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The Threepenny Review

SPRING 2021

SEVEN DOLLARS

A Symposium on Rhyme and Repetition, with Commentary by Mark Morris, W. S. Di Piero, Ellen Pinsky, Nate Klug, Ethan Iverson, Rosanna Warren, and Mark Padmore

Brenda Wineapple on Diane Johnson

Javier Marías: Ridiculous Men

Poems by Louise Glück, Jim Powell, Charles Simic, Adam Zagajewski, and others

Ross Feld: Doing It Over

David Hollander Watches Television

Photographs by Arno Rafael Minkkinen

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The Threepenny Review

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Cover Art: Arno Rafael Minkkinen, *Skrøvafjellet Mountain, Skrøva, Lofoten Islands, Norway,* 2007. For information on the Minkkinen photos in this issue, please see pages 4 and 7.

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Brenda Wineapple's latest book is *The Impeachers*. She teaches at Columbia.

Adam Zagajewski is a major Polish poet, essayist, and novelist. His translator, **Clare Cavanagh**, teaches Slavic Literature at Northwestern University.

Table Talk

LAST JANUARY, I sent a stern email to my three adult children, all over thirty, informing them that if they didn't claim their possessions by the end of the year I would throw them out. The pandemic scrambled my plans: one son landed home for months and my daughter, an ER doctor, was afraid to visit, for fear of infecting the old folk. Last week she finally drove up and managed to sort through a bookshelf. Many of the books in the discard pile were paperbacks she bought for courses, titles like *Coffee Will Make You Black* by April Sinclair and *Native Son* by Richard Wright. When I sat on the floor stacking them into bags, I realized that over the years my husband and I have instinctively held on to books by black authors, as our parents before us did. Knowing that these books were widely available, even fashionable now, I still felt reluctant to let them go.

My father, who earned a bachelor's degree in English at the University of Michigan, was a journalist and editor of the *Chicago Defender* in the 1950s. Langston Hughes wrote a column for the paper in those days. In our house in Hyde Park, there was a room off the dining room lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves full of books by black authors. My mother reviewed many of the books the *Defender* received. When I read Alice Walker's article about Zora Neale Hurston in *Ms.* magazine in 1975, an article that is credited with rekindling interest in Hurston's work, I found original copies from the Thirties of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Go Tell My Horse* on my parents' bookshelf.

As a child, I think I understood that not every house had a library, but I didn't think it was unusual. The motley collection included Shakespeare, Book-of-the-Month Club offerings, and mystery novels as well as works by black authors. My mother read whenever she had free time. After she put us to bed, she would drink a beer and read alone at the kitchen table. Nothing irritated her more than for one of us to interrupt her during her sacred hour. I can hear her voice: "This is *my* time, now. Your time is over."

On a trip to Mali in 2005, I visited the Ahmed Baba Institute, a library in Timbuktu which collects and preserves Arab manuscripts. We were told that the manuscripts had been dispersed into private hands in the nineteenth century to hide them from the French colonists, carried in saddle bags on camels when necessary. Yes, I thought, that's what my parents did, too. They held on to a written record which they felt was not valued by the majority culture, not archived in mainstream institutions. My parents moved every decade: Detroit in the Thirties, New York City in the Forties, Chicago in the Fifties, Washington D.C. in the Sixties, back to Chicago, back to Washington when Carter was elected in 1976. They dragged hundreds of books around with them. Finally, to the great relief of their children, they donated most of them to Howard University. None of us had room.

I never studied African-American literature in school. Harvard University's African-American Studies department was founded amid great controversy in 1969, the year I matriculated. I did not enroll in a course in the new department, partly because the political rhetoric on campus intimidated me. I was one of the Negroes in the woodwork, perversely majoring in a field (geology) which a black resident advisor declared was not "relevant to the revolution." At the same time, I could not imagine discussing racial themes with white students, who seemed uninformed. I was used to reading books by and about black folk at home, and white books at school. I wasn't ready to share my private world with strangers.

Here we are, in a new century and a new world. When I visited my daughter at her college, I sat in on an African-American literature class. The Black Arts Movement had been churchified and deconstructed, and a multicultural group of students was studying our literature, some of which, like the Hurston, had been rediscovered since I was an undergraduate. And the discoveries continue. I just read *The Street*, by Ann Petry, published in 1946, brought to new attention by Tayari Jones. I wonder if that book was on my parents' shelf—perhaps not, since, according to Jones, some of the earlier covers were pretty racy.

Back on the floor in my daughter's room, surrounded by books, I told myself to get a grip. "Surely you don't feel that you personally need to hang on to these physical volumes. Everything's online anyway. We don't have to keep the written record in our home to protect it." Still, in our family, where we don't have houses or jewelry to pass down, we remember our relatives by their books. I have scattered titles by black authors, like the Hurston books, too well read to have rare-book value. I also have my grandfather's 1938 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* and a 1943 edition of *Illuminations* by Rimbaud, which belonged to my mother, the French major.

So I examine each book individually. I find photographs and a letter from my daughter's college boyfriend stuck between pages. She might want those someday. And a 1965 copy of *New Negro Poets* edited by Langston Hughes, with my husband's aunt's name inside the cover. Aunt Peri was a jazz maven and constant reader, who marked the poems she liked with one penciled checkmark or two. That's a keeper.

—Toni Martin

*

THE FIRST and only time I saw John Prine play live was on my thirtieth birthday. It was a present from an old friend, who showed up with his new girlfriend and took me and *my* new girlfriend to the Schubert Theatre in Philadelphia. The sound was concert class, no coffee-house brick walls to ping it back or drapery to damp it or

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A Note on the Artworks

For the past half century, Finnish-American photographer Arno Rafael Minkkinen has been engaged with one of the longest-running nonstop self-portrait undertakings in the history of the genre. Not a document of a performance nor a project with a beginning, middle, and end, his photographs duplicate the reality before the lens as he travels the world. "Make it different, keep it the same," he says. "Making yourself the subject means no one else comes in harm's way. Refusing manipulation rules out illustration. Being without clothes instills timelessness. And listen to the planet. It's pleading for its life."

A Madison Avenue copywriter in his twenties, Minkkinen went on to study with Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind at Rhode Island School of Design. Currently Emeritus Professor at UMass Lowell, Minkkinen also serves as docent at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. Major monographs are *Waterline*; *SAGA: The Journey of Arno Rafael Minkkinen*; *Homework: The Finnish Photographs*; and the recent *Minkkinen*, which won the German Photo Book Prize in Gold for Best Monograph of 2020. His photos are in over seventy-five museum and institutional collections worldwide, among them the Musée d'art moderne in Paris, the MFA in Boston, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

His many awards include the Finnish State Art Prize, the Order of the Lion First Class medal of knighthood, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Society for Photographic Education's Honored Educator awards, and the Pro Finlandia medal from the President of Finland. Fotografiska in Stockholm is currently presenting Minkkinen's fifty-year retrospective, *Two Hundred Seasons*, through April 18, 2021.

We are grateful to the artist for allowing us to reproduce his work in *The Threepenny Review* and for generously providing us with the scans.

crowd to interrupt with a cough or a request. John Prine in a concert hall was a bit like chinchilla seat covers on a Rolls-Royce, but of course this was precisely his appeal.

He did all the songs he's remembered for that night—"Hello in There," "Sam Stone"—but the one that lit me up was his masterpiece, "Angel from Montgomery." These lines in particular made me sit up straight:

> How the hell can a person
> Go to work in the morning
> Come home in the evening
> And have nothing to say—

How many times had I heard some version of the same rhetorical question raised over a family dinner, at the corner saloon, or coming from a porch across the street? The lines don't sound or look like much—they don't even rhyme—but their plainspoken beauty took my breath away. When Bonnie Raitt covered "Angel" on a live album years ago, she turned it into an aria, but it's not quite that. It's some approximation to and in the same dramatic mode as Shylock's "Am I not a man?" or Lear's repetition of the word *never* across a line of pentameter. It doesn't look like much until one gives the vernacular context a ninety-degree turn and reveals the polarizing force of the question-that-isn't-quite-just-that. I remember dismissing out of hand, years ago, a book titled *The Poetry of Rock*. This isn't rock, but it *is* poetry.

And it's also what sets Prine (and Joni Mitchell, who deserves her own Nobel) apart from their contemporaries. Prine was more than just a folk singer, in part because his lyrics were scrubbed of politics and formalities like strict cadence. This was actually poetry composed by a writer who, like Thomas Hardy, wrote small novels in verse and rarely intruded; and who, like Prévert, throve on gossip and anecdote and direct lifts from remembered speech. If all poetry aspires to the condition of music, American poetry aspires to the music of American speech isolated within the particular endtime of its utterance. This is hard to describe unless and until you've read Whitman and especially Dickinson.

Prine wrote "Angel" while he was a mailman, as he walked around making deliveries. His compositional praxis, in other words, was like that of Emily Dickinson, who scribbled lines or whole poems between straightening the beds or tending her garden, or Wallace Stevens, who composed in his head as he walked to the Hartford Insurance Company every morning, or William Carlos Williams, who would pull his car over to the side of the road on the way to the hospital. When Prine was asked about "Angel," he claimed that something like what the ancients called divine afflatus brought him the song by way of the character. It was the character's voice that "dictated" it to him. I consider it a bad idea and bad manners not to believe genius when it describes how it produced a masterpiece. If Dante says he actually lived the *Commedia*, that's enough for me.

All of which leads me to wonder whether a writer like Prine is possible anymore. The opening lines of "Angel" —"I am an old woman / Named after my mother…"—might appear to some as effrontery or insensitivity, coming from a white male born just outside Chicago, whose Southern "accent" is merely Southern-ish and as phony as Dylan's or the dozens of Brits (Stevie Winwood, Joe Cocker) whose blackish accents were pure fakery. His character's gender came with the voice he claims he heard. Prine was actually asked about that once. "I got asked years later lots of times how I felt I could get away with writing a woman's song first-person. And that never occurred to me, because I already considered myself a writer. And writers are any gender you want." Coming from an American folk singer, this suddenly much-contested claim (it's not quite an argument), stripped of any and all theoretical regalia, sounds as simple as the song itself. Is it true, as Louis Menand put it a while back, that unless you are born it, you cannot perform it? If you answer yes, it's instantly impossible to know what to say to Pound when he pretends to be the river merchant's wife—a woman around sixteen years old and Chinese—or the British poet Stevie Smith when she impersonates an older man married to a younger woman during the Blitz. But this is not news: our cultural moment is poisoned by politics. If the source seems obvious (our addiction to failed presidencies), is the antidote more memoir, more personal reportage, more born-to-the-manner accounts of what cannot be refuted or ignored?

Which brings me back to John Prine. When you listen to "Angel," pay attention to the way he inflects the third and fourth lines of the quatrain I began this with—

> Come home in the evening
> And have nothing to say

—and note how he runs the syntax of line three into line four. Singers, performers of speech, whether singing or reciting it, reproduce live speech and lift the lines off the page. Performers invented enjambment. Here it identifies this moment as the climactic one, when the old woman being impersonated is either raising or lowering her voice—in rage or frustration, it's hard to say. My ears hear a woman too worn down to yell at a husband who won't have a ready reply anyway. Whether moral or not, this is art because it does what art does. It allows whoever is listening to migrate for a moment into an alien, alienated consciousness, and maybe rise to that level of "compassion" generally unavailable (we're all pretty busy) and yet constantly advertised as the very condition of cultural health and national sanity.

—J. T. Barbarese

*

THE SUGGESTED pre-requirements for enrolling in any non-digital art class were Basic Drawing and Color Theory. I skipped Color Theory but obediently signed up for an introductory drawing class that met twice a week at the Fort Mason campus of City College of San Francisco. The teacher had graduated from RISD and had two sleeves of dazzling tattoos that climbed her forearms. (The ink may have scaled higher, but the area above her elbows was usually covered.) One arm show-

cased the ocean floor, with Haeckel-like illustrations of coral, sea anemones, a pearl resting on an open-faced oyster, and many types of seaweed. The other arm pictured a banquet table set with a candelabrum, wine goblets, a bowl full of fruit. Each scene was a visual bounty, loaded with an amount of color and detail that was surprising to observe on skin. I accepted the sleeves as proof of my instructor's credentials, though I never asked if she designed the tattoos herself. In any event, all the exercises and demos that were done in that classroom under her guidance have been of lasting value to me. Never have I learned so much so fast, and for so little money. Tuition at City College of San Francisco was then $45.00 a credit. And enrolling in the class had the added economic benefit of allowing me to postpone repaying my considerable undergraduate loans. I couldn't afford to stop learning.

After completing Basic Drawing, my conscience was cleared to try Introduction to Painting. This class also met at the top floor of Fort Mason's Building B, but in the bay-facing wing of the building. Whenever I went between the studio and the storage closet where canvases were left to dry between applications of oil and acrylic, I always made sure to look out the fire-exit door (which was kept propped open to circulate the paint-perfumed air, no matter the weather) and catch a glimpse of the San Francisco Bay. In the distance you could see birds and sailboats, and the stony face of Alcatraz Island.

Learning to paint has been a slower process for me than learning how to draw. I'm still frequently frustrated by my inability to get something right on canvas. So much of learning to paint the way you want to comes from trying things out. Through experimentation and failure, I've learned that the kind of painting I do best is straightforward, representational. In spite of my sincere efforts, not to mention the efforts of the instructors who encouraged me to take a more expressive direction, I never got comfortable with abstraction. To try to translate into a personal idiom the objective, comprehensible beauty that surrounds my easel feels beyond me. I suppose I see no need to *intentionally* mediate reality as it hits my eye—only to render it as sensitively as I can with the skills I have managed to cultivate at a great bargain.

When I moved to Oakland a few years ago, I enlisted in a summer-long intensive painting course at Laney College. It wasn't the same learning experience, of course; their art building is single-story and adjacent to the football field. At Laney, the fog never rolled in to meet the water's horizon the way it did from the windows of the studios inside Fort Mason. During these months of adjusting to a new situation, I found myself drawn to representing interiors—not interiors in the sense of emotional or psychological states, but sitting rooms, hallways, the corners of my new apartment.

For the class's final critique, I painted my bedroom. My partner is included in the frame: with his exposed back turned toward the viewer, he stands to the side of our wooden bureau, inspecting the mycelium he had been attempting to grow in a neat set of jars. He is carefully holding one glass cylinder up to the lamplight, trying to detect any change, any growth.

No one in my intensive painting class thought much of this work, myself included. When the teacher asked why I was unsatisfied with it, I told her the painting didn't look as good as the photograph I had based it on. I'd failed to capture what was contained in that intimate scene of looking, inspecting. I expected the teacher to tell me that I ought to approach the painting on its own terms rather than with standards set by another medium, and that I shouldn't get hung up on staying faithful to a photo. Instead, she asked to see the picture. I opened the file on my phone and handed it to her. After examining it, she said, "It's a nice image. Maybe you should try taking photographs instead of painting, and see where it gets you." I took the unexpected feedback for what it was worth—as an invitation to keep experimenting and working out new ways to convey what I see.

—Sabrina Ramos

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On January 27, 2020, the reported death toll from the mysterious new disease in Wuhan grew to 106, stock markets shuddered around the world, and I ordered a state-of-the-art fifty-five-inch OLED video monitor. It was time to hunker down.

Newton Minow said in 1961 that TV was a vast wasteland, and his words became gospel to me. For most of my adult life, I was the worst kind of television snob. In college in the late Sixties, and downtown New York in the Seventies and Eighties, we definitely had better things to do in the evenings. Entertainments were supposed to be high art, or highly transgressive. When I did watch television, it invariably annoyed me. Blathering talking heads, unendurable advertising. A premature cord-cutter, I haven't had cable in this millennium. I hadn't watched a series since *Twin Peaks* ended in 1991.

When *Downton Abbey* arrived in 2011, I was nesting in San Francisco with a new partner, and we decided to give it a go. (On DVD. Remember DVDs?) And we loved *Downton Abbey*. Who could not love Mrs. Patmore? Otherwise, we stuck to motion pictures. Streaming arrived, and Netflix and Amazon seemed to be vast wastelands of their own, with few quality films and poor interfaces for finding them. *The Crown*, still the Mount Everest of series for me, was the only one we watched. We relied on Filmstruck and later the Criterion Channel for art films.

Then the pandemic arrived and we were all stuck at home with time to fill—and, well, there are only so many quality movies. Also, a good movie is a full meal, or at least a full entree. You don't want two entrees in a night, do you? Television series are more like tapas. You can eat some, and then some more. Some are good for starters, and some make good desserts.

I started watching series TV with elitist intent. Netflix had picked up an edgy indie series called *Eastsiders*, very gay, fresh and original. As usual, one thing led to another. How about *Last Tango in Halifax*? Not violent, about old people, stars an actual distinguished stage actor, Derek Jacobi. Reasonably entertaining, in its way. Someone recommended the French series *Call My Agent* (featuring a dog named Jean Gabin). So much fun I doled it out to myself slowly.

Then an old friend recommended *Giri/Haji*. Quite violent, which used to make me recoil—but it turns out I loved it! Maybe I could handle the highly-touted *The Americans*. And I did—for a couple of seasons, until its characters' impossibly conflicting loyalties became too much of a mind-fuck and gave me bad dreams. But I had fallen for Matthew Rhys. What else could I watch him in? *Brothers & Sisters*, season after season. Some television-watching friends told me I'm nuts: that's generic situation/soap trash. Am I developing a problem? No. Perhaps it's okay just to be entertained, without pretensions of enlightenment.

Since I've never seen anything, there's so much to watch. Police procedurals, of course—*Unforgotten* (Nicola Walker solves cold cases), *The Bureau* (French spies), nutsy *Money Heist* (Madrid mint robbers), *Endeavor* (Oxford), *Deadwind* (grim-looking Helsinki, sexy detectives), the new *Perry Mason* (Matthew Rhys resurfaces). But also the wonderful *Borgen* (Danish parliament), the saucy *Love & Anarchy* (Swedish publishing house), lovely *Rita* (Danish school), *The Paper* (Croatian newspaper, plus crime), *The Last Word* (German eulogist), *The House of Flowers* (Mexico City florist), *The Night Manager* (arms trafficking), *Bodyguard* (with its high-level tension and swoon-worthy Richard Madden), *In Treatment* (crotchety Gabriel Byrne and astringent Dianne Wiest as shrinks), *Big Little Lies* (crazy rich women in Monterey), *Dead to Me* (crazy women in Laguna Beach), and *Chance* (all kinds of crazy in San Francisco). Not to mention the most Zeitgeisty show of all, Russell T Davies' brilliant *Years and Years*.

One of the joys of rampant television watching is spotting favorite actors in unexpected places. There's future *Queen's Gambit* diva Anya Taylor-Joy as a child in boarding school in *Endeavor*! There's Andrew Buchan, the sad father of the murdered boy in *Broadchurch*, looking dapper at a party with Prince Charles in *The Crown*! There's a very young Olivia Colman in the BBC's *The Office* from 2002! And wait—that clean-cut cop in *Occupied* looks familiar. Yes! In a few years Oddgeir Thune will portray Stone Age man Navn in *Beforeigners*, naked and gnawing on a raw rabbit in twenty-first-century Oslo.

I try to preserve a vestige of my status as a snob. Most days I watch an actual motion picture in addition to television. This year it's been fun "going" to film festivals, which used to be inaccessible except to industry types and critics, who would gush about things mortals couldn't see for months. But now that it's virtual, I too can be at the opening night of the New York Film Festival.

So for the duration of whatever this is we're living through, I have a routine. A few hours of television, mostly viewed on my large iMac and heard through wireless headphones. Then dinner, which my industrious husband has usually cooked as his own pandemic therapy. More television. At 10:00 P.M. or so, a movie (or more television) jointly selected and viewed on the big screen, followed sometimes by a video nightcap. The resurrected *Dr. Who* is perfect for that: cartoon-scary, but the Doctor (especially in his David Tennant incarnation) always makes things right by the end.

I am learning so much about life from television. People all over drink way too much. All parents have difficulties with their teenagers. Scandinavians (and Croatians) say "OK" even more than we do—and it can mean almost anything for them, too. Most importantly, if you cheat on your partner, or lie to your family or business associates, it will very likely end badly. Despite this, people continue to lie and cheat.

—David Hollander

Second Wind

I think this is my second wind,
my sister said. Very
like the first, but that
ended, I remember. Oh
what a wind it was, so powerful
the leaves fell off the trees.
I don't think so,
I said. Well, they were
on the ground, my sister said. Remember
running around the park in Cedarhurst,
jumping on the piles, destroying them?
You never jumped, my mother said.
You were good girls; you stayed where I put you.
Not in our heads,
my sister said. I put
my arms around her. What
a brave sister you are,
I said.

—Louise Glück

MEMOIR

The Home of Two Cliffs

Clifford Thompson

MY OLDER daughter and I were biking around Brooklyn's Prospect Park to her last soccer game of the season, she in her pale green uniform. The spring of 2003, this was. I had turned forty a couple of months before. My daughter was nine. As I recall it, it was during this ride that she asked if I played sports as a kid, if my father was involved, what all of that was like.

"My father thought it was important for me to know how to play baseball," I said as we pedaled in the pleasant air around the park's paved inner loop. "People in his generation thought there were some things boys should just know how to do. So he tried to teach me. We spent a lot of time playing catch in our backyard. I wasn't very good at it at first. And he wasn't well—he was a good dozen years older than I am now, and he was in pain a fair amount of the time. He died within a couple of years of that. But he thought it was important for him to do this while he still could, because he knew he didn't have a lot of time. When I messed up, he got impatient, and sometimes a little nasty. He was in pain, like I said. I understand it all now, but at the time I hated it, and I resented it. So, that was my experience with sports as a kid."

We came to what I called, in my head, Dead Man's Hill—the steep decline we had to bike down before exiting the park at the Parade Grounds. This part of the ride always made me nervous. I worried that my daughter would panic at how quickly she was moving and lose control of her bike somehow; I pictured a horribly scraped or broken arm, a head injury despite her helmet. But I didn't tell her to be careful, as I was tempted to do, because I didn't want her to be afraid. We coasted down the hill in silence, slowing as we always did when the road mercifully flattened out. Soon we reached the field where her team would be playing.

On the soccer field, parents and uniformed girls stood around, mostly quiet, waiting for the doughy, brown-haired coach. "Good morning," I said, for some reason, as he and his daughter, who was on the team, walked onto the field. Old habits die hard, I guess. "How are *you*," he said as joylessly as usual, no question mark, because it was the very last thing he wanted to know. The team photo, which we would all receive later, told me I should not take it personally: his face, as he stood by the girls, was the face of someone who has spent hours outside the operating room and is finally about to talk to the surgeon.

The coach, as always, asked for a parent volunteer to be a linesperson. I took a couple of steps back. I had done this before, and I hated it. When the ball went out of bounds, as it frequently did, the linesperson called which team had last had contact with it, determining which team should have it now. You could say the stakes were not high. Still, this was a job that called for someone with complete confidence in his judgment or, failing that, the belief that being decisive was more important than being right.

I was the opposite of that person. I once heard *liberal* defined as someone who won't take his own side in an argument, and to some extent that was me, a person who would do anything before he would risk being in the wrong. This seeming self-effacement may in fact be a kind of egotism, the conviction that one knows what the rights and wrongs of a situation *are*, that one is above the rest of squabbling humanity.

Convictions are tricky. To be without them is to live, at best, a meaningless life. To follow a conviction too devotedly—say, the conviction that your son should learn to play baseball come hell or high water—can do more harm than good.

How had I managed this balance in my life, up to age forty? The answer could lie, or not, in a quick glance at that life. I had a decent job and was happily married and raising two girls I adored in a beautiful neighborhood. At the same time, there were things I dreamed of and pursued but felt very far from achieving. Did I have the balance right, or had I gone wrong somewhere, followed the wrong conviction or not followed the right one? There were times when I thought of my life as a giant machine, one that I had built but that was now controlling my actions with merciless regularity, regardless of what I might want or any convictions I might have. There were other times, in the few hours I had to myself, when I wrote or read or watched a film or listened to music, when I felt as one with the creative spirit.

What would my father have done?

This is the person I was, this was the life I lived, these were the questions I asked as I stood on the sidelines and cheered for my daughter's soccer team. After the game was over, the parents and kids all met at the coach's house to have pizza and celebrate the season. The coach and his daughter lived not far from my apartment—one street over and a few blocks down the hill that gives Park Slope its name. The house, a brownstone, was near the bottom of its block. The house number seemed familiar. When we walked in, I looked around at the layout and the high tin ceilings. In the same moment I realized, and said aloud to whoever was nearby, "I used to live here." And for a moment, like a character in a science fiction series, I was transported to another time, another life, another self.

THE TIME was seventeen years earlier, the late summer and early fall of 1986, when I was twenty-three and new to the city and living on the top floor of this brownstone. I shared it with another man, a thirty-year-old who, like me, was named Cliff. This all might have come from the mind of a sitcom writer, since our first names were the beginning and end of what we had in common. Actually, that's not true—we were both thin, and neither of us was exactly tall. Otherwise, imagine *The Odd Couple* with both guys named Oscar. I was introverted, quiet, and, incidentally, black, with close-cropped hair; my roommate was extroverted, loud, and, incidentally, white (and Jewish), with stringy blond hair that came to his shoulders. Cliff rented the top floor from the family downstairs, and I rented the larger of the two bedrooms from Cliff (his room was tiny); we shared a kitchen, bathroom, and living room. When I moved in, my roommate cheerfully changed the message on the answering machine to say, "This is the home of TWO Cliffs!" We shared other things, too. I had a turntable and a stack of albums—rock, R&B, a few classical—that I put in the living room. One day Cliff told me he had rearranged my albums. "It's a simple system," he said with a grin. "See if you can figure it out." When I couldn't, he told me: he put the ones he liked on top. He felt I should be free with his things, too. Once I asked if I could borrow or use something, I forget what. "You don't gotta ask," he told me. "Just do." Cliff's laugh sounded a lot like a car engine revving. When a friend of mine from back home visited, he and I and Cliff and Cliff's girlfriend went to see *She's Gotta Have It* at the old theater on Flatbush Avenue; the movie made Cliff laugh, and my friend was more entertained by my roommate than by Spike Lee. "Coolest white boy I ever met," he later told me.

When I knew him, Cliff didn't have a job—"I'm livin' on spit," he said at one point—and/but he was an aspiring pop musician. "If it's not Top 40, I'm not interested," I heard him tell a potential collaborator. He sang—yowled, really—and played guitar, and he would play me the songs he wrote. That was how I discovered that you can get songs stuck in your head, and find yourself singing them, whether you like them or not.

What about the other Cliff, the one speaking to you now? I would write short stories, typing them up on the manual typewriter I had bought for seven bucks at the local flea market. (On a few occasions my roommate read and critiqued them, thoughtfully.) I worked for a company in Manhattan, where I was my department's low man on the totem pole—that may have been my title—a job in which, unlike future jobs that involved more responsibility, I never knew from one hour to the next what would be coming at me. I didn't like that much. I didn't like the pay, either. One of the measly twice-monthly paychecks covered the rent, or most of it, and the other covered everything else, or didn't—I can remember stuffing laundry into a pillowcase because a pillow seemed beyond my means.

The unpredictability of life in those days, at work and outside it, had the occasional upside. I recall going out for the evening with a casual female friend, an occasion I didn't think of as

a date until, as we were having coffee, our hands accidentally touched on the table, and neither of us pulled away.

All of this is to say that I hadn't yet built the machine, the one that ran my life with such regularity. That had its problems. If I didn't know from day to day what was happening in my world externally, that was partly because I wasn't too sure what was going on inside, either. I had convictions—about the unimportance of race, the oneness of people—that I had not thought through very far. What would later be my interests in film and music were more impulses then, blind groping. To put it more succinctly, there was a lot I didn't know about who I was, and knowing who you are makes difficulties on every level easier to deal with.

I wonder, now, if that accounts for the inordinate fright I felt late one night in my room, when summer had become fall, when I was on the edge of sleep and suddenly heard a rustling I thought was a rat under the floor or in the wall. I went to get the other Cliff. As we stood in my room, he explained in a groggy but kindly voice—I had woken him up—that the heat was coming on, that there was nothing to worry about. In that one moment I felt comforted, cared for. Fathered.

A young woman I was close to at the time said once that Cliff had a big heart. I realized she was right. I liked him, though if I was being honest I would have said that I liked the *idea* of him, that there were days I wished he would practice his big-heartedness, and his loudness, and his voice exercises ("I-love-you-TRU-u-u-ly"), and his midnight sessions with his girlfriend, and his freedom with other people's things, away from where I lived. I was beginning to learn that much about myself. So I wasn't altogether dismayed when Cliff told me after three months that the landlord wanted to give the top floor to a family member, and the two of us needed to leave. "Welcome to New York," he said. I moved out, in the casual way of the young—that brownstone was the third of five places I lived in when I was twenty-three—and went elsewhere in the neighborhood, and then places out of the neighborhood, starting on the road that brought me, seventeen years later, to an afternoon pizza party with my daughter and her teammates and their parents and the coach.

As we sat and stood eating pizza, the coach talked about the people who volunteered as referees for the American Youth Soccer Organization. "It's one thing if your kid is on the team, and you're a coach for that reason," he said. "But being a referee—that's just pure altruism."

So, this man's being a coach was an extension of what he saw as his responsibility as a parent. Being deeply uncharismatic, he was better at some parts of this job than others. But who fills all roles equally well?

And I thought of something I had witnessed earlier in the soccer season. The team's win/loss record was not impressive, but during a break near the end of one game, the coach gathered the girls and told them, "It's looking like we're going to win this game. So it's important for us to be gracious about it."

We learn gradually about ourselves, and our selves, and we do what we can. Sometimes it works better than other times, this rising of our different selves to meet different roles. My old roommate had called the top floor of the brownstone "the home of two Cliffs"; my body was, is, the home of more than two Cliffs, probably many more, and who knew how many other people. Somewhere in me was my father, a man I never really got to know, and he was only the beginning. Occasionally I think of the people I will never know about. Was there, centuries ago in Africa, an ancestor who watched his daughter climb higher and higher in a tree, who felt afraid for her but did not want to make her afraid by saying so? How much of the machine is genetic? From time to time I look in the mirror and wonder what other people are looking back at me.

But we can deal only with what we know. At forty I began to think of my father not as one who had made my life miserable for misguided reasons, but as one who thought he had a job to do and tried to do it the best he could. As I looked more kindly on him, I began to father myself. I'm not sure I ever told my daughter that part of the story. I will have to, one of these days.□

Sestina for the Matriarch

It's filtering down across our state line
now that the storm has passed—the kind of water
we'd like to think was born of the river,
but it's not. It only arrives after drowning
swine in their slaughterhouses. This water's black,
death-steeped, brackish. My neighbor's sons

float across the road, basking in the sun-
warmed water, belly-crawling 'cross the line
halving the street. I warn of worms wading over black-
top. Good as poison. They wallow in this water
that tastes of decay and is day by day drowning
the houses that lie low to the earth. The river

feeds and swells till it isn't just the river,
it's my home, and even under our scathing sun
I can't parse the difference between drowning
and redeemed. Rising, inch by inch, the only line
that matters anymore is where there's water
to recede and leave behind the rotted, bitter, black

of charred remains, like Nana's ashes turning black,
sinking like loose tea leaves into the river.
Maybe it's been her all along, a gator in the water
free to scratch against our crawlspace, sun-
shimmered, spiteful. Swimming under the line,
cloaked in dark scales, between alive and drowning.

She always said *baptism's as good as drowning*
in this kind of place. This flood is her black
swan song. She smears our inheritance with a hard line
of rot across her living room walls for the river
to rise to. She came to me in a dream, her son
least loved, but I didn't heed her warning that *water*

is the wage of sin. That in bearing life, water
is worshipped, matriarch of the drowning
masses. This is our purgatory beneath the sun's
slow burn, shining over the ever-rising black
lapping against our ankles. Our river
can't be escaped. I know which side of this line

we were destined for even as the waterline
crests. Everything I know is drowning in this river
and the sun can't dry this sort of black.

—Madison Rahner

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6: *Foster's Pond*, 2000.

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15 top: *Daniel, Andover*, 1979.

15 bottom: *Daniel, 12.31.1986, Andover*, 1986.

16: *White Sands, New Mexico*, 2000.

17: *Helsinki, Finland*, 1975.

18: *Piimävuori, Finland*, 1996.

19: *Le Petit Eiffel, Daniel, Andover*, 1986.

20: *Foster's Island, For Bravo*, 2020.

21: *9.9.99, Foster's Pond*, 1999.

22: *Mountain Lakes, New Jersey*, 1977.

25: *Masking the Unknown, Polaroid 20 x 24, Boston, Massachusetts*, 1987.

28: *Halfway Up Mt. Mitchell, Burnsville, North Carolina*, 2013.

31: *Väisälänsaari, Finland*, 1998.

Back Cover: *Nude Descending a Staircase, Rockport, Maine*, 2005.

For information about the artist, please see the note on page 4.

Belated Recognition

Brenda Wineapple

The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives
by Diane Johnson.
NYRB Classics, 2020,
$17.95 paper.

INITIALLY PUBLISHED in 1972 and nominated for a National Book Award in 1973, Diane Johnson's *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* is a gem: tart, canny, and unaccountably out of print for many years, but as fresh and wry and vital today as when it first appeared.

Partly it's the story of Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls Meredith, the first wife of the novelist George Meredith. Though she was largely ignored in the Victorian biographies of her eminent husband, Mary Ellen had a hold on Meredith's imagination. (For one thing, he wrote the sonnet cycle *Modern Love*, about the protracted end of a marriage—presumably theirs.) But he pretended she didn't exist, or didn't speak of her except now and then to say she was insane. His admirers followed suit, relegating her to a single page or to a footnote. After all, she'd committed the unpardonable sin: she'd run off with a painter, leaving behind a chap "clearly destined to be great," as Johnson wryly notes. "How could anyone leave a man like that?"

Indeed—but Mary Ellen Meredith could and did. Worse, she didn't even have the good sense to throw herself in the Thames, the only respectable recourse for such a woman. At least she was considerate enough to die young.

All that remained of the first Mrs. Meredith, except for some deriding remarks, were a lock of hair, a pink parasol, a green satin dress, and a few essays: not the stuff of biography, to be sure, and certainly not enough for the conscientious Victorian biographer, should he have been inclined to care. As a result, one of the pure pleasures of Johnson's book is its firm but gentle sendup of the genre.

We might suppose that beneath all that bustle, the Victorians were really like us. But they weren't, Johnson remarks in one of her many pungent asides: "People's psyches conformed, as much as their manners did, to the peculiar notions they had created." The same might be said of Victorian biography. Winking at the reader, Johnson invokes the specter of the Biographer, a "good man," but a prim traditionalist who buttresses a very conservative genre. He's constitutionally unable to imagine that grief is anything but exemplary; that *Schadenfreude* feels good, as does anger; or that real people, even historical ones, have bodies and actually embrace. "I am sometimes severe upon the Biographer," Johnson tells us, "for he is the purveyor of received attitudes and accepted traditions that often turn out to be misinformed or even willfully benighted." (While the Biographer may have been imprisoned in a set of Victorian attitudes, Johnson observes, these notions also seem to plague modern biographers.)

When turning to her desired biographical approach, Diane Johnson sides with Virginia Woolf, who felt that life consists in personality as much as actions, words, or derring-do, and that biography would enlarge its scope, or, more to the point, deepen it, by hanging lanterns in odd corners to suss out cant or pretension. "The biographer," Johnson notes, "must be a historian, but also a novelist and a snoop."

Her purpose, then, is aesthetic (hence the novelist) and ethical (hence the empathetic imagination that the novelist deploys). Every life has intrinsic value, and therefore biography is rightly concerned, or should be, with the lives of the obscure—the "lesser life," which, as Johnson mordantly observes, "does not feel lesser to the person who leads one."

Enter Mary Ellen Peacock Nicolls Meredith, the forgotten woman who flouted convention and embarrassed her great husband. Born in 1821, she was raised to be independent-minded and fearless by her father, Thomas Love Peacock, who has himself become something of a lesser life. A friend of Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley, Peacock was both a satiric novelist and an official in the East India Company; by all accounts he was an amiable, amorous, intelligent, and worldly man who liked to eat well, enjoyed Greek poetry, and composed his own verses. But though he seemed unafraid of intelligent women, he married a provincial Welshwoman, Jane Gryffydh, who seemed not to share his interests. Such were the paradoxes of Victorian culture.

Within six years of the Peacock marriage, Jane Peacock would go mad, in the parlance of the day, or at least become debilitated by the strangling depression that followed the death of her second child. Her firstborn, Mary Ellen, was doted on by her father, and at Mary Ellen's birth no one minded that she wasn't a boy. Quite the reverse, it seems; her father kept her supplied with French novels and clever house guests. One such visitor was Lieutenant Edward Nicolls, dashing son of the ferocious "Fighting Nicolls" of the Royal Marines. Mary Ellen married Nicolls in early 1844, but just two months later the lieutenant drowned during a storm while trying to rescue a one-armed sailor. His young, pregnant wife was catapulted into widowhood.

Unlike the Queen, Mary Nicolls would not dress in black for the rest of her life. She stayed active, and by 1848 was involved with a literary magazine, the *Monthly Observer*, which she and several friends were editing. Among them was a callow George Meredith, seven years her junior. Handsome and already desperate for fame, Meredith fell hopelessly in love, though in later years he hinted that he'd been somehow "ensnared." That's hard to believe, since Meredith proposed marriage to Mary Ellen six times before she relented. Her father wasn't pleased. It seems young George wasn't likeable or willing to bend in any way, particularly when it came to making money. (Peacock had to rescue the couple and put them up in his home.) Plus, Meredith smoked, and he liked Tennyson's poetry. He was also a finicky eater with a nervous stomach. A friend of the Peacock family dubbed him "The Dyspeptic."

Mary Ellen, a gourmet cook, catered to George's unhappy digestion, retaining for a time her sense of humor while she prepared his special diet. Johnson wonders, though, if perhaps Mary Ellen was alluding to domestic difficulties when she reviewed a recently published cookbook. "Many are the blue devils which a vulgar rich dinner has raised, and scattered on evil missions amongst the children of men," Mary Ellen wrote, "many a childish disobedience is concocted in a soda-cake; and many a lover's quarrel lies in ambush at the bottom of a tureen of soup, where it jostles with matrimonial squabbles, morbid creeds, and poetic misprisions."

Mary Ellen was also pregnant "more or less continuously," as Johnson notes, speculating that the multiple pregnancies may have caused or made worse the renal disease that would later kill her. Certainly she was seldom well, and there were miscarriages and debts. She and George had a son, Arthur, who flourished, but Mary Ellen kept falling ill. More and more George was traveling. Marriage to The Dyspeptic was falling apart.

Now enter Henry Wallis, another lesser life. The son of a prosperous architect, and a "pre-Raphaelite brother in the second degree," as Johnson remarks, he was a minor celebrity when he and Mary Ellen began their affair. His recent painting *The Death of Chatterton* had been shown in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1856 and praised by John Ruskin. (Today the painting hangs in the Tate.) In later life Wallis was also known as an authority on Far Eastern ceramics and all-round decent fellow, but he too was relegated to a footnote, if that. Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father and a friend of George Meredith, excluded Wallis from his *Dictionary of National Biography*, as if to make sure he stayed lesser or, preferably, nonexistent.

The model for that painted Chatterton happened to have been George Meredith, which likely made Mary Ellen's affair with Wallis even more galling. But Thomas Peacock seems to have been unruffled by his daughter's behavior, and when Mary Ellen and Henry Wallis had a child, whom they called Felix, he seemed nonplussed. George was not quite so sanguine. He grabbed Arthur and refused to give him back.

By then Mary Ellen was desperately ill, and when she died in 1861, Arthur was eight. The next year, Johnson tells us, when the boy was nine, George Meredith packed him off to boarding school and soon to Germany. As Arthur grew older, he would have little to do with George, who surmised that his son did not like him much. (And apparently he didn't, Johnson drily tells us.) Mary Ellen's daughter Edith, the child of her first marriage to Edward Nicolls, was very kind to her half-brother Arthur when he became stricken with tuberculosis, and she took care of him during the last months of his life. Edith had lived with her grandfather Thomas Peacock until his death and had then begun to write his biography. Another

"lesser" life, she later became principal of the National Training School of Cookery, having learned quite a bit from her mother and grandfather, and she remained head of the school until she was seventy-five. She married, published notable cookbooks, earned a gold medal from the Royal Society of the Arts, and was made a Member of the British Empire; she was something of a chip off her mother's block, but luckier.

Felix was only three when his mother died. But his father, Henry Wallis, was devoted to him and raised him in full view of his acquaintances, even though Felix was "illegitimate." He took Felix on his travels and was careful about his education, keeping him in England rather than dispatching him to the Continent. Felix became a businessman, married, and had children.

As for George Meredith, he seems to have portrayed Mary Ellen as "fretful" in novels like *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, while accusing her, in his self-exonerating *Modern Love*, of "faithlessness of heart." Presumably, though, he was more just in his proto-feminist novel *Diana of the Crossways*, written more than twenty-five years after their marriage ended. Though Meredith was nominated for a Nobel Prize several times, he never won, and remarkably few people read him now, despite his acknowledged virtues as a novelist.

Henry Wallis would outlive Meredith by seven years. After he died, museums began to squabble over his collection of rare pots and vases, some of which he had already donated to the Victoria and Albert. In "Brief Lives," the appendix to her book, Johnson wittily identifies Wallis as "the villain—or hero—of this work." As for Mary Ellen Meredith, Johnson describes her as unfortunate but courageous. To my mind, Mary Ellen has actually been quite lucky in a critical way: the brilliant Diane Johnson has freed her.□

The Great Poet Basho Begins His Journey

After lengthy preparations
the great poet Basho begins his journey.
The very first day he happens
to walk past a sobbing child
abandoned by his parents.
He leaves him there, by the roadside,
because, he says, such is Heaven's Will.

He walks on, northwards, toward the snow
and things unseen, unknown.
Slowly the imperfect cities' sounds grow still,
only streams hold forth chaotically
while white clouds play at nothingness.
He hears an oriole's song, delicate,
uncertain, like a prayer, like weeping.

—Adam Zagajewski
(translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh)

The Tenth Muse

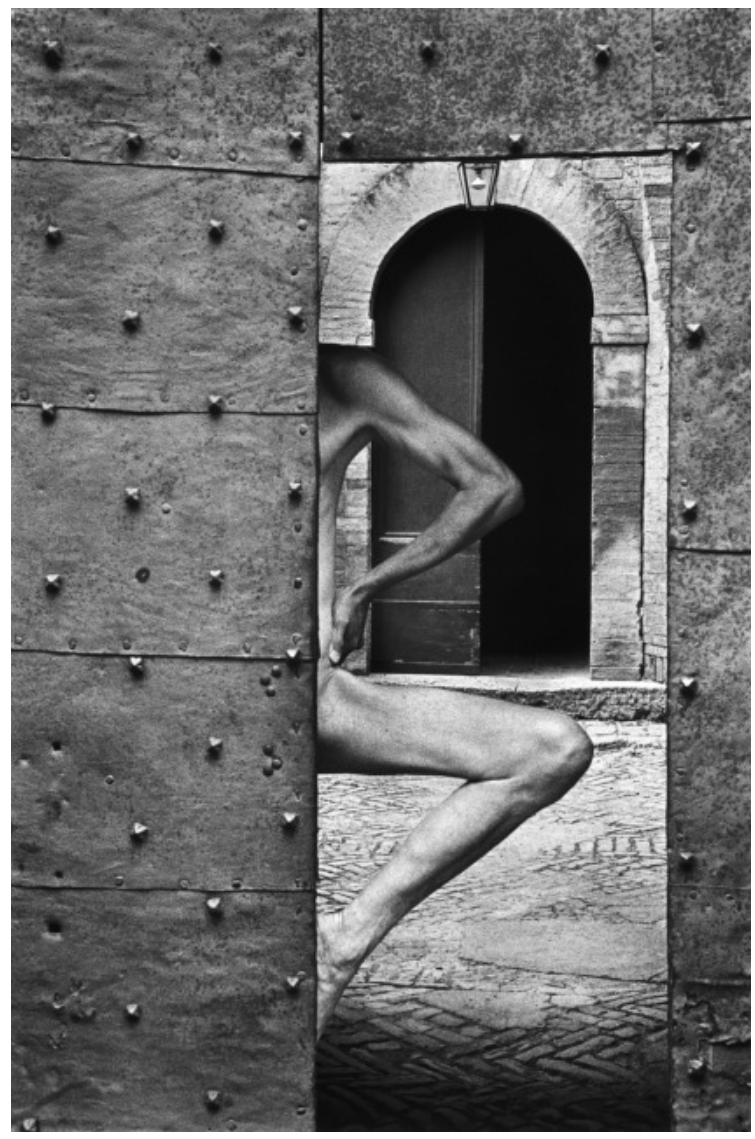
Henry Walters

The Poetry of Sappho,
translated by Jim Powell.
Oxford University Press, 2019,
$15.95 paper.

THE ABBREVIATION *lac.*, in the laconic shorthand of a textual scholar, indicates a lacuna, or a hole in the received text. Like death's heads, or stone lions flanking a locked door, the letters are posted before and behind nearly all of the shredded poetic corpus that bears the name of Sappho. Precious little survives: bits of papyrus, shards of inscribed pottery, a few quotations in later authors. All told, about 650 lines of Greek have been, in one way or another, tied to her over the centuries, though the vast majority resemble poetry the way chimp typewritings generally do *Hamlet*. One poem, a hymn to Aphrodite, is complete; the remaining lines can be grouped into a couple hundred fragments.

If her work leaves much to the imagination, what we know of the poet herself consists of little else. In the ancient world Sappho was famous; her poems were widely disseminated by word of mouth, written down, and eventually compiled in collections (none of which survive). Yet facts about Sappho's life fall somewhere between the hypothetical and the wishful, usually reflecting the preoccupations of the wishers: what she looked like; whether she was married; the names of her mother and father; her politics; her much-discussed sexual preferences; how many poems she wrote. One third-century BC inscription records that she and her family were exiled to Sicily for a period of time, but for what reason, we have no idea. She was born around 630 BC on the island of Lesbos, then a bustling center of trade, near what is now Turkey. Its people spoke Aeolic Greek, a dialect that dropped aitches like an ancient Cockney and was ridiculed as "barbarous" by one of Plato's characters, two hundred years later. But other than a few inferences drawn from archaeology and later histories, we have little basis on which to reconstruct even a general cultural context. Her disfigured poems, and those of Alcaeus, her fellow islander, are the only primary texts on which to build.

Even the question of what poetic landscape Sappho might have inhabited remains blurry. For centuries after her death, Greeks and Romans recited her poems as after-dinner entertainment at symposia, helping build her reputation as "the tenth Muse" (Plato again) but also as a sort of proto-*chanteuse*, a woman of shady character making art of our own proscribed desires. This was invention, but we are right to understand her genre of "lyric" as first of all a musical one; depictions of Sappho (vases, coinage, statuary) regularly show her carrying a type of lyre called the *barbitos* or, as she called it, *barmos*. As to where she sang, for whom, and whether these songs were accompanied by the burble of wine or barefoot dancers or respectful silence, we are free to speculate. Oddly, far more deductions can be made about the earlier Greek epic tradition that culminated in Homer, himself more myth than man, than about the world that gave rise to Sappho. And so, instead of a white chalk outline where her life and work should be, the field of "Sappho studies" looks like a crime scene crisscrossed by the footprints of scholars, poets, translators, papyrologists, Hellenophiles, feminists and misogynists, LGBTQ advocates and their naysayers, and, when "new fragments" turned up in 2014, by the whole mad stampede of the blogosphere.



One might well wonder whether our interest is no more than the allure of all the unsolved mystery. Like frayed spiderwebs with no trace of their spinner, her poems give us so much to ponder because so much is missing, even the doorframe in which she spun them. Confronted by a snippet such as

> and gold chickpeas were growing on the banks

you, reader, are utterly free to read by your own lights. Without reference to a whole, the part admits of most every interpretation. The larger the number of such possibilities, the stronger the urge to throw up one's hands and dispense with any exegesis whatever. Where poems have been whittled to koans, as here, Sappho is only nominally *poietes*, "the maker." Time, in the role of unscrupulous translator, has written the Sappho we imagine we know.

Whoever gets the credit, the collaboration continues to be successful. Sappho is read widely, and not only by specialists with axes to grind. Over a dozen English translations remain in print, differentiated by titles ranging from the romance shelf (*Stung with Love*—Poochigian) to the unwittingly instructive (*You Burn Me*—Edmonds) to the oxymoronic (*Complete Poems and Fragments*—Lombardo). Many collections have been revamped and reissued to include "new poems" uncovered by scholars in 2004 and 2014. One of these is Jim Powell's *The Poetry of Sappho*, whose notes give as capable and thorough an introduction to poet, poems, and critical reception as might be wished. In fact, his scholarly reasonableness takes for granted that these are known quantities; hence his modest proposal is "not…to make Sappho over as our contemporary, but rather to allow her to sound like herself."

More easily said than done. What, one asks, did Sappho sound like? More importantly, to whom? To her contemporary Alcaeus, she was "violet-haired, holy, soft-smiling Sappho": hardly helpful. To a Greek of the Hellenistic period, she was already antique, an established part of the lyric canon, her name a byword for the female poet *par excellence* and a trope for vase painters. To Catullus, her Roman imitator, she was a model of the unvarnished directness that he sought in his own work. To Horace, she was *mascula*, "manly, vigorous," though whether that referred to the vigor of her expression or the fact of her expressing love for women is anyone's guess. By the Middle Ages nearly all of her work was lost, and the world was free to make her a symbol for un-Christian vice—namely, frankness of eroticism—or, later, for the virtue of the same name. Conscientious scholars like Dimitrios Yatromanolakis, recounting some of these (mis-)appropriations, are forced to refer to her as "'Sappho'" or "[Sappho]," as though the very syllables have become too volatile to handle without gloves.

In acting as medium, the translator renders not only the words of the poet but the odd phantasm she has become. As the latest Penguin edition attests, the temptation to gussy up a fragment into a rhymed couplet or to sort them into thematic categories is too strong to resist; lacunae indicated by the three dots of an ellipsis suggest not so much a textual mutilation but rather a narcoleptic Sappho continually nodding off. Even her most thoughtful translators—Mary Barnard, Guy Davenport, Stanley Lombardo—have aimed to make something whole out of what is patently not. The poet and scholar Anne Carson, whose bizarre idiolect makes Sappho "sound like herself" in quite a different sense, goes furthest in offering a non-classicist a window onto the translator's predicament. In her version, which transcribes the Greek on a facing page and includes even the shortest fragments (191 consists of the single word "celery"), reading becomes something like archaeology: a few letters here, a syllable there, now a stranded phrase, finally a few lines in succession, but cut short, mid-breath. "Sappho," we start to think, is simply a messy collaboration between a Greek poet and her own posthumous history. As in the prints of Piranesi, both the bones of the temple and its ruination have staying power. And anyway, there's no choosing: we're cursed and blessed with double vision.

In Powell's version, we meet the poems as a body of work, with typographical fleurons easing the movement from one to the next as if they were a series of anthologized quotations. To his credit, though, Powell does not flinch from rendering broken, damaged text. Where the sense of a passage becomes impossible, he supplies brackets, and the gaps make themselves felt in the reading. A lacuna, like a sudden gulp, has its own strong music:

>] don't you remember [
> we, too, did these things in our youth [

Whatever the "things" Sappho wishes her addressee to call to mind here, they could not be more poignant to us, at this distance, than the black hole of the bracket suggesting where that memory once lived. Sappho's poems seem always to take place on both sides of this border, the event horizon between irretrievable past and some invitation into her immediate presence, whether calling on a goddess, a beloved, herself, her lyre, or, as in the fragment above, an unexplained "we," as if she felt an easy familiarity even toward us, her readers, light-years away. The combination of the two perspectives is also

what makes the fragmentation so ghostly; over and over, accident seems to enact the very separation Sappho is describing and lamenting:

Like a hyacinth in the mountains that men
shepherding
tread underfoot, and on the ground its
purple flower [

The way these poems are damaged may be arbitrary, but the effects are often chillingly beautiful, as though damage had a consciousness of its own. (This is especially true, ironically, in translation, which tends to sharpen the text's ragged edges.) Often, uncannily often, it excises with a censor's precision the personal details we long for. What is left, skeletally bare, is a single poetic gesture that might have been written by anyone, anywhere:

Lithe girl, in the old days
I strayed from you, and now again [

To read the fragments as fragments is to discover how much depends (unloading Williams' wheelbarrow) on the archetypal impulses of the genres in which Sappho worked and helped establish: the ode's impulse to praise, the hymn's to pray, the elegy's to bind with a love charm, the curse's to blight, the priamel's to individuate. The force of these genres does not require a personal portrait of their maker any more than Shakespeare's sonnets require a name for their "Dark Lady." If in reading Sappho we are confronted time and again by the haphazard erasure of the personal, the pity that wells in us is not for the poet's particular oblivion or for the poetry the world has lost, but for ourselves, who will undergo the same rendering, soon or late.

Once pulled into such a state of heightened suggestion, we may be forgiven for hearing in the fragments a kind of commentary on our own reading, as though Sappho herself had foreknowledge of what would happen to her songs and was laughing, ever so gently, at our efforts to patch them together:

As a sweet apple reddens
on a high branch

at the tip of the topmost bough:
The apple-pickers missed it.

No, they didn't miss it:
They couldn't reach it.

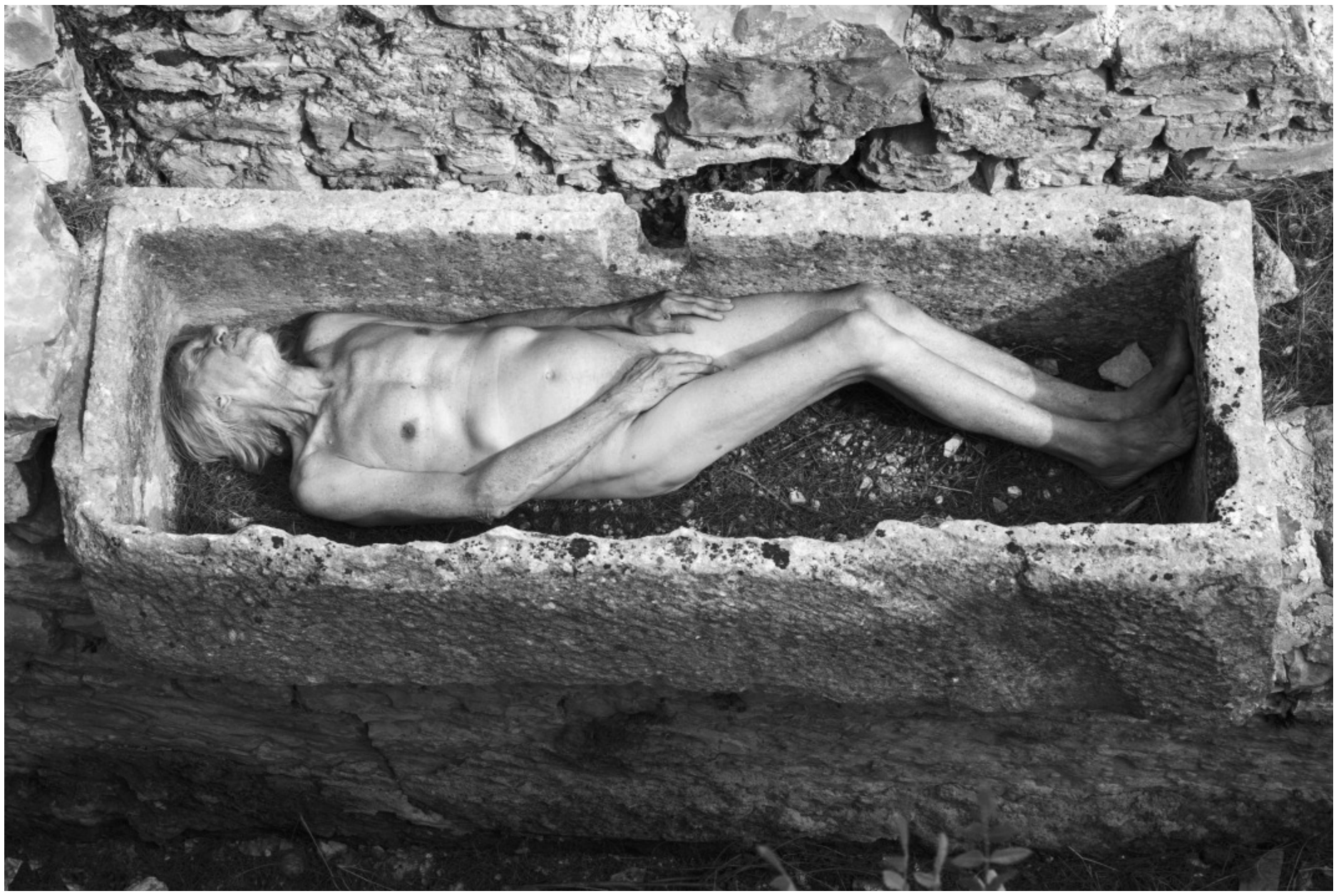
She seems to be looking at us, seeing us. Another fragment reads simply, "I think that someone will remember us in another time." Who is *us*? Most probably, Sappho meant "me and my lover," and yet we cannot quite banish the hope that we, her living readers, might be included there. At the very least, aren't we the *someone*, remembering? Historically speaking, this is fanciful; there is little to suggest that any of the Greek lyric poets were hatching so Whitmanian an instinct to speak to the distant future, or even that Sappho would have recognized such a thing as a lyric poet's task. She sang; she played the lyre; she celebrated marriages; she named the ones she loved. Her own wide world was, by all estimates, wide enough. Are we to call all poems prophetic that have undergone a mangling at the hands of time and lived to tell the tale?

Perhaps a fragment, by its very nature, makes unreasonable demands of us. Some of the last lines Keats wrote, in 1819, appear upside-down on a draft of a poem called "The Cap and Bells," itself unfinished:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold,
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming
nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry
of blood
That in my veins red life might stream
again
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see, here
it is,
I hold it towards you.

The lines don't belong to "The Cap and Bells." They don't seem to belong anywhere. Helen Vendler and other critics have suggested, despite the cadaverous setting, that "you" should be understood as Fanny Brawne, to whom Keats became engaged around this time. ("Love? His affections do not that way tend.") Other scholars give good reasons to think the lines were intended for another, hypothetical, "lost" poem or even that we should imagine them spoken by a character in the play Keats was working on, the forgettable *Otho the Great*. But such reasons fail to prevent the shivers we feel, reading the last line. Might this not be the actual poet speaking to us from beyond his grave? History itself tempts us: Keats had a hunch he was going to die. He holds his hand toward us, and we *do* wish it were living. He suggests we have troubled consciences, and we begin to feel guilty. How far are we willing to go to bring him back? Do we dare sacrifice the illusion that we, the living, know more about the dead than the dead know of us? Do we dare insert ourselves back into the poem? What an anachronism. The *danse macabre* is an illusion. We know full well, or else we should: we are not the ones being addressed. And yet the fragment insists on the illusion: "you" means—[gulp]—*us*.

What this fragment and Sappho's fragments so often reveal is the strength of such illusion and our appetite for it. Lyric poetry has always invited our participation. Its pronouns stretch to accommodate us. When Sappho suffers, we suffer; when she longs for a nameless *you*, we feel her longing. Dispassionate reading is bad reading and has always been. In the sixteenth century, a scholar named Isaac Casaubon emended the received text of Fragment 147, changing the past tense of *mnasasthai* ("remembered") to the future *mnasesthai* ("will remember"). What had been a banality, a scrap of something else ("I think someone had us in mind"), became a poetic gesture that stood alone, without reference to particular persons, places, times ("I think someone will remember us"). Is it Sappho's? No. But that we emend, translate, engage in such revisionism is no embarrassment; it is the poetic instinct alive and well in us. Our poets are inseparable from the history that maims and scatters their work. We might even say that very history is what keeps those poets perennial. And as we are part of history ourselves, it is our wayward reading, too, that does the scattering.□



BOOKS

The Private Life

Chelsie Malyszek

The Selected Letters of John Berryman,
edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae.
Harvard University Press, 2020, $39.95 cloth.

"I HAVE A slight bone to pick," John Berryman griped in a 1942 letter to James Laughlin of New Directions Press. A letter of Berryman's to Laughlin had been displayed at Harvard's Widener Library, and the ensuing cost of "two hours' rage" was too much for Berryman to expend a second time. "If a possibility exists that anything of the sort will happen at any time in the future, I would like the letters destroyed or returned to me. Sorry, but I feel very strongly about this," Berryman insisted. Not surprisingly, a letter outlining his will, written to his second wife, specifies that "I want all my journals & diaries & all such notes destroyed at once unread; also my correspondence." Despite Berryman's wishes, it would seem, we now have *The Selected Letters of John Berryman*, edited by Philip Coleman and Calista McRae.

In the past two years, numerous caches of poets' letters have been dug out from archives to be cleanly packaged as published collections. Sylvia Plath's final letters poignantly crawled to their inevitable end point. *The Dolphin Letters* felt redemptive by contrast: over forty years after Robert Lowell converted private letters from his wife Elizabeth Hardwick into the material of poetry, both sides of the exchange could finally and fairly be judged. The recently unsealed letters from T. S. Eliot to his lover Emily Hale quickly exposed Eliot's infidelity to his wife Vivienne, but more so his cruelty to Hale. Prolonging the suspense, researchers in the Eliot/Hale archives narrated their finds, letter-by-letter, as the drama unfolded.

Reading the letters of long-dead poets is like skipping to the end of a mystery novel and then doubling back, years later, to locate the first clue. Lowell recognized in the 1970s that readers had a sordid desire to read dirt about poets. Letters help us satisfy our curiosity about the minds of poets, perhaps especially "confessional" poets, whose private lives were as much the stuff of their poems as the other way around. We know what came of the poets' lives, but we do not know how those lives came to be. Letters, or at least the letters that have lately been published, show us the destruction in slow motion.

If *The Selected Letters of John Berryman* presents far less drama than the Lowell or Eliot letters, it may be because the most titillating episodes appear already in Berryman's poetry. In *The Dream Songs* (1969), Berryman drifts through the surreal, nebulous terrain of biographical events and mental collapse, a slow unraveling that is performed for us at a remove. Berryman speaks indirectly through an interlocutor named Henry, who from the very first Dream Song is "pried / open for all the world to see." However, Henry's openness obscures the facts and fictions of Berryman's own life. Berryman explained Henry away as "nothing but a series of conceptions—my conceptions." Henry's unnamed friend is the more troubling presence. He speaks in the vernacular of a nineteenth-century minstrel and refers to Henry as "Mr. Bones." The blurring between poet and speaker generates all the constant thrum of a good drama—especially when that blurring is caused by the reverberations of racial tension.

The racist dialect throughout *The Dream Songs* has been a frequent focus of contemporary black poets. Kevin Young has edited a selection of Berryman's poems and written critically about Berryman's diction. Tyehimba Jess gives us an antidote to Berryman's blackface minstrelsy in his collection *Olio*, for which Jess won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, as Berryman did for *77 Dream Songs* in 1965. Claudia Rankine repurposes Dream Song 53 in *Citizen: An American Lyric*. If any part of Berryman's career was a call—for help, for attention, for a new poetic movement—these poets give him a long overdue response.

The Selected Letters can finally clarify which parts of Henry are indeed Berryman. But that clarity can be achieved only as a result of the meticulous and demanding work of sharp editors. Anyone brave enough to take on editing a selection of letters faces a heap of difficulties that shift as the book comes together. There is, foremost, the ethical dilemma of whether to publish letters at all. Many times over in *The Selected Letters*, Berryman asks his correspondents to destroy his letters: "don't pass any of this letter out, of course," he asks Lowell, of all people, in one instance. The appeal of Berryman's letters is heightened by the drama of his desire to conceal them.

Then, there is the issue of how to

frame the selection. Coleman and McRae note that it is "important to stress how many letters have not been included," such as Berryman's letters to his mother (previously published in *We Dream of Honour* in 1988), lost letters, and omitted letters that contain sensitive material about living persons. Previous assortments of Berryman's letters have had a more focused lens than just "selected" letters, and the editors point the reader to a few of these for more information. *Berryman's Shakespeare* (1999) showcases letters about the bard, and two Berryman biographies include relevant correspondence.

What makes *The Selected Letters* enjoyable is its utter capaciousness, its willingness to select without any evident narrative in mind. That capaciousness, though, also hides the logic behind the editors' process of selection. The introduction explains that the "main principle of selection was to shed light on Berryman as writer." This principle does not necessarily clarify for readers what has been selected, as Berryman believed a selection ought to do. Instead, the selection was conducted partly through the negative, as the editors eliminated previously published and unavailable letters. We are left to grapple with the gaps and questions of a life told from one perspective and unfettered by the demands of comprehensive biography.

As it has come to be known, Berryman's life has the direness and dudgeon of a soap opera. He was born in 1914 in Oklahoma to John Allyn Smith and Martha Little. He was named after his father, but retained that name for only twelve years, until John Senior committed suicide behind the family apartment in Florida in 1926. Months later, Berryman's mother remarried the family landlord, John Angus McAlpin Berryman. At that moment, John Allyn Smith, Jr., became John Berryman. (Predictably, Berryman's letters demonstrate his fondness for invented names, in particular cutesy pet names for his wives and close friends.) He was married three times, fathered three children, and won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a Bollingen Prize. In 1972, he committed suicide by jumping off of the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis.

Given the dramatic arc of Berryman's life, it is merciful that his letters frequently focus on the minutiae of daily life. James Merrill supposed that if poetry were considered an aria to be sung by an individual, prose was the recitative—the explication that moves a story along. In *The Selected Letters*, Berryman's arias are barely announced, nearly drowned out by the humdrum of quotidian housework and errands. "All I did yesterday," he details to one of his youthful lovers, "was write out a long letter to Shea and half dozen others, unpack & sorted all my papers of the last 8 months & back, began working out my fiction course, reckoned my bank account & bills." Notes to fellow poets, including Delmore Schwartz, Ezra Pound, and Robert Lowell, likewise have the familiar pleasures and rhythms of small talk. Many letters run this same course and are "short and practical," as the editors note. Even Berryman's marriage to Eileen Mulligan is disclosed for the first time in the midst of an angry letter to the couple's landlord, in which Berryman berates him for a fridge that never worked properly.

For those familiar with Berryman, there is a certain suspense in reading these letters and waiting for the moments we know are coming—the divorces, the deaths, the affairs, the failures, the triumphs. When such moments surface, there is a sudden rush of relief, as if the Berryman we have been expecting has at long last arrived in front of us, delivering bad news we have perversely been waiting to hear. "In short, I can't live, and my insurance, the only sure way of paying my debts, expires on Thursday," he tells Mulligan soon after their separation in 1953. "So unless something happens I have to kill myself day after tomorrow evening or earlier." (The letter ends mid-sentence, and an endnote tells us that "subsequent pages of this letter are missing.") Here is a familiar Berryman: the tortured genius, the manic-depressive voice of *The Dream Songs*.

Over the course of *The Selected Letters*, Berryman reveals a stylistic tic of suppressing many of his major life upheavals, literally pushing them down into the space below the text body. To reveal upsetting information in the appended space of the postscript was something of a Berryman signature. The "P.S." lingers below the material that Berryman wants to present to his correspondent. He can pretend everything is fine if he technically leaves it out of the letter. Yet one effect of the delay is that these revelations come across as cliffhangers. The first time Berryman signs off in these letters as "John Berryman," in 1929, he does so in a letter to his stepfather which ends with a note so devastating it must be sincere: "P.S. I'm a disgrace to your name." When in 1959 he writes that he "is dead all the time" and likely "having a nervous breakdown," the explanation, which might be expected in the text body, comes after Berryman's valediction. "I am divorced. God bless all married persons & everybody else too," he slips in. After praising the work of Edmund Wilson, he adds as a P.S., "What you wrote abt yr father moved me v. much; my father killed himself when I was 12." The postscripts are like an act break in a soap opera or the unpredictable volta in a sonnet.

Some of the narrative is predictable. Letters to publishers and editors smolder with rage about money owed and poems not accepted. But Berryman is liable to switch subjects and tone in an instant. "I am not impressed by your women. All I can say of Miss Pergament is that I hope you got her to bed and it was worth it," Berryman responds in 1940 to Laughlin, who was editing an anthology of five young American poets. This is hardly the most disturbing comment that appears in the letters, and the worst moments are best left unquoted.

The tamer letters, too, have a tinge of unpleasantness. For instance, when Berryman promises a lover that they can go to Mexico and live "on beans & amour (French for love)," his romantic sweetness is tempered by the condescending gloss of "amour." The annotations in *The Selected Letters* can be just as overdone as Berryman's gloss. When Berryman's signature appears twice at the end of a letter to Laughlin, the endnote indicates that "MS [manuscript] and TS [typescript] signatures are retained here." The editors' addition (there are others like it) indicates their extreme attention to textual detail as scholars, but this same scrupulosity leads them to supply information readily discernible from the letter's content: "I take it you have a Guggenheim," Berryman writes to Delmore Schwartz in a letter from May 1940, which is followed by a note explaining that Schwartz won a Guggenheim in April 1940. Annotations such as these are perhaps how the collection ended up with a whopping 1,270 notes. On the other hand, only after we have hefted hundreds of pages from right to left does it become clear that phrases in German, French, and Italian are not translated anywhere in the book.

A reader hoping simply to crack open *The Selected Letters* at random and pluck out Berryman's juiciest poetic insights will have to do more work. The instances of Berryman's writing advice are infrequent relative to the mass of letters in the collection. His advice, when it does arrive, can sound like weak *sotto voce* encouragement rather than a strong opinion about what poetry should be or do. Berryman dishes out his best advice when he is barely published, and it is worth quoting at length: "The poet invents some of his materials, and others he takes where he finds them,—from personal, conversational and literary experience; what he gives them is order, rhythm, significance, and he does this by means of style and the inscrutable operation of personality." These letters rough out the myriad ways Berryman's inscrutable personality controlled the rhythms of his conversations and, ultimately, the development of his style.

But not all the materials of a poet's life should be published. Berryman wrote to D. D. Paige, the editor of Ezra Pound's selected letters, "I'm glad Pound's correspondence is to be done; it should make a very useful book. I don't envy you any part of it, the collection, the deciphering, or the annotation." He believed that "a complete collection wd be intolerable,—the problem is to select, and then make clear for readers what has been selected." The editors of *The Selected Letters of John Berryman* have performed valuable, painstaking work, and although the result may not have pleased Berryman, it is certainly far from intolerable.□

Struggle's Map

Even scavenging birds seemed reticent
to circle that dead thing washed ashore
in its gray dress of skin and net.
Bright red cuts were raw and crossing—
struggle's map. If you followed the slow
freezing of the eddies in winter's grasp

this told the creature's death,
each crystal building upon itself until
a body cemented at the edges. If you
stumbled upon the carcass, car-large,
you would see it was fresh—not yet
smelling of destruction but of hot

blood tinged in ice. You would know
suffering was long—weeks, maybe months,
before this frozen beaching. Netting
is a heavy, slow noose. You'd contemplate
closing the eyes that likely don't, consider

lying along the body's shadowed side,
hoping for the cold sand to open, to swallow
its own. Who of dignity wants to be carried off
organ by ligament by vessel in the sea's onslaught
or in the tiny mouths of the living?

—*Kara Penn*

Valley Oaks Drive

Deborah-Anne Tunney

SHORTLY AFTER I moved into this house, more than a decade ago now, I met the neighbors who lived behind us. Their yard, the same size as mine, butted up against my yard, and their house, also the same size, had an identical layout. In our neighborhood there were four models that repeated on five long, winding streets. Our house on the outskirts of the development faced a high hill and on the incline, leading to the top of this hill, the crest that separated us from the Pacific Ocean, were palatial homes that at night we'd see glittering, as if they were the stars themselves. Some of these houses had vineyards terraced along the hill, enclosed by fences, and all properties sat on at least an acre of land.

When my husband and I moved here the house felt enormous and there were rooms we did not even use. This was before so much happened—before the death of my mother, before the diagnosis of my husband's illness, the disease that made it impossible for him to work. So much has changed in the past decade, but what I've been thinking about lately, what I've been holding in my mind as I go through the day—caring for my husband, working at a large chain hardware store, making meals, doing the gardening, housework—what I've been thinking about are our neighbors, how they were a decade ago, when we first met. And how one night I saw them in a private moment when they were unaware I could see them.

THE CALIFORNIA sun in summer spreads over our yards, the streets, the hills where I walk each morning, as I'm sure it spreads, honey-smooth, over the poorer neighborhoods that lie close to the commercial core of this small town, where the Mexican field migrants live. It reaches as far as the eye can see, and if we decide—as we used to when we had more funds—to travel over the mountain, through the forested pass, to the throbbing ocean, it would be there too, its shards of light touching each wave with a blinding brilliance. These things continue unabated despite what happens to us in our little house. Of course, the house is only small in comparison, especially to the huge, never-still ocean. It has high ceilings in the front rooms, two-story windows, a kitchen, breakfast nook, and family room make up the rest of the first floor, with a master suite and three more bedrooms with washrooms on the second. We bought this house before the collapse in the market and over the past five years or so we have barely been able to hang on to it.

THE NEIGHBORS behind us live there alone, they're childless, or their children are gone, married, far away, for I never see or hear visitors in their yard. The fence between our yards is solid and high and I only had the opportunity to speak with the woman who lived there when our dogs started barking at each other through the fence. I heard her voice before I saw her. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I can't seem to make Rodeo calm down here."

It had been only a few days since we moved in and I did not want to seem like a problem neighbor with an unruly dog (although the unruly dog was certainly true). "Oh no, it's this crazy creature of mine," I said. "He thinks he owns the neighborhood." And then I worried this made me sound entitled, as if my dog had a right to be a nuisance. "I'll bring him in," I said quickly, and she said, "Oh, thank you. I'm sure they'll learn to behave."

"I'll just be happy if they learn to shut up," I said and then thought I sounded harsh. "I mean Cracker here. He should shut up." And I heard her laugh in response.

THE FIRST year we lived here, a community group organized a neighborhood BBQ, and it was here that I was able to meet my neighbor in person. These BBQs were to end when the economic situation worsened, when more and more houses stood abandoned, or people were publicly evicted. I witnessed this trauma twice on my block and gained three cats from those neighbors, who begged us to take in their animals.

On the day of my first neighborhood BBQ, ten years ago, I was introduced to the woman who lived behind us, the owner of Rodeo, a poodle, the dog who continued to bark at Cracker. The woman was shorter than I am, which makes her short, with sturdy white legs that I could see below her shorts. Her blonde hair was curly and loose to her shoulders, and she, true to my over-the-fence impression of her, was quick to laugh. She wore a T-shirt and was what some people would refer to as "chunky," as if she were put together in chunks—hefty shoulders, a block of chest, midriff, wide generous hips, and those lumpy legs, which ended in sports socks and brightly colored running shoes.

AT THIS time, I was working in the office with my husband, looking after payroll and the accounts. The day of the BBQ was a Saturday and I needed to return to work to complete a report for the auditors who would be at our office on Monday, and so I was only able to stay long enough to greet my neighbor and her husband. He was lanky and gave off an air of befuddlement, with a moustache that seemed suited to an action figure from the 1970s, and I wondered—as I often wonder when I see someone looking as if they were from a different era—what delusion of style kept him looking this way.

I remember this day in particular because my husband was standing with another neighbor, a tanned woman who lived a few doors down from us. She was tall and wore—again, I remember this clearly—a wide patent-leather belt with a huge buckle that stood out against her white dress. Strange that I should remember this, standing with my neighbor and her husband as my own husband laughed his sharp, bark-like laugh. I barely heard what my neighbors said, as some anxiety, or was it merely anger, settled. As I watched him I thought how comical he looked, when I knew he was trying to be ingratiating, or maybe even mysterious. I interrupted him and this woman whose smile never wavered, saying we had to leave to get back to the office. "Oh, duty calling," my husband said, smiling broadly at the woman. There was a small patch of spinach on his front tooth that I did not tell him about.

THE MASTER suite in my home takes up the entire back area of the house. Above the bed there is a cathedral ceiling with a fan which, when on, moves the air about languidly. I would lie some nights when I couldn't sleep looking at that fan, when I was worried about making the mortgage, or those months after getting my husband's diagnosis—the information that told us why his leg trembled, why he had trouble holding utensils and his hands shook. Those nights alone, if my husband had fallen asleep downstairs, or beside me but turned away, I'd watch the fan moving in the evening heat, its endless loop. California nights are seldom humid, even if the day has been, and usually you can trust a breeze to rustle the trees, bringing into the room the sound of its sizzle, as well as the perfume of the oleander and lilac bushes, the hibiscus and wild roses.

One night, when I was reading a novel my sister had left the last time she visited, I put the book aside and glanced toward the large Palladian window that overlooked my yard. It was the first time I noticed that at that time of night I was able to see across my yard to my neighbor's and into their bedroom. It was that moment of the day when the sky seemed to gleam metallically, to almost shimmer, while the darkness was settling in the streets and yards. When I looked over, I could see my neighbor's husband lounging on the bed, watching television. The door to the washroom opened but his attention stayed on the show he was watching, even though his wife entered the room completely naked. Her skin had a rosy glow as if she had just stepped from a hot bath, and she moved with an unconscious confidence, draping the towel in her hand along a high-back chair. She said something to him and he answered without glancing toward her. It struck me how beautiful she was—her wet hair pulled back, the plumpness of her torso, high breasts with deep rose-colored areolae, the curve of her waist, triangle of hair at the top of her legs, and when she turned to go back to the washroom, the round full buttocks with two high dimples above. She was a vision, radiating warmth, something fundamental as life, or maybe even love. She went back into the washroom and when I glanced a few minutes later, the curtains had been drawn. Her image stayed with me, how this vision was in contrast to the woman I had met with her running shoes and tight t-shirt and ruddy complexion.

AS I went about my routine the next day, the image of my neighbors during that calm, unmediated moment returned, how she stood in front of her husband, saying something before turning away, something I imagine as inconsequential, *I'm going for lunch tomorrow*, or *Is the news on yet?* My husband asked me why I was so quiet as we drove to our office in the city. I didn't tell him because I wasn't sure what it meant, and I thought he'd hear *naked woman* and not understand what it was I saw that had touched me.

At the office that day I had lunch with the receptionist, Karen. My husband and I owned the business and most of the people there avoided me because of this, but Karen was young and her democratic sense meant she spoke with

everyone. I wonder what has happened to her. My husband and I were to lose this business within a year, and Karen was never to speak to me after we were unable to make payroll and she was out a month's wages. But on this day, the day after I had witnessed our neighbor, she and I sat on the patio of a restaurant close to our office in the industrial park where our business was located. She was speaking about a man she'd met the weekend before and did not notice my attention slipping from her, until she said, "He's Canadian. Like you."

"Really," I said. "Good guy, then."

"You think?"

"I'm joking, Karen. There are some pretty awful Canadians, you know."

"I guess. But you always speak so well of Canada."

"My family, of course, my family is wonderful." This reminded me my sister was to visit soon, the first visit since the death of our mother the winter before. I had gone home then and stayed with her the last week of our mother's life. The night before the death, my sister and I stayed at our mother's nursing home. Her body under the thin flannel sheet was small, withered, and the skin parched. "She's used every bit of her body," my sister said as we placed new warmed blankets on her legs. "Every part." It snowed heavily that night and we could see it accumulating in the courtyard outside her window. Karen mentioning Canada brought this view back to me, and it struck me then, not for the first time, the capriciousness of memory, how it drills down and settles on an image or a sentence said in haste, and how there doesn't seem to be any hierarchy to what the mind remembers and brings forth. "This reminds me, my sister is coming in a few weeks," I said, but Karen wanted to speak of the man she met and the conversation soon returned to him and her hopes for the future.

My sister lives in Ottawa, where I grew up. She is more than a decade younger than me, and when I was a teenager I was often tasked with looking after her, especially during the years our father was ill and our mother was forced to work. This was before my marriage, before my first husband, the father of my two children, before the move to California after he landed a job there as a map maker. Our divorce shattered so much. I look back at it, at how liberating and damaging it was, equally. It was the moment I first truly sensed that everything would pass someday, the moment that told me I could not continue living as I had, that the dullness our lives had settled into was to be fought instead of endured.

My ex died shortly after my mother, more than ten years ago, and their deaths seemed to end permanently that version of me—before the move here, before this second marriage.

I've spoken to my sister about this and she said, "But I'm here. I remember you then." My sister is a writer, has written from the time she was young. And so when she visited me that time, a few weeks after my lunch with Karen, the first visit since our mother's death, I said to her, "Here's something you could write about." And told her about the neighbor. I told her how the woman seemed so relaxed entering the room, and her husband not looking at her. "I mean there was nothing sexual about it, nothing like that. But there was something, I don't know, something so intimate and full of trust."

My sister said, "You could write it. I mean you've been able to make me see it, feel how important it was. You should write it, just the way you said it."

We were sitting on the deck in the back yard, having a glass of white wine. Rhine wine. Because she said she has a hard time finding it in Canada. We had spent the day at Santa Cruz, walked the boardwalk and beach, ate at an outdoor seafood restaurant, watched the sea lions, heard their heavy bark and talked about our mother. "No, no," I lifted the wine glass and before taking a sip said, "I'm not a writer."

My husband came to the back door, slid it open, and spoke through the screen. "Dinner any time soon?" he said, and I answered, "After this glass," holding it up to him. He shut the door and I said to my sister, "He's mad, always gets mad when I have people here that I love more than him. Which these days is just about everyone."

We laughed. The sun, so bright during the day, was dimming, illuminating the pots along the fence, full of pansies, daisies, and roses. The orange tree branches hung over the table where we sat, and the birdbath and fountain gurgled. We fell silent until I said, "You should do it, write that scene, don't let it slip away."

And she looked away from me, toward the neighbor's yard. "She lives there?"

"Yes, our bedroom windows are level," I said. "But you can only see clearly at a certain time of night."

"Well," she took another sip of wine, "I'll keep it with me. I'll keep it and maybe someday I will know what to do with it."

After dinner—broiled salmon, salad, corn, and buns—when the night began to rest darkly upon the neighborhood, my sister and I went for a walk on the hillside pathway. It was a long walk, and as we passed some of the large estates their lights came on, like sudden fireflies. We spoke of our mother, of the last night of her life, we spoke of our memories of her and we laughed at times, became silent at others, and made it almost to the top of the steep hill before turning back. When we reached Valley Oaks, our street, it was late and dark. There was a mingling of scents, garlic from the nearby farms, citrus from the lemon and orange trees in the back yards, and the warm perfume of the oleander bushes that grew wild along the street. I think back on that night, how two cats came down the wide lane to greet us, how we could hear the sound of my husband's cheer as he watched a football game and we entered the house to its raucous sound. I think back, and wonder why we were not happier.□

Once

That was the one time I ever sleepwalked.
When you wake up, you're a little boy
halfway down some hall of a huge hotel
with far too many rooms, endless many.
You're only half dressed, half weeping
already. When someone finds you this way
how will you ever explain. What will you do
when no one finds you. Your family sleeps soundly
in no room whose number you know, so you say
to yourself, it is this one, pounding the door
till the rhythm of the act makes you certain
this man wincing through the careful opening
must be your father. The exhausted stranger
looks almost afraid. Security takes pity.
Security is a clerk who knows every mystery
and so asks nothing, only leading you back
in the odd hour, hour of numberless things
that might be forgotten, a hand on your shoulder.

—Tomas Unger

Doing It Over

Ross Feld

THERE ARE cosmic jokes, as we all know; and the one I'm probably most familiar with on a daily basis is the one whose punchline goes: "I don't write...I *re*write." As cosmic jokes go, this is hardly the most terrifying; but, as I say, it's the one I'm most familiar with, and like all such jokes its aim is to chasten.

Everyone who's ever written anything at all knows all about this humbling joke, of not writing but rewriting —with the exceptions perhaps of teenage poets and professional philosophers. Whether it's to be a love letter or a term paper on Thomas Paine or a few blistering remarks to be delivered before the neighborhood livability subcommittee, or whether it's *Anna Karenina*—the semi-comic truth is that whatever is first put down on paper shouldn't be seen as much more than simply a way to get the ink accustomed to coming off the pen. That's it. Even to call it a framework or a scaffolding is probably to say too much.

Better to think of it as the beginning of a dazzling process of subversion. You knew—or you *thought* you knew—what you were going to say. After all, you knew what you thought, right? But the moment you commit it to the piece of paper on the desk or in the typewriter, or to the floppy disk (and if there's ever been a more appropriately metaphorical term for a receptacle for human thinking cast into language, I don't know it)—the moment you first try to write it down—all that certainty steals away. Doubt—doubt that you ever really knew what you were thinking about—sets in. But that's only if you write occasionally. If you write more than just occasionally—for instance, every day, in order, God help you, to pay the rent; if you write because there honestly is no other decent thing in the world you know how to do—then doubt doesn't set in. "Set in" in that case is too mild. Think instead of those booths at fairs, those dunking booths. There's not a writer who can see one of those without wincing. That feeling of sitting up there, just waiting to go down.

The fun then starts, the joke part I spoke of. You had no idea what you wanted to say, it turns out—Hell must be where they paper the walls with your first drafts. You definitely did say *something*—it's right there in front of you, unless you want to cover it with a magazine or your forearms—but *what* did you say? You're forced to actually look. E. M. Forster's quip—"How am I supposed to know what I mean until I see what I said?"—is everywhere the truth. And what you said isn't necessarily the same thing that you meant.

So then the question becomes, of course, with which side to throw in your lot? What you meant or what you in fact said? One of the reasons most writing—the stuff that overwhelmingly bulks the fiction catalogue of every library—one of the reasons why most of that is of so little account is because the obvious chasm between meaning and saying instills a bout of paralysis in the writer. To paraphrase the poet Jack Spicer: I wanted to write a paragraph about the war in Vietnam and ended up writing about skating in Vermont. *Now* what do I do?

You *revise*. After all, that's what you were taught to do in high school by your English teachers: revise. Today we're going to learn to revise our compositions. The word basically means to see again, and is in the same family as to *review*—but with some of the juice removed. And what most high school and college teachers really mean by "revise" is a kind of literary dress code: straight seams, color-coordination, no ragged hems, every button buttoned; the imposition of manners. Housekeeping—straightening up before company gets there.

But not until you write prose that isn't strictly utilitarian—not a paper that's due next Wednesday, nor a letter to Mastercard explaining that you never bought the deer rifle charged to your statement, nor a narrative on a resume that details your work history—it's not till then that you realize how useless the dry and mannerly concept of revising is, and that you're going to have to replace it with its far worse mannered, grubbier cousin: rewriting. Which is something that's not pretty—as Hemingway somewhere, at some point, must have said.

The reason that the far funkier process of rewriting isn't pretty is mostly because it is, at its deepest core, for the writer, an exercise in spiritual humiliation. Absolutely necessary—but no less hard to take. The writer's ego finds itself not on Parnassian heights but on the ground floor: *If I'm so wonderful, how come I didn't say this well, say this nicely, right off the bat?* And then in the basement: *I don't exactly seem to know what the point is of all this, do I?* And finally, subbasement, everybody out: *Words apparently know more about me than I do about them.*

One particular subcategory of all chastened, slightly foolish-feeling rewriters is the novelist—who not only has sentences that whip around like garden hoses, going where they want, but imagined characters and plots doing that as well. The insecurity is, in its way, spectacular—until the novelist gradually comes to know his or her story as a foot does a shoe. You wobble into it; foot and shoe come to some comfortable compromise, a fit; if it looks good and feels right, you're halfway home. But only halfway. Novels, complicatingly, also happen to be shoes that go where *they* want to go, the kind of shoe no one in his right mind—except a novelist—would ever think to wear more than once.

When Dostoevsky began work on *The Idiot*, he conceived of its main character, Prince Myshkin, as the embodiment of everything over-refined, over-rationalistic, everything cynical, manipulative, and cruelly evil in the world of that day. We happen to know this because Dostoevsky says it right there in the amazing notebooks he kept for each separate novel's progress. By the time the book was done, though, Myshkin had become not the anti-Christ but instead its opposite, the Idiot: the saintliest, most open-spirited, simplest example of pure grace to inhabit a human body. How did this ever happen?

It happened because Dostoevsky didn't revise. He first read his own book—what was there and what wasn't in each successive version—and he also let his book read him. Tell *him* what *it* thought. The other characters, it turned out, didn't need Myshkin to be bad; they needed him to be saintly. In a sense they staged a revolt against what Dostoevsky had originally planned to do.

So he didn't do it. Instead he turned on a dime. We're speaking here of an act of almost sublime artistic acrobatics and courage. Which in part explains why there are so few Dostoevskys. Still, it's the dirty little secret common to all novelists: that you never had the faintest idea of what was going to happen until you got about mid-

way...and it then happened. Day after day of going in there and rapping away for hours without more than a glimmer of wistful confidence that things may really resolve: it's nerve-wracking, and can make a writer quite impatient. When novelists become impatient, they either seem to turn excessively stylish or they begin dropping moral hints that are about as subtle as horseshoes. But underlying this hysterical skill and/or didacticissm is basically a layer of embarrassment—at not having got it right the first time. At, in other words, being human. Art is both forgiving and unforgiving of its creators' fallibility. But I have a feeling that the pliancy of the relationship between the ideal and the reality—what you meant to say and what finally came out—is exactly where the art of fiction is found. The old and really beautiful maxim, *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans*, is one a novelist should understand. Slipping in the words *A novel* for *Life*.

I KNOW THIS all sounds like the writer's side of the matter only. But is there something that rewriting, the fairly ghastly process, can reveal about re-reading—or the other way around? People, as no one but a librarian is in a better position to know, mostly read a book one time only. They perhaps reserve the *right* to re-read, but it isn't exercised too much. (Although libraries are in some way designed to be there in the isolated event such a right *is* acted upon.) Yet it does happen sometimes of course: pride will spur a vexed reader on to try again and get into something that the first time locked him out—or vice versa. Or there's a book that you weren't ready for. It's my suspicion that, like a not completely pleasant secret, every veteran reader privately carries a book he or she guiltily knows *they* failed and not vice versa. Failed through inattention, laziness, or simply meeting it at the wrong time. When I was thirteen, I read everything I could find by John O'Hara. What could I have understood of John O'Hara's at thirteen? What possibly?

But my suspicion is that the reason the general reading public doesn't re-read is simply because they're never asked to. Children crave hearing the same stories over and over; the sameness brings with it security. And no one complains at having to listen to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony more than once—Oh, *that* thing again?—nor at seeing a reproduction of the Sistine Chapel. Art may be the one place where familiarity *doesn't* breed contempt.

So why can't a book be read again? Why can't favorite books be for adults what they are for children: things to be responded to as though a kind of music? Is it because we already know how a novel or a story turns out? Unlikely; adults stay up through *Casablanca* at two in the morning, knowing exactly who is and who isn't getting on that plane. We probably don't re-read because we've forgotten how to—and why.

Writers, though, happen to be a group of people who frequently do re-read. They're looking for how-to tricks and hints; and they also have a habit of re-reading as a form of self-punishment, going back to books they wish they could beat, wish they could be better than—and which paradoxically are the ones that provide the most hope, the ones that break, as Kafka said, "the frozen sea within us."

They also re-read, however, because they've got some insider's information: they know that all literature is itself basically a re-reading.

Fiction, for example, reads and re-reads life. In a novel or story, we are encountering a middle slice of a heightened reality different from ours yet somehow recognizable, as if it already had been buried in us. To take an arbitrary model, let's say a very lousy book set in the Egypt of the Pharaohs. You pick it up and then very shortly put it down. Why? Because nowhere did it ring true; it seemed too "unbelievable."

But how was it unbelievable? What do you know about the Pharaohs?

Honestly, nothing—or only things from other speculative sources that may themselves be incredible, who knows. Yet you do know, somehow; you do know about what's credible, on either the banks of the Nile or the banks of the Ohio. Somehow, especially when the book is not lousy and instead is great, you know a whole raft of things you never knew you knew. You find yourself able to respond as fluently to the days of a Russian prison camp inmate as you can to the rude shock of a young man waking up to find he's been turned into a cockroach during the night, or to the nuptial anguish of a Jane Austen maiden as fully as to the sexual frustrations of the wife of a French bourgeois named Bovary.

My guess—my writer's guess—is that the reason fiction can let us do these amazing acts of sympathy and identification is because it instinctively calls up in us our inherent taste for complication. And no other art does this so well—since only this one is produced *by* humans *for* humans and expressly must be in some way *about* humans. Fiction satisfies our lust for muddle that our daily lives repress.

And so fiction turns out to be anything *but* a means of escape. Actually, it's a recapture. Into mischievous messes, into the capacity we all have to screw things up.

It's no wonder, then, that writers, who give form to these screw-ups by screwing up themselves, know this best of all. And that they therefore are able to read with a kind of humility and shame and readiness for *re*-experience and *re*-focus that's not at all a bad thing in this very disposable world.

Libraries have a shelf with a sign that reads something like: Books You May Have Missed. "Missed" here presumably means never read when first issued; but as you've guessed by now, I'm sort of suggesting an even longer shelf. It doesn't have to be in the actual, physical library. It's probably better off, more potent, in the mind of the librarian—that there are books we have missed and maybe always will, and that every now and again they deserve another shot. To come back at a book ten, twenty, thirty, even forty years later is always a remarkable experience, whether disappointing or exalting, but it can be something more also: a refresher course in why we read at all.□

Asking for Light

I make my students write sestinas
to prove they are more than machines.
Do not go gently into that blue light,
I joke. We are reading the unknown,
future characters who want to be bodiless,
free from our stone-age flesh. They don't despair

over pronouns, prefer their avatars to despair
in pixel-hearted dreams. They never write sestinas.
I used to think the goal was to see through the body—
like a telescope, or submarine eye, or prism machine
distorting a thousand rays into an unknown
palm asking for light.

I tell my students to use the word luminous
seven different times. *Mean laughter,* I say. *Mean despair.*
C says he is going to use the word bullet, a known
topic appropriate for poetry. The class nods, their own sestinas
suddenly dimmer, less worthy, a cog in the teacher's machine.
Maybe they feel used, like discarded bodies

in our online utopia. *The poem is the body,*
I say. *The words are the soul.* I feel erudite, light
cascading from my mouth, *so* not a machine.
I wave my expo marker around. *The heart is despair!*
I near-shout. *The poem is love!* Most of their sestinas
are about broken legs and puppies. *Don't forget the unknown*

I whisper to B. She looks at me oddly, unknown.
Another girl is writing about her lover's body,
and I am horrified by the word—lover—in a sestina
by a fourteen-year-old. I fear how she will incorporate luminous
and am concerned perhaps it is I who dwell in despair.
Still, not a machine!

At least she is writing about sex and not machines.
This reassures me, hedges the unknown
so I can continue on with the usual despair
of teaching teenagers. At least she still wants a body.
There is hope in that, and the bullet, and the light
shining through each child's truly horrible sestina.

If I am a gentle machine? I give each sestina
an A for effort. Let the bullet's despair illuminate
the unknown lover. Let the poem glow inside every body.

—Jennifer Garfield

A Symposium on Rhyme and Repetition

Editor's Note: As is always true in the case of our symposia, these contributions were written simultaneously and independently in response to the assigned topic. Any overlaps, parallels, or violent disagreements are therefore purely serendipitous.

ATTEMPTING TO define these terms, I found myself lost. Considering how I rhyme and repeat within my own work, as a choreographer of dance to music, I realized that I could not discuss rhyme or repetition without including rhythm.

Rhyme is a pair of things that agree.

Repetition is something that happens again.

Rhythm is the establishment of a time period.

All three require a minimum of two events. I can't tease them apart, so I won't: they are impossible to disentangle, as all three are interwoven in use and in description. Therefore let Rhyme + Repetition + Rhythm = R.

I'm thinking of R principally from the angle of dance/music, but inclusive of poetry, cuisine, architecture, visual art, sport, and nature. The three components are each a form of matching—of tension, suspension, release. In the microcosm of the theater, which is the natural habitat of my work, I see R as something like this: the "beat," or "foot," is a dot, a point in an arc of time, with time being the duration of a performance. It takes a minimum of two beats to establish R. There is a pattern of R in just about any occurrence of any duration: the beat, the measure, the phrase, the movement, the full "piece," the evening, day, week, month, year, etc., infinitely large and small in every direction.

I believe that fundamental R is based on heartbeat, on breath, on bilateral symmetry; the body spatchcocked, split down the middle; pairs of eyes, ears, knees, thumbs, ovaries, lungs, feet, nostrils, and nipples. Bipedalism freed the arms to swing in coordination with the legs, and to clap hands, row a boat, knit. Songs and chants, and their R, unite people in actions such as pulling ropes, moving water, herding livestock, lulling an infant, plaiting hair, dancing and singing. Walking is a steady beat, a pulse, a repetitive, rhyming rhythm... and it gets you somewhere; you're striding through space and time.

When I start to think about these subdivisions and accents of time—of R—I go nuts. There are so many examples, so many tangents, that it is hard to pick a few to pursue. I'll skip that part in favor of the general.

It's all about arriving, albeit temporarily, in consonance, satisfaction, completion. R lets us know when to stop: the rhythm, the repetition, the rhyme all meet on the terminal beat, the tonic, the end of time and of tempo. The punchline, the terminal cadence of the symphony, the "cherry on top," the orgasm, the "button," the "Tristan chord," the sunset. R bears us, seduces us willingly through the whole experience, to the end. We made it! R creates memory, ritual, satisfaction, nostalgia.

At the resolution of even the most densely complicated figures in American square dance, the four couples of the quadrille head back to their start positions: "Home." It is a re-set, an end-rhyme, a conclusion. A task completed, with style. Home.

—*Mark Morris*

*

I LOVE TRAINS with a city boy's love. Train horns are elsewheres, vague promises, a route or pattern of deliverance. And I love the repetitive sounds trains make. No matter where I am, I catch myself pausing with attentive happy reverence at the *clack-a-clack-a* of wheels—city or country, streetcars or boxcars. Best heard in the darker hours of the day. Best while pained by a day's fatigue or night-worries.

Repetition can satisfy our need for steadiness and predictability. It can pacify the jagged unhappy soul. It entrances with its sheer clockwork normalcy and has a peculiar moral force, a persuasiveness. Its constancy consoles, especially in times of distress, upset, manic irregularity. Repetition is the mesmeric heartbeat of old-style rock and pop, though its beauty and slipperiness will give it a maddening unforgettability. (Get out of my head!) It induces an aggravating wakefulness. "Na-na-na-nana-na-na, Hey, Jude." "Bar-Bar-Bar-Bar-Barbara-Ann." Repetitions like these, which can sound like entreaties or come-ons, charge us up with hope, undetectable cellular hope, because they presume an enthralling ongoingness. On a dance floor, repetitiveness makes us feel happily lost.

In poetry, repetition is essential to cadence and pacing, which means it's critical to the shape of feeling. In "During Wind and Rain," Hardy's great poem about household and familial change—*mortal* change—the haunter-lines that alternate through four stanzas, reacting to scenes of domestic tranquility and dislocation,

are "Ah, no; the years, the years" and "Ah, no; the years O!" The repeats (the lines are used twice each) intensify the mournfulness and doom.

Poets have their favorite instances in Shakespeare, favored because of the musicality of the repeat or refrain, or because of how it textures meaning. When Macbeth goes into himself in Act V with "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," you hear the tremendousness of the defeat he feels in his destiny-defining aspiration, to have action trammel up its consequences, to be dictator of reality, summary lord of events. The phrase voices a tragic tedium. Near the end of *King Lear*, the old man pleads with the universe not to take his daughter from him, and his speech has a terrified absolutism that Shakespeare achieves by hammering "No, no, no life? / Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life / And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more. / Never never never never never." The reductive pistoning monosyllabic question is followed by Lear's desperate repetitive "never" answer. In a different context it might turn into a nonsense jingle, instead of a gasp of end-stop pain. The line also reverses (with desolate emotional neediness) the established pattern of the previous line, the mighty little iamb, mightiest when timed to completely overcome and overturn life. The language is itself an agonizing intimacy. Its metric counts out the end of continuity, of the forwarding of existence. The pitch of grief, the agony of Lear's existential reckoning, is measured by the metrical mechanics. In these punchy blank verse lines, he's also punching himself for having arrived at the gibbet too late to save Cordelia. Then the turn, the recognition, enacted in those five words whose cadence reverses what we've just heard. Now those "never" trochees enact finitude and finality.

In the closing lines of "Those Winter Sundays," a lyric about the tense, anxious intimacies between father and son, and about necessary repetitive household chores, Robert Hayden reflects on childhood's opacity, the inability to really read the meanings of human actions. The father, on yet another cold morning, is getting a fire started and polishing his son's shoes. The son seems to tremble a little recalling "the chronic angers of that house." At the end, he puts a question to himself that's also an assertion: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" Play it back, vocalize it, sliding stresses from one word to another: emphasize the "what" or the "know" or the "I." The language's repetitive simplicity enacts the morning rituals in his and most other households, and the *fraughtness* of such mornings, such regularity. Repeated household habits lend time an orderly rhythm but also reinforce whatever is unbearable and stifling. Read the lines and they change on you—they change the shape of experience, they astonish, they wake you up.

—W. S. Di Piero

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A HUNDRED YEARS ago, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud described an eighteen-month-old child's "great cultural achievement." In what is the first recorded psychoanalytic infant observation, ever, by anyone, Freud watches his toddler grandson playing, with wooden spool and string, the game of "fort-da." The little boy, who has let his mother go without fuss, repeatedly tosses his toy over the side of his cot, "fort" (gone), then pulls it back, "da" (there), thus managing the experience of loss by symbolically re-enacting it over and over again. Therapeutic repetition.

The baby also finds words to repeat: "o-o-o-o." In emphasizing the untiring repetition of disappearance punctuated by the toddler's spoken "o-o-o-o" [fort], Freud isolates the centrality of language to the individual's development, and within human culture itself. Cadence, too, is a form of repetition: rhythmical cooing and rocking create a minimal, symmetrical other, bringing comfort to the upset baby so he is less alone. In playing "gone," he uses his imagination to give shape, meaning, and vocal music to the loss.

All development happens against the backdrop of loss. In giving up the Eden of omnipotence, a surrender that never ends until the final loss, Freud's toddler endures his pain by making something. The wooden spool, like the mother, is gone and then returns, saying, in effect, "Da! I am here!" But even more important, the boy who creates the drama is also saying "I am here: *I* did this, I'm the one who *made* it!" The boy stages a "joyful return." Then Freud adds another motive, the turning of passive to active, as with comedy and delight he speaks the boy's defiance, "*All right then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself.*" And there's the additional satisfaction of the child's revenge: he throws her away. In repeating the represented experience of abandonment and return, he's like a poet, and like his essayist grandfather, working through his grief—a "great cultural achievement."

But in this game there's never a moment of doubt who controls that wooden spool. The little boy is the choreographer of loss. This constantly reasserted authority reminds me of the talking cure Freud invented. In psychoanalysis, too, one stages scenes, repeatedly rehearsing and rehashing experiences in the mind. The patient may feel stuck, but the repetitions, he or she hopes, are headed somewhere.

For Freud, it is a given that reality is unsatisfying, and to transform it by fantasizing is the nature of being human. Like a child at play, the adult builds "castles in the air"; we daydream. An event in the present rouses a desire and "[f]rom there it wanders back to the memory of an early experience…in which the wish was fulfilled," thus bringing present and past together. And the daydream adds a future—the three moments of time held in one imagining. In Freud's marvelous words: "Past, present and future are threaded, as it were, on the string of the wish that runs through them."

Repetition can be a source of comfort, creating reassuring order: form becomes a companion. Here, in Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "The Land of Counterpane," is an older child more elaborately re-arranging his diminished world, with the outward play of rhyme and repetition achieving restoration in the mind:

When I was sick and lay a-bed,
I had two pillows at my head,
And all my toys beside me lay,
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so
I watched my leaden soldiers go,
With different uniforms and drills,
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain,
The pleasant land of counterpane.

Deprived by illness of the world beyond his bed, Stevenson's boy, like Freud's toddler, is a choreographer of loss. And like Freud the essayist, or any other writer, the poet creates a scene—the protagonist stuck in bed and in his own head. *My* head, *my* toys, *my* soldiers, *my* ships, *my* trees and houses. Five repetitions of authority and control followed by the last stanza's stillness, and calm: "I was the giant great and still / That sits upon the pillow-hill"—the past of "I was" and the eternal narrative present of the seated giant, both strung on the thread of desire.

—Ellen Pinsky

*

WHAT BETTER than rhyme epitomizes both the blind luck intrinsic to poetry and the humiliation of using shabby words to communicate? I remember the rush of fortune when, in an early poem, searching for an echo for the word "flecks," I stumbled on "vortex" and crested onto an image I wouldn't have discovered otherwise. But when rhyme slips into our everyday speech, in English at least, it often feels embarrassing, undercutting the force of what we're trying to say. Sometimes an unintended rhyme even prompts that wincing joke about being a poet without knowing it, as if the art comes to mind only when language is at its least convincing.

"I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired," Robert Frost rhymes in "After Apple-Picking," a poem about appetite and pattern—that is to say, about the conditions of art-making itself. Poems that employ rhyme foreground the art's relationship to repetition, constructing a sonic game out of the mind's hunger for correspondences. But in Frost's poem, the speaker is haunted by abundance, by nature's excessive answering of his appetite: "I keep hearing from the cellar bin / The rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in." There is a sickly-sweetness in tasting, or "hearing" (for Frost puts it in sonic terms), too many similar things. And in a poem full of recurrent sounds, Frost's final repetition is telling: the word "sleep" appears four times in the final six lines, and twice in the last two lines. The pursuit of correspondence has given way to dullness, deadness, a closing down of possibilities:

One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like
his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

What happens when a poem's traditional scheme of echo and variation breaks down altogether, and a poet rhymes the same word with itself? Thomas Hardy's "Who's in the Next Room?" features four intricately rhymed stanzas of dialogue between two voices, drawing to a close on a final couplet that undermines the previous resonances:

"Who's in the next room?—who?
I seemed to see
Somebody in the dawning passing through,
Unknown to me."
"Nay: you saw nought. He passed
invisibly."

"Who's in the next room?—who?
I seem to hear
Somebody muttering firm in a language
new
That chills the ear."
"No: you catch not his tongue who has
entered there."

"Who's in the next room? —who?
I seem to feel
His breath like a clammy draught, as if it
drew
From the Polar Wheel."
"No: none who breathes at all does the
door conceal."

"Who's in the next room?—who?
A figure wan
With a message to one in there of
something due?
Shall I know him anon?"
"Yea he; and he brought such; and you'll
know him anon."

Cutting through Hardy's prosaic awkwardness, the doubling of "anon" produces a chill at the poem's end. Throughout "Who's in the Next Room?" and especially in each stanza's rhyming couplet, we have been experiencing repetition as difference—just as the next day of our lives diverges from the previous day, even while resembling it. At the poem's end, as at the end of a life, Hardy gives us repetition as identity. As in "After Apple-Picking," similarity has succumbed to sameness. That the word Hardy chooses to repeat is "anon" heightens both the banality and the terror of the final stanza's turn. The figure in the next room is death, of course, and with that second "anon" we realize how closely he's been lurking all along.

Sameness is what Frost's and Hardy's patterned correspondences nod to but keep at bay until the end. Often associated with closure, rhyme in these poems actually enables suspension, a maintenance of distinctions. Is it going too far to extrapolate an ethics from these observations about form? We want the world to arrange itself into patterns we can recognize, and recognize ourselves within. Rhyme, whether intended in art or accidental in speech, suggests the pervasiveness of such patterns. But in seeking correspondence too insistently, we might fail to see the world; we might only see ourselves. Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is the otherness, the "irreducible alterity," of every human being that contains divine value and must be preserved. As Sufi wisdom puts it, "When you first meet [someone else], he may seem to be very different from you. He is not. He may seem to be very much like you. He is not."

—Nate Klug

*

BOOGIE-WOOGIE IS one of the few genres of music whose name rhymes. Rhymes repeat sound, and the musical characteristics of boogie-woogie include melodies and rhythms that constantly replicate. Standard boogie-woogies generally feature an unaccompanied pianist. Both hands of the player repeat short musical ideas, in each case looking to generate hypnotic and danceable joy. The left hand stays in the bottom of the keyboard, romping through a churning ostinato pattern, sometimes called "Eight Beats to the Bar." The right hand offers a bit more variety, but it is still repetitive. Short, groovy, and shouting blues phrases can be called "riffs," and a good boogie pianist has a full complement of them at the ready for their right hand. When "riffs" cycle over "Eight Beats to the Bar" in the right way, the effect can turn from hypnotic to ecstatic.

Usually boogie-woogies are based on a twelve-bar blues. The blues is rightfully considered one of the most soulful and humane musics, but many boogies add in the unfeeling repetition of industrial mechanization, namely the steam locomotive. In Meade Lux Lewis's "Honky Tonk Train Blues," first recorded in 1927, older African polyrhythms blend with the bumping and thumping of the rails. Lewis's left keeps steady sophisticated time while the right decorates with an elaborate gallery of whistles and bells. Some of the polyrhythms conjure the sound of a level crossing, and eventually the pianist slows down as the train pulls into the station.

Lewis's masterpiece was the end product of several decades of community research. After the Civil War, African-American musicians in the South were allowed access to pianos. They began using that keyboard to combine ragtime, blues, church music, European classical music, guitar jangles, popular song, and everything else. The primitive turn-of-the-century bars known as barrelhouses frequently had pianos: if you could play for dancing, you could drink for free.

Pinetop Smith knew Lewis—they practiced together—and a year after "Honky Tonk Train Blues," he released the 78 LP that named the form: "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie." This record is one of the key documents in American music, a template for hundreds of hit records since, from Tommy Dorsey to Ray Charles. Tragically, Smith was killed in a dance hall fight a year later.

"Pine Top's Boogie Woogie" features exhortations from the pianist explaining what the dancers should and shouldn't do. It's party music. The best boogie-woogie remains connected to that celebratory party feeling, but the pianism is refined into high art. Meade Lux Lewis and Pinetop Smith made their mark in Chicago alongside two other legendary practitioners, the outstanding virtuoso Albert Ammons and the surreal poet Jimmy Yancey. From Kansas City came Pete Johnson, a drummer turned pianist whose direct approach offers an obvious link to rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and even the most repetitive American music of all, hip-hop. Many other great pianists contributed to posterity during those early halcyon years, often bearing colorful names: Cow Cow Davenport, Little Brother Montgomery, Big Maceo Merriweather, Cripple Clarence Lofton, Montana Taylor, Speckled Red. I have a special fondness for the 1939 side of "Little Joe From Chicago" by Mary Lou Williams, who suavely varies both the top and bottom patterns in a notably carefree fashion. Musicians call that kind of initiative "mixing it up." Williams mixes it up, but her performance still has enough hypnotic danceable repetition to make it classic boogie-woogie.

—Ethan Iverson

*

POETRY IS an art that performs the magic trick of converting sound, provisionally, into sense. It pulls a semantic illusion out of the phonetic hat. The rabbit dangles before our eyes only as long as the poem lasts; when the final words trail away, sound collapses back into its intrinsic meaninglessness. Good rhyme, insisting on likeness of sound, produces a frisson, even a shock, of simultaneous relation and incongruity: the sound chimes, the sense differs. We feel the gorgeous force of this hybrid art, mingling sensory excitement with intellectual exercise. In a whole poem, rhyme sets up a structure of memory, anticipation, and revelation.

Auden is one of the masters of modern rhyming. His poem "As I Walked Out One Evening" plays along with a faux-naïf trimeter melody in quatrains rhyming ABCB, a kind of folk song: "As I walked out one evening, / Walking down Bristol Street…" The first rhyme is simple: "street"/"wheat." But in the second quatrain, the misplaced stress throws off the apparently simple rhyme of "sing" and "ending," and so throws the romantic illusion off balance. "Love has no ending": we cannot pronounce the line to rhyme properly with "sing." In this case, the effects of rhythm and scansion distort the rhyme.

The poem unfolds in a savvy sequence of chimes and dissonances, delivering in stanza seven one of my favorite rhymes in twentieth-century English:

In the burrows of the Nightmare
  Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
  And coughs when you would kiss.

The clash of "is" and "kiss," with the sinister hiss of "Justice" echoing behind them, perverts the ideal coupling of sound the pattern has led us to expect. In vain does the poem revert to simple rhymes like "Jack"/"back" and "distress"/"bless." The damage has been done. Innocence is lost; romantic love cannot be made whole.

T. S. Eliot's "Marina" rhymes much more irregularly and complexly. It doesn't even present itself as a rhyming poem, so its few instances of rhyme, and one stanza built on exactly repeated words, stand out in high relief. This intensely moving lyric, written in 1930 at a time of Eliot's estrangement from his wife Vivienne and his recent conversion to the Anglican Church, recalls an early landscape of joy, the Atlantic shore of Cape Ann in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where the poet spent his boyhood summers. It's a poem of regeneration set in a frame of destruction, and its themes of images returning and a rediscovered daughter are sounded out in the rare rhymes, which restore sounds we might have lost.

Marina, we know, is the lost daughter in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, miraculously restored to her grieving father. But this fable of return is shadowed by the epigraph from Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, where the hero wakens from madness to find that he's murdered his wife and children. Eliot sets himself the task of rescuing Pericles from Hercules, one father's story from another's, and rescuing the lost daughter. He does it through his own memory of a blessed place: "And the scent of pine and the wood thrush singing through the fog / What images return." An Atlantic, not a Mediterranean scene.

In the second stanza, the clangorous repeated words—"meaning," "meaning," "meaning," "meaning" and "Death," "Death," "Death," "Death"—petrify in spiritual stasis. But that stanza pours in a fluid enjambment to the opening of the heart in stanza three, where rhyme, unlike literal repetition, allows change: "grace"/"place"/ "face." This triplet leads to another: "hurrying feet," "all the waters meet," "paint cracked with heat." And these in turn give way to the mysterious drama of consciousness reintegrating through the integration of sound and sense, past and present, as we *hear* memory becoming conscious and restorative:

I made this, I have forgotten
And remember.
The rigging weak and the canvas rotten
Between one June and another September.
Made this unknowing, half conscious,
  unknown, my own.

"Unknowing" hovers between a present participle and a gerund, between verb and noun, performing its own kind of rich syntactic unknowing. It could be the object of the verb "made." It could be a participle modifying the speaker. Or it could be a participle modifying "unknown." It has to be all of these: in his mysterious deliverance, the speaker is both maker and instrument of the transformative act of unknowing. "Unknown" similarly hovers. It could be the past participle as noun, the object of the "made," modified by "this": "I made this unknown." But it could also work as an adjective, modifying the speaker: "I, unknown, made this." The speaker has given himself up to a discovery, has relinquished control, is no longer the sole agent. The rhyme, from "unknown" to "my own," in the space of four syllables, makes the redemptive leap.

Eliot has made Seneca and Shakespeare his own, as he has repossessed childhood's lost freedom of heart and the chance for unselfish love. And it shows, yet again, that poetry is an art that works through the senses even as it touches the mind, unifying consciousness and restoring us as whole sentient beings.

—Rosanna Warren

*

THE ART of listening is governed by Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and mother of the Muses. Rhyme and repetition are tools of memory, and by bearing in mind what has gone before we are able to anticipate what is to come.

Think for a moment of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: one of the most recognizable statements in all classical music—da, da, da, DAA; da, da, da, DAA—fortissimo, unison. The repeated rhythm alone would identify the piece for most listeners. The second four-note group also rhymes with the first, although they are not identical; the second group is a step lower and where the interval between the third da and the DAA in the first group is a major third, it is a minor third in the second. What Beethoven gives us, instantly and irrevocably, is the means by which to make sense of an entire span of music. The opening gestures form the material of the first subject of the movement's sonata form and remain present in the bass even during the unfolding of the more lyrical second subject. Beethoven plays with this material throughout the movement—he changes the pitches and the intervals, he turns it upside down and elides it—but because we remember its source, we can orient ourselves; we become present because our memory allows us to look forward and to imagine the completion of the gesture from its start. Memory also enables us to be surprised and delighted by the delayed gratification when, instead of three das, Beethoven gives us nineteen (!) before reaching DAA. (Beethoven is the great champion of pushing things to their limits: in one quirky song, *Ein Selbstgespräch*—"A Monologue"—he sets the word *ich* fifty times.)

This involvement of the listener—the demand that the listener has work to do—seems to me to be a fundamentally important part of the experience of music. The expectations set up by rhyme and repetition encourage an active participation; we can guess what might be coming next even in music we are hearing for the first time. And remember that before the invention of audio recording, people were always encountering music for the first time. Johann Sebastian Bach performed the *St. John Passion* just four times in his life, each time in a different version, reaching an audience of perhaps two thousand people in total. If you weren't in Leipzig for one of those performances, you would not have had another chance to hear it in your lifetime.

Perhaps that is why Bach chose to play so radically with his audiences' expectations: to make sure they were paying attention. The whole of the *John Passion* is full of subversion and irony, but the greatest example comes in the final soprano aria, *Zerfliesse, mein Herze* ("Melt, my heart"). It seems that we are in a standard da capo aria—the conventional form, ABA, for arias in opera and oratorio in Bach and Handel's time. Rhyme and repetition are in place:

Zerfließe, mein Herze, in Fluten der
  Zähren
Dem Höchsten zu Ehren

Erzähle der Welt und dem Himmel die
  Not:
Dein Jesu ist tot!

Melt, my heart, in floods of tears
In honor of the highest

Tell the world and the heavens the anguish:
Your Jesus is dead!

We get an instrumental introduction with solo flute playing the melody that the soprano will take over; we then hear the sung A section of the text with internal repeats, and this is completed by a play-out from the instruments. The B section takes place conventionally in the relative major key, again with internal repeats, and we start on the da capo with the original instrumental introduction, only this time the soprano interrupts as if to say, "No, you don't understand! Your Jesus is dead!"—interjecting the last line of the B section to shout out the shocking enormity of what has happened to the crucified man. Only then can the da capo resume, returning us to the (changed) world with a new understanding of the necessity of those tears.

In an age of instantly accessible music, when we can listen to the *John Passion* while doing the washing up and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony whilst driving to the shops, it is all too easy to take these pieces for granted and not notice what is being said. But the greatest music demands attention. Its rewards come from a listening that is not merely passive but alert and imaginative, that gives as well as takes.

As Bart Simpson once said about another art form: "C'mon people! This poetry isn't gonna appreciate itself!"

—Mark Padmore

Back at the Berlin Philharmonic

Wendy Lesser

IN MARCH of 2020, Berlin, like the rest of the world, shut down its live performances. Gradually, as late summer blended into fall, indoor concerts began to reappear in a few selected places, and by the time I got to the city at the beginning of October, I had my choice of a number of classical music venues. In the course of less than a month—that is, before the second wave of coronavirus arrived and locked everything down again at the beginning of November—I was able to attend eleven performances in five different locations.

At first, I was like a hungry person set down at a banquet table, stuffing myself past the level of comfort. I attended a performance on the very night I arrived, something that expectations of jet-lag generally prevent me from doing; and although I was thrilled to be hearing live music for the first time in eight months, I found myself barely able to focus on anything but the germ-laden aerosols I imagined Jörg Widmann was blowing out at us through his clarinet. Three nights later, I packed in two concerts in a row—a 5:00 P.M. symphonic performance at the Berlin Philharmonic, followed, after a brief subway ride, by a 7:30 quartet concert at the Pierre Boulez Saal—and again, my eyes proved bigger than my stomach. I'm not sure I would have enjoyed the Belcea Quartet under any circumstances (I have heard them before, and they are always a bit too harsh and unmodulated for my taste), but coming immediately after Simon Rattle's splendid interpretations of Beethoven and Haydn, they just seemed unnecessary.

I was also distracted, during that first week or two, by observing the differing approaches the various venues took to our safety and security. At the Konzerthaus—a vast, beautiful old auditorium—the ceiling was high enough and the surrounding seats empty enough that I felt comfortable taking off my mask during the performances, as we were allowed to do. At the Pierre Boulez Saal, the relative crowdedness of the chamber-music venue was countered by the high quality of the masks that were handed out free at the door and were required throughout the concert. (A Berlin friend, when I showed him my Boulez Saal mask afterward, told me they retailed for between five and eight euros *apiece*.) My evening listening to a musically terrific though dramaturgically nonsensical *Die Walküre* at the Deutsche Oper was ruined by the fact that the management insisted on retaining the standard two lengthy intermissions, replete with maskless dining and drinking; I was so terrified of the possible contagion that I spent these dangerous periods huddling alone in an empty stairwell. Even the Komische Oper—which put on a tremendous live *Bassarids* last year that required us to sit in our seats for two and a half hours without pause—cravenly inserted an intermission in its video-heavy *Magic Flute* this fall, increasing the chance that we could infect each other while going to and fro in the crowded, narrow hallways.

Only at the Berlin Philharmonic, with its ninety-minute intermissionless performances, did I feel a hundred percent safe and comfortable. I was grateful for every element of precaution: the cordoned-off rows behind and in front of me, the three or four empty seats on either side, the masked ushers escorting each and every patron individually to

pre-reserved places, even the contact-tracing paperwork we had to fill out before the concert and drop off in a box afterward. On my first night there, when I came to the wrong door and had to be led around to the sole mobile-ticketing entrance, the masked young man who escorted me confided as we walked, "We have to be really cautious, because even a single infection will close us down." Add to this that I also heard the best music of my Berlin month in this acoustically perfect hall, and you will see why I regretted that a mere three out of my eleven concerts were held at the Philharmonie.

And the music itself? It ranged from pleasurable and fascinating to deliriously exhilarating. Admittedly, only one of the three concerts—the evening designed by artist-in-residence Tabea Zimmerman in conjunction with visiting conductor François-Xavier Roth—featured what I would normally call adventurous programming. Zimmerman, herself a brilliant violist, surrounded Paul Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher*, his concerto for viola and small orchestra, with complementary pieces by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (the twelve-minute Symphony in D major) and Béla Bartók (the always welcome *Divertimento for String Orchestra*). The Hindemith was a revelation, especially as performed by Zimmerman, who allowed the other members of the orchestra, and particularly the harpist, to shine along with her. And Roth proved a distinctly able if not terribly exciting leader of the somewhat reduced Berlin Philharmonic that was spread across the stage.

The two other programs were heavy on Haydn and Beethoven, who both turn out to be great mood-lifters during a pandemic: Haydn because he is relentlessly cheerful, even in the face of bad news; Beethoven because of his willingness to confront his own interior agony, which outdoes and in some way counters any external dire events. In the concert conducted by Marc Minkowski (another visiting Frenchman), we were treated to Haydn's Symphony No. 59, which I don't recall ever hearing live before, followed by an even greater rarity, Beethoven's ballet music for *The Creatures of Prometheus*. Both works were beautifully performed by the Philharmonic musicians, and both had their high points (quite a number of them, actually, in the sixty-minute Beethoven piece), but I never quite got that feeling of transcendent lift-off that arises from the most enthralling concerts.

Perhaps I had been spoiled by my first experience back at the Berlin Philharmonic, that late-afternoon Simon Rattle concert which took place on the fourth day of my Berlin stay. By that time, my accommodation to the city and its habits was already pretty complete, so I was not distracted by mundane irrelevancies like jet-lag and mask etiquette. It was also a thrill just to be back in the beloved building, with its warm wood tones, its terraced seating in the round, and its perfect sound quality. I have to admit, too, that Simon Rattle—for a long time *the* reason I returned to the Philharmonie to hear concerts year after year—was a big part of the draw.

And he did not disappoint. This time he was conducting, not the fabled Berlin Phil itself, but a smaller, younger group called the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. I'd heard them before, conducted and accompanied by András Schiff, so I knew they were good, but I didn't know *how* good until I saw them under Rattle's baton. He has a way of taking a familiar old chestnut—in this case, Beethoven's violin concerto—and introducing subtle variations of volume and pacing so as to make it seem a newly minted piece. In this case the chestnut happened to be a very delicious one, and Rattle was assisted in his reconfiguration by an astonishing young Norwegian soloist, Vilde Frang. This slender, swaying, almost dancing violinist appeared to be about sixteen, at least from my seat (though when I looked her up later, she turned out to be thirty-four). But she had the kind of ageless genius that makes the musician seem a perfect channel for the music, a living embodiment of its vital force. As I watched Frang play and listened to her violin's swelling communion with the orchestra, I had the sense that I was truly hearing live music once again. Nor did the distinctly humorous Haydn symphony that followed—No. 90 in C major, with its series of false endings leading up to a final firm conclusion—subtract one iota from the overall experience. If the Beethoven had offered an intense emotional high point, the Haydn was a pure joy, effortless and thrilling.

As the concert ended and I made my way out, down scarcely peopled stairs, through the unoccupied restroom, then past the uncrowded cloakrooms to the nearly empty lobby, I had a sense of my own privilege that was so overwhelming as to be viscerally guilt-inducing. *This is what royalty must feel like*, I thought. I had sat through the concert in splendid comfort, with no nearby patrons to annoy me with their coughs or page-turnings, no tall heads in front of me to obstruct my view, and now I was exiting the building—a building that had always before, in my experience, been filled with crowds—as if it were my own space alone.

Many things about the pandemic have made me aware of my privileged existence. It is impossible to live through something like this and not feel the unfairness in life and death, the way some people end up shielded, through no merit of their own, and others take the brunt of the punishment. But until I attended that Simon Rattle concert at Berlin's Philharmonie, I didn't fully connect that sense of privilege to the role of art in my life.

This belated realization does not make me inclined to renounce art. I couldn't manage to do it even if I wanted to, and in any case I am not a person prone to self-sacrifice. It does, though, make me more conscious of the isolated splendor in which I normally dwell, now exacerbated by the worldwide virus and its effects. I am used to thinking of live music as a communal experience, and to a certain extent it is that. But this time, at the Berlin Philharmonic, I was also made aware of how separate my existence is from the general lot of humanity. The awareness is discomforting and, perhaps for that very reason, valuable.□

Inspecting the Game

Poled upriver in teakwood dugouts we
disembarked and were greeted a second time
paraded up a prayer-flag avenue
and mounted on five elephants, seated
snug in the howdah's pillowed canework carriage,
three to a pachyderm under the canopy
plus the mahout with his hooked goad up front
in a tasseled beanie, riding astride the neck,
Carol and I on the same colossal beast
as yesterday. Our magisterial
behemoth led the way for the procession
tearing off obstructive branches and muscling
aside debris that compromised his passage
and meanwhile, at intervals, picked and stored
between his tusks pale shoots of a favored foliage
he ate with relish in our idle moments.

The jungle was not exciting—bedraggled
sparse trees, the forest floor burnt over, scorched.
Back out along the river again we spotted
a pair of sambar—a largish, handsome deer—
and crossed to an island, the elephants
wading a languid current belly-deep
with flotillas of waterbirds escorting.

Soon game abounded. The principal attraction
is single-horned rhinoceros, now rare;
also hog deer, swamp deer, water buffalo
and more sambar. The rhinos are immense
lumbering things, massively armored and quite tame.
One stopped and mugged for cameras shamelessly.
They are complacent creatures. Formerly
they were trained to plow. Now old bulls have started
tagging along behind the elephants
which gives the tourists a poor impression
of their ferocity. The charging buffalo
is reputed the most dangerous.
A holstered double-barrel howdah pistol
is strapped behind the mahout ready to hand.
Its 20-gauge slug load can stop one short.

The view afforded from our swaying vantage
was lordly but unpromising. This country
is without resources. The market price
of timber will not meet the cost of transport.
The farming villages are self-subsistent,
imported goods are rare and odd exotics.
The Paris Zoo acquired a stockade rhino
last year for twenty thousand rupees, and now
the price is forty thousand. Such is prosperity.

Two hours was enough of the mosquitoes,
the heat, the back flies, the humidity.
I detached our elephant from the party
taking a guide and rifle to contend
with possible tiger. Much of our passage back
to the field station guest house was downriver,
belly-deep again at times. Once our animal
noticed an object on a gravel bar,
picked it up in stride and delivered it
to his mahout, a lidless film canister.

—Jim Powell

Ridiculous Men

Javier Marías

I WAS PROMPTED to write this article by two photos of Hitler I came across in a copy of *150 Years of Photo Journalism*. We have become so accustomed to images of Hitler that we barely notice them any more; he has become an icon of evil so well-known and so often reproduced—so ubiquitous—that we tend to gloss over such images, to ignore them, to dismiss them briskly with a meaning and a name: ah, yes, Hitler. His face has become some-

how all too *déjà vu*, so familiar that we find it neither strange nor shocking: what you might call a normalized anomaly. There are hundreds of images in which Hitler appears in the most histrionic and grotesque of poses, a lunatic caught in mid-harangue, disguised as a soldier or, rather, disguised as himself. We confuse him with all the parodies and caricatures, especially Chaplin's version of him in *The Great Dictator*, and because of this he has become, in a way, a deactivated icon, divested of all his real horror, as is also the case with the more hackneyed versions of the Devil, complete with horns and hooves, trident and tail. Nowadays almost no one fears or takes seriously such a figure, not even when depicted by those who did once believe in his existence, a belief that now arouses feelings of either pity or laughter.

This is precisely what struck me about those two photos, because they made me stop and see Hitler almost as if I didn't know who he was, as if he were someone to whose face I had not yet grown accustomed, as if I were looking at that first photo through the eyes of someone seeing it in 1935, long before the Second World War, long before our own Civil War, when Hitler had come to power just two years before, following a democratic election—a political process he then ensured would not happen again, at least not fairly. In that photo, according to the caption, Hitler is reviewing the guard of honor before receiving the new Spanish ambassador at the presidential palace. He's not wearing a military or even a paramilitary uniform, but the formal garb of a diplomat; he is dressed and ready for the occasion. It appears that the Spanish ambassador has not yet arrived. Since it's unlikely that anyone would have dared keep the Führer waiting, one cannot imagine our compatriot (who would have been a Republican) arriving late, and so one presumes that Hitler had a few spare moments, time enough to make sure that the guard of honor was properly turned out and that all was in order—either because he was keen on protocol or simply loved playing with soldiers. What is most striking, and most shocking, is that Hitler is in civilian dress reviewing thirty-nine armed guards, complete with helmets and high boots. He is shorter than the shortest soldier, or so it seems, and that front row could, with just one movement of their arms, so easily become something very different: a somewhat overmanned firing squad. The person reviewing them is not, of course, a condemned man, but someone who himself tirelessly handed out death sentences, and while he may not be in uniform, his haughty demeanor shows that he is in command. His gaze is so stern as to be ridiculous, so over-the-top that it could be that of an impostor playing the part of an inspector of the guard. There is even something phony about his arms: his right arm by his side, in a simulacrum of militarism, his left arm bent as if he were carrying an invisible whip. But look at his feet—good grief, those feet placed awkwardly one in front of the other really let him down and transform the whole image into a scene out of a vaudeville show or an opera buffa; it's the kind of step a staggering drunkard might make, and one finds oneself picturing the next step (the step not captured by the photographer) as he brings that laggardly right leg forward. If this were a still from a movie, we would replace Hitler with Chaplin or Jerry Lewis or Peter Sellers, or some self-absorbed, inebriated clown taking advantage of a case of mistaken identity or usurpation or a concession to his evident madness; a nobody, a fool. It's hardly surprising that the Army despised him, because he seems so inoffensive.

The second photo shows him at the launch of the Volkswagen in 1938, gazing enraptured at a model car. Around him are nine other men, who could easily epitomize the devoted, militarized German society of the time. There's the old man with peasant features and the young men from good families, the shopkeeper sporting a small, imitative moustache and the industrialist concealing his bald patch with a very precise comb-over; perhaps, also, the civil servant revealing the vehicle's secrets to Hitler. The degree of submissiveness is apparent in the fact that no one is looking at Hitler, but only at what he is looking at: they see it purely through his eyes. The Führer is smiling a smile bordering on the imbecilic, captivated by the sight of the engine being shown to him—what a beauty. However, despite the innocuous nature of the scene, that mouth drawn back in a smile and those pale cheekbones send a shudder through me, for I can sense the irascible man beneath that proud exterior; indeed, those cheekbones look as if they had a life of their own.

It's easy to be wise so long after the event, but it's still hard not to wonder how it was possible for entire nations—not just one—to trust such an individual and idolize him. Perhaps it was precisely because his clownish, risible appearance made them think that in his hands power would be less powerful than in other, more imposing hands. Nothing is more dangerous than disdain. We are disarmed by those we laugh at and who fill us with something akin to pitying derision, those to whom we feel so superior that we see no point in stopping them in their tracks or stooping so low as to confront them, just as, in ancient times, noblemen would not deign—or were not allowed—to fight a duel with someone not of the same class, hierarchy, or rank. But as we all know, such noble men have long since been erased from the face of the earth by the ridiculous.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

John Van Druten and the Remnants of a Lost Era

Steve Vineberg

THE PLAYWRIGHT John Van Druten has long since been forgotten, but he had a phenomenally successful career. He wrote twenty-eight plays, sixteen of them in London in the Twenties and Thirties and the others for Broadway in the Forties and Fifties. (He died in 1957, at the age of fifty-six.) Five of his dozen American plays were made into major motion pictures. For many years now, American theater has imposed an invisible boundary between popular entertainment and serious drama, but in Van Druten's heyday, when a theater season was packed with new offerings, that line was blurry, and Van Druten, who was both a skillful technician and a highly literate writer, could work both sides of it. The plays that made his reputation were box-office successes, but critics valued him too: he won the New York Drama Critics' Circle prize in 1952 (for *I Am a Camera*), and John Gassner included four of them in his *Best American Plays* anthologies. In the tradition of George S. Kaufman, Van Druten often directed the New York productions of his plays. He wrote or co-wrote eight movies, too, and the three I've seen are all notable: *Night Must Fall* (1937), based on Emlyn Williams's thriller, with Robert Montgomery as a psychopath; *Lucky Partners* (1940), a romantic comedy with Ginger Rogers and Ronald Colman, derived from a film by the French writer-director Sacha Guitry; and, most famously, George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944), with Ingrid Bergman as the fragile Victorian whose husband (Charles Boyer) is trying to drive her insane. (Bergman deservedly won the Academy Award for her performance, and the screenplay Van Druten co-wrote with John Balderston and Walter Reisch was nominated.)

The only one of his English plays I was able to get hold of was *London Wall*, which was first produced in 1931 and has been revived both in the West End and off Broadway. (The estimable Mint Theater in New York, which resurrects obscure English and American texts, mounted it in 2014, the year after its well-reviewed London revival, but foolishly I missed it.) It's a compelling example of a kind of drama no one writes anymore—an ensemble piece driven by its setting, in this case an office that houses a firm of solicitors. What makes it unusual for its era is that the main characters are all members of the female office staff, whose careers are dead-ended since there's no opportunity for advancement, and whose only chance of happiness is in the domestic realm, if they're lucky enough. The protagonist, a nineteen-year-old named Pat Milligan, has to choose between a struggling young man who adores her and the womanizing managing clerk of the firm, who has the cash to take her out on the town. God knows the conflict is timeworn, but the characters are sharply drawn and the dialogue has a natural, fluent quality that makes it seem fresh nearly a century after it was written. When you read the lines, you can hear them in your head.

American plays from Van Druten's era, even very fine ones, have tended to fade into obscurity unless they were written by a handful of playwrights who are universally agreed to be enduring masters (chiefly Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams), or unless theater companies suddenly deem them to be of contemporary relevance. But I think it's also the case that a playwright without a trademark style, who refused to fall back on the same genre over and over, tends to be underappreciated, especially after his time. Nothing about Van Druten's plays makes them immediately recognizable as his: not the style (which is, except for *Bell, Book and Candle* and a few touches here and there, standard American realism); not the kinds of characters he favors; not even the genres. The five published American plays by Van Druten are, not surprisingly, the ones that generated movie versions. Two are romantic comedies: *The Voice of the Turtle* and *Bell, Book and Candle*. Two are period dramas and künstlerromans, specifically narratives that trace the development of young writers: *I Remember Mama* and *I Am a Camera*. One, *Old Acquaintance*, is a high comedy that focuses on the complicated lifelong friendship of two middle-aged writers.

The Voice of the Turtle, from 1943, is the story of the unexpected romance between a young actress, Sally Middleton, and a sergeant on leave, Bill Page, who get thrown together one evening in Manhattan. What almost keeps them apart is their shared cynicism about love; each is still suffering from a broken heart. *The Voice of the Turtle* is the only one of this quintet of plays that isn't of much interest; one guesses that its three-season Broadway run was due to a combination of factors—the wartime mood, the frankness about sex, and the presence of the disarming, quicksilver actress Margaret Sullavan in the part of Sally. The 1947 movie, which stars Eleanor Parker and Ronald Reagan, provides no clue to what theatergoers got excited about *and* it omits the sex; Eve Arden, as the woman who leaves Bill high and dry, is its only high spot.

Bell, Book and Candle, which opened in New York in 1950, is something else again. The lovers are a publisher named Shep Henderson and his landlady, Gillian Holroyd, who lives in the apartment below his. What makes it unconventional is that Gillian is a witch who puts a spell on Shep on Christmas Eve to get him to dump his fiancée, Merle, and fall in love with her—because she finds him attractive, but also out of a malicious impulse to get back at the fiancée, whom she knew and disliked at college. It's clear that Van Druten's inspiration was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—he even references it—and the magic allows him to build a layer of high comedy around the insulated community of witches and warlocks to which Gillian belongs. In both Shakespeare's play and Van Druten's, the magic underscores the theme—for Shakespeare, that love turns us into idiots in a farce; for Van Druten, that love is its own sort of enchantment. But Shakespeare separates the magic out from the structural romantic-comedy convention of an obstacle that the lovers have to overcome (it's Hermia's father, in this case), whereas in *Bell, Book and Candle* the magic *provides* the obstacle. Witches aren't supposed to fall in love; if they do, they lose their powers. Gillian seizes on Shep out of a desire for a superficial romantic fling. Under her spell, of course, he can't tell the difference between that and real love: he just knows that after spending a few hours with her, he no longer has any interest in marrying Merle. But undoing the spell doesn't restore Shep's world to its previous shape, because he finds he doesn't feel the same about Merle as he used to. That second kind of enchantment has come over him, though he's so furious at Gillian for what she's done that at first he doesn't realize it. Only when she experiences love for him—and thus loses her powers—can their happy ending come about. The plot is an ingenious rethinking of the convention.

You could hardly hope for a better production of *Bell, Book and Candle* than Richard Quine's 1958 movie, with James Stewart as Shep and Kim Novak, gowned by Jean Louis, as Gillian. (The film came out the same year as *Vertigo*, which paired the same two actors; they're such an inspired match in both pictures that it's a pity they never got to work together a third time.) The lush cinematography is by James Wong Howe, and he and Quine wittily employ the artificiality of the soundstage to point up the supernatural quality of the plot. Daniel Taradash, the screenwriter, sticks closely to the playscript, but he wisely invents on-screen roles for two off-stage characters, Merle (played by Janice Rule) and the sorceress Mrs. de Pass (Hermione Gingold), whom Shep pays (exorbitantly) to un-witch him. The fact that we get to see Merle rather than just hearing about her also has the effect of softening Shep's treatment of her, because we can tell from the outset that she's simply not right for him—not good enough for him, just as the characters Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn are engaged to marry in *Holiday* and *The Philadelphia Story*, respectively, are not the people we want to see them wind up with.

Of Van Druten's two portraits of young artists, the 1944 *I Remember Mama* is by far the superior one. *I Am a Camera* is the first dramatic version of Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, set in that city during the rise of the Nazis. The main problem with it is that you can't help comparing it to Jay Presson Allen's screenplay for *Cabaret*, which restores plot elements that the stage musical took out, as well as some of Van Druten's dialogue. *I Am a Camera* has fascinating characters, and it's extremely ambitious, but

the tonal shifts are clunky (not generally a failing of Van Druten's), and the last act—where the writer-protagonist, Chris, realizes that as a human being he can't divorce himself from the political horrors around him, and as a writer he can't be merely a camera recording what he sees—turns bluntly cautionary.

In terms of its longevity, *I Remember Mama* was Van Druten's most successful play. It ran for two years and was turned into a hit movie, a television series that held on for eight seasons, and a Broadway musical that was Richard Rodgers's final venture. Based on Kathryn Forbes's novel *Mama's Bank Account*, *I Remember Mama* is set in San Francisco around 1910, and the heroine, Katrin, is a teenage girl and an aspiring writer; the play is a series of episodes about her Norwegian family, the Hansons, presented in flashbacks as she reads aloud from the book that, in her twenties, she has published about them. Forbes's major influence, and thus Van Druten's, is *Little Women*: like Jo March, Katrin can't become a good writer until she stops spinning romantic fantasies and settles down to write about what she knows best, the lower-middle-class family she loves so dearly. Katrin focuses on her wise, grounded, imaginative mother, who offers her four children not only a rock-bound sense of values but also a sense of security through a benign lie about a last-resort bank account that they avoid having to dip into by economizing and making sacrifices for each other. (The eldest Hanson offspring, the only boy, Nels, was played onstage by Marlon Brando, three years before *A Streetcar Named Desire*.)

Is *I Remember Mama* sentimental? Absolutely—it's a sentimental triumph. I've never seen it onstage, but George Stevens's beautifully filmed 1948 movie, faithfully adapted by DeWitt Bodeen, works in tandem with the text to gently stylize the material, giving it both an old-world charm (though Katrin and her siblings were all born in America) and the fairy-tale softness of fond memory. The dialogue has a folk-fable rhythm, and the three aunts, Mama's sisters—bossy, overbearing Jenny (Hope Landin), the whiny complainer Sigrid (Edith Evanson), and timid Trina (Ellen Corby), who has fallen in love with the undertaker and is afraid to tell the other two because she doesn't want them to laugh at her—are caricatured, with outsize hats and overcoats and theatrical Norwegian accents. When Papa (Philip Dorn) and Nels (Steve Brown) put their heads together to figure out how they can afford the boy's high-school education, they walk with parallel gestures, like a father and son in a comic strip.

The credits contain old-fashioned lithographs of the family life of the period (the last one morphs into a real cityscape), and the shots of the streetcar down the hill from the Hansons' Steiner Street home look like etchings. Katrin (Barbara Bel Geddes) addresses the camera to introduce each episode, and there's a lovely moment, invented for the screenplay, where Mama (Irene Dunne), having stolen into the hospital ward to visit Dagmar after her operation, sings her a Norwegian lullaby and all the lonely children in the ward are charmed, as if a magical sprite had flown into the room in the middle of the night. Even the one death in the story, of Mama's uncle Chris (Oscar Homolka, the only actor in the film who also appeared in the stage version), is stylized: he bids his niece goodbye, then he lies down, contented, and passes away with a smile on his face. It's a magical death, a death from a child's story. And part of the stylization comes from what Van Druten and then Bodeen and Stevens leave out—Dagmar's cat getting wounded in a fight, or the way that the sudden knowledge of Katrin's selfishness around her high-school graduation, which her sister Christine (Peggy McIntyre) insists on bringing to light, affects her. Mama had intended to give her a family memento, a cherished brooch, for a graduation gift, but Katrin pushed for a dresser set from the local drugstore and got her way; what she doesn't know is that Mama traded the brooch for the gift her daughter really wanted. The recognition of her bad behavior leads her to perform distractedly in the school play that night, and afterwards she bargains with the shop owner to get the brooch back, but Van Druten didn't write either of those scenes, and the movie omits them too. The result is an elided version of the short story—a fragment, like a memory.

My favorite of Van Druten's plays is *Old Acquaintance*, his second for Broadway, opening in 1940. It's the only one I've seen in live performance: the Roundabout Theater in New York mounted a first-rate production of it in 2007, directed by Michael Wilson, with Margaret Colin, Harriet Harris and Corey Stoll—and it marked the first time I began to think seriously about the virtues of this playwright. *Old Acquaintance* is a commercial entertainment, and some of it is quite funny, but the characters are psychologically true, the way they are in the plays of Philip Barry or S. N. Behrman, America's premier high-comic playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century.

The two principal characters are Kit Markham and Mildred Watson Drake (the triple-layer name is a clue), friends since childhood. Kit is a highly respected novelist who struggles with her books, turning out one about every four years. Milly decided at some point that she could be a writer, too, and her potboilers, which she churns out at the rate of about one annually, are huge sellers. They're awful, but the two friends show each other everything they write before it's published, and Kit has avoided telling Milly what she really thinks about hers by critiquing them strictly on their own terms. Milly is a ridiculous woman—a melodramatizer, a scene-maker who behaves like the characters in her books. Her entire life has been fueled by an obsessive jealousy of her best friend, whose bohemian life suggests a profound contentment with unconventionality that Milly essentially doesn't approve of but that, pretentious and restless and never satisfied with her own life, she somehow envies. "It's been that way right from the beginning with you and me," she complains to Kit. "Me, having all the advantages, and you, having all the fun." Milly's husband, Preston, walked out years ago yet she's convinced she can get him back as soon as she learns that he's going to marry someone else. Kit protests that she treats Preston (who, as Milly learns in the course of the play, was once in love with Kit) "as though he were a piece of pie you don't want, but [you're] darned if you [are] going to let anyone else eat." The major bone of contention between the two women is Milly's nineteen-year-old daughter Deirdre, who finds her own mother tiresome and is entranced by Kit's life. Kit invited her into it when she was a little girl; now she has carte blanche to crash at Kit's Washington Square apartment whenever she's in Manhattan.

This is a marvelous premise for a satirical comedy, but Van Druten never makes the hack's error of simplifying the two women—of making them symbols of an authentic and an inauthentic way of being. Milly has qualities that surprise you. Kit asserts that she's a sharp-eyed reader of Kit's manuscripts: "She's got an extraordinary gift of common sense that never seems to get near her own work, but is quite unerring when it comes to mine." And though Milly's fury at Kit when she finds out that Preston once wanted to marry her is pumped up and unjustified—Kit refused to consider his proposal, out of loyalty to Milly—her accusation that Kit has tried to steal her daughter away from her has a great deal of truth in it. Moreover, Kit's maternal feelings for Deirdre have put her in a false position. Kit, who's forty-two, has a lover, Rudd Kendall, more than ten years her junior, and she's kept their relationship from Deirdre because she doesn't want the young woman to emulate her lifestyle. Her own first affair, at Deirdre's age, was unsatisfying, and she'd like "the first hay that [Deirdre] hits to have something worthwhile in it." It's a noble mission in a way, but of course it requires her to lie about herself. "She's a complication I hadn't visualized," she admits (which is a pretty fair way to characterize children in general). And when Rudd asks her to marry him, she goes from insisting that they never had the kind of relationship that leads to marriage and "you can't change stakes in the middle of the game" to realizing that her lifestyle has left her lonelier and more unsettled than she ever suspected it had.

Van Druten has given Kit, his most self-aware and reflective character, lines a good actor would kill for, and in the 1943 movie version, adapted by Lenore Coffee and Van Druten himself, and directed by Vincent Sherman, Bette Davis accords them all the depth they deserve. (It's perhaps the least heralded of Davis's great performances.) The movie is tremendous fun, but much of the complexity has been stripped from the play—inevitably, I think, because the Hays Code restrictions make it necessary for the writers to mute the sexual material, though miraculously they don't tame it down entirely. The other reason is Miriam Hopkins, who plays Milly: she's hilarious, but so broad that she tends to flatten out her scenes.

That John Van Druten could write *Old Acquaintance*, *I Remember Mama*, and *Bell, Book and Candle*, plays that are all ideal pieces of dramatic construction but hardly seem to have emerged from the same imagination, is mysteriously wonderful. That the playwright who accomplished it has vanished from cultural memory isn't so mysterious, but it is dismaying. When the Roundabout produced *Old Acquaintance* a friend of mine who runs the box office was kind enough to make sure I didn't miss it but told me sadly that audiences weren't showing up for it. Why should they? It was an old play by someone they'd never heard of.□

Cinderella in Reverse

You finish cleaning the toilet on your knees,
sour, unsung, no one looking for you—
your looks all gone, busted, it's all you can do
to finger that rosary of memories,
flicking the ghost channels, bored, your lease
on luck expired, bi-polar, in rags. But who
was that sexy charmer? *He* really knew
how to spin you 'round the floor and grease
your hips. I'm sure he's dead. *This bead*: that touch
shivering your thigh—remember when? Your dress
up a tree, gin fizz at dawn, silk and marabou
poolside, naked as Eve? It all ends much
too soon, Pumpkin, youth's royal, hot mess.
None of it fits you now, not even that shoe.

—Peter Spagnuolo

We All Have Our Stories

Radhika Borde

SHE ALWAYS sat in the fourth row of seats. And never on the driver's side. She was the sort of person who anticipated accidents. So many had already occurred.

Her coat was a subdued rust-orange. All the lint had been picked off her black cloche hat. It was important for her to be clean and stylish. She didn't want people to think she was a gypsy—it wouldn't be convenient. In this country, gypsies often weren't clean, and had stopped being stylish more than a half-century ago.

Back home, she had enjoyed flaunting a cat-eye, but here she wore her face stripped of makeup. She had thick, dark eyebrows and full lips. Her face didn't need to be painted for the features to stand out. Everything was already clearly visible, and when people were taking the measure of her, she wanted a single glance to be enough.

Not that this worked on the bald guy.

She called him "bald guy" in her mind, because she didn't know his name. They had never spoken, but they had communicated. And here he was again today. Muscles under his leather jacket. A quiet, black scarf. Looking at her and looking away. Taking a seat that would face hers, as he often did.

Her name? Myrtle.

A sentimental aunt had given it to her. And she had worn it self-consciously ever since she had realized that the curiosity people expressed when they heard it for the first time was not benign. Such an old-fashioned European name for someone who was not of European origin. "My family…they are Anglophiles, you know," she would say to those who asked about it. Apologizing.

Myrtle had grown up in Queens, in New York, but had since moved eastwards.

The bald guy would continue on to Beroun. And she would get off at Vráž. An unlikely place for an American woman to live. But for her it was the right kind of hermitage.

"You don't want to live in Prague?" people would ask. Astonished.

"No, I see enough of it when I work, and I can always stay back for something in the evenings if I want" was her reply.

She didn't need to huddle with all the other foreigners in Prague. The Czech lands were not closed to her as they were to them.

In Vráž, she had a wood-burning stove in her attic apartment, and her landlady's garden was fenced with raspberry bushes.

Myrtle taught English in Prague. It was supposed to have been Czech literature. But this wasn't possible anymore. Her position as a visiting lecturer hadn't become anything more permanent. She had been an adjunct for a while. Which she had accepted. After all, how much was a doctorate in Czech literature worth back home? She also translated. It had been business reports and policy documents at first. And now she had an arrangement with a Czech publishing house. Two children's books every month.

As she looked out at the receding gleam of Prague's domes and spires as the bus left the city, Myrtle often wondered if things would have been different for her, career-wise, if she hadn't been a "woman of color." Such a politically correct term, and one that the Czechs were wonderfully ignorant of.

But she wasn't thinking about this on that first day. She was thinking about the bald guy.

The driver had shifted gears and the bus was powering its way up the summit of a small hill with a throaty whine. The bald guy didn't look comfortable. The sun was setting at an angle that sent rays of orange light deep into his irises. They were blue with flecks of green. Now glowing with more light than they could stand, and they had begun to water. But he wasn't going to move. He liked his vantage point. He loosened the scarf around his neck and lowered his eyelashes to block out the sun. Like everyone else, he had a phone that he liked to play with and he began tapping.

And then Myrtle did something unusual. She got off. At Svaty Jan pod Skalou. The church under the rock. Her ticket was for Vráž. The next stop. "Stomp, stomp, stomp," said her boots in the resin-scented air, as they moved off down the pavement.

The bald guy had gaped at the action with his phone in one hand and the index finger of his other held aloft in mid-tap. Then he got off the bus too.

Just beyond the bus stop was a restaurant that served freshly brewed beer. Was she going there?

"It is pork. It is okay for you?" waitresses would ask whenever she ordered a traditional Czech sausage with horseradish sauce on the side. They never asked if she ate beef, though this might have been appropriate. Myrtle's family came from India and she had relatives that didn't eat beef even though their ancestors had been Christians for two centuries. They gave their daughters names like Hyacinth and Myrtle and wanted them to be married in white dresses. But some traditions had to be kept up.

Myrtle had walked past the restaurant—no, she wasn't going there. She was walking fast, with her head bowed. The bald guy was following her. He kept his phone in one hand and looked at it every now and then as if he had a GPS app open.

She passed the church. When she was opposite the monastery that was adjacent to it, she turned to look at it. And the bald guy did the same.

To one side of the church you had the steady drip-drip-gurgle of a spring that was supposed to have curative powers. Further on, you had an herb garden. She would have seen the bald guy in her peripheral vision when she had turned to look at the monastery. Why, then, did she choose to move away from the relatively public space outside it, into the shadowy confines of the herb garden?

She walked into the green space very slowly.

There was a stone bench in a corner, and she sat down on it with some sage she had plucked on the way. She began to chew the sage with an air of absentmindedness.

The bald guy was standing at the stone and wrought-iron entrance. Looking in.

They would have to give up their pretense soon.

She shifted her gaze to him. And he smiled, walking over to her as he did so.

No, he didn't keep looking at her the whole time as he approached. That would have been predatory. His gaze slid to the ground and then back to her face. But his expression didn't change.

"*Dobry den*, hello," he said, when he was a few meters away; an opening gambit in two languages.

"*Dobry den*," replied Myrtle.

"Every day, I see you on the bus and I thought we should speak," he said. His English had the polish of someone who used it regularly.

Myrtle paused. She had a half-smile on. The sort that people wear when they want to appear friendly and caught off-guard at the same time.

"Why not? I'm Myrtle," and she stood up, suddenly all very businesslike, and held out a hand for him to shake.

"I'm Roan," he answered, with his head cocked to one side and a smile playing on his lips.

In her other hand she held the sprig of sage with the tops of the leaves bitten off.

He pointed to the sage with a theatrical gesture.

"You like to eat plants?" he asked with a grin.

"Actually, yes," said Myrtle. He was being funny. Taking control. "My family's Indian. In India, people eat a lot of plants."

At Myrtle's words the bald guy's eyes narrowed. Assessing. But the smile didn't leave his lips.

"I thought you were," he said at last. "But you speak perfect Czech—I heard you talking to the bus driver several times. So I wasn't sure. It's very nice to meet someone from so far away," he added.

"Actually, I'm American," said Myrtle. "But as I said, my family's Indian."

At this he threw his head back and laughed.

"That is complicated," he said. "Here in the Czech Republic, we are used to meeting people who are simple."

"Oh, I think Czech people are very complicated," said Myrtle.

"Really?" asked the bald guy.

And so it had started. Before too long, he was sitting beside her on the stone bench. After half an hour he invited her to go with him to the pub with the fresh beer.

"It is too cold to talk on this bench," he told her. "And I think it will be possible to eat some cooked plants in the pub."

In the pub, they chose to sit at a banquette that was set into a shallow niche beside the fireplace.

Beers and pickled sausages followed. Myrtle told Roan why she was where she was. And Roan told Myrtle that he was a mechanical engineer in a company that built locomotives. He even told her about the divorce. Marriage when he was nineteen to a girl he had met at a party. A child tucked away in the mountains that bordered Germany. The child a young man now. Twenty. Unemployed. Living with his mother. Father and son met for beers twice a year. He was playing the part of the man who is in a hurry to unburden himself. Making himself transparent. So dazzlingly transparent that she wouldn't be able to see the most important stuff.

He walked her home after they had finished their beers and unburdening. It was a short walk and the autumn evening was pleasant. He took care to say goodbye to her at the garden gate without showing any eagerness to be invited in. She turned around to smile at him as she shut the door to the house. He was watching, and he raised his hand in something between a wave and a salute.

AFTER THEIR first meeting, both of them suffered three awkward bus journeys that began with perfunctory hellos and an exchange of pleasantries at the bus stop, followed by Myrtle's retrieval of a slim novel from her bag, absorbed phone-tapping by Roan, and a subsequent scramble for separate seats.

And then, one day, Roan had asked her if she would like to walk with him. Risky. It implied an intimacy that was fragile, if existent.

She had said yes. Her yes was coy. Perhaps there had been no other way to say yes. She couldn't have said yes with eagerness.

It is a beautiful autumn evening when Myrtle says yes. The sky still holds an orange sun. There is that autumn sadness in the air. All the leaves just starting to say goodbye to the trees. The knowledge that the heat will soon go out of the land, a starkness will descend, and people will bury their chins into their scarves and look at the ground when they walk.

"Have you ever been to Divoká Šárka?" he asks her.

He has raised his head from some frown-inducing swiping and scrolling. His thumb is on the screen, he can lower his eyes to it in the same second that he will take to stroke it.

"I haven't," says Myrtle.

"Do you know the story of Šárka?" he asks.

"I do," says Myrtle.

"You know everything," says Roan. He smiles, and shakes his head in admiration. "Tell me what you know," he says.

"A Bohemian tale. Some think it is legend. Others think it is oral history. It first appeared in writing in the twelfth century. Women didn't want to be ruled by men, so they initiated an armed rebellion against them. A war. Šárka was a key figure. A female warrior. She used tricks to entrap a band of men, led by a man called Ctirad. Ultimately, she was defeated. Along with the other female rebels," says Myrtle. Adding, "Ctirad was killed. And after the war Šárka kills herself."

"There's some sort of romance between Šárka and Ctirad," says Roan.

"Hints of it, yes," says Myrtle. "But it's not clear if they fall in love."

"Why do you think she kills herself?" asks Roan. "Isn't it because she feels guilty about being responsible for Ctirad's death?"

"That's what some interpretations argue," Myrtle says. "The most common explanation is that she jumps off the rocky ledge because she can't stand the shame of being defeated by the men's army."

"Would you like to go to Divoká Šárka?" he asks her. "You know too much about it not to go there. We can walk among the rocks."

She says yes.

Why does she say yes? Perhaps she has seen him looking at her too many times on the bus. And Myrtle is a person who can be shaped by a gaze even though she has struggled against this malleability all her life.

They agree to go there on a Saturday.

There's a breeze when they meet. She's waiting at the bus stop in Vráž, in her olive-green trousers. The trees are throwing leaves at her. The black boots she often wears will do for hiking and she's got them on. He comes in a car. An old Fiat with some dents. But he's cleaned it, and it smells of clean rubber and rose-scented air freshener. In the car, she removes her thick framed sunglasses and gives him an indulgent smile. They have that conspiratorial air of not-yet-lovers.

The journey takes an hour, and when it's over, he parks the car beside a Hostinec. The crag from which Šárka jumped rears above them.

There's a path that will take them to the top of the crag. They climb. And soon each one has damp palms and armpits. The breeze still blows. Myrtle has her hair in two side French braids and they're too tight and heavy to be lifted by moving air. She made them in the morning with the help of a tutorial on the internet, and it took many attempts before she was satisfied.

When they reach the spine of the crag, they take off their jackets and sit down on the rocks. After they are no longer panting from the climb, conversation becomes appropriate. Neither one seems to want to start. They survey the tumble and crash of slate and rust-colored rock below them. The determined little trees that are scrabbling in crevices for things to feed off are flame-colored. Not a pretty place where a man can hold a woman's hand. A place where a woman died.

"Tell me about your childhood," she says. Maternal feelings, and a tide of compassion. She doesn't like to see Roan panicking. She prefers it when he is suave.

Roan looks at her. A bald guy-baby look.

"My childhood?" he says.

"Yes," says Myrtle.

He nods. And begins to tell her a story. A story of hams and a big car.

"My mother was very beautiful," he begins. "But my father had left us because there was a widow in the next village who had a big farm. My father used to work with the cows in the farm. But then he saw that the widow was lonely and that he could be the master. You understand?" he asks.

Myrtle nods. Brows slightly furrowed. Her face otherwise expressionless.

"We were very poor, and my mother took me to live with her parents in the city of Litvínov. I was four at that time," he continues.

"I've never been to that part of the country," says Myrtle.

"It's a mining area," says Roan. "Now, there are mostly just museums. But there are also mountains and even some spas. It's beautiful. Of course, it is an area with many problems. It was Sudetenland... You know about it?" he asks.

"Yes, I do," says Myrtle. "The part of Czechoslovakia that was occupied by Germans—who were expelled after the Second World War. Repopulated by Czechs and Slovaks from other parts of the country... Did your family come there from somewhere else?"

"My mother's family did," says Roan. "But my father's family had been living in the area around Litvínov for many generations. They were living alongside the Germans. And liked them. Relations were good. When the Germans left and they had a chance to grab their property, they didn't. Sentimental reasons. Other people took the beautiful wooden houses with the expensive ceramics, the land. My father's family preferred the poverty they knew. I think my father never forgave them for that..."

He resumes his narrative, "I remember being woken at night by my grandparents. It happened twice a week sometimes. They would be so happy when they woke me. When it first started, I didn't know they could be so happy. My grandmother's cheeks would be shining. I would wake to see my mother painting her lips. A very dark red. She would be standing in front of the big mirror that leaned against the wall beside the cuckoo clock. We had three cuckoo clocks—I think they had been taken from the houses of rich German people. My mother never looked at me or said anything to me when she saw me looking at her in the mirror. She would be wearing a gold-colored silk housecoat. In that house, we had cuckoo clocks, silk housecoats, and beautiful teacups. But we didn't have much food. Not good food. Most people didn't. We lived in the city and most of the time you could only buy cabbages and *papriky* in the shops. Potatoes, cabbage, and bacon or sausage once a week. My mother was painting her lips to get food. Food for me. But my grandparents were happy because they would be able to keep most of it. 'We can't let you get fat, and too much meat for a little boy is unhealthy,' I had overheard my grandfather say.

"After I was woken, my grandmother would dress me to go outdoors and take me from the room I shared with my mother. I slept in a little bed that was set into a window nook, and my mother had a canopy bed with heavy drapes. My grandmother's shining cheeks would light up the corridor that led from our room to the living room. I would walk along it with my small hand in my grandmother's sweaty one. In the living room, there would be a big man sitting on the sofa. Two other men would be sitting on the chairs. All of them would be smoking Marlboros. It was very difficult to get Marlboros in those days. You could only get them in a special shop called a Tuzex. My grandfather would be standing—handing out shots of *Slivovice*."

Below them, now, the trees are acting possessed. Whipping their red and orange crowns around while the gnarled fingers of their roots grip the rocks ever more tightly.

"When the men see me, one of them takes a big ham out of a black net bag that is placed on the glass-topped center table. He gives it to me. It's so heavy that I can't hold it. Everybody laughs. They are pleased by its size. I totter with the weight of it. But before I can drop it my grandmother takes it from me. '*Dekuji*,' she says to the man on the sofa. He smiles and makes a dismissive gesture with the hand that holds the cigarette. Then the two men who are sitting on the chairs take me for a late-night drive. We go in a big white car. As I step out of the lighted front hall I turn back to look at my grandmother. She is waving at me. The men put me into the front seat. It is green leather. I sit between the two men. We don't wear seatbelts. In those days, you didn't have to. The car starts with a jud-jud-judder. The headlamps are switched on. And we move through the dark streets of Litvínov with the broken pavements and the occasional alcoholic. I am so small that I can't see much. Mostly, just the top halves of buildings and the street lamps as they pass across my line of sight through the windshield. The men are laughing. They've rolled their windows down and their arms are balanced on the frames with the elbows sticking out. Cigarettes move from their lips to the window frames. They don't need to flick the ash off the tips. The drag breaks it up and carries it away. We trail glowing sparks in the night air. We are magical.

"'Your mother is a very special lady, you know,' one of them says to me. 'A very special lady for our very special boss.'

"'He is very high, very high, you know?' the other one says. 'A very clever man. A big engineer.'

"And we drive all over Litvínov in our big white car. Always for just about an hour.

"When we return, the big man's got a belly laugh rippling through him. He's leaving. He's swigging a last shot of *Slivovice* as he's leaving. He's blowing kisses to my mother, who's got her head sticking out of the upstairs bedroom window. She's blowing kisses back. Her lips are bleeding color. She looks so happy. Her hand that's usually slack with fatigue is waving energetically. And then she sees me, and she isn't happy anymore. The smile disappears from her face and her face disappears from the window. That's when I know—she doesn't like me. For some reason, she doesn't like me. She would like to have the big man with her always and to have me in the white car all night and all day."

And now Myrtle's hand is on his arm. Pat pat, pat pat.

"You know that's not true," she says.

He looks at her. His eyes are dancing with emotions. Mischief is one of them. He lets out a short, snappy laugh with a sideways jerk of his head. Unbelievable, his headshake says. His childhood is unbelievable. His life is unbelievable.

"She was doing it for food," he says. "Hams and oranges. Once, even, a pineapple. Which they didn't know how to cut. We pricked our tongues on the eyes when we ate it. It was fun. No one had ever seen a fresh pineapple before…we recognized it from the pictures we had seen in books. A bottle of champagne as well. I watched them drink it together at the kitchen table. The big man, my grandparents, my mother, everyone. Everyone drank. In the green crystal glasses. These were the nice things. But there were things my mother didn't like. Like the sweat. The big man would sweat. She didn't like that. She always changed the bedsheets the next morning. She didn't want to do it at night because she thought that would make me ask questions. I didn't need to ask. I knew. I could smell his sweat when I was brought back to my bed. I knew he had been in it with his clothes off. I could smell my mother's juices. I knew what they had done while I was being driven around in the big white car."

And then the bald guy stops.

An image of his beautiful mother with the big male sweating into her bed hangs between them.

Myrtle looks him over. "Well, well," she thinks. "But we all have our stories now."□

Photograph

He was framed
Sitting pretty
With a tough guy
Look that said

I've had it good,
And now you
Have it good,
Unknown miss,

Seeing me drop
Out of a book
You picked out
At a garage sale.

—*Charles Simic*

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Springtime, Permanent Supportive Housing

Once again ransacked by the actual—
By the down-slurred chirps of a cardinal
Outdoors as much as by Jack, foetal, slack
In the bathroom stall, startled back
To life by a nasal shot of Narcan.
Once again Susan's riled, resolved again
To focus on coping skills; thus she works
Markers on a mandala coloring book.
A dumb brass band of daffodils tunes up
As Dan who's off his Seroquel is schlepped
In cuffs by CPD back to Beau Vista.
Replete with incident, event-laced, the
Day scintillates with joy and grief; it shines
Both the tragedy of Roy off the wagon
Dragging a bag of Bud cans to the bin
And the rapture of Shanée skipping the lawn
With her therapeutic Pomeranian
With equal brilliance.
Ephemera in,
Ephemera out, ephemera held,
Ephemera lost to the erstwhile world.
Out back where Jim, in eternal sweatpants,
Tends to his motley spread of plaintive plants
Is the flicker of courting woodpeckers
Wrapping an oak. It's enough, more or less.
The squad screams into the lot; the squirrels
Screech into the nut. Redbuds, crabapples,
Magnolias efflorresce; green ensues.
And, of course, case management continues.

—Jake Crist