to be pragmatic.

WHITE MAN 6

She was a lawyer from Yale, right?

WHITE MAN 3

At the end of the day it's about who will win.

WHITE MAN 6

Yeah, I hear you.

You want the diversity stuff but some moments transcend race.

SCENE 2

WHITE MAN 5

The Democratic field really narrowed.

WHITE MAN 9

Well, the candidates have to be electable.

WHITE MAN 5

My kids were so excited about Kamala Harris. (*saying it in different ways*)



*because he's not sure if he's pronouncing it correctly*) Kamala. Kamala, Kamala Harris.

WHITE MAN 9

Kamala? Didn't *Saturday Night Live* do a thing about her?

WHITE MAN 5

Yeah, she really went after Biden for saying he can work with anybody.

WHITE MAN 9

But who's the man now? 'Cause she's out.

WHITE MAN 5

For now. There's always the VP slot, but you're right. No one can say anything anymore.

Biden is bad but he's not Trump bad.

They make him out to be Trump bad.

You know Kamala is only the second Black woman to be elected to the Senate.

WHITE MAN 9

What about Shirley Chisholm?

WHITE MAN 5

That was the House.

WHITE MAN 9

What's the difference? Only two? Who's the second one? Rosa Parks?

WHITE MAN 5

You're hilarious.

WHITE MAN 9

Not her?

WHITE MAN 5

No. It was Carol Moseley Braun.

WHITE MAN 9

I've never heard of her. You're sure it's not Sheila Jackson Lee? She has a cowboy hat.

WHITE MAN 5

No, that's Frederica Wilson.

WHITE MAN 9

How are you keeping them straight?

WHITE MAN 5

They have different names.

And faces.

[...]

SCENE 7

NARRATOR

After another long flight, I wondered what it would take to get white men to discuss their privilege. I knew they would speak differently if I were white.

I asked my friend, who's completed more than a hundred oral histories with white people, what he learned in his conversations with white men.

WHITE MAN 11 *as* WHITNEY DOW

They're struggling to construct a just narrative for themselves as new information comes in.

I include myself in that.

We're seeing the deconstruction of the white male archetype. The individual actor on the grand stage always had the support of a genocidal government, but this is certainly not the narrative I grew up with. Few of us did.

It's a challenge to adjust, but not everyone has taken up the challenge. I don't think this guy I interviewed got the memo.

*White Man 2 appears as a video subject of Whitney's interview.*

WHITE MAN 2

Should slavery be something that because it happened, we owe Black people something more? Absolutely not. I think it's hard to talk about race as a white person, because I feel like maybe, sometimes Black people are just looking for a reason to . . . tell you why you're wrong or tell you why you owe them something. If I was in a room full of white people, I would not feel uncomfortable talking about race.

NARRATOR

*(to Whitney Dow)*

I wonder if by race he means Blackness.

Did you ask him if he talked about his whiteness with other white people?

WHITNEY DOW

No, I didn't want him to stop talking to me.

NARRATOR

What is it Audre Lorde said, the master's tools—

WHITNEY DOW

Won't dismantle the master's house. But don't you want to get in the house, see how it's built, know what he's thinking?

NARRATOR

I would never get in the house. The trust they have with you is based only on the fact that you're white. That's how taken for granted a sense of white solidarity is.



WHITNEY DOW

That's true. What can I say? My hope is this work makes apparent the terms of that solidarity. I think for some white men, the privilege is becoming recognizable.

But I guess, they can't truly see themselves until they can see how you see them.

NARRATOR

But shouldn't that be how you see them too?

# *D. H. Tracy*

## THE NEW NEW NORMAL

It is desirable that as little happen as possible.

An aristocrat said this, knowing (I hope) it was hopeless.

Inevitably,

sporadically (like clockwork,  
unlike clockwork), something  
goes thlunk into the pond of you,  
and the normal expires.

Your contract/lease/tour/term was up. You moved across town.

The guests departed, or you got a diagnosis.

The new normal feels like fresh linen, a little,

even when bad. The new normal monkeys finically

with the sublives where you dream and mate and work; the new normal  
tweaks

the way you think about the future, light jazz, incarceration, and vegetable  
cream cheese;

about the toupee of dust on the top of the fridge (care, don't care),

about fixing things or tossing them,

about the relative merits of an enchanted forest and Rantoul in broad  
daylight.

Striving and coasting, hating and forgiving.

The new normal has backdoor access to all of this,

for now. And you fall in with the rhythm of where you have to show  
up when.

We say life is normal when it resembles itself.

We say numbers are normal when the appearance of outliers  
follows a certain formula, as though freak occurrences were normal.

We say a line is normal when it sits square to another line,  
as though it were normal to be at cross-purposes.

We say a town is Normal if it has a Dairy Queen and a little zoo  
and an insurance company where normal people go to work, maybe you.

I say *you* because the way normals come and go must be the same  
for other people, even  
if the normals themselves are so peculiar that there is no normal normal.  
My latest normal tastes like hard-to-say-what, the way  
the blue raspberry slushy sweating in a cup holder  
when the lights come halfway on after a movie  
tastes like something.

It sits there as though blue raspberry slushies  
were the most normal thing in the world.

As though the normal were not churning  
and sick of itself and determined to depart from its own pattern  
and fade, like a firework, to be replaced by another,  
like a firework. Replaced and replaced again.

I want to say there is still a cadence to this,  
a normalcy of normals. But what if they ask, someday, What were  
things *like*?

We say normalize when we want to compare apples to apples  
but in the new new normal normals  
just were what they were, the best you can do  
is stack the generations of them and hold them up to the light and see  
the flecks  
of everything they varied and interchanged:

in some you are a dog person,  
in some you are shallow and buy things,  
in some you crave a pallet in a monastery,  
in some you think the best of people,  
in some the secret lies in a book,  
in some you do Jell-O shots,  
in some precipitation is welcome,  
in some you live in hope,  
in some you watch a lot of TV,  
in some you gesticulate with chopsticks,  
in some they smell your desperation,  
in some the dress shoes pinch,  
in some you screw the pooch,

in some machines are fascinating,  
in some you are civic-minded,  
in some you feel belittled by the staff,  
in some you wander by the lamp of reason,  
in some there is time for niceties,  
in some it seems strange that once you just sat there watching a willow in  
a storm, but it must have been a normal thing to do, because until the  
next new normal there was no other thing for it to be



## *The Puppet Theater*

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GYÖRGY  
DRAGOMÁN

**O**lgi says she's going to take me somewhere and show me something I've never seen before. We walk through a door into an inner courtyard, then from there into another one, then into a third one, where there is a wire fence. Olgi knows where the fence can be lifted, she picks it up, holds it, I slip through, then I hold it up while she slips through the fence.

We are now in front of two large iron doors. No matter how much I ask Olgi where she's taking me, she doesn't answer, all she says is that I won't regret coming. We are about to see something we've never seen before. She places the palm of her hand on the iron door painted blue and beats out a rhythm on it, not haphazardly, but with three long and two short beats; she repeats this many times.

Nothing happens. I want to suggest that we leave, or if she doesn't want to, then I'll go, but suddenly I hear the clattering sound of a bolt pulled on

the other side of the door, then a second and third. The door slowly opens a crack, a fat face with a quivering double chin, a stubby nose, and angry eyes looks out at me, the voice is harsh and raspy as it speaks to me, saying, What are you doing here—but before I can speak, the face changes, a smile spreads across it: Olgika, is that you? So you came, welcome, come in quickly, before they see you here.

Olga greets her, I kiss your hand, Godmother, then she says that she's also brought a friend. The fat woman nods, Fine, Olgika, that's fine. She opens the door, she leads us into a fluorescent-lit space smelling like mint tea, then she quickly closes the door behind us, pushes the bolts back in place, and at the same time murmurs in a raspy voice: Oh, but it's so good that you came, my little Olgika, you have to see this, the opening will be on Monday, but everything's prepared already, everything's in place, she says, all while leading us through a labyrinth of crates and boxes piled up on top of one another.

The air is full of strange scents: mint, washing powder, plastic, earth, fresh paint, all mixed up together—it's nauseating and cold. The fluorescent lights hiss and vibrate, I know that my head is going to start aching in a moment, as if we had already been winding in and out of these crates and boxes for a long time. From above, from the direction of the ceiling, there is a soft creaking sound, and as I look up I see that high above, meters above the crates and the boxes there are huge puppets hanging down—paper birds with outspread wings, an owl-headed horse with red wings, a many-headed dragon, a violinist with a green head and a black coat, a sun, a moon, stars, clouds, a tractor, a cat wearing gardening pants and a miner's helmet.

I nudge Olgi to look up. She does and is so surprised that she bumps into one of the crates, which then makes a rattling sound. The fat woman looks up as well, and she croaks, Yes, these puppets are still here, and a few of the old stage decorations, too, but don't worry about that, because this hasn't been a puppet theater for a long time, it's something much more fantastic now. The whole place has been transformed, the front hall, the theater, everything.

We come out from among the crates, walking alongside a wheelbarrow, then we reach another door, as the woman pushes open the double-leafed door, there is soft music, I recognize it, "The Blue Danube," it's playing in some kind of extended electronic version, the woman says, Look at this, you've never seen anything like this before. She grabs our shoulders and shoves us through the door.

The sharp white light blinds me for a moment, I look around, squinting, I see that Olgi and I are standing in the middle of a large self-service department store. Everything is packed with gigantic shelves, the colored boxes nearly tumbling off, I see large, thick bars of chocolate, packs of chewing gum piled up in heaps, bags of candy, cake boxes, canned goods, one-kilo tins of coffee, huge packages of laundry powder, cigarette cartons, and there are ten, one hundred, one thousand varieties of each item, and fruit juices—orange, apple, lemon, grape—in enormous boxes.

I look at everything, I can't move, I hear Olgi snort next to me as if she has suddenly been hit in her solar plexus, I, too, sense that I can't catch my breath, I feel that all these items will collapse on me any moment now, they'll bury me, but at the same time I think about going over to one of the shelves, the first one I can reach, the closest one, grabbing a bag of candy, ripping it open, and snatching up its contents, not to eat, but because I want to see if there's really candy inside, and if there was really candy inside, then I would rip open another one, and one after that, all of them, and I would unwrap all the chocolate bars, and the chewing gum, everything, all the boxes, all the bags, even the ones filled with items I don't recognize, I would open up every single package and rip out the contents.

I imagine how all these things would flow between my fingers, the colored wrapping papers ripping open, making crackling noises, the snap-snap of the cellophane tearing, and all the while I hear Olgi's godmother murmuring behind us, saying that this is a real hypermarket, the very first one in the city. There's everything here, everything that exists under the sun, everything, but really everything, thirty different kinds of toothpaste, eight different kinds of butter, fifteen different kinds of cheese, sausages, salamis, hams, and so many types of soap that even if we used a different kind to wash our hands every day, we would still have enough for at least two months until we had tried them all, and there is much more of each item, not just what's displayed on the shelves, but an infinite amount, transported here on trucks packed to the gills.

She talks about the jams, the toilet paper, the tinned fish, chocolate creams, There is everything, and there will be everything, because from now on there will always be everything, she pronounces these words as if they were a prayer, as if she didn't even believe them herself, as if she were trying to persuade herself of something nonetheless true, in a hoarse voice, to the

tune of the Blue Waltz, she sings of the milk in boxes and the vacuum-sealed coffee, before she could never have even imagined that such things exist, she sings of cocoa powder that already contains milk and sugar, you only need to add water and it's ready to drink, she chants how she thinks all of this plenitude did not come into existence only recently, but that it always existed, even when we couldn't get any of it, even when the shops here were completely empty, and you could never get anything, people were ready to murder each other just for the one kind of plum preserves and tinned fish that you could get, she doesn't want to think about it, but she can't think of anything else, that's why she wanted us to come and see it for ourselves, because she has been among these shelves for almost two weeks now, she stacked them with her own hands, but never will she be able to grasp the entirety of it. Perhaps she's already too old for this, perhaps it's too late for her, because all she can think about is what it was like when there was nothing, when you had to steal and cheat and lie for a bit of cornmeal, and as she says this, suddenly she begins to sob, she sobs loudly, blubbing like a child, nearly choking on the tears, she says that she did it all for us, she did it only for us, so that we could have all of this, so that all of this would be ours.

She steps over to Olgi and embraces her, with her thick arms she squeezes Olgi into her, Olgi embraces her back, she's crying now, too, tottering, they stagger in front of the shelves, there is a large bar of chocolate in the godmother's hands, she rips off the lilac-colored paper and the foil, breaking off large pieces and shoving them into Olgi's mouth, Eat, my little dove, eat, she blubbers, she, too, bites into the chocolate, I see half-eaten currants and hazelnuts in the chocolate, the marks of the godmother's teeth, they eat the chocolate, clutching one another, tottering.

I turn my back to them, and I walk among the shelves, I'm standing in front of cans of pineapple preserves, there's also apricot, mandarin, and mango. I reach over and take one, I let it drop, I reach for another one, and I let that one drop as well, I think of the teacher with the red hair who took us girls into the city once, and we stood in front of a small shop, and for the first time I saw shelves full of items, and the red-haired teacher pressed a fiver into everyone's hand, and she said we could buy whatever we wanted, I bought a package of big chocolate balls for four, I thought there'd also be chocolate on the inside, but then when I bit into one, it turned out that on the inside there was sweet pink-colored cotton candy, it was sweeter than anything I'd ever



eaten, so much so that my tongue and my entire mouth began to ache, and the candy was so dry that I could only eat one—now I feel the exact same sweetness in my throat, the exact same unbearable sweetness. I let the tin cans drop, I will only take one can of orange preserves, I think of the horse puppet with its owl head and its wings that I saw flying above the boxes, I want it to come for me, to put me on its back, to take me away from here. I open my arms wide, and I think that I'm not here, I run on the white-tiled floor, among the rainbow-colored shelves, full to the point of nausea.

*—Translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet*

# Cynthia Zarin

## FOUR HOURS IN FRANCE

We look at the map. When we arrive in France from King's Cross the fields are striated with barbed wire and it is raining. At the station in Lille we contented ourselves with two mediocre sandwiches from a stand and a visit through the back to Notre-Dame de la Trielle. We had our bags, so took turns, circling around to the great doors of the church and admiring the stained glass and the general feeling of use and mishap. Newspapers left in the stalls, where someone had come in to read or to get out of the rain. Across from the church, a woman leaning out of the window smoking, the smoke curling above a window box filled with fuchsia geraniums. I thought: I will never see her again. Then back to the station, where there was a woman under a peeling beech tree stripped to the waist, feeding her baby. Then back to sit in the waiting room on a row of bolted plastic chairs, noting nothing particularly French: a feeling of ennui and nerves, except for some children playing air hockey near the concession machine, gesticulating. I imagine you in the station, holding a ticket, saying, "I told you I was a terrible traveler." You do not like France; it is hard to remember what it is you like. You are saying, "But you, on the other hand, love to travel, and the porter carries your hatboxes." I have one bag. A race to find the right car when the train is announced. We sit in the wrong one and then are asked to move. The train lurched forward. The flat brown fields stretching off, the streak of yellow rapeseed, the wire power stanchions like gigantic scarecrows, arms akimbo, by a ruined Roman silo. A house raised its eyebrows. A church with its one-eyed steeple. At Notre-Dame, I relit two almost-spent candles for the dead—the stubs kept blinking out as if the souls to which they were already promised were chastising me. When I dropped more coins in the slot a box of tapers miraculously appeared, and the two flames took hold immediately, as if to say, *So there, when you behave correctly and pay for the candles, all goes well.* The French with their mania for correction. Picardy. Four soldiers with machine guns walk through the train. One is a redheaded girl no more than twenty, her hair tightly scraped back. Out the window, a bank of red roses in bloom where the sun hits first, although it is July and one would have expected blooms everywhere. A rush of green,

thick as paint, and the clouds clearing. A few low clouds straggle, like baby elephants tagging along, and then a stand of newly planted trees at the edge of a field, each leaf definite, trees painted by Seurat, seen through a window of dust motes. I don't need to know what you are doing because I can picture it; by now I am more accustomed to picturing you than to being beside you. When I arrived home last week after a month away and was about to leave again you called, this after a silence of four months, as you did, at midnight last summer, the night I returned from Rome; you have an uncanny sense of my arrivals and departures. I did not answer. As I would not answer six months later, in Rome again, as the year turned over in its sleep. A small town passed, its church circled by pale stone houses. Then green after green after green. The church steeple's radar towers eyeing the now pearl-colored sky, sending signals. I wear the watch you gave me—I am wearing it now, it is too big and slides on my wrist—but not the bracelets. Why is that? I feel you have worn me out for love. L. woke up and ate a pale green pistachio macaron the exact color of the fields, as if she were eating a piece of France. It is the last moment she is a child. In the seat behind me a woman turned to the section of a magazine called "Maisons des Stars." When L. finished the macaron, she read Sally's beau's new book. Sally said, "I read it with my eyes closed," because she was so afraid it might be terrible and then what. Apparently it is not terrible. The train moved south through this deep wedge of France in midsummer, a train that does not run over a hare. Or does. In Turner's painting the train runs off the canvas. I feel now as I have not before that I can see the end of the page. We have passed through Saint-Clair and now we have stopped in Saint-Rambert-d'Albon. A man gets on carrying a bicycle helmet. Everyone on the train is eating. A family across the aisle—a mother and her beautiful daughter and sons, perhaps five and eight, one with big black horn-rimmed glasses—eats a whole sliced loaf of bread, studded with hazelnuts, out of a brown bag. A little girl with fifty cornrows and silver sandals eats a bag of chips. The driver of a white van pulling out of a lane in front of a herd of sheep took no notice of the train three hundred years away. The train slowed. I watch as he waits to turn onto the run into a lane scarcely bigger than the rutted towpath he has left. Although it is daylight and will remain light for hours, his headlights are on. A strand of yellow in the fields shimmers so fiercely it is almost blue. It is nearly twilight. What did the truck driver leave behind when he turned out of the lane? A Roman aqueduct rises along the

Ardèche. The space where you were is empty, like the field behind the gate, the canal lock in the moonlight by the station in Valence when we arrive. You are too cloudy, L. said last night. I must try not to be cloudy. There was Ninette, greeting us, waving from the bridge over the platform. That yellow I remember from last summer, a stripe in the curtain, the fields now sylvan in the twilight, the yellow I wanted then to describe to you but did not.



## *Brian Tierney*

### YOU'RE THE ONE I WANNA WATCH THE LAST SHIPS GO DOWN WITH

Dr. Redacted will tell me not to tell you  
this, like *this*,  
in a poem: how it's all right, love, that we don't love  
living. Even actors don't  
exactly love the spotlight they move through,  
as your sister, the actor,  
has told us; they just need to be lit  
for narrative motion  
to have meaning. As such it is  
with artifice and embarrassment  
that I move through fear  
to you, tonight, where I had dreams,  
a short nap ago, about lines  
of poetry I struck through  
with everyday blues, month after  
month, in dream  
after dream; an attempt  
I guess to forget, if I could: defeat  
sometimes is defeat  
without purpose. The news, at least, tells me  
that much. I know now,  
in fact, we don't have to be brave,  
not to survive a night  
like any we've looked on  
together, seeing blue-tinted snow  
once in a Kmart  
parking lot's giant, two-headed lamp—  
and my father hooked up,  
up the street, with no chance

of waking—as many years ago now  
as how much longer I've lived  
with you than without.  
Forgive me, again, that I write you an elegy  
where a love poem should be.

## *The Loss of Heaven*

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DANTIEL W.  
MONIZ

**H**e weighed 210 pounds buck-ass naked; 217 in his leather jacket and boots, which he wore that crisp March evening to the bar along with a gold pin in his lapel. It was shaped like a spade, a gift from his wife when they were young, once she'd discovered how much he liked expensive-looking things. He wasn't handsome, but his light skin, wavy hair, the polished gleam of his fingernails, and the bills pressed tightly in his wallet almost made him so. As he entered the Albatross he stopped in the doorway and imagined his body filling the width of the frame, giving the occupants time to look and wonder who he was. The jukebox played the Temptations and threw colored light onto his face, and a couple of women at a nearby table glanced up from their pastel martinis, one sucking the cherry from her drink. Satisfied, he walked in. Hilda swept a dish towel along the bar top, looking bored, smiling out from under her

bangs at a trio of men at the counter, a pretty laugh spilling from deep within her chest. He chose a stool in the middle, with an unobstructed view of her.

“Hey there, Fred. Jim and Coke?” she asked, the start to their ritual. Her low, drawling voice pulled something tight inside his stomach.

“You know it, kid,” he said. He slid off his jacket and draped it on the back of his chair as she filled a rocks glass with three large cubes of ice, so big they could sit in a drink a while before melting. In the few months since he’d met her, Fred often imagined tracing one down the contours of Hilda’s spine, recording an exact rate of body heat to melting points.

“No lime,” Hilda sang, placing his drink in front of him on a square of white napkin she’d sprinkled with salt. “Start a tab?”

“I’ll pay as I go,” Fred told her, as he always did, and placed a five on the bar. Hilda disappeared the bill into her apron in one discreet, fluid motion. She never brought him change.

The Albatross hosted a quiet crowd on Tuesday evenings, a mix of suits, day laborers, and truckers with three-day scruff. The bar’s aesthetic lingered somewhere between a dive and a lounge, sporting wood details and burgundy upholstery along with burger specials and, in the back, streetwise games of pool on red felt. Older gentlemen sat at tables in dim corners sipping rye whiskey, talking with other men about matters only other men would understand; some kept their hands high on the thighs of women who were not their wives—girls, really—who did not yet keep house and still had inexact ideas about all of the ways in which they could be disappointed. The girls possessed a malleability, a willingness to be impressed, their soft cheeks flushing at even the most trivial compliments. These were sweet, bygone qualities the men wished to bottle and harbor for themselves.

Fred took a swig from his drink and watched the young bartender over the rim of his glass. He liked the healthy way her hips moved under her black uniform skirt; the deep brown of her skin; the way she talked to other men, her oiled hair sweeping forward as she leaned over the bar to take their orders. He liked that she knew what a two-dollar-a-drink tip was worth, and that his glass was never empty. Hilda smiled every time she made him a new one, as if they shared a secret—as if she *knew* him—and sometimes her fingers would linger over his, creating heft and heat.

“Still good, Fred?” she’d ask from time to time, letting him watch her. Making sure he never lost sight of his importance. He was good. Fred lifted



his glass to her, the bite of bourbon still glowing in his throat. “To beautiful friendships,” he said, and when Hilda laughed, even that seemed just for him.

FRED SPENT THIRTY DOLLARS at the bar before heading home. He kept the radio off, preferring just the sound of his tires crunching gravel on the road, the shake of the V6 under his seat. He’d bought the ’85 Buick Regal brand new—metallic blue with a racing stripe—as a present to himself once he turned fifty-two. When he’d driven it into the yard six years ago, his wife had laughed to see it, asking if this was the Band-Aid for his midlife event. “What’s next,” she jeered, “a mistress?” Fred had been offended. He wasn’t old, not yet, and he deserved nice things.

He caught his reflection in the rearview mirror. “You’re still the man,” Fred told himself, and watched his eyes to see if he believed it.

GLORIA WAS ON THE PORCH in her nightgown when he pulled up, a cigarette dangling between her elegant fingers. Fred cut the engine and sat for a moment, flexing his fists around the steering wheel, trying to calm himself. It wouldn’t do to start a fight. He got out of the car and hauled himself up the porch steps, leaning against the railing next to her. He studied her profile, the tufts of newly grown-out hair like shredded brown cotton, the petite ears and dished forehead, her angled jaw. The small triangle of skin beginning to loosen beneath her chin. The sheer nightgown slipped from one burnished shoulder and its hem piled on the floorboards around her crossed ankles; it swallowed her. She looked like a child dressed in her mother’s clothes, and in that moment, he loved her terribly.

The porch light glowed orange and flickered with dazed moths as Gloria let him watch her. She brought the cigarette to her mouth and took a long, smooth drag. Fred imagined the smoke swirling down into the cage of her chest, every bone illuminated, turning what was left of her lungs the color of stone. She finally turned to face him, her eyes wet and penetrating, and he remembered when he used to call her his little bit of Glory. He didn’t know when he’d stopped.

“How was today?” he asked.

“Fine as can be expected,” Gloria said, flicking ash.

“And the doctor? What did he say?”

“Fred.” She dropped his name like an anchor. “It’s fine.”

He started to speak, then changed his mind. He wanted to shake her, grip hard into those bird-boned shoulders until he felt them snap, but only a monster would treat a dying person like that. Instead he held out his hand. “Let’s go inside.”

She smiled at him. “I’m sitting with the night,” she said, and looked over the yard toward the low edge of the horizon, still crimson from the parting sun. Fred’s shoulders sagged under the weight of sudden gravities: that she preferred her cigarettes and her own company to him. That she had started smoking the damn things again in the first place, and now wasn’t troubling to hide it.

When, two months ago, her oncologist had hustled them into his office with his grim face and rattled off his list of bloated, ugly words—*recurrence*, *metastasis*, *inoperable*—Gloria took it dry-eyed, her head bobbing as if she, too, were a doctor, comfortable with the impersonal language of death. He recommended immediate and aggressive treatment and Fred had coughed into his hand. “What are our chances here?” he’d asked, and ignored how Gloria’s head whipped around when he said it. “We’re not worried about the cost.” He wouldn’t let this white man or anyone else think they were poor. The doctor cleared his throat, said, “Studies suggest that patients in this stage, with targeted therapies prescribed in conjunction with homeopathic remedies, and rigorous adherence to the plan—” and Gloria stood up and left.

Fred found her ten minutes later posted up at the car with her purse on the hood, pretending to pick dirt from her fingernails. As he unlocked the door, he’d given her a questioning look and she’d just shaken her head. Fred reflected that only she could look annoyed after hearing a scary verdict like that. Only she could be so rankled. The first time they’d gotten this news the previous winter, she’d climbed back into the car and bawled the entire drive home. He’d had to carry her into the house. Fred waited for this delayed reaction, but she didn’t cry. Gloria said, looking out the window at the street going past, “None of that had anything to do with me. All that was, was two men talking in a room.”

The reaction did come later that night, as they ate dinner—smothered pork chops and mashed potatoes and peas—but not the one he had expected.

“I’m not doing the chemo. I’m done.”

“Baby, you’re in shock,” he’d told her, because he certainly was.

It had been hard on her—the chemo, the radiation, each feeling more like additional sickness than any kind of treatment. They'd cut Gloria open and removed a lobe of lung, and now a long, pillowy scar curved under her right breast, raised several centimeters from the surrounding skin. She said it was her last-minute souvenir, like, *Haha, what'd you bring me back from Cancerland?* Forgetting the scar, the loss of her hair, the sores in her mouth, and the dizzy nausea and fear of it all, they'd beaten the cancer back. And just as they were celebrating, finally crawling toward something like normal—this. It felt like the worst betrayal, but Fred knew if they did it once, they could do it again. He repeated that, financially, they were good, just in case she felt guilty over how much killing the cancer cost. Fred was a provider—always had been, always would be—a retired car hauler who had worked since the age of thirteen. Above all else, he was a man, and he took care of his own. No one could say any different.

Gloria set down her cutlery and rubbed the place between her eyes, and when she spoke again, she looked tired and patient, and he felt irked by it. “Fred, you're not hearing me. I said I'm done. If it's my time, it's my time.”

He hadn't believed her then, but shortly after that night, he began to smell smoke on Gloria's clothes. At first she spun the usual line, it was others smoking near her, but then he'd found a half-full pack on the floorboard of her back seat. She'd been in the living room reading, glasses sliding down her nose, when he confronted her. He flung the pack at her and it hit her in the chest.

“I guess you've made up your mind,” he growled.

“To live the way I want to live?”

“You mean die the way you want to die!” and she'd said, “What's the difference?”

She was punishing him, he knew, and Fred's stomach seized at the thought of all the things Gloria didn't say, how her answer to nearly every question was an inconsequential “fine.” Fred was certain that she somehow saw everything about him. That this cancer, as it ate at her body, had imparted in her a kind of godly knowing in exchange for what it took. Fred could feel his wrongdoings bathed in light: his dalliances with other women, that he had denied Gloria children because he didn't want to be encumbered by their need. She knew, too, about the mad money tucked away in a secret compartment in his wallet; about the disgust he'd felt upon first finding out about

the tumor, at the weakness of her body; his resentment at swapping roles—she was nine years younger and supposed to take care of him. And the worst possibility—that Gloria could taste his absolute terror at being left alone, the bitter tinge of his shame dissolving on her tongue. She knew he would be a coward without her, and he believed a part of her enjoyed the thought.

Fred went inside alone, trailing through the three-bedroom, split-level house that she often said was too large for just the two of them. She thought he'd bought it because he'd wanted a family, but he liked the acre of land it sat on and the idea that he could own it. Over the years, he'd let Gloria fill the rooms with art and plants and rare books. In their bedroom, he removed his boots and jacket. He left his oxford and undershirt on a growing pile of clothes Gloria had yet to wash, then stepped out of his pants and double-checked that the ten crisp bills in the hidden pocket of his wallet—all hundreds—were still there. He took the bills out and ran his fingers along their creased edges, measured their weight on his palm. When he was younger and his older sisters were in dating range, he'd listen to their mother caution them anytime they went out with a new boy, giving them money to hide in their socks. He'd never seen either of his parents so free with cash, but when it was his turn to court, his father merely said, "Don't get them pregnant." Fred never got the lecture or the mad money, and felt left out. What if he needed to escape?

Holding the money gave Fred a sort of chill, a pulse of irrational pleasure at the thought of getting into his Buick and driving away. Maybe he'd leave the swampy stench of Florida and go back home to the Tennessee foothills to live in the house his father had built. Maybe Hilda would be with him—riding shotgun, her luxurious, heavy hair whipping in the breeze. He pictured her red-lipped smile, her hand on his arm—and wasn't that the most coveted thing? A pretty woman content to be near you?

Standing in his underwear and socks, he put the bills away and searched through Gloria's side table, as he often did when his own fantasies made him paranoid. He found nothing—no secret money, no getaway plan, just an unopened pack of Virginia Slims. Her little sticks of spite. He would have liked to trash them, but it wouldn't matter. There was always another pack. Fred closed the drawer, then walked to the bathroom to remove the rest of his clothes. Naked, he stood on his scale and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he found he still weighed the same, even with all of his transgressions nestled snugly inside him.



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Fred had restless dreams: Gloria hanging blood-spattered sheets to dry in the yard; Gloria standing against an empty sky; Gloria gone, and the goneness blotting out the world. One night he woke suddenly, startled and lost, and flung out a hand to feel her beside him, her slight frame set sideways, precise as a blade. He tugged her closer and pressed himself against her, wishing he could push her inside of his body and make them one again. Gloria responded, pressing back, and they fumbled from their nightclothes. Bare, her bones bumping at him, the reality of her smacked into the room; she seemed proud of this ugliness. She latched her lips to his and Fred felt he could taste the sickness in her mouth. Repulsion shuddered through him, somehow spurring him on, and he entered her, overcome by the expanse of his love and disgust. He bucked beneath her, filling his fingers with the memory of her prior flesh. He moaned, "Glory, Glory, Glory," but the past didn't come. There was only this new wife, skeletal and knowing, grinning down at him in the dark with what he saw as contempt.

Gloria's panting turned to wheezing and she slid off him, coughing viciously, her body crumpled on the sheets. When she finally stopped and sat up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Fred asked, "Any blood?" She didn't answer, but riffled through her side table for her cigarettes. His lip curled without his consent. "You're really begging for that grave."

Gloria made a sound, though whether a laugh or a cough, he couldn't tell. She dressed slowly, with her back to him, her spine pronounced in even that sparse light, but when she walked to his side of the bed her expression was muzzy. Fred wanted to turn on the lamp and recognize her, his Glory, but her eyes kept him fixed.

"You know, the closer I get to it, the clearer I see," she said, and left to blow blue smoke at the moon. Fred lay there, awake through the night, wondering why she didn't seem afraid and if she still loved him, but was too afraid himself to ask.

He started closing the Albatross down on Tuesdays, staying later to spend time in Hilda's validating company, to bask in the beer-and-vanilla scent radiating from her skin. He liked to consider that he was personally responsible for keeping her lights on, for putting food on her table. That he, in some ways, was responsible for the girl herself—Hilda's dependable goodness, a reflection of his own.

RETURNING HOME FROM THE BARBER on a Friday in mid-April, Fred heard the telephone ringing on the other side of the door while he dug for his keys. Two times. Three. He scowled as he stuck his key into the lock and hurried inside, tripping over his feet, cursing as he scuffed his recently polished shoe. He could sense Gloria moving at the back of the house and wondered why she didn't pick it up. He answered, breathless, on the fifth ring.

"Mr. Moore." The usually clipped voice of Gloria's oncologist sighed through the line. He sounded relieved. "I was hoping to reach you." A band of muscle in Fred's chest tightened.

"How can I help you, Doctor?"

"Your wife was in today for a checkup, and I'm afraid she threatened to find another physician. As you know, I was highly against the decision to forgo radiation." He went on about ethical and professional concerns, about his responsibilities to the Hippocratic oath, his reputation. He told Fred that Gloria's treatment was a matter of limited time. Maybe only months. "I know I don't get a say, but I was hoping you might still convince her. Mr. Moore?"

"Yes, I'm here," Fred said, eyes sliding again down the hallway to their bedroom. "I'm sorry, Doctor, I—can I call you back?"

He hung up and stood for a moment with his hand on the receiver, hoping, if he waited long enough, it would ring again and the verdict would be different. When it didn't, he trudged back to their bedroom. Gloria was folding clothes neatly into her overnight bag, a cheerful pink suede thing that didn't match the energy in the room.

"That was Dr. Howard, wasn't it? Shithead. You know he has me listed as 'noncompliant' in my files?" She tucked a couple of dresses into the bag. They were so small, like dolls' clothes. "I'm getting rid of him. I need a doctor who's on my side."

"How can anyone be on the side of something so crazy?" Fred said. She didn't need to punish him. Didn't the sinner always punish himself? He felt a stinging warmth gather at the corner of his eyes, and he hated her for it.

"Fred, you don't know how it was for me."

"I was there! I was right beside—"

"You. Don't. *Know*." Gloria came around to him and put her hands in his, but his fingers remained limp. "Do you want me like that? Dead alive?"

He just wanted her, full stop, but he wouldn't say it, couldn't give her the pleasure of seeing him break. He gestured to the bag.

“You’re leaving.” He felt cheated. There had been no sign; he’d looked for it. He kept himself from asking where her money was hidden.

“Just going to visit my ma and sister for a few days,” she said. “While I still can. While they can recognize me.” She had a flight the next afternoon.

Fred had a strong desire to knock the bag from the bed. To scatter the clothes, to burn them, to chain her to the bedposts, and Gloria saw.

“You want me to stay, just say it.”

Fred pictured himself dropping to his knees, as he’d done all those years ago when he’d proposed. He could wrap his arms around her, rest his face against her hip. He could give her what she wanted, whisper *Don’t go* into that stark, hollow place. But his pride, his fear, kept him from it. He cleared his throat. Stepped back from her. He asked if she needed a ride.

Without her hair, Gloria’s feelings sat plainly on her face. She stared into Fred’s eyes until he had to turn away. She brushed a few spare hairs that the barber had missed from his forehead and thanked him for his offer. She continued to pack. Fred smiled to stay standing. “When you get back, let’s drive to St. Pete. Spend a weekend on the Gulf. How’d that be?”

“I’d like that,” Gloria said, but there was no pleasure in the words.

IT WAS BUSY AT THE ALBATROSS the next evening, a noise and bustle Fred wasn’t used to and wasn’t sure he liked. After he’d dropped Gloria at JAX for her two o’clock flight, he’d driven around the city, aimless and sorry, until he ended up in the parking lot of the bar, blinking at the squat little building nestled against the sun. He didn’t understand how he’d come to be there, and then understood all too perfectly that he had nowhere else to go. Shamefaced, he sat in the car with the windows down until, at four, he’d seen Hilda stroll in; then he waited half an hour more. Fred entered the bar nervously, his fingers beating at his thighs through his pockets. Pausing in the doorway, he thought he might leave, but Hilda saw him. “Look at you! Gracing us with your presence on a Saturday!” she called, and he felt immediately reassured. He was wanted here; *she* wanted him, and Fred regained his swagger. He withdrew his hands and grinned, feeling like the man he knew he was. “Jim and Coke?”

“You got it, kid.” The jacket came off and Hilda brought him his drink, and for the first hour or so, everything felt the same. But then he was sitting shoulder to shoulder with a group of rowdy, younger patrons, all swarming the bar

for attention, and every other sip, someone jostled him. Top 40 blasted from the jukebox—unfamiliar simpering over synthetic beats—and he watched people gyrating throughout the bar, as if any open space were a dance floor.

“It’s like a dirty club in here,” he’d scowled when Hilda finally appeared in front of him. His ice was a pile of chips in his near-empty glass. He didn’t like this Hilda, skin glowing with sweat, hopped up from the rush and all the young bodies, and too busy to see after him.

“Saturdays,” she said by way of explanation and—sloppily, Fred thought—fixed him another drink.

The big man sitting to Fred’s right paid his tab and left, but before he could be grateful for the extra room, another body took the man’s place. Fred, irritated and more lonesome than when he’d arrived, told himself he would finish this drink quickly and then be out the door. He’d make sure to keep to Tuesdays from this point on, and he smiled to himself, already imagining how he might jokingly berate Hilda for the poor quality of her service tonight, get her feeling just a little bad and eager to make up.

The new man tapped Fred’s shoulder and Fred saw he wasn’t a man at all, probably just old enough to be in the bar. He wore a white cap over a tapered cut, a green sweatshirt with a few holes in the collar, and a pair of black Dickies slung low on his hips like every other youngblood in the place. There was no drink in front of him. “Got the time?” the boy asked.

First, Fred pulled his comb from his shirt pocket and raked it back through his hair. Then he hitched up his sleeve to glance at his watch. It was gold-faced with large numbers, on an imitation-leather strap. Most people thought it was a Rolex, but he’d never spend that kind of money to tell the time.

“Quarter to nine.”

“Thanks,” the boy said, then offered his hand. “Antonio. Well, friends call me Tony.”

“Fred. Pleasure.” He made sure to squeeze Tony’s hand good and hard, and a look crossed the boy’s face.

“My pops always said you could measure a man’s integrity by his grip.”

Fred puffed himself up. “Your pops wasn’t lying.”

“Busy in here, right?” Tony said, turning to frown at Hilda, who still hadn’t come for his order. Fred looked at her, too; she was down at the other end of the bar, laughing with one of the fry cooks as he handed her a basket of greasy onion rings. Her hand lingered on his arm.



“Downright shameful service,” he said nastily, then to the boy, “What do you drink?”

“I don’t know. Beer, I guess. A Bud?” and when Fred laughed, Tony asked, “What, that’s too green?”

“Might be. What do you do, youngblood?”

Tony was enrolled in trade school to be a mechanic. He said barely any of the kids his age even knew how to change a tire. Fred agreed that this was true and Tony asked, “What about you, sir?”

“Commercial car hauler, thirty-five years.” He didn’t bother to mention he was retired.

Tony’s eyebrows disappeared into the rim of his cap. “Wow, I can’t believe it.”

“What?” Fred said, ready to be affronted.

“My pops used to do that work. Those double-decker rigs?” When Fred nodded, he added, “That’s real honest work. Skilled work.”

The boy’s respect warmed Fred like the bourbon. He could tell this one had been raised right; if he’d been a father, his son would have come out just the same. He decided he’d stay for a little while longer. Fred signaled to Hilda with a piercing whistle that cut through the din of the room. She looked over her shoulder at him, her mouth parted prettily. The fry cook slunk back into the kitchen where he belonged. “A drink for my friend. Two of these, on me,” Fred said, raising his glass.

Hilda brought them both Jim and Cokes, her nose scrunched up like she had something to be mad about. “Get you anything else?”

Fred didn’t look at her. He thumbed condensation from the side of his glass and wiped the finger along the edge of the bar. Then he threw a twenty down, letting his money speak for him.

THEY BOTH ORDERED the burger special—fried onions, Muenster, garlic mayo—and as they ate and kept drinking, Tony asked a lot of questions. *Whereabouts are you from? How much did it cost for a car like that? A watch like that? A house like that?* The drunker Fred got, the looser his tongue. He told Tony he came from nothing. Not a dime to his family name. “And now I got that nice car. These nice clothes. I own land!” He slammed his glass down on the bar, the drink sloshing up the sides. “Most people don’t understand upward mobility. Always got their hands out, asking for something.

Not me! I take care of mine!" Several people glanced over, concerned or annoyed or amused.

Tony watched him, too, his eyes careful and bright. "Bet your missus is a knockout," he said, and Fred's stomach lurched as he thought of Gloria, gone. He put his head in his hands and agreed that she was. Hilda came by with her dishrag, cutting her eyes, wiping around Fred's mess, and Tony angled closer to his ear. "Prettier than her, right?"

Fred snapped up to consider Hilda. If he put them together at the same age, Gloria would take the girl two to one. But Hilda had been good to him, barring tonight; they were friends! He wanted to show Tony that he still had a way. That he was still the man. He grabbed Hilda's wrist, pulling her toward him just as she was walking away.

"Don't run off," he slurred, trying to hold her eye. "Stay and meet my new friend."

Hilda laughed and moved to pull her arm from his grasp, but Fred gripped it tight. Her second laugh came out mechanical and strained. "Fred, you're hurting me."

"Just stay still a minute," he barked. Why didn't anyone ever stay?

"Fred. Let me go." The words plunked down, heavy between them. Fred studied her face and considered that she wasn't so pretty; it was just youth that made her special. He'd had a million just like her. Feeling superior in this conviction, he opened his hand and let her go, his expression snarled. The boy next to him looked on and heat flooded Fred's ears.

Fred watched Hilda scurry back to the end of the bar where the slinky fry cook again waited, posted up against the counter. She said something to him, rubbing her wrist, and the guy's dumb face turned in his direction, his jaw tight. Fred downed the rest of his watery drink. "Yeah," he muttered to himself, "come try it, buddy." He stood abruptly and wrenched his jacket on.

"You won't stay for one more?" Tony knocked his own empty glass against the counter and Fred sneered. He'd played right into the boy's trap; he was just another nobody with his hand held out, and Fred had nothing to prove, not to him or anybody. He said to the boy, "Haven't I done enough for you?"

Fred strode from the bar, his anger a molten coil in his chest. The parking lot was quiet and dim. In this light, the building looked shoddy, unworthy of his business. He spat on the ground and vowed that he'd never come back.

Fred reached the Buick and as he searched for its key in the dark, fighting through his inebriation and embarrassment, an arm looped around his neck; he dropped the key ring and his mind went blank. The arm flexed, and by the time Fred began to struggle, it had found a solid hold.

“You’re hurting me,” he gasped, surprised that it was true, but the grip continued to tighten across his windpipe until he felt his breath sucking distantly into his lungs like the pull of a stopped drain, slow and then slower. His vision grayed at the edges but sounds sharpened—crickets whirring in the nearby grass, the highway’s white noise. The steady puff of the man’s breath. Fred grabbed at the arm, managing to turn his head and catch a glimpse of Tony’s face furrowed in grim concentration before it—and everything else—faded into black nothing.

HE WOKE ON THE ASPHALT ALONE, his body twisted halfway underneath someone else’s car. Where the Buick had been, there was only litter, an oil stain dark and spreading. His wallet lay splayed beside his cheek. Fred struggled up from the ground, his throat throbbing. He snatched up the wallet and searched through it, muttering, “No, no,” as if the incantation would make this act undone. His license was there, all his credit cards, but the cash in the main pocket was missing. Fred closed his eyes before opening the secret compartment. *It’s still here*, he hoped, but of course it wasn’t. The mad money, his wedding ring, the Buick, gone. Tony had left the watch, not fooled after all. Thick with shame, Fred hobbled back inside.

“Call the police!” he shouted, and the bar quieted, all eyes turned to him. “I’ve been robbed!” Then, commotion. Several men went out into the parking lot, as if Tony might still be there; another led him to a stool at the bar, and the patrons cleared the way for him. A woman with a beehive hairstyle and rhinestones affixed to her nails offered him her glass of water. “Haven’t even sipped it,” she said. Hilda, who had been pulling a beer, slammed the tap closed and whirled out from behind the counter, disappearing into the kitchen.

Fred slumped onto the stool, wincing as he massaged his neck. In the mirror over the bar he saw the skin already bruising, purple rising steadily under red. The other patrons issued automatic condolences and indignation on his behalf. “Damn shame,” the men mumbled, hands in their pockets, fingering their own wallets. Fred accepted their shallow comfort, feeling the slick bar top beneath his hand, and also Tony’s strong arm pressing hard into his

Adam's apple; the way Tony might have slid his ring from his finger, gentle as a lover. He wondered if the boy had let him down easy, or if he'd dropped him quick, all 210 pounds, like a worthless bag of potatoes.

THE POLICE SHOWED UP just after closing time, both of them white and jacked with blue eyes and short-cropped hair, walking in like they owned all the hours in the world. Fred buried his resentment and explained what had happened. Hilda wiped the same stretch of bar for five minutes, listening. The cops were writing down his story and so was Hilda's boss, trying to look official, his yellow legal pad headed: INCIDENTS. Fred felt slighted, and tired, and important. He told them, "He could've killed me," and paused to see what reaction this stirred in Hilda, but with her hair swung over her face, he couldn't tell.

The officers spoke with a few of the other patrons who'd stayed behind. Asked if anyone had seen where the man went. "No," one man said, pleased to be questioned, "but I saw him leave. The way they were talking, I figured they were friends."

"Friends?" Fred croaked, his eyes bulging in disbelief. "It's a crime to be nice?" Everyone started talking over one another, wanting their opinions heard, and the officers beckoned Fred away from the bar, into a more intimate corner, to ask their questions. He turned toward Hilda, opening his face to her, giving her an opportunity to return to him all that he'd paid for. "You'll wait, won't you?"

Hilda turned her back, organizing receipts at the register. "Uh, sure, Fred. I guess I could stick around for a little while," she said, but a few minutes later, he saw her slip out from behind the bar, apron folded in a neat square hugged to her chest. The fry cook's arm was draped around her waist, comfortable there, and she left without even once looking back. Fred couldn't help it, a raw little sob bumped up his throat, and the officers shifted their eyes. He kept answering their questions—*yes, no, yes, I don't know*—his tongue leaden in his mouth. The cops said they'd call as soon as they had something. "Oh, we'll probably find the car soon enough, stripped and burned in some abandoned lot," one of them said, a little too brightly, "but I wouldn't count on the boy. Cases like these are usually dead ends." They offered Fred a ride home, and when they put him in the back and closed the door, he understood he looked like nothing more than a criminal.



FRED GRABBED THE SPARE KEY under the fake rock near the steps and let himself inside. A dense silence lay over the house, the click of the front door, his footfalls, all sound disappearing smoothly into it, as if there were nothing physical to his being. What he wouldn't give to have the phone ring right now, shattering that awful, accusatory quiet, so complete, implying to him something eternal and dreadful from which he could no longer hide. Would that the doctor might call with better news, or the officers, even Tony—who could have still been a good boy gone wayward, who might have looked up his name in the phone book and wanted to check that he'd left him alive. Fred wished so hard he thought he heard a ring, and he ran to the phone, jerking it from the cradle and slamming it to his ear. "Gloria!" he shouted, hurting his throat, but only the dial tone answered.

Fred felt all the tears he hadn't cried with Gloria the day before rocket up inside of him like soda in a shaken bottle, and for a few merciful minutes, he let himself weep, needfully and gasping. When he was empty, this noise, too, vanished quickly. Fred wiped the snot from his nose with the tail of his shirt, then unpinned the gold spade from his lapel and held it in one hand as he stripped. The oil-stained jacket, his boots, his pants. He left his clothes in a pile in the front hall, and wandered into each dark room of the house, rolling the pin on his palm, the fact of his nakedness following along the corridor. In the bedroom, the closet gaped, absent of Gloria's blouses, her favorite pair of shoes, a purer darkness leaching from within. Fred went to close it, and when he crossed the mirror, he would not look.



that is,  
not in Kalinga,

Self too  
writes her sorrow  
elsewhere.

Don't speak in love  
He just know  
with joy - loggers

to know we saw it all  
but he in control  
of his mind

you're always in my eye  
I remember the  
I know you

to be right ~~about~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~day~~  
Dance in the night  
I will see you at the



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EDWARD HIRSCH

Edward Hirsch is the author of ten poetry books, most recently *Stranger by Night* (2020). His debut, *For the Sleepwalkers*, published in 1981 when he was thirty-one, won the Lavan Younger Poets Award. It was followed by 1986's National Book Critics Circle Award-winning *Wild Gratitude*. These first collections set the stage for others, such as *On Love* (1998) and *Lay Back the Darkness* (2003), that spotlighted a poet of both emotion and intellect, a poet as able to explore metaphysical subjects as to give voice to the disenfranchised.

*Gabriel* (2014), Hirsch's ninth book, is a virtuosic confessional sequence in tercets about the life and death, at twenty-two, of his troubled son. The National Book Foundation noted, "*Gabriel* enters the broad stream of human grief and raises

in us the strange hope, even consolation, that we find in the writer's act of witnessing and transformation." When I asked Hirsch to identify a common undercurrent in all his books, he said, after some thought, "Human suffering." But grief is not his only register—the elegies that weave his collections are complemented by love poems, poems informed by history and politics, and poems after art and artists.

Hirsch, whose honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Prix de Rome, and a MacArthur Fellowship, has also written several books about poetry, most notably the encyclopedic *A Poet's Glossary* (2014), which was spawned by the popular *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999). As editor and critic, he has taken on subjects including John Keats, Galway Kinnell, Philip Levine, William Maxwell, Theodore Roethke, Wisława Szymborska, nightingale poems, the sonnet, and visual art. He has conducted five interviews for *The Paris Review*, among them conversations with W.S. Merwin, Derek Walcott, and Susan Sontag. "My most stressful one was with Sontag," he recalled. "She considered it the definitive interview with her as a novelist, but it took me several days to get her to cop to the fact that she was an essayist, too."

Between 2017 and 2019, I met Hirsch four times at the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation's office in Midtown Manhattan, a stone's throw from Grand Central Terminal. He was proud to point out his book collection, lining the walls of a foyer, a reception area, and his large office. "You can tell they're poetry by how thin they are," he joked. I was treated to a spectacular view as we talked, before me a large southern exposure, the Empire State Building looming on the right, the East and Hudson Rivers visible beyond skyscrapers. Hirsch, who spent more than twenty years teaching at the University of Houston and Wayne State University, has been the foundation's president since 2002, the first practicing artist to be appointed to the role. "Suddenly, I had a different kind of day job," he said. "There's a staff, there are budgets, there are hundreds of outside readers, there are art juries, there's a board of trustees. I was no longer on an academic timetable. But I've adjusted."

Hirsch was born in Chicago in 1950 and grew up there. Broad-shouldered and tall, a competitive athlete in high school and college, he naturally transmits his physical presence to his words, imbuing them with gravity even when he is joking. His gaze is concentrated and powerful. His considered responses reflected a no-nonsense approach to work, and only briefly, when

my questions turned to *Gabriel*, did I sense in his voice a surge of emotion, on the brink of overflowing but kept in check.

—*Bhisham Bherwani*

INTERVIEWER

What's so funny?

EDWARD HIRSCH

I was thinking of something—it always makes me laugh—that Joe Brainard said to a friend of mine on the phone and my friend shared with me. It was a very sad call because Joe was dying of AIDS-related pneumonia, but then he brightened up a little. “Well,” he said, “at least I don’t have to go to any more poetry readings.” He paused. “But you do.”

INTERVIEWER

How many poetry readings do you think you’ve gone to?

HIRSCH

Let’s just say that I’ve put in my ten thousand hours.

INTERVIEWER

What’s wrong with poetry readings?

HIRSCH

Nothing. I just don’t like to be bombarded. Most readings just make me slink farther and farther down in my seat. But I’ve had a few transformative experiences and so I keep coming back for more. Once, at Bread Loaf, I heard Brigit Pegeen Kelly read her poem “Song.” It was mythic. I heard C. K. Williams read his shocking poem “The Gas Station” in Philadelphia, and Philip Levine recite his great poem of rage “They Feed They Lion” in Detroit. I once listened to Mark Strand read his entire book *Man and Camel* in an apartment in New York City—it was both droll and magisterial. When I was in graduate school, I heard Elizabeth Bishop read “The Moose” at Bryn Mawr. She seemed like a very unwilling reader, but the poem is spectacular. I was fixed to my chair.

INTERVIEWER

When did you give your first reading?

HIRSCH

I was twenty-five years old. I'd just gotten hired for a job in the Pennsylvania Poetry in the Schools program. I was then invited to read outside on the parkway in Philadelphia. It was very loud, and I raced through my poems. All the pent-up feeling made me nervous and I felt exposed. It couldn't have been enjoyable for the twelve or thirteen people who were there.

INTERVIEWER

You were obviously undeterred by the unnerving experience. Eventually, you even overcame a crucial challenge of validation by publishing a book.

HIRSCH

I don't think "challenge" adequately describes what you go through in your twenties as you try to make your way as a young poet. It takes a long time to create a first book, which goes through so many different iterations. You face so much doubt, so many rejections. You're not at all sure that you are going to be able to have the life you've imagined for yourself. I wrote the earliest poem in *For the Sleepwalkers* in 1975, when I was twenty-five, and the last poem in 1980, when I was thirty. Those were certainly "challenging" years.

INTERVIEWER

You're a Midwesterner. Was it the job that brought you East?

HIRSCH

No, I had just started graduate school in the folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania. I applied for a job at PITS and Gerald Stern interviewed me, if you could call it that, at Horn & Hardart in downtown Philadelphia. I had never met anyone like him. I was wearing my one coat and tie, he was wearing a ratty sweater. We got in line to buy coffee and he started singing and carrying on, talking to everyone. He left me to pay. When we sat down, he said that we had both written poems about salt. I was hired. I started to argue with him. I told him that I had a lot of ideas about teaching poetry and he should ask me about them. That wasn't necessary, he said, he would train

me to teach. He wanted to tell me about a long poem he'd written about the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. I protested again. "Look," he said, "do you want this job or not?" I shut up and learned about "The Pineys."

That was my first poetry job and I was excited to have it. Jerry had a gift for treating young poets as equals and we became friends immediately. He was writing the breakthrough poems of his second book, *Lucky Life*. I loved the exuberance of those poems, the way he faced and embraced failure. I've looked up to him as an older brother ever since.

INTERVIEWER

Did any family, adopted or inherited, influence you before Stern?

HIRSCH

I'm not sure that "influence" is quite the right word for the effect that my mother's father had on me. My grandfather Oscar Ginsburg scribbled poems into the backs of his books. He died when I was eight years old. I don't really know anything about those poems, because after he died, my grandmother gave away all his books. No one in my family seemed to know if those poems were written in Hebrew, Yiddish, or English. Or if they were original. Or what they were about. But the idea stuck. I had it in the back of my mind that it was possible to write poems because he had done it. Otherwise, no one was writing or reading poems when I was growing up.

I had some family traumas as a child—who doesn't?—and they made me intensely emotional. I had trouble figuring out what to do with my feelings. I started writing in high school to make myself feel better. I wrote the way a lot of teenagers write, out of emotional desperation. I didn't have any idea what I was doing. I hadn't really read anything. But when I wrote things down in lines—it would be generous to call what I was writing poetry—I felt consoled. And so I kept doing it.

INTERVIEWER

Your grandfather appears as a persona in "Oscar Ginsburg" and is the subject of "My Grandfather's Poems," and your grandmother is the subject of "My Grandmother's Bed."





A Civil War memorial in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 1961.

HIRSCH

I adored my grandmother, who was kindhearted but tough-minded. Sometimes I used to sleep over in her studio apartment. I tried to capture the magic of pulling down her Murphy bed and sleeping next to her. When we were young, our grandparents sometimes babysat for us, and my sister and I remember our grandfather copying poems into his books while we raced wildly around the house—that’s the impetus for “My Grandfather’s Poems.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, who had such a traumatic early life, called childhood “a treasure house of memories” and told the young poet to “raise up the sunken feelings of this enormous past.” That’s what I was trying to resurrect.

INTERVIEWER

Family, which later surfaces again in *Gabriel*, has been important to you.

HIRSCH

I didn’t set out to write about my family. In fact, that was the last thing I wanted to write about. There isn’t much about it in my first book. I was much more interested in writing about Paul Klee and Edward Hopper, about Gérard de Nerval and Christopher Smart, about the cultural world I was discovering.

It's true that *For the Sleepwalkers* has key poems about factory workers and waitresses. I thought it was important to write about people from different class backgrounds and to put them next to the artistic figures who mattered to me.

I'm aware of and amused by something that Czesław Miłosz said—once a writer is born into a family, the family is finished. But at a certain point you begin to feel resigned, and I've sometimes been moved to write poems about family. You need to write about the life you've lived. It can't all be aspirational. It's part of your job, as a poet, to write out of experience. To name what matters to you. You've only got one life to draw on.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start formally studying poetry?

HIRSCH

Never. But when I was a freshman at Grinnell College in Iowa, I brought my poems to my Humanities 101 teacher, Carol Parssinen. She was the only person I had ever met who spoke in fully formed sentences, like Henry James. I was pretty rough around the edges and Carol encouraged me to learn something about the craft of poetry, to become a maker. She started floating me reading lists. I dove in and decided that I would rather fail at poetry than succeed at anything else. Looking back at it now, I feel that it all had an air of desperation—as if I were drowning and saw an oar going by and grabbed on for dear life.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the poets then casting their shadows on you?

HIRSCH

The English Metaphysical poets. I was also reading the Modern poets, who took me back to them, too. I couldn't help but notice that they were all Christian, and I was a little alienated by their religiosity. But I've always liked the way that John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell construct poems and think through metaphors. That led me to the praise poems and desolate sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who turned me back to Saint John of the Cross and his "Dark Night of the Soul" poem. I never expected to

find kinship with a sixteenth-century Carmelite friar, but that's the magic of poetic encounter. You find commonality in unlikely places.

INTERVIEWER

Who was the first poet you met? That must have been another beginning.

HIRSCH

Carol put me on to the Montana poems of her teacher, J. V. Cunningham, and so I decided to crash his office hours at Brandeis University to tell him how much I loved them. I was twenty years old and thought it was a good idea. I saw him coming down the hallway and immediately lost my nerve—he was gaunt and lined, slightly bent over, and wearing a string tie—but a friend of mine pushed me forward and suddenly I was standing in front of him. He seemed ancient to me—he was fifty-nine. I asked him about Yvor Winters, his teacher at Stanford, and he said that Winters was a great man with great faults, like Dr. Johnson. I asked him what modern poet he returned to most often and he said Edwin Arlington Robinson. I asked him how he felt about undergraduate verse and he looked at me wryly. Then he said that he would be glad to read my poems.

INTERVIEWER

Who was the second poet you met?

HIRSCH

Donald Hall came to Grinnell when I was a senior. I played football and baseball all through high school and college, and I had to rush over from baseball practice to hear him talk on a Friday afternoon. I was still wearing my uniform. I didn't know that he loved baseball, but it seemed to make an impression on him. It turned out that he'd already decided to award me the college poetry prize. Naturally, I was thrilled. It gave me confidence that I was on the right path.

INTERVIEWER

How did you handle being a jock and a poet at the same time? In a workshop of hers, Marie Ponsot—perhaps to make me and the one other male participant not feel unheroic—addressed the predicament this way. “Poetry,” she said, “we're sadly told early on in our culture, isn't for boys.”



With his father before a football game at Grinnell College, 1971.  
“It’s part of your job, as a poet, to write out of experience. To name what matters to you.”

#### HIRSCH

Yes, you can feel this anxiety permeating the work of many hetero American male poets, like Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot, who can seem panicky about their masculinity. There’s a palpable terror in some of our male poets, who then overcompensate in discomfiting ways. Personally, I was lucky because my high school football coach said that he wanted to find a college where a “freaky” kid like me could play football. He found the Midwest Conference, which encouraged scholar-athletes. We liked Grinnell because it had a strong passing attack. The academics were good, too, he said. A scholarship made it possible. At Grinnell, everyone seemed to like the idea of my being a poet and a football player, this kind of alternate masculinity. I’m not under the illusion that the larger culture is like that, but I found a place where people thought it was a good idea.

#### INTERVIEWER

You have some sports poems—“Execution,” “Fast Break,” others.

HIRSCH

“Execution” is an elegy for Coach Basrak. I remember the way that he used to fill up the blackboard with X’s and O’s. In the poem, that becomes a metaphor for the way that cancer carved up his face. A football term, *execution*, takes on a larger meaning. I had learned something from the Metaphysical poets, after all. I suppose that’s also when I discovered I could use my experience in sports metaphorically. As a long one-sentence poem, “Fast Break” uses language to imitate a fast break in basketball, but it’s also an elegy for my friend Dennis Turner, who loved basketball. We played a lot of pickup games together in our thirties. I also have a couple of poems about playing baseball, “The Poet at Seven” and “American Summer.” I think of these as quintessentially American poems, American experiences. All of them try to bring the specialized vocabulary of sports into poetry.

INTERVIEWER

The glossary in *How to Read a Poem* is a gem. It’s practically a book in itself. It also led to your larger book, *A Poet’s Glossary*. How did those projects happen?

HIRSCH

*How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* grew out of a community seminar on reading poetry that I conducted at the Menil Collection when I was teaching at the University of Houston. I was speaking to a group of people with good intentions who had no idea how to read a poem. They felt lost. Later, I wrote it up as a talk for a writers’ conference and called it “How to Read These Poems.” It seemed to speak to both groups. I was also fed up with the way that most literary theorists condescended to lyric poetry—I felt that poetry criticism could use an intervention. That’s when I decided to write a book that spoke to both initiated and uninitiated readers of poetry.

When I wrote the book, I tried not to use a specialized language. But there were terms and concepts that seemed unavoidable, things I needed to explain. My editor, André Bernard, encouraged me—well, he insisted, really—that I create a glossary of terms that I’d employed in the book. I homed in. I was all too aware of everything I had left out. Over time, the glossary became one of the most widely used parts of the book, especially by teachers, and I kept getting questions about terms I hadn’t included. I also knew that I hadn’t really applied my knowledge of folk and epic poetics.



Finally, I decided to go all in and compile my understandings. The result, *A Poet's Glossary*, is a giant doorstop. It can be used to ward off unwelcome intruders.

INTERVIEWER

Can you recall examples of entries not commonplace that you thought it important to incorporate into the larger *Glossary*?

HIRSCH

Don't get me started! I like the Scottish *flyting*, a contest of witty put-downs, cursing matches in verse, which is kin to *the dozens*, an African American verbal street game of escalating insults. Poetic contests turned out to be much more prevalent worldwide than I had realized. I don't know another glossary that includes *bird-sound words*—the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea speak a Bosavi language, and for them, “poetic language is bird language.” I'm moved by *keening* and *coronach*, which means “wailing together” in Gaelic, Irish forms of lamenting the dead. The West African *griot*, called a *jeli* in northern Mande areas, is a praise singer, a poet-historian who preserves the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of a people. I like the *bhakti* poets, ecstasies who tended to come from the lower rungs of the Hindu caste system, and the *kobzari*, blind Ukrainian minstrels who wandered from village to village. Bedouin women sing *ghinnawas*, which are usually dark and plaintive love songs, like the blues. I'm probably too fond of the term *cacoethes scribendi*, which means “writer's itch,” a mania for writing. Shelley wrote to his friend Thomas Peacock, “Your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage, or *cacoethes scribendi* of vindicating the insulted Muses.”

INTERVIEWER

What was the process of the book's making?

HIRSCH

Long and involved. Initially, I was going to do something much narrower, but I found that the things I was most interested in were the things that were outside the range of other standard dictionaries and glossaries. I wanted to include what I'd learned from the ethnographic literature about poetry. I loved the stuff about contests and epics, all the different terms for poets in different

cultures. For example, in Náhuatl, the language of the Aztec world, one key word for poet was *tlamatine*, meaning “the one who knows,” or “one who knows something.” Poets were considered “sages of the word,” who meditated on human enigmas and explored the beyond, the realm of the gods. The Aztec poets sang of *cabuítl*, “that which leaves us.” I wrote the book one entry at a time. I’m afraid it ended up taking me more than a decade to complete.

INTERVIEWER

How did your desire to share your acquired knowledge come about?

HIRSCH

I set out to learn everything on my own so that I could become a poet. That was my goal. I didn’t know another way. For a long time—I’d say all of my twenties and much of my thirties—I was simply reading everything I could and trying to assimilate it. I visited a lot of countries, but I had no idea of the larger map. But then at some point—I had already been writing for years—things started to fall into place. I began to sense how things might fit together. I developed some theories. That’s when I decided it would be good to pay something back, to put my learning to good use. I was already a poet and critic, but I also started to reach out and become an advocate.

INTERVIEWER

You had also been teaching.

HIRSCH

Yes, I love teaching poetry. It’s one of the things I was meant to do. I’ve mainly taught at two working-class schools, Wayne State University, in Detroit, and the University of Houston. I’ve never gotten too far up in the tower. I’m from Chicago and think of myself as a Chicago intellectual, which is different from an East Coast intellectual. After I published my first book, Studs Terkel generously invited me onto his radio program. I was very nervous and excited. He sized me up immediately and said, “Don’t worry, with our accents, we can never sound too learned.”

Recently I found myself writing a group of poems about my first teaching experience in Poetry in the Schools in small towns in Pennsylvania. It’s about the interchange between poetry and those working-class kids, whose

parents mostly worked in the coal mines, and how much I learned from them. I suppose I wrote them because I'm moving toward the end of my teaching life.

INTERVIEWER

They appear in *Stranger by Night*, along with poems about traveling and writing, though not chronologically.

HIRSCH

The poems in *Stranger by Night* take up the past. I initially began with the poems that were about the earliest part of my life and moved forward toward the present. Then Laurie Watel, my partner, a marvelous writer who also happens to be my closest and toughest reader, thought that it would be more interesting to reverse that, to begin in the present and move further back into the past. Then the book moves back toward the present. I decided to structure the poems around that journey through time.

INTERVIEWER

I love "Windber Field." It's a little *ars poetica*.

HIRSCH

Yes, thank you, that poem surprised me. It's a memory that leads to an opening, a vision. I remember how desperate I was to connect with a tiny group of high school students, and stumbled on the idea of bringing them a poem by Wilfred Owen, which connected them to their lives. In the poem, I'm standing at the blackboard writing down their memories and assembling them into a collage. I was excited by the liftoff of the poem. "Night Class in Daisytown" works the same way, but now I'm teaching the parents. Both poems start with failure—"I don't know why / I thought it was a good idea" and "I was failing / my night class"—and somehow stumble into the light.

INTERVIEWER

What are your views on reading and the use of language *outside* the tradition? Your poem "Mergers and Acquisitions," for instance, is informed by finance, and "A Short Lexicon of Torture in the Eighties" is informed by human rights.

HIRSCH

I don't think it's a good idea to read poetry to the exclusion of other things. That would be like eating only one kind of food. I tend to read all kinds of things that interest me as a person. Naturally, those readings influence my poetry. Poetry needs to continually enlarge its vocabulary and its subject matter. In every era, it tends to get circumscribed. The conventions can be invisible and so poetry is always in danger of becoming bound by rhetorical codes. Poets don't even realize that they are speaking to each other in encrypted ways.

I got the idea for "Mergers and Acquisitions," a poem about greed, crazed materialism, from a Wordsworth line—"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers"—as well as from reading the business section of the newspaper every day. I found myself suddenly alert to the egregious specialized language of capitalism and the finance industry. There's a whole terminology that serves to hide the ways that people are being exploited.

We have a responsibility to the words we employ, since, as poets, language is in our care, our keeping. I've been shocked by certain abuses of language. I wrote "A Short Lexicon of Torture in the Eighties" after reading an Amnesty International report about torture around the world. In those days, the United States wasn't officially included, but then the Bush administration decided to endorse and implement torture overseas, too. It became our official policy. But you'd have to say that we've always had domestic torture—we just called it something else. It's part of our historical DNA, our barbarous racist history, our legacies of genocide and slavery. I got the idea for my own lexicon because the report alerted me to how ordinary language was being co-opted in the most heinous ways by authoritarian governments. I wanted to expose the linguistic manipulations and sinister euphemisms of the torturers. I was thinking especially about torture in Argentina where so many people were "disappeared." Our current government has introduced a whole new appalling lexicon.

INTERVIEWER

Your elegy for your son, Gabriel, also adopts language from outside the tradition, informed as it is by disability.

HIRSCH

That's a different story. The poem is completely driven by grief, by my own raw feeling, my bewilderment, my sense of a sudden, inexplicable, overwhelming



With his son, Gabriel. Rome, 1989.

loss. It's a father's grief-stricken book. But once I committed to writing a book-length elegy, going all in, I became acutely aware that I didn't have a poetic vocabulary to describe Gabriel or his friends. There aren't any kids like them in our poetry—or I couldn't find them. I wasn't just writing about his death, I was also trying to describe his life. Where are all the troubled teenagers in American poetry?

I needed to find a new vocabulary for lyric poetry. I wanted to find a way to write about all the special schools he'd gone to, the medications he'd taken, the stories he'd lived, the other kids he'd known. I felt that I had to make it up. That's why I borrowed from other sourcebooks. We need poetry to keep expanding so that it can account for the actual lives that people are living. It can't all be just about love, death, and the changing of the seasons.

Part of the challenge was to try to make a poem that sounded the way Gabriel sounded, to see Gabriel and his friends in a new framework. The idea wasn't to make Gabriel and his friends sound more like lyric poetry, it was to make poetry sound more like Gabriel and his friends. I wanted to write a poem that was large enough to include them, to explore their world.



INTERVIEWER

The tercets in *Gabriel* suggest that terza rima is an important stanzaic form to you.

HIRSCH

Dante is my great model for the journey to the underworld—I love the machinery of his form. He invented terza rima for the *Commedia*, and I used it as a model for my own unpunctuated three-line stanzas in *Gabriel*. The form is like a spiral staircase. You're always going forward while looking back. And there's something abject and beautiful about the way he calls on Virgil at the beginning of the *Inferno*. He recognizes that he can't make the journey—or write his book—without a sponsoring model. He's inventing Virgil as his guide, but he's also confessing that the *Inferno* needs a precursor text and advertising its dependence on the *Aeneid*.

Dante picked up the motif of the journey to the dead from Book 6 in Virgil's epic, and then found a distinctive way to imagine getting through to the other side. He also knew that Virgil had taken his idea from Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. The notion of calling on a poet from the past to lead you is important to me because it suggests that you can call on other poetry, other poets, to help guide you on your own journey.

INTERVIEWER

A lot of poets make their way into *Gabriel*. It's a modern "Lament for the Makers," of sorts.

HIRSCH

I needed to tell Gabriel's story from my own point of view as a father, but at the same time I was all too aware that I'm not the only one who has lost a child. Many people have suffered losses far worse than mine. No one escapes unscathed. I wanted my elegy to show some awareness of that dark truth. But, of course, I couldn't write about all of them. Where to start? Finally, I got the idea of calling on my people, all those other poets who had lost children.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean "calling on"?

HIRSCH

I mean summoning their examples. I was thinking about how other poets had dealt with their grief, how they had suffered and written about it. I think of them as a kind of chorus—from the English poet Ben Jonson to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, from Jan Kochanowski, the inventor of Polish poetry, to Margaretha Susanna von Kuntsch, a seventeenth-century German poet who lost eight sons and five daughters. There's also a leitmotif of poets as parents—that story isn't particularly heartening. I wasn't rereading the work of all these poets, but I was recalling their stories and how they had managed their grief. That seemed instructive. And it enlarged the frame of reference.

INTERVIEWER

One of the strongest passages is about the nature of mourning.

HIRSCH

For much of the time that I was writing about Gabriel I was searching for a metaphor for the work of mourning. Finally, I got the idea that it's "like carrying a bag of cement / Up a mountain at night." I believe in the enlargement.

Look closely and you will see  
Almost everyone carrying bags  
Of cement on their shoulders

That seems true to me—everyone carries around an enormous weight. It's just not always visible.

INTERVIEWER

In an article on *Gabriel*, Richard Howard was quoted as saying that your work embraces "material that is psychically dangerous," which echoes an interviewer twenty-five years earlier referring to one of your poems as representing "a dangerous kind of material." What do you make of their use of the word *dangerous*?

HIRSCH

Poetry partly comes out of dark underground forces. Writing it is a bit like psychoanalysis. You're supposed to go where it's psychically troubling. It takes

a certain kind of recklessness to face oneself. The more upsetting it is, the more you're supposed to fly toward it, like a moth to the flame.

INTERVIEWER

But *dangerous*?

HIRSCH

You're facing things that are emotionally red hot, psychologically dangerous. There's a burning coal inside of us—the poet's job is to unearth it. E. M. Cioran's essay "Thinking against Oneself" helped me think about the risks and dangers, and I've tried to emulate Dostoyevsky's credo, Convict thyself.

INTERVIEWER

So, poetry can take one to where it took John Berryman. And Sylvia Plath. And Paul Celan.

HIRSCH

It can take you to the far edges, but I don't think that poetry leads to self-destructiveness. It's life that gets people there. If anything, I believe that poetry is transformative. You can take the muck and mire of your own life and turn it into something. That seems to me a noble enterprise, if I can use such an old-fashioned word.

INTERVIEWER

Or turn the muck and mire of the world into something, as in "Two Suitcases of Children's Drawings from Terezin, 1942–1944," from *Lay Back the Darkness*.

HIRSCH

I'd been thinking about the children's drawings ever since I first visited the museum in Terezin. Why were there no such drawings in the other camps? I discovered that at Terezin there was a teacher, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, a protégée of Paul Klee's at the Bauhaus, who loved children's art. She inspired me. I hadn't been enthusiastic about the way that so many American Jewish poets had approached the Holocaust. First, we have the sacredness of the subject. Then we have its various poetic representations. Was there a way to write about it without positing it as one's own experience? I decided to write a

quasi-documentary poem. There was no room for sentimentality. I cautioned myself to remember that almost all of the children were murdered. Dicker-Brandeis herself was murdered. She was transported to Auschwitz, and that was the end of children's art of the Holocaust.

INTERVIEWER

Visual art and artists are everywhere in your work. Where did the interest in ekphrasis begin?

HIRSCH

When I was in high school, I used to take the L downtown to the Art Institute of Chicago. I discovered art at the same time I discovered poetry. The two were mixed up in my mind and so writing about painting seemed natural to me. At first, it was a way for me to write about the artistic process, to write about writing, but at one remove. I didn't know anything about the historical relationship between poetry and painting, the so-called sister arts. Later, I learned about ekphrasis. It took me a long time to develop a theory about it. Now I don't think it's sufficient to tell stories about paintings. The poet should bring something specific to the act of looking.

INTERVIEWER

Does one come before the other, a painting before the "something specific" or vice versa?

HIRSCH

One work of art stimulates another. It's all about the encounter. Sometimes a painting or sculpture or video piece enables a poet to think through a problem. For example, there was a period when I was grieving the loss of my friend, the fiction writer William Maxwell. He was the most lovable person I had ever known, and I was stunned by the grace with which he had died. I once told him that I was glad I had seen someone dying the way he was, but I didn't think I could manage it myself. He said that he had lived a long life and it would have been greedy to ask for more.

I remembered that during the last few days of his life Bill had been very intent on sending me off to see a Chardin exhibition at the Met. He had gone through it in a wheelchair. I was teaching a poetry workshop and



With William Maxwell at the novelist's home in Westchester, New York, 1996.

hadn't made time yet to see it. He had his nurse call and guilt me into going that day. I'm so glad he did. I ended up writing "The Chardin Exhibition," a poem of simple parallels—while I was going through the exhibition, I was also thinking about what Bill was doing as he moved through his apartment on the last day of his life. Looking at Chardin gave me a way to access the experience.

INTERVIEWER

In the same book as the Maxwell elegy, *Special Orders* (2008), you have a different approach to ekphrasis in "Soutine: A Show of Still Lifes."

HIRSCH

I've always loved Chaim Soutine, but one summer I suddenly became obsessed with him. I wanted to write a capsule biography. The poem is personal because I was also trying to think through what it means to be a Jewish artist. He's one of the great case studies.



INTERVIEWER

What motivated the use of dramatic monologue in *On Love*, in the middle of your career?

HIRSCH

Those poems are fictive lectures. There were things I wanted to explore that I couldn't manage in my own voice and so I decided to think about them from the podium. Richard Howard, our Browning, says that the dramatic monologue always contains a secret. The writer is creating another fictive layer. The persona enables us to say things that are otherwise difficult to say. At one point, for example, I ascribed one of my own adventures to D. H. Lawrence. I'm not sure we have the exact poetic term for this sort of monologue. As in a drag show, you see the performer peeking out from behind the mask, which slips. The reader hears a historical figure speaking—the poems are meant to be accurate—and also someone else who is costumed as that speaker. Most dramatic monologues infer a single listener, a sort of stand-in for the reader, but here the speakers are addressing an entire audience. That makes the intimate revelations a little bolder and weirder.

INTERVIEWER

The “On Love” sequence also uses form, whereas that did not appear earlier in your career. What did the use of form enable or inhibit in those poems?

HIRSCH

In *For the Sleepwalkers*, you can find the ghost of iambic pentameter haunting many of the poems. But I had to break the forms in order to find something that was my own in poetry. I had to invent new structures. I'd put myself through a formal apprenticeship when I was young. I'd tried to write in all the major forms, but I felt that they defeated me, and it wasn't until much later that I was able to get a better command of the forms that had instructed me. It took me a long time to find a way to make them my own. Robert Frost said that when he read a rhyming poem, he scanned the right-hand column to see who had won, the poet or the rhyme scheme. For me, in those early days, the rhyme scheme always won. I was waiting for the moment when my subject matter could be wedded to the form. And then I pounced.

In *On Love* there's a sestina and a pantoum, but most of the poems use

the same form. I didn't invent it, but no one has used it in such an extended or ongoing way. I put my mark on it. The form implements a kind of envelope rhyme. To get technical, it rhymes *abba* or *abcba* or *abcdcba*. The rhyming words are always identical and the form is accordion-like—the words get closer and closer together as they move toward the middle of the stanza and then gradually get farther and farther apart again. My idea was to mimic repeatedly the movement of lovers, who come closer and closer together, almost to the point of merging, a transcendent state. But then they inevitably separate again, as two different people.

I called on a series of figures from the past for an imaginary conference on erotic love. You could say I was confused and really wanted to know what they might say. I imagined each one of them standing up, coming forward, and telling her or his story while thinking through the larger subject. Since I could invite anyone I wanted to, I sent out invitations to Charles Baudelaire, Heinrich Heine, and Guillaume Apollinaire, to Oscar Wilde, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Gertrude Stein. There were a lot of others, too. I even reserved a slot for my grandfather—I thought he should be included with the poets. No one turned me down. The subject was personal, and everyone said the most outrageous things in a public setting. Everyone brought her or his own experience to the subject, approaching it as an issue of power—Baudelaire—or powerlessness—Heine—and so on. I gave the last word to Colette, who seemed wiser about erotic love than everyone else. I discovered that the formality of the lecture could also mimic the way that people speak. The repetitions sound natural.

#### INTERVIEWER

A favorable review concluded, “How ... firmly civilized much American poetry has lately been becoming ... it may reflect a general nostalgia of civility and civilization as being in the end an inevitable source for poetic culture.”

#### HIRSCH

I thought that was totally wrong. For me, the idea of using figures from the past to think about erotic love wasn't an academic exercise. The subject is *hot*. What my figures are saying is often shocking. And I don't think many American poets are nostalgic for some great European past.

*On Love* is a sharply divided book. The first half consists of various personal poems. But those poems gradually turn toward the subject of love,

which becomes the obsessive subject of the second half. I feel the “On Love” lecture sequence was misunderstood. Some people loved the figures, others were put off by the allusions.

INTERVIEWER

What’s motivated your engagement with criticism?

HIRSCH

I’m old enough to remember the ideal of a *Partisan Review* intellectual. The poets I looked to when I was coming up all wrote criticism. I thought it was essential to being a poet. I considered it integral to my on-the-job education, my job description. Part of me believes it would be purer to write poetry and nothing else. But I always wanted to participate in the discussion about poetry. I wanted to contribute.

INTERVIEWER

Polish poets have figured extensively in your reviews and essays. How did that come about?

HIRSCH

In my early twenties, I started looking for an alternative to the coldness of Anglo-American Modernism. I wanted something that was intellectually rigorous but with greater warmth, more emotionality. First, I happened upon the poets of the Spanish Civil War, such as César Vallejo, Federico García Lorca, and Miguel Hernández. I was thrilled by the wildness and surrealism of these Spanish and Latin American poets. Their work is more passionate than the work of the French surrealists, though later I discovered Robert Desnos, Paul Éluard, and Blaise Cendrars, who complicated my views. Then I discovered Paul Celan and Yehuda Amichai, among others, and sought out the Russian poets, especially Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Osip Mandelstam, who called Acmeism “a nostalgia for world culture.”

Polish poetry was a special revelation—its gravity struck me. I’ve tried to learn from the ongoing dialogue or argument in Polish poetry between civic and metaphysical concerns, between historical and philosophical subjects. I’m drawn to the seriousness of the conversation between what my friend



Kraków, Poland, 2002.

Adam Zagajewski terms “solidarity” and “solitude.” On the one hand, poetry is called toward solidarity, community, social issues, political issues, what’s happening to society at large, and on the other hand, poetry is called toward personal life, aesthetics, interior feelings, love, music, beauty. On the one hand the poets are aesthetes, who want to write about the nature of God and the passing of time. On the other hand, their little country was occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which they couldn’t ignore. So, there was a pull toward *civitas*. In Polish poetry, there’s a dialogue between the communal and the individual that’s not there in most other poetries.

#### INTERVIEWER

Do you identify as a somewhat displaced American poet who has connected to your subjects through international, especially European, figures?

#### HIRSCH

I’m an American poet, but I’m on the side of American poetry that is internationally oriented. I’m stimulated by the conversation with other languages and other poetries. It probably stems from the provincial in me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever feel that our society is too affluent and comfortable—if not complacent—for an urgent poetry?

HIRSCH

You're kidding, right? American democracy is very much at risk now, and poets, like other citizens, have felt the need to respond. We feel an imminent threat. Racial injustice, the original American sin, has also galvanized poets, who very much feel the need for an intervention.

When we were teaching together at Wayne State University, my friend Charles Baxter once came into my office and read me Louis Simpson's poem "On the Lawn at the Villa," which has the funny, illuminating lines, "It's complicated, being an American, / Having the money and the bad conscience, both at the same time." Yes, okay, I understand, we took the money and have the bad faith. Some American writers have had affluent lives. But we can still open our eyes to what's happening around us. We can respond to social injustice. We can see what's happening to the environment. We can certainly think about what it means to be an American in the world today. It's our responsibility.

INTERVIEWER

Not long ago, I heard a UK critic pose the question, Why can't a poem be just a poem? American poets, he said, feel pressure to have poetry be *about* something.

HIRSCH

I agree that a poem can be a poem, a thing of beauty unto itself. But I know that most American poets don't think of it this way. Perhaps British poets take the purpose of poetry for granted. Maybe they think that everyone in the world already cares about poetry. I'm an American, we know better. There's a witty polemic by the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz called "Against Poets." He says, "The minute the poets lost sight of a concrete human being and became transfixed with abstract Poetry, nothing could keep them from rolling down the incline into the chasm of the absurd." It's good for poetry to keep human beings in mind.



INTERVIEWER

What kind of rationale do you apply to structuring a collection? Most of your poetry books echo the preceding one while departing from it.

HIRSCH

I tend to structure a book of poems as a journey or an argument. In making a book of poems, you're looking for the whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. You're writing individual poems, and then you're trying to formulate the nature of the book you are writing. It represents something more than a period of your life. There's an underlying argument going on. Every one of my books since *Wild Gratitude*—except perhaps *Gabriel*, which is unique—has come together this way.

INTERVIEWER

What's an example of an argument?

HIRSCH

In *Earthly Measures* (1994), there's an argument running through it about the nature of transcendence. There are a lot of cultural figures in the book, such as Paul Celan and Simone Weil—Jesus, there are three poems about Hugo von Hofmannsthal—and many of them are looking for a way out, a way up. The final poem, "Earthly Light," is a homage to the seventeenth-century Dutch painters; it's also a rejection of transcendence in favor of something earthly. In other words, I end up ultimately critiquing my own longing for God.

*On Love*, which follows *Earthly Measures*, is an attempt to describe, discuss, and portray earthly love as opposed to unearthly love. It's a response, therefore, to what's come before. It's the next step of the argument.

INTERVIEWER

What happens between the books? What motivates the next project? A backlog? Anxiety?

HIRSCH

Initially, there's a terrible blankness, a void. I feel my creativity is over and try not to despair. Slowly but surely, I come back to life—at least that's how it's happened in the past. I find something that moves or torments me, something

that's on my mind, something unexplored. My desperation gives way to curiosity and something begins to emerge. I feel I ought to do what I can.

INTERVIEWER

When you start, what do you do? Do you write something on paper? On a computer?

HIRSCH

I always begin with pen and paper. I write by hand. I used to type up my poems, then revise them by hand, then retype them. Now I move fluently between writing by hand and revising on the computer. It's a hybrid way of writing that is subject to constant revision.

INTERVIEWER

By "revision," you mean everything ...

HIRSCH

I mean thinking through a subject. I write by the line. I continually revise the lines and stanzas as I go. I'm listening to what I'm making and changing it all the time.

I was once doing a question-and-answer session at a bookstore with the novelist Jane Smiley. Someone asked me a question and I explained how I wrote. Jane said, "Oh, I would never let my students write like that. You could never write a novel that way. You'd never get anywhere." I know what she meant. My process is excruciating. But I can't help it—that's the way I work. I was also amused when someone asked her if she wrote poetry and she said, "No, I leave that to him. I don't want to live like that." It's all about the intensities.

INTERVIEWER

So you feel there's a different requirement when you're writing poetry than when you're writing prose?

HIRSCH

Yes. I feel that poetry is never at the dispensation of the will. "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the

will,” Shelley says. He knows that not even the greatest poet can say, “I will compose poetry.” That’s true. Writing critical prose is a little different. You take your lunch pail to work and fasten yourself to the chair. It requires great concentration but it’s a little less whimsical in its inspiration.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you write?

HIRSCH

Most of my life I’ve worked in coffee shops, cafeterias, fast-food joints. I like to go to public spaces and settle down to work. I’ve almost always started a poem while sitting in a coffee shop or walking. If something kicks in, once I’m working on it, I open the computer. I can go on working in my study or in my office. Sometimes I head back to the coffee shop.

But now, with the pandemic, no one can work in a public space any longer. It’s one more small loss in the midst of a large calamity. Like everyone else, I’ve had to learn to adjust. I’m riding out the quarantine with my partner in Atlanta, and she has generously turned a small bedroom into a workable space. My consolation is very long daily walks.

I’ve always felt the connection between poetry and walking, and the drift helps put me into a state of reverie. I know where all the benches are now, and sometimes I pause to write something down. The French poet Paul Valéry, who paid more attention to the way his mind worked than most of us, noted that there was “a certain reciprocity” between his pace and his thoughts. “My thoughts modify my pace;” he said, “my pace provokes my thoughts.” It’s all in the pacing.

I work in the daytime now, in what Henry James calls “sacred mornings,” and that’s a terrific help. In my twenties, thirties, forties, I used to work deep into the night. I did my most serious and difficult reading at night and I wrote many of my poems at night. I liked the concentration, the solitude, the sense of being the only one awake. Hence all my poems about insomnia.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a reader in mind as you write?



New York City, 2019.

#### HIRSCH

A poem is a dramatic experience. It carries its own meaning. I won't be there to explain it. It's an orphaned creature that must make its own way in the world. While I'm writing it, I'm also trying to live up to the models of those who came before me, my poetic exemplars.

I write for myself and others. At first, I'm just trying to think through something crucial for myself. That's hard enough. I'm trying to make something, to remember and express something, to find something out. Along the way, I start trying to unpack and articulate, to dramatize and transform it in such a way that it will be meaningful for someone else, someone unknown to me who may not even be alive yet, who doesn't have any idea about who I am. I'm writing to a stranger in the future.



# *Alicia Wright*

## EVERYTHING THAT RISES

One after another the angel of history  
Women: rural, 9, 1536, 1547, 1550, the angel of history  
1551—52, 1559; in business, 147; and the angel of history  
athletics, 245—46, 565; and education the angel of history  
266, 1533, 1536—38; and flowers, 340, the angel of history  
385; folkways among, 451, 452; per- the angel of history  
I can no longer hear the music the angel of history  
Singings, all-day 1039—40 the angel of history  
Sit-ins: and civil rights movement the angel of history  
*Southern Literary Messenger*, 909, 933, the angel of history  
Big Thicket 335, 350, 377 the angel of history  
A cast-iron farm bell the angel of history  
The bell rust friable the angel of history  
In the fricative air between tolls the angel of history  
Make a basket of kudzu twines the angel of history  
though these forms are less common the angel of history  
shoot-the-chutes. We had been in swimming and we had the angel of history  
-hibits African, folk, 15th-century, and contemporary the angel of history  
art, among other things. The Cottonlandia Museum in the angel of history  
648 History and Manners the angel of history  
I heard my mother ring the bell for the angel of history  
The king snake in the bush a branch painted the angel of history  
A dream of the red-and-black snake the angel of history  
Around my throat tightening the angel of history  
The hoarse boys shouting in the dark street the angel of history  
-Nothings captured political office and established nativist the angel of history  
Would the angel of history know when memory the angel of history  
*Father's House* [1978] is a grim novel exploring future the angel of history  
Let Gaines rest the angel of history  
in peace the angel of history  
the monograph had been adhered to an the angel of history



1838 copper-plate the angel of history  
He asked *What about sin* I'd forgotten the angel of history  
South that has all but vanished the angel of history  
The fracture in the ledger grave-marker the angel of history  
The dog that bit my father digs in it the angel of history  
Most artists in the South have embraced the tenets of the angel of history  
what is loosely called modernism the angel of history  
Hot knobs of the rooms I cannot enter the angel of history  
wreckage upon wreckage the angel of history  
What calls from the dead in the flat air the angel of history  
That I can hear the angel of history  
Mass., and a Norman-style Episcopal church in the south the angel of history  
Mothballs and tin in the slat-shelf pantry the angel of history  
Collapse in her last kiss the angel of history  
Technocolonialism the barbs on the wire the angel of history  
ily, 1049; image of, 1492 the angel of history  
Bottle trees 495—496 the angel of history  
Into the hulls of westward-racing ships the angel of history  
went bags of letters desperately calling the angel of history  
A tithe purloin'd cankers the whole estate the angel of history  
The ledger the fissure the sin of the dog the angel of history  
May at his perill further go the angel of history  
Clay clods the slippery elm leaf spray the angel of history  
386; as symbol, 586; and concurrent the angel of history  
Myself no better than the angel of history  
The blood from my mouth the angel of history  
The fourth escaped into the tall August sugarcane the angel of history

# *Rae Armantrout*

T H E

Let Scott equal “I.”

Scott says, “I  
asked my team  
to pull your records.”

I am regularly updated.

I think of one thing,  
then another—

a monarch then a butterfly—

now the two are comparable.

I speak of the past  
and the future.

Scott is Scott-free  
by nature.

I can be removed  
from the equation,

leaving this blinking cursor,  
“the”

AN EXCERPT FROM

*The Stumble*

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DAVID ADJMI

CHARACTERS (*appearing here*)

OSCAR LEVANT, *late forties to fifties*

GEORGE GERSHWIN, *thirties*

THE NURSE, *twenties*

SETTING

There are three primary settings for the play: the theater in which the play is performed, a private room in Mount Sinai Hospital, and the inside of Oscar's mind.

TIME

Now. And varying points in time between the 1930s and the 1970s.

This play is a ghosting. People vanish and appear as if by magic. The space should feel uncanny. Transitions should be effortless and lightning quick. Punctuation should be treated as indicators of rhythm rather than grammar.

*Lights up on Oscar in pajamas and hospital slippers. He's holding a pack of cigarettes and a lit cigarette, which he smokes over the following. He's high—not flying, but a few feet off the ground.*

OSCAR (*when the applause dies down*): Thank you for that very warm welcome. You're very nice, thank you. (*beat*) Uh. I want to begin with a story—a marvelous ... sort of a fable, one my father told me when I was a little boy. It was always one of my favorites, it goes like this: *A young man* murders his mother—it's a happy fable. *A boy ... murders his mother* and—he cuts her heart out and he presents it. To his sweetheart—this was before the invention of ... normal gifts—and *in his hurry*; he stumbles. And the disembodied heart he carries in his hand cries out, "Did you hurt yourself, son?" (*beat*) And the moral of the story is *LOOK WHERE YOU'RE GOING!* (*smokes*) I feel a bit naked without an orchestra *In any event*.

Thank you for coming tonight, to our brilliant ... singular and ... *truly ... genius*—night of theater—and we're so happy to have you. Who *we* is I have no idea—I'm speaking in the royal we. And we ... (*sotto voce*) apropos of schizophrenics—AND ... *by the way* my name ... is George Gershwin and—this is all about me *No I'm Oscar Levant*. (*snickers to himself*) I'm not Gershwin I've just stolen his identity. Uh. I'm Oscar Levant and you're ... whoever you are; I have no idea who you are.

You're my alibi. To the murder of ... well, I didn't kill anyone. UHHH.

I've had an extremely thrilling and ... eminent ... uh, life. That I want to share with you in the form of a dramatic presentation. I ran the music department at RKO when I was twenty-one. And I studied ... years later ... with the brilliant Arnold Schoenberg. And for many years I was friends ... *close* friends with George Gershwin, the greatest composer of the twentieth century, whose career was—cut short by. Tragically ... uh. (*beat*) And I got very—known for playing his music *I don't play music anymore*. I'm on strike. I developed a phobia of the piano and I can't be near the piano. But I used to say I excreted Gershwin music through my pores like a drug—there are drugs you excrete that way—like paraldehyde, which I've—uh—taken. Uh ... Actually I'm on it right now. I'm—did I mention that? I am. I'm in withdrawal from drugs. I'm in a hospital, I'm in Beverly Hills, except this really isn't Beverly Hills, it's a stage and *I'm on it*. And who knows how I got here, I certainly don't.

*Oscar brightens.*

But *we've got sets* ... we've got ... lights—we've got ... long ... tedious speeches like this one *It's marvelous*—but the theater is marvelous, I always loved the theater. Which is why I've devised this wonderful—*escape*—a night out—in the theater for all you wonderful people. You see I just had a nervous breakdown. My second—and (*re: audience member*) he's nodding—you had one? (*to himself*) He's nodding again. (*to us*) Don't worry this will all make—progressively less sense at the evening wears on. (*smokes, then he restarts*) *Two weeks ago* I noticed my wife packing my things I said where are we going? She said where do you think we're going? I said the mental hospital She said yes. She was frantic. She was throwing the clothes in the suitcase. I said why are you rushing? She said you have to get to Mount Sinai before eleven thirty, I said what's at eleven thirty? She said we need to be certain there are beds available. I said June it's like a clearance sale! (*smokes*) I think I've been having a stroke for the past ten minutes. Okay.

*Well that's our show* and everyone can leave now *no I'm kidding* UHHH. (*beat*) I was actually *in* a play, around the corner from here—at a theater—this was a while back—the Mesozoic era—just past the invention of the wheel. (*to a lady in the front row*) You remember—(*to us*) she's nodding yes. *Anyway*. I had one line—it was called *Burlesque* and it had Barbara Stanwyck, by the way, this was before she was famous; *and I will recite* ... my one line for you presently. By the way I can't act. *It went like this* (*brightens*): “Mazie! Great to see you! Give us a little kiss!” (*puckers up for a second and then smokes*) I used to do that for Ethel Barrymore, she gave me notes. She said, Oscar it's *war!* I said (*hysterical mania*) *MAZIE-GREAT-TO-SEE-YOU-GIMME-A-KISS!!*

*Oscar regains his balance, smokes.*

But life. Is the farce we all must play—which is a quote by the brilliant—French writer Arthur Rimbaud *who also*. Said something to the effect of *That's enough about Rimbaud*. I have a cramp. (*winces*) I have all these undiagnosed—ailments. I'm in a hospital by the way but I'm—planning an escape *AND YOU'RE IT!* (*smokes*) But first. I'm going to trot out my old. Pony. Uh. As in dog and pony ... *my oldest* and best ... friend. *Ladies and Gentlemen*: the great ... genius composer ... paramour and—a wonderful human being ... mainly; and *my* primary source of income UHH. I'm not kidding ... *Mister George Gershwin*.

*Gershwin appears at a piano, dashing. The metabolism of the play speeds up like crazy.*



GERSHWIN (*to Oscar*): It's the end of the first act. Or no it's midway through Act Two—*why are you standing over there, you're in another precinct!* So the philandering playboy has been banished from his family to a ranch in Arizona to keep him out of trouble . . .

*Gershwin plays a few bars of "I Got Rhythm."*

OSCAR (*to us*): That's from *Girl Crazy*—

GERSHWIN: What are you doing? (*reprimand*) Act Two!

OSCAR: I'm living with George at the penthouse. It's 1931.

*Gershwin plays a quick arpeggio.*

GERSHWIN: Why are you all the way over there?

OSCAR (*to us, as he schleps over to Gershwin*): I'm twenty-four.

GERSHWIN: Oh and bring some of that compote will you, I have a spoon over here.

OSCAR (*schleps back for the compote*): Yes, George.

GERSHWIN: Oh and get me a pencil—so there are no girls in this particular town but he falls in love with the one girl there, a postmistress and complications ensue. I know, it's stupid—*what's the matter?* How I got roped into doing this—yes, we've got Bert Lahr but . . . who knows if we've got Bert Lahr, Ira thinks he's skittish.

OSCAR (*to us*): Ira was right.

GERSHWIN: But I think some of the songs are pretty good. Listen to this.

OSCAR (*to us*): But it had Ethel Merman.

GERSHWIN: We used a version of this in *Treasure Girl*.

OSCAR (*to us*): Ira hated Ethel Merman.

GERSHWIN: Well we didn't actually use it.

OSCAR (*to us*): Ethel hated Ira too, it was mutual.

GERSHWIN: Oscar, I need to you stay focused—get on the piano and let's go back to work. (*Gershwin sits on the bench and hands Oscar sheet music.*) Take a look at this.

*Just being near the piano causes a resurgence of Oscar's phobia of playing.*

OSCAR (*panic*): I don't feel like playing.

GERSHWIN: I think this could be something, we need to redo some of the harmonies, I'm thinking we start with horns—*dah dah dah dah*—and then it slows down: (*sings a cappella, slow, ballad-like*) “*I got rhythm, I got music, I got my gal, who could ask for anyth—*” We need to change the lyrics obviously so they *rhyme*, these are *terrible* but they're just dummy lyrics.

OSCAR (*terrified*): Uh-huh—

GERSHWIN: What rhymes with *rhythm*? What about *with 'em*? No that's crap. What's the matter you look panicked? (*speaks as he plays piano*) It's just the same four notes and then up down up down—it—maybe too simple—but you can play around with it, look:

*Gershwin plays around with it.*

GERSHWIN: Have a seat, maestro. (*Oscar is petrified of the piano; Gershwin loses patience.*) What's the matter with you!?

*Oscar reluctantly sits at the piano next to Gershwin, but deliberately faces away from the keys.*

GERSHWIN (*now angry*): Why are you sitting like that! Stop fooling around!

OSCAR (*to us*): That's enough of Gershwin—uh—let's go to a new scene.

*Oscar starts to exit, but Gershwin stops him.*

GERSHWIN: Now wait a minute. I'm sorry for shouting, pal.

OSCAR (*to us*): He never apologized.

GERSHWIN: *I'm not sorry* GODDAMNIT!

OSCAR (*to us*): And he never cursed really.

GERSHWIN: Let's take a break.

OSCAR (*to Gershwin*): I'm getting a coffee.

*Oscar schleps to a coffee urn. Gershwin bounds up, grabs a cracker off a plate, and eats.*

GERSHWIN: They were asking for you at Ginger Rogers's party, why didn't you show?

OSCAR (*sulky*): Because I have a talent for not being invited places, that's why.

GERSHWIN: Awww, look at that *punim*, you know you're invited.

OSCAR: You're outta sugar!

GERSHWIN: Everyone thinks you're clever and droll, they were asking for you.

OSCAR: I was busy.

GERSHWIN: Where'd you go?

OSCAR: Lindy's.

GERSHWIN: You sidestepped the breadlines?

OSCAR: Walter Winchell introduced me to a girl.

GERSHWIN: You don't say.

OSCAR: I do say. A chorus girl. Barbara something.

GERSHWIN: Cute?

OSCAR: Barbara Woodell?

GERSHWIN: Don't know her.

OSCAR: Ziegfeld girl. She likes tennis, horseback riding, and *golf* she says.

*Oscar makes a sour-lemon face.*

GERSHWIN: What's so bad about golf?

OSCAR: It's horrifying!!

GERSHWIN (*laughs*): What's she look like?

OSCAR (*stirs coffee*): Skinny, consumptive looking. You know—my type.

GERSHWIN: Heavy in the tangerines?

OSCAR: More like kumquats.

GERSHWIN: *Ripe* kumquats?

OSCAR: Don't push the metaphor. (*to us*) I teased him a little, I could tell he liked it.

*Oscar sips his coffee.*

GERSHWIN: I'm seeing a girl too, you know. Pringie.

OSCAR: What's a "Pringie"?

GERSHWIN: She's Basque. And she has a gorgeous Basque body, I'm just wild about her, you'll have to meet her.

OSCAR: Pretty?

GERSHWIN: Her face is chop suey but she's big in the tangerines.

OSCAR: Split it down the middle, I say.

GERSHWIN: You want a girlfriend?

OSCAR: I wanna get my ashes hauled every now and again, sure, but it's not worth a round of golf.

*Oscar winces at the thought, then gets a refill of coffee.*

GERSHWIN: Say, have you ever thought about getting married?

OSCAR: Have you?

GERSHWIN: I'm married to my work.

OSCAR (*dry*): What a coincidence, I'm married to your work too.

GERSHWIN: Ira and Lee and I all discussed it and we think you need to be married. You need the stability. It'd be very good for you.

*Oscar munches on a cracker and sips coffee.*

OSCAR: When do you have these discussions about me? If there's a discussion about me I want to be in the middle of it!

GERSHWIN: See what I mean? You're terribly self-centered; marriage would cure you of that.

OSCAR: And what'll cure *you* of it—assignments with your protégée, *Pringie*? I'm only twenty-two years old—

GERSHWIN (*gallops back to the piano bench*): Twenty-four.

OSCAR: I'm not getting *married!* (*to us*) I married her the following month. I thought it would help me get over my obsession with George—not that I was obsessed, I don't like that word. In any case I married Barbara.

*Gershwin does a quick arpeggio.*

OSCAR: And we got a divorce six months later—

GERSHWIN: Oscar!

*Gershwin gestures Oscar over to the bench.*



GERSHWIN: I need you.

OSCAR (*to us*): He needs me.

*Oscar's phobia resurges—he can't sit at the bench.*

GERSHWIN: What's the matter with you?

*Oscar demurs; eventually sits next to Gershwin.*

GERSHWIN: That's better.

*Oscar reluctantly faces the keys of the piano.*

*Gershwin starts to play an extempore version of "I Got Rhythm." Oscar every so often pings a single note—reluctantly—still holding on to his phobic aversion to the piano, intermittently mopping sweat off his forehead. Gershwin responds to his pings, couching them in glissandi and lush counterpoint; they start a little playful pas de deux, some version of the "I Got Rhythm" variations—that sort of playfulness. Oscar starts to relax and gets absorbed in the music.*

*The phobia vanishes.*

*The lights shift and we're lifted, lifted into this sphere of pure enchantment, pure music as they play—and their playing is perfectly complementary. It's in the playing of music that we really get a sense of this magical, ineffable spark between these two men. When they finish, Oscar is elated, incredulous.*

GERSHWIN (*jotting down a note as he speaks*): I think it's good when we speed it up—if I cut down some of the harmonies and give it some muscle we can maybe use it for the end of Act One. What do you think?

OSCAR (*blown away*): I think it's pretty terrific.

GERSHWIN: "Pretty terrific"? That's *all*? Don't go overboard with praise, I might get a swelled head.

OSCAR (*annoyed*): All right, it's *incomparable*.

GERSHWIN: You need lessons in giving compliments.

OSCAR (*to us*): He didn't have a swelled head. I mean he *did*, but it was just a salient fact, he was a genius, and if you didn't notice he got offended. I razzed him about it. (*to Gershwin*) Tell me George—if you had to do it all over would you fall in love with yourself again?

GERSHWIN: Every time.

*Gershwin smiles with supreme self-confidence and humor, then bangs a few notes out on the piano and bounces up on his feet. He starts jogging in place. Oscar just looks at him.*

OSCAR (*to us*): You'd think that—over the years this would get annoying and. You'd be right! But I stayed on with George. Because he was a genius.

*Oscar plays some music to accompany the jogging. Gershwin stops. Oscar stops. Gershwin starts again; Oscar's in perfect sync.*

GERSHWIN: Stop fooling around. I hired a personal trainer.

*Gershwin gestures to Oscar to jog in place with him. Oscar reluctantly jogs in his pajamas.*

OSCAR: What's he training you for?

GERSHWIN: I'm developing an interest in fitness, look at my pectorals.

*Oscar jogs and looks on as Gershwin does tricks with his pecs.*

GERSHWIN: How's that?

OSCAR: You have the hairiest chest since Beethoven.

GERSHWIN: I've been doing pushups.

OSCAR: You ought to cut off a lock and give it to a girl.

GERSHWIN: Try to get your ankles up to the small of your back—oh, look what I got!

*Gershwin jogs over to another part of the stage—ankle to buttock—and opens up a Ping-Pong table. Oscar clutches his heart and rests momentarily on a divan.*

*Gershwin throws Oscar a paddle; Oscar swerves and avoids getting hit in the face with it.*

OSCAR: What is this?

GERSHWIN: A paddle, you idiot.

OSCAR: I'm—much too enervated for physical activity, George.

GERSHWIN: I'll serve!

*Oscar drags himself to the Ping-Pong table, picks up a paddle. Gershwin serves. Oscar lets the ball fly past him. It makes a hollow pinging sound and rolls across the stage. Oscar smokes, unperturbed.*

GERSHWIN: What are you doing?

OSCAR: I have no idea.

GERSHWIN: Don't just stand there and—(*laughs*) Oh Oscar, you're marvelous. You've got to hit the ball with the paddle. Now run and fetch the ball.

*Oscar gives us a look.*

OSCAR: Run and *fetch*?

GERSHWIN: Come on, I haven't got all day. What are you doing?

OSCAR: I'm surveying the vistas. That's a line from Victor Hugo, "I'm surveying the vistas." It's—not a great line UHH—

GERSHWIN: Never mind. (*Gershwin bounds over and curlicues around Oscar.*) Getting my metabolism up!

OSCAR: Oh boy!

*Gershwin picks up the ball and goes back to serve.*

GERSHWIN: Now, you just be sure to hit it this time.

*Oscar smokes and Gershwin serves. Oscar is vaguely aware that he's missed it.*

OSCAR: What happened?

*Gershwin sighs, produces another ball. He serves, Oscar hits the ball. They go back and forth for a while.*

GERSHWIN: Isn't this nice?

OSCAR: It's repetitive. (*They play a bit.*) It's like a rondo—it never ends. (*Oscar gets the hang of it.*) It's pleasant. I like that hollow sound. It's like the sound of the universe mocking my existence.

*Gershwin scores a point.*

GERSHWIN: One—nothing. Isn't this marvelous? It's a wonderful game.

OSCAR: Let's take a break—

GERSHWIN: No breaks!

OSCAR: I need one!

GERSHWIN (*half-joking*): You need what I tell you to need!

*Oscar gives us a look, pants exaggeratedly, then reluctantly keeps playing.*

OSCAR (*to us as he plays*): I actually have a career at this point—I had a couple of hits on the radio. One song got me some attention: “Keep Sweeping the Cobwebs off the Moon”—which—good luck decoding those lyrics. The title was a metaphor. Except it was crap. The song itself though was actually . . . also crap. *It was all crap*—what can I tell you I'm morbidly—untalented *but it was a hit song*. And I. Had a few others. But somehow I end up George Gershwin's permanent—Ping-Pong partner—

GERSHWIN: You're getting pretty good.

OSCAR: My wrists hurt.

GERSHWIN: So stop using your wrists.

*Oscar puts down his paddle and walks downstage. Lights shift.*

OSCAR (*to us*): I also had a musical on Broadway at the time. It was called—in­auspiciously—*Ripples* . . . needless to say it failed to make any. Uh. And we were playing at the New Amsterdam right across the street from—Mister Genius who. *Had Strike Up the Band* at the Selwyn. I played hooky every night from my show to see George's because I hated mine. *And one night*. During his show—I was at the back of the house and this . . . woman with a fur collar and jewels came up to me and said you're Oscar Levant I said yes. She said and how is your show doing? I said why don't you come see for your­self. So we walked across Forty-Second Street to the New Amsterdam to see my crappy show. And after a few minutes Lee—oh, did I mention it was Lee Gershwin? Lee sort of . . . gestured over at me in the dark and led me into the lobby . . . and we walked *out of my show* and went back to George's. (*pause*) I wasn't going to go, but there was a voice in my head: *Go, follow her, go. Your show's no good.* (*shrugs, smokes*) Lee brought me home that night and intro­duced me to George *and I stayed on*. At the penthouse late into the night—we played Debussy. He loved Debussy. Everything changed for me that night. And a couple months later I was all but moved in at the Gershwin penthouse on Riverside Drive.

*Oscar gets a cup of coffee from one of the urns. Gershwin catapults himself onto a sofa and puts his feet up on an ottoman.*

GERSHWIN: You got a telephone call.

OSCAR (*to us*): Now it's a few months later.

GERSHWIN: Dilly, your producer—maybe I got the name wrong.

OSCAR: About what?

GERSHWIN (*after a beat*): I'm afraid your show is closing. (*beat*) That's the word on the street, anyway. (*gently*) It could be unfounded. You want to call him?

OSCAR (*morose*): No.

GERSHWIN: I'm sorry, Oscar.

OSCAR: Where are those awful chalky crackers you like?

GERSHWIN: If they're so awful don't eat 'em.



OSCAR: They plug up my ulcer.

GERSHWIN: You're too much.

OSCAR: And not enough, evidently or they wouldn't be closing my show.

*Pause.*

GERSHWIN: What are you working on next?

OSCAR: Aside from mourning my demise as a composer?

GERSHWIN: Oscar. We all have failures to mourn.

OSCAR: Sure we do George. Let me know if your Pulitzer needs dusting.

GERSHWIN: You just need to be resolute. What is it that Goethe said?

OSCAR (*glum, bored*): Be resolute.

GERSHWIN: You'll be back on Broadway in no time.

OSCAR (*to us*): It was my last show on Broadway. (*to George*) Where are those hideous crackers?

*Oscar gets up and Gershwin stops him.*

GERSHWIN: I don't know if this is the time to tell you. But there's a chance that the New York Philharmonic might program the Second Rhapsody.

OSCAR: Congratulations.

GERSHWIN: Save the congratulations, it's not a done deal. Toscanini hasn't heard it yet, and—well, you know how the Philharmonic feels about me. But listen, Oscar—and feel free to turn me down—but if it actually happens ... I'd love it if you could play it for him.

*Oscar turns to look at Gershwin.*

OSCAR: You're serious.

GERSHWIN: Of course I'm serious.

OSCAR: You want me to play it for Toscanini?

GERSHWIN: I can't do it, I'd be too nervous.

OSCAR (*laughing*): You want *me* to play the Second Rhapsody for Arturo Toscanini?

GERSHWIN: Would you do it for me, pal?

OSCAR: I'd be ... honored, George. I'd be just honored. (*Gershwin touches his shoulder, a sign of gratitude and affection. Oscar turns to us.*) And then there's a homosexual love scene—which—I'll spare you the very graphic. Details of that—UH—

*The Nurse appears.*

NURSE: Congratulations.

OSCAR (*to us*): Oh look, it's my drug dealer.

*Gershwin vanishes.*

NURSE: Everyone's been talking about the song you played.

OSCAR (*to the Nurse*): Is it time for my pill?

NURSE: All the other patients were raving.

OSCAR: Well they're prone to raving, it's a mental hospital. (*to us*) Toscanini never programmed it, by the way, but I did get to play it for him. (*schleps stage left toward the Nurse*) OW! (*Oscar's foot is bugging him.*) Help me to the—

NURSE: What song was it?

OSCAR: It's not a *song*; it's the Appassionata Sonata. Which is one of three, uh—major, and very ... distinguished—genius and—(*The Nurse holds out the pills for Oscar to check the dosage. He doesn't even check it.*) It's too low.

NURSE: You didn't check.

OSCAR: I don't need to check, it's too low—it's *been* too low; and I cavil and I complain, and *no one*—cavil means complain by the way—

NURSE: Sit.

OSCAR (*as he sits*): I also carp. I cavil and carp and—I'm like Mary Poppins all of a sudden! "*Cavil* and *carp* and—"

NURSE: Open.

OSCAR: And I need a podiatrist—my foot is—crumbling with every step over here.

NURSE: First things first, we've got to get you your medication, so be a good boy.

OSCAR: You sound like my mother.

*Oscar opens his mouth, swallows the pill.*

NURSE: Lift the tongue.

OSCAR: Now you sound like my wife.

NURSE (*amused*): Don't you make trouble.

*Oscar lifts his tongue so the Nurse can see if he's hidden the pill.*

OSCAR: Why do you people think I won't swallow it, I'm an addict.

NURSE: So you don't collect the pills and overdose.

OSCAR: I'm not that strategic—I'm more pell-mell. (*to us*) *Pell-mell?* I never said that before—

NURSE: Lift.

*Oscar lifts his tongue. He's clean.*

OSCAR: How old are you? Twenty-one?

NURSE: Twenty-three.

OSCAR (*firting*): That's old.

NURSE: It's not *old*.

OSCAR: Time moves faster for girls over nineteen.

NURSE: Now you're just being fresh.

OSCAR: I miss the limpid misery of youth. When you get really old everything is ... well I don't want to burst your bubble.

*The Nurse rolls up his sleeve, prepares to take his blood pressure. She feels his pulse, counts silently.*

OSCAR: I have a daughter around your age. Marcia.

*The Nurse records Oscar's blood pressure, then removes the device from his arm.*

NURSE: What does she do?

OSCAR: She avoids me. I have three daughters who all take turns avoiding me, that's how they get their exercise. I can't say I blame them. I'm not a good father. I mean I'm all right for a mental patient. Of all the maniacs here, I'm probably the most hands-on parent. I guess that's where all my genius went. Into my ... lousy uh ... parenting.

NURSE: Let's get you on the scale now.

*The Nurse ushers Oscar over to the scale.*

OSCAR: You know, for a nurse you're awfully patient.

NURSE: Thank you.

OSCAR (*mild disappointment*): Oh you took that as a compliment; okay. (*He looks over at her while she adjusts the weight.*) Where do you lurk? (*The Nurse gives him a look.*) After you're done here, where do you lurk?

NURSE: I don't lurk anywhere. I go home and I feed my cat.

*The Nurse checks his weight.*

OSCAR: You never told me about your cat.

NURSE: I have one.

OSCAR: What kind?

NURSE: Tabby.

OSCAR: Short for Tabitha?

NURSE: No, silly, it's a kind of cat.

OSCAR: *Tabby?*

NURSE (*laughing*): You've gained two more pounds.

OSCAR: I feel a little buxom.

NURSE: And you have some color in your face. (*She helps him back to the bed.*)  
I hear you're going to have your own television show, isn't that something!

OSCAR: Well Doctor Greenleigh says I have narcissistic personality disorder and all I have are fake selves. That works for television.

NURSE: He thinks you'll be ready to leave in another week or so. That's good news isn't it?

OSCAR: For you, maybe.

NURSE: Why don't you leave your room and socialize a bit? Lynn was asking for you.

OSCAR: I'm playing hard to get. (*beat*) Say, I think we have great chemistry. Do you have a boyfriend?

NURSE: That's none of your business.

OSCAR: I'd like it to be my business.



NURSE: I don't know that your wife would like it.

OSCAR (*deflated*): Oh, you know about her.

NURSE: Your wife is a wonderful woman.

OSCAR: Yeah. Well—you haven't seen her with an unmade face.

NURSE (*laughing*): She's very beautiful. I hope I'll be that pretty when I'm old.

OSCAR: I'll relay the compliment.

*Oscar wants to light a cigarette but his pack is empty. The Nurse helps him back to bed.*

OSCAR: Do you like music?

NURSE: You're full of questions today.

OSCAR: I'll take that as a no.

NURSE: Well, my father is the real music lover in the family.

OSCAR: What family.

NURSE: Mine.

OSCAR: Oh.

NURSE: He knows you. I mean—he knows who you are.

OSCAR: That makes one of us.

NURSE: He lives in New York. That's where I was raised as a girl. He used to take me to concerts at Carnegie Hall all the time.

OSCAR: You must know who Toscanini is then.

NURSE: The conductor.

OSCAR: That's right.

NURSE: He's in all the newspapers.

OSCAR: He's a dear friend of mine.

NURSE (*after a short pause*): Oh.

OSCAR: Toscanini is like a father to me. Actually he's more like a mother to me—I bring out the maternal instinct in men. (*beat*) What you mean, all the newspapers? What'd he do now?

NURSE (*deer in the headlights*): Maybe I was thinking of someone else.

OSCAR: I have access to newspapers you know. What happened? (*beat*) What happened to Toscanini?

*The Nurse grabs a tray with uneaten food on it and starts to leave. Oscar grabs her.*

NURSE (*demurring*): He, uh ... he died. I'm sorry.

OSCAR: Don't say that. I don't want to know! DON'T SAY THAT WORD!

*Oscar weakly releases his grip, instantly lost. The Nurse vanishes. Oscar's breathing gets heavy. He looks like he might break down sobbing—then remembers he has an audience.*

OSCAR (*to us, straining to be charming*): If I seem agitated it's—just my—wonderful acting.

*Gershwin appears.*

GERSHWIN: Finish your story.

OSCAR (*slightly disoriented*): What are you doing here?

GERSHWIN: You were telling me about Vernon Duke.

*Gershwin produces a cigarette and lights it for Oscar.*

OSCAR (*to us*): Oh god, Vernon Duke.

GERSHWIN: You were having dinner ...

OSCAR: That's right. (*A tiny smile breaks out on Oscar's face. The smile turns to a grimace; to us.*) This is pretty funny, actually. (*to Gershwin*) I was having dinner. And Vernon Duke was there and I was making cracks ... all the leading neurotics were there, Moss Hart, Artie Shaw. And I said "Vernon, at your *best* ... Cole Porter is better." (*Gershwin laughs.*) And Vernon—you know how he turns blue?

GERSHWIN (*still laughing*): Yes.

OSCAR (*getting more into it*): He turns blue, his arteries come pulsing through his face, and he says "Oh, fuck you, Oscar—fuck you, I'm always the target!"

GERSHWIN: Which is true.

OSCAR: But he's a baby about it. Waaa! Waaa! Oscar called me a bad name! (*laughs, then winces in sudden pain*) Ow—GODDAMNIT!

*Oscar's hurt his back.*

GERSHWIN: You're nuts, you know that?

OSCAR: Don't overstate the obvious. (*Gershwin gets him a pillow for his back.*) Thanks. (*beat*) Why, you think I was too fresh? He accused me of indiscriminate mendacity; I thought I was pretty discriminate.

GERSHWIN: You *know* you're caustic Oscar; let's face it—

OSCAR: I'm scrupulously truthful and that's all I can face—and barely that; *and Vernon* and we know this George—is a second-rate songwriter but he's anointed himself as the head of some pantheon of popular songwriting, which—is ludicrous and *you know it*.

GERSHWIN: I like Vernon, and I think he's very talented.

OSCAR (*to Gershwin*): Oh come on.

GERSHWIN: What do you think of Copland?

OSCAR: I think his limitations are boundless.

GERSHWIN: Even *Billy the Kid*? I thought it was very free-spirited.

OSCAR: I thought it was very fragmented. It reminded me of me, actually; which ... incidentally—that's not a compliment.

*Oscar takes a drag on his cigarette.*

GERSHWIN: I think you're a little envious, old pal.

OSCAR: Who, *me*?

GERSHWIN: You've got to learn manners Oscar or you're going to burn every bridge.

OSCAR: What about you?

GERSHWIN: I have manners.

OSCAR (*laughing*): I've seen you besmirch Jerome Kern right to his face.

GERSHWIN: That's different.

OSCAR: And you were nasty. I'm not *nasty*—I'm—*first of all* I believe in speaking behind people's backs.

GERSHWIN: You're talented Oscar but you haven't had the kind of success Copland has had—not to mention Vernon. But you're just as talented. (*beat*) You've done very well for yourself Oscar. Be happy with what you've got.

OSCAR: I'd be more happy with what you've got.

*Gershwin takes this joke at face value.*

GERSHWIN: There he is again.

OSCAR: There who is again?

GERSHWIN: That demon of yours. Rearing his stout little head.

OSCAR (*to us*): He was always talking about my demon. George was demonless; I didn't know how that was possible.

GERSHWIN: I can see past your bluster but some fellas get the wrong idea.

OSCAR (*to us*): George lacked envy.

GERSHWIN: They won't put up with it.

OSCAR: What about you?

GERSHWIN (*quizzically*): What about me?

*Oscar looks at Gershwin, a moment of rare, unselfconscious earnest emotion.*

OSCAR: Why do *you* put up with me? (*pause*) Why don't you loathe me like everyone else? Don't you like me?

*Gershwin is taken aback by this comment. He smiles, discomfited. Then plays a little something at the piano, softly.*



# *Two Poems by Rita Dove*

## POSTLUDE

*Stay by the hearth, little cricket.*

—Cendrillon

You prefer me invisible, no more than  
a crisp salute far away from  
your silks and firewood and woolens.

Out of sight, I'm merely an annoyance,  
one slim, obstinate wrinkle in night's  
deepening trance. When sleep fails,

you wish me shushed and back in my hole.  
As usual, you're not listening: time stops  
only if you stop long enough to hear it

passing. This is my business:  
I've got ten weeks left to croon through.  
What you hear is a lifetime of song.

NAJI, 14. PHILADELPHIA.

A bench, a sofa, anyplace flat—  
just let me down  
somewhere quiet, please,  
a strange lap, a patch of grass...

What a fine cup of misery  
I've brought you, Mama—cracked  
and hissing with bees.  
Is that your hand? Good, I did  
good: I swear I didn't yank or glare.

If I rest my cheek on the curb, let it drain...

They say we bring it on ourselves  
and trauma is what *they* feel  
when they rage up flashing  
in their spit-shined cars  
shouting, *Who do you think you are?*  
until everybody's hoarse.

I'm better now. Pounding's nearly stopped.

Next time I promise I'll watch my step.  
I'll disappear before they can't  
unsee me: better gone  
than one more drop in a sea of red.



ERIN O'KEEFE

*New and Recent  
Photographs*

---

WITH AN ESSAY BY

*Kate Tarker*

STAGE DIRECTIONS FOR  
APPROACHING AN O'KEEFE

There was a triangle in her face. An elbow. A triangle, emerging from a morass of black puffy coats. So many people jammed together, pretending they were alone in space. She tried to press her head backward to escape, but an orange parallelogram pressed her forward into the elbow, which by way of some shuffling was now a purse. She looked up at the eyes looking down on her and held her breath. She glanced around, then slid out a white rectangle and looked again at the time printed on it. She was golden. It was all going to be worth it once she got to the show.

She was on the wrong train. She was on the right train going in the wrong direction.



She stepped out, into the shadows. She felt stupid and cold. How could she have possibly thought she had enough time? Her biggest fear was that she was in the right life going in the wrong direction. That she was the right word, perhaps, but the wrong answer to the crossword puzzle. A bright shop window told the demented lie that spring was coming, if only she'd layer in teal and grass green. A passing cab switched off its glowing light. On her screen, she plugged in her walking route and did some calculations. She was never going to get there on time.

By gathering speed, she regained confidence. It was snowing lightly, and sure, there were sludge lakes, but she could maneuver the crowds, stuck as they were in well-trodden pathways. There are plenty of ways to lie to yourself, she thought. You can lie by omission, or you can lie by multiplicity. You can trust in too much possibility or not enough. She wanted to risk more, to believe in more. But she also sensed, increasingly, that disappointment and possibility abutted each other on a razor's gleaming edge, seamlessly competing for her attention.

This whole city was fantasy after fantasy, piled on in crisp layers, one hope on top of the other, jostling for prominence. The paint wasn't thick enough; other people's dreams could push through yours. Or was that, too, slippery illusion? Reality had a mysterious structure here. Surrounded by vibrancy on all sides, it was at times easy to compete and shine. But it was easy, too, to believe you were living amply in three dimensions, when really you were as flat as a photograph.

As she trudged on, she let go—discarding heavy memories, erasing details, pressing her past days into curves and angles, rolling her loudest emotions into their broadest outlines and then leveling them all into smooth, even planes. Navigable.

She hurried through a particleboard tunnel, where hunter-green paint lapped up slapdash against hard, straight edges and an ocher ground. Thick sludge dripped down from the scaffolding. Thin mucus dripped out of her nose. She wiped it off. "This will be a great city," her dad liked to say, "when they finish it." She could handle remembering that much about him.

Last winter, she walked deep inside a sidewalk shed like this one, only to find it had no exit. She banged on the offending wall. It was an unsolvable







problem. Beckoning you in just to spit you back out: her life was full of doorways like that. It was best if you could give in to the pleasures of rerouting, but she wanted so badly to be a straight line. Tonight, she was a motherfucking train, she was an urban gazelle, she was going to make it. She was the prima ballerina flying over Slush Lake.

She missed her aim by an almost trivial margin and stepped forcefully into a void. Her foot rolled and folded. Down she went. Huh, she thought. Huh. She noticed she was throbbing, pulsing, vibrating. Regardless, she got up again and ran for ten more breaths. She was not going to miss this show.

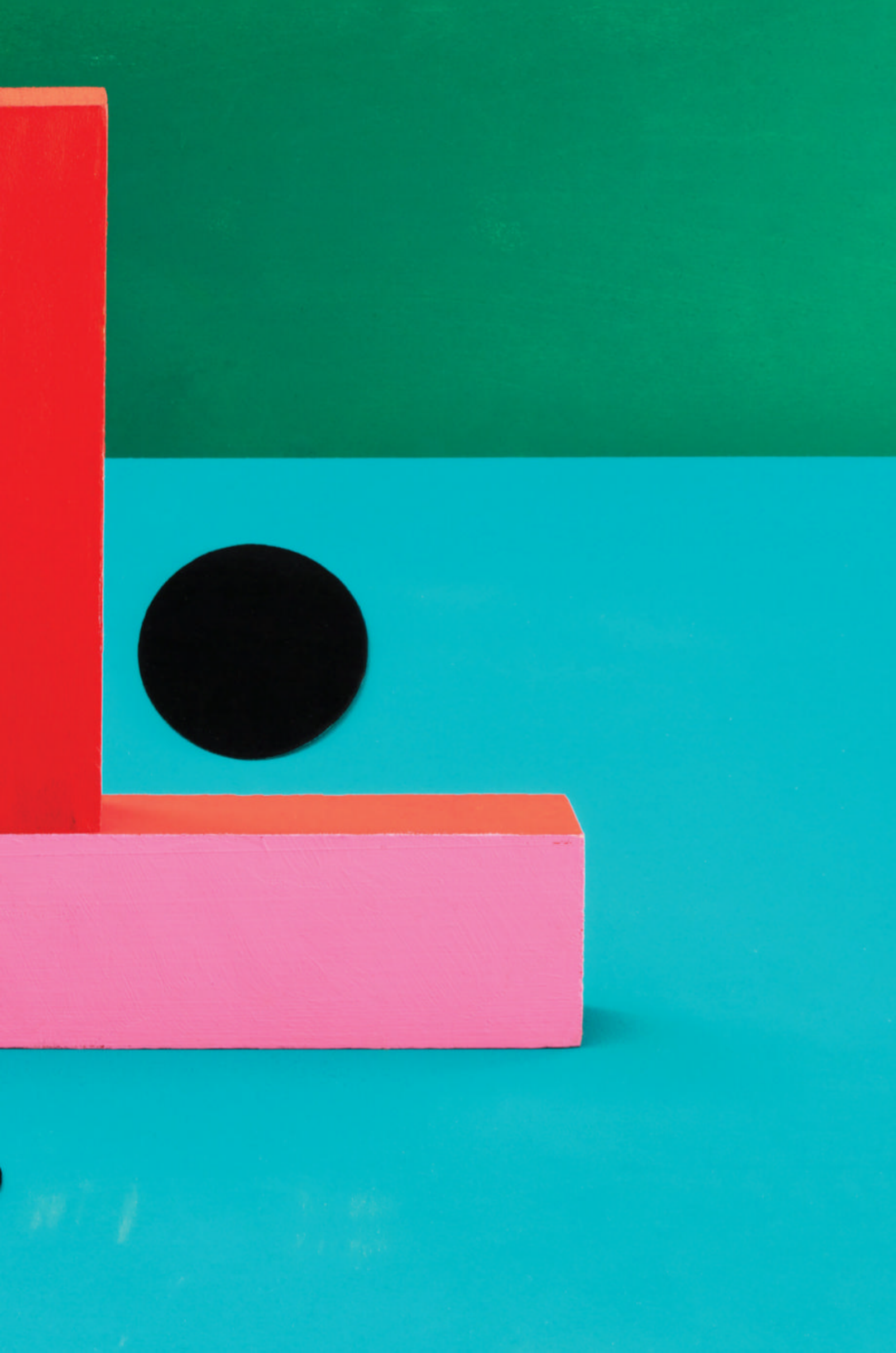
In the exam room, the doctor showed her the X-ray: a clean but relentless break, diagonally bisecting the entire length of her fifth metatarsal. The bone halves were perfectly misaligned. She would need a sharp incision from a knife, plus a roofie from a surgeon, plus a ground-floor home addition, a metal plate and a clamp, to return to being something structurally sound. Did she have health insurance?

“Do you hear me?” he asked.

She didn't say anything, she was in shock. Though in her memory, this was when she turned so blue and so square, when she full-throttle screamed bright pink.











Previous spread: *Circle Circle* 2020, archival pigment print, 32 x 40".  
This page: *Floating Ellipse*, 2020, archival pigment print, 25 x 19".



This page: *Inside Voice*, 2020, archival pigment print, 25 x 20".  
Following spread: *Still Life*, 2020, archival pigment print, 32 x 40".



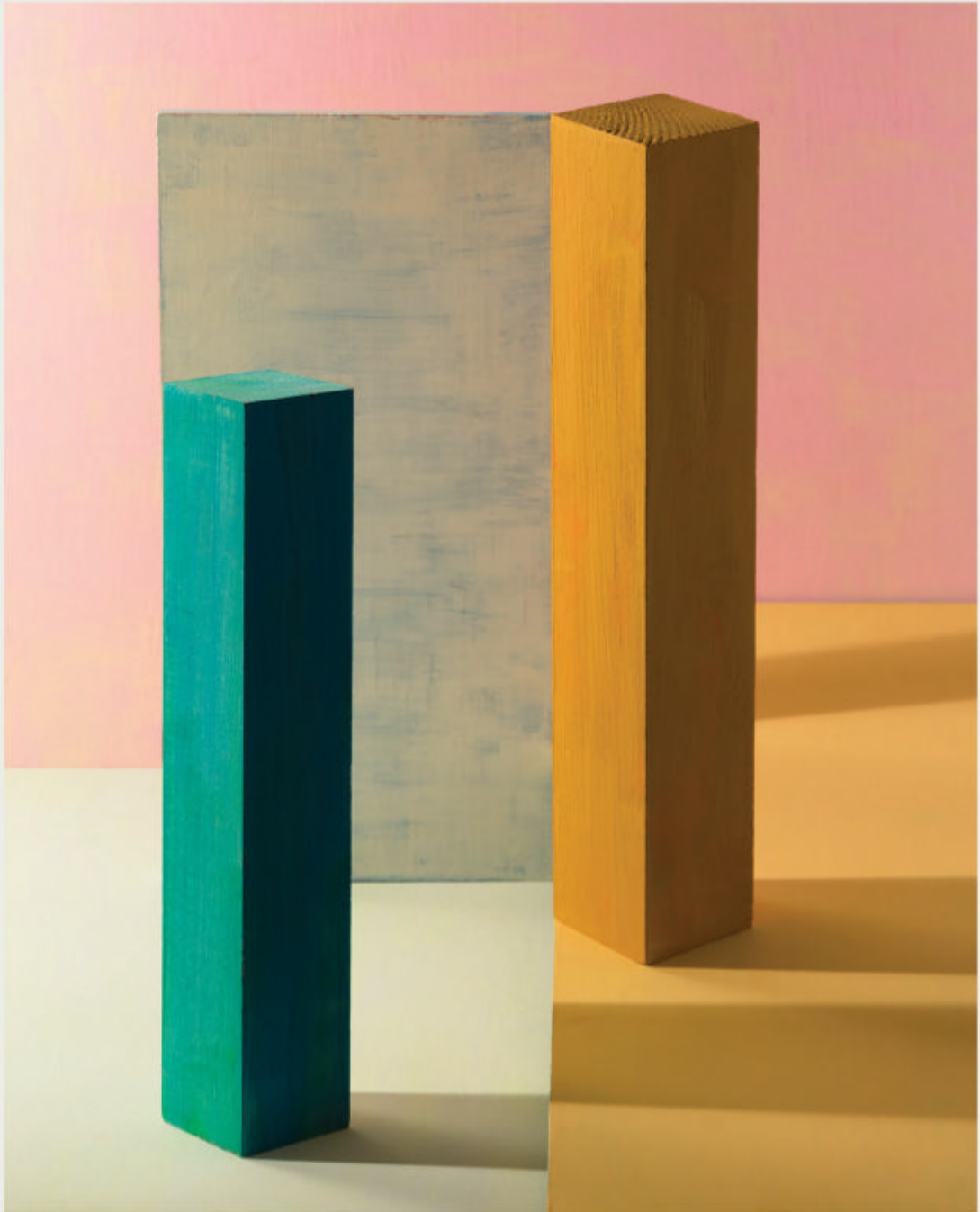






*Doorway*, 2020, archival pigment print, 25 x 20".





*Built Work #18*, 2018, archival pigment print, 40 x 32".



*Built Work #40*, 2018, archival pigment print, 25 x 20".



This page: *Green Stripe*, 2019, archival pigment print, 25 x 20".  
Following spread: *Red Reach*, 2020, archival pigment print, 20 x 25".









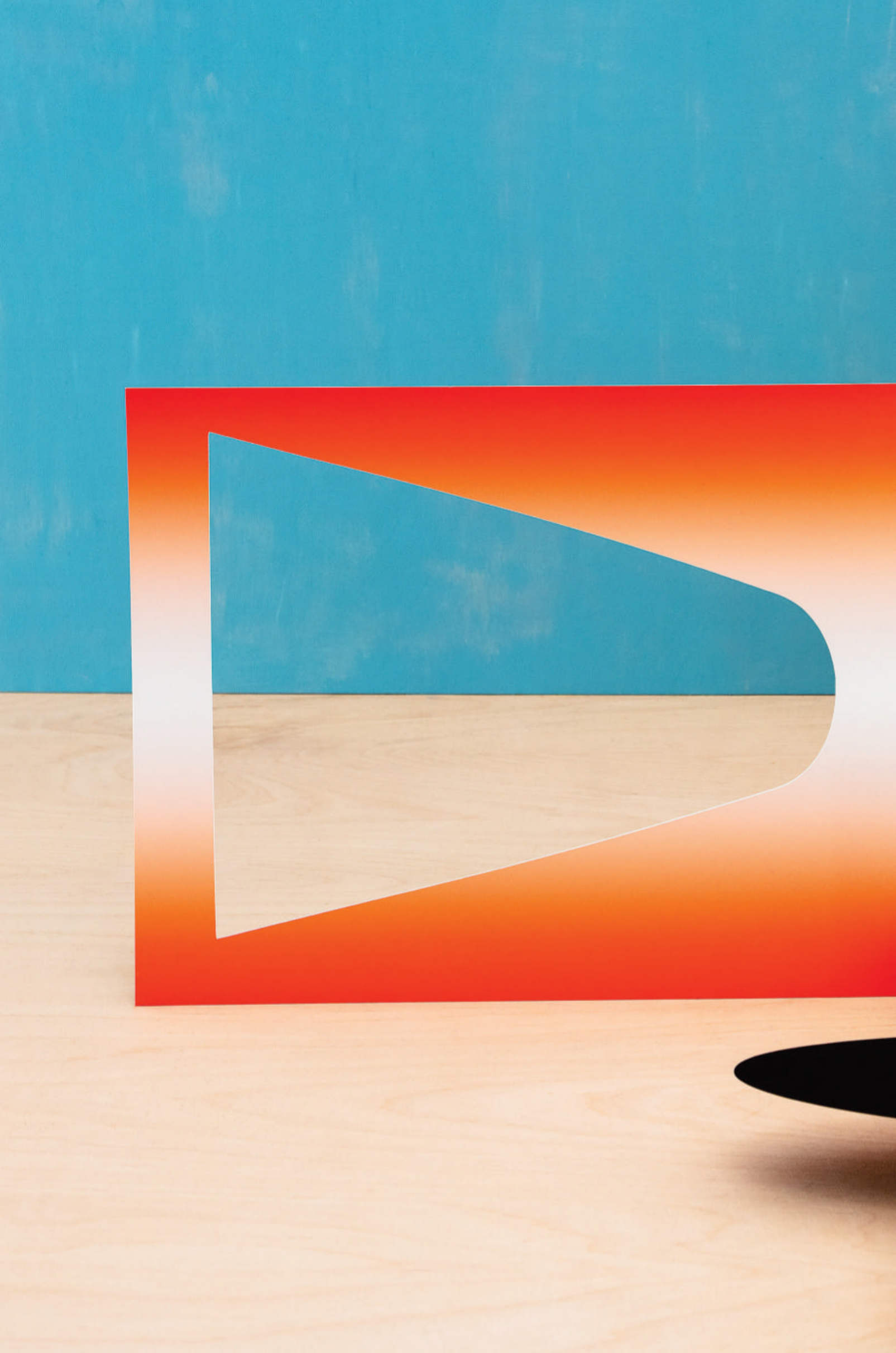




*Sidle Up*, 2020, archival pigment print, 25 x 20".



This page: *Flat Green*, 2020, archival pigment print, 40 x 32".  
Following spread: *Gathering*, 2020, archival pigment print, 20 x 25".







# Mary Crockett Hill

from "1976: A LYRIC, A MEMORY, A LIE,  
THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH"

In my family, a silver cup  
is called a goblet.

A room with books, however small,  
a library.

I had to wait for this—to wade through heart attack and heart attack  
and heart disease, brain tumor and old age, the mysteries of the  
body flung back on its own tongue—a new language that doesn't  
use *e*'s or *t*'s, that clucks and purrs in place of the perfect "what,"  
the perfect "gee."

Does it matter if I talk  
to myself  
(only myself)?

You never cared before.

*And why did I ever  
leave you?*

*Love, you never left me.*

You formed my lips like the mother wrapping silk bands around  
her daughter's feet.

*Now, we are bound  
whether or not*



I speak of you  
or you of me.

In my family,  
rules proved nothing  
but our rulelessness.

*No streaking when company is over.*

*No smoking pot until you're thirteen.*

*No shooting BB guns at the neighbor's windows,  
but if you do, we will lie and say you did not.*

Our bookshelves were jammed with Hopkins,  
Stevens,  
Donne,

plays of O'Casey I would stage, too young  
to understand the words  
but old enough to mouth them—

my one-girl show, hopping from velvet  
armchair to velvet armchair, lowering or raising  
my voice as I read the different bits.

(I blush to recall this  
as one of the several times  
my father looked at me.)

In the cupboard, a mason jar of moonshine  
for colds, or entertainment, or despair.  
Always someone sleeping in the attic,  
always someone coming through  
the screen door out back—

always and always always—

Love,

don't let this overtake us

We'll take it together

slowly, simply, with words anyone could speak

—a conversation at the long walnut table  
over homemade pizza topped with the garden's green beans.

There were flies in every room that summer. Windows open, rolled  
pages of newsprint at the ready in our grips.

My brother Sam's grand plan: to fashion homemade firecrackers  
from a neighbor's shotgun shells

(each shell emptied  
gingerly,  
its black grain  
raining  
into a paper sack)

and when he finished, Sam stashed the bag of powder  
on the bottom rack of Miss Maloney, our woodstove:

a safe hole, he guessed, because who would light a fire in July?

Who but my mother,  
shooing flies, thinking to bake bread  
as a gift for the demolition workers who delivered to our yard  
the rubble remains of the old AME church, a pile of still-good  
bricks.

We were one strike away from oblivion,  
but *something told her*,  
she said, *to check*.

In the cupboard, moonshine.  
On the shelf, Wallace Stevens.  
In the loft of the two-story ramshackle shed, boy porn.  
The magazines were called *Playgirl* but I was a girl and I knew  
those naked man bodies were not for me.

The long walnut table could extend out or fold in on itself.

Did I tell you  
that was where we were told

(according to my siblings, who were older and remember)  
what was meant by the word *gay*?

I never *didn't* know that word. I never didn't know  
my father was that word.

*How*, it struck me later, when there was no family to be in,  
when there were no flies, no July,  
*did a gay man happen to have six children?*

One or two might be explained, but *six*?

I, the sixth, of all people should not be.

Yet here I am, love, and here you are  
coming out of me.

There are too many stories for this to be a story.  
There isn't enough for anything else. It had to be you. I'm so  
happy. (Simple words, remember?) Happy.

I learned words in places and the places became the words.

The walnut table is gay.

The walnut table is my grandfather (heart attack) pounding his fist.

The walnut table is my mother (heart disease) spooning  
chipped beef gravy over dry toast.

In my family, we had picnics in a graveyard in Washington, D.C.  
We attended the opera, drank corked Dutch beer, plied and grand  
jetéd, sewed costumes for the local production of *Everyman*.

I was raised by that box of costumes—musty green velvet,  
upholstery braiding for trim, snaps and hooks  
that would not hook,  
stiff, mildewed cardboard,  
ruffled cuff.

They were my kindly, simpleminded uncles  
who pretended to eat the mud pies  
I baked under the summer sun.  
Where are they now, I wonder.

No time for that.

Speak.



# *Jeff Dolven*

## NOW IS MY TURN TO SPEAK

Now is my turn to speak, if I  
can claim it, tipping myself forward,  
letting my tongue fall with a soft,  
an inward, an almost inaudible click.

Now the leaves turn, turn in the wind,  
tipped by the wind, or the sun, by the wind  
and the rain, by the season, cupping their ears  
and listening in, listening out

for the telltale sharp intake of breath  
that happens only every time  
around again, my turn again,  
it's now, this in-between, or never.

The cameras turn expectantly,  
turn in the wind the satellites make,  
tipping us off that something is  
about to turn, or already turning,

and who could raise a hand to stop it,  
who could clear my throat, excuse  
me, but events, as it turns out,  
seem as entirely sure of themselves

as you do, fast asleep, your heart  
turning, turning under my hand,  
a calm, implacable, rotary hum  
so constant, who knows where to start?

## *The Mirror Test*

MELISSA FEBOS

I.

*always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; but  
what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?;  
you mean to say that after all you are really going  
to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let  
near the bread?*

—Jamaica Kincaid, “Girl”

In the eighteenth century, “slut’s pennies” were hard nuggets in a loaf of bread that resulted from incomplete kneading. I imagine them salty and dense, soft enough to sink your tooth into, but tough enough to stick. What could a handful of slut’s pennies buy you? Nothing—a hard word, a slap in the face, a fast hand for your slow ones.

A slut was the maid who left dust on the floor—“slut’s wool”—or who left a corner of the room overlooked in her cleaning—a “slut’s corner.” An

untidy man might occasionally be referred to as “sluttish,” but for his sloppy jacket, not his unswept floor, because a slut was a doer of menial housework, a drudge, a maid, a servant—a woman.

A slut was a careless girl, hands sunk haphazardly into the dough, broom stilled against her shoulder—eyes cast out the window, mouth humming a song, always thinking of something else.

Oh, was I ever a messy child. A real slut in the making. My clothes tangled on the floor, my books splayed open and dog-eared, their bindings split. At a certain point, when I got in trouble and wanted to be seen as good again, I would clean my room. But only when I wanted to be good, not when I wanted to be clean. I already understood that goodness was something you earned, that existed only in the esteem of others. Alone in my room, I was always good. Or, I was never good. It was not a thing to care about alone in my room, unless I was thinking about the people outside and the ways I might need them to see me.

The story goes like this: In March 1838, Darwin visited the Zoological Society of London’s gardens. The zoo had just acquired Jenny, a female orangutan. The scientist watched a zookeeper tease the ape with an apple. Jenny flung herself on the ground in frustration, “precisely like a naughty child.” Later, he watched her study a mirror in her cage. The visit led him to wonder about the animal’s emotional landscape. Did she have a sense of fairness to offend? Did she feel wronged, and what sense of selfhood would such a reaction imply?

More than a century later, Darwin’s musings led to the mirror test, developed in 1970 by the psychologist Gordon Gallup Jr. It is used to assess an animal’s ability to visually recognize itself. In it, an animal is marked with a sticker or paint in an area it cannot normally see. Then it is shown a mirror. If the animal subsequently investigates the mark on its own body, it is seen to perform this self-recognition. Great apes, Eurasian magpies, bottlenose dolphins, orcas, ants, and one Asian elephant are the most frequently cited animals to have passed the test.

Just think of all the things a woman could do rather than clean. Which is to say, think of all of the pastimes that might make her a slut: reading, talking, listening, thinking, masturbating, eating, picking a scab, smoking, painting, building something, daydreaming, conspiring, laughing, communing with

animals or God, imagining herself a god, imagining a future in which her time is her own.

In Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary (the precursor to the Oxford English) a slut is simply a dirty woman. In the nineteenth century, a slut also becomes a female dog and a rag dipped in lard to light in place of a candle. It isn't until the 1960s that a slut finally becomes "a woman who enjoys sex in a degree considered shamefully excessive."

It is a brilliant linguistic trajectory. Make the bad housekeeper a woman of poor morals. Make her maid service to men a moral duty and every other act becomes a potentially immoral one. Make her a bitch, a dog, a pig, any kind of subservient or inferior beast. Create one word for them all. Make sex a moral duty, too, but pleasure in it a crime. This way you can punish her for anything. You can make her humanity monstrous. Now you can do anything you want to her.

One of the first orgasms I remember having was to the 1983 movie *Valley Girl*, starring Nicolas Cage. I was not interested in the chaste romance between Cage's punk, Randy, and Deborah Foreman's Valley girl, Julie. There was a scene, however, in which Randy goes to the punk club and runs into his ex, Samantha, a smoldering brunette. Their urgent exchange in the shadows of that club was so compelling that I ignored the fact of my grandmother dozing on the sofa behind me as I masturbated to climax, then again, and again, and again. I had no concept that my behavior might approach "a degree considered shamefully excessive."

Female pleasure or any indication of it was nowhere found in our school's sex ed curriculum. Wet dreams and male masturbation, of course. Boys, I knew, could masturbate excessively, though this cliché was treated with jocular resignation. "No one ever tried to hide a man's penis from him," writes Cara Kulwicki in her essay "Real Sex Education." In order to talk about reproduction, sex ed curriculums can't avoid describing men's most common route to orgasm. Conversely, "women enter adulthood all too often without knowing what a clitoris is, where it is, and/or what to do with it," writes Kulwicki. Girls' sex ed was all periods and unwanted pregnancy, unrolling condoms onto bananas.

I was lucky to have no family or religious dogma that condemned sexual pleasure, and so I was as enthusiastic and messy in exploring my body as I was

in exploring the woods around our home, in whose tangled depths I played all summer. I was free of the consciousness of self that a gaze brings. An orgasm was a private thing, a firework in the dark of my body.

The psychologist Henri Wallon observed that both humans and chimpanzees seem to recognize their own reflections around six months of age. In 1931 he published a paper in which he argued that mirrors aid in the development of a child's self-conception.

Five years later, Jacques Lacan presented his development of this idea at the Fourteenth Annual Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad. He called it *le stade du miroir*, the mirror stage. Before it reaches the mirror stage, the infant is simply a conduit for her own experience. Self-conception is piecemeal—here is a foot, here a hand—but perhaps closer to what Lacan would later call the Real. There is no *I*. Then the baby sees herself in the mirror. The image of her own body disturbs and then delights her as she identifies with it. The self becomes unified and objectified simultaneously, and the uneasy grasping for a fixed subject begins. The baby cannot tell the difference between the mirror self and the actual self. It is the first story she tells herself about herself: that is me. It is the beginning of self-alienation.

The summer after fourth grade, my classmate Vicki had a pool party for her birthday. Vicki lived in a characterless mansion on the west side of our town, in a housing development of identical mansions. I lived in a gray-shingled house in the woods with a tiny black-and-white television and cabinets full of foods no one at school had ever heard of. Vicki had more Barbies than friends, and she was very popular. Most notably, Vicki had a pale white Popsicle body and freckled cheeks, while I was the first girl in our grade with breasts.

In her spacious backyard, she commanded us as she did on the school playground, except on that day she did so in a pink bikini with a squared top. The other girls also scampered around her yard in their suits, legs straight as clothespins, bellies bright white, chests flat and unmoving as they ran. I kept my T-shirt on. Underneath I wore a bright green one-piece with a decorative zipper on the front, bought on sale at T.J. Maxx, rather than the Gap or Puritan. Those were places where I thought only rich people like Vicki shopped.

As we sat around the patio table eating pizza, a girl complimented Vicki on her suit. Vicki waved dismissively as she took a bite and then swiped a



dribble of grease from her chin with a paper napkin. We all watched her chew and then regally swallow.

“This is for babies without *boobs*,” she explained. “When I have boobs, I’m going to get one of those suits with a zipper *right here*.” She pointed coyly at her pink top. “And I’m going to unzip it all the way down to here.” She dragged her finger down until the whole cohort laughed, even me, with my heart in my gut.

The role of the mirror stage is ultimately “to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.”

The baby, Lacan tells us, can see herself before she can control herself. It is this temporal dialectic that makes the mirror stage “a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation.” This fragmented self is reconciled by the creation of an anticipatory body, an “‘orthopedic’ form of its totality.” The creation of a story about the body—*I will have boobs, I will have a bathing suit, I will unzip it all the way to here*—to reconcile the distance between the image of the self and the experience of the self allows us to move through space, to have a conception of identity that feels solid, though it is not. It is the construction of a fiction that will eventually harden into something else.

After presents, Vicki ordered us all into the pool. I lingered at the table and tried to demur, but she insisted and so I waded into the shallow end with my T-shirt on, its wet hem sticking to my thighs as the whole party watched.

“No, Melissa,” Vicki shouted, exasperated. “Take off your T-shirt! You can’t play with a T-shirt on.” Someone giggled. I stared down at the blue water, my feet rippling at the bottom. Then I squeezed my eyes shut and pulled off my shirt.

If I had hoped that it might be seen as luck—me in possession of that thing they all wanted, most of all Vicki—then my hopes sank before my shirt hit the concrete. They stared at my zippered swimsuit in silence. No, they stared at my body, and in those scorching moments I knew that there are some people we love for having the things we don’t and some people we hate for the same reason.

Though I spent hours staring in the mirror at that age, I hadn't yet learned how to see my own changed body. That afternoon, I glimpsed her, a glimmering double that was the only thing others could see of me. Vicki and I never played again, not because what girls did at recess or on the weekends was no longer playing—instead a kind of work to become an impossible thing and to discipline the bodies that failed worst at this—but because she had recognized that we were different, a fact I'd already known. It would be another year before anyone would spit in my face, threaten me, or prank-call my home, but by the time they whispered *slut* into my ear, I already knew whom they meant.

Gallup's mirror test answered the question of an animal's ability to recognize itself in its reflection, but it did not answer Darwin's first question: Did she have a sense of fairness to offend? Did she feel wronged, and what sense of selfhood did such a reaction imply? Darwin's ultimate question about Jenny was always the same: How human is she? The acceptance of poor treatment has often been interpreted as a validation of such treatment, at least by its enactors.

Queen Victoria, who visited another ape named Jenny in May 1842, described the animal in her diary as "frightful & painfully and disagreeably human."

Say the ape, the Eurasian magpie, or the elephant looks in the mirror and recognizes the paint smeared on her body by the researcher. The animal who passes the mirror test then investigates her own body for the offending mark. What if she finds nothing, but the mark on her reflection is confirmed by all the other elephants? How long before her reflection replaces herself?

2.

*What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe.*

—Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

"She's tight," they kept saying with glee about this girl or that. This was before *tight* meant good or mad and after it meant drunk or cheap.

“What about me?” Is it possible that I actually asked this? Of course. I was a child.

“No, you’re loose as a goose.”

I know exactly what I wore that day: button-fly jeans, short-sleeved shirt with a floral pattern. It must have seemed important. I must have looked down to see what they saw. There was no mark, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there.

The geese in our town shat everywhere. Their long black necks were as fat as the pipes under our kitchen sink, their identical heads sleek with white-feathered cheeks. Their wingspan was enormous. Sometimes they flew in a V formation, their muscular wings beating in unison, their bodies’ improbable masses gliding over us in an arrow, honking as they sliced through the sky.

I felt loose as a goose in my bedroom, the book of feminist erotica that I’d pilfered from my mother’s bedroom clutched in one hand, the other hand between my legs, no mirror anywhere in sight. I felt loose as a goose in the bathtub, the door locked, the water rushing warm as the inside of my body.

I did not feel loose as a goose in Kimmy’s kitchen with her older cousin, or with that stranger in his twenties. I did not feel loose as a goose with that ninth grader after school. Still, I let them touch me. It seemed that when my desire and theirs met, the result ought to be some shared reward, though it never was. My desire found a dead end in them and there was no easy route out.

I recently reread Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and found it almost too painful to finish. I had not remembered that it was a novel about dying of a bad reputation. I only remembered that Lily Bart was beautiful, that she becomes addicted to “chloral,” and that such a fate seemed either likely or appealing to me.

As a child reader, I loved tragic stories of smart women whose difference led to ruin. Better yet if they were also beautiful. The romance of tragedy was a balm I could apply to my own sorrows. I felt different in so many ways, not least of which in the way I looked—not blond and freckled like the most popular kids but tan and green-eyed, with the body of a woman. I had always been told I was exotic—*what are you?*—but it had started to feel like an insult.

Tiffany was not a close friend and it would likely have been the only sleepover we ever had anyway. The smells of other people's houses sometimes allured me in their novelty, but the cloying smell of Tiffany's house made me instantly homesick.

Tiffany's older brother was more interesting than either Tiffany or her ruffled bedroom. When she introduced us, I felt burnished by his attention, the kind I'd already become an expert at detecting. I could feel a man's gaze when it sharpened with interest, like the birds who flitted at the feeder in our yard could feel mine. Desire filled my bones with air. Tiffany noticed, too. Later, when she suggested we play truth or dare, she dared me to ask him to join us. Then she dared us to go in the closet. There he kissed me, probing the inside of my mouth with his tongue. As the dresses shifted on their hangers in the dark, I recognized the mix of fear and excitement that fizzed in me. The familiar sense, when he touched me, that I no longer existed. Not girl but vapor. My body a thing in his hands, my mind a balloon bumping the closet ceiling.

On Monday, I was summoned to the vice principal's office and arrived to find Tiffany waiting there, a tissue clenched in her hand. She told the vice principal that I was going to get a bad reputation. She thought I ought to be punished for her hurt feelings. I had used her, she said. I did not think to apply the same word to myself. I did not think her brother had wronged me, though it had not exactly felt like a choice. When the vice principal suggested that I apologize to Tiffany, I did, my face burning, without knowing exactly for what.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's mother teaches her daughter that society's regard is everything. That "a beauty needs more tact than the possessor of an average set of features." That she must manipulate and manage both her gifts and society's esteem to get what she needs, to be safe. It makes sense that Lily is always looking in mirrors; she knows very well that the specular self is the social self, the one on which her life depends.

But there are two Lilys: the one ravenous for approval and security, who believes entirely in "the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled," and another, more private one. When she disobeys society's rules, the rules of her mother, in that grace period before the other inhabitants of the cage begin to punish her for her transgressions, she can feel it, "one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears."

First, it was just the other students in my class, kids I'd known since first grade. I was loose as a goose, mostly because of the way I looked. It only took a few true stories to stoke that fire.

One night, I was eating dinner with my family and the phone rang. A tiny bolt of lightning struck in my chest and I leaped up to answer the call in the next room. "No phone calls during dinner," my father reminded me. I ignored him and snatched the phone from its cradle. There was a shuffling and then a girl's gravelly voice shouted, *You're a fucking whore!* into my ear. I fixed my face and went back to dinner. That first time it happened, I wondered if I should have apologized more sincerely to Tiffany.

It is Gus Trenor's wife, Judy, who is Lily's best friend early in the book. It is she who warns Lily, in her pursuit of a potential husband, about the dangers of being perceived as "what his mother would call fast—oh, well, you know what I mean. Don't wear your scarlet crepe-de-chine for dinner, and don't smoke if you can help it, Lily dear!"

Lily doesn't marry that man and she doesn't fuck Judy Trenor's husband, but she does accept something she needs from him: money. That is enough.

The most frequent caller, she of the gravelly voice, was Jenny, a sophomore at the high school. One day after school, Jenny's older boyfriend and his friends had noticed me. Their attention, as with every older boy's, dazzled me like headlights on a dark road. I froze, exhilarated and scared. Nothing physical had happened between Jenny's boyfriend and me—just an exchange of light. That was enough.

I became the mistress of the telephone. No one got to it faster. I came directly home after school and parked myself next to the beige contraption with its long, curly cord. It was not always Jenny—sometimes other voices told me I was a slut and described the ways they were going to punish me for it—but I came to know that gravelly voice.

There were times that we exchanged more than light. I always got burned. Every time, I was sorry before it ended, hot with regret by the time I got home. I already knew the story that I was helping to kindle with my own body.

They told us to say no to so many things in school, but never how. My father insisted that boys were not to be trusted under any circumstances. My



parents encouraged me to respect my body, to protect it. But what did that mean? For better and worse, I've rarely been capable of summoning respect simply because I was told to. Sometimes the things I did felt like a kind of protection.

Jake and I had hardly ever spoken. He was the older brother of a classmate I'd known since elementary school. What he thought he knew about me was enough. In the busy hallway of school, he stopped directly in front of me, reached out a hand and roughly groped my breast through my shirt, his gaze steady on my face. I froze. He withdrew his hand, smirked, and walked away. In twenty-five years, I have never spoken of it aloud, though I have thought many times how lucky I was to be confronted by him in a school hallway and not behind a closed door.

I had not been a fearful child. Now I was afraid to go to school. I feared my own body, which seemed cursed. Most of all, I was terrified that my family would discover how reviled I had become.

The part of me that knew how to climb trees and disagree with my teachers, who drew "deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration," she was not gone, though it felt that way. The other one—"gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears"—her dark smoke had obscured everything else.

Here's the thing: they were calling me a slut before they ever said the word, before I let any boy touch me. They saw the mark on me and though I didn't see it, I came to believe it was there. People can be mirrors, too. With hindsight, I understand the instinctive shame girls feel at this kind of treatment. The story of us has been revised to include the thing that warrants humiliation. Even when we know it's not true, or at least not right, a part of us believes it. We are not ashamed of being humiliated, but of what we have become. To tell my mother that they called me a slut would have been to reveal that I was one.

For months, Gus Trenor insists that Lily pay him special attention. She avoids him, but he will not be placated. In their final, terrifying encounter, he sends her an invitation under his wife's name. Lily arrives at his door that evening to find that his wife is not even in town. His whining swells to menace. He feels owed, not only because "the man who pays for the dinner is

generally allowed to have a seat at table” but simply because he wants her. As Lily rebuffs him and tries to leave, the careful manners that govern the world inside their gilded cage evaporate from him like steam. How quickly his desire, when thwarted, turns to hatred. It is on this grave miscalculation of Lily’s that the whole book, and her life, turns.

Though she does not pay that debt with her body, she pays it with her reputation, which amounts to the same thing in the end. Whatever power she has held depends entirely on the esteem of others, and once that falters, it becomes clear to both Lily and the reader that he can do anything he wants to her.

We were studying some aspect of American history, discussing a true rumor about some dead president, when my teacher said, “The thing about reputations is that they are usually true.”

There it was: my reluctant sense of fairness, my feeling of being wronged. It bloomed in me like a corpse flower, rare and putrid. I was afraid to be angry. If I let myself get angry, I would have to face my own sense of the injustice, the true breadth of my own powerlessness. There are benefits to believing what they say about you.

Did I argue with him? Probably not, though I knew he was wrong, and not only on behalf of my own bad reputation. What is a reputation but the story most often told about a person? Perhaps the bad stories told about white men throughout history have mostly been true. After all, the threat of punishment for telling false stories about white men has often been great. Likewise, the ability of white men to correct the record. But the stories those men tell about women, queers, or anyone who is not white? Power is required to inflict punishment and to revise the public record. You need a weapon to defend your own name. If you don’t have one, they can say anything they want about you.

I don’t think my teacher meant that reputations are usually true in the Lacanian sense of a self that is built by social collaboration. He meant that if they say you’re a slut, you’re probably a slut. Which implies that a slut is a kind of woman, rather than a word used to control women’s bodies.

Some Buddhists believe in hungry ghosts. When a person dies and is consigned to this role, the experience that follows is considered a milder version

of hell. The hungry ghost might have an enormous belly and a long, needle-thin neck. Invisible during daylight, she roams the night, ravenous. Maybe the food turns to flames in her mouth. Maybe she can only eat corpses. Maybe her mouth itself has gone putrid. In any case, she can never satisfy her hunger. She is always disappointed and she is never full.

The harassment only lasted a year, but that was a forever. At school, I was tormented. At home, I became angry and sullen. Some nights, I sought relief in the gazes of men. After, I burned with self-hatred, as if I'd ingested a poison that was slowly blackening my insides.

Lily doesn't want to die; she just wants to sleep. Her life, now one of poverty and isolation, offers only that relief. She is so tormented by the events that led to her ruin that the opiate sleeping draught is her lone route to "the gradual cessation of the inner throb, the soft approach of passiveness, as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness."

I would also have found it "delicious to lean over and look down into the dim abysses of unconsciousness," to "[wonder] languidly what had made [me] feel so uneasy and excited." But I did not find my chloral for a few more years, and that was lucky, because otherwise my story would have ended the same as Lily's.

It is how the story of the slut almost always ends. Sometimes, she is exiled, like Little Em'ly in *David Copperfield* or Hester Prynne. Rarely is she redeemed. In the 2010 film *Easy A*, a high school student who wants to appear more interesting starts fabricating sexual exploits; in the end her sex is a farce and her virginity intact, and thus she emerges unscathed. But mostly, the slut dies. The trope of the murdered slut in horror movies is so familiar that it has a name: "Death by Sex." By contrast, only one woman is ever allowed to survive a typical horror movie: the "Final Girl," who must be as pure as her dead friends are dirty.

Daisy Miller dies of Roman fever. Nana Coupeau dies of smallpox. Ophelia dies by drowning herself. Tess Durbeyfield dies by execution. Emma Bovary dies by swallowing arsenic. Anna Karenina dies by throwing herself under a train.

I did not die. I withstood. By fourteen, I started having sex with girls and stopped feeling like I had poisoned myself. Sometimes when our desires met,

there *was* a shared reward. After one year of high school, I left it for good. My pain had felt exceptional, though my story was an ordinary one.

The following summer, I worked as a maid for a roadside motel in town. There, one of my coworkers was an older girl who it took me a few shifts to recognize: Jenny, my most frequent prank caller. She still had that gravelly voice, smoked menthols, and used a lot of hair spray, but there were stretch marks on her belly and dark shadows around her eyes. There, both of us sluts in the oldest sense of the word, we became a kind of friends. We traded complaints about filthy guests and shared her cigarettes while we waited for the washing machines to complete their cycles. We both remembered those calls she made to my home, each of us breathing into the strange darkness of the other, but we never spoke of it, because while there were so many words for *what* back then, there weren't yet any for *why*.

There is a part of me that still can't bear to see it in other women: that shimmer, that man-sourcing of self, that vaporous need to please, to fill the invisible belly with the thing they told us was food. It hurts to look at them and I feel a twinge of that muddy desire to punish them, to prevent them, to protect them.

I suspect that as long as a part of me hates them, it is the persisting part of me that hates my young self, that is still afraid of being the girl in the mirror. Or even the less-young self, who sought attention as if playing the slots, who handed herself over for the impossible chance that it might pay off in some lasting way. She didn't get punished the way I had as a kid for playing that mean lottery, but she did go broke in other ways.

I can't undo the years of my life I spent marked. When you leave the cage, you take the mirror with you. It took me half a life to smash it. But now that I have? The gazes of men are worth nothing to me. When my beloved touches me, I fill my own body like a storm under her hands.

It turns out that almost everything they will call you a slut for being is a thing I want to be. I am finally loose as a goose, my wingspan unfolded its full length, my powerful neck raised as I slice into the sky. I am the same woman in the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*. I am that careless girl, hands sunk haphazardly into the dough, bedroom a sty, pen stilled against her hand, eyes cast out the window, mouth humming a song, thinking of something else. I am a firework gone off in the dark, a spectacle of disobedience, a grand finale of orgasms anytime I want.

I don't want to take the word *slut* back, like I don't want to own a gun. It was never mine. You'll never hear me say it to any woman, not as joke, not with pride or affection or irony.

The only definition of the word that I claim is the one of a rag dipped in lard and set afire. Call me that kind of a slut. Call me flashlight. Carry me through the dark if it helps. Here, take this story and watch it burn.



# *Jeff Fearnside*

## O N C E

Once I walked  
through a forest.  
It was high  
in the mountains.  
The air was clear and thin.  
The stars shone brightly,  
the outline of the forest canopy  
in sharp relief  
like the background  
to a stop-motion silhouette fairy tale.

The children are awake.  
Once I knew that.  
Once I heard their voices.  
Once I had a voice.  
I was a child in a forest.  
I was a tree in a fairy tale.  
The stars were a flying carpet,  
its jeweled fabric undulating  
with the rotation of the earth  
and procession of seasons.

Their dreams birthed clouds  
and rain and weathered rocks  
and all that made me grow.  
I was a tree in a forest  
under the cyclic dreaming of seasons  
once. Then the seasons were disrupted.  
Their fluid motion halted.  
Magic had been cut,  
extracted, shot—  
or flat-out wasn't allowed anymore.

Red-faced they had come  
armed with saws, shovels, guns,  
and something more violent:  
their own cleverness.  
It smelled like rusted metal.  
Once I breathed this in  
I knew it was blood.  
I could taste it  
in my lungs.

Once I was a man,  
and I cut myself.  
Once I was a star,  
and I fell.

# *Elly Bookman*

## NOCTURNE

After I make my home dark  
I wander through the few  
quiet rooms and let  
the bright blinking eyes  
of the continuing electricity  
take me in. The modem, forever  
streaming its signals in and back  
out again to the air of the  
living room, flashes the language of  
its six green indicators  
into the dim, and I'm not  
untouched. By the door,  
the alarm pad keeps its emerald  
beacon of earnest defense  
burning on, and I'm not  
vulnerable. And I remember  
every thing is a thing  
someone made,  
that somewhere someone's job  
is to place tiny bulbs  
inside plastic bodies, that  
someone else's is to decide  
that firefly color, to sit  
at a table shining under office light  
and tell me what vividness  
should tell me I am kept  
safe, I am kept connected, even  
as loneliness hums its generator  
like a heart in a jar.

27 May

This is not a play for George Floyd

George Floyd: And write a play for the  
burn some; down instead  
burn down the city  
burn down the ~~into~~ county  
burn down the whole damn world  
Hell, it's being angry.

And while I talk, not be feel this way, tomorrow  
today, I am feeling it  
Although I just admit that right now  
right now  
right now  
I am Not of Ground kind and Body.

They pulled the car and I exited by car hands  
up I was not resist, I was compliant and kept  
my hand on the white cop had his knee in my neck  
and he was pressing and the other cops were  
watching and someone was filming and my eyes were  
going out of my head to feel a little look & what  
the \* was going on and I pinned myself and which  
I know. Give you some of you a ripple of pleasure and  
I yelled "cannot breathe, thank you" (was very conscious of

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SUZAN-LORI  
PARKS

There are few living writers—and fewer playwrights—as celebrated, cited, and studied as Suzan-Lori Parks. In three decades, Parks has become a staple of both the American theater and university syllabi, with a body of work that includes nineteen works for the stage—including a reboot of *Porgy and Bess* and a cycle of 365 short plays—widely read essays on style and form, three films, a novel, and a TV series inspired by the life of Aretha Franklin. She has received any number of honors and recognitions, including the MacArthur Fellowship and the Windham Campbell Prize. In 2002, she was the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, for her play *Topdog/Underdog* (2001).

Parks was born in 1963 in Fort Knox, Kentucky, the second of three children. Her family, guided by



her father's military career, moved frequently, perhaps most consequentially to West Germany, where she spent four formative years and became fluent in the language. This bilingualism may be why she's always lived at such an innovative and interesting remove from language itself, and perhaps also why she had a difficult time with spelling, which led a high school English teacher to dismiss her early dreams of becoming a writer. But Parks found the affirmation she needed at Mount Holyoke College, where she abandoned a major in chemistry for a life in letters at the encouragement of English scholar and critic Leah B. Glasser. Initially insecure and uncertain about the right form for her—fiction, poetry, songwriting—she was nudged toward the theater by none other than James Baldwin.

From essentially the outset of her career, Parks has been feted as a genius of the form. After a brief but interesting apprenticeship fashioning short works in “the bars and the basements” of late-eighties downtown New York, she broke onto the scene with *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989). A wild, epic, genre-scrambling fantasia on themes of Blackness, Americanness, history, surveillance, language, and family, her first full-length play went on to win an Obie Award (she has now received four). This work, coupled with her next play, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), heralded the arrival of a critical new voice in theater and cleared the ground for new themes and modes of expression on the stage. Parks's innovative deployments of dramatic techniques find inspiration in the Modernism of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, the jazz of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, and the experiments of the off-off-Broadway pioneers Sam Shepard, María Irene Fornés, and Adrienne Kennedy; with these eclectic forebears she has staked new claims for artists of all colors and shapes to embrace multiple aesthetic legacies of radical work regardless of so-called gender, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

This interview, much like a Suzan-Lori Parks play, moved through many forms across the span of years: a jovial breakfast at a French bistro near her home, only a table over from her husband, Christian, and their young son, Durham; a more formal back-and-forth at a palatial studio in the Park Avenue Armory; and finally, in the throes of the pandemic, a couple of dishy gabs over “the Zooms.” Throughout it all, her generosity never waned.

A Broadway director once described Parks to me as “kind of our version of a rock star,” and in person she comes across as just that—ageless, wise, confident

in her gifts, and strikingly free in her sense of self. Our conversations moved pleasantly between stretches of excited playfulness and wistful revelation, when it seemed that even she was cracking open some long-neglected chest of memories for the first time in a while. Parks claims that her creative process has always been more about listening than speaking, but more often than not this interviewer found himself struck by the ease with which she could toss off a casually elaborate metaphor in the moment or the speed at which she could turn a thought or idea into a better version of itself. Her mind is ever open but always, it seems, at work.

—Branden Jacobs-Jenkins

INTERVIEWER

What's your relationship to the finished "product" when you're working? Is it—the play or whatever—a thing you're building in real time, or do you feel that the thing is already in there and your job is clearing away dirt?

SUZAN-LORI PARKS

It's like what "Michelangelo" said, right? He's working with the marble and taking away everything that's not the sculpture.

INTERVIEWER

Everything that's not *David*.

PARKS

Right. And let's put Michelangelo in quotes, 'cause was he really the one who actually said that? But, anyway, the idea still holds. I feel that whatever I'm writing exists already. Maybe that's because of a glitch in the space-time continuum and when I write I'm actually putting my *living* self behind the *present* moment in time. Like I'm following something through the woods. Eyes open. Ears open. Heart open. And I'm following a path that is sometimes *behind* me. Now I'm sounding like one of my characters. That's what the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln in *The America Play* (1993) is talking about. He's *following* in the footsteps of someone who is *behind* him. There is a strange relationship between writing and history and time, and

I don't think it is what we think it is. Or how we perceive it. There's more to it.

INTERVIEWER

This talk of time and writing brings to mind your relationship with music, which people often talk about—the musicality of your language, the way your scripts sometimes read as scores, the occasional evocation by academics of something like a “jazz aesthetic.” Then there's music in the literal sense. You've written songs for your novel, you write songs for some of your plays, you write songs for your band.

PARKS

Writing songs is my first thing, the first way I started being an artist. My first love. My songwriting and music have been living in the shadow of my large dramatic-writing tree, which is fine, I guess—they inform each other. Songwriting still feels like the kundalini and the Gordian knot. That energy is intense, and I think I've done more with literature because, growing up, music was not the safest thing for me to do. We'll put it this way—the library was safer than the music hall.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you learn about music?

PARKS

From listening. My mom, she's a Texan, she loves jazz, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and then of course Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne, and Brubeck and Monk and Mingus. Dad, he's passed, he loved opera. He would walk around the house lip-synching to Puccini and Wagner. My aunts and uncles love funk and soul, Aretha and Marvin, Curtis Mayfield and Parliament, James Brown.

When I think now about my writing, the story architecture is partly from my dad, opera, it's like classical architecture—strong walls and huge, clear story lines, combined with the repetition and revision that I borrow from Mom's beloved jazz aesthetic. And the people, the characters—classical-slash-historical origins that explode into brilliant and inventive jazz people. And the vibe is all soul.



“When I think now about my writing, the story architecture is partly from my dad . . . strong walls and huge, clear story lines.”

#### INTERVIEWER

I love that. Do you have any sense of where your dad got his love of opera from? Because it’s historically a form associated with ideas of whiteness or Eurocentricity.

#### PARKS

It might be considered a “white” form, but there were a lot of trailblazers, people who made inroads—Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Jessye Norman, Leontyne Price. These icons singing the music of grand, huge, enormous things. My dad was very tall and opera is all about living large—it’s big, mythic, epic. I think that’s why he loved opera so much. And he loved structure. My dad was in the army, he joined back in the fifties. The army had just been integrated and it was seen as one of the few places that might give a Black man a fair shake. My dad grew up very poor, coming from Chicago, and with the ROTC he got through college, then he joined the army, and he stayed in as a career. When he retired he went back to school and got his Ph.D. Mom already had her master’s. She was already a professor.

INTERVIEWER

Your dad's work with the army sent your family to Germany, right?

PARKS

We moved to Germany for my sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. My parents, thinking out of the box, sent us to *Gymnasium*—which is German for secondary school.

INTERVIEWER

That's prime "let me be the most insecure I can be" time.

PARKS

I know, right? German people had not seen too many African Americans in the flesh. *Roots*, dubbed in German, was being broadcast on TV. There were the brown-skinned *Gastarbeiter*, the guest workers, primarily from Turkey. But it was quite intense to be the first Black person that my German friends had seen. Actually laid eyes, and hands, on. And there was the German language, which I had to learn, and the German kids learned British English, so my American English was frowned upon.

INTERVIEWER

Where in Germany were you?

PARKS

In Frankfurt. And in Gelnhausen, in Oberursel, and in Höchst—which was a very old, very small town. It was all eye-opening and beautiful—and stressful. But coming back to the States and finishing high school was also stressful because we were not—American anymore. The white kids were like, "You don't act like a Black person." And the Black kids were like, "You don't act like a Black person." And I was like, "What do you mean?" There's a variety to the Black experience.

INTERVIEWER

So you've been fluent in German from a young age and now you're married to a German. Do you guys speak German to each other?



PARKS

Yeah, we speak German in the house. We haven't yet taught our son, because we like having a secret language.

INTERVIEWER

I bet he's picking it up and you don't even realize it.

PARKS

Oh, he certainly is! Durham's got a great ear.

Maybe I write like I do because I spent those years in the cauldron of not fluently speaking the native language of my classmates. Those several years of being told that the tongue I spoke wasn't right.

INTERVIEWER

On the page you're very interested in architecture, and that feels very German to me. When I'm writing or talking in German or listening to German, I always feel like I'm stacking bricks.

PARKS

Legos or something. In German you can stack words together and get amazing compound nouns. And the punctuation. They use dashes—*Gedankenstriche*—for when the speaker is thinking. Very cool.

INTERVIEWER

And with sentence structure, there's an element of improvisation that requires you to trust that the language will catch you. If you just hang on, eventually the meaning will emerge.

PARKS

There's some kind of undergirding—that is faith-based, in a way.

INTERVIEWER

So, when you finished high school, in the U.S., you went to Mount Holyoke. You famously studied with James Baldwin at nineteen. What was the content of that class? Was it a workshop?



As a student at Mount Holyoke College, 1982.

PARKS

Yes. A creative writing workshop. Fiction. The class was held at Hampshire College, just down the road from MHC. I only went to MHC 'cause of Mom. She really championed my academic efforts.

INTERVIEWER

You started out writing stories?

PARKS

Yes, but I wasn't necessarily good. All around the table in writing class there were people who would get published in *The New Yorker*, or get favorable rejection letters. And they were very sophisticated and they had read all the writers in *The Atlantic Monthly* and it felt like they were on the on-ramp to the literary highway and I was just on the little access road, just driving alongside. Every time I had to present my work I was nervous, because we had to read our stories out loud to James Baldwin and the fourteen other students. I would freak out beforehand, but it was great, it was really helpful.

INTERVIEWER

Was it your first time ever doing that?

PARKS

I guess. In other classes, you wrote your story, you handed it in. And then everybody would get a copy and read it, and then maybe give you feedback. But Mr. Baldwin wanted to hear it coming from you, or maybe he didn't have time to read it himself. [*laughs*] Teachers, we have all kinds of methods. Anyway, when I would read mine, I was very animated, and he said one day, "Have you ever thought about writing for the theater?" I said no. I hated theater—it felt dumb, it felt fake.

INTERVIEWER

The plays themselves or theater culture? What was your first experience of theater?

PARKS

In the schools I attended, I was one of the few Black kids, and when they did a show there wasn't ever a role for a Black person, and they could only imagine me playing roles written for Black people, so I didn't get any parts. And in college, theater wasn't very appealing. I remember, everybody talks *like this, dab-ling*. And they were only from, like, Long Island. The kids were local, American kids, using phony British accents, wearing—

INTERVIEWER

Scarves.

PARKS

Yes. And hats with feathers in them, and they all were *fabulous*. The men were slightly unshaven and really *interesting*, and the women were very *important*. So the theater, to me, seemed like a lot of ridiculousness. And I thought, Mr. James Baldwin, he's sending me to the theater 'cause he's saying that I suck as a writer!

INTERVIEWER

Right, he's condemning you to the worst version of writing.

PARKS

Get thee to a theater! And be with all those *oh, dab-ling* people. I didn't want to be sent to a place that I thought was dishonest. I was sad, I was really sad, but I thought, Okay, let me try, 'cause why not, right? I learned later that he was pointing me in a direction where he thought I might excel. By the way, I had a very compartmentalized mind—there were *plays* and there was *the theater*. Plays, oh, plays, I loved plays. I was an English and German double major, so I'd been reading my Shakespeare, Hansberry, Beckett, Lorca, Baraka, Shange, Shepard, Soyinka, the Greeks. I was deeply into the Greeks, myths, tragedy.

INTERVIEWER

But the idea of seeing plays live made you wanna jump off a bridge.

PARKS

No. I enjoyed *seeing* plays. But *theater culture* wasn't initially very welcoming to me—I was not cast in anything, and the stage crew wasn't welcoming either, it was always very cliquish. I wasn't a *theater kid*. But I loved reading Shakespeare, memorizing Shakespeare.

INTERVIEWER

Were you reading plays in German as well?

PARKS

Yes. Brecht, Dürrenmatt, Goethe.

INTERVIEWER

After being midwifed by Baldwin, were you writing plays? Taking classes? Were you thinking about grad school?

PARKS

Baldwin gave me some great gifts. He taught me how to keep showing up for the craft and how to conduct myself in the presence of the Great Spirit. And, in my evaluation—that's how he gave out grades—he wrote that I might grow up to be one of the most valuable artists of our time. It was a Big Thing for a great writer to see me that way, and—I've been working hard ever since, 'cause I didn't have the heart to prove him wrong. [*laughs*]

After Baldwin, I was still an undergrad, I took more writing classes, but I wasn't really architecting my career at all. I've never been one of those people. But I knew I didn't want to go to grad school. I'd had James Baldwin as a writing teacher! And I remember looking at a brochure from Yale and thinking, This is a domestication of the art form. Plus, everybody I knew was heading to grad school! So I figured I'd just go live in New York and see what happened.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you living?

PARKS

With a friend that I met during a summer internship. While in college I'd gotten a gig at the Sojourner Truth Players in Fort Worth, Texas. Basically my job was to clean and help the artistic director file her paperwork. That summer they were doing a production of *For Colored Girls* ... They had managed to get someone from the original Broadway cast to come down and direct the show. Laurie Carlos.

INTERVIEWER

Oh my goodness.

PARKS

Yeah. So that summer, one of the actresses who was supposed to be in it got pregnant and dropped out, and Laurie asked me, "You want to be in this play?" I said, "I don't know. I'm supposed to be cleaning and filing paperwork," and she said, "Come on, you can be in the play. We need you onstage." I was *Lady in Blue*. The part that Laurie had played on Broadway. And of course she was really nice to me. Wink, wink, wink, not. She was so hard on me, so incredibly tough. And I hung in there. In the end I had a wonderful time, and when I got back to school that fall, I wrote her a note, "Dear Ms. Carlos, thank you so much for the opportunity." She wrote back, "If you ever come to New York, mi casa es su casa." And so when I came to New York I called her up and she allowed me to rent a room in her very spacious apartment on Riverside Drive.

INTERVIEWER

You are twenty-two, twenty-three at that time?



PARKS

Yeah. I was just a kid. Laurie was very welcoming. She introduced me around. I got to meet all her friends, the greats like Sam Jackson and Ntozake Shange, Bimbo Rivas, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and Bob Holman—all the people from the downtown Nuyorican poetry scene. Oh my God, they would all hang out. And I was the youngster, watching from the sidelines, happy to just be in the room. Meanwhile, I went to the Betty Owen secretarial school and learned how to type.

INTERVIEWER

Skills you use to this day! I'm thinking about your *Watch Me Work* performances, where you invite an audience to watch you sit and work at your typewriter.

PARKS

You know it, that shit pays off. [*laughs*] I'd get these jobs working with bankers and lawyers, and they'd scream at me all day. That was how they showed they were the boss. And I worked in the World Trade Center. When it fell, I was horrified, 'cause I knew people who were still working there. They were good people.

INTERVIEWER

So you get sent out and you're a typist in the pool.

PARKS

For the most part, temp word processing was a good way to pay the rent. So there I was, working, and, when it's slow, I learned to work it. On my lap, I had a book, I was reading *Ulysses*. One day, one of the bankers comes around the corner. "What are you reading?" He's thinking, Ha, caught you, Temp Typist Girl. So I showed him *Ulysses* and his face totally changed and he just went, "Oh, cool," and shuffled away, looking frightened. I'd been saved by James Joyce!

So I would read while on the job. And then I'd go home and I might treat myself to a movie, go to a play or some performance art at PS 122, Franklin Furnace, or BACA Downtown. I'd see a lot of Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group. I'd see Laurie Carlos and Jessica Hagedorn and Robbie McCauley, whatever they were doing. I'd go see something at the Public, if I could afford

it, but that was a pricey ticket. Shakespeare in the Park was always free, but back then you had to take a day off from work to wait in line all day.

I hung out at the Poetry Project at Saint Mark's. We read Charles Olson, we read Gertrude Stein. We read James Joyce. We dug into the Last Poets, Sekou Sundiata, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Bob Kaufman. All these great writers, all these fantastic people—Ntozake Shange, of course.

I was very low-key and quiet, but I was developing a strength inside. At parties, I wasn't one of those people who could work a room. I'd be over in the corner by the bookshelf, but I was tuning my ears, my literary ears. I would spend a lot of time working on my writing, and that gave me a quiet confidence. I wasn't distracted. I am not easily distracted. Eyes on the prize.

#### INTERVIEWER

What was the prize?

#### PARKS

Ha! Oh, that's a good question. I remember one day I was sitting at my desk in my college dorm doing an assignment. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and my desk faced a window and the light was coming in just so, and I was typing, writing a story, trying to figure out what it was about, and all of a sudden it was as if the room was populated by people and all I had to do was listen up and write down what they were saying. I felt like I was in the river, that big river, and I'm in the flow of the stream. After that, the act of writing, the prize, became the chasing of that experience.

So the prize is just the joy of writing, hearing the sounds, hearing those voices. Just being in that river, with the Spirit, having your veins hit the Vein. When these veins in my arm intersect with the Great River and the divining rod goes bzzz. You can feel that thrum. And to come back to it again and again and know that it's always there and if you work for it, it's there. The work is the prize.

#### INTERVIEWER

So was that the period where you shed that feeling of theater being fake?

#### PARKS

Not with that initial experience of hearing the Voices, but later, in New York,

doing Poets Theatre. I was hanging out with performance artists and poets and painters. They welcomed me in. Wow. Oh my gosh, they're so amazing! They're not fake. They're alive. They're electric. And yeah, some of them have the *dab-ling dab-ling*, but for the most part they're deeply cool. I guess I got to know them. I got farther than the door.

INTERVIEWER

What was your first production?

PARKS

*Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987) at the Gas Station, this bar in the East Village. I had written parts of *Last Black Man*, but it wasn't finished, so I was just toiling along and loving writing and enjoying getting to know the people in New York.

I had the classic downtown off-off-off-Broadway experience. Laurie Carlos directed. My play ran for three days. Four people attended—my mom, my dad, my sister, and, as it was cold outside, there was a homeless guy who came in. And me? I was over the moon.

INTERVIEWER

*Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* was the next, if I recall, and that was a big coming-out for you, wasn't it? This gigantic, form-busting, pathbreaking play, almost a passion play in the medieval sense, garnered you the first of many Obie Awards. What are your memories of that production?

PARKS

*Imperceptible Mutabilities* took a long time to write piece by piece by piece, trying to figure out how it all fit together. I couldn't find a referent and I was very confused. I would bring pieces of it into a playmakers' workshop—a more traditional theater group on the Upper West Side where actors and writers would meet and do scenes. There was a lot of, "What is this?" And I tried to explain it, but they were all Broadway-bound types and very dismissive.

INTERVIEWER

What do you feel like that production achieved?



“I was the youngster, watching from the sidelines, happy to just be in the room.” New York City, 1989.

#### PARKS

I was really just glad to have a show. I had secured the venue by walking up to Alisa Solomon late one night on the uptown 1 train. I had seen her around, didn't know who she was but knew she was in the know. “Where can I get my plays done?” I asked her. She told me BACA Downtown. I went there. Greta Gundersen was the director. Mac Wellman was on staff as the dramaturge. Liz Diamond agreed to direct my play. And there were so many things that I didn't know. I knew how to put the words on the page and I knew how to make it sing in my head, but there were things I didn't know, like working with actors and set design, working with a director, producers, getting grants to finance the production. There's always so much to learn. And at BACA I was happy to have people come in and share their expertise.

#### INTERVIEWER

And it sounds like you came up in a specific artistic moment in New York with its own specific sense of community. Talk about that period. It's downtown New York for *real*, right? No boundaries?

PARKS

No, there were so many fucking boundaries. Barricades and boundaries. It was ugly.

INTERVIEWER

You mean between genres or in terms of being or professionally?

PARKS

Between genres. Between colors. Between you fucking name it. If you were doing downtown art, POCs weren't in the majority. There were greats, though, Laurie, Robbie, Jessica, those three amazing women. There were also some awesome brothers down there, Nicky Paraiso, William Pope.L, Ruben, Bimbo, Pedro Pietri. Great people.

The worst barricade I experienced was not in the downtown scene—we were all in the same mosh pit, and it was all good. The weirdest ones were—this is just in my experience, it must be different for lots of people—I was trying to break into the more traditional Black theater and getting nowhere. No traction. No luck. Folks would hint that I wasn't Black enough, I wasn't Black like them, I had not read the handbook thoroughly. August Wilson was the gold standard. His work is great, of course, but he and I are—different.

INTERVIEWER

This thing seems to happen when you are a Black artist where you're supposed to pass some mysterious Black Test. And no one knows why they have to pass the test or who even wrote the test.

PARKS

Exactly. I have been Black all my life. And, back then, I'd been very dutifully submitting my plays to various theaters and organizations. And several Black-owned, and run, and operated organizations and theaters—I couldn't get in to save my life. I thought, Of course, come on, we have a history. We have Adrienne Kennedy, we have Amiri Baraka. We got people! We got Ed Bullins. We got Bob Kaufman. We got the poets! We got the Last Poets. We got *folks* in these fields. We got Ntozake Shange! We do got a history of doing stuff that's not just colored, but also—



INTERVIEWER

Weird!

PARKS

Yeah, not just colored but weird! We colored folk have that rich and strange history, too! How about seeing *me* in that history? No luck. And then, when I got a play produced at BACA Downtown, I got sort of taken to task for working at the “white theater.” And, the difficulty—the heartbreaking thing, actually—is that you’ve gotta pass this other test there, you’ve got to pass a certain number of tests with white folks and jump through lots of hoops. A part of the fine print of getting in the door, part of the presumed, agreed upon, and unspoken understanding is that you are going to be, as a person of African descent, you are going to be the Black Whisperer. That was a time when I would be in talk-backs and audiences would ask, “What do Black people think about such and such?” As if one person could speak for the whole group. We are constantly explaining to the world at large that there is no Black mono-thought, and we have to beat that fucking drum. Every fucking day. Here we are, all doing our different things.

So I’m jumping through those fucking hoops and, with Black theaters, I was hoping to feel the solidarity, the joy of being with my tribe. And yet Black theaters were saying that my plays weren’t “Black enough”—or that they didn’t show Black people in the appropriate light.

There were plenty of boundaries downtown. I remember folks had a fit when the Wooster Group did *Route 1 and 9*. But in my immediate experience, downtown people welcomed me. Thank God for them. I worked my way up, like we all did, and then I was lucky to get an artistic home. BACA Downtown was my first. And then, my second home, the Public Theater, and George C. Wolfe. He is a member of the theater establishment, a brother—specifically, a king who happens to be a brother—who opened his arms and his doors to me at the Public Theater.

INTERVIEWER

George’s tenure was not long compared to that of the average artistic director today, but the impact was extraordinary. I remember talking to a colleague once who said that the Public, at least at the time we were talking, was the only theater in New York where, as a person of color, you actually felt like you were *supposed*

to be working there. And how that is absolutely the result of George C. Wolfe. It was a beacon. I was wondering if you could talk about how George even came into your life—or how you came into each other’s lives. Because you were doing crazy stuff at BACA. And in, like, bars and basements!

PARKS

I know! BACA and the bars and the basements! I had been happily and proudly a downtown artist, doing stuff downtown. Not even really downtown. Gosh, mostly in Brooklyn.

INTERVIEWER

You weren’t even on the island.

PARKS

I wasn’t even on the rock. Anyway, I did *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World a.k.a. the Negro Book of the Dead* in 1990 at BACA and George came to see it.

And then, a few years later, maybe 1992 or 1993, there was a party. I don’t know how I got invited. It was a cool party. Like a hip Black folks’ party. And there I am, wearing my little trying-to-be-cute outfit, and popping around the party, and feeling *happy*, and seeing *all* the people up close! Whom I’ve only ever seen on the screen or on the stage! They were all there. And there was George C. Wolfe. *Hanging out*. And he was like, “Suzan-Lori Parks!” And I was like, Shit, he knows my name. Get *out*. “Hi!” He’s like, in a loud voice, “One day I’m going to run a theater, and I’m going to do your plays.”

INTERVIEWER

This is pre-Public George?

PARKS

Totally. This was pre-I-run-the-Public-Theater George C. Wolfe. And I smiled, of course, and said, “Hey, thanks, man.” I appreciated his kindness. Didn’t think anything of it. I had won an Obie for Best New American Play and—not to be cynical, just to be real—after you win the Obie, everyone wants to talk to you. Most of them, they’re all just talking shit ’cause they have to say what people think they have to say. But George was speaking truth.

And when he took over the Public Theater, he did *The America Play*. I guess it was the '93/'94 season.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like to be in George's Public?

PARKS

I was one of the junior people, full of awe and gratitude all the time. He was very respectful of my work. His notes were always super helpful. I mean, he's a crazy character. But I never felt like he was dishonest or bullshitting me. His own work—his own writing, his directing, his producing, are so excellent and genius. He created an environment where someone like me could thrive and grow into the artist that I am.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel like you really grew up at the Public?

PARKS

I think so, which is probably why I'm still working there. Growing up, my family moved around so much. We didn't have a hometown. So the Public Theater was the first time I felt like I had a hometown. Mount Holyoke was lovely. But at the Public—I'm a professional with an artistic home. It was huge, still is.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about some of your work there. I remember you referring to *Death of the Last Black Man* as a jazz experiment. That and *Mutabilities* had these kind of Gertrude Stein-y structural games, letting language do the dancing. Did something about your relationship to those elements begin to change once you got to the Public, like with *The America Play* specifically?

PARKS

My work changed before I got to the Public. In *Mutabilities*, I was sort of free, but also bound by history. In *Last Black Man*, there's a lot of structure. Six by six by six. The plot of the play is the grave. So there's this weird structure. And it's defying its structure. It's saying, "When I die, I won't stay dead," like Bob Kaufman's poem. And it refuses to stay dead, really. And then, with *The*

*America Play*, that energetic spell that I was weaving attracted the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, which was not the real historical figure, but he is someone who impersonates a historical figure. And the writing of the play, the searching for the character, mirrors the action of the play. After a lot of “digging,” the character just showed up and started talking. And then it was as if that character just downloaded itself straight into my brain.

INTERVIEWER

You continued with the historical figure in *Venus* (1996). What did you know about *Venus*, how did it come to you?

PARKS

Stephen Jay Gould had written an interesting article about Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. the Hottentot Venus, a woman with a large behind who was “exhibited” in London and Paris. Basically kidnapped from southern Africa and exhibited in Europe. Meanwhile I was commissioned to write a book review of a Josephine Baker biography. I came across this great line, Ms. Baker’s phrase, “the rear end exists.” I loved it. And in my childhood, I’d been called names because of my “booty”—“Ledge Butt” was a nickname I had.

INTERVIEWER

*Ledge Butt?*

PARKS

Well, these are mean things that kids used to yell at me. Now we say “baby got back” or “junk in the trunk” and it’s very complimentary, but back in the day, the kids were mean. So I endured that throughout my growing up. And my essay about Josephine Baker was a meditation on her behind, her past, and my own. And a bell went off. I knew I had to put the woman they called the Hottentot Venus in my play. I knew that the play was about love. Love and dismemberment.

INTERVIEWER

I love those little sparks that come together and become a planet. How did *The Red Letter Plays* (2001) come to be? *Fucking A* and *In the Blood*, which make up this kind of diptych-but-not, are your responses to not necessarily

history or historical figures but somehow American literary history, a confrontation with the canon.

PARKS

So, I was in a canoe—this is a real story—rowing, paddling, as you do. Somewhere off the coast of some New England place. And I was with Bonnie Metzgar. We were hanging out. Chicks on the lake, your typical New England Weekend Away.

And I'm paddling, and I'm talking shit. Bonnie was in the front of my canoe. So we are paddling along and I'm like, "Yeah, Bonnie! I'm going to write a riff on *The Scarlet Letter* and I'm going to call it 'Fucking A!'" Ha ha ha! Laughing.

INTERVIEWER

Apropos of nothing?

PARKS

That's what I'm saying. I thought it was the funniest thing. Bonnie didn't laugh because Bonnie Metzgar is *sensible*. Anyway, so we get back to land, we're carrying the canoe. And I'm still like, "It's a *really* good idea." Maybe I was being haunted by the ghost of Hawthorne.

INTERVIEWER

Well, it sounds like you were in his backyard.

PARKS

"Up through the ground come a bubblin' crude!" [*laughs*] That's from that TV show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The oil just comes right up through the ground.

So I read the book and got to writing. It's not an *adaptation*. I was very clear that it's a riff. It's very much like John Coltrane does "My Favorite Things." It's very much like Charlie Parker makes "Now's the Time" out of "You're in the Army Now." It's playing the jazz changes but making up a whole new melody to go over top of it. Like the beboppers did.



INTERVIEWER

It's like you're honoring and challenging the original or something.

PARKS

I'm bringing it into its next incarnation. It was hard going. I would write a draft and look at it and throw it away. I thought the play was called *Fucking A*. The title was my lighthouse. Or the lamp on top of my head. The miner's helmet. So I am padding around in the dark, inching forward, writing draft after draft of this play called *Fucking A*. I knew that the draft wasn't clicking. Like musicians say, it wasn't laying right.

INTERVIEWER

When you work, do you only work on one thing at a time? Or was that also cooking with some other stuff? How much of your focus was on *Fucking A*?

PARKS

These days, I have five, six projects at once. Back then, it might have only been two or three projects at once. *Times were simpler*. Back in my youth. But I'd sit down month after month, turn out draft after draft. And *Fucking A* still wasn't feeling right. I finally got this idea. I pulled it up on the computer and said, "I'm going to start at the end. Like at page one hundred thirty, or one hundred fifty, whatever. And I'm going to delete everything that's not working."

INTERVIEWER

From the end to the beginning?

PARKS

Starting at the beginning and rewriting wasn't working. So I thought, Let me go backward. And just cut everything. I've got my hand on the delete button. It was great.

INTERVIEWER

Oh no.

PARKS

Start at “The End”! Okay! Delete, delete, delete, delete. Page after page after page after page. Nothing worked! I would read a page and think, This is shit! Not this! Nope, no, no. Deleting all the way to page number one. And I got to the title. And I was like, The title still works.

INTERVIEWER

Wow. So you literally physicalized the experience of cutting some cord or walking backward out of the forest.

PARKS

Ha! Yeah. What’s weird is that even though I was cutting on the computer screen, digitally, I felt like I was actually physically cutting things and throwing them off to my left. It felt like I was using a scythe. Then I heard this voice—from the left—I think it was the physical energy generated by cutting piling up and rescrambling itself into some kind of energetic field. I have no idea. I didn’t care. I didn’t *ask*. I just listened. *Someone* was talking to me! It said, “I know the story of your play.” I’m like, “Okay. What is it?” *Not* turning my head. You know, this has happened to me before, so I’m not afraid.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned to me you had a similar experience with *Death of the Last Black Man*. You don’t look toward the voice, right? You just listen.

PARKS

Yep. Same kind of thing with *The America Play*. And when it happens, I don’t look. I just listen. I’m being visited, and I don’t want to show disrespect by asking questions. It’s not a conversation. It’s a moment. And I’m very respectful. So, I’m still. I mean, I’m typing. I’m listening and writing good stuff. So, this voice said, “I know the story of your play. Let me break it down. It’s a mother with five kids from five different liaisons. Five different husbands. Five different menfolk. Whatever. Five different situations. Oh, and the kids are played by adults.”

And I couldn’t help it, I spoke. “But that’s not *Fucking A*.” And she said, “Of course it’s not *Fucking A*. It’s *In the Blood*.”

INTERVIEWER

Are you speaking out loud, or is this a conversation you're having with your spirit?

PARKS

It's not audible. But it's loud.

I say, "Okay, great. I'll write that play." I write *In the Blood* relatively quickly. Not relatively quickly considering it had taken years and years and drafts and drafts and drafts for me to get to this place of liberation. And after I finished the whole thing, *In the Blood*, I was like, Oh! I know what *Fucking A* is about! And I just wrote it. Right at the end of that year. It just came out. So there were two plays in that *womb*—

INTERVIEWER

In that impulse—

PARKS

And they were twins, and the birth was complicated because they were all twisted around each other. And once one was free, then the other one was fairly easy.

For *Fucking A* I did drafts of the songs in an early version. But when I was in rehearsal for *In the Blood*, I would lie down on the set and write new incarnations of the songs. And I would call out to the crew as they were hanging lights, and go, "What rhymes with wha-da-da?" I was fishing for lyrics. They'd laugh. It was fun. I'd be writing the songs for one play while lying on the set of the other play. That was pretty trippy.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true you wrote *Topdog* in a weekend? Or a draft?

PARKS

Well, it wasn't a weekend, but it was three days. I was really stressed. I had been invited to a theater to be their writer in residence. And then they decided that they didn't want to do my plays after all. I won't mention the name of the theater. They'd decided that my plays were too—who knows what the fuck, but it felt like a bait and switch. But instead of being really angry, I was

like, Yeah, okay, maybe my plays aren't exactly right for this theater and maybe I'll take my free time and make friends instead. Instead of focusing on the things that weren't happening, I focused on the things that were. So I spent time at the theater showing up in all the ways that I could. Holding writing workshops, reading submitted scripts, scheduling play readings, helping them tidy up their literary office, whatever they needed. One day I was tidying up with Emily Morse, who was working there at the time, and I started laughing. She said, "What's so funny?" And I said, "Two brothers, Lincoln and Booth. Ba-dum-bum." And I was laughing really hard, Ha ha ha ha ha ha.

INTERVIEWER

You've apparently got to be very careful when Suzan-Lori Parks starts laughing, because something's about to happen.

PARKS

Well, of course. Because the Great Spirit is the fisher person. And the Great Spirit dangles lures. And I'm a fish. And when I laugh—ha ha ha—I've taken the bait. I get caught. Caught up in the mystery, right, and then I gotta speak it.

INTERVIEWER

So, you said, Lincoln and Booth, brothers. Ba-dum-bum. And you weren't thinking about *The America Play*? That play's specific cosmology wasn't even in mind?

PARKS

I was thinking about cleaning the literary office! And Emily looked at me, she said, "It sounds like you should go home and write." And I said yeah. I started writing *Topdog* on the night of the sixth of January and finished it in three days.

INTERVIEWER

The draft came out, and did you feel in the writing that it was good?

PARKS

Yeah. It lay right. It was right in the pocket. The writing experience felt like someone was holding a silver gravy boat and pouring silver liquid down the

inside of my spine. I called Bonnie Metzgar when I finished. She was working as a producer at the Public. I asked her if I could have a reading. She was like, “Hell yeah!”

INTERVIEWER

Was there any sort of revision process for it?

PARKS

There was a lot of trimming. George was great at, like, “Cut that. You don’t need that.” There was simmering down, slimming. And some growing, too. Once in rehearsal he wanted me to write some more of Lincoln’s speech where Linc talks about his day job. We were in tech. Don Cheadle and Jeffrey Wright were standing there onstage. George asked me to write more. I held up my fingers, measuring lines of text. “How much you want?” I said. Two inches of text? Three inches? I had so much of the characters’ lives spooled in my head. It was just waiting to be written. I borrowed the stage manager’s laptop and just sat there and typed it up and printed it out and gave it to them. That speech is one of my favorite moments in the play.

INTERVIEWER

That production is this powerhouse, a magical show. It goes to Broadway. You’re the first Black woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. I think that big fancy fellowship came for you around then.

PARKS

The MacArthur—before the Pulitzer.

INTERVIEWER

Is that when you decided you were going to write a novel?

PARKS

I decided to write a novel when I was in fifth grade, and it took me that long! I know, it’s so sad.

INTERVIEWER

It’s not sad.



PARKS

The novel gives me great joy. It's my people! My mother's family in Texas—they are rich and strange. And I love them. And I'm still trying to write the second novel.

I love the process of writing. Whether it's a TV script or a play, novel, song, or a film script, writing is all the same process. Just the rhythms are different. And where you have to begin and end is different. And how much you can see of a scene is different. What details you need to make a scene. In the novel, there are more words in those details. You can't just say, "She's tall and good looking." You've got to let us know how *so*! Give me *specifics*. You've got to let us know how good looking she *is*.

INTERVIEWER

Were you reading a lot of fiction? I'm asking because I felt a Faulkner thing happening.

PARKS

*Getting Mother's Body* (2003) is a reverent bow to *As I Lay Dying*, which is a family road trip. Growing up, my family took a lot of road trips. And so my first novel is a road trip. Faulkner's people, they're going to bury somebody, and my people, they're going to dig somebody up. Because we are diggers. Ba-dum-bum.

INTERVIEWER

There are so many moments when that Modernist canon comes into your biography. Stein on your brain. Joyce in your lap. That Eliot essay. What's it called?

PARKS

"Tradition and the Individual Talent"? That's me riffing on T. S. Eliot.

INTERVIEWER

You essentially appropriated this Eliot essay, rewrote it.

PARKS

I think my action was more like what the composer of "Meet the Flintstones" did with "I Got Rhythm."

INTERVIEWER

I remember reading somewhere that *To the Lighthouse* changed your life. You were definitely vibing with those Modernists. I wonder why, how this literature landed like a thud in your life, so hard that it seems you're still in some ways wrestling with it?

PARKS

Embracing it. 'Cause I'm being ferried along by the architecture. Again, there were also people like Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Alice Childress, James Baldwin, Ed Bullins, Zora Neale Hurston, Jacob Lawrence, August Wilson, and Toni Morrison, and my grandmothers and grandfathers, and everybody in the Movement, and Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman and Amiri Baraka, Bearden, Basquiat, Faith Ringgold, and Elizabeth Catlett and others and others and *so many* others. These brilliant people, great artists and activists, are architects of their known worlds *and also* of a *lost civilization*. And they are giving us the blueprints to the portal that is not easy to see every day. I feel like that's what the Modernists—and the Black Modernists—do. They are dismantling the world and putting it back together again. This is the activist. The agitator.

INTERVIEWER

We've talked a lot about what New York was for you, what kind of freedom it brought you, what it meant to find community in a downtown arts scene. But then, at the height of your first wave of success, you decided to up and move to Los Angeles.

PARKS

I went out there to teach at CalArts and start up their dramatic-writing program, and ended up leaving that to go and work for Oprah. While I was living in LA we did *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006) and I really got to know the theater scene there. It's very vibrant, very exciting, and yet the film and TV industry overshadows everything.

You don't brush up against people in LA. The beautiful thing about New York that I love, you sit on the subway and you look across the aisle and you see the row of people sitting across from you and there's a woman who looks like she's from this place, there's a man who looks like he's from that place,



Venice Beach, Los Angeles, 2003.

and they call it the beautiful mosaic, and it's right there in front of you. In Los Angeles, I never experienced that. There's plenty of diversity, but the city feels so isolating. Maybe 'cause there's not a lot of public transportation. I once said that, to me, Los Angeles was like the torture where they leave the lights on all the time. Not to say it's evil or anything, it's just odd. You could say New York is like the torture where they leave the sound on all the time.

#### INTERVIEWER

Around that time your relationship to writing for the screen seemed to deepen. Do you approach the plays and the screenplays in the same way? Or do you have a different mindset when you go into film or screen work?

#### PARKS

Both are character-based, and architecture comes out of character for me. But a play is alive. And a film, to me, is a memory.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of characters—you're wrapping up production on a TV series about Aretha Franklin. As a merchant of fiction, how did you approach Aretha as a real human? How did you refashion her into a character that you could move through your imagined realities? It's an ethical question I always wonder about with these dramatizations of real lives.

PARKS

With a lot of respect and a fair dash of moxie. Those of us who put words in people's mouths for a living—we are the makers of manners, so we're accustomed to that. I respect my fictional characters, my completely totally made-up characters, as much as I would respect my historical characters.

INTERVIEWER

You've also adapted Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (2019) and *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* (2012). How do you share those fictional people with their original authors? Do you feel a boundary between your choices and theirs? What are you negotiating that's different from when you sit down in your own work?

PARKS

All writing, for me, is a relationship. I don't feel like I can do whatever I want with whomever I want. It's call-and-response. I'm in partnership with the character. I'm in partnership with the truth. I'm in partnership with the play, the teleplay, or the original work. Some people say, "Oh, you're going to do that and you're going to put your stamp on it." I don't even know what that means. Unless my "stamp" as SLP is "the one who follows the call and works as hard as she can to get it right."

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned you were in LA when you wrote *365 Plays*.

PARKS

After winning the Pulitzer in 2002, I thought, Let me say thank you to the theater. And what's the best way to say thank you? To show up every day

with a play. I got up and wrote something every day, it felt so good—after I finished it, Bonnie Metzgar said, “So what about that play-a-day thing?” Looking at me like a producer does. And I said, “Oh yeah, I *wrote* them.” She suggested that we *produce* them.

INTERVIEWER

I remember that year so vividly because it was like everyone I knew was in a Suzan-Lori Parks play. And I was going to random broom closets and abandoned bodegas and, like, churches.

PARKS

And Laundromats. And street corners. We got the plays done all over the world and the production lasted a whole year. At one place in LA, there was a group of friends, and everybody had these elaborate tattoos, so they decided to all be naked in their tattooed bodies and writhing together doing one or two of the plays. I showed up and I was like, Dang, this is some wild shit. It was beautiful, the range of experience.

INTERVIEWER

When it was over, how did you feel? Did you mourn?

PARKS

I’m very proud of it. If I were an athlete, I’d be an ultramarathoner. One of those people who just goes and runs in the desert. That’s my kind of thing. I used to be a long-distance runner.

INTERVIEWER

And now you’re a monster yoga practitioner. Do you feel a noticeable difference in terms of your writing pre- and post- your engagement with Ashtanga?

PARKS

Before I found my yoga I did karate, every morning. I was an advanced brown belt. I didn’t go for my black belt—I was like, Enough, now I’m gonna do yoga. So I have these physical-slash-spiritual activities. I was never a gym rat, but I have these meditative forms. I’ve been doing it for a long time, the daily practice.





With her husband, Christian, and their son, Durham. New York City, 2015.

#### INTERVIEWER

Is there a relationship between the physical practice and the writing? Is writing a compulsion or discipline? Are you the kind of person who sits down every day and gets their two thousand words in?

#### PARKS

I believe in integration. For better or for fucking worse. I am devoted to the exploration of how we can integrate our lives on the big levels, meaning, feeling comfortable sitting next to or having love for the Other—the one we perceive as the Other, who isn't actually the Other at all, it's another version of ourselves.

I used to have a pristine routine of getting up in the morning, meditating, then going to yoga. When I became a mom, that changed. When Durham started walking, he would crawl out of the crib, walk into the living room—we have a little, tiny apartment, so it wasn't far—and then, finally, he started talking. “What are you doing?” “I'm meditating.” So he'd see that. Then when he started going to school, I had to walk him to school before my yoga.

INTERVIEWER

You became a parent comparatively late. Did that take you by surprise?

PARKS

I wanted to be a parent for a while, it just didn't work out until it did. I'm on my second marriage. First husband was a lovely, lovely guy. Just didn't work out. Second husband is even more lovely and I'm over-the-moon happy, which helps my work.

Early on, I'd wanted to be a mom, but I watched so many women who, when they became moms, they laid down their artist life. Sure, there are wonderful stories about creative motherhood from Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, these women that we look up to. But on the level of chicks I knew personally, I would watch them put their artistic impulses into their mothering. Their husbands wouldn't put their artistic careers on the shelf, but the women did. And I was watching that and going, Wow. My artist-call is so strong. How can I do both? Then I figured, Well, let me become a mom and see what happens. [*laughs*] And then many of my friends were like, Say goodbye to your writing career. But instead I said hello to a whole new level.

INTERVIEWER

The past nine years, since your son was born, have been such a resurgence and explosion of creativity for you! Can you talk about creating *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2015)?

PARKS

*FCH* started out as a bunch of short plays in *365 Days*. They were linked more by title than by anything else. And then I heard more. My feeling is that everybody's life is like a piece of music. It has a leitmotif, a recurring theme. For me, one of my leitmotifs is my dad, the army officer, going away to war and returning home. Or he would go and do war exercises. When I was born, my dad was out in "the field"—that's what they called it. He wasn't behind a plow, he was doing war exercises. They had to rehearse. Before they went into the "theater of war." Funny, right, how it all comes together? And so I started hearing this theme and began writing. It's a huge project. At first nine parts. And now twelve. We premiered the first three at the Public. Doing these new projects—*FCH*, *White Noise* (2020), *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2021),

all these lovely projects—it's like hiking, you know? Climbing a mountain. When you've got something to carry, you get stronger. The burden is heavy but the feeling is light. For me that's what being an African-American-Woman-Creative-Person is all about. Getting things done, continuing to climb. I love the climb.

This does require organization. I've written lots of things, and I've also written some great lists, working to be very organized, you know. So I wake up at six, meditate, take the kid to school, go to yoga, and then come home and write.

INTERVIEWER

And you work through the weekends?

PARKS

What is a “weekend”? Shit yeah. Weekends have become an opportunity to find out that I can write while my son is running in circles around the living room—which also happens to be my office. I've pretty much developed the ability to write while I'm having a conversation with him.

INTERVIEWER

At this point, do you feel like you can sit down and quickly get into a writing flow?

PARKS

That's interesting. To answer that question, what if one is *always* in the flow? We get hung up on the flow feeling a certain way, feeling good. What if everything is the flow, like, you're always on the river? I spend less time anguishing about the work these days. I spend less time getting all consternated about it.

INTERVIEWER

That reminds me of this interview with another writer that I really love. Someone asked her, Does writing get easier? And she was like, No, you just get used to the despair. [*laughs*]

PARKS

Right! That's it. People who are in the early years of their writing experience

often figure that writing's easy for those of us who have been writing awhile. And actually I think it gets more difficult. And yet, to agree with that writer, we grow more accustomed to the difficulty.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still have that orange typewriter?

PARKS

Yeah. I have a lot of typewriters, not like Tom Hanks, but I have three or four of them. A pink one, a red one, a green one, a couple of black ones. On the red one I mostly write letters to Mr. Baldwin. Dear Mr. Baldwin. I use it for my *Watch Me Work* show. I talk with him. Letters to a dead poet. And within those letters I'm working out a plot or some dialogue or some lyrics or whatever.

But I write with everything. By hand, computer, typewriter. Sometimes in the notes section of my phone. Or sometimes I'm hanging out and I tell Christian, my husband, something fun, and he's like, "You better write that down!" So I turn on the voice memo.

INTERVIEWER

But there's no ritual for you about where that draft starts?

PARKS

No. I might start writing on a napkin! *Last Black Man* started when I "saw" some writing on a wall—I woke up from a dream and the words were hanging in the air. The writing can start anywhere. The play is always happening.

INTERVIEWER

Do you try to push through a first draft as quick as possible, or do you take your time with it?

PARKS

These days, to stay organized, I outline. Images or actions, actions or dialogue, it's all the same. In the first draft, it doesn't need to be written *right*, it just needs to be written *down*. I'm listening, I'm watching. And I'm saying, okay, sure, yes to everything, and then at a certain point there's writing. In the first

draft I remind myself, Anything goes. Everything grows. I'm in the garden. Later, in the second draft, I take out my "sword of discrimination" and I put on my favorite music and I cut everything that doesn't fit.

INTERVIEWER

The things that don't "fit" are basically identified through some sort of intuitive process? Or do you have a secret math you use to decide what's in or out?

PARKS

Must be the secret math. The world revolving is based on math, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

It's based on physics. It's like God's intuition.

PARKS

God's math! That's what it is. It's just listening. That's how I know what's working and what's not. And cutting is a joy. I love cutting.

INTERVIEWER

There seems to be such a freedom at the heart of your process, a sense of detachment and openness to change. What do you think changes in a writer over time? Or, rather, what changes a writer?

PARKS

Anything, anything can change a writer, if one is open to it. The artists I admire most go through their changes. Think about Aretha Franklin. Started out singing gospel in church, went through a change. She grew. She got into secular music, blues and jazz standards, and then pop songs that became classics. Started writing her own material. At first, people had an issue with her secular side, but she had such confidence in her voice and she was able to follow it.

One could say that as a writer, my voice has changed. It's grown. And the idea that we have to *be* who we *were* when we started is bullshit. It's poppycock. Think of Bob Dylan at Newport. The famous folk singer has an electric guitar and plugs in—and he gets *booed* by the audience. The artists I admire go through their changes instead of *clinging* to what they might have started



out doing. Like, we are no longer babies, right? We grow. As a human it's natural, but as an artist, you are known by your "brand," and it takes a lot of moxie to step out of your comfort zone again and again and again.

INTERVIEWER

I love Bob Dylan's seventeen-minute Kennedy song that he just released.

PARKS

He dares to keep on pushing, embracing the present instead of holding on to the past.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is the secret to maintaining that presentness? Is it about investing in mastery of "the instrument," whatever that means?

PARKS

Looking at my own artistic journey, what gives me the ability, what gives me the courage to keep growing, keep changing up? The Call gives me courage. The idea that there is something—that the Spirit is bigger than me. That there's the little-s self, and the big-S Self. Spirit. It's not the call of the marketplace. It's the call of the Spirit. The Spirit is calling me and I'm answering the Call. There's that quote that I love—I must do the work that they sent me to do. It's a paraphrase of the Bible, "We must do the work of them who sent me."

INTERVIEWER

Do particular plays feel like pivot points when you look at the shape so far of your body of work? Or do they all live in the same energy field for you?

PARKS

Each piece feels like a pivot point, yet another departure. But they definitely live in the same energetic field. Sure, they look different, they sound different, play in different arenas or theatrical spaces. Even the work-for-hire stuff is an answering of a Call. Sometimes really literally. For *Genius: Aretha*, Brian Grazer actually called me up on the phone. Ha ha! It's such a huge endeavor. Showrunning for TV. I got an invitation to engage in a Spiritual

Quest in service of the Queen of Soul. I answer the Call by saying yes. It's that simple.

Whatever the work is, for me, it all lives in the same energetic field and activates different parts of the human or universal experience on different levels. Different pieces ask different things of the audience. Or they could be asking the same thing, just in different ways. And my process says, "Now that you've digested *Last Black Man*, we're going to serve you up *Topdog/Underdog*. Now that you've digested *Topdog/Underdog*, we're gonna serve you *Fucking A*." And naysayers go, "Oh, gee, *Fucking A* doesn't look like *Topdog/Underdog*," but is that *really* a problem? If it's a problem, it's not the writer who is having a problem. It's that the audience member is *clinging* to something and they've decided who the writer is. Which is a form of slavery. The audience is holding the writer in bondage, saying, "You gotta be like you were back when I met you." It's like, if you, Branden, would hang out with your grandma, and she says, "What do you mean you've got facial hair? What do you mean your voice is like a deep, handsome-person's voice?"

INTERVIEWER

[*laughs*]

PARKS

Yeah, you laugh! Some artists, they have their one thing and they do it consistently and that's very beautiful. They shouldn't be chastised for remaining constant. But change is something I embrace. If I'm writing something and it doesn't look like what I wrote last year, do I throw it down and say, "Out of my house, you must be an illegitimate!" No, of course not, I welcome it. Because I have grown.

"There's that quote that I love—I must do the work that they sent me to do."

**EXCITING  
GOSPEL  
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## *Two Poems by Sara Deniz Akant*

### DRACULA, BY MARRIAGE

One hundred and eighty-two pages spreads her story like disease.  
They send me one false daughter—*Dracula*—  
and then carefully erase the scene.

She's been erected out of thin air—with the thin air of money.  
In Konya—I scream—in Ulus—I embrace her—  
while these papers spread her story like disease.

So what? So I name my daughter *Saddle Bag*. I name her L-O-9-15.

The *Dracula* bitch that I *Dracula*-prayed for  
cannot carefully erase these scenes.

Last night P walked into a bar and screamed

—*my monster would be nice!*

It's true—this poem spreads her story like disease—

all along the normal human trajectory:

from poet to novelist—from *diplomat* to *topless whore*.

But who could carefully erase these scenes—

of my daughter in striding—my sick daughter—in striding—  
when once she was—when once, she wasn't—or

this poem spreads her story (like disease)

and I'll scream—I'll embrace her. I'll carefully erase this scene.

BRUCE BABA

Take this pic—take this  
newly minted plaque.

For plaque, read empire. Say—*puff puff*  
*pass*. Say—*Baba, please. Zip up*. You and your dirty  
cistern wrists. On the phone my mother  
says—*you keep your mouth and your legs shut*.

This tooth-grinding voice is my obligation  
and reward. Take each body upstairs  
momentarily, and fold—

—my limbs into *Beyaz Ev*—boobs-out mafia next door—dress me and  
re-dress me for the guards of each *Gillette*—sharpen me (my image)  
against the gaze of each *Kemal*. *Bruce gibi*—I say in earnest—*Bruce*.  
That will be the title of my next book. *Bruce*.

My next book starts like this: *Ah-chooka-chooka*

*I've got big boobs boobs boobs.*  
*My butt is so big,*  
*I think I'm going to ex-plode.*

It's the closest thing we have to narrative—a name, a series of mediocre  
jokes. *Jaja*, I say—in my American clothes. Later on, I speak of zero-point  
history, in zero-point words. Her Baba  
calls her *baba*. He tries each scarf on me.

It is 7 A.M. on the oversize ottoman. It is raining  
in the ambulance called *yabancı*. Me? I drink sour cherry juice  
while floating through the office of the newly  
minted airport. Centuries-old men shift their aprons into  
—*groan*. In the fourth empty



Playland, I decide to let them dream. I say to him in earnest—  
*Baba, let them sleep.*

What is it now, to be thirty-three at 3 A.M., false lumps  
in the breast and still  
humming *Bruce*—still falsely humming *Bruce*. The dog—  
I say—it barked for noon.

*Shut up you horn*—some *bebek*  
moaned. But that was twenty years ago.

# *Arthur Sze*

## DILEMMA

A musician tumbles bicycle handlebars  
on a sidewalk and makes jangling music;  
a gardener prunes branches, then shakes  
the Japanese maple to drop a few

leaves onto the stone path; raking leaves,  
you focus on the noise of the rake;  
in a time when pangolins near extinction  
for scales, rhinoceroses for horns,

you find tufts of skunk fur in the grass;  
this is an August with no mushrooms to hunt,  
where smoke from the Rio en Medio  
fire stings the eyes; bears swipe suet

from bird feeders, ransack garbage bins  
along streets; and when you drive  
to an intersection, a man in a wheelchair  
glares; before turning, you ponder

this chance encounter: as he holds  
an upturned hat and cardboard sign,  
WAR VET, you wonder, is this truly  
an illusion or an illusion of harrowing truth?

# *Jessica Greenbaum*

## THE FIRST REALLY COLD DAY

Plugging in the portable heater and pulling it toward my legs I remembered  
The braziers under the round table at the finca you brought us to  
In the Spanish hills. It was January, a searingly cold afternoon, and in a cave-like room  
We sat with the sisters who worked there, the tablecloth pulled over our thighs . . .  
And we might all have been knitting together, or divvying provisions;  
It was a sudden, short-lived society, and in between envisioning all the accidents  
Born from live embers near legs and beneath cloth, I experienced the little  
Miracle of it, the conversation—bright and unintelligible to my schoolroom Spanish—  
You, chatting easily, as engaged as a car in third gear, making your own jokes while  
Agreeing enthusiastically, and I could follow the music of it, the lead-up and  
The laughter, because I knew the cadences of your conversation like a winding path  
Through the woods—we had wended through many woods in many weathers—  
And because of all that neither of us knew then—of the illnesses to come, and the reality  
Of those women's lives that we had conveniently cropped out at that moment—  
This could have been a childhood we lived in together for that sheltered hour  
Before we walked back into the cold, crossing paths with the owner's teenage daughter  
In her jodhpurs and riding boots, and what we still laugh about was the open pack  
Of licorice she held in one hand, and the fork she used to pierce the pieces with the other.

AN EXCERPT FROM

*The First Line of Dante's 'Inferno'*

---

KIRK LYNN

CHARACTERS (*appearing here*)

ANN ESPINOZA

*Early forties, tall, self-possessed. Hiking in the woods in search of her missing sister.*

CRAIG GORDON

*A young park ranger, late twenties. Pretty. Slim. Strong.*

NOTES

The play is formatted like prose; however, it is intended for performance. If actors simply perform the dialogue in quotes, the audience need never know about the world-building stage directions presented elsewhere in the text. And, as has been the case in readings and developmental workshops, it is *possible* that some of this world-building text can enhance productions when performed by an unnamed voice or presence. Most important is that the natural world and our longing for it are portrayed in the theater.

As I remember, there were trees everywhere, thick, so they made the day dark with shadows. No such thing as an unobstructed view. You don't like it. I don't care. Find yourself another forest. Birch trees. Rich black dirt underneath.

Randomly set in these woods was a very small, one-room cabin. What else would you call it? A handmade shelter? The walls were stolen plywood. The window was borrowed from a bigger building. It was all put together with duct tape and weird hinges. If you walked up to the window, here's what you would see inside: a little propane camp stove, a sleeping bag on a cot, and a big mason jar, lid on.

The woods were a national park. It was a squatter's cabin. It was illegal. The cabin was nowhere near a path or a stream. It wasn't even near a game trail. The cabin was sort of trapped by the trees surrounding it. It was as if the trees had captured the cabin in a more reasonable spot and dragged it out to the woods where they could hide it and keep it forever.

Dawn there lasted twenty-four minutes, starting from the eigengrau, which is what you call the gray your mind sees in complete darkness, to the moment you would notice someone walking through the woods.

And one day a woman stepped out of the trees. She was forty-ish years old. The woman was tall; when she hiked she took those long slow steps. She wasn't going anywhere so she didn't have to make any noise. Ann Espinoza. She was "camping clean." You wouldn't want to stand next to her in an elevator, but if you were in the woods with her for as many days as she'd been in the woods, you would consider her clean compared to you, no matter who you are.

The cabin wasn't any bigger than an elevator. There wasn't a real elevator anywhere near the spot. Was it possible the cabin was located in the geographically most distant spot from any elevator in North America? Was it possible the cabin might suddenly drop through the ground and carry a person into the center of the earth? That was Ann's fear as she approached the cabin. Ann was careful not to fall because she was carrying a heavy backpack. Heavy enough to suggest she wanted to be out in the woods for a long time. Heavy enough to suggest this was her first time in the deep woods.



The woman looked at the cabin. She knocked on one of the walls. She called out, "Carol. Carol. Open up."

The woman waited for an answer, but she knew. There was no one in the cabin.

The woman walked a full circle around the shack. She shined her flashlight in the window. She took off her backpack. Then she took the back end of the flashlight and busted in a windowpane. She reached in and unlocked the window, opened it, and started climbing into the cabin. She got stuck for a while about halfway. She didn't struggle. She just stalled for a moment with her legs hanging out the window before she tipped the rest of the way in.

The woman unstrapped the homemade lock on the door from the inside and went out to get her backpack, came back into the cabin, and looked around. She looked in the sleeping bag and in the metal stove case. She found a book inside the sleeping bag. She found a hammer and a can of nails by the stove.

The woman went outside. She closed the window she had opened, opened up the book, and nailed it over the broken windowpane. The woman tore some pages from the helplessly pinned book and went back into the cabin and used the paper to start a fire in the camp stove. The propane was long gone, but there were some little branches around.

The woman went outside and said to the trees, "Attention all wolves and snakes, bears and mountain lions: I can feel you out there following me. I'm not hunting you. I'm hunting one of my own kind. I'm looking for my sister. I want you to know this is now my cabin and I will not tolerate any bother."

She smiled. She was enjoying herself.

"I have a hammer. And it looks like she left me a jar of moonshine in there and a book of matches. So I'm gonna keep a cup of moonshine by the door and if any of you try to come in I'm gonna throw the moonshine on your face and light your face on fire. And then beat you to death with the hammer while you burn. I'm not here to live in harmony with you or whatever. I don't know how to live in harmony with you. But I do know how to make trouble. Consider yourself warned. This is my cabin now."

Then the woman went back into the cabin and latched the door. She climbed into the sleeping bag and slept through the day.

2 .

As I remember, there was a sound in the middle of the night. It seemed to come from the sky. As if the invisible cable connecting the moon to the earth suddenly snapped.

It woke the woman.

“Hello?”

I didn't answer.

“Hello? Fuck. This is stupid.”

The woman felt around the cabin until she found her flashlight. The woman shined the light out the window. The woman opened the door and shined her flashlight out on the trees. The woman picked up the hammer. The woman slumped down and leaned her back against the doorframe. The woman's flashlight slowly died in her hands.

“Hello?”

3 .

As I remember, it was bright day all of a sudden and the woman was up, opening her backpack and searching around. What she was looking for wasn't there. She started looking through the cabin frantically. She couldn't find what she was looking for. She finally took the tin can of nails and poured them out onto the floor of the cabin. The woman pulled down her pants and squatted over the can and pissed. She pulled up her pants. She went to her backpack and took out a bottle of water and drank it all. Then found a piece of jerky and took a bite. Pissing in a can out here was stupid she realized. She opened the door to throw the piss out, can and all, but then she saw something.

The woman walked out of the open door very slowly and said, “Hey, bunny. Hey, bunny, bunny. You want some jerky? It's all right. I'll just leave a little here and you can come get it after I go back inside.”

The woman went back inside and watched through the open door.

“I need a friend. I wish you would eat my jerky this morning. And then tomorrow again. And then again. Until you trust me. Don't run away. It's good jerky.”

After watching a bit, enough was enough. That rabbit wasn't going to be her friend. She started unpacking and setting up her house inside the cabin.

4 ·

As I remember, the woman was whistling as she stood in the doorway of the cabin. Not a care in the world. And off in the trees, his hand on his gun, there was a young park ranger. Craig Gordon. His uniform was fresh. He hadn't worked much in it today. And like so many young men with guns, he was the one who was nervous.

The woman wasn't scared at all when she noticed him. She asked, "You think she's coming back?"

"I dunno," the ranger answered, moving a few steps. He wanted to be in a better position for the conversation. "But you can't stay here. It's federal land."

"Are you the one who scared her off from here?"

"Nope. She was long gone 'fore I ever knew she built this cabin. If she even built it. Maybe she found it. Dudn't matter. It's illegal. I'm gonna tear it down."

When the ranger looked off in the other direction the woman picked up her hammer and ran at him. It took them both a second to realize it was an attack. The ranger fought the woman off without drawing his gun, screaming, "You're under arrest! You're under arrest!"

The woman stopped attacking and said, panting, "Leave me alone."

"Fuck you."

"You have that authority?"

"I can," said the ranger, assuming the woman was asking about his right to arrest trespassers and not his right to fuck her. "You're under arrest."

"Then I guess you got me. It's like a magic spell, isn't it? If a cop says you're under arrest. Then you are."

"You don't have to be," said the ranger, calming down. "Don't fucking attack me."

"What are you going to do with my sister? When you catch her?"

"Nothing. Send her home."

"Let me see your badge."

“You’re the sister?”

“You know her name.”

“Carol. I know it.”

“It was in the papers.”

“I got ’em all. ’Cause it’s my forest. So I clip ’em. I’m gonna make a book of it.”

“How many stories have there been?”

“How long since you read a paper?”

“I know the Pats lost to the Steelers.”

“All right. That was three weeks ago.”

“And how are they doin’ now?”

“I don’t want to be the one to hafta tell you.”

“That bad?”

“Tom Brady just up and disappeared. Abandoned his team midseason. No foul play. One minute he was throwing passes and then next minute he sets the ball down on the twenty-four-yard line, the *Buffalo* twenty-four-yard line and walks off the field. People seen him in this very park. Walking right through campsites. Walking into the woods. No foul play. They say his sister is trying to get him to come back. But he just didn’t love the game anymore, I guess.”

“I’m not gonna find her, am I?”

The answer was no, but it seemed rude, so the ranger repeated, “You can’t stay here.”

“You’re gonna tear down the cabin?”

“It doesn’t belong here.”

“Neither do you.”

“She stole plywood. She stole the window, too.”

“She’s in the middle of a forest,” the woman said, meaning, Where would she find stuff like that?

But the ranger understood her to mean, There’s no laws out here, so he said, “It’s still stealing. Wood doesn’t get free if you’re close enough to the trees.”

“You’re an idiot. I oughta arrest you for trespassing on intellectual grounds.”

The ranger knew his understanding had been stupid. It’s a funny feeling to be embarrassed in front of your prisoner by your own reasoning, so instead

of continuing that train of logic he switched to one of his competencies. He told the woman how he had come to find her. "I tracked you from the west entrance."

"You're good at nature. Great." Then the woman realized he could help her figure out if Carol was alive. She asked the ranger, "Tell me what you would do if you wanted to survive out here?"

Pointing at the campsite, the ranger said, "I would build myself a cabin. Shelter, food."

"What about other people?"

"I don't know that you need it."

"Is there a danger of them out here?"

"Not much. Besides me."

"I'm going to stay."

"I'm tearing the cabin down."

"No one will know."

"I know."

"You can come out once or twice a season," the woman offered. "Bring me food. Get your dick sucked."

The ranger was caught off guard by that, so he told the truth, "Your sister's probably dead."

"Your uniform's stupid," the woman countered.

"It'll start getting cold this month," the ranger said. "This is the last month for hiking."

"Great. Maybe she'll come back to the cabin."

Then there was a noise in the woods and both of them turned to look. A big flush of birds and the light skipped.

5 .

As I remember it. The ranger and the woman were now both sitting down. The woman was leaning against the cabin and the ranger was squatting nearby.

"I was a schoolteacher."

"I own a coffee shop."

"Who's watching it?"



“It doesn’t do anything, trust me ... I thought it would be like a watering hole for smart, new kinds of people. But, no ... I made the sign say CLOSED and came looking for Carol. That’s it.”

“You like peaches?” the ranger asked, remembering the huge mis-shipment of peaches they had at headquarters.

“No. I don’t know. Why? I don’t care about peaches either way.”

“I have a bunch of canned peaches I can’t eat.”

“She has kids. They’d fucking love a treasure of canned peaches.”

“I know. I’ve been reading all the stuff about her in the news. Probably know more about her than you do from a certain point of view. That’s how I knew you were the sister. They know you’re looking. How long you been looking?”

“She didn’t say a word to her family. Didn’t leave a note,” the woman said before spitting into the dirt to clear her mouth.

The ranger could understand things a little from Carol’s point of view. How do you explain to your family that you’re done with them? It’s easier just to show them. “What are you gonna say?” the ranger offered as an explanation.

“She’s got a four-year-old and a six-year-old.”

“I taught older kids,” the ranger said. “High school. I always thought my students were gonna kill me.”

“And now?”

“They lack the kind of commitment it would take to find me out here.”

“You oughta get going.”

“She’s not coming back.”

“Not with you standing there.”

“I thought you were gonna give me a blowjob?”

“Can you accept gifts from campers?”

Agreeing with the woman that it might not be a good idea, the ranger said, “Yeah. I could lose my job. I don’t wanna go back to teaching school.”

“Because then wherever would you find someone to give you a blowjob?” the woman asked sarcastically.

“Never mind,” the ranger said, defeated.

He was cut up a little on his left forearm. It made it seem to the woman like he must do real work from time to time. He had a bushy head of hair that accentuated his boyish looks. His ranger uniform was a little too small

for him. Again, this accentuated his appearance of being a growing boy. The woman felt like it would be easy to make him cry. If she just bullied him by one sentence too many he would cry. Besides, trading a blowjob for peaches wasn't the most unfair deal ever struck on this continent.

"You'll let me stay?" the woman asked, to make the terms clear.

"Not indefinitely, but—"

"All right. C'mere. Let's get it over with."

"I don't want it if you don't want to."

"Well, you're gonna have to get over that."

"Forget it. I got one can in my bag," the ranger said, taking off his backpack, fishing out a can of peach slices, and putting his backpack on quickly, as if he didn't want anything from her. "I'll bring you a whole stack of cans in a week."

"Seriously?" the woman said, willing to fulfill her promise and incredulous this asshole was going to pass it up. "You can't be serious."

"Serious as a snakebite."

"I'm not gonna beg you."

"Fine," the ranger said, taking his backpack off without a smile, looking at his shadow on the wall of the cabin.

6 .

As I remember, the ranger's shirt was unbuttoned and the woman kept checking her hair, which was a little mussed.

"Leave me alone for a while," the woman said, gently.

"How long?"

The woman was suddenly sharp with him. "Aw, fuck off. Don't make me say an amount of time. Surprise me. Come back tomorrow or seven weeks. You decide."

"You got a mean streak."

"You got a dumb streak."

Seven brownish-gray geese silently flew over. Their shadows attracted the woman's gaze. The ranger could identify the species and get pretty close to an accurate count without looking up. He knew there wasn't a lot of point to looking up. Those geese get in one of those high jet streams and just cruise by.

Winter was coming. The ranger watched the woman look for the geese and then bring her eyes back down to him.

Fuck her. He didn't need to let himself get treated this way.

"All right," the ranger said, looking off into the woods, "I'll wish you good luck and take off."

7 ·

As I remember it. His shirt was still unbuttoned. The woman spit into her hand and rubbed some dirt off her arm.

"So what are you gonna do?"

"Use the cabin as a home base and, I guess, go out and find her. Or some clues," the woman said, looking off into the trees. "Did you ever find anything?"

"I found some books in the middle of nowhere, in like a clearing, stacked kinda weird. I don't know if they were hers."

"How else is a book going to get in the middle of the woods?"

"Books can walk," the ranger said, not smiling at all.

"What books?"

"A book on pigeons and a copy of Dante's *Inferno*."

"That wasn't her," the woman said and repeated the action of spitting into her hand and rubbing some dirt off her arm.

"The pages were interwoven, so the two books were, like, holding hands. I don't talk to a lot of people or at all. So my thoughts and my words aren't always in conversation. You know the way fingers interlace?" The ranger held hands with himself as an example for a moment.

"Maybe it is her? What kind of book about pigeons?"

"Facts about. Pictures of the kinds."

"Are there lots of kinds of pigeons?"

"Used to be."

The woman looked at the ranger, who she was starting to think of as *her* ranger. She said, "You should get a haircut."

"You should take a bath."

"The creek's too cold."

"I could help you?"

“You should be more forceful. I say, The creek’s too cold, you should say, I *will* help you.”

“What does that mean? Help you take a bath?”

“You said it.”

“We don’t have to be meant for each other.”

The woman stopped and looked at him seriously. “I’m not saying we do.”

“That’s the most enjoyable part of sex with a stranger,” the ranger said. “You’re too bossy and dirty. You don’t even like me.”

“You should stop cracking your knuckles.”

“You should stop sharing your opinions so freely.”

“You should keep your shirt unbuttoned. It looks nice.”

“You should wear your hair down.”

“You should smile more. Laugh more.”

“Laughing doesn’t have any special function. I’m not going to give any special effort.”

“Everybody likes laughing,” the woman said matter-of-factly.

“Every woman I ever met said she liked who she liked ’cause he made her laugh. That’s the number one thing. Every woman ever. At least, enough so that I honestly think there’s something broken about women that they need someone else to make ’em laugh.”

The woman was quiet for a second. Going about her business. Then she asked, “Can you get us some dope?”

“Weed?”

“Marijuana.”

“Great. Sure. There’s a whole field of it about half a mile over there.”

“It grows wild?”

“I didn’t say that. But it’s all over. I think they plant it and forget it. Plant so much—in case some get busted—they forget all of them. They forgot this one.”

“I’m gonna kill a rabbit,” the woman said, “and you get some weed and let’s have a proper date.”

“We should dry it out first.”

“How long does that take? Two weeks?”

“Two or three weeks.”

“Stay away two or three weeks and then when it’s ready, when it’s all dried out, come strolling up here with a big joint and your shirt unbuttoned and do something with your hair and I’ll kill a rabbit.”

“And I’ll go into town and get somebody to tell me the stupidest joke there is—just knock you over it’s so stupid—leave you panting on the ground.”

The woman let her hair down and said, “It’s a date then.”

The ranger laughed. Natural. Then noticed he was doing it and blushed. There was something wrong with men, too, of course. With him more than most, he felt, as he saluted the woman, like an idiot, and walked off into the woods as the night came up.

8 .

You ever read that poem by Yeats about the isle of Innisfree? I can only remember this and that of it. I once sat in a lecture hall and Robert Bly was there wearing a fucking purple cravat! It was a Galway Kinnell reading. Galway Kinnell was reading his own poetry and out of nowhere Robert Bly asked him, from the audience, to recite “Innisfree,” this poem I’m talking about. And Galway Kinnell *obliged* him. And I remember thinking how badass that was. If someone asks you to recite some poem and you just know it cold, that’s badass, in *my* opinion. And it also was badass because Bly and Kinnell were friends. Which, who cares? But my point is, this poetry reading was a big deal for us in the audience, but for these guys, they were just there. They could’ve started talking about baseball or the weather. Poetry was something they did. Like mechanics working on cars. But while they work they talk about whatever. Mechanics talk about other cars and it doesn’t confuse them or make them jealous. And also, it was like there was this lineage that connected Kinnell to Bly to Yeats. So I was happy to be there.

The poem essentially tells the story of a guy who wants to drop everything and go live on an island he remembers from, like, childhood. He wants to live in a cabin and grow food and eat honey. But he lives in the city and it’s all around him, the cars and everything. And living on this island is just a dream. Maybe the island doesn’t even exist anymore. But I think I remember this one line, that there on the island, “peace comes dropping slow.”

That’s what it was like for the woman. She settled into things. Settled into living alone. She got used to the cabin. She got used to the cold, which was growing stronger every night. She got used to the privacy. You name it: farting, shitting, masturbating. She thought no one was watching. Her sense



of herself evaporated at times. She only occasionally remembered her full life. She did lose herself in reveries of her sister. She called out randomly. If she thought she heard anything, she called out. Not in a panic, or desperation. It was almost as if she were developing an ability to talk directly to her memories. To take part in them rather than just to have them. There was a peace developing in her, slowly. I never answered, when she called out. It would have destroyed the peace she was learning.

9.

As I remember, it was the middle of the night. The woman was sitting up in bed, staring at the walls. She was listening to the crickets. The sound of the moon and the dark blue silhouettes it made of everything. The sound of the word *silhouette* in her mind. She could feel the word on her tongue without speaking it. She also knew she could never spell the word *silhouette* in a million years without a computer with built-in autocorrect. She thought it might be better to live that way. This way. Maybe she would never have to try to spell the word *silhouette* again. She could just listen to the shadows, practically taste them.

Then it got quiet.

...

The woman said, "I can hear you. When you get close all the crickets shut up for a second."

...

"You might as well come in. I don't care. Hello? Hello?"

...

"Now I'm getting creeped out. Don't just sit there. Carol? Fuck."

...

"I have moonshine and peaches. I'm going to set 'em outside the door and if it's you, wait 'til you hear me start snoring and then come 'n eat 'em."

# *Peter Balakian*

## SHADOW GRID

*April 2020*

When I came to—crocuses were pushing up  
purple in my garden, return of the cooing dove—

and when I got out at Penn Station there were no faces  
along the tracks—

wind blew through 32nd Street with a faint whiff of onions  
and hair spray

cabs drifted between lanes like bumper cars at Asbury Park

crosswinds; crosstown; the uroboric shape of Columbus Circle

Etruscan bull's eye. Minoan nude. The cylinder seals of Ur,  
stately people on folding stools,

at the Met—in the dark,  
the peace, the peace, the peace.

A bird, the stripes of a flag, a floating bridge.

The nation's pleasure myth unspooling  
through stadiums and supermarkets

I see a wavering horizon across borders  
from the shanked Palisades below Fort Lee,

air flows through my open window like any day,  
innocent coming over the Hudson.

## *River Crossing*

JACK LIVINGS

**M**y wife, my daughter, and I live on the bluff overlooking the river.

The river is wide, and it is swarming with crocodiles and hippos. Courtesy of our unique ecosystem, they have developed a taste for each other's flesh, and some days the banks are thick with pink froth. Sometimes the crocodiles are up, sometimes the hippos. It's your standard vicious cycle.

There are inhabitants on the other side of the river. Some people say that we are the same, those of us on this side of the river and those on the other side, but the people making those statements all reside on this side of the river and tend to be members of fringe groups dedicated to inventing unsettling concepts. My brother is one of these people, and he once spent two years building a life-size mechanical model of a hippopotamus. It was confiscated the moment he walked it out of his domicile.

Having never met anyone from the other side, I cannot say I trust any assessment that extends beyond certain observable facts. For instance, I have observed that at night the other side of the river blazes with light, therefore I feel confident saying they have electricity. I also have deduced that they like to party, and not only on the weekends. Were there a central authority in charge of both sides of the river, I'd be the first in line to file a complaint about their music and lights (especially the strobes), as my family, due to the orientation of our domicile, is subjected to thunderous distraction at all hours.

MANY, MANY YEARS AGO, a team on our side built a glider designed to carry a single pilot across the river. On its inaugural flight, the eagles who perch high in the trees around the settlement, far above our sight line, came swooping down and tore the glider to pieces. What was left, little flags of fabric and splintered wood, spiraled into the river, where the hippos and crocodiles swarmed over the wreckage. The hippos and crocodiles then fell upon one another and flesh and bone churned out of the river for days, or so I am told. As a result, airborne conveyances were temporarily abandoned as potential methods of crossing the river.

Take a boat, you might say, which would get a laugh on this side of the river, as it's sort of a dark cliché that means, more or less, go fuck yourself. Of course we've tried boats. Throughout the settlement's history, there have been attempts to cross the river in myriad forms of waterborne craft. The most recent, launched when I was a child, was a sloop that cruised at twenty knots in lake tests, fast enough, it was hoped, to outpace the hippos and crocodiles. As a child, I hung great hopes on this sloop. On the appointed day, we gathered at the shore to cheer on the crew. After a communal song, the sloop was released down the slipway and more or less directly into the waiting mouths of the hippos. Then the crocodiles got in on the action. The gracefully curved hull was smashed, and the beautiful sails were shredded before they'd even had a chance to fill with wind.

My classmate's father perished on the sloop, taken to his watery grave in the gray jaws of a hippo. He was the helmsman. My classmate's father had known nothing about sailing, but when he found out there was a sloop in development, he learned to sail and competed to be a member of the crew. That's just the sort of guy he was. He beat out two thousand would-be crewmen. Two

thousand people volunteered to be part of a mission that everyone in the settlement knew deep down would end in tragedy. Our history is filled with these stories.

I HAD A NORMAL UPBRINGING. My parents taught me to do my best, treat others fairly, and figure out how to cross the river. My brother, same upbringing, turned out to be something of a comedian philosopher. He likes to ask people what they think would happen if the river froze over.

BECAUSE OF OUR STRICT intellectual property laws, my classmate's father was never able to hand down any specialized sailing knowledge to his son. Practically speaking, it wouldn't have been useful, since these days sailing is just another hypothesis from the past, but it would have given my classmate something to remember his father by.

Naturally, I have tried to pass along to my daughter something that does not violate the intellectual property laws. I am a playwright, so, practically speaking, my specialized knowledge isn't directly applicable to river crossing. But I have taught her that the best time to gaze across the river is dawn, when the air is clearest, when the other-siders have finally gone to bed and the hippos and crocodiles are in repose. My wife and I have made every effort to teach her that a life lived in service of oneself is a life lived in vain. We have made every effort to teach her to do her best, treat others fairly, and figure out how to cross the river. Maybe we should have cooled it a little on the last point.

MY OWN FATHER WAS IN MARKETING, a branch of the civil service. Marketers spend all their time trying to come up with products to lure people from the other side to our side. They innovate ideas and create elaborate advertising campaigns, which is why our riverbank is lined in billboards, all touting extraordinary products the other-siders can't live without. However, without metallurgical expertise or smelting ovens or electricity or the internal combustion engine, we are somewhat limited in the temptations we can offer, and to my knowledge no one from the other side has so much as paused to squint at the billboards on our side, not once, which gets at a central problem: I'm pretty sure no one from the other side has ever looked across the river at *anything* we've got going on over here. It's like they don't even know there's a river to look across.



I wouldn't bring this up in mixed company, but sometimes I question whether or not they even know we exist. It's hard to feel anything but the bottomless pit of your stomach when you engage with this idea, which is why I never bring it up, but lately I've been getting to know the bottomless pit of my stomach pretty well, so why not.

We have similar situations here on this side of the river, which is probably why I came up with the idea in the first place. Some people in our settlement, for instance, have almost everything they need (except access to the other side, of course, ha ha), live relatively unimpered lives, yet have no idea that just around the back of their compound walls are people who can barely get it together to submit their monthly crossing idea. Not quite the same thing as being nonexistent to the other-siders, but the larger point is that we can all get lost in our own heads. It's a regrettable oversight, but it's not a capital offense, and I don't hold it against anyone on the other side if they're too distracted by their party lifestyle to check out our goods and services.

What *is* a capital offense is failing to submit a crossing idea six months in a row. Look, it's not easy to come up with a crossing idea. It's time-consuming and it's stressful. If you're blocked, things can get hairy pretty fast. Every so often a gang selling black market ideas is apprehended and then we all go to the river to watch the hippos and crocodiles chow down. Which is also what happens if you fail to submit ideas six months in a row. Which is why the black market exists.

You can buy ideas legally, but they're expensive. If you're flush, there are subscription services that provide access to vast halls crammed with fine young minds generating piles of ideas. Every month, you receive a tidy, preapproved idea. If you take into account the legal and governmental infrastructure around the services, and throw in the pharmaceutical industry supporting their efforts, about seventy percent of our economy relies on crossing idea generation. That doesn't even include the government's massive idea operations. It's reasonable to assume that if anyone generated an idea good enough to get us to the other side of the river, our entire economy would collapse.

Naturally, there are some subversive elements (yes, my brother again) who suggest that the government scoops up all the good ideas and locks them away, far from human eyes. These are the same people who suggest that the hippos and the crocodiles might just be a metaphor for an incurable cultural problem. And who am I to argue? I'm sure in the end there will be statues of my brother all over the settlement. In the meantime, I welcome you to head down to the

river on an execution Monday to watch the hippos and crocodiles rip the arms and legs off a family of crossing idea delinquents. Then let's talk metaphors.

WE LOOK ACROSS THE RIVER and see the lights. We hear the music. That's our incurable cultural problem right there: we can't stop going to the edge of the bluff and gazing across the river like lovesick teenagers.

ANYWAY, IT'S THE PEOPLE on the backside of the compound walls who really suffer when it comes to idea generation. Even with One Family One Idea, it's no mean feat to forage herbs for pharma from sunup to sundown every day, drag yourself home, get the kids fed, washed, and in bed, and then sit by the fire sketching concepts for glider prototypes. Except, of course, because airborne vehicles and catapults and watercraft and zip lines and bridges are all government-funded research programs, they're off-limits to civilians, so you can't submit a glider prototype or anything like it. You've really got to innovate. You're crazy if you think I'm going to give you any of my own ideas, but for illustrative purposes I'll share some that I've heard about over the years.

A sand-powered bellows. A carved yew-wood staff for generating sound waves. A lens made of quartz, polished to a high gloss.

The most famous example, the one everyone hears about in school: the straw.

The straw, you say. What kind of idiots, you say. Yet it was the invention of the straw that led to advances in atmospheric science and physics, which led to the construction of the glider. Who's the idiot now?

(Yeah, I know.)

You might still be wondering what any of those other ideas have to do with river crossing, and that's because you're probably thinking big picture. You have to think small. You have to think in increments. The sand-powered bellows, for instance, might be used to keep a warm fire going on a cold winter night, allowing an idea generator who's on the cusp of a crossing breakthrough to work uninterrupted until dawn. See how it works? Everyone does his or her part.

Some of us were lucky enough to inherit ideas from our parents. And if you're me, for instance, you had a burst of creativity in your twenties when you were a loyal customer of the pharma industry, and you cranked out fifteen or twenty ideas a day for a couple of years. Between my inheritance, my brother

not needing his, and the backlog from my twenties, we're pretty much set. My daughter is set. Her kids will be set. Well, she could be. Her kids could be.

WE'RE NOT JUST TRYING to figure out how to cross the river that's right in front of us. Expeditions leave the settlement every two years. We've been trekking up the river in search of its source for ages, and our terminal outpost is so distant it can't be reached in fewer than three lifetimes. No one from our settlement will ever get anywhere near it. What this means is that by the time a dispatch from the terminal outpost arrives back here, the courier is a third- or fourth-generation explorer who was born on the trail, as were his or her parents, and the dispatch itself is well over a century old.

No one in our family has ever been part of an expedition. No one on my wife's side of the family. No one on my side of the family. My wife is a biologist and I am, as mentioned, a playwright. Historically everyone's done fine, everyone's muddled through, my father, as mentioned, a marketer, my mother a researcher, everyone respectable. My wife's family, the same. Homebodies all the way back. I don't know what our daughter's thinking.

EVERY FIVE YEARS OR SO a new dispatch arrives, bound in leather, thousands of pages long, filled with wonders. The entire settlement closes down and we gather for the reading of the information. We hear about technological and medical advances, feats of engineering that enable lives of unimaginable pleasure, yet it never fails that treachery and war abound. Fratricide, matricide, patricide, sororicide, canicide, ecocide, you name it. You wouldn't believe the shit that goes on at the outposts. Everyone has his or her favorite dispatch, but the hands-down winner-take-all volumes are a string of tomes from the early days, catalogues of catastrophe and mutilation, the result of our not knowing squat about exploring and about not building outposts in the paths of avalanches or on the sides of active volcanoes or about growing enough crops to fend off starvation or about proper sewage treatment or inbreeding. Recent dispatches feature less plague and more political betrayal, but, on balance, about the same amount of tragedy.

There are references to technologies that would easily get us across the river, but because scientific and medical advances are governed by the age-old intellectual property laws, the dispatches provide no guidance that might lead to the manufacture of, say, an internal combustion engine, or tips about the

extraction and refinement of petroleum, or, say, a primer on producing steel, an infinitely hard substance that is nonetheless malleable if one knows its secrets. Wonders abound. But we all know that even if our distant cousins bent the rules and dropped in a page or two of blueprints, the government would just rip them right out of the information and burn them. What we learned a long time ago is that a sudden advance is a dangerous advance. An advance uncoupled from the natural cultural, intellectual, and emotional progression of the settlement leads to mass conflict. A sudden advance is a death sentence. So we do not ask questions about fast attack submarines or suspension bridges. We do not gaze out at the river and wonder how easy it could all be.

EVERY DISPATCH ends the same way: The search continues.

IN MY DARKER HOURS, I find myself wondering if the farthest outposts have forgotten that their mission is to reach the source of the river so that we might safely cross to the other side. Surely outposts capable of such mighty feats of engineering would have crossed the river hundreds of years ago, yet the dispatches have never mentioned it. We await good news.

There are some people—my brother, yes, of course—who suggest that the dispatches are complete fictions. Some have gone so far as to suggest that they're all produced by an explorer only a few outposts up the river who's been having his fun with us for decades now, just like his parents before him, and their parents before them. It's an intriguing idea, and, I confess, exciting in the way that it might be exciting for a person to walk out to the end of an execution platform and put his toes on the edge and imagine what it would feel like to spread his arms and fall headlong into the mouths of the crocodiles and hippos.

MY BROTHER HAS YET ANOTHER THEORY, his alone, and it goes like this. Once upon a time there was nothing but forest on the other side of the river, and we were fine until someone said, Look at those hippos. Look at those crocodiles. We'd never get across that river. We'd be crazy to try! And so, as though we were children told not to stick our hands in a fire, it began. We dispatched expeditions, and centuries later the farthest outpost managed to cross the river and began to populate the other side of the river, until finally, after even more centuries had passed, a new outpost was developed directly across from our settlement, and thus we find ourselves

today the pathetic losers in a story about success, yearning to cross not for reasons of technological advancement or trade but because we feel the inexorable magnetic pull of a people divided from itself. My brother trotted out this theory the last time he was over for dinner, and he has not been invited back since.

TO SIGN ON FOR AN EXPEDITION is to abandon your domicile and your parents forever. The way it works is, you're evaluated at the age of thirteen. If you're a favorable candidate, you undergo a series of physical and intellectual tests, and if you do well on those, you're selected for training. Provided you make it through training, which is rigorous and not without the occasional fatality, at the age of fifteen or sixteen you are deployed, the idea being that you'll make the first outpost by the time you're eighteen. Approximately every two years thereafter you'll arrive at the next outpost. At outpost four or five, you stop to reproduce, then proceed at a rate of one outpost every three years with your children, which you're producing more of along the way.

Once your oldest child turns thirteen, he or she, being a born explorer, forges ahead with the other thirteen-year-olds in the squad, hitting outposts at a rate of every two years. Each of your children will do the same in succession. Given that you will have graduated permanently to the three-year schedule, you will fall farther and farther behind them. You will never catch up. Just as you left your family back in the settlement, your family leaves you.

WHEN I WAS STARTING OUT, I wrote some expedition propaganda. One-acts with perilous escapes, teen dramas that ended with the protagonist choosing the greater good over selfish desires like love or comfort, that sort of thing, all sacrifice and heroism and adventure. It was a simpler time, I suppose.

LAST SPRING, MY DAUGHTER came home from school making noises about the expeditions. She recounted in great detail the plays she'd seen. I recognized the plotlines but not much else. I don't know who's writing the propaganda these days, but they're pretty good at it. Maybe it's only because my daughter was so taken with them that I felt the dramas were more complex, targeting a different demographic, than in the past. Not to



put too fine a point on it, but kids who live in domiciles at the edge of the bluff overlooking the river don't apply to be explorers. If you live on the bluff, you have other options.

Traditionally it's kids from the backside of the compound walls who sign up for the expeditions. Don't get me wrong—the standards are high, and an expedition is pitched as an honorable path to take. But everyone understands it's about the compensation. As part of the package, your family gets a ten-year idea dispensation. That's enough to get them off the back wall, to say nothing of keeping your mom and dad and brothers and sisters out of a crocodile's mouth. Talk about heroic.

Maybe recruitment numbers were falling off? As far as I know, there are still plenty of smart, physically able kids on the back wall.

My daughter is tall and strong, logical to a fault. She would never, ever mistake the river for a metaphor. She abhors obscurity, which makes her the perfect audience for these government-sponsored dramas starring good-looking kids who have to make a tough decision: join the search for the river's source or live a regret-filled life in a settlement where, if only a hero had emerged, things in the future could have been different.

You see where this is going. My daughter had turned thirteen, and she was suddenly full of tolerance for my jokes, gentle toward me in a way that suggested I'd gone soft in the head but she wasn't going to let on. In short, she was no longer a child who looked to me for approval but a person who took my suggestions under advisement. When school ended for the year, she quietly, sidelong, let us know she'd been looking over the application materials. Had I any intention of standing in her way, I should have said so when she first mentioned the application materials. But because I wished to be a father who said that he trusted his daughter to know her own mind, I didn't.

**SHE FILLED OUT THE APPLICATION.** She asked her mother and me to sign. Her mother, unlike me, speaks her mind. Are you crazy?! she said. My daughter turned to me—not beseechingly, as she might once have, but with a calm look of inquiry, as if to say, And what do *you* think, young man? My wife looked at me, too, furious that she had to look at me.

Well, I said. My wife expelled a sigh that sounded a bit like a moan, which caused my daughter's placid facade to crack, just for a moment. They

are confidantes and competitors, those two, and I am quite sure that if one cuts her finger, the other, who might be on the other side of the settlement, flinches.

I attempted to placate them both, with predictable results. Eventually they set up in a corner of our domicile, arranged so closely to each other they might have been a pair of foxes in their den, and they talked through the night. When I got up the next morning, they had reached an agreement. Our daughter was asleep in her bed. My wife had signed her name.

This is a terrible, terrible idea, my wife said to me. I feel like I'm being dangled over the river.

Why did you sign, then? I said.

What choice do I have? She'll hate me if I say no. And I can't bear that, because I am a small, insecure crumb of a person who cannot live without her love.

I was ashamed. She had spoken a truth that I knew was meant for me, too. My wife at least had the courage to identify herself. As for me, I am a crumb and a coward.

AT TIMES LIKE THESE I WONDER how other-siders approach problems of this scale, problems that arise because of insurmountable personal failings. What would it mean to a father on the other side to hear that his daughter wanted to volunteer to become a pack-mule-slash-baby-machine, to throw away a perfectly good future? Do they even have these problems over there or do they just party all the time and eat pharmaceuticals and take everything as it comes? Sometimes I wish I could party all the time.

AFTER OUR DAUGHTER submitted her application, my wife and I spoke about her as though she were someone else's child. That is, we participated in a shared delusion that her desire to become an explorer was a phase, a normal function of her arrival at the doorstep of adulthood, and that we'd done no harm in allowing her to engage in this act of independence. In fact, we talked about it as though we'd behaved in an enlightened fashion. A butterfly, emerged from its chrysalis, does not instantly take flight. First it must open its wings to the sun so that they might dry. Look at how well we've handled our butterfly, we said. Bravo for us!

BRAVO. YAY FOR STUPIDITY. Hurrah for morons. Our daughter was selected for in-person evaluation and was given a week to respond.

So? I said to my daughter, doing my best impression of an impartial, if curious, third party. I was still participating in the delusion.

My daughter did not answer immediately. She held the evaluation information—time, date, location—in her hands, looking down at it as if weighing her options. She'd always done the right thing in the past, and I was counting on her to do the right thing again. Doing the right thing meant carefully considering her mother's and my wishes, whether spoken or not, and submitting. There had never been an option before, not an actual option.

Well, guess what. I was about to learn why my daughter was a top recruit. She is neither defiant nor sarcastic. Beyond her physical attributes, she bears few of the traits one might expect to find in a thirteen-year-old. She is definitive, able to read the moods of those around her. Confident but not arrogant. Thoughtful but firm. Invaluable characteristics, I'm told, out on the trail. And she is resolute.

IN THE LATE SUMMER the crocodiles mate. For some reason, perhaps jealousy, this agitates the hippos, and for a few weeks it's crazytown down at the river. They destroy everything—the billboards, the execution platforms, whatever abandoned crossing experiments might be lying around. Getting a seat in a tree stand isn't cheap, but I anted up and took my daughter. We hadn't been since she was little, a visit that had ended early when she insisted on leaving after a band of hippos tossed a crocodile, twenty feet of thrashing prehistoric monstrosity, out of the water and into the trunk of our tree, which shuddered to its highest branches, setting a flock of eagles screamingly aflight and frightening her so profoundly that she had nightmares for months.

Cruel, but I thought, you know, I'd give her another dose of the primal mode to shock her back to her senses. It was quiet when we sat down but things got started soon enough. A juvenile hippo had drifted away from the bloat to investigate a crocodile nest and was being stalked by three crocodiles. They slid like knives through the water, nothing more than three pairs of eyeballs, and surrounded the hippo. Their jaws broke the surface. They snapped at the hippo until it was fatigued. Then they got serious, and one clamped its jaws around the hippo's head and went into the death spin. The

other spectators were cheering and booing (no one really knows who to root for at these things). The rest of the hippos, alerted to trouble, began their charge, their awful mouths gaping, and the ensuing carnage was so bloody that I had to look away from time to time. I could not help but think of what dangers awaited my daughter on the trail. Meanwhile, farther down the river a different bloat had attacked a pair of crocodiles locked in the mating pose. And then a third attack broke out along the stretch of bank directly below us. My daughter was leaning forward with her hands on the rail, enraptured.

ANOTHER THING THAT TROUBLES ME about the other side. Are their entertainments so awesome that they can't be bothered to come to the river at mating season to watch? Perhaps it's nothing more than a fundamental difference in what they find entertaining versus what we find entertaining, but I get a little hollow when I ponder the possibility of a whole settlement of people who can't even take the slightest interest in mating season.

MY DAUGHTER AND I HAD LEFT the tree stand and were taking a circuitous route to the domicile, along the tranquil edge of the settlement, when she said, Do you still think it's a phase?

She elbowed me in the ribs. I was glad the frogs were making such a racket because I didn't want her to hear my heart cracking, which sounded like me getting ready to vomit. I'm not a person who believes in moments that change everything, but the realization that something has already changed can come on you in a flash, that's for sure. We'd never babied her. On the contrary, we'd had high, possibly excessive expectations of her, but I didn't see this one coming. She'd outgrown us well ahead of schedule.

That night, while my daughter was in her room alternating between push-ups and advanced orienteering problems, my wife asked me what we were going to do.

I don't know. We're in real trouble here, I said.

What's the worst that can happen if we shut it down? my wife said. She's angry for a couple of weeks and then everything goes back to normal, right?

My wife had taken another dose of delusional thinking. I didn't want to say what we both knew: that if we told our daughter no, if we told her that

under no circumstances would we allow her to continue with this expedition nonsense, we'd lose her. Not for a week or two, but forever. We might have her body, her voice, her physical person there in the domicile with us, but we'd have lost her. The person our daughter had become would not be bent to our will. We were going to lose her, absolutely. The only question was how we would lose her.

My wife said, If we let her go without a fight, we might as well tell her we don't love her. We have to show her that we want her here because we love her.

Which will not change her mind, I said. It will make her feel terrible. But it will not change her mind.

We have to do something, my wife said.

WE SAT OUR DAUGHTER DOWN. I told her we wanted to talk about life choices.

He means we want to talk about the expedition, my wife said.

Okay, our daughter said. She leaned back and crossed her fingers over her stomach and tilted her head to the side and smiled peaceably. She looked like a judge about to hand down a ruling that we would eventually come to understand to be in our best interest.

I think we'd like to hear your reasoning, I said. Tell us about your motivations.

Okay, she said, beaming like a winner, like she was sitting before the assessment panel at the exploration ministry.

So? my wife said.

Oh, you know, my daughter said. She looked up. She tapped her chin. She pursed her lips. Then she said, I guess it's complicated. She shrugged.

Most things are, my wife said.

I guess I don't really know, my daughter ventured.

You don't know? my wife said, her voice just this side of combustion. You must have given it *some* thought.

I guess so, our daughter said. I was struck by the shift in her attitude. I didn't quite understand where the self-assured girl who'd elbowed me in the ribs had gone.

Is this a joke? my wife said.

Our daughter's eyes narrowed. No, it's not a joke, she said.



Do you understand that we're concerned for your personal safety? I said.

Mhmm, our daughter said.

And you know what's out there? I said. You've heard what happens on the expeditions? You've listened to the dispatches?

I do. I have.

We understand, my wife said. We understand that this is not the most exciting place to grow up. We understand that you're ambitious. But there are ways to live an exciting life. All in due time.

I'm not looking for excitement, our daughter said.

Then why in the world would you leave *this* for *that*? my wife said.

Our daughter looked away from us. She looked down. For a long time she didn't speak, and when she did, she said, I think there might be something different out there, is all. I mean, this is great. I love our domicile and everything, but ...

But what? I said. Now I was on the verge of combusting.

Don't take this the wrong way, she said. Promise you won't take this the wrong way. She looked at us.

I shook my head in disbelief. My wife's hands were out before her in a plaintive gesture I'd never before seen her make.

It's not you, specifically, our daughter said. It's long term. It's the settlement. It's all of it. The settlement and the unique ecosystem and the other side. Don't you listen to the dispatches? Don't you want to know how they're doing it? Don't you want to live a more advanced life?

The resonant echoes of propaganda. What is propaganda, anyway, but a candle held up to beliefs we already suspect to be true? I had no idea what to say, so I said the most outrageous thing I could think of: The dispatches are fairy tales, I said. They are nothing more than fictions propagated by a band of settlers at an outpost just a few years from here, and for precisely the reason that there's nothing out there—no engines, no airplanes, no penicillin—the government allows the dispatches to keep flowing in. It's all about controlling the populace.

Oh, Dad, she said.

You won't even make it a quarter of the way! my wife said. You'll never even get close to seeing any of the advances!

I know that, our daughter said.

So what are you thinking? my wife said. This makes no sense!

My children's children, our daughter sighed. We can't stay here forever. We have to move forward.

Well, if the advances are real, why haven't they sent someone back for us in an airship? Explain that, my wife said.

Our daughter looked at us as if we were the saddest, dumbest creatures in the whole world. They've forgotten about us, she said. Isn't that obvious? We're the fairy tales. Why would you send an airship back for a myth?

MY BROTHER LIVES IN A SMALL DOMICILE on the forest side of the settlement. He passes whole weeks without seeing the river. Though he lives modestly, he is insanely rich due to an idea he came up with while working at a research lab cofunded by big pharma and Settlement Advancement. His idea was so good that they told him to go back to his domicile and put his feet up for the rest of his life. He hasn't had to submit an idea in twenty-five years.

Naturally I do not know what his idea was, and my brother alternately claims to have forgotten or to have never known in the first place. He claims that like everyone else at his research facility, he submitted multiple ideas a day. Then, one afternoon, he received a document informing him that he no longer needed to introduce new ideas to the pipeline. Ever.

I don't know what the truth is. Seems to me that they'd want to hold on to a guy with good ideas and see if he could come up with anything else. But what do I know? My brother likes to say, If it was such a great idea, what are we still doing here?

Normally I would not have presented a personal problem to my brother, but in this case I was desperate and felt that he might be able to enlighten me as to my daughter's views on life in the settlement, as I'd often heard him sound familiar notes.

I sat on his dusty floor—my brother has almost no furniture—and explained what was happening. He listened attentively, occasionally rubbing his beard and staring at a point on the wall, as he's always done when trying to puzzle out some seemingly intractable problem. When I got to the part where she said we couldn't stay in the settlement forever, he laughed.

What's funny, I said.

She's no dummy, he said.

On the surface, I can't disagree with that assessment, I said.

She knows the score, all right, he said.

How so.

You still spend a lot of time looking at the river, do you?

Occupational hazard, I said.

Sure, he said.

It's just right there, I said. How do you not look at it, even if you don't want to? I said. My brother has always done this to me. He's the smart one, and he taunts me with questions he already knows the answers to.

So what, I said. So I look at the river. Everyone does.

I don't, he said.

Yes you do.

I close my eyes when I'm near it.

No you don't, I said.

I do, he said.

I guess some of us don't have that luxury, I said.

Oh, my brother said. But we all do. It's the one luxury we all share.

That's juvenile. The river exists whether you look at it or not.

Absolutely correct. I'm not denying the river's existence. But I'm denying my eyes the chance to confirm its existence.

You're ridiculous.

Do you ever wonder, my brother said, if the river's a circle?

No, I said.

What if it's not a river but a moat, and one day all the expeditions will walk back into the settlement from the south side, and then what?

I shrugged.

Ever wonder why we don't just dig a tunnel under the river?

Can you cut it out with the philosophy? I said.

Let me show you something, he said. He got up and walked through the door to his workshop. Come on! he called.

I'm coming, I said, though at the time I had no interest in anything he possibly could have shown me.

Look at this, he said when I entered the workshop, which was almost as big as my entire domicile. He pulled a sheet off to reveal, you guessed it, another of his life-size mechanical hippos.

What's with you? I said.

It's a good idea, he said. You know why they took the first one? Because they knew it was a good idea. And it works.

What do you mean it works? I said.

It's a theoretically sound idea, my brother said. If a person were to conceal himself inside my machine and remain among the hippos, he could move about the river at will.

I ran my hand over the hippo's rough skin. He'd textured and colored it perfectly. It was hideously lifelike, from the hairs on its snout to the washed pink around the ears. Only the eyes, which were empty hollows, gave it away. There was some sort of fan mechanism beneath its tail.

Propulsion, he said. Do you want to get inside and see how it works? he said.

Nope, I said. No way.

Suit yourself, he said.

Say you get it down to the river. What about the crocodiles? I said.

There's risk in every venture, he said.

Well, it's very nice, I said. I'm sure you'll be executed for building it.

Probably, my brother said.

So, I said.

I don't really know your daughter, my brother said.

I feel like I don't either. Not lately.

You could bring her around once in a while.

You could swing by our side of the settlement, I said.

Hm, my brother said.

So, any thoughts? I said. Anything?

Well, my brother said, all things being equal, sounds like she's no more a fan of the river than I am.

She's not walking around with her eyes closed, if that's what you mean, I said.

Are you sure? my brother said.

I had to think about it. What did I really know about what she did and didn't do?

I don't really close my eyes, my brother said. I don't want to fall in. What a way to go. But I could. I could if I wanted to. And I suspect she could, too.

Right, I said.

I don't know what to tell you, he said. Anything that helps you, hurts her. I'm not in that line of business.

Neither am I. There's no solution.

There's a solution, my brother said. Just not the one you want.

That's what I meant, I said.

Sure, he said.

WHEN I GOT BACK to our domicile, the other side of the river was pumping. They had the rainbow strobes on, washing the low clouds in bursts of color. The mist hanging over the water was throbbing to the beat.

Inside, my daughter was sitting at the table, her face in her hands. Her forearms had become sinewy from all the grappling training she'd been doing, and her veins stood out like threads against the braids of muscle. She was sobbing. My wife was sitting at the table, but not next to my daughter, at a small distance, and she looked grim. Her arms were crossed. They were the arms of my wife. They had not changed, they were recognizable, for which I was glad.

What happened? I said.

My daughter shook her head. Her ponytail whipped back and forth. Her sobbing changed slightly to accommodate her attempt to communicate, without abating.

I looked to my wife and made a face.

I'm not supposed to speak, she said.

Shut up! my daughter said.

Hey! I said. We don't talk to each other that way!

Then tell him! my daughter said. Tell him what you did!

My wife shrugged and said, I went over to the Commission for Expeditions and inquired about research slots.

LET ME EXPLAIN. Some expeditions have an adviser attached, someone from a scientific or technical field. When a research slot is vacated at an outpost—that is, when someone dies—word comes back with the dispatch, and, in the case of an outpost vacancy that's within striking distance, the settlement sends someone to fill the post or, in the case of an outpost that's too far to reach, an adviser who can train an explorer while they're on the trail. In that case, the adviser will die somewhere out on the trail, but the young, freshly trained adviser will carry on to the outpost to fill the vacancy. My wife, who



is a botanist of some renown, finished her fieldwork long before our daughter was born. There was no reason for her to volunteer for an expedition. She could not accompany our daughter, due to very clear and well-known rules that prohibit family members from joining the same expedition.

What she'd done was nothing more than an act of cruelty, like an injured animal attacking because it is in pain.

If she's going, my wife said, jerking her thumb at our daughter, I'm going. My daughter's sobbing became a wail.

Who can explain why people do what they do? I have known my wife for half my life. We are not strangers to each other. We do not harbor secrets from each other. She is a mystery to me.

LATER, LONG AFTER our daughter had refused dinner, after she had refused consolation, after she had shut herself away in her room, her sobbing relented. It was the middle of the night. The music from the other side of the river, even through our soundproofed walls and windows, was thumping away. I wonder if the party animals over there ever skip a shindig due to problems back at the domicile. I wonder if they ever tone down the light show in deference to those who might be trying to sort something out. In my experience, the human condition, the simple act of being, is a license to create problems of increasing complexity, even as we struggle to solve them, until eventually we are trapped by our own decisions, unable to escape from the maze we've built around ourselves. They must be subject to the human condition on the other side, too, so they must deal with hairy problems. What I wouldn't give to know how they'd handle this one.

Are you bluffing? I said to my wife.

We were in bed, and she was reading. She responded without looking up from her text. Nope, she said.

I don't understand, I said.

I don't either, she said. But someone has to do something.

This doesn't solve anything, I said.

I disagree, she said. I don't feel like I'm a little rabbit being dangled over a float of crocodiles anymore.

That's me, I said. That would be me now.

Well, she said.

Yeah, well, I said.

I FELL ASLEEP AND HAD A DREAM, a recurring dream, in which I was being pursued by the authorities. I was running through the settlement, and though everyone wished to help me, they were afraid to do so. An old couple, however, opened their door and I stole inside their domicile.

Then it was years later. I had a seat in the front row at a play, not unlike the ones I write for production here in the settlement. I was wearing fine clothes. The authorities who pursued me were no longer in power. Onstage, the old man and woman were standing outside their domicile, being questioned by the authorities. They were skilled liars, but not so skilled that the authorities were fooled, and they vowed to return.

I was troubled by the paradox of the play, as in act three I was apprehended by the authorities, yet there I sat in the audience, watching my own capture. I was caught because when the authorities returned, I could not resist peeking through the curtain to watch the interrogation. It was my eye, googling around in the corner of the window, that betrayed my subterfuge.

I have this dream in times of trouble, yet I always wake with a strange feeling of peace, not the cold terror one might expect, as though two parts of myself have been rejoined, though I cannot understand why, as I have always lived in this settlement and have never been anything but a law-abiding citizen.

I KNEW YOU'D BE BACK, my brother said. It was deep in the night, and I had risen from the dream and walked directly to his domicile through the deserted settlement, dark except for the ambient light from across the river.

Well, I said.

My brother was wearing a heavy apron and was carrying a mallet and a chisel and was covered in wood chips.

Do you ever sleep? I said.

Only when I'm not awake, he said.

So, I said.

Domestic tribulations? he said.

I told him my wife's plan.

Yow, he said. So?

I looked past him to the workshop door.

So, I said.

Yeah, he said, come on. I followed him back into his workshop. There was an old tree trunk in the corner, stripped of its bark, minor signs of chiseling here and there.

What's that? I said.

Nothing yet, he said.

I blinked at him.

I just started it today, he said. It's a sculpture.

I walked over to the mechanical hippo and touched the sheet.

Yeah, go ahead, he said. I pulled it off.

Hatch is on top, he said, sliding me a stepladder with his foot. It's pretty self-explanatory, he said. Push the things on the floor to move the legs. Turn the crank for the propulsion system. Pull the sticks to turn. The rope in the back twitches the tail. Use the straw to breathe if the air gets stale.

Inside, the hippo smelled like pig fat and compost. I closed the hatch and my brother played a little ditty on the rump. Send a dispatch when you get there, he said through the ear mesh. He pushed open the workshop's big roller door.

IT'S NOT HARD TO MANEUVER. My brother is a genius of mechanical advantage, and walking through the settlement was no harder than climbing a gentle hill. His first hippo had been confiscated because, although he'd walked it out of his domicile in the dead of the night, it had made a terrible racket and had woken up the whole neighborhood. This new one is silent but for its four-toed feet, which make slapping sounds on some of the harder-packed roads leading to the river. By the time I got there, I was pretty sure I had the hang of it. Even clearing the bluff and the sloped bank wasn't so bad. The partying had ended on the other side, but there was enough light to see where the hippos were clustered. I stopped at the water's edge to yank the rope for verisimilitude's sake, and then I was off.

THE CHASSIS HAS EXCELLENT BUOYANCY, and the propulsion system seems to be working just fine. I check the right eyehole. Some hippos are drifting toward me. Their eyes glisten in the light from the other side. One opens its mouth, lazily, not in a threatening fashion, and it closes just as slowly. Soon they are close enough that I can see their eyelashes. They bump my

craft, and the rough friction of our skins sliding against each other vibrates up through the steering sticks, but I remain on course. The bloat is sounding, their underwater calls booming through the shell and echoing around the spacious interior. They're huffing and grunting all around me. I can't concern myself with whether they can see me peering out at them from the hollow innards or whether they are dismayed by my silent progress. I must keep my nose pointed at the other side and continue to turn the crank. My daughter is about to vanish into the wilderness with my wife in tow. Someone has to put an end to this madness.

## *Two Poems by Noah Warren*

### C A L E N D A R

Some waves came up overnight, though in Norderney, there was no weather.  
At the commercial wharf, a thin stream of white exhaust rose vertically from the ferry.  
The first service would depart soon. The puddles lay dark in the stone streets  
and in the garden, and on the narrow walk. A bank of haze hung a hundred meters  
offshore, perfectly still. While at the end of the long pier, the shallow-bottomed *tjalk*  
that Tomas had restored, good at hauling, bad at sailing, knocked against the pilings.  
It was regular enough that you began to expect the next knock  
but then there was none, or two came quickly together and the effect broke.  
Marta had been up before us, and made coffee, and laid the table for breakfast.  
A blue cloth, mugs, plates, and silverware, three zinnias in a thin white porcelain vase.  
We helped ourselves to brown bread and cheese and the least strange-looking of the meats  
she had rolled neatly on the tray. We ate quickly, gazing out the small window  
at the blue and purple sky, the path down to the water, the long pier.



## THE COMPLETE STORIES

Even relating it, Sofia shivered with the weirdness of it.

He'd read all my stuff online, I mean all of it. And he was like, glistening with the effort of being nice to everyone, but especially me. How he knew I'd be there I don't know. What I hate is that I bought it. I thought he was lonely, sure, but changed, mature. It was only after, walking home, that Jen told me. And I yelled at her for letting me interact with that, which I regret, but she fucked up. I don't care if he's sober: hate is worse. Hate is poison. I'd been murmuring sympathetic words, my face mirroring her revulsion; now I filled my eyes with the care I felt for her, and feel; however, what I could find to say ended before the love did, so a small silence came, Sam squeezed her hand, our expressions softened to the resting smile, and as her head tilted toward his shoulder my eyes slipped over her other shoulder to Miriam, who was putting down her seltzer because, I could tell, she was preparing to talk, and as Mark was finishing, as everyone—Jasper and Rob, Mark himself, and me—was still chuckling at his Folsom Street Fair bit, the leather grannies and the librettist who played bemused but two hours later was getting fisted on the sidewalk, she launched, drawlingly: That reminds me of the last time I saw John Ashbery: the National Book Award after-party was at an apartment on Central Park West, the elevator opened in the living room and there he was, pouting under the chandelier, in his wheelchair, alone, he'd lost his handler to the bathroom and no one was noticing him, so he just began waving his empty hand, yelling, *Gin and tonic!* And I tried, but there was only *champagne and elderflower* and can you imagine telling that to *John Ashbery?*—Lord. It can ice your heart to rediscover people you admired, or wanted to fuck, and find they're just the same. Across the room, I found Molly's eyes and smiled. She didn't: she had opinions about Miriam, and so I made my face grave like hers and, turning back to the circle to slip from it, saw Jasper's fingers on Mark's lower back, which I was glad for: there are so few people. And it's uncanny how the deaths start so slow, a few a year, even the terrible ones somehow logical, until gradually the shock grows constant, or the unsurprise does, I don't know, it depends I think on whether you read life as a comedy, the sustainable way, or as a tragedy, which according to Yeats is when we really begin to live, I was saying to Rumur, post-bump, he was nodding, humoring me, when Lily broke in Well I don't think how you read it matters half so much as how you write it, excuse me for screwing up your metaphor, I mean how you live toward others, and I think some dissonance between those is necessary, for art, sure, but also for intimacy—if that's going to mean anything. I thought this was beautiful and I said so: her personal life, for four years, had consisted of flying most weekends to Florida, going to hospitals, cooking, and helping raise her niece, as her sister died of ALS. She smiled thinly and I knew I'd misspoken, I mean, this helps me, I said, that gap

has always haunted me, the silent self always judging out of pain, the self in the world fickle, trying to make sense of what it's done, working to forgive itself. Maybe, she said, and it's true, vulnerability often doesn't work, nor is it often true, Excuse me, I said, I'm getting signals from Molly, and I went to her, because the animal in me felt small, and I loved her, and in each instant our problems still felt repairable, and were. I found her hand and she let me. She was talking to someone shortish, with cropped hair and a memorable face. She was saying that it's possible to recognize our limits for what they are, with bravery, even as we fail, hearing ourselves repeat the things we don't believe, and don't comfort us.

# *Natalie Shapero*

## IS THIS A BAD TIME

For how many years have I kept up the lie, the story  
of the middle-aged man in the cap and the gray  
or possibly bluish sweatshirt  
gaining on me in the night, wrenching  
me off the street by my neck, and tossing me  
into a ditch, where he had me pinned? I have  
paced, I have reflected, I have purposelessly  
driven a car to the Unglaciaded Appalachian Plateau  
at the state's south margin, then circled back  
to the central till plain, and it has come to me I must  
come clean. It wasn't

a ditch. It was flat.

My regrets at having repeatedly dismissed the land's  
unimpeachable flushness, or—depending on  
point of view—my congrats to the upstart parcel there  
on having been credited with a little  
depth. I should specify also this is a guess.  
It's not as though I've been back with a hammer,  
with stakes, with paint and string to truly  
gauge the grading—it's more a feeling I get.  
That if you placed a marble on that dirt, it would  
stay set. It would not roll. No way. No way  
to strain or snake or twist or kick or up and go.

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**DAVID ADJMI**'s play *Stereophonic* is scheduled to premiere on Broadway next season. A memoir, *Lot Six*, was published in June.

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**GYÖRGY DRAGOMÁN**'s "The Puppet Theater" is a chapter from his novel *The Bone Fire*, which will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in February, translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet.

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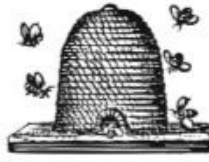
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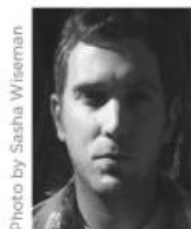
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