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Spring 2021

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A Novel

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A Novel

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EVERYDAY MOJO SONGS OF EARTH

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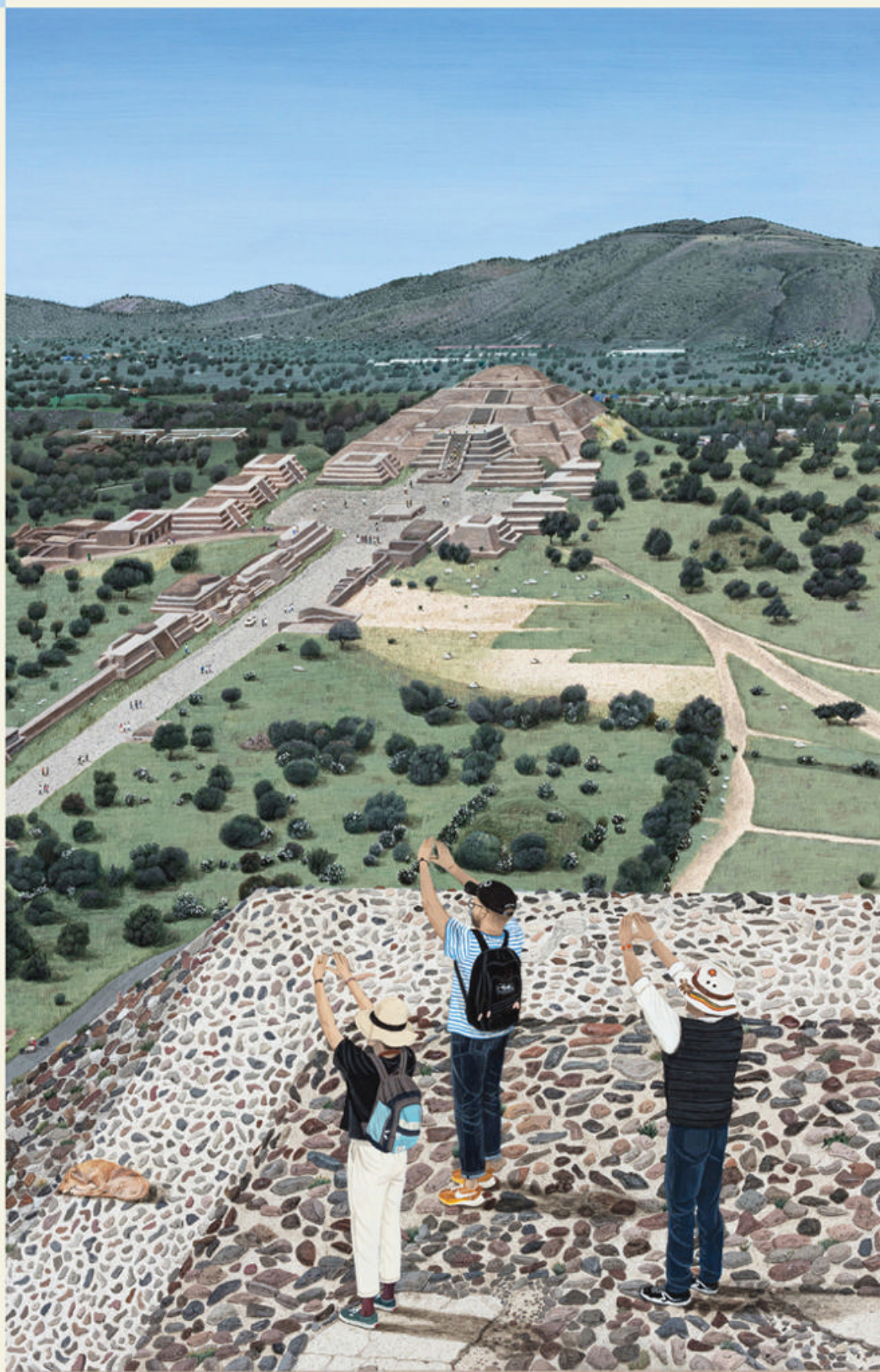
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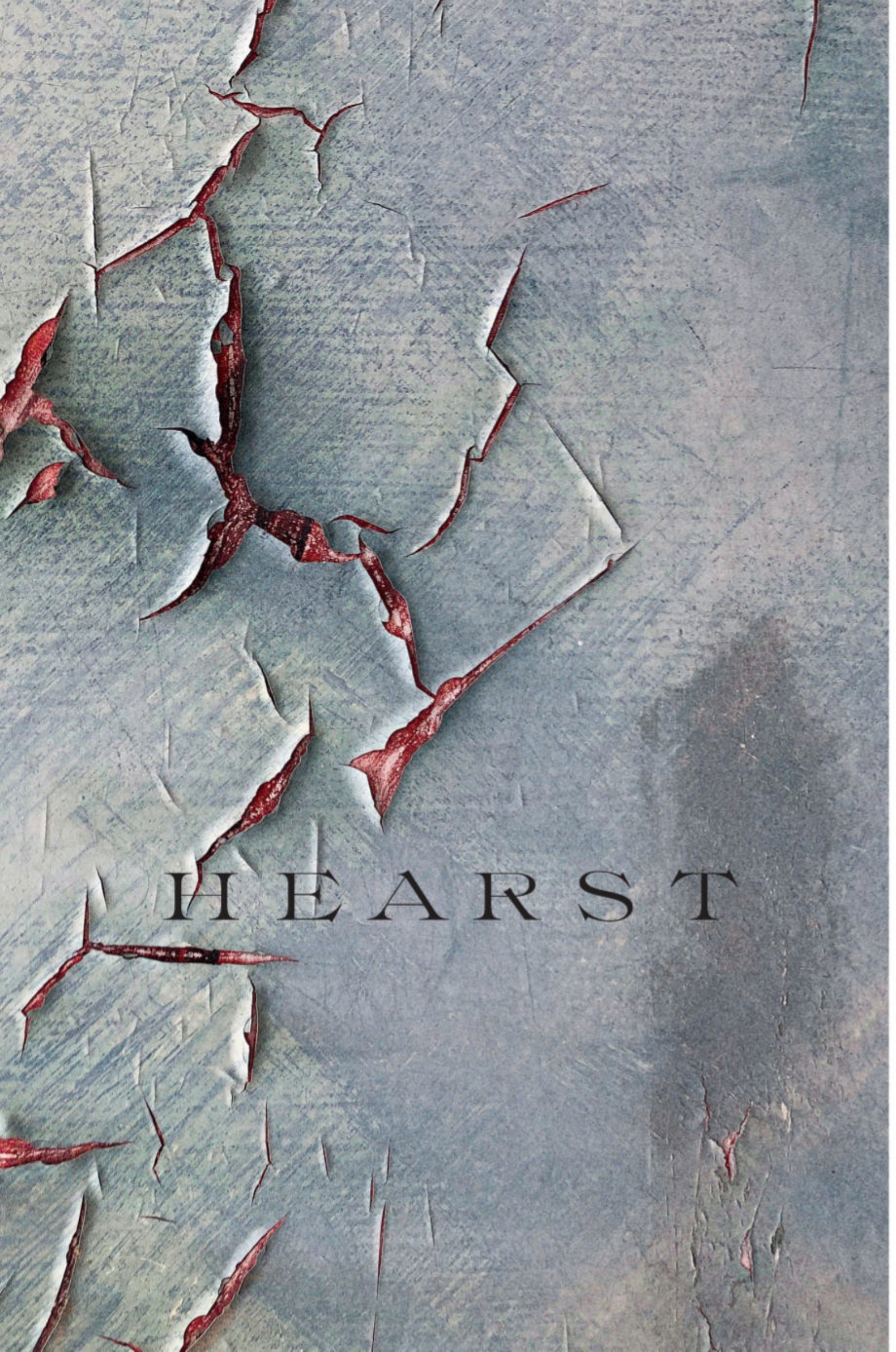
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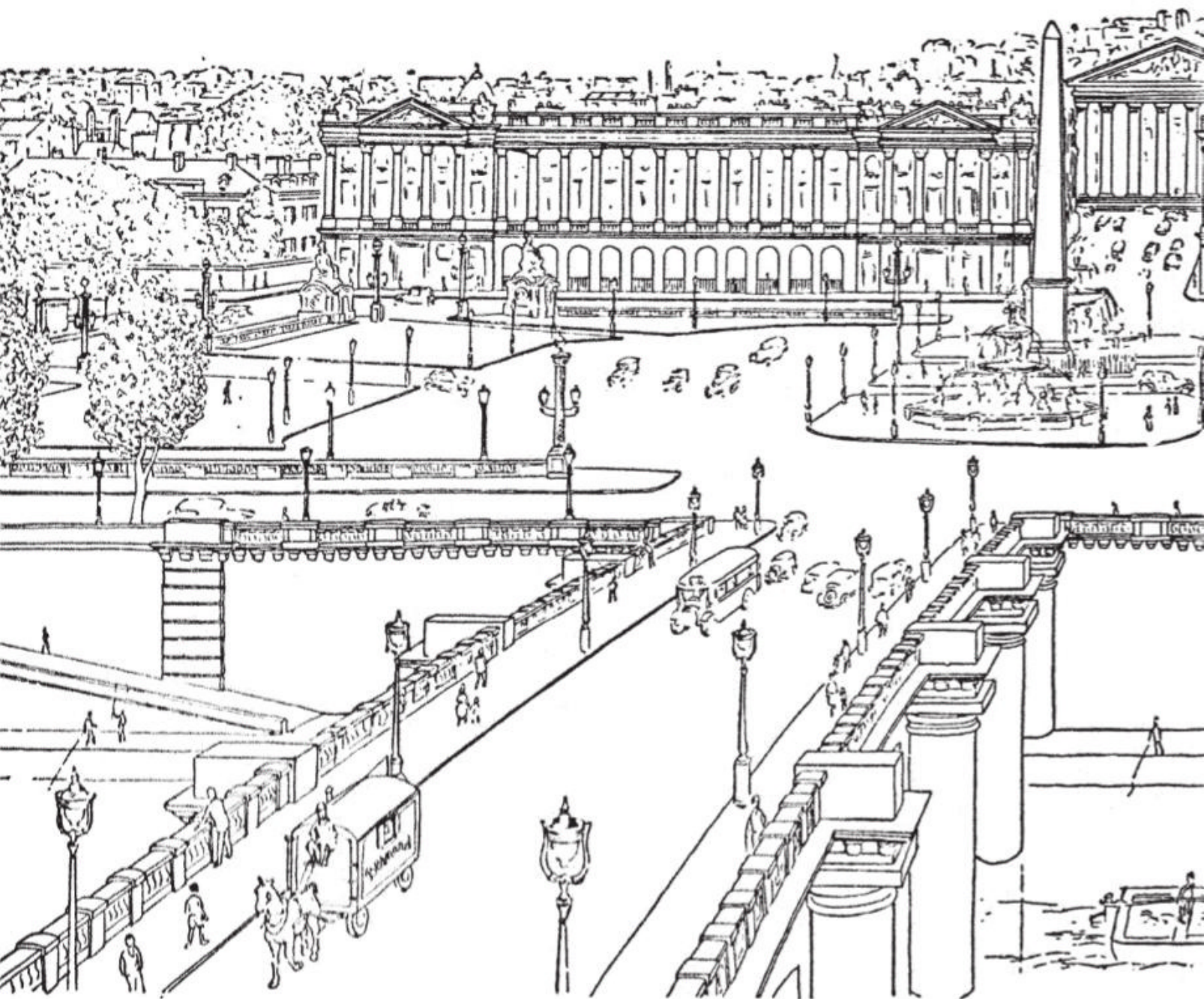
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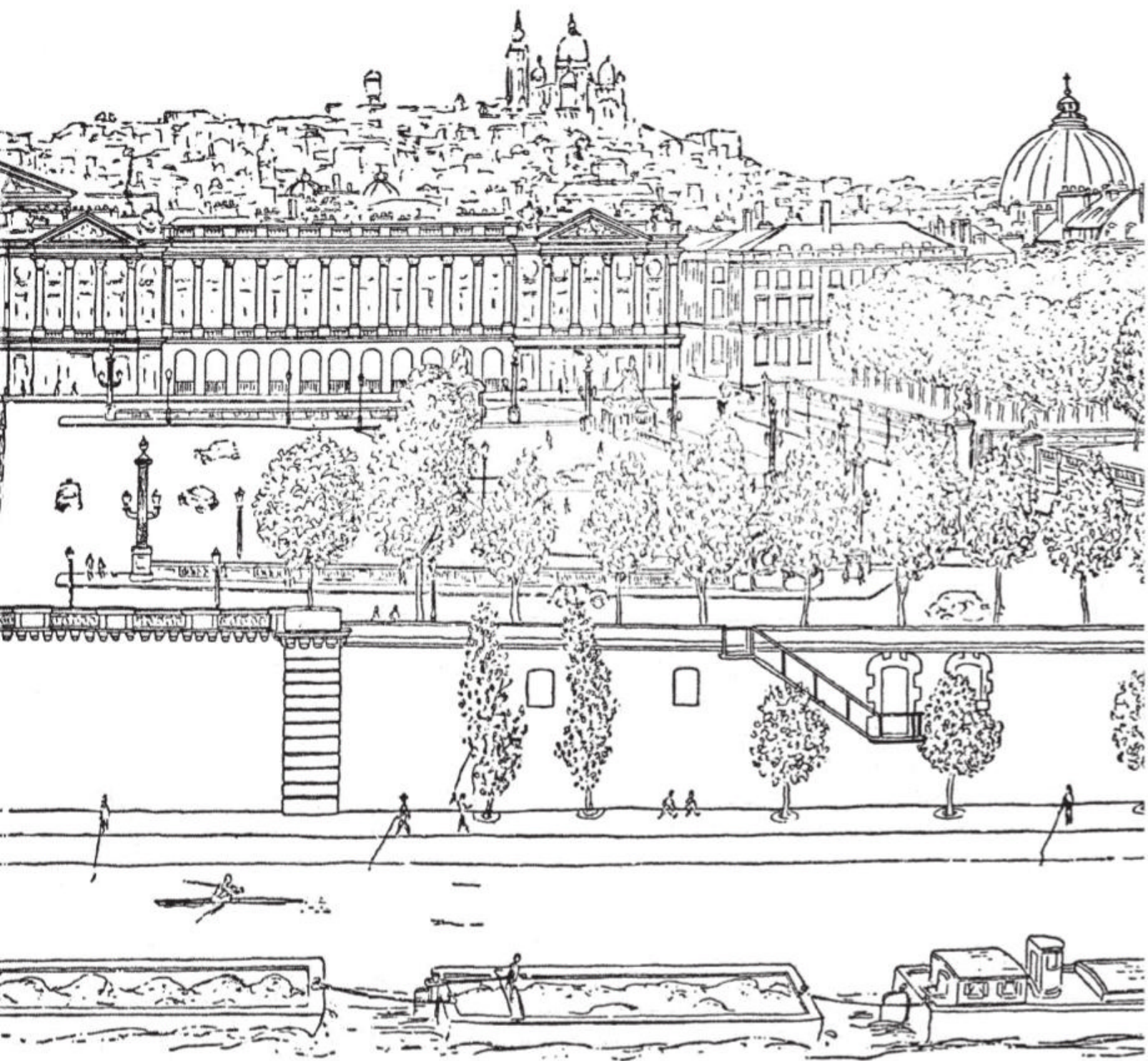


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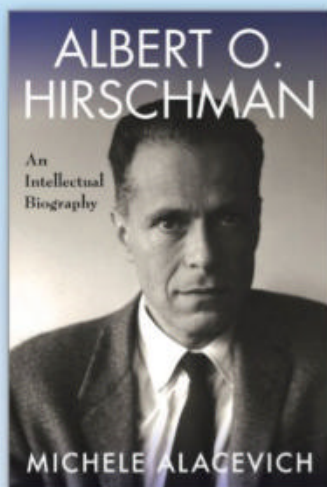


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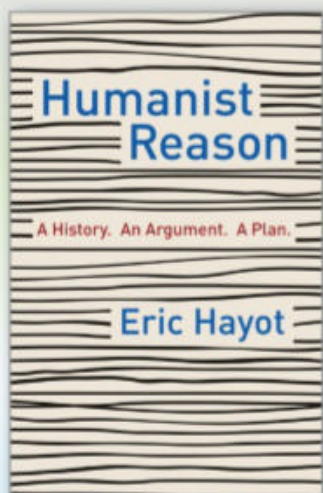
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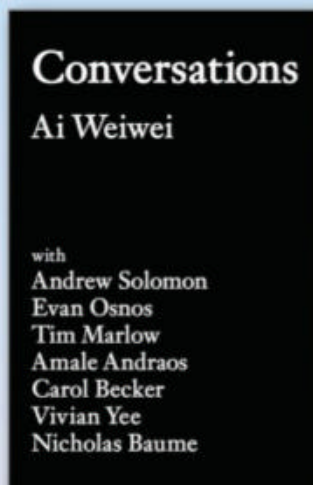
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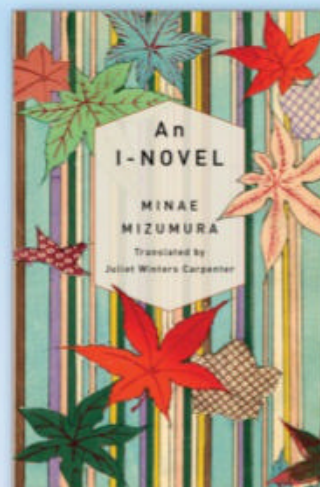
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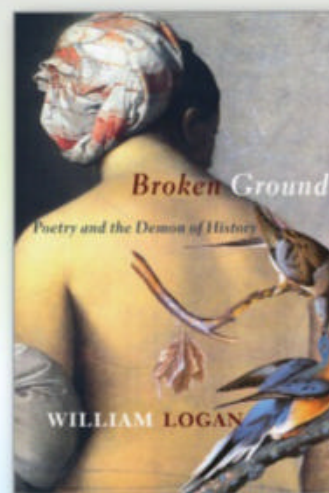
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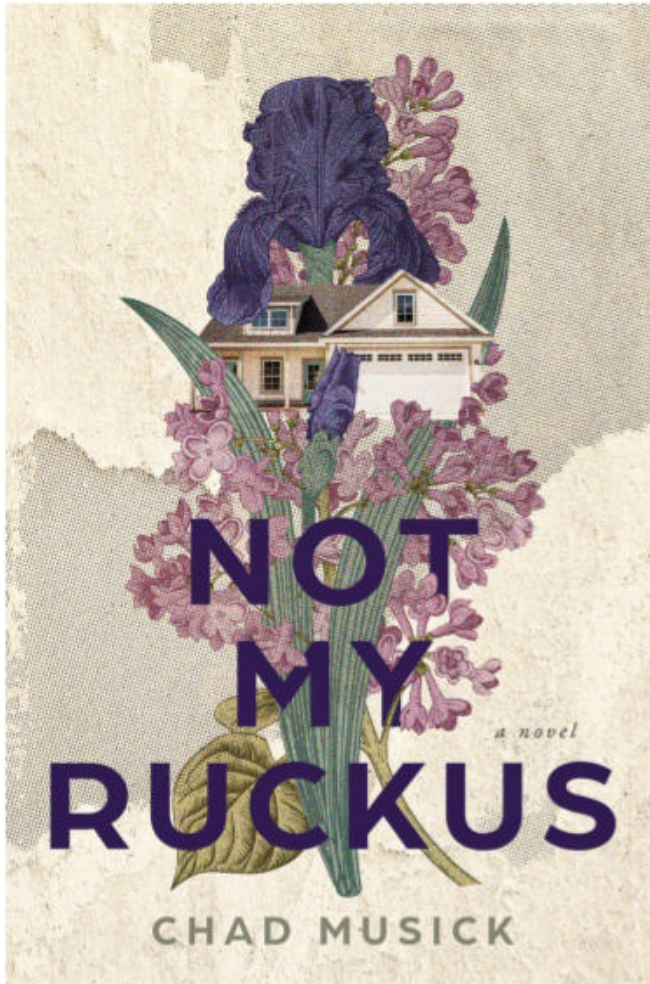
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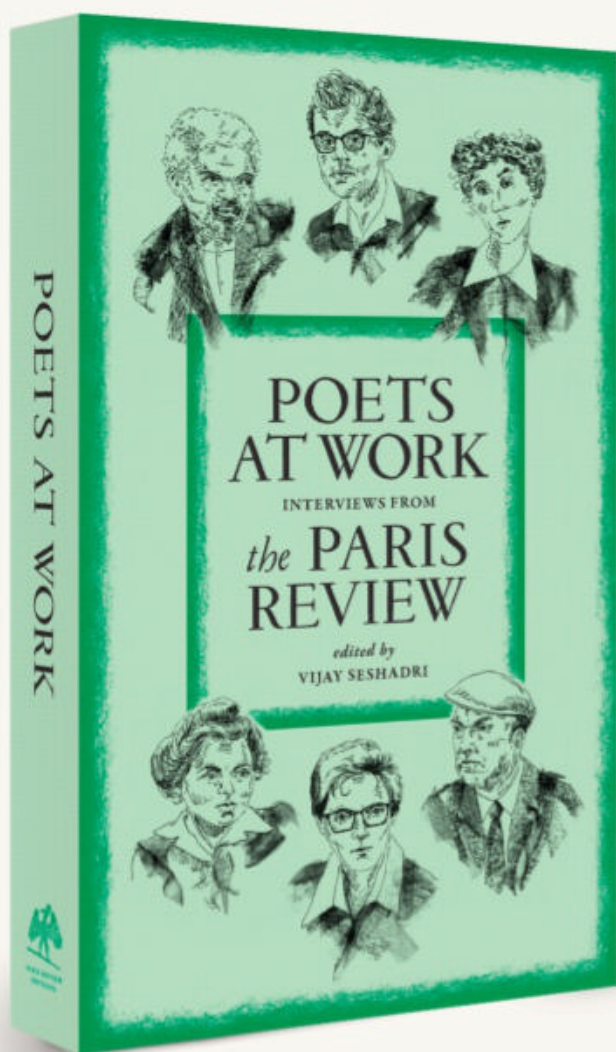
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Maly, Maly, Maly

ANTHONY
VEASNA SO

Always they find us inappropriate, but today especially so. Here we are with nowhere to go and nothing to do, sitting in a rusty pickup truck, the one leaking oil, the one with the busted transmission that sounds like the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Here we are with the engine running for the AC, the doors wide open for our bare legs to spill out. Because this, right here, to survive the heat, this is all we have.

An hour ago we became outcasts. One of us—not me—would not shut the fuck up. And since the grandmas are prepping for the monks and need to focus, we've been banished outside to choke on traces of manure blown in from the asparagus farms surrounding us, our hometown, this shitty place of boring dudes always pissing green stink.

And according to the Mas, everything about us

appears at once too masculine and too feminine: our posture—backs arching like the models in the magazines we steal; our clothes—the rips, studs, and jagged edges—none of it makes sense to them. The two of us are wrong in every direction. Though Maly, the girl cousin, strikes them as less wrong than the boy cousin, me.

“Ma Eng can suck my dick,” Maly says, still not shutting the fuck up, her long hair rippling in the gas-tainted breeze of the vents, her blond-orange highlights dancing, or trying to, anyway. “What is up her ass? Seriously, I should have a say in this party’s fucking agenda. It’s my birthright!”

“At least Ma Eng gives a fuck about you,” I say, my chin resting on the steering wheel. Under the truck, the cracked concrete of Ma Eng’s driveway seems to be steaming, and I swear the very dust in the air is burning, it’s so hard to breathe. We can’t even listen to the radio, you know? Can’t focus on anything but our own sweaty boredom. I look up at the harsh blue sky, how it crushes the squat duplexes of G Block. I am trying to deprive Maly of my full attention, but her vivid presence, that vortex of cheap highlights, it exhausts my energy. Plus, she’s slapping the side of my head.

“Ves, Ves, Ves!” Maly says. “Look at me!”

“Jesus,” I whine, batting her hand away. “I thought you ‘gave zero fucks’ about this party. Why do you care if they’re making amok or not?”

“It’s what *I* want to eat, okay, and it’s *my* dead mom.” She violently throws her head sideways, cracking her neck. “I mean, apparently she’s not *dead* dead, anymore, but still . . .”

Unsure of what to say, I clench my teeth into a lopsided smile. I can’t help but admire her looks, as I always do. Almost with pride. Maly’s got it going on, no matter how disheveled. Even today, on this random August Sunday, as we wait to celebrate the rebirth of her dead mother’s spirit in the body of our second cousin’s baby, she looks good. Her left leg’s thrown up onto the dashboard, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she started clipping her toenails. She’s in a pair of jean shorts she stole from our other cousin, who was too chunky for them anyway, and a white T-shirt cut into a tank—also stolen—which she’s stuffed down her panties so you can notice her thin waist. Hard to say if it’s intentional, the way her clothes fit, all these hand-me-downs, which is the effect she uses, I guess, to chew up guys too dumb to realize she will spit them right out.

Through her cheap sunglasses, I see her bug eyes looking at me and past me at the same time, an expression affirming how I feel sometimes, like she’s

my responsibility, like I'm a dead broom reincarnated into a human, my sole purpose to sweep away her messes—whatever Maly happens to shatter next.

“Stop being dramatic,” I tell her, my hands tapping the steering wheel. “You know it's all bullshit—the celebration, the monks, our third cousin or whoever the hell she is.” I'm not sure I believe what I'm saying or if I'm just trying to make Maly feel better. “It makes zero sense, right?” I add. “Like, I'm no expert, but why would your mom reappear over a decade later?”

Maly shrugs her shoulders, indifferent now, too full of herself to entertain my attempts to console her. It reminds me of our sleepovers. Whenever my dad got stupid drunk, my mom would send me to Ma Eng's. He was never violent in front of me, but who knows what happened between my parents when I was sleeping on Maly's bedroom floor, especially in those years when my dad was jobless—after his restaurant failed and before he started cooking lunch for a rich-kid school—and when it became obvious I wasn't, you know, a normal boy, that I was a girly wimp who despised sports and watched weird movies. I was a precocious freak who came out before puberty, and I was clearly doomed. It's hard enough for people like us, my mom would say. All very cliché, in that gay sob story kind of way, but I can't explain it any better than that. They are my immigrant parents.

Anyway, every night of what my mom called “bonding time with grandma,” even though technically Ma Eng's my great-aunt, Maly would nudge me awake with some fake urgent question, like was she actually pretty, or even that funny? For weeks, she obsessed over our eighth grade English teacher, how he claimed she wasn't ready for the high school honors track and then refused to write her a letter of recommendation. Why do teachers always hate me? What if that stupid dirtbag is right? Every night I told her, You're awesome, everyone's a dick, and so on, only to discover that she'd fallen asleep before I even stopped talking.

I was always there for Maly, right where she wanted me, on the floor beside her bed, doling out reassurances until she sank into her dreams. Though maybe she's getting worse these days, needier than usual. Because in less than a week, I'm heading to a four-year university in LA, while Maly's stranded, stuck with Ma Eng for another two years, at least, as she makes do with community college.

Maly has closed the passenger door and is now sticking her head out of the window. She leans her right hip against the door, presses her left foot onto

the center console, holding herself in place for a moment, grabbing on to the truck's roof, until she steadies herself into a stillness, like she's posing for a famous photographer. I watch her, skeptically, as she dares to go handleless, crams her fingers into her mouth, and whistles a deafening sound.

"Get over here, bitch!" she shouts, and my limbs tense up.

Jogging toward us now is Rithy, his arms bulging around a basketball, baggy gym shorts flopping. He looks like he always does, all brown-kid swagger. He's the kind of guy who recites 50 Cent lyrics and loves *Boyz n the Hood* and *8 Mile* even though he doesn't—I suspect—get their political themes. This summer Rithy and Maly started fucking, which makes sense, as both of them have dead moms and shitty dads, but now I have to remind myself that I've *also* known Rithy forever. That he's not just Maly's personal plaything. Her boy toy, as she calls him.

Maly returns to her seat and tilts her sunglasses down while licking her teeth. Rithy's not even at the truck yet, but there it is: *Lolita*. Neither of us has read the book, and only I've seen the movie, but working at the video store, we both stare at that fading *Lolita* poster. Usually stoned. Stoned enough we get sucked into those heart-shaped glasses, that chick's wild, don't-give-a-fuck look, the crazy bravado of that tagline—"How Did They Ever Make a Movie of *Lolita*?"—as we burn illegal DVDs for our dipshit uncle to rent out.

"Aren't you supposed to be, like, setting up a *party*?" Rithy teases as he leans against the truck's door and stretches out his legs. He's sweating all over, probably from shooting hoops at his cousin's house, and I can almost smell him. Everything Maly says about his body swirls in my head.

"We've been exiled," she tells him flatly. "'Cause every Ma has been a psycho since the genocide. It's like, as long as they don't overthrow a government and, you know, install a communist regime, they aren't being total dicks." Pleased with herself, Maly laughs.

"Your Ma's hella rad, you know it," Rithy responds. "Old lady comes through with the beef sticks." He raises the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his forehead, flashing that flat stomach of his. I don't even care if it's intentional. "What time's the party again?"

Maly flings both her hands toward the duplex, as though pushing it all away. "Go ask Ma Eng yourself. I'm fucking tired of her bullshit."

"Girl, just tell me," Rithy says, biting his lip.

"Look, we can be late for my dead mom's birthday bash, okay, it's *fine*."

She closes the distance between her face and Rithy's. "We're young and beautiful and the concept of time is a fucking buzzkill."

"Six is fine," I chime in.

"Oh, hey, Ves," Rithy says, oblivious to my focus on the veins of his forearms. "Excited for college?"

"You got any weed, Rithy?" Maly interjects, slamming back into her seat. Rithy twists his face into an even bigger smile. "You know I do."

With barely a nod, Maly tells me she'll be right back, that if I leave she'll be pissed. She gets out of the truck and walks Rithy to his uncle's duplex, just down the block, as if leading a disoriented puppy home. His hand slides down her back to hover over her ass, which sways just enough with every step. He cocks his head slightly, to witness Maly by his side, before looking forward again. Even from here, I can tell how enraptured he is by her, how much his own dumb luck astounds him, that he should be so blessed this early in his life, all of us only three months into adulthood.

AND HERE'S THE PART where shit gets common, right? Or rather, here's the part that makes outgrown Power Rangers twin sheets feel pretty awesome, allowing the srey to understand how men see her thick eyeliner and her fake nails, letting the proh assert power, for just a moment, over his own dark skin and his addict father with the bad, broken English. Here's the part that seems like a revelation until it's forgotten as life is lived, because nothing's special about an adulthood spent in the asshole of California, which some government official deemed worthy of a bunch of PTSD'd-out refugees, farting out dreams like it's success intolerant.

This is the part just like the thai lakorns, those soap operas from Bangkok dubbed into Khmer and burned onto wholesale discs from Costco. The srey—raggedy and poor, flush with the blood of forgotten royalty, angry from the backstabbing of wills and inheritances—cons her way into the arms of the prince whose family is the very cause of her misfortune. She allows the scheme to redeem her family's name to blind her to the feelings of real love developing beneath the high jinks, the pratfalls, her awkward but whimsical personality. Little does she know, everything will soon feel like a missed opportunity, as the prince enlists in the army to prove his manhood, because every Thai prince in every Thai soap, like every shitty proh in every shitty neighborhood, always craves some higher purpose.

For now, though, the srey basks in the prince's hot breath, the shock of secret touches, the rush of manipulation. And, hey, at least she isn't the sidekick, the faggy best friend. Because there he is, in every episode of every different version of the same dumb story: the kteuy, sidelined to the bleachers, baking in the sun, expected to get off not by his own proh but simply by the idea of the srey he supports getting hers.

Of course, all these depressing thoughts aside, I am relieved, regardless of how demeaning it feels, to have some peace as I wait for Maly and Rithy to finish fucking. I'm even happy for her, that on this nightmare of a day, she can find solace in her boy toy's tight body. Though I'm assuming that's how Maly feels about it. She hardly ever talks about her mom in a serious way.

I look into the windows of the duplex where Ma Eng has lived since the eighties, since before Maly's mom, her niece, committed suicide, and long before she took in Maly when Maly's dad proved just another fuck-off Cambodian man. Ma Eng's pointing antagonistically at the other Mas in her kitchen, instructing them on how to cook certain dishes—not amok—for the party tonight. She's probably still pissed that Maly's shown so little respect for the ceremony's preparations. I wonder how Ma Eng must feel right now, clinging to the desperate wish that her dead sister's dead daughter has another chance at life, that the forces of reincarnation are working their voodoo spells to rebirth lost souls. Especially those who died as pointlessly as Maly's mom, an immigrant woman who just couldn't beat her memories of the genocide, a single mom who looked to the next day, and the day after that, only to see more suffering.

Honestly, if I think about it too hard, I get really mad. I know it's terrible to ask, but why did Maly's mom even *have* a kid? And why does only she get to tap out of living? Well, joke's on her, I guess, because now she has to deal with yet another life, and in G Block, too.

Ma Eng's garage door opens, an uproar of Khmer thundering out of the house. Two Mas I recognize from the video store begin sweeping the concrete floor, where we will pray and eat during the party, on sedge mats that imprint our legs with red, throbbing stripes. Again I turn to face the kitchen windows, but Ma Eng has walked out of my sight. Wrapping my hands around the steering wheel, I think about driving off to college right now, leaving behind my worthless possessions, my secondhand clothes—all of it. I could finally start my life, with a blank slate. Only I can't, not yet anyway,

as the Mas helping Ma Eng have parked their cars behind mine, blocking the driveway indefinitely.

I AM ABOUT TO FALL ASLEEP, the cold air from the vent and the oppressive dry heat of the afternoon competing for my skin, when Maly jumps up from under the car window and screams, “Boo!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I say through the coughing fit I’ve been shocked into, as Maly recovers from laughing hysterically at her own antics.

She throws a joint into my lap. “Say thank you,” she tells me, and waves at the Mas in the garage with a fake smile. They only stare at her, clutching their brooms like they’re prepared to whack us. “Least now we won’t be sober for this shit.”

Yet again, like all the times she hid alcohol or lube in my bedroom, offering me a share, Maly looks out for me while remaining, to the very core, self-absorbed. “Well, we can’t smoke it here,” I say. “Not in front of Ma Eng’s henchmen.”

We agree to toke up in the closed video store, because we enjoy messing with our uncle’s stuff when we’re high, so we start walking the quarter mile to get out of G Block, passing duplex after duplex, all of them packed with Cambodian families and guarded by chain-link fences and patches of dirt where grass should be. Halfway to the store, I see the pink duplex my parents rented before we moved, and I remember that G Block used to be called Ghetto Way. I think of how lame and uninspired everything is, these nicknames, this neighborhood.

By the time we reach the video store’s strip mall, we’re drenched in sweat. The Iranian man who owns the liquor market is smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. He ignores us, too busy leering at the Vietnamese boys outside the Adalberto’s. They are throwing cherry poppers at each other’s feet and passing around a Styrofoam cup—probably horchata, that’s the big hit at Adalberto’s—and I imagine these boys growing up into Rithys and pairing off with their own Malys. The boys now explode into laughter as one of them freaks out over the sparks of those mini firecrackers. The poor kid bolts away and Maly shouts, “Run, Forrest, run!”

Inside the empty store, we light the joint, both take hits, and then I watch Maly shuffle through the art house films our uncle inherited from the previous

owner. Usually she goes straight to the back room and sprawls onto the couch, but not today. She's pretending to be a customer, for shits and giggles, and I guess I'm also pretending, by being around her. We usually split an extra-large horchata, too, and if we have enough cash a carne asada burrito—the California kind, stuffed with french fries—but only Maly manages to never gain weight, that asshole. Really, I shouldn't be complaining, even if the weed's making me bloated. I'm okay, body-wise, and the handful of times I cruised in Victory Park I learned that guys aren't picky as long as my mouth is wet and I keep my teeth in check. It was Maly, of course, who taught me how to give a proper blowjob.

I suck in another drag and take in the front room. The tacky sales rack of ten-dollar Angkor Wat shirts. The clueless stupidity of our uncle placing the candy dispensers—which are for kids, obviously—right next to the dirt-red curtain of the porn section. The store's supposed to look like a Blockbuster, but the shelves and bins are spaced out unevenly, with some aisles fitting only one person and others wide enough for jumping jacks. Right now, Maly's in a small aisle and I'm in a big one, the "horror" DVD island separating us.

Our uncle, who's actually the cousin of both my mom and Maly's mom, peaced out to the homeland for the month—probably to play house with his second family—leaving his younger brother in charge and us with the spare keys. With our older uncle gone, our other uncle disappears from lunch till closing on most days. He also refuses to work on the weekends, so the store's not open right now. A week ago, we were told to burn copies of the latest shipment of thai lakorns, to make ourselves *useful* at work, but instead we take turns smoking weed in the alley, and then pig out on candy bananas from the dispensers. We get up from the couch to man the cash register only when the front door jingles. I'm not about to spend my last week at home ripping bootleg soap operas on DVD Shrink with a second-rate laptop. Maybe that's why all the G Block grandmas are so cranky, so filled with contempt, like they're on some karmic warpath of eye rolls. We haven't burned the new thai lakorns, and thus we have cheated them of their one pleasure here in America, thousands of miles away from anything they can actually stand. At least that's what I think to myself, now, stoned as fuck.

"Swear to God," Maly says, still wearing her oversize sunglasses, even here, in this illegitimate video rental business. "These movies are fucking *weird*." In the dark reflection of her lenses, I see Maly draping me in her mom's old

dresses as I wobbled on high heels, our lips painted red, eyelids smeared with shadows, before we screened another movie—like *Candyman*, we viewed that one so many times—on the PlayStation 2 my dad bought me, even though he couldn't afford it, hoping I'd be like the normal boys. "Earth to Ves!" she shouts. "The fuck's a Videodrome?"

I snap out of my daze to squint at the DVD she's now holding, by the corner like it's a dirty diaper. "Oh, yeah, I've seen that one," I say, recalling the last time I watched an actual good movie with Maly—*Suspiria*—and how she couldn't stop cracking up. Fucking idiot, Maly said when a character fell into a pit of wire and got her throat slit. "It's about this lame white guy," I explain, "who's obsessed with a TV station called Videodrome." I hit the joint and blow rings of smoke into the air, which Maly studies closely, scrunching up her face. "The station plays, like, snuff porn. You know, people being sex-tortured."

"Why not jack off to actual snuff porn?" Maly asks. "Why even bother with a dull artsy film?"

"It's a metaphor," I answer.

"And the metaphor means ... what?"

"It's about how we are constantly violated by the media and ... like ... TV commercials ... " I pause to flip through the thai lakorns Ma Eng forced us to watch as kids, which makes me, stupidly, think of my college essay topic: how our Khmer lessons were dubbed Thai shows with confusing plots, shitty camerawork, and female characters who all spoke with the voice of the same voiceover actress. I wrote about that, Maly, my gay sob story. "There's this part of the movie," I continue, "where the white guy's stomach turns into a vagina, you know, and then some other white guy forces a videotape into his vagina-tummy ... The rape of our minds, or some shit."

I don't admit that when I first saw this scene, I found it tempting, and hated myself for that. Instead I pass the joint.

"That's fucking idiotic." Maly breathes the smoke into and out of her lungs, leaving the joint hanging from her mouth like a French girl in a Godard film, only brown and poor. "Raped by the media," she says, and kills the rest of the joint. "Would we even *know* English without Judge Judy?"

"Guess it's the only way we survived," I say, still searching, absentmindedly, for a thai lakorn I might recognize, for something that really pulls, or strikes, me. "Like, we had to let ourselves be violated by all those shows we

loved as kids ... *Full House*, *Step by Step*, *Family Matters*—Steve Urkel fucked us in the brains every day after school on ABC Family. ‘Did I do that?’”

“Yes ... that’s, like, really messed up,” Maly replies, and we stare at each other in silence, for a split second, before sliding into laughter.

We stay giggling until a Thai Lakorn finally catches my eye. “Oh, shit, remember Nang Nak?” I pick up the DVD and hold it over my face, covering my bloodshot eyes with the image of a demented woman, all black hair, pasty skin, and ghostly presence, like the Thai, low-budget version of *The Grudge*. When I lower the DVD, Maly’s face looks frozen.

“Holy fuck,” she says, removing her sunglasses. Without much body awareness, it seems, she tries to climb over the movie bin, almost in slow motion, as though the air has turned into a thick mud. Somehow she makes it to my aisle, struggling, tumbling onto the floor, kicking the entire Kubrick section, and right after she recovers from that unnecessary stunt, she snatches the DVD from my hands. “I haven’t thought about this in years. Is this the whole thing?” She peers over the Khmer words she can’t even read. “Wasn’t it, like, ten thousand hours long?”

“I mostly remember that crazy shrieking,” I say, and start impersonating Nang Nak as a vengeful mother spirit, but Maly doesn’t react, so I shut up, mid-haunting screech. Then I examine her expression as she contemplates the faded DVD cover, her puffy eyes locked in a staring contest with Nang Nak’s.

An eternity passes before Maly suddenly says, with a strange sincerity, “I’ve always thought Nang Nak was a badass.” She lifts her head, and her eyes, dark orbs in the dim light, cut straight through me. “I’m serious,” she says, “like ... *fuck*, man. She haunted those assholes for years.”

Just then I wish Maly could move to LA with me, that we’d keep hanging out until one of us—Maly, obviously—got discovered by some Hollywood hotshot, and then maybe I’d make movies of her, because she’d probably be a great actor, actually, the perfect muse, and what else was she going to do? Though that’s also the last thing I want, and besides, I’m not attending film school. I applied and was accepted, but it was too expensive.

“I know it’s stupid,” Maly adds, almost shaking, “but I want my mom, like, out there, you know? Like ... shouldn’t *she* get to torment everyone, too ... everyone who wronged her ...”

“Right,” I begin to say, unable to finish my thought. I’m not even sure I understand what she means. I place my hand on her shoulder—a useless

move, I know, but it's the only thing I can offer. We hold this position, not talking or making eye contact, until Maly stops trembling. Then she nudges me off and throws the DVD down the other aisle.

She shouts in my face: "You know what we should do right now? We should play a fucking movie! One last time before you, like, leave me *forever*, you dick asshole. And let's make it big this time—epic. Okay? Let's fucking watch a porno! Seriously, stop talking about vagina-tummies and just watch some *porn* with me. See how long it takes for our minds to feel violated by the media, you know?"

I'm not sure how to gauge her enthusiasm, but then Maly dashes for the porn section. "It won't be weird," she says, her voice moving farther and farther from me. "'Cause you're gay and I'm a girl!"

The porno Maly chooses to screen on our uncle's digital projector comes across as standard shit—bright lights flattering to nothing but bouncing breasts and engorged clits and veiny dicks, all stilted dialogue and stilted facial expressions and stilted moans, the porn actors as enviable as they are gross. The whole shebang. Too many POV shots, too many close-ups meant to put the viewer right there. Seeing a sloppy wet penis enter a sloppy wet vagina, from above, going in and out with the practiced tempo of professionals, strikes me as yet another drama for the ages I am meant only to witness, rather than learn from, like the Olympics or presidential debates. My own penis feels faint, nonexistent, and not just because Maly's presence has scared it into hiding but also because I can barely project myself onto the digital projection; what am I, really, but a knockoff version of the woman getting pounded, my dick vestigial and just . . . in the way?

It's beside the point, though, whether I see myself in this porno world—where a mustachioed plumber can uncloth a big-titted MILF with a devious smirk, an arch of the eyebrow—because, as always, Maly is forcing herself into the center of my perspective, obstructing my view of the giant, high-def vagina.

"Look . . . he's literally fucking my brains out," Maly says, standing in front of the wall we are using as a screen. From where I'm sitting on the couch, the colossal dick appears to thrust in and out of her left ear, across and through her face.

"That's cool," I say, with a half-heartedness I don't try to hide.

"The hell is your problem?" Maly snaps. "That was hilarious," she says,

pacing back and forth, as she always does when her high peaks, her attempts to be fun crossing into belligerence. The image of straight sex contorts around her body, wrapping her in fleshy colors.

“Calm down, okay?” I say. “It’s *your* porno.”

Maly places her hand on her hips and strikes a pose, shooting me an exasperated look, and then sits down.

The porn actors are now fucking more aggressively, and I expect Maly to start heckling them, to crack a joke about the guy’s grunting or the woman’s moaning. I want her to make a comment that confirms the insanity of this situation. Anything that would align us together as observers of the world, of everyone else but us, outsiders who can see through the bullshit; but instead, she just goes sullen. Lost in thought, she studies the porno. So we sit in silence as the scene nears its climax, as the male actor pulls out of the female actor, as he masturbates vigorously and she writhes in ecstasy, her vagina almost calling out to his penis to unload itself. And unload it sure does, all over her inner thighs, so much so that Maly, jumping from her seat, seems to be exploding herself with some newfound motivation.

“I need to see this baby,” Maly says, darting to the door.

Cleaning up so I can run after her, I stop the film and struggle to find the DVD case. Then, before I hit the eject button, the frozen image compels me to pause, and sit there, dumbfounded, stoned. I am entranced by the cum covering the woman’s bottom half, though not the vagina itself, and, despite my own preferences, this reminds me of failure, somehow. Failure in its most legit form.

BY THE TIME I CATCH UP WITH HER, Maly’s jumping the fence of our second cousin’s duplex. Maybe our second cousin wouldn’t mind that we’re sneaking into her house, but I’m too high and paranoid to deal, and apparently Maly doesn’t care about anyone’s privacy or taking the extra steps to ask for permission. Anyway, it’s too late to calm her down, convince her this may be unwise—breaking into the nursery of a baby who happens to be her dead mother—so I follow her nervously through the back door.

Our second cousin’s napping on the couch, and I fight the urge to yell for Maly to abort her mission, to grab her by the shoulders and remind her that none of this matters, that we shouldn’t partake in the stupid delusions of old people wishing their lives had gone another way, that we have each other, just as we always have, even if we’re about to be separated by three hundred miles,

a whole mountain range. Fuck everyone else, I want to say, for burdening the two of us with all their baggage. Let's go back to minding our own business, anything but this. Who cares about our family? What have they ever done but keep us alive only to make us feel like shit?

We find the baby's room without any mishaps, other than my growing sense of unease about following Maly down this fucked-up rabbit hole of hers. Once inside the bedroom, Maly cautiously approaches the sleeping baby. She shakes her head and clutches the rails of the crib. She looms over this tiny and new body of the mother she grew up without.

"It's uglier than I thought it would be," Maly says.

"What did you expect?" I ask from behind her, wondering what she is seeing in the baby's face, whether she recognizes a flicker of her mother's soul, or nothing at all.

"I ..." She shakes her head again, but quickly this time. "Who do you think my kid will be?"

"You actually believe this?"

"I mean, hypothetically. What if it's Ma Eng? You know, after she dies."

"Now *that* would be serious karma."

"Shit, that'd fucking suck," Maly says. "I have zero interest in facilitating the rebirth of Ma Eng. She'll pop from my vagina reeking of Tiger Balm, pinching my ears 'cause she's, like ... already disappointed in me. No way I'm unleashing Ma Eng onto the world all over again."

We laugh until we don't, and endure a silence together, with her back still turned to me.

Finally: "I'd totally have an abortion if I knew—like *really* knew—that Ma Eng was gestating inside of me."

"Even as a dead embryo, reincarnated, she'd haunt the fuck out of you."

"Probs," Maly responds, glancing at me from a slant. It's almost like she can't move away from the baby, like something's forcing her to confront it. "Ves ... is it weird I want my mom reborn as ... *my* child?"

"I don't think so," I answer. Because what else can I say?

Watching as she redirects her gaze, as she lowers her hand into the crib, I can't help but imagine Maly hurting the baby. I know that doesn't make any sense, but I worry she's about to do something terrible, even as she caresses its head, delicately, with the gentlest touch of her fingers.

"I've changed my mind," Maly says. "She's actually pretty cute."

And this, out of everything, is what chokes me up. The air suddenly stuffy, I feel the cramped dimensions of the room, the dry roof of my mouth, all the words trying to claw their way out of my throat. *Fuck*, I now think, teary-eyed, trespassing not in our second cousin's house but in Maly's world, her one opportunity of peace with this baby. Of course Maly would want to be with her mom, no matter how. Of course she never needed me, not really. Maybe I was the one who was angry, with Maly's mom, with everyone, this entire time. Just me.

Right then, Ma Eng opens the door, presumably to collect our second cousin's baby for the party. Her eyebrows collide. She's surprised to see us, but she only tells us to hurry up, that the food is ready, the monks are at her house, and then orders us to bring the baby. So Maly swoops it up and turns around. Standing before me, her reincarnated mom pressed against her body like armor, Maly looks natural, as if she's been preparing to hold this baby her whole life, her cocky anarchy so easily swept away.

"Let's go," she whispers, following Ma Eng.

It takes me a second to realize Maly is talking to the baby, and I find myself overwhelmed by the quiet of the nursery. For a moment, I am the only person in the neighborhood separate from the celebration, from the grandparents and the parents, including my own, and the babies. From all the generations, old and new, dead and alive, or even reborn. Staying here, in Maly's wake, I understand how truly alone I am.

THIS NIGHT — AFTER THE MONKS bless Maly's reincarnated mom, after everyone toasts the baby and feasts on food the baby can't even eat, after our drunken uncles sing too many karaoke songs, and after Rithy whisks Maly away, for only an hour, to bring her back with nothing but hickeys—I dream I'm in the Videodrome. Around me towers of TVs broadcast the programs meant to brainwash our minds, the conspiracies of our time on every channel, including Maly's lives playing in tandem on hundreds of screens. In every single one, she's a different girl, with different caretakers who express their affection in odd ways, who sacrifice too much to raise her, who abandon her for various reasons. Self-loathing scumbags and narcissistic good guys and corrupt role models of all genders float in and out of her lives, hurting her most of the time, but others, when she's lucky, they push her into something like happiness. Regardless, she eventually has kids, sometimes many,

sometimes only one, all of them growing up with forms of entitlement she never understands, all of them loved by her, fiercely, no matter what. And still, every iteration of Maly's life, despite any trace of rebellion, any nitty-gritty details, they all map out to a similar pattern, follow the same arc into the very same ending.

Surrounded by visions of Maly, I regret that I won't remember each of her lives, but I will keep this: standing here in the Videodrome, watching my cousin grow into the same mother across all her reincarnated selves, as I wonder about my kteuy-ness, how it fits into the equation before me, and doesn't.

Then I wake up. I rise out of my twin bed, look around my room, the sunlight from the window exposing the floating dust, like the phantom beam of a projector. And finally, I start packing.

Two Poems by Kirmen Uribe

TROTSKY FOR ME WAS

Trotsky for me was riding
high up on the back of the tractor.

Trotsky for me was taking a bath naked
with my little friend in the bathtub.

Trotsky for me was riding
high up on the bicycle's handlebars.

Trotsky for me was using ash wood
to make arrows like those of the Sioux in the Americas.

Our family was supposedly Trotskyist.
But I didn't know who Trotsky was.

Trotsky for me was climbing the haystacks
and crossing the ocean.

Trotsky for me was instead of wearing a cross around my neck
wearing colored stones.

Trotsky for me was seeing in the next room
two women sleeping together.

Trotsky for me was imagination,
ripped T-shirts and the smell of grass.

I do know a few others also
used to do those things.

We were not that special.

Trotsky had a tadpole body,

dolphin eyes, and squirrel-red hair.

That for me was what Trotsky was, what else.

But the others didn't see us like that.

IN THE COASTAL TOWN

Pool at the Antzo-mendi

The Antzo-mendi bar was where
we went when we were male adolescents.
The place was big
and had a pool table in the middle.
Wooden floors.
You heard Velvet Underground there,
Ziggy Stardust.
In the back, kids hung out
sitting in the booths and talking.
The boys with their hair in colors,
their leather pants and heels.
The girls with their hair up and
tight leopard-print jerseys.
Whoever won at pool
played the older guys after.
That's why I wanted to win,
to mix it up against them.
When the cue stick hit the ball
their neck chains and bracelets
jangled.
For some they were probably the devil incarnate,
but for me, angels.
With them I learned how to fly.

Mild Summer Night

The mild summer night.
Music from the bar.
I want to flee into my insides.
I feel the merciful drug
moving into my veins.
Going, going,
because that snake knows
my darkest corners best.

It's the one thing
that embraces me from inside.
At last I'm calm.

Last Date

"We birds, man.
We free.
We above party,
above all the politics.
Forget all that.
We birds.
And they can't catch us."

Zubibarri

A bunch of people lived in Zubibarri:
Pixerune's people, Santane's, Txailane's...
They lived along the river,
above the cannery
in plain old wooden houses.
The kids ran free from house to house,
there were no locks.
They bathed in the muddy stream
and played, with whatever there was,
in the old shipyard.

At Christmastime,
people would give them dolls,
sewn by hand by the mothers,
from old sheets and wool.
They were big families,

with a lot of relatives in those small houses.
If that many was too few,
some also took in orphans
from the Saturran prison.
They had nothing and shared that too.

They razed that whole neighborhood.
Pixerune's people, Santane's, Txailane's
went someplace else.

Today the ring road runs through
the place where the wooden houses once stood.

They built a big merchandise mart too
on the lot scraped out of the mountain.
That's where one buys
dolls nowadays.
The same all over the world.

—Translated from the Basque by Elizabeth Macklin

Hive

MARY KURYLA

The thing about the shape of a bee, which might be why it is often drawn curved around a flower with the black head bowed over the thorax and the knees tucked in lovely and benign as a comma, lucent wings arching from stripes furred to catch pollen blurring with light, is that the shape of the bee is like the honey it makes, sweet, healing, golden-lit from within such that a bee fallen dead on the rug or balled along the base of a window frame still holds the comma shape, and while it may be that

bees like to sleep with other bees holding their feet

it is not how we think of bees, sleeping like new babies, we think of bees at work, laboring, and maybe that is the thing, right there, the thing that persists in their own minds, too, how bees think of themselves, abuzz in the hive keeping away invaders or tidying the

chambers or collecting some pollen, working always working without distinction or honor, more like how a hanger serves a coat, taking away from words the ability to help themselves by themselves one after another compounding in our held breath, an enfeebling thing the comma, a poet once said, when words could just follow each other into a line, which is to say a sentence, enfeebling, but a beehive is not a one-after-another thing, at least not in a line, it is more a multiplication the honeycomb composed chamber upon chamber and so on that is the way of the hive on the inside but how the hive looks on the outside is another thing entire, the outside of a hive a piling on, one bee on top of another, mounding, though this was not how it started, first the bees swarmed outside our kitchen window, uncountable dots swelling humming diving shaping a flock of birds but not birds far up in the sky, up close, the scale off, contracting in one mind the decision that this house of ours must be the place,

I smoked cigarettes then,

I had weaned my son, my first son, but was still addicted enough to step out each evening to smoke the one cigarette on the porch where the bees had made their hive just above where we stood, exposed to the eye and the size and shape of the head of an ox, the hive more black than gold, sagging at the bottom from bee holding on to bee, comma-like, unsettling, so much so a friend who was really only good for smoking with, so few of us now, retreated from the porch but with a laugh at the bees that was really a laugh at us for allowing bees to hive on our house with a child toddling about and smokers milling about, I puffed cigarette smoke at the hive and to my delight the hive roared and buzzed, doubling in size without adding a bee, let alone multiplying, but nonetheless amassed, an angry thing, this hive, our first, dribbling down, no way around it disgust is how a thing like that makes you feel, a hive wedging between the pine boards of the house a lot like a hive wedges into the place in the mind where fight or flight holes up, and maybe that hive is why I've quit smoking but I could just as well blame it on the fires that ash up the air in the canyon no different from smoking a pack a day, or so they said, in those days of our first hive how could we have known, having recently moved in and knowing nothing about wells and groundwater, which are some of the things you must know of if you choose to live off the grid, that a lone bee buzzing at the window is not kept out by the screen as we thought because the bee was

never looking at the screen or at us safe behind it but rather at the holes in the pine drilled by the woodpecker tapping for bugs running under the boards of our house, holing a door in the gap between the exterior and interior walls where a swarm could pass through and Jesus start to chamber, but

we have gained country ways or gone coyote, as they say in the canyon,

and you would think, after the cost of getting the hive scraped off the outside wall, and after nailing up new pine boards in place, when the next swarm settled inside the midsection of our roof, we would have done something about it and quickly, but I was nursing again and it was all I could do to get milk into a newborn coughing on the smoke, which was the only relief for the swelling in my breasts that were killing me, so bees were not the trouble really no trouble at all they do not hunt you out, like a comma will to enfeeble your sentence or a yellow jacket will to feast on your milk, out of nowhere a yellow jacket stung my swelled breast with the newborn only just latched on after all the coughing, I leaped up with an ouch and the baby rolled off my lap onto the cushion, but not bees, they just roamed our living room while I nursed, looking for a way out without finding one even when doors were propped open, the bees spinning in smaller and smaller circles of dismay to paper out on our carpet but never menacing, and we were trusting then and full of home, thinking everything would be fine with our baby, what could we worry about fires we could not put out or the smoke that kept looking like the bees for a way out of the house but never found it and so stayed in our baby's cough, and at least this new hive was out of sight, except for a bee here and there roaming the rug so when the summer made hotter by the fires or the fires inflamed by the heat melted the honeycomb, the bees were in trouble—no storing honey when the chambers won't hold, though the bees tried, I'm sure of it, why

they would use their own bodies to hold in the honey—

we thought let's eat the honey that runs down the main support beam between the living room and the kitchen, catch in a jar the golden liquid flavored with mariposa flowering on the tree outside the house or so we imagined we never tasted the honey and anyway who had an appetite for sweet except the bees that tried to scoop back up their gold, setting it on each other's legs to bring

back to the hive before black ants marched in to lick the drippings I for one did not have an appetite too occupied anyway with my milk sopping every blouse which is what happens when you do not wean a baby you just stop there was no longer a baby to nurse that last summer light black with ants inside the honey the bees balled commas on our rug and my other son now ten gently pushed the papery hackles into a mound studied the pile remarked upon how still were the dead and I told him to scoop those nasty things up in his palms and toss them outdoors even though we had all retreated indoors by then but now in the high arch of the A of our framed house between the interior pine boards and the exterior ones a third swarm of honeybees hive in spite of our hiring a local man to patch up the inside holes and though I would like to hire the man again to just yank out the whole thing the whole exercise is more than I've the heart for so have opted again to live with bees which is really just the occasional scout roaming the living room to find a flower but finding only an empty couch and the odd toy no one will play with you would think the scout might speed out of such an unflowering place but the bee does not seem to know how to get back in whatever hole overhead it passed through so dies inside this closed-up house whether from sadness at the lost path or the ash in the air I cannot say cannot move cannot any longer speak not out loud anyway but the bees in the hive keep buzzing the only vocals heard so listen my son my only son steps by mistake on a dead bee on the rug and the bee stings him in pain my son hollers so it sounds like a bee can still sting after it is dead but really I would say if I could any longer say anything it was the bee that by causing the holler hollered through my son somehow after thousands of years it had to be heard above the smoke used to dull the guardian bees that might otherwise put up a fight at the ransacking of the hive's stores is it all these fires blocking the sun's rays that enfeeble the bees from mounding together even one more hive I've slipped his coat off the hanger holding it all this time without distinction to set the coat on his shoulders open the door and hope he will find his way out of this house to scout some other place to hole up a risk now that everyone is gone only the bees stay and we dance around each other which is talk enough for a woman whose back no longer holds it has curved as if over a flower gray head bowed but held in by the bees fretting over their wax burning the faint fragrance of mariposa before it crisps and sings in the sweet golden light the sun's last comma

Three Poems by Sheri Benning

O F

the baby, name lost. 1906. Spring born,
almond and blackthorn in bloom. Meadowsweet,
chickweed, petals of milk on her lips.

Spider-silk saliva from mouth to crab apple fists,
on Mother's lap, the train from Kiev to Minsk
after the last harvest in Tiegenort.

Teething, feverish, pinpricked cheeks, Mother sings
Kniereiter to distract—*bouncing, bouncing baby.*
Should you fall in the ditch, ravens will feast,
ravens will feast.

Bitter pip of sick picked up in Riga's quarantine. Soon
they will slip her little body into the Baltic, wrapped
in blue douppioni cut from Mother's wedding dress,

but now she conducts with waving fists, skeins of dawn
mist lift from feather grass and knapweed by the tracks,
Mother's soft breath in the cradle of the train car—

bouncing, bouncing baby. Should you fall
in the sea, should you fall in the sea.

Ravens perch in witches'-broom
of passing oak and silver fir.

W I N T E R S L E E P

Luke 19:11

Wheat threshed, casks of cherries, plums,
boiled melon, beef tallow, pig bladders blown
and tossed by children, mothers stirring stock,
kidneys, hearts pressed with aspic,

casings scraped and stuffed, allspice, cloves.
Fields bare, packed clay, porcelain sheen,
the long winter sleep. In my dream,
I wake and the village is empty,

coal smoldering, acacia shadows on snow.
Second sons, sow thistle, the first to go.
In my dream, I wake to chaff and dust,
a war lost, harvest thrown down,

grain scattered on the temple floor.
In my dream, I wake hungry, an ocean away
in a hut hollowed out of the side of a hill, Black Sea
salt in my mouth. Wild onion, sage,

hawkweed, prickly rose, plowed
dirt worked thin as smoke, poplar scrub
felled and bucked into windrows to make way for
electric blooms, Monsanto Roundup Ready canola.

What we had wasn't enough. Silk, balsam,
communal granaries full. We were told to take
what the master had given us and multiply it tenfold.
In my dream, I wake in the attic bedroom

of a mail-order farmhouse. A hundred and sixty acres seeded
in barley and oats. A few brood hens, five head of cattle,
three-hitch binder, a trotter, two heavy horses. We were told
to take what we did not lay down, reap what we did not sow.

I wake to 6,000 acres, high-clearance sprayers
with 140-foot booms. Sulfur, phosphorous, nitrogen, potash.
Harvest done by drone. Yields monitored, data downloaded
into \$750,000 air seeders come spring. We were told—

to those who have, more will be given.
Viterra's actuaries betting on futures markets,
brokering grain they don't own. We were told
those with nothing, even that will be taken away.

Just look at those who stayed—
in my dream, the men from Grünau, found
heads down, shoulder to shoulder, tongues
nailed to the dining table.

Or Alex Saretzky from Tiegenort,
blood pouring from his wrists, hands cut off
by Makhnovists requisitioning his cattle.
In my dream we tell these stories

to our babies in their cradles.
The lesson of the parable? What good is your labor
if the fruit doesn't grow and grow and grow?
I wake in the hip-roof barn,

and where we hang the throat-cut animal,
men dangle. Hailstorm, flood, drought.
Interest rates. Debt loads. Go big, or
get out.

TO GLASGOW

Standing on the platform, Manchester Victoria,
waiting for the after-supper train. Home,
to Glasgow.

Spring sky, bruised fruit. Pigeons in eaves.
Rain-bloated newsprint, overripe peonies
that lined the porch at the farm,
long sold.

A breeze lifts my hair, sweat of my nape,
a train, not mine, shoots past. Diesel,
smoke from the burn barrel at dusk,
the farm again,

dew on bluestem, my body, my breath. My face
in the windows of passing cars. *I am. I am.*
There is no going back.

Uhtceare

JOHN JEREMIAH
SULLIVAN

CHAIR

When I was small my parents would host a lot of parties. I don't know if they had more friends then or were just, as people say, "at a more social place in their lives," but at least once a month there would be a bunch of adults in our apartment, drinking crappy wine and trying to play our untunable piano. There is something powerful for a child about your parents having people over. It's not anything that happens at the parties but the evidence they give you that people feel safe where you live. That must go back to the savanna. Sometimes things happened at the parties that I was probably too young to see, but nothing scarring, just grown-up scenes. The air was bluish with different kinds of smoke. I have a memory of my father giving me a

sip of wine on a sofa shortly after I turned four. Or one of the guests might say something inappropriate—for me cryptically so—and then at a look from my mother turn red and apologize. They had accidentally given me a glimpse of the darker and more serious world that otherwise lay unthinkable miles ahead. Guests would start to show up at around eight, meaning that I was allowed up for only the first hour or so. In reality I would lie awake much longer than that, listening to the chatter through the walls. My mother used to sit beside me for a few seconds. She was a high school chemistry teacher, always bone thin. She would pat my head, and ask if I was okay. Like that, “You okay, kid?” Her own carefully shaped and hair-sprayed hair . . . I knew better than to try to make her read to me like on other nights. She’d say, “You know I want to, honey, but I can’t be rude to our guests,” and then she would leave, closing the door very softly, and I would lie there listening—for hours, it seemed to me, but given how kids’ brains are with time it may have been minutes. Things went differently one night. I don’t know why this happened—that is, I can’t grope my way back into a conscious motive—but as nine approached with the first little wooze of drowsiness, I got up and left the party without needing to be told. Instead of going to my bedroom, I walked to my father’s office, which when parties started everybody suddenly called the “coatroom.” There was a chair in there, where all of the guests threw their coats. It was a big round chair like a bowl or a bird’s nest, called a papasan chair. People used to have them. I don’t really see them anymore. The room was dark. The only light came from an orange streetlamp outside the window. I pulled the door behind me until it was almost shut but not quite and approached the chair. There weren’t a ton of coats, maybe seven. It wasn’t nine yet, and a lot of the guests tended to arrive later, tenish. The few that were visible (strange how well I remember) were a khaki overcoat, a fuzzy orange one with large buttons, and a fur, which had an unfamiliar cool, animal slickness to it. Without thinking, possibly worried that someone would walk in behind me, I dove into them, burrowing my way down to the bottom of the bowl. I curled into a ball and lay there on my side. At first I had no breathing hole, and my breath was making the air warm. It smelled like my breath, which didn’t smell bad and was even enjoyable in the way of secret gross pleasures, but eventually I had to reach through and open a little airway. The cooler air from the room hit my face. The radiator in the corner made hammer-

sounds that were always mysteriously cavernous. The pipes did not seem large enough to have produced them. The only sounds I've heard since that reminded me of those were inside of an MRI machine. Under the coats it grew warm and slightly moist. It had started raining. The most recently added coats were wet. I felt sleep coming, the first stage, when your thoughts start to fray. I opened my eyes and mouth as wide as they would go and resisted. The door creaked, and someone walked in—a man, by the weight and hard flat sound of his steps on the wood. He threw a coat onto the pile. He may have thrown two—the added weight seemed too much for one. He left without saying anything. I don't know why I include that—why would he have spoken?—but he didn't mutter or anything. This kept happening: a person would walk in, or sometimes two or three, and another coat or more coats would be thrown on top of me. Then the person would leave the room, and a few seconds later the party would get a tick louder. That went on for a while. I did not sleep but lay there in a purely physical state of anxiety. No dread, in other words, but alert to the danger of being discovered. Once a woman came in. I heard her humming to herself. At first I thought she was neatening the coats. They moved and kept moving . . . no, she was rummaging for her own. Leaving early. I froze in expectation that she would feel the lump, but she didn't. Her coat must have been in the middle. She had not stayed long at all. I heard her walk out of the room, and then the higher pitch of the goodbyes. I heard tentative music, and something made of glass broke, followed by groaning and laughter. I never moved except to squirm my limbs every so often. I tried to move so gradually as to be imperceptible, like a tree sloth, in case someone walked in. And then two people did. I heard the door close all the way until it clicked, the first time it had done that. There were muffled sounds I didn't recognize. I heard mouth noises and a sort of panting. They were kissing. The woman's voice said, "But if he already knows . . ." The man sighed. "Please, one time, can we not do this?" Then more mouth noises and a rustling of fabrics. They said other things. I have been remembering what they said my whole life. After a minute they left. I was at the bottom of the nest, breathing through my air hole, with easily twenty coats on top of me, and finally I drifted off. To this day, if someone brings up the subject of sleep—if a person is having trouble sleeping, for instance, and talks to me about it—my mind goes back to the chair. I can't say how long I spent there. Three hours? At a certain

point my eyes snapped open in the dark. A deep laughing voice said, “Hey, there’s a kid in here!” Then a female voice, whispering: “*What?*” Then the first voice, even more loudly this time: “Ron, I think your kid’s in here!” My father from out in the hallway said, “*What?*” I clawed my way up out of the coats and chair as if from the grave and walked straight to my bedroom, not looking at any of them, and fell instantly back asleep. My parents never said anything about it, not the next morning or ever. They may not even have remembered that part of the night.

NATURE

Only in the eighties was it discovered that bees sleep. A scientist studied them with a thermographic camera and observed that the bees would sort of go down onto their faces and stop moving, and that while they slept “some of them held each other’s legs.” There are people, learned people, who argue that bullfrogs never sleep. Whether this means that they are always awake is a different matter. They are always, perhaps, in a state between sleep and waking. Torpor. This is how they seem, when you look at their eyes. Dolphins go to sleep on one side of their brains, but keep the other side awake, so they can keep swimming and breathing. They often swim in circles when they sleep in this fashion. Bats sleep hanging upside down, as is widely known, and so do some species of whale. Both share an ancestor, a four-footed furry mammal that walked on the ground. One line of that creature’s descendants took to the seas, one to the sky. Now they both sleep upside down and would never dream of each other. The bat sleeps hanging that way because it cannot take off, only let go. Honduran white bats sleep bunched up in little green tents made of folded jungle leaves. They tumble out of them to fly. Whales dive far down to perform their sleep. Divers have come upon them hanging there motionless, as if bewitched. The beautiful red-throated frigate bird sleeps while it flies. It can stay in the air for two months at a time. It flies hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles over the ocean, despite the fact that it cannot swim. Its mind sleeps for ten seconds at a time, but over and over. The seconds add up. Sea otters sleep on their backs in the ocean and often sleep holding hands, or forefeet, perhaps to ensure they don’t drift away from one another. They like to lie in beds of kelp and let their bodies get wrapped up in the fronds and float along with it. Tigers sleep for twenty hours a day. Their work is a ferocious blaze between long stretches of dream. Zebras lock their necks together and sleep on each other’s shoulders. Many fish will simply let themselves settle to the bottom of a stream. I do not think that they close their eyes. Orangutans make themselves new beds almost every night, weaving together leaves and branches into a bowl-shaped nest. Scientists say that orangutan beds are harder at the edges, for structure, and softer in the middle, for comfort. They like to make their beds high, sometimes as high as 120 feet above the ground. One theory about the hypnic jerk, the shudder we sometimes feel just at the instant of succumbing to sleep, is that our genes remember those days when

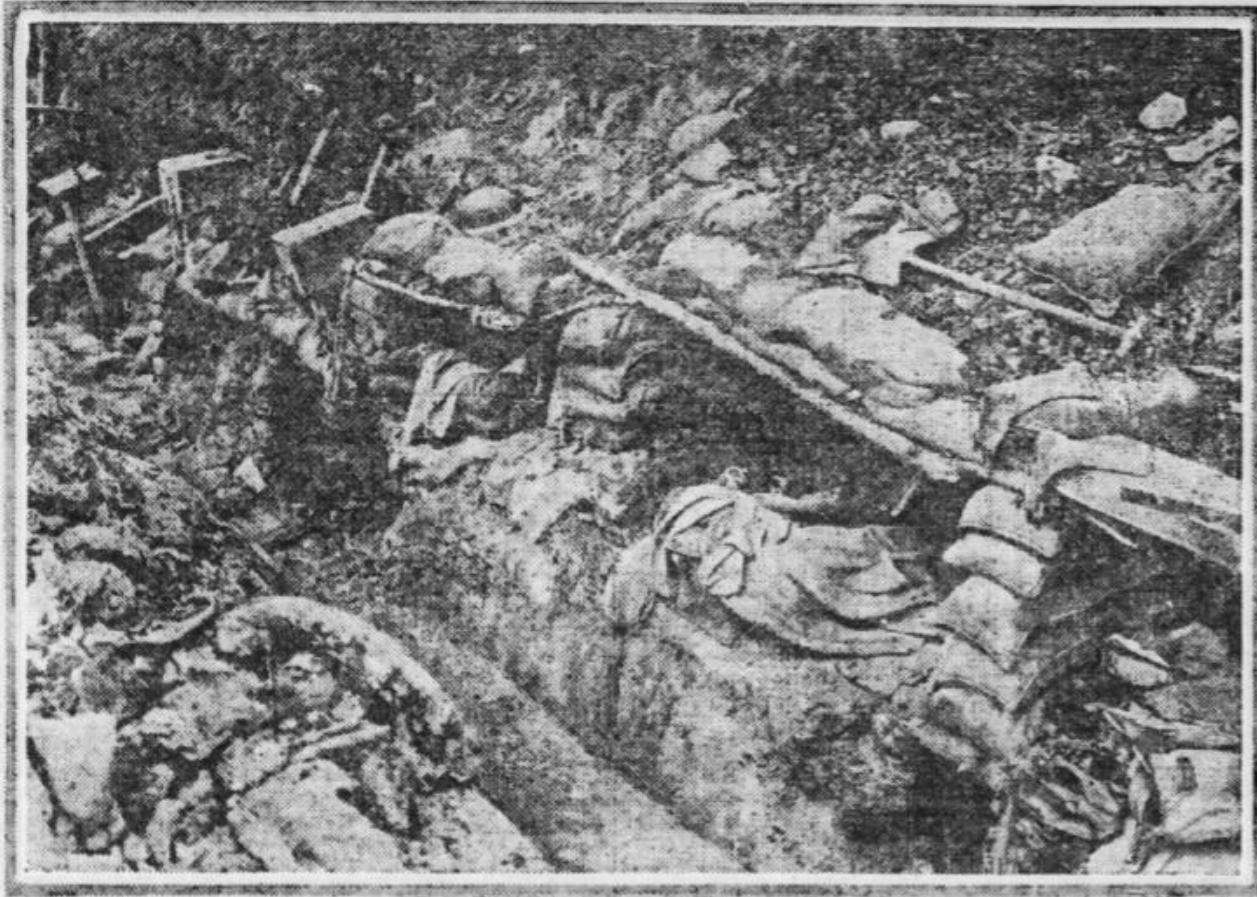
there was constant danger of dozing off on a limb. The Greenland shark has a Latin name, *Somniosus microcephalus*, that means “sleepy small-head,” because they seem sluggish and do possess, proportionately, small heads. They can live for five hundred years. Despite the name, scientists are unsure if the animal ever really sleeps. If not, it would mean that some Greenland sharks have been awake for half a millennium. Little raccoon-faced African meerkats sleep in huge groups, down in their burrows. They cluster up into “mobs” to keep warm and protect one another. Sometimes as many as fifty will sleep in one mob. They build rooms in their burrows for sleeping and do nothing else there. They get up every morning and go about their work. Not hibernators, in other words. Hibernation, from the Latin *hiberna*: winter quarters. We know about bears, but turtles and even some birds do it. One might assume that cicadas hibernate, during their famous cycles of seventeen years in the ground, but it turns out that they are awake the whole time, digging and eating and fleeing moles, before they emerge screaming. A recent anthropological study suggests that our own ancestors, *Homo heidelbergensis*, went through a period when they hibernated, to survive the most hideously cold millennia of the ice ages. Apparently they were not very good at it and tended to sicken soon after. The greatest hibernator of all is the snail. When the weather gets cold or dry, snails first go in search of places where they feel safe, among rocks or leaf litter. There they close themselves up. The snail moves in a shell that is its dwelling, and when it wants to hibernate, it makes a covering over the entrance. This is called an epiphragm, Greek for “lid.” The snail concocts it of mucus and calcium. The lid seals in moisture and keeps the snail from drying out. Inside its damp chamber the snail sleeps and waits for rain. Sometimes it sleeps for years. No one knows if snails dream. Someone may know. Evidence suggests that certain birds dream and that in their dreams they are singing.

TRENCH

Please excuse this paper as the trenches are very muddy and my skin is parched with the fever that accompanies lack of sleep. Your boy has been tramping half over Europe, sleeping in trenches, doing without home comforts for months. He deserves, and you want to give him, just a little more comfort. Here and there as one moves shadows loom out of the mist—the close-standing sentries, singular figures, hidden in vapor to the waist, all wearing heavy cloaks of different types. You can see the men asleep on their horses, chins sunk on their chests. Sleep, next to hunger and thirst, is the greatest and most persistent appetite of the battlefield. There is a story about an infantryman who fell asleep over his bayonet, received the point in his neck and died. Shells which fell into an Austrian camp killed sleepers. Some of the sleepers did not hear the shells; others opened their eyes, stared, and went to sleep again. German troops in Flanders are so exhausted by British raids, many have fallen asleep at their posts, not caring if they are killed or captured. It is in a semi-unconscious state that most of the acts of heroism are performed, so men become heroes without their knowing. While making a tour of the line this morning I came across complete sections fast asleep in spite of its being dawn. Three sections had removed their equipment. A condition of affairs which up to this time would have been thought unbelievable in an army notorious for its discipline. One section had got in about a foot, and then, being so utterly fagged out—for they'd had no sleep for nights—simply lay down. Many of them are young and their bronzed faces look quite boyish while they sleep. It is heartbreaking work to be obliged to go about kicking the poor fellows up. Two of them, in order to be warmer, had cuddled up together. Men take corpses for pillows and if permitted doze through the day. You are walked on all the time but you are much too tired to mind. Shooing off rats is one of the industries. If a fellow went to sleep in a trench with a piece of chocolate on his person, he would soon have a dozen rats fighting to get the sweetmeat. Boys sleep with their cheeks to the stocks of their rifles. I slept wrapped in a Dutchman's blanket that smelled and was closely inhabited by the shirt-squirrels that play all over you. I have slept with only an oil cape over me, and I have been without a blanket entirely. On the firing line the men sleep in dugouts hollowed out under the sides of the trenches, constructing cells according to their ingenuity. All outside is a waste of mud. As a surgeon in charge of a field hospital

Tommies Sleep in Their Trenches

CENTER



SLEEPING QUARTERS IN BRITISH TRENCH

(INTL. MIL. SERVICE)

English soldiers are shown taking a much needed rest in a trench on the western front. The trenches are so sheltered as to prevent fatalities from bomb and grenade attacks, as well as from cannon fire.

SOCIAL UNION TO GIVE SUPPER

CAMBRIDGE CITY, Ind., Sept. 19.—Mr. and Mrs. P. H. Zehring and daughter, Mrs. Cora Bailey, have returned from a visit of three weeks with relatives at Meadsville, Penn.... Robert Beard has gone to Crawfordsville to enter the sophomore year at Wabash college.... Mrs. Joseph Garvin is spending the week with relatives at Marion, Ind.... Mr. and Mrs. Charles Denny of Kokomo are the guests this week of Mr. and Mrs. George Babcock.

Sells Business House.

Forest Murray has sold his confectionery and pool room to Harry Thompson of College Corner. As yet Mr. Murray has no definite business plans for the future.... Max Kitterman will be a student of the sophomore class at Earlham the present college year.... The first section of the Social Union of the M. E. church will give a penny supper in the dining parlors of the church Tuesday evening, September 19.... Mrs. Richard Swisher has for her guest, Mrs. Sarah Comers of Frederick, Maryland.

A very sensitive telephone transmitter that works well over long distances is so thoroughly waterproof that it is efficient even though submerged in water.

RETURNS FROM VISIT

CAMBRIDGE CITY, Ind., Sept. 19.—Lee Laux of Indianapolis is spending a few days with his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Lee Pitman.... Mrs. Mary Knox has returned after a visit of two weeks with friends in Indianapolis.... Miss Inez Voorhees, who spent last week with her sister, Mrs. Clifford Marson, returned to her home in Centerville Saturday.... Mrs. Annie Stickler has returned from a week visit with Mr. and Mrs. Frank Whitesell of Hagerstown.... Mrs. James Smith and son of Bradford, Ohio, were guests over Sunday of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ulysses Eaton.

MEET AT 6:30 O'CLOCK

FOUNTAIN CITY, Sept. 19.—The Christian Endeavor society will hold its regular Sunday evening meetings at 6:30 o'clock during this month. C. C. Clark and family have returned home after an extended trip in the west.... Harry Clark has left for Dayton, O., where he has accepted a position with the Buntelle-Roth company.

SOW MUCH WHEAT

ECONOMY, Sept. 19.—Much wheat will be sown in this part of the county this fall. The farmers are planting much of the grain in the corn. Allie Weyl was the first man in Perry township to fill his silo this year. It holds one hundred tons. Several teams are hauling gravel on the Economy, Williamsburg pike.

ACCEPTS NEW POSITION

EATON, Ohio, Sept. 19.—Miss Grace Hendricks, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. D. C. Hendricks, has accepted a position as instructor in German in the public schools at Lowell, Ind. She taught in the Eaton schools following her graduation here and from the Western College at Oxford.

FORMER TEACHER MARRIES

EATON, Ohio, Sept. 19.—Local friends of Miss Louise Voorhees, a former teacher of music in the Eaton schools, have received announcement of her marriage to Prof. Earle E. Elliott, Urbana, Ill. The couple will reside in Champaign, Ill., where the bridegroom is an instructor in Champaign University.

SELLS VALUABLE PROPERTY

HAGERSTOWN, Ind., Sept. 19.—Aif. Holderman sold his residence property on Main street to Dr. R. B. Ramsey. The price was \$2,500.

China has the longest national hymn.

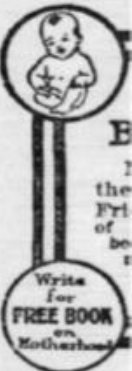
SARGOL
— THE —
FLESH BUILDER

CENTERVILLE

Mrs. William... thews and fa... and daughters... son, Raymond... reunion at Ric... ing. Misses... Dunkle assiste... some excellen... ma Wilson and... "The Little So... Maid," which... fully a few ni... recital.... Mrs... ess to the M... Wednesday... about twenty... program was... of Mrs. Wilson... H. H. Pulte, M... O. K. Dunbar... added to the... ward Smith a... The October m... A. B. Dunbar.

Visits

Miss Mabel... been the gue... Clinton Coone... past week... Craig visited... Brownsville d... Mrs. Artie Rol... Paris Wednes... serious illness... Naber.... Mis... lanta, Ga., w... calling on old... Charles Lan... and Thursday... Earle Hat... transfer deliv... business in th... load of young... lan church a... Greensfork W... Miss Norene... a visit of a fe



First Complete Showing

two miles behind the battlefield I noticed about three months ago that the wounded in many cases suffered more from nightmares than from wounds. I learned from those who had patiently endured sickness, mutilation, privation, and endless strain that the worst terrors of the trenches were the visitations of sleep which dominate even the waking mind with a violence impossible to shake off. I watched one man, a nightmare victim, crouch beside his cot, trembling with eyes wild and staring. "I am so tired," he said, "but I will not sleep again. Such a dream!" It is no uncommon sight to see sleeping men walking behind the lines with arms outstretched and terror depicted on their faces, seeking regiments that, in their dreams, they had lost. The following is a description by Private M. (British):

Once it came six nights in succession. Sleep in the trenches claps itself on you like a shock. You are so worn out that the moment you sink into a sitting position you are asleep, but there is no rest. You dream. You are lost in a tangled doubling line of trenches. You are all alone—except that you walk among the bodies of the dead. The dream trenches, some hewn seemingly from solid rock, others dug out of the turf, are the exact duplicate of the trench in which you are sleeping, except for their winding course, and except for the fact that the men who lie in them as close as they lie in the trenches of the living do not answer when you speak to them.

Abraham S. Stromwasser made a novel plea for exemption. Piano teacher of Brooklyn, Russian, Jewish, twenty-eight, he claimed to be a somnambulist and expressed a dread of walking into a German trench in his pajamas one night. On the other hand he may walk safely out of a German prison camp one night. Here not even the dead find rest. I realized with a shudder that the men are plagued by their own dead. Mine explosions unearth them at every moment. In April I saw bodies of men who fell in October. Some of our men were so exhausted that they lay down, and could go no further. They said, "We must have sleep," and they lay down right there and slept, with the Germans close to them. One of our younger officers, seeing this and knowing it could not be, remembered he'd seen in the village shop toy drums and pennywhistles. He

went into that shop and bought all those toys and came out and gave them to his sergeants. "Play something," he said. The sergeants played that old tune "The British Grenadiers." When these tired men heard that music they staggered up on their feet again and marched again and they turned again and they fought again. (Loud applause.) All sentences but the one you are reading are drawn more or less verbatim from articles that appeared in small-town American newspapers between 1915 and 1918, at which time the subject of sleep became of great interest to scientists, owing in large part to the horrific experiences of radical sleeplessness undergone by the soldiers who fought in the trenches. Meanwhile as day wore on panic grew. Sleeplessness began to tell. Three men had gone mad entirely. Two had to be shot. Others began to dig deeper to escape the horror of it all. During the uproar of shells I noticed a ground mole digging in as fast as his entrenching tools could work. As I watched him it occurred to me that Mr. Mole was a very wise animal, and I wished I was a mole. When I got back to the base I was so dead beat that I could not eat. I didn't care whether I lived or died. I had a bath without knowing what I was doing. Dead letter, July 29, 1915, Berlin, sender since killed in battle near Ypres, rec'd this office torn to shreds, never delivered, made out to a girl in Shreveport, came back No Such Person Here, repeated attempts at tracing failed, recoverable text as follows: "Sleep has almost overcome me and I can scarcely ... There is no safe place here ... [bodies?] that have lain out there ... pressed raisins, cube sugar, nuts, safety razors, bouillon cubes, insect [powder?] ... soggy excavations ... please to call them 'citizens' or my personal favorite 'galloping freck[les]' ... hard, gray faces with deep lines running around their deep-set eyes and hard pressed lips ... Some lonesome ... do so love ... " Please excuse this paper as the trenches are very muddy and my skin is parched with the fever that accompanies lack of sleep. Permit me to crave a small space in your Everybody's Corner for the following: "Far from the starlights I'd love to be. / Lights of old London I'd rather see." Starlights, commonly known as Verys (after Edward Very, the American naval officer who invented them), were a kind of greenish-white flare sent up to illuminate no-man's-land. From time to time starlights (starlight bombs) gave off their steady brilliancy. They, from this distance, look like a trolley headlight coming toward you, but behind a slight hill. Their illuminating properties carry for miles, and the greenish-blue light seems so nonchalant in its passage to earth. It gives one the feeling that it is bored by

the ghastly business. The enemy's starlights are wonderful things. Their light is very white. Later the moon came out very bright. The curious case of a Soldier, aged 31 years, who has been in a state of lethargy for 27 months, has been described to the Surgical Society. Patient was among the troops mobilized for the Marne. He disappeared but was afterward found in Brittany. Since which time he has been sleeping, eyelids closed, respiration regular, but pulse rapid. He is sensitive to excitement, stimulation provoking a weak defense, without, however, interrupting his sleep. It is possible to administer liquid food. The case is one of historical lethargy, and it is likely he will awake in time and resume his normal occupation.

GROUND

Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," a story about a man who drinks a magic beverage and falls asleep for twenty years, is one of the most famous things ever written about sleep, which makes it strange that the story says absolutely nothing on the subject. Irving, a New York merchant/lawyer who is said to have written the piece in the course of a single sleepless night, seems to have possessed a total lack of interest in his character's hibernation. The moment in the story when it would make sense to pay some attention is simply ignored. Van Winkle drinks the potion. "One taste provoked another," writes Irving, "his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep." The next sentence begins, "On waking, he found himself on the green knoll." I have read this story a couple of times in my life, and had it read to me as a child. I carry it in my head as one of the American myths, and when I think of it, the picture that leaps to mind—to most people's minds, presumably—is of Rip lying there asleep on the ground in the mountains. That image never occurs in the story. Two decades without comment! Rip's body is protected during that time by some power, a corollary of the spell contained in the stupefying drink. Is he visible to animals or passersby? He is not eaten by a large beast, nor devoured by insects, nor frozen or baked to death, nor robbed and murdered by bandits, nor crushed by a falling tree, nor buried by somebody taking him for dead. He neither starves nor dies of thirst. He lies safe in the open, preserved. His body does age (when at last he reappears in the town, he is an old man with a long white beard). The seasons go reeling by. His nails and hair grow, wrinkles deepen, gums recede. He ripens—his name, Rip, comes from the Dutch for "ripe." Does he lie still, as if on a bier, or does he toss and turn, lie on his stomach? The text is silent. We have entered the unapologetic obscurity of the old Germanic fairy magic. There is an even older story, from the Talmud, along the lines of "Rip Van Winkle," that goes into slightly more detail about the sleep of its hero. That Irving knew of it seems unlikely. In this story the sleeper is Rabbi Coniah. He meets, one day, a man planting a carob tree. Carob pods have a slightly sweet, nutty flavor, and you can eat them or feed them to animals. (People used to weigh things in carob-pod units. You would put however many pods on the opposite side of the scales. When we talk about karats of gold, it's a survival of that word and custom.) The rabbi walks up to the man planting the tree and mocks him, saying, Don't you realize that you will never eat the fruit of this tree? You

will die before it can feed you. The man says, Well, it may benefit my children. Rabbi Coniah laughs and tells him, Your children will also die. Put your mind on heaven and forget earthly concerns. The Talmud deems the stance unwise. God decides to teach the rabbi that for humankind, the greatest meaning lies not in the present, nor in eternity, but in the kind of human time we observe, the progress of generations. The rabbi sits on the ground and eats some bread. “Presently he became drowsy,” in the words of one account,

and fell asleep. He awoke not all during that day, nor during that night. The day returned, and the night began again, but still he slept. Thus passed many days and nights, during which he awoke not. A wall of stone was erected over him by a miracle, and shut him from the sight of men.

Thus for years he lay incarcerated as in a tomb. Generations passed away, and numerous events occurred to change the aspect of the world. Finally seventy years were accomplished, and the stony sepulchre removed, restoring Coniah to the light of day.

He awoke.

At least not nothing. The sleep part is given its due, or given. The detail of the tomb explains the question of protection, or how it is that a person asleep in one spot for decades could remain unharmed. Not a gratuitous question for the ancient Hebrews. In *Sleep, Divine and Human, in the Old Testament*, Thomas H. McAlpine writes that “Egyptian beds evidenced a concern with safety during sleep, and this dovetailed well with the Old Testament’s interest in sleep as a time of vulnerability.” That theme, of the danger in those hours when the body lies undefended, resurfaces thousands of years later in “Sleeping Beauty,” though not in the version most of us know. An older variant exists, “Sleeping Briar-Rose.” In that tale, after the princess pricks herself with a spindle and falls asleep, “round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher, and at last grew close up round the castle and all over it, so that there was nothing of it to be seen.” Any prince wishing to kiss and revive her, and any monster who meant to molest her, had to fight through the enchanted hedge. Only Rip, it seems, requires no shield or barrier, neither tomb nor thorns. He rests in peace. Rain, snow, hail, and leaves fall on his face. Vines weave through his beard. His eyelids flutter. Numerous events occur to change the aspect of the world.

MOON

Lots of the people I know in my life, or know well enough to discuss things with, tell me that they have a certain place or scenario that they visualize when lying in bed, to help them fall asleep. I had a friend who would imagine lying in a hot bath in an igloo. My father used to picture himself in a middle bunk aboard a submarine, traveling under the North Pole, beneath the ice pack in the dark. My own default scenario, sleeping on the moon, may in some respects be similar. It comes from reading crates of astronaut books when I was a kid. In particular I would devour any book or magazine story that had to do with the Apollo flights, the lunar missions. For whatever reason the part that seized my imagination was not the craft or the craters or anything like that, but sleep, the problem of it. I would reread pages on how the astronauts slept on the moon. Partly it calmed me. If people could sleep up there, on the lifeless moon, where the most infinitesimal crack in your window would cause your head to explode, then I could sleep in a warm bed, even if it was uncomfortable or in an unhappy house. More than that, though, it was sheer fascination. People had been on the moon, and they had gone to sleep there. A condition that even on Earth a person must feel relatively secure and relaxed to enter, these men had achieved on the moon. Two hundred and forty thousand miles from Earth. They were at that moment invisible specks in a lifeless void. Yet they had closed their eyes and ... Before the first flight, NASA technicians had wondered how the astronauts would do it. "One of the most seemingly provocative and least publicly discussed aspects of America's manned moon landing program," said one of my books, "involved the questions: (1) Should the first American astronauts to land on the lunar surface spend almost as much time sleeping on the moon as they do in 'exploring' it? (2) Should the first astronauts that land on the lunar surface be permitted to sleep on the moon at all?" Was sleep even possible there? Might they be too excited or afraid? Could they afford to "waste" all of that time, every minute of which cost millions of dollars? Should they take stimulants? These questions served as a rosary when I couldn't sleep, until the habit itself became the thing. I remember reading that the astronauts on the first lunar mission, Apollo 11, had not slept well. There wasn't enough room, it was too noisy and bright, they were cramped and cold. They napped more than slept. They tossed and turned and worried about their equipment and

experiments. With each mission, things improved a little, and by the time of Apollo 15, 16, and 17, in the early seventies, you can find reports of astronauts sleeping well in their hammocks. They had begun to notice that the lesser gravity on the moon—about one sixth of what we experience on Earth—let their bodies rest lightly. “Those hammocks felt like water beds,” said Jim Irwin of Apollo 15, “and we were light as a feather.” Jack Schmitt of Apollo 17 remembered that there had been “just enough pressure on your back in those hammocks to feel like you’re on something but not enough to ever get uncomfortable.” Inside the lunar lander it was pitch black, after the shades had been drawn. A constant hum issued from the pumps and fans. On waking, the astronauts opened their eyes to the dark, then pulled up the blinds to reveal the blinding, nearly white surface of the moon. David Scott of Apollo 15 said that the astronauts on that mission, when they did sleep, felt like “exotic birds in an elaborate cage.” The best sleeper of them all was an astronaut named John Young, who flew on Apollo missions 10 and 16. The aviation historian Rowland White described Young as “seemingly entirely at home on another world.” Young himself remembered that, even though he had declined to take any of the sleeping pills that NASA gave to the astronauts, he “slept like a brick.” As for dreaming, there are no recorded lunar dreams. The United States Information Service proclaimed in 1969 that “if, indeed, the astronauts have any dreams on the moon and are willing to reveal their contents, professional and amateur analysts may have work cut out for them for a long time to come.” But no Apollo astronaut ever described a moon dream, not in print. Doubtless the men did dream. Maybe the dreams were horrific nightmares, or too intimate to share. There are a few recorded space dreams, experienced in Earth orbit. Studies have been done. Russian cosmonauts, at least in the early years, tended to have extremely “terrestrial” dreams. Landscapes, gardens, soil. One, Mikhail Kornienko, dreamed that he was on Earth and had missed his ride to space. The Americans’ dreams were most often set in a weightless world. Their dream bodies floated, and if the dreamer were to float up to a rose, the rose too would be floating. An exception was Don Pettit, who lived in the International Space Station. He reported that although on Earth he had always dreamed of flying, in outer space he dreamed of walking. “I guess it just shows,” he said, “that even in your dreams there’s a certain measure of discontent.”

VARIOUS

Probably the strangest sleeping place recorded was that of a gentleman whom a policeman found sleeping on the top of the sharp spikes of an area railing. Before the magistrate on the following morning he stated that he was never more surprised in his life when he awoke to find himself where he was. One of the spikes had entered the sleeper's clothing without, however, disturbing his slumbers. Several persons, from some cause or other, have resolved at various periods not to sleep in bed. Perhaps the individual who kept his resolution the longest was Christopher Pevitt, of York, who died in 1796, aged ninety-three. He was a carver and gilder by trade, but during the earlier part of his life served in the army. His house at York, after he had settled down, was accidentally burned down, and he therefore formed the singular resolution of never again sleeping in a bed, lest he should be burnt to death while asleep, or not have time, should such a misfortune again befall him, to remove his property. The resolution he rigidly kept for the last forty years of his life, his practice being to repose on the floor, or on two chairs, or sitting in a chair, but always with his clothes on. He lived entirely alone and was his own housekeeper, and seldom admitted any one into his habitation. Among other articles which composed his home was a human skull, which he left strict injunctions should be interred with him. There are several authentic cases of bicyclists sleeping while riding their machines, and police constables on duty have been known to fall asleep while standing on the pavement without support of any kind. Recently a man engaged to pick apples was caught indulging in a surreptitious nap astride a branch, and it is quite a common practice of the men who bring garden produce into London for the early morning markets to fall asleep while seated on the shafts of the cart, trusting to their horses in order to arrive safely at their destination. A hotel servant once dozed off while sitting outside cleaning the top row of windows in a seven-story building. But this feat was eclipsed by a steeplejack, who found the distance between the top of the church steeple on which he was at work and the ground below too far to go for his dinner, so he partook of the meal up aloft, and then lay down on the solitary plank, face downward, with his arms hanging in the air, and fell asleep. A pedestrian named Ernest Mensen, who flourished in the third decade of this century, and who once ran from Calcutta to Constantinople in fifty-nine days, when employed as a courier, took very little rest, and never

slept in a bed when on his travels. He got short naps of only ten or fifteen minutes at a time each day, as and when he could, and took them standing or leaning against a tree, with a handkerchief over his face. Only the other day a man, on being charged with begging, declared that he had not slept in a bed for thirteen years, but took his night's rest in doorways and passages. Perhaps the strangest sleeping place was one discovered a few years ago, when the police of Budapest found thirty persons of both sexes lying in a dirty, but warm stream of water that flowed out of a mill. The water was shallow, and the vagrants had got into it for warmth, taking stones for pillows.

—*Spare Moments, 1891, and the Wilson Advance (North Carolina),*
December 15, 1898

THE BARREL

I am a captain, yes, but was once a ship's boy, not even as old as you. My father had been a sailor, an officer, and knew my mother for only a very short time before sailing off again. She was later forced to sue for his meager fortune. I was six when I met him. He had come back to London for only some days. My mother told him he could either marry her or take me to sea with him, and he chose me. It was a good choice. From what I saw of him during the next two years, he had not been made for marriage. He died at the hands of the Spaniards off the Azores when I was almost nine. He had sent me below-decks right as the fighting started. I heard the cannons and then, faintly, the pistols, but that was all. They told me I might see him again in the next world. It was then I became a true "wet sea-boy," and a skilled one. My father had held me back. I mean that he was protective. The others gave no thought to my safety, and so treated me like a man, which is to say like an animal, which I much preferred. I scrubbed and hauled rope, or helped in the galley when asked. I did other jobs that are best unmentioned, vile work. We saw many strange sights. They run together now. One incident, though, I have never forgotten. We were sailing for the West Indies. A trade mission. It was peacetime, and no one expected trouble. We were about a day's sailing east of the Bahamas when the wind blew strangely. Not gusts—more like sudden explosions. One of the old men who had been at sea the longest, since before my father's time, uttered the word the rest of us feared to speak, *hurricane* (that's how they used to say it). The native people of those islands would tell you it's one of their gods, or a devil, blowing terrible breath from the upper world. You can believe it. I never again knew fear like what moved through me when the billows started to rise and fall, looming up like a hillside until we were face to face with them, then dropping us into a canyon, taking my balls and stomach along. I was hurled like a puppet from one side of the ship to the other. Twice I heard a short scream—more like a moan, in the second case—and whirled about to find that a man who had been standing behind me was gone. There was no saving anyone in that weather. At moments the wind had a voice, or voices, like a choir of old women. More than once I braced myself for the ship to be smashed into planks. The *Marigold*. She was built in the Hull shipyards with wood from the royal forests, boards cut from the tallest, thickest trees, marked with the king's broad arrow. My father had

said she could take any wind, plunge into any trough in the sea and rise up dripping, riding high. For two days and a half we fought the devil's breath, and no man slept, nor any boy neither. Time bends when death is that close. Seconds were hours. Only late in the night on the third day did the storm start to weaken. It went on strong enough to have been a caution at another time, but for us, by then, it was lake water. The captain warned us not to get comfortable. It could be a lull. Sometimes they would do that, briefly fade then strengthen again. He stepped to the middle of the deck and called for a watchman. I felt the men's eyes turn to me. There was no arguing. I was the smallest and weakest. No other back could be spared. My arms and even my face were rigid with exhaustion and strain. Could I scale the rigging in the dark? I could have done it asleep! Which is more or less what I did, climbing past the tattered sails. One had a burn hole blasted through the middle of it. Another hung in fragments from the boltrope. Up like a monkey I went, until I reached the crow's nest, although we didn't call it that then. It was the barrel, and the sailor who kept watch in it was the barrelman. It looked like a sort of deep wooden tub. I climbed in and took up my watch. I was up so high that the voices of the crew below barely carried. Their shouts came and went in little snatches, depending on the wind. They hollered up to me once or twice, to know if I spied anything. The truth was I could hardly see. It was the kind of dark you could cut, and my eyes were weak with fatigue. I was far even from the feeble lanterns, whose very flames made themselves small in fear. An hour went by. An hour and a half. I vaguely recall at one moment folding my arms on the edge of the barrel and resting the side of my face on them. I must have left it there a second too long. My body crumpled. I slid down into the tub and curled up at the bottom. That's how small I was, how young—I fit perfectly. I have, of course, no memory of what happened next. I know it only because of what the men told me afterward. It seems that not long after I lost consciousness, the storm did what the captain had warned, re-strengthened and re-surfed. It was, they said, as if the tail had caught and lashed us. The sea grew wild like before. The wind boomed. We were blown helpless back and farther away from the island, into open sea. The ship rocked even more violently, leaning at times almost sideways, such that the mast swung close to the waves as we flew. Picture the tub, and down in the tub a boy, asleep in the cradle of the surge. Warm enough with a patched-up reefer jacket around him. His mouth hanging open. Dreaming. Because I did dream in the tub. In

a funny way it is my only memory of the second storm, pictures from another world. I dreamed of a king. An English king, I don't know which, maybe one of the Richards or Henrys. He had my father's face. He was in his bedchamber at night and wanted to sleep. A fire blazed. He had a soft bed, with the softest blankets, but he had been up for days. It seemed to me that he had just fought in a battle. He nodded his head and silently prayed, and wet snow plashed on his window. I remember no more. But I have never forgotten the poor king. He had come from somewhere, a story or poem I'd read in my hammock. I knew somehow that he would not live much longer. At dawn I began to stir, aware of unexpected warmth. Calm sea and winds. The ship bobbed, and a fine kissing rain fell on my face. I climbed down the mast, and the men stood gazing at me with faces that seemed to tremble between surprise and fear. Some of them took me for an apparition. A couple did not stop believing it. Our Welsh cook, William, told me that. A man slender and small with a reedlike voice and a laugh so ready it sounded mad, he was the closest thing to a friend I had, too much an uncle to be a friend but loving to me. He confessed, toward evening—as we knocked the ship back together as best we could, keeping a list of items to buy on the island—that the men had rather quickly assumed I was lost and forgotten me. Surely I had been spilled out like a dumpling from a spoon, on one of those wild swings when the barrel had all but skimmed the foam. I was not lost, though. Only sleeping. When we made anchor, the men, who if they did not fear me as a ghost considered me bad luck at best, bribed the captain to leave me on the island. They sailed two hours before dawn. I was still asleep, in a windowless room above a tavern. You have heard, no doubt, of the subsequent wreck of the *Marigold*. Betrayal was all that saved me.

Tracie Morris

401 REQUIEM

I.

There's a sign near the waterfront
I think it's advertising cheer:
says 400 YEARS, VIRGINIA SPIRITS. A swig.

A year ago last night, my dead crowd me
an even ceremony
of Jamestown, at the schooner

that brought those first here.
They think: long trip
did not yet know, not the longest part

hairpin turns 'head:
The exact day's alignment,
if the moon bled that defining night. Wisp

of clouds. Was sunset
golden? I'm sitting
yards away. Feel pulling

Brooklyn cemetery, southeast. I'd been
with friends, white from
out of town, just before. We marvel

at the dock's sky hues, pinking, baby's breath, the water's
iris of the narrow, soft cotton scenes
atmosphere, the svelte lede.

Back, many birds fight for food
at the edge of my home
underfloor people

drywall crates upon another
comfortably canopy
until the next storm

hits, a sandy conflagration of shore and concrete,
or other setback of colluding elements. The birds are
notes along the rail. They see inside.

2.

Temporal extension of a pine
greet me, sees,
expectant: "I'm waiting for you—

to do something." Who waits on the side
larger birds, gulls: feast, fight, spring
from earth, flailed wings.

Below, sparrow and finch grow fat
off my spread, little grains left
by aguish doves. Deserved largesse.

Various avians fix pennons,
peck to make others, move
sparrows, occlude, recede to floor

eat under hangings
chirping toward each other in shadow
of bigger feathered arms.

I give the little things to gobble, don't waver. Even
with them "I overcook," make too much.
The worst thing a Black woman can do:

not have enough food for whomever she might feed.
I fit so this peaceful instant, its verily
wishing through a lover of sun—as

though a latch on the other side sprung.
401—the dehydrated people, the first
few, asking for slake, shrivel and askew-faced look west.

3.
Squirrel fritters and climbs, stalking when
filling his cheeks, burrows up and under this tree. Feet up to gravity,
head to loves, no one will see him until after fall.

His slender climbed chicken wire of my window, screens to feast
body arrowed. His teeth edged from shells.
He and his well-rest, will want from hunger for months.

My extended family, me, played cards last summer.
Board games, cheesed slider potato salad plates.
Gulps and guffaws in the grass needles.

We sensed a season change in this humming
day. A niece's messy Afro puff and frown: some anchor on
her like, living. My ankles became full of welts, skin bubbles
'round feet. Engorged anklet. Mosquitoes flit, still feed.

(I rub alcohol, drip lotion, and the itch left. It kept
coming back until it breached.
Dem keloids blendin' in as we speak!)

Difficult hereditary straits on this country here.
Something out of this nunnery, this place, we made.
The blue jays' many calls are after

the orchard. Robin pushing with beak
red body and black wings in the coloring flora,
hard to see, secreting, she winks in my autumnal cooing sympathy.

(Anyway, "Looka here: when you see my caul
see me, when you di'int, I see you." Oh baby.
Will water be wacky as canary eyes.)

We have these. We'd had. The birds on
rafters manage not to shit on each other. The piper
around pessimism is a whisper in peeping.

4.

Could those Dark people, moved, who
lived on in brokered strength
know what would buoy from their

bedraggling? The penalized, agile
muscular busters, as bucks with dick antlers? Through tense
and thistle of the sheened, stack-corded mothers? People

of so-called intellect began, clipping into
the vast drink with knuckled hands, the children
of frailed Moors, and more. Sounds no

whipperstill for new natureland.

As persons who stubbornly headbutted through,
duressed, encapustuled, scurvied. Those of us form

the phalanx of kings, their scion. Profile of a few faces
lurching to the sunset of empire. I shake out of harkening, see
the tackling birds fight for my lineups of pre-seedling.

I wonder where they go
in quiet
when brambles and light are bare?

5.

They disperse as every one
memory I view them waiting
unexplanatorily for myself, put me here.

Today is falling new, they come back to some frosh, the air, year of seeing clearly
the whistles of claws, crossed their ways
a language echo I know, in our Black constructed first names.

Seasonings sift and things go back to
where they. The world turns spiraling bake,
shapes, sound small and unseen things, believe in Sol's rising.

The sun shifts their minute shadows
when they shudder
so many scads of sparrows.

Side-to-side with every bound. Weight seemed less
what slowed it than its means of clockwork locomotion.



From all the dark
taking ~~the~~ slung

below, you
had to peg this
one as
Certifiably
Male. The
paky paky derm
advanced,
lumbering inside
a silence ~~the~~
more heart-breaking
given ^{such} its size.

Off its fore-
most-end
flapped one
ragged ear the
yerdage of a
shower-curtain,
the shape of Africa.

1623
Duke of Brunswick

Jegs progressing
underneath it blurred — seeming to construct
then destroy an ever-changing log-cabin of extremities as

The Art of Fiction

No. 248

ALLAN
GURGANUS

Allan Gurganus's prose exemplifies Evelyn Waugh's belief that writing, all writing, must be regarded as an exercise in the fresh use of language. In his best-selling debut in 1989, the behemoth showstopper *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (it won the Sue Kaufman Prize and was adapted into both a TV film and a Broadway show); his romping masterwork about AIDS, *Plays Well with Others* (1997); two collections of novellas, *The Practical Heart* (2001) and *Local Souls* (2013); and two collections of stories, *White People* (1991) and the new *Uncollected Stories* (2021), Gurganus has proved that he worships at the altar of the word with an intensity unique among contemporary American fiction writers.

Gurganus's dynamism derives from some unexpected harmonies: a gay man whose work can't be

crammed into the box called gay fiction; a Christian agnostic, secular in mind, sacral in spirit; a rural sensibility with urbane flair; a nineteenth-century gentleman's delivery relieved by impish sedition; a tiny-town North Carolinian with a prodigious artistic vision. He once said, "I am not ambitious. I only want to tell the story of consciousness in the world." And he tells that story with a persistent urgency that uncovers the messy collisions of our living, our loving, our hoping. His comic vibrancy, the Southern Baptist hellfire energy with which he animates each line, is evident everywhere—and particularly in his invented literary hamlet of Falls, N.C., where his storytelling talent for the miniature matches his storytelling talent for the enormous. John Irving has said this of him: "The architecture of Allan Gurganus's storytelling is flawless. His narration becomes a Greek chorus, Sophocles in North Carolina."

Born in the town of Rocky Mount in 1947, Gurganus was the eldest of four boys, the son of a self-made father and a socially responsible mother who kept her sons well supplied with drawing paper. That was Gurganus's first art; he didn't begin to write with a mission until he quit art school in 1966 and, with the Vietnam draft on, reluctantly enlisted in the navy. After the war, he studied with Grace Paley at Sarah Lawrence, then became John Cheever's star student at Iowa. Cheever called him "the most technically gifted and morally responsive writer of his generation." Gurganus's first published story, "Minor Heroism," was also the first story *The New Yorker* published with an openly gay main character.

After a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford and a few years of teaching at Duke, in 1979 Gurganus began a thirteen-year stint in Manhattan, during which he did battle in the trenches of the AIDS plague. (A devotee of both Doctor Chekhov and Nurse Whitman, Gurganus told me that he would have become a physician if art hadn't found him first. His second choice? Preacher.) In 1992, having buried thirty beloveds, Gurganus fled New York for the calm of home, where he has remained since, in a tucked-away town that puts you in mind of a pleasingly intimate eighteenth-century village.

We conducted this conversation by phone, Zoom, and email between July and October 2020. The scourge of COVID-19 kept our talk from occurring how we had wished it, in person on the expansive wraparound porch of his 1900 Victorian home, a manse crammed with art, antiques, and every flavor of Americana. Seventy-four this year, Gurganus has not been shrunk or bowed by age, and in person or not, he still converses like the raconteur he's

always been. His freshet of references to writers and artists and thinkers, to films and symphonies and sculptures, comes out in a curative drawl you can listen to half the day. He is a font of folkloric wisdom, a sage for whom the personal and regional past is not past, but a storyteller's daily bread.

—*William Gibaldi*

INTERVIEWER

Louise Glück has made the important point that she reads to be personally addressed. And that's precisely what one gets in a Gurganus fiction, a welcome to the reader that says, Sit down, I've got something to tell you, something you need to hear.

ALLAN GURGANUS

People were telling stories eons before they ever figured how to write them down. Some novelists derive major inspiration from Gutenberg's typography itself. Others, like me, still go to the well of tale-told narrative. We believe that human conversation shapes itself toward legend. I'd give as an example the start of a Grimm fairy tale, collected from a hausfrau at the dawn of the nineteenth century—"Once upon a time, when wishing still helped ..." Boy, do I wish *I'd* written that.

INTERVIEWER

The mission and the method of the storyteller can be, at their best, childlike.

GURGANUS

It takes one durable person to believe that fantasy is as potent as reality. Seeing too far into others' lives can make you cynical. Novelists face danger, spending their lives imagining adult temptation and corruptibility. Holding on to the great "What if?" requires a willingness to live wide-eyed. A readiness—even an eagerness—to go on being surprised. When I'm writing from a child's point of view, I sometimes find it helpful to literally get down on my knees and walk around the house. I'm once again a creature four feet tall. You can see the undersides of tables. Electrical outlets near the baseboards become fascinating again.



“A novelist cannot originate everything.”

INTERVIEWER

The oral storytelling tradition must have been prevalent in your town and family.

GURGANUS

One rule of Southern etiquette runs, Silence must never fall at dinner. It seldom did. My father’s parents expected us at the noon meal after church each Sunday. They lived in town on an oak-lined street in a respectable Victorian. My father had six siblings and I had twenty-odd first cousins. We all gathered without fail. Dinner went on for hours and the conversations repeated from week to week, more Sabbath liturgy. The same thirty stories were offered over and over, with slight variations. The goal, I guess, was to add some one detail that would forever after be repeated by our kin. It’s a tournament, family life. Grown-ups recollected our few illustrious forebears. They gossiped about

neighbors, talked of who was about to buy a Lincoln Continental and what he'd likely overpay for it. I soaked in such lore but craved more backstory. Sometimes the other kids would run out to play and I'd duck under the lace tablecloth. I guessed that, if hidden, I might finally hear what adults really talked about. Children gone, the conversation switched at once to hysterectomies, divorces, bankruptcies, filthy racist politics. I doubt that mine was better at storytelling than any other Southern middle-class family. But their raw material itself felt molten. I got the sexual sense that vital information was being shared. This was what Mother, a Susan Hayward fan, called "real life." And I wanted to be a part of both living it and telling it. I've fought to keep that sense of urgency on the page, the sense that "You *must know* this!"

INTERVIEWER

Storytelling confers a species of power onto the teller and the hearer both.

GURGANUS

Yes. There were people in my hometown who were famous for how they told one to three stories. Some were old guys sitting at service stations, and they took requests. In exchange for an ice-cold Coke and a sack of peanuts, they would tell you a twenty-minute version of "The Day Bill Johnson's Hundred Hogs Got Loose Downtown." They were the first professional storytellers I met. And they never told the same tale quite the same way, forever revising for more groans, maximum laughs. Of course, if you promise a great story, you must actually *have* one. There's no faking that. Your characters' personal travails must reverberate enough to stand in for national and regional history. It's lucky, then, as the Confederate widow says—"Stories only happen to people who can tell them."

INTERVIEWER

If your sense of personal storytelling emphasizes how the soul makes a self, then your sense of collective storytelling calls up Faulkner in its emphasis on the webbed reciprocity of citizens and their community. Your invented hamlet of Falls, N.C., which appears in nearly all of your fiction, strikes me as downright Faulknerian in its parameters and dynamism.

GURGANUS

Faulkner founded an impoverished swampy county, then made of it a vineyard. I came to feel that some rough acreage was my birthright, and that it could—with time and craft, with care then love enough—somehow become my own invention. Since mine is essentially a comic talent, seeing that released upon a tragic region might make for new alloys. This realization didn't happen overnight, mind you, but across many years of work mornings. You wake up slowly to your God-given subject. It arrives with practice. It accrues the best way you can learn a foreign language—by living in its country of origin. Through buying daily papers or making small talk with your landlord and a favorite waitress. You become fluent in your own developing patois. It is a lingo redesigned, essentially streamlined and retrofitted for your own tale-told purposes. Every writer must finally invent both a whole new-old landscape and the unique language needed to explore, explain it.

INTERVIEWER

So you homed in on your Southern heritage for your earliest fiction?

GURGANUS

Not exactly. As a young writer, there's the burning question, What to write *about*? From the start, I was reading Kafka and Nabokov. I imagined I could create many books of puzzle-parables, as cryptic and funny as wise. But something told me that to settle and fully populate a novel, you'd need to know your invented region's agriculture and manners. You must first concoct its food ways, its feelings for both its ghosts and its God. A novelist cannot originate everything. And it slowly came to me that if I had to pick any sector of any country, I'd been born into one of the best for any writer.

INTERVIEWER

The sector of the country with a bitter history.

GURGANUS

The bitterest. The only zone ever occupied by furious torch-wielding troops of its own nationality. You want a gigantic lingering crime that lurks everywhere, daily denied yet undeniable? Try slavery. You want a gorgeous humid landscape that seems both soothingly pastoral and disturbingly glandular?

Check. So, how about generations of Kafka parable-paradox-perversities left at boil in a little Carolina village that time had, till now, forgotten? Maybe call it Falls, N.C., hinting at lost Eden, original sin?

INTERVIEWER

Which brings us to the church. Your dad was a born-again Baptist and your mom a by-the-book Universalist-cum-Presbyterian. I see in your work a worshipful quality you certainly must have absorbed from them. Even if you no longer practice or buy into the dogmas, your home is stocked with Christian iconography and you live in a highly religious region. It's never really left you, has it?

GURGANUS

I grew up Presbyterian and that little brick church was like our second home. I sang in the children's choir and preached for five minutes on Youth Sunday. When I was twelve I took the classes and was welcomed as a full-fledged member. That same day an important members-only meeting was to be held. This thrilled me since I thought some holy truth or secret handshake would be revealed. We're talking 1959 in North Carolina. The subject of this hush-hush session turned out to be how our church could keep Black people from worshipping with us. None had ever tried. They sure weren't coming to hear adult choir. But, with our being Presbyterians, some foreordained policy seemed needed before crazed Black worshippers stormed our premises. The deacons I'd grown up respecting suggested stopping these intruders by politely, yet firmly, directing them to the nearest "Negro" church. "They'd be far happier with their own." A vote was taken. Prayers were said and many congratulations got passed member to member on our humanity and Christlikeness. And at age twelve, twenty minutes into my sanctified membership, I saw through the whole thing.

INTERVIEWER

Appalling. But you couldn't just shuck the entire religious enterprise. Not then, not now.

GURGANUS

The lessons were learned. Christ's parables, the choral music, J. S. Bach, the

admonition to do unto others as you would have others do unto you—those persisted in me despite our church’s inability to practice what it had forever preached. Religion is too important to let just churches have the franchise. They’ve botched their own central ethic—absolution, forgiveness. I’d been shaped by Christian values if failed by Christian practice. *Worship* is both a noun and a verb and can be variously applied. Love of nature is one lovely form of it. Work well done can be one lifelong act of thanksgiving and dedication. If there is a God, He surely belongs more to the realm of physics than psychology.

INTERVIEWER

You were shaped by that experience of race in the church and have returned to the upheavals of racial realities many times since in your fiction. I’m thinking of the oldest living Confederate widow’s closest ally, Castalia Marsden, a freed slave of the widow’s husband. Castalia is a colossus of a woman, righteous with rage. Toni Morrison called her “marvelous.” And more recently, “Saint Monster” follows a Black man whose unusual appearance allows him, with hellish consequences, to pass as white, even to his wife and son. Why this mining of Black-white relations?

GURGANUS

Because I’m an American, particularly a Southern one. When I was growing up, race was not some abstract issue. Unlike those in most other regions, the South’s Black and white citizens live in daily sight of each other, still locked in economic dependency. My hometown is now seventy percent Black. When I was a kid at my parents’ home, footsteps in the hallway were as likely to be those of an African American as a white. The first person on earth I can remember was a Black nurse in her white uniform, holding my bottled milk while singing what I’d later learn were English nursery rhymes. If she was paid no more than the going rate, Lizzy Hollins didn’t hold me accountable for that.

INTERVIEWER

She crooned stories to you. But you didn’t begin your artistic life with singing or even with writing. You started with painting.

GURGANUS

As a kid, when adults asked if I'd become a doctor or a lawyer or what, I inwardly rolled my eyes. I knew I was more attentive than people thought kids should be, smart enough to keep that hidden. But the one place it showed was in my drawings. No Picasso, mind you. But I could make my hand do what my eyes/brain/heart told it to do. I was the eldest of four boys and the son of a self-made man who'd survived the Depression. He considered art to be frippery, sissy stuff. The best drawing surface in our house was the kitchen table. So I risked this private act in plain view. In all the thousands of times my father walked past me, bent there inventing animals and monsters and armor, he never stopped to say, "And what are we imagining today?" or even, "That crow's feet are certainly thorny."

INTERVIEWER

Did your father ever come around to showing interest?

GURGANUS

When I was twelve, I started selling paintings and he began offering advice. "Double, no, triple your asking price. You'll sell twice as much in the end. There's an art to this, I tell you." Dad feared I would starve to death as a grown-up artist. To prevent that he tried disinheriting me of any stray respect. But this only made me trust art more, him less. Everything he withheld I found quadrupled in a sixty-nine-cent bottle of india ink. Pen and ink became my superpower. I didn't think of aesthetics as aesthetics but as tactics for survival. When my first book sold, Dad told me he'd assured his golfing partners, "I never doubted it." I thanked him, knowing better.

INTERVIEWER

There aren't many major American fiction writers who started as visual artists. Updike was one. Flannery O'Connor was a painter and, not surprisingly, a good cartoonist. What did you bring from your art training into your narrative work?

GURGANUS

I caught the habit of looking, then looking again, again. A crucial verb for writers is *revise*. Which means, of course, to re-see. As for painter-to-writer

inside baseball, from Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Jan Steen, I learned how to present crowds. I love writing large gatherings that bracket one small, specific, personal transaction. From Matisse, Derain, and Soutine, I learned that a human face is often more eloquent when shown not at noon, but shadowed and illuminated at three-fourths turn. From great colorists such as Braque, I learned that—since my books are printed in classic black and white—naming a color on the first page of any tale lets the reader participate in setting up the book’s palette. The shades mentioned should not be overfamiliar and primary like red, white, and blue. Instead try taffy white, sparrow brown, or even baby-shit yellow. The reader comes out to help mix the paint, using her or his own experience, and a sensual bond, a true collaboration, is formed. One of my art school classmates became the film director David Lynch. So whatever you learn of art history will have multiple applications!

INTERVIEWER

But you dropped out of art school in 1966, without noticing you’d be subject to the Vietnam draft.

GURGANUS

That’s right. I’d applied for conscientious objector status in a conservative North Carolina county that lost my files twice. Finally I had to choose between serving six years in federal prison or joining some branch of the armed forces. My Republican parents were all for service “to toughen you up and give you some travel.” I was eighteen. I had read *Moby-Dick* and a Conrad story. So the navy it was. I’d figured that most U.S. ships were too big to fit up any live-fire river. This saved my life. I got assigned to the carrier *Yorktown* with an at-sea crew of four thousand. On board, I encoded and decoded secret radio messages. I soon discovered the ship’s library, two thousand books. Basically, I started with the *a*’s.

INTERVIEWER

And which of those books worked the most magic on you?

GURGANUS

Oh, the nineteenth-century novels. Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* changed me. As a painter I’d tried learning from Rembrandt, Hals, Velázquez,

Manet. Always focused on figures, faces, the visible mystery of human character. James's skill as a portraitist surpassed everything I'd even thought to try on canvas. There was no art studio aboard the USS *Yorktown*—believe me, I looked. So the library, adjoining the chapel, became my holy of holies. I soon lived like some monk sealed in his cloister, with the added danger of drowning. When not on duty at a code-scrambling teletype machine, I kept drawing. Line had always kept me semi-sane, the joy of controlling a single witty filament, controlling anything! But now? The sentence itself was becoming a craftable unit. I counted words in a typical Jamesian paragraph. I copied out whole pages of his, then wrote my bottom-heavy imitations. At art school, we'd sketched from casts of classical sculpture. Now I started doing my own versions of a Dickens opening chapter, a Jane Austen party, a rustic fair as seen by George Eliot or Balzac.

INTERVIEWER

You were teaching yourself to write at the feet of the masters.

GURGANUS

Remember, it was the Summer of Love, and here I was, nineteen, sexually able but with my head shaved and at sea for weeks on end. The best of what I'd done so far and might do just ahead could only be described one blank page at a time. Drawing and writing soon started feeling interchangeable. I could now draw mug shots of my characters, I could write my still lifes. In sketchbooks, I paid studious homage to minds and skills far, far beyond my own. It felt like a religious practice but one freed of tithing to any single God.

INTERVIEWER

You needed to make things.

GURGANUS

I made something every day. Early on, I sensed that—in every art—the ultimate shared subject is human consciousness itself. The more comic-tragic notes you can wrest onto a single active page, the better. I would later suggest to my students that they put something funny on every page and something beautiful on every other. My naive obsession was to shape something so true,

energized, and hilarious, it would necessarily outlive me. The goal was not becoming known, it was becoming useful.

INTERVIEWER

You were conscious of a literary immortality even then?

GURGANUS

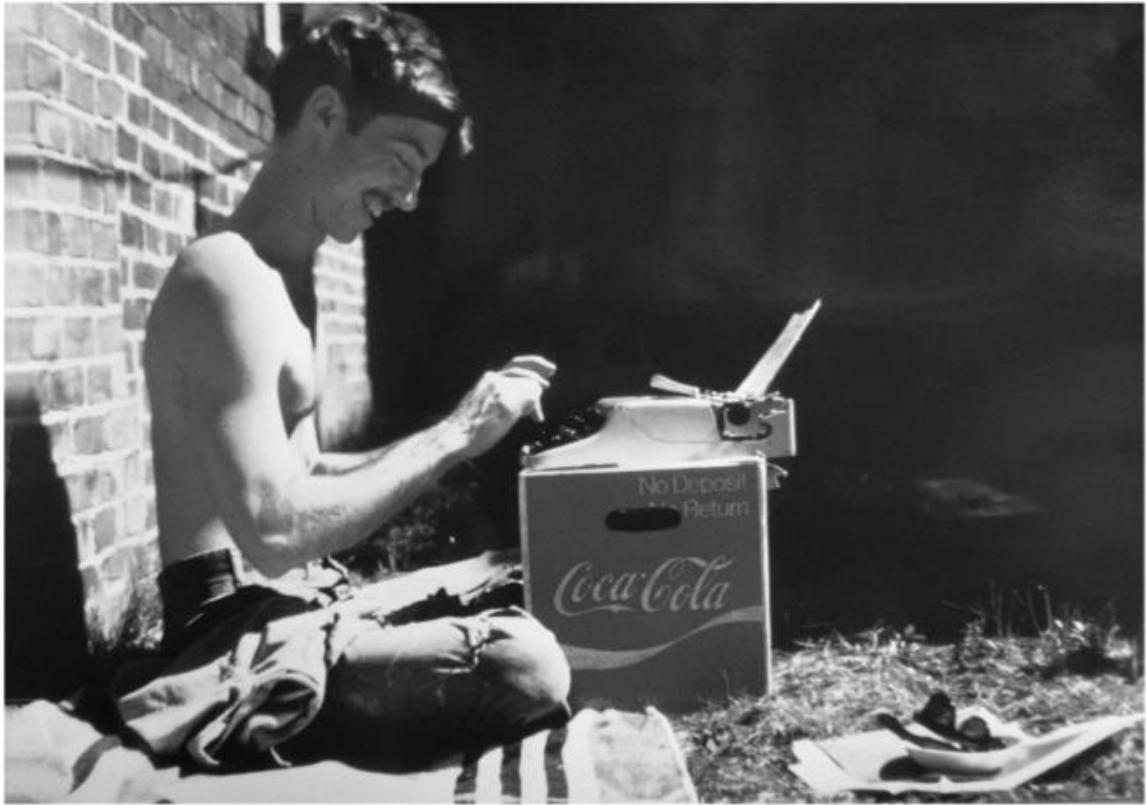
Well, I needed a gigantic mission to offset the humiliated role of enlisted man. I'd been shanghaied to fight an unexplainable war few believed in—past Dow Chemical stockholders profiting from the lakes of napalm we dropped. My country had jailed me into this untenable moral position, but maybe I could stage my own defense by figuring things out on paper? So ran my hick's hope. I tried to hold to this plan with strength enough to save myself.

INTERVIEWER

So, here you are on a ship, attempting the development of solid selfhood, but you have the added pressure of being gay and knowing, fearing, what that meant at that time, in that place.

GURGANUS

I knew it would work against me. But, hell, Michelangelo and Proust had outstripped such prejudice. I'd inherited the work ethic from my driven father and I'd caught the love of texts and art from the Scottish academics in my mother's clan. I had an IQ, some facility, and enormous will. It was this mission or nothing. It was either this mission or teaching junior high school French somewhere in rural Alabama. My shipmates called me Professor and sought my help in writing letters to their families and girlfriends. Some sweet guys, barely literate, handed me their love letters to unseal and read to them. The communications division nicknamed me Augie, abbreviating Allan and my complicated Welsh last name. I'd always longed for a butch nickname. I made rank in hopes of earning college funds. And I saw the world, Japan, Australia, Chile, Brazil, Denmark, France. Every day I tried to figure how to translate my painter's sense of composition into separate sentences that might forge a valid little world that I, and then others, could eventually believe in.



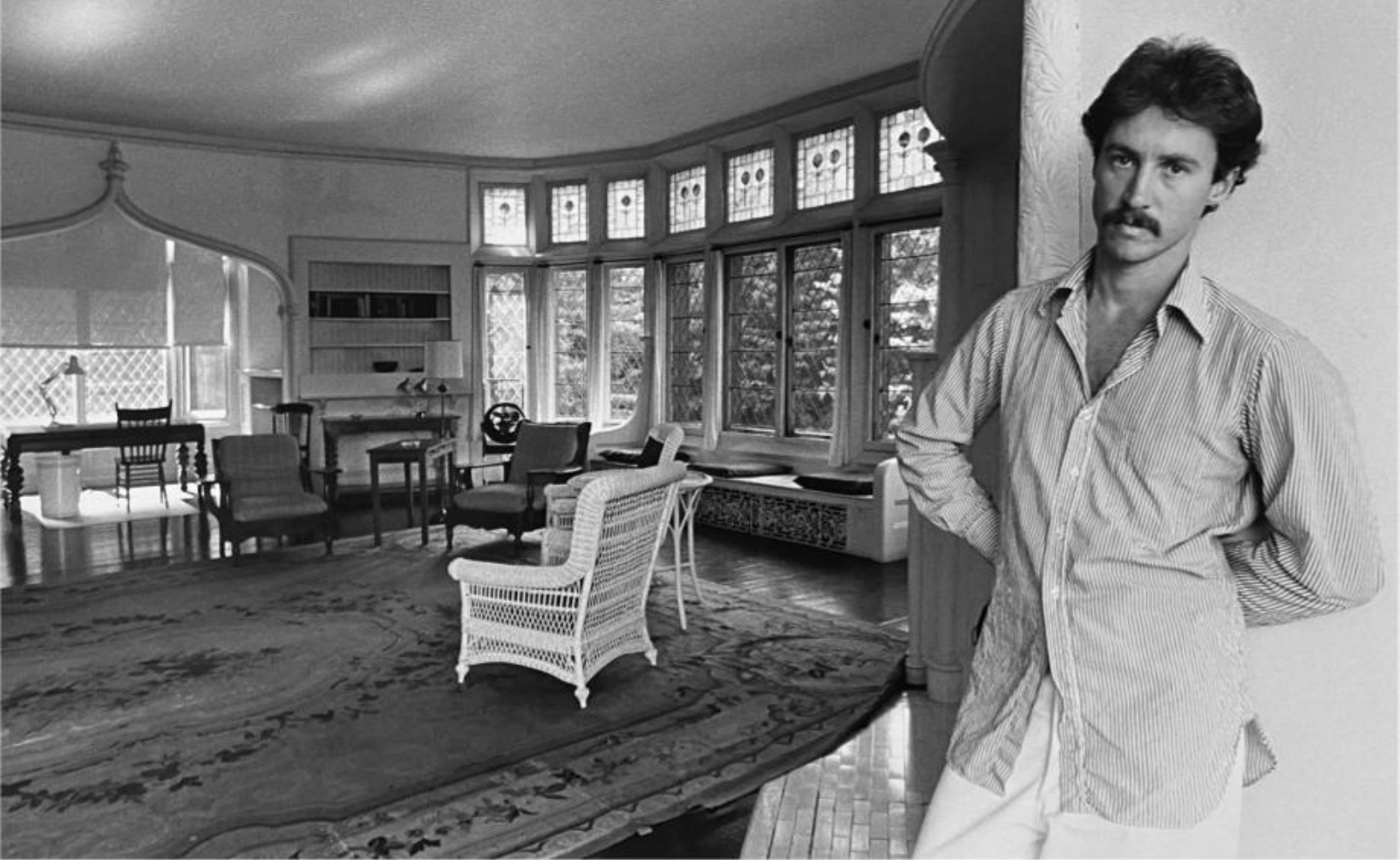
Boston, 1967.

INTERVIEWER

After the navy, you studied with Grace Paley and then John Cheever, two immense talents, if with substantially different literary sensibilities. Did you find it dizzying to take in what might've been warring points of view?

GURGANUS

Well, turned out they admired each other's work. I went to Sarah Lawrence specifically to work with Grace. I didn't understand all her sources. I'd not yet read some of her Russian models, such as the great Isaac Babel. But her language was so associative, original, emotional. She stood five foot even but was colossal, both a granny and a goddess. Wildly compassionate, she had time for everybody. The college cleaning crew hung out in her office and so did Susan Sontag. Her father had been a doctor and Grace's every pocket contained vitamin C, Kleenex, and Midol for her students. Her class sounded like a plenary meeting of the War Resisters League. We all talked at once and Grace would point to one speaker at a time, like some conductor. She coaxed order from hormonal radical mayhem.



“If I’m going to invest my life in inventing stories, I want them to have lasting value and as much meaning as I can possibly impart.” Yaddo, 1974.

INTERVIEWER

And I’m guessing she had her own tailored, Paleyan approach to teaching fiction.

GURGANUS

She made us read aloud, then write aloud. Storytelling is a communal duty/privilege. She read us the book of Second Samuel, Isaac Babel’s genius story “The Sin of Jesus.” Weekends, our class convened at antiwar demonstrations in Manhattan. I was freshly back from the Vietnam War. Grace, deeply opposed to it, knew I’d tried and failed for conscientious objector. Having spent years inhaling my aircraft carrier’s library, I was then writing—with the pigheaded energy of all autodidacts—nineteenth-century prose based on George Eliot. Misguided? Yes. But at least I’d copied the best. It fell to Grace to tell me, “It’s not that formal now, dahlink. Now? It’s more about how even people trying to do good get in the way of being honest or even very helpful, or something. You *know*?” I found I did. I literally ran back to my dorm room, to my Hermes portable, and got down a tale about a Southern family, not unlike my own, cheating each other in love and business without ever really meaning to. I’d begun.

INTERVIEWER

But you didn't begin by imitating the nuanced suppleness of Paleyan sentences.

GURGANUS

Well, Grace wrote for the ear—those killingly sad, hilarious tales. She demanded linguistic experimentation and encouraged formal risk taking. I can still quote lines from other students' stories circa 1972. Once you worked with Grace, she never stopped being your friend. She recommended me for an unpaid job as a writer-greeter at Yaddo, the artists' retreat. They needed a kid to help settle older campers arriving for their work stints. Aaron Copland and Malcolm Cowley were visitors and reminisced about the wild party days, the twenties and thirties at Yaddo, when an impoverished John Cheever had held my job.

INTERVIEWER

So was going from Paley to Cheever luck or fate or connections—or some cosmic intermingling of the three?

GURGANUS

With me an unpublished middle-class kid from Rocky Mount, N.C.? Rule out connections. Say, a roll of the dice. And maybe a talent for thank-you notes! Cheever spent one term at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He was in his sixties, had just survived a major heart attack but proved unable to stop drinking. He'd exhausted his family, and so had exiled himself to winter in the Midwest. He had great charm he could turn on or off midsentence. He had a rich baritone that sounded taller than he was. He'd been one handsome lad, but a lifetime's scotch and cigarettes had crinkled him toward something petrified if pixie-ish. His New England accent had a Brahmin's broad *a*, even broader than Katharine Hepburn's. He wore Brooks Brothers shirts, old corduroys, size 6 penny loafers. Blake Bailey's superb biography makes clear how nearly dead Cheever was that winter. But he still got invited to dinner parties by every Iowa City hostess born with a lifetime subscription to *The New Yorker*.

INTERVIEWER

There must have been enormous differences between Paley's classroom and Cheever's.

GURGANUS

Yes. If Grace's class resembled the heated Talmudic arguments of a communist cell, John's was sort of an educational cocktail party. He was as funny, lively, and irreverent as a much younger man. His conversation was jumbled with famous intimates. When he said Saul, he meant Bellow, when he said Walker, he meant Evans. He would say, "It's certainly possible to start a story, 'It was one of those Sundays when people woke saying, "I *drank* too much last night.'" Now, students, 'It was one of those Sundays when ...'" A great silence fell. He had an office but held student conferences in his hotel room. The half gallon of scotch and two water glasses were its only signs of human habitation. He treated our stories the way he created his own. The family livelihood depended in part on his selling *The New Yorker* a certain number of tales per year. He'd published over a hundred there. He paid the mortgage on a fine Westchester property, paid for three kids' boarding schools and orthodontia. So, if a story was not working after he'd typed two pages, he tore it up and started another.

INTERVIEWER

A potent lesson in that.

GURGANUS

The sailboat speed of his tales speaks to their working immediately or not at all. Will it float? In his own view, his stories merited either a no or a yes. He considered my work more a yes than a no. I turned in a story for his class, the saga of embattled relations between a World War II war hero father and his gay teenage son. One day the phone rang in my sixty-dollar-a-month Iowa Avenue apartment and a whispery voice said, "This is William Maxwell at *The New Yorker* and we'd like to publish your new story in a November issue." "Yeah?" I said, "And I'm Mae West. Who *is* this?" He laughed and gave me the phone number of the magazine switchboard. "I think you'll find this is legitimate. John Cheever submitted it." That became my first publication. Maxwell proved as fine an editor as he was a writer. I stayed friends with Cheever for the rest of his life and attended his burial in Norwell, Mass.

INTERVIEWER

In New York in the eighties, you were teaching at Sarah Lawrence as AIDS



From left: Jonathan Santlofer, Diane Keaton, Holly Solomon, Gurganus, and Melissa Meyer, New York City, 1992.

ripped through your community. Afterward, you wrote the great American plague novel, which is how I think of *Plays Well with Others*. And here we are in the fangs of COVID-19. I'm wondering if a novelist will "find some way to make Comedy of this shuffle toward the crypt," as Hartley in *Plays Well* says about his own singing mission. Since this is the second plague of your lifetime, have you been thinking about what it can mean for the storyteller?

GURGANUS

Absolutely. Throughout *Plays Well* I cite Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. It was published in 1722 but recounts the bubonic plague striking London in 1665 when the writer was just five. Having heard about it all his life he preserved the stories of his relatives' suffering along with official statistics. It's still riveting. I wanted to suggest how these disasters have always been part of human history, whatever grim comfort that provides us. As for

narrative interest, I'd say AIDS beats COVID-19. For one thing, HIV first befell Haitians, intravenous drug users, and gay urban men—three groups the right wing was only too pleased to see erased. Since HIV could be sexually transmitted, the American habit of blaming the victim came immediately to hand. While now, if you can catch COVID from a heavy-breathing bus passenger, the cause-and-effect drama is abstracted. But I'm sure great books will rise from this latest blight. A population in endless lockdown might produce more *fiction* than tales of actual sufferers. Part of the pathos of HIV's story stemmed from threatened communities closing ranks to protect themselves during Reagan's years of letting the epidemic spread unmentioned. The search for a cure was delayed by those government officials bent on calling it "gay cancer."

INTERVIEWER

The way certain shameless officials are now calling COVID the "Chinese virus."

GURGANUS

Yes. According to Washington logic, a disease cannot be studied till it's properly named. So this attempt to demonize early AIDS victims costs hundreds of thousands of lives. From Reagan to Trump, history keeps—if not exactly repeating itself—then certainly stuttering. From disaster to disaster, we never seem to learn, to remember. Historians provide us only the factual half of the story. Novelists and poets must tell the rest—how it felt to raggedly *live* it. From Homer to Defoe and forward, meeting this need is what literature keeps essential.

INTERVIEWER

And it's what you yourself have consistently kept alive in your work. You have written warmly about many topics arguably forbidden in our world—a comic novel about AIDS, an unconsummated romance between boy Confederate soldiers, and a mother-son sexual relationship gossiped about but ultimately accepted. But there's no rubbernecking impulse in your fiction. Your work suggests, quite humanely, that, well, these things happen. Taboos are broken far more often than we think, and we don't have to look very far into local folklore to see it. How does this shape plot in your books?

GURGANUS

Plot confuses beginning storytellers by sounding so extruded, mechanical. Simply put, plot is what your characters most want and whatever they will do to get it. I am always attracted to characters having a hard time. Fiction can be summarized as “and then something went terribly, terribly wrong.” The more specific the hero’s trouble, the more unconventional his wish or obsession, the greater chance the story has of saying something new and helpful. Empathy is a writer’s pilot’s license. Without it, you are grounded. You aren’t creating characters. You’re judging them.

INTERVIEWER

I recall those lines by Nietzsche that make a fitting recipe for what you just explained about plot, lines plot-baffled scribblers should Scotch-tape to their desks. “It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.” Which brings me to another observation about your work. You have never used two familiar contemporary gambits, the unreliable narrator and dystopian prediction.

GURGANUS

That’s right. Blame my temperament. Blame my antique belief in a hick-like sincerity on the page. Blame birth order—I am the protective eldest of four sons. Or maybe blame my being born in 1947, three years nearer the nineteenth century than to this slum of one. My favorite grandmother was born in 1885. She saw her century of origin as Eden, virgin forests crisscrossed by noble locomotives that ran on harmless steam. Narration worked then, too! Voices like Whitman’s and Douglass’s and Lincoln’s and Dickens’s. Those could be as trusted as the King James Bible. World War I broke all such contracts. The picture plane exploded into Cubism. And Ford Madox Ford wrote a novel called *The Saddest Story* that his publisher retitled *The Good Soldier* in order to sell books to a postwar audience. Ford is credited with creating the first unreliable narrator, but what about Petronius?

INTERVIEWER

You see the post–World War I twentieth century as a cataclysm, the aftershocks of which still quiver beneath our boots.

GURGANUS

The twentieth century said, Nothing and no one is fully accountable anymore. Nothing can be trusted. But the outrageous fiction I love often passes as reliable truth-telling. *Huck Finn*, *Bartleby*, *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, *Beloved*. The very word *narration* derives from the Latin *gnarus*, meaning “to recognize or know.” So a narration is a knowing, a narrator a knower. A know-nothing narrator has no value to me. Confused narrators? They’re both endearing and essential. But someone setting out to mislead, he’s not my tour guide of choice. You shouldn’t travel with people you don’t truly love or whose credit cards bounce. Ergo, if I’m going to invest my life in inventing stories, I want them to have lasting value and as much meaning as I can possibly impart. They should be difficult but reliably so. And it’s no embarrassment if they’re *about* something.

INTERVIEWER

I see your storytelling as *about* creating credible heavens rather than commiserating over inevitable hells.

GURGANUS

If our present century suggests we are headed for times even worse than this last round’s, why should I predict more of the miseries awaiting us? That’s what some of my contemporaries have done. A credible paradise is far harder to invent. Whereas hells? They’re burning everywhere and we lit them ourselves. So here come more novels about food shortages? Leaking nuclear waste? Pandemics incoming, melting ice caps, and, of course, race war? You don’t have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

INTERVIEWER

There are angels in your work. There are miraculous healings.

GURGANUS

And I’ve written elaborate predictions of how, in paradise, we might be rewarded for our sexual experimentalism while we were still on earth. There must be utopian ideals at large *somewhere* to offset this cheesy rush toward sci-fi doom. I’m fascinated with how ordinary people, fallen into extraordinarily difficult times, can rise to the occasion and, by doing so, become briefly

extraordinary. My earliest published story was called “Minor Heroism.” This hints that some action, grand and outsized, can be undertaken by a mere mortal. I consider that first title prophetic. It might also help explain why all my books are still in print.

INTERVIEWER

Let’s talk for a second about that sexual candor in your work. How have you arrived at such intrepid portrayals?

GURGANUS

Long research, sleepless nights. I want to offer my characters some sexual risk taking, a reflection of the way I once lived my life. I’ve learned so much about others, in and out of bed. Tennessee Williams swore he’d never created a character to whom he was not sexually attracted. I always urged my students to let their characters have erotic existences on the page. We put the poor things through such tortures, why not let them score a few Fridays and Saturdays per annum? What a protagonist eats and wears and how he decorates his rooms and treats his parents—yeah, all that’s important. But what she wants sexually and what she’ll risk to get some of it on a given weekend—that’s a fast, amazing way to show her true hidden identity. I’m pleased to see young novelists now risking far more sexual honesty. What subject is more mystical and entertaining? Most sexual exchanges are far more awkward, and therefore more endearing, than what you find online. Ordinary folks’ groping attempts I usually find far sexier than a couple of tanned models going at it in Malibu. A writer, a real writer, must be fully committed to those people somehow created on his pages. He cannot stand apart from them, cannot cartoon or disdain them. They are not quite villains, they are hardly saints. They are all citizens different from each other, each with a peculiar mission, varying sets of merits and flaws. They are partial talents striving toward something, but what? For sure, it’s a fascinating exercise, creating others and then trying to be responsible both *for* and *to* them.

INTERVIEWER

And that responsibility has something to do with letting them evolve as they will. I remember you once told me something a respected writer said about the unconscious being bunk. He spoke of being in total control of his characters,

master of each decision put down on the page. He claimed that the dream life is null and our unconscious rumblings nonsense. Has that been your experience?

GURGANUS

On or off the page, complete control is a delusion. Literature works obliquely. Literature is a backstage pass. If fiction is partly blueprint, it's mostly dream. In Kafka's great tale, Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a three-foot cockroach. "Waking" is his first act. No final alarm clock will undo the unpleasantness. Reality itself often constitutes the nightmare. Trouble is our subject. Escape is desired, if unlikely. We love seeing the virtuosic dodging of major difficulty, Chaplin's tramp avoiding a gigantic cop with the grace of a chimney-sweep Nijinsky. Fact is, the cis-gender male novelist who boasts of unanimous control of ways and means has largely missed the point of being an artist. We are not exempt from the banana peels that others slip on—fact is, we must fall more times than they, if only as *research*. Conrad claims the greatest fiction "honors the mystery" of existence. The goal is not offering readers your snappiest answers but your most resounding questions.

INTERVIEWER

I take it, then, that you don't blueprint your fiction beforehand but rather sit in anticipation and preservation of expected surprise.

GURGANUS

Something like that, yes. I have never outlined a novel. It must grow a day at a time like the nest of mud-dauber wasps. Its architecture should be organic, inherent. Trial and error and spittle and luck. If the reader is surprised by its twists and nautilus chambers, its author should have keenly felt and calibrated those dips first. The goal is to preserve the unexpectedness that makes lived life so dangerous, if fascinating.

INTERVIEWER

And almost all of your work is written in first person. I have the sense that third-person-historical-omniscient is your settled foe.

GURGANUS

Call it a lifelong authority problem. As a kid, when my father gave me a direct order, I'd sometimes ask why. His usual answer—"Because I said so." Though that's technically a first-person sentence, it's the very spirit of third. I guess one goal of third-person narration is to demonstrate the writer's capacity to know all facts and motives. But how many people would opt to be godlike for more than a weekend? The official version of some important battle is usually a fact-studded third-person account pretending to objective truth. But, in the end, every writer brings her own agenda, favors one of the two armies involved. Better to admit that up front. If you want to really know about the Holocaust? Read first-person testimonials of those who escaped the camps. In the greatest book about the Final Solution, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi tells how he endured by parlaying his skills as a chemist. He speaks in reasonable tones and painful specifics. He has the genius to leave out the Nazi guards. Instead he shows the debilitating effects of confinement and terror on himself and fellow prisoners. We see only through his eyes, not from some all-knowing safe-in-space weather satellite. I don't trust official explanations.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

GURGANUS

They're usually belated as well as self-justifying. Our wish to understand history, whole, is as admirable as it is impossible. However fallible human memory is, that's mostly what we have. And the flukes and flaws of spoken memory often constitute its poetry. If a writer ever succeeds in establishing a credibly fallible human voice recounting events notable or mundane—or, best, both at once—the chances of wringing some truth from history is immeasurably increased. Grace Paley often said, "There's something totalitarian about third-person-impersonal. In fiction, I want a jury trial with the laws of evidence in force. I want to defend myself in my own voice."

INTERVIEWER

Back to literal reality, then. Tell me about a typical workday.

GURGANUS

I like to be up by six thirty. I guess I do this as proof to my father—dead for decades—that writing is really manly labor. He himself was an early riser. Like him I prefer those hours when dew is everywhere and birds are first auditioning their day's likely song. I'm sure that if God created Eden he did it all with a single dawn. Early-hour innocence promotes ambitious, unrealistic hopes. You've just been dreaming. You have strong coffee and a piece of fruit. You re-read what you got down yesterday. It's important to leave yourself a handhold on the cliff you are inventing. Most days involve rewriting, boiling out the cornstarch, essentializing a gesture, paring down dialogue that's grown too wordy or explicit. On schedule you go through familiar rituals that've at least produced satisfying results. Most days such work can go on till two or three. Then you get to do your banking or shopping or gardening. You again become a citizen of the sloppy capitalist realm after shoring up the secret world you've been home inventing in black and white.

INTERVIEWER

So tell me now about an *ideal* workday.

GURGANUS

Well, that ideal one always comes stuck between sandbags of the standard kinds. You need a sign over your desk announcing THE MUSE IS IN. Keep regular shopkeepers' hours. Be, Walter Benjamin said, "like a man digging." Breakthrough days are the rare ones. Ideal sessions bash you with surprises and rewards. They bring simple technical insights denied you till this morning, which is somehow unlike any other morning. But you must be present for the good news to find you. Sometimes the hardest thing a writer does all day is set the alarm that'll get him up three hours before anybody else in the house.

INTERVIEWER

I believe Flannery O'Connor once said that each day, from nine to twelve, she'll be at her typewriter, and if during that time the muses elect to croon to her, she'll be there to get it all down. But *being there* each day was key. I have a memory of you *being there*, at your desk, in summer, and Bach was streaming from the windows. And I remember thinking how apt this was, because

if your prose is always highly pictorial, it is also unfailingly, I'd say obsessively, rhythmic. Can you compose while music's playing?

GURGANUS

When writing first drafts, the only music audible should be your own language and pulse—the metronomic drumbeat of your personal digestive percussion section. But, later, when I'm typing in handwritten changes, what sometimes speeds my fingers and cheers me is listening to solo keyboard work—played by Oscar Peterson or Glenn Gould, Monk, or Gershwin's piano rolls. Reading the work aloud is another trade secret that can't be stressed too often. Every sentence must make logical sense while offering its appropriate ghost song. Even someone reading your work silently should be always registering its music. I prefer chamber works. I love four instruments in conversation, arguing before briefly agreeing. That's closer to the spirit of my work. Bach, Mozart, and Brahms are some of my friends I daily hear and learn the most from.

INTERVIEWER

I count myself among the many who learn from you each time they pick up your fiction. And I confess I've always been perplexed by how you occupy a somewhat underestimated position in American letters, but now I'm wondering if there have been certain advantages to being underestimated.

GURGANUS

Yes. One advantage of being periodically underrated—if your first published book provokes too much acclaim, you might be tempted to offer up more of the same. I didn't follow my visible first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, with *Apparently Immortal Rebel Widow Confesses Even More*. Capitalism seeks consistency in product. But my publisher never mentioned the word *sequel*. Instead I offered up books of short stories, collections of novellas, *Times* op-eds, essays. My fiction has tried keeping track of what I learned by just living my life, and not as “the writer,” but as a citizen, a guy. I've wanted my work to retain the immediacy of whatever I am dealing with today, the Vietnam War, AIDS, the deaths of parents, COVID-19, whatever has me by the throat right now. I don't want to go on repeating some formulation that chanced to work for readers thirty years ago. I'd say we need more underestimated literary hicks.

INTERVIEWER

We share an editor in the last-of-a-breed Bob Weil of Norton/Liveright, our own irrepressible Max Perkins. What does an editor like Bob mean to work like yours?

GURGANUS

So many books are published every year. When you send one out into the world, you want the introducer to be not just an efficient functionary but its godparent. Writers know when some rare person in the business truly “gets” what they are doing. There’s an affectionate respect working at the sentence-making level. I’ve been very fortunate in my editors. Bob Weil only publishes books he loves. He’s known as hardworking but, beyond that, he still reads for pleasure. From his nonfiction list, he brings rare insight to the novelists he champions. We were once talking about which foreign languages we studied in college. He said to me, “But you speak another language, one that’ll soon be extinct.” I asked him which language he meant. “Nineteenth Century. You still know how everything would’ve been said in that.”

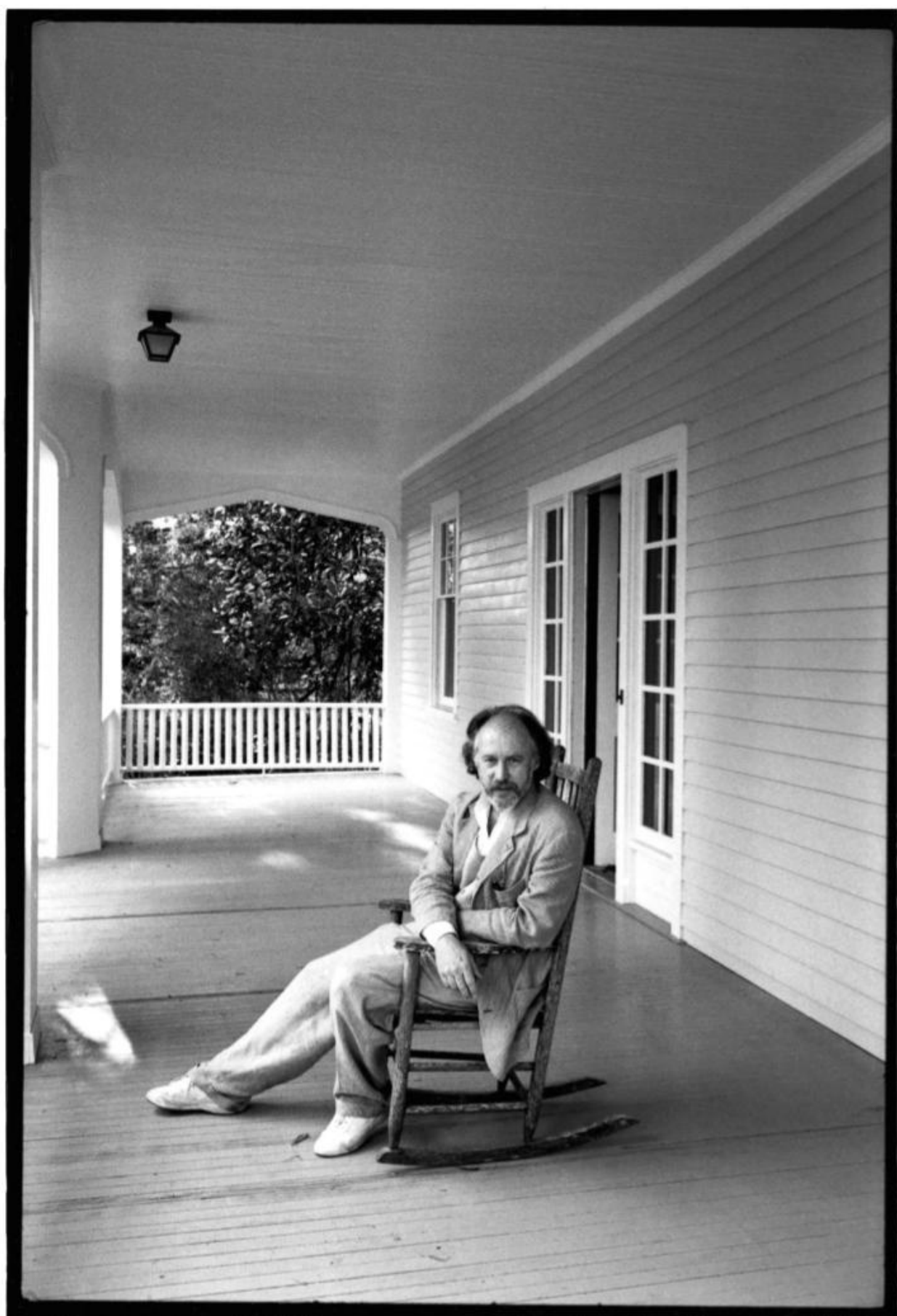
INTERVIEWER

And Bob, like you, is a dedicated reviser, knowing there’s no such thing as writing, only rewriting, which is a handy revision of Nabokov’s quip that there’s no such thing as reading, only rereading. You mentioned revision earlier, and I know you as someone who rewrites until the moment before publication. Right through galleys, you’re renovating. Tell me about this, because not all writers do that.

GURGANUS

This is essential. I love the joy of a first draft in longhand, putting everything in, writing as fast as the hand will go. Of course, ninety percent of writing involves the re-seeing. This is the agony non-writers can’t imagine. But, practiced long enough, the correction of a manuscript can help you feel inches smarter, almost in charge. There’s a jingle sometimes attributed to Chesterton, “Let it be said, when I am dead, *He rewrote, to be reread.*” A good initial draft is like sex on the first date, hoped for yet unexpected and far more fun for that. Rewriting is

Gurganus photographed by Jill Kremetz on April 5, 1994, Chapel Hill, N.C.



April 5, 1994

Joe Aronowitz

more like marital relations—what little I know of those—applying vast past experience to achieve fast, reliable results. When I was teaching, I'd sometimes mystify my students by saying, "I will now write on the board what Literature is." Then I'd take the chalk and—with flair, I hope—would slowly spell: "Literature is Sentences."

INTERVIEWER

How did your charges respond to that blast of sheer sense?

GURGANUS

They'd give this bald-headed truth a nervous giggle. Beginning writers see language as a means to an end, the paint used to coat your house. But language is the whole game, it's not the frosting on the cake, it's the cake, milk, sugar, flour, wheat. How accountable and original and mellifluous is the building material? That counts most of all. Our primal duty is to the hive's queen bee. She is either/or. She is language itself. We're mainly here to guard and renew her. Our regeneration depends on her. There are famous American writers whose books exist *despite* language. Reading them is like eating a salad made of sandpaper.

INTERVIEWER

I'm continually baffled by this. If the *sentences* don't work—in their unexpected exactitudes, in their rhythms and freshness, in their allusiveness and connotative complexity—how does the *story* work? Is the story not being told with sentences?

GURGANUS

Exactly. And then there are writers whose sentences always surprise with their inevitable loving precision. Henry Green, early Evelyn Waugh, Walt Whitman, Toni Morrison, Chekhov, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Flaubert, Nabokov, Montaigne, Dickinson, Agee, Beckett, Melville, Günter Grass, George Eliot, García Márquez, our lists go on and differ year by year. I keep the works of my current deities in easy reach. Scanning even one of their living sentences can resurrect me like CPR. People talk of plot and character, but too few genuflect to the beauty and power of the actual single sentence itself.

INTERVIEWER

Tell it, brother.

GURGANUS

As mortals we'll never make a perfect thing. But it's our obligation to try. Some—Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Bach—came close. But whatever is required to achieve your present idea of the ideal is worth the risking. A publisher recently charged me \$2,500 for making changes in the final galley stage. See, I discovered that I'd left a crucial generation out of my novella "Decoy." So I wrote in the farm folks that'd managed moving to town and eventually nabbing country club memberships. I added and wove in new characters at the last moment and they made the work whole. That penalty fee was the best money I've ever spent. After all, writing is my life sentence.

Campbell McGrath

FEVER OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN

I.

A storm of buzzards is circling outside the window of my hospital room, looking south and east across the river toward the high-rise construction cranes downtown.

They are a regular sight in December, buzzards migrating in particulate vortices, slow-moving gyres that resemble, from a distance, glassless, black-feathered snow globes.

Satin-hemmed sheaths of cloud shuttle across the sky, diffuse silver light alternating with bursts of Florida sun, the occasional spatter of raindrops from a string

of unseasonable storms parading up from the Gulf,

cars composing a stop-and-go stream of metal parallel to the river, small Caribbean freighters docked

along quaysides of cabbage palms and crab traps,

I can see it all with great clarity, the birds, the traffic,

it's effortless—the doctor in the eye clinic

spoke enviously of my vision, better than 20/20,

even at my rapidly advancing middle age.

The bad news is that I am periodically blind

in one of those otherwise excellent eyes, which flickers

between darkness and light, like poorly connected cable TV.

It's terrifying, that darkness. Enveloping. Confounding.

Immediately, all thought flows toward the remaining eye—

may it never falter, dear lord, may it guide me

through the corridors of your mansion forever and ever,

amen. In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king

but I have never envied royalty. I am a democrat

and I want to go home. It's two days before Christmas here

at the ho-ho-hospital, and the nurses are antsy

for some quality family time, Becky has four girls

and a worthless ex-husband, she started nursing school

after the divorce at age thirty-nine, if you can believe it.
How to describe the gloominess of the hospital at this season?
Little worse than its familiar, jaundiced, institutional gloom,
in some ways, but it is more poignantly melancholy,
doors adorned with droopy silver wreaths, a poinsettia
dropping its leaves on the brightly sanitized nurses' desk
as if it were coming down with something.
Every effort at seasonal cheer serves only to clarify
its inherent joylessness, just as all the holiday schmoozing
on the ever-running TV sets, the enforced jollity
of Toyotathon commercials and celebrity chefs
baking caramel gingerbread men on the morning show,
makes us feel more empty-hearted, fearful, and alone.

2. *What is light?*

That part of the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation visible to the human eye is known to us as *light*. It propagates through space as electromagnetic waves but strikes the cornea as particulate quanta, called *photons*. Its famous speed surpasses 186,000 miles per second though I once attended a lecture where a physicist explained how her team had created *slow light* within a Bose-Einstein condensate of liquid rubidium cooled to a billionth of a degree above absolute zero. They could actually push frozen photons back and forth with an array of specialized lasers, like children playing with toy cars. Brilliant, if somewhat impractical.

3.

This is the second acute illness I've suffered in a year, the first a siege of fever, cough, night sweats, fatigue that simply would not abate, week after week after week. For two months they scanned and probed and cultured, seeking a culprit while ruling out a hundred maladies of dreadful consequence, which is good, which is wonderful, though uncertainty can itself become a type of illness, or a handmaiden to illness, and the enigmatic diagnosis under which I waited was hardly coined to reassure.

Fever of Unknown Origin: great name for an album,
John said, which is true. Thanks for that, John.
But mostly when you mention it people look at you strangely,
they ask, Is that a real thing, I mean, what is it?

There's a scene in one of my favorite Godzilla movies,
Destroy All Monsters, or maybe *Invasion of Astro-Monster*,
in which a gleeful Japanese scientist announces
that the mysterious creature just then ravaging Tokyo
has finally been identified: "He is called—Monster X!"
As a big reveal, this leaves a few things to be desired.
As scientific information, it is precisely as useful
as a diagnosis of *Fever of Unknown Origin*.

Eventually I began to feel better, the fever faded down
and the infectious disease team finally decoded
my cocktail of nastiness, the primary malefactor being
a virulent strain of the Coxsackie B enterovirus.

Coxsackie: it's a town on the Hudson River south of Albany,
where they first identified the illness, back in the 1940s.
I've seen its bright green exit sign a hundred times
and now it's inked within me, a bastardized Algonquin word,
possibly meaning "owl's hoot," possibly nothing at all.

So much of medicine is translation disguised as insight.
You tell the doctor what's wrong with you in English
and she tells you back in Greek, as the joke goes.
Which is not to say that words can't taste like medicine.
Placebo, in Latin, means "I shall be pleasing."

4.

When the iodine dye enters the IV tube it spreads throughout my body
like a warm typhoon; the CT scanner is molded from white plastic smooth
as the cartilage of an airplane, it hums and whirs, my own private flight to
nowhere.

After she injects a string of minuscule bubbles into my vein, the technician and I see them carom speedily through the chambers of my heart—*there they go!*—blood racing furiously throughout the body, exhausting just to watch the great muscle clench and pulse, a gray homunculus on the ultrasound monitor.

For hours I endure the embrace of the MRI machine, a tube into which I am inserted as into a Neanderthal burial pit, a casket-size blast furnace that bangs and grinds, piston-like noises that downshift to resemble mystical voices chanting, as if death were a pulverizing music.

Fascinating, the delicate scopes, prisms, Zeiss lenses, all designed to examine the eye by mirroring the eye's mechanics, refraction, dilation, fluorescein angiography, the pressure tests of tonometry, the Ishihara book of pseudo-isochromatic plates to screen for color blindness—they've shown it to me so many times I have it memorized.

Push the button when you see a flashing light.

Cover your left eye. Look for the star. Follow my finger.

Don't blink.

5.

There's something wrong with my optic nerve.

The doctor points to an inscrutable cloud on the screen, perhaps an autoimmune issue, possibly a meningioma, a tumor on the delicate lining between the coarse sheath and the nerve itself, or some unclassified inflammation, perhaps neuritis, possibly triggered by the Coxsackie virus, which has been known to skulk and malingering in the body, leaping out to ambush unsuspecting organ systems.

Sometimes, when my sight falters, I see fireworks pulsing on the eyelid's screen, or a ring of blue dots the color of morpho butterflies in a Costa Rican jungle.

But mostly it is darkness. I rest, I wait. It comes back.
The world rebuilds—an image of the world—pixel by pixel,
though my visual field remains a fractured mirror,
any stress and it fades, like a silent movie, to black.

Today's diagnosis is more lyrical than the last: *amaurosis fugax*,
which means neither more nor less than “fleeting darkness,”
episodic blindness, though the doctor dislikes that word,
blind, preferring TVO—*transient visual obscuration*—
which is itself obscurative, a label of scientific precision
intended to disguise a general truth, a forest hidden behind trees.

Amaurosis fugax: sounds like a Swedish heavy metal band,
John said, “TVO” could be their breakout hit,
and I appreciated, yet again, his effort at lightheartedness,
as I appreciate all the efforts undertaken on my behalf.

I appreciate the orderlies, the techs, the 4 A.M. nurse,
the kindly Haitian man who trundles his snack-time cart
of saltines and tiny apple juice boxes around the ward.

I appreciate needles and Jell-O and *Family Feud*,
I appreciate bottled water, I appreciate diligence,
I appreciate Antonie van Leeuwenhoek
for inventing the microscope and discovering the world
of little animals we call microbes and bacteria,
I appreciate the elegance of the computer images
that resemble grayscale Gerhard Richter prints
revealing the fine, fluvial network of veins
that feed the spore field of my brain, a spongy globe
of blood and cerebrospinal fluid riven with organic wiring,
nerve pulses conducting their ontological wizardry—

let there be light, let there be matter, let there be
Miami on a rainy Thursday forever and ever, amen.

6. *What is the eye?*

Human eyes can differentiate up to ten million colors though the mantis shrimp deploys nature's most complex color vision system. Trilobites, extinct denizens of ancient seas, formed hard crystal lenses from calcite. Compound eyes combine a huge field of view with terrible resolution—if we had compound eyes, like bees or houseflies, they would need to be dozens of feet in radius to match the simple eyeballs we possess.

The eye's interior cavities are filled with gelatinous goops, properly called *aqueous humor* and *vitreous body*.

The lens is suspended from the ciliary muscles by a transparent ligament known as the *zonule of Zinn*.

Cornea, pupil, lens, light proceeds through its gateways one after the next, falling at last on the retina, which, as in a fairy tale, transmutes a pattern of photons into electrical pulses, shuttled along the optic nerve to the lateral geniculate nucleus, a data-processing station in the thalamus, which refines the transmission en route to the visual cortex, in the occipital lobe of the brain.

The brain controls the nervous system, which controls the body, like a marvelous octopod trapped in a bumptious robot.

The eye is where it—the nervous system—surfaces, like a prisoner tunneling beyond the walls to freedom, where it crosses realms, like Charon poling across his river, or Janus, the gatekeeping god, who looks both ways.

7. *What is vision?*

Last year, Elizabeth and I viewed an exhibition of paintings intended to illustrate the collegial rivalry among Dutch genre painters of the seventeenth century—it was their golden age—though what it really demonstrated is the enigma of talent. The child watching the woman scrape parsnips has a face like a parsnip in *Woman Scraping Parsnips, with a Child Standing by Her*, Nicolaes Maes, 1655; and so on—Gabriël Metsu, Jan Steen, Gerrit Dou—canvas after canvas of windmills and rutabagas until you arrive at the work

of Johannes Vermeer. We don't know every detail of Vermeer's life but it was ordinary, provincial, delimited by Dutch propriety. He was never famous and left his wife and eleven children a mountain of debt when he died at age forty-three, having completed perhaps three dozen paintings in his lifetime. He was about twenty-five at the time of *The Milkmaid*, which depicts a stout, placid woman pouring milk from an earthenware jug for the making of bread pudding, to judge from the torn loaves scattered on her table, in a drab room with walls of pockmarked plaster. The maid is wearing a bonnet and a vivid blue apron, there's an old-fashioned foot warmer behind her, some figurative Delft tiles, everything commonplace, elementary, and yet it evokes the bewildering realness of the real in a manner unknown to his peers—their mutual influence is far less remarkable than Vermeer's luminous virtuosity. The painting has been interpreted as a tribute to domestic virtue or subliminal eroticism but it is actually a testament to art as an act of witness, a form of scrupulous attention.

“Ut pictura, ita visio,” Kepler wrote—sight itself is a picture. Galileo built his first telescope in 1609 and Kepler provided the optical theory behind double convex lenses, while Van Leeuwenhoek, looking the other direction, glimpsed microbial heavens implausible as the moons of Jupiter. (It was the golden age of optics, too, the Scientific Revolution.) As luck would have it, Vermeer lived across the street from Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a former cloth merchant whose meticulous lens making arose from a retailer's desire to determine the exact thread count of his fabrics; art historians debate whether he may have provided Vermeer with a camera obscura, an optical device designed to project an image of perfect visual accuracy onto a screen, with which Vermeer could have traced his compositions before painting them on canvas, as if reliance on such technology would tarnish his illusionistic genius, as if vision were entirely synonymous with eyesight. *Camera obscura* means “dark room,” or “dark chamber,” in Latin. Photography would not be invented for another two centuries but the photographic camera takes its name from this predecessor. Both devices are simplistic imitations of the human eye.

The Dutch exhibition had been curated by a French museum but we saw it at the National Gallery of Ireland, and we were distracted, that day in

Dublin, by news of a catastrophic hurricane bearing down upon our home in Miami, four thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean. It was maddening to watch from afar, helpless, numb, parsing the wormlike mass of deadly potentialities, meteorological doom noodles, and as I slipped through a side door to check an incoming text I was filled with foreboding and startled to discover myself at the back of a conference room where a young Irishwoman in a sea-green sweater was holding forth to a group of older men seated around a table covered in documents and tablets. She was a passionate teacher, explicating Vermeer's work in vivid and minute detail, and it took me a moment to grasp that the men were blind. Their booklets were braille catalogues and the tablets small-scale models designed to translate from visual to tactile, a way to envision painted images with their fingertips. It was our son texting just then, to say that we were late to meet him for a pint at a pub in Rathmines, and I barely had time to suggest to Elizabeth the mystery I had stumbled upon—the blind men, their vivacious young guide, the skillfully modeled simulacra—when the entire group of them filed into the gallery. “The room is thirty meters across,” she was saying, “and the paintings are hung head-high from the floor, about six paces in front of you, and the first from the left, completed circa 1658, is *The Milkmaid*.” Mirroring the milkmaid's concentration, the sightless men attended to their task, conceiving a picture, composing in the jewel-box theater of the mind an image of an image of the world. “And now,” she said, “I will try to describe to you Vermeer's extraordinary use of light.”

8.

Allow me to apologize for my self-absorption. My virus
is your virus, ours is a virulent commonwealth.
We breed them together, refine them, borrow them
from friends and strangers, camels and bats,
as my body fights its infection the global corpus
combats our latest invader—retrovirus, ebolavirus, coronavirus—
we are besieged, we sicken, we counterattack, we die.
But illness leads you inward, away from the tribe,
the clan, the calculus of multitudes
vs. singletons that constitutes American thought.
Interiority is a mode of social distancing.

Here, in the hospital, I am me, alone, a being
frightened of its own mechanical failings,
like a bystander trapped in a broken elevator.
I feel, to myself, like a construct, a built thing, a city
in which I encounter my own bacterial hordes as strangers
passing silently through a maze of narrow alleys.
I watch my heart pulsing and I do not think,
That is me, there beats my engine,
I think, *Ah, skillful machine,* as if it were an iPhone.
I feel the body's otherness all around me.
I compose the urgent letter in its envelope,
I carry the scepter in its keep.
It is a prison and a vehicle of emancipation, a strong horse.
My legs trot and canter, my hair grows unlicensed,
my lungs expand and contract automatically.
I am me, alone, but how do I happen
to be here? What am I
if not my body?
Who am *I* if not that *it*?
The doctors tell me the many ways I might die
but not how I come to be alive,
existence is a fever of unknown origin,
a pandemonium of desires—
I want to live, I want to breathe, I want
to see as vividly as Vermeer and as broadly as a common fly
and as encyclopedically as the mantis shrimp
though I cannot understand why
it would need to differentiate ten million colors
or how anyone could measure its ability to do so—
the Ishihara test?—simple questionnaires?
I want my heart to shake its defiant fist at the sky forever.
I want my soul to swell with sorrow as with joy.
Most of all, with a desperation that embarrasses me,
as if I had been jailed a decade, I want to go home.

9. *What is the soul?*

I am not a virus nor an elevator nor a meadowlark.
Something makes me human.
In which cell or organ does it reside, the soul?

Da Vinci located it in the optic chiasm
while Descartes was a partisan of the pineal gland.
Aristotle searched first the liver and then the brain,
dissecting cuttlefish, rays, snakes, a peacock,
and possibly a zebra,
before deciding it lives within the heart.

Perhaps so.

But I imagine it not as a humor or an aura
but an essence flowing
from one vessel
to another—it is her pool of milk
and everything it touches,
the act of pouring
and the generosity of its fall,
it is sunlight
washing the walls of a room
adjacent to the kitchens in Delft and it is,
quite possibly, the milkmaid herself.

The master has gone off to paint
and she is absorbed in her task, mindful
not to spill a drop.





New and Recent Work

PAIGE JIYOUNG MOON

This spring, with the world still in on-again, off-again lockdown, our memories of seasons past grow sweeter. The California-based artist Paige Jiyoun Moon makes a practice of recording her memories in paint. Her canvases are ambitious not in scale (no work included here is larger than two feet across), but in their level of minute, prismatic detail. She playfully skews perspective, hovering just above each scene like a ghost revisiting an experience that she won't allow time to swallow up. Quotidian moments are captured with a jeweler's eye: her home being spruced up with the help of friends in *Painting Day*; a cluttered hotel room shared with her parents in *Oakhurst Lodge*; and in *Warm House*, an evening with friends in a crowded Seoul bar.

How fine Moon's brushes must be! Her interiors

chronicle our dependence on gadgets and consumer comforts in a most intimate way. If you have the good fortune to examine these works in person—or with a magnifying glass in these pages—a game of I Spy will reveal familiar corporate logos (the lettering meticulously rendered) on empty Papa John’s pizza boxes, stuffed Trader Joe’s grocery bags, and used Starbucks cups. In contrast, her outdoor scenes are mainly free of single-use plastics and the excesses of modern life, but you’ll find clusters of spiny desert shrubs and the like filling in the corners of these canvases with equal maximalist zeal. Her landscapes leave no natural detail unexamined—every stone, sand grain, and pine needle is accounted for.

All of Moon’s diarist paintings, indoors and out, show small figures engaged in their own acts of recording, phones always at the ready. A sharp eye will glimpse slices of her larger vistas viewed on their tiny screens. Life-changing events as well as the mundane receive equal treatment by both the smartphone selfie and Moon’s able brushes; the artist seems intent on documenting the memories of others within her own, perhaps to hold us all near when we need and desire it most.

Pre-pandemic, Moon’s canvases were easy to admire as engaging twenty-first-century miniatures. Her skill and winsome storytelling recall the encyclopedic paintings of celebrated outsider artists in the vein of Grandma Moses. But over the past year, it’s grown difficult not to envy Moon’s figures, too, as they go about their lives standing so much closer together than six feet apart. Her small panels have become time capsules from the not-so-distant past, when we were free to roam and sightsee, to make last-minute plans with people outside our pods, and to share handrails with strangers whose smiles were still unmasked to us.

—*Charlotte Strick*



Pages 108–9: *Zion and Us* (detail), 2019, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14".
This page: *Lonely Paddle Boarder*, 2020, acrylic on panel, 18 x 24".



Subway 2015, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 14".



Sunset Golfing, 2020, acrylic on panel, 12 x 16".







Previous spread: *Baldy Road*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18".
This page: *Mirror House*, 2018, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14".



This page: *Oakhurst Lodge*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 16".
Following spread: *Bryce Canyon and Us*, 2020, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14".







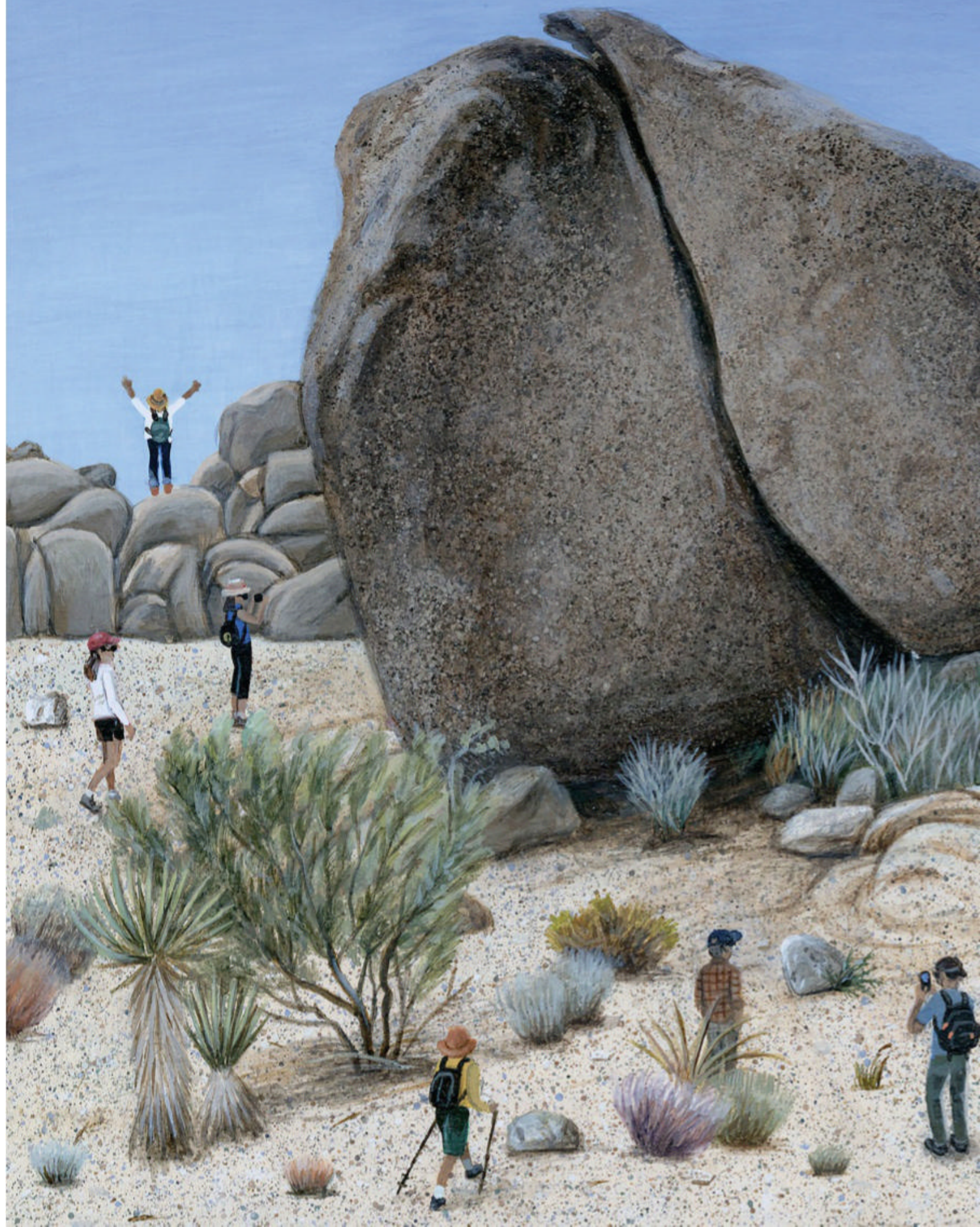




Previous spread: *Painting Day*, 2020, acrylic on panel, 18 x 24".
This page: *Alpaca Farm Visiting on a Rainy Day*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 14".



This page: *Warm House*, 2018, acrylic on panel, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Following spread: *Split Rock*, 2017, acrylic on wood panel, 6 x 6".







Baldy Summit, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 14 x 18".



132 *Studio*, 2019, acrylic on panel, 11 x 14".

Gjertrud Schnackenberg

STRIKE INTO IT UNASKED

Poetry's "impulse, like electricity, crossing the space, leaves its signature."

—W. S. Graham

No wonder that a flash of sparks
Spills out from what I touch—the LaserJet,

Brimming with static shock,
Suspends invisible electron-clouds

Across the laser-paper's Radiant White
To print "The Windhover"

Electrostatically—
Hopkins' creation-poem, spelled out

In powder-particle black sparks *hard-hurled*
From underlying fire—

The substrate of his poetry
The veiled fire of Christ,

Suffused, incarnate, metaphysical—
And poetry is where

A bird of prey is teetering
Among wind-angles

Intermittently, a fleck
Amid cloud-rhythms, then

A flickering along the morning's
Diamond-edged peripheries,

At such a height, it's there—
Then not—then there again—

Without my realizing it,
Between “The Windhover” and me,

A space is opened, sparking, live,
And I've reached through it, unaware

It *will flame out*, will flare
In a split-second of brute force

To jump a gap that's imperceptible
Until I touch the page, and instantly

Hopkins crosses the space
Without a step—

The *wonder of it*, that the briefest touch
Can instigate a shock that's mutual,

As if sheer being, in and of itself,
Is equally as shocked by my existence

As by its own, and equally as startled
To exist as I am here—

Electrons' phantom-loads, drawn off,
Reel back, and hurt me

With a strike as unequivocal
As if it's understood—a law, a truth,

A given—that brute force alone keeps
For itself the power to disclose

The presence of a shining residue
Pent in the fallen world—

Fallen, but even so, *The world is charged*
With power enough to stop the heart—

Electrons, always in the present tense,
Without locality or mass

Or temperature or light—invisible,
Yet capable of spreading in a flash

Across the surfaces of all that is—
Like consciousness lit

For a moment by the thought
That God is worlding, worlding now

And here—even the blearest things,
Objects we overlook, inanimate,

Inert—the sparking doorknobs,
Shining paper dust, magnetic

Clinging combs, the laser printer's
Thermoplastic case—

Even the blearest things can stun,
Be stunned, are sites

Of inscape-metaphysics where
Materia has taken hold

Of “whatness,” “suchness,” “isness,”
“Hereeness,” *laced with fire of stress*—

But even so, such objects only pend
As fragments of a universe

Awaiting a beholder—
Consciousness—

The outbreak of a hidden voltage
Stricken from the ore

Of Hopkins' poetry: titanium,
The paradisaical mineral

Whose lightweight metal sheds
The brightest, *clearest-selvèd sparks*

And most heartstopping firefalls
Before it lets its shining dust

Sheer off, go dark, fall back into itself—
Like humankind—*How fast*

his firedint ... is gone ...
In an ... enormous dark—I stand among

My own footfalls, the imprints of my soles
Mysteriously electrified

And vanishing across the carpet
Where I've *trod* and *trod*, as if my purpose

All along has been to try
To make it visible—the field of force

That hovers over Hopkins' poetry
And brims at margins, boundaries,

White peripheries,
The blinding thresholds where I try

To cross a space as charged and bare
And emptied as the room at 85

St. Stephen's Green, where Hopkins left
His battered shoes behind, because we're meant

To come to God barefoot, and left
The treadmire toil there ("there"

meaning "here") *Footfretted in it*—dust—
And left the footfalls of his poetry

Behind, in disarray,
Scattered, and insufficiently "explained"—

("Novel rhythmic effects," dismissed
By literary interlocutors

As needless, odd, and disagreeable—
A later critic was "repulsed")—

But poetry's *selfbeing* selves itself
Without self-explanation, selves

Without explanatory power,
The way divine creation does—

The way the starry night
Appears—

And Hopkins, as a Greek professor, knew
The ancient word for the divine

Creation is *poiema*—poetry—
And, as a poet, he discerned

Poiema's fire is rapturous and wild
And sudden as a talons-first assault

Out of the blue—Christ's
Striking-in—and knew

That poetry is where a falcon stalls
Midair, prepares to jettison

The cloudbuilt, white
Wingbeaten falcon-footholds

Where contrary winds have brought
The falcon to its highest pitch

Of being—heights upwind
From which to dive headfirst

And upside-down, *hard-hurled*,
With wings pressed shut,

Its livid, bright, *outriding* feet
Drawn back and up,

As if a falcon's feet are useless, weak,
Superfluous impediments

To raptor-plummeting—
Useless, until

The final instant of a strike
So shocking, so unguessed-at, unforeseen,

No prey on earth is able to prepare
For how a nearly imperceptible

And distant hovering
Transforms itself into a

Fraction-of-a-second mortal blow,
The instrike, talons-first, a heralding

Of chaos in the yellow talon-flames
And blackout-wingbeats mantling

The sight of it—the site
Where He consumes the flesh and blood

Of His annihilated prey,
Whose lacerated innocence

He takes into Himself, the way
The *world's wildfire* subsumes

A single flame, to signify
No partial flame exists,

All flames are whole—
As He was first internalized

When He had selved Himself
Into the first and last

Immortal sustenance,
So now His prey is selved

As it becomes a part
Of Him, the Eucharist reversed—

As *in a flash*, a circuit, broken
Violently, is violently restored,

Its suddenness the signal trait
That Jesus emphasized, a sign

The gap is closed between
The kingdom and creation where

God is upstream, and flows
To Christ our Lord—

“Yet I am idle,” Hopkins wrote,
Burned out, a socket scorched

Through its interior, without
A visible connection

To its source—useless,
Without effect, like poetry unable

To explain itself, or say
What good it does, or what it’s for—

A transcreation of the downstream power
Coursing through what is,

In a creation where all things
Are brimming with a brilliant signature

That will *fall, gall, and gash*
Itself across the space it opens,

Crossing it—
The way a windhover’s

Headlong freefall crazes
The atmosphere with friction-speed

And turns itself into a shining trace—
A blowing-by

As rapturous as if creation
Were an end unto itself

And it's enough that poetry
Strike into it unasked,

And leave a spilling out of sparks
Torn from the *fredint's* continuum

Before the strike—a glimpse
Of the creation, surging past—

*The Little Widow
from the Capital*

YOHANCA
DELGADO

The widow arrived at LaGuardia on a Sunday, but the rumors about the woman who had rented a big apartment, sight unseen, had taken an earlier flight. We had already reviewed, on many occasions and in hushed tones, in the quiet that comes after long hours of visiting, what little we knew about the widow and her dead husband.

About her life in the old country, we asked the obvious questions: Were there children? Cheryl heard from a friend who still lived in the Dominican Republic that they had only been married a year when he died. Had her husband been rich? No, our sources in the old country said, poor as a church mouse, with a big family to support out in el campo. Had the husband been handsome? Yes, in a rakish sort of way. And with what we knew we created him

in our minds: medium height with a mop of curly hair and an easy laugh, walking down Saona Beach in a white linen guayabera, dropping suddenly to one knee. We ourselves felt a flutter in our hearts.

On the day the widow finally arrived in New York, the rain came in fast, heavy drops that sounded like tiny birds slamming into our windows. She emerged from the taxi with a single battered suitcase and, little-girl small, stared up at our building as the rain pelted her face. Behind us our men and children called out for their dinners, but we ignored them. We would wonder later if she had seen our faces pressed up against the windows, on all six floors, peering out over flowerpots full of barren dirt.

We watched her until she made her way out of the rain and into the lobby. Those of us lucky enough to live on the fourth floor squinted through our peepholes or cracked open our doors as the super carried her suitcase to the three-bedroom apartment she was renting. How could she afford it?

The little widow walked behind the super, her gait slow and steady on the black-and-white tiles of the hallway. He was rambling about garbage pickup and the rent. She was younger than we expected her to be, thirty, maybe. The amber outfit was all wrong for the chilly autumn weather. She was from Santo Domingo, but she looked like a campesina visiting the city for the first time, everything hand-sewn and outdated by decades. She wore an old-fashioned skirt suit, tailored and nipped at her round waist, and a pair of low-heeled black leather pumps. Seeing them made us glance down at our own scuffed sneakers and leggings. On her head, she wore a pillbox hat, in matching yellow wool sculpted butter-smooth. She dressed her short, plump body as though she adored it.

Instantly, we took a dislike.

WE OURSELVES HAD BEEN RAISED on a diet of telenovelas and American magazines, and we knew what beauty was. We gathered after dinner to laugh at her peculiar clothes. We murmured with fake sympathy about her loneliness, and joked that she might turn our husbands' heads. When we ran into her, though, we smiled and asked her how she was finding New York.

We began to invent stories about the little widow's life: torrid affairs that had driven her husband to die of heartbreak, a refusal to give him children, a penchant for hoarding money—we repeated the tales until we half believed

them. The drama of the little widow's previous life became richer and denser, like a thicket of fast-growing ivy. Who did she think she was, anyway? Living alone in that big apartment?

The little widow seemed to understand what we expected of her: she muttered only quiet thank-yous when we held the door open as she struggled with her groceries, or when we helped her up after she slipped on a patch of ice in front of the building and landed flat on her back. As briskly as she could, she composed herself and disappeared, her head bowed low into the collar of her quaint amber coat.

When we heard that the little widow could sew, we started bringing her dresses and pants to hem, mostly because we wanted to know how she lived. The little widow's three-bedroom apartment was laid out like the others, but as she worked, our eyes darted hungrily between her and the contents of her sewing room.

Her hair was curly, dyed reddish brown, and cut short around a pointed chin. When we got to see her up close, we noted that though she did have deep creases at the corners of her eyes, she did not have a widow's peak. Her eyes were a dark hazel, and her pupils so small they looked like pinpricks.

The little widow had wallpapered her sewing room with a cheap burlap. When one of us slipped a fingernail underneath a panel and discovered that the rough cloth was glued on, we crossed ourselves and said a quick prayer for the little widow's security deposit.

On that burlap the little widow had embroidered massive, swaying palm trees, so finely detailed that we could almost feel a salty breeze warm our faces as we stood on her tailor's pedestal. Running our fingertips across the embroidered walls we could feel the braille of her labor; the grains of sand were individually stitched, as if the little widow knew each one. The ocean seemed to ripple and surge as the little widow worked around us in meditative silence, kneeling near our ankles with a pin between her lips. She was so gentle and fluid in her movements, her soft skin creasing like a plump baby's around the pincushion she wore on her wrist.

We liked her in those moments, but even so, we didn't invite her to our birthday parties or gatherings at Christmas, though we knew she was alone in that large apartment, watching the passing of the seasons, just as we did, through black-barred windows.

WE IMAGINED she would soon have to take in a subletter to make ends meet. We mentioned that a cousin was coming to work at a coffee-filter factory and needed a place to live. She didn't have a lot of money yet, we explained, but she would be able to pay back rent on a room once she started collecting paychecks. And that could be a good source of extra income!

The little widow tilted her head to one side and appeared to think about it. She said yes, and Lucy, a single girl from Higüey, moved into the little widow's spare bedroom.

THE GOODWILL THE LITTLE WIDOW WON among us was short-lived. On a visit to get a skirt hemmed, Sonia asked to use the restroom and snuck into the little widow's bedroom. Like the wall of her sewing room, the wall across from her bed was covered with burlap, and on that canvas the little widow had hand-stitched tidy rows of Limé dolls.

The faceless dolls looked just like the clay figurines tourists bought as souvenirs. They varied in hair and clothing—some wore their hair in a single thick plait, draped down the side of their necks, and some wore it down around their shoulders. Their dresses were every color of the rainbow and some wore Sunday hats and carried baskets of flowers. But rendered in the little widow's hand, these familiar dolls took on an eerie quality. Sonia studied the wall for a long time and became convinced that the dolls represented us.

She took a picture and texted it to the group. We looked at the faceless dolls, with their caramel skin and their ink-black hair styled into bouffants and braids and pigtails. Then we looked at each other, with our jeans and winter boots and blond highlights.

The resemblances are uncanny, we said. And so a rumor spread that the little widow was a witch come from Santo Domingo to ensorcell us and steal our husbands. We rummaged in our drawers for our old evil-eye bracelets. We started going to the dry cleaner's down on Broadway to get our clothes hemmed.

When we ran into the little widow in the halls, she smiled at us sadly, but said nothing.

TO THIS DAY, we do not know how Andrés and the little widow met, but the rumor is that it happened through mutual relations from the capital.

Unlike the little widow, Andrés was a New Yorker, born and bred, and he spoke in a brambly, chaotic Spanish that she seemed to find charming. On

their first date, the little widow wore a silk slip dress, hand-embroidered with small, delicate birds. He wore a blazer, jeans, and dress shoes. They stayed out until two in the morning, and when they came home, we heard her laugh ringing in the halls, a lovely, alien sound.

The next day he delivered to her a bouquet of radiant, limp-necked sunflowers. She arranged them in a giant vase by the window in her sewing room. Then in the weeks that followed, he could be heard in the small hours of the morning, serenading her on his guitar. He wrote her poetry, and according to Gladys—who took to pressing a glass against the wall she shared with the little widow—it wasn't half bad.

He was about thirty, like the little widow. But unlike her, he wore his age gaily. He was boyish and relaxed, and we often spied him leaning on doors and smoking cigarettes near the trash cans. He kept his hair cut in a neat fade that he refreshed every two weeks. He used the creaky metal ladder on the fire escape to do pull-ups until the super told him to stop. We decided that we liked him, tsk-tsked that he was too good for the little widow, with her opaque melancholy and insufferable pride.

It is said that he proposed to her right in her sewing room. Relieved that she was finally on the right track, heading toward a life we understood, we flocked in a squealing, air-kissing mob to her apartment to admire the ring: a small round diamond on a simple gold band. The way she wore it made it look like something Elizabeth Taylor would have been proud to own. There was a new lightness in the little widow that we liked to see, in spite of ourselves.

She smiled often, sometimes for no apparent reason, and it was a strange, unfamiliar smile that made us think of sunlight bursting through a cloud-choked sky. The wedding was set for the following month and the weeks flitted by. Lucy told us the little widow was hard at work on a wedding dress and that she mooned around the house, dreamy, distracted, and in love.

IT ALL FELL APART as quickly as it had come together. Five days before the wedding, Lucy woke up in the middle of the night to find Andrés standing at the foot of her bed. He had come in with the little widow's key, he said, and he had come in to see her.

Lucy leaped up and, assuming he was drunk, tried to walk him back to the door. But he refused to go and instead pinned her against the wall, which

the little widow had recently embroidered with sunflowers. He attempted to unfasten his pants. Now scared in earnest, Lucy screamed and shoved him to the floor.

The little widow appeared quickly and without sound, like a ghost. She had been working; she had a needle pressed between her lips, and one lip was bleeding. She looked from Andrés to Lucy and understood everything.

Without a word, the little widow took Lucy by the hand and led her into her own bedroom until Andrés was gone, and then she dead-bolted them into the apartment for safety. The little widow kept vigil by Lucy's bed until she fell asleep, then locked herself in her own room.

For two days, the little widow didn't speak, or eat, or sleep. She subsisted on a nightly glass of morir soñando, which she drank to appease Lucy. The girl blamed herself for everything and thought it a small penance to squeeze the orange juice for the little widow's drink.

BECAUSE WE DIDN'T KNOW YET that the little widow was rich, we assumed Andrés returned two nights later because he loved her.

Florencia spotted him from her window on the first floor and it only took a few minutes on the phone to spread the news. By the time he was at the little widow's door, we all hovered at ours, swatting away needy children and chatty husbands.

On every floor, we cracked our doors. His pleas reverberated through the tiled hallways, filling even the central stairwell. Our hungry ears consumed every sound: The wet, racking sobs. The thud of his knees dropping onto her welcome mat. The wailing against the hard wood of the little widow's door.

He was sorry, he insisted. It hadn't meant anything. Who was Lucy to him?

After nearly an hour, it seemed to us that he planned to spend the night there, performing this noisy contrition. Then the little widow flung open her door with a whip-sharp bang that sent an echo all the way down to the first floor.

"What," she said, her voice a small, cold blade, "do you think is going to happen next?"

All through the building, our ears pricked up.

"You're the love of my life," he moaned. Cheryl, watching from her apartment across the hall, could attest to the fact that he was still, at this point, on his knees.

“And are you mine?” The little widow crossed her arms over her chest. She wore a silk dressing gown, embroidered with human hearts the size of silver dollars.

“Yes, yes,” he cried, pressing his face to her bare feet.

The little widow stepped back to free her feet, and then stepped around him, out into the hallway. “Let these busybodies witness,” she said. And now we could see that her eyes were red and her curls ravaged by nights of insomnia.

Andrés hobbled after her, on his knees, making mournful sounds.

“Let these *chismosas* be my witnesses,” she said again, waving her hand and locking eyes with Cheryl, who later told us that she had nearly died of shame. “If you bother me again, you will not live to tell about it.”

Andrés clasped his hands together in a prayer motion and mutely held them up to her.

The little widow looked at him as if he were a turd on the sidewalk. She shoved him aside, walked back to her door. “You heard me,” she said, one hand on her doorknob. “Not a single knock.”

She closed the door and left Andrés to gather himself off the floor and wipe the snot from his face. We thought we’d never seen a man renounce his dignity quite so definitively and that realization seemed to hit him at the same time. Grimacing, he wiped his mouth, and cursed under his breath. He kicked the door as hard as he could. Once, twice.

“You think you can control me,” he said. “I’ll show you control. And Lucy, too.” He slammed the heel of his hand on the door.

Only Cheryl—who slowly and silently slipped the chain lock into place, all while holding her door ajar and keeping one eye firmly on Andrés—can describe what happened next, and only you can decide if you believe it.

Andrés raised his arm again, and as he drew it back for another blow, it froze. The arm appeared to be stuck to his head, as if glued there. His back still to Cheryl, Andrés shook himself and tried to use his other hand to pry it loose, but that one became attached, too, and then it looked like he was holding his hands to his head, the way men do when their baseball team is losing. He began to make a frantic humming sound.

When he turned to Cheryl, with the purest, most desperate panic she had ever seen blazing in his eyes, she discovered that his lips had been sewn shut with large, sloppy stitches.

He dropped to his knees with a grunt, and then bent in half at the waist. He kept folding in on himself, over and over, becoming smaller and smaller, his moans of distress more and more distant, until he was just a small scrap of cream fabric that fluttered to the floor in front of apartment 4E.

No one knocked on the little widow's door after that. Three days passed in shallow breaths.

IN OUR APARTMENTS, huddled together over coffee, we discussed what we knew and filled in what we didn't. We imagined the little widow, dead-eyed and small in her cavernous apartment, punching a threaded needle through cloth—until she folded the entire building in on itself, apartment after apartment, life after life, collapsing together—until she could tuck it all into her little silk coin purse and carry us away forever inside her handbag.

We pretended we were innocent. Weren't we like an old fan, just moving the air around? We tipped over our coffee cups and saw in our fortunes an angry darkness that threatened to swallow us. And hadn't we sensed it from the beginning?

For the first time, it occurred to us to call our families, the ones back in the old country, to find out the full story. We pooled our facts together. We knew the story people liked to tell, but now we were detectives. We dug deeper, asked our distant aunts to ask their cousins what they knew, and were stunned at how shallowly buried the truth was.

The little widow had married for love right out of high school, to a man who was primarily interested in her family's money but liked her well enough besides. When the new couple said they wanted to move from the capital to the beach, her parents bought them a big, sprawling house on the coast near Bávaro, and hired three live-in servants to work there. And the little widow was happy! She loved the beach; it was said that she went swimming twice a day, that she walked up and down the shore as if she wanted to memorize every gull, every seashell, every grain of sand. It was at this time that the little widow began to embroider seascapes and mermaids, her head bent low over her needle and hoop.

But middling affection does not a good man make. The husband began to throw his weight around the house, speaking cruelly to the servants, punching walls, breaking things. The little widow miscarried their first child under mysterious circumstances and mourned the loss in private. She focused

more than ever on her work; sometimes the light in her sewing room burned through the night.

Less than a year later, a servant filed a police report against the husband, saying that he had forced himself on her and she had become pregnant. The husband's proximity to the little widow's influential family allowed him to avoid serious charges. But he did not live to see another year; the servant's husband shot him, point-blank, as he walked down the beach near the house.

The little widow's parents swiftly stepped in, at their daughter's request, to scatter the tragedies of the story in the wind. They paid the hefty bribes required to free the servant's husband and sold the beach house to American tourists. The little widow quietly went away.

HER WEDDING TO ANDRÉS had been scheduled to take place at Our Lady of Lourdes, the crumbling, majestic old church we attended, and on that day, we dressed for Sunday mass.

Someone's mother-in-law in Queens said she spotted someone who looked like Andrés slinking out of a bodega, but who could be sure? The tiny scrap of cream fabric had long since disappeared in the building's hustle and bustle. We knew for certain that the wedding was canceled. But for reasons we still can't explain, we sent our husbands and kids ahead to Sunday school and lingered in the building. The wedding had been scheduled for four in the afternoon, and when the time came, we opened our doors and, like cuckoos from their clocks, stepped out of our apartments and crowded into the narrow fourth-floor hallway.

By then we knew her name, and we started slowly calling it, in unison. Lucy came out first, dressed in sweatpants and looking like a wrung-out dishcloth. When we asked her if the little widow had spoken to her, she shook her head sadly.

A thud inside, the sound of footsteps, and our murmurs dissipated into a tense silence. When the little widow opened her door, she wore an enormous white silk wedding dress.

On her head, she had crowned herself with a ring of white silk flowers, embroidered with red drops of blood, delicate as anything we'd ever seen. Her face seemed younger than we remembered, though her undereyes were bruise-blue from lack of sleep.

She maneuvered the seemingly boundless skirts of her dress through the tight doorframe and began making her way to the elevator. With a gasp, we parted like a sea to let her pass. At least six feet of heavy, layered skirts embroidered to the last inch with small, careful cursive letters trailed behind her.

Unfamiliar-yet-familiar names were scattered densely across the silk like polka dots. Women's names from the old country: the Dominican *y*'s, the florid, delirious layering of syllables. We knew our people.

We did not recognize these specific names and we did not dare ask anything of the little widow. Instead—and without thinking—we formed two lines and picked up the train of the dress to keep it from getting soiled as the little widow walked slowly down the long corridor with her head bowed and her hands clasped.

Mutely, we helped her enter the elevator and passed her the skirts, which foamed up around her, rising well past her shoulders. As the heavy door slid closed, she gave us the brokenhearted smile we had come to recognize.

“Up,” we half whispered, half barked, after pressing our ears to the door. We ran toward the stairs, taking them two at a time to keep up with the old elevator, jostling one another at each landing—until we saw that the little widow was going up to the roof.

She walked out onto the silver-painted cement with us trailing behind. The air was cold but we hardly noticed. We elbowed each other and pushed to get close enough to see her without touching her, though when one of us shoved through and blurted, “Don't jump, *viudita*! Don't do it!”—she spoke for all of us.

The little widow turned to look at us, like a somnambulist shaken brutally awake.

Then, before anyone had a chance to stop her, she sprinted across the silver roof, clutching her frothing skirts to her sides. She climbed onto the ledge and we saw, or thought we saw, the cream soles of her naked feet.

She turned to face us. Behind her the sun had begun its plunge to earth, the sky ripe-mango orange behind needle-sharp skyscrapers. The little widow's dress lathered all around her, making her look ten feet tall. Why hadn't we seen before how beautiful she was?

The little widow's eyes shone. It was as if she were recognizing us, each of us, across a crowded room. Afraid to approach, we formed a semicircle around her, willing her to stay.

For a long moment we were mesmerized, frozen where we stood, in our regret.

When we came to our senses and reached for her, surging forward together—to grab hold of her dress, at least, to keep her from falling the seven stories to the street below, we didn't move fast enough. She took up her dress again, great big fistfuls of it, and with her back to the sky, let herself fall.

The whine of a car alarm below halted our hearts. We rushed to the edge and peered over. And what we saw—how to even describe it? The dress dissolved into a thousand pigeons, and they filled the space between our building and the next with brown and gray and white, with the sound of wings flapping. The air was thick with the feathery thrum of their wings as they flew away in different directions, toward downtown, toward the river, toward the Bronx, and skyward, toward heaven.

The little widow was gone. All we had left—as we huddled together for warmth on that silver roof and watched the sky deepen to the bruised plum of Manhattan night—was the story. And so we told it again, and again, until we had stitched the details into our memory.

We carried the story back to the patios of Santo Domingo, where we sat at dusk with the yellow light of our old family homes behind us, listening to the crickets and the slow creak of our wicker rocking chairs, and told the tale again, except this time it ended like this: in some far-flung town, maybe here in the old country, maybe back in the new, the little widow appeared with a small suitcase in hand.

Here, our eyes brightened and we leaned forward.

This time she arrived without fanfare, we said, and her neighbors liked her right away. The little widow wore an amber-colored dress, hand-sewn. Perhaps a little older than we remembered, but still recognizable, with her full cheeks and shiny curls. She signed a lease for a house by the beach. She was already picturing the magic she would create on these new walls, and we, too, thrilled to imagine it.

Ocean Vuong

RISE & SHINE

Scraped the last \$8.48
from the glass jar.
Your day's worth of tips

at the nail salon. Enough
for one hit. Enough
to be good

till noon but
these hands already
blurring. The money a weird

hummingbird caught
in my fingers. I take out
the carton of eggs. Crack

four yolks into a sky
-blue bowl, spoon
the shells. Scallions hiss

in oil. A flick
of fish sauce, garlic crushed
the way you

taught me. The pan bubbling
into a small possible
sun. I am

a decent son. Salt
& pepper. A sprig
of parsley softened

in steam. Done,
the plate fogs its own
ghost. I draw a smiley face

on a napkin
with purple marker.
I lace my boots. It doesn't

work so I tuck them in. Close
the back door. Gently
the birches sway but never

touch. The crickets
unhinge their teeth
in the first light, last

syllables crackling
like a pipe steady over
a blue flame

as footsteps dim
down a dawn-gold road
& your face

at the window
a thumbprint left over
from whose god?

I get a collection to go to Nyala to
buy people. None of them offer me.
Vic says I have been hit but she has
barely received me. She also announces
she is going to England for 6 months tomorrow.
We send Mph off to Nyala with
£5,000 for travel and Liberton. Tahji or
someone will care and help Liberton.

Very tired. Retire early to sleep. Wake
at midnight and find Collingwood's
Autobiography, the latter bit of which seems
amplify relevant to current U.S. situation.

Then find I. B. Cohen's "The Birth of
a New Physics" at that Eisenstein.

Back to sleep at 5 p.m. Wake at
8:30 am because Ma's boys on
first floor and some will open it.

The Art of Nonfiction

No. 10

KWAME ANTHONY
APPIAH

Fifty years ago, at a harp recital in Gloucestershire, a retired British military officer with a clipped aristo accent came across a brown-skinned teenager. “I say, old chap, do you speak English?” the officer said.

As a story in Yale’s *New Journal* recounted, the young man—Kwame Anthony Akroma-Ampim Kusi Appiah—replied, “Why don’t you ask my grandmother?”

“Who, may I ask, *is* your grandmother?” the retired officer said.

“Lady Cripps.”

Lady Cripps was Isobel Cripps, the widow of Sir Stafford Cripps, a Christian socialist and Labour politician who had been chancellor of the exchequer and the Crown’s ambassador to the Soviet Union; he was known for his stalwart desire to relinquish

Britain's imperial possessions, from Calcutta to Accra. In 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, Stafford and Isobel's daughter Peggy married Joe Appiah, kinsman of Ashanti kings and a leader of the Ghanaian independence movement. (The marriage would help inspire the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.) A year later, the Appiahs' first child and only son was born.

When Anthony was growing up in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region of Ghana, the Appiah household was a locus of political and literary conversation. Among the visitors were the historian and activist C. L. R. James, the Pan-Africanist George Padmore, and the novelist Richard Wright. Joe Appiah instilled in his son a sense of global citizenship and family honor. As Anthony once wrote, "I found myself remembering my father's parting words, years ago, when I was a student leaving home for Cambridge—I would not see him again for six months or more. I kissed him in farewell, and, as I stood waiting by the bed for his final benediction, he peered at me over his newspaper, his glasses balanced on the tip of his nose, and pronounced: 'Do not disgrace the family name.' Then he returned to his reading."

Appiah earned a double first degree at Clare College, Cambridge, and then a Ph.D. in philosophy, the first African at the university to do so. He is perhaps best known, among nonphilosophers, for his work on cosmopolitanism and the nature of identity in a globalized world, though his bibliography and his range are vast. He is the author of sixteen books (including three mystery novels, which he considers, in Graham Greene's terms, the "entertainments"). Although his earliest works are best enjoyed by professional philosophers, his writing for decades has been sparkingly lucid; each book wrestles with problems immensely relevant to modern life: identity, race, sexuality, nationalism, liberalism, our capacity to live together on one planet. For instance, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), in its nine essays, provides a memoir of his father, examines the varied fates of African nation-states in the postcolonial era, and criticizes the very idea of race as a human category. Everywhere in his work, Appiah urges readers to see the multiplicities of our identities, which both define our individuality and describe a commonality. There is never a trace of dogma or ill will. He is the teacher—patient and erudite—you always wished you had. And now you do.

Through these efforts Kwame Anthony Appiah has become one of the

most celebrated thinkers of his generation; in 2012, President Obama awarded him the National Humanities Medal for “seeking eternal truths in the contemporary world.” He has held faculty positions at Yale, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Ghana, in Accra; he is now a professor of philosophy at New York University. Appiah also lectures all over the world and writes the Ethicist column in *The New York Times Magazine*. He and his husband, Henry Finder, the editorial director of *The New Yorker*, live in an apartment in Manhattan and an eighteenth-century farmhouse in Princeton, where sheep can be found gamboling near the barn.

Appiah’s is a protean, rigorous, generous, and elegant mind; he is a multilingual scholar whose interests range from probabilistic semantics to political theory and, in his *Times* column, such problems as a troublesome in-law or a violent house pet. As one might expect from someone whose ancestors include leading figures at the court of Ashanti back to the eighteenth century and left-leaning aristocrats in the Cotswolds, Appiah is often noted for his fluidity and grace.

This interview began in January 2020 in front of an audience at the Morgan Library. Our subsequent exchanges were by email. At the Morgan, Appiah was winning, his way of telling a family anecdote captivating. And yet this was an instance when charm was a way not of concealing but of revealing. Appiah is a liberal in the most profound sense, a philosopher whose concerns are deeply contemporary and yet reminiscent, in decency of spirit, of some of his intellectual heroes, including Mill and Montaigne. It is hard to imagine a mind of greater rigor or amplitude.

—David Remnick

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about Kumasi and your family’s place in the city.

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

Kumasi is the second city of Ghana, after Accra, and it’s quite big. So, obviously, it’s not like a village where everybody knows everybody. But, given who my grandfather was, and given who my father was, and given who my mother was, pretty much everybody in town knew who we were. Kumasi is in

the middle of the Ashanti region of Ghana, and my father was Ashanti—his father was the king's brother-in-law, when I was a child, and a cousin who was like a sister to him was married to the next king. But, in part because of these connections, even though my mother was obviously from elsewhere, it would never have occurred to people to question her right or our right to be there. It was a big deal when the United States had its first biracial president, a dozen years ago, but Ghana's head of state, for the last two decades of the twentieth century, was Jerry Rawlings, whose father was a Scotsman. He was my color, and nobody cared much one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

You grew up in a house of readers. Your mother got very involved in local folklore, local literature, children's literature—your father as well.

APPIAH

There was a small middle class in Kumasi, and many of them were people who were educated outside Ghana. We didn't have universities and law schools and medical schools up and running yet in Kumasi when I was born. But the traditional elite wouldn't have had a lot of books in their houses. In the generation before my grandfather, they wouldn't have been literate. We had the largest library of anybody in town that I was aware of, apart from the Kumasi branch of the National Archives. In particular, we had a vast library of children's books, which was sort of the library for the neighborhood kids. They would come and sit on the stairs and the veranda and read. They would read about Enid Blyton's Noddy, and Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit, and A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh. It's hard to believe these days, but my sisters and I all read Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo*.

INTERVIEWER

How did you take to that book?

APPIAH

These things get reinterpreted with time. But we enjoyed it. We knew Little Black Sambo came from somewhere else, because it was a place with tigers and there were no tigers in Africa, but he was a brown child and rather a cunning one. So there was some appeal there.



Appiah (left) with his sisters, Gloucestershire, England, 1961.

INTERVIEWER

Your mother became a kind of expert in folklore.

APPIAH

Yes, and one of the books my mother published was called *Tales of an Ashanti Father*. My father really had collected a lot of these folktales, including when he was in prison, but these tales of an Ashanti father were most energetically delivered by our English mother. And soon my mother started collecting these tales on her own. She went out to villages and talked to people. These are called Ananse stories—the central figure in Akan folktales is a spider called Ananse, who becomes Nancy in the West Indies and Aunt Nancy in the American South. And there were other collections—*Ananse the Spider: Tales of an Ashanti Village*, *The Children of Ananse*, *The Pineapple Child*, *Why the Hyena Does Not Care for Fish*.

INTERVIEWER

Why was your father thrown in prison?

APPIAH

It had to do with a falling-out between my father and Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghana to independence from Great Britain, in 1957, and was the country's first prime minister and then president. They had been extremely close and had lived together for a time in London. Then, when my father came home and hung around with people in Kumasi, he eventually split from Nkrumah's party. There were the usual concerns about corruption and cronyism and other abuses of power. My father joined a political party that became a center of opposition to Nkrumah, and he was outspoken about his concerns about the fraying of constitutional liberties. Once the government passed the Preventive Detention Act, in 1958, he knew he would be one of its targets. He kept a little bag packed.

My mother was wonderfully good at keeping calm under difficult conditions, and she managed to communicate to us that something bad was happening but that we would be okay. My father's family were very loyal to us, which cost them, because that meant you had to be against the president. There were people who dumped us, but mostly our friends stayed loyal.

As to why he was imprisoned—I once asked a political prisoner from Malawi why he was in prison. He said, They told me, It has pleased His Excellency, the president, that you should be imprisoned.

I mean, there wasn't a trial, or formal charges, or anything. My father and a bunch of other people in the opposition were just hauled off.

INTERVIEWER

What were the conditions in the prisons?

APPIAH

My father was a genius! Not too long before he was arrested, he had given a speech in Parliament recommending significant improvements in service conditions for prison guards. He told me they asked him who he'd like to share his cell with, and they would smuggle in Campari for him, which is what he liked. In reality, it was, of course, grim—it was, after all, prison. In his memoirs, he wrote memorably about the regular experience of squatting

on a narrow wooden plank over a rat-filled latrine pit. In later years, during times of unrest, he would be rearrested, and there was a terrifying occasion when a cellmate was taken out and shot, and he basically had to argue for his life. But during his first experience as a prisoner, my father decided to treat it as a sort of mandatory rest. There wasn't much to do in prison, because they weren't allowed many books. My mother sent a volume of the collected works of Shakespeare that my father had asked for, and it was denied to him on the wonderful grounds that Shakespeare was a "well-known British subversive writer." My father wasn't going to be stopped by that, so he persuaded the prison doctor to write him a prescription for the book—as a matter of maintaining psychological health. So my father got Shakespeare on prescription. But he also collected many folktales, and then he told them to us. Which is how my mother started her collection.

INTERVIEWER

How long was he in for?

APPIAH

He was in for a year and a half. This is a moment to give thanks—Amnesty International was founded in 1961, and the first mission they carried out was to Ghana. My father was one of the first prisoners of conscience, as they came to be called, and I think Amnesty really did help. The government of Ghana got these letters from people all around the world, saying, What are you doing, locking up this innocent man?

Meanwhile, I came down with toxoplasmosis—which wasn't well understood back then—and I had to be hospitalized. So that's where I was when the Queen of England made her first visit to Ghana as a foreign head of state.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't I see this episode of *The Crown*, where the queen comes to Accra?

APPIAH

Yes, the one where the queen dances with Nkrumah. Which she really did. But she also visited the hospital where I was a patient and stopped by my bed and asked me how I was, so, naturally, I said I was fine. And as they're

leaving, Prince Philip—who’s famously good at stirring up trouble—turns around and says, Do give my regards to your mother, making it plain that he knew that I was the child of a political prisoner. This annoyed Nkrumah. As he feared, it was covered by the British newspapers and the major wire services, which wasn’t ideal PR for the president. He had my doctor fired. And my mother thought it probably a good idea to send me someplace where my doctor couldn’t be fired. So when I was eight, she sent me to my English grandmother, and Granny put me in a school near her home.

INTERVIEWER

So you get shipped off to England and you’re eight years old.

APPIAH

I remember getting off the plane. It was 1962, a very cold winter—and I recall stepping into the frigid air and thinking, This is a terrible mistake. I’d basically lived in the tropics until then. Anyway, my grandmother picked a boarding school close to her house, and it was close enough that I could have run away and gone home to her, which was reassuring.

The school was owned by the headmaster, who was an unmarried priest of the Anglican Church. His name was the Reverend Hankey—you can imagine that eight-year-old boys thought that was pretty amazing. He owned the school, and he didn’t run it very well. By the time it ran out of funds, my grandmother had arranged for me to go to a school with my English cousins in Dorset.

What kept me sane as a child far away from home was poetry—my mother and I wrote and exchanged poems, sometimes once a week, by mail. I should say that she loved the poems she learned growing up, but her tastes were eclectic—Wordsworth and Basho and the Acholi Taban lo Liyong. After President Léopold Sédar Senghor, in Senegal, published his complete poems, he sent a copy to my mother, signed “in faithful friendship.” When I translated some of them, my mother sent them to him and got an encouraging note back. She had three of my translations privately published in a volume of family poetry. My first publication!

INTERVIEWER

Tell me a little bit about your intellectual development. You’re in a boarding

school, you're preparing to go to university, you're spending summers in Ghana. When do you start reading philosophy?

APPIAH

I started because I had a small group of friends, and we were—this is going to be misunderstood here—but we were evangelical Christians. It was the late sixties and that meant we were on the Left. Jesus was on the side of the oppressed. It also meant that we read theology. We didn't begin with philosophy.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you at the time?

APPIAH

I was fourteen, fifteen. We read with the support of the assistant chaplain, who had just finished Oxford in theology. He had a big beard and was even more left-wing than we were. And in the course of reading these theological things—Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann—it became clear that they had all of these philosophical presuppositions. So we started reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*—

INTERVIEWER

At fourteen?

APPIAH

Fifteen, maybe! We were not making much sense of it, I have to say.

INTERVIEWER

What sense were you making of it? What was sticking to the fifteen-year-old mind?

APPIAH

A sense that you could think reasonably about things of faith, that there were intellectual traditions that you needed to know in order to think about things properly, and that if you struggled intellectually, you could make some sense of things. We also read Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and I remember

working very hard and figuring out this passage, which in the English said—I can still remember it—“Consciousness is the knowing being in its capacity as *being* and not as being known.” And I remember thinking, I know what that means. It means that consciousness is the subjective side of things—it’s not “being known,” it’s “being the knower.” But it took a while. Every sentence was like that, so it was slow work. There was also a master who was interested in running a philosophy club, and he was an atheist, so he was trying to get us to read different things. One was Alfred Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

INTERVIEWER

This is an entirely different tradition, analytic philosophy.

APPIAH

Yes, logical positivism, in Ayer’s case. And I remember reading that and thinking, This person takes hard, difficult issues, uses plausible, powerful principles, and comes to surprising conclusions.

INTERVIEWER

Give me an example. What would you have encountered in a first reading of Ayer?

APPIAH

Something relevant to theology, to my religious situation, which eventually led to my not being religious anymore. I came to understand the verification principle, which is the idea that you don’t really understand a statement unless you can figure out what it would take to show that it was true. Not for it to be true, but to show that it’s true, or to understand what it would be to show that it was false—to verify or to falsify. Ayer didn’t talk about theology in that book, but I realized that I didn’t know what it would take to show whether a lot of religious claims were true. By that standard, I didn’t understand them. That led me to read more about arguments for and against the existence of God, including Bertrand Russell, who was one of Ayer’s friends. I didn’t lose my faith for a while, but the process of thinking in this deliberate, careful way about whether you understand a claim, what it would be to support the claim or to refute the claim—all of that turned out to be quite exciting, because you could apply it to all sorts of things.

INTERVIEWER

What would happen when you went home for the summer? Would you bring up this subject—about challenges to faith?

APPIAH

I never talked to my parents about it. My parents were very devout. Over time my mother and father became aware that I wasn't a theist because they read things I wrote, but we didn't ever talk about it. I continued to go to church with my mother, and did so until late in her life, when she was no longer well enough to go.

INTERVIEWER

As a kind of family ritual?

APPIAH

Yes. I loved going to church when I was a kid in Ghana, more than the compulsory services at school every day in England. And so I was happy to go with her. I guess what I felt was, when I first lost my faith, that this was a loss, and I wasn't sure I wanted to impose it on anybody else.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when that happened?

APPIAH

I must have been seventeen. There was an actual moment. People talk about being born again *into* religion. I had a moment of being born *out* of religion. There had been years of preparation, of thinking about the arguments for the existence of God, and so on—but the actual moment of loss of faith was sudden, and it took me a while to adjust to it. It happened when Jeremy Butterfield, a friend who's now a philosophy don at Trinity College, Cambridge, visited me in Ghana. His father, as vice-chancellor of an English university, had to travel to the country, and he brought Jeremy along. My mother arranged for us to spend time studying the foundations of quantum theory and relativity with a mathematician at a local university—that is what Jeremy now works on. Not long after he arrived in Ghana, I was playing a hymn on the piano that I had composed. And as I sang this hymn,



With his parents, Joe and Peggy Appiah, 1954.

Jeremy said, I don't think I believe that anymore. And after a couple of seconds, I thought, I don't believe it either.

INTERVIEWER

At what point did you begin to think that it was possible to occupy your life with the study and writing of philosophy? How did you conceive of what such a life might be? The world knows what it is to be a historian or a scientist. But a philosopher?

APPIAH

I had been very sick as a child, as I said, so I was going to be a doctor. In my first year at Cambridge, I was a medical student. But the truth was, I just hated medicine. I liked biochemistry, that was exciting, intellectually challenging—this was Cambridge and I was at Clare College, where Jim Watson was a student when he and Crick were uncovering the structure of DNA—but the rest of what they teach you in the first year of medicine is science that's sometimes hundreds of years old. The anatomy Vesalius knew. And so the professors are bored stiff teaching it, because it's not interesting

to them. Also, we had to dissect a human corpse, and I found that repellent. I began to slip into a bunch of philosophy lectures.

Basically, I realized that philosophy was what I really enjoyed. I asked the college if I could shift to philosophy, and they very kindly permitted me. My parents weren't paying for anything—that's how things worked in England in those days—so I didn't have to ask them. I just wrote and told them that I was switching out of medicine. Many years later, I discovered that my father, when I was eleven weeks old, had been asked by a British journalist what he thought his baby boy was going to do. Which is a ridiculous question to ask. But nothing fazed my father, and he said, Well, if he's doing science he'll go to Cambridge, and if he wants to be a philosopher, he'll go to Harvard. So, when I told my father that I wasn't going to do medicine, his response was, Ah, so you're going to do philosophy!

INTERVIEWER

That was the other option.

APPIAH

It never occurred to him that I, or any of my sisters, would be lawyers, even though he was a lawyer and our English grandfather and great-grandfather were lawyers. My father loved philosophy—he kept Marcus Aurelius on his bedside table. But I was not choosing a career. I was just choosing to spend two more years doing the thing that I most wanted to do in all the world.

INTERVIEWER

And that enjoyment continued into your graduate studies at Cambridge.

APPIAH

Yes. In those days graduate study was just reading and talking to people about philosophy, perhaps attending the occasional lecture. I loved it. I had a few friends there and in London. But the main thing was just being buried in philosophy—mostly philosophy of language—for a few years.

INTERVIEWER

One of your most widely cited early pieces made the claim that race doesn't exist. You wrote, back in the mid-'80s, "The truth is that there are no races:

there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us.” Now, today the argument has become widely accepted, a kind of cultural studies slogan, but at the time you wrote this, it caused a storm, and there were arguments that took it in all possible directions. Do you stand by this original formulation, and what does it mean?

APPIAH

I wrote that because I had arrived in the United States as a young professor, and I was teaching philosophy and African American studies at Yale. I should say that this was basically a job organized by Henry Louis Gates Jr.—he’d come to Cambridge for graduate school, we’d ended up having countless late-night conversations about race, and he decided that my professional future was in America and should involve some intellectual engagement with the African diaspora. Anyway, it seemed to me that people didn’t seem to know—especially in the humanities—what the science was. And because I had been prepared as a medical student, I knew a fair amount of evolutionary theory and genetics, so I just thought I was going to tell people what was well known among people with the relevant expertise, and, you know, pass on the good news. I didn’t realize that it was going to be all that controversial.

INTERVIEWER

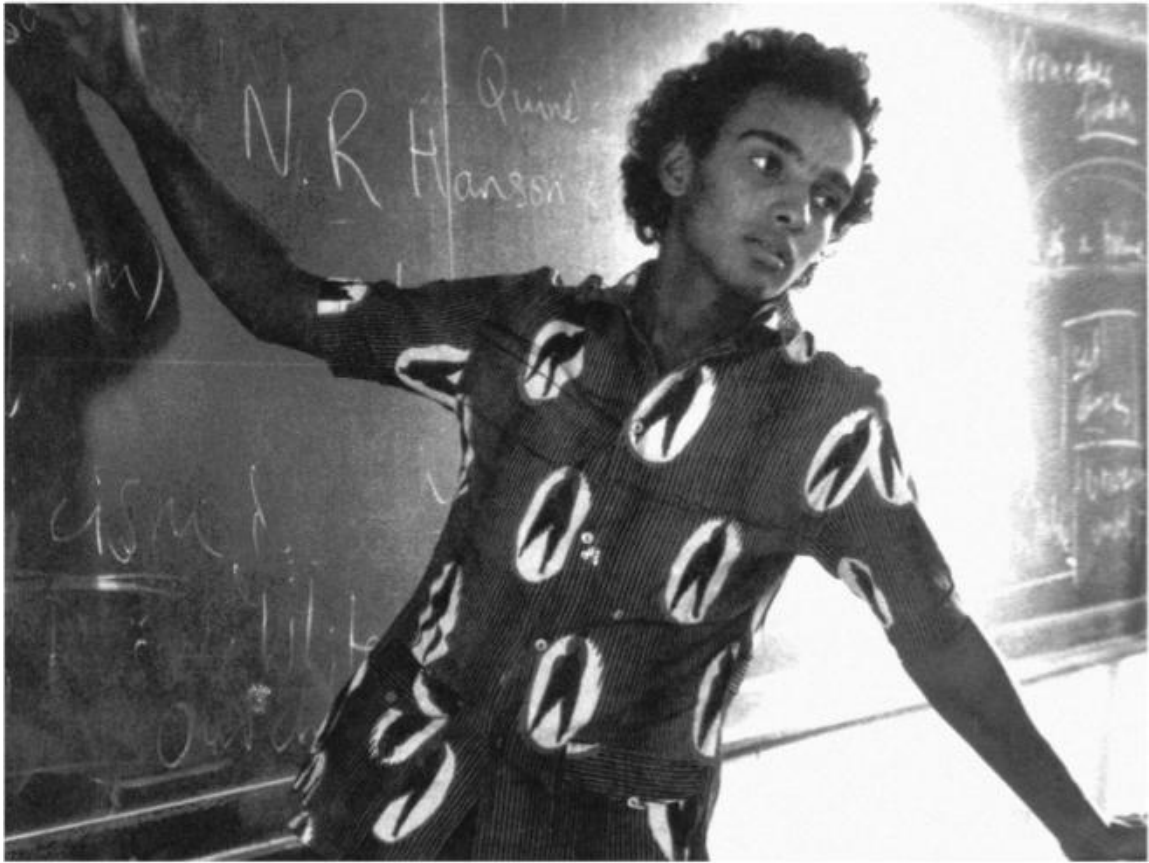
What were the outlines of the controversy?

APPIAH

People didn’t argue with the main claims because those were footnoted to articles in biology journals, which they didn’t feel equipped to disagree with. But I think what they felt was, in saying that there were no races, you were denying what the social constructionists were asserting, which was that, of course, in everyday life, in a country like ours, people have experiences as if there were races. People are treated as if races existed, and if you take that away, it sounds as though you are denying that you yourself are a Black person. Now, of course, I was saying that, as a claim about biology, there aren’t any White people either.

INTERVIEWER

But that means what?



“The project is trying to understand the things that puzzle me.”
Teaching at the University of Ghana, Accra, 1976.

APPIAH

What I was denying was the thought that these social cleavages mapped onto interesting biological ones. I was denying that once you'd classified people in those ways you could then say powerful and interesting things about their other properties, how smart they would be, or how honest, or whatever. And that's part of a package of ideas that was put together in the nineteenth century. I was not denying that people *thought* there were races—that's obviously true—nor was I denying there was *racism*. Racism doesn't require races, it just requires people to believe in races.

INTERVIEWER

And how did you handle the incoming fire this argument generated? Did it change your outlook, either on your subsequent writing projects or on your role as a professor and public figure?

APPIAH

I don't think I felt that I was any kind of public figure. I used to tell my students that, because of my parents, I was born famous and had been getting

steadily less so ever since. But I learned that, especially outside philosophy, people often read you symptomatically rather than trying to figure out what you're actually trying to say. And certainly, I took on board the need to say more affirmatively what I thought was going on when people talked about race. I developed the idea that we should talk about racial *identities* and began to explain what that meant. And I tried to do it in language that you didn't have to be trained in philosophy to understand.

INTERVIEWER

You've spent a lot of time elaborating this notion of identity. We live in an age of hyperawareness of identity that you think is in many ways dangerous. I'm thinking of your recent book on W.E.B. Du Bois, *Lines of Descent* (2014), in which you talk about how imaginary things can extract a really terrible toll. You write, "The concept of race might be a unicorn, but its horn could draw blood."

APPIAH

There are many dangers associated with identity, but one that racial identities share with national identities, religious identities, and so on, is a tendency toward what psychologists call essentialism, which is toward treating these labels as if the people who share them necessarily have some deep and important properties in common that determine how their life options can and perhaps should go. I think, on the other hand, that all the large groups—African Americans, Jews, Catholics, Muslims—are staggeringly diverse, and that what it means to be one of those things is to be decided by people. It's not fixed in advance by the nature of race, or the nature of nationality, or the nature of the Muslim faith. Muslims have to decide how to be Muslims. Islam doesn't tell them everything they must do. African Americans have to decide how to be African American, if they want to be African American. They can't just look inward, scan the barcode of their African American identity and say, Okay, that answers the questions for me. I think part of the danger of these identities is that they trap us into a kind of fatalism of identity, of thinking not only that we have to be whatever we think we are—you know, Black, gay, male, American, atheist, whatever—but that there's one way to do that.

INTERVIEWER

How does this go over in the classroom?

APPIAH

I find that if you lead people up to it, if you start with the arguments and the evidence, it's okay. It's not been suggested that I've been saying something that is impermissible to say. When I talk about identities in class, I certainly always begin by saying, These are sensitive topics, but our task is to understand them. If you have a thought, say it, and if it upsets somebody, we'll take that as part of the evidence, we'll think about why it might upset them. But don't avoid saying things if you think they're relevant. Our main task in a seminar room is not to make people feel good, it's to help people understand things, and sometimes, in order to understand things, you have to feel not so good.

INTERVIEWER

You've also argued that the idea of Africa was largely a New World invention—something that Black intellectuals in the Americas, for the most part, had created—Africa as fiction. How did you come to that conclusion?

APPIAH

In the middle of the nineteenth century, most people in Africa certainly didn't think of themselves as belonging together with all the other people on this vast continent. They didn't know about most of the other people on the continent. And if some of them had come along, their main reaction would have been to pick up their spears and defend themselves from them. It would not have been to say, Welcome, brother. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of warfare in Africa—not just colonial warfare, but internal war. Kumasi grew out of a state that was busy conquering other people in the neighborhood.

The first people who have the experience of being brought together by the fact that they all come from the continent of Africa are African enslaved people being brought across the Atlantic Ocean and arriving in Jamaica or Brazil or Charleston. Instead of being responded to as Ashanti, say, they're responded to as Africans. And you have to get used to the fact that, even though you speak one language, and these other people speak another language—and even though you've never heard of the place these other people come from—something about the way you both *look* is making you all into one kind of person. Then diaspora intellectuals—like Alexander Crummell, a New Yorker who went to Cambridge to study theology and became an Anglican priest



Lyle Ashton Harris, Untitled (*Face #192 Kwame*), 2007.

and a missionary to Liberia, or E. W. Blyden, who was from the West Indies and later settled in West Africa—brought the idea of Africa, as it were, back to Africa. Crummell has a book of essays called *The Future of Africa*. But the Africans didn't know that they were Africans, and didn't know that Africa had a future to make, until the message was brought from these New World Black people. So Africa as an idea *in* Africa is a diasporic creation. Once an idea has been created, of course, even if it was done by someone else, you've got it, and you have to decide what to do with it. Which means that people in Africa were free to take it up and make of it what they wanted. But again, with

Africa, there's this risk of essentialism—of thinking that, because everybody's African in the continent of Africa, they're going to be able to work together or they're going to have to make a shared destiny.

Being African isn't going to do any work unless Africans decide to do something with it. Actually, what they have decided to do, interestingly enough, is partly shaped by ideas about race. There's a strong sense of the distinction between what we call the Maghreb, which is Arab North Africa, and Black Africa, even though there's no sharp boundary between the two. A country like Senegal is 96 percent Muslim, but they're mostly Black, so they don't count as part of the Maghreb. That idea that you should divide Africa between the Blacks and the non-Blacks is also, I think, something that comes from outside Africa.

INTERVIEWER

You're known for a multiplicity of identities—I mean it in the sense of your activities. You're a teacher, you write about cosmopolitanism, about ethics. You are on lots of juries and boards—including for this publication—that do good works of one kind or another. At a certain point, though, you must have said that my project is *this*, and not *that*.

APPIAH

Talk of projects is usually the product of retrospection, not prospection. I would say, sidestepping retrospection, that the project is trying to understand the things that puzzle me. Many of the things I've written were in response to someone saying something and my thinking, I don't understand that.

INTERVIEWER

For example?

APPIAH

Well, I wrote *Cosmopolitanism* (2006). That word comes from a Greek word meaning “citizen of the cosmos,” *kosmopolitês*. I was raised by cosmopolitan parents. In an interview I think you've seen, done on British television with my mother in the sixties, she actually says she's raising us as much as possible as citizens of the world. And my father said in a letter that he wrote to us before he died, “Remember, always, you are citizens of the world.” So I was

raised to be a citizen of the world. But when I started thinking about it, it seemed to me profoundly unclear what that could possibly mean. Normally, a citizen is a citizen of a polis, of a political community—there is no cosmopolis to be a citizen of. How can you be a citizen of something that doesn't exist? I thought, on the one hand, I know what my parents were urging me on to be, but, on the other, that can't be quite the right way to think about it. So what is the right way to think about it? When I wrote *In My Father's House*, in 1992, I was living in the United States, I was half African, half European, I was teaching African and African American studies as well as philosophy, and I was trying to make sense of the ways in which people thought about Africa, race, racism, African cultures, the relationship between the religions of Africa that have developed out of missionary work by Muslims and Christians and their relation to earlier African religious traditions, and so on. These were all things that interested me, and that I was forced to think about, because I was talking to students about them. People had ideas about them that I didn't think were correct. But I couldn't immediately figure out why I didn't think they were correct—I had to work on it.

And because a lot of what I've worked on has just been things that puzzle me, I'm not particularly preoccupied with the issue of whether something is a "philosophical" question. If a question interests me, and I have to learn some biology to answer it, I will learn some biology. If I have to read some more novels to answer it, I will read some more novels. And if philosophers don't normally talk about novels very much—which they don't in my tradition—you know, *tant pis*. You should follow questions where they take you.

I was taught very little history, for example, in high school, because I was going to be a doctor. You had to make choices in an English high school between things to study, and I was doing physical sciences and biology and mathematics. I didn't have time for history if I was going to learn French, Latin, and German as well, which I wanted to. But since then I've had to learn a lot of history, especially intellectual history, to just make sense of these things, because I think that concepts like race are most easily understood by figuring out how we came to have them. That was an insight of Nietzsche's and of Foucault's—that the genealogy of concepts is one way to get a grip on them.

INTERVIEWER

So you're following these questions, but how do you construct your answers?

What does the building of your argument look like, and how does that idea get committed to paper?

APPIAH

First, immerse yourself in the relevant bodies of knowledge. Then try to explain on paper what you think people are saying, getting it as clear as you can for yourself. Then try to write what *you* think. You don't know what you think until you try to say what you think. Look at it. See if it makes sense on the page. I love the way word processors work, allowing you to write a sentence, reshape it, move it around. I do that all the time as I proceed. It was only when I was given a computer account in the late seventies at Cambridge—it was in the Cavendish physics labs!—that I learned to assemble text in this new way. Typewriters never worked for me, and my handwriting is illegible. I only really became a writer once I worked out how to interact with a word processor.

INTERVIEWER

How does language fit into all of this? As you write and revise, do you think about the artfulness of language and the possibilities of narrative prose? Most philosophers don't use narrative as you do.

APPIAH

Most of what you write just comes out of you when you put your fingers on the keyboard. It's not a process over which you have a great deal of conscious control. The initial stimulus for an essay or a chapter is usually an episode—real or fictional—or an argument or a claim I've been struck by. After so much writing, I now know what my take is on many questions, and so I've spent more time reading history and fiction looking for stories that make the abstract point come alive. Sometimes, though, the story is already there waiting for me in my own history. I would say, also, that I think philosophers often underrate the importance of narrative explanation. Philosophers like rigorous, logical structures, but the way we understand many things is through stories in which abstract concepts are exemplified. I teach a course on the idea of individuality every other year. We begin by reading four novels. The only thing that's as good as the novels is something that they also read, which is a chapter of *On Liberty*, "Of Individuality," by John Stuart Mill. So I suppose

I'm an intellectual. In the root sense—*intellego* means “I understand,” and I am someone who wants to understand things. Philosophy isn't the only way to understand things, but it's an awfully good way.

INTERVIEWER

What are the novels you teach in that class?

APPIAH

Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. These are novels about heteronomy and autonomy, about negotiating, as individuals, a relationship with the collectivities and social norms that shape our lives. That's a story you can tell about the characters in these works. At the same time, you can see similar interplays, similar negotiations, in the achievement of their literary effects. Achebe's task, for instance, was to find a way to use English to express the lives of his Igbo characters. He did it by drawing on a range of registers of English diction, from the King James Bible to nineteenth-century realism to contemporary Nigerian English. He faced the problem and solved it so successfully that many readers, I think, don't see there was a problem to solve, and many of the African anglophone writers who came after him just stepped into his conventions.

INTERVIEWER

Did his solutions help your own prose, as someone who comes from, in part, the traditions of African anglophone writing?

APPIAH

His task was to adapt the register of the anglophone novel, which isn't a challenge in writing nonfiction. I've certainly learned a great deal from a few African philosophers, particularly Kwasi Wiredu. He was the chair of the department at the University of Ghana, which was the place I first taught. He, too, had an analytic training, and he, too, was concerned to think about what that kind of philosophical training was good for in his own context. In that first job, I had to teach an introductory discussion of skepticism, and, in reading historical material about skepticism, I came across Montaigne's essays and was blown away. The mixture of the conversational and the philosophical,

the personal and the abstract. And the wit. “*Quand je joue avec mon chat, qui sait s’il ne s’amuse pas plus de moi que je le fais de lui?*” “When I play with my cat, who knows that he is not playing with me more than I am with him?”

INTERVIEWER

Your prose is not limited to philosophical texts. You wrote some really wonderful thrillers when you were very young. I just finished, and loved, *Another Death in Venice* (1995).

APPIAH

Kind of you to say so!

INTERVIEWER

One evening you mentioned to me that you were not finished with fiction, that you have it in mind to write a novel. Do you have anything you can tell us about that?

APPIAH

The one that I have vaguely in mind is different from the mysteries. It’s set in the seventies, between the places I grew up—Ghana and England—and its protagonist is an academic. I am tempted to explore times and places that I once knew well and that now seem a little strange to me. I hope it will be, if not a comic novel, not without comedy.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the past and contemporary novelists whom you admire most?

APPIAH

There are classics that captured me at a certain moment in my life and that, as a result, I’ve returned to from time to time. Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*, or Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, or Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*—genius to take a metaphor from chemistry, *die Wahlverwandtschaften*, to explore amorous entanglements—or Marcel Pagnol’s *My Mother’s Castle*, which I suppose we might now call autofiction. I loved Pagnol’s ternary sentence structures, his joyous evocation of idyllic summer holidays spent in the countryside of Provence, hunting for the elusive rock partridge, *la bartavelle*. I read *War and*

Peace in a couple of days one summer at home in Ghana. I left my bedroom only for meals and brought the book with me to the table, which wasn't usually allowed. My mother would put books for me to read on my bedside table. She loved Tolstoy—she had lived in Moscow for a while during the Second World War, when her father was the British ambassador—and she had a soft spot for the Russians. So an exception was made!

I was very grateful for Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* when I discovered it as a teenager coming to terms not so much with my being gay as with other people's attitudes toward my being gay. The book has the kind of hostility to the sexual body that Baldwin got from Saint Paul—body good, flesh bad. And, since I had been raised in a Christian church and family, this had some resonance for me. I might not have taken to it if I'd first read it now. It's melodramatic, and sometimes overwritten. One of the sentences has stuck in my mind through the intervening decades—"The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness." I've always wondered if Baldwin was thinking of Herrick, "A sweet disorder in the dress / Kindles in clothes a wantonness." In this case, bedclothes.

When I was a little older, a young adult immersed in the Oxbridge world, Anthony Powell had an almost gossipy allure, the prose tuneless, terse, and yet curiously effective at conjuring an enchanted world. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* had a similar traction, which arises from the interface of the odd exactitudes you draw from social observation and the freedom of the fictional. Nobody now reads Sartre's Roads to Freedom trilogy, which was also somewhat autobiographical, but I remember finding those novels enthralling, though one of their virtues, it must be said, is that philosophy doesn't figure in them overmuch.

I love Norman Rush and George Saunders, who are equally propelled by a fine moral intelligence—like George Eliot in this respect, or even J. M. Coetzee—but who are opposites with respect to scale. *Mating* resourcefully evokes an imaginative landscape at great size and length, while Saunders has written so many brilliant, witty miniatures. Then, suddenly, there was *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a grand experiment of a novel. Perhaps Rush will dash off a haiku to right the balance.

Among writers who are not sufficiently known here, I might pick Tsitsi Dangarembga, from Zimbabwe. Her first book, *Nervous Conditions*, thrusts the reader into the world of a rural Shona girl in racist, late-colonial Rhodesia.



With Toni Morrison at the PEN American Center, 2010.

It demonstrates how a novel can bring you into unfamiliar realities without seeming to explain them. I was thrilled when I first discovered it and honored to be asked later to write an introduction to a new edition. It's one of those books that reminds me each time I read it that T. S. Eliot was right that "although it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being universal, I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local too."

And then there's Toni Morrison. Part of the magic of her writing for me is the way it fills your head, as a reader, with her particular, resonant voice, a voice that was strikingly continuous with her actual voice, which, because she was a friend, I know well. Anna Burns, who won the Booker Prize the year I was a judge, is another writer like that. *Milkman* has this voice you cannot *not* hear.

INTERVIEWER

Make the case for philosophy in a person's reading life. Often enough on the train or in the park you will see someone reading fiction of the highest order, or serious nonfiction of all kinds. One rarely, if ever, sees anyone reading philosophy in the wild. Perhaps some New Agey or self-help texts masquerading under the rubric of "a philosophy of ..." but not the real thing. How would an adult who emerged from schooling relatively unburdened by reading in,

much less instruction in, philosophy, go about starting? Where, dear professor, to begin? And why?

APPIAH

People read for so many reasons. So, the case for philosophical reading is really many cases. You could commend Montaigne, in Donald Frame's very reliable translation of the *Essays* if you don't read sixteenth-century French, because he's such an engaging companion, and he teaches the liberal virtues—intellectual modesty, tolerance, compassion, an aversion to cruelty. You might want to read Nietzsche because he's such a stylist, which comes across in the best English translations, and because of the mad vitality with which he challenges the pieties of his time ... and some of ours. Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* are easy to love. It's amazing to think that this humane and cosmopolitan thinker managed, in his spare time, to run the Roman Empire. And John Stuart Mill should be easy to love, too. *On Liberty* only gets richer on rereading. Why? Because it contains sentences like these: "It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself."

There are other great philosophers—Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein—who strike me as worth reading only if you're willing to put in a great deal of effort to grasp their systems of ideas, something that I wouldn't propose to most nonphilosopher readers. Though with these three there are exceptions—Aristotle's *Poetics*, Kant's *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* are well worth reading if you're interested in aesthetics, for the first two, or anthropology, for the third. But there are others, like Hume or Burke or Adam Smith, whose prose is so enticing and whose ideas are so engaging that you can drift along with them without worrying too much about the technicalities. Simone Weil certainly meant a great deal to a quite wide audience, and Hannah Arendt published some work in a certain large-circulation weekly magazine. Then there are people like Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Ryle, Philippa Foot, and my late friend Robert Nozick, who are good company because they're so smart and clear and take such pleasure in crafting an argument.

Among contemporary philosophers, Daniel Dennett takes the best in contemporary science to shape your understanding of what it is to be a conscious

creature, what that is and how we came to be the way we are. And he does it in language that combines clarity with wit. Martha Nussbaum takes on big questions—about the role of the emotions in moral life, about how to measure economic development, about the value of a liberal education—and uses her deep engagement with ancient philosophy and her philosophical chops to open them up. And, finally, my colleague Thomas Nagel is someone whose work is both widely admired by technical philosophers and a joy for someone without philosophical training. He can get you to see a problem—what could the consciousness of a bat be like?—that you might not have thought about without his prompting, but he can also help you think more clearly about questions everyone must face, like the significance of the fact that each of us must die. The point of their writings is not that they tell you the answer—I think all three of them are wrong about lots of things—but that they challenge you to reach for your own answer. This goes back to the beginnings, Socrates’s irritating reminders that we don’t really know what we’re talking about so much of the time and that questions are more important than answers.

The central thing that each of us is doing—and this is a thought that arcs from Aristotle to Ronnie Dworkin—is making a human life. It’s something you can do better or worse, and though you can lead a good and decent life without philosophy, you might have a better shot with a bit of it.

INTERVIEWER

And how does that “us” operate? Are you in constant dialogue with your peers, or does independent work net better results?

APPIAH

Philosophical arguments are always in dialogue with other philosophical arguments. The volume of new material makes it impossible to keep up with, but teaching—and especially talking with graduate students about their work—keeps you in touch with what’s going on. In my first job in America, as an assistant professor of African and African American studies and philosophy, I certainly got used to trying to write in a way that would engage people across disciplines. And because I was reading work in African and African American literary studies, I probably learned—not very consciously—to write in a way that was modeled more on mainstream humanities writing than on analytic philosophy. Bernard Williams, in the preface to *Ethics and the Limits of*

Philosophy, one of his many wonderful books, describes that style as “a certain way of going on, which involves argument, distinctions, and, so far as it remembers to try to achieve it and succeeds, moderately plain speech.” But he himself had a gift for illustrating and illuminating his arguments through literary examples—from Sophocles, Sartre, Čapek—and I don’t see why moderately plain speech is necessary. Intelligibility and precision are to be found in writers like Nietzsche who would have thought the ambition to be moderately plainspoken preposterous.

INTERVIEWER

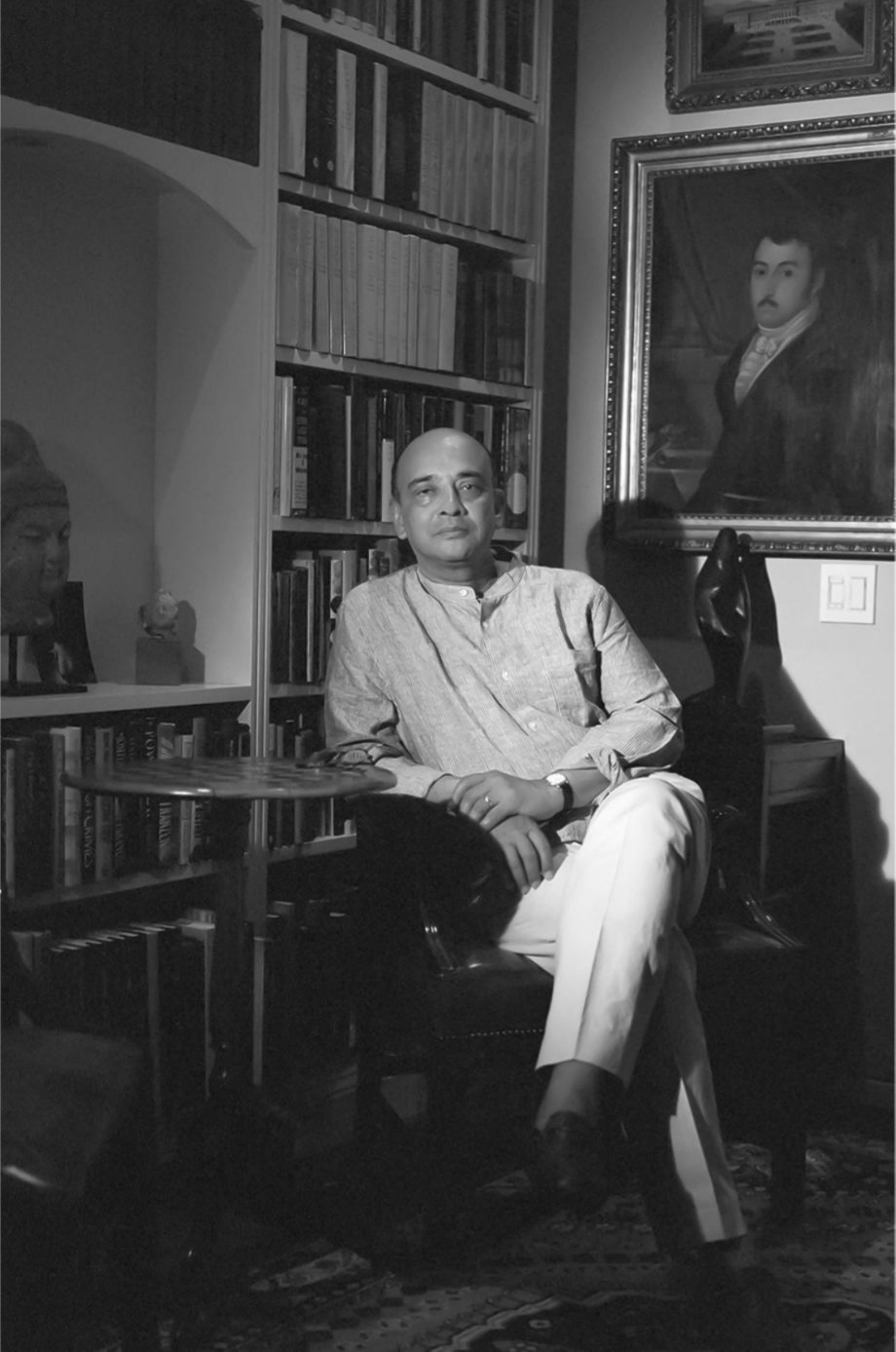
Anthony, we started our conversation in front of an audience at the Morgan Library. Now we are socially distanced, emailing and talking, from New York to Princeton. And I wonder if this prolonged crisis, the global pandemic, raises any distinctly philosophical issues in your mind.

APPIAH

I suppose we’ve discovered something about what you might call epistemic immunology—just as the virus learned to circumvent our biological defenses, falsehoods about the virus circumvented our epistemic defenses. A larger point I find myself returning to is that rationality is best understood not as an individual attribute but as a social one. The cognitive division of labor is a powerful thing. It’s what gives us science and technology, including vaccines. Lots of researchers with different knowledge bases get enlisted and coordinated into a marvelous array of complementarities. Literature is produced by writers, yes, but also by communities that shape them. Unfortunately, there can be malign forms of cognitive outsourcing, too. Individual rationality doesn’t stand a chance when it’s enmeshed in a dysfunctional epistemic community. So we should keep thinking hard about the social dimensions of knowledge.

But this might also be a moment for seeking consolation in the Stoics, with their focus on managing what is under your control and trying not to be too anxious about what isn’t. I sometimes have my quarrels with them, but Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* have been a source of consolation for a couple of millennia—and he lived through a plague in the Roman Empire that bears his family name, the Antonine Plague, and that took the life of

“*Intellego* means ‘I understand,’ and I am someone who wants to understand things.” New York City, 2018.



his co-emperor, Lucius Verus. As Epictetus, who influenced him, says in the *Encheiridion*—the word means a handbook—“Remember that you are an actor in a play, of such a kind as the author may choose . . . this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another.”

He’s not saying you should accept your social position. As someone who had been born a slave, he knew that it might be that your task is to emancipate yourself from a position in which you’ve found yourself. What he’s urging is that you start with an accounting of your particular capacities and your specific circumstances, which are always unique. Not many philosophical traditions can aim to be best represented by an emperor and a freedman!

Ron Silliman

from "PARROT EYES LUST"

for Elliot Helfer

Do potatoes suffer?

Would it be new
with a blue pen?

This lightweight
futuristic
slightly minimalist
black German
fountain pen

The Lamy Safari

The alphabet
with my name inserted
black against red

the same as
Caxton's Missal

Should I look that up?

Constraint

con

straint

it ain't

what you think

The ship sinks
rather quickly

Why were they sailing so far north?

Kate Winslet concedes
it isn't her best work

The knife on the counter
blade side up

Where
in the word
is the theory?

Me, I
just tend to
blurt things out

Editing function at fancy dinner
Must not be barbarian

“raised by wolves”
is an insult to wolves

the boy wanders in from the forest

which I no longer even remember
except when I look in the mirror
& see the animal there

fancy faux
leather carrying case
just for the tweezers
that inevitably
are lost

First berry, best berry
Now that one is true

In the microwave oven
blackberries burst
into the oatmeal

What to do
with the tail end of the page?

The spine ripples
when I open
this book

It's April before
I try writing
on the porch

The wind too cold still
at least at this hour

I come inside
but my son
sleeps on the couch

that I no longer call
by the word of my youth
a chesterfield

that whole concept
a field of chesters

Angela Davis's innocence
always was inscribed
absolutely
by the fact that

the guns
registered in her name
Jonathan Jackson had stolen
from the Che-Lumumba Club safe house

Still that concept—
the Che-Lumumba Club safe house—
is itself worthy
of further exploration

Sentences
dangling in midair

Davis
as an undergraduate
studied at the Sorbonne

I got a job
with Pacific Gas & Electric

This house
at that point
newly built

In the back
a string of oaks
in an utterly straight line

I hear the alarm clock
one story up

Outside, the rain is intense
but only for 15 minutes

I stare up from the long desk
in the archive

Works that I wrote
but don't even remember

dry desert riverbed
but the pond at the end of it
indeed has ducks
& even three cormorants
perched comically
on the limbs of a dead tree

The cop in the prowl car
is a good-looking blond

The homeless kid
to the beggar in the wheelchair
“My name is Fillmore,
pleased to meet you, John”

Shut my eyes
to sense my breath

Southwest reroutes
a replacement aircraft
only to discover
the plane is too small

Who one runs into
in this
resolutely Republican
county when
reporting
for jury duty

For five years
they've nursed this grief
bitterness, rage

the death of their daughter
just two days old

the beautiful but
beleaguered defendant

the crap cafeteria
that in theory stops serving
half an hour
before the judge
releases the panel for lunch

What I can't stop seeing
is the force with which
that day
early in '89
the anesthesiologist
shoved the surgeon
hollering
that I had a right
to a second opinion

meaning
I better damn well use it

what I did
what in turn
saved her life

but just barely

*A Supernatural Landscape
of Love and Grief
Not Unlike Your Own*

PEYTON
BURGESS

Sometimes PB to my students, Sack to my friends, and always Pete to my family, my name is Peter Burgundy and I worry that death has been my only inspiration to be a better person—that death has had a way of making life understandable. And oh whoa, how I worry that this will be the case till kingdom come—walking through every day to the quiet beat of grief’s unfinished heart.

Somebody shouldn’t always have to die, right?

So let me try with here and now. I’ve been wanting to for a long time and I’m going to do it. So here. This is now:

I’m driving to work, and as I make my way down City Park Ave., I’m rerouted by traffic cones

and flashing yellow lights. I brake, slowly make the U-turn, and see that a huge pond has formed between Delgado Community College and City Park.

I say *pond* because, unlike a sinkhole that would swallow the earth, this pond is straight-up asserting itself into the world, projecting a blue aura. And in the middle of it, a gnarly, bespeckled cyan-colored cypress is sitting atop its own tiny island of roots. The audacity!

The pond is a little bigger than a basketball court and fills the neutral ground and sections of traffic lanes in both directions. S&WB and DOTD engineers, firemen, and police officers are staring into it, adjusting their hard hats and belts as they exert all sorts of wonderment over the thing right there in front of them. Joggers and walkers in City Park are snapping photos, as are the tourists vacating the streetcars while the operators organize their reverse efforts. Local newsies are jockeying for the best shots.

I drive toward the college's rear entrance, wondering if I should be more impressed. I turn up ye olde SR5 stereo, which, connected to my phone's bank of tunes—tunes symptomatic of the times—plays a big-on-aesthetics song by (the) Butthole Surfers, and the song reminds me of my big sis.

I drive on. The glowing pond and that gnarly tree are in my rearview mirror, vibrating along with the bass.

Despite knowing the thematic implications of floods, sinkholes, storms, et cetera, I'm going to go ahead and decide that this beautiful pond, along with its cyan tree, is just implicative of the city's infamously unsteady ground and aging infrastructure, an infrastructure that emphasizes death upon death upon death. I've seen almost every street in this city underwater before, so why pack the bug-out bag now, right?

I SIT DOWN AT MY PC and pull up the spreadsheet to see what we'll be doing today: replacing trampled pansies in the signage bed by the main entrance, trimming the limp palm fronds by the bookstore, testing pH at the Williamson Complex water garden. This is the regular paycheck and health insurance job. I'm the grounds manager at Delgado. But I'm also an adjunct, teaching landscape design and management in the college's horticulture technology program.

I radio Benito to get a few flats of pansies ready.

"Let's go with purple and gold. If you're around, we can plant after my class," I say.

“Sounds good, Sack.”

I have about twenty minutes before class, so I check my email. I spot some auto-forwarded email, the sender an address I don't recognize. The email was sent to an old Hotmail address I haven't used since I was like nineteen. Yes, mail forwarding—where old tragedies come back to haunt you.

IS THIS STILL YR EMAIL? REMEMBER ME? HAHA. OF COURSE YOU DO ...

IF YOU READ THIS, CAN YOU SEND ME YR CELL. I WANT TO SAY HI.

ACTUALLY, I WANT TO SAY SORRY FOR NOT CHECKING ON YOU AFTER HEATHER DIED. DO YOU HATE ME.

MOM AND DAD PROBABLY TOLD YOU IM DYING, IM NOT DYING!

YOU'RE MARRIED NOW??? I DON'T BELIVE IT. BUT I'M HAPPY THINGS WRKED OUT FOR YOU! WHO IS THIS GAL????

YOU DESEVE TO BE HAPPY, MAN, I KNOW THAT SOUNDS STUPID

I MADE A NEW PLAYLIST FOR YOU, SOME YOU KNOW, SOME MAYBE NOT. PUT HER IN YOUR PHONE OR SOMETHING

THE BIG SIS,

K

'HATE' ISN'T THE RIGHT WORD. I'm not sure I cared that my one and only sibling never contacted me when Heather died. If anything, it was an excuse to not deal with her bullshit ever again. Years went by: I mourned and did what I did and I'm here. Why fuck with me now, K? I load the playlist onto my phone and press play, reluctantly agreeing to adopt it as the soundtrack for the next couple days, and, weird, there's that Butthole Surfers song¹ again.

I CALL MY WIFE to tell her about K's email.

“Do you think she just wants money?” I ask.

“That’s what you tell yourself because you’re scared to talk to her after so much time,” Liz says without any hesitation. It’s like she’s been thinking that since she first heard I had a sister. “Also, I doubt she needs money. She might be a burned-out rock star, but she is a rock star.”

“Probably true,” I say. “How’s the grading going?”

“Oh, you know. Haven’t even started. I decided to read.”

Liz teaches eighth grade English lit at an all-girls charter school down the road.

“Who?” I ask.

“Stanford.”

“Not familiar, but sounds rad.”

“Listen, you haven’t told me what your sister’s email actually said.”

“It was in all caps. And sounded like bad song lyrics,” I say. “Maybe she’s writing music again!” I feign excitement. “That would be perfect. In a perfect world, she just wants to tell me she’s clean enough to record another album and tour again.”

“Then we could ask her for money.”

“Right.”

“But seriously, what about your biggest fear?”

“Let’s not go there,” I say.

My biggest fear is that the next time I see my sister it will be at her funeral and, as a result, I will learn yet another lesson the hard way. My sister, K, is (was?) a musician whose name most people would probably recognize, especially if you were around in the nineties. And she’s battled addiction, losing every time, for most of her adult life. The word from Mom and Dad is that the damage is done, and now it’s just a matter of time before her vital organs fail. But despite my parents’ warnings, K’s death doesn’t seem like it’s anywhere in the near future, for me, anyway. It’s far away enough that I can ignore her email, right? Let us not go there.

“Long story short,” I say. “I don’t want to not see her before she dies. Not that she’s going to die.”

“I get it,” Liz says. “But I think you’re capable of better. How about seeing her just because you love and miss her?”

“Have you heard about *the pond*?” I ask.

“Pond? We’re talking about your sister, Pete. What did the email say?”

“Love you.” I end the call.

MY STUDENTS are debating the nature of the woman in Klimt's *The Kiss*. Why, you ask, are students learning about *The Kiss* in Landscape Design and Management at the local community college? Because, according to my extremely rough quant research, their future clients will probably be the type of people who fucking love Klimt. Or, at least, the aesthetic of Klimt. We can infer that their clients will want to exude an aura of knowing and appreciating Klimt.

There are about ten minutes left in class, so most of the students have tuned out and are waiting for the conversation to find a natural conclusion. I'm waiting, too, my mind having drifted to climbing palm trees with a saw, the breeze in my hair, and then tonight, maybe some cheap wine or a couple beers with Liz before bed—such a good life.

Max, my favorite worst student, signals that it's time to pack up by playing, aloud from his phone, a Sonic Youth song,² the one that inspired K to record her first demo. Now it feels heavier on pick scrapes than I remember. And as it turns out, this song is also on the playlist K sent me.

"Max," I say. "Not now. I hate that band."

"But you're wearing their shirt," Max says, shaking his head.

I point to the Klimt again. "Now listen, one last question before we wrap. You walk into the prospective client's house and you see this hanging above a white marble table in the foyer. Klimt's aesthetic. How might it inform the imaginary lines your client desires outside their home? Like, for example, azaleas or no azaleas?"

No response. Max continues playing the song, louder now. I'm about to get up and shut down the digital projector, to say goodbye to *The Kiss* for the semester, but then Claire clears her throat and leans forward, focusing on the painting.

"Honestly," Claire says. She's resting her chin on the table. "I think she looks like sort of a bitch."

No. Not again, I think to myself. "I was asking about azaleas, Claire," I say.

Rob smacks his pencil down. "No way *bitch* is part of Klimt's emotional lexicon or aesthetic with women. I don't see *bitch* at all," he declares.

"Guys." I'm kind of whining. "Guys, y'all throw that word around like it's nothing. Can we not? Let's stay focused on the questions of landscape."

"Robby, Robby, Robby," says Claire. "We all appreciate you sounding so smart, but do you really think Klimt had to know the word to feel it? Men have been calling women bitches one way or another since the minute they popped out of bitch numero uno."

“Whoa, okay!” I say. “Enough. Please.”

“PB, have you ever been called a bitch?” Claire asks.

“I guess a handful of times or so. I don’t really know exactly,” I say for some reason.

“Well, I get called a bitch, like, five times a week,” Claire says. “So I think I’m okay to throw that word around every now and then.”

“Claire,” Rob says. “That’s because you *are* a bitch.”

I’m horrified. There were only three minutes left, and it came to this?

“No. No. No. No, Rob. You are *not* going to speak like that to anybody,” I say. “Not in my class.”

Everybody, including Claire, starts laughing. They are all laughing, the whole class.

“Why is everybody laughing?” I say. “This isn’t funny.”

“PB, Rob’s right. I’m such a bitch,” Claire says. “And I love it.”

“Listen, nobody is going to talk like that in my class,” I say.

They get up, packing their bags, some still laughing.

“PB, we’re all friends here,” Claire says.

“Yeah, PB, lighten up,” Rob says.

Everybody begins to do their foot-drag out the door. Claire and Rob walk out of the classroom holding hands.

“When did that happen?” I mumble, watching their grip tighten. I pack up my things. Shut off the projector and *The Kiss* disappears. I look out of the classroom window. In the quad, Rob and Claire are standing in the grass, making out, like really going at it, like attacking each other. I can almost hear it. I walk up to the window to get a closer look. “Wow. Good for them,” I say. My breath fogs the window, which makes me feel weird. Then I see all of my other students join in, kissing one another, pretty intensely. Johnny kissing Isabel. Connie kissing Max. Then Max kissing Johnny. Isabel, Max, and Johnny kissing. Mike is trying to kiss Connie, but she’s kissing Mary now. All of them kissing around Rob and Claire.

“What is happening?” I say.

It’s as if they’ve all figured out exactly what they want in life. It’s fucking great. I bang on the window. They stop and look. I give them the thumbs-up. “Bravo! I’m very happy for y’all!” I yell.

Rob shakes his head and points at his ear. I don’t think they can hear me. They go right back at it.

Then, just like that, my indulgence in this, all this that is apparently life now, is interrupted by thoughts of my sister, and how she wasn't scared of anything. Or was it that she didn't care about anything? Why didn't she call me when Heather died? Or even years later when I met Liz and we got married?

I try to sink these thoughts. My life has somehow turned out too good, and I worry that it might get even better, and then, after it gets as good as it can get, somehow it will all be taken from me. This is a reminder that some grief and some fears that I pretend are no longer alive are very much alive in me, alive as much as my sister might not be alive very soon. Wrap your head around that and walk straight through the fucking day.

But here are all of my students, kissing each other in the quad. I know they can't hear me, but I bang on the glass and yell anyway, "Does this mean I'm doing a good job?"

By the time the window defogs, they have disappeared.

AFTER BENITO AND I FINISH planting the purple and gold pansies, we take a break and sit on the tailgate of ye olde SR5 and eat oysters. I always have a sack sitting in the cooler, maybe the only perk of keeping the dying oyster farm that Gramps handed down to me. I shuck a pair and hand one to Benito.

"I've had this feeling lately, Sack, that it's time for me to go do something else," he says. "But it is scary, you know?"

About four years ago, Benito was a student of mine. He moved here from Chimalhuacán, Mexico, which I'd never heard of until I met him. When he got his cert, I hired him right away. Super convenient for us both, but we also knew that he might be missing out on something better. We talked about this and there was always this understanding that someday he'd leave.

"Of course," I say. "I'd miss you. But you should do it." I throw an empty shell into the cooler.

I admire our work with the pansies and see, lying back against an oak in City Park, that strange, severe man who follows Benito. He's a white guy, wearing a stiff khaki button-up and matching pants, black cowboy boots, black aviators, and a black cowboy hat, one hand always resting on a pistol holstered at his side. Other than the outfit and gun, he looks like any other white dude. Sometimes I think he even looks like me. He's always been there.

When Benito was my student, I'd see the man out in the parking lot watching us through the classroom window.

We don't talk about the man. But we do talk about how Benito could do a hell of a lot better than this job. I watch the man and wonder if he's ever going to make a move. What is his move? Benito seems unfazed. He looks at the man, squints his eyes, as if he's pondering something for a second. He uses the razor edge of the oyster shell to clean the dirt out from his fingernails.

I WASH MY HANDS and retreat to my office—Lil Wayne³ making the headphones crackle, the relentless beat giving me the sensation that I'm being productive, that I'm doing important things.

I check the news. And according to the news online, the pond is growing. Growing fast. But also changing.

When referring to the pond, the newsies use the word *mystery*, or variations of the word, a lot, as in *this New Orleans mystery; the mysterious sinkhole*; or (my favorite) *the sinkhole*, which is mysterious, and quickly becoming one of the most mysterious millis in New Orleans, a city known for a milli mysteries.

MOM CALLS at about two. She is calm, collected; she's being my mom.

A couple weeks ago Mom had seen a photo online of me and my new tattoo. She'd texted me, "I don't know you," that it "reminds me of your sister and all her drug addict friends," and that she was "going back to bed." Never mind that my friends and I have jobs and mortgages, and we only indulge in light drug use on the rare occasion that we see some local show together. From her bed, surrounded by photos of me and K before we could even dress ourselves, all Mom saw was a son who reminded her of the daughter she feels responsible for.

But now she has a kind of over-the-top calm that evokes worry. My new tattoo doesn't matter anymore, it seems. She doesn't mention it. I know she's calling to talk about something more real than all of that, more serious. But I don't press her—I'm fine with being her good boy when she needs it.

"Are you at work?" she asks.

"Yes, it's two. Just finished a round of grading," I say.

"Sorry I didn't mean to ..."

“No, I don’t mean it like that. I’m not busy. What’s up?” I say.

“Your sister is in the hospital again.”

“Again? I mean, I know it’s a process. How’d you hear?”

“Some guy called us. One of her friends, or one of the people she hangs out with.”

I’m angry and I don’t do angry well when it comes to my sister, although I know I should, by now, just be compassionate.

“Well, you think she’s finally going this time?” I ask.

“It could be tomorrow or it could be next year. But her kidneys are failing,” Mom says.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I never know what to tell you or what not to tell you.”

“I guess the thing is, Mom, she’s been long gone for a while. I wish y’all would let her go.”

“She’s still here, Pete. We’re her parents. Maybe you’ll understand someday.”

“I love you, Mom, but I have some palm trees to trim.”

“Be careful.”

ONE THING I LIKE ABOUT MYSELF is my ability to climb a palm tree, especially with 2 milligrams of clonazepam in my blood and some dope tunes in my ears. And boy howdy, the Mexican fan palms on campus are tall enough to kill me if I fall.

I tell my students that *Washingtonia robusta* grows to eighty or ninety feet, but I swear by the shit in my britches I’ve climbed and almost fallen from ones that were a hundred feet, easy.

I put in the buds and crank the next song⁴ on K’s list, do my safety check, and start my ascent, the song’s dreamy pulse working with the benzo, lulling my nerves. I don’t use climbing spurs because the leaf scars provide perfect holds the whole way up the trunk. The way I ascend, like most people, is by not looking down as I go up. Once I get to the top, the dizziness subsides, and I cut dead branches, hoot and holler *look out* to the people below, and swing from my harness like a trapeze buffoon. My favorite move, the mermaid on the bar.

Off in the distance I see the pond, glistening blue and rhinestone against the backdrop of the City Park oaks. From this height, it looks like something or some things are twisting and throbbing deep below the surface. I want

to get a better view, so I lean against the harness and thrust off the tree, letting my head hang back as I swing. But as I'm coming around the other side of the tree, my view of the pond improving, the kaleidoscopic light off the surface blinds me for a second and my foot slips. I say a prayer that I'll remember what this feels like just as my forehead meets the bristles of the leaf scars.

I OPEN MY EYES and see the dean of business and technology, my dean, Dean Meredith, standing on the ground below, looking up at me.

"Hello, Meredith," I yell.

"Were you sleeping up there, Sack?" she yells back, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"It appears so. Sorry!" I rub the bump on my head.

"Can you come down here so we can talk?"

"Sure thing, Meredith!" I right myself, adjust my equipment, and start heading down.

I ask if I can study the pond during lunch break, get its pH, identify plant life. "Benito would probably be interested," I say. "It might be good professional development for us."

"It's not on campus, Sack," she says. "So it's out of your lane and would probably create a lot of administrative headaches for me. I can't give you and Benito special treatment."

"Who wants to be treated special? I don't want to be treated special," I lie so big.

"Let me buy you a Starbucks," she says.

"The ole consolation-coffee trick, yes, of course. Sounds special," I say. I am sure to laugh.

At the campus Starbucks, Meredith and I sit across from each other at a small table. We sip our drinks. She's drinking a latte and eating a slice of lemon cake.

"Listen," she says, "it's just a bad time. Worse than people realize."

"Worse than I realize?" I say.

She takes a bite of her cake. "God, this is so bad for me." She savors the bite. "Way worse. Just always assume that everything is worse than you realize, Sack. You specifically."

I try to ignore what feels like a dig because it was a little funny, too. The

cake smells good. “Nothing wrong with treating yourself every now and then,” I say. “But anyway, things are bad, like the world is ending bad?”

“As in, the state is entertaining buyout offers.”

“Selling the whole school? That’s a thing?”

“Yes. But you can’t talk about it.”

I knew the college was having financial problems. There was that round of layoffs last summer and word of another one this summer.

“It’s probably a bad time to ask if Benito and I can go to a convention,” I say.

“Jesus, Sack.” Dean Meredith takes another bite of her lemon cake.

“The survivalist expo, out in Kenner.”

“What the hell is a survivalist expo?” she asks.

I give her the gist: the survivalist expo is where people go if they want to find out how to exist while people around them are dropping like flies. And then, after everybody else has died, the ultimate question is, How does one live with oneself?

“I think it will make me more equipped to survive this dead-end job,” I say.

“You’re lucky I get your sense of humor,” she says. “Maybe we should all go.”

I BUY ANOTHER ICED COFFEE and hightail it over to Liz’s work. When I get there, she’s out on recess duty, and, being a legit hydrophile from Manchac Swamp, quite naturally she’s leading an extracurricular workshop on the art of pirogue construction. The kids are gathered around, and by the looks on their faces, they are enthralled. They’re chanting something together, too. I watch for a bit to admire how well Liz does it all—her smooth, cutting scoops into the cypress, the gentle hand on the shoulder as she guides a kiddo while the others watch and learn. She’s as good with the knife and ax as she is with the nurture and instruction.

It’s such a nice moment that I decide not to interrupt it. I leave her coffee at the front desk and text her.

BENITO AND I ARE TESTING the pH in the Williamson Complex water garden when Dad calls.

“Your mom told me something about a sinkhole in front of the college, next to City Park?” he says.

“Yes, it’s more like a pond though.”

“How so?”

“Because things are living and thriving in it.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s obvious. I’ll send you a photo. Benito and I might study it. Actually, we’re going to study it.”

“How is Benito?”

“Benito, how are you?” I say.

“Okay, Mr. B,” says Benito as he holds the test strip up against the sunlight.

“He’s moving on. He’s got big plans, Dad,” I say.

“That’s great! Tell him I’m happy for him,” Dad says.

“Mom tells me K has liver failure and kidney failure and all sorts of things,” I say.

“That’s why I’m calling.”

“Okay?” This is when I feel the holes in my gut, worn by my insides wringing and cramping with dread over the years.

“K left the hospital. A nurse went to check on her and she was gone.”

“Do I need to come up there, Dad?”

“And do what, son? I think you need to keep doing what you’re doing. But if you really think you can help, then, yes, come up and help.”

It’s not often that he calls me “son.” The old dude pretty much never calls me “son.” There’s an expectation that I want to live up to, and it’s situated somewhere in what he said, is lurking around in his refusal to tell me what exactly to do.

“She needs meds, right? Do you think she could die?”

“Pete, for all we know, she could have died a few minutes ago.”

WHAT A DAY. I park in our driveway and give the neighbor a wave. She frowns and shakes her head slowly, probably on account of the network of antique submarines that make up Le Chez de Liz and Pete.

In 2001, my grandfather, a sort of successful oyster farmer, purchased a collection of the earliest submarines ever built. Some of them are replicas; some are originals. He always had a thing for submarines. He was a navy man, an A-ganger on the USS *Wahoo*.

Thanks to him, we have three replicas of the wooden Yefim Nikonov subs, which look like giant wine barrels turned on their sides. They are all connected via decks and balanced five feet above the ground on pilings. They serve as our living room, dining room, and kitchen.

We also have two Ictíneo II wooden subs designed by Narcís Monturiol. They are a bit more modern, cleaner than the Nikonov subs, so naturally we use one as our master bedroom and the other as a guest room. They look crazy similar to the illustration of the Beatles' yellow submarine, like it's the very sub Edelman had in mind. Our Monturiol subs are also connected to the Nikonov subs via decking and raised five feet on pilings.

This wasn't always how we lived. During a tropical storm, a fallen tree destroyed our modest canary-yellow shotgun house. Gramps, without anybody's prior approval, had the subs installed on our property as an alternative to us living in a poisonous FEMA trailer. He died soon after.

It was supposed to be a short-term thing, living in the submarines. But we couldn't afford to rebuild. And anyway, we've come to straight-up love the subs. They are cozy. The neighborhood association has sent us about five letters threatening legal action. When did we get a neighborhood association?

AFTER DINNER, LIZ IS FIGHTING the bite for a cigarette. She ended up having a real crummy day at school. A student tried to stick another with a chisel while everybody was working on the pirogue and reciting "Woman Work." And then, when Liz intervened, the student turned the chisel on herself.

"It's too much for them. What was I thinking?" Liz says.

"No, Liz. Actually, they're lucky to have somebody that shows them things the way you do," I say.

"I know we're trying not to smoke, but I'm going to have one. Okay?"

Liz goes out the front door and sits on the stoop. I can see her through the patterned glass window. She hasn't smoked regularly in almost three years, but she still does it like a pro. It reminds me of our nights spent on the porch of the old house, chain-smoking, going through bottles of wine and maybe some whiskey, staying up later than we should have.

She's probably wondering what she could have done differently. How she could have helped her student more, her role in preventing disaster. Is she thinking of her little brother? Tom, her only sibling, died when they were just kids. I think he was barely one. I've known about Tom since day one of knowing Liz, because his picture was right there in her living room when I picked her up for our first date.

On our stoop right now, she has no idea how perfect she is being. She's rubbing her short blond hair. When she stops, her frizzy hair glows in the porch lamp's light like a golden tumbleweed.

Liz has a determination that I am both scared of and want to protect her from. And yet I know I take advantage of that quality in her, too. Like, how else could she accept me and Heather and what happened to her? It takes a stubborn kind of charity to love someone along with their ghost.

She squeezes the cherry off her cigarette and throws the butt in our trash can. When she comes inside, she shuts the door slowly. She turns around and leans against it as if to block the world out. I'm at the kitchen island, popping some red.

"I want to be pregnant," she says.

"Me, too," I say, and offer her a glass.

She doesn't take it. She walks to the kitchen and reaches into the cabinet where we stow the cigarettes. She grabs the pack and throws it in the trash. "I want us to have a child," she says.

"I get it," I say. "It would be nice."

"You're not listening." Liz starts setting up coffee for the morning.

"Let me do that, please." I scoop some grounds into the brew basket. "I think there are things that need to happen before we can have a kid, right? Like for one, maybe we should wait until they figure out what that *pond* is all about."

Liz grabs the coffee from me and adds more grounds. "The pond? Get real, Pete. It's never going to feel like the perfect time to have a baby. And maybe *you* should figure out what the pond is all about," she says.

"Okay, let's say we have a baby. What if one of us dies? Or all of us. Then what?" I say.

"You promised you wouldn't say dumb shit like that. I'm not going to live like that with you anymore."

"And then there's my sister and whatever comes with that mess."

I refill my glass and offer her some again. She refuses, and then she yells "Clear!" and punches me in the heart.

WHEN LIZ COMES OUT OF THE SHOWER, I hold her and tell her I'm sorry. She's wrapped in one of our bleached-out bath towels and her wet hair dampens my T-shirt. We dance slowly to something nice⁵ from K's playlist, something with a soothing synth bass that makes the dancing easy.

“You’re trying to be sweet,” she says.

Yeah, the romance of it all makes me feel silly and self-conscious, but I go ahead and say this anyway. “I love you, but what if . . . ”

“Our fears,” Liz says.

“Never go away?”

“They won’t.”

“We learn to move to the beat?”

SO HERE WE ARE at the survivalist expo. It’s in the old Pontchartrain Center, which is surrounded by an expansive concrete parking lot and a rain-stained levee system that looms over the whole show. Past the full-height turnstiles, the scene is mostly paranoid white men in ill-fitting camo T-shirts, Confederate flag T-shirts, or camo Confederate flag T-shirts. As soon as Benito and I finagle our way through the old turnstiles, pretty much all eyes are on the young Mexican man wearing the Club América jersey that is Benito.

I stop, but Benito takes what seem like, in this place, bold strides to a table full of military-issue medic kits. He shuffles through them, flipping open the rucksacks and inspecting the contents. From there, he goes to tables of freeze-dried foods, powdered soups, Geiger counters, tasers, ammo, essential oils, to all kinds of Confederate flag, assault rifle, and build-the-wall apparel. I start to regret our coming.

But here we are at *the* survivalist expo. I peruse a table of pocketknives not because I need a pocketknife but because I’m trying to distract myself from my discomfort. I then see that Benito, who must be familiar with a discomfort like this, is at a table of what looks like a thousand boxes of survival blankets.

“Yes, everybody should have one. Get many,” he says.

“Right,” I say.

I tug on Benito’s elbow. “I’ll be straight with you,” I say, “I think we’re surrounded by a bunch of fucking wackos.”

“Cuidado, buey,” says Benito.

And then, there he is again, that frightening man, the armed khaki-clad man who follows Benito everywhere. He is charging through the turnstiles without even paying.

“I think we need to go, Benito.”

“I need to get some blankets. They are good stocking stuffers. I give them to my sisters every year.”

I turn for the exit and try to drag Benito with me, but he puts me in what I will call a very loving headlock. It invites me to just sort of relax and go with it, which I do. The frightening man in khaki stands at the end of the table, his hand resting on his pistol, as always.

“Nobody can survive alone, Sack,” Benito says. “Buy some blankets for you and your loved ones.” He tightens his lock on my head and I succumb, handing over my debit card to the vendor. I’m surprised to find out that a box of ten SOL (which stands for Survive Outdoors Longer) Survival Blankets is only forty dollars. Benito and I each buy a box.

“Now let’s go,” I say. I return the favor and place Benito in a similarly loving headlock, dragging him through the turnstiles.

WE SLOUCH in the truck bed, say grace together, and slurp oysters.

I level my eyes with the bed wall and scan the convention center parking lot for the khaki-clad man with the pistol. He stands about thirty yards away from us, leaning against the hood of a navy-blue Chevy Caprice.

“Do you see that man over there?” I whisper. “The scary dude that keeps looking our way?”

Benito stands up, puts his hand to his head to shield his eyes from the sun, and surveys the parking lot. “Which one, Sack?” he says.

I think I get his point. “Never mind.” I pull a couple of silver bullets from the cooler.

After a handful of rounds, who cares. Some of the old Staten Island hip-hop⁶ is rattling from my busted speakers. The sun is setting. We dance in the truck bed with the metalized survival blankets draped over our shoulders and crackling in the wind.

“This is my two weeks, Sack,” yells Benito.

“You might as well use up your sick time and not come in tomorrow.”

“You don’t want to do the lawns tomorrow?”

“No need. I’m moving us to a wild design.”

IT’S CLASS TIME and I’m a little hungover. And unfortunately, it’s the last class, and then the summer will come and it will be hot. Liz and I will be slightly more broke, we will love it, and we will miss teaching some of the time, but not most of the time. And then, will we ever teach again?

I still get anxious during those ten minutes leading up to every class. It’s

my rush, if you will. I think it's cool that after six years, I still feel like I'm going to puke right before.

I walk into our room and notice right away that my students, who all, except for maybe three, actually like me, are shifting a little self-consciously in their seats, some of them are giggling, some are just playing it cool. I freeze in my tracks. No doubt, something is up, something is different, but what it is I can't exactly decide. I survey the room. I look at all of them, sitting in their usual seats around the seminar table. What is up?

"What is up?" I ask.

Some snickering.

"I repeat, what is up?"

Then it smacks me silly. They are all wearing clothes just like me, exactly like my choice garb. That is: T-shirt (preferably a rock band T-shirt), unbuttoned patterned button-up (not flannel!), and jeans. I look under the table. And yes, even Doc Martens.

"I see," I say quietly in feigned lament. "I see." This is part of my teacher shtick. Even a joke, which is at the expense of my shtick, will not force me to abandon the shtick. I am a lovable misfit, a self-effacing, weird, caring guy, or at least that's what I try to get at. It works most of the time; sometimes there are one or two that get particularly irked by it, but fuck them, I guess. And then of course, there are my own failures at my shtick.

I am both embarrassed, being so suddenly made aware of how easily it is to nail "me," but also, so fucking honored.

"First, I'd like to make it clear that I'm not to be confused with a role model," I say. "I am no role model."

I snap a picture of them with my phone; Liz might think it's funny. I consider how much my shtick keeps my students from really knowing me, but then I remind myself that they don't need to know the real me; they are better off not knowing the real me. My shtick is so much better than me. I put my phone away and sit down.

"I appreciate the lesson, weirdos," I say. "What are we supposed to do today? Anything at all?"

"It's the last day," Claire says. "We've done it all. If we haven't figured it out by now, we're fucked. So let's just hang?"

"Sure thing, Claire. You want to Netflix and chill," I say.

"Oh, jeez. That's so wrong," she says.

“I don’t think PB knows what that means,” Rob says.

“Thank you, Rob,” I say. “Will somebody order pizza if I give them my debit card?”

Nobody says anything. I don’t want things to get awkward on the last day, but I’m afraid that’s what we have to live with.

“We’ll miss you, PB,” Claire says.

“Is this how you all feel?” I ask them.

No answer.

“Shall we go to the new university pond? Ponder our existence, what the world requires of us, or whatever?”

“The sinkhole?” says Claire.

“Of course, *you* would call it that, Claire.”

“Our cohort isn’t concerned with stuff like that, PB,” says Rob.

I roll my eyes and stand up. “Max, you’re the line leader,” I say. “Let’s go, everybody.”

AT THE POND, we all get lost in the sight of it for a second. The tree has moss on it now, and it sparkles like silver tinsel in the sun. My students seem actually impressed. Some of them take pictures of it, some take selfies with it in the background.

“Oh gosh, I don’t even have to use a filter for this thing! It’s gorgeous. It even makes us look gorgeous,” Claire says.

And she’s right. It does make all of us look beautiful. It’s like you can see it reflecting in our complexions, this bright blue healthy glow.

“Hey guys,” I say. “What if we studied the composition of the pond?”

“Like a class project? The semester is over, PB,” Rob says.

“So I give you all As, and we keep meeting, like, off the books. For art. For science. For ourselves?”

There is silence. They’re actually thinking on it.

“We could come here every night,” I continue. Still nothing. “Well, I’m doing it. I’m coming here every night at eleven.”

“So late,” Rob says.

“It works,” I say.

“Are you what people might call an *outlier*, PB?” Claire says.

“You can’t really be one if you’re accused of being one,” I say. “But to answer your question, no, I am not an *outlier*, as you say.”

“Right,” Claire says.

“I’m coming here at eleven every night,” I say. “I *can* be that kind of person.”

Max manages to play a popping old rock ’n’ roll piano tune⁷ off of K’s playlist.

My students slowly back away to dance with each other and leave me standing at the pond alone. I text Liz that I’m going to drive to Virginia and visit my sister in a couple of days. “I hope that’s okay.”

She texts back. “I think that’s a great idea.”

MEREDITH IS STARING out her office window, looking across the expanse of the quad, the students laughing and milling about, celebrating the end of the semester.

Meredith turns to me. She’s crying. She has an expression that is the absolute dead-on representation of dread.

“Is everything okay?” I say.

“The grass, Sack, it’s so long all of the sudden. Didn’t you just cut it?”

“Yes, just a few days ago. It looks like it’s growing faster than usual. I wanted to ask actually if we could switch to a different landscape design, a wild design? Also, I wanted to ask for this Friday and next Monday, and maybe Tuesday, off. For a family matter.”

“Sure. Whatever.” She turns back to the window.

“Okay, thanks,” I say. That was too easy. “Wait, to which one, the new landscape or the days off?”

“They seem synergistic to me, Sack.”

“Right.” I’m not sure I know what that means.

“I hope everything is okay with your family,” Meredith says.

“We’ll see. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“They’re selling the school.”

“Is that really how this works, Meredith?”

“As long as nobody cares, yes.”

“Well, I care! I think. I mean, you care. Right?”

“Yes, but they’re already in negotiations with the buyer.”

“The buyer?”

“Come here. I’ll show you.”

I walk over to the window.

She points. “Them,” she says.

There's a cluster of suits. The only suits out there. Maybe the only suits to be out there in a long time. Maybe ever. At some point they start walking and leave enough space between each other that I can actually count them.

"They look corporate. Are we selling to a for-profit or something?"

"I can't say."

And then, as Meredith and I are standing there, looking out the window together, a low-lying fog starts crawling across the entire campus, enveloping everybody up to their knees in a thick, white smoke.

"What in god's name is that?" says Meredith.

"That's not normal," I say.

"No. It's not."

Meredith rushes over to her desk. She activates her speakerphone and dials.

"Captain Richards."

"John, there's smoke of some kind spreading across campus. Is everything okay?" Meredith says.

"Ma'am, it's coming from that sinkhole!"

"The pond?" I interrupt.

"It's billowing up out of the sinkhole," Captain Richards says. "Pouring like an avalanche, coming down a mountain."

Meredith ends the call, her mouth hanging open in wonder.

I'm watching the fog cover every inch of lawn on campus. Students, holding their arms up as if they're wading through water, laugh and spin in circles. The suits are scratching their heads, looking at each other with frowns, as if they might have to revise their plans for the takeover.

Then suddenly, the university emergency PA system comes to life with a song, the volume steadily increasing—an eerie, beautiful psychedelic punk song⁸ I've never heard before, with a high-trebled guitar and piano getting louder and louder.

A group of students, maybe a hundred of them, emerge from the fog in a somewhat messy but choreographed ensemble. Claire and Rob, some of my other students, are among them. They start dancing.

"Did they hack the PA system?" Meredith says.

We watch their synchronized dancing, the fog swirling with the movement of their limbs.

"What could we ever teach them?" I mumble.

And even after the song's end, all of the students just keep dancing and spinning silently in the fog.

A SECOND EMAIL to the old Hotmail account:

BY THE WAY, you still living in gramps old subs??
Plan on coming up for fresh air soon?????
I think you need to play our fav old song before its too late
Its the last one on the list. did you get the playlist

I KNOW THE SONG, of course. We used to listen to it backstage right before she had to go on. But I don't press play because it's too loud. Actually, because I can only play it too loud.

IT'S A DINNER OF POPEYES, and Liz and I are discussing the best way for me to go to Virginia Beach, if I go to Virginia Beach.

"What if she's miraculously all better, or maybe has a few more years in her?"

Liz takes a bite of biscuit and thinks on it. She has a morsel of fried chicken batter stuck in a curl of hair by her jawline.

As if on cue, Dad texts me that K, once again, is back in the hospital. It's weird because it's a relief to hear, but it also means that she's probably, really on the verge again. I wonder how she manages to survive so many detoxes. If anything, it's a lesson in what the body can survive. I consider her suffering; the mean me thinks of a sunbaked worm on the pavement and wonders why the hell the good lord doesn't send a bird along to take it out of its misery.

And I'm always confused that K is alive and Heather isn't. It makes sense physically, but it also doesn't. Heather was taken without any hesitation, a sudden trauma in a car accident, and in that suddenness, her family and I were left still feeling her all around us every day, but no longer seeing or hearing her. But K, somehow surviving death upon death upon death.

Liz chases the biscuit with some sweet tea and looks at my Dad's text. "I think what we're trying to do is the right thing, and not just when we're forced to do the right thing."

"I want to visit my sister, impending death or no impending death."

If I were to see K, would I give her an SOL Survival Blanket? I think I have to go up there and find out.

IT'S ELEVEN AND HERE I AM at the pond, just like I said. There is nobody else, except for a police officer catching z's during his security detail. The camera crews are gone. But there are a couple floodlights, erected by DOTD engineers, beaming down on the pond. I'm stunned by how much more beautiful the pond has gotten over the past week. It seems to have crested, size-wise. But it's still increasing its intensity, as a thing to behold. You can practically hear the glowing blue and the air percolating up and the weird tendriled plants curling and slithering their way around the pond and puckering up as if to explode little bright blooms at any minute. The sound of all that is a humming, and maybe it's the floodlights, but I'm pretty sure it's coming from the pond itself. The tree is bigger, too, and the island of roots from which it grows is higher now above the water's surface. It's like a monument.

"Earth to PB," Claire says.

I turn around and there are Rob and Claire. What do you know? Rob and Claire are here.

"I think I'll just set up right here," I say. "What about y'all?"

"We're not here to work," Rob says.

"Oh?" I say.

"No," Claire says. "We're here to swim."

I look at the officer. I walk over to get a closer look at him. His NOPD patch reads M. COMPASS. He's so at peace in his z's that it seems likely that he'd understand what we're doing here.

"I guess you're good to go," I say.

"You should join us," Claire says. "I have a hunch this thing has super-powers."

"Convincing. By the way, I enjoyed your performance earlier today," I say.

"Rob figured out how to hack the emergency alert system," says Claire.

"That sounds very much in violation of the college code of conduct," I say. "If not illegal."

"We're out of your jurisdiction now, PB," says Rob.

"What about the fog?" I ask. "I don't think we covered anything like that in HORT 222. How'd y'all arrange that?"

"We didn't. It was an unplanned collaboration."

Claire kisses my cheek.

“Inappropriate,” I say.

Rob kisses my other cheek.

“Inappropriate again,” I say.

They strip down to their underwear and dive in. They are quiet. The pond’s humming, the sounds of Rob and Claire’s arms cutting through the water, and the wakes lapping up against the mossy edges of the pond are really all you can hear. At times, Rob and Claire rest and whisper to each other, their bodies treading water so easily.

“Do we know if this water is safe to swim in?” I say. They don’t bother with an answer.

I try to document some imaginary lines, figure out how the pond fits into this world, but mostly I’m staring into the water, looking for something that makes me not scared anymore. Fear is not how I thought I’d end up. When did it creep into my everyday existence?

I peer around my notebook and see Benito at the opposite end of the pond. He’s taking a water sample with a test tube. He holds it up against the light to check its clarity. And then Benito sees me, smiles and gives me a little wave. He is all alone; no more shadowing from the menacing man with the gun. Benito stows his sample in a satchel and disappears into the night.

For a second I consider chasing after him to say hello, to ask what test he plans to run, but my phone suddenly blasts that song,⁹ the one K and I used to listen to backstage before her shows, and I slip on the moss and fall into the pond. The more I kick to the surface, the more it feels like a current is pulling me down, and then, deep below me where the bubbles are rising up from the darkness, I see K, Heather, and even Tom, all swimming, smiling, and laughing.

I kick harder for the surface and break through, taking a deep breath. In the distance, I see Liz in her pirogue paddling toward me. I taste salt. And I’m not too gone to know that there’s no salt in a sinkhole.

-
1. “Pepper” by Butthole Surfers
 2. “Drunken Butterfly” by Sonic Youth
 3. “A Milli” by Lil Wayne
 4. “How Many Times” by Dope Lemon
 5. “Oh Baby” by LCD Soundsystem
 6. “Liquid Swords” by Genius/GZA
 7. “The Big Beat” by Fats Domino
 8. “La femme ressort” by La Femme
 9. “Negative Creep” by Nirvana

Kendra Allen

THE SUPER SADNESS! FEELS LIKE ANGER, WHICH FEELS LIKE

Foreskin. A default setting. Stomach churns after
midnight. Dry eyes. Sunday morning worship.
Hesitation at an intersection. Changed passwords.
Premature adulthood. Missed deadlines. Fitted
sheets. Freelancing. Yes maybe. Momentum. Ashy
knuckles. Hypervigilance. Corn stubs stuck between my gap.
A sucked-in stomach. Syncing.
Infantile embroidery. Showtime. The next step. Primary colors.
My pocketbook. Learned behavior. An exit. Intermediate
hand gripping. When my grandmother was supposed to turn a hundred
yesterday but forgot all them years ago. Resolution. Yardsticks. Small talk. An incubator.
Groupthink. A Ferris wheel. Melodrama. Accidentally
swallowing water at the bottom of a three foot pool. Meaning to swallow water at the bottom
of a three foot pool. Not drowning. Sex sometimes. Compulsive eating. A fed family
Liquidated compensation. Weakened breaths after
walking up a flight of steps. A glitch. Controlled air
conditioning. Method acting. A book release party.
Crashing. An accessory. Writing what I do and wishing
I felt better. Staying together. I'll air all this shit out. Thighs
chafing. Losing my life. Gnats in a kitchen. Cotton
candy. The end of "Throw Away." 635 heading to Mesquite.
Mesquite. Light voices. Black exploitation. An
isolation. Everything. Hyphenated. Promotion. An expiration
date. My idol in mourning state. An organization.
Getting to know you. Room temperature water and the sun is out.
A fan blowing hot air. What I always wanted.

AN EXCERPT FROM
EVRIPIDES'



THE TROJAN WOMEN



A COMIC BY ROSANNA BRUNO
TEXT BY ANNE CARSON






ENTER POSEIDON, A LARGE VOLUME OF WATER
MEASURING 600 CLEAR CUBIC FEET

POSEIDON:

TROY, I'LL GIVE YOU TROY:
JUST A BIG OLD HOTEL,
LUXURIOUS, DAMP AND FULL OF SPIES.
IT CROUCHED ON THE PLAIN
LIKE JAMES BALDWIN
WITH ITS EYELIDS DRIFTING DOWN AND DRIFTING UP.
YOU KNOW THAT POEM OF FREDERICK SEIDEL
WHERE JAMES BALDWIN IS A LEOPARD?
THE LEOPARD KILLS AND EATS ITS TRAINER EVERY DAY.
WELL, GOODBYE TO ALL THAT.
TROY KILLS AND EATS NO MORE.



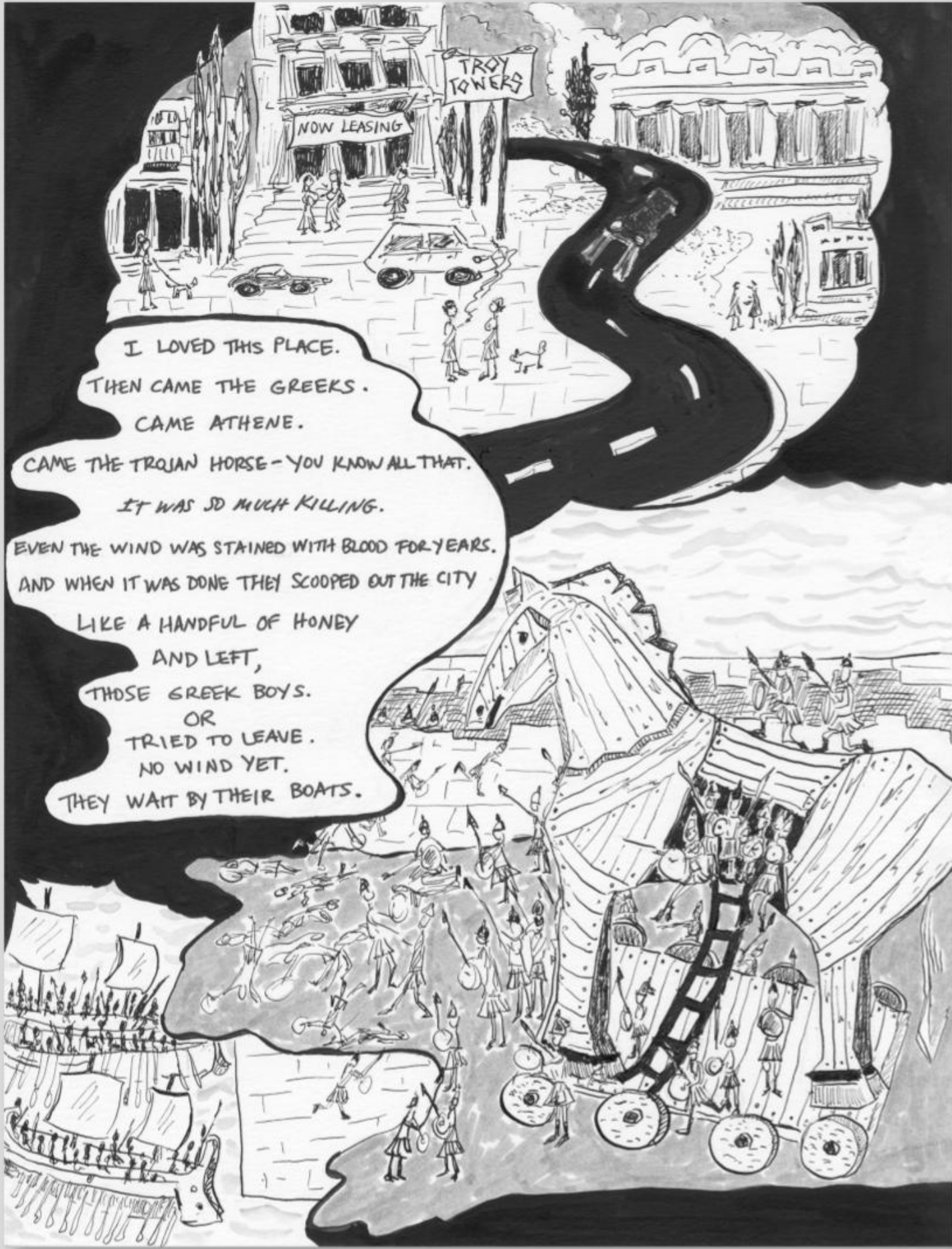


I AM POSEIDON, GOD OF THE SEA.
I CONTROL OCEANS,
WINDS, WAVES, WEATHER, TRAVEL BY WATER, DEATH BY WATER, ETC.
MY FUNCTION HERE IS TO "PROLOGUE" THE PLAY.

SET:
LOOK BEHIND ME, THAT PILE OF RUBBLE, TROY.

TIME:
DAY AFTER THE WAR -
A DAY AS LONG AS THE REST OF THEIR LIVES
FOR SOME, e.g.
THAT MOB OF DOGS AND COWS YOU SEE
DOWNSTAGE -
PRISONERS OF WAR,
LEFTOVER FEMALES,
BRAINS BRIMMING.
THEY'LL NEVER GET TO USE THEIR BRAINS AGAIN - SLAVES DON'T
THEY BARK AND WAIL - IGNORE IT.

STORY SO FAR.
I BUILT TROY - IT WAS ME AND APOLLO
DRAGGED THE STONES UP FROM THE BEACH,
WE BUILT BOULEVARDS,
WE DREAMED OF HEADLIGHTS GOING GHOSTING THROUGH
THE FOG.



I LOVED THIS PLACE.
THEN CAME THE GREEKS.
CAME ATHENE.
CAME THE TROJAN HORSE - YOU KNOW ALL THAT.
IT WAS SO MUCH KILLING.
EVEN THE WIND WAS STAINED WITH BLOOD FOR YEARS.
AND WHEN IT WAS DONE THEY SCOOPED OUT THE CITY
LIKE A HANDFUL OF HONEY
AND LEFT,
THOSE GREEK BOYS.
OR
TRIED TO LEAVE.
NO WIND YET.
THEY WAIT BY THEIR BOATS.

I'LL DEPART SOON MYSELF
RELIGION'S GONE OUT OF BUSINESS HERE
NOTHING LEFT OF TROY NOW BUT THE DOGS AND COWS -AND HELEN:
SHE'S OVER THERE, DO YOU SEE, BY THE FENCE, POLISHING HER DEW
CLAWS.
HEKABE'S THE ONE LYING FLAT ON THE GROUND.
SHE'S TOP BITCH.



AT FIRST SHE OBJECTED TO HELEN PENNED UP WITH THE DOGS
AND COWS, BUT HELEN JUST
SNAPPED HER JAWS AND WENT TO SLEEP.
SO HEKABE DID TOO.



HEKABE'S BEEN MURDERED SO MANY TIMES, NO SPIT LEFT IN HER.
SHE LOST PRIAM, LOST POLYXENA, LOST ALL LEGENDARY 50 SONS.
HAS ONE DAUGHTER SURVIVING - KASSANDRA,
WHO'S CRAZY,
AND SLATED FOR AGAMEMNON'S BED.
GOODBYE CIVILIZATION OF TROY.
AH, HERE'S ATHENE!

ENTER ATHENE, A BIG PAIR OF OVERALLS, CARRYING AN OWL MASK IN ONE HAND



A: NO LONG FACES, POSEIDON.
WAR'S OVER.

CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?

P: CAN I PREVENT YOU?

A: NO. HERE IT IS. A PROPOSAL OF INTEREST TO US BOTH.

P: IS THIS A MEMO FROM UPSTAIRS? LIKE ZEUS?

A: OH NO. IT'S JUST - I'M FEELING SAD FOR THE TROJANS.

P: YOU? YOU HATE TROY! YOU HAPPILY SAW IT FLATTENED TO THE GROUND!

A: TIME TO LET ALL THAT GO, SWEETIE.

YOU AND I ARE ON THE SAME TEAM NOW.

P: WHICH TEAM IS THAT?

A: OKAY FORGET TEAMS. THE TROJANS WERE MY ENEMIES ONCE BUT NOW I
WANT TO CHECK THEM UP AND GIVE THE GREEKS A REALLY BAD VOYAGE
HOME.



P: ARE LOVE AND HATE SO COMPLETELY INTERCHANGEABLE FOR YOU?

A: YOU KNOW THE GREEKS INSULTED ME? DEFILED MY TEMPLES?

P: I KNOW AJAX DRAGGED KASSANDRA OFF BY FORCE.

A: AND THE OTHER GREEKS STOOD BY WITH FOLDED ARMS.

P: YET THEY COULD NEVER HAVE SACKED TROY WITHOUT YOU.

A: EXACTLY. SO NOW I WANT TO MAKE THEM PAY. YOU CAN HELP.

P: REALLY. WELL, WHY NOT. HOW?


A: I PLAN TO RUIN THEIR HOMECOMING.

P: ON LAND OR SEA?




AS SOON AS THEY START GRINDING THE WAVES WESTWARD, ZEUS WILL BLACKEN THE AIR WITH WIND AND RAIN AND HAIL UNSPEAKABLE, AND I'LL GET HIS THUNDERBOLT AND BLAST THEM TO BLAZES. MEANWHILE YOU PILE UP SOME OF YOUR THREE-MILE-HIGH WAVES, SPIN THE SURF INTO PEAKS AND CRAM THE EUBOEAN GULF WITH CORPSES. I TRUST YOU SEE THE POINT HERE. THE POINT IS REVERENCE. THEY HAVE TO LEARN TO RAISE THEIR ARMS TO LORD ATHENE!





P: SURE, WELL ANYWAY, IT LOOKS LIKE FUN. I'LL EXPLODE THE VERY SALT OF THE AEGEAN ALL THE WAY TO MYKONOS AND DELOS, FILL EVERY GULF AND INLET WITH THE BODIES OF DROWNED MEN! GO GET YOUR THUNDER BOLTS AND WATCH FOR WHEN THE GREEKS LET OUT THEIR SAILS - POOR CLOWNS! THEY NEED A LESSON! WHY?
BECAUSE THEY BROKE SOMETHING OF OURS.
BECAUSE THEY SQUEAK WHEN THEY DIE.
BECAUSE WE CAN.



EXIT A AND P. AS HEKABE, AN ANCIENT EMACIATED SLED DOG OF FILTH AND WRATH, LIFTS HER HEAD



START ME UP, NOSTRILS.
START ME UP, LEFT LEG.
TROY IS NO MORE.
WE ARE NO MORE.
OUR LUCK CHANGED.
TRICKY GOD, THAT LUCK.

AM I SUPPOSED TO CRY OUT SOMETHING LIKE AUIS! AUIS!-
BECAUSE MY HOMELAND IS A RUIN,
MY CHILDREN WIPED OUT,
MY HUSBAND MURDERED
AND A WHOLE HIERARCHY OF ANCESTORS ERASED AS IF THEY HAD NEVER
BEEN?




SILENCE IS JUST AS GOOD.
OR IS SILENCE TOO GOOD?
WHAT ARE WORDS FOR?
HAVE I EVER BEEN AS BAD AS THIS?
NO, I HAVE NEVER BEEN AS BAD AS THIS.



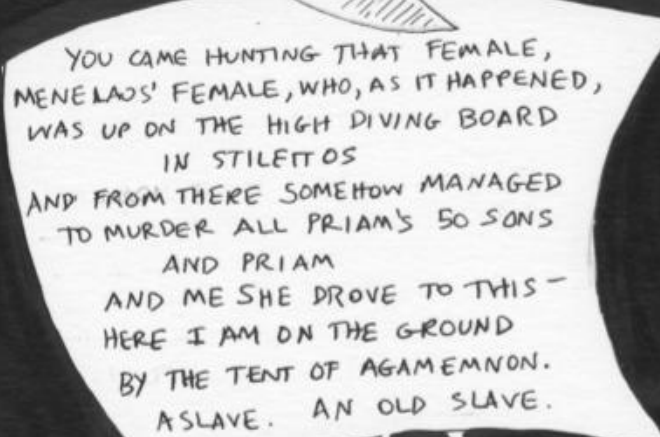
CAN'T TURN OVER.

CAN'T TURN MY FACE TO THE WALL- THERE IS NO WALL!
ALL MY BRUISED DECADES ARE RATTLING THEIR VERDICTS TO CRY OUT-
WHAT ARE CRIES FOR?
CAN WE STRANGLE THE MUSE?

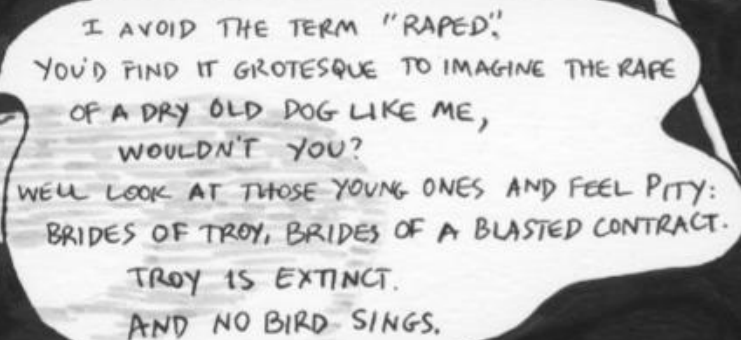




I HATE SHIPS. I HATE GREEK SHIPS,
YOU WITH YOUR PATHOLOGICAL PROWS
AND YOUR SPASMS OF OAR
AND THE ORIGINAL SIN OF YOUR SAILS—
ONE SCORCHING NOON
YOU CAME LICKING AND LAPPING
AT THE SHORE OF TROY,



YOU CAME HUNTING THAT FEMALE,
MENE LAOS' FEMALE, WHO, AS IT HAPPENED,
WAS UP ON THE HIGH DIVING BOARD
IN STILETTOS
AND FROM THERE SOMEHOW MANAGED
TO MURDER ALL PRIAM'S 50 SONS
AND PRIAM
AND ME SHE DROVE TO THIS—
HERE I AM ON THE GROUND
BY THE TENT OF AGAMEMNON.
ASLAVE. AN OLD SLAVE.



I AVOID THE TERM "RAPED!"
YOU'D FIND IT GROTESQUE TO IMAGINE THE RAPE
OF A DRY OLD DOG LIKE ME,
WOULDN'T YOU?
WE'LL LOOK AT THOSE YOUNG ONES AND FEEL PITY:
BRIDES OF TROY, BRIDES OF A BLASTED CONTRACT.
TROY IS EXTINCT.
AND NO BIRD SINGS.



ENTER CHORUS OF COWS AND DOGS, SINGING ENTRANCE SONG OF THE CHORUS ANTIPHONALLY WITH HEKABE

CH: WHAT ARE THOSE CRIES?

H: OH MY CHILDREN.



CH: ARE THE GREEKS ON THE MOVE?

H: WHO CAN KNOW.



CH: DO THEY PUSH FOR HOME?

H: PLEASE NOT KASSANDRA.



CH: DID I HEAR THE WORD SLAVERY?

H: STIFFEN YOUR SOULS.

CH: HAS THE HERALD COME?

H: IT'S THE LOTTERY NOW.



CH: WHOSE SLAVE WILL I BE?

CH: WHOSE SLAVE WILL I BE?

CH: WHOSE SLAVE WILL I BE?

CH: WHOSE SLAVE WILL I BE?



H: WHOSE SLAVE WILL I BE?



CH: SAY, MR. WHITE SLAVER,
DO YOU HAVE A NICE HOUSE?
WILL THE WORK INVOLVE DIRT?

WILL THE WORK INVOLVE SEX?

DOES BLOOD COME FROM YOUR PHONE?
DO I EVER GET BUTTER?

OH!
HERE'S THE HERALD
FROM THE GREEK CAMP
WITH INFORMATION
ABOUT EACH
ONE'S
SPECIFIC
DESTINATION.



ENTER TALHYBIUS,
A COLOSSAL RAVEN WHO
FLOPS DOWN NEAR H



TALHYBIUS HERE. YOU KNOW ME.

LADIES, THIS IS IT.

THE LOTS ARE DRAWN.

WHERE DO I GO? THESSALY? SPARTA?

EACH OF YOU TO A DIFFERENT PLACE.

GIVE US THE LIST.

I DON'T HAVE A LIST. ASK ONE BY ONE.

KASSANDRA?

AGAMEMNON GETS HER.

AS A SLAVE FOR HIS WIFE?

NO, TO SERVE HIS OWN BED.

SHE'S A VIRGIN CONSECRATED TO APOLLO!

NOT ANY MORE.

THROW DOWN, MY CHILD, YOUR SACRED INSIGNIA.

A KING'S BED IS NOT NOTHING.

AND MY YOUNGER CHILD?

POLYXENA?

POLYXENA.



ASSIGNED TO WATCH ACHILLES' TOMB.

ACHILLES

WATCH THE TOMBS? THAT'S WEIRD. SOME OLD GREEK CUSTOM?

LET'S JUST SAY SHE FEELS NO PAIN.

OH I DON'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT.

'TIS FATE UNSHUNNABLE, AS THE POETS SAY.

I PASS ON, WHAT OF ANDROMACHE?

ASSIGNED TO THE SON OF ACHILLES.

AND ME. DOG OF A THOUSAND YEARS. WHO'S MY MASTER?

ODYSSEUS OWNS YOU NOW.

NO. NO. NO.
THAT TOAD.
THAT PLAGUE.
THAT DOUBLE-TONGUED TWISTER OF LOVE INTO HATE,
THAT VAPOUR OF EVERYTHING POISONED.
NO.

REPEATS NO, FADING VOLUME

NO NO

NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO NO

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NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO

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Maya C. Popa

LETTERS IN WINTER

There is not one leaf left on that tree
on which a bird sits this Christmas morning,

the sky heavy with snow that never arrives,
the sun itself barely rising. In the overcast

nothingness, it's easy to feel afraid,
overlooked by something that was meant

to endure. It's difficult today to think clearly
through pain, some actual,

most imagined; future pain I try lamely
to prepare myself for by turning your voice

over in my mind, or imagining the day
I'll no longer hug my father, his grip

tentative but desperate all the same.
At the café, a woman describes lilacs

in her garden. She is speaking of spring,
the life after this one. The first thing

to go when I shut the book between us
is the book; silence, its own alphabet,

and still something so dear about it.
It will be spring, I say over and over.

I'll ask that what I lost not grow back.

I see how winter is forbidding:

it grows the heart by lessening everything else
and demands that we keep trying.

I am trying. But oh, to understand us,
any one of us, and not to grieve?

Sventa

MAXIM OSIPOV

Vnukovo is the smallest, most intimate of Moscow's airports, and when your flight arrives—especially if it arrives on Saturday at eleven at night—you don't expect to see much of a crowd. Stamps in the passport, baggage claim—quick and easy.

“Where are you coming from?”

“Vilnius.”

“What's in the bag?”

Nothing special: books, cheese. No food embargo rules violated—entry granted. But then, at the exit, you're in for a surprise: a phalanx of men. This is the sort of throng that might greet a plane from Tbilisi, but these people don't look Georgian. And no solicitations either—no “taxi, cheap taxi, taxi into town, very cheap.” It's eerily quiet. You begin to squeeze your way through the crowd, and there's no end in sight. The men don't step aside, but neither do they block you deliberately; they

just stand there. It's as if these muscular, beardless, middle-aged guys in dark jackets and coats simply don't see you. If the wheels of your suitcase happen to roll over their feet, they won't snap at you, won't even say a word. You feel you could pinch or poke them and they still wouldn't move. They're like an incomprehensible force out of some bad dream: Who are they? Where are they going? On some kind of pilgrimage? The hajj? You'll get to the bottom of this: Where's security? Police?

Once you fight your way to the glass door, you find that it's locked—and beyond it, on the street, there's another crowd. But this one is more diverse, made up of both men and women. A policeman is stationed by the door. He's holding a vessel of some kind. Of course: an oil lamp. Well, it took you a while. It's Holy Saturday. The crowds are waiting for the Holy Fire to land.

“Special aircraft. From Tel Aviv.”

“*Rak zeh haser lanu*”—that's all we need. The only Hebrew you know.

After an hour or two, the “special aircraft” will land, the television cameras will capture the clergy and the authorities lighting the beardless men's oil lamps, and these lamps will travel all over Moscow, the suburbs, and the neighboring districts. Once the men leave, everyone else will be allowed to pass through the glass door. The story's been all over the papers, TV: people have flocked to Vnukovo from far and wide—“We've been coming for six years” and “We have faith in our people, in our country.”

Stay calm. No reason to panic. The policeman gestures with his hand. “The third exit's operational.”

You have to push your way through again, suitcase in tow. Welcome back from Lithuania.

“WHAT FEELINGS DOES THIS PLACE EVOKE in you?” the literary correspondent of the Zarasai paper asks in English after your book launch. She's the only person in attendance who doesn't speak any Russian. Tomas, your Lithuanian translator and publisher, watches the exchange.

“For me, Zarasai is not so much a place as it is a time in my life. I won't find better words: *paradise lost*.”

The young woman is wary. Does the gentleman miss the USSR? “No, no. I only miss that time when my parents were alive.”

“So is this your first visit to independent Lithuania?”

To independent Lithuania, yes: the first. It's good not to feel like an occupier. Upon arriving you took a quick jaunt through Vilnius, liked everything, but couldn't wait to get back here, to the Zarasai of your youth. You have a look around: a new library by the lake (the whole town is on the shore); the café from the early seventies, with the interior columns (now shuttered; they used to serve two-course lunches); the Catholic church. The Soviet statue of the girl with the rifle (Marytė Melnikaitė) is gone without a trace, as if it were never there. And as is usual in these provincial towns, the natural landscape is more attractive than anything man has constructed.

"Why haven't you visited us before?"

No good answer. All you can do is shrug. Almost forty years earlier, your father sent you a letter from here: "It's so quiet, so peaceful—in the house, outside. There's almost no one around these days, which is probably why they're so polite to me even at the post office. From time to time you forget you're a seedy Muscovite with an overburdened conscience. You begin to see the world differently—it sinks in, penetrates."

And here is your own diary entry from fifteen years ago: "I want to go back to Zarasai, where I spent so much time—every summer, many years in a row. And instead I fly here, fly there—to places one has to visit, places it would be a shame not to see—but never to Zarasai. That means I'm not living my own life."

It's windy here, clean. The soil is sandy, and the locals like to keep things tidy. It's ... desolate.

"Peaceful?" the young correspondent suggests with a smile.

Yes, that's better. You say goodbye.

"Come back in the summer. Bring everyone."

That would be nice. But the people with whom you used to come to Zarasai aren't around anymore. One now lives in San Francisco, another in Amsterdam. You fell out with a third. Several others, including your parents and your sister, have died. And so you set out for the peninsula alone. It's about two kilometers away, on the south side of the lake. You remember the road—no need for GPS or any other guides.

A LINE FROM ONE OF IVAN ELAGIN'S POEMS comes to mind. "A house stood here." This one was two floors, made of stone. Not a sign of it. Demolished. After the owners died (that much you knew), the children

divvied up the inheritance and sold the house. But the buyers didn't like the style, so they tore it down, along with all the extensions and outbuildings. Razed everything to the ground. They wanted to build something of their own, but apparently ran out of money. The neighbors give you the story. They remember your family, a little.

Strange. It was a strong, solid house—with a huge balcony, big enough for a dining table. Your family would eat out there some evenings. You had a neighbor over, a fellow Muscovite, the spitting image of Sergei Rachmaninoff. Over tea, he told you he was the Communist Party organizer at his institute. “What an honor,” Mom said wryly. Mom was usually quiet, especially in comparison with Dad, but every once in a while she'd come out with something like this, some inopportune aside. She was only ever here in July and August, while Dad might come any time of year. In the summers he lived upstairs, and in the winters down on the ground floor, approximately where you're standing right this minute. “And now a bird goes flying through / the empty space that was a window.” Poems are well and good, but the disappearance of the house really does set you back on your heels: stone, it turns out, is also short-lived. Disheartening—although, of course, there are worse things in this world. And besides, you're neither Nabokov nor Proust. Go down to the water through the pines, across the cushiony moss. The tall old pines, the slender saplings by the lake, the thickets of reeds—still there, just where you left them.

A memory: August '78—you're about to turn fifteen. You and your classmate Kharitoshka, a friend for life, have set sail in a dinghy. The vessel's name is the *Dolphin*—made in East Germany, patched up every which way (back then people used to fix things, not toss them away), two sliding centerboards on the sides to prevent drift and give directional stability. A maritime adventure on Lake Zarasas. You man the jib, Kharitoshka the mainsail and the tiller. Working to windward—lean out! “So long, dear mother! Farewell, my sweet! / I'm off to join the Baltic Fleet!” But one of your centerboards has broken off, and you just can't get the dinghy out of the bay. The waves keep pushing you back to the shore. You take turns trying, halfheartedly, to paddle out. Dad is watching from the jetty. He's already had to wade into the cold water and push you out of the reeds several times. Avast! Kharitoshka has an idea: “We should get some epoxy. Glue the goddamn board . . .”

“Epoxy, eh?” Standing waist-deep in water, Dad launches into a lengthy speech. *Jackasses* is the warmest word he can find for you two.

From then on, *epoxy* was the family shorthand for useless ideas. As for the dinghy, you see it later, on film, when you begin to sort through the archive. The early sixties: the *Dolphin* has a motor and no mast; Dad’s at the stern; mom is water-skiing on the Oka. After Dad died, you grew busier, more impetuous. Now it’s time to take on another set of responsibilities: framing photos, maintaining the archive.

After you learn that the house is gone, the disappearance of the little bathhouse doesn’t come as a shock—it was wooden, dilapidated. Everyone always bathed on Saturdays, and on Fridays they’d bring water up from the lake, gather wood for the fire. “We did good work,” you once said to Juozas, the bathhouse’s tall, skinny owner. You were ten. Juozas’s huge, strong hands were black with dirt, and you wanted very badly for him to like you. “Yes, we sure showed those bastards,” he replied dreamily. Juozas smoked unfiltered cigarettes. The smell of burned matches and so on. If you wanted to, you could also reminisce about all sorts of bathhouse escapades—but again, this is a travelogue, not Fellini’s *Amarcord*.

And so, no more house, no more bathhouse, and even the jetty has been replaced with something tastelessly sturdy. Don’t get stuck here, on the peninsula. Go get Tomas and drive to Sventa, but first—the forest.

THE WOMAN AT THE LIBRARY gives you and Tomas directions: take the highway to Degučiai, turn off toward Dusetos, then, after the second bus stop, look for the marker. “At this site, on August 26, 1941, eight thousand Jews were murdered by German Fascists.” The mention of Jews on the obelisk had always seemed impossibly brave to you; in the days of your youth, the word was used strictly in special cases—only when the authorities couldn’t very well call them Soviet citizens, as they did on the monument at Babi Yar. Behind it, a ravine, overgrown with grass. Two hundred thousand Lithuanian Jews are buried in such ravines.

De-Sovietization has not left the monument untouched: the Russian inscription was removed. Was it right to do that? In this case, you would have kept it, but it’s not for you to decide. Now there are two inscriptions, one in Yiddish and the other in Lithuanian. The Yiddish reads: “Here lie eight thousand Jews from Zarasai and the surrounding region, who perished

cruelly at the hands of Nazi murderers and their collaborators on August 26, 1941. Blessed be the memory of the innocent victims.” The Lithuanian version adds a clarification: “their *local* collaborators.”

Some of the locals also saved Jews. Some began by shooting them but wound up saving them, and some even took the opposite route—hard to believe, but it’s true.

The place is spick and span: a fence, a neatly trimmed little hedge, a Star of David on the obelisk, candles, Israeli flags, and stones on the pedestal. Someone has brought a little handmade cross. This isn’t how it used to be.

“The lot of Lithuanians,” says Tomas, “is to be patient, to mourn.”

Everyone around here knows the old joke: for his last wife, a man should pick a Lithuanian woman, so that he’ll have someone to look after his grave. No, these aren’t Mandelstam’s “women kin to the damp earth,” whose calling is to accompany the dead; on the contrary—they take the simplest, most practical approach to life’s most difficult challenges.

On the way to the hotel you remember a short, gloomy old man, about sixty—one of the locals—with a face darkened by drink. He was a mechanic or an electrician, rode around on a motorcycle with a sidecar, and had done some time in prison. “Polacks? Kill ’em all. Russians? Kill ’em all. Yids”—eyes raised to Dad’s face—“every other one.”

He’d never get away with that now, but back then you had to put up with it, grudgingly: after all, you were the occupiers. *Žydai*—so painful to a Russian Jew’s ear—but it’s the only word for “Jews” in Lithuanian. This old man also saw himself as a victim, in every possible way. And well into the mid-’50s, Radio Free Europe gave him and his Forest Brothers hope: hang in there, fellas—another world war is just around the corner.

YOUR FAMILY USED TO DRIVE DOWN to Sventa for the whole day—with blankets, books, and food, with a volleyball, with tin cups for picking blueberries and baskets for picking mushrooms. There were holes in the car’s floorboard. You could watch the asphalt beneath you. The transmission was, needless to say, manual. How you and Dad laughed at Mom when she returned from her first trip to the States, back in the late eighties, and reported that new cars had no clutch pedals. You told her she was wrong, and she agreed: you knew better about these things. And how you wish you could share this simple pleasure with your dad, this piece of automotive perfection

you're now driving, though it's only rented. No need to ask for directions this time. You have your GPS. It suggests Lake Svente—Sventes ezers—just what you need. These Baltic languages and their superfluous *s*'s. Your name is “Maksimas” now: it's right there on the book.

A border crossing? Is Sventa really in Latvia? Yes, sure—after all, you did use to drive to Daugavpils whenever you needed anything from an actual city. There they had a prison, and Lenin by the train station, wearing his cap with earflaps even in the blazing heat. LitSSR, LatSSR—borders weren't such serious business back then. And here's the familiar gravelly road where you learned to drive. And here's the forest, shabby and sickly. Everything is familiar: the road and the forest.

Apparently there aren't that many tourists these days, and one can drive right up to the water. Sventa was never crowded—one of the reasons you loved it—but it used to be a state reserve: no campfires, no cars. Everything else is exactly as you remember it: that sand, that little punt with its tarred, shiny bottom, and that old rotted jetty—how you missed the jetty. You walk out on it and find yourself ankle-deep in water. Then you dry your feet and look around.

“Why are you blowing your horn, young man? / Lie in this coffin—it's warm, young man.” Wasn't it there, hiding behind those trees, that you blasted your trumpet for all to hear? Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*—you thought your roaring was music. “No rhythm, but, on the other hand, no tune.” Your pianist friend, the one who's now in Amsterdam, persuaded you to drop the trumpet and pick up the flute—a quiet, sensitive instrument—but you never got a feel for it. Your sense of joy is still somehow linked to the sound of a trumpet.

On the mysteries of happiness ... Your father ended his last letter with this thought: “We're together. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we don't. And I no longer ask myself whether life worked out. I catch myself thinking: Maybe this is happiness?” You try to tell Tomas about your parents, but how can you communicate the mystery at the core of any individual? It's harder than translating poetry.

“Trouble can find us any day. It can find anyone, of course, but especially us. Our goal should be to minimize our fear of trouble”—your father always remembered how, in '52 and '53 (the Doctors' Plot and so on), he couldn't find even the simplest, lowliest job, how he'd almost hoped for the mass deportation

to the Far East: as long as all the Jews were together, among their own kind. His letters were meant to instruct, to tell you something important, while your mother's were a means to prolong her silence. "I spent the whole day as if I were on a train. I'd just wake up then fall back asleep. Didn't do a thing. And now I'm just babbling, because you can't leave a letter blank."

You stand by the water a little longer, have a smoke, think a few things you can't share, eat a mandarin. It's a bit dead around here. So quiet. Quiet as a graveyard.

And only after returning to the hotel and studying an actual map do you realize your mistake. Sventes, Šventas, Šventoji—Holy Lake and Holy River—such names are found on either side of the Latvia-Lithuania border. Lake Šventas—what your family always called Sventa—is where you wanted to go. How did you get so lost, so turned around? Blame it on the haček: Šventas ežeras is south of Zarasai, toward Turmantas, not up north in Latvia. Hačeks, by the way, were invented by Jan Hus.

Later, Tomas says, "But Maxim, you recognized everything: the road, the lake."

"True. I did."

ON THE WAY TO VILNIUS, you compare impressions of Zarasai. For Tomas, the highlights of the trip were the massive trucks rumbling along the cobblestones in front of the town's church, the wind, and the hail. But you didn't notice any of that. Memory is an odd faculty: sometimes you'll sit there and listen to an entire concert, but later the only thing you'll remember is that the conductor wore red socks.

Storks and hills, and lots of water. The sky reminds you of the Netherlands, but the landscape is more expressive, because of the hills. Would you like to live here? It's the provinces, yes, but not provincial—not excessively so. Just a country in Eastern Europe. In many ways, worthy of envy. Everything here will get better and better, gradually. That is, if no one interferes.

One of your friends—a woman of advanced years—likes to preface her reminiscences with the words "when I was a pillar of society." Maybe she really had been, way back when. And you also find people in Lithuania who like to remember the good old days, when the Grand Duchy extended to the Black Sea (mainly thanks to successful marriages), but here no one draws practical conclusions from the premise of former greatness.

“You just don’t know the whole truth.” You’ve heard that said countless times by anti-European Russians in Paris, in Rome. That’s all they talk about: people don’t like us here, don’t like us there. My friends, you know where they like us least of all? In Moscow, at home.

“Our goal should be to minimize our fear . . .” You weren’t even twenty when you received that letter. Now you’re past fifty. You say to Tomas, “It’s really quite amazing. Everything has returned. My concerns today are exactly the same as they were some thirty years ago: first, not to sink in the mud, to sully my conscience; second, not to land in jail; and third, not to miss the moment when one ought to leave, forever. And I harbor the same illusory hope I harbored then: that we’ll wake up one day and find ourselves in the clear, with all this darkness behind us.”

The present circumstances, however, force you to stay up at night, keep your eyes peeled, always look behind you. A witty friend will later tell you, somewhat inflating the matter: “Prince Andrey Kurbsky had similar feelings. He, too, ended up in Lithuania.”

“MEET ME AT THE SCRAPYARD,” texts Bóris—your friend Borechka—a great violinist who recently moved here from London. He struggles courageously with Lithuanian suffixes—*žmogus*, *žmonija*, *žmogiūkštis*, *žmogiškumas* (man, mankind, et cetera)—although they say one can get by here with English or Russian.

Borechka wants you to like the city. He shows you around, apologizing for anything unattractive—for instance, the scrapyard. Life here isn’t lavish, but it isn’t too shabby, and, most importantly, there are fewer of the prohibitions, restrictions, barriers, and other torments that have plagued Moscow in recent years. Vilnius is nice: clean, but not spotless. The neighborhood where you’re staying is like a mix between Serpukhov and Paris, and the Old Town is unique.

“Every place has its problems,” says the owner of a literary café with a smile.

He’s an experienced fellow. He’s lived in Israel and America, almost settled in Jordan—he knows what he’s talking about. But does he expect, for example, the special forces (who knows what they’re called here?) to raid his café and take it away from him? Would he be thankful if they didn’t toss him in prison, too—where Amnesty International wouldn’t even think of

getting involved? He's genuinely surprised: No, he expects nothing of the sort. It's a good thing the Soviet Union collapsed! You had also dreamed of that moment, long before you got to Lithuania—back when you were reading *The Pickwick Papers* as an eight-year-old boy. You knew there was a city named London, had seen it in books and on maps, but to see it in life—forget it, son.

“The author is obviously unfamiliar with Viktor Shklovsky's theory of prose,” one of the listeners says, quietly but clearly. He's a huge Lithuanian who works at the Vilnius Observatory. Hard not to be high-minded when you work at an observatory.

The reading, the questions—all in Russian. Who, one wonders, needed this translated book? The answer is clear: the author. “So who's going to buy the booze for the launch?” You heard this somewhere else, but for a similar reason.

The second event is in Užupis, a district of independent artists, with its own jokey constitution and government (in which Tomas occupies a significant position). Here you read your story “Objects in Mirror,” and come to the conversation about escape plans: “‘Houston,’ Ada says thoughtfully. ‘Andryusha, did you know we got an apartment in Vilnius?’ ... Vilnius, they reason, can't save them from everything. But with an Israeli passport ... Oh, they have Israeli passports, too?” And the listeners smile. At the end a Muscovite, about your age, with a doctorate in physics, comes up to you. It turns out that the apartment you're staying in belongs to him. He won't wave his Israeli passport under your nose, but he has one. That means the story rhymes with reality: the answer is a round number, not some nonsensical fraction.

“Come back often—or just move here. Believe me, you'll find a lot to like.”

A friendly chat, a glass of wine—and not only one. “You just don't know the whole truth ...” You haven't heard those words from anyone here. No, this isn't Paris or Rome. On your last day in Vilnius you begin to run into your new friends in the street. Vilnius can distract and entertain you to precisely the right degree. In one of your stories, a mother asks her son: “How could I ever feel sad because you're happy?” Perhaps only one's parents can truly take joy in one's happiness. Enough of that. Be a good passenger: find your seat, keep your chair in the upright position, and fasten your seat belt.

DREAMS FALL AWAY, one after another—some because they come true, but most because they prove pointless. Your father wanted you to become a professor—what good is that now? Or say you find a beautiful cemetery on the other side of the river, make arrangements with the woman in charge, but then—it's all for naught. Turns out there's a quiet, cozy cemetery right here in Tarusa, on your own shore.

There is indeed a lot to like over there—that's true. But there's a lot to like here, too—as long as you find a gap in this solid wall of dark, muscular men blocking the exit. But you've already said everything you had to say about these guys. Remember those you love. Remember the priest who presided at all your family funerals: nobility and simplicity, the best qualities to be found in the Russian people. Think about that, look at the water, and remember Lithuania.

You get home long after midnight. Now you'll log on, pull up Skype, call your family, and read from the first chapter of John, verses one through seventeen—in Old Church Slavonic, English, German, and Russian. That's the kind of Easter you'll have this year.

To the memory of my parents

Tarusa, Russia, April 2017

—*Translated from the Russian by Boris Dralyuk*

Forrest Gander

SEA: NIGHT SURFING IN BOLINAS

Maybe enough light ▪ to score a wave ▪ reflecting moonlight, sand ▪ reflecting moonlight and you ▪ spotting from shore ▪ what you see only ▪ as silhouette against detonating bands ▪ of blue-white effervescence ▪ when the crown of the falling ▪ swell explodes upward ▪ as the underwave blows through it ▪ a flash of visibility quickly ▪ snuffed by night ▪ the surf fizzling and churning ▪ remitting itself to darkness ▪ with a violent stertor ▪ in competition with no other sounds

paddling through dicey backwash ▪ the break zone of ▪ waist-high NW swell ▪ as into a wall of obsidian ▪ indistinguishable from night sky ▪ diving under, paddling fast ▪ and before I sit ▪ one arm over my board ▪ I duck and ▪ listen a moment underwater ▪ to the alien soundscape ▪ not daytime's clicks and whines of ▪ ship engines and sonar ▪ but a low-spectrum hum ▪ the acoustic signature of fish, squid, ▪ crustaceans rising en masse ▪ to feed at the surface I feel ▪ an eerie peacefulness veined with fear

after twenty minutes the eyes ▪ adjust, behind the hand dragging through water ▪ bioluminescent trails ▪ not enough light ▪ to spot boils ▪ or flaws in nearing ▪ waves appear even larger ▪ closing in fast ▪ then five short strokes into a dimensionless ▪ peeler, two S-shaped turns, the ▪ kick out, and from shore ▪ your shout

it is cowardice that turns my eyes ▪ from the now-empty beach ▪ for with you I became ▪ aware of an exceptional chance ▪ I don't believe in ▪ objective description, only ▪ this mess, experience, the perceived ▪ world sometimes shared ▪ in which life doesn't ▪ endure, only ▪ the void endures ▪ but your vitality stirred it ▪ leaving trails of excitation ▪ I've risen from the bottom of ▪ myself to find ▪ I exist in you ▪ exist in me and ▪ against odds I've known even rapture, ▪ rare event, ▪ which calls for ▪ but one witness

CONTRIBUTORS

KENDRA ALLEN is the author of the essay collection *When You Learn the Alphabet*. A book of poems, *The Collection Plate*, will be published by Ecco this summer.

SHERI BENNING's fourth collection of poetry, *Field Requiem*, is forthcoming from Carcanet.

ROSANNA BRUNO is a visual artist based in New York. Her first book, *The Slanted Life of Emily Dickinson*, was published in 2017.

PEYTON BURGESS is the author of *The Fry Pans Aren't Sufficing* and a graduate of New York University's M.F.A. program in creative writing.

ANNE CARSON was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living.

YOHANCA DELGADO's fiction appears in *One Story, A Public Space, Story*, and other publications.

BORIS DRALYUK is a translator, the editor in chief of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and a coeditor of *The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry*.

FORREST GANDER's new book *Twice Alive* is forthcoming from New Directions in May. His collection *Be With* won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

WILLIAM GIRALDI is the author of the novels *Busy Monsters* and *Hold the Dark*, the memoir *The Hero's Body*, and a collection of criticism, *American Audacity*.

MARY KURLA is the author of *Freak Weather Stories*, recipient of the 2016 Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction. A novel, *Away to Stay*, is forthcoming from Regal House in fall.

ELIZABETH MACKLIN is a poet. She translated Kirmen Uribe's *Bilbao–New York–Bilbao* and his first book of poems, *Meanwhile Take My Hand*, from the Basque.

CAMPBELL McGRATH is the author of eleven books, most recently *Nouns & Verbs: New and Selected Poems*.

PAIGE JIYOUNG MOON was born in Seoul in 1984 and moved to the U.S. to attend ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California. She creates small-scale paintings that chronicle her everyday life.

TRACIE MORRIS is the author of eight books, a performer, and a professor of poetry at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

MAXIM OSIPOV is a Russian writer and cardiologist. *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, his first collection in English, was published in 2019.

MAYA C. POPA is the author of *American Faith*, winner of the 2020 North American Book Prize. She is the poetry reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*.

DAVID REMNICK is the editor of *The New Yorker*.

GJERTRUD SCHNACKENBERG is an American poet. Her sixth and most recent collection is *Heavenly Questions*.

RON SILLIMAN has published over forty books, mostly of poetry. He currently teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

ANTHONY VEASNA SO (1992–2020) was a graduate of Stanford University and earned his M.F.A. in fiction at Syracuse University. His debut short story collection, *Afterparties*, will be published by Ecco this summer. Born and raised in Stockton, California, he lived in San Francisco.

CHARLOTTE STRICK is the art editor of *The Paris Review*.

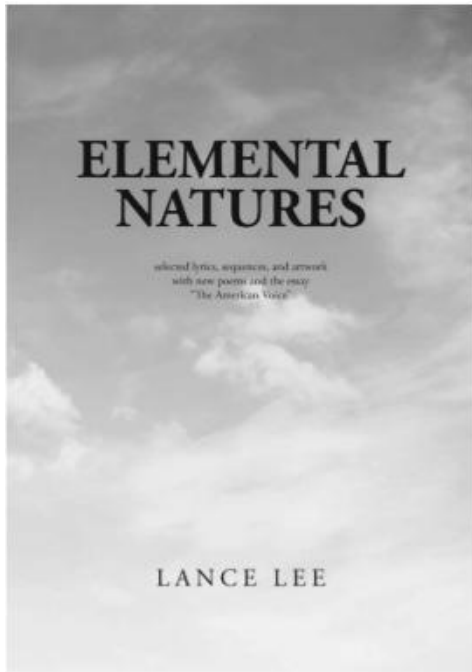
JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN is the Southern editor of *The Paris Review*.

KIRMEN URIBE is a Basque writer living in New York. His novel *Bilbao–New York–Bilbao* won Spain's Premio Nacional de Narrativa.

OCEAN VUONG is the author of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. He was awarded a 2019 MacArthur Fellowship.

CREDITS

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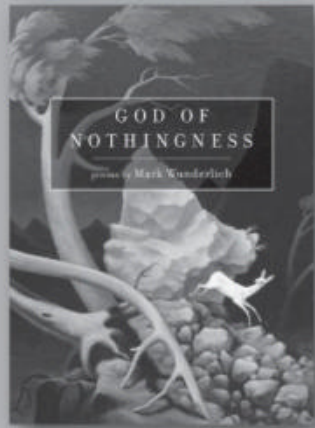
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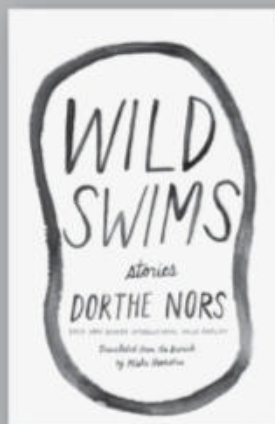
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