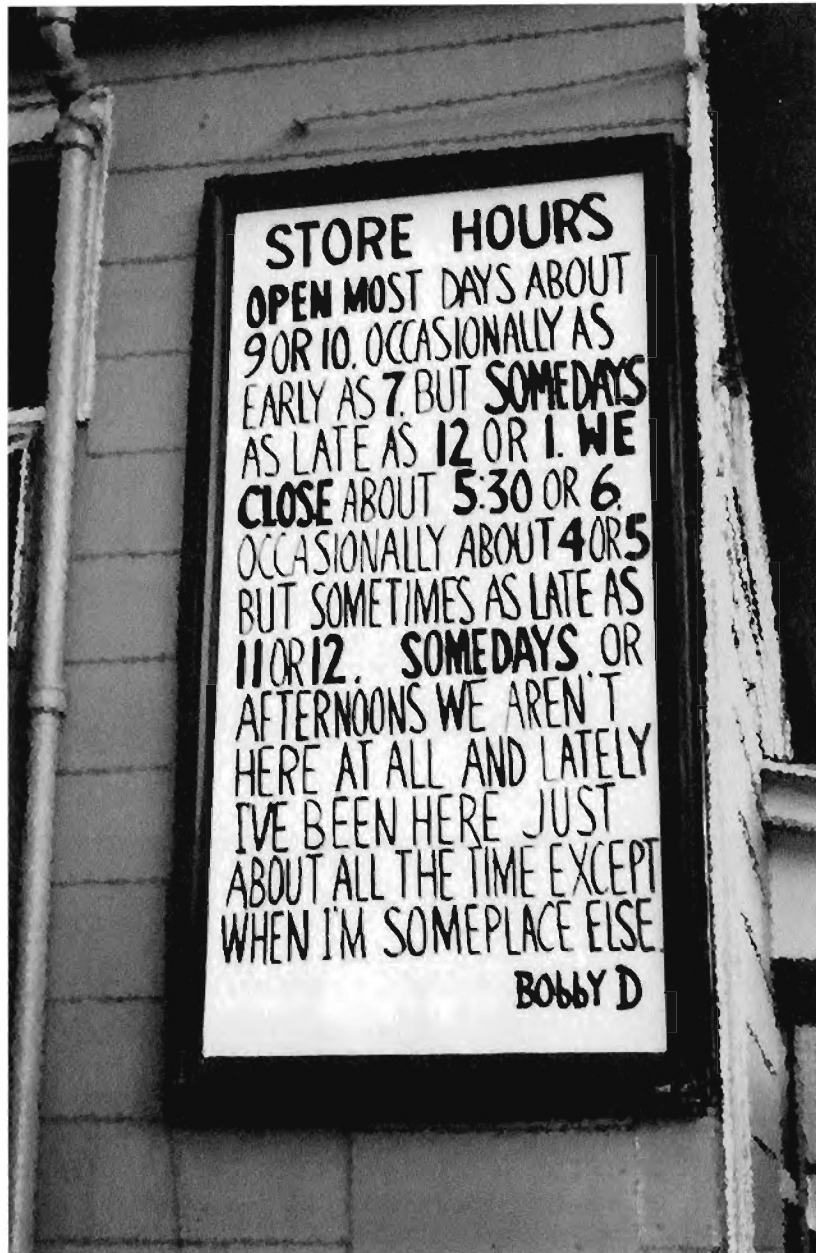
An abstract painting with a rich, textured background of deep red and dark blue. The colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement. Several small, delicate white flowers are scattered across the composition, some appearing to float or be painted onto the surface. The overall effect is one of vibrant, organic complexity.

New Orleans Review

31:1



STORE HOURS
OPEN MOST DAYS ABOUT
9 OR 10. OCCASIONALLY AS
EARLY AS 7. BUT **SOMEDAYS**
AS LATE AS 12 OR 1. WE
CLOSE ABOUT 5:30 OR 6.
OCCASIONALLY ABOUT 4 OR 5
BUT SOMETIMES AS LATE AS
11 OR 12. **SOMEDAYS** OR
AFTERNOONS WE AREN'T
HERE AT ALL AND LATELY
I'VE BEEN HERE JUST
ABOUT ALL THE TIME EXCEPT
WHEN I'M SOMEPLACE ELSE
BOBBY D

New Orleans Review

Volume 31 Number 1

COVER ART:

Floating Lotuses, 1999
Raine Bedsole

FRONTISPIECE:

Store Hours, Old Algiers, 2004
Ji-Taek Park

BOOK DESIGN:

Christopher Chambers

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P R E F A C E

This issue marks the end of an era for the *New Orleans Review*. With its publication, Sophia Stone, the longest serving editor on the masthead, ends her tenure as poetry editor. Sophia began as associate editor in 1994 (her first issue included an interview with the poet, Jimmy Carter). In 1999, as editor, she oversaw the challenging production of what turned out to be a remarkable special issue on Czech poetry since the Velvet Revolution. And since 2000, as poetry editor, she has read and considered every poetry submission we've received (some 50,000 or so poems by my estimate). Throughout, she has worked on this journal with diligence, integrity, an unwavering passion for poetry, and a wonderful sense of humor.

Sophia is among the keenest readers of poetry with whom I've had the privilege to work, and it has been an education and a pleasure working with her. The poems she's selected and edited speak for themselves, poems that have been reprinted in such places as the *Pushcart Prize* anthology, the *Utne Reader*, *Verse Daily*, and *Poetry Daily*.

On behalf of all the poets she has encouraged, edited, and published, and all of us who have worked with her on the magazine over the years, I thank her for her contribution to the *New Orleans Review*, and wish her all the best. I expect her presence and influence will continue to grace the pages of this journal for years to come.

And in turn, I welcome our new poetry editor, Katie Ford, an accomplished poet and teacher, and another keen reader of poetry. We are fortunate to have someone of her caliber to follow in Sophia Stone's footsteps, and she will no doubt make her own mark on forthcoming issues of the *New Orleans Review*.

—Christopher Chambers

CHANA BLOCH

Ballast

On the empty pan of the scale
we lay a stone.
It bears the print of the hand
that unearthed it.

The mind is weighing its losses again.
and the hand
foraging for a comfort
heavy enough to serve.

Could have been worse
is the stone we choose,
weighing the dark of the day
in the balance
against a larger life-sinking dark.

JAMES CAPOZZI

Paradise

Who knows how long I'll maunder solo, some
estranged unit beneath even these spires
that found pure partnership, natural yang quired
in the night. Flood-lit from underneath, they loom

like wed giraffes. They're leaning toward the ark
of the sea, because said silver omega's all
satori, a peace in which we bear our gentle
necks up a bit and, with a final bark,

bid bye to violence written us.
Just like Gaudí, hidden in this dank castle,
sublimated each evil urge to spines

of spires, to techne ballasting an Eve divine.
He chose to self-sequester as his last
peace, to subsist alone on tomes and lettuce.

EDUARDO MILÁN

[But without blaming hunger]

But without blaming hunger
because hunger knows no blame,
writing. Even writing about guilt
after purging it, to see it
as the clothing you've worn
the most, your most intimate clothing.
On the verge of the abyss
to be that rough draft.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

EDUARDO MILÁN

[Poem, don't be afraid to speak clearly]

Poem, don't be afraid to speak clearly,
as clearly as if you were another,
as a foreigner would speak, or Keats
with the titans, resetting their scene
in a different light, in a different tent.
Error lives in the burning summer,
this summer, with its heat waves.
It was forgetting, not melancholy
nor lack of caring, that earned us this grief
played out beneath a single sun, the true sun,
beneath the general singing above our heads,
without medals. Without medals but without fear.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

EDUARDO MILÁN

[I write because they told me]

I write because they told me
that money had done away with fables.
I write means I came here,
what more could the future want from me?
There is no forgiveness for unbelievers,
you who doubt because you can't hear the music,
not everything is grapes and flutes. What's lacking
will appear at the end of what's lacking,
with the *it will appear*. A hummingbird flies in through
the window. *Look*, I tell Gabriela, who says: *Look*.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

EDUARDO MILÁN

[It's important that children be born]

It's important that children be born
and that adults not be born,
said my son. A curious paradox
most of all because it isn't.
When we see what we adults do
or don't see what we adults do
when we play with the truth and don't see
because we don't want to see, we don't understand
how we've gotten there, here,
anywhere. This paradox that isn't
was given to me by Alejandro when, one morning,
we played a distracted game of who knows what.
It's important that children be born,
ceremonial children.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

EDUARDO MILÁN

[Under a night like this]

Under a night like this
it's hard to know what to write.
One of those nights when everything
seems in its place, one
could wonder how, and moreover
why, the word insists, as
if the word, limpid and innocent,
stood out in profile amid such stillness.
As if the world had been liberated
from the world, once and for all, and from pain
all from grief and grief turned
into a feather. Night like the bread of God,
bread for kindness, the image
liberated from poverty and wealth.
And man set free from both.
A dream like this, a night with no date.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

EDUARDO MILÁN

[Art is never truth]

Art is never truth
but there are moments, there are moments as rare
as this, in which truth is an art form,
a mine, a treasure, El Dorado. One to find,
two to recognize, three to sing a trio—trilling,
four to make a chorus. And thus, with a yes now and then,
the moment reveals itself. When the moment reveals
itself, it's almost a fact. In this moment a fact is a miracle
because truth is an art form, it is the present
mystery which no one dares approach. With the melody
it seems to sing but it's a concept,
the nightingale concept.

—translated by Steven J. Stewart and Patrick Madden

WILLIAM BORDEN

Ice Fishing for Alligators

The basis of all our knowledge is the inexplicable.

—Schopenhauer

“Alligators under the ice?”

“Mutants,” Lonnie says. Lonnie’s sitting on a stool, hunkered over the opening in the ice, a neat square about four feet on each side, a little larger than the usual hole, but he’s got to have room, he says, to drag the alligator out. “Way I figure it, folks brought these babies from Florida. Or they could be caimans, cousin to the American alligator, from South America, where weird shit happens—head-hunters boil a fella’s brains, shamans turn into panthers—where the fecund humidity spins the phyletic yarns of Gabriel García Márquez and the intellectual labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges.”

I look out the window of Lonnie’s fish house at the frozen lake, ice three feet thick, snow sprinkled on top as if the lake were a hundred-acre bundt cake. It’s my first time on the ice.

He goes on. “Some rich logging magnate with a longing for piranha soup tucked a couple of infant amphibians into his Gucci luggage, slipped past customs, stopped by the old homestead here in northern Minnesota, and the little critters slipped their leashes, or maybe the magnate’s grandkids took those leathery babies swimming with them one hot summer, and the bug-eyed Amazonians, chromosomes jumping with uncertainty at the cool blue waters, found a few tasty northern pike, gobbled some loons and mergansers, found they had a sweet tooth for the feathery flesh of walleye, and gave orders to their deoxyribonucleic acids to adapt.”

Lonnie’s reddish beard, flecked with gray, fans out from his face like a reckless sunburst, and his blue eyes glint with a barely harnessed ferocity, whether from wisdom or madness is hard to say.

“Evolution had a new mandate,” he says. “If the rain forests were going, those suitcases on the run figured, they might as well try a new climate. Hell, the Africans did the same thing millennia ago, moving up to Norway. Look at them now, pale and can’t dance worth a damn. No, those alligators are out there right now, taking a lesson from the turtles, snuggling into the warm mud at the bottom of the lake for awhile, then venturing out for a quick lunch. They’re moving into about ten new lakes every summer. Across land, at night. People think they’re low-slung deer darting across their headlights. People see what they expect to see.”

Through the window I see other fish houses scattered here and there like tiny shanties dropped randomly from the overcast sky. Snowmobiles snuggle beside some of the fish houses. Pickups huddle next to others. Inside, a man in a parka sits on a stool wiggling a wooden fish he’s lowered through a hole he’s sawed in the ice and waits with a five-pronged barbed spear to bring a hungry pike into the winter air. The fellow probably has some cans of Bud in a cooler beside him—in the cooler not to keep them cold as he did in summer but to keep them from freezing. He watches the clear greenish water below for signs of aquatic hunger. Will he see a mutant alligator? If he sees it, will he believe it?

“He’ll keep quiet,” Lonnie says. “He won’t be believed. He’ll confess anything else—where he was last night, having a gal on the side, how much he won at the casino—but he won’t open himself to humiliating ridicule from his male-bonded buddies.”

Lonnie’s dropped a wire with a noose on the end about six feet down, and he has a large eelpout, an unbelievably ugly bottom feeder, thrashing about as bait. When the alligator goes for the eelpout, Lonnie will slip the noose over the alligator’s head, jerk the

noose tight, and haul the alligator out. Then he'll flip the alligator on its back, where it's helpless. He has another wire to wrap around its jaws and hold them shut. He's been watching videos about alligator wrestling to prepare himself. He has a deer rifle, too, in case his other plans fail. "Six, eight feet long, the way I figure it," he says. "Have to be that big to ward off the cold."

Lonnie's fish house is about ten feet by ten feet. It has a wooden floor that surrounds the opening in the ice. A kerosene heater warms the enclosure. We've taken off our parkas, and we're comfortable in our shirtsleeves, even though it's twenty-three below a mere foot away. Lonnie tells me that when some fellows fire up a small woodstove or a kerosene heater, the small space gets so hot they take off their clothes and maybe even their long underwear, and they'll sit there naked as a jaybird except for their wool socks and insulated boots, hunched over the hole of green luminescence, peering into the abyss of their own unfathomable contemplations.

If a fellow spearfishes, he can have a dark house, without windows. If he uses a line, he has to have a window. That way the game warden can peek in and make sure he's not spearing and baiting at the same time. Or that he hasn't set a line then gone home to get warm, which is against the law. They don't have rules yet for alligators, but Lonnie has a window anyway, mostly because sometimes he likes daylight. Other times he pulls the shade and we sit in the otherworldly illumination from the water, a greenish glow that's almost bright enough to read by, daylight sucked in through the ice to brighten the watery depths.

I gaze out the window into the distance at the village of fish houses, some only a couple of yards apart. Most of the fish houses are small, each like a cramped prison cell, each holding a solitary soul who has chosen this isolation, more out of a yearning for some kind of inarticulatable vision than a hunger for fish.

"It'll be years before this gets into the files of the DNR," Lonnie says. The Department of Natural Resources are the storm troopers of habitat protection. "It'll be like flying saucers and Loch Ness.

Like the alligators in the New York sewers. Only this'll be real. This'll change the way we live. A new cash crop eventually. Unless they turn mean, like the killer bees from Africa, and prey on small children, pet dogs, and unwary swimmers."

Lonnie Alderson is rooted to Northern Minnesota deeper than the jack pine, which is endangered. I guess Lonnie's an endangered species himself, a man of the woods who reads Heidegger, an independent contractor who taps his foot to twelve tone lullabies, an odd-jobs, all-weather handyman who pores over a Russian grammar so he can get the up-close flavor and scent, as he puts it, of Dostoyevsky, who he thinks must surely have been a Scandinavian to have been so tortured a soul—"except a Scandinavian wouldn't find God at the end, he'd just stew in his existential miasma. Strindberg, Hamsun, Kierkegaard—they're tortured souls who should've done some ice fishing to cool their brains."

Lonnie lives alone, in a log cabin he built himself, felling the trees and sizing them and notching them the old-fashioned way. He's pan-frying us walleye fillets from his freezer. He has biscuits in the oven. I'm not sure why he's befriended me, why he confides in me. Maybe I'm the only one who listens to him.

He was hauling gravel one summer—one of his odd jobs—and I needed my driveway covered. I invited him in to pay him, and he saw all my books. He wandered from bookcase to bookcase, tapping the spine of a book here, pulling out a book there, leafing through this one to scan a paragraph, paging through that one to ponder a sentence. We devoted the rest of the afternoon to debating if Schopenhauer's pessimism was warranted by rigorous syllogistic reasoning or was merely a biochemical product of too many cloudy days in Frankfurt am Main. We exhausted the evening considering whether Feuerbach was saying that religion is mankind's hopeful dream or its unfortunate nightmare. Finally, after spirited maturinal

contention, we greeted the dawn agreeing that the idea of the Platonic Idea is itself a Platonic Idea, a meta-Idea, that recedes to infinity, like common sense sucked forever into the ravenous gravity of a black hole, all the time fortifying ourselves with chips and peanuts and beer.

I live alone, too, though not, like Lonnie, by choice. Brigit left me a year ago. She said when my writing was going well, I was completely absorbed and didn't pay any attention to her, and when it was going badly, I was morose and withdrawn and didn't pay any attention to her. She said my writing was my mistress, and she was spending too many nights alone.

She didn't know about my two year dalliance with Abigail Sorensen, so our parting was friendly, but then, after Brigit moved to California to follow her bliss and train to be a professional surfer, Abigail went back to George, who forgave her because she told him our affair had lasted only a week, so that worked out for Abigail. Lonnie, on the other hand, says he's a confirmed bachelor—a phrase that isn't used much anymore—because, as Schopenhauer, according to Lonnie, said, “to marry means to halve one's rights and double one's duties.”

I've hired Lonnie to build me a couple of new bookcases for my den. He said he'd have them done in a couple of weeks. That was over a month ago, and I've seen no sign of any work on them. If I mention them, Lonnie gets a disappointed look, as if I'm somehow at fault, and mutters that he supposes the Pope kept telling Michelangelo to hurry up with that ceiling.

The walleye is good, coated in egg and flour and sesame seeds and fried in olive oil. We eat in silence. Lonnie seems to like to concentrate on one thing at a time, and that's not a bad idea. I scatter my energies too much, working on free-lance assignments for various in-house publications and cranking out a series of detective novels under different noms de plume. It was when Lonnie discovered I was a writer that he began to confide in me. He needed to tell

somebody about his alligator hypothesis, somebody who wouldn't ridicule him, and maybe somebody who would help him get the word out. It didn't need to be somebody who believed him. It just needed to be somebody who listened to him.

After dinner he pours us each a generous splash of Courvoisier vsop and leads me to the sturdy wooden chest-high table at one end of the room. It's a flat file cabinet for artists' paper and supplies, with several drawers. Next to it he has a computer and a printer and a scanner. He pulls open a drawer and lifts out a stack of drawings culled from a variety of scientific publications.

“Lookit here,” he says. He lays out a series of sketches, a tree of evolution's might-have-beens, extrapolations from the fossil record of where evolution might have gone but didn't, where it started to go but came up against a hostile environment, dead-end ideas from the DNA lottery, natural selection's tossaways, nature's little jokes, prehistory's blind alleys. Finally he comes to a prehistoric alligator. “Who's to say these fellas couldn't—wouldn't—develop fur?”

“It's never happened.” I say. “I'm no biologist or paleontologist”—Lonnie eyes me severely—“like you,” I add, hoping to stroke his ego, but he'll have none of it.

“I'm an amateur,” he admits, “but a damn sight smarter than those pansies in academic gowns.”

“But,” I push on, “those are different lines of evolution, the leathery amphibians and the furry mammals.”

“Suppose an alligator mated with a beaver.”

“Unlikely,” I say.

“A cold winter's night mistake. A romantic error in the darkness of the sludge at the bottom of Lake Betawigosh.”

“No.”

“Love knows no bounds.”

“You're not talking love. You're talking madness. Myopia. Crazy affection.”

"There you are. There you are. We see stranger things in the newspaper every morning. We see people with forty-seven personalities. We see babies with no heads. A billion people believe they've lived other lives. Tens of thousands swear they've been inside flying saucers and had sex with folks with big eyes. Cows fall from the sky in South America. And you think alligators couldn't grow a bunch of fur follicles in a burst of endocrinal necessity?"

I shake my head.

He stares me in the eye. "We used to be blue algae. Now we've got brains and toenails. How did that happen?"

"It took hundreds of millions of years."

"Wittgenstein," he says, "a guilt-ridden neurotic whose vivisection of language I find irrelevant to the Big Questions, did say on one occasion, and I quote, Our greatest stupidities may be very wise."

"I don't think you're stupid," I say, "I just think you're..."

"Obsessed?"

"Well..."

"Don't you think *Principia Mathematica* was the fruit of obsession? *The Critique of Pure Reason*? Fermat's Last Theorem? Michael Jordan's lifetime scoring record? If we weren't obsessed"—he gets a wild look in his eyes—"we'd still be slime mold."

It's spring. It's mud everywhere.

Sometimes I don't see Lonnie for days. Sometimes he's hauling logs down a two-lane blacktop at seventy miles an hour. Sometimes he's working construction. In winter he might be plowing snow off parking lots and driveways. Right now he's remodeling a million-dollar house on Lake Betawigosh, a vacation hideaway for the co-producer of a successful Broadway musical that has no plot and no new songs; the fellow, Lonnie just learned, vacations regularly in Florida, but Lonnie hasn't inquired if he has ever brought back any

long-snouted reptiles. Lonnie's installing a sauna and paneling the game room. I still haven't seen my bookcases.

Lonnie doesn't say much about his personal life. I've wondered what he does for sex, if his alligator obsession is a devotion like a monk's, and celibacy is Lonnie's way of concentrating his energies. He might have a gal stashed somewhere, but he's never mentioned her. He's never asked about my private life, but I wouldn't have much to confide there, either. I write most of the day, absorbed by my computer screen.

It's after midnight when a knock rattles my door. I'm watching a video. I turn off the VCR and open the door. Lonnie walks in, mud on his boots and vindication in his eyes. He hands me a chunk of plaster.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Look at it." It's a footprint, larger than my hand. "I found that in the mud on the shore of Lake Julia, not five miles from here."

"And this is...?"

He pulls a book from his old beat-up leather briefcase, the kind college professors carried fifty years ago. He flips through the pages. He holds the book out for me to look at it. "Alligator foot," he says, jabbing his finger at the drawing. "Alligator foot," he says, shoving the plaster cast in my face. "Now? Now do you believe me?"

I admit the cast resembles the drawing. "Only one print?" I ask.

"They found one footprint of *Australopithecus afarensis* in the mud in Kenya and postulated a whole species."

"But look here," I say, suddenly spying a hole in his logic. "If this print matches that of the ordinary alligator, what happens to your hypothesis that these local gators are mutating? Wouldn't they have a different footprint?"

Lonnie smiles his crooked smile. "In 1985 an anthropologist picked up an australopithecine skull in the muck of Lake Turkana in

Kenya. It's two and a half million years old. Parts of it look like our heads. Other parts look very primitive." He lets that sink in. He goes on. "In 1997 the Spanish paleoanthropologist Bermúdez de Castro was poking around a cave in the Atepuerca Mountains in Spain. He found a new human species—six folks that were almost a million years old, with faces like yours and mine"—I study his intent blue eyes, his grizzled beard, his wild eyebrows, the hairs curling out of his nose, the disarray of his gray-streaked hair hanging over his collar—"but their jaws and foreheads are those of Neanderthals!" He squints one eye. "*Homo antecessor*," he says, "our ancestors. Ours and the Neanderthals." He opens the eye. "Here's another tidbit. Some of the bones were broken, the marrow sucked out. Know what that means?" I shake my head. "Some of those fellas ate the others." He leans back, strangely satisfied.

"What does that have to do with..."

Lonnie pulls a beer out of my refrigerator. He twists off the cap. "Nietzsche says that the irrationality of a thing is not an argument against its existence, but rather a condition of it." He takes a few calm swallows.

"Nietzsche didn't live in Minnesota. Nietzsche never saw an alligator."

"Philosophy is not rooted to any time or place." He falls into an easy chair, props his muddy boots on a footstool. "Oh, sure, any philosopher is a product of his time and place, of his friends and his toilet training, his diet and his fears, like you and me. Spinoza was a Jew in Amsterdam, he read Descartes, he was unlucky in love—the Ethics followed. Plato grew up amidst political instability, his teacher was executed, he wanted something solid, he grabbed onto another reality, purer and more permanent than this one. But ideas themselves are like numbers. Once we know about them, we can figure with them."

"But new alligators?"

"In 1994 a new species of kangaroo was discovered in Papua New Guinea. Locals call it a *bondegezou*."

"It wasn't new. It didn't evolve yesterday. It had been back in the jungle for a million years. No one had seen it, that's all."

"We don't know that."

He walks over to the glass doors to my deck, overlooking Loon Lake, invisible in the moonless night. "Those gators out there," he muses, "they've been there for years. Biding their time." He studies the impenetrable darkness. "Evolution is not a superhighway," he says. "It's a drunkard's peregrination. It twists and turns and doubles back on itself. Every step of the way it's nothing but another Reuben Lucius Goldberg contraption."

"So you're saying that the alligators might have mutated in some ways—put on fat, grown fur, maybe learned to talk—but still have the same feet?"

"Why not? And sonar, too!"

Still no sign of my bookcases. Lonnie implies that dark conspiracies are hoarding the nation's inventory of quality oak. I don't pursue the matter.

Lonnie brings me some fresh walleye he's caught. I broil them, with a little butter and a splash of bourbon.

I ask him if he prefers summer fishing, when he can skim from place to place, to ice fishing.

"The way I see it," he answers, "ice fishing is the bottomless metaphor for the philosophical pilgrimage, the never-ending quest for The Answer To Everything."

"How's that?" I ask, despite my better judgment.

"Well, look here. You drill an aperture in the ice—in other words, you peek into the cold crystalline certainty of death. Oh, the ice may be sprinkled with the wishful thinking of religionists and otherworldly fanatics; it may support the snowmobiles of received

opinion; but it's there, you can't ignore it, you're getting cold feet, and so you welcome your window into that greenish enigma, you study that eerie glow of brumal mystery. Do we have an Aristotelian telos? Is there a bright sun outside the shadows of the fish house? Should we step outside and get a tan, chug a cold beer, as Epicurus suggests? Does love move the planets, as Lucretius says? Is it all just a damn merry-go-round, as the Buddha and Schopenhauer believe? Will I be a minnow in my next life? Am I Sisyphus, doomed to fish for eternity without catching anything? Is there no exit from my fish house? Will I encounter the Überfische? Is my line a thesis, the fish an antithesis, our dinner here, tasty and crunchy, the synthesis? Does life have meaning? You gaze for years into the watery conundrum. You wait for an answer to flash into view. Maybe nothing swims by. Maybe it's so fast you can't believe you saw it. Maybe you hallucinated. Or maybe slippery truth nibbled at your bait."

He eats the rest of the walleye and drains the glass of Chardonnay. "True ice fishing is a discipline," he concludes, "a meditation."

He's been hauling his boat from one lake to the next, looking for signs of the gators. Is he getting discouraged?

"Schopenhauer says that the misery in a fella's life comes from his wanting things. Even if he gets those things—it doesn't matter what they are—a good lay, a juicy T-bone, a vision of God himself—next week he'll be wanting something different. Or more of the same. That's why we're miserable. The only answer, according to Arty S., is to listen to reason. And reason tells you, Stop wanting."

"Stop wanting to find the alligators?" I ask.

"That would be the reasonable thing. To stop my frustration. To stop my misery."

"You're giving up?" I hate to even think it. It's not that I believe him, exactly. It's that I can see that his pursuit gives his life purpose. And don't we all need a purpose, no matter how absurd?

He scowls. "Give up?"

"To stop your misery."

"Hell, man, who says we're reasonable creatures? I love my misery! People have believed in one god or another for millennia, believed in satyrs and mermaids, dragons and griffins, in heaven and in eternal damnation. Is there one shred of evidence in the entire history of mankind that would lead us to believe that *Homo sapiens* is reasonable? Or that we don't love our misery?"

He reaches for his beer. He says, "I have a new plan."

"Which is?"

"An underwater mike. Recording equipment. A male gator makes a low-frequency call when he's shopping for a gal. I'm going to sweep the lakes. I'll hear that call. Those gators, my friend, are multiplying like rabbits, and they're moving like quicksilver across the liminal landscape."

I'm at K-Mart buying two metal bookcases when I notice the story in our local newspaper, *The North Woods Forester*. A woman out for her morning power walk saw an alligator ten feet long slither through the underbrush next to some railroad cars on a siding near Oak Lake.

I can't find Lonnie anywhere.

The next day a schoolteacher, on his way home from his summer job making hamburgers at a fast food restaurant, sees "a monster lizard" waddle across the highway and splash into Oak Lake.

Finally Lonnie shows up. He catches me assembling the metal bookcases. His eyes narrow. His beard vibrates. I tell him they're for the garage, for tools and things. I don't think he believes me. I try to ricochet his attention elsewhere, ask him if these sightings are the hard evidence he's been looking for, but he shakes his head. "It's not one of my alligators," he sighs. "This fella came up from Louisiana on the train."

"Sleeper car?"

"In the timber. Where'd those folks spot him? Right by the pulp mill. By the train tracks. Right after a shipment of logs from Louisiana. It all fits."

I lead him into the kitchen, away from the bargain bookcases, for coffee. His wide red suspenders, decorated with loons, hold his worn dungarees high on his stomach. His blue cap, worn and bruised by grease-stained fingers, proclaims his readiness as a volunteer fireman. He takes the mug of coffee and sucks the dark liquid through his bushy mustache.

"Then you're not excited?" I ask.

"Hell yes, I'm excited. This guy means genetic diversity. I was worried these acclimated gators might be inbreeding, the scions of only a couple of interlopers. This big fella can widen the gene pool."

"That's good."

"Maybe." Lonnie Alderson's face clouds. "Thing is, these mutant gators that are already here—hell, I might as well tell you, I've told you everything else—I've named them."

"George? Sally? Aloysius?"

"*Alligator minnesotiensis*. And, if we find furry ones, *Alligator minnesotiensis aldersonis*."

"I see."

Lonnie tugs at the suspenders. "Thing is, this new fella, or maybe it's a gal, has not adapted. *Alligator minnesotiensis* has. Will this new specimen add vigor to *Alligator minnesotiensis*? Or will it weaken it? Will they even mate? Has *Alligator minnesotiensis* already branched too far and won't find this visitor, *Alligator mississippiensis*, a winsome mate?" Lonnie looks uncustomarily disheartened. He wipes his mustache with the back of his wrist.

"The future is dark and unaccountable," he reflects. "But then, we know that, don't we? The philosophers, the good ones, know that. Evolution—human history!—is a record of fits and starts, fecundity and catastrophe. Species multiply, then a meteor hits or an

ice age sets in, and it's curtains for a million very promising genotypes, critters that might have evolved—who knows?—into something smarter, or kinder, than *Homo sapiens*, nothing left now but a bone or an imprint in volcanic ash, lost forever."

"What about your sound sweep? Listening for the growly mating call of *Alligator minnesotiensis*?"

"Nothing yet. But maybe the mating season is over. Maybe the gals have already laid their eggs. I'm going to scour the banks of the lakes for signs. Those caimans make nests three feet high and six feet in diameter. They lay forty or fifty eggs."

"That's a lot of little gators."

He gives his suspenders an authoritative snap. "We're carrying millions of sperm in our balls, too, but only one makes it to the goal line—if it even gets in the game. Nature is profligate, because she feeds many. Those eggs may be gobbled up by raccoons, eagles, dogs. There's no guarantee. As Heraclitus says, You can't fish in the same river twice."

The *North Woods Forester* reports that Irv Bergan shot and killed a five foot alligator that was snoozing in Irv's hot tub in his back yard, a hundred yards from Oak Lake, not far from the pulp mill.

I want to cheer Lonnie up. He seems Schopenhauerianly despondent.

I present him with a copy of my new mystery, just out, a paperback original, *Lumberjack Lunch*, the first mystery I've set in northern Minnesota, about a cannibalistic logger who dismembers fellow lumberjacks with his chainsaw and roasts them on his Weber. My detective is Ramona Rafferty, a buxom forty-year-old iconoclastic bisexual homicide detective sent up to the northland from Minneapolis who traps the murderer, Paul, by pretending to be a male lumberjack and then, just as Paul is coming at her with his Stihl 088 she rips open her red and black checked wool lumberjack's shirt to

expose, like Phryne before the Athenian assembly, her full breasts (well, yes, perhaps surgically enhanced), which unnerves Paul, because she reminds him of his mother, and Ramona takes him peacefully into custody as he blubbers on her ample freckled bosom about being abused as a child by his mother's boyfriend, a logger who made up scary stories about Paul Bunyan as he did unspeakable things to young Paul. I wrote it under the nom de plume Rose LaFleur, because most readers of mysteries are women and many of them like to read women authors. This is my first mystery by Rose, and the first with Ramona as the protagonist. If *Lumberjack Lunch* sells well, I'll write a series. In the next book I'll give Ramona a drinking problem, or maybe a morphine addiction, acquired when she recovered from bullet wounds from an earlier assignment (which could be a prequel), and she'll be a recovering kleptomaniac and will have a developmentally challenged son who gets into trouble for sexually inappropriate behavior in a schoolyard. I'm pretty proud of *Lumberjack Lunch*, even if it is a potboiler, because I feel I'm getting a handle on the culture and mythos of this region.

Lonnie, however, merely glances at the cover (Ramona is ripping open her shirt, Paul is in the background with the chainsaw—which I thought unnecessarily telegraphed the book's climax, but they don't ask me about cover art) before he sets it down on the table, and then "forgets" it when he leaves my place later that evening.

The local lodge of Swedes in America has erected a maypole on the shore of Lake Betawigosh. Maybe "maypole" isn't the right word, because it isn't May, it's midsummer. But there you are, things aren't quite the way you think they should be. The maypole, or midsummerpole, is a cross twenty feet high garlanded with flowers. Some of the older Swedes have donned authentic Swedish folk togs—the women long skirts with brightly embroidered aprons and cute caps, the men knickers and white stockings and embroidered vests,

clothes no one in Sweden wears anymore—and they're dancing around the midsummer pole, their joints creaky from arthritis but their faces bright with a vague genetic memory of pagan bacchanals back in a pre-Christian homeland. Olaf Olafson, ninety years old, is playing the fiddle, and Lonnie, to my surprise, is sawing beautifully on a cello. Olaf and Lonnie are sitting under the midsummer pole, and the other Swedes are dancing in a circle around them. Some children have joined in. They're barefoot, and the girls are wearing crowns of woven flowers.

I glance around at the scattering of onlookers, some of them of Swedish descent, others the product of historical raids, wars, love, infatuations, and errors in the night, their lineage a hash of Norwegian, Danish, Celt, Etruscan, Gypsy, warrior, milkmaid, rag-picker, bard. I spy Abigail Sorensen, whom I haven't seen since she went back to her husband, George. She's standing beside George. She's cut her auburn hair. Sunglasses hide her green eyes. A peasant blouse hides her plump, freckled breasts. I have the feeling Abigail has noticed me, but she doesn't look my way. George spots me, and I look away. When I glance back again, they're gone. Could we have been happy together, Abigail and I? If I had devoted more time to Brigit, would she have stayed? Would I be happier if she had stayed? Is happiness our goal? Is happiness that deep falling into place of something, like a lock opening, the satisfaction that comes when a question is answered, a problem solved, a consummation accomplished, an uncertain mission clarified, an inchoate quest realized? Or is philosophy a question, rather than an answer?

Later, in the gazebo by the waterfront, as we're chowing down on the hot fruit soup and lefsa and potato sausage and the thick, creamy, buttery, cholesterol-freighted *rømmegrøt*, the latter a gesture to the semi-Norwegians in the group, Lonnie tells me that he enjoys this annual celebration of genetic resourcefulness. He reminds me that Queen Christina of Sweden, a kick-ass gal whose troops sacked

Prague, enticed Descartes up from Amsterdam for early morning chats on ethics and metaphysics. "But then he caught a cold walking to and from the castle and kicked the bucket. Just goes to show," he says.

"Show what?"

"The Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body can be disproved by a wintery draft."

He rolls his lefsa, a thin white crepe made from potatoes, into a cylinder and bites off the end.

"You're always surprising me," I confess.

"How's that?"

"This. The Swedes. The cello. You never told me."

"These folks don't realize—not consciously, anyway—that this is a festival dedicated to unbridled lechery, chthonic abandon, and Dionysian high-jinks—but their old arthritic bones know, their worn-out DNA knows. It doesn't occur to them that that pole is one belluva big cock, festooned as in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with posies and honeysuckle, the flowers a metaphor for unstoppable seminal juice, their dance a primitive rousing of the spirits of regeneration." He takes a swallow of coffee. "Just as well they don't know," he adds.

Lonnie seems softer this afternoon, less driven. His graying hair, still wet from the shower, is combed smooth and ends in a short pony tail. His jeans are faded but clean. Leather sandals grip his bare feet. A big toenail is black, where he must have dropped something on it. I have trouble reconciling him, as I know him, to this folksy communality. His philosophical iconoclasm seems in abeyance, his dedicated solitude a mistaken aberration, his monomaniacal pursuit of *Alligator minnesotiensis* an idle hobby, easily abandoned.

Has he changed? Is this the real Lonnie, brushing the powdered sugar from a krumkake off his t-shirt, the shirt boasting *You Can Always Tell a Swede But You Can't Tell Him Much?* Are there many Lonnies? Or is the real Lonnie deep and impenetrable, unpredictable

as ice fishing, harboring many flickering, darting possibilities, past and future—ugly bottom feeders, delicate walleye, lonely snapping turtles, down-home crappies, drowsy mollusks, and, who knows, creatures new and marvelous and dangerous, like uninvited ideas?

"It may be," Lonnie reflects, leaning back in his folding chair, "as the prescient nineteenth-century Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström proposed, and as the contemporary American neo-pragmatist johnny-come-lately Richard Rorty contends, that there's nothing but shifting sands to hold up any belief, and that my belief in these gators as the offspring of a trigger-happy evolution has no more validity than me expecting to see a unicorn gallop by. But we're trolling in deep waters here. We can't see the bottom, even with a digital depth finder. Maybe it's true that philosophy is nothing more than an after-dinner conversation over espresso and cigars, as Rorty maintains. What's new about that notion? Isn't that what Plato was saying in *The Symposium*? And isn't that conversation like the one evolution has with its profligate children, sorting them out, seeing who can weather the ice age or the new bully on the block?"

The celebrants in their ancient attire and luminous accessories have gathered again by the festooned phallus to crown the Midsummer Queen, Alice Torkelson, eighty-six years old. Lonnie plays a fanfare on his cello. She smiles sweetly. In her heart she's sixteen.

Alice rests her frail bones in a lawn chair and sips punch from a paper cup. The Swedes pack up their dishes, shake out their checked tablecloths, fold up their tables, and load them into Arnie Bergstrom's pickup.

Out on Lake Betawigosh fishing boats are drifting, lines slack in the calm water, while fishermen ponder the idiosyncrasies of wall-eye behavior. A sailboat, its white sail curved like an innocent breast, glides blissfully through the blue. A flock of Canadian geese waddle across the waterfront, picking up crumbs and dropping green goose shit in the grass. Near the shore a mother mallard swims, her dozen young ones following in a perfect single file.

Old Olaf plays a melancholy tune on his fiddle. Alice listens, as if he's playing especially for her.

Barefoot children dance around the garlanded midsummer pole.

Lonnie snuggles his cello into the velvet of its case.

A splash breaks the calm. The baby ducks scatter, panicked.

Alice points from her chair.

The mother duck is gone.

Olaf stops playing.

Lonnie walks to the water's edge. Away from shore the water feathers, made uneasy by some dark disturbance accelerating silently just below the surface.

T O M H A U S H A L T E R

Still Life in the Gulf of Mexico

As a gust picked up, all parasols were tilted into it.
What bronzing faces lay undefended soon turned down-

wind. All we care to know is how aware you were
your boys, seaside and incapable as overturned canoes,

having abandoned the molded sand-nudes, pinned their gazes
to your reclining figure—borne aloft as if by some

inflatable pyrè—long before you woke to see how easily, how far
the ocean had borrowed you. After trembling for some time

to imagine jellyfish like scores of hands taking you under,
we watched you wave, that forearm reassuring as any buoy.

Now, these years later, to place my ear to a conch's tunnel
is to hear driftwood lapped in the surf, how sand spoke

in hushed tones when blown away, and out of my throat
one disinterred sentence: *You needn't treat us like this.*

GUY R. BEINING

dripping from the basin

to the bottom of this ode,
to the bottom of this id,
o, fractured in waters spent,
living in the curl of a wave
for several billion years,
making due with sand as mate;
algae as one's skirt, hiding manners,
& finding the roof of a cavern
where one can rent another hurt.
& when you do wobble onto
that shore for good,
reflected in eye of lavender past,
you will have forged beigeness of a new set.

GUY R. BEINING

seams

there had been a prison
on the boulevard many
years ago & before that
dogwood, & trances
of forested light.
today is scalped by
rain & leaves nothing
but notations from dreams
& the curling iron
of my grandmother,
& her remembrance of
flat st petersburg.
what picture is stuck
in her penny arcade?

EMMY HUNTER

I Lived in the Forest

But it was darker.

There was an expanse, an exit—*don't pick those flowers*
Or strip those trees.

How did my neighbors know?

I chose a path
And a lake appeared.

But it was only the pond.

I was the planet, huge and unable,
Encumbered, pushing forward, a tank,
Continuing, continuous, a beam.

Where the woods began, shade
And a tractor, rusting, abandoned.
We never touched it.
We smoked on a rock. You could only faintly hear a bell.
We were busy in a life of forts.

Inside, I played with cold things.

The closed windows
Showed pieces of yard.

You couldn't see where it ended
And dropped toward chaos, water, darkness.

Beyond that was nothing,
You could fall.
We didn't play there. Land, wall, woods.

I told my father I thought a novel was:
He walked toward the door;
He put his hand
On the knob.

The light came in.
I played by the boiler.
The dark room of books was shut.

These are lost places.

His study was the murder room
In *The Erasers*.
The light of the lamp
In the black of the glass.

I went down,
The dark, the cans,
And out.

EMMY HUNTER

Vicinity

They cut a swath through whatever was there,
So the woods are thin dresses
Of children in books.

In this depletion, the houses are in-between areas
Where no one is waiting for you.

I stroll nowhere along an unused sidewalk,
By a small adjacent muttering, a half-boy or brother
Someone made from a cup.

Water and reeds engulf the bases of gargantuan pylons, silent
stones
In a movie of another universe.

There's a road
And a white billboard.
Remnants.

I can't be with them in the light from the wire-service photo,
But I'm close
At the edge of the dark deck.

ROB YARDUMIAN

Ornithology

I step down off the porch into the healing oven of August. An old man, a sweater, chilled to the bone. Weatherman says ninety-seven degrees; birds drift, diving through rumors of breeze. I reach the sidewalk, the cane clicks, the squeak of steel joints. I turn on a slow dime. A flutter in the heart, of warning and birdsong. This heart laid open to the rising of murder, and the faint song of birds, in the leaves then gone. *Spizella arborea*. *Spizella pusilla*. A fleeting melody, come and gone like love. A woman loved me once. And yet, in August: this sweater, cold bones.

I'm off to the park for a pigeon hunt, for the promise of the warming. Down the block an old man walks, a sweater in August and a cane for his limp. Pigeons, Manny called them. Rock dove. *Columba livia*. People head down, crumb-bobbing. Blind to the hammer til it cracks their skull. You find birds kill smaller birds. A murder of crows. *Icterus spurius*. *Icterus pectoralis*. We used ropes and knives, iron bars and razor blades. You find a .38 tears a hole in a man's stomach. You find a bicycle chain rips flesh from bone. You learn to recognize it. Good work, until this leg, but now, an old man, there's this cold. *Icterus galbula*. *Icterus bullockii*. In the street, cars swim past like angry bears. Past two brown shoes past khakis past holes worn in elbows where the bone pokes. An eagle once. this man, *Aquila chrysaetos*. An eagle once—made of wingspan, made of majesty—but how could they know? Long cuffs keep it hid, the steel ankle. Silver bones to keep oiled and screwed. Brown wingtips and long cuffs scuffing, and khaki hides what's left. People learn this leg, they maybe guess the rest.

The sun is a thick snake on my shoulders. Ahead is the corner where I turn. *Aquila chrysaetos*. It started that day the war ended. A Brooklyn boy, drawn to the streets. When the bombs dropped and the Japs lay down there were people in those streets, confetti and shouting. There was brassy music and hands full of bottles, flags, a passing waist. Charged, like monkeys after a kill. I dodged elbows and uniforms, collecting sips from pints and money on the ground. Rising up from a shiny quarter, I saw him then. Tall and thin, with a face like a shovel. This was Manny, though I didn't know it then. Through the crowd his eyes reeled me in. Say, kid, he said, the words dripping from his mouth, making his cigarette dance. About him, in this swirl, it was the only thing that moved. Make an honest buck? I nodded at the middle of his long black coat. The cigarette danced again. Take this to the man in the red hat. By the newsstand. His hand was long and a package appeared, magic. It looked like a wrapped pork chop. Get on, he said, and waved me away. I felt large, and filled up with life. I checked the bill folded under the package and slipped it in my pocket with all my change. Fingering the butcher paper, sliding toward the newsstand: Red Hat, Red Hat. There was music and elbows and bottles being passed. A sailor in a white uniform grabbed a blond woman and bent her back to a kiss. She punched him in the eye but he was too strong and he kissed her again, harder, a fistful of hair. I moved away with laughter behind me, a package in my hand gripped and squishy. Drawn by the masking tape, the finger smudges, I crossed the street to my alley. Quickly, carefully unwrapped, then staring: an ear in gauze, roughly severed and bloody edged. My heart fluttered in its cage. A world was at work here. I creased and taped the package back, and back into the crowd. Aimed at the newsstand, parting the sea of singing and flags. A man stood holding a newspaper, and I saw the tall black letters spelling out victory. Under the Red Hat, his eyes were bugged and jittery. Whose ear was I holding? His father? His son? Mister, I said, touching his sleeve. You waiting on a package?

On the sidewalk, a jogger aims himself at me, sleek in his limbs and a square head. He is a panther, his pounce buoyant with muscle; his eyes consider, dismiss me—a sweater in August—and move on. The heavy tramp of rubber sole and the breathing and the shivering bends me into a question mark. I think about the impact, his lowered shoulder in my chest. I am a house of cards and wicker-boned. *Pterodroma ultima*. *Pterodroma inexpectata*. Their souls are made of rubber, bounceback strong, and this cold will end me. Once: stepping out of a Stutz-Bearcat in a long leather coat, leaving bags and a C-note for the doorman. *Pterodroma hasitata*. *Pterodroma cookii*. I think of flattening to the sidewalk. I think of pooling into liquid. Joggers huff past and I see their eyes and I watch the ground before my feet, but it feels months away. By the time I got there it would be winter, blades of grass like daggers, concrete slick with ice. *Pterodroma longirostris*. A cane for this action and so many killings. How could they know? Unless I told them, and I'm not talking.

Down the block in the high branches, a song of hunger, a song of learning to fly, and ahead is the corner where I turn, the shimmer of summer heat rising. *Ajaia ajaja*. A woman loved me once. Where cars turned under neon, tire squeal and jumped out laughing, then courage at the door and in through the velvet curtain. The blue lights, the red lights, the long nights at Bop City. So young then, slick with sweat. *Tell me what'd I say*, asked Ray Charles, and me in my only suit: church black, a few years from store-bought, and slightly too tight a pinch. It seems like years but it's only. The night Hilly walked in. Not colored, not PR, but something. Cool, slim, a tight white dress; dark like a cat and short-haired and thorny. She hovered and her friends flapped around her. She took it all in—the raucous dancers, the whispering corners, the sweet velvet rumble of lights and bodies and rhythm—all this she took inside. She hovered and everything flowed into her. The deep of her skin, the white of her dress. Like iced licorice. She raised the nerve in me. A kid from the neighborhood—Joe Rothkowitz, he had it coming, his dad

sent to Queensboro for tax evasion—talking her up, cornering her with both arms. *Only you*, the Platters sang. Grease in my hair and liquored up to boldness, I tapped his shoulder. Let her go, I said. He turned, a toothpick in his mouth. Fuck off, he said, and pinned her again. I grabbed his arm. Let her go, Joe. That spun him around. I said, fuck off, he said, and shoved me in the chest. Only I stayed put. In his eyes surprise. I muscled up to his face. No, Joe, I said. Why don't you fuck off? The lady's looking for a dance partner, not an accountant. All the time watching his shoulders, waiting for the swivel that would tip off the punch. Sure enough, it came. Ducking under the big right hand, I dumped a short jab in his belly, then landed a ton of bricks on the bridge of his nose. He went down like a puppet, somebody cut his strings, and I felt the blood run hot to my hands. It happened so quickly, no one saw it. Just Joe on the ground and me turning to Hilly. I offered a hand still throbbing. Dance with me. Her drink was clear, with a slice of lime. She took a sip, her eyes on mine, and something jumped the space between. Sure, she said. I held her to me and we spun under lights, light and breathless. I held her to me and the tables went by and the long bar went by and the lights. There was a thrumming and she was warm in my arms. Stepping live and jivey, Brazil in her hips. *Maybelline, why can't you be true?* Her mouth was wide like a wound, dark and sexy. I'm from Rio, she breathed in my ear. I didn't need your help. My suit and the smell of her hair. Fragile under any weight, the choices we make.

Ahead a baby rides at me in a carriage, wet finger stretched to the sun. It laughs, he she baby, and the woman with the push laughs too. Look, baby, she says, butterfly. Look, baby, bars of gold. The woman with the push wears a red shirt white shorts blue shoes. She moves like a flag. Baby, you'll go blind with envy. Baby, you'll break no one's heart. Wheels wobble whitely and I can't choose sides to pass. In a field long and bloody, a train clattering away. Find me, boys, before I bleed all the way to death. Tantrum, meanness, accident, death. It's cold, cold, and baby's lost in market, swept up

in a bad man's hands. Baby rises from the carriage, with a gurgle gone, and the flag can only watch him go, she can only scream. In the street with an empty carriage, where just before there was something worth killing. Valium Demerol Thorazine nurse wearing white like an angel with a hacksaw, with a chain saw, nurse where is my leg? Baby, Mommy loves you dearly. Baby, Mommy found you dead.

The houses I pass are brick and shingle, ringed in roses. Shiny car driveway, square and summer lawn. Sixty years of getting over. A young girl, fine and strong, washes a bicycle, and water runs. I've been standing in water, staring at a green door. Hello, she says, and gestures with a sponge. Nice, huh? She might mean the sun or the bicycle or the years she has ahead to fill with days like this. Do you want something? she asks me. I'm staring at a green door. Eagle soars and the world stops to watch. This wingspan, made of time itself, takes up more sky than the eye is used to giving. Eight feet across? Twelve? Watch it. Shaped against the pale blue, carved from it. Wing feathers trail like fingers, fan tail behind. The sharp smart eyes, cruel hook of nose. It's a terrible beauty, everything life has to offer. And to steal. Sir? she asks. Between us there is too much water to bridge. I'd like a bicycle, I say to her. And a green door. She levels the business end of the hose at me, the black O of death. The muscles in her legs are taut, golden, poised for flight. I look down and I'm standing in water. The tip of my cane in water.

Shuffle on, the cane clicks and the squeak of steel joints. Two brown wingtips, and khaki hides the rest. *Anas formosa*. *Anas penelope*. An eagle once, but how could they know? The chill in answer rises from the sizzling sidewalk, from the median grass, from the summer square and hissing lawns, and I can see the sweat of passing skin and I can see the shimmer up ahead but I know by the time I get there—mirage—it will be cold. I never try on pants in public. I always take the final stall. I am moving closer to something. *Anas americana*.

The door to Manny's bar was green, the color of weather-dropped apples. Inside the dark walls I wiped tables, emptied ash-trays, kept my ears open. This became school, learning cards and women and murder, the tools of a man's life. Yearning for flight from this, for soar and high bank, for a bank of cloud to pierce, to tumble through, to emerge from in some unknown landscape. She could have been that for me. Then one day Manny crooked his finger. Hey, kid, he said. Wake up. You want to do some business for me? So I dropped a man from a roof. Punched a pigeon bloody twelve stories up and dangled him by his tie and stepped on his fingers and when Manny nodded the body just dropped. Man, that felt like something. Like life rushing in. Afterwards apple pie and coffee black, which Manny treated. Can't believe it, I said. Guy ripped a ring right off my finger. You're young, kid, Manny said. Dead men leave lots of rings. Blushed in the warmth of that, and dots of blood on my shoes brick red. Two brown wingtips, one in front of the other. My fingers, my toes. My God, this cold burns, but it beats the heat. A man frozen stops breathing, feels nothing, sleeps. A man burned his skin blisters and flays off whole, peels away til blood travels blue and red crisscross pulse pulse pulse burst. Heat is agony but is thaw too much to ask? It's the blood gone cold, and what we do to make it flow.

Here is the corner where the summer shimmer rose. Here is where I turn. *Amazilia beryllina*. *Amazilia rutila*. The park the water ahead. *Limosa lapponica*. In August, a woman loved me once. In undershirt and rolled-up jeans, her in a summer dress, we watched storms from the fire escape, under a high light ceiling, eating peaches from a bag. Inside, the sound of a horn. *Kind of Blue?* *Giant Steps?* What we listened to. Hilly made of copper in that light, indelible. Counted lightning crack one thousand one one thousand to thunder rolling toward us across the rooftops. Third of a mile. That's how far but it seems like years. Women pulled their laundry off lines; kids played down in the alley, their voices spiraling up. Baby? she

said around the juiciness of peach. Bobby Dupree said you killed a man. She swallowed in the stillness, picked at her teeth. Told Roxy you dropped him off a roof uptown somewhere. Down in the alley, a chase and capture, triumphant echoes. That true, baby? I looked out over the rooftops. Birds were fleeing the storm, tiny black arrows drawn on the walls of broken light. That huge and beautiful room, all the glory of the world, and birds flee. One thousand one one thousand. I touched her knee. Bobby Dupree's got a big mouth, I said. You know that. She looked at me funny, her lips pushed out, but I turned away. Jack? she said. Pigeons bobbed for crumbs; lightning struck and the rolling boom of thunder. I don't mind, you know, she said. I mean, whatever you got to do, I understand. Just don't lie to me. Trapped in that beauty, I stood up. Down below the captives screamed. I looked down at her, at that wounded mouth, in that holy light. I know, I said. I won't. A square of darkness was the window back, a lonely horn rising, and I ducked inside.

One house I pass is made of glass. I consider, as I always do, a well-placed stone, the lob and shatter and what's inside, but this time, as I think and walk, the windows upstairs suddenly blaze up orange—sunstruck as I walk into its angle, but to my eyes lit from within, aflame. A special invocation, a careless turn of phrase—and ladies and gentlemen, here's Satan in his ring of fire. The Devil who, holding court and stealing souls, could use a man like me. Counselor, I say, upstairs in a windowed house struck orange by the sun. There are no horns, no pitchfork; the only red the slash of the silk tie that pierces the center of his pinstriped and double-breasted navy blue suit. Cardinal red. *Cardinalis cardinalis*. Counselor, I say, and he smiles to me, his teeth matching the smiling white blindness of his button-down shirt. Perhaps a little sample of my work? In invitation, he sweeps a hand toward the circle of naked, shivering men standing just inside the soundless flame (and in this room, of course, I'm warm). I walk to the nearest one, an old and feeble fellow, his hands covering his privates. I reach my hand through his teeth, into his

mouth, down his throat. The passage is narrow, but my arm slides easily down, until my fingers reach his quivering heart. I enclose it, make a fist of it, and begin to pull upward. It comes slowly, veins and tendons snapping free, the feel of fruit leaving the vine. It is up his throat and out and in my hand, purple and quietly thumping. He drops to the wooden floor, a hollow sack of bones, and I extend my hand to his new master. In his blue suit he is still smiling. Drop it on the pile, he says in a voice like oil on water, and I turn to see that all the men have collapsed where they stood. In the center of the floor stands a small pile of hearts—purple, slick, and quietly thumping, like a nest of eyeless frogs.

Near the park, behind a wrought-iron fence, a huge dog lunges at a length of chain. Out of reach I stand, an eagle once, six inches from the hot snap of jaw. *Aythya ferina*. *Aythya marila*. Once, in a boiler room turned blue by the tinting of memory, I slit a man's throat with a straight razor. Handcuffed to a chair, duct tape on his mouth, wishing he'd paid his bills. Cool him, kid, Manny said. I slid the blade below his Adam's apple and life spilled out on my fingers, thick and sticky, a deep cut deep red and flowing. He seized in his chair, a violent torment: chair legs a tattoo on the stone floor, tucking his chin to staunch the gushing flow. Red death painted his shirt; the smell was black and perverted. Shortly he quieted. I wiped my hands on his pants and we went for ice cream. Kid, Manny said, peering over a banana split, you're an artist at work. A regular what's-his-name. *Aythya americana*. The dog, chained and lunging, a malevolent sound from deep inside him spilling out past long sharp teeth. The fence between us tipped with spikes. If this were Paris, the revolution, bourgeois heads would top these iron stems: bulging eyes and tattered necks, staring past the end of their lives. Turning then, walking the length of fence, I twist the trophies inward to face the frothing dog. They never speak, the severed heads; the blood run paints the rails red. Chained, leaping, into madness. A cane for this limp and so many killings.

Then I am at the park and enter, and force myself to slow. In here, more babies, more joggers, and more: the cry of birds, the flash of children, the rank smell of standing water. Paths wander off in green light, benches crouching in shadow. Shoes crunch over fields of gravel, tiny bits of crushed stone—felt one side, the other imagined, filled in. How the gone foot gets colder, the itch behind the invisible knee. An eagle once, but not unless I told them. *Parula superciliosa*. *Parula pitiayumi*. One day, October, the wind a little mean. Hilly and I with some distance between, some disagreement dragging on a week or two. In front of my building, people taking in the dying light of day, on the steps and sidewalk, a crisp rosy cast to the sky reflected all around. A rubber ball off the wall, one bounce and back, keeping my hands warm and lively. Waiting for Manny to call. Down the block came Hilly and two friends. She was in white for winter, fur lined around her face, and made as if to walk on by. Attitude oozing, and in my chest something came loose. Hey, Hill, I called out, her boots pausing their parade. Pretty cold last night, by my lonesome. She turned her face to me, framed by that fur. Well, she said, and her voice was so cool. Better get you another blanket then, honey. People laughed, men and women, the sound fluttering around me in that rosy light. Struck down, but I didn't mind—charmed by her face, by her pirate's heart. They walked on, and I watched her, skinny legs knocking. A ways down, she turned, saw me watching. She smiled then, that wide mouth in a white circle of fur. A real smile, so much you-and-me in it I knew we were mended. Her smile left behind then; left behind now, so clear. This walk I have, this thing I've lost. This leg, the flow of blood. A woman loved me once, and I turned away from that. Here trees and leaves and sundance flit, somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere a man is broken. Somewhere a woman cries. Children take flight on bicycles, wreck themselves screaming in branches overhead. Dogs trot by, something squirming in their jaws. *Parula americana*. I keep to the edges of the path.

Deeper in, a canopy of green: high, holy windows to the sky above. Flowers a riot of yellow sound, awash on both sides of me and crowding fast. Men stand in whisper, exchanging something small and gleaming. The pond through the trees, taste of metal in my mouth. This leg, a phantom hum. Here's how: Grab the girl, Jack, Manny said. He says he won't pay? Grab the Betty. Put your boot on her neck for a while. We'll see who won't pay. And so on a westbound freight this girl was skinny and wiggled with rings on long white fingers. Aimed for Lebanon, my uncle's farm; a straight ransom job, no aim to kill. The day was a dark bruise, bitter and hollow; we passed long hours huddled in its empty center, battered by the pounding of the passing rails. With us on that car: the hateful stink of piss and desperation, drifting from a gathering brood of grifters and carnies, a rolling game of seven-card stud. A dozen hands trading whiskey necks, eyes shifting her way with the rocking of the car and the whistle in the whipping wind. The miles, the fields, the sky outside thickening. Someone palmed an ace off the bottom of the deck and a fight broke out; an uneasy truce sucked all the air out of that car. A couple of them were watching her from the edges of their eyes. I opened my knife in my pocket. This thing felt bad, and I wished hard to be out of there. Two of them staggered over in a film of whisky and malevolence and she counted heads against me and waved her wild fingers in the air. He's a no-good kidnapper, she yelled, and I slipped the knife from my pocket. He bodily kidnapped my person. The bigger one made to reach down for me and I buried the blade in his thigh. He looked at the handle quivering out of his pant leg. Son of a bitch? he said, and sat down. But that was all I got. A wave of them jumped me, bottles and bootheels raining down. I covered my face but the blows landed: ribs, back, legs. I heard the grunting and the curses and some of it was mine and some of it was the Betty. It felt like hours going on and some would say my own medicine, well deserved. I thought if

they'd just stop so I could do my job. Take her and hold her somewhere quiet for a few days, out on the farm. She might even like it there, with the ducks and the cows. The orange cat in the window of the barn. And my uncle had a tractor. But then they lifted me up and herded me to the door and then I was in the air and then I was landing twisted and bounced and then my leg. My leg caught under steel wheel grind and bone ripped free from bone. The train disappeared without me, and the truth is I was glad to be free of the pounding of the sound. Eventually the moon rose, and crickets began to sing to me. My leg lay a ways up, between the rails, my boot still on my foot. It got very cold. Some boys found me before I bled all the way to death.

Turn a corner and a pigeon, older even, more frail than I, sleeps on a bench. Rock dove. *Columba livia*. Prey. Hair wild under a wide hat, brown clothes stained; in sleep public and comfortable the chill wind doesn't touch. His hands in his lap pink with circulation glow, his face no sign of pinching. Regarding him, I am brought to a moment: Mercy Hospital, a broken collarbone, two cracked ribs, one leg left behind in a dark and bloody field. A prosthetic future, the doctors with pamphlets and models. Manny in once, in a long black coat, saying I'll pay for it, kid. You just rest up. Then Hilly in the doorway, hands covering her face and tears streaming. I told Manny to keep her away, but through the door she came. And burst out at the sight of me, at the depression in the sheet, at the expression on my face. Oh, my God, she said. Jack. Burst out at the wrappings and the gauze. At the rest of my life. Tears streaming. Racked and woozy on pills and self-pity, it suddenly seemed all her fault. She'd done this to me. Get out, I said, and her mouth fell open more bruised than ever. The pain was lifting, from all parts of me, through the top of my head. Get out. The machines ticked and wheezed, and a gulping noise came from her, and her face was doing this to me. Killing me. Nurse, I yelled, and it hurt, and the angel in white came

running. The one with pills and needles; the one that washed me down. My hands were clenched and shaking; the tubes rattled, the metal frame. The rest of my life. Nurse, I said through teeth, make this person leave. She's bothering me. I'm sorry, ma'am, the nurse said, gripping Hilly's arm above the elbow. You'll have to leave. The patient isn't taking visitors right now. In my state, I thought she said prisoners. But baby, Hilly cried, pushed out and struggling. I don't care. I don't care about it. Get some rest, the angel said, and closed the door behind her. When the pain lowered again and spread, when I cracked open the sealed books of my fists, blood seeped from the wounds the nails had made. Six months later, on the street—a cane for this limp, long cuffs in summer—came Hilly walking with a tall man in a suit, a handsome high yellow, with glasses and a long nose. Hilly in heels and a short skirt; this time no smile. Jack, this is Roger. She turned her face up to his. Jack and I went out once upon a time, she said. Until he killed it. His eyebrows knitted up, and she looked back to me. Cuz that's what he does. He kills things. He's a killer. Her voice was ice falling into the sea. And he killed us. Didn't you, Jack? I waited, nothing left to give or take. One thousand one one thousand. Let's go, said the tall nigger, in a deep, quiet voice. He nodded. See you round, Jack. Yeah, said Hilly, this one with whom I'd planned. See you, Jack. I watched them walk, her skinny legs knocking, smiling up at him instead. I hadn't said a word. In the park, the pigeon snores, dreaming someplace soft and warm. A good woman loved me once, and I turned away. Turned away in shame and anger, in hatred of a world that could cut a man in half. In the knowledge underneath that hatred, deeper through the years, that I did it to myself. Did all of it, everything. There is a song of murder in me, shriek and rising.

The cane rises, wicked and strong, and I bring it down across his open mouth. He wakes like an animal with a high-pitched wail, with teeth in his throat, with blood in his mouth, and I slash the cane across his belly, doubling him on the bench. Jack, she urges,

hips full of samba. Do you want to hit me? Is that what you want? He raises a hand in protest, but no one takes notice, the tramp of rubber sole steady on the path. His hat in the gravel, I crack the cane across his skull. A question in his eyes but the only answer's coming down again and blood begins there. In the dancing light of tapers, Hilly's kitchen hot and close. Gilberto on the radio, a finger crooked. Come, Jack. Let's dance instead. He slumps to his knees, a moan. The moon rises, a long train clatters away. Find me, boys, before. Again the cane lands, across the shoulder blades. Dots of blood on my shoes brick red; two old women in sweaters like mine take their time in talk and passing. In the golden belly of a glass of beer I watch the jump of flame. Her dress ends at the knees and I am mesmerized by her thin and shapely calves. Bring down the cane, the crack of ribs, and he is down and still in the patch of softly dappled sunlight. The sun plays with leaves in the trees above the dance we make. A young man strides by in headphones, a child on his back, a glance at two old men on a park bench. An eagle once—made of wonder, made of cruelty—and who would take notice now? She is speaking across candlelight. Or do you want to fuck me? Is that what you want? His face a bloody mask, and finally I am warming. My fingers tingle, blood surging, and sweat rises on my face. Warming. Clearing. I'm on a path, I'm ringed by trees, and all is still around me. The bedroom waits behind a wall of beads. A finger crooked. In the night outside, in the rooms upstairs, but that doesn't matter. The train disappears, and as the sound rattles away, a wide net of loneliness, cast over the land, falls with the fall of the light, and I am pinned, clipped, and grounded by the weight of it.

Needle Carries the Thread

Let a terrible example be made in every neighborhood where the crime can be established, and if necessary, let every tree in the country bend with Negro meat. Temporizing in such cases as this, is utter madness. We must strike terror, and make a lasting impression, for only in such a course can we find the guaranties of future security.

— *The Clarksville Gazette (Tennessee)*, December 1856

Downtown the night after the beatings,
 after the reddened irons' namings,
 another communion—
 a clearing
 near the square, and every last owned person
 force-marched there, the story like
 this: *At dusk, the Committee of Safety
 presented the heads of rebel leaders
 impaled on spiked poles ...
 had the blacks parade all night beneath.*

Needle that carries the thread
 through fears so familiar I swear
 they crossed here from there ...
 the woman even the tortured wouldn't name
 held six lifted heads
 in the torchlight of her eyes, their blood
 already rusting
 the railroad spikes' forgings
 to long iron tollings of the Baptist bell,
 an ironed trudge on dead leaves.

Her steps print out hobbled paths of spirits
 chained to the place but freighted
 with those eyes' terrible shine
 through what scripture calls time.

Down tracks crossed with nothing
 but births' and deaths' tied creosotes
 what she saw was
 the Committee
 of Safety poxed in prison camps,
 decapitated by grapeshot at Shiloh,
 pillared homes gone to ash,
 saw their faces seen
 monumental—set in the salts of their fears'
 bone-white marble.
 And she—seeing then that scene,
 widows and orphans of the Lost Cause
 closing their quilted paths
 in the steely eye of God's needle—
 camel-walked her pregnant hoodoo ...
 gave that
 circling crunch of dead leaves
 massed balance and measure
 with a rustle of buzzard wings,
 like dark magi, roosting
 beneath one long bright star.

Ruins at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Forced to retreat to their mountain refuge
the Zapotec endured a famous siege

by collecting water from a cave beneath
the city. This evening, five hundred years later.

here at the continent's narrow waist,
El Mar Muerto continues to evaporate,

obscured by the blue haze of dusk.
Artifacts poke out of the ground,

their small shadows lengthening.
Every potshard seems mounted on a pedestal,

every blade of obsidian demands attention,
as if too much time had passed since

someone last touched it. Far below
the river flashes and is gone to shade

in the canyon. The Zapotec guide demonstrates
how hollow the mountain remains:

the stone he drops into a dark shaft
falls in silence, fails to report back.

Leeuw V. Vlanderen L. 9

Greasy, soiled, our souls caught under pushpins,
our glance chafed and scarred,
we linger in night's power at the paws
of the Flemish Lion.

If we looked in the mirror, we could easily spy
images of knights errant punched and pounded
by inflatable, rosy-cheeked innkeepers' wives;
if we looked each other in the eye, we could perhaps discover
immaculate old Damask cloth, woven in the local workshop,
on exhibit in the city museum.

Kortrijk, Courtrai, Cortoriacum, St Eloi and the chapel
that over the centuries became St Maarten's Church,
Taxus baccata and its flame-red berry
(deadly if you take a bite),
the River Lys, the park stately with plane trees, the tomb,
the high mound of great nobles vanquished
in the Battle of the Golden Spurs,
the stillness,
Fernand's vest-pocket garden where you can glimpse
the crowns of the poplars far in the distance.

—translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Alina Cârâc

Burnt Clay on Bread

The drizzle was of course the same; the violet sky—
likewise;
to say nothing of the Meuse, the bitch Molda,
the Belgian landscape.
And yet this is about you, born and not fabricated
of bones, ashes, IV serum,
woven out of empty air, bitter stone,
spread like clay on bread.

The beginning of September. My Walloon notes.
Unsurprisingly, local residents come and go in the street,
but the fact that I'm thinking about you
is something out of character, in defiance of all patterns.
I'm thinking about you, though I feel almost nothing,
only a confused state of mind, only thunder
at the gate of cardiac muscle,
silence dissipated in the sheets.

If I were *The Poet* playing the organ, the harp, the kobza,
I would have managed to extemporize a line in which
(with a sentimental roar) a certain slightly redundant
construction would have found its natural place.
As the *I* gets embodied from somebody else,
I should say also that this is really about you and not
about the enclosed courtyard of the red-brick inn, the tepid beer

on the table, the tower clock of St Pholien's Church
striking the half hours of September, the quarters, the passions
that have withered over time and dried.

This is about you, absent like burnt clay on bread.

—translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Alina Cârâc

If We Choose to Believe

Liquid crimson channel of the bridal bed, world
of the senses related to the universe of thought, perception that
makes our concrete action possible,
crude light that lashes the forehead, temples,
thighs, knees,
mucus that (if we choose to believe the ancients) is
nothing other than gray matter oozing down through the nose.
Hale and alert, zigzags only, scintillations,
he no longer tossed about under a heap of blankets in broad daylight.
He was dreaming of deeds of arms, or if not, at least of
storming the casemates of speech.
With small eyes, a straight nose and a long face,
juniper brandy, the ricochet of imperfective verbs,
in no way about the exact same world...

*You were right a moment ago, the clerk called out to
Dmitry Dmitrich, the sturgeon was a little off!*

—translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Alina Cârâc



Yellow Felt Eyes

The closet was dark except for the triangle of light that came in and touched my knee and divided my body in half: the part behind the white door and the part that could see. The long side of one of her shoes was cutting into me, pushing into the round bone of my bottom. The whole floor was covered with shoes, shoes for fancy parties and work and tennis and golf and walking and everyday and nighttime. Black satin high heels with the white lining coming away from the edges, big orange boots sticky with shoe polish.

Her skin was pale against the bedcovers, a thin pink spread with lace strips down the edges. Her skin was white but had brown lines on the belly, squiggly lines, so it looked like oatmeal there. Her knees were spread apart and she was on her back. The skin at the top of her leg, below her hip, was squeezed together into chicken skin or elbow skin, ridgy and dark. Her feet, which were flat and long with long toes and frosted pink nail polish half chipped off, were pressed into the bed. The one gripping the side of the mattress sometimes slipped off and then she'd put it back. He was touching her breasts, his arms stretched straight up over her belly and his fingers spread over the very white skin of them like a brown-red star, and the nipples came out from between his fingers, and he pinched them sometimes. His head was between her legs and he was putting his nose into that place and moving it around, like a pig looking for oats or a puppy trying to get milk from a mother dog. The hair between her legs came out curly and rough below the curve of her stomach, and his straight hair fell on it, dragged through it. He'd move back a little and look and then rake his hand and press into the

hairy spot, or do something fast with his finger, like he was jiggling a key into a lock, and his face which was always reddish was now shiny too, as if he'd just stuck his whole face into his soup bowl instead of using a spoon. I would have laughed if he'd done that.

"Fuck me, please," she whispered, and he pushed his head even further between her legs, and her toes were bent, squeezed against the pink bedspread. Her hair was all pushed up around the pillow—she had slipped down but it had stayed up. She was breathing with her whole body. Her chest was going up and down, she raised her whole body and then let it fall again, and her breaths were long and loud, not regular—high sounding, like a princess recovering from a faint, or like an actress pretending to be a princess recovering. "Please, fuck me, please fuck me, fuck me," she said. The way she said it was as if it wasn't a bad word at all, she didn't sound angry. And the way she said please, it was like she really needed something, like she was a starving person who needed food or a person in the middle of the desert who needed water. Please was a polite word to put on other words, the words that said what you really wanted. What they were doing was like going to the bathroom together, really needing to go and then getting to the bathroom and pulling down your stockings and underpants and sitting down and going. It was like throwing up.

She said it again. And then she stopped saying it, and her breaths became quieter. He looked up at her with his shiny chin and then pulled himself up like he was crawling. His peanut was rigid and bouncy, and then underneath or attached were these other things.

I myself wasn't breathing loudly. I was trying to breathe as softly as possible, but it didn't seem like I was getting enough air, I felt like I was suffocating. My head was leaning like a turkey neck away from the winter skirt flopping on my hair. All the pants-suits and dresses and blouses draped around me thick and heavy, their empty arms and legs and fat cuffs and cold buttons touching me and smelling

like her, perfume and old metal and sweat. The dirt on the floor got into my hand, pushed into my skin like I was holding a hairbrush the wrong way. I closed my eyes, but it seemed more dangerous like that.

He moved up and kissed her face and then she spread her legs more and put them around his back. He started rocking into her. She was moving that way, too. Her face was raised, her chin up. She closed her eyes and her head fell to the side and her cheeks were red and smudged looking. The room out there was red and pink and white and tan and light and moving and noise, and in my closet was darkness and stillness and hard things, and then she opened her eyes and looked at me. Her eyes, which are brown, just like mine which are brown too, were staring right at me and they stayed there, unwavering. It was like in *King Kong* where the monster doesn't look real because of the glassy look in his eyes, they pivot back and forth and you don't know if they are really feeling anything even though his limbs are waving up and down or a little tear is trickling down his face. Now Dad was breathing in a funny way, like he was counting as he was breathing. One, two, three, four. One, two. One, two. She blinked, slowly, and his body was moving up and down and against the pillow her shoulder was shrugging, and her eyes turned away.

I waited until they were downstairs. She went down right away, but he went down the hall to the bathroom first. I heard him blowing his nose and then his feet against the wood, loud steps even though he was barefoot. I leaned forward on my knees, pushed the door open the rest of the way. I crawled out of the closet, unbent myself. I stood by his dresser where the tall green apple man stood. If I went in at night and was too scared to wake them but too scared to go to sleep, I'd see things all over the room, always the same: angels flying around, a big black woman and her children, the tall

man with green apples. He'd drop a poisonous apple on you if you weren't careful. I stood in his corner and long rays of sunlight had shortened into bright blocks on the green bench-seat near the window. The bed had been smoothed over and the pillows were fluffed up and it looked like nothing had ever happened here at all. Then I heard my mother calling me. She was calling out the back door—she thought I was at Karen's. I kicked one of her blue velvet clogs back into the closet. I'd tried them on before. If she had just taken them off, they'd be hot and moist inside, like a cave. In my hand I still held my bicycle key, the one I had taken out of her red jacket when I heard them coming.

I went to my yellow room, which was bright and where I had my green clock with the flower sticker on it and sticker flags of six nations on my dresser. I would someday have all the nations if we ate enough Cheerios. I would cover all four drawers of the dresser. My dolls were resting on the shelf. Beth was next to Elizabeth. Emily was leaning on Beth. Maggie was sitting on the edge, reserved and alert. Jo sat near Hester, who stood (she couldn't sit). The Blue Boy was there too, with his pink cheeks and black eyes. My dolls rested like bears or other animals in the wild, hibernating and not getting hungry or needing anything. I lay on my bed facing the wall and put my hand on the matted head of my snake. Dad had won him at a fair. He was long, longer than me, and I slept with my legs wrapped around his thin body, and I put his hatchet-head by mine on the pillow. He had two yellow felt eyes, one of which hung loose and sideways. He had two creases in his body, thin parts where the stuffing had separated and only the outside fabric held him together. She was calling me again. This time she called up the stairs. I closed my eyes and placed my cheek against the snake. She was coming up the stairs. I wished that it was a regular day and that I could have a tea party. She was coming up the long hall and then the sound stopped and I knew she was standing in the doorway.

"Darling," she said. "Are you all right?"

I turned. She was wearing a brown and white shirt with buttons up the front and blue and white striped pants. She was wearing an apron with a ribbon around the edge, brown bric-a-brac. Her hair was brushed and neat, pulled away from her face. She had arching eyebrows and her mouth was closed now, zipped. Her eyes were glassy. When she came closer I wasn't sure she could see me at all, her eyes looked right through me out to the other side of the house.

NATHAN WHITING

New Books around Her

A girl alone in a wooden chair, vast
bookstore basement, talks.

*I'm wearing my big sister's Rocky
Horror bra. It's red with sparkly glitters.*

Her Ls limp slightly, bent
through a still-childish mumble, important
undergarments hidden by school clothes
or since she talks on her cell phone

could be wearing only a bra, bra full of her,
homework done together, her hidden
here. Whoever listens, clothed or naked,
also alone, lightly afraid of a lonely life,
connected, answers gotten, given,
watches evening come as words form.

Objects tame, brand objects, cult movie
stories an existence, her importance,
she grows more slowly, wise faster,
her true name hidden, fame borrowed,
Does her big sister know? Horror
works its way into what skin tries
very hard, very often, to fill.

Gospels from the Lower Shelf

1

When Mama got her mind plugged in and cleaned
every five years or so,
Aunt Ruby would pick me up after school
in her Nova: *I love my sister, but this is bullshit.*

We'd go to Crosby's Bar-b-Que for redneck
pork and *Jesus ain't lookin'* onion rings,
long with double cole slaw to avoid getting
the trots or packed in. I'd have two

Of Daddy's tip quarters for the juke box
so Aunt Ruby could get the vinyl booth blues:
yes, it was *Cryin' Time* again.
When I was fifteen, Aunt Ruby said to me

In front of God and the Men's Methodist prayer group:
Always use a rubber and you'll never be sorry.
Back home, when we couldn't bear to open the car door
to face life, we'd split a stick of Juicy Fruit

And diddle with the dial until we found the song that meant
Lord help my Christ, I don't know, I just don't know.

2

Mama was not always In; mostly, she was Out.
We'd lie head to foot and foot to head
on her bed and gossip about sane people
until Aunt Ruby stopped by, fresh from Sunday worship:

*Dolly and Buster shared a beach house each year with the Millers.
The Millers had a son, and of course Dolly and Buster
had Wanda Kaye. One night, the big folks drove to Charleston
for dinner, leaving the kids behind for pizza and television.*

*Now, because Dolly has spent half her life with her head
up her twat, she forgot her purse. When they got back
to the house, Dolly hollered WANDY KAYE, HELP ME
FIND MY PURSE. Of course, at that moment, the Miller boy's*

*Thing was in Wanda Kaye's purse, if you get my meaning.
When Wanda Kaye heard her mother's voice,
her purse clamped like a vise around the boy's Thing.
Child, you couldn't GIVE me Hilton Head for the confusion*

*that night. They had to dope Wanda Kaye to get the Miller boy
Out, and they had to dope Dolly to get her off the Miller boy.
Aunt Ruby fixed me in the crosshairs of her Army green eyes:
Now, don't you ever get into a tight spot like that!*

3

Reading to children at the Home

was my *Project for a Better World*
required of students considered for Honors.
Aunt Ruby swore her job there putrified her soul,

But she drove me until I got my license.

This is Purgatory, I wrote: everyone waited
for the Second Coming or the next shift.
Not one of those kids understood what I read.

As Aunt Ruby said, *Sometimes God goes out for a smoke.*

She played the ponies at Northfield Park on her breaks,
and six volunteers invited me to join their tap class.
Once after I worked Sunday midnight to eight

For extra points, Aunt Ruby drove me to breakfast and sang
spirituals that carried to all the places I've never been.
In an alto that locked the gates to hell, she declared for all of us
I'm satisfied with Jesus, and he's satisfied with me.

4

May is Mental Health Month

is how I answered the Honors English Essay Question
about irony in everyday life. Such attitude was
Not Appreciated, and I got demoted to Regular Track

On the same day Aunt Ruby and I took Mama to Psych Admitting
For-the-Last-Time-Please-God. The tech didn't
believe we lived at the corner of Sanitarium Drive
and Faith Lane until Aunt Ruby sassed his face:

And who put this Akron looney bin on Infirmary Road?

Finally, they wheeled Mama past, crying, crying
as she always did at such times,
like those weeping Madonnas on the barns in Barberton.

Back home, too tired to breathe almost,

I put Patsy Cline on the old turntable and let her sing
through the window screens. Aunt Ruby and I rode
our past on the slow porch glider that keeps

Every secret, tucked under a quilt too tatty now
for anyone but family, while the stars called us
baby, baby, all night long.

*Private Thought Worlds of the Sons
of Remote Fathers*

hidden away in the lung book of certain air-breathing spiders
 who dance in time to the tremor that passes
 from boy-to-father corridor a taut vibrating wire
 tunes the front yard vegetation away
 from leaf scent and fruit structure
 paved with storms congealed become eyes
 tear their rootlets out of the visible devotion
 carry them to shelter in arms of bitter nightfall
 and linden flowers swallowed under cuirass
 of mating beetles a Forbidden City
 around the male birth event an animal
 must needs shade into a way of life
 in adulthood the arms become horny elytra
 or personal kingdom/zone of "winged words" fronted by mouthparts
 typically the biting type with ritual
 nictitating membrane fused over brittle stars
 so that boy-region "pictures" with manufactured sun his parents' heads
 cleanly diced by a vibratile cage as of cheese-cutting wires
 into "exploded view" diagram and from between the neat cubes
 all that messy intercellular
verklärte nacht guttering out onto the dining room table
 first person familial plural to wit some remote gift
 of monsters under the bed by not wanting them there
 in the form of suspecting that they lurk
 teaches boy-zone to plot new fear-based data point begins

now to consider how the unbidden juju spreads
 helps boy-district with shoes and socks
 returns to wallpaper where it lives a
 fugitive urine in the neighbor's pool
 lets go some yellow string through his tiny Knights of Malta
 streams out into the transparent pimpermels of chlorination
 close round the warming saffron
 effluent this is vicious mine says the boy-area grabs at his
 must hold his pure product his voluptuous water
 escapes without witness it is happy
 hour yet he adjusts
 and adjusts

Fight

In the end, it was animals fighting that turned us on. S&M had run its course, swinging and swapping a step down from there; combining the two harvested few responses to our personal ad. The kids kept us from divorcing, but even their feelings were wearing thin: neither was very good in school, or at sports.

When the squirrel snuck through the doggie door and dropped gloves with Ichiro, our three-legged Siamese, we called the babysitter and checked into the Comfort Suites by the airport. We talked a lot beforehand, too, mostly about Ichiro's comeback victory, then invoked the missionary position for the first time since the first time. We stayed two nights, turning down maid service, not even bothering to eat.

The woman at the shelter looked at us with suspicion, but the trapper from up north asked no questions. Raccoons, we soon found out, were more than a match for any dog, and opossum, despite our predictions, fought better during the day, except against foxes. Foxes had the most fight in them, that was clear. Once, when the babysitter bailed, we rented that cartoon where the mongoose battles the cobras, but felt guilty when the kids wanted to watch with us. That, we quickly agreed, held no interest whatsoever.

Like the rough stuff and the orgies, one species duking it out with another lost its luster. The combinations became less imaginative, a collie versus an Airedale, a mouse versus a shrew. Even the trapper

from up north stopped returning our calls. Our last grasp pitted a gerbil against a hamster, but to tell you the truth, going in, we didn't know which was which. Expectations were at an all-time low.

What happened next, though, reignited the flame, at least for a day. Instead of tearing at each other's flesh, the gerbil initiated what would be called, by any witness, sexual assault. The hamster, a miniature Cowardly Lion, ran for the safety of the wheel, but relented, we hypothesized, just to get it over with. Later, we wondered if the hamster was female and the gerbil male, or vice versa, and what would become of this union. The possibilities were endless. We moved closer and grasped hands, squeezing tight, fighting off the rolling eyes of the kids who, when they were old enough, would, if they were lucky, one day understand.

Heroes

Before the heroes came to town, things weren't that bad, or, depending on who you asked, going pretty well. The county had just paid to have the throughway resurfaced, our boys had made it to the state semis, falling in overtime to the eventual champs, and business boomed at the tire factory up by the mall, which, in turn, made business boom at the mall as well. Everyone felt good about the economy, the kids were getting into good colleges, and if a town with prettier women existed, we hadn't been there.

The heroes' debut was a splash, we had to admit, putting the fire out at the tire factory. They even maintained the integrity of the structure, limiting the shutdown to a mere week and a half. A few days later, they saved that kid who'd fallen into the quarry, too. None of us could have squeezed into that drainage pipe, let alone pounded through the twenty solid feet of bedrock. Our hats were off. And whether or not we could have fought off the super villains and their giant, mechanical attack birds isn't worth discussing. We had to give them that one.

But cats out of trees and baby-kissing aside, we were skeptical. The heroes, for all their wondrous deeds, never really warmed up to any of us on a personal level. When their job was done, they disappeared, gone to whatever cave or fortress, wherever it was they went. No kind words, no interviews, not even a catchphrase to distinguish themselves. After the attack birds, someone came up with the idea of a picnic—horseshoes and potato salad and all that—just to say thanks, but the heroes didn't even respond to the invitations. We started to think that they were saving our lives just so they could

mock us. *A picnic*, we imagined them laughing. *Who do these people think they're dealing with?* The women were quick to take the heroes' defense, reminding us of how hard it is to be the new kid on the block, that we'd feel the same way if we were the strangers and the heroes were the Welcome Wagon. We were grateful for what they'd done—don't get us wrong—but when a man's wife starts to see the other guy's point of view, he begins to wonder just where her loyalties lie.

Suspicions arose. Who were these guys behind the masks? Where did they come from? Why did they choose our town, out of all the towns in the world? We did have the prettiest ladies, as mentioned before, and any hero we'd ever seen always had a pretty lady hanging off at least one arm. Maybe the heroes weren't mocking us. Maybe they were just auditioning, trying to show us up. Someone suggested that the heroes were responsible for the fire and the kid in the quarry, and those of us who bought into that theory had no trouble throwing in the giant, mechanical attack birds. It was all starting to make sense.

But as quickly as the heroes arrived, they left our town. No one even knew they were gone—not until the tragedy at the dynamite plant. As the flames inched toward the main warehouse, everyone watched the skies, assuming the heroes would be swooping in to save the day. We'd all be safe, the women would swoon, and the heroes would leave without saying good-bye. Several large, disastrous explosions later, it hit us. No one had dug a fjord to the lake up in the hills to drown out the fires, no one had blown out the hundreds of thousands of burning fuses. We were on our own.

The women took the news the hardest. They wept openly, walked around like zombies, and held us closely at night, tighter than we'd ever been held before. We didn't know what to do. After all, the heroes were gone, and they didn't seem to be coming back.

Though we could never be sure exactly who it was our wives were thinking of when they held us so tightly, we were there for

them. Holding is holding, any way you look at it, the one thing that was better than before the heroes came to town. It was in these moments we found our solace, what allowed us to maintain our pride. It was in these moments, our wives in our arms, their minds off in the skies, that we were the heroes. We were there for our women, posing as our own secret identities.



Radicand

A poverty of circumference
and besides, a lack of import. Weights.
A solemn round of industry.
That pile driver, no, not like a trumpet.
The modest houses. The gray weather
of their porches. Sancta. Unities.

...

Some rain guttering off salvo.
The hourly filibuster of thunder
above tangles of trees
flashing, hourly, like screams. *Wracks.*
By dint of, and in thrall to, outskirts,
the under-chassis of vespertine shadows.

...

Fuck of a mouth goes on
like a repeater. Numberless. Parallax.
While the faces brood.
Then by the transitive property,
closures, both American and otherwise.
Selfsame equals indwelling.

...

On the margin and illegible.
Everything in middle distance, even
the coal of a large fire squirting
black smoke, bulbs of ink,
into the brightening bond of the sky.
To gather: Solve for: Underneath.

Southern Melody

The clear sound of the vertical flute
 is the wind's dirge among bamboo leaves.
 The intermittent lilted cry of a balloon guitar,
 doleful as a lone wild goose,
 evokes tremors out on the flowing water.
 The slow long chants of the singer
 tell of endless yearnings and regrets.
 In them I hear sufferings of ancient subjugated people
 and hardships of farmers in remote, barren fields.
 I can see high peaks linking clouds everywhere,
 steep trails winding up the cliff sides,
 lonely boats that ride the waves during storms,
 women sitting alone late into the night.
 The living were separated long ago, the dead left no messages,
 wars broke out again and again in endless new bloodshed...
 Motherland, you bequeathed us songs of your past griefs,
 urging us who live in the light to bear them in mind forever.

1956

—translated by Edward Morin, Dennis Ding, and Fang Dai

On the Eastern Outskirts

The peach trees in full bloom on that spring day
 beside the red brick house in the country
 glowed like a pale red mist
 under warm sun in the bright clear sky.
 With sparkling eyes and a radiant smile
 you held onto a peach bough.

That day on the stone veranda,
 we knew neither desolation nor loneliness.
 With your voice racing ahead of yourself,
 you told a story out of the past.

Halfway up the cliff that day,
 your silhouette shone in the slanting sunlight.
 How captivating the shadows were.
 How splendid that distant place was!

1976

—translated by Edward Morin, Dennis Ding, and Fang Dai

Green

Sunlight flew through the poplar forest
causing the green gold leaves to sparkle.
Green seedlings spread over all the open countryside
making this great land a slab of green jade.
As you ran away along the road,
wind gusts blew through your hair
raising a lock of green cloud.

1977

—translated by Edward Morin, Dennis Ding, and Fang Dai

At Purple Bamboo Garden

Light wind is dancing among bamboo leaves.
The stream flows past tips of willow switches,
Why should grief be showing
at the edges of your brow
and on your lips?

Your coat has caught the shadow of a tree.
Your face reflects the luster of bright flowers.
As we gaze
through that silence
why must our hearts be so apprehensive?

1977

—translated by Edward Morin, Dennis Ding, and Fang Dai

Dandelion Winds

Aprils, we could never wait for Saturdays when My Lady's Manor ran, and Grand National and Hunt Cup. Forever, forever, it took to turn that steeplechase month. We squeezed into the back of station wagons, packed between wicker baskets and picnic totes, all the while swearing to ourselves that once we got there, we wouldn't watch. We were over horses, almost—except for Tuesday riding lessons and the plastic thoroughbred statues that we kept hidden under our beds. Fruit might float in the bowls of iced punch, but we weren't going to fish out apple slices or hold them over the paddock doors, just to get screamed at by trainers.

The horses were nervous. The horses had to jump.

It was hours and hours still, until the running of the course. The riders in their ironed silks and timbered gates stood at the far end of the field, ribboned off from the blankets where our parents sat eating mold cheese on crackers and making fizzy talk over Dixie cups. It was April. It was a steeplechase. Our mothers had their legs stretched out, daisy-white and veined up the thighs like the back of a leaf. Our fathers bloomed red across their faces, whacking backs, whiskey-laughing. We couldn't wait not to be petted on the head, told to finish up our chicken salads.

Yes, we tripped into laps. We spilled and we tugged. We asked and asked our mothers, until they looked almost happy to kiss us good-bye on the cheeks saying, "Don't wander too far off, promise?"

And we were free—running through the grass, bumping into knees and elbows and other parents who could be our parents, except for a different fruity pattern on their poplin skirts, a different flower sprinkle on their ties, already yanked loose. "Have you

seen the horses?" These parents said. "All the girls are over by the horses."

We smiled. We said we'd be polite, kind girls, and say hello to our mothers for them, and not get lost with all the people running around in this heat.

The sun was always out, Aprils, as if winter and all the clouds had bolted off to a state beyond Maryland, spooked by the honking of station wagons and the flapping of canvas tents. Everything shone green and golden. A dandelion breeze was blowing, thick with the silkiest fluff. We followed it past the bugle music, to the edge of the field and into the woods.

Poison ivy, we warned each other, as if there was a way not to get it. We were in our sundresses. We would have to sit in a hot oatmeal bath all night, eating scrambled eggs our mothers made us as if we had the chickenpox.

But that was later. Now, there was a log. Now, there were soft, mossy places where we slipped in our sandals. And puddles of rain with leaves sludging fall and brown at the bottom. One of us ran ahead to hide behind a tree and jump out—bra-hah-hah got you!

"I knew you were there," the rest of us said.

Another of us turned into a unicorn. She rushed us, jabbing with her hooves and horn. The rest of us flew away to escape—Pegasuses. We soared above the trees and reeled around and beat her with our silver wings. A battle started, Pegasuses versus Unicorns! And the Pegasuses were winning, until a unicorn or two lost their horns. They were stallions now, galloping.

"Be goddesses," we said. "That way you can fly on our backs."

The ground thundered.

We listened.

The horses were running in the dirt.

"Come on," we said. And we ran, chasing each other over trickled streams. There was light up ahead and music. We could feel it through the leaves. We went faster and faster, screaming to each

other to hurry, catch up, until we all bunched together in a nervous stop, at the edge of the woods, blinking at the brightness of the sun.

This field was much, much bigger than our parents' field. Radios played static. A horn honked. Above the grass, we looked for a familiar glint of hoop earring, a streak of lemon-lightened ponytail.

We couldn't get caught. Our sisters were older and somewhere nearby, whispering in a huddle of friends on a bumper. We were only going to follow them around for a while, not even so they'd notice. Only a few of us had older sisters, but we all knew what they did—slap you, twist your arms around back, lock the basement door when boys were over. Up in their rooms, they had perfumed sticks you lit with a lighter, and seashell ashtrays under their beds. Or sometimes, on the carpet, a piece of rainbow string that we braided into bracelets just like the ones they wore on their wrists. And in their stereos, mixed tapes with magic-markered cases that we stole, copied, and snuck back into their double decks.

"What's up with the music?"

"Fast-forward. I'm sick of *Legend*."

"Bob Marley sucks. Where's Bess? She stole the mixers."

We ducked under the voices, turned into wind. We were shimmerers in the green gold heat, floating below the uncut grass to steal potato chips and cans from tailgates that we ran back in the woods to drink.

A girl saw us and said, "I know you. You're Katie's sister. You go to Garrison. Or Maryvale."

She stood above us, gilded in tan skin—a tenth-grade goddess with lacrosse shorts and mirrored glasses.

We were in the sundresses our mothers made us wear, appliquéd with tulips and sailboats. We waited with hopeful, lost looks on our faces, cans lumping obvious in our pockets.

"Did your mom send you? Look how cute you look. Andrew? Where's everybody? Is it cup time?" She flopped down next to a boy on a blanket, hit the hat off his face. "It's cup time, kids."

He flung an arm at her. "Too wrecked."

We turned back into wind and floated off.

Another girl saw us, but she wasn't whispering, or laughing, or being a goddess at all. "You guys aren't supposed to be here," she said. "You're only like eleven or ten."

We glared up at her.

She stuck out her hand as if we had to take it.

But a goddess boy drifted over, saying, "Give them a break." He had his shirttails out, his tie knotted around his forehead. He held out a can. "Here, have a sip. Careful, now. Nice dress."

"I can't believe you!" the girl said.

"It's not going to kill them, Jesus."

We turned their voices into wind and floated off. We flew in the open now. We spun around, our arms held out. Hot and browning, we fell on our backs, the grass flickering over our face. A honeyed, stupid feeling glistened through our veins. We listened to the dirt and heard nothing.

The thunder was far away. Fields and woods away, where the horses were running. One mile, two miles, three miles, four. They were jumping and landing, slipping up from the mud, pulling in on the stride, nudging each other out of the way and off from course. It was a steeplechase. But only in our heads, where we remembered. All around us, voices talked.

"What did I say about *Legend*? Enough already."

"I can't find the freaking tapes."

"Look under the backseat."

We hid. But we had to go, badly. We crawled past boys shaking themselves dry—looking, pretending not to. Deeper in the woods, goddesses squatted behind logs, their friends watching. None of them were our sisters. They were talking and smoking and going loudly.

"I've got poison ivy on my ass."

"Do you have a lighter?"

"Did you see Mandy falling all over that guy? He has, like, a middle part. And no teeth. She needs to eat something."

"Who the fuck is anybody? We should have skipped the National. Too many grits. Too many randoms."

Back on the field, we were hungry. Meat smoked over from barbecues. But the people standing by the coals were too grown-up to be goddesses or our sisters or our sister's friends or boys. They had boiled red faces, hot-dog skin. Music played from the backs of their hatchbacks, sounding crashed and broken. They wanted to see the horses. "The horses is the point of the thing. If I'd of known it was all just drinking I would of stayed at home and saved the ten on parking."

We snuck up to their barbecues, looking orphaned and starved.

"You lost?" they said. "Where's your mom and dads?"

"Our sisters brought us," we said.

They gave us ginger ale and burgers, and some a sip from their cans the way the goddess boys had did. "It won't pass them out. What are you, ten?"

We smiled. "Thank you. You're nice."

"Watch it now. Don't gulp. That's some pretty dress."

"Our dad has a horse," we said. "His name is Jupiter. And his other horse is Lightning."

Now they wanted to know about Jupiter, even if they couldn't bet like on a real horse race.

"Wait a minute," a goddess said, but we knew her. Her name was Alexandra. She was one of our sisters. We tried to turn into wind and not hear her, except she came charging over as if she were our mothers. "You all come with me, right now. All of you!"

Over by the station wagon, Alexandra kept on yelling. She had an Oldfield's t-shirt on—skin and bra showing through the neck. We studied her rainbow bracelet. Then picked at the stringy braids around our wrists.

"You shouldn't be over here," she said.

We looked at each other. "We don't feel so good."

"Did those grits touch you?"

"They gave us ginger ale."

"What's up?" said another girl, the most goddess on the whole field. She floated in a seashell light, a dandelion stuck behind her ear. Turquoise glinted across her fingers.

"Mandy," said Alexandra. "It's almost cup time."

We gulped, but didn't correct her. We knew her friend's real name—Aphrodite, Queen of the Pegasuses.

"Don't leave me, Alexandra," Aphrodite said. "Okay?"

Alexandra went over to the car door.

"I love you," said Aphrodite.

Alexandra opened the car door. "We should have only gone to Manor. The whole world is here. Some grits were slobbering on my sister, for god's sake."

We started floating off. Only a few of us made it, though. We hid flat, watching the rest of us get rounded up and carted off by Alexandra in her station wagon, the tires spitting mud across the grass.

"I love you!" Aphrodite waved at the station wagon. A goddess boy came over, talking to her angry.

We waited. Dragonflies flew over and clouds of gnats. One of us found a can in her pocket. We drank, the honey-stupid feeling buzzing in our heads.

"Don't be so uptight!" Aphrodite ripped her arm away. "Go leave if you want to."

"Mandy," said the goddess boy. "Why do you always have to be so fucking psycho?"

"You're boring." She was coming towards us now, her hair loose from her ponytail, her rings flashing turquoise. We flattened. She saw us. But winked as if we were friends and flopped down by us. "You're cute," she said. "You're little."

We waited. "Our sisters said we could stay."

"I don't have a sister," she said. "But you guys are alright."

"We could be your sisters."

"You already have sisters."

"We have brothers," we said. "But they're away at school until it's time for camp."

"I wish I boarded," she said. "I wish I wasn't here, anyway."

"Can we be your sisters now?"

"You don't even know me," she said. "I'm..."

"Aphrodite!"

She lay back. "That's like Venus, right?"

"She's the queen of all the goddesses and all the Pegasuses."

"I thought some guy rode Pegasus."

At first, we weren't going to tell her. She might slap us or laugh or leave. But she asked over and over until we had to explain—how Aphrodite built a golden stable under the ocean, how she fed the Pegasuses sea flowers and pearls, but only if they were good and followed her around and protected her. If they didn't, she cut off their wings.

"So I'm in charge," she said.

We nodded.

She got up. She had to go too, badly.

Everywhere in the woods, girls were squatting. We held hands, going deeper and deeper where nobody was. "Hey, Mandy," somebody said. "Wait up!"

We ignored them, following Aphrodite all the way to a meadow wavering yellow with flowers. She rubbed buttercup butter on our chins. We stood around her while she went on the moss, turning her hissing into silent wind.

Some of us tried to braid her hair with our fingers. Aphrodite jerked her head back and stood up. "Curry comb me," she said. "Catch me!" She started galloping around.

We stayed where we were, not moving.

Aphrodite wasn't stupid, but she didn't know the rules. Everybody was a horse at first—on the playground, in the trees behind

the gym at school. But then if you turned into a Pegasus and flew around and ate your pearls and beat the unicorns, you got to be a goddess. That was the game.

"You're a goddess. You have to stand on a rock and let us fly around you."

"That's no fun." She went soaring through the woods, jumping over clouds and oceans. All we could do was fly behind her, changing the rules to let Aphrodite be a Pegasus.

By a mountain of rocks, she stopped and gathered us around her, crouching. "Quiet."

"Okay," somebody was saying. "Softer. Like that."

We laughed.

"Quiet, I said." She pointed. "Look.."

There were two of them. They had their shirts on and their shorts off, down to their shoes. The girl was leaning back against the tree and the boy was standing in front of her, pushing into her—a butt, white and fat and jabbing.

"Jesus," Aphrodite whispered. "Disgusting."

We didn't say anything. It was a little scary. The boy had the girl's arms held up over her head, her back scraping against the bark as he jabbed her, gripping the inside of her leg.

"That's Becca," she said. "She's going out with Chip but that's Richard-something from Boy's Latin."

"They're having sex," we said.

"People are assholes," she said. "It makes me sick. You don't want to keep watching, do you?"

"No," we said, even though we did—a hot tingle feeling prickling in our skin. We hit each other, fighting over who was going to ask why they weren't lying down the way it was in books. Aphrodite said it was because they weren't in love and it went faster.

Back on the field, there were fewer cars now. It was getting dark. None of us said it, but all of us knew—our mothers were looking for us, furious. Aphrodite was hungry. She wanted a hot dog and

more to drink. She flew us over to a barbecue, the sparks jagging up in lightning streaks.

"No," we said. "Those are grits."

"You guys aren't assholes, right?"

"No," we said.

"Grits just talk uglier and don't go to our schools or live where we live." She had a bottle from one of their tailgates, but it wasn't sweet and brown like ones in our father's bars under the sink. It was liquid silver and shot through your heart, burning. "I'm your sister. I'm Aphrodite. I have a bow and arrow. Nothing's going to happen as long as you stay with me."

A grit switched on his headlights. The grass flared white. Aphrodite's eyes winked into hard blue stars, "Now this is fun," she said.

We sat on a bumper, eating hot dogs. Aphrodite kept dancing in the headlight grass. A grit was trying to make her slow dance, even though the music was fast and broken.

"Cut it out," she said, floating off.

Our heads were dry inside and wooden. We took her hand. "She's our sister," we said. "We have to go find our parents."

"I don't want to," she said.

"She doesn't want to," the grit said. He had dirty teeth. "Do you, Mandy?"

"It's cup time," we said. "Don't you want to see who won the cup, Aphrodite? We have to go now, right?"

"Cup?" she said.

"Mandy wants to dance." The grit slung his arm around her. She was leaning. He was getting bigger and redder in the coal light of the barbecue. We didn't let our faces look afraid. "She doesn't want to dance. She's our sister. Aphrodite, come with us."

"Get along now. Go run find your Mom." He shooed us.

We grabbed her by her hands and pulled. "Let's be Pegasuses. You can be a Pegasus with us, okay? And fly, fly away."

"What's that?" the grit said.

We flew around in dizzy circles.

The grit said, "Wait! I can be one with you all!"

"No you can't," we said. "You're just a stupid grit." We flew away from the headlights. Aphrodite stumbling behind as if she'd forgotten how to use her wings.

"I said wait up, you spoiled little shits!" the grit yelled after us.

"You're ugly," we screamed. "And you'll never be a goddess!"

"Your friend's a wasted tease!"

It was dark. The grass was full of whispers and snakes, but we didn't touch the ground, pulling Aphrodite up with us into the sky by her hands. "I'm not a tease, am I?" she kept saying.

"No. You're our queen and we love you."

"I love you too. I do, really."

Deep in the field, a fire burned. A bunch of goddess boys sat around it on blankets. One of them had a guitar. He had long hair to his shoulders like our sisters and a rainbow-braided bracelet on his wrist. We watched his hands' magic over the strings. The music was quiet. We were tired.

"This is boring," said Aphrodite.

"Who's that?" a girl asked.

A boy stood up. "Mandy. And some little friends."

"They're my sisters," said Aphrodite.

"Cool." He took us by our hands. "Come on. You can sing, can't you?"

We let him lead us to the blanket. The goddess boy with the guitar kept pushing his hair out of his face. Sometime he would stop to stare at a goddess in a hooded sweatshirt, as if all the other girls around her had blown away into wind. She had dimples. She had soft-colored eyes. We inched nearer. "Over here," she said. "I'm Becca. You can sit on our laps."

We looked at each other, deciding. Then we crawled over, leaning back into their arms, breathing in their smoky, apple-smelling hair.

Aphrodite stayed on the blanket edge, picking at fringe. Becca sang, her voice blowing warm on the back of our necks.

We laughed when they laughed.

We lit lighters for their cigarettes.

"This is bor-ing," Aphrodite said.

"We could tell scary stories," we said. "like at camp."

"Yeah," Becca said. "Tell us a scary story."

We tried to remember. Camp was months and months behind us, and months and months ahead. We overlapped each other, once upon a time, a man named Blueblood lived in the forest. He was a handsome and kind man. He was a woodcutter, no, a hunter, no, an old man with a cabin. A young couple got lost and asked to spend the night. He showed them to a cozy bedroom with a quilt. They heard a creak at their door. They saw a flash of hatchet. But we didn't have a counselor to sneak up and yell, "I want your blue-blood!" as a surprise at the ending. Nobody screamed. We trailed off in a mumble.

"Blueblood," said Aphrodite, laughing. "That's funny. That's hysterical."

"It's scary," we said.

But she wouldn't stop laughing. "I know. Why don't I tell one?"

A girl across the fire stretched. "Whatever. Go ahead."

"Once upon a time," Aphrodite said. "There was a silly, little girl named Becca. She lived in a tiny little hut in the woods with her mother and father. Every night she ate bread and water for supper while her fat, mean parents told her she was nothing. But Becca was a smart silly little girl and studied hard and got a scholarship."

"Mandy," said the goddess boy with the guitar. "Cut it out."

"She tried and tried, but nobody at her new school liked her. Except a girl named Mandy. They played mermaids at Mandy's pool. They played tennis at Mandy's club and hung out at Mandy's beach house. Until Becca figured out that nobody liked Mandy either."

"Jesus," said a boy. "Why do girls always fight in public?"

"Shut up," said Aphrodite. "So Becca dumped Mandy and made all these new friends. She even got a super-sweet boyfriend named Chip. She was going to go to Duke. She was going to come back home and marry him or another boy like him and be on the board at the club and sit around by a punch bowl, talking crap and ladling fruit into glasses. But sometimes she got so, so scared that nobody still liked her. Sometime she did the silliest little things, just to get them to like her. She would go into the woods sometimes with guys. She would ditch Chip by some tailgate and go off and..."

"Becca?" said the goddess boy with the guitar.

"She didn't know everybody only liked her because of Chip. Except for Mandy. Because Mandy thought Becca and her were friends. Mandy loved her."

"Whoa," said a girl. "Loved?"

"Chip?" said Becca.

None of us asked if she was the Becca from the story. Or if Chip was Chip. Or if anybody was going to follow him when he banged down his guitar and walked away into the woods

"He's an asshole, Becca," said Aphrodite. "All of them are. Don't you remember?"

Becca stood up. "Why do you have to be so mean?" She was crying. "You're the asshole, Mandy."

Aphrodite held her hand out. "Come on, you guys. Let's fly away and be unicorns."

"Let's be unicorns?" a girl said. "You're wasted, Mandy."

The whole blanket laughed.

We laughed too, shrinking deeper into their arms.

"Come on," said Aphrodite. "I'm still your sister."

We stayed where we were on their laps.

Aphrodite looked at us, her face jerking. Then she started flying, running and jumping and spinning through the grass—her hair and rings glinting as she spun in front of the fire.

*Reflections in the Magic Mirror:
The Poetry of Vijaya Mukhopadhyay*

Vijaya Mukhopadhyay's poetry has two principal voices: the ironic, urbane voice of contemporary social criticism, and a sober, searching voice that explores the historical and socio-economic dynamics of Indian culture, both in its ancient and modern contexts. *Palm Leaves from the High Rise*, the title I have given to the collection in which these poems appear, embodies the two major influences upon Vijaya Mukhopadhyay's work. Early Sanskrit prayers and ritual chants were often first written on palm leaves, and later copied to more durable parchment. Vijaya Mukhopadhyay has an extensive background in Bengali literature and the Sanskrit language (she holds advanced degrees in Sanskrit philology and dramatic literature) that informs and lends historical and cultural depth to her work. She is also a member of contemporary literary and political culture, living in a modern high-rise apartment building and writing poems that express her concern for social and political issues, especially those involving women.

So far, most of her work published in translation consists of the witty, ironic poems set in middle-class Kolkata.¹ This work—as manifested in poems like “The Magic Mirror,” “Male,” and “Stop, Forefinger!”—reflects critically on the existential angst of educated, middle- and upper-middle-class Bengalis: those privileged enough to have the full bellies and leisure time necessary for worrying about whether pleasure, love, and poetry have abandoned them in their consumer-goods-filled high-rise flats. Meanwhile, the rest of Kolkata's masses of working poor and destitute people are preoccupied with more fundamental concerns: food, clothing, shelter, and rest.

In comparison with English, Bengali is a very dense, concise language. Connecting verbs like “is” and “are” are not always used, the inflection of nouns eliminates many articles and prepositions required in English, and compound verbs say in two words what takes a whole clause to say in translation. One result is that a short-lined poem in Bengali becomes a long-lined English poem, and a moderately long-lined Bengali poem turns into a Whitmanesque sprawl in English. I have retained each poem's original line and stanza breaks, and inverted or transposed lines only where necessary to make sense or be grammatically correct. To avoid the “sprawling” effect, I have run many long lines over onto a second line, usually breaking at a point, approximately midline, that is effective for English syntax and faithful to the poet's own sense of lining. To show that these second halves are continuations of the same Bengali line, I have indented them two tab markings. When an indentation occurs in the original, I have usually indented three or four tab markings. It is ironic that attempts to retain the original line integrity of formal Bengali poems have frequently resulted in translations that look anything but formal in English.

I have not added to the texts of any of these poems, except the occasional explanatory epithet or phrase that serves, I hope, to create a similar sort of allusory context for Western readers that the epithet or phrase by itself would evoke for most Bengali readers of the original poem. For all facets of Bengali historical and cultural lore, I have resorted to notes when the terms, the allusions, or the objects to which the poem refers seem to require background information and carry symbolic significance of which the Western reader is not likely to be familiar. Such information will, I hope, help English-language readers to appreciate the compelling cultural milieu out of which these poems emerge, and to gain a better understanding of poems that make Vijaya Mukhopadhyay one of the clearest and most incisive voices of her generation.

Toward the Purbasha Island

Some of you
 said you would
 set out for the Purbasha Island.²
 Go then, rub in the luster of Purbasha,
 there the silt is soft.
 Just one of you stay here,
 who will stay with me—you,
 poison fruit?
 All right, you come, inside the room a small room.
 Come, let's lie down side by side;
 Insult, let's lie down side by side,
 tonight there'll be rain, a storm,
 lightning in the sky.
 Tonight the two of us
 are close together,
 very close.

1993

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Paramita Banerjee and the author.

Without So Much as a Glance from You

You came in through the back door, O dream,
 and you went out again through the back door,
 brushing with your hands a few pots and pans, and
 the crumbs of daily life in the inner
 chambers of the house
 (so many defects all over the place, so mortifying for me).
 Then through the courtyard behind the house
 you went away on the dirt road.

A tastefully decorated drawing room in front—books, Picasso prints,
 recordings of Abdul Karim³ and John Gielgud
 lying there useless in the empty room,
 without so much as a glance from you.
 You've gone now, dream, pouring scorn
 on these human artifacts
 designed all wrong, that with such self-satisfaction
 were laid out so earnestly and lovingly by me.

1977

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Sunil B. Ray and the author.

Rock of Resolve

Will you rob me of my calm?
 Disdainful city
 you fly as dust over my head,
 cling to my feet as mud,
 hurl the yelping of crows and dogs at me
 to lead me astray?

I walk across the dark gaping mouth,
 ghouls and spectres don't bother me.
 The cursed ones step off the path,
 is there temptation in your fingers?

All right then, notice
 that at the pinnacle of my vow's observation
 the nascent rock of resolve is calm.

Will you rob me of it?

Go back, disdainful city
 as dust, as commotion
 skimming the antennae of red and yellow buildings,
 fly quickly away to the border.

1988

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Paramita Banerjee and the author.

Exhilaration and Boat

Winter sunlight shimmers
 on the rags of pavement dwellers
 and on the disdainful dome of the church.
 Exhilaration cries out to the dumb person
 —would you respond?

Each night the boat drifts a little closer
along the dark line of the axis,
 cheerless and unerring as fate's decree
 —would you step onto the deck?

Exhilaration cries out
 the boat drifts closer
 the dumb person stands there
 the person alone
 the person.

1988

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Paramita Banerjee and the author.

Let Yourself Go

Don't be so sure of yourself, woman,
 controlling everything in your hands.
 Let some things go,
 outside, in confusion, in sun, in the rain,
 in uncertainty.
 Let some crops spoil
 squandered or unseen.

Once in a while, leave yourself
 open to attacks and fear.
 Let a few leaves drift down like feathers
 onto your disheveled hair.
 From all your regimented ways
 take a few days' leave.

Sometimes it's good
 mentally to let yourself go.
 What if your feet stumble over a few tufts
 of straw and stubble—
 if you keep yourself open,
 leave some things behind?
 Let the wind burst in
 to stroke your rigid body.
 someday let your guard come down.

1977

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Sunil B. Ray and the author.

No Home

I came back home and found my home's not at home.
 A huge door
 and some mocking windows
 jittering to demand
whom do you want?
 I'll have to think about who I was looking for.
 The house stood empty, the home wasn't there.
 Like a tenant on a wooden chair,
 like an uninvited guest,
 I understood everything,
 indecision in my eyes, my legs giving way.

I'm alone.
 In my house today there is no home.

1988

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Sunil B. Ray and the author.

Stop, Forefinger!

Something's left unfinished.
 There's too much dust in the evening clouds;
 many of you are rather short
 with wrinkled foreheads, faces
 lacking in dazzle.

My complaint has also swelled
 in equal measure.
 Keeping half this meter in my hand
 I give the rest to you;
 if you can do so, make it whole,
 and if you can't, stop,
 put your finger on the spot
 and tell me—here's the fault.

Radioactive fallout spreads
 in the evening clouds.
 The work's not done, before me looms
 a colossal frown.

1984

—translated by Carolyne Wright with Sunil B. Ray and the author.

The Magic Mirror

Shankar asked, *What have you been writing?* Unlike him, I couldn't say—I've written nine new things, that's why I'm so cheerful. Sometimes everything goes blank, I feel afraid, and I think—it's that magic mirror in front of me, which the professor advised me over and over to beware of, which changes its tasseled drapery⁵ only to reflect the same image two-four-eight-sixteen times larger every day.

It's so amazing, how have I ever written anything new? My brain is crammed with phonemes: What's the nature of the current Middle East crisis? How legal are gherāos⁶, in the exclusive shops of which cities do we see hanging those polyester⁷ shirts collected for droughts, and why don't I know yet how to knit wool, is that robust girl's name Love, or how many waves will remain in the pearl necklace soon to arrive? Where is poetry, where inside? Or outside where? So many obscene words all around me, so much restlessness in this low-ceilinged room, inside my head so much coffee, so much commotion, even my trusty teeth are sunken.

I've written nothing new. Making marks with his fingers on the dust-covered surface of the car at the turn of the lane, Shankar took off without looking back.

1971

—translated by Carolyne Wright with Paramita Banerjee and the author.

*Bethuadahari*⁸ *Half in Shadow*

The earth has come to nest on the fields;
 beside them the railroad, a neat parting of the hair.
 The trees stand, their faces covered with loose tresses,
 moonlight out of order in the sky, Bethuadahari half in shadow.
 The fish-vendor women are travelling without tickets,
 their baskets stinking of fish beside them.
 They sit dangling their feet from the upper-class seats
 and nobody objects.
 The almanac peddler hawks his wares, nobody objects.
 The whistle sounds, tearing through the night;
 leaving the intolerable world behind, the train departs
 from an unreal station, toward an impossible expanse.

1990

—translated by Carolyn Wright with Paramita Banerjee and the author.

NOTES

1. The English spelling of the name of West Bengal's largest city, once called Calcutta, was changed recently to reflect a more accurate transliteration of the original Bengali.
2. The Purbasha Island, one of many shoal-islands formed by tons of silt washed downstream every year by the rivers emptying into the Bay of Bengal, emerged in the late 1970's from an estuary of the giant Ganga/Padma River, a sort of no-man's area between Bangladesh and West Bengal. In these overpopulated countries, such shoals are zealously watched: as soon as the Purbasha formation rose even a fraction above normal tideline, it was settled and cultivated by landless farmers from both countries. A dispute then arose as to which country could claim the island, because no one knew who was first to cultivate, and thus take possession of it. Interestingly, the name Purbasha means "Eastern Hope."
3. Abdul Karim was an eminent singer of classical Hindusthani vocal music.
4. The final two words of the original Bengali poem are actually the transliterated English words, "glorious retreat." To throw in English terms reflects the custom of a class of affluent Bengalis who show off their sophistication to each other by peppering their conversation with English phrases.
5. The "tasseled drapery" in Bengali is the *jhālat*, a fringed valance or fancy piece of tapestry or embroidery with which well-to-do Bengali women covered the mirrors. In the days when polygamy was condoned among some Hindu Bengalis, especially the Kulin Brahmins, folklore was full of "Mirror, mirror, on the wall" sorts of stories, in which a co-wife would ask, "Which one of us is fairer?" In one "Magic Mirror" poem by Rabindranath Tagore, the mirror gives the questioner its answer—the other wife—by showing the image of her co-wife's face.
6. The *gherāo* (literally, surrounding or encircling) is a protest tactic used by Indian labor and political organizations, usually when negotiations break down. Groups of workers surround the office or factory, and prevent the owners or bosses from leaving until they agree to hear the protestors' demands.
7. The Bengali word translated as "polyester" is the word for terylene, an older brand name for petroleum-based fabrics.
8. Bethuadahari is a forested game preserve in West Bengal.

Raining Peanuts

It's raining peanuts, oh sweet Jesus, it's raining peanuts. What a relief—I can quit my job. This is the currency they shelled out anyway. It refused to grow on trees but now bounces off rooftops, clogs gutters, inspires automobiles to whoop and chirp. I can go primitive and simply gather what I need. You can take this job and love it all the way back to the bone age! I shout at my insane boss over the knocking of nuts against the window pane, and out I go into the nutty world. People are carrying aluminum umbrellas. Plows are pushing up peanut hills in a parking lot. I romp and roll in the cardboard-textured tidbits and leave a few peanut angels around. Yes, okay, it is getting arduous, wading down the sidewalk, knee deep in peanuts. The rain is letting up and I'm getting hungry. The first shell I crack open contains not a peanut but a pebble. There must be some misprecipitation; that's a tad dangerous, in fact. The next one I open has a cigarette butt in it. The next, a tiny plastic soldier, and the next, a jelly bean. A bean is an improvement over a butt, but still not a nut. When one is unemployed, consistency is what's needed with this kind of work. I'm shelling ball bearings and paper clips. My God—how am I going to feed my children on this stuff? Oh sweet Jesus, it's clouding up again.



Das Vorlaufen-zu *at Mike's*¹

I walk in the door and they look at me like I don't belong; a dozen beery old farts swivel their barstools to stare. I remember the chunk-chunking sound of old-time cash registers. The brains of these drunks make an identical noise.

Whom do they see now? What did they expect? For one confused wishful instant was I a dear fallen comrade, home from that Great Taproom in the sky? Did they take me, even briefly, for a celebrity, a gunman, a Connecticut skier with his Beamer in a ditch?

Whatever they want, it'll never be me. And as they comprehend this, slowly, they resent it.

I look back at them. And from those milky eyes, that silver stubble, those shaking hands all veins and tendons, comes the realization that somewhere, sometime, this will become of me. Such a pastiche of decay and desperation is what my future holds.

And now, at the bar, I can't forget. I've been there, swiveling on my stool, hand trembling on my glass. My own filmy gaze has turned on me, demanding, Who the hell are you and why are you not what I wanted?

¹From *A Practical Guide to the Teutonic Philosophers*.

Interview

Antonio Brooks, a field reporter, has covered the Midwest since it was started. He scheduled a meeting, surmised his Midwestern perspective, and blindsided Reed with questions on the whereabouts of his wheat. Here's what happened.

A.B.: You accept fiction from what it constitutes in the reader. Is this your moral, and could this ever extend beyond into action?

S.R.: Fiction should be ethical so as to deprecate religion, resetting its conclusions as a promise. Bases in patterns, the description's morality rivals mere location propaganda by playing off the associations that peak in the reader's withdrawal into the story. The reader's consciousness takes the event into related action, processing the linkage between what is read and acceptable psychology. My ideal reader's consciousness has a resulting agenda to train around, yielding the prized judgment of his supplied references.

A.B.: As a Midwesterner, I have to ask, how does this lead to sexual advancement, or your "era of correspondence"?

S.R.: Focus on the climax that preserves a skill. Time these climaxes to permit no framework for fantasies. Sex could be a collection of rationales and the physical severity corresponding to them. Fantasy relies on an inner working lacking a plateau for an event. Fiction should prompt the physical experience to rival the story. The primacy of the resulting sensation is the place to test your judgment

of my fiction. Mine provides a mental diversion into what logically could correspond—one that relieves the reader from the response to fantasy.

A.B.: Where is the right arena for processing such fiction?

S.R.: Sequence approval should shape the reader's innocence. Ideally a birth viewership, because of the way it forces one to look into the body. It doesn't permit the patterns acquired via my fiction. Another is War with its reversal in textures, with its wounds, and the way you have to look into the body. Coordinate both for seclusion. I reckon my ideal reader is a medic considering staggering his ethic long enough to betray patriotism.

A.B.: I processed your words inland amongst family with no creed to speak of. What of my conclusions? Are they valid?

S.R.: I say consider your prior affiliations. Were you drawn to farmers thankful for their landscape of rows? Did you ration that temptation yielding a consciousness meant to process your morals into a hierarchy? My fiction should lead to a reproduction, a sort of tact with which to handle scenery. Maturity inland should devalue family, inclining one to work. Kinship is permitted only once the production is gauged. From this vantage one can decide on their affiliations with family. Mine passed—we can outwork anyone. Take turns at it, if my family was to inherit a mill or such. I found that this pragmatic virtue enforced multiple sensations forming the framework for considering values. Now these sensations space events, aiding the process of which emotion to assign them. Granted, all this happened miles from the coast. Virginia was the ideal geographic site: coast, piedmont, mountains. The flatness of the Midwest may be a distraction; one could see others much easier.

A.B.: Is there a time order for the exposure to your ideals whereas the reader can embrace, say, quotas for sensation and still remodel his inward fiction?

S.R.: Positioning begets an inherited tragedy. Revision will revolve around the story's cadence, its logics progression, and the sentence-by-sentence involvement. I look for terseness to the language and a recall of event. It should shepherd the reader, yielding a commitment to structure that enhances evaluation, hopefully supporting one's surroundings so one realizes the safeties that were always in place. It's preaching, while a lesson to orient at the same time.

Study of the Human Figure in Motion (Man Bathing)

His eyes light on the river's grim twitch.

The river muscles beneath its quick skin.

From the stable's loft, through a triangular window.

I am if he is.

•

In motion he is as a horse. Poll, ear,
mane, withers:

the tip of the spine may
protrude.

Loin, croup, dock, tail: I said
to him Give her up.

The river continues,
screen on which light's film projects his
ineffable blur. And beyond each surface,
unknown movements. Elbow, fetlock,
pastern, hoof:

(forearm, shoulder, neck,
back)—

I watch him who watches the river
and what catches there, brutal as fact.

•

Body's garments gone errant with wind.

Spooked cry rax spastic from the horse's
clenched pit.

Dust bedded, hair flown with disorder,
how his whole figure
enters the river.

I never said to him Give her up.

The river is an image: like any other.

Field Recording

[How I Became a Ghost]

He asked me. To come. Come to
listen I said
to myself

May we have a little light?

Blinds drawn up hard like
deck of cards shuffled: twice. I drew
in my chest

Aren't you cold?

Sunlight like
that. He didn't
say.

Are you alone?

Sunlight like that
his face screened
stuttered blanks. Then I heard

down the passage.

from a vinyl groove scraped
(Listen I said)

fused volumes, breaths

popped by a dusty needle—

(within that room)

(later)

I saw the bedclothes hover.

Night Cycle

Without you I slip through night
like a coin the slot won't take

*You fill me like a child
in the body of an old refrigerator*

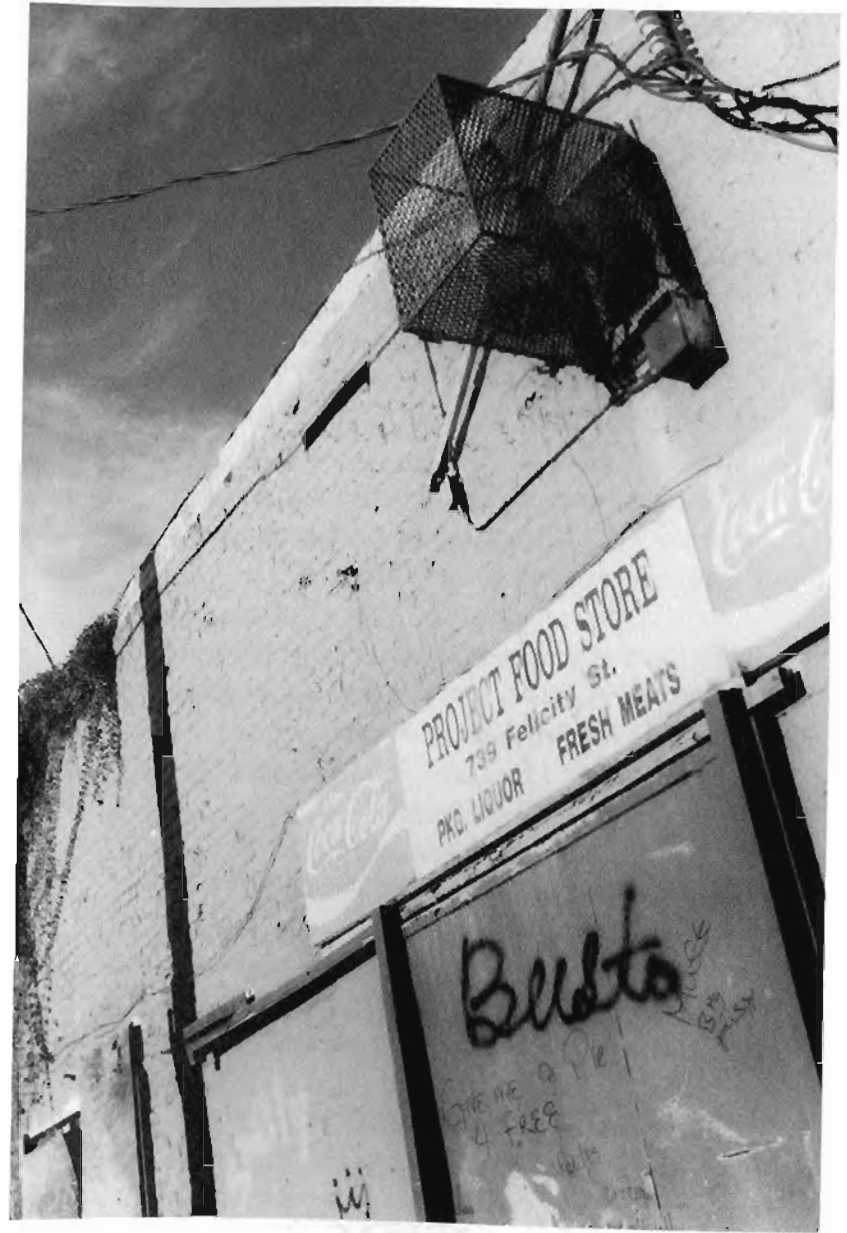
Like a coin the slot won't take
without you I slip through night

*You let my snapdragons
die now you can't leave them be and*

Without you like a coin the slot
won't take I slip through night

*You dream a desire to caress the gray stubble
of a man smoking through a hole in his throat*

But without you I slip through night
like a coin the slot won't take



May Day, Krakow, 1986

And you are free now, I concede it,
To crush me. —Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

So here we are in Krakow. May,
the mid-eighties, decade of Solidarity,
the Socialist Workers Party party day—

processions, banners, placards, insufferable
speeches—it could be Easter all over again.
Car-battery-powered speakers blare,

By the Rivers of Babylon by Abba
and *Poland Has Not Yet Perished*
by a kids' choir. We don't know yet

reactor number two in Chernobyl
has exploded, that the glowing clouds
we see breaking up their huddle above

the oddly cheerful, sentimental Krakow crowds
swell radioactively from here to Finland.
We will not know until the BBC tells us.

Tomorrow we will hear of lambs nibbling
the high mountain meadow grass in Bochnia
dropping dead. Then we'll be told we shouldn't have

waded barefoot through the dewy meadows
or kicked up dust on our slow,
medieval walk home. Our year is almost up,

Mania etching at the Art Akademia,
me in cafés and reading rooms, as unstable
an element as the revolution performing

out in the streets, casting off electron pages
from the half-life I'm living writing a novel: a failed
expatriate composer falls for a mezzo

singing Tatyana in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*
and gets caught up in Solidarity intrigue.
I set it in the famed Michalik's Pit,

where performers from the Krakow Lyric break
and a blond French-braided, costume-plump Tatyana
shows up every day for tea and pudding.

A tall, gangling Eugene lurks from the coat check,
half hidden by his cape. Oh how I long
to come between them, but I don't. English

increasingly turns into a foreign tongue
for me, a tortured debased dialect.
I spend half the day in lines—

toilet paper, Slovenian wine, kielbasa not
from horse. Today even the Stalin Steel Works
are still—Mania and I stroll joyfully

across the stage of the budding revolution.
It seems the crackdown might not come, even
the General's distracted from his tanks

and secret police today—cognac, boxes
at the opera. The only Russian on his mind
is sad Tatyana, who'd gladly ease

his woes. The sun like party streamers,
the sun like a warm provincial breast.
Catastrophe averted, May Day. May Day!

Convenient Care

Twenty years and I was not sure I still loved you
Until he flipped your lid up
And beckoned me to come closer,
To look you in the eye
As he droppered iodine in, dyed the white a yellow
Curry color, then stood on a chair
To adjust venetian blinds.
When he turned the light off
Your eye glowed in the dark, neon green, a horror
Film, your veins snaking
Like sheet lightning,
There, in the middle of the limpid, ink-black pupil,
A tilde, a diacritical mark.
It was then that I knew.
I beheld you and liked, I knew I loved what I saw.

Life

I hardly knew where to begin, it wasn't like
in a game, like Monopoly: clearly: Start Here; I came in

in the middle; the little I could glean
from watching the rest of them

was less than useless: one was to blame & don't think
she didn't know it, though

for what unuttered reason; but things
always come to a head if you leave them

alone. It re-began
with a shiny tiny toy from someone with a yen

(Auntie Madam?) for chronic occupation; not even for me,
underneath the tree, addressed to the smallest

of sisters: its keys of luminiferous metal & crowned with
a ravishing top that said TYPE

WRITER: the first I'd ever seen, & for my sibling
the boringest offering. Everything stuck

it's true upon being struck, & the Ks a cacophonous maze
yet for blizzardy days I stayed in

pecking & hunting, relentless: & it came—blinding flash—
that all you need to set What right

is sit & pound it down

Tiresias the Seer

1. THE PART OF WHERE JACK TRIPPER WAS HIS ALMIGHTY FATHER

—Paw, I see where it is written your heart is gonna one day rip in two.

—Son, I don't doubt it for one second, not for one minute. You see so good with them specs.

—Paw, I don't want to die.

—Son, that's a useless thing to say.

2. THE PART OF HOW HE COMES TO KNOW HIS OWN LOINS

Chrissie over there with her giggles and her jiggles. She smells like a breeze. I see her and I think of the undulating oceans. Me stuck in the sand ashore. I told Paw:

—Chrissie makes things happen.

—Not that I'm aware, Son.

—Chrissie makes things happen to me.

—Now that's a good boy. That's my begoggled young man. Now, how old are you?

—We stopped count at eight.

—When was that?

—Ten years ago today.

—Shitfire, Boy! You are ready to be cast out!

3. A BAD HOTEL IS GROUND ZERO

So I was and I was supposed to be happy. Paw put down the cash for the first week.

Now, Chrissie is a beautiful, breezy-smell, pat-me-on-the-head thing to which one might aspire, but it gets shoved back in these uncertain times. This is where I know I don't know nothing. A long time sitting on the very end of the lumped and saggy bed brings nothing. I take off my thick co-colas, so as I might see in a different way. It doesn't do.

Paw's at The Beagle:

—That you Son? How's life as a bona fide man? I love you boy. You make me so proud.

—I'm glad to make you proud Paw. And life as a bona fide is fine, just fine. Except there's one or two questions regarding which I might like to bend a fellow's ear upon.

—Fire away.

—What do I do?

—Boy you'll need to be more specified than that.

—Let me say it another way: what's next for me?

[He calls out to the barroom, hand over receiver but I still hear him: —Drinks on J.T.: my boy's dumbstruck with the highest ideas. Here, here. A-ho.] —Shit Boy you're a regular philosopher.

He hangs up and that is the wisdom that is supposed to last me.

4. THAT THEY BRING UP THE FOOD TO EAT ON A COVERED PLATE AIN'T TOO BAD

5. ALSO THAT THEY GOT A POOL

6. MORNING OF THE NEXT DAY

Paws are only a certain kind of help. I see that now and that's fine. In these situations a man must rely upon his agency. Also rinds and crusts from last night's meal.

7. AND A QUEST IS DEFINED

So I say to myself that a place such as this must have a light bill as one would not even care to imagine, and who pays that light bill, I wonder, and this man with the wherewithal to pay such a bill—He must have answers, mustn't He? The desk clerk downstairs with the big glasses almost like mine and the cigarette on his lip looks at me queerly for such a question and he says a bit of queer talk in a gravelly soft voice. Seems there's a Mr Such-and-Such lives out on the lake. Eats moon pies and such all the day long—this is what I can gather, to hear the gravel-voiced little man talk about it. Can I meet this man, I ask him, and he says sure he supposes and by the way ain't I that son-of-a-bitch Jack Tripper's boy because boy does he have a score to settle with him on account of his sister and his deaf-dumb niece. I'm smart enough to say no and smart enough to cross my fingers into my fist.

Hot Damn, I'm going to meet Mr Such-and-Such the Light Man.

8. THE QUALITY OF LIGHT

There's nothing to say except it's a kind of aspiration.

There's nothing to say except how you'll never hold it in the small pool of your palm.

There's nothing to say except how it's everywhere all around.

9. ON HOW LARRY UPSTAIRS IS A PULL-MY-FINGER UNCLE

- That you?
- It's me.
- Thought you was gone.
- I am gone.
- But you're here.

—I'm here and I'm gone.

Larry is a skinny, hairy, disgusting man. Once upon a time, he was forevermore talking about conjugation to excess. Now he doesn't put on any pants until after lunch and he never does any kind of useful thing. Not much he gives two shits about.

He lets me in.

He pretends I'm not there. Scratches his balls. Coughs like a gross old man. Takes one or two elicit pills. I think it is choco-milk he washes it with. On the tv it's a gameshow and he stares at it intent on something and lights a cigarette. At the commercial he ashes, long overdue.

—Somebody in your shoes is bad to solicit folks. I need a god-damn sign with these panhandlers such as those what sell choco-bars for the greater good. And also sometimes purple irises. Now this.

—I don't want anything from you.

—You lie.

—Okay, the Pinto.

—That damn thing's got no fuel. It is a ragged pony.

—I'll nurse it.

—What do I get?

I think on it, or pretend to. Truth told, I already know how I'm gonna reel him in: Titillation.

—I got a secret.

—About what?

[He's a smarmy little man. His problem is the world's a mystery to him. He is adrift, flailing, drinking in sea foam. He wants so much—so much world, so much touch, so much of its dust, its detritus, its flotsam-jetsam. No longer are his wants even specified; he is a man-sized organ of continuous sensual desire. Gameshows and choco-milk. He throbs with it and so these days he can't even be in the same room as the perfect bounce and jiggle of a Chrissie,

or Janet's pert Janet. His head hurts from it for days. In this case my power is what I might have spied downstairs, that I might relay these things to him. Visions. Communion with his utmost version of God. I am his Pope.]

—Gimme the keys and I'll tell you. Plus I'll buy your groceries.

—What if I don't care?

—You care. Trust me. I know you. Any red-blooded hetero-man would care. That goes double for you. You know I know things.

He tosses me the keys and doesn't look at me.

—Uncle Larry Dallas is a lucky man. Lucky because it's not even things I can say but I have the pictures to prove it. You'll have choco-milk and pictures when I get back. I shall return.

I don't have picture one, but he doesn't know that. Or if he does, he wants so much for me to have those pictures, he tries to will them into existence. He puts his hands in his pants and I leave him to it.

10. OATS FOR THE PONY, THE SIPHONING OF WHICH FROM FURLEY'S COACH EVENTUATES A LASTING ELECTRIC TINGLE UPON MY LIPS

11. A NOTE ON THE PROJECT

It is a journey, a there and back again.

What after all is not a bildungsroman?

12. THE TRINITY

See, you'll want to know how I got there. That the courts and such made special considerations. That my mother was a hard case. That they found me back in the shed, back behind the lawn mower. That for weeks on end it was only cat food to eat. It wasn't that way at all. I was born in my present form. It was their song that beckoned: come and knock on the door. They are waiting for me, where the

kisses are hers and hers and his. This is the one and only root of my bona fide existence.

Chrissie: She floats on golden ether, for she represents the pure innocence and also pure form and pure beauty and also that which is always and forever sweet to the tongue.

Janet: She is the tightest of the tight, a spring. Thus is the expression of energy. She is small, dark, and concentrated. She will bounce forever because she is The Juice manifest.

Paw: Just a dumb lucky pratfall bastard, really. He watches over it all, makes fancy meals. He's just every one of us.

They all three—but mainly their conjunction—taught me what I know and will never leave me. Isn't that a religion, I ask you.

13. NOW I WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO MAKE COMMENTARY ON THE WEATHER

Goddamned steam. I ride with the windows down through this day what's haze-gray with heat. I hear the tires suck to the road. Which way is the lake?

If you want to know, there was a day when Furley downstairs took me to an empty parking lot and taught me how to drive. Brake before putting the car into gear. A crucial point. Furley bugged-eyed Furley. Where on earth did he get those shirts? But he was a clean man, and therefore suited to the task. I learned to drive from a clean man on a crisp day in February.

Would that it were that crisp February day today: the day I must go in search of something larger than myself. This is happening because it happens to us all. It is not a gradual thing. I've learned this, in, now, twenty-nine hours of bona fide life. The day comes. You set out.

If I were a lake, where would I be?

I take the big four lane highway and it is clogged with a morning's full of tired people who are dead to the world. I exit because I cannot stand the path of least resistance. This is one thing that begins to define me in this bona fide life: I swim upstream. That and my nice blue eyes.

If I were a bird, I could smell the lake, see the lake, hear the little edible creatures speeding this-a-way and that underneath its viscous surface. I ain't no goddamned avian beast. I ride this humpbacked Orange Steed. Clop-clop. Clop-clop. In the direction of what probably is not the lake. I take off my shirt, ride through the day with the sun browning my left arm, my blue eyes squinting and only a passing of the stale air to make me feel cool.

14. THE KIND OF UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE ONE MIGHT EXPECT

Her name is Hazel and she's outside the Abernathy's IGA with short pants and a real tight t-shirt. I go in for a can of juice and whatever else that handful of change I find in the ashtray will buy to eat. Hazel's exactly my age and she's in exactly the same boat as me, which is to say she wants to be headed somewhere where somebody's got some goddamned answers but she don't know any better than me where that might be. So she's shiftless and at the IGA instead. That's the nature of our confluence.

—Hi, she says. Nice ass. And I like your flat stomach.

Nobody I know's talked to me this way before. Hazel's a first. Her teeth are just a little buck, but they're white and strong. She's got a pretty jaw and, what's more, the form of the rest of her's quite shapely.

—I like how brown you are, I say. She laughs at that and later on she tells me it's because that's a fucked up, weird thing to say, even though she liked it and it made her feel good to hear it. So good she takes my hand and we walk in and buy a couple of orange Nehis and a box of Fig Newtons.

—How come you got this plum ride? she says.

—Uncle let me have it.

I eat a Newton in a bite.

—You're gonna choke on those. Don't choke now.

I swig some orange and hit my turn signal in one motion.

—Where we going? she asks me, but I can tell she doesn't care.

—Lake.

She laughs at this—there's a bunch of times where she laughs at what I have to offer up into the world—and tells me how there ain't no lake anywhere near here.

—Besides, she tells me, I know a place better than any old lake. She grabs my co-colas off my face and puts them on hers and when I get real close she's so pretty I lose breath and decorum.

Of course the next part's sex but it sure isn't any good for either one of us. Hazel's done it a fair number of times but only with stupid boys like me, and I've never done it. I don't think I get my pants all the way off. When she is naked, I find her to be a pretty girl who rastes like salt. The backseat of a Pinto's a small place for love. After, I drive down the dusty alley and she cuddles up close to me.

—At four-thirty I got to find my boyfriend, but you must stay with me until then.

—Okay, I say.

15. WE MAKE OUR OWN TRIO

Billy Ray only likes to be called Billy Ray by Hazel, and only then when he's in the mood. Instead he likes B. R. B. R. comes up to me that afternoon and shakes my hand. We meet him outside the Gas-n-Sip. He used to work the register.

—Quit that fucker today.

—That's my baby, says Hazel. And she kisses him hard with tongue and smiles at me real proud.

—Friend of Hazel's is a friend of mine, he says. He gets into The Pony, Hazel hops onto his lap. There's something in my throat as I put it in gear. Salt, I think.

16. BILLY RAY'S AN ODD BIRD

Says how he wanted to sing in the Vienna Boys' Choir which sounds like the most faggoty thing I could ever think of but Hazel she leans herself up under his chin and says how someday baby someday.

—Dumbshit it can't be someday. I'm already too fucking old.

—I meant all the sons I'm gonna give you, Billy Ray.

—Don't call me that.

He looks out the window for a long time, doesn't talk except to tell me when to turn. Hazel crawls into the back. We drive out along the river, past the steel mill, up into the trailer parks. They live with his sometimes-Momma.

—Park it around the back there.

It starts to rain right when I get out of the car. They bolt inside and slam the door shut, and it takes them a long time to open up. I almost leave, wet. I can't really figure why I'm there in the first place. There's still five days of time left at the motel. They answer finally, and she's tucked up under his arm and he's sort of smiling—as much as he ever does, I come to find out—and he hands me half a can of beer.

—Say hi to Momma.

His Momma is a terrible woman to look at because of all the haphazard lines across her face and hands. She don't look like him one bit, but I guess if he says she's his Momma, then she is. There's bad teeth in there, and the black-muscle tongue of a lizard. Her hair's a mat. She's in a ratty robe. I go to shake her hand anyway but he slaps it back.

—Isn't right to reach for a lady. Let her present her hand if she wants.

His Momma doesn't want. She just eyes me blankly and goes to one of the pantries. There's cookies in it and she takes the box with her to where the tv is. Maybe she can speak, maybe she can't. That's what she is.

—What's the plan tonight Momma?

She doesn't say.

—We're gonna paint the town. Quit that fucker today Momma. You'd a been proud. That bastard Glenn just stood there with his slack-jaw wide open. I said Glenn you better watch it or you're gonna catch some flies, boy! He didn't say nothing to that Momma cause he couldn't say nothing at all. I had him.

His Momma stuffs one cookie after another into her mouth. The news is on and it's about some man out in the country who never did leave his house and when he finally died they went in there to find nothing but stacks and stacks of hundred-dollar bills.

—Wonder what he ate? says Hazel.

—Hundred-dollar bills, I guess, I say. She laughs bright-eyed and I remember the backseat. You can tell she remembers it at the very same time.

—That's dumb, says Billy Ray. Almost like he remembers too. He takes her by the hand and they go back into the back. After a time, I hear the shower running and Hazel's laughing. I'm stuck up with the tv and the Momma. No use talking so I just keep watching the news even though all I can hear is how there's no noise coming from the back anymore except the shower. That and I hear the crunch-a-crunch of those sandwich cookies.

17. THE TOWN IS PAINTED

This town is shit, as I have always suspected but needed bona fide proof of—me out and about without any home to go home to. At night, it smells like rubber afire. Ain't a goddamn good thing about it except anybody is gonna sell you a drink. We go into the one bar

where B. R. is known, where his visage is welcomed with a few dead grunts and imperceptible nods. He has Hazel on his arm. They like that Hazel is on an arm in the place. This place is musty. Outside there's some Frenchified language such as *Liberte. Fraternite*. B. R. talks about a revolution. About a little man with a small dick who ruled the world. I can't remember the fellow's name, but I'm pretty sure B. R. made it up.

—It's the principles of this establishment, he says. That the small man is the most powerful man there is. That we all each of us can conquer anything.

It's this that makes me sure, once and for good, that Billy Ray has a tiny pecker. Mine ain't tiny at all—in fact it's more the other way round—so I feel better. How it's me whose been further up in Hazel than he could ever be, touched a place in her that's all my own.

—Who's this? says the barkeeper. He is shave-headed and has an inky tattoo on his face and one circumnavigating his neck.

—This's Pinto, says B. R. Hazel laughs. I don't say anything though I know it's not my name. I'm a bona fide and can go by something else now. This life is a new life. I am born again.

We drink. And drink and drink. Hazel, at first, wants a white wine but B. R. yells at her that she's being pretentious and fancy and trying to show off her Audrey Hepburn in front of me. Ain't it enough that you smell so sweet and swish this way and that? he asks her. He's mean about it. So she drinks sweet brown bourbon and coke instead. We go out to the crummy courtyard out back, where it's dark and we're walled in and the only light is that of a faraway yellow street lamp. There's this one fellow back there who's malformed and drunk and has a tattoo of a fat x on his elbow. There's one sad tree, cement slab benches.

—x marks the spot Eddy.

—Yeah boy.

This is the spot.

Later on we go from the loud throb music out into the quiet street.

—I wanna fuck something up, says B. R. His face is red as a brick. And sweaty, mean.

So here's what we do: we start walking. It's three of us spaced out in the middle of the empty road. This town is quiet and fully asleep except us and the all-night reprobate bar from whence we've come. We are all of us super heroes. Juiced up. Ready to take on the night. The first thing we tackle is a house we come to. It's not quite to where the rest of the houses start, but it's something in which there might be some trouble, breathing soft and steady. Billy Ray doesn't say anything through the whole thing, just turns off the street and giddy-ups into a jog across what should have been the lawn but was just dirt from the hot dry summer. Whoever lives in it just doesn't give a shit and that is something too. Me and Hazel stop in the street. B. R. tries the windows, the door, finally he goes around back. Me and Hazel don't say anything but just sway in our drunks. Calm and easy as one might please, out comes B. R. finally, strolling from the front door, a two-year-old black child with a shiny round head in his arms. I can't tell what it is—boy, girl—but it just looks back and forth at Hazel and me. Doesn't smile but doesn't cry and doesn't feel uneasy in the arms of sweaty, red-faced man.

—Where's your momma and daddy boy? B. R. seems convinced it's a boy.

He hands the kid to Hazel. He turns around back into the house. The door hangs open like a tongue. There's one muffled crash from inside, then it's quiet again. Soon enough, Billy Ray emerges from the black. He doesn't wait for us to follow him down the street but we do. Our pace is quickish. Downwind of him's an incendiary smell. I know what he's done. Maybe Hazel doesn't. She just carries that kid with us and she also carries a blank face and sometimes a stumble. I can feel the warmth from the house soon-to-be-afire behind us. We're into the proper neighborhoods before we see the yellow glow just over the trees. We walk this way and that for a while.

turning down the neighborhood streets, just walking. The kid goes to sleep in Hazel's arms. He's heavy, so she hands him to me. He smells like a baby, just like a white baby would, which surprises me a little bit. I'm sobering. Hazel tries to catch up with B. R., to walk with him, to be his woman for a while, but he's too fast, his stride too strong and long. She hangs back, between him and me, in a nowhere. Then we hear the sirens. It's a lot of them. Billy Ray turns and walks backwards, says to me: Ditch the kid. He's a albatross. I don't say anything and my not saying anything seems to say—and it does—But we can't just leave him here in the street. B. R. stops walking backwards.

—Give him over.

—No, says Hazel. Don't give that bastard that kid

He walks forward a few steps and punches Hazel dead in the chest. She goes to sobbing, slumping in the street. The kid goes to sobbing. I would too but I'm not allowed on account of my new bona fide status. B. R. snatches the kid from my arms, holding him under the pits like he's shit himself, and carries him over to a gigantic, wrap-around-porch, richie-rich house. The kid is deposited upon the porch. B. R. comes back out into the street and hoists Hazel up and over his shoulder like a fireman. She beats on his back with her fists, raging as much as she can muster. Those sirens are going.

—Pinto, he calls back to me, you better double-time it.

Double-time it we do.

18. AN ASIDE ABOUT THE QUALITY OF THE VOICE

—I bet you're all from the nasal cavity, everything's with you's in front of the throat.

I don't know what he's talking about. Hazel's fallen asleep and he schleps her over his shoulder still. She's limp like a doll. He and I amble side by side, sweet as you please, as if we didn't burn down a house, steal a child away from the fire, only to abandon it to an alien wrap-around porch in the dark.

—When them little Viennese fellas belt it out so large and sharp, it's because they get taught to find it in their gut and push it out. It's in the guts. Everything's in the guts.

19. A MINISTER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT CAN BE A DEVIL TO FIND

What Billy Ray aims to do is to hitch up. He thinks this is the essence of romance. He thinks there is a symbol in a burning home. He thinks a night of violence and ne'er-do-well is just the time. He tells me so:

—She don't know what's good for her half the time.

—And you do.

—You learn quick, pony boy. I'm fittin' to make her honest. I know this fella, he'll officiate. He's no account, but it's legal.

But we go round and round in this neighborhood and that, looking for the slumbering minister. We can't find nothing or nobody. One time we knock on the door to what B. R. thinks is the man's house, but it ain't. Or else it is and he won't answer.

—That does it then. You gotta do it, he tells me.

—Me? I don't know what to say.

—Honor, obey. That's all. She's up for it, you know that much. We'll find us a grotto, a bower, somewhere fit for nuptials.

We walk out of that neighborhood, back up into a stand of trees, and I'm fairly certain we disappear, maybe someplace deep inside the earth.

20. CHUGGA-CHUGGA CHOO-CHOO, DING-DING, CHOO-CHOO, CHUGGA-CHUGGA CHOO-CHOO, DING

There's tracks we come to. B. R. lays her down across them and laughs like the devil.

—Just like a Buster Keaton pictureshow!

It's all fine and figurative until a train comes along. His eyes flash. He grins. The train growls in approach.

—Ah, shit. Get her up from there and we'll hop this sucker.

21. WE GET HER UP FROM THERE AND HOP THE SUCKER

A train ride, in such circumstances, seems just what the doctor ordered, at first. Hazel's still zonked out and piled up in the dark corner of the railcar. B. R. stands in the open doorway, surveying. I sit and do nothing and listen and let the breeze kiss my face. Hark, a voice from the black:

—Tell your friend he best get out of plain sight.

It's a hobo. There are such things as hoboos, and this was one. B. R. starts when he hears a voice that ain't mine. When he sees what we got, he gets that devil-grin. There's mischief to be had.

—Come 'ere bum, he tells the man. We can't even see his face. He's in the dark corner opposite Hazel. Only his boots stick out in the pale light of the world.

—Boy, the hobo says, you don't come into a man's home and talk ugly at him.

At that, he stands up, and he's a mountainous sort. He moves slow toward B. R., and we catch his face. One eyed, scarred, what you might expect. His knife's out.

—That's the way it's gonna be then, says B. R., and he sets to making all manner of strange facial exhortations to me. We are to be a tag-team, I imagine. I am to hop on the hobo's back. I am to run interference. I look over at Hazel, who's still slumped. I then look at B.R. and, real slow, I shake my head back and forth. He's on his own. When the hobo passes me by, I slide in behind him and gather up Hazel. The car starts to speed up. We drop and roll as the railroad bum plunges his dirty knife into Billy Ray's middle.

22. JUDGMENT

I think I had a plan. I think I imagined it'd be me and Hazel from then on. It wadn't. Turns out, the bum pushed Billy Ray out the car at just about the spot where Hazel and I jettisoned. He moans like a baby and Hazel is roused by that and the great commotion of a fall. Billy? Billy baby? We scramble through the vines and black dirt. Hazel forgets everything but the moans, and Billy Ray cries out for Hazel. I'm gonna die please sweet Hazel don't let me die out here in the vines. Billy. Billy Billy baby.

He has a dying wish:

—Marry me. Make me honest.

—Billy, she cries, there ain't nobody to do it. Don't taunt me like this.

—He can do it, and he points to me.

So I do. I talk about putting love asunder. I talk about committing thy spirit unto one another. For the most part, I make shit up. Problem is, he's supposed to die there in her arms and she's supposed to be leftover to me. But he don't die. It's as if this ceremony is the only thing that keeps him alive.

23. DURING BILLY RAY'S CONVALESCENCE, HAZEL AND ME HAVE ONE LAST ROUSING GOOD TIME

We go to the roller rink to pass the time, this buck-tooth beauty and me. We hold hands for neither one of us skates too good. But Hazel sets me straight:

—I love Billy Ray. I do. We can't do things that would betray that love. I'm a married woman now.

We can, turns out, do other things, things I won't talk about but they're foul and devilish and salty and divine. Turns out the seed and its purchase are to be circumvented. Turns out there are sundry ways to do it and myriad tucked away places where we can hide our

loves. That's a lesson about things: it's not always what you think. A person says one thing one way and it can really be something else. Things and people can always be turned around. When we're through, I stare at the roof of the Pinto and wonder how one can feel so spent and clean and naked to the world—how that's an honest and pure way to feel—but still be engaged in acts of utter stink and prurience.

—I love you, she tells me. She's lying on her back, hard on top of me with her full nothing naked weight.

I ask her how that's so with my arms around her middle.

—It's different. You're pretty and you make me laugh.

She knows from me waiting that I'm asking her what Billy Ray does for her.

—But it's just always been Billy Ray. Can't remember a time when it wasn't. I don't have to explain myself. I'm married now. He's my husband.

I tell her he ain't got a spleen or even a whole liver anymore. How he's just going to be a skinny, scrawny, sickly husband. One who lives off the dole and the beauty she brings into the world.

—I got dreams enough for two, she says, or more. And man if I don't believe her. So I just kiss her shoulder and the nape of her neck and don't bother with it anymore.

—Time's coming, she tells me, when we might have to bust up this threesome.

—Fine, I say. And maybe I even mean it.

24. THE PART WHERE BILLY RAY GETS BACK AND FOR WEEKS SLEEPS IN HIS MOMMA'S BED AND MOANS AND TURNS TO JESUS

He now looks like a brown, withered monkey. His momma casts mean glances at Hazel and me. Hazel won't look at me. She reads him bible verses, wipes the perspiration from his tired brow.

25. THE PART WHERE WE COME CLEAN BECAUSE WE MIGHT AS WELL NOW AND HAZEL'S READING HAS HER BELIEVING IN REDEMPTION

She can only sob.

—It's been where? I can't figure no good reason to put it there.

—I thought that would be better, she chokes.

At that he doesn't say a damned thing. Until he starts to cry too, sob convulsive with his face in her lap—O sister, sister. Baby, my befouled Love—and then I suspect that what I've done is somehow wrong.

26. HOW IF LATKA ON TAXI BELIEVES DEPRAVITY MUST BE MET WITH EQUAL PARTS DEPRAVITY THUS HIS SNOWSTORM INFIDELITY IN EPISODE 94 CAN BE WIPED CLEAN IF SIMKA HAS HER WAY WITH ALEX IN EPISODE 95—THEN THE SELFSAME PRINCIPLE MIGHT WORK HERE

So there's a strange time for the rest of that mid-morning where nobody's talking and everybody's trying to stick to their particular room. There's a breeze through the trailer. The momma's the only one unfazed, crunching cookies in front of TV, safe in the knowledge that things are reaching their just desserts. And then it hits me. I can make it right. I go to him. He sits on the bed wringing his hands in his empty lap.

—Unzip, I say.

—Fuck you, he says.

—That's what I'm getting at, I say. In the bible it's an eye for an eye.

He looks at the floor. He's mulling it. Then he labors to stand, doesn't look me in the eye, unzips. I take off my co-colas, kneel and turn round, open myself before him.

27. THE SUBSEQUENT ACT ITSELF

I was right way back when he talked about that little French general. It is a tiny tiny Bonaparte—so much so that I don't know if I am to consider myself a changed man or not. At the very end he croaks out in one long, single note. He is a frail singer, his body a cracked instrument, but maybe all of it between us is made near about right.

—Don't forget your glasses.

He's held them in his hand all the while, for safekeeping. He's almost tender how he says it.

—I don't need 'em, I say.

My work here is done.

28. OLYMPUS REVISITED

I have near forgot the point of my excursion, lo those many days ago: to seek and find the Light Man out by the Lake. I come to think a body's liable to turn down every road and thoroughfare and never find Him. Shit, I can't even find the lake. I drive until the Pinto's running on fumes. I'm penniless and squinting and there's no room left in the inn. I am, in so many ways, changed, new. I therefore revisit myself upon my nearabouts place of origin for a reckoning of sorts. They are in bed, the three of them. When they hear me rustling with the lock, they tiptoe out in the laugh-track dark, one behind the other. I open up and Paw rears back with the frying pan he holds. I dead pan. Paw screams out like a little girl, and they do, and he falls back onto them, and they are a sit-comedic pile on the floor.

—Hell boy, I thought you was gone for good.

I sneak a peak down Chrissie's soft pink nightie. I think she notices, but cover up she does not.

—I'm not staying.

Pajama'd Janet pops up: What is the meaning of this and you are no 'count and don't you have the common decency to stay gone or

at least return at proper visiting hours and whatever happened to your co-colas?

—I once was blind but now I see, I say. I am accounted for too, and here is my account:

I make the accounting. They know the story from A to Z: where I been and who I been with and the sundry things I've seen and done. Paw, his interest's piqued. Janet just taps her foot and shakes her head and talks as if she knew it all along. Chrissie blushes and smells so bath-oil sweet. I see her flash me a winky sort of grin, but she's sly about it—ever the preacher's daughter—so's Janet won't catch on.

—So let me get this straight, says Paw...and he proceeds to straighten it for himself:

—You been both a man and woman, so to speak?

—Yes.

—And you know the ways of both?

—Yes.

—And the delights?

—Yes.

—Well, boy...

—Yes?

—Lotsa folks who'd love to know which way's the better angle, if you catch me.

And so I tell him. He guffaws, says Dagnabbit he knew it all along, and grabs his little black book to dial up Greedy Gretchen. Janet rages, grabs that frying pan from Paw and cracks both him and me over the head. The credits roll: gaffer, key grip, producer, etc. All against the backdrop of the great big wide Pacific at sunset. Now, look close at that still shot. If you're an eagle-eye, you see a splash of pink off in the distance. At the edge of the surf, in the foam, there's a giant seashell—the vessel of a proper she-god—and in it, me and Chrissie. We're hand in hand.

Past an Indiana Garden

A blue vinyl tarp
hung like a gonfalon
on the peeled and dying
birch tree.

Near a thicker
of fruitless brambles
she thumbed an apple's
white meat,

roed stem rust,
kicked a burn barrel under-
pinning spiny tangles,
bald tires.

Car oil pooled
in an aluminum pan
as a man dumped grill ash in
a pile

cemented by rain—
gray dust feathered
the gummous black, sole
prettifier,

save the girl
who molted the surface
with fluted breaths,
scattered ashes.

She gazed past the tulip
tree, the nicotinic shake
of his hand—pressed
the proud flesh.

Sunlight fell on a patch
of spilled oil, glittered
dirt with a peacock
feather.

Imprint

The boy fears ... *Murder*, perhaps,
meat-on-the-bones:

But that's not why people kill
others—cattle and fish,
birds and pigs.

He bottle-feeds the brown pups,
digs his heels into the snow and falls back.

Sees an angel flash black in dots
before his eyes—inhalés
and grabs a stick from the icy crust.

The pups scratch
inside their juice-dyed bushel
as his limbs slide to an x.

Mouth wide, he catches snow
in feathers of cotton and metal.

The babies murmur like fish.

He sees the footprint of a Sasquatch,
then fabricates more artful tracks.

Everything can vanish.

He stops at the woods' edge, hears
a faint squeal, some floundering.

This wind is murder.

New Year's Eve

I tried to say this last year,

when the Vietnamese manicurist
painted my fingernails a color
called Nomad's Dream,

as if wanderers everywhere
wished to rest in my grasp—
strange tautology,

that one would dream of altering
his nature. Before I loved you,
I pictured your near-wedding

in Udaipur, knew the heft
of your optimism, which is also
what changed your mind. In Vietnamese,

sao means to tell a lie, and speaking
in monotone is chaos, nonsense,
evidence of fissure.

Mithra to Helios

Light through laced
carmethine beads, light
through the tips of fingernails,
all the same, no matter who
thought it up—

Who could resist a cult
of brightness?

Cults need leaders,
maybe you're thinking, *and I have this mountain,*
this chariot. You have, as well,

my travels from Persia, the word of me;
you have the fearsomeness of Ra.

Ease those hymning Christians
into a liminal dusk; they're singing to you, too.

There is only one of us here.

from *Crossed, Cross, Crossing*

Wasn't there something about a sandbag
doing no good a burlap sack cinched at no waist
by water,

didn't we believe
the woman pulling her children would arrive

I swore the wood pigeons mingling here
last year would again

Yes we did say this much

Which one of us sat here Which preferred
the train's soft metalling

The will of a maggot is so easily
mistaken for rice How I behave as if I know you,
offer you a little bark then a little more

You talk of bodies tailless and at fault It matters
to no one

Systematic slow,
you are hungry always hungry

Skies change
according to the blood in my cheeks Searchlights pulse
their usual pulse

I'll meet you in the dark, I say, where history says
it won't matter Will you trade anything, you ask

We discover new sentences They order themselves
Their pink feet turn away from you & not
the other way around

I mean which one of us sat beneath the razored water
slinking beneath ice,

what I'm asking is where
each tooth in the pile belongs and how come you can't
return to me stunned and leaving

★

You return with the pieces
 the way each rock
 needs more time, a place
 close, almost your breasts
 still heating the Earth
 that asks what day it is

—it's Spring and your headstone
 erupts with sunlight
 though there's no fruit
 struggling to open —only rocks

spread out, waiting forever
 to blossom as your arms, your eyelids
 that weigh nothing under ice

—you are covered
 with a tiny sky
 that has your patience
 your restful thighs

—you become invisible
 except for the grass
 and the breeze from nowhere
 after each try standing still
 as if you were still frozen
 were already too far behind.

★

Between two fingers
 you expect a knot, the string
 is used to breaking its fall

the way her shadow
 still opens the Earth
 for a last look

follows your every move
 —even with the sun
 you wrap this small box

are carried off
 by an icy stream
 tighter and tighter, the cover

beginning to close, first
 as snow, years later
 over your lips already distances

and mountain peaks taking hold
 though the mist inside
 is not the water you drink

lets you say something
 in secret, close to the ground
 emptied out in the open.

*Compassionate Cruelty:
Kim Ki-Duk's Christian Korean Zen Parable*

In 1992 my wife and I found ourselves on the tiny Cycladic island of Amorgos, along with several thousand other travelers. After carrying our backpacks up to the old town among the windmills, we ended up sleeping in a rooftop kitchen, our feet on the wall and our heads under the sink. Not until we were leaving, having a last drink in a bar called The Big Blue, did we find out that Europeans were flocking here because they'd seen the island in Luc Besson's *Le Grand Bleu* (1988).

Such a cinema-induced glut of tourism is unlikely to hit the location of Kim Ki-Duk's *Spring Summer Fall Winter...and Spring* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2003). The floating hermitage in the midst of a spectacular mountain lake is no more. Built in three months, "painstakingly and lovingly," Kim has said, "as if it were a real temple, not just a set piece," the set was torn down at the end of the year's shoot. Permanent structures are not allowed in this protected Korean national park, not even as valuable tourist attractions.

That the set no longer exists underscores the theme of constant change. As the Master (Oh Young Soo) tells the Young Adult Monk (Kim Young Min), "What makes you think you can hold on to anything?" Everything we become attached to in life—buildings, pets, lovers—will be taken from us. "If you like something," says the Master, "other people will like it too." Had the floating temple survived, it would have no doubt become a tourist trap.

We should be careful not to read too much Buddhist thought into the movie, but not too careful. A *New York Times* review was subtitled "A Buddhist Observes Humanity With Sharp and Stern Eyes"—

except that Kim Ki-Duk is Christian. The film, Kim has said, is about "the spirituality of the Korean people," who have been Buddhist for 1500 years. Still, the director is being disingenuous when he says, "I made this film without having studied anything about [Buddhism] at all." Kim Ki-Duk, who also plays the Adult Monk, has obviously studied martial arts, and tae kwon do is suffused with Korean Zen (Son) Buddhism, a notoriously tough sect, even in the tough world of Zen discipline.

Some of the major motifs—walking on water, atonement—could be either Christian or Buddhist, but I suspect more conscious Buddhist thought went into this movie than the director admits. We enter the realm of the monks through a gate that is not a gate but a framed set of doors on the edge of the lake. In the flood season the gate floats, so that those coming and going seem to be walking on water, something done by Christ but also by Taoist "immortals." The gate that is not a gate, however, appears in the *Mumonkan* (the "no gate koan," or "gateless gate"), one of the primary collections of Zen koans. Enlightenment is achieved by passing through these paradoxes. Similarly, the bedrooms inside the hermitage, one on each side of the altar, have doors but no walls, a design feature that seems impractical, except to a filmmaker—or a Zen master.

Each of the characters (except the Master, who sometimes bypasses the gate) arrives at the temple by first passing through the gate on the shore of the world where *samsara* occurs, the ceaseless, illusory round of fear and desire, passion and violence, love and retribution. On the surface of the water, floating in its own reflection, is the hermitage of the Master, the old monk who has taken on the lifelong responsibility of teaching the child, as he takes in any creature, dog, cat, rooster, snake or turtle, each of which appears on the deck of the floating hermitage in one season or another.

The cyclical structure of the film shows the natural progression of the seasons, their disappearance and return. The structure might

also represent basic Buddhist teachings, each season with its own lesson about the Four Noble Truths: in Spring we discover that life is suffering; in Summer, that the cause of suffering is desire; in Fall, that there is a way to relieve suffering; and in Winter, that the way is the eightfold path of right action, right thought, right meditation, right livelihood, and so on.

SPRING

What the Child Monk (Kim Jong Ho) learns in Spring is what the Buddha found out when he left his sheltered life and observed others less fortunate: life is suffering. Each of us must discover this in our own way. Playing in the forest, the Child Monk enjoys an idyllic existence, tormenting small animals for his amusement. *See the funny fish with the pebble tied to its body!* From a distance the Master observes the boy's innocent cruelty; rather than save the fish he teaches the child a life lesson. That night, he ties a stone the size of a loaf of bread to the child's back. When the little monk wakes up and complains of the stone, the Master points out what he did to fish, frog and snake. Find each of the creatures, he says, and release them. If any is dead, he says, "you will carry a stone in your heart for the rest of your life." Finding the fish and the snake dead, the child weeps, having learned that life is suffering for both the tormented and the tormentor.

SUMMER

The Boy Monk, now a teenager, observes snakes coupling in the grass. Soon, a Girl (Ha Yeo Jin) arrives, brought by her mother to be healed by the Master, stirring the desire of the boy—with the natural result. The Master discovers their affair, notes that the Girl seems cured, and sends her away. Desire, he tells the boy, is natural, but "lust awakens the desire to possess, which ends in the intent to

murder." The Boy Monk doesn't listen, of course, and has to find this out for himself, absconding in the night with the stone Buddha from the altar and a rooster. His action is not so much practical as symbolic. He sets the cock free on the other shore, and carries the Buddha in his backpack like the stone in his heart.

FALL

The Master arrives with a new stray, a white cat, in his backpack, a visual reminder of the boy's theft of the Buddha, and a sort of replacement, it seems, as it briefly takes the Buddha's place on the empty altar.

Soon the Young Adult Monk returns with the stone Buddha, seeking some relief from his suffering. Having followed the Girl, who was unfaithful to him, he ended up killing her, fulfilling the Master's prediction. Some reviewers have noted a certain "cruelty" in the movie. But the boy's torture of small animals in Spring is only natural human curiosity, and the murder of the Girl takes place off-screen. I suspect that what makes these viewers uncomfortable is the Master's treatment of the Young Adult Monk in this, the most interesting part of the film. For it is here that we find the great lessons about the origin and cure of suffering.

The young monk tries to escape his guilt by smothering his worldly self, papering over his mouth, nostrils, eyes and ears with the calligraphic *kanshi* for "shut." The Master reacts immediately, beating his disciple mercilessly with a big stick. This beating is not given for the Master's pleasure, nor even for the young monk's punishment: the Master's apparent cruelty is actually a spontaneous act of pure compassion, a rejection of his disciple's escapist wish to die. The "wake-up stick" (*keisaku* or *kyosaku* in the Japanese tradition) is based on the sword of Manjusri, bodhisattva of wisdom, the sword that cuts delusion by increasing one's awareness of his existence here and now. After the beating, the monk is suspended from the

ceiling; a candle burns the rope, dropping the monk to the floor. The pain of the fall indicates that, like it or not, he is alive. The Master explains: "You may be able to kill very easily, but you are not so easily killed yourself."

The Master does not let up here; he drives the point home by having the young monk carve out each *kanshi* of the Prajnaparamita Sutra (the Heart Sutra) that he has brushed on the deck of the floating temple with the tail of his white cat. This *sutra* will help restore "serenity of soul," the Master tells the detectives who come to arrest the young monk. Carving the *sutra* with the murder weapon reminds the young monk of where he has come from and where he is now. It reminds him of his upbringing in the temple, of the heart of the Master's teachings, and most importantly of his own origin, the origin of consciousness, the emptiness out of which all phenomena arise.

The pair of detectives who come to "investigate something" learn more about themselves than about the criminal they have come to collect. When the Master, whom they call "Holy One," asks them to let the suspect finish carving the Heart Sutra, they accede. Bored with waiting, they take pot shots with their pistols at a tin can in the water, missing it repeatedly. The Master, whose teachings are immediate and without sermonizing or judgment, uses this moment to teach both the disciple and the detectives a lesson. Hearing the shots, the young monk stops carving; the Master, continuing to brush the characters of the Heart Sutra with the tail of the cat, asks him, "What?"—as though to say that concentration on the task at hand is the only thing that's important. Then he picks up a pebble and negligently tosses it, easily hitting the tin can. Soon the detectives are putting down their pistols and letting down their guard, holding a candle for the prisoner as he works through the night, covering him with a jacket when he falls asleep, and even completing his task by painting his carvings in bright pastels. When it is time to go, they take him in without handcuffs, like a man instead of a criminal.

The Heart Sutra, the most basic Zen text, teaches a wisdom that goes beyond all intellectual, moral, or religious understanding. These modes of understanding are based on dualistic thinking—either/or, for/against, pure/impure, guilty/innocent, lost/saved—and so they miss the point of the wisdom that goes beyond. Spoken by Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, the Heart Sutra encourages Shariputra, the Buddha's most intellectual disciple, to go beyond the entangling discriminations of the head's wisdom to discover the compassionate wisdom of the heart to be found in the dissolution of dualistic thinking through meditation, concentration on the here and now. The Heart Sutra's most famous lines are: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form; form becomes emptiness, emptiness becomes form; form is exactly emptiness, emptiness is exactly form." The conjugating repetition mimics the cyclical flow of the cosmic order—mirrored in the disciple's carving—showing the impermanence of fear and desire (guilt and shame), and the insignificance of one man's actions, no matter how heinous, as well as the egoism of self-pity at the root of his suffering. The Heart Sutra ends with a Sanskrit mantra—GATE GATE PARAGATE, "to the other shore together"—and the monk must again leave the floating temple.

Some viewers, bothered by the Master's unexplained appearances and kinetic powers, complain of "movie Buddhism." (How, they ask, does the Master get to the shore to watch the boy torture the animals or the young man torture himself? When the detectives take the monk away, the Master delays the rowboat long enough to wave one last good-bye. When they reach the shore, he draws the boat back and shuts the gate, presaging the shutting of his own eyes—the *kanshi* for "shut" includes a pictograph of a double-doored gate.) Such magical powers, however, are not Buddhist at all. The Master's knowledge of herbs and roots, his reputation as a healer, his affinity with nature, and especially his modest magical feats are marks of the Taoist herbalist and healer.

His disciple taken to prison, the Master prepares to die. He papers over his eyes, just as the young monk tried to do earlier—the same act, only different. (In a famous Zen story, a master answers all questions with a pointing finger. When his disciple is asked about the master's teachings, the disciple holds up one finger. Hearing of this, the master cuts off the offending finger.) The Young Adult Monk's attempt to shut his senses, while similar to his master's act, is qualitatively different. He still has work to do, atonement or enlightenment: in the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva dedicates his or her life to endless actions to benefit others, just as the old Master accepted the responsibility of caring for animals and children when they came his way.

WINTER

Returning in winter, the Adult Monk (played by Kim Ki-Duk himself), who has presumably spent the last several years paying for his crime, is quick to get to work repaying the Master who taught him all he knows about suffering. The work he has to do is, essentially, the eightfold path of right thought, right action, right concentration, right livelihood, and so on. Entering the gate and bowing, he walks across the ice to find the rowboat half-submerged in the ice. He bows to the frozen remains of the Master's funeral pyre and chips out enough ice to retrieve a few charred teeth and bones (*sarira*, charred relics of the Buddha), placing them in a red cloth. After sculpting a life-size Buddha from the ice of a frozen waterfall, he tucks the cloth into the Buddha's forehead. The Buddha/Master will now melt back naturally into the stream.

Inside the temple, the Adult Monk discovers his inheritance, or in Buddhist terms, the signs that the Master has given him mind-to-mind, master-to-disciple transmission in the Zen tradition, without words and without ceremony. As the Master's dharma heir, the Adult Monk accepts the responsibility in crisp, business-like fashion,

getting to work on his own enlightenment because with transmission the spiritual work has only just begun. From a drawer in the altar, the Adult Monk removes a manual on the martial arts and begins to train, sharpening his discipline in the icebound landscape.

A woman, her identity concealed beneath a purple headscarf, leaves a brand new child monk for the new Master to instruct. So the cycle begins again. Now we know why the Young Adult Monk was not allowed to "shut" his senses. He had work to do, debts to pay, things and people to take care of, karma to live through. Who is this woman who leaves the child—a leper, a former lover, a fallen woman? These are interesting dramatic questions, but drama isn't relevant to the new Master's work, to raise the child that has come to him. The woman without a face is not an individual but an archetype, who, like Kwansum (the Korean female version of the Indian male Avolokitesvara), comes in many forms.

As he undertakes his final act, a Sisyphus-like struggle to carry a bronze figure to the mountaintop, dragging along a millstone by a rope tied to his waist, many viewers wonder: Who's taking care of the little boy? It doesn't matter. Boy or bodhisattva, the Adult Monk is not only the new Master, he is also the child he must raise. Carrying the statue for an afternoon or the boy for the rest of his life, the interconnectedness of all things makes every gesture count. (*Lift a speck of dust and you lift the world.*) During his endless climb, flashbacks remind us of the burdens he tied to fish, frog, and snake. And in case we don't get the symbolism of this Christian/Buddhist atonement/enlightenment, we should recall that the Master told the boy that if any of the animals died, he would carry a stone in his heart for the rest of his life.

The three main characters can be associated with the creatures: the Girl, with the fish (courting her, the boy gives her a fish in the stream); the Master, with the snake (a snake enters the hermitage at his death, curls up in his folded clothes, and stays until the Adult

Monk returns); the Monk, with the frog (his *tae kwon do* leaps and kicks as well as his sitting still in *zazen* are very frog-like). Like the fish and snake that the boy tormented, the Girl dies first, then the Master. Like the frog, the monk survives. By placing this stone on the mountaintop and the bronze bodhisattva on top of it, the new Master not only does (Christian) penance for his cruelty to animals in his youth and to women in his young manhood, he is enacting and embodying his (Buddhist) enlightenment.

To grasp what this monk's penance/enlightenment consists of, we should understand the significance of the bodhisattva who lives in the world. Some reviewers have mistaken the bronze bodhisattva that he erects on the mountaintop for a Buddha—not just any bodhisattva, but Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion. Some reviewers have seen the statue as male, and some as female. While the original Avalokiteshvara was male in India, the figure became the female Guanyin in China and Kwanseum in Korea (ever since Christianity was introduced into Asia, Guanyin has been associated with the Virgin Mary). Its androgynous appearance is typical of depictions of the hero(ine) of the Heart Sutra because he/she is also the bodhisattva of “wisdom that goes beyond” all such entangling distinctions.

In the end, the monk pulls up the stone in his heart, having thrown off the burden of his worldly existence. What Kim Ki-Duk has said of (Christian) “deliverance” could also be said of Zen satori: “living our lives here today—living in itself—is meaning. Time is too precious to go off into the mountains to pray all your life. I think living out in the real world, clashing and in conflict with each other, may be a truer path to meaning.”

BOOK REVIEWS

100 Jolts: Shockingly Short Stories by Michael A. Arnzen
(Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2004).

Reviewed by Erica Ciccarone.

In Michael A. Arnzen's *100 Jolts*, a collection of one hundred short short stories, anything can happen: a child plunges into a McDonald's ball bin and retrieves a polished human skull, a butcher shop turned coffee shop boasts “caffeinated” steaming cups of joe, planet earth is invaded by curious albinos and no one seems to care. Arnzen finds the short short story to be the perfect form for what he calls “minimalist horror,” the “genre of the jolt, the shock, the spark.” By keeping his stories brief—most of them are under five hundred words while some creep in at fifty—he lends each tiny tale the darting momentum of an attack. When he does master the precision—when his stories are interesting, surprising, and concise—he shocks us not with his blood curdling, bone crunching images, but with his ability to expose the dark underbelly of the human mind.

In “White Out,” the narrator's world suddenly goes white, and he's surrounded by albinos. He fears discrimination and is approaching madness when a gang of albinos in pink suits abducts him and puts him on display. They reminded him of “the beauty of blood,” and they resolve to protect him, study him, and admire his strangeness. Here, Arnzen explores the horror of difference, assimilation—and the beauty that the tension creates. “In the Balance” comments on the imperfections of our judicial system, when a judge weighs two sickly rats on a balance to decide a life sentence. Other stories are less relevant to our standard literary themes. In “Nightmare Job #2,” we enjoy a day in the life of the food and beverage tester for an insane, suicidal king bent on destroying them both. “Stabbing

for Dummies” reads like a How-To list: “5. Always let the blade do the bulk of the work. Do not twist, saw or chop. Simply slide... TIP: Pretend you’re painting.” His characters always act out their darkest, most violent impulses; on a ride to the airport, the driver hacks his friend’s legs off because they won’t cease their nervous shake. Arnzen maintains a play between what is really occurring and what is occurring mentally, seducing us into confronting our own dark desires. In other stories, the protagonist is a victim in a nightmare world that he cannot escape. “Who Wants to be a Killionaire?” retards America’s favorite game show into a killing spree that his characters just can’t win. The collection at times reads like a list of souring images—how many ways can he describe a raw, bloody skull? the dripping tendons of just-torn muscle?—but Arnzen’s dark humor and satirical voice save him from melodrama.

When Arnzen is at his best and really achieving something for fiction, his horror extends into the vicissitudes of real life. In “Tugging the Heartstrings,” a father returns home from open heart surgery, and the black knotted suture left from his stitches becomes a symbol of his surviving love for his son after his death. Where the story lacks a candy-coated luster, it is replaced by revolting descriptions of the scar, churning the softness of the story and making the last moment a tender, well-earned surprise. Perhaps most poignant in the collection is Arnzen’s ability to pin down the human tendency to turn trauma and pain against the body. He uses physical wounds as gory symbols of emotional ones: in “My Wounds Still Weeps,” when a father burns a cigar tip into his child’s arm, the lesion refuses to heal long after the father dies of cancer, and the child is left with an eating disorder—a hunger for love and security that will never be satisfied. In moments, Arnzen is shockingly touching and wise. He shines brightest in “A Donation,” when his narrator donates his body to science as a way of helping others to “see what they really are, and can be,” of living on, of beating the darkness of death by

continuing to connect and communicate with others through the body. Arnzen finds a new meaning for the old horror concept of the undead, marking a rebirth of the old genre with a startling balance of grace and gore.

The Lichtenberg Figures by Ben Lerner
(Copper Canyon Press, 2004)
Reviewed by Ryan Darder.

The Lichtenberg Figures, Ben Lerner’s first book, is a series of brilliantly contrived poetic crash tests: what happens, the text asks, when the vocabularies of post-structuralism and slang collide? Can the jargon of art theory be enlisted in the service of elegy? What is the result of juxtaposing moments of violence with moments of stunning lyric beauty? *The Lichtenberg Figures* is at once highly literary and highly personal, formally subtle and shockingly frank. Dark, hilarious, obscene—it is a reading experience nearly impossible to forget. And the book’s exploration of the very possibility of forgetting is one of its notable accomplishments.

In a central (both literally and figuratively) trio of poems—a miniature garland of sonnets embedded in the larger sonnet sequence—Lerner writes: “The stars are a mnemonic without object / Let the forgetting begin.” An aid-to-memory that has outlasted the memory it was intended to aid, as starlight can outlive the star from which it originates—this figure for the failure of figuration is typical of Lerner’s elegant engagement with the very possibility of communicating experience, both personal and collective, through symbol and sign. “Let the forgetting begin,” the final line of the first poem in the garland becomes, with a slight but important modification, the first line of the second poem: “The forgetting begins.” The repetition that the form demands is in interesting tension with the

sense of the line: it reminds us to forget. The form itself, then, is a mnemonic without object, or a mnemonic that undoes its object, as remembering to forget is not exactly forgetting. Such paradoxes occur throughout the book, as in the unforgettable tercet that concludes a late poem:

Will these failures grow precious through repetition,
and, although we cannot hope to be forgiven,
will these failures grow precious through repetition?

The repetition of the question produces both a kind of preciousness—the beauty of the unexpected recurrence—and is itself a failure: the failure of the sentence to progress to the alternative to forgiveness promised by the second line.

The violence and beauty and sheer outrageousness of many of the poems in *The Lichtenberg Figures* will no doubt attract (or repel) the attention of many readers. After the violence has faded from the reader's mind, like a Lichtenberg figure on the back of a person struck by lightning, the most memorable part of this audacious and accomplished first book might be its exploration of memory itself.

Back in America by Barry Gifford
(Light of New Orleans Publishing, 2004)
Reviewed by John Hicks.

"Poets behave impudently toward their experiences," wrote Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*. "They exploit them." Barry Gifford's latest collection of poems provides a welcome tonic to Nietzsche's stark assessment of poetic license. While the poems in *Back in America* are often transparently autobiographical, they recount the author's travels and memories with reverence, tenderness and

lyrical precision. Gifford never fails to illuminate what Jack Kerouac called the "jewel center of interest," the arresting image or moment in time that invites the reader to become a part of it.

Gifford, best known for his fiction (*Wild at Heart*, *Perdita Durango*, *Night People*), screenwriting (*Lost Highway*, *City of Ghosts*) and nonfiction (*Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac*, with Lawrence Lee), has been deemed by Richard Price an "American Original" whose body of work evokes everyone "from the Beats to noir to social realism to postmodern to cinematic."

Back in America's major themes—love, beauty and mortality—are explored in vignettes set in a variety of locales, including Mexico, Cuba, the United States, and several European countries. The cumulative effect is that of a chance encounter with a well-traveled, articulate stranger. One of the book's few disappointments is its brevity; the spell Gifford casts with these pages is mysterious and seductive.

The first section of *Back in America* shines with celebrations and remembrances of Beat icons Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg.

In "On Viewing the Manuscript Scroll of Jack Kerouac's Novel On The Road in the Tosca Bar, San Francisco," Gifford expresses his kinship with the "collapsed Catholic Buddhist pilgrim" who revolutionized American literature. "On Viewing" is a wonderful poem, an elegy and an example of Gifford's own "constant search for the Sacred." It concludes with one of the book's most powerful images, a description of Kerouac's manuscript as a "phantom tome brought out by hand [...] from America's burning Egyptian heart."

"Small Elegy for Corso" captures the late poet's irreverent sense of humor, as well as Corso's reputation for trickery: "O Gregory, may you take eternity for all / it's worth, the same as you captured / your time on earth."

"The Day Allen Ginsberg Died," one of the book's longest poems, is a staccato meditation on the passing of Gifford's hero and

friend. As the narrative progresses, Gifford folds in the impending death of the father of a childhood friend, as well as a fleeting visitation by Ginsberg's ghost, who's eager to attend his own funeral: "I didn't die / but I don't want to miss this. / Come with me!"

Back in America will surprise those who've pigeonholed Gifford as a writer of edgy, satirical, take-no-prisoners prose. Many of these are Romantic poems. Gifford has mastered the task of addressing life's enduring mysteries with a keen eye and an open heart.

But, as more than one reviewer has pointed out, Gifford is a writer who routinely defies categorization. In poems like "Bordertown," he transcends the boundaries of romanticism and becomes a steely-eyed witness to history.

"Bordertown" is a series of cascading stanzas that take the reader on a journey to the end of the road, to an outpost of corruption "built / on the refuse of / El Norte." Gifford ends the first line with a sly nod to Orson Welles' 1958 noir classic *Touch of Evil*, and the poem echoes the film's dark vision of a place where "[t]he only certainty is/at the cemeteries."

The book's third section, "As if It Were a Photograph," is a sequence of poems inspired by the work of seventeenth-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. The section's title is, perhaps, a reference to the debate surrounding Vermeer's alleged use of the camera obscura as an aid in his painting. However, Gifford pays closest attention to the story or mood each painting summons, and the resulting poems are delightfully vivid and concise.

Back in America closes with haunting translations of the work of French poet Gerald Neveu, who died in 1960, and a prose poem in the form of a micro-play entitled "The Last Words of Arthur Rimbaud." The iconoclastic poet is a fitting subject for Gifford; *Back in America* is the work of a fellow adventurer and visionary.

Facts for Visitors by Srikanth Reddy
(University of California Press, 2004)

Reviewed by Katie Peterson.

Srikanth Reddy's debut collection teems with a vivid postcolonial jumble of animals, thieves, jungles, monsoons, crumbling kingdoms, untrustworthy interpreters, and hapless explorers swirling around an often bewildered speaker whose lack of orientation doesn't keep him from a kind of honest confidence in his own ability to navigate his world. Reddy's narrator is an appealing guide for his reader, as he is often as foreign a visitor to his chosen landscapes as we are. Besides, the usual (though often outdated) tools for orientation refuse to make sense of this world. In "Sundial," the speaker concludes, "When I blink, I see the blank // I carry inside me no matter / how long I keep watch." Though the locations of the poems shift from India to America, and back again, the care and feeding of this existential "blank" inside the self continues to be the book's primary "location." Self-discovery is for Reddy what Emily Dickinson called "the tooth / that nibbles at the soul." Though the book's protagonist is a traveler, his internal landscape is his most significant subject.

Reddy's world feels bright, empty, and even mythic with its starry skies, large expanses of sea, and endless fields – but it is also a place in which vivid narratives begin and end, and where personal history occurs. Still, the seed of discord in the prose poem "Loose Strife with Apiary," suggests larger, tumultuous surroundings: "Word is the governor's wife scattered loose strife in the barnyard thinking it chicken feed & the wetlands turned purple overnight. We make ready vectors for smallpox & language." In much of the book, Reddy demands a density of imagery and sound from his lines that is similarly arresting. Listen to these, from the fifth section of "Ninth Circle," one of a set of poems loosely referencing Dante's *Inferno*:

"A flunky mops auroras / of spilled oil from the deck." Vectors? Flunky? The book's own brand of weird colloquial speech combines a language of technological precision, a kind of legendary, mythic tone, and regular old American slang. The poems love verbal action, and often tend toward strong and baroque imagery invigorated by a central emotional condition of trembling fear varied by giddiness, as in the crazy, naughty villanelle "Second Circle:" "Now, darling. It's time you strapped me back on that wheel."

Like many first collections of contemporary poetry, *Facts for Visitors* wants to theorize itself from the beginning: it wants to tell us how to read it. In order to do this, the book gives us a number of intellectual "facts" to guide us in visiting it, beginning with an epigraph from St Augustine that readers of twentieth century verse will also remember as one of the landmark moments of T. S. Eliot's famous poem of the decline of Western civilization, *The Waste Land*: "To Carthage then I came." The central sequence adapts freely from the predicaments of the *Inferno*. The collection is bookended with "Corruptions," prose poems that incorporate and change language from the twentieth century mystic Simone Weil, the novelist W. G. Sebald, Augustine, and other writers. These allusions make sense—what's at stake here is spiritual crisis, and the consequences of a continued engagement with a difficult, disorienting world, which is something all of Reddy's alluded-to literary angels know quite a bit about. But my favorite poems in the collection, the mysterious and beautiful "Monsoon Eclogue," and "Scarecrow Eclogue," among them, don't seem to need all the bells and whistles. Consider the decisive beginning of "Inner Life:" "The bear stopped dancing and unscrewed his head." Working a thieves' market, or learning a lesson in the jungle, Reddy often combines an appealing bewilderment with great intelligence, patience, and sensitivity. Still, the poems don't always hit the right notes as consistently when they picture someone deeply alone. "I'm afraid I will never be lonely enough," he confesses in the witty "Fundamentals of Esperanto."

It's hard for me to imagine a lonely person saying that line. When writing the poem of spiritual crisis in the dark, the three in the morning poem of existential despair, Reddy can sometimes turn his own vulnerability into a kind of finished cleverness. After all, this is a speaker who, in the course of the book, is listened to, spoken to, and engaged with: he's frequently face to face with violence, or loss, but he just doesn't seem all that lonely. A poem that speaks to loneliness better is "Sonnet," whose last four lines threaten by implication and accusation, not confession:

Some men will make a grave out of anything.
Anything.
It depends of how lonely they get.
Times when a body could dig through the night.

Facts for Visitors has so much in it that a reader can see the poet going a number of different directions—one of these is the terse clarity of these lines, which don't attempt abstraction until an emotional condition is achieved. I admire their cool courage, restrained sadness, and decisive use of silence.

Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced by Catherine Barnett
Winner of the Beatrice Hawley Award and the Glasgow Prize for Emerging Writers (Alice James Books, 2004)
Reviewed by Ed Skoog.

Early in Catherine Barnett's award-winning first book, before the facts of the tragedy at its center—the perishing of her two nieces in a plane crash off the Pacific coast—have been put before the reader, she asks "what grief looks like." First she answers "a knife rusted in the side of a goat," but quickly corrects herself: "No, no. / A coin

falling in water / / And the fish dart for it." The crazed pain of the first vision, like the folk-permanence of its goat image, opens a tactile flood of imagery through the book's remaining forty-six poems. It is the second vision, however, glint of falling coin and fish rushing toward the disturbance, which provides a better analogy for the work being done in these poems.

Representations, perhaps even emanations, of grief appear in the succeeding poems singly and in pairs, as chronological time moves away from the accident along a continuum of intense, plangent moments. In "Nits," the speaker considers the lice treatment the girls were going through before they left: "With a slotted spoon she lifted the brushes / from their bath and left them bristle-down to dry." The precision of this image, the reader feels, is the same precision through which the speaker sees the girls' absence. The speaker's own son, near the age of the nieces, continues to grow and thrive and question in the months and years after the tragedy.

Another bath figures in the poem "Ritual." Here, the girls' absence becomes palpable through the presence of the son. What is he rehearsing in the last tercet, and does the water "take cold" literally, or only in the son's imagination, or only in the speaker's imagination? Here the boy is almost his cousins, and partly Ophelia, and every bit the picture of grief in the speaker's eyes:

Ritual

In his bath my son looks half-
drowned,
lying so still.

his hair a scarf of weed,
his eyes closed,
and only the water breathing.

He practices
in his porcelain bed
his resting,

rehearsing
until the water takes cold
and he shivers a little against it.

In this poem, as in most of Barnett's poetry, she speaks in the short-lined voice of privacy, of intimacy; it excludes more than it welcomes, if one hasn't yet learned how to listen, how to follow the p and the r from "practices" to "porcelain," and the eh from "bed" to "resting," concluding something emotional and musical in the leap across tercets and syntax from "resting" to "rehearsing," which, although the sentence continues to poem's end, has welcomed the reader into the deep interior of the speaker's mind, and the pathways between grief for her nieces, love for her son, and some lonely human need for poetry, song, composition, and order in the presence of chaos.

Organized by lyric moments, the book follows the moments after, the long days after, the unimaginable weeks, the impossible months after the girls' deaths. The tragedy brings the family together only to turn them toward solitude again midway through the book. Her mother returns to painting, first a still life, and then more. Her father drinks and then doesn't drink, and eventually stops falling asleep with the ice cream spoon in his hand. Her sister's last appearance in the book is a slow-disappearing smile the speaker can't trust:

My sister's smile before disappearing is an uneven
tear in the blank sheet of her face.

In the book of lies it says there are eighteen kinds of smiles—

It says look for lies in the opening and closing of the mouth.

Meanwhile, the speaker and her son try to fit back into their lives. The future, time's winged chariot, having already drawn near, beckons again in the book's final two poems, "Son with Older Boys" and "River." In the former, evening comes to a baseball game in a summer field, and when it becomes "time to stop playing," they wrap the ball in masking tape "until it looks like a half moon / falling into and out of their game, / which lasts a little longer now for their troubles."

In "River," on the other side of the continent from the book's central events, the speaker walks down the rocky shore of the Hudson River, and finds the water unusually disturbed. The river, an immense and perfect analogy for the speaker's grief, as well as for the book's austere aesthetic, "makes no progress to speak of, nothing much floats by / but a few red leaves caught on the rocks / ... I see it's not all gray—" With this poem the book admits its failure and resistance to resolve in the acceptable trajectory of the contemporary grief narrative, which generally urges the grieving person to heal and move on. No, *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced*, despite its narrative arc, isn't a novel or memoir about healing, or dealing with grief, but something both fleeting and built to last, an unprecedented abundance of feeling about loss and absence—a polished, raw thing.

The poet asks what grief looks like. Poetry answers: it looks like living.

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