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17th Street Canal

H A R O L D S C H W E I Z E R

Of Movements and Signs

Like an outstretched arm is my call.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Seventh Elegy”

All of our movements are signs, all of them are particular to each one of us, each movement of the body, even the way one looks up to check the time—she holds her hand to her face, she moves her head when she hears her name called, each movement is intimate, a sign of herself and of her singularity and of each moment in time—

Movements of the body are illegible because they are made across almost impassable distances; most of them remain unseen like the swinging of branches or the bending of lilies under the rain or ash, acorn and oak leaves wafting in scaled clumps deep in the current of the river or the rising of the cold of the earth—

If seen they are merely thought of as the movements of matter (the bending of flowers, the turning of

the hand); many of them are purposeful and explicable, to which category belong even the intimate adjustments we make when we cry and shift slightly in a chair, although each movement (the utilitarian gait being the most singular), if decipherable, would be utterly revealing—

Someone in the distance would raise an arm to answer, and we would turn our faces and lift our hands in response to the sign of the arm, and these would be interstices, openings each to the other—

The abrasions of grief in the tissues that had turned into cysts and inflammations hard to the touch would have been lifted like the lids on boxes swelled in storage, and the thread roots of breath would have been white and exposed.

She turns her hand reaching up to seize something, she hears voices,

someone carries a cup across a room to a sick child, the child sits up in the graying light slowly lifting a hand towards the cup and all is still for a moment and there are voices across the distance and signs.

Time is a void to leap across. She calculates the hours until she can go to sleep, like a jumper who needs a certain distance to gain her speed and turns to face the distance, and the slight movement of her face scrapes the lacuna, she looks up, and her breath turns in the scales of night, and she holds her hand out—

J Y N N E D I L L I N G M A R T I N

All the Day Summarized When We Exhale

—for T. G.

Ask and I will give the nations to you, you who have not known to ask—

an abacus bead slid so long in one dimension that you thought
there was only this: to figure into the complex calculations of others,

thumbed on the margins of inscrutable quadratic machinations.
Not to be the frogman with a harpoon descending deep, not
to be his rippling slippery-scaled prey, not his mask, his oiled suit,

his rusted blade slid inside so many enemy bellies—

merely the one who admired his hunt in a romantic picturebook,
drawings of gods and strangled dragons put back on a long ago shelf.

You always confused why and how you failed. You mixed up strangers
and relatives, skies and sheets, mistook wallpaper patterns for stains,
brochures for colorful journeys, persons surrounded by smoke for saints.

Ride your horse down a rocky bank until both of you are crushed—

what other way to begin again. If you do not have a horse I will give one
to you for this purpose, with legs weak as yours and its tongue cut out

so there will be no abrupt neigh as its front knees buckle under,
instead will come a roar of all you never heard: the sound of bones,
of solitary monks kneeling in caves, an apricot swelling, closed wounds.

To know what it is to slay and be slain, and how there is no difference—

then you will know what it is you want, then I can give you the nations,
their flags, their legislatures and municipal towers, their sewers and snow,

their arbitrary borders and the soldiers who patrol them day and night,
pistol barrels slowly wiped with cloths, every bullet that will and will not
be fired, I will give you the lungs of every creature tautening with air,

how they then deflate over and over and without sorrow.

In Which Our Poet Jugs a Hare

The goats of Angora, frequently dipped in mountain streams,
misunderstand this gentle river ablution to be loving affection

and likewise, my darling twitch-nosed love, I fattened you
on sausage and carrot casserole, buttered crumbs patted on top,

bowls of clover milk and rinsed green globes of iceberg lettuce,
not so we could hold plump paws and whisk into the sunset, no.

Untold hungers leave me holding you upside-down, beheaded,
your blood escaping hotly down the drain of this porcelain basin,

all four stove burners blazing. You see, when I said I had ways
of making you talk, that was no idle threat. When I politely asked

how long have you been a witch? Why did you inflict these injuries?
Has the devil assigned a limit to the duration of your evildoing?

I wanted honest answers about your feelings for me, sweets.
Braised, tied up, fricasseed, plated with egg noodles and onions,

your brown-eyed stares will torment me no more. One less
mixed message to wonder about. Who can stomach being in the dark:

the motionless blindfolded man facing a firing squad which raises
just one loaded rifle, hyenas with their spotted silky heads locked

to their spines so predators behind and sideways can't be seen,
the patient's brain with a foot-long needle inserted undetected.

Explain that one: empirical evidence puncturing the skull
and still your mind doesn't know that needle is up there.

Even the police confess that how such stains got on everyone's
kitchen floors, or even what animal they came from, no one can tell.

J Y N N E D I L L I N G M A R T I N

A Man is Stalked by a White Arctic Fox

Its wet breath wheezes between the trees.
Some days he sees it skulking on the horizon,

or is that just sun witching his windows,
white furred flicker?

With thickest glasses, through fuliginous air,
he makes out figures penciled roughly

on a sanatorium chart: an eyeball, strappadoes,
garrote, elongated jaw of fangs. As he runs,

a sinking feeling down another drainage tunnel.
One by one, his neighbor's teeth get stolen away.

Five wayward years in the desert of Lop,
still one dusk among crackled mollusk shells

slender prints dented the yellow clay.
His final resort is fasting, flogging, phlebotomy,

blood fleamed from his side and drained
quart by quart into a white enamel bowl.

A multitude of crows alighted on his house
such as no one imagined existed today.

J O E L L O N G

The Healing (Ars Poetica)

If the hands had eyes, if the eyes could see
inside the body, by that light, by the blood
near the organ, the organ like a wet moon, the black
tissue that smells of burning hair, if cancer had eyes
of its own that digest light, turn it bile,
the medium with the beads, with the tea,
with his own eyes folded back in his skull,
would put his hands on the body
stripped to the waist, a white cloth covering
the groin, would put his hand on the skin and press,
and the skin would open, bloodless, and the muscle part
like lips of the willing, and smoke would trickle
up his palm, and his fingers run along the organ,
smooth as a whale, and he would grab the dark tissue,
pull it like the tongue from the leper, pull it into the lamp light,
hold it in his hand, breathing, stinking with curds
of afterbirth, whimpering like a zither.

[Chaucer authors the distance...]

Chaucer authors the distance between you & Chaucer. Indeed, between Chaucer & you, other versions of you engage in an eternity of language.

Therefore, through a shared

fairy tale,
we can trace back our first ancestors
over time
to linguistic
tribes who did not think of themselves as manic cousins.

—*The trees of famous Darwin retained branches through prolonged contact to metaphors & varieties of incomprehensible language.*—

Because humans

decay, but do not choose their decay, patterns
ebb & flow, progress & dislocate.

Like the tide

language may lose
anything that others do not retain.

Something Awful

“Can you light this, Jack?” Sally says, bending with a cigarette in her mouth and handing me a book of matches. “I can’t make these things work.” The matches are soaked. I don’t know if she’s looking for trouble or not. Both Joe and Elaine must be watching from the other couch as I hold my lighter to her cigarette and try not to look down her sweater. “Thanks, sweetie,” she says over the roar of the Pistons game. As she walks away, Joe and Mark resume their discussion—small caps, large caps, this fund versus that fund, no-load. I don’t know what any of it means.

Joe and Sally live down the street from us, Mark and Beth farther away. They’re nice enough, but most of the time they’ll bore you to tears. We’ve only been in Michigan six months, and for some reason, they invite us to their barbecues and drinking parties. And for some reason, we attend. Everybody has kids, except us, and this sets us apart and makes us suspect: how lucky we are, yet how unfortunate. Selfish maybe.

Elaine returns to my couch and puts her glass in front of my face, meaning, Make me another drink, so I do.

“Thanks, honey,” she says when I hand her the glass.

She passes me a joint.

Sally sits on the couch arm beside me. “What about me?” she says.

I give her the joint.

“What about you?” Joe says, turning off the tv.

She takes a big hit and shrugs. “I don’t know,” she says.

Joe puts on some awful old music, Genesis or Journey, and Sally starts dancing. She knows her body, seems comfortable with the

way it will move. "Come on, Sally," Joe says. He rubs her shoulders. "We'll play a game."

She's wearing a black cotton sweater with little pearl buttons, the top ones undone, and when she throws her arms back, it rides half-way up her stomach so you can see the beginning of her ribs.

"Come on and sit down," Joe tells her.

But Sally keeps dancing, twisting to the music, demonstrating that she's still a viable candidate, even after a baby.

Joe takes her arm and pulls her toward the other couch. "We'll play a game," he says. "Okay, mama?" He places her on the couch and puts on some different awful music, some kind of fusion nightmare, then stands above us, rubbing his hands together, and says, "Trivials or Pictionary?"

Mark shrugs. Beth takes her glass into the kitchen. Sally's sweater hikes up her belly again as she slouches into the couch. Between the buttons, I catch glimpses of her bra, black, with a purple flower between the cups. Joe pulls her up, straightening her. "Up we go," he says. She takes it all very well.

"Trivials or Pictionary?" Joe says again.

Elaine digs her fingernails into my palm. She hates these kinds of games, but I don't know what to do. I can't keep my mind off Sally.

Beth returns with a fresh drink.

"What'll it be, Beth?" Joe says, and she says, "You decide."

"Trivials, then," Joe says, and he walks into the back room.

"I like Pictionary better," Mark says.

"I need a drink," Sally says.

Joe returns with the game and starts setting it up on the enormous glass coffee table.

"Can't we just talk?" Beth says.

"Don't you want to play?" Joe says.

Sally returns with her drink.

"I hate this game," she says, and I say, "Everyone does."

Elaine gives me a look.

Joe seems hurt, sitting on his knees setting up the game. "Well, we don't have to play," he says. "I don't want to force anyone."

Elaine says, "Maybe we could play a different game."

"Maybe Pictionary," Mark says.

"No," I say. "They're all awful."

Elaine gives me another look. I'm stoned and in trouble, and, for some reason, I don't care.

"We've got to play something," Joe says. He's putting the plastic pieces back in the box.

"What about, Something Awful?" I say.

They all look at me.

"He's making this up," Elaine says. "To be cute."

"No," I say, "it's a game I know," wondering when Elaine dropped out of our conspiracy—a month ago, two months ago, tonight?

Sally's eyes are shiny from the booze. "Let's play that," she says.

"How do you play?" Joe asks.

Elaine watches me.

"You tell a story," I say, "something you did—no, the worst thing you ever did. You can cover up certain facts or make them different, but the idea has to be the same."

They're quiet for a second, and then Joe says, "What's the object?"

Sally slaps his shoulder. "All Joe cares about is winning."

"The object is to have done the worst thing," I say. "We'll vote at the end."

Beth says, "That's kind of gross," and Mark squints at me.

"Maybe," I say, "it can be whoever feels the worst about what they did."

"See?" Elaine says. "He's making it up."

"But how would we measure that?" Joe says.

"Oh, who cares," Sally says. "Let's just play."

Joe says, "I'd better check on the kids first," and Elaine leans toward me and whispers, "Don't be around people if you're just going to mock them," and I say, "What?" and she shakes her head, pissed, then hands me her glass for another drink.

When I come back from the kitchen, Sally is on the little expensive couch perpendicular to the big expensive couch where Elaine and I sit. Beth and Mark are on the floor across the table from us. Joe turns down the music and joins Sally, then rubs his hands together again. "Who's going to start?" he says.

Mark pulls a joint from his pocket and lights it. Elaine passes it to me without taking a hit.

I'm actively ignoring Elaine when Beth says, "I think I've got one. I mean it may not be exactly right—"

"Sure it is," I say.

She sits up and smooths her skirt. Everybody watches her, waiting. "I mean, this didn't go on that long. Longer than it should have, I guess, and I never got caught. That was the thing."

"What was it?" Sally says.

Beth takes a long drink, bringing up the tension. "It wasn't much," she says, finally, and Mark says, "Well, what?"

"I stole things," Beth says.

"Shoplifting?" I say.

"It started when I was twelve," she says. "Just gum and little stuff. Combs, barrettes."

Sally and Elaine lean toward her.

"Teenage girls do these things," Beth says, and Elaine says, "Yep," meaning she's back in the room, that I might be forgiven.

"On a dare," Sally says.

"Then it got to be expensive stuff," Beth says, "and it wasn't a group thing anymore. I mean, I didn't tell anybody I was stealing these things."

Joe says, "Like what?" and Beth takes another long drink.

"It became a private thing," she says. "Jewelry, clothes. You know, expensive underwear."

"I did that," Sally says.

"But not for this long." Beth says. "A lot of times I just threw the stuff away and felt kind of guilty and embarrassed."

"How long?" Mark asks her.

"Not that long," she says.

"Did I know you?" he says.

"It stopped in college. I stole a pair of expensive sunglasses. That's not easy. They keep them locked up, and I had to have about twelve pairs on the case and sneak one in my purse when the guy wasn't looking."

"Why was that the last time?" Elaine says. "What made you stop?"

"I don't know," Beth says. "It wasn't—"

"Are we supposed to vote on this?" Joe says.

"Is this awful?" I ask Beth, teaming up with Elaine on the inquisition. "Do you feel awful?"

"Guilty maybe," she says. "It's just that I never got caught."

"Rebellion thing," Sally says. "Not awful."

"It did go on a long time," Joe says.

"A little klepto," Mark says.

"So, do we vote on this?" Joe says.

"It's just a wrong thing I did," Beth says.

Joe stands and rubs his hands together. "Who needs a drink?" he says, but no one responds.

"I have to think of one," Mark says.

"I want one," Sally calls to Joe in the kitchen.

I feel let down by Beth's crime. I look at Elaine. She half-smiles. I never used to worry about her approval. I half-smile back.

Mark extends his legs under the coffee table, squinting and scratching his head.

“What about me?” Sally says, when Joe returns with one drink.

“We can share this one, Mama,” he says, sitting on the floor at her feet.

“I’ve got one,” Mark says, and everybody looks at him, waiting.

“It was in college,” he says. “In the house.”

“Your frat house?” Joe says.

“It seemed bad then,” Mark says. “But not—” He runs a hand through his hair. “It would probably be a rape today, but not—”

“What?” Beth says.

“That’s why frats should be illegal,” Elaine says, and both Mark and Joe stare at her.

“Rape?” Sally says, repositioning herself behind Joe.

I look at Sally and she’s staring at me, her mouth open a little. Her sweater has pink yarn flowers on it I would like to bite off. She smiles, doesn’t disengage eye contact, so I’m relieved when Beth says, “Are you telling me you took part in a rape?”

“I didn’t take part,” he says, “but, whatever it was—not rape then—whatever it was, I walked in near the end.”

“And you didn’t do anything?”

Sweat’s popping on his forehead.

“I’m not sure what happened exactly.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Beth says.

“Fine,” Mark says. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“You finish it now you’ve started,” she tells him.

I look at Sally and she looks right back, smiles again. It sends a shiver through me.

“It was near the end of junior year,” Mark says. “Pledge night, everybody’s drunk—”

“I can’t listen to this,” Elaine says, starting to rise.

I take her hand and bring her back down to the couch. “Let him finish.”

Beth says, “All right, then, finish.”

Elaine digs her fingernails into my palm.

“We’d run out of beer,” Mark says, “but there were two reserve kegs for when everybody left. I was looking for a cup.”

He takes a drink. “Give me one of those cigarettes,” he says to Sally, and she throws him the pack.

“Finish,” Beth says.

“I will if you’ll let me.”

“Go ahead.”

“There’s this storage room down a long hall in the basement,” he says, lighting the cigarette and blowing smoke over our heads.

Beth says, “Will you—” and Mark says, “I am. Just. So, okay. I open the door and she’s there on the floor, but, I mean, fucked up, like her eyes rolling back in her head. And somebody, you know, on top of her, and two brothers smoking and watching, making jokes, or whatever, and it’s horrible, but she’s not screaming or fighting or anything, but, you know, seems to be enjoying it—”

“Right,” Elaine says. “Kind of like surgery.”

“Who were the brothers?” Joe says.

“Let him finish,” Beth says.

“I know it was wrong,” Mark says. “The chick doesn’t even know I’m there. That’s how bad it is. And Rick’s the one that’s—”

“Rick Altman?” Joe says.

“But I don’t do anything, don’t say anything—”

“Until you run upstairs and call the police,” Sally says.

“I’m like paralyzed,” Mark says. “Mitch closes the door and puts his arm around me.”

“Mitch O’Connor?” Joe says, and Mark rolls his eyes and says, “It doesn’t matter.”

“Mitch O’Connor?” Beth says. “I cannot believe this.”

“So you did her too,” Sally says.

Elaine digs her fingernails into my palm. Mark shakes his head widely.

"This is before anybody talked about date rape," he says, and Beth says, "You did it, too?"

"Let me finish," Mark says. "Mitch kept talking with his arm around me. 'She's loving it,' he says, and she's making all the right sounds, like she is loving it. But just by the way he's talking, I know how wrong it is, and there are supplies everywhere on steel shelves, paper towels and silverware and stuff."

"But, finally, you do her, too," Sally says.

I look at her and she's grinning, playing with a piece of her hair, twirling it around her finger, scaring the hell out of me.

Mark says, "I'm sick about it. I'm like, 'I'm just getting these cups,' and I have to step right over her to get to the shelf."

"Oh my God," Beth says.

"But the feel in the room is different, because they see I'm not going to do it. And then I'm gone, out of there, freaking out in shock—"

"What happened to the woman?" Elaine says, and Mark says, "I don't know."

"Did you talk about this?" Beth says. "Did you confront them?"

"I never said a word about it."

"Don't you think that's cowardly?" Elaine says.

"That's what I'm saying," Mark says. "I should have done something."

"You could still do something," Elaine says.

"That was fifteen years ago."

"Yeah," Beth says, "but Mitch still comes by when he's in town."

"And for years," Sally says, "you thought about it and jerked off."

Elaine sighs—or grunts—disgusted, and Joe says, "Hey," turning to face her. "That's not right."

"He's never coming over again," Beth says. "You see to that. We have a child. What about me? You let a rapist in the house?"

"I didn't know what it was exactly."

"Well that's definitely worse than Beth's," Joe says.

"I'm getting a drink," Mark says, and he walks to the kitchen.

Elaine says, "Sick."

"At least he told the whole story," I say.

Sally looks at me, and says, "How do you know?"

"Knock it off," Beth says. "I cannot believe this."

"What about you, Joe?" Sally says. "Did you rape any drunk chick at the house?"

Joe shakes his head. "You heard about it, though," he says.

When Mark comes back from the kitchen, he says, "I know it was horrible. I'm not saying it wasn't horrible." He tries to take Beth's hand, but she swats him away.

Elaine hands me her glass.

"Are you sure?" I ask, and she nods, not looking at me.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," I say.

"Just make it," Elaine says.

"It's getting late," Mark says, and Sally says, "But we haven't finished."

I walk into the kitchen feeling as if I've taken part in something that should be reported to the authorities. The ice bucket is empty, so I take some trays from the freezer and while I'm twisting them over the sink, I feel her press up against me and grind.

I drop the tray and spin. Sally's there, smiling. I take her by the shoulders and push her back. She keeps smiling as she twists out of my hold and rubs herself against me, cupping my crotch with her right hand.

"Hi there," she says.

"Come on," I say in a strangled whisper, "I can't do this. Someone will come in." I've never cheated on my wife, never wanted to be the kind of guy that cheats on his wife.

"Well, when, then?" she says, and I say, "I don't know. I'm making this drink."

She moves her face toward me, keeps the smile on, like she's amused by my childish antics. When she brushes her face against mine and licks around my ear, she smells like shampoo and cigarettes and perfume and garlic and baby powder, and I can hardly breathe.

"Okay," I say, "all right." I push her away again.

She grabs me one more time and squeezes as she turns to walk out of the kitchen, shaking her ass like a little girl imitating a woman imitating a hooker.

Only Beth and Elaine are in the living room when I return, both silent and staring.

"Where is everybody?" I say, and then Sally and Joe walk in from the back rooms. "Joe tried to rape me in the baby's room," Sally says, laughing, and Joe rolls his eyes.

I try to hide in the couch.

"That's not funny, Sally," Elaine says. "There's nothing funny about rape."

"It was just a joke," Sally says.

"But it's not funny."

"It's okay, Elaine," Beth says, and Elaine says, "I wasn't defending you, Beth. I just don't think it's something to joke about."

I wish she'd let it die.

"And you're right," Joe says.

"Oh, what do you know, Joe," Sally says.

Mark sits at the coffee table and begins rolling a joint. Beth puts her hand on his head, and he turns to her, smiling.

We have to get away from these people.

"Christ," Sally says, "nobody's telling the truth here. I'll give you something awful. How about wanting to kill your baby? How about wishing your husband would die on the way home from work one rainy afternoon?"

"What are you talking about?" Joe says.

We're going to have to get away from everyone.

"Come on," she says. "Willy screamed the first two months he was home. Don't tell me you didn't once, sometime in the middle of the night, just once, so tired, think about letting go and throwing him through the wall."

"Oh my God," Beth says. "I never felt that way about Amy."

"Yeah, sure."

"It got frustrating," Joe says, "but I never felt like that."

"I love my baby," Beth says.

"Sure you do," Sally says. "And you love Mark, too. But that doesn't mean you don't sometimes wish he were dead."

"That's not true."

That is true.

"What are you talking about?" Joe says.

Mark takes a deep hit. Elaine takes a hit, but I pass this time. I'm far too stoned.

"Sally doesn't want you or the baby dead, Joe," Elaine says. "She just thinks of possibilities in her life."

I look at Sally and she smiles. "I do think of possibilities," she says.

"I'm sure you do, Sally," Elaine says.

"When Joe had his affair, for instance, sure, I thought about revenge, my own little fling."

"What?" Joe says, and he laughs, but the red in his face gives him away.

"Oh, come on," Sally says. "We're all friends, here. Right, Mark? Right, Jack?"

"Sure," Mark says. "But—"

"So Joe was fucking this Deadhead chick. I was seven months pregnant. Joe met a little girl from the college. Where was it Joe, a coffee shop?"

"I really don't—"

“Was it because I wasn’t putting out?”

I look at Elaine looking hard at Joe. The room needs to be quarantined. But first we have to escape. I try to catch her attention with a head movement, but she won’t look.

“Why not bring it all out?” Sally says.

“I think we’d better get going,” Beth says, and Sally says, “But we’re not done with the game. I’m helping Joe with his Something Awful, here, aren’t I, honey?”

She musses his hair.

He jerks away. “This is idiotic,” he says. “I have no idea—”

“Oh, come on, Joe,” Elaine says.

Her voice cuts through me. I grab her hand. “This is none of our business,” I say, but she pulls away from me.

Sally leans forward on the little couch close to Joe’s face. “Was it wrong of me to hate you for that?”

He’s being careful, controlled, but his hands tense like claws.

“Did you honestly think I didn’t know? I mean, do I look like an idiot?” She musses his hair again, but this time he grabs her by the wrist and squeezes, then carefully moves her hand away.

“What was her name?” Sally says. “Sunshine?”

Joe rises to his feet, starts moving around the living room. “This is ridiculous,” he says. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“We really have to go,” Beth says, standing. “Maybe you guys need some alone time.”

Sally sits like Buddha, crosslegged and smiling on the couch.

“Maybe we’re all just a little too buzzed,” Mark says.

“I didn’t do shit,” Joe says.

“Well then,” Sally says, “maybe this is my Something Awful.”

“That’s not funny, Sally,” Elaine says.

“Oh, what do you know. I’m just trying to let you liars off the hook. Of course he fucked her. He probably still is.”

Joe turns toward the stereo, the back of his neck red. “This is not even true,” he says.

I wonder how long my toes have been curled in my shoes. It’s just a bad tv show, really. Nothing I’m a part of. Amusing, possibly.

“Please don’t leave, Beth,” Sally says. “You know how Joe gets.”

“What?” Joe says, turning.

“Honey,” Elaine says to Sally, “do you want to stay with us tonight?” and I’m thinking, Wait a minute, then saying it: “Wait a minute, here. We’re butting in,” but Elaine ignores me. “You can stay with us,” she says.

I look at Joe, shaking my head, No.

Sally bows her head.

“I’m going to get Amy,” Beth says to Mark. “Would you get our coats, honey?”

I take Elaine’s hand and squeeze until she looks at me. My teeth are grinding as I make another head movement toward the kitchen. “Can I talk to you in private?” I say, and we rise together, numb, and seem to float into the kitchen, where a rage begins to pour out of me. “Just what are you trying to do here?” I ask her. “We shouldn’t have heard any of this. She is not coming over.”

“You saw his eyes,” she hisses back. “God knows what he’s capable of.”

“No,” I say, our faces close together. “He’s a gentle man.” As if I know. As if I care.

“Sally told me he’s violent.”

Behind us one of the babies starts to cry.

I feel like I’ve been up for ninety-five hours.

“She might be lying,” I say. “This might be a game.”

Elaine glares at me.

“She seems capable of anything.”

“And he doesn’t?”

“We hardly even know them.”

“I couldn’t live with myself if something happened.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” I say. “I don’t want her in my house.”

"You could have fooled me," Elaine says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I have to be very careful. With my eyes I have to communicate a perfect combination of innocence and indignation.

"Fine," Elaine says "We'll go home. And if something happens, I will never fucking forgive you."

I follow her out of the kitchen.

Beth is changing Amy's diaper on the coffee table, Mark behind her with her coat over his arm. Joe and Sally sit on the love seat. Amy makes gurgling noises and smiles up at us. Joe looks exhausted, but he's holding Sally's hand and caressing it.

"We talked it out," Sally says to me and Elaine. "I told him everything."

Mark stares at the floor, shifting his weight back and forth. Beth wipes the baby's butt.

"He admitted it once I showed him the underwear," which she waves as evidence. "It was wedged in the back seat of the Saab." She holds it out to us, as if we might like to sniff it, but none of us move.

"And I told him about us, Jack," she says, looking at me.

Adrenaline pumps to my fingers and toes, bringing on tremors. I'm as good as guilty, but in a snotty, shaky voice, I say, "What about us, Sally?"

Elaine looks at my profile. Joe looks at Sally's hand in his own. The baby coos.

"Our kissy, rub-rub in the kitchen," Sally says. "Dry humping there by the sink. Making plans."

I laugh incredulously, but it sounds phony even to my ears.

"Okay," Joe says. "It's over."

Elaine cocks her head, sizing me up.

"That's not true," I say.

Beth hands Mark the dirty diaper which he puts in a plastic bag.

"Come on," Mark says to Beth, "we gotta go." They exchange baby and coat. I feel sentenced and forgotten as Joe and Sally rise to bid their friends good-night, hand shakes from Joe and kisses from Sally. "We love you guys," Sally says. "Sorry about the scene."

"This is a lie," I say, but no one seems to hear. Elaine takes the baby and kisses her cheek, then hugs Mark and Beth and says good-bye.

Mark shakes my hand. "Maybe at our house next time," he says, and then they're out the door.

Joe helps Elaine with our coats at the hall closet. Sally smiles at me.

"Tell them it's a lie," I say.

Joe hands me my coat. Elaine won't look at me.

"It didn't happen, Joe," I say.

He looks at the floor.

"Thanks a lot you guys," Elaine says. She lets Sally kiss her cheek, but Sally looks at me over her shoulder.

"Tell her it's a lie, Sally," I say, and Elaine says, "Shut up, Jack, it was obvious." She hugs Joe good-bye.

Now we start growing old together.

Sally walks forward as if to hug me, but I hold my hands up to keep her away. "Don't touch me," I say.

"Oh, all right," she says. "It's a lie. Feel better?"

"Come on, Jack," Joe says. "Too much to drink."

Elaine's out the door.

Joe turns away.

Sally takes my arm, but I jerk it from her and walk outside.

Elaine stands by the passenger side of the car, waiting for me to unlock her door. I touch her back. She winces.

"I didn't do that," I say.

A crash sounds from inside the house, a vase, an ashtray.

"Oh, Jesus," I say shaking my head.

They're screaming at each other. Another crash.
"Yeah, you did," Elaine says. "We'll call the cops when we get home."

I stand outside the open door and bend down to her. "You've got to believe I didn't do that," I say.

She shakes her head rapidly and closes her eyes. "I can't talk to you," she says. "I can't hear you."

I close the door on her, and walk to my side of the car, knowing we won't call the cops when we get home. Inside, there's another crash. I open my door and crawl in next to Elaine. She won't acknowledge me. I crank the engine and pull out of the driveway. Elaine looks out her window, as far from me as she can be. "You don't really believe," I start to say, and Elaine says, "Shut up, Jack. And, please, please spare me the worst things you've ever done. I don't want to know." I drive the three blocks home in silence. The worst things, it seems, are all in front of us.

A N G E L C R E S P O

A Tree

When I hear the cry of a wolf, I know full well it's coming from someone else's throat.

Twenty ants dismantled a locust and buried it among its roots. Twenty hunters, with different luck, waited under its branches for a hare to pass by in the afternoon. Twenty times there was someone shattering wishes against its bark. Twenty times twenty.

All of them left in a hurry. All of them, sooner or later, cried out in a voice they believed to be their own.

When I hear the cry of a wolf, I know full well it is someone else who is alive.

—translated from the Spanish by Steven J. Stewart

ANGEL CRESPO

Stones Against Stones

Tricked by our desires, converted (we are) into rain, that (after it has rained) is converted into us.

The rain beats on the stones, on the zinc rooftops—everything is (dis)covered with water. Though it licks, soaks, beats, besieges, plucks, ruins, drags, disperses, and abandons, it does not penetrate.

Like fragmented columns or shrunken stars, like eyes in ecstasy, the stones that have been bathed, violated (not penetrated) by the waters, do not smile, do not bite, do not drink. And we return from the rain to ourselves: we haven't broken through to the secrets.

The drops go away (flying, on all fours) and, returning, bring us aromas, surfaces, traps. But they have not penetrated: they are stones against stones.

We are left with nothing but words: that other rain, dynamite or gunpowder with which to love the stones, since, into the stones, that other rain cannot penetrate.

—translated from the Spanish by Steven J. Stewart

ANGEL CRESPO

On Nothingness

Nothingness: that immense box, cupboard, or lake away from which all things are exiled by God. The forest wherein is heard the bleating of all the birds that ever or never were.

Disgraceful is he without nothingness: he must make do with what is given him by others, taken out of pockets or dreadful closets. He must live like a nuncio, like a vicar, like a minister, but never with autonomy, because he lacks nothingness.

Mine is memory: the scales of fish that silverplate the seas at midnight, and the noontime in which the sun swims: nothingness yet to be.

Or perhaps it's the way nothingness smells deeply of life.

—translated from the Spanish by Steven J. Stewart

The Word “No”

The word “No” is elastic and more or less spherical. It bounces off water as well as off sand and iron. And it doesn’t take off through the air, for sometimes it stops suspended—like the moon in any night’s sky—and at other times it beats insistent (and sometimes softly) against things until it succeeds in transmuting them. But not so much that it exposes them to the havoc of the word “Yes.”

The word “No” is shaped by two emptinesses. Which means that its structure has something to do with the nature of the Void, though the Void is actually limitless and negational. On the other hand, the word “No” has the ability to awaken: between the two emptinesses that shape it—that of the Void and that of the eventuality of the poem—the face of the word “No” is almost affirmative.

Since the emptiness of the Void is inexhaustibly elastic, it offers no resistance to the pressure from the interior emptiness of the poem: and since poems can be legion (and each one of them with a different but limited expansive force), the word “No”—shaped by two impressions—constantly varies in size. On occasion we don’t see it but we feel that it exists in a manner similar to the Void. At other times, we look out the window and ponder a great “NO” that encompasses the stars. And it may be that some of the so-called Novas may be developing “No’s” whose light index bounces off an obscure destiny.

As it is supposed that the function creates the organ, the ordering task of the word “No” has created its own intelligence: It’s a word both cerebral and romantic. It ties and unties the knots of thought, and without it neither poetry nor love would be possible.

Some might suspect that they would likewise not exist without the word “Yes,” but this is a mistake. Because every thing, every situation, every possibility (from the very moment that we imagine it) implies, and with no mystery whatsoever, the word “Yes.” So that it’s a matter of a superfluous term, a luxury. We can imagine perfectly well a world (and a language) without the word “Yes,” for it would be enough, to affirm them, to look at or call for the things themselves. It would be impossible, on the other hand, to imagine them (without being devoured by, without sinking into—with the unassailable power it would then have—the Void) without the word “No.”

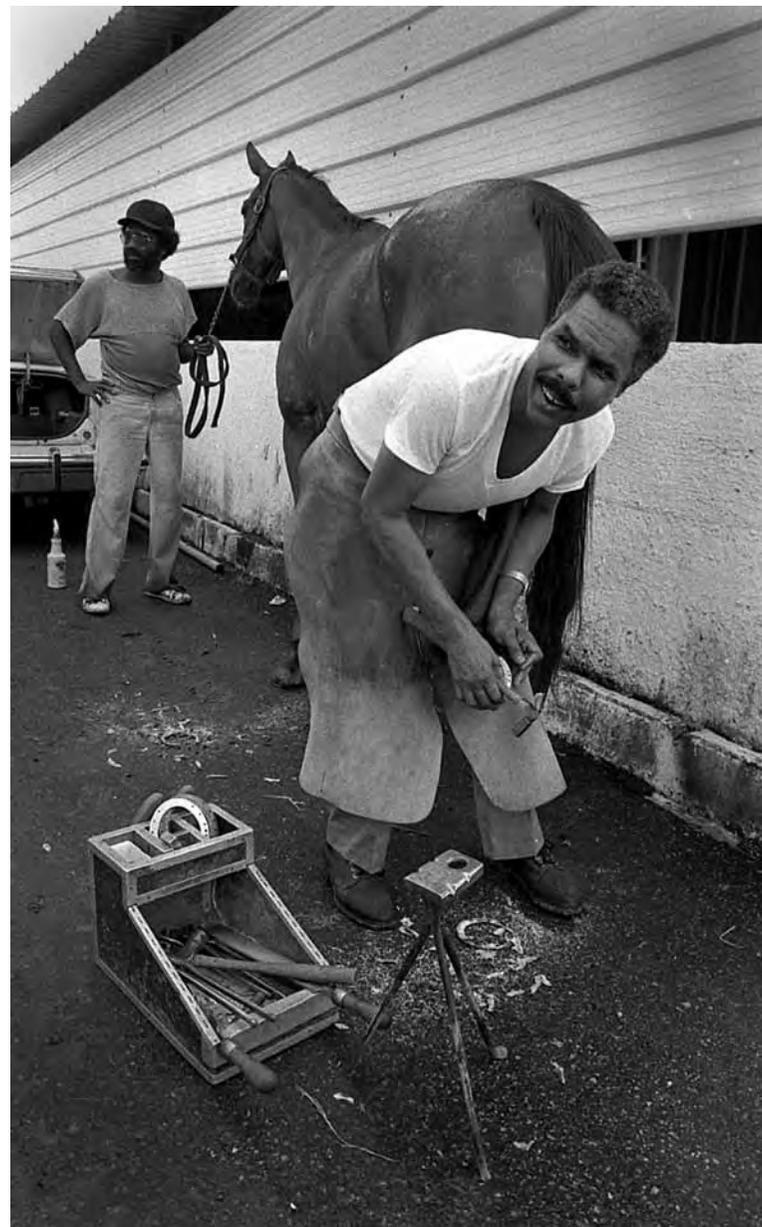
In reality, the very word “No” implicitly contains in its round, elastic heart an insidious “Yes.” Because, yes, the word “No” does exist, yes it does beat and gravitate, yes it does offer itself for pondering (but just sometimes) when we open the window. But what is not “Yes” implicitly contains a “No”: it’s impossible to say that “Yes” does not exist, in the same way that we affirm that yes, “No” does exist. Which isn’t necessary.

The result, moreover, is that poetry develops in a single miserable direction on the side of “Yes,” while it opens up into limitless and expansive possibilities in the mysterious paths of “No” (which implicitly contains an insidious “Yes”).

However, when “Yes” is directed against “No,” it affirms and sustains it, even though this only happens when the latter is found to be in the position of gravity (something that is impossible in epochs of decadence).

From here it can and must be deduced that poetry always revolves around the spheres of “No,” even when its nature is affirmative, just like the sun and other stars.

—translated from the Spanish by Steven J. Stewart



Farrier

Mussels

I used to think they lived out
their shuttered lives wherever they happened
to spin fast and spawn—shagged on pilings
striped with seaweed, wedged in the crevices
of breakwater jetties—great shocks of them
exposed at low tide, seething
like a janitor's keys.

So when I first see one
then another abandon its post, detach
from the substratum
of surf-battered wharf to swim—
or rather, propel the glossy mummy casing
of itself through tidepool and backwash,
fluttering in brine like an erratic
heartbeat—I am startled

as in that dream when the body takes flight,
thinking matter and gravity have come unhinged,
the polarities of attraction
reversed. (How long until pears
shrug off their still lives, or castaway
oceans bring down the moon?)

They are beautiful
in propulsion—lopsided, hangdog, all
wobble and farce—momentum's own

discrete bursts and bubble-wakes
plucking away—like the butterfly
strokes of infant swimmers, or a raft
of quavering notes, some dark, dumbstruck
melody released into solution, free-
floating, tide-spun, seeking a fresh clef,
a deeper staff to fasten on.

A N N E H E I D E

PondBee

Slipped into a paper place, he's a tunnel. Witness to the growth of sap. Down his throat. No throat here: glass, walls called home if they last enough. A paper nest to swarm into: he's a paper room. Waking wind and slip from the branch. Fever called fire. Home's in the hands of a swarm. Thought through the yellow night—a swarm, a home, a brood. Washed out night of a home. An occasional.

A N N E H E I D E

Sea Pig

Her blind dust snaps the ground: small dark she's trapped in: her snout pulls, out of the underwater, a brighter root: turn herself inside out: gasp: freshwater: a breathful: a peace between swine & soil: and in her vision, she's a little healed whale: miniature on her bended back: a replica: eating the torn dust, she'd been: torn, too.

Psalm

When you visit
again, Lord, please
take everything

that is not here
to stay, to be
long after me.

See, all my junk
has been sorted,
scooped and neatly

stacked in three piles
against the wall.
This stained futon,

this wobbly chair
and the coffee
table, can be

carried at once
upon your back.
All the tools of

my crime are here,
packed in the wood
box sealed and nailed

shut for the road.
Read the labels—
not in Coptic,

Aramaic,
but in plain speech
of zeroes, ones—

it will help You
decipher my
notes, thoughts, even

some bars of rage
written at night
in the margins

of books, white sheets
that my lovers
never found soft.

You see, I read
somewhere that we
are nothing but

fertilizer
for History, for
what's yet to come.

How funny then
that I now sit
leaning, blocking

my exit door.
Will you knock three
times, ring the bell?

Until you come,
pardon my dust,
my paper hat,

the fact that I,
dear Lord, kill time
tasting the hard

candy of your
body trembling
inside my mouth.

E. B. VANDIVER

Milk Teeth

Then it is spring. After Easter Faye and Dolorie say, *We have made up our minds, we are going to fetch Brother Fig from San Francisco to bring him back to Nazareth and set him on the straight path. There's nothing we can do about your momma but there's someone we can save and that's Fig.* They send us to stay with their church friend Molly for those two weeks and we learn what it is to be poor: outhouse-poor, dirt-floor poor.

Molly brushes our hair and says kind things about Lise, who she knew at Nazareth Junior High before Lise ran off with that joiner to Eufaula, the joiner that is Poug's father and my maybe-father, but we are so miserably hungry, us five, so sticky and filthy in the sudden May heat that we can hardly stand it. We whine softly like dogs, for doughnuts like Dolorie makes on Sundays, for a real toilet, to go back to our own house for the night, until Molly cries. Not out and out cries, but stands over her kitchen sink and doesn't hide it from anyone as the tears stream silently down her fat cheeks. The twins, who are five, go to her and wrap their arms around her sausage shaped legs and beg, *sorry sorry*, but Poug and I, who are older and cunning, sit back and watch, holding hands tight from our place in the corner, and wait. And sure enough, Molly leads us back to our house and puts Poug in charge for the last three days and makes us promise not to tell Faye and Dolorie, and we have won. In my bag is an Elvis record stolen from where I discovered it in Molly's gospel music collection. That night we put it on the record player and set baby Rose on the floor, draw the curtains tight, and dance. We have never danced before for dancing is the devil's work, Dolorie says, it

leads to sin. But the rhythm sews into our bones and we say to one another, since there are no men there can be no sin and we grip our hands together and spin, pumping our toes against the floor. That night the living room is a blur of lamp-light and bleeding color, with the sweet voice from a stolen Elvis record soaring above our heads.

When Faye and Dolorie return with Fig from San Francisco, he goes into the spare bedroom straightaway, kicking and fussing all the way to the four poster, carried by the three big Blately boys. They tie him up, hands and feet, with a good thick rope, lash him to the bed like a dinghy to a dock.

“How’d you get that Fig in the car in the first place?” we ask, “and get him sitting still that whole way from California?” Faye and Dolorie exchange a look.

“Women have ways,” is all Dolorie says.

The first morning we are too scared to go near that bedroom door, but as his hollering wears on into afternoon, we find the courage, the twins and Poug and me, holding hands as if he would otherwise knock us down like a terrible wind. For we have never seen a man come to live in our house, or a drunk, or somebody gone mad.

And we see that he’s not much more than a scarecrow, his bony bare back slick in the summer heat, hems ragged around his spindly ankles. Patched up on his trousers, and his beard grown long and riddled with grey. Still stinking with the rum.

But can he holler. Oh, and he does holler, all day long. Hollers through our Saturday supper and on into morning, when Faye scrubs us five in the bathtub and puts us in our church dresses and drives us down to First Cavalry, Dolorie stern-mouthed and silent by her side. By that time he’s been hollering so long we think we can hear him even over the choir singing and the preaching and the how do you do’s and the whole drive home. He hollers through the twilight and the noon, “like the devil got him by the throat,” Poug

whispers as we lay awake at night in the bed we share together, staring into the dark like it has answers.

“It’s the poison,” Faye explains, “just the poison leaving his system. He’s been drunk so long he doesn’t know his left from right. We’ll get him clean.”

Poug says, *what’s it like not to know your left from right? You think it’s like being a baby, like baby Rose?* We think on this and bribe the biggest Blately boy, Jim, to get us some of the cheap strawberry wine from the corner store with a nickel and a promise that Poug will spend ten minutes in the shed with him next Friday night. We hunker down in the barn behind the cows and pour out our wine into Dixie cups and make our throats sticky with the sweet sweet taste until our heads are humming something beautiful, something like a hymn.

“I love Faye and Fig and Dolorie and Jim,” Poug says as we lay in the hay, arms stretched broad over our heads, kicking our feet in the air.

“I love these cows,” I say. “You can’t love Jim. He’s old as sin and you’re just fifteen.”

When we touch our feet together, they’re pale as ghosts and twice as light.

Poug says, “Race you to the door.”

She’s up and leaving me behind before I can even think to stand, laying helpless and heavy in my nest of hay. Fig still hollering for his drink and Faye calling us in to bed, God making the world spin so fast it’s hard to hang on, like a runaway pony, like a merry go round.

The hollering fades as Fig’s voice finally gives out until finally he just lies rasping in his bed, thrashing, useless, like a catfish on a hot dock, and when I wake up one morning not to the sound of his hollers but the call of our old rooster Cash I think to myself for sure he’s dead, that Fig. I lie in bed, listening to the wind move in the pecan

tree, and push my tongue against the tooth that's gone loose in the night, wiggling and bothering it and rattling it in my gum.

I remember how Faye treated the last tooth of mine that got loose, how she got so grim and matter of fact, tied a string around it and gave it a hard yank, and the sudden rush of hot, metallic blood, Dolorie shoving a cold washcloth in my mouth to stanch the wound, telling me, *never mind that, just wait til you birth a baby*. The cold water from the washcloth, the blood from my gum pooling together and trickling down my throat, into my stomach with my dinner. I'd never hated anyone so much in my life as Faye at the moment when she tossed that string in the trash and held my tooth between her thumb and forefinger up toward the naked kitchen light bulb like a prizefighter brandishing his fist. We all stared at it together, that tooth shining so white and clean in the light. I couldn't believe anything so beautiful had once been in my mouth, couldn't believe I'd never noticed it. A jewel! And now it was gone, and an aching hole where it used to be, oozing still: slow blood, thick as snot.

"A fine specimen," Faye said, and laughed, and pitched the tooth into the trash right along with the string. The lid of the can slammed down with a bang, like a shot.

By then we had been living with Faye and Dolorie so long I'd nearly forgotten about anything else before Nazareth, what it was like living with Lise in that housing project outside Seneca with the crazies next door who shot off their rifles at the slightest provocation, and the sourwood trees scratching and poking at the roof all night long. Poug has told me so much about it that I can't even be sure the memories are mine or her own words making that picture in my head. Maybe I do remember Lise's boyfriends one after another, so many they all looked the same, most of who became Poug's boyfriends in time when Lise was done with them or they with her. Maybe I can remember our bedroom window that overlooked the

hardpan flat that had once been meadow, that now flooded in the slightest rain. But like everything else with Poug, it's hard to tell where her words end and my own mind begins. What I do recall is only the social worker, her voice as bland as broth, speaking to Lise through the screen door, that one word, unfit, sticking like a fly in the netting before Lise ran out past her, crying and began picking up the twins' toys off the yard and throwing them against the social worker's Buick, denting hell out of it. She only stopped when she broke the rear window, and then she sat slowly in the chaise lounge she had put out earlier in the week, for sunbathing and put her hands over her face. The social worker, who had done nothing through all of this, at the smashed window lit a cigarette and squinted up at the sun as if to check the time. "Faye's a good foster mother," the social worker said. "She's been doing this for years. You couldn't ask," she said, "for anyone better."

Poug turns over in bed and says, "What's wrong with you."

"My tooth's gone loose." I wiggle it to show her. "And now Faye's got to yank it out just like last time."

"You're too old to be getting loose teeth anymore," she says with a knowledgeable air. "All your milk teeth are sure to have fallen out. If you're losing teeth now it's because you got cavities, you got something rotting away in your mouth."

"Shut up," I say, full of dread.

"You got to see a dentist," she insists, wide awake now, pulling her sheet to her chin. "Or you'll end up like those hill ladies who got three teeth."

In the early morning light she looks so much like Lise it hurts my stomach. Her hair inky black and her eyes so blue. Poug has never lost her grown up teeth, could never be ugly even if she fell off a truck flat down on her face. We look so nothing alike that in moments like these I know in my heart we are only half sisters, that

that means my daddy really is some nobody, not even Poug's nobody daddy, and I feel stark inside, like my heart might be the altar of First Cavalry when it is stripped for Good Friday, when the pastor tells us the story of Jesus with the spear in his side making him leak blood and water and the wine burning like vinegar on his face before he prayed aloud to God and gave up his last breath. I shove the blanket aside and crawl out of bed, the wet cold of morning coming through the window that's slipped open in the night, touching my skin and making me shiver.

After all those long weeks, and his throat burned out and rough as sand, Fig motions to Faye, says he's found God, and she unties his knots and puts away the bedpan, telling us, *now he's right in the head once more, he is the brother we knew*. We gather around to watch his first steps from the bed, his long yellow feet like cornhusks scraping the floor. His eyes are round and bulging, nearly popping from his head with the effort as he makes his way from his mattress to his bureau to unpack the red suitcase Faye and Dolorie brought with him from San Francisco. From that suitcase he pulls so many things the five of us have never seen in all our years in this house with its yellow and pink painted walls, its lace curtains and flowered coverlets: He takes out the woolen pants he wore, for it was a cold and foggy city, shiny black shoes, a silver straight razor and matching mirror and matching silver bowl and matching tiny brush that he uses for shaving. Boxer shorts, with a mysterious flap down the center. A harmonica!

Finally sitting to rest on the side of the bed, he weighs this harmonica in his hand and speaks to us with his new voice, thick and tired from his swollen, tuckered throat. He tells us five how he played this harmonica for coins on the train platform, how during the Friday night rush hour after all those rich men's paydays he could sometimes make fifty dollars a night, how he spent it all on

liquor, sweet liquor—amber whiskey and harsh harsh rum that kept him warm in the night, for it was a cold and foggy city. As I listen, I am flush with envy, thinking what it must be like to play music all day and float on a cloud of liquor-bought happiness and have men drop money in your hat out of simple charity. But as Faye listens to Fig she shakes her head silently, her eyes swifiting shut in the briefest of prayers, and I can see she is ashamed for him.

He tells us it is a beautiful city, the houses like wedding cakes, each one fancy in its own way, and the colors they're painted the colors of Easter eggs. How these houses crowd together, shoulder to shoulder, so as not to go somersaulting down the vicious, steep streets that plummet straight to the ocean. He tells us of the suicides plunging from the Golden Gate Bridge, down to the icy waters of the San Francisco Bay where the seals bark day and night like the tortured souls of the dead. He tells of the fog boiling into the streets so thick you can't see your own feet beneath you.

The more he talks of the city the longer his vowels ease out, giving way to his remembered voice, his Carolina voice, his words spilling out slower and slower and closer and closer together, without comma, without break, whole honeyed sentences flowing on and over islands of adjectives such as I have never heard, strange and lovely as orchids, so as I can't imagine his mouth behind all that ugly hollering that scarred our mornings and ruined our breakfasts going on weeks.

"This city is like a woman, a beautiful woman who takes your heart and feeds on it for her own pleasure," he says.

"Fig, that's enough," Faye tells him, and he goes quiet and wise-seeming, nodding down at us, nodding and nodding.

"You'll see," he says sagely. "One day you'll see this beautiful city for yourself and you'll know how it is. God blessed you girls to bring you to these sisters of mine, to set you on the right path from any misery that might find you."

“Amen,” Dolorie says.

“Amen,” we chorus.

“Fool,” Faye says. “There ain’t going to be any misery, not for even one of these fine girls. They’re warriors, every one.”

We look at one another to see what she means but we only see our faces, the faces we have always known, and our black braids slick as water moccasins, our muslin dresses faded and stained and hitched onto our laps where we sit to watch Fig. The same red mosquito bites itching our calves and our knees grass crusted and cruddy with mud. Are we warriors? we wonder now. Will we grow up to be? What Faye says, it must be true. But we are only girls.

Fig, now at one with his repentant soul, asks to be washed clean by the First Cavalry pastor, and on a cool grey morning we five girls and Faye and Dolorie gather on the banks of Square Creek with every last body in Nazareth, clamp our hands to our elbows and shuffle our heels in the slick mud to keep from sliding down right into that fast-moving water. Fig is dressed in a white tuxedo with a white ruffled blouse and a white bow tie, his graying hair combed against his skull with what we suspect must be Faye’s grooming cream. But he does look a man, and rightfully solemn and grim, and when the pastor leads him into the creek up to their knees, we shiver for his chill, strain our necks to watch Fig make amends with himself as if it were a boxing match between Satan and Jesus himself, and when the pastor proclaims him born again and plunges him backward into Square Creek so violent and fast, we gasp quietly together. The clouds rip from the sun, the sky abruptly blue, we are warmed deep through our skin by the rays of what must surely be heavenly light, and so too, we are baptized. We too are made clean.

In summer as the rooms go still and hot as ovens we drag our beds out to the sleeping porch. After supper the fireflies spin in the dusk

like clumsy stars and moths bat against the screen, pushing for the one naked light bulb that we leave burning for the sake of the twins, who are scared of the dark. We dance, even baby Rose, who has only been walking these six months, though there is no Elvis record, we still hear that song the night the house was ours and sing silently, mouthing the words to one another. When from the living room below Faye raps the top of the broomstick against the floor of the sleeping porch, we crawl into our beds and hush, crushing our pillows under our heads, and Poug and I whisper until our eyes grow heavy. For my education she describes the act of love, which she is currently bestowing on Jim but of late only from charity, as he is just such a child even man as he is.

It is July when I wake one night in the silence, my whole body suddenly listening in the night, and when I realize Poug’s gone, I am suddenly taut with that stillness, like that time I was reaching for Dolorie’s glass above me on the kitchen counter, the glass emptied of sweet tea, ice cubes cloistered and glistening at the bottom, in the sunlight. It is just that moment again, before it slipped past my fingers, when I saw the accident it would become, the millions of bits bursting past me, the slivers we would be sweeping up for weeks from the corners—saw it all, and then it was.

I find Poug at the kitchen table, her hands over her face like Lise the day the social worker took us on to Faye and Dolorie. “Can’t sleep,” she says, hearing me, laying down her hands, spreading her fingers over the table. The kitchen smells faintly of lemon, and I realize she’s been mopping, and on her hands and knees at that—nearby a sponge floats in a bucket of greyish soapy water. The floor is damp under my feet.

“Listen,” she says, and I say “Jesus.”

She looks up at me, her eyes so huge it looks like it hurts when she blinks. Then she starts to laugh. “I don’t even get to say it?”

"I knew it, I knew."

"How?"

"How? You'll get under anyone, that's how."

"You don't get to talk to me that way," she says. And then, awhile later, "But I think it's that God's punishing me."

"What's he got to punish you for?" I sit at the table, finally, and she lays her head down and closes her hands behind her neck.

"For my nature," she says to the floor. "Everyone knows about me," she says. "Even Fig who just got here. And now this. This."

The more she speaks the quieter she gets, until I can only barely make out the shape of her words, as if they're coming to me from very far away, from a closed place that won't let her voice through. Though we are only across the table from one another, I feel myself strangely, as if a wind was pulling me far away, far higher, almost to the sky, where the air is thin and hard to breathe, and at the same time she seems to be wasting to a husk, frail and thin and rattling under the slightest breath.

"Do you figure God is punishing me?" she asks.

"Stop saying that," I tell her. "Nobody's punishing you." My voice has an edge, like Faye's before she's about to call someone a fool. But I feel sick.

"I've just got to tell Faye. She'll work it out," she says. "The way she and Dolorie worked it out for Fig."

"Yeah?" "Yeah. She'll send me one of those places," she says. "When I start to show. And then I'll have it and I'll give it away, and come home and tell everyone I went to see Lise awhile. Or maybe I won't come back at all. Maybe I'll go to San Francisco." She lifts her head finally. "Well," I say. "You've got it all figured." "You'd be better off without me anyway," she says. "You can be your own person, not like now, with me always in the way."

That's how it's left, and sure enough later it is easy for me to pass judgment, lying cold in my bed at night with no sister breathing beside me, and me at one against the night, like Baby Rose in her crib.

Then I can say Poug shouldn't have been what she was, that if not punishment she only got what she needed to to turn herself right. Dolorie, Faye take no notice of the change in my face. They take to sitting and smoking together at the kitchen table, rattle dice in their palms and look out at Square Creek catching the dead leaves off the trees. "Isn't it just like a man," I hear them say late at night from my one-alone bed. "Sees what he wants and does what he wants, no regard for the consequences. Like it his God-given right." They could be talking about Jim, or Fig, or Poug's and my-maybe father, or the fathers of the twins and Baby Rose—they could be talking about anyone at all. Later, when I finally take and twist that loose tooth out with my own two fingers, they notice neither the sudden gap where my tongue glistens through like a serpent's tongue. I flip the pillow, press my face into the cold, finger the tooth under the cotton of the pillow case. Feeling now what Faye felt that long ago night: the underside nearly smooth, with its tiny womb where the root used to be. The tip sharp and dangerous clean, like a new-cut beginning.

POETRY FEATURE

Shane McCrae

S H A N E M C C R A E

Won't

Won't you yes marry us O Mary pray / O May we may

to the marriage of imped-

iments admit two minds O Mary May

I have distinct and often wondered memories

For sixteen hours and for

twenty-four hours / I've waited for the day

O Mary as / If waiting were the day

for thirty years

If waiting was the day I've wasted my whole life // O Mary won't
O Mary

won't you yes / Or give us such a no as says you're lying

O Mary won't you O May lie to us / O Mary

give us such a yes as says you won't

S H A N E M C C R A E

[*We married in a dislocated shoul-*]

We married in a dislocated shoul-

der couldn't see through the blood heard nothing but

Groans and the scream when suddenly the bone

Was snapped in place and we were told to kiss

And almost when we kissed I closed my eyes

And blood was pooling in my goggles when

We kissed and as we kissed I wanted out

Before we kissed and after of the shoul-

der smaller suddenly but never ver-

y big the shoulder in its socket sud-

denly was never very big and dark-

er suddenly no light from the wound we made

So we could climb into the wound and mar-

ry in the wound closest to the whole heart

S H A N E M C C R A E

[*We married on a speeding train the roof*]

We married on a speeding train the roof

Fighting with knives a speeding train we were

Fighting each other stabbing through the roof

The windows but where were the passengers

Stabbing each other full of holes but no

Blood and no bones the knives slipped through our bod-

ies and we didn't lose our balance though

We lunged and we were stabbed we were not dead

But we were dying though we lunged and we

Were stabbed and didn't bleed and fought on the roof

And didn't fall we fought and didn't see

It what was really killing us and if

We had we wouldn't even if have stopped

Stabbing each other half of love is hope

S H A N E M C C R A E

Recovery

We married in recovery our son's

Almost immediate recovery

After his diagnosis in the hope

Almost immediate an intake spe-

cialist she didn't know him anyone

Though could have said the same kind things and we

Would have believed her married in the hope

He would escape in the hope we would escape

His autism married for a year at the end

Of spring and comes the summer spring but hot-

ter one year later and he isn't get-

ting better O it's one year later and

We've never seen that specialist again

Again O once you're in you're always in

S H A N E M C C R A E

Mausoleum

In summer in a cold month Februar-
y spring in August we drove to her grave
Grandmother you and I your mother's grave
In the mausoleum in a cemeter-
y full of ordinary graves in the mau-
soleum not a grave I didn't know
Grandmother then what you knew now I know
Burning a body is cheaper than a fu-
neral a grave now that we've had to burn
Grandmother my mother and I your bod-
y and the poor are buried in the wall
And buried you grandmother in the wall
Remember when you would inherit grand-
mother the earth first you must break through the stone

S H A N E M C C R A E

[Lord God Lord Basket Lord gather them in]

Lord God Lord Basket Lord gather them in
My sisters brothers father mother her
Mother who died the day before her birth-
day yesterday and my great-uncle who
Wanted his sister's money none of us
Have money Lord or ever had the dis-
appointed and the generous the scru-
pulous the criminals the criminals with
Scruples Lord gather them the wives and liars
Husbands and liars gather them the hon-
est ones and the ones who married well Lord Mi-
grant-Worker pick them gather them Lord al-
so those they love who maybe are not me
And those who love You though not always well

S H A N E M C C R A E

The Honey and the Frost

Dear Roses-Roses dear Venetian dear
The-Californian-One-The-Italian-One
Lord God Thou art a city of canals
The river and the sea beyond Lord God
Thou art a garden of one flower Lord
The honey and the frost Thou art the fall
And not the winter coming and the sun
In winter Lord Thou art the winter hoar-
frost Lord and snow dear Roses-Roses Thou
Art mandrakes and the paperwhite narcis-
sus Lord that grows in rocks and water Thou
Art flowers in the low valley and narrow pass-
age through the mountains to the sea the hon-
ey and the frost that kills worker and queen

S H A N E M C C R A E

Ghosts

White ghosts and can't imagine a black ghost / Black sheet
who surely also die
and die / Younger more frequently in cities in
The country in this country surely
al- / so violently more often younger and
More often violently *per capita* / In certain neighborhoods
in certain cit- / ies all the ghosts must surely be black ghosts //
Black sheets
and surely when the eyes are cut / Out
in such neighborhoods the eyes behind / The holes are mine
and like my eyes and the
Skin is like mine around the eyes and mine / Ghost skin ghost
broken necks ghost bullet holes
Surely we haunt if this is how we die

Startle and After

Startle and after startle startle al-
ways was a startle always is or clos-
er always will be always almost hap-
pening or always just and never is

Startle and always after never while

While in the very dark room with the very

White door the door I thought was easier

Than the other doors to find and this in very

Many dark rooms with very many different-

ly colored doors was tried and might have been

The same room every time but never while

Before and after never very while

And always after never before until

After and always after startle never

Before until and had a beautiful

Face very beautiful and yes she is

Alive and I can't anyway say *has*

But after the next after she will be

As beautiful as ever never is

But after the next after she will be

Northern

Her name was Nina. Nina Lee. She weighed 108 pounds when we started hanging out, but she didn't look like the highs had made her lose weight. Big eyes and the god's teeth. Only black girl in the entire scene. And she wasn't one of those hollowed-out soulies you see eyeing you when they want to buy something and you know they don't have any money. She walked right up and asked.

"Five is five," I said. "No negotiating on price." We were in the parking lot behind the Kasbar, at the start of the night, up against the fence with the vines on it, out of sight from the street. The air was heavy and warm. She started touching my arms, telling me how she liked my hair, the blond pigtail I would wear, said how smooth it was. She curled it around one finger and put her other hand on my waist. "Your shoes are dirty, girl," she said. Shit Converse. I said it was five for a green-and-clear no matter what, and she said alright, and smiled at me, flashing those teeth. I'd been afraid of her, this neighborhood, across a clear wide street from mine, and black girls who would scratch my eyes and punch me in the face with rings on, soulies or not.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Look," she said. "Maybe I could pay you back?" Her hand on my waist again, hooking a finger into one of my belt loops. Me looking at my feet. I said yes, alright, for you, and gave her two green-and-clears, best amphet I had. She smiled and said thank you. Thanks. She walked back around the corner in her little flat shoes and her white A-line dress that lit up her skin, and I wanted to pull her back by a hemline, and kiss her on the back of her neck, on the tight curls under her bob where the lye didn't take.

The Northern scene as I knew it was white kids obsessed with Britain circa 1971. The Kasbar was low on customers, the side of the road they were on, and sponsored a night. I don't know where all those kids came from, soulies, not my neighborhood, and certainly not hers, only that they needed speed to stay up, and I had a pharmacy connection, plenty of that: pinks, blacks, long purples, green-and-clears, even chalksticks, which were almost unbearable, and made everyone sick. I didn't take the things much on my own. I always stayed in the parking lot, underage, and sold what I could. And I didn't know or care about the music or the culture, or what these kids were about, soulies, staying up all night, dancing to this music they called Northern, as in Northern Soul. I didn't dance. But that night—something about Nina—call it hope—I waited for the doorman to cross the street for the store—it was still early enough, still light—and I followed her in.

The Kasbar was dark inside, up a long narrow staircase, above a restaurant called Hot Stop. There was a bar in the front room and a passageway at the back that led through a series of small rooms, opening on a large space at the end. Nina was there, talking to the DJ. I found a spot in one of the small rooms, where the only light came from a strand of red Christmas lights tacked into the top molding. It felt like a hallway cut out to join two buildings together, the way it twisted around. The ceiling was covered with old 45s glued over each other like scales. I leaned back on the wall, waiting, watching the club fill up.

The soulies wanted to know why I wasn't in the parking lot when they found me inside. I said cops outside, and cash only. You pillheads, I mouthed to myself. "Is this the best gear you got?" they said. They were crowding around me, making a scene.

Nina came over and said, "Well look who it is."

"Hi, Nina," I said. She looked even prettier in the red light.

"You come in to dance?"

“Just keeping an eye on you.”

Soulies from the front room were filing past us, balancing drinks, trying to get to the back, and kids who'd already been to the back were crowding the other way, to get to the bar. Nina had to press close to me as we talked, and someone bumped into her, saying “Sorry, Neen,” and for a second she pushed her small, hard breasts into mine.

Somewhere around midnight everything jumped. I was still in the passageway, watching everyone chatter, finishing sales, when a certain soul song came on and all the kids were on the dancefloor at once, like a gun had gone off, start of a race. Everyone at the front bar jammed into the hallway, and somewhere in the crowd Nina found me, grabbed my hand, and said “Come on, try this out,” pulling me toward her. On the dancefloor she moved like she was born for it. I followed her, echoing her steps. It didn't look right, me in the jeans and the old shoes, her in the dress like the other girls, but we were both dancing, and Northern has a beat to it—vintage soul. The kids on the floor made a circle around us, clapping on the half-beats, giving Nina space to show off, and the DJ shouted “Frog stomp!” and everyone started stomping the hardwood. Kids took turns in the middle and I watched them dance as I tried to move right, watching them watch Nina, every kid on her with his eyes. “Just follow me girl,” she said over the sound. And keep going, you getting it, again and again. I chewed my last amphet and danced until four, when the bouncers came in and cut off the power, and threw us all out.

Nina lived in a split-level apartment, just down the block. Half the crowd went back with her, including the DJ, and I followed along. I thought it was funny, this whole pack of white kids marching down the street, kicking cans and asking for cigarettes, loud, who would

never come out here during the day. At her house they picked up were they'd left off, music playing, some of them dancing. The rest laid themselves out on the couches, coming down off what I'd sold them, passing out on the floor, under tables, or throwing up in the kitchen, in the toilet. I drank from the sink. Nina saw me and said come upstairs, and led me into a room.

“I don't have anything to pay you with yet,” she said. Her hand at my waist again.

“Is that right?” I said, faking like I was tough, but stepping back. Heel hitting the wall.

“Look, I'll owe you, okay?” Her hand sliding over my back pocket, me looking at my feet. I wanted to say you're something Nina, you know that? but I didn't know if she wanted to rob me or kiss me or ask for more amphet, and I thought there could be kids here, I could get jumped. This side of the neighborhood. I couldn't help thoughts like that, making her out to be something, and she always knew. She curled a finger over my waistband, into the top of my underwear. They were boys' underwear. She pulled up the elastic and saw the blue and yellow lines and said “Yep.” Nothing else, just nodding, kind of laughing at me. I looked her in the eye and focused on the shade of difference between her iris and her pupil, then I put my eyes back on her hands, to see what she would do. She held on, not saying anything, then looked down at my shoes. “Why you seem nervous?” she said. “You never done this before?”

I smelled the dry sweat on her skin, and the salt in my limp hair, down my tired legs, and we both looked up at the same time, then down, and I smothered a laugh. She pulled me by my waistband toward her. She touched my cheek with her chin and I couldn't move, and she tugged me by the elastic again, knee between my legs, jammed her chin into my cheekbone, and found my mouth. I searched her lips for how she tasted, sour, and licked the edge of her teeth. I put my hands on the curve of her back and felt her skin

through the dress. Her hipbones jutted out. I watched how she put her hands under my shirt and pulled it up, and how she looked at my bra, like she thought it needed a wash, and pulled that up, too. I felt for the button at the back of her dress. “Wait,” she said. She closed the door. The room was suddenly dark, save for a long arrow of light coming in through the doorframe, drawing a line to the bed. I stepped on the backs of my shoes to get out of them, then took off my jeans, and met her in the middle, coming back toward me, and backed her up to the bed. We climbed on and stood on our knees on the bedspread. I kissed her neck near the hairline, and again she said wait. I pulled off the dress. It fell over the end of the bed like a cloud landing, and collapsed out of her shape.

The music downstairs went up and a surge of Al Wilson—I hadn’t yet learned his name—came through the floor. Nina was touching my shoulders, looking at me, like she was waiting to say something, or finally pull off my shirt. She wasn’t wearing a bra, just thin cotton underwear, white, with the outline of an apple sewn on. I backed her into the wall where a headboard would have been, and started kissing her breasts. She made a throat-clearing sound that I think meant she liked it, then she said, “So, you like Northern?” I looked up at her, and kissed her neck again, and said something stupid like “No, just you.”

The long night, dancing, all the sweat that had pooled at the bases of our backs, made the underwear smell. She seemed shy about it, pulling away, and I wasn’t sure if all her power before had been a play to make me take my turn, and take power over her, or if I should be the one asking whether she’d ever done this before. I had, a few times, with shy girls who needed a bottle of wine to tell me how bored they were, with life, their boyfriends, meaning please make the first move. But Nina’s smell was different, strong. Her body floated over me. I pushed aside the white fabric and felt. Every girl is different. She hovered above my fingers, wet. I made my mind up—non-words—and made her come with my hands.

In the morning, while she lay sleeping, one arm over my chest, I looked at her. It was strange, watching her lying there, trying not to wake her. The room was filled with sun, and she looked like a real person, without all the music playing. My ears rang. I pulled my clothes on and left.

The air outside was cooler than it had been, and quieter, and the sky was hazy and pale. I noticed, walking back toward the wide street, that the last of the trash had been swept from the road.

We didn’t talk to each other the next weekend at the Kasbar, not at first. I told the doorman I was with her and he let me inside. She was over by the DJ again. I went back to the room with the records on the ceiling and stood there in the red light, looking up, trying to make out names on the labels, but someone had scratched them all off. The DJ was playing a little reggae in between rounds of soul. I rolled my eyes at myself. What did I care about records? Soulies were idiots. The dancing had been fun last week and Nina was cute but I’m not a soulie, I said, I’m not into this, or any weird label scene. But I kept thinking I could recognize some of the songs.

Two skinny soulies came over and said “Got any green-and-clears?” as loud as they could. I did, but I was saving them. I had my stock lines: these ones are new. Listen. Have you up for days. “Is this the best gear you got?” they asked me again. And “Will you be at Nina’s later?” smiling to themselves. “Cash first,” I said. They started pulling wadded singles out and counting quarters, then a soul song came on.

They hurried, took their chalksticks and went to the dancefloor. I hung back on the wall and listened, trying to make out the words. I... wanna testify, it went.

I shook my head. I wasn’t dying to know what the song was, or hoping for Nina to come over and ask me to dance. Just business. But I shifted around and I looked for her, waiting for midnight. Then I made my way to the dancefloor and found her like I had just

run into her there, like I wasn't led like a bug to her, to how her skin shone.

And I lie, I always lie, at first, when I have fallen in love: it was for the Northern, not her. The music got into me through the holes in my skin. No, no. What a bullshit line. It was for Nina. The image of her. I wanted her and I wanted to smell like her, the oil in her hair, and I wanted to get to know this music, be a better dancer, be a soul kid into this sound. I started coming inside every night. And following her home. Short story. You can't do amphet like we were—I started doing my own gear, a lot of it—and not get hooked on the confidence, or hear that sound—underground soul—acts that never got famous—and not need to know what it was, see the names on the labels: Stax and Motown, Okeh, Atlantic, Chess. I didn't care about the money. I gave Nina whatever she wanted. She didn't have to ask.

And one morning I confessed: tell me more about this music. She laughed at me. "Come downstairs," she said. "I'll show you my records." We took two pinks and she played me everything: cue "Frog Stomp," the Velvelettes, Dobie Grey, Wayne Gibson, "Under My Thumb"—a Stones cover, that one I recognized—cue Young Holt, Sam Cooke, "Another Saturday Night," Booker T and the MGs, Archie Bell and the Drells—every track a floor stomper, my life, I never thought music could do this to a person. She put on the Temptations, "Cloud Nine," and we danced all day with the speakers going loud and the lights all off until we collapsed, laughing, over and over, drinking sodas to come down, miming all the lyrics, and passing out in her bed.

She said she wanted me to look like a soulie, and pulled a collection of Mary Quant dresses out of her closet: A-lines with no sleeves, pretty on her, but I couldn't do Carnaby Street, those skirts. "Let me at least put a skirt on you once," she said, "I just want to see how you look."

"No never," I said, "My legs are too white."

"Come on."

"Don't you boss me," I said. But she had a way. "Alright," I said. "For you. This one time. And only in here."

It was busted gray denim and it was too tight, I held my breath, I was losing weight. She put on Israelites and took me for a spin. Desmond Dekker crooned like a woman: After a storm there must be a calm—they catch me in the farm, you sound the alarm—and the beat was so gummy it took me a while to get it. Then Nina kissed me on the side of my face, tilting my head back, and my legs got caught under hers and I fell, taking her with me, and we knocked the record shelf down. She pulled herself on top of me and said "Damn, you're a fool," and I laughed and said "Yeah, who made me wear the skirt?" "You," she said, "you the one!" and I said "Lemme show you, I'd feel less naked without any clothes on at all."

She started to get more courage with me, more sure of what she wanted, us taking turns. Lee Perry sang "Give Me Power." When she was coming she would push into my mouth like she wanted to get inside of me, saying wait, wait.

She decided to dress me like one of the boys after that. Dark oxford shirts over my boy body, or pique polos with the collars up, loafers to wear instead of Converse, and tight grey cords with the waistband cut off, so I could sit down between sets. But I'd stopped sitting anyway, only on the bus down there at the start of the night. Once you get into soul and you start on uppers you don't have to sit, even when your legs hurt, and later she told me she didn't like my pigtail so much and I cut it off, trying to do her bob, then cut it some more, and she said I could look like Twiggy, and I let her pick out some makeup and put it on me, big dark eyes and pale lips. Soon I got to be all bones, even less like a girl than I'd been when she found me, with no lithe muscles on me to match hers, me, eating my own

amphets like a fool. But I was home now. This was music I could taste, like salt. I said to Nina we would be soulies to the day we die, I will always be a soulie, never anything else.

She never asked me about fights, the rhinestone-sized dents in my face, or where every mark on me had come from, or when, or how I got here. She asked me what I had in my pockets. "Do you have any pinks tonight?" I wanted to ask her "Do scars show better on white girls?" But soul songs are love songs, and there weren't any lyrics about that.

C H A R L I E C L A R K

The Inner Life

On the porch for a breather from the inner life,
I turn my attention to the thicket of spruce

looming between the two passes of the highway.

I believed the man who lived in there last summer
when he came to my door asking for a knife.

A goat had wandered into his camp, he said,

and he wanted its meat. I believed enough to say
I don't believe it and follow him into the clearing.

A plenitude of garbage in good order, tent of tarp

and flag, one tree stump shaggy with notched slivers.
No goat, though. Heat hung in there, despite the foliage

and shade, dulling even the swarm that hit when

in my head the word *torpor* slurred its way to *murder*
then back again while I watched him paw the far

wall of leaves and call after the goat, still consumed

either by his mirage or ploy, the knife flickering
in the greenery like it were the sole morsel whose

scent could lure the creature back inside the grove.

S A R A H P E R R I E R

Lesser Beasts

Bare-handed, I snapped all the necks
on a six-snouted pig named Lucius
and beat back Lycoris, the bringer

of dull evenings. Now come, lesser beasts,
imps and sprites, swarms of you
like gnats in the yard. Here's a saucer

of vinegar to lap, a small bowl of cloves
to fatten up on before I pluck you
from your own burpy stupor. The staccato

gallops of the night-mares' hooves will slur
and thicken in the strip of honey I've spread
on the windowsill; their hollow bones will keep

until I sift them from the black ants' trails.
I'll blow their dust back to the distant north,
shine their saddles like trophies to hang

from my jacket buttons. Beware my open hand,
beware my wicked tongue—it cleans my teeth
like a plague cleans a field. It's the gristle

that causes the glint, gorgeous prey. Rattle
your chest full of coins against my knuckles
while I split your ribs. My fingers fly along

your bent spine, it tends toward the bowstring
of my will. And listen—our song—
my breath in your mouth, your last note.

The Gift

One more paper bag / full of hand-me-downs...
—Hazel Dickens

Beyond Mike's cattle gate, the field is nothing,
the sycamore less than nothing.
Pippins bend as Baptist bells carry from town,
a mile. Beneath the house
is a crate of nails,
and every nail's a perfect nail. Look at one.

The dogs are learning to be careful (*I am a pilgrim*)
and attentive (*and a stranger*) and run circles around reason.
It's fall, so men are shooting back the bolts
of the beautiful rifles.
As I write, the range of variables narrows.
I think, the line is like the seal of the manifold

to the block, most correct when least visible. Diesel mules creep
in switching yards, their lights on night and day.
Mike had said his gifts to me would make me
more useful to him: a tape. Level. Framing hammer.
Also: fence pliers; *Five Acres and Independence*;
Lives of the Poets.

Cold coffee, cold comfort, the moon just past new
and waxing, there's no need for challenge, nothing to break
the fall of leaves as squirrels go nuts.

I have spent my time standing between field and road
wishing I was drunk and waiting
for something to change my life, which it won't.
The dog's warm, wet—healthy—nose pushes up
my free hand, the hand I don't have
on the chain latch. The bells are ringing.
I open the pipe gate.
We populate, we punctuate the field.

JOHN CASTEEN

Polestar

I didn't mean to make the train
jump off its tracks. But one time I was in a fight
in a cold locked room with wooden walls
and I realized I was trying to kill someone—
but more than the green light of dusk,
more than the lolling, broken neck,
beyond a prayer, beyond release I needed
the high blue-shifted wane of the polestar
to sound the bent half note that means go.
I wanted to be a simple machine.
High in the cold woods, alone, I know
you saw down into that spinning
place behind my chest where rage was.

Now in the night on my back
on the shifting, heaving mirror of lake ice
that speaks up to you with its groans,
I lay clamped between two flat sheets
that match with no seam: I let up,
I let his collar go, I turned my fingers loose
from their knot. Mercy, fall now.
Bury me with an acorn in my mouth.
The beacon moves a little on the ridgetop
each night, so the seasons are changing,
the light shifting along the shoal it marks.
I unscrewed and stole the lockset from the door
to every house I ever lived in.

JOHN CASTEEN

Insomnia II

Acer saccharum, juglans nigra, pterocarpus soyauxii.
I came in from outside and made and ate black stew.
Some people can be content with small acts with
small consequences but winter doesn't stay
like nothing doesn't. Which cavils the weather we love

to talk about, and to outlast. Like figures of speech.
Like a rip on the horizon. I painted myself into a corner
and I owe a debt I don't know how to repay.
Late this week or early next, put the clutch in,
take the clutch out; I'll forgive a lot about a person

if they love the same things I do. Here, James River
runs green, rocky and clear. Here, nobody can be unhappy
when they get what's coming to them. Where's it coming
to them from? Lay the hymnal down, and get your act
together, boy. Hold one of your gentle hands with the other.

S H I R A D E N T Z

Sing to me, sing to me too

Snow-packs on trees,
white mums everywhere

refusal blends in circles
her silence, sky.

Sing to me, sing to me too.

A bird flying in circles

silence flying a flock
open put of bird's not.
I could attack it
won't crack of not.
I with the silence
a nut to climb of not.
Her silence draws silence
a bird's refusal blends.
Goodbye tell my mother silence a cat
a snow mountain a not them down
branches.

Birds draw silence from before.

Padding like a bird's
beak raptors me too.

I will a hill no frills mother silence.

My sky. Her life.
I frill the silence,
guilt my sky chalky
as if it won't crack
open still no.

I try all through
I will a hill a hill a hill no frills mother.
The no response.
Sing in her silence from before.

Fruits to Be Eaten in Hell

As far back as I can remember, the arrival of the first budding plum meant that a man with two different colored eyes, an immigrant whose name I couldn't pronounce, would come over and do my mother a favor by climbing a ladder and covering our plum trees with nets. He was some sort of handyman who couldn't speak the language very well and smoked weird-smelling cigarettes. The immigrant was always doing odd jobs around the house on weekends, giving furtive looks that seemed to say he felt sorry for me because I needed a cane to get from one place to another. Mom would be at the window standing in front of the kitchen sink hand-washing what she called her delicate clothing. Occasionally she'd whistle like a bird out the window, and the immigrant would perk up.

I never liked the nets. After the immigrant had finished and gone inside for a glass of water, I'd go to the trunk of the largest covered tree and sit for hours watching while blue jays swooped down, only to learn a lesson in custody. Nets didn't seem fair to me as a child, despite the show the birds put on trying to peck the ripe plums. Nets only make birds try harder to get fruit.

Then I had my first wet dream, which resulted, the following morning, in the birth of the scarecrow I named Oscar. I did my own laundry from that day forward. I told my mom that we weren't going to use nets that year when the plums arrived. I assured her that I could handle everything on my own and that climbing ladders wouldn't be necessary. I dressed Oscar in some of the old work clothes my father had left behind in the basement. I found his big brogans and denim overalls, a red bandanna, black apron and gloves, a flannel shirt, and a crimson baseball hat. With a clean pillowcase I

made a face that never frowned, and I filled Oscar with newspapers in order to make him really come alive.

Oscar's expression never changed. He'd smile through rain or shine like some enlightened being, standing head and shoulders above the tops of the tallest trees by the aid of a pole I'd stuck into him and planted in the dirt. I didn't know then that by stuffing a scarecrow I'd become a part of this tangled web of deception adults called playing God.

The birds weren't scared of Oscar. The blue jays that arrived that year murdered my scarecrow and left marks on every piece of ripe purple fruit, exposing its moist, golden flesh. It was too easy. They pecked into him as if he were a piñata, and Oscar's detached head smiled while rolling aimlessly in the wind around our backyard. From my usual perch under the largest plum tree, I cried at the death of my imaginary friend. Once the blue jays finished tearing him to pieces and flew away, I noticed a piece of newspaper sticking out of Oscar's neck where his head should have been. As if it were a message sent in a bottle meant exclusively for me. I unrolled the paper and found myself staring at a headline that spelled out the word AIDS. I didn't know then that the letters were an acronym. Underneath the headline was a color photograph of a naked African child. He was crying, getting a shot in his arm while clutching a stuffed parrot. That's no way to help a sick boy, I thought.

Even before I opened the door to my mother's bedroom and found the immigrant dressed as a policeman, I'd already stopped believing in heaven.

The Sunrise Club

Although the idea may seem farfetched and requires a certain amount of imagination, it's not so surprising if you bother to try. We had only twelve members when we started here in New Mexico, but we've grown like crazy. I don't know which one of us came up with the idea. One person sees something and eventually everyone sees it. We meet every morning before work, a little later in the winter than in the summer, atop a mound outside of town that rumor says was an Indian burial ground, and we sit quietly and watch the sun come up.

If you're willing to wake up early, the Sunrise Club accepts all types. We simply sit cross-legged together in silence, watching the sun come up, then afterwards over coffee we try to share what we saw. Believe it or not, a sunrise can vary to great degrees. There are as many suns as there are days.

I guess I'll get to the particular morning that you're interested in, even though I again want to say that every one of the Sunrise Club's mornings is priceless, there's no one more important than another. It was about a month or two after our first meeting, the beginning of summer, May I believe. The twelve of us and our first visitor, a redhead who wore a cowboy hat and snakeskin boots, sat there in the dark waiting. Gradually the sky started getting that inky sort of look, like an octopus covered the heavens. That's when we started hearing birds sing.

Birds are nothing new. They are lifelong members of the Sunrise Club. But these birds, we realized, were chirping from inside the ground, like an unborn baby softly singing a lullaby in the womb.

I don't know what could've prepared us for the glorious music we heard coming from the mound we were sitting upon. And then, as in accompaniment to the chorus, corn started sprouting up all around us. Stalk after stalk after stalk, as if we were watching a sunrise in the heartland.

Now we in the Sunrise Club are loyal to our purpose, and so despite all of this commotion, none of us said a word. We had a gorgeous watermelon-red sol on our hands. We never ruin what's sacred by talking. But once we'd finished clapping, this stranger peered around one of the stalks and said: "I propose we take Eve's solution to this matter." So each of us bit off a healthy amount of corn. But the moment we'd swallowed, we found ourselves dressed in feathers.

I'm not trying to be modest here, but I don't sing, nor do I play dress-up. But here I find my feathered self squawking and crowing as if I'm a skylark. Each one of us warbling away and sounding perfect while doing so. James sang just like a sparrow, and John soared like a finch. Thomas was a little reluctant at first, but eventually even he got going. I don't remember how long it took for this whole rapture to come to an end, but at some point the cowboy newcomer tried to fly. He lifted right off the mound, kind of hovered in place above the stalks the way a hummingbird does right before diving into some nectar. Damnedest thing I've ever seen, a man hanging in the air between the earth and heaven. It makes you scratch your head and think twice about what all you put stock in.

Anyhow, our singing stopped and we were left with nothing but our feathers and a gnawing sense of guilt, on account that this was sacred ground we were treading on. I thought maybe we were being cursed. We were too scared to speak. We just stood there listening to that mysterious cowboy hovering in the air with the sun behind him like bright wings tell us about a time called the Golden Age. The Golden Age was a time of plenty, when people loved one

another and everything that lived was holy. It's hard to believe in something like that now, but when I'm on the mound right after the sunrise it all seems to make sense. I know this isn't news, but as the stranger pointed out, everyone in the world does live under the same sun.

Still today every time I look at corn, I think about the Golden Age. The Indians used to call it maize, the cowboy said. Right before coming back to the ground, he tipped his hat and said, "Do this in remembrance of me," and then he disappeared into the corn.

The members of the Sunrise Club, no longer dressed in feathers, quietly went our separate ways off to work, tapping at our chests like we were summoning something buried but maybe not yet quite dead.

DAVID PARKER

This Old Man

This old man wants me to bring him a plate of spaghetti. I bring him a heaping plate of spaghetti. This old man wants me to fish his keys from the kitchen sink. I fish his keys from the kitchen sink, then the toilet, then from the sweaty heap of his pants pocket in the hamper in the bathroom.

This old man wants me to fetch him a woman. I find one washing cracked dishes in a kitchen off a backyard with a screen door releasing the heat of her. I smell her. She smells like fish, and like lemon, and like babies. I drag her by her wrist to this old man, beg him to his knees before her. She smiles like a woman at this old man. This old man smiles like a boy.

This old man wants me to find Jesus sometimes. This old man wants me to win at chess and small business and arm wrestling. This old man wants me to kiss this woman when he's not looking. I do all this for this old man. Because he wants me to.

PHOTOGRAPHY FEATURE

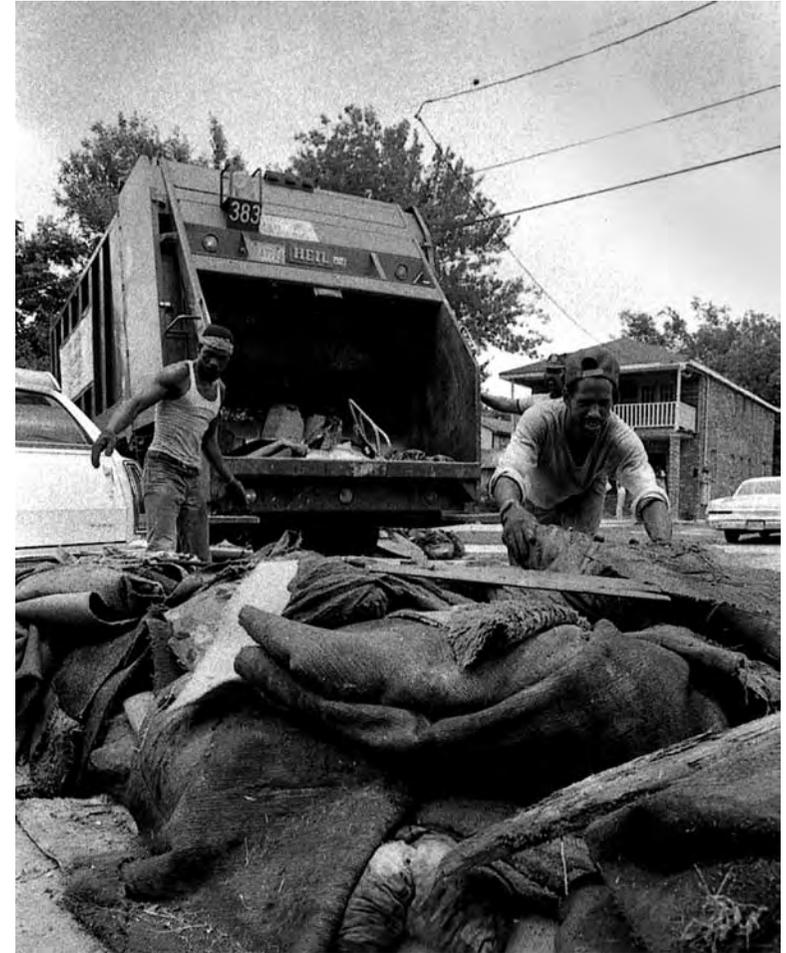
Harold Baquet



Painter



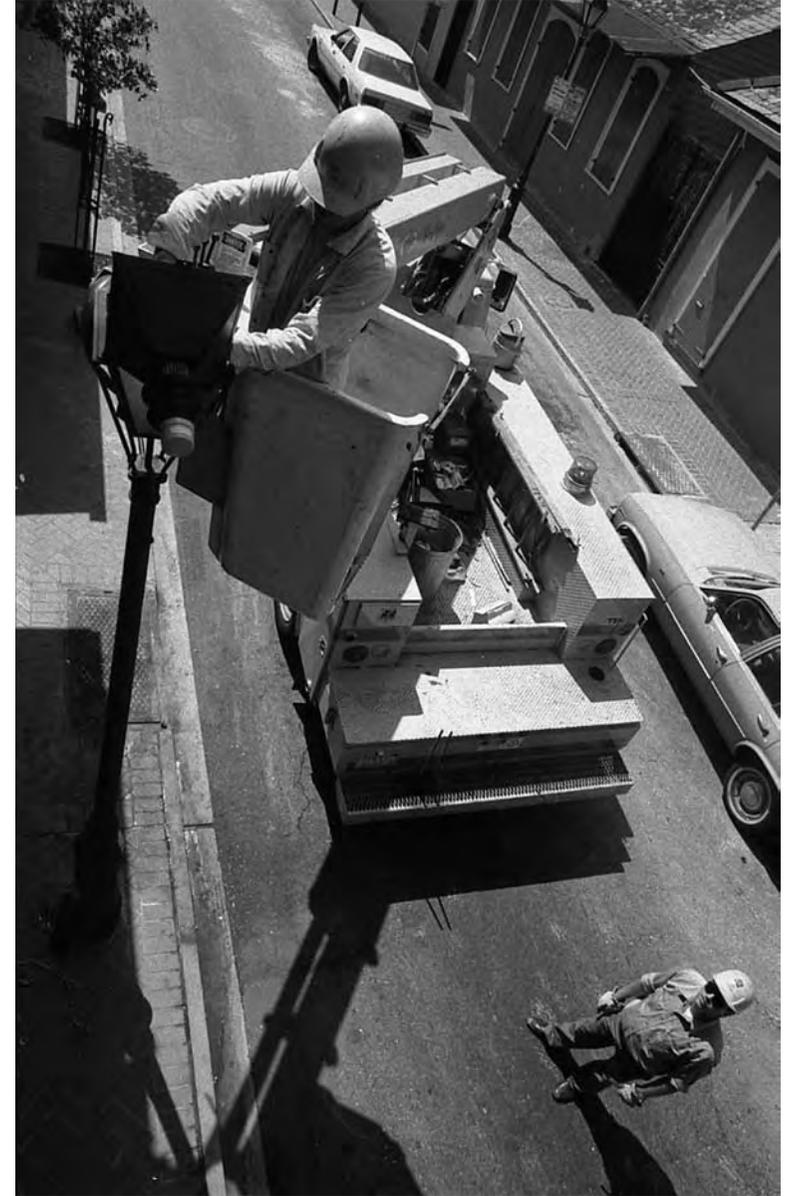
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Trashman



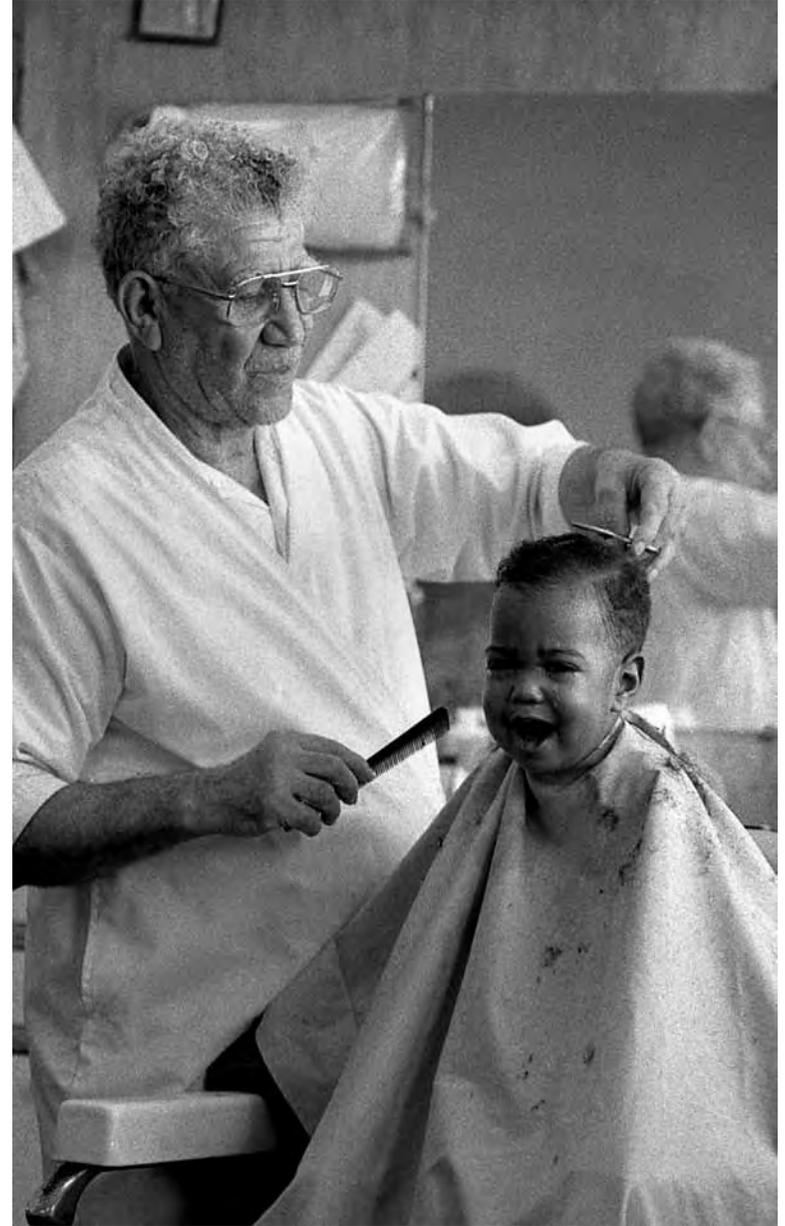
Welders & Fitters



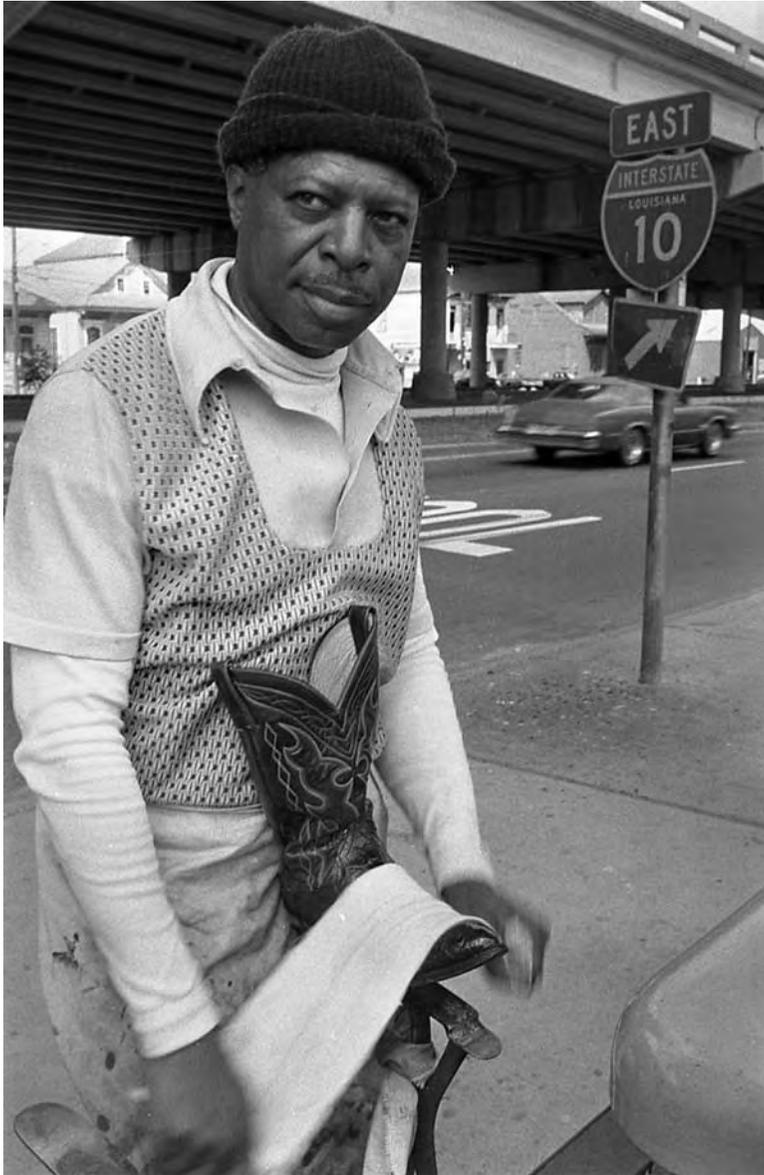
Lamping the Overheads



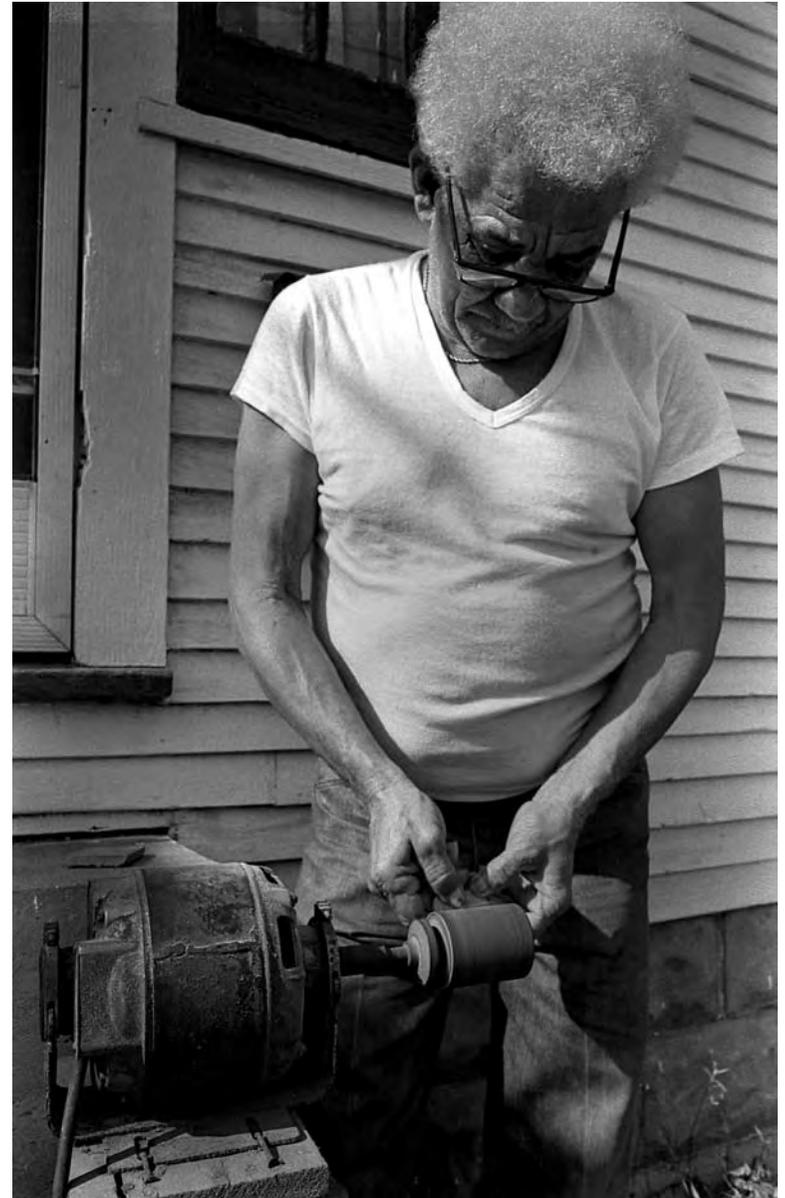
Sonny's Bakery



Wendel-Pepin



North Claiborne



Craftsman

An Interview with Harold Baquet

How did you get into photography?

I was always interested in photographs, and at an early age realized they represented something precious in time and space, how the most important things we owned in the house were family photos. As a boy I had a little toy camera, you know, a little Kodak camera that actually made some pretty good enlargements, and once I got a nice picture of a family member who passed away a year later. The recognition I received as a young boy for that one little picture was kind of inspiring. Years later, I had a swimming coach in high school who had a dark room set up in his office and had made some pictures of us competing and I wanted one, for my girlfriend or something, and he said that if I watched how it was done, if I came in and checked out the process, the printing, so that I'd understand that it took time, then he'd give me one. He was trying to show me, the craftsmanship and the labor that went into something I just gave away without a thought. And it was just magical when I saw that image appear on that blank paper in the development tray for the first time, man, it was something incredible. I was maybe fifteen at the time. Years later, when I got a job and was able to afford some equipment, I bought a decent camera and immediately I wanted to do my own printing.

And how did you learn the actual art of making pictures?

I still question whether my photography should be considered art. I didn't approach it as art. I mean, I taught myself photography. I have no formal training at all. There's your liberal arts education: I picked up a book. I spent years in self-exploration and discovery

of the processes and techniques that I'm sure that, had I taken a course, I would have figured out in weeks.

What do you mean by self-exploration?

I mean exploring photography and its capabilities—how come what I see doesn't always translate to what I print? All of these problems were worked out generations before I started playing with my photographs, and it was just a matter of locating the information that I needed in development and seeking an understanding of the processes and techniques, you know, the wrenches, the tools. And I do have a good mechanical sense. I have good sense of space, and the arrangement of space and converting the three dimensions that we live in into that two-dimensional image. I did achieve an intuitive technical understanding of photography, but probably the most valuable tool in my bag is a working understanding of people. That's my primary subject, the most dynamic and interesting subject that there is. When I first started out in photography, you could just photograph people on the street as they were, but nowadays, you know, you have to stop and ask permission, you have to break the ice, you just can't photograph a man and his family out anywhere or some intimate situation that you may see in passing. You have to legitimize yourself as a documentary image gatherer; you have to legitimize these people as subject matter, and often times it's a matter of explaining to people how interesting they are.

Are there racial dimensions to your ability to "legitimize" yourself to your subjects, many of whom are African-American?

Are we going to go there? I mean, that's always been an issue. Black photographers, both commercially and professionally have worked in New Orleans since the discovery of the first processes. Jules Lyon, a French citizen and free man of color brought the process to New Orleans within a year of Louis Daguerre's discovery. We had signed groups and portraits by Arthur Bedou, and Marion Porter on the

walls of our home. Over the years, white photographers documented our subjects right along side us. Because of that, it opened doors. Just in New Orleans, among my favorite role models photographically were white guys: Johnny Donnell, Jules Cahn, Mike Smith. These guys basically went in there before most of us [contemporary black photographers] were born, before I was born, and they helped legitimize us as subject matter. We're interesting people!

Was there anything exploitative about white photographers' use of African-American subjects?

If theirs is the only vision that is allowed to be seen, it would be. Shucks, I only started shooting seriously in the late seventies, and anything before then is out of my hands, man. Thank goodness these guys were out there, sensitive enough to see the value in African-American culture and history and personalities, our social structures and politics, our religious entities. Yeah, it's different, our food and the rich life that has developed here, especially in South Louisiana, especially in New Orleans. New Orleans, for a black man, was the freest city on the continent before this was the United States. New Orleans had a craft class, we had an artisan class. Jim Crow was really a response to the Americans coming here after the end of the Civil War and realizing that black people were running this city, that Creole was a dominant culture, coming from folks who had descended from free people of color and slaves. The economy was a Creole-driven economy. New Orleans is where the struggle for civil rights began. It didn't evolve from a power vacuum.

So...

So, this freedom, I mean, it's always been here, it's cultural. It brought you Plessy vs. Ferguson, which would bring on the civil rights movement. Our freedom brought you your Jazz. And, yeah, people in New Orleans, we grew up thinking our food was better, our music was better, our climate was better, why would you live

anywhere else? I think a lot of our current post-Katrina reconstruction initiative is based on our stubbornness and our willingness to sustain this cross and sustain the pain. And, you know, it's nothing new. These aren't the first homes we've lost to storm and flood and catastrophe. Our history is filled with rebuilding and reclaiming and reinventing ourselves, and reinventing anyone who encounters us.

Could you talk more about having to get to know your subjects and introducing yourself or gaining permission to photograph them?

It's a very exciting part of the whole process now. Back when we all did our own black-and-white processing, I found the most exciting part of the process was when you pulled those wet negatives out of the tank and held them up in the light and yes, you know, it worked, it came out, I'm going to be able to feed myself off of this roll of film. And, actually, in many ways that confirming moment really surpassed the excitement of shooting it. We don't do much darkroom work these days and our digital exposure is confirmed on a little screen at the time of the shot. But the excitement of walking up to a complete stranger is still a great rush. It still seems magic.

Have you ever been turned down?

Very seldom. I'm not making a claim of personal charm or anything but I think it's the sincerity, my sincerity, that has to come across and self-confidence has to come across...even when you're scared. It's part of the job.

I guess this is where I was wondering if there might be any racial dimensions to your relationship with your subjects.

I grew up in an African-American household, in spite of my complexion, I was raised Black. What does that mean? I grew up in a New Orleans Creole home and was raised in the Black Experience. These are my people that I photograph...not strangers. Their

struggles are my struggles. I learned at an early age not to judge others by appearances. A great asset to living and photographing in New Orleans is that people know who and what I am, I'm family. It helps to understand the subject. There was a time right after Katrina where I just couldn't photograph this one man. We were both crying and embracing in this trash heap, knowing that my own family... we have trash heaps all over town just like his.... Yeah, there were very personal moments. And sometimes your access can be almost pornographic in how personal it is and how exposed the person is. There are images I'll never release, images I hate looking at, that are just painful. And that's the effectiveness of photography as a medium: the ability to snap you back to a moment, sometimes decades in the past and, for a moment, you're there, not just there visually, but emotionally, too.

Tell me about why you like to photograph in black and white.

The less is more thing. Sometimes the color distracts from the essential subject. Sometimes, just light, line and form is enough, and it allows you to explore the sculptural qualities of that third dimension, that illusional dimension of depth. And it's fun. I still enjoy the process. It's a game, even though I don't print much anymore. I print maybe twice a year, but my printing chops are as tight now as they've ever been.

Can you talk more about the types of images or scenes that attract you as a photographer?

The man who's had the most influence on my career is Keith Calhoun, a local Ninth Ward treasure, and a best friend of mine—I'm his son's godfather. He and his wife, Chandra McCormick are nationally-recognized documentary photographers. One of the things I realized about what he was doing was that he had a knack for finding things that wouldn't be around much longer. He helped show

me the "document" part of this craft. He had a way of achieving an intimacy with the subject, a closeness that I picked up on.

Is that what you mean by understanding your subject?

No. It's deeper than that. Basically people are people and we all have buttons that can be pushed, and as a photographer, you have to be able to assess a situation immediately. I remember one Mardi Gras I was coming down Galvez, people were thick along the parade route, and there was a father and infant. The man was tattooed all up, a fierce-looking man in his own right, muscular, strapping, and he was having this wonderful tender moment with his infant son, and I made a few pictures of him and after about the third or fourth picture he looked at me, and all of a sudden his demeanor went from one of parental compassion to fierce, protective defensiveness and I immediately realized I've got to square up with this man, which was a matter of acknowledging him as a compassionate father. The sequence of shots went from Teddy Bear to predator in a matter of four or five frames. So, yeah, you have to be perceptive, be aware of the space between you and how you're coming across. The transformation from stranger to subject happens first in your head.

Tell me about growing up in New Orleans and how that inspired your work.

I was born in Charity Hospital, our first house was in Treme, with all that that represents. New Orleans in the late fifties was still segregated in many areas. I mean, I don't remember the screens on the bus, but I always heard talk of it. My family, we're all of different complexions. Culturally, we're Creole, but ethnically, racially, I'm a black man, I'm an African-American. We were never to sit in front of those screens regardless of our pigmentary ability to do so.

"Culturally Creole" means what?

Well, you know, it's different. I'm a New Orleans Creole. We're descendents of free people of color and people of bondage. My family came here in the late 1600s from Haiti or Saint Domingue with marketable crafts skills. As young men, my dad and my uncles, most of them were craftsmen, and my heroes were craftspeople. The skill sets that I admired were of these tradesmen who were bricklayers and carpenters and plumbers and electricians who built their own houses, laid the foundations, and worked on their own cars. And to this day, the craft ethic is one of the most important aspects of our culture, you know, our work ethic, which we learned from our mothers as well as our fathers, this pursuit of perfection. And you're right, this was something that I applied to my photography. I wanted a working nuts-and-bolts understanding of my craft, and I did it through thousands and thousands of exposures, just like that craftsman does it through thousands and thousands of handset tiles or handset bricks or precise cuts or nails driven into lumber. The pride that these men exhibited was tangible. There are great musicians in my family, my fathers' brothers and his father, were architects of jazz: my grandfather, Theogene Baquet, was the founder of the Excelsior Brass Band, George Baquet, Archile Baquet were world-traveled musicians. I'm named for an uncle who was a great vaudevillian performer who was murdered in a Harlem nightclub by a fellow New Orleans musician. My father, Arsene Baquet, Sr., was an incredible vocalist and a master shoemaker. I learned to play the piano as a boy. We grew up downtown, in the Catholic Church. I attended Corpus Christi and Saint Augustine High School. I have outdoor skills and fishing skills that I learned down in Point A La Hache. Every weekend we eat like it's Thanksgiving. And we claim all of our family, I have over 180 cousins. That's what it means to be culturally Creole.

The work or craft ethic you're talking about is reflected in your "Labor" series, which is interesting, in part, because you don't often see images of people working or of working-class people in New Orleans.

Look at these old houses here or at some of the old churches. If you go into the attic of St. Louis Cathedral or Our Lady of Good Counsel, you see those vaulted ceilings and you see the workmanship and how precise these huge timbers were cut and fitted. Oh, it's admirable. The topside of that ceiling is like a boat, crafted inside out.

So, is that workmanship and precision what appeals to you in your photographs of men and labor?

I did a four-year apprenticeship in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. I'm a Union Electrician. That first job that allowed me to buy my cameras was as an apprentice electrician. I haven't worked in the trade since, maybe, right after the World's Fair in 1984, but the whole thing of Union craftsmanship, is that, electrical perfection was our product and the advantage we felt that we had over non-union tradesmen was our handing down this craft ethic, handing down the secrets of the trade. We spent months laying conduit pipe perfectly level and plumb only to have it covered up in concrete. What still appeals to me is their dignity, their pride.

It seems that a lot of laborers in New Orleans today don't share that ethic.

You'll always find men who pride themselves in their craftsmanship. It's easy to do shoddy work. But the craftsman has learned from his mistakes and...it's something that you're constantly aware of. You know that your next move, your next cut, your next stroke of the blade or the hammer or the saw or the shutter button, is going to be precise and predictable and predictability is gained through repetition. It's not done by being perfect once. It's done by getting it right and being perfect ten thousand times. They call us professional photographers but what the hell does that mean? You look at other people who claim this title of professionalism and you find your doctors, your architects, your lawyers, your engineers, and these are people who you expect to get the job right the first time, and yeah,

that's an awesome legacy and an awesome responsibility, but it's something that you develop daily. It's not a step, it's a lifelong path.

Shifting gears here, I know that you stayed in New Orleans after the storm. Do you have any reflections about that experience that you'd like to share?

Civilization is a very fragile thing, upheld by the threat of violence and incarceration. We hire young people with guns who allow us to sit in this fine institution and trust in our safety. We stayed for four days after Katrina and it was four days of horror. There were gang members and predators who had organized and were preying on vulnerable people. I saw the best and the worst in people and I'm lucky that I got myself and my family out safely. In the end, it was family that we resorted to, it was family that housed and fed and protected us. I mean, it changed me. I'm better for having experienced it, but I wouldn't want to live through the horror of those first days again.

How has that experience affected your photography?

I'm very fortunate to be able to do this for a living, but I don't want to shoot anymore Katrina crap. I'm over it. I have images in my head that I didn't stop to photograph that still haunt me, all those fires burning, hopeless people that I didn't stop to help. I try to stay grounded in the present. I try to remember that my real subject, especially here at Loyola, is my people, my community. Photography is not just about the light, It's the relationships, the space and the connections between people, or between the subjects in the photographs and the viewer of the photographs. That's something that's real. Sometimes the invisible is more real than anything, and photography can capture that.

POETRY FEATURE

Paul Guest

To-Do List

A lot you should do: hurl invective at dawn.
Stop at dusk. Stop all attempts
at rhetorically complex valentines
as timed to the sun or any star
available for general reference. Mow the lawn
or at least remove the rust-
clotted bear traps from the thicket
all the lawn has slowly become
in a kind of melancholy art installation
you want to watch forever. Definitely determine
the distance between thinking
and doing. Once and for all. For it is vast.
And submit the results
to many peer-reviewed journals
hoping to give so much thinking and doing
to oblivion. For it too is vast.
And full of fondness for however much
you're content to ignore
its tab for the ruin it keeps running up
everywhere you care to look. And those places
you don't. Don't think
there isn't a spot for you
in all this abstraction; you'll fit right in
and never look back at that
world again. How her skin
and your skin, how both were one world
while her red hair burned

you through the chest, through to the bone
and to the well of blood
where she held you
up and all you carried, all that you had in you
like an ore, you gave. Give
again.

Rented Dark

Even priapic bouts of sexual insanity
were no match against that winter
which dropped snow like cement
for cement's sake. I came to think
of the weather as one of the leering
prison guards in a *Women in Chains* flick,
cast for his ability to produce
terrifyingly profuse body hair
and an admirably effortless mien of depravity.
Breakfast became bananas
and anthropomorphizing the storms
or thoughtfully vetoing
each other's baroque murderous impulses
or speaking to each other
in the flat affect of hostages
denouncing the moral and ethical whatever
of wherever. I dreamed
of understanding the sky
or touching your skin somewhere
beyond the bit of darkness we rented
on Olympic Street
without fearing we'd lose a thumb or toe
or dawdle into hypothermia
like lost children.
But that was when I dreamed
or slept at all. At night by light of the busted tv,
it was easy to see how

your face fell into sleep
and the rest of you followed
while each infomercial taught me
how to be wowed
by borrowed yachts
and stock photographs of Italian roadsters
and grimly orgasmic headcases
who waved cancelled checks like stays of execution
while swilling soda water
with Pentecostal fury.
There were secret methods
and proven techniques
and when I closed my eyes
it sounded like birth control from an alternate dimension.
Supplies were low.
I had to order now
but I never did,
letting the night run out
like the special offer each one was.
While we made love
in a frozen world, operators stood by.

Elegiac Forecast

May God bless and keep the last man
struggling with galoshes, which means
French shoes in Old French and who knew
the French had ever been fond
of their feet sheathed in onomatopoeic
footwear or that their tongues
had in the dead past divagated and dithered
whole ages and dialects and Europes
away. The thought is enough
to wave away the generic sorrow of rain
and set fire to the umbrellas
of passing strangers and be soaked past bone's last cell.
A good thought, made of sadness
easily found in the body, residue
of one disaster or another—
sex collapsed like an old shed
and weariness plead
and tomorrow night maybe
and pulmonary half-apologies caught in the mouth
of sleep. Her gone in time
or you gone, your eyes gone,
your feet on an endless carpet of old razors.
Something lost somewhere
inside you, untraceable, sinking,
and even at her heart's request
you'd never pluck a single shining coin
from behind her ear, the warm shell of all her sound,

in which you heard the ocean
rolling away in bracing violence.
In which more of you began to sink and be lost.
In which and in which
and this was enough
to put your lips to the door and not know why.
Not really. Not while rain
held its court in the world
and even in the noon darkness
the day gleamed with water on its face.
To think of her was easy.
Her swimmer's legs entering her jeans like water,
her arms learning help
you needed and help you could give
and all you couldn't,
her hands combing her bed from your hair.

Accent

Werner Herzog, I'm trying to speak like you,
though outside autumn wildly arcs
and the Alps are only a word I have
loved a long time. Tired is not
what I want my body to be
but a mist above snow. So I'm pretending
this Teutonicism. Jackhammers
through lake ice. Rabid flocks
of woodpeckers immune
to migraine but not so much hunger.
Last week I learned this,
that recycled glass has a name.
That it's *cullet*. I thought of Faulkner,
his mongrel personae. Which
is to say I thought of
suffering and fire and the south,
to which I am speaking
like a fool. Amused in my flesh,
even by my flesh, though
lovers never laughed. Sighed appropriately,
called out, murmurations
and writhing. In my mouth
I held them as well. All of you,
come back, my nerves seem
to clearly say, though mumbling
I've said the direst things
or stopped one at my door

in muslin dreams, her body specked
with paint. *Longer still*
won't you stay is what I meant though
what I said I cannot say.

Preemptive Elegy

Another future I don't want to believe in:
my body filled with me slabbed in ice,
victim of comic book conflagration
involving great powers and absurd scheming
and slights darkly nursed over the years
and monologues refined and refined
for the day that had to come when Fate
evened things out, made right or bearable
the wrong and unbearable, brought low
the high and mighty, raised up the low and once weak—
and me stumbling in on it all,
looking for the bathroom or the gift shop,
blasted northward to the Pole.
Assumed dead and left to dream endless cold.
And there would be the scientists
to find me and thaw me
back at Ice Station Zebra with hair dryers
because they were bored
or out of large caliber ammunition
or had forgotten where the helicopter was parked
or were just crazed by isolation.
Stunned when my body spasmed in the air.
When all the lights began again
to flicker inside the defrosted wad of brain.
When the shock had passed
and we devised elaborate hand signals
because they spoke languages

that sounded a lot like other languages
but not my own. A day or two
and black floods of coffee
would determine the years
and the worlds I had slept away.
And the you. Who mourned me
however long, however brokenly you needed.
And all the rest of your life
dodging the rage of others
and keeping sparse gardens
and a lot of pragmatic, hurried showers.
Which is reason enough
to be sad. To mourn
your tangled hair with my thawed heart.

PAUL GUEST

*Elegy for the Plesiosaur
on the Advent of Its Predicted Return*

We find your bones all the time and try not to be sad.
We're not even sure how late we were
to your funeral or whether we sent flowers
or told great stories of how you lived
on your own terms and without regret
and that for you the most important thing
was family. And awesome displays of predation.
Carbon dating can't say whether
the toasts we raised to you and your epoch
would have burned your alien face
with embarrassment for all the wildness of your youth
or swallowed you up in laughter,
as you might have tried to swallow us
on another day in the long life of ancient hunger.
And we hope the words we said
to all the mates you'd won with rituals
impossible for mammals to even comprehend
helped to assuage the thing that was grief
that was in them and would never fade,
they swore by the dangerous volume of their tears
and the veils of black weed
they wore in the fathoms of bereavement.
To your children looking on you
who said to themselves that you only slept
and would wake when all this was over

and everyone had left who swore
to honor your last hunt with all theirs to come,
we can only theorize how much they felt
of our terrified stabs at consolation
and whether they would have
let us keep our arms. The fossil record
so far contains no evidence
that we attended the deposition of your body
as it was lowered into the murk
while many beasts sadly lowed in the depths
or whether the tears finally came
when upwards we desperately kicked
to the air of the world that was soon to be our own.

PAUL GUEST

*Beginning in the Lost and Unclaimed Baggage Center
in Scottsboro, Alabama*

In that tumble of flotsam, that hall
of the mishandled and shunted
and slightly damaged and mostly never missed
except maybe to curse
the constant loss living is,
I couldn't be consoled, though I snickered
the same as we all did
rifling the racks of red negligees,
faux satin and wrongly furred
and crotchless and sexlessly peek-a-boo
there in the open air
far from the foreign nights
for which each had been
bought in arterial glee or shame
and one of them I tried to imagine
in an Eden not wholly defiled
but I couldn't be consoled,
not even by the strangeness of the sacred
undergarments worn by Mormons
beneath their clothes when inside the temple,
that one of us bought
to wear for Halloween,
the long coveralls stitched with arcanum
meant to keep
the wearer from all harm,
meant to be secret

like all the wretched lace lost before love or after it
but fated for Alabama
and the mockery
that was our boredom,
a kind of karmic piling-on
that hardly seemed right or fair
but there it was,
and there we all were
in the night bleeding heat
while in the magnolia's branches
dying locusts sang to us only scorn.

The Arab Mind

It was nearly time for the dawn prayer, and the Englishman on his second floor balcony was still waiting for his wife to come home. Now and then a car swished by, and finally a taxi turned onto the patch of salt flat and sand between the two rows of glowing white villas that were perpendicular to the road. Terry's heart clenched. If Feyrouz was in the taxi—and she had to be, surely, after being out all night—he would make her talk. The car halted in front of the building. A thin woman in black sat on the rear seat.

She leaned over, extending a hand to pay the driver. Terry hoped the man didn't touch her as he took the fare. Even in the blue gloaming, when she got out of the Corolla he could see she was wearing a black *abayah* over her clothes, and a *shayla* covered her hair. Gold gleamed on her chest, wrists and ankles. It wasn't Feyrouz after all, but Shanti, Tom and Janet's Sri Lankan maid, who sometimes wore Muslim dress as a disguise. She must have been returning from a rendezvous with one of her Sikh or Pakistani paramours—paying customers, according to the neighborhood maids' gossip. How else could she buy all that jewelry?

Terry wondered what rumors were circulating about his wife. And what if one of their Arab neighbors should see her coming home at this hour? Terry would become a laughingstock and she might end up in prison. Last year in Sharjah a Russian woman had been sentenced to death by stoning after her British husband had reported her for adultery. Terry told himself he would never stoop so low, though he might just threaten to turn her in. That he had become manipulative disgusted him, but to be fair, who had started it?

At least he had never caused her pain deliberately. In fact, he'd been tormented by guilt. Not while he was having his affairs,

admittedly, but always when she found out, especially if Maryam or Zahra saw her crying. If only he had known where to draw the line. Had it not been for his last fling, he might still have had a marriage.

It had been a year ago, more or less, in the first week of September; the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington had come days later. He'd met Kamila in a club in Dubai with a Polynesian theme—Lord Jim's. The homage to Conrad had amused him, an English professor whose specialty was Colonial and Postcolonial Lit. She was fresh and innocent, his eldest daughter's age, very blonde and white in the midst of Lebanese and Syrian customers, and Filipina waitresses. She talked to him shyly at the bar, then later at a table. She was Russian, she said, and he told her he was an oilman working in Abu Dhabi. Under the matting and the masks, the canoes and rubber plants, Terry flirted and Kamila fenced while the Cuban band played Latin jazz. She was cold, even rude, and slippery as a fish, which she resembled, in a silver-lamé halter-top and long clinging gray skirt. He supposed she was a prostitute, like most of the young Russian women in the Emirates, and yet he was not getting anywhere with her, and besides, she seemed too vulnerable. When he offered to pay for her drinks, she refused, and he thought he must have made a mistake about her. Touched by her trouble, whatever it was, and fascinated by her air of mystery, he left her, convinced he would never see her again.

But he had seen her, of course, and here he was, an insomniac who had spent the last two days writing an exam, his mind feverish, a white man in the tropics, *on a balcony, wearing a cream calico suit, sipping gin and tonic*, a character in a Somerset Maugham story. And what was he doing? Waiting for his "errant wife" to come home. For God's sake. He shed a smile. As usual, his life was imitating art.

True, Terry's faculty villa did not overlook a fecund, rotting Conradian jungle, nor a brown river, thick and steaming like gravy. Nevertheless, across the road, beyond a strip of flowers, thorn trees

and grass that looked like Astroturf, lay the dull dark humps of the desert, which resembled a school of stranded whales.

The sky was already turning khaki in the east when a white BMW sailed soundlessly onto the sand. Tinted windows—which meant an Arab was driving. *Because the man must not look at the Muslim woman:* that was how his female students explained the law. On the men's campus, the *shabob* told him with lecherous grins that their black windows enabled them to hide their girlfriends. The sedan drifted to a halt ten yards away but the engine still hummed. Right now, perhaps, a man's hands were on her breasts, between her legs. Or was her mouth clamped on his cock? *Filthy wog:* just that day he'd watched *Lawrence of Arabia* with his students, and a phrase uttered by the eponymous hero leapt to his lips; like Lawrence, the strain of maneuvering between two cultures was proving too much for Terry. It wasn't racism, of course, but letting off steam.

How did Feyrouz let off steam? What were her needs? The woman was as inscrutable to him now as she had been twenty years ago, when, numb with shock after her brother's murder, she'd stumbled across him in Sabra. Fresh out of Cambridge with a degree in Arabic, he'd been working for Amnesty, had volunteered to go to Beirut, to the Palestinian refugee camps, in the aftermath of the massacres by the Christian militias. He'd never met anyone like the thin, solemn girl whose tongue stung like a scorpion. She invariably carried a book by Kahlil Gibran or Ghassan Kanafani and was, he imagined, deep. But nowadays she scarcely ever read, and Terry wondered if her leftist persona had been a pose. Since they'd come to the UAE, she spent most of her time by the pool at the Intercon, sunbathing and drinking gin. In the evenings she was at the Horse and Jockey or Samantha's, the hotel nightclub. Was she as banal and superficial as she seemed?

As he waited on tenterhooks for the car to disgorge his wife, Terry heard the haunting theme from *Lawrence of Arabia* in his mind. It occurred to him that if it hadn't been for that film, which he had

watched again and again as a boy, he might never have done a stint as an aid worker, or gone to Lebanon and met Feyrouz. Nor, in all likelihood, would he have become an academic. If his dissertation hadn't been on parallel visions of the Arab world—Naguib Mahfouz and Lawrence Durrell, Wilfred Thesiger and Abdelrahman Munif—he would never have found his way to this perch over the desert, to be eaten alive by jealousy and anger.

In Colonial narratives, the natives did the waiting; in Postcolonial Literature and film, the roles were often reversed. In David Lean's epic, a smudge of heat-haze on the horizon turns out to be Omar Sharif on a camel; at a sedate trot he approaches the two interlopers at his tribe's well, and even after he has shot his hereditary enemy, Lawrence's guide, for stealing water, from a great distance, he continues tantalizingly slowly, toward the defenseless British officer. Feyrouz was intelligent enough to make use of similar stratagems.

At long last the passenger door opened and she emerged. Her black clinging cocktail dress had ridden up around her thighs, whether from rubbing against the leather seat or petting, or worse, and now she half-squatted, bare brown legs apart, wiggling her behind as if she were on a dance floor, at the same time pulling down the hem. She straightened up, reached inside for her handbag, and said something to the driver, whom Terry could not see. He saw Feyrouz' face, though, and she looked her usual morose self. Cold comfort.

No sooner had she shut the door than the cry rang out from the nearest mosque, *allahu akbar, allahu akbar*, and she was mincing her way toward the villa, carrying her shoes, while the BMW floated away and the muezzin gave his testimony, there is no God but God and Mohamed is his prophet. Feyrouz glanced up and saw Terry but didn't acknowledge him. Come to prayer, come to prayer, come to salvation, come to salvation. She kept walking in her ladylike manner, unconcerned, as if God were omnipotent and everything were written; atheist though she was, she had absorbed the fatalism of

her religion and culture, and in her own way might believe it. But he did not. There was no salvation for her or him, not through prayer, nor faith, but only through the flesh.

By the time he opened the front door, she had put on her shoes. Her heels ticked like a time bomb on the stairs.

She trudged towards him with glazed eyes. Her lips were dry, dull and pursed. The lipstick had worn off. The tops of her breasts bulged from her décolleté, incensing him. His body was as stiff as a stick of dynamite. He had no right to play the outraged husband, he reminded himself, and besides, Maryam and Zahra, who were visiting from England, were asleep. But he couldn't go on like this.

"It's a *little* late," he said as she brushed past. His voice came out so hoarse that his sarcasm went unnoticed.

He followed her into the living room. She turned her back on him and fiddled in her handbag. "Why didn't you go to bed?" After all these years he still noticed the harsh staccato accent, yet even now her voice seemed rich and creamy, maddeningly seductive. Could an erotic obsession last two decades? He couldn't think of a case in literature. The backs of her legs were smooth and slender and he wanted to stroke them.

"You know I can't sleep before you get in," he said. He had tried watching a video with the girls, but had been unable to concentrate. Feyrouz kicked off her shoes, dropped her handbag and unzipped the back of her dress.

"Will you speak to me, Feyrouz?" His voice was quiet but the anger in it took him by surprise. He had an urge to grab her by the hair and spin her round. Weeks ago he had done that and she had groaned. He had felt brutal, despised himself. A feminist interpretation of the imbroglio came to mind as the pile of student papers on the coffee table caught his eye. *The abuse of women of color by white males is a metaphor for the postcolonial enterprise. Discuss with reference to the works of...* Why had no western fiction writers taken on the Gulf yet? Were they afraid of looking in the mirror? The living

room door was open. If he gave in to his impulse, Maryam or Zahra might wake up. He had to get hold of himself.

"Who brought you home?"

"What does it matter? You don't know him."

"I want to know his name. I want to know if you kissed him."

"Oh God."

"Did you?"

Her only answer was to exhale with a long hiss. Not that knowing would settle his fears: he himself had slept with her and married her, fool that he was, before she let him kiss her. In the middle of the Lebanese civil war, as rockets rained on the city and mortar blasts shook his apartment building, animal sex had seemed preferable to loneliness. He had accepted what was on offer. And although he eventually coaxed her into kissing, in the last twenty years she'd invariably averted her mouth or pulled such a disgusted face that it put him off. Whenever he managed to slip his tongue past the iron gates of her lips, he felt as if he were violating her. So even if she were not kissing the Arab, she might be having sex with him, pounding her pelvis against his with the fury of those who have learned to love in wartime. Terry knew all about that.

And he knew *he* was the villain of the piece. His students were obsessed with weddings and fashion, enjoyed movies of Jane Austen novels (but eschewed reading them), and in their minds a term like 'postcolonial literature' made as much sense as algebra—and yet, from their point of view, Feyrouz would be the righteous Arab, while he was the western imperialist. And Feyrouz was the perfect heroine, a wronged woman and a Muslim, brown-skinned, a member of the colonized peoples. A Palestinian to boot, whose country was occupied by the Israelis, and had previously been occupied by the British. Rebellion against her husband could be seen as paradigmatic of Arab nationalism and the fight against western racism—even symbolic of Islamic feminism, that cherished paradox. *What role does irony play in postcolonial narratives?* Inspired

by Peter O'Toole as Lawrence, Terry realized, he had seen himself as a latter-day champion of the Arab underdogs, only to find that they—his own wife included—regarded him as an imperialist.

Feyrouz spoke over her shoulder. "I don't have anything to say. I'm exhausted. Can't you leave me alone?" Terry's aggravation was building like a head of steam. She flopped on to the flower-print sofa, facedown. Her uncovered back was sleek and tanned and her dress was rucked up, revealing a black lace triangle and most of her buttocks. Perhaps he only wanted her because she was no longer available. It had been six months since they'd had sex. He would have liked to yank her panties down or slap her—he had done that once, when she had come home drunk and clutched at a blind to prevent herself falling, pulling it to pieces. Or else slap her *and* pull her panties down. Instead he forced himself to speak, evenly but firmly.

"You're going to talk to me. We're going to settle this once and for all."

She twisted her body, half-raising herself on her elbows and one knee, and looked over her shoulder in a parody of a porn model's pose. She had always played him like a violin. And yet—he still needed to run his fingers up her thighs. He struggled to restrain himself, wondering why he had to pay for those sexy panties, when other men would salivate at the sight of them. And that thought did it. A roar rose in his throat and he was beside himself, watching his body perform actions beyond his control.

Six months ago he'd called Kamila from the public phone at the gas station, on the pretext of going to see the lion in the little menagerie beside the carwash and the café where the locals smoked *shee-sha* pipes. There was a real lion, not a hundred yards from the villa, an African male, full of latent power as it drowsed in its cage, even though its coat was a tatty carpet, strips hanging off, and it stank. When two young Emiratis poked at the beast with sticks, grinning,

Terry cursed them in Arabic—your fathers have bent dicks—and the *shabob* threatened to call the police. Terry told them to report him, and stormed off to phone Kamila. It was more than sex, he told himself as he dialed her number. He was seeking love, passion, Sturm und Drang, everything Feyrouz had denied him. He felt sensitive and spiritual as he told Kamila that he missed her.

It was a shock when he got back, to find Feyrouz lurking behind the bedroom door in lingerie—black lace negligee, garter belt, stockings, stilettos, the works. She looked coy as she opened the negligee. In all their years of marriage she had never worn lingerie for him. Any other night he would have thrown himself on her. So why not this one? *Be honest*, he told himself, as Feyrouz eyed him nervously, Kamila is well on her way to becoming a prostitute, if she isn't one already. She accepts the presents. *How could you accept a purely sexual transaction with her, but not your own wife?* He considered a white lie—the girls might hear, he had grading to do—but in the end all he said was, "I'm sorry, I just don't feel like it." She looked as if he'd slapped her, as if she would not accept such a lame excuse. She dressed in a huff, and he knew that the marriage was over.

It was his fault. After his last affair, she'd warned him that she wouldn't tolerate another. For three years he'd managed to stay faithful. Kamila had just happened; he hadn't meant to do more than flirt. He'd bumped into her in the street, hours after meeting her in Lord Jim's. He'd given her a lift home, had been invited into her apartment, and one thing had led to another. Incredibly, she was a virgin. And yet she had meant to pick him up, he was sure; she'd lost her job in a hotel and was desperate to return home—to Poland, she let slip, not Russia after all. Still, she refused his offer of money. Pride, he supposed, though he flattered himself that she had enjoyed it too. Afterwards she was affectionate, laying her scratchy blonde head on his shoulder, telling him about her childhood dreams of becoming a dancer or an actress. It was one of those rare

occasions when casual sex touched him, and he asked for her phone number. All the same, he had discreetly left five hundred dirhams on the way out.

Somehow, Feyrouz had started suspecting him again, and on the night of the phone call had given him a single opportunity to prove his passion for her. Which he had blown. Yet now, when he could no longer have his wife, he had to have her.

All men are rapists. Wasn't it Janet who'd said that, one night at the Horse and Jockey, on the balcony overlooking the spot lit pool and its thick fringe of palm trees? *Yes, I am,* was the reply of a drunken American soldier, and most of the men at their table laughed, but not Terry. Rape disgusted him. He'd always thought he would be morally and physically incapable of the act. How could a man be aroused by an unwilling woman, and suddenly too? Nevertheless, as the clock cracked and time imploded, the room spun, hurling his mind outside his body. He didn't have a hard-on but maybe he would get one if he touched her. She was his wife. He had the right.

He slid his fingers up her bare thighs.

She shuddered, kicked, pushing her dress higher over her rump. His heart pounded as he stroked her buttocks. She snorted, half-asleep and doubtless drunk. She might give in after a halfhearted struggle; she'd always been a teaser. He snatched at her panties. She reacted with astonishing reflexes, grabbing her underwear up and jumping to her feet in one motion, yelling that he was a bastard. He drew back his hand, furious and terrified that the girls might hear, but knew he mustn't hit her, so he shoved her, and she stumbled like a toddler, with no attempt to break the fall. Her head smacked the marble floor. What had he done? She didn't move or make a sound. Was she unconscious? Dead? He knelt, touched her shoulder. She flinched. Her eyes opened and she grimaced. She wobbled to her feet, blubbering and ugly, old, crow's feet, ashen flesh, sagging jaw, nothing like the girl he had known in Lebanon, bright and brittle as a bird, with her sunglasses and summer dresses, her poetry and

politics and dreams. He had been her rescuer then, saving her from the war. How had he become this vile person? He said sorry, but she pushed past him, slamming the front door before he had a chance to ask where she was going. Moments later he heard footsteps in the corridor.

How could he face his daughters after this? Already they thought him a pompous idiot. At dinner—when? last summer?—they'd been having a conversation about the Camp David meetings in 1997, when Arafat had rejected Rabin's offer of a Palestinian state. His voice unctuous with red wine, lamb kebabs and falafel, Terry had condemned Arafat's stupidity on the grounds that the Arabs would have regained control of ninety percent of the Occupied Territories. Feyrouz had pursed her lips and twisted a strand of hair in front of her eyes, a gesture that irritated him beyond reason. She was no fan of Arafat either, but for the opposite reason: she took the Hamas view, that he was a traitor, in the pay of the Israelis.

"We must have Jerusalem too," she said.

He couldn't resist a dig. "That's the Arab mind for you," he said to Maryam and Zahra, who rolled their eyes. "All or nothing." The moment the words were out of his mouth, Terry felt ashamed: it was the sort of racist nonsense that Middle East "experts" spouted on Fox News. Besides, whether he liked it or not—and he was forced to admit that he didn't—his children were half Arab. Both of them: Maryam, who looked like her mother, dark and aquiline, and Zahra, gray-eyed and fair, who might have been French.

"The Arab mind," Zahra said, drawing the words out.

He tried to gloss over his faux pas. "There's no word for compromise in Arabic. Of course I'm not saying it's a concept that no Arab can grasp."

"Arabs only understand force," Feyrouz said with a nasty little smile. "That's what your books and newspapers say, isn't it?"

Terry could hardly admit that he agreed.

“Yes, Arabs don’t understand how to compromise, they only understand force,” Feyrouz went on to the girls. “Listen to your father and learn. We are just wogs, after all. Huh? And what about the Arab body?” she asked her husband with a defiant glare. “Does that only understand force as well?”

Had she been prescient?

If only he could erase his words and his deeds. If only he could erase himself, he thought, as one of his daughters approached.

It was Maryam, his first-born, sweet Maryam, barefoot, in an outsize Korn t-shirt that fell to her knees. She looked much as her mother had done at twenty, though Maryam’s eyes still had the ingenuous expression of a child’s.

“You look like shit,” she said.

He stood before her like a criminal, not knowing what to do with his hands.

“I heard the uproar,” she went on. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Her eyes had dark rings under them; too much drinking and smoking, too many late nights. He’d tried to impose curfews when the girls were teenagers, before they went to England for college, but when Maryam had appealed to her mother, Feyrouz had not upheld him. To spite him, he thought. Or maybe she thought that by spoiling her daughter, Maryam would take sides with her. As far as he could see it had worked, too. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He held out his hands, palms upward.

“Where’s mum?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Did you hit her?”

“I—I pushed her.”

“Christ Almighty. Did you hurt her?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean to. She fell.” He felt Maryam’s scorn branding his forehead like a hot iron.

“You’re pathetic,” she said. “Where is she?”

“I’m sorry, Maryam. She must be at Janet’s.”

“Well you’d better find out, hadn’t you? Or shall I call the police?”

“No,” he said, not because he would get into trouble—the Qur’an endorsed wife-beating in moderation—but because he would lose face as a man who couldn’t control a woman, and if Feyrouz’ scandalous behavior came out, they might be on a plane out of the country within hours, and lose everything they had saved. “I’ll go.”

When he reached Tom and Janet’s front door, he knocked gently so as not to wake up their children. Would his neighbors refuse to speak to him? Would they ever talk to him again? Feyrouz’ dress was torn. Her face was probably bruised.

Shanti opened the door a crack. She had taken off her black outer garments, but wore a long straight Gulf Arab shift, a floral dress with a high square neck, the chest embroidered with paisley patterns and studded with rhinestones. She had protruding front teeth and big frightened eyes.

“Is my wife here?”

“No, sir.” She glanced over her shoulder, so she was lying.

“Can I come in, Shanti?”

“No, sir. Everyone sleeping.”

“I have to find her. She ran away. Please tell Tom I’m here.”

The maid eyed Terry as if he were dangerous. She held the door with both hands, her fingers fettered with silver and gold rings. Clearly she didn’t know what to do. A shuffle of slippers presaged the appearance of Tom behind her; tall, fair, and balding, he was the epitome of an English gentleman. He raised his eyebrows slightly. As he opened the door wider, Shanti turned and dissolved down the corridor.

“Hello, Terry. Feyrouz is with Janet. I’m afraid she’s rather upset.”

“I’ve got to see her.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea right now. Feyrouz wants to spend the night with us. You can see her in the morning. Why don’t you go to bed for a couple of hours?”

Suddenly Terry was banging his head on the wall. When he stopped, his colleague was observing him with the detachment of a bird watcher. Embarrassed and ashamed, Terry said, “I’m going to kill myself.” The words were melodramatic, but couldn’t be unsaid, and in the absence of any reassuring remark from Tom, who showed no more surprise than if Terry had announced his intention of taking a shower, he turned and ran home. The front door was still open. He shut it behind him and took off his clothes as he walked to his bedroom. He lay naked on the marble floor. He had to commit suicide now. How could he ever face Tom and Janet, his other colleagues, and Shanti, and Feyrouz, and above all his daughters? He found some yellow nylon rope in a closet. The bedroom would be best, because Feyrouz would find him. He stood on a chair, the make registering, absurdly enough—Ikea—and tried to tie the rope to the light fitting. His fingers trembled. At last he managed it, then attempted to fashion a noose around his neck. He couldn’t see what he was doing. He had to untie the rope, make a loop with a slipknot—he hadn’t been a Cub Scout for nothing, he thought—and then he retied the whole thing to the light fitting. It took ages. He stood on a chair, slipped the noose over his head and tightened it round his neck. He felt like a fool—he’d been one all his life. Should never have married her, he thought, knew it was a mistake. He remembered a cold autumn night in England, when Feyrouz was pregnant with Maryam, and he’d been about to leave her, but a sense of honor had prevented him. They’d seen two white swans on an oil-black river, and he had known that the Universe was One and everything was connected by love, but hadn’t been able to communicate how he felt. She’d been impatient to get home, irritable, and regarded him as silly and hysterical. He should have known

it would never work between them. On the other hand, he couldn’t regret having Maryam or Zahra. He wished he could tiptoe into their rooms one last time, hug them and tell them he loved them. He wished he could have said goodbye to his parents. How would they feel? How would his daughters manage? Be better off without him. Wouldn’t they? Was he going to do it? His mind fell silent as it had sometimes during the fighting in Beirut. The room rocked. His skin was prickly and hot. His legs did it on their own, all of a sudden—kicked the back of the chair away, and he was strangling, wishing he hadn’t done it but aware with a rush of panic that it was too late—and then the rope snapped and he was on the floor, tearing at the rope, choking, gasping. No, the rope hadn’t snapped: the light fitting had broken. Bloody workmen. He had just managed to loosen the knot when the front door bell rang.

He rushed to answer it, so the girls wouldn’t wake up.

He looked through the fish-eye: Tom. Terry recalled that he was naked and had a bright yellow noose round his neck. He considered dressing, but a desperate man didn’t follow conventions, and at least Tom would see that he hadn’t been bluffing. That lent him a certain dignity. As he opened the door he hoped he looked like Lord Jim or some grim existentialist antihero like Meursault. Yet as Tom’s eyes took him in from head to toe, widening with mild surprise, Terry found that he was cold and his penis had shrunk. At this point, all he could do was brazen it out.

“Hello,” he said, “what can I do for you?”

“Well, Terry,” Tom began in his patrician voice, “you did say you were going to kill yourself. I thought you were bullshitting, to be honest, but Janet made me come over and look in on you.”

Surely there was a trace of amusement in those Wedgwood blue eyes? “Want to come in?” Terry said.

“Why don’t you put some clothes on while I make a cup of tea? Frankly, you aren’t a pretty sight.”

Terry laughed in spite of himself. Back in the bedroom, he removed the noose and pulled on his stale shirt and rumpled trousers while Tom busied himself in the kitchen, banging pans like an Asian peasant scaring birds. Outside the municipal workers were spraying the sand with DDT. It was going to be a normal day. He and Tom would chat about their kids, their students, plans for holidays—always the major topic of conversation—and plans for retirement. They would drink Earl Grey tea like civilized Englishmen. Unable to face the chattering students, he would call in sick, and at eight thirty or nine Feyrouz would walk in with a black eye and torn dress, like a hooker in decline, and they would have the standard argument about divorce. He'd offer to keep her and give her their savings if only she'd move out. She'd refuse—for the sake of the children, she'd say, but really because she would lose her residence visa unless she found a job, and she was adamant that she was incapable of working, with no qualifications or experience. Besides, she would have to sleep with someone to get hired, so she said. They could live together but lead separate lives, she would suggest. Each of them would be free, and she would still cook and clean for him. All they had to do was keep up the appearance of the marriage. What about the scandal? he'd ask. No problem: she drank with the secret police in the Horse and Jockey.

So he was trapped like the moldy lion in the menagerie. And she could taunt him whenever she felt like it. For the past couple of hours, since everything had gone awry, the lit-crit. thoughts had ceased, but now, glancing at the papers on the coffee table, another essay question came to mind. *Gulf governments have often feigned submission to the United States and former colonial powers in order to pursue their own interests; the resulting codependency is disastrous for western and Arab nations alike. Evaluate this proposition with reference to the novels of....* Yes, Terry could see the scene as he sat on his sofa, talking to Tom and sipping tea. Feyrouz would stride in, bend over to pick

up her handbag, dangling her assets, then stand, legs apart like an American actress, and look down upon him with stony eyes. Epiphany and denouement. Conflict resolved. Triumph of the antagonist over the protagonist. Or was it the other way round? In literature, as in life, so much depended on point of view.

C O D Y L U M P K I N

In Support of Corporate Farms

Stalin scythed wheat in Russian Georgia, Mao waddled knee-deep in a rice paddy field, and Saddam Hussein tended his uncle's melon patch on the banks of the Euphrates. Mussolini

would be the type of dictator to keep a tomato garden. I think this might say something about human existence: what the land makes us do. The disenfranchised Cain giving

the boulder to Abel. Closeness to a speck of ground only makes us want more. To kill whoever needs to be killed to get it and to hang them by their fat calloused toes under the drying sun. Marx had it wrong. The revolution

would not come from the city, where it didn't matter if you knew the upstairs couple or not (but took comfort in the sound of them making love occasionally)

or the fact of a park with a fountain that makes you smile. The danger lies in the lonely farm, dirt on the palm's lifeline. Let stalks of corn miles from anywhere be their own

kind of wilderness. Let a stranger snatch them up with some newfangled harvester, thinking only of going to his suburban home, his curtained master bedroom, the clanging of trashcans his rooster.

M A R Y K A I S E R

Shakertown

We magnify the seed and reduce the president. Split phrases

fill our quadrants with the pomp of late-summer

grasses, heavy-headed asters in their circles, their clusters, their

inner distances. A red roof fills one corner inside a ruled

square: happy cube and its inhabitants happy in their well-framed house.

We call the secretary to the table and feed him apples

of remorse. The flesh of smaller children not allowed, their apparel

costly, circumstanced as we are. Mother would be overtaxed,

our treasures corked. Hearts, half-circles centered over cones,

contain a sign. Not to read; just so you can see possibility in letters.

A D A M C L A Y

Poem Beginning with a Line from Tranströmer

Here I come, the invisible man, perhaps employed
by something only the dead
can articulate in their oily view of the past
and their eagerness for a future, a future
they have forgotten even exists.
Here I go, lost in a game of chess

with the weather, a game of latitude
with the mast of a ship,
a game of searching gone black
by night. What I desire in the sleepy
folds of repetition—only a crumb.
May I for a moment be nervous

breath beneath the sky's slivered
blue? As if given an excuse to turn
my back on the horizon,
am I only a crow holding my flight
pattern turning away from violence
and all other kinds of weather?

C H R I S T I N A P U G H

Water Music

*I can do what I want to do, but I want to stay
here*, said someone's girlfriend, draped as
a piece of real technology. Yes, she nearly
danced as a river, following one arm to the
estuary's break; or pasting a quilt of refractive
light upon many square inches of her body.
A scarfskin map lies infinite, and a river
turns like mercury in the mind: it shines
there as folklore, as floodgate, as copper foil
for beach glass. This is why we say *Her name
is Rio*, and why I'm learning love requires
a trawl net, an act of free will. Someone
is singing at the dark end of the street,
the velvet of her voice covered over.

—after John Ashbery

Incidental Love Poem

I step in the water sloughed off your body onto the bathroom floor. I sleep in your stains, wake in your border, eat your leftovers, sweep up your dead skin cells. Your sauces sit in my refrigerator like organs in their transparent, breakable containers. When you are here I hear you cough, stroke your skin as if to keep it taut. We swap colorless, odorless gases and saliva. Our eyes bob in our magnetic faces. When you are elsewhere, I curl like an old photograph trying to raise its dead. I swim in three lakes simultaneously. I part my hair down the middle of my head through the mirror where you untie your face, the sutures undetectable. I think of your body as a plank and a screen, of your soul as a cloud of grasshoppers. My tongue absorbs the salt in your skin, swallows oceans, the giant gyratory seagulls scanning my face, the sun holding my tender pink core together as you do. I finger through your pages, listen to the symbols grind their teeth. Your things congregate in small heaps. They take on significance, crystallize, and I am deep into the damp cavern of idolatry. I put on your shirt, spread peanut butter on toast. In my dreams I fondle your blue glacier, pull hummingbirds from your chest, feel quenched. I admire how your mouth never looks like a dam blasted with carp, how it evaporates in the skeletal light of the hallway. Our gravity is horizontal, palpable as heavy whipping cream. I decorate absence. I pull one of your hairs from my mouth.

Backyard

The moon licks one thing, lacquers another,
is powerfully soft-spoken, turns heads of
lettuce porcelain,
and sometimes within the moon's bone china
dogs pierce the dome of darkness with a howl.
Each of us delicate & irrelevant under layers of
blankets, shellac, the cold steel of the grill perplexed.
Metallic insects at work, earthworms digging tunnels,
churning the soil. The laundry damp and glowing on the line,
and your dog pinned to her spot of grass unaware of
the two teenage hands that drop her eight pups,
one by one, in the pool, just to see
how they struggle, then don't, their yet-unopened eyes
laced with chlorine, their small bodies drifting
down, through, into
the amniotic sac of the world,
moonlight pulled over everything like a television
screen, what is real, difficult in the sheen.

KEVIN POWERS

*Elegy for an Old Woman Found Hanging
in a New England Asylum*

I have been three times sick this year.
Three times sick in the year of this,
Our pale moon landing.
And I have grown so old
This year. So thin and sickly old and watched
Three cynics called to a self-strung
Hangman's noose.
And I do think, from time to time,
Of how I was left, a doorstepped

Child, on the stone steps of a nunnery,
Where I would nightly hear
The abbess call and then absolve herself
Of solemn vows. And in the dark she would
Three times touch me and I would listen to the
Spring of cool breezes off our northern sea.
I felt nothing then, so unlike now and in the dark
Room I would think of how the spring was
Yearly married to the starling's call.

On this day I have thought
Of my last descent down those stone steps,
And a passage to a ferry boat, paid for with
Three dollars, taken over three days
From the coffers of those pillarists. The dusty cart paths
Of my youth now worn down by the passage

Through new salt air, rocking gently
On the way to mainland
From Newfoundland.

In the new city I did three times
Daily beg for alms, until
An insurer paid me for my skill with
Figures. And three times did I, in secret,
Carry boys for him. All three times
They came born unborn, stillborn and pale covered
In the blood from my scarred womb.
And I three times heard the alley doctors
Say, "Woman, observe thy son!"

After they relieved me of my human echoes
With scarred hands holding riding crops.
And several times was I
Observed to haunt the alleys and the public
Houses, my face less young than
Age allowed. Time and time and time
Again, the policemen did guide my hands
Into canvas and I was more girded
To madness than plain thought.

For three times twenty years now
I have sat and watched through windows
In St. Hermes house. I have fought the urges
Daily to heed the bell the cynics ring,

To shuffle my nightclothes over piping
And string myself a hangman's noose.
But I have heard their bell today and I remember
That the spring is yearly married to the starling's call,
In this, the year of our pale moon landing.

DAVID FRANCIS

City of Curiosities (Baltimore, 1820s)

The cheapest attractions were exhibited
at the market: one day it would be
a pair of stuffed lions on display,
the next a thirty-inch-tall Indian chief
named Shawishanan, "the greatest
curiosity in America." Elsewhere,

in a private exhibition room, it cost
a little more to see "The Temple
of Flora," a landscape painting
as long as a football field. Meanwhile
the museums, with their vitrines
of mastodon bones from the marl pit,

struggled to compete with such popular
amusements. One look at a stationary
object often proved sufficient. Even
the original mummy seemed to grow old,
requiring the additional attraction
of a tattooed head from New Zealand.

Staying in business required gaslights
and evening entertainment: a delegation
of three Seneca chiefs, a rare cactus
that bloomed only at night, Miss Honeywell,
born without arms, who wrote poetry
and played violin with her feet.

The Vengeful Men

Not long ago in another country, a civil war raged between the governing party, who believed mankind descended from the stars, and the multitudinous poor, who believed mankind descended from oxen. One day a man and his wife, both of whom were poor, received news that their only son had been captured and subsequently beheaded after a skirmish in the south. After many nights of uninterrupted grief, the woman suddenly roused her husband and said to him, "Where might we go to avoid death ourselves, to live quietly and somewhat ambitiously?"

"Though being a vengeful man," said the husband, "we will leave this loss behind us and move to another country where we will open a little store."

"What will we sell?" the wife said.

"We will stock our shelves with chintzy goods and sweet tasting snacks," said the husband.

Within a week they had sold their home and all possessions, save clothes and a few toiletries, and arrived here. If they had not arrived here, of course, this story would have no reason for being told, for what is significant is only that which happens within the confines of our great borders.

So after several weeks of language training, the husband and wife opened a little store in the downtown area of a little city. The day they swung their doors open to the public, their shelves were fully stocked with plenty of chintzy goods and sweet-tasting snacks. The little store did quite well, for there was plenty of foot traffic downtown, and no citizen of a great civilization can resist spending his pocket money on throwaway things, as long as they be properly advertised.

One very cold afternoon, during a particularly busy shift, the store was suddenly darkened, and the wife noticed through the window a decrepit old man sitting in a wheelchair in front of the little store. The sun hovered almost directly behind him and threw a looming shadow over the little store and all its shoppers, who quickly filed out. For many days this was repeated during the afternoon when the sun was low, and the little store suffered greatly in profit. When the husband and wife realized the harm he was causing them, the wife opened the door and spoke to him. "Who are you?" she said.

"I am a fifth generation resident of this town," said the man, "injured in a war, without home or friend. I carry with me at all times the missed connections section of the local newspaper, and suspicious beliefs concerning outsiders. I warn you, I am a bigoted and vengeful man."

"The shadow you cast is scaring away our customers," said the wife. "Will you hurriedly come inside where it's warm? Or never pass this way again?"

"I might," said the man. "Though I won't pretend to enjoy myself."

"My husband and I had a son who was killed in a war. He was younger than you, and it wasn't your war."

"I will come inside," the man said.

Soon enough the decrepit old man had made himself quite comfortable next to the register, and the shadow being gone, the customers began filing back into the little store. With a twinkle in his eye, the old man regaled the passing shoppers with stories from his history, and when in the presence of the husband, told little offensive jokes about foreigners. The customers, who secretly hated relying on foreigners for their disposable trifles, laughed and laughed.

"Who is this decrepit old man sitting beside you, who so deftly conjures up our basest feelings?" they asked.

"I do not know him," replied the husband angrily. "He carries with him a terrible shadow."

That evening, as the husband and wife began to close the shop, the husband approached the old man. "The hour is come for you to leave," he said. "Go away and do not pass this way again."

"I will spend the night and all future nights in your little store," said the old man. "You may plug me in to one of your outlets, and I will snack from your well-stocked shelves. If you turn me out now, I will surely die in the cold, and will make a point of doing so in front of your little store, for I am a vengeful man. Your customers will see me slumped there in my chair, overturned in the gutter and frozen to the bone, and they will suspect foul play or at the very least a niggardliness of charity, and they will condemn your little store and you and your betrothed will go bankrupt and be forced to wander."

So the decrepit old man got his way, and the husband and wife plugged his chair into their outlet and locked him in the little store. Later that evening over dinner, the wife detected her husband's misgivings about the old man. "It is a difficult situation, I know," she said. "But we are unfamiliar with the codes and customs of this country, and it might be best to wait and see."

"We have seen our homeland torn apart by sectarian violence," the husband said. "The graves of our ancestors looted for their gold as if they were no more than a lowly bank. The body of our only son, I needn't remind you, has been buried apart from his head. So now we are here, and an old abject man wishes to deprive us of our profits. If we let this pass, we are a shame to our people."

"What would you see done?" said the wife, placing a hand over his.

"Tonight I will surprise him in the little store and cut off his head," said the husband. The husband then procured himself a blade from the garage, and kissed his wife good-bye and left for the store. All night the wife tossed and turned in her bed, for her husband had not returned. When the violet rays of dawn came falling on her window, she heard the front door open, accompanied by the

noise of footsteps and a high-pitched, mechanical buzzing. The wife entered the kitchen where there kneeled her husband beside the decrepit old man in his wheelchair. Both regarded her seriously.

"We have come to an understanding," said the husband, passing his wife the blade, "that this problem is more ours than yours."

The old man nodded solemnly, and then both men bowed their heads. "We only ask that you make it quick," they said.

Country Home

Aged Momma sits alone in her country home, recollecting that she has not seen her wandering boy in quite some time. Her husband, Daddy, has been dead a good number of years and her wandering boy, Sonny, has been gone nearly as many. So Momma is good and truly alone.

Suddenly the door flies open and in sprints Sonny. He wears a lumberjack shirt and his hair is wild and wind blown, and to Momma, he barely resembles her old Sonny of old. To allay her fears, Sonny drops his pants and shows Momma the *Daddy* tattooed blackly on his calf. They embrace.

Sonny points to a portrait above the mantle which depicts Daddy nude, riding a black horse through a forest of white birch. "Momma," he says gravely, "take that picture off the wall."

Momma hands him a cup of steaming milk, smoothing his hair.

"The men at the depot chased me out today," Sonny says, "on account of crying. My last pair of undies lies in ruin, cruel world." He puts a hand on Momma's shoulder. "Hey," he says, "do you remember when we were all a little littler and we used to sit here in front of the fire while Daddy picked out an oily sounding tune on the ukulele?"

Momma attempts to peer backward over her life. "Time for your bedtime," she says.

"Will you at least take that picture off the wall?" Sonny cries.

"Crouch with me," Momma says, "and recite the prayer of Healthy Request." They kneel together, speaking in unison. "Oh thank you holy benevolence for giving us hands to hold other hands and soft rubber floors to kneel upon. May we always have pekoe tea

in the morning, Ben Gay at night, and an eternal unspoken understanding of one another..."

They are interrupted suddenly by the frenzied clomping of horse hooves. The men from the depot surround the country home, led by the ghost of Daddy, transparent yet visibly nude, riding his black horse. "Give him up, Momma!" they shout. "Give him up!"

Epidemic

Saint Michael, I have come to warn you about a new breed of demon. You're probably wondering who I am. I'm just a concerned citizen who has the special ability of detecting danger. It was passed down from my grandfather. Anyway, how did I know you were Saint Michael? Your curly blonde locks and open-toed gold shoes were dead giveaways. Have you heard of surrealist demons? If my calculations are correct, the average person says "surreal" six times per day. The numbers are on the rise. By the end of the year, the incidence will increase dramatically. I have been crunching numbers day and night for the past week. Do you discredit my findings? Laugh it up. I will show you my calculations in due time. If this keeps up, we will have an epidemic on our hands. So I ask you, Saint Michael, do you have the power to erase memories? No? You're no use to me. Do you know a Saint who knows a Saint? I have tried the Internet, but my wireless connection is too slow. Nice slippers, by the way.

Godspeed

Mr. Porres, Mr. Porres, Mr. Porres. Is it okay to call you "Mister"? Or would you prefer Mr. Saint Porres? Have I offended the man who brought mouse, cat, bird, and dog together? That must have been a chore. How did you manage it? Did you tempt those creatures with lasagna? It must have been lasagna. Italian food can unite any group of folks. Lasagna and breadsticks. How stupid of me to leave out the breadsticks. Mouthwatering breadsticks with garlic butter. Did you serve wine? Again, I'm not thinking. Wine, lasagna, and breadsticks can unite a toad and a fox. Have you taken on that task, Mr. Porres? Pack your bags immediately and head for Grimes, Iowa. They have a large population of toads and foxes. I will rent a car for you this afternoon. I will rent you a Ford Taurus so you will remain inconspicuous. Good luck, Mr. Saint Martin de Porres, and Godspeed.

CYNTHIA ARRIEU-KING &
ARIANA-SOPHIA KARTSONIS

The Small Anything City

I was down in the hole collecting rain.
Directing the crane.

A giant hole rimmed with ripped oak roots
the house could fall into.

I hid as a girl in a closet, waiting to get choked
on the ruby enamel choker, the green calico box full
of rings and almonds, close crush of dimensions
falling down my father's coat, my father's coat
being worn by a stranger.

We've offered our warmth to the good will
of less fortunates. House dilapidated
in dreams of its winter children. We've offered
a winter coat. A ghost of each appliance.
We are shirt-sleeved. We are cold.

*

That plant was older than me.
The cactus in the trashcan sweeping its arms out to the lawn.
Smarter somehow, the way mushrooms propagate,
falling into the lull.
Slow, blue brown, slow earth.

*

I wanted to get off scot free—
I wanted to get off scot free—

To a tree in a row like three
thrown into a hole.

*

Three daughter trees marched to a tree
Unhinged. The house unhinged.
The trees. The daughters.

The brain trimming it back letting it all grow wild rooted
as in the ideal cave, the back of a long dank cave.

Once in a while I'll go to another city and reach for the phone
trying to call to my father—

*

A horse in blinders knows
what stops tears, starts the small anything city, anything you ever lost.

CYNTHIA ARRIEU-KING &
ARIANA-SOPHIA KARTSONIS

Obey Gravity

A turnip puts a leg down in the earth
swift fingers of wind in her hair, crying
pebbles but not for reasons.

One star holds the sky pinched into place
the next keeps the beach from floating
another: a sea in satiny motion

colliding with shredded moon, salt
resisting large-bodied intentions to
drag it down. Anything with lungs

can float there. Tripping forward,
anything with legs can hold its breath
for two summers or drop a penny. Anyone

out there? Anyone afloat in the snow globe
of someone else's memory: obey gravity.
Don't tip the turnip, the world up. Top-down,

shift your golden flags to indicate direction,
hold up your ounce breath invisible as a
hand pulling the blood through the tunnel

of artery of muscles, telling the eye beware,
the dawn the good-bye dreams, minute
the pillow's last kiss. The body, heaved

storehouse for gazes, pressed tight with
embraces, loaded with water, bugs, burlap—
thing to be stacked against floods.

Sails in the Trees

Spencer can't afford a studio in Providence
& he can't afford canvas either so he paints
at his parents' house in Hartford on damaged
sails he gets from a hook-up at a sail factory.
These sail-paintings are forty feet long & I
drive by every day to check if they're drying
between his parents' trees because Spencer
never calls to let me know he's coming home
& I'm lonely this winter living with Tommy
who's sober & staying home all the time

to fight with his girlfriend over the television
which is what my parents are fighting about
six blocks away & seems to be all any sober
person in Hartford cares about & nobody
thinks that's wrong & nobody here wants to
run away anymore not even me & I always
want to run away but hell with this economy
& me having a decent job working for my dad
& my car because when I take it out for drives
it barely makes it over Avon Mountain now

so what'd be the point of risking the Rockies
when at least I know the radio here by heart
& don't have to look too long for the adult
contemporary songs that don't mean as much
as they used to but shit I still know the words.

Spencer works a couple days a week washing
dishes & lives in a warehouse with his friends
from college & stays sober most of the time
because he's got a girlfriend & big plans
& doesn't want to waste the money he's saving

for a trip across the country to make contacts
at galleries that I don't really think he'll take
because he won't leave until he can buy a UPS
truck to paint in on the way & I don't really
think people buy UPS trucks but anyway
I still drink some & have the money so we go
get a pitcher at the Spigot & I tell him stories
because Spencer uses me as his memory
& I'm good at it because I've been right next
to him for twenty years as we turned from

football players into fuck-ups into adults
& I like telling him stories more than anything
except maybe bitching about my life which
Spencer doesn't let me get away with & I don't
really feel like doing when he's around anyway
& we could be going on about genius & our
thirty-year plans which is what we always go
on about for hours until I end up sitting there
full of this goddamn hope for the two of us
as here we go again turning into god knows what.

RICK BURSKY

Then What

for M.

Four years after burying the cat she decided to dig it up.
The gardening spade used to plant flowers along the porch,
she would dig with that. Surely the skeleton would tell her
something, but if it didn't, then what? When she pushed
the spade into the ground the moon was low
over her shoulder, like her father. Below the roots
of grass the earth was soft. She dug with her hands.
Isn't it enough to be curious? That would be the answer if questioned,
though she didn't plan to share this with many.
And behind her on the clothesline, a blouse and the white underwear
she meant to retrieve earlier but was distracted by a phone call.
She remembered the grave deeper, but in minutes
touched something brittle and curved. The underwear billowed
in a breeze that grew into a gust and glowed over her and the grave.

RICK BURSKY

The Virtu

This wasn't the first time I watched a woman
wear high heels in the shower.
Closed-toe this time, her toes weren't painted
and she didn't want anyone to see.
After she told me this her head tilted back.
Water masked her face in a way
not possible if she was still turned
to me as I stood at the sink shaving
—or I might have been brushing my teeth,
either way, an inconsequential detail.
Water darkened the red shoes.
Though the damaged world spun beneath,
her balance, of course, was perfect.

HENRIETTA GOODMAN

Hell: Detail of a Couple in Bed

What he tells her, finally, is that demolition
sucks—the dirty joke he didn't get for months,
his arm numb from swinging a hammer.
They talk by lamplight until the mantle
collapses like spun sugar. So much
to dismantle: his innocence, hers, the fruit
of their losses. It's not what he did,
but that he can't confess. She'd be his
confidante once more, then never—
and still, they can reach across
this little crevasse.

He thinks he's writing it down in ink,
but it's ice, hoarfrost rising like magnetized
filings over what really happened
until a new story sets in like a hard freeze.

He's already left out *the blood*
on her white dress, added a fox in the snow.
She makes her fingers into quotes,
or, she makes the shadow of two
antelope on the wall.

LYNNE POTTS

Tipsy Resignation

Buoyed up, rattled like summer sheets against a corncrib
night back out, dragging phrases (prattle on rocky roads)

words snagged out of cells first in fish lopped from water
to become birds circling in odd orbs til they became

erratic dabs having lives of their own in the soft coddle
of human brains: colossal mystification, words tipped

onto matter bled to paper which you (I want to say we)
may not have wanted but what we now simply accept.

Ruins and Requiem

One of Walker Percy's most celebrated novels, *Love in the Ruins*, published in 1971, stands with a special prescience in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The protagonist, Dr. Tom More, is a lapsed Catholic struggling with a spiritual crisis at his home in an all-white country club community somewhere outside of New Orleans. Tormented by anxiety and paranoia, More imagines a sniper, one of a group of radical African-Americans who live in the swamps surrounding his home, following his every footstep. More associates his fear with a larger condition: "Americans have turned against each other; race against race, right against left, believer against heathen, San Francisco against Los Angeles, Chicago against Cicero." *Love in the Ruins* is a profound social commentary written during the upheaval of the late 1960s, as civil rights demonstrations, and riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, engulfed American cities. Percy like his character, Dr. Tom More, struggled to maintain a moral stance on civil rights, ultimately viewing "history as a nightmare from which [he] hopes to awake," as Jay Tolson writes in his biography of Percy. *Love in the Ruins* portrays a society torn by anarchy and apathy—a prophetic picture of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a city once pumping with cultural vivacity, "empty now save for the rusting hulks of cars abandoned or burned in the times of trouble."

Percy died in 1990. We can, nonetheless, imagine him evacuating from his home in Covington as Hurricane Katrina bore down, speaking through his fictional alter-ego, Dr. More: "Since catastrophe may overtake us within the hour, I am dictating these words into a pocket recorder so that survivors poking around the ruins of Howard Johnson's a hundred years from now will have a chance

of avoiding a repetition." Had Percy witnessed Katrina and its aftermath, he would have been outraged, but not surprised. The racial commentary in his writings proved to be prophetic. In his essay, "New Orleans Mon Amour," Percy writes "despite the bad past, the slavery, the Latin sexual exploitation, the cheerless American segregation, the New Orleans Negro managed to stake out a bit of tolerable living space...New Orleans can perhaps take comfort in the fact that this man still wants to live here, still has the sense of being at home, still has not turned nasty." New Orleans had a distinctive presence in Percy's life, and in his writings. Given his personal ties to the city, and his interest in film, we are left to wonder—what would Walker Percy have thought of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*?

Spike Lee's epic documentary provides us with a meditation on the suffering of African-American New Orleanians, and white, working-class residents of neighboring St. Bernard Parish. "It was a very painful experience to see my fellow American citizens, the majority of them African-American, in the dire situation they were in," Lee said in an interview. "I was outraged by the slow response of the federal government." After seeing the federal government "turning its back on its own citizens in the manner in which they did," Lee decided to make the film in order to expose the failure. *Love in the Ruins* uses satire to show similar flaws in America's system. Both works deal with the erosion of the spirituality in America, the disjointed social spheres and the critical flaws of the government. *When the Levees Broke* is subtitled *A Requiem in Four Acts*, evoking the Catholic Mass celebrated for the repose of the souls of the dead. Where Lee uses the documentary as a device to tell the stories of Katrina survivors in a kind of purgation of suffering, Percy uses his main character's lapsometer, a device designed to ease the soul of the Western man, to comment on the deteriorating spirituality of Americans. The loss of spirituality in *When the Levees Broke* is most evident through the chronicles of Ninth Ward resident Phyllis LeBlanc who expresses her suffering and sense of abandonment

when she dials the operator during the hurricane, asking them to connect her to 911. “If you can hear my voice”, she says, eyes full of tears and desperation, “you know there’s a heart beating inside a body; there’s a life here.”

In Percy’s essay, “The Modern Malaise,” he expands his thoughts on our spiritual vexation. Percy attributes it to America’s “very real depersonalization” and characterizing this consciousness with a sense of “impoverishment and deprivation and by the paradoxical language of the so-called existentialists, terms like loss of community, loss of meaning, inauthenticity, and so on.” The film portrays the loss of community, and the resulting loss of personal identities, through images of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Percy, cynical as he was about the conditions in America, says: “No doubt, human brotherhood is better than a depersonalized society. But a depersonalized society is better than one threatened with violence.” Percy’s essay on New Orleans echoes in the stories documented in Lee’s film, foreshadowing the epic tragedy Katrina brought to the city, and to America. “For any number of reasons, New Orleans should be less habitable than Albany or Atlanta. Many of its streets look like the alleys of Warsaw. In one subdivision, feces empty into open ditches...It plans the largest air-conditioned domed sports stadium in the world and has no urban renewal to speak of.” Percy uses the Superdome as a metaphor for poor decisions made by New Orleans officials, but he could have never imagined the events that would take place in the stadium thirty plus years later.

The subtitle of the novel, *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, sets up the recurring theme of spiritual malaise. For Percy, the malaise took many forms. In Louisiana, the illness manifested in the “depletion of its known oil and gas reserves, its marshes plundered and polluted... the loss of fifty square of wetlands yearly.” As Percy suggests here, America might be doing the infecting. Percy and Lee confront the historic racial inequality that plagued America in Percy’s time, as it does today in Lee’s. Both artists convey the severity of anger and distrust within America us-

ing disturbed, collapsing worlds a generation apart. Lee’s, of course, is real. Harry Belafonte, in *When the Levees Broke*, responds to the President’s claim that he was uninformed about the hurricane: “There was information. Why the government of the United States, and particularly Bush, decided not to respond and not to pay attention to that, I think was based upon a host of reasons. First of all, the arrogance of power... It didn’t mean that much to other things that were capturing his attention... He just thought that the people who were caught in this terrible tragedy were first of all socially of no importance, and certainly racially of no importance as well.”

Percy, though a liberal thinker like Belafonte concerning race, was a moral conservative. “Perhaps the best imaginable society is not a countrywide Levittown in which everyone is a good liberal ashamed of his past, but a pluralistic society, rich in regional memories and usages. I sincerely believe that the worst fate that could overtake the struggle against segregation would be its capture by a political orthodoxy of the left,” writes Percy in *A Southern View*. Belafonte and Percy both note the government’s indifference to its citizens. In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy writes, “Don’t tell me the U.S.A. went down the drain because of Leftism, Knotheadism, apostasy, pornography, polarization, etc., etc. All these things may have happened, but what finally tore it was that things stopped working and nobody wanted to be a repairman.”

Percy viewed the depersonalization of humans, even in economic terms, as a cause of America’s spiritual malaise. He would have shared the outrage over Katrina, for, as he wrote in *Diagnosing the Modern Malaise*, society has suffered “a radical and paradoxical loss of sovereignty of the layman and of a radical impoverishment of human relations.” Hurricane Katrina showed the racial divide to be worse than Percy imagined in *Love in the Ruins*. Tom More may have posed the same question to Belafonte, or Lee, that he did to an African-American revolutionary, Uru, who haunts the woods of his subdivision, a threatening symbol of race war: “What would you do about the four hundred years?” Have we not, in neglecting to

provide a systemic response to poor, black New Orleanians, reversed at least some of the progress made towards civil rights?

Belafonte's criticism of the president echoes More's brooding on "the dread chasm between body and mind that has sundered the soul of Western man for five hundred years." And yet, how would have Percy reacted to the chasm between the victimization of and the looting done by African-Americans as in news footage and in *When the Levees Broke*? While the looting became a pivotal focus of media attention, the measures taken to control the situation were extreme. Lee shows looters taking necessities such as food, water and clothing, but he also shows the looting of Wal-Mart where "assembly-like lines" of looters took televisions, athletic gear and other luxury items, among them an NOPD officer coming out of Wal-Mart with an armload of DVDs. Like the Colonel in *Love in the Ruins* who has orders "to guard the molasses cakes and soybean meal" instead of trying to stop the riot of the Bantus, there were NOPD officers who found helping themselves to consumer goods more important than saving lives.

Governor Kathleen Blanco in a television address said that she was employing the National Guard to control the looting situation, saying angrily, "These men know how to shoot and kill, and if necessary, I expect they will." Nagin said that the looting went out of control because the local government was allocating most of their resources towards saving people. Yet at the first breaching of the levees, Nagin first consulted with the business community, protecting his economic and political base. Tom More, in *Love in the Ruins*, is disgusted by "ancient spurious friendships" between the lower class blacks and white elites of his Paradise Estates, and would have been more outraged by the current government's paternalism. Percy, though something of a conservative himself, would have been utterly sickened at TV scenes from Biloxi of Bush hugging and comforting survivors of the disaster in an apparent attempt for redemption after the initial sluggish response of the federal government. But it was too late. Five days too late. News coverage presented in

Lee's documentary shows Bush flying over the New Orleans area without landing, commenting that it looked "like the Gulf Coast had been obliterated." His initial disengagement from the reality of the situation, followed by his struggle to appear caring and compassionate shows the government's failure to deem this "obliteration" a tragedy worthy of national importance. Percy, in his essay "Stoicism in the South," suggests this might be racially influenced, that "there is nothing atypical about Faulkner's crying the South's guilt to the high heavens one moment and the next condoning street fighting to perpetuate it. The old alliance of Negro and white gentry has broken up."

Lee shows the failure of the government to be systemic—local, state and federal. Michael Brown, who was appointed head of FEMA with no qualifying experience for the position, was previously a valet with the oil industry. Spike Lee shows CNN anchor Soledad O'Brian, five days after the breaching of the levees, hammering Brown. O'Brian points out that New Orleans is still waiting for assistance, and yet when after the tsunami hit in Indonesia, governments sent aid within two days. "Why are you discovering this now?" she presses. "It's been five days since FEMA has been on the ground. The former mayor is putting out SOSs, crying on national television. I understand that you are giving out food and water now, but it's Friday, sir. It's Friday." Brown had no answer.

Walker Percy's commentary on politics rings especially true after the flooding, which was caused in part by destruction of the wetlands: "Some Louisiana politicians and the big oil-and-gas corporations seemed to have enjoyed an extended love-in, a mutually beneficial arrangement, but not necessarily beneficial to the people of the state." Percy, well aware of this defunct of the state in his time, unabashedly exposed the faulty systems of law (that continue today) in *Love in the Ruins*, using political elites, as they responded to race issues, to show that the political parties could fuse together only in their hate for blacks. Dr. More, not excluded from the fusion, expresses the hatred shared by liberals and conservatives of blacks in

Paradise Estates. “The Negroes around here are generally held to be a bad lot. The older Negroes are most trifling and no-account, while the young Negroes have turned mean as yard dogs. Nearly all the latter have left town, many to join the Bantus in the swamp. Here the conservatives and liberals of Paradise agree. The conservatives say that Negroes always have been trifling and no-account or else mean as yard dogs. The liberals, arguing with the conservatives at the country club, say yes, Negroes are trifling and no-account or else mean as yard dogs, but why shouldn’t they be, etc. etc.”

But could even Walker Percy, a spiritual prophet, have been able to imagine a natural disaster that exposed such governmental bungling and corruption at all levels. wwl radio talk, Garland Robinette, who was interviewing Nagin when he infamously yelled on air, “I am pissed!” was later moved to tears by the hysteria in New Orleans upon his return a week later. As Robinette tells Spike Lee: “Nobody had the balls to say what was happening and until [Nagin] did, nothing did happen. Afterwards, people began being politically correct, racially correct, class correct.” Robinette’s erosion of faith in the country echoes Percy’s tone concerning the future of the country. According to Percy, the stoicism of the south is “based on a particular hierarchal structure and could not survive the change [of human individuality/equality]. Nor did it wish to survive. Its most characteristic mood was a poetic pessimism, which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its values—because social decay confirmed one in his original choice of the wintry kingdom of self. He is never more himself than when in a twilight victory of evil.” The entire country may have, as Percy predicted, adopted this stoic nature of the South. The “social decay” of which Percy speaks and the image of man “in a twilight victory of evil” is depicted in the plight of those profiled in *When the Levees Broke*.

The evacuations, after horrible experiences at The Superdome, The Convention Center, and the airport, left many people separated from their loved ones. One woman in the film felt that she had an “ancient memory as if we had been up on the auction block.” The

media referred to the evacuees from New Orleans as “refugees,” suggesting that they were no longer citizens. In Percy’s novel, the “ferocious black Bantus” of Paradise Estates are similarly disenfranchised. Forced into the swamps on the outskirts of the town, the Bantus use the wilderness as “both a refuge and as a guerilla base from which to mount forays against outlying subdivisions and shopping divisions.” It is only in this exclusion of blacks from society that the conservatives and liberals of Paradise agree. The servants in the town are the only exception to this brazen racial divide: “faithful black mammies who take care of our children as if they were their own, dignified gardeners who work and doff their caps in the old style.” Outside the swamp, “there are no ruins. We are beginning to pass sparkling new houses with well-kept lawns. What a lovely silent car. What lovely things money can buy.” These class-conscious sentiments exhibit Percy’s frustration with the connection between wealth and the crude segregation of the times. In “New Orleans Mon Amour,” Percy comments on the history of race relations in the city: “New Orleans was the original slave market, the place where people were sold like hogs, families dismembered, and males commercially exploited, the females sexually exploited.” The racial conflicts remain, though perhaps not as sharply defined as in Percy’s Paradise Estates.

Love in the Ruins, in fact, eerily presaged another horrific event which occurred in 1973, barely a year after the book’s publication: a sniper attack in downtown New Orleans. Mark Essex, a young African-American, who, after being discharged from the United States Navy for unsuitability, became involved with black radicals in San Francisco before moving to New Orleans. On January 7, 1973, Essex went to the rooftop of New Orleans’ eighteen-story Howard Johnson, where he set fires and began shooting people for the next twelve hours. Later, when his mother was questioned, she said: “The same old discrimination that made my son do what he did is just as strong as it ever was and it will drive others to violence. It can’t be helped.” During the siege, Essex told black employees

not to be afraid, that he was only killing white people. The police exchanged gunfire with Essex for hours, as a crowd cheered Essex's shots. He was eventually shot to death by police. The city remained on alert for the next eighteen hours as police searched for an accomplice they were sure Essex had. "No accomplice was ever found, but veterans of the Howard Johnson's siege remain certain Essex did not act alone."

The Essex tragedy was like a page out of Percy's novel, where African-American men with guns overthrow the suburban town. Dr. Tom More calls his local Howard Johnson's. Essex can be seen in the character of Uru, a leader of the Bantus and black separatist. In his dialogue with More, Uru attacks the white hierarchy of the state that has repressed African-American influence in society since the inclusion of America: "You chucks had your turn and you didn't do right. It's our turn now and we are going to show you. As Victory says, we sho going to move your ass out... We're liable to do to you what you did to the Indians." Uru removes himself from the struggle. He longs to be a savior of the African-American race. Essex, too, felt his acts would redeem the historical maltreatment of his affiliated race. In a letter to the local television station before his attack, Essex writes: "Africa greets you. On Dec. 31, 1972, apprx. 11 p.m., the downtown New Orleans Police Department will be attacked. Reason—many but the death of two innocent brothers will be avenged. And many others." Uru and Essex are both motivated by their experiences as African-Americans and by the cruelty and subordination that their race endured for centuries.

When asked about the connection between the events and the novel, Percy said only that it was "the weirdest sort of coincidence". Had it been Katrina that struck a year after *Love in the Ruins* hit the bookstands, Percy might have reacted a bit more strongly concerning connections between the novel and the apocalyptic events it foresees. Viewing Spike Lee's documentary through the eyes of Walker Percy, however, it appears that American society was able to avoid becoming ill with the spiritual malaise that so concerned the writer. That is, until the levees broke.

BOOK REVIEWS

Seismosis

Text by John Keene, drawings by Christopher Stackhouse

1913 Press, 2006

Reviewed by John Casteen.

It's a rare recent collection of poems that reaches toward or stems from other disciplines within the arts. We find here and there one book that riffs like the jazz that informs its poems, or another that includes lines from Bo Diddley and James Brown songs, or, more regularly, individual poems that take their occasion in the speaker's experience of some painting or other. But real collaborative work is rare, and rarer still are publishers who understand the value of such an enterprise and who are willing to help it find its audience. So the premise of *Seismosis*—text by a writer who's also a visual artist, line drawings by an artist who also writes—is immediately appealing in that it's out of the ordinary, and full of potential, and laden with risk.

Even from its title, *Seismosis* gives its reader/viewer ambivalent instructions on how to approach the book; the titular non-word, or contrived word, is a portmanteau in the style of Lewis Carroll's "slithy," or the more contemporary "spork." Unlike the traditional portmanteau, though, "seismosis" doesn't suggest an intuitive taking-apart of the component words that could give the reader access to their combined meaning. There's no conventional sense that lets us collapse seismic behavior (of the earth's tectonic plates) with osmosis (the process of the diffusion of water through cell walls) in a way that's more or less meaningful than any other possible combination: seismiotics, osmontology, hermseisomomeneutics, and so on. As units of language, these look like words, but they don't act like them. Their meanings may be absent, or may not be intentional. They're all about the same to the reader, who is, in terms of the authors' intent, not evidently relevant to the book itself.

Furthermore, it's not clear that "author" is the term to apply to Stackhouse and Keene. *Seismosis* carefully avoids calling its language component "poems," though many look like poems. Many clearly ask to be read in the way one would read a poem; they include a speaker who refers to recognizable ideas and objects, they're shaped like poems, and they attempt to use language in a way that's distinctive and personal. For example, from "After C(4): Event Location:"

For and through him, owing and owning
 this impulse to compose, to cop some
 movement and push himself into
 each visual challenge. Conditional,

not photographic, yet freeing up what confines
 in most of us encompassing depth and analysis.
 Modeling an economy harder and more
 Revelatory, all ground and marks,...

While these look and behave like conventional stanzas, they're alongside the next text, "Oscillation," which differs radically:

visible	topoi	echoingspiral
delay		
density	sets	merge
coupling symmetries		
rapturous	boundary	g r a p h i n g
subjective	technique	
interior	threading	t r a n s i t o r y
labyrinthine	cartography	
faultline	rhythm	signals
lyric	plenitude	

The effect is a cumulative undercutting of the conventional relationship between writer and reader, in which the latter is given to

understand certain of the former's rules of the road. When we read Browning, for example, we know he himself is not his last duchess; in contemporary work, though, the lyric "I" continues to frustrate poets and readers alike, since neither group quite knows what they owe or what the other expects. Whereas Rachel Zucker and Meghan O'Rourke have taken up that issue in prose, Keene and Stackhouse take theirs up through their collaborative effort: the explanatory notes to *Seismosis* explain that much of the book's "texts," as they're consistently labeled, include language and/or components of images from other sources. That is to say, they are a collage; they do to language and drawings what Q-Bert and Mix Master Mike do to vinyl records.

It's impossible to know how extensive the sampling is, or what individual image, word, line, or phrase comes from whom; none of the texts include attribution, and the range of originators (Guy Davenport, Wassily Kandinsky, DJ Spooky, Barnett Newman, and Frank Stella all make appearances, apparently) suggests the technique is widespread across both disciplines throughout the book. That's frustrating. On the other hand, it broadens the idea of collaboration, a process perennially fraught with issues of what belongs to whom and who controls what. Those concerns do not appear to have any influence in the work of these two writer/artists, which is a refreshing change from the customary my-genre-next-to-your-genre joint effort. The impossibility of attaching a given expression to either of the two composers, or to any of their sources, erodes the concept of authorship down to the bedrock level: these are words next to drawings on a page, nothing more, and without the illuminating and complicating context of an identity that generated them.

Stackhouse's drawings deserve particular attention, since they're intended to be much more than the usual decoration one finds on a book jacket or in the glossy innermost pages of an otherwise monochromatic quarterly. The best demonstrate tension and balance in their composition. They include parabolic curves, cruciform intersections, and explosions or matrices that seem to imitate the

movement of Keene's work. Many, though, seem altogether formless. They don't respond to or prescribe a related act of language, and seem to exist only as by-products of the act of applying pencil to paper.

The book is most successful when it exploits the conventions of language writing: political dissociation of language from culture, corrupted or absent syntax, and an abiding interest in theory. It's least successful when it's most complacent in those conventions, or with their outward manifestations: it has an unhealthy fascination with the vocabularies of science and conceptual mathematics, an inconsistent approach to the reader, and a wholesale disregard for the integrity of any particular text. The last piece, "Self, black self, is there another label?*", is probably the most damning:

*In the selving, in a variety of mathematical applications, a shearing into abstract models yet visual logic retains the inner contours' pictographic properties.

*A rivening in which superposition remaps loosely upon the other.

*Preconceptualizations arise on each differentiable map.

*The inverse of one self overlapping another.

Here, any one unit of language—a word, a phrase, a block of text—could be redacted, or rearranged, or switched for almost any other word or sequence, without affecting the experience of the reader. That's fine if the point of the writing is to play out a theoretical construct, to gratify the author, or to illustrate one's subject matter. It's a problem, though, for a "text" that announces through its title that it has real intentions regarding real people in the real world, where words have meanings, and where those meanings inhabit a political reality in which author and reader are mutually involved.

Experimental art, which *Seismosis* surely is, always moves in more directions than the canon can follow, and always has a dedicated

public. What's interesting about the book in terms of its contribution to the avant-garde tradition in American poetry is its insistence on the inseparability of language's ideas from the visual image's ideas. In the same sense that no one piece here has an author, no one piece is independent of the other medium. The arts are lonely, all of them. Efforts like this one make for interesting, if inscrutable, companions.

Blue Positive by Martha Silano

Steel Toe Books, 2006

Reviewed by Diane Lockward.

Martha Silano's *Blue Positive* is a book that *can* be judged by its cover. The top half is a blue sky, gently mottled with white clouds; the bottom half zooms in on a baby's head, from his big brown eyes to his fuzz-covered crown. It's irresistible and no false tease, for the fifty-five poems inside are every bit as alluring and startling.

As the cover hints, Silano's predominant obsession is motherhood. We have in this country a history of motherhood poems going back to Anne Bradstreet, but while Silano might be seen as following this minor tradition, there is nothing traditional or minor about her poems. Surely no poet has ever given us such an inside view of pregnancy or described it with such unique and delightful figures. In "Getting Kicked by a Fetus," Silano conveys the physical sensations with a clarity so sharp that the reader, too, feels those little internal kicks:

Like right before you reach your floor, just
before the door of an elevator opens.

Like the almost imperceptible
springs you waded through
in Iroquois Lake.

Carbonation.
Twitch.

And later, “low and fizzy like a pie / releasing steam,” “slosh bringing sand crabs / that wriggle invisibly in,” and “squirmy like worms”; and then at last, “your little swimmer // sinking, giving way / to the waves / of his birth.”

In “Begging to Differ” Silano does an about-face and now disputes the idea that pregnancy is nine months of anticipatory joy. “Fat, fucking hooley,” she says to that old myth, then lists the nose-bleeds, heartburn, migraines, nausea, and six-month stiff neck she endured. For emphasis, she delivers a volley of alliteration, one of her signature talents: “She didn’t dance; she galloped. She didn’t / do-see-do, hokey-pokey, or hullabaloo; // unhaltingly, she hammered; didn’t divide / but devoured...blow torch in one hand, // jack hammer in the other. Constantly flailing / two feisty fists.” She ushers in the baby on a stream of t and r sounds, telling us that the child remained in utero “till she got too big // to make her turns, to run her rumbling rudders, / till it was time for her to make her raucous, ruby-red debut.”

Silano also confronts that part of pregnancy that until recently women weren’t supposed to talk about or couldn’t talk about because they didn’t know what it was, that is, postpartum depression. In “Crazy,” she records the terrifying months that followed the birth of her first child when she was certain she’d “been shot, killed, sent though the long, slow / stove of cremation....” She both reassures and frightens the reader:

Not likely your mother
will fly 3,000 miles to find you unable to see

let alone speak, or, if speaking, loudly, of the universe
as a giant, glowing bowel. Less so you’ll unhinge,

lose a screw, your marbles, go bananas or ape,
become the fruitcake of endless re-gifting, believe

you’ve the power to stop the Unabomber, send your loved ones
to hell. *Where ya going? Crazy. Wanna come?*

Again Silano embraces contrary emotions, later finding herself on the flip side of such despair. In “Song for a Newborn,” one of the collection’s finest poems, she employs the catalog, another of her signature talents, to praise each part of her baby’s precious body. At the same time she deftly juggles a spate of similes. Speaking directly to her “Double Thick Pork Chop,” she says, “Bless your arms which hang, / outstretched, in sleep, / as if conducting an orchestra / a tune I’ll never know. / Bless your capillaries / like the roots of Early Girls, / your large intestine like dozens / of miniature knack-wursts.” She ends with a blitz of metaphors: “for now I’ll have to settle, / my Sugar-Cane Showered Scallop, my Swimming Angel, / for your smile which says Braised Chicken, / Cilantro Dumplings, Romaine’s Most Tender Hearts.” Has any baby ever been presented as this delicious?

Another of Silano’s obsessions is the home. She peppers the collection with poems about food—Polish dishes, beans and rice with hot sauce, pears, cabbage, Phad Thai. She brings us right to the table in “Ingredients,” grabbing us first by the ear: “In one ear the crunch of *kapusta*—in the other the sizzle / of *bacala*.” And then the nose: “Through one nostril the deep, dark sting // of hot oil meeting garlic—through the other the steam / of cheddar cheese suffusing mashed potato peaks.” And finally, the tongue: “Some nights our burps told tales of *halushki*...fried with buttery cabbage.... Some nights the basil in *pasta siciliana* / sweetened our breath till dawn....”

Even the dead are called to Silano’s table. And how interesting that in a collection which has so much to do with birth we also find

death. But as the poet points out in the stunning “Suite for the Visiting Dead,” the difference is slight: “Laugh, and the not so dead will laugh with you, // because today the line between them and us / is porous as a sopapilla...” Again she employs a catalog, listing those who come back on the Day of the Dead and rejoin the living. Although her subject is somber, Silano is playful with language and imagery:

It’s the day, if you’re willing, to don
your sombrero, to step courageously into your green tamale
shoes, into your most unpoker posole face, if you allow yourself,

to sink deeply into your jalapeño heart, to believe
the ones you’ve loved and lost are with you,
having awakened, at death, from a dream;

it’s a day, if your mother loved cabbage, to fix her
a steaming plate of *halushki*, the green head shredded fine,
sautéed in butter, dusted with pepper and salt,

to remember how she loved the polka. Also kielbasa, pork roast,
spaghetti, singing in Polish, also the occasional swig of Bud,
percolated coffee, chicken soup.

On the domestic front we also find poems about love and love-making. In “Traveler’s Lament” Silano lists all that she misses while away from home, ending with these sensual details: “I miss lugging the trash to the curb in a robe / about to slip open. // The hot water tank we easily emptied / each time we made love in the tub.” And we have poems on such esoteric topics as lawn equipment. “Sprinklers of the Western World” typifies the leaps this poet’s mind takes. When she sees one sprinkler, all the sprinklers she has ever seen come tumbling back, each worthy of praise. She recalls the

childhood joy of playing under a sprinkler and at fifteen kissing her first boyfriend under a different sprinkler.

Lovers, sprinklers, and, of course, flowers, that old staple of poetry. But what an idiosyncratic approach Silano takes in “To Know a Flower.” As she often does, she fearlessly uses a specialized vocabulary—“mucronate,” “tegules,” “axillary,” “cymose,” “retrosely barbed,” “cleistogamous.” She raises the question: how to really know a flower? Predictably, she replies, by looking closely: “... to know a flower, you will need / a magnifying glass.” Looking closely, however, leads to more questions than answers: “Are they straight? / Recurved? Flattened? Glabrous? / Take a second look / at the leaves: Shallowly toothed? Deeply crenate? / Round-tipped? Retuse?” Ultimately, Silano suggests, we come to know the flower via the language used to name its parts, and in that knowing we come to wonder about and know ourselves: “Are we stellate (star-like, spreading / like the rays of a star)? Connate and conning, doomed / to decumbence, or are we swinging free? Are our lungs not / papilionoecous?”

Clearly this poet revels in language. She seems to find words as scrumptious as her culinary dishes, serving up one feast after another and savoring the strangeness of words, their meanings, their roots, their associations with people, the irony of them, the sounds of them, all of which she captures in “My Words”:

I never liked pachyderm, especially when I learned elephants are
anything

but thick-skinned. Ditto to the dowdily galumphing dromedary
with its root in dromad, Greek for swift.

Ones I never considered memorable or strange—
bubble, banana, anemone—bloomed
when my son began to use them

to describe falling snow, a crescent moon,
a cockatiel's plume. Plum is a terrible
word for a perfect fruit ...

Silano often fuses scientific language with playful, imaginative phrasing. In "Define Medical Terminology and Conditions Associated with Conception," she exploits the lingo of pregnancy: "sperm & egg," "fertilization," "zygote," "oogenesis," and "formation of a haploid ovum." But to describe the miracle of fertilization, that it should have happened to her, she uses appropriately ear-grabbing and startling language as she speculates that the actual moment of conception occurred during a chilly bike ride, "that godforsakenly cold and drizzly day / gravelly jerky mud-puddled rutted all-too-jolting ride / icy bike seat jutting my miracled mound..."

Silano's playfulness with words further reveals itself in her flair for the invented compound. In "This Is Not the Last Poem about Pears," she describes the best pear as "worm-riddled, squirrel-gnawed, / hornet-bored, grackle-pecked." In "Salvaging Just Might Lead to Salvation," she indulges in nonsense patter with her lover: "...oh my sweet sweet square root of three / my tikka masala poppadum chutney-dipped / let me get you a patch of blue a stratocumulus..." Even in "Crazy," a poem about depression, she playfully combines alliteration with slang: "As if by joking, calling it cuckoo, gaga, // wacky, or bonkers, we could inoculate ourselves // from the batty and the beany. As if no one—least of all me, // least of all you—ever returns from the uppermost story, / ever stops rounding the minus-a-few-buttons bend."

Silano beautifully combines tenderness and boldness, gravitas and humor, mastery of craft and invention. Everything in this collection invites us in, then back again. It is full of love and hunger and nourishment and amazement at how baffling, disturbing, and wondrous this life is.

Bohemian New Orleans: the Story of The Outsider and Loujon Press
by Jeff Weddle
University Press of Mississippi, 2007
Reviewed by Alan May.

In *Bohemian New Orleans*, Jeff Weddle tells the story of Jon Webb, a small press giant who published the ever-idiosyncratic lit mag called *The Outsider* and books by Charles Bukowski and Henry Miller. But *Bohemian New Orleans* deals with much more than the history of Loujon Press and its publications. Weddle's in-depth research reveals the story of an ex-convict turned con man trying desperately to pursue an artist's life in New Orleans and various other locales. During this odyssey, Webb crosses paths with the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Kenneth Patchen, Charles Bukowski, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and even Johnny and June Carter Cash.

John Webb was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. He eventually married, had three kids with his first wife Opal, and became a newspaper reporter. This was before the formation of the Cleveland Newspaper Guild, however, and Webb was barely able to pay the bills. To supplement his income, Webb robbed a jewelry store and was later convicted of armed robbery. While in prison, he began writing and publishing short fiction. After prison, Webb eventually left his alcoholic wife for the love of his life, Louise Madaio, a woman who lived in the same building (and eventually the same apartment) as the Webbs.

Louise and Jon Webb ended up, somewhat surreptitiously, in New Orleans where they were befriended by Big Easy writers and artists. Jon was able to finish a draft of his first and only novel, *Four Steps to the Wall*, which earned him a publishing contract with the Dial Press. He and Louise then moved to California under hopes that Jon could salvage a poorly-written screenplay by David Goodis that was based on *Four Steps*. Finally, the Webbs returned to New Orleans

where Jon tried to make a living as a writer, and Louise began painting and selling her work to supplement their income.

Though he'd obtained some success as a writer, Webb soon became interested in literary publishing and made plans to start a literary journal called *The Outsider*. In its short run, *The Outsider* published work by Russell Edson, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Creeley, Charles Bukowski, Henry Miller, LeRoi Jones, Marvin Bell, William S. Burroughs, Howard Nemerov, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Patchen, Lary Eigner, Denise Levertov, Thomas Merton, Robert Bly, and Simon Perchik.

Highly praised for their work in fine press printing and publishing by *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice*, among others, Jon and Louise risked health and fortune working late into the night as printers, typesetters, promoters and editors to produce not only *The Outsider*, but four other books under Loujon's imprint (two by Charles Bukowski and two by Henry Miller). Perhaps what is interesting, however, are accounts of Jon Webb's many schemes to keep *The Outsider* and Loujon Press afloat and Weddle's vivid accounts of the Webbs' contact and correspondence with Kenneth Patchen, Henry Miller, and Charles Bukowski (who moved to New Orleans for an extended period while writing *Crucifix in a Deathhand*). In *Bohemian New Orleans*, we see the Webbs, Bukowski, and 1960s New Orleans (perhaps Weddle's most appealing subject) warts and all. This is truly a remarkable book that will appeal to fans of 1960s literati in America and the small presses who published them. Most importantly, however, *Bohemian New Orleans* serves as an homage to New Orleans itself, and brings to light the story of Jon and Louise Webb, who risked everything for each other and for the love of their art.

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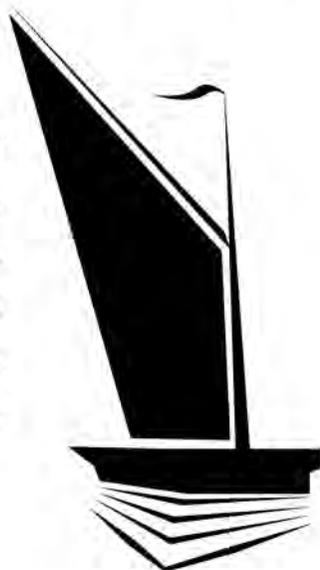
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