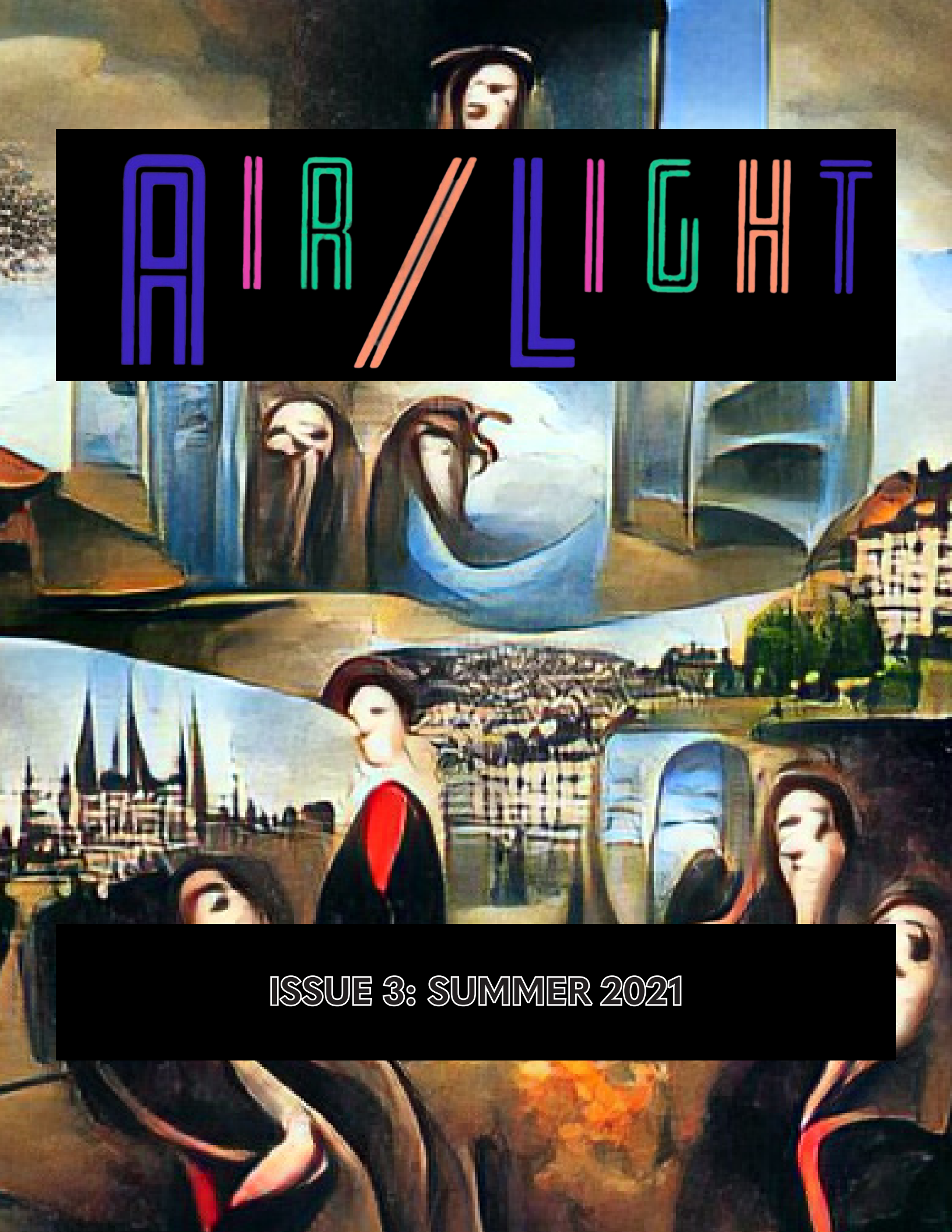

AIR/LIGHT

ISSUE 3: SUMMER 2021

AIR/LIGHT

Summer 2021

Volume 1, Issue 3

Los Angeles, California

AIR/LIGHT

Contents

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Air/Light *is an online literary journal published by the English Department at the University of Southern California. We showcase both traditional and innovative works. We are firmly of California and the West Coast — the occupied land of the Tongva in Los Angeles, where we are based, and those of other indigenous peoples of the Americas — but also national, international. We mean to look out expansively from this place rather than to gaze narrowly back at it, to express a West Coast aesthetic, a West Coast sensibility, and direct that lens onto the world.*

Submissions should be made via Submittable: https://airlightmagazine.org/about/submissions/

FROM THE EDITOR

Breaking the Mold

David L. Ulin

For the third issue of *Air/Light*, we've decided to change things up a little bit. It's been our intention all along to grow the journal, to remain…flexible. I've written before in this space of my sense that literature operates best as a conversation, connecting readers and writers through the medium of the line. With this issue, we've opened up that definition to include conversations—about aesthetics, about craft and practice, about what it means to be an artist in the world.

Throughout the issue, you'll find a number of these dialogues: one with Shin Yu Pai, another with Kazim Ali, and a third between Maggie Nelson and Hari Kunzru. Each is wide-ranging and, we hope, surprising, revealing these writers as they think and talk in real time. I've long loved extensive author interviews; they offer a kind of intimacy, an informality, that allows us to peek beneath the surface of an artist's life and mind. We'll be publishing more as we move forward. Call it the conversational intention at the heart of the magazine.

We're also introducing two special packages with this issue. The first is a tribute to the poet and professor Marvin Bell, who died of cancer in December at the age of 83. The material here includes Bell's final lecture (as video and text), a discussion between Christopher Merrill and David St. John about his work and influence, and a selection of paras—the single paragraph prose poems Bell and Merrill wrote in response to one another as a kind of correspondence, a conversation in another way. Ninety of these "linked paragraphs" appeared in the 2016 collaboration *After the Fact: Scripts & Postscripts*. We are publishing seventeen more.

Speaking of collaboration, we are delighted to be inaugurating, in conjunction with the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, a series called *The Neighborhoods Project*, which is dedicated to mapping Los Angeles via word and image, one community at a time. To kick us off, Judith Freeman and Anthony Hernandez take a wide-angle look at MacArthur Park, through the filter of both the city and their own shared and individual histories. We will feature more of these collaborations in future issues of *Air/Light*.

Literature, like all art, is expansive. It covers the world around us in fresh growth. We want to experience it, to listen to it, to hear the voices of the city and the human soul. I understand that art can't save us, but it can ennoble us for as long as we are here. Welcome back to the conversation we are having—every one of us, together—about life, the universe, everything… and all that it may mean.

FICTION

No Refills

Diane Lefer

When the rental agent promised he'd find me an apartment, I should not have been surprised, given my price range, there was something wrong with every unit he showed me. "There's no stove," I said. He lowered his voice: "Too many people gassing themselves." In the next apartment, the shower had no curtain rack. "Too many people hanging themselves." The windows could not be opened in the next. "Jumpers?" I suggested. He nodded. I found a new rental agency. I did not want to know any more ways to off myself. And so I moved into this one-bedroom apartment that met all my needs and here I've lived happily for almost twenty years. Little did I know it was only a matter of time. The ceiling descends; the walls close in.

At work one day at the hospital, this is quite a number of years ago, they switched me over to autopsy reports because there are so many different ways to die. Before that, when I typed Pap smear results, it was eight long boring hours of normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal normal until I said Enough! I longed –wouldn't you? – for somebody's cancer.

For days I wasn't sure, but now I know my bed is shrinking. No matter how I arrange the sheets, they drag on the floor, inches more each day. Aha! you think, the sheets are being stretched. Used so often, the fibers loosen, the fabric no longer holds. I'm sorry, the sheets are exactly the same size they always were. Thinner, perhaps, but in latitude and longitude, no different. Let me tell you, for months I was unable to sleep. Then I discovered a simple ploy. All I had to do was imagine my consciousness leaving my body. I

would gently push, project, expel, and just like that I was asleep. Perfect, until it occurred to me that one night my consciousness might leave and not come back.

Since then, I lie awake. My bed, I think, is trying to tell me something. It's this feeling of constriction, my life growing smaller, until I remember Mrs. P. She was our neighbor when I was a child. Just looking at her, a grownup no bigger than I was, frightened me. Now I know she was a little person. Back then, she was not just the smallest, but the oldest person I had ever seen and I thought, ah, this is how it works, this is how people die. They grow smaller and smaller and then they disappear.

Have you seen the beds our ancestors slept in? Even Abraham Lincoln had a bed much shorter than yours. Not because people were smaller then, but they slept sitting up. It was considered bad for the health to lie flat. So maybe my bed is telling me *Look back, don't fear the future, look to history*. But the truth is, if I were to go backwards in my life, there is nothing I would want to relive. It wasn't bad but once was enough. After my accident last month, the friend who drove me home said, *See, you're all right. Now you can get back to your little life*. Everything happens for a reason. The sheets spill around on the floor, like waves around my island bed.

Frankly, if I were going to commit suicide, jumping out of a window is not the way I would choose, but that's the image that flashes again and again through my head. If I believed in reincarnation and karma, I'd say my life on earth this time is a do-over, but the question remains whether I'm supposed to live differently or merely find a better way to die.

And I waited and waited for my coffee. Well, why should I expect anyone to serve me? *I am a murderer*. I woke from the dream and knew it was true. I am a murderer. But it happened so long ago, I couldn't remember. The details are gone, just the unease, the certainty of—not quite guilt. The certainty of—something. Who did I kill? How? When? I don't ask myself why. No motive could possibly be enough. All I know for sure is something must have happened. If not murder, I must have done something. Sooner or later, it will catch up with me.

POETRY

Point Lobos

Shin Yu Pai

along the western waterfront
I froze while walking across
the ancient seawall,

waves rising up against
the ruins of architecture,
as around me perfectly styled

couples posed for wind-swept
engagement photos staged
in the calm of salt-water

reflecting pools, mothers
hiking with newborns
wrapped to their chests

crowded the passageways
with utmost ease, how they resembled
the young women in elaborate dress

who are effortless in ascending
the dusty path up to Tiger's Nest,

babes strapped to their backs,

hiking the Paro Valley
I felt anxiety then too,
fear for my companions

the New Mexican rancher
with the hernia, the old woman
celebrating her 70th year,

the man with the enlarged
atria with whom I tour
the ruins of history now,

who gives me
an outstretched hand
when I lose sight

of where I stand staring
at distant sea stacks converging
to reveal the heart's contours

COLLABORATIONS

In Place of a Sanctuary, I Found Myself: A Conversation with Shin Yu Pai

Abbie Reese

Shin Yu Pai's collection *Ensō* (Entre Ríos Books) reveals a mature, interdisciplinary practice. Pai completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—an institution that encourages cross-genre experimentation. A poet, essayist, and artist, she also spent a lot of time in the photography darkroom.

Ensō recalls Pai's twenty-year revisitation of the Tadao Andō Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago. It also documents a project in Seattle's Carkeek Park where she stickered the skins of apples with letters and induced the sun to process prints, so that poems emerged on trees. "Heirloom," a playful engagement with her multilingual son, Tomo, extends her iterative, embedded approach.

Pai's parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan, and she grew up in Riverside. She has described her childhood as "filled with long silences and loneliness that was soul crushing." But poetry, she insists, "is a practice of hearing silences at the deepest level."

When you started working on the project involving the Tadao Andō Gallery, did you know it would become a long-term series of revisitations?

I didn't know that I'd want it to be almost twenty years. I think that when I

had begun to visit the gallery, it was a really remarkable place to me. Tracking the changes and activity and the things that were coming on and off display, it became this interesting space to me. It's a kind of material that is so rich and can be mined over and over again for so many layers.

Did you ever try to time the trips for when you knew there was going to be a changeover?

No, it was more like: I'm going to Chicago for this Association of Writing Programs conference, so I guess I'd better book some time in the gallery. The last time I went, which was in maybe 2018, I had no idea that the thing that was in the gallery the very first time I stepped inside would be back on display, and it pretty much had been stripped back to its bare bones. They still had taken the door off of the gallery; I don't think they'll ever put it back on because they really want to get people in the space. And they upgraded the lighting. But in all other ways, it had that feeling of being restored to what it had been. And that felt like the perfect time to kind of close the circle, which is one of the key motifs of the book.

The gallery space you kept being drawn back to—do you know what feeling you were chasing or trying to go back to in that space?

The first time I walked into that gallery, I just saw a darkened room with doors, and there's a little plaque, Gallery 109 Tadao Andō. I didn't know what was beyond those doors. When I stepped in, I felt it was truly this sort of magical world. The temperature was markedly cooler and maybe that was psychological because it was dark or the lights were very dimmed, and so it altered perception in a way with the conditions of the room itself. Tadao Andō set up that room with sixteen pillars, which obscure the views, so it invites you in fully, to move towards the perimeters of the room so you can see everything there. It was such an inviting space despite its strange conditions. It really created a sense of welcome. There were benches that invited you to sit down and to be in that space as long as you wanted. Having spent a year at the Naropa Institute in Boulder and having studied some Buddhist meditation practices, I think there was this feeling for me of coming home, returning to the self and also of the eyes opening and becoming awakened to the beauty around me. This place was like a home away from home, be-

cause Chicago was a strange and big city, but in this place of sanctuary, I could find myself.

The sense you're describing of the invitation—being required to move around—is in the physicality of the design.

It's a very embodied invitation. You can't experience the space unless you choose to be in your body. And that's powerful because when we move through museums, we're usually observing through the eye; we're moving around things that we're not supposed to touch, and so there's a way in which we kind of dislocate from our bodies. And this was a different thing.

Could you talk about the element of chance in your practice, which appears to have become more pronounced after you became a parent?

That element of chance or happy accident is a language used a lot in the darkroom to talk about trying to make the perfect print, which is really, really hard. That fits well with what my life was post-motherhood, in that there was so much control that had to be let go of. I think of my work as structured opportunities for chance, where intention is built into it. In the case of "Heirloom," it's been a learning process, a collaboration with nature and letting go. That project is about using an apple orchard and the ripening apple skins as a light sensitive surface to basically do printing. There were a lot of variables of chance that were difficult to control, like all the different species of apples, and how long each one might need to ripen and to print, and weather conditions, and people and animals intervening with the work. I feel like the lessons I've learned over time about chance and control have more to do with needing to let go of the conditions in which a work is made in order to let it more fully emerge into what it needs to be. That's an element at play in the series in the Tadao Andō Gallery, too, because I'd never know what visitors, what students, who would be visiting the gallery, or what the curators would have done to it while I was away. I never knew what to expect. And sometimes I'd get really crabby about it, because, gee, I want it to be the way it was, but there was something else that was being offered, and so I had to try in some way to be attentive to that.

Throughout *Ensō*, your work strikes a very meditative chord.

I think that you're remarking on a quality of time in these poems, or in these works. In the Japanese tea ceremony, there is such a slowing of the experience of enjoying the drinking of a tea, or the eating of the sweet, or the being with the host, so you are fully present to receive what they have to offer you. There's some kind of imperceptible shift in time or the experience of time when you're in that space. When I was writing and making that series about the gallery, I was thinking of it as almost a way to explore what I was imagining as Japanese time, but is actually time, in general, more than Japanese time. But the Japanese are very interesting in the way they deal with time, in terms of seasonality and the tracking of the passage of time. When I look at some of the other time-based projects I've ended up doing—like the apple project—it is very much a way of durational unfolding, not just of chance, but of time, a time that is kind of outside of ourselves but also becomes inside of ourselves, like overlappings of time. That also grew very much out of the process of being pregnant and becoming a mother, the strange disorientation that happens to time and requires us to develop a different relationship to it.

Could you talk about the parallel between the solitary nature of a writing practice and the aloneness of being pregnant?

I had a miscarriage before my first viable pregnancy, and I think that's important to say. My relationship to time shifted in many different ways when I became pregnant. There are all these measures—things that are supposed to be developing or happening—these markers of time that are observed in a calendar from conception to birth. There's almost a hijacking of a normal sense of time, in some ways, because the time that was yours and your conception of time is now taken over by this other being you're incubating and their time, which is operating differently from yours. There is also a strangeness, in that it feels endless. Sometimes it's super physically uncomfortable, and maybe you want the time to move faster, but it's moving at the pace it wants to move.

That experience began to sort of reorient me, rewire me, I feel like in some unusual ways. The apple project was the first work I made after the birth of my son. I've become more interested in work that requires me to have a period of time to incubate what the project is going to be and to

evolve with it, rather than just making this polished, edited thing that I'm handing off.

The idea of reclamation also seems present in your poetry.

Yeah. I think that's an idea that I've been getting closer to over the last ten years. There was, for me, reclamation in the radical act of deciding I'm not going to be a translator. Instead, I'm going to write the columns and the essays that need to come from me in my embodied experience.

That was maybe the first example of coming to terms with this question of whose story am I telling? Who does it belong to? What is my story? And the idea of reclaiming, the idea of exploring a place over a long period of time is about the development of a deep relationship with that place or the people, a sustained engagement that is about coming to terms with the thing I want to say about it.

I am of the diaspora, and so this is very much about sifting through the things and the qualities that have been of value to me from the Taiwanese culture that I want to retain, that I want to keep or pass along to my son. But also reclaiming and centering my voice because so much of my work has been, I think, about the question of what to preserve. Am I here to further my father's project or my parents' legacy, or to make sure that their stories—what they want to transmit or to culturally preserve—don't die? But I think reclamation also exists in my work; I, as a Taiwanese American, have felt very displaced. I have moved a lot, west to east, to south, to north and back again, re-exploring places more than one time in my lived experience. I think that in this way, I haven't felt a sense of place or a sense of belonging. I have had a sense that these places can be created in the imagination, like the Tadao Andō Gallery and how it felt to me. I began to feel it when I made the apple orchard project in Carkeek Park, because it was for me, not a way to claim that space—which isn't mine—but to claim my experience there in a very personal way.

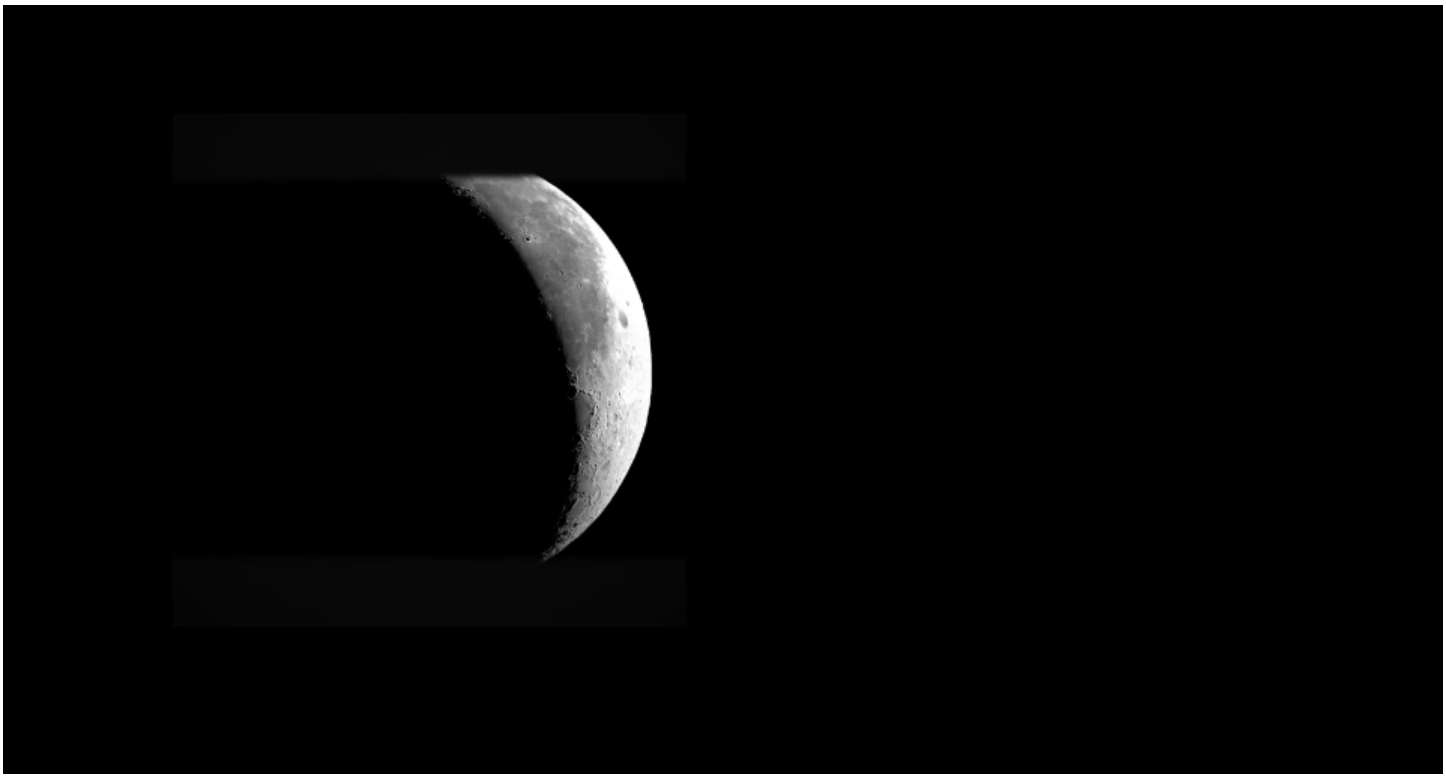
COLLABORATIONS

“Tidal,” “Have You Ever Bullied a Wave,” and “Starshine”

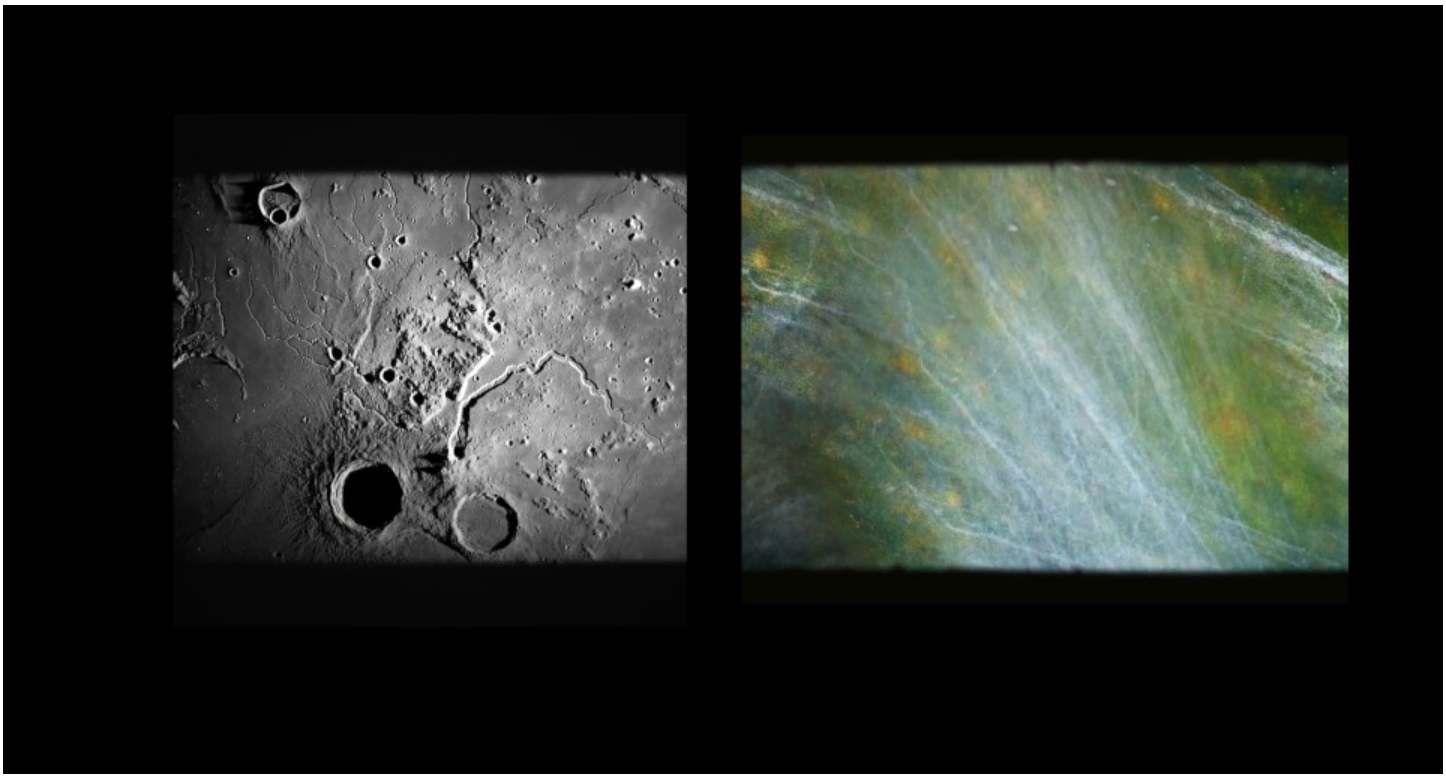
Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley

“Tidal” and “Have You Ever Bullied a Wave?” are excerpted from a five-part video poem series called Tidal by poet Shin Yu Pai and filmmaker David Ian Bickley. Kyle Hanson composed the music for “Have You Ever Bullied a Wave?” The series explores Buddhist notions of karma through the metaphor of ocean tides and of the human body in relationship to these natural forces.

“Starshine” explores the possibility of life on other planets, the conditions of which are revealed by starlight. Shin Yu Pai wrote the text and David Ian Bickley created the film and music.



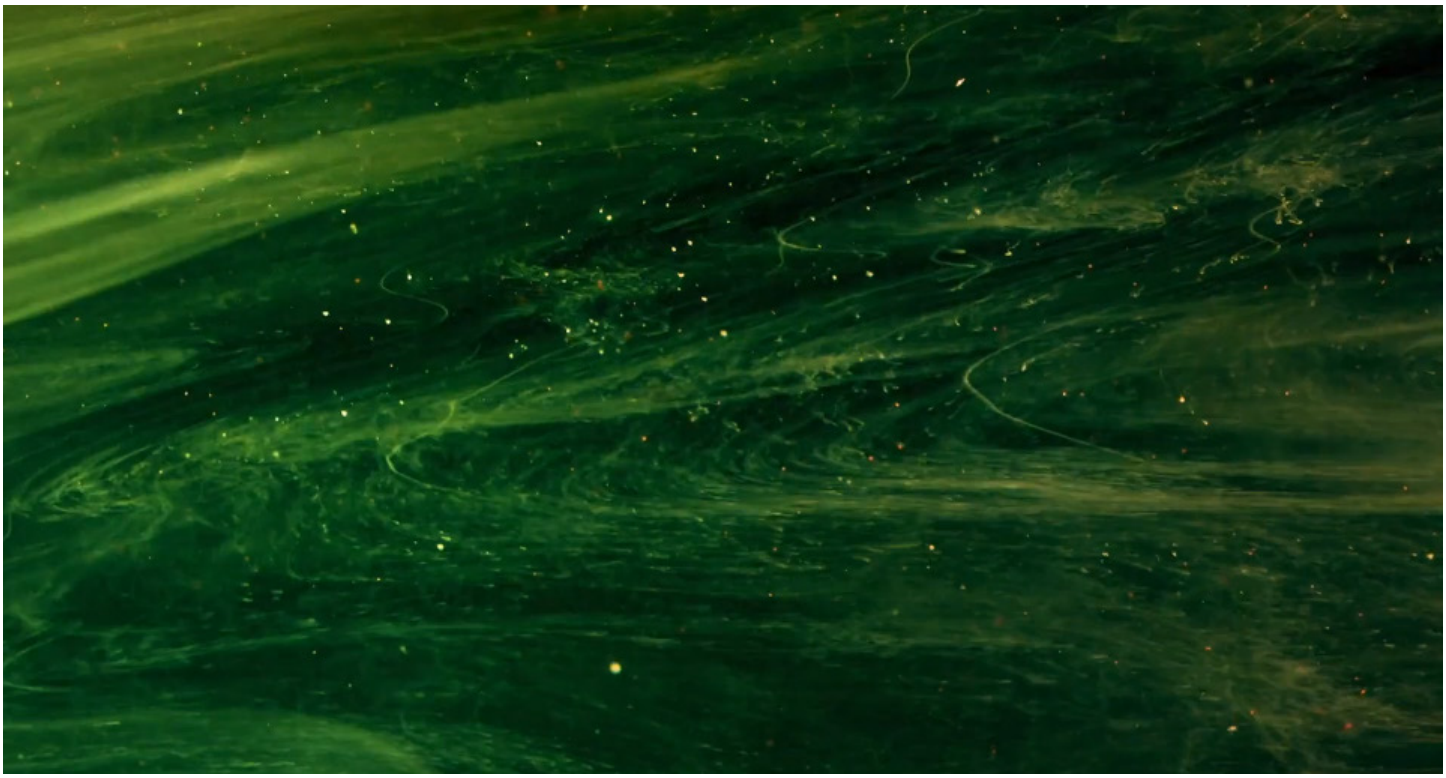
from "Tidal", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley



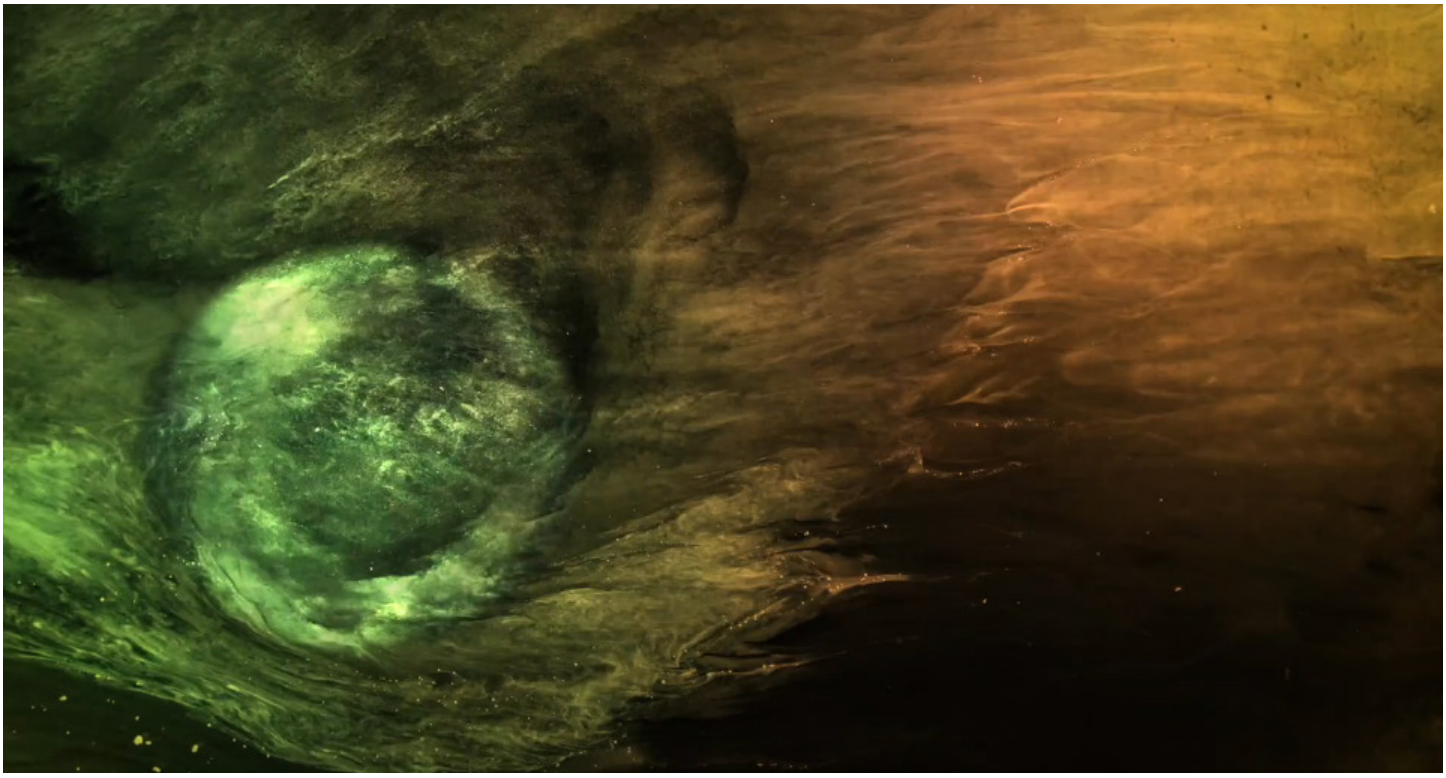
from "Tidal", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley

from "Have You Ever Bullied a Wave?", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley

from "Have You Ever Bullied a Wave?", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley



from "Starshine", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley



from "Starshine", Shin Yu Pai and David Ian Bickley

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

You Have Time

Tyler Dilts

You plan it out almost to the minute. If you leave at 9:55, you'll get there between 10:20 and 10:25. They'll start setting up for lunch a few minutes after 11:00 and begin serving sometime between 11:10 and 11:25. The last eight months have taught you that between forty-five minutes and an hour is the ideal duration. Shorter, and the guilt begins to corrode your already meager functionality; longer and you won't be able to escape the gravitational pull of the grief and you'll lose the rest of the day. Maybe the next day, too.

So you time it with care and precision.

To be sure.

Also, you know if you get to the Rooster Café by 11:35, you'll be able to get a breakfast burrito with Portuguese sausage and a side of sour cream before the lunch rush takes up all the parking and crowds you out and sends you back up the 405 with an empty stomach.

From the freezer, you retrieve a Hershey Bar and insulate it with three folded paper towels so it won't start melting by the time you get there.

But on Wednesday, there's a traffic accident. You know about it miles and miles before you get to the site of the incident because even though you've driven the route more than a hundred times at this point, you still Google Map it every trip so you can track each minute.

On Wednesday, it's going to take you sixty-two minutes. You look down again. No. Sixty-six minutes.

Wednesday is turning to shit.

People ask "Why Costa Mesa?" and you tell them it's really close to your brother's house. Less than a mile. You could walk there in eleven minutes. You say that like it's the reason you picked the place. But you visit more

than he does. Because you have time. He doesn't have time. Because he works his ass off so he can pay for it. He pays his fair share and a lot of your fair share, too. Because you have time.

You teach. It's summer. So you have time. Sure, you really need to be writing the book. You're not, though. Not really. No matter how hard you try. Every day you sit down with it, you take more out than you put in. So you have time.

You have time.

But there's an accident on the 405. You're going to be late. And you feel guilty. Even more guilty than you did for going away to the writers conference last week and missing all those visits. The writers conference, by the way, was terrific and made you feel happier and more hopeful than anything has in a long time, but now that you're back, you feel worse for feeling better.

And you're going to be late.

You watch the Google Maps ETA go up a minute, then down three, then back up five and you remember you have to pick up the last (please god let it be the last) form you need to apply for the VA benefit that's had you backflipping through bureaucratic hoops for months now, and that's going to take a few extra minutes that you simply do not have today.

You finally park and you take a Lorazepam and walk up to the outside gate and push the buzzer and wait to be let in. You look through the bars of the fence at the tiny garden and the little walking path that winds around and in between the two buildings and is the real reason you chose this place over all the others, no matter how far away from home it is, this little bit of outdoor space, this little bit of sunshine that none of the others had. You take a few deep breaths and wait.

Then the buzz comes and you pull the gate open and go inside and up the little walking path to the office where you have to sign in and write the time.

11:07.

Shit.

Maybe things are looking up, though, because the business manager has the form in a manila folder all ready for you and it's in your hand by the time you put the sign-in sheet pen back in the floral-embossed cup on the desk. Down the hall in number twelve, you drop the file on the bed and barely even think about the fact that it's covered by a crocheted bedspread that you've never even seen and not the fleece blanket you bought for

Christmas three years ago. And you walk outside across the patio and into the big activity room.

You look to the left and see someone asleep on the couch all the way down by the recliners. You study the shape.

Is it?

Too big.

Not her.

You look the other way and you see her. At the third table. With her back to the window. Where she usually sits for meals. But her place has already been set. Even from where you're standing you can see the placemat and the silverware and the glass of water. Everybody has them. They're waiting. They're all waiting.

11:10. Lunch is coming early today.

Shit. You already feel guilty because it's been more than a week since you've visited. Nine days. That's the longest you've gone without seeing her since she moved here.

She's sitting next to an old man you don't recognize. He must be new. She reaches over and pats his shoulder, comforting him.

You try not to think about why there's always room here for someone new.

You remember how only a year ago, she used to put a blanket over you when you fell asleep on the couch waiting for your wife to get home from teaching school. High school. Real school. Not college creative writing like you. Your wife works for a living. But it's summer and she has time, too. It's better for you when she's there at home, the hole doesn't seem quite so deep, but you worry. About what you make her deal with. You worry. When she's teaching, the days are harder but at least you have until dinner time to try to get your shit together and then even though you haven't gotten your shit together, you can put on your best game face for the evening so she won't have to deal with as much. But it's summer and she has time, too, so she has to deal with almost as much of you as you do.

You stare across the large activity room at her, sitting there at the table, and wonder if you should just turn around and go. Come back later. But even as you think that, you know it's a lie. You won't come back later. You'll leave and go to the Rooster Café and get a breakfast burrito with Portuguese sausage and a side of sour cream and it will be perfect and that will be just barely enough. Just barely. Then you'll go home and try it all again tomorrow.

You've talked about it. Your therapist said that sometimes it really is okay to leave if she seems engaged with someone else. If she seems happy. Because she doesn't usually seem happy when you're visiting. She always seems sad. So sometimes it's okay. Sure, there's that little bit right when you get there and she kind of recognizes you and there's that little hint of a smile, that little flash in her eyes, but it vanishes even more suddenly than it bloomed and the sadness washes over her. You're not sure why it's always like that, but you figure she must have some traces of memory of what it was like when she lived with you and your wife. The two relatively good years. The bad year when the decline accelerated so rapidly that you took a leave of absence from teaching to care for her full time until your own health began to decline so rapidly that her doctor told you that you had to do something or you'd die before she did.

Happens all the time, her doctor said, all the time.

But you're feeling too much shame because you haven't seen her for so long.

Nine days.

You glance at the med tech inside the door to see if she's judging you but she just smiles and says hello and points to your mother across the room. Now they've seen you so it's too late to leave because what will they think? They don't know you've talked to your therapist about it and maybe sometimes it's better if you don't make her sad. They don't know.

So you walk across the room and put a hand on her shoulder and lean down and say, "Hi Mom." It takes a few seconds. It always takes a few seconds, but maybe it's a few seconds longer today? And then you see it in her eyes.

She recognizes you.

Kind of.

A little bit.

You pull an empty chair close and sit at her side and she pulls you in for an awkward hug. You adjust the chairs but it's still clumsy. You don't want to move hers any more than you have to because she's set for lunch and you don't want to distract her from that. So you sit there leaning over and twisting so she can rest her head on your shoulder and it only takes a few minutes for the ungainly posture to make your side hurt, but you don't move because she's saying something in your ear that you can't understand. It's not like how you usually can't understand what she's saying with the recog-

nizable words and phrases that just don't seem to go together or connect at all to what's happening.

No.

She's trying to say words but you can't understand what they are. You try to remember if it's been like this before but you don't think so. Maybe a little bit like this. But not this much like this. No, not this much.

You pretend to understand like you usually pretend to understand but differently. You say what you always say, that you're here now and you're going to take care of everything and that she doesn't need to worry. You know that helps sometimes but you can't tell if it's helping now. She reaches out without moving her head and adjusts the spoon on the brown placemat. Then she says something else that you pretend to understand and you say that you're here now and you're going to take care of everything and that she doesn't need to worry.

The twist/lean is making your right side feel like someone is jabbing it with a sharp stick, so you try to adjust yourself in the chair without disturbing her head which is still resting on your shoulder, but you move too much and she looks up at you with a question in her eyes. You're not sure what the question is but it doesn't quite look like the question that's always in her eyes even though you don't know what that question is either. It's worse, this question. Maybe she's having a bad day. But the days are mostly bad so this bad is even worse than the regular bad. Or maybe you've been gone so long that now this is the new regular bad and later you'll remember the old regular bad and think about how much better it was than this new regular bad is now.

Then she says something that you do understand.

She says kill me.

Kill me.

And you think thank god.

Because you understand what she's saying and she's been asking you to kill her for months now, so maybe the new regular bad isn't as bad as it seemed even though it's still worse than the old regular bad. Maybe it's better than you thought. Maybe.

Then she says something else you don't understand so you pretend to understand and you say that you're here now and you're going to take care of everything and that she doesn't need to worry.

You say that you're here now and—

They wheel in the cart from the kitchen with all the bowls and the big pot of soup. Is that a pot? You don't think it's a pot but you don't know what to call it. It's big and metal and looks kind of like a bucket and there's a lid on it so maybe it is just a pot? Is it a tureen? What the fuck even is a tureen?

She says something else you don't understand and you say that you're here and everything's going to be okay and it's time for lunch. You say look over there and she turns her head but you can tell she can't see that far, and even though the hospice nurse said you shouldn't take her anymore for the eye injections to treat her macular degeneration, you think you should have kept going but then you remember that last time and how scared she was and how much she cried and that even though she'd been getting the treatments for ten years, she didn't have any idea of what was going on and even the doctor said maybe to let it go.

And then they're serving the soup to the people at the next table and they're close enough that she can tell what's happening and they put her bowl of chicken noodle on the table in front of her and she gives you one last distracted look and you take your arm from around her shoulders and she leans in and picks up her spoon and starts eating and it's almost like you're not even there anymore.

You say goodbye and that you'll be back soon and she slurps her soup out of the spoon and you get up and push the chair you were sitting in back under the next table and walk outside into the sun.

It's hot.

Was it this hot when you got here?

It feels too hot to even be outside.

You walk past the tiny garden on the little walking path. The flowers are beginning to wilt. Maybe they need more water or fertilizer or—

And then they're buzzing you out and you're in the parking lot getting into your car and turning the air conditioning up a few notches and it's 11:25. You were only there for fifteen minutes and you ask yourself what kind of a shitty person visits their mother for fifteen minutes after more than a week away and you look in the rearview mirror and back out of your parking spot and try to think about how good that breakfast burrito with Portuguese sausage and a side of sour cream at the Rooster Café is going to be and you hit two green lights in a row and it seems like you get there in no time at all and then you're making the last left turn and you see it.

The little parking lot is full.

The street is packed with cars.

There's no place to park.

You turn left into the little lot and stop with the back bumper of your car barely out of the traffic and you wait. You try to look inside and see if it looks like anyone is finishing and you watch two guys get up and walk out the door and you think it's going to be okay, everything is going to be okay, but then they just keep walking. Past all the cars in the lot. Past all the cars in the street. And then around the corner and out of sight.

There's no place for you.

That's okay, though, because you can wait. You have time. You can wait as long as—

Someone behind you honks.

You look in the mirror and see a woman in an Audi raising her hands palm up above the steering wheel.

You pull through the parking lot and back out onto the street and she sits where you just were. So you drive up the street again and make a u-turn. Then you drive to the other end of the block and make another u-turn and you're not sure how many times you've done it when you see a big Chevy SUV pull out of a space in the lot and the woman in the Audi pull into it. You smack the center console so hard it feels like you've broken two fingers.

After several more laps up and down the block, you see the line at the Rooster Café stretching out the door and you wonder where they're coming from and where they parked or did they all just walk?

And you know it's too late.

Fuck.

The lunch rush is here.

Even if you parked a mile away and walked back, there wouldn't be any place to sit and it would be so crowded that you can't even let yourself imagine it.

11:55.

You give up.

Head back toward the freeway.

It's not the first time.

Won't be the last.

You'll have time for more burritos.

Time for all the burritos you'll ever want.

But before you get to the 405, you feel your stomach begin to seize and

your chest tightens. You pull into the little shopping center on the corner with the ramen place and the Japanese restaurant and the other Japanese restaurant. You park and you squeeze the steering wheel as hard as you can because if you let go, you know you won't be able to stop the shaking.

You breathe and you breathe and you breathe.

When you can, after minutes that feel like hours, you take another Lorazepam and you breathe.

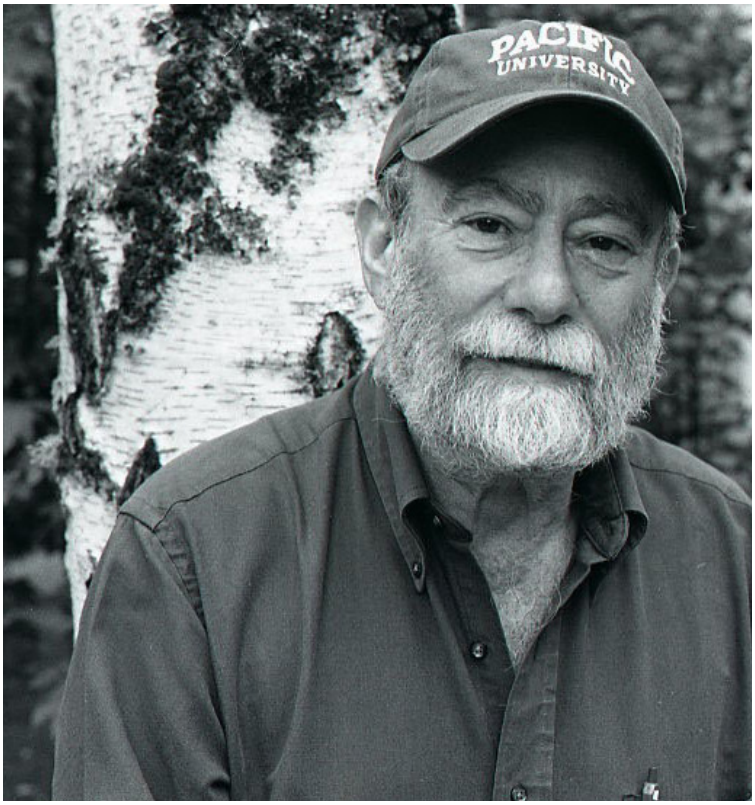
And you breathe and you breathe.

And you breathe.

Because you have time.

FICTION

Marvin Bell: A Remembrance



Marvin Bell, who died in December 2020 at the age of 83, was a poet of relationships. Not expressly autobiographical, his work nevertheless did not shy away from the intimate and the personal. And yet, it also managed to be global, political, mythic, an exploration of both the human and the natural world.

"There is a kind of physical reality," he once told the Ohio Review, "that we all share a sense of. I mean, we might argue about what reality is, but we all know how to walk across a bridge—instead of walking across the water, for instance. And it seems to me that one definition of modesty in poetry would be a refusal to compromise the physical facts of what it is that is showing up in one's poems."

It seems strange to describe such a capacious talent as modest, and yet in the most essential sense, that's precisely what Bell's work is. Not in terms of its ambition, or the clarity of its language and conception, but in the light touch of the poet in the world. Bell, in other words, is always gazing outward, even when he is writing about himself. He is interested in our rela-

tions with one another, with space and landscape, and with the unavoidable realities of mortality and death.

In his "Dead Man" poems, for instance, he takes as a recurring epigraph the Zen admonition, "Live as if you were already dead." It's a dichotomy, such a statement, a contradiction—and yet, at the same time, a kind of code. The idea is to aspire to a condition that one cannot reach, which only raises the stakes of the poems. In "About the Dead Man's Recent Dreams," Bell makes such a paradox explicit from the opening lines:

Call them ravaged castles in the air.
Think them fancy, fantasy, reverie or romance.
Dismiss them as head trips and chimeras.
He sees them day and night, call him a woolgatherer or stargazer.
He cannot stop his seeing what is not there.

Bell was a worker; he was writing and teaching until his final days. We are honored to present some of these last works in this issue of Air/Light. What you'll find is a wide range of material: Bell's final lecture, "Bloody Brainwork," which is a vivid evocation of process; an audio conversation about Bell between the poets David St. John and Christopher Merrill; and a selection of previously unpublished prose poems Bell and Merrill wrote in collaboration with one another—single paragraph dispatches ("paras," the authors called them) that reflect, through the back and forth between two long-time friends and colleagues, the uncertainty and constancy of a changing world.

"Poetry," Bell once observed, "gave me a way to express everything at once. That is, it gave me a method by which to say more than words can say." If this seems another conundrum, that's the point precisely, to turn language into feeling, to express our tenuous and tenacious engagement with the world.

You can find additional audio and video material in the web version of this package at airlightmagazine.org.

REMEMBRANCE

After the Fact

Marvin Bell and Christopher Merrill

Editor's Note: *What follows are two sets of excerpts from Marvin Bell and Christopher Merrill's extended collaboration* After the Fact*, in which the poets shared a conversation on the page in the form of a series of linked, single paragraph prose poems. The first thirteen of these works, or "paras," are from the as yet unpublished* After the Fact: If & When*; the final four are from* After the Fact: Here & Now*, a subsequent volume left unfinished at Bell's death. Each selection is introduced by one of the poets.*

AFTER THE FACT: IF & WHEN

Preface

After the Fact: If & When is a sequel to the 2016 book After the Fact: Scripts & Postscripts, ninety linked paragraphs written in 2011-2015 with Christopher Merrill, whom I first met in 1978. It was Chris's idea to start a back-and-forth collaboration. By turns, it has felt like prose poetry, lyrical nonfiction, poetic memoir, and emotive journalism. It is a conversation in which we take up matters biographical, philosophical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic. Neither of us realized at the start how much it would come to mean to us. Hence, *If & When* following *After the Fact*. Because Chris un-

dertakes cultural diplomacy missions for the State Department, his paragraphs arrive from all over the world, while mine have been sent from Iowa City, Iowa, and Port Townsend, Washington.

—Marvin Bell

CM:

The Werther Effect

The Sorrows of Young Werther, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1774. Theorists of social contagion trace the idea that harmful social influences can be transmitted like infectious diseases to the rash of suicides that followed the publication of Goethe's semi-autobiographical novel. Like his doomed protagonist, melancholy young men wore blue coats and yellow trousers to shoot themselves or jump from bridges—stylized statements that convinced some European authorities to ban the book. Goethe composed a poem for the second edition, admonishing readers not to follow his example. Two hundred years passed before a sociologist coined a term for a form of contagion—the Werther effect—that soon infected my hometown. Keith's younger brother took his life, and others followed suit, as others always do. Consider the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire at an intersection in Saigon to protest the war, inspiring other self-immolators, including a fruit-seller in Tunis who sparked the Arab Spring. Then remember the suicide bombers in London, Madrid, and Manchester; the killers stalking houses of worship in Charleston, Pittsburgh, and Christchurch; the white supremacists chanting "Blood and Soil" in Charlottesville, MAGA-hatted men and women threatening journalists at Trump rallies, online trolls desperate to own the libs. Some take their marching orders from what they read, see on TV, or track on social media, inoculating themselves, or so they think, against the viruses circling the globe. Think again.

MB:

April Fools' + 1

April 2, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump declares that wind turbines cause cancer. The comedians snicker, and we guffaw. Think back to the Piels beer television ads of 1955 to 1960 in which the comics Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding voiced the animated characters Bert and Harry marketing Piels. The ads were meant to focus attention on the brand, but Bert and Harry sometimes entertained us as if they were still getting around to it. Was it the cartoon Bert or the cartoon Harry who sent the other for a table and was told to stall by doing bird calls, which he did until the table appeared, by which time it was too late. Trump is an unwitting practitioner of the method: to entertain us until it is too late. Viewers enjoyed the Bob and Ray ads but forgot for what product, and Piels resorted to the hard sell in which a song kept repeating "Piels, Piels, wonderful Piels" over pictures of people having fun. Schlitz, Pabst, and Budweiser steamrolled the national beer world. January 6, 2018, Trump says, "I'm a very stable genius." Are we having fun yet?

CM:

Tongue-Tied

June 6, 2019, Normandy Beach, France. The ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Normandy was delayed, according to U.S. President Donald Trump, by the interview he taped with FOX News—a mixture of grievance, insult, and deceit, with the American cemetery in the background. I was ruing, once again, the loss of the journals my father's godfather had kept during his medical service aboard the hospital

ship USS Hope, which had set sail across the Pacific not long after the liberation of Paris. His meticulous record of the final campaign against Japan, during which his ship evacuated and tended to the wounded and dying from the Battles of Corregidor, Okinawa, and other islands, disappeared when I moved west, along with my dream of bringing his voice to life in a novel. I feared him in my childhood, perhaps remembering in some vestigial way his decision at our kitchen table in my infancy to use a pair of scissors to snip the band of tissue connecting my tongue to the floor of my mouth. My malnourishment he blamed on the fact that I was tongue-tied, which relieved my mother, who traced his brutal methods to the USS Hope. I did not speak until I was nearly two. Sometimes it is best to hold your tongue.

MB:

Native Tongues

The Duke of Deception, Geoffrey Wolff, 1979. A book of revelations. To be moved to write for an occasion is a sure cure for the wordless. You and I were there in the Bread Loaf barn to hear the stuttering author who had barged through his fear of his first-ever public reading so that his children would hear, prior to the publication of his memoir, the truth of their father's father, whose life as a con man had been unknown by his son. I recall, too, the novelist who, as a student, lengthened every question with an unstoppable stutter but who did not stutter on stage. Both writers would vanquish their genetic constraints. There are other reasons for not speaking. I will never know if my father would have said anything much about his escape from Ukraine under a horse-drawn load of hay, or his horseback ride to Poland and the voyage in steerage to America. Had he lived longer, still I think he would not have told. Indeed, it seems that asking PTSD veterans to speak of the horrors of their wars abroad is not therapeutic but destructive, as they go through them again. The desensitization training of the military did not carry over for those whom Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy sent to Vietnam, and for whom no treatment could loosen their tongues about the

whole truth. Our friend Rocky tells me of his 99-year-old mother, her faculties intact, who asks of him that he tell those at her "service" to enunciate clearly. We are lucky who are given the words to say enough.

CM:

Ghosts

Mickelsson's Ghosts, John Gardner, 1982. The reviews of Gardner's final novel were brutal—one critic likened it to "mountains and mountains of loose black coal, shifting and sliding but burning no fire and making no light"—and that summer at Bread Loaf some attributed his drunkenness to literary despair. He was late for his morning lecture, and when I found him in his room drinking with his fiancée and another writer, he was in no mood to go to the Little Theater, where he delivered the shortest lecture anyone could remember. *If you're not writing political*, he said, *you're not writing*. Then he strummed his guitar for a minute or two before returning to his room to continue partying. I developed a theory about his fall from grace, which ended the next month, just before his wedding, when he drove his motorcycle off the road. He survived colon cancer, two divorces, and assorted literary controversies, including a plagiarism charge, only to find he could not rid himself of the ghost that called him to write, in one form or another, how at the age of eleven, driving a tractor on the family farm, he had accidentally crushed his younger brother to death. From his books, his attempts to exorcise the nightmares and flashbacks he suffered until his dying day, I am learning that what I witnessed and experienced in Sarajevo will not leave me be.

MB:

Holograms

Sept. 27, 2019, Beverly Hills, California, the Saban Theater. Holograms of Roy Orbison and Buddy Holly take turns not being there. A reviewer, against his expectation, said, "It wasn't creepy," but admits his mind wandered after two numbers. A tribute show, the audience had come to see the artists perform. They cheered the first appearance of Hologram Orbison. They moved to the beat when Holly jumped about the stage. Were the holograms memory blocks—in either sense of the phrase? Or both at once? Holograms, ghosts, people in dreams, the fabricated characters of fantasy, echoes of times past, déjà vu—they show up unbidden, living in the resonant cavities of the brain yet seeming to arrive from afar. Staying in Frost's cabin in New Hampshire, when poets who had slept there previously said they had met a nightly ghost, I welcomed the ghost but, whether awake or asleep, neither saw nor heard anything. I kept the bedroom door open, not that it would have been a hindrance. Free of the ghostly, I tell stories about friends who have died because, after all, I still know them. In that way, but only in that way, I bring them to life. I remember the insomniac John Gardner writing through the night at a small table in a Bread Loaf hallway, and wonder now if it was a way to avoid his lost brother. Those who paid $25 apiece to be in the moment with Orbison and Holly were largely satisfied and appreciative, though the reviewer noted that some left early, as had Orbison and Holly.

CM:

Kissing Snakes

The Fishermen, Sculpture Garden, Petrozavodsk, Russia, 21 October 2019. My guide, a linguistics professor from the state university, had remained

single for so long that when she invited her friends to a wedding celebration, at the lakefront restaurant where we were dining, they did not believe she would marry the Egyptian computer scientist she had met on holiday in Alexandria; hence they brought no gifts to their nuptials. After lunch, walking along the embankment, she rehearsed the nicknames locals had bestowed on the postmodernist sculptures commissioned and presented to Petrozavodsk by its sister cities—*Woman with Four Breasts;* a series of posts called *Dogs' Joy;* and *Kissing Snakes*, two tall columns twisting toward each other, each topped with a metallic serpentine shape. The monument to Peter the Great had been moved from the city center to make way for one to Lenin—which was not removed when the Soviet Union dissolved. We had no time to visit Lenin Square, also called "Round Square" (the English translation of круглая площадь), before my overnight train departed for Moscow. The other passenger in my compartment was attached to one of the security services, though I could not make out the pin affixed to the lapel of his leather jacket. Nor did he speak to me or turn a page of the book he was reading, which was thick enough to be *War and Peace*. Our encounter was as unlikely, and perhaps inevitable, as my guide's marriage or the pair of wire mesh fishermen overlooking the lake, who would soon be coated with ice; they had no nicknames. After midnight, when I realized my bunkmate would read until morning, I took an Ambien and slept like a baby.

MB:

Smiles

Nov. 13, 2019, the public impeachment hearings of Donald Trump. With my father having come to the U.S. from Ukraine as a teen, I should like beets and borscht, and the bitter herbs of the seder, but I do not. My culinary affiliation with his Old World consists of the likes of bagels, garlic and halvah, though one can hardly find a true bagel any longer, even on the lower east side of New York to which those fleeing poverty and pogroms came. When I delivered my son to his sublet on his move to New York, before leaving

I fixed the mailbox, bought a duplicate door key, and pointed to a nearby deli, telling him to ask for a "bagel with a schmear." He was too shy to say such a thing, but half a year later, his girlfriend told me that he had gotten better about it. She explained that he had ordered a bagel and, when the waitress asked if he wanted "a schmear," he had said yes. Such a small thing, it still makes me smile. Even the inquiry to establish the President's crimes linked to Ukraine has its humorous side, given his continuous "I'm rubber and you're glue" fibs. In good times and bad, we take our joy and delight from actions of which we were a part, even when it falls to us only to know the news and to speak of the obvious. I'm not saying everything is peachy keen, but there's a reason to smile.

CM:

Fantasy World

November 20, 2019, the public impeachment hearings of Donald Trump. When Jennifer Williams, a Foreign Service officer detailed to the vice president's office, swore an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to the House Intelligence Committee, I thought I recognized her from a cultural diplomacy mission a decade ago. My control officer's instructions for my first engagement in Beirut were unnerving, given the travel warnings issued by the State Department for Lebanon: take a taxi to Fantasy World, a family-themed fun park in Dahiya, a largely Shi'a district and Hezbollah stronghold in south Beirut, then cross the road to the high school. A young diplomat (Ms. Williams, if memory serves) was waiting for me with her security detail. She was anxious to start, and stayed only long enough to introduce me to the class, reminding me before she left to take a taxi back to my hotel and send her the receipts. I do not remember ever feeling so alone. But the students, who were fluent in Arabic, English, and French, seemed to embrace my idea that translating poems and stories from one language to another could be part of their literary apprenticeship. And when they read aloud the writing exercise I gave them—describe a

room in your house—it felt as if they had invited me into their lives. This was a fantasy, of course, like the fun park across the road, which belonged to Hezbollah's financier, or the belief that truth might prevail in Congress. The diplomat testified that Trump's phone call to the Ukrainian president was "unusual and inappropriate." It took me forever to hail a taxi in that part of town.

MB:

The Art of the Deal

1987, a book "by" Donald Trump, ghosted by Tony Schwartz. January 22, 2020, President Trump says, about the coronavirus pandemic, "We have it totally under control." Jan. 24: "It will all work out well." He explains that it will "just disappear." Previously, he called it "the Democrats' new hoax." March 24, 2020, over 53,000 people in the U.S. and territories have tested positive, and over 700 have died. Trump has caused a run on hydroxychloroquine, a drug needed for lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, falsely claiming it treats the virus. He refuses to invoke the power to pay companies to make ventilators with which to save the sick. Trump, who it seems has betrayed banks, stiffed workers, and stolen from charities, now shows the qualities of a wholesale serial killer. My wife and I, seniors with "underlying conditions," will be indoors for a long time, while Trump is eager to tell us not to self-isolate but to make the economy look better for his re-election campaign. Meanwhile, our son in NYC, a trained ninja, is buying things for us he thinks we should have. Our other son, who FaceTimes from Tennessee, convinced us to buy LifeStraws. They say you can stick one in the mud and suck up clean water. If only that applied to the Trump administration, devoutly lying, while "Let them eat cake" Melania, is having a tennis pavilion built on the White House lawn. Who will play tennis there? This time of "social distancing" is no time for Socratic dialogue, but we can seek a smile here or there, to wit: Dorothy, out walking, heard someone across the street say, as his friend approached him, "I've got a tape measure, and I'm not afraid to use

it."

CM:

The Plague

26 March 2020. I was rereading Camus' novel when the United States became the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, with more confirmed cases than any country and a thousand deaths. One month after Trump's declaration that COVID-19 would disappear, "like a miracle," this public health emergency was for the president not what the French writer had described in his diary as "the redeeming plague." Camus set his story in the coastal Algerian city of Oran, which had a history of epidemics, and while the plague he describes in minute detail is often regarded as a metaphor for life in Vichy France, it is first and foremost a disease. Quarantine resembles military occupation, it is true; also Sarajevo during the siege, which was where I first read *The Plague*. A friend suggested that Trump was leading a death cult. *What's next?* an Episcopal priest asked me in an email. *Frogs and boils?* The ten plagues of Egypt, sent by God and recounted in the Book of Exodus, which include turning the water of the Nile to blood, a thunderstorm of hail and fire, and enough locusts to cover the face of the earth, convinced the Pharaoh to free the Israelites from slavery. The president's dereliction of duty will cost many lives. In despair I snuck out of the house at dusk to go for a run, and when I started down the hill above the marsh, I heard a chorus of spring peepers calling to their mates. It sounded like sleigh bells.

MB:

Aesthetic Wobble #6

March 28, 2020. Can we vindicate our yearning for beauty during a pandemic? Is there a writer's hazmat suit? Beginning to write at 2:30 in the afternoon, I noted the count of 116,448 coronavirus cases in the U.S. and 1,943 deaths. When I quickly reloaded the page, I saw that someone else had passed. By 2:41, the death toll was 1,978. Now Trump wants people to die for the Dow. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, during the pandemic the most presidential spokesperson in the country, having asked in vain for sufficient federal assistance while New Yorkers perished, now could not keep from calling Trump's plan to get people into the streets by Easter "not aspirational, but asinine." Trump has told his sycophantic veep, Mike Pence, not to telephone governors insufficiently "appreciative" of him. I am bent from concern for my son and daughter-in-law residing on the 26th floor of a Brooklyn high-rise. He reassures me: "We take the stairs down and up," he says. "Nobody takes the stairs in New York!" Taking a break from writing this at 4:00 p.m., the U.S. death count stands at 1,979. One minute later: 1,993. Trumpism is exponential.

CM:

The True Believer

March 29, 2020. On my mother's birthday, one month to the day after her death, I counted out the pills remaining in my supply of hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, to gauge how long I might have before my immune system resumed its attack on my joints. A Trump tweet extolling its miraculous healing properties for

sufferers of COVID-19 led to a shortage of the drug, with doctors prescribing it for themselves and their families, and so the pharmacy cannot refill my prescription. The president's faith in a single study, dismissed by virologists, unnerved public health professionals accustomed to making policy recommendations based on scientific evidence. And his followers' belief in the misinformation he offers daily about the pandemic, despite media fact-checking, called to mind *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer's study of mass movements and fanaticism, which once helped me understand my mother's trust in Richard Nixon. The stevedore wrote his first book in longhand between shifts on the San Francisco docks, then sent his only copy to Harvard University Press; when asked what he would do if the editor lost his manuscript, he said he would just write it out again, because he had it memorized. *The true believer is everywhere on the march*, he wrote in 1951—and this is still the case. My mother died of dementia on Leap Day, the date of the first American death from COVID-19, and since I last checked this morning, the plague has claimed 172 more lives, medical supplies are running dangerously low in New York City, and Trump is boasting on Twitter about the television ratings his press conferences garner. If and when this finally comes to an end, I hope that what we have written here—and what we may yet write—will be at once original and true.

AFTER THE FACT: HERE & NOW

Preface

Marvin and I completed the second volume of *After the Fact*, subtitled *If & When*, in the early days of the pandemic, and while we could not imagine how long the initial lockdown would last or what toll it might take on our lives, we knew that the novel coronavirus would not only change the nature of our collaboration, which had heretofore depended to a certain degree upon the tension between what I experienced during my international travels and what Marvin was thinking about closer to home, but force us to document and reflect on the sudden changes thrust upon us. Thus began *Here & Now*, the unfinished third volume of *After the Fact*, which I wish Marvin and I were still writing. Here are its opening paras.

—Christopher Merrill

CM:

Ransoms

From Twitter, I learn that the Welsh word for self-isolation, *hunan ynysu*, can be translated as self-islanding—a working definition of our new dispensation, which has its own nomenclature. Here in the Peninsula neighborhood, where we shelter in place, practicing social distancing to avoid contracting the novel coronavirus, I recall stories my late friend, the Welsh writer Leslie Norris, used to tell: how in one bleak period of his life, he would look over the page he had typed each day, crumple it up, and drop it in the trash can. His wife, Kitty, would retrieve the page, read it, and return it to the trash can. Leslie relished the idea that in his elegy for Edward Thomas he misnamed the white star-shaped flowers growing on the hill above the poet's house, calling them ransoms instead of ramsoms, which merited a citation in the OED. Sometimes I wondered how they survived their last years in Provo, Utah, feted by the Mormons at BYU, though they did not belong to the Church of Latter-Day Saints, and now it comes to me: they made an island for themselves at the base of the Wasatch Mountains. I had the good luck to dine with them regularly, gathering stories, it seems, for our self-islanding. Medieval Welsh bards, Leslie told me more than once, wrote their deathbed poems when they were still healthy. No telling when the end is nigh.

MB:

Endings

I am especially fond of literary endings in which a poem stops but the poetry continues. Does that not apply to deathbed poems written early? It's an up-in-the-air presence, a sailing away, a wave of insinuation, neither an aura nor an omen because endless. We were leaving the Salt Lake City airport for a long drive south when I turned to the *Deseret News* journalist in the back seat and asked, "Where do Mormons think Heaven is?" "Do you really want to know?" he asked. "We've got five hours," I said. And it came to pass that he told me the ins-and-outs, the ups-and-downs, the then-and-now, even the story of the borrowed garment for a hot date. He told of a mission where they competed with Jehovah's Witnesses to see who could find the next graveyard. He said (was he joking?) they received a pound of chocolates for each male soul and a half-pound for each female. It was a happy drive, though two years later he would walk by me without speaking. Having once written an article that displeased his editors, he had been welcomed back. In the age of COVID-19, a doctrine by which the faithful stockpile for emergencies and tithe on principle, even as they seek converts, looks like a business plan for a pandemic. In a safer time, at the Mormon university in Hawaii, down the road from the Polynesian Cultural Center, where the Samoans do the haka and the hula dancers sway languidly, the man assigned to deliver the prayer before my poetry reading declared his certainty the audience would leave the event feeling spiritually uplifted. I knew I was being told to watch my step. Afterward, I played basketball with some of the teachers, and then we went for ice cream. I don't know if the Mormons have yet baptized every branch of my Ukrainian family tree. Can they ever? That's a lot of blood and chocolate.

CM:

Inheritance

A whistleblower's complaint to the IRS detailing how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had misled its members about investments in its charitable accounts brought to mind the last time I saw my father's Aunt Kay. She was visiting family in Orem, Utah, in May 1987, finalizing preparations for her move from a 5,000-acre mountain ranch near Carmel-by-the-Sea. Her husband, Dudley, chairman of National Airlines, had been dead for twenty-five years, and she explained that when a Mormon deacon offered her disabled son a job, she took that as a sign to convert—a decision, my father said, that would have caused Dudley to turn over in his grave. Aunt Kay was nearly seventy when the Mormons sent her on a mission to Hawai'i. Over lunch she described her friendship with Robinson and Una Jeffers, also Clint Eastwood; when asked about the ranch, Aunt Kay said she had decided to donate it to the Church for a conference center—which apparently was not built. The whistleblower claimed the investment manager had set aside $100 billion for the Second Coming of Christ, some of which was used to bail out failing companies instead of helping those in need—which gives new meaning to Paul's command to *store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal*. The tithing of the faithful might be put to better use in a pandemic. Poor Aunt Kay gave up everything to enter the Celestial Kingdom.

MB:

Bad News

April-June, 1954, the Army-McCarthy hearings. They overlapped my graduation from high school. I was glued to the TV, oblivious to the local damage inflicted by McCarthyism and the Red Scare, but I could tell Tail Gunner Joe was bad news. I had won the American Legion annual speech contest by relating the Constitution to daily life, including baseball. I had won because they weren't going to give first place to my friend, the son of a physicist at Brookhaven National Lab, who had spoken about McCarthyism.

Anyone could be a commie, how were we to tell? Scientists were suspect. People who thought twice were suspect. Suspicion stayed on the level of gossip kept from the children. At least that. Jump to June 1, 2020. The powder keg of police brutality has brought us once again face-to-face with the systemic racism of our country. Trump's response is to stand in front of a church holding a prop bible fished out of Ivanka's $1,500 purse. To let him amble across the street for a photo-op, a peaceful assembly has been tear gassed. The Archbishop labels Trump's stunt "baffling and reprehensible." The Bishop says she is outraged. The Mayor defines Trump's blatant ill-use of the church as "shameful." Even a senior White House official is reported to have said, "I'm really honestly disgusted. I'm sick to my stomach." I wonder which speech contest topics are now considered unpatriotic. The McCarthy-Army hearings lasted thirty-six days, while the blacklist of alleged Communist sympathizers lasted a decade. The popularity of lies is an unfathomable curse. To depend on the Trump government for truth is whistling in the graveyard.

REMEMBRANCE

Emeritus Talk: Bloody Brainwork

Marvin Bell

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"Bloody Brainwork" is Marvin Bell's final lecture, presented by the Emeritus Faculty Council at the University of Iowa as part of the Emeritus Faculty Lecture Series on November 5, 2020. You can watch the video of the talk on the web at https://airlightmagazine.org/airlight/issue-3/emeritus-talk-bloody-brainwork/.

EMERITUS TALK: BLOODY BRAINWORK

Good afternoon. This will be a light talk about brainwork, in particular some ways we reach for language. It won't be about the science of the brain, nor about brain research, but anecdotal and narrative. Not about the electrochemistry of the brain but reports of behavior. Because so much of my life has been around artists, immigrants and, at one time, military folk from all over the world, I tended to notice the ways our brains go after language. Even in a limited area like American English.

Some of you may know that I am in the midst of chemo treatments for stomach cancer. Please forgive me for a weak voice and for my talk being shorter than others.

As for my own language, apparently I didn't have any for about three years. I didn't speak a word until I was three. My parents took me to the

doctor who told them, "He'll speak when he's ready." I may have been waiting for syntax. When finally I spoke, it was a complete sentence, four words that many would say have defined my life ever since. I came into the kitchen where my mother was working and said, "What's for dinner, Mom?"

Now to the enigmatic anecdote I promised. Many years ago, on a planet far, far away known as the Writers' Workshop, in a building built in a previous century in which the windows were designed to be kept locked, but for which everyone knew someone with a key, a stranger knocked on my office door. A polymath, as it happened, who among other things had written a book about Southern textile workers. You're a genius, she told me. — Everyone's a genius, I replied.

She told me she had been watching me teach at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, lurking, like they say, in the back of the room, taking notes. She said I was one of a small number of people who were in the center of a coming explosion in the arts. She spoke about there being several kinds of brains, I forget how many, mine being what she called "explosive," referring apparently to the electrochemical way in which such a brain accepts and processes stimuli. I should tell you that I have never been able to confirm that there was ever any such recognized type of brain as "explosive," apart from brains injured by explosions, internal or external.

But on we went. She handed me journal pages about what she had observed of me. When I read them that evening, they did seem to have my number, not in the way a fortune teller can land on easy targets, but in more specific ways. She saw through my tricks and evasions, the way I turned my responses to questions into other areas, the ways in which I did not yet tell students everything I was thinking.

I can't now recall her exact observations, but I do remember thinking she saw a lot about my teaching and my language that might not be readily apparent. So I wrote a couple of journal pages myself, wondering what was going on.

Then I called the poet and biographer Paul Mariani. I knew she had been at the Bread Loaf School of English, where Paul taught, as well as at the Writers' Conference. When I asked what was going on, he said he couldn't tell me, but that I could trust her. A great thing to say. I never forgot it. He also told me that her husband had had a heart attack and, while she was nursing him back to health, her daughter had an accident, falling from a horse, or while hiking, had hit her head on a rock and fallen into a coma.

He said the polymath had flown to her daughter's side and talked to her till she came out of the coma, then had the daughter blink her eyes to make decisions about characters in stories—something like that. The result was that the daughter had recovered from her injuries enough to return to school, but still had trouble connecting words and thoughts—like a stroke victim, I would guess.

When we met the next morning in the student union, she gave me a book about the brain. I showed her my journal pages. I remember that she said, "I'm not used to this parallel activity." We talked, and I was supposed to send her my writings, but I never did. As I recall, she was going off to investigate the aboriginals.

So here is the wild guess I made at the time about what she was doing. It's important to know that she really is a polymath. A supremely educated and confident woman. I decided then that she was going to try to foster in her daughter another way to think, another maneuver for her brain, so that she could better line up her thoughts with her words. Is that even possible?

Another possibility, I'm afraid, is that she was testing the limits of poets' egos!

Truth to tell, whether what I thought then was true or not doesn't matter to our thinking about brainwork. This was many decades ago. The crucial fact is that brains can be wired very differently, one from another, and we see it all the time in the arts. That is why I took a wild guess about her intentions. I like to say that genius in the arts consists of getting in touch with one's inner wiring. That's what I teach—genius—though of course, I never put it that way for the dean. By artistic "genius," I don't mean skill, but originality.

Probably, the question can't be asked usefully of rote or hands-on learning or of STEM courses, but can anything be taught? Everything, it seems, can be learned, which is not quite the same thing. To state it more usefully, can any liberal arts subject be taught? The liberal arts depend on abstract thinking. You may recall when their ultimate purpose was to teach thinking. Can that be taught?

Can imaginative thinking be taught? It can be fostered and recognized, but taught? For writers, it's all about accumulating a new, and some would say personal, language, which usually begins in imitating writing that knocks your socks off, not by what it says but by how it says it.

I have an odd example of language skills at home. One day when our son

Nathan was in grade school, his teacher phoned Dorothy. We like Nathan, she said, but he lies. The pupils had been asked to report what they had read over the summer. Most of the students had read two or three books. Nathan had listed fifty. That's because he reads thousands of words a minute—not hundreds, thousands. At the start of each school year, the students took reading speed tests. Seeing his score, the school thought he somehow had cheated, so they would make him take the test again, and he would deliberately read faster the second time. Finally, they put a note in his folder explaining he was a freak. It's not something you can learn, it's genetic. It's almost a curse, because he loves to read. In Iowa City, he had an agreement with Jim Harris at Prairie Lights that he could read half a book, put it back on the shelf, and come back another day to finish it. Interestingly, he can't explain how he does it.

In the classroom, I saw examples of synesthesia: students who physically associated words with colors or smells. We asked the one what colors we were, but we didn't ask the other how we smelled.

Many of you must know *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, by A. R. Luria, which tells the story of a man who experienced synesthesia and who had an astonishing, and in some ways crippling, memory. When asked to remember a very long list of items he would be asked to list some good time later, he placed each item somewhere in a neighborhood in his mind. Asked to repeat the list, he got all but one. So he took another walk through the neighborhood. Aha: the item he had missed was a white egg, which he missed seeing because he had placed it on a white picket fence.

So people's inner wiring can be very different, one from another. I promised to say something about teaching under the umbrella of brainwork that is seeking a new language, which is what most good poets are doing. In forty years of teaching, if "teaching" is the word, the gifted poets of the Writers' Workshop, I have concluded—I concluded this early—that the teacher can only see what has been done, not what lies ahead. I have developed a few principles for how a talented poet might proceed. My mantra is learn the rules; break the rules; make up new rules; break the new rules. To that I add, the good stuff and the bad stuff are all part of the stuff. No good stuff without bad stuff. I go so far as to say, try to write a poem that at least one person in the room will hate, because it means you're pushing the envelope. And finally, write with abandon.

A few years ago, several former students, all highly successful poets, de-

cided to stage a program about me at the annual Association of Writing Programs meeting. They had not planned anything beyond choosing an order in which they would speak, and it got funnier and funnier, because each one in turn told a version of the same story. He or she had asked me a question about writing poetry, and I had said, Let's get a cup of coffee in the Union, where we talked energetically for an hour. In each case, the poet had realized, later that day, sometimes not until the next day, that I had never answered the question.

Why not? Because in general, the answers to such questions make the poet smaller. The answers get in the way of the experimental character of brainwork. I laugh to say that my chief talent as a teacher is knowing how to get out of the way, but I mean it.

In 2005, I found a new way to free one's language, promote free association, and create those interstices in which fresh language and, hence, fresh subject matter may appear. It's what I call The Scroll. It's partly about how to be a poet every day. I had a low-residency student in the Northwest who wanted to write more but couldn't manage it. So I said, tell you what. Let's you and I each write something—each on a single document—for the next ten days, after which we'll exchange our documents, not for criticism but just to see how the other person went about it.

The idea is to make one file on the computer desktop into which all your writing will go. Name it anything. I call mine "The Dailies."

Every day, you open the file, scroll to the bottom, type a date if you like, and start typing. You let it become an addiction. That is, you can't go to sleep till you write something at the bottom of the scroll. Or you can't have breakfast until, or... Everything stays on the scroll: the abandoned lines, titles and poems, the false starts, the recipe or phone message you had nowhere else to type, everything. If you decide to revise a poem, you copy it and paste it at the bottom labeled "revision" with a new date. One doesn't look back unless one has written something new, but it's okay, of course, to take to the scroll some days to extend a poem in progress. The idea is to get into motion and write with abandon. If all you have to say that day when you open the scroll is "My coffee is cold," you start there.

It's okay to miss a day now and then. In other words, you don't have to boogie every day as long as you turn on the music.

Writers' blocks are language blocks. We cooperate with them. For one blocked student, I wrote out the 26 letters of the alphabet on a piece of

torn cardboard, with arrows pointing to them and the instruction, "Use these."

My best story about highly reactive, even impulsive, speech took place in Sarajevo in 1983. At the banquet ending the festival, the Russian poet and I were seated far apart. The mayor made a point of telling me that the American presidency was so important that it must always be respected. By then, I knew the code. The mayor was saying, Your president is a jerk. After certificates and kisses, my translator took me to a young poets' bar. I didn't speak Bosnian, and they didn't speak English. My translator introduced me as an American poet, and one of the poets raised his glass and blurted out, "Fuck Reagan!" I was asked if I was a Democrat or a Republican. Neither, I said, independent. "Aha," said the poet, again raising his glass. "Anarchista!"

One special word can characterize a sentence or a paragraph. Here's a simple example. Many of you have read, or heard read, my poem to my wife called "To Dorothy." It's all over the Internet, sometimes under other people's bylines, and has been used at weddings, funerals, and other occasions. The first two lines have been used as a title for a website, and at least one person has had them tattooed on her body. And it's all because of one lucky word choice.

The first two lines are "You are not beautiful, exactly. /// You are beautiful, inexactly." The poem goes on to make its case. Had I not gone colloquial in line one, I would not have come to the word "inexactly." That word, in this context, redefines beauty and makes of the love poem something deeper than just "I love you."

Imagine if the second line of the poem instead read, "You are beautiful, I guess," or "You are beautiful, after all." It turns out that the word "inexactly" is the more suggestive word.

To Dorothy

You are not beautiful, exactly.
You are beautiful, inexactly.
You let a weed grow by the mulberry
and a mulberry grow by the house.
So close, in the personal quiet
of a windy night, it brushes the wall
and sweeps away the day till we sleep.

A child said it, and it seemed true:
"Things that are lost are all equal."
But it isn't true. If I lost you,
the air wouldn't move, nor the tree grow.
Someone would pull the weed, my flower.
The quiet wouldn't be yours. If I lost you,
I'd have to ask the grass to let me sleep.

Everything in the poem is personal, which offers chances to say something original. Thus, the quiet is defined by the adjective "personal," and again another way in "the quiet wouldn't be yours." The weed is said to be "my flower."

The truth about making art is that what is sometimes called "inspiration" likely occurred during the writing, not ahead of time. Regardless, if you're a poet, you ain't waitin'. If you are a poet, you can write poems of surprise and discovery—any day and every day—without either "inspiration" or *a priori* content.

It's not just poetry that can be written this way. It works for essays as well. The trick, if that's what it is, is just not to always use the words others expect, and to let those words bring forth others.

The poet Tess Gallagher, as an undergraduate at the University of Washington, signed up for a writing class with a visiting poet. Turned out the class was over-enrolled, and the visiting poet said he would have to eliminate some students. He gave them an assignment—six words to use in ten lines—and said he'd pick the students who wrote the best poems. And Tess Gallagher wrote a poem titled, "The Horse in the Drugstore." She gave herself an eleventh line by starting the first sentence in the title, and she daringly used only five of the six words. See if you can spot the five she used.

The Horse in the Drugstore

wants to be admired.
He no longer thinks of what he has given up
to stand here, the milk-white reason
of chickens over his head in the night, the grass
spilling on through the day. No, it is enough

to stand so with his polished chest among the nipples
and bibs, the cotton and multiple sprays, with his black lips
parted just slightly and the forehooves doubled back
in the lavender air. He has learned here when maligned to
snort dimes and to carry the inscrutable bruise like a bride.

– Tess Gallagher

Can you tell which words were assigned? Readers have guessed every word in the poem, including the articles "a" and "the." Well, the words are "horse," "milk," "reason," "bruise," and "bride." The word she didn't use is "crystal." She used the word "horse" in the title and pushed in two more words, "milk "and "reason," in line three, then left the requirements in favor of delineating the goods for sale in the store (the word "lavender" for the air around the perfume counter is a great find, as is the look of the horse with "its forehooves doubled back." And suddenly she was at her eleventh line with two words yet to use. Two words that will make all the difference.

I asked Tess about the writing of the poem, and she wrote back to say this: "I badly wanted into [this poet's] class. He said he was cutting it down. And indeed when we reached the class, there were about thirty people crammed into the classroom. He then gave us that assignment. I just kept the words in my pocket and as I walked to classes and had to cross streets, wait for lights, etc., I took out the list and read it through. After a day of this, the poem just tumbled out.

Of course she got in the class. First, because the assigned words do not stick out. The poem doesn't just *include* the five words but *uses* them. Sure, there's some strain in "milk-white reason" where she jammed together the two words that may have involved her the least. Still, even "milk-white reason," with its charming awkwardness, is visually fit to the blur of chickens in the barn at night, and to the bright light of the open fields in the day.

Now if you were going to write about this poem, you would not ignore "bruise" and "bride." What does it suggest to say that the drugstore horse is inscrutably bruised "like a bride" and, in turn, that a bride may be bruised like a horse?

You might or might not write a feminist interpretation of the poem, but you would not ignore that last line. Yet that line exists because Tess Gallagher had one line left in which to use two words. Given six words, you might

omit one, as she did—but omit *three*? Do that, and you're out of the class! Well, by the time she elaborates the store goods and the horse, she is down to one line. One can almost hear her sigh with relief as she finishes the poem in a burst, squeezing in the words "bruise" and "bride."

Also, the poem wins us over because it expresses a true act of imagination. Coleridge wrote a famous essay distinguishing between "fancy" and "imagination." Put simply, fancy is a lighter form of the imagination: daydreams, clever figures of speech, and such. Imagination is something else and has to do with seeing into the meaning and structure of things, into the "real reality," if you will.

Tess Gallagher did more than make up a story. She imagined that this drugstore horse (today you see them outside grocery stores where they cost more) is a real horse who has been given, if you will, a new job assignment and has had to adjust to it. Like any of us.

One more thing about this poem: it has a secret subtext. The visiting teacher was someone with whom Tess Gallagher would become friends. But not yet. This was her first look at him. In he walked: Mark Strand, one of America's handsomest poets—tall, expensively dressed, with a manner suggesting that he really didn't want to be there. Hence, the beginning of her poem:

The Horse in the Drugstore

wants to be admired.
He no longer thinks of what he has given up
to stand here...

That's right, the poem begins with an insult to the teacher. Now you know.

Here's Tess again: "I had turned [the poem] in and entered the classroom to see my fate. 'Who is this Tess Gallagher?' Strand inquired in a challenging way. 'I am,' I said. I thought I was out for sure. 'Damn good poem,' he said. And I was in. But I thought for sure he would have realized the poem was a portrait of him. Evidently not!"

Here's a poem that is famous for good reason but particularly for its final word. Indeed, it's generally the only poem readers know of Robert Hayden's work, and it's likely because of that one word. Teachers and students can't

stop rapping on his use of the word "offices."

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

– Robert Hayden

Imagine if the final word of the poem were, say, "duties" or "responsibilities?" Indeed, there is no great poetic line that can't be ruined by a mundane paraphrase. "Austere" is a pretty good word, but it doesn't do what "offices" does. "Austere" is precise to the max, but "offices" has an extra dimension—that of the imagination. That wider sense of "lonely offices" expresses a special significance with which anyone who cares for others without acknowledgment can identify. It lends a luster to a common experience.

I want to notice that the writer is speaking of winter Sundays, not school days—days of rest, as it were. We can assume the father is preparing the family for church.

Now I thought I'd give you a glimpse of a back-and-forth Christopher Merrill and I have been writing in paragraphs. It is a conversation in which we take up matters biographical, philosophical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic. Neither of us realized at the start how much it would come to mean to us.

The back-and-forth format fosters reactions, echoes, and lots of free association.

Chris Merrill came up with the idea. One book of ninety is in print, a second is finished, and we are well into a third. It's brainwork without a plan but, rather, with an antenna. You know, I believe in dumb luck, but you have to make yourself available to it. That is what can happen when you collaborate, looking to another person's words and associations to start your own.

I've asked Chris to say something about the back-and-forth. He'll read one and I'll read my response to it, and then we'll do it again. Chris?

CM:

Afghanistan

She said that what I saw I didn't see: a Predator drone taxiing down the runway of an airbase near the border with Pakistan and taking off toward the mountains. And where I went I didn't go: a house in which young women wrote in secret, nibbling tea cookies in a narrow white room that looked out on a snowbound garden. And what I heard I didn't hear: a story told by the crippled woman seated by the woodstove, who used both hands to straighten out her legs. Let's go to school, her father said when she was little. School: a marvelous word for a girl confined to her house. What did I see? An old man rubbing his dislocated shoulder beyond the street of butcher shops. A bomb-sniffing dog biting its trainer's arm. Soviet medals for sale on a table covered with knives. Where did I go? The gym, the canteen, and the Duck and Cover—a windowless bar on the other side of the tunnel. What did I hear? The whirr of helicopters, the footsteps of an aid official running on the treadmill, acronyms: PRT, IDP. The armored vehicle that took me to a roundtable discussion was called an MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected); the soldier swiveling around in the turret, aiming his mounted gun at cars and buildings, couldn't believe the mission was for poetry. The word on everybody's tongue was kinetic—i.e., dangerous. I was marking days off the calendar in my hooch when the duck and cover warning sounded. Under the bunk bed I crawled to wait for the all clear signal. What did I see? A photograph of a green-eyed Afghan woman taken before the Russians came. Everybody knows her.

What do we see or not see, and how do we respond? My response will be called "The Scope," but it won't begin there.

MB:

The Scope

I confess that in any group of three, I am two. Myself watching myself. I admit that, in my writings, the third person, while not me, is someone who knows a lot about me. Thus have I altered the first person pronoun so that he is I and will be I long after the one who here inhabits the I has gone. What am I getting at? It is to suggest that projection and abstraction are ways to transcend the tangible gang war that is contemporary nationalisms. To conjecture that artifice, fancy, illusion, fable and the generalized vision made possible by abstraction are what we use to save ourselves, day after day. We inhabit them. We push ourselves out of ourselves to inhabit them. If there are those who do not buy it, well, they have their own escapes. Some went under the bed, some to the cellar, some to the woods. Some enlisted, some went to prison to be safe. Some sought anonymity—if not off the grid, of a profile so low they would be overlooked by the satellites and could readily stay off the moving target. We were writing students when Dr. Finch, our nervous professor and cellist, praised Lew's story, in which a distraught salesman on the way home stopped in a penny arcade to fire a rifle beam at the midsection of a glassed-in bear. Our beloved teacher noted that the shooter was at the same time shooting his reflection on the glass. The bear reared, growled, and reversed his course with each hit. The man shot himself again and again. For the moment, his truth lay in the efficacy of a rifle scope. I had no symbolism in me and did not understand. Lew's was the best of our stories, because his troubled character would remain in the arcade, never running out of quarters and bullets. He is still there, he will always be there. That was Lew's achievement. Some went under the bed and are still there, some to the woods, some to prison. Some wrote about it.

Sometimes one word in Chris's paragraph stirred something in me that might lead to a response. This paragraph by Chris is called "Cognac."

CM:

Cognac

In the first winter of the war, a military monitor arranged for me to interview the Yugoslav Army general who had orchestrated the siege of Dubrovnik; when Croatian authorities barred me from crossing the border into Montenegro, I took a bus from that medieval city to Split, caught a flight to Zagreb, and boarded a train to Budapest, intending to travel to Belgrade and Podgorica, where the general was stationed. This added nearly 1,700 kilometers to my itinerary. Not far from the Hungarian border, I developed an acute pain in my ankle, around the scar from the surgical removal of a ganglion cyst some years before, and so decided to seek treatment in Budapest. I could walk and run, but sleep evaded me in my rented room until I draped my leg over the side of the bed. In the morning, the elderly landlady ordered me to drink a shot of Cognac before I left to search, in vain, for a doctor—our daily ritual until I departed for Serbia. The pain vanished as mysteriously as it arose, and by the time I met the general, more than a week later than planned, in the officer's club at his base, I was prepared for anything—except the monotony of the typewritten answers to the questions I had faxed him in advance, which he insisted on reading aloud. His translators and orderlies seemed to relish my discomfort in the face of his patent falsehoods, and while I knew it could be dangerous to interrupt him—I was, after all, a freelance journalist—I asked him why he had allowed his troops to commit so many atrocities. Nothing rattled him. Nor did he reply. But I was becoming more adept at ferreting out the truth from the dark arts of propaganda. A waiter arrived to serve us slivovitz. Živeli, I said when we clinked glasses. Long life.

As you can tell, Chris' story is full of Cognac, though it's a detail set among more dramatic details. As is the liquor in my response, a paragraph titled "Scotch."

MB:

Scotch

You would have had to have been there to see with what gusto we threw ourselves into our adolescence. Teen boys in the Puritan Fifties, we formed a stag party each New Year's Eve. The ultimate plan was to crash a coed party just before midnight in the hope that some pretty girl might kiss us. First, we shaped a pyramid of bottles of booze and laid in a multitude of cookies and chips as well as ill-advised sausages. Roger showed up with his cornet case, shaking it to show how he had snuck the liquor out of his house. I always brought bourbon. We hung streamers. Then we took a photo of the booze pyramid before embarking on a sea of drink and acting as silly as good friends can be in adolescence. Indeed, it was The Night of Our Adolescence by which all successive juvenile behavior in the new year was to be judged. This night, someone had rigged fireworks to my Plymouth, so that when I tried to sneak out a little early to find a kiss that might not be available after midnight, a quick burst of fireworks gave me away. Then on we went, arriving at the party where our booze-strengthened nerve and good timing would surely win us the unending passion of, say, three seconds. I went to the kitchen for one last bracer, bypassing other forms of alcohol to swill some scotch, after which I threw up. I have never been able to take a taste of scotch since. No kisses. How is taste made? From taste buds on the tongue, of which a fussy eater is now known to have more? From expectation? From associations with a hope of romance? The song that filled the airwaves was "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?" Me, I was throwing up. Years later, I always brought ouzo to parties. Turn a seemingly empty ouzo bottle upside down, and you can usually get three more drops. I drank ouzo in Tangier, Slivovitz in Serbia, Guinness every day in Ireland, and Victoria Bitter in Sydney. I have a taste for other lands and a diffidence toward New Year's Eve.

I said I'd also say something about the Dead Man Poems. They come at you in two titled parts. They take our view of experience as kaleidoscopic. Is synesthesia, I have wondered, fragments of a kaleidoscopic response to the sensory world? No beginning or end, no so-called terminal pleasure.

Said another way, why must line one lead to line two, or line twenty-one be connected to line twenty? Can't the connections be more like a spider's web, in which touching one part makes the whole tremble? Must our experiences be made linear for us to feel and understand them?

Of course, it's a tightrope aesthetic. Anyone can shoot off random words,

phrases, sentences, and the like and insist that they are connected—you know, like the famous butterfly in chaos theory that caused a storm? Is it possible to express stimuli coming from every direction as whole units of thought that create connections if—if—the writer is alert to them? I think it is.

You should know that the dead man of the Dead Man Poems is alive and dead at the same time, defeating time. There is an old Zen admonition that says, "Live as if you were already dead."

Because these Dead Man Poems can go anywhere and everywhere, and because they can freely associate with abandon until everything connects, I can take on any topic and run with it. When the typographer and all-around scholar Roy Behrens asked me to write something for a book and an exhibit devoted to camouflage, I said sure thing and off I went. Did I know where it was headed? – No. Rather, the poem listened to itself as it went, while I tried to stay receptive to every hint of a connection. No plan, just an antenna. Here's the poem.

The Book of the Dead Man (Camouflage)

1. About the Dead Man and Camouflage
When the dead man wears his camouflage suit, he hides in plain sight.
The dead man, in plain sight, disrupts the scene but cannot be seen.
His chocolate-chip-cookie shirt mimics the leaves in a breeze.
His frog-skin dress, his bumpy earth nature leave us lost and alone, his mottled apparel sends us in circles.
His displacements distract and disabuse us, he is a slick beguiler.
Everything the dead man does is a slight disruption of normality.
He is the optical trickster, the optimum space-saver, the one to watch for.
He is of a stripe that flusters convention, he is the one to watch out for.
That we thought him gone only proves his wily knowledge.
The dead man has lain unseen among the relics of embalmed time.

He was always here, always there, right in front of us, timely.
For it was not in the dead man's future to be preserved.
It was his fate to blend in, to appear in the form of, to become . . .
Now he lives unseen among the lilies, the pines, the sweet corn.
It was the dead man's native desire to appear not to be.

2. More About the Dead Man and Camouflage

The dead man knows that camouflage is all in the mind.
He has seen in the human need for shape the undoing of shape.
He has witnessed the displacement of up-and-down, across and slantwise.
He has curled the straight lines and unbent the curves, he has split the wishbone and painted outside the lines.
The dead man has undone the map by which to get there.
It is not what the dead man looks like, but what he no longer resembles.
For he hath reappeared in no disguise but as himself.
Call him disheveled, call him disposed, call him shiftless, he is.
For he hath been made and remade in the form of his surroundings.
He hath become all things that he looketh like.
Hence, he has been stepped on by those who could not see him.
He has been knelt upon by those who looked in vain.
The dead man bestirs in a background that looked inert.
The dead man is the ultimate camouflage.
He is everywhere, but where is he?

Sometimes, the place where the poem is set firmly determines the vocabulary. The mind in search of language is quickly and firmly used up by what is manifestly at hand. I'll give you an example. It comes from a tour I was given aboard a nuclear submarine. By itself, such an event isn't so much, but it comes to more when placed in an opposing context—in this case, an earlier time.

The Book of the Dead Man (The Nuclear Submarine)

1. About the Dead Man and the Submarine

Earlier, the dead man fired the mortar and bazooka, lobbed the grenade and swept the barrel of the automatic.
He boarded the troop copter, the armored carrier, the jeep.
He shouldered the rifle and wore the night revolver on duty.
He was called out when the AWOL soldier lay down on the railroad track.
He kept his head down on the infiltration course.
He shared his foxhole, his rations, his canteen.
He was not brave, he was one of the boys, he would have gone along if called.
Those dead man days shrink aboard the nuclear sub, touring its armament, its math and physics, its dark genius.
It takes two grips to fix a bayonet but only fingers to launch an atom bomb.
The dead man descended to the lower decks where the gauges were masked.

2. More About the Dead Man and the Submarine

The crew moved quicker, not
stepping but sliding down the
vertical ladders with a whoosh.
The crew that slept on mattresses between the missiles.
The crew that worked in colored lamplight before a puzzle of gauges.
The crew that loses its depth of field to each six months at sea.
The crew members listening but never transmitting, their location the captain's secret.
And the torpedoes longer than a string of limos at the ready.
In the labyrinth below the waterline, a network of interdependence, call it a warren, a burrow, a den, a lair.
Call it reliance, call it trust, call it faith.
The dead man, like you, wants to be safe, but is not.
The dead man, like you, is in the sights, on the target, inside the zone, acceptably collateral, and a man on a mission.

Before we turn to the Q&A, I want to tell you about a word Dorothy made up some years ago on a day when she was feeling befuddled. She decided on the spot that she was boflippibrick. A great word. Boflippibrick.

We all need something to do that we would do even if no one paid us to do it. I believe that art and philosophy are survival skills, and that art is a way of life, not a career. The poetic movement known as Imagists said that a new cadence is a new idea. I would go further and say that a new vocabulary, a new syntax, a new architecture are all new ways of thinking. I try to keep this in mind whenever I go boflippibrick.

POETRY

“Doing the Work,” “Nice While it Lasted,” “The Best Time to Plant a Tree was Twenty Years Ago,” “Sonnet”

Ifoghale Eguwe

DOING THE WORK

1

I open shop and the day’s first light is still dawdling.
Without ceremony, I keep the machines warm, turning slick with oil.

I clock-in this overtime.

2

There goes the indifferent hour hand. Meanwhile I’m bearing the names I know
on one shoulder, counter-balanced by the forgotten.

He had wanted to live. And him, and her, and him—and her—

3

Suddenly these celestial points are pulled back to reveal the system behind.
In the ghost
of the sky, in the night complicit in murder, I don't know

how to map an exit.

4

Months after the bullets turn cold, I grind my teeth in compulsion.
Worry becomes mechanical,

Sustaining its own momentum.

5

Worry me to sleep. When I retire, I will have earned my grief the hard way.
I will have spent all the currency I own.
Let it be known: we paid the toll, and nobody was freed.

NICE WHILE IT LASTED

On the final scenes of Bojack Horseman

On a roof
the horse's heart
Having worn out its own
History. The silence of it
Balloons, hurricanes
The room, so I'm left
Facing the splinters;
Jagged corners

What's more
Than we are forgiven
And largely we carry
On in that
Former gait—pleading
And receiving—

The self, subsumed
By memory
Tortured then soothed

THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE WAS TWENTY YEARS AGO

Everyone is blue but busy inventing
new ways to wear the word toxic, and my friends and I have dug up the
stump
of that old baobab to make of it a few hip bar stools
for the culture; we've long now left behind the niceties—
little fears of tripping over the other, it's all clumsy sarcasm
from here. Maybe we're pleading for a chance to be heard maybe for the
last
time before something foul rides into town, in with the bad weather, hangs
unbidden; see how quickly.

We the numberless green, loose
leaves, are all vastly open, all sad and sundry. I'm part time all of my friends,
part time recording the time of our lives, pocketing grainy photographs. I'm
jotting down the things you are saying to me: the next best thing We've got
is now. It will have to matter on a red planet, what with the sun
hard-pressed against us. Great fires licking up our cities, old wars turning in
the valley.

SONNET

Thank you for the
mammoth black gates
around the island
of concrete. For Saturday
mornings in the garage with math,
thanks. Living room camping site,
the fire we carried from
tongue to tongue to pass the time,
thanks. Thank you, the Peugeot, more
so the clear windshield & its one dead
bug, the drowsy shapes of rain. I am
dry & lonely. Thank you both the
ocean and moon, tall tide. I miss you
all through this
Gorilla glass.

The Wuhan Survivor Tree

Mara Mills

"It's really blossoming now." My sister texts me on her walk home from the hospital, where she runs one of the ventilator programs.

"Flowers?" I reply. It's March 2020, the start of spring.

"Virus."

A week later: "It's really really bad. Lot of sick doctors and nurses getting placed on ventilators." We switch from texting to phone, and she tells me about a sick ward that seems remote from my everyday life, 80 blocks south. This is before the around-the-clock sirens.

"I'm trying to focus on the small things. The pear trees."

I look out my window and see creamy clouds of white up and down the Houston Street meridian. Are those pear trees? We hang up and I search the internet for "Manhattan pear." I'm startled to find an interactive Street Tree Map published by the Parks Department, with seemingly every tree in the city pinpointed in a shade of brown or green. "The world's most accurate and detailed map of a city's street trees," it was created by thousands of volunteers who measured trunks and logged GPS coordinates.

I am surrounded, it turns out, by Callery pears, one of the most common trees in the city. Clicking on the green dots, I read about the extraordinary "tree care activities" performed by anonymous "stewards." Even now, when care is in such great demand. This week, a Callery on a nearby corner was "cleared of litter/waste" and "had flowers planted around." To the dollar, I learn the value of the stormwater each tree intercepts, the energy it conserves.

By the late nineteenth century, the New York Commissioner of Health

recognized that trees had sanitary value, from oxygenation to the shade they provide during the city's sweltering summers. Tree-planting societies were founded; care for trees was care of the self. The Parks Department received city funds to take up the mission of cultivating public health. It was an uneven project: looking at the clusters on the Street Tree Map today, I see that my neighborhood, the West Village, has more than twice as many trees as Chinatown, kitty-corner on the map.

Plant Pandemic

Calleries were brought to the United States a century ago from Hubei, the Chinese province whose capital city is Wuhan. They were rootstocks and ornamentals, a second wave of pear immigration after the varieties that bore fleshy fruit. Pear trees have been cultivated for thousands of years in China. This supposed "gift of the gods" in The Odyssey made its way to ancient Europe via longstanding routes of earthly trade. Pears traveled well. They later sailed to the Americas with the colonizers, where they picked up a deadly oozing infection, fire blight—part of the inevitable traffic in disease that accompanies the movement of living things. People knew that trees got sick, but it wasn't until the nineteenth century that fire blight was connected to a bacterium: the new germ theory held true for contagious plants as well as humans.

Pears began to be mass produced along with everything else in the nineteenth century. Industrial capitalism operates at a grand scale, and as rows of genetically identical pear trees were planted along the Pacific coast, they provided the ideal habitat for agricultural pandemics. Once fire blight entered an orchard, it raced from tree to tree, blackening branches and hiding in roots. And it traveled with pears back around the world in tins, as people everywhere developed a modern taste for sweet canned fruit.

Before diseased orchards began to be sprayed with streptomycin in the 1950s, plant scientists searched for immune species of pear, hoping to graft prized fruiting branches onto disease-resistant trunks. In the early 1900s, Frank Reimer ran the Southern Oregon Experiment Station, a "test orchard" in the town of Talent where he examined dozens of known pear varieties for evidence of blight immunity. Nearby in Medford, companies like Bear Creek, run by Harry and David Rosenberg—*the* Harry & David—were on their way to becoming international giants of Comice pear-growing as

blight encroached in the Nineteen-teens.

When Reimer identified Pyrus calleryana as a resistant species in 1915, and one that was well-suited for the Pacific Northwest climate, he sent an urgent request to the Department of Agriculture in Washington D.C. for the launch of a collecting expedition to "the flowery kingdom": China. At the time, the lone Callery pear in the United States could be found in the Harvard arboretum, grown from seeds collected in Hubei in 1908 by "plant explorer" Ernest Henry Wilson. But Reimer needed at least a hundred pounds of seeds, extracted from thousands of pears, for his industrial grafting plan.

In 1916, the Department of Agriculture hired Dutch explorer Frank Meyer to return to Hubei to collect the roots and seeds of Callery pears, along with other potentially "economically important" plants. Meyer is now memorialized for the lemon he dispatched to the U.S. during a prior expedition to China in 1907. (The pear received its Western name in the nineteenth century from a missionary, Joseph Callery, who brought the species to France.) Meyer's base this time would be Hankou (in his spelling, "Hankow"), the city that gave the "han" to Wuhan when it merged with two neighboring towns in 1926. The region had long been mined by Western explorers for its "plant wealth"—bought, stolen, and bartered.

On this trip, Meyer noted that he was chasing a new sort of botanical commodity. Not food, ornament, or human medicine, but disease-resistance; an immune understock for "foodstuff." In one of the many letters he posted to the Office of Seed and Plant Introduction in D.C. during his two-year sojourn, Meyer marveled, "This disease-testing work has opened up an entirely new field for certain introductions from abroad!" But there was something self-defeating about the American agricultural project: botanical variation was introduced for the purpose of massification; new diseases hitchhiked along, spreading and evolving at lightning speed. Meyer commented in another letter, "The sooner the American people realize that one kind of a product cannot be grown everywhere and under all sorts of conditions, the better it will be."

Hankou/Wuhan

When Manhattan "pauses" in mid-March, I learn what I can as an apartment-bound historian of science about the new coronavirus—not just its

effects on humans, but its natural history. Andrew Liu's "Chinese Virus," World Market, published in *n+1* before the end of the month, introduces me to Wuhan and cautions that natural history is inevitably peopled; it doesn't exist outside the economy. In the 1980s, Liu explains, market liberalization, leading to more and faster commercial interchange and rising incomes, transformed local diets and the surrounding landscape. If it turns out to be true that the virus leapt into humans somewhere in the Wuhan region, in a market or mine, the chain was never so simple as bat—>person. It is more like a netting, all the "pathways of the 21st century global market" that connect Wuhan to everywhere else.

Pyrus calleryana flowers and fruits, photographed by Frank Meyer, 1917. From USDA Special Collections Exhibits

When my pandemic reading shifts to the Callery pear, I should not be surprised to find Wuhan there. And another slipstream of disease, arcing much further back, trailing centuries of transnational plant commerce. I spend the first part of April reading Meyer's letters and field notes collected in *South China Explorations, July 25, 1916-September 21, 1918*. It was a period of constant, grinding human illness. Not just the irruption of the 1918 "Spanish" flu, but numberless endemic diseases with heaps of sequelae, and no pharmaceutical end yet available. Meyer went to Hubei province for fruit and cures. There is something discouraging about the way this biologist, this lover of variation, described the people there as "weeds" and "pests" for their experiences of universal plagues like syphilis and lice.

> *In the mountains whole villages are syphilitic; people without noses are often met with and syphilitic blindness and deafness are very common. In the inns the vermin is exceedingly plentiful and bloodthirsty and ordinary travellers have to sleep three abreast in one bedstead or on one broad bench and the stinkingly dirty bedcovers are kept in use until they fall to pieces. No wonder that 80% of the population suffers from all sorts of skin diseases, being inoculated by lice, fleas, and bedbuds*

[sic].

He admired certain aspects of the Hubei diet, the pickling and the soy products, but he labelled most of the population "nothing but human animals" for living on vegetables alone. He never documented any "wet markets" or exotic meats—or even anyone eating a fish.

Meyer foraged for the better part of two years in the mountains around Yichang ("Ichang") and Jingmen ("Kingmen"), returning to the Hankow Hotel to prepare and ship specimens after the fruiting season. For brief periods he was laid up with his own illnesses, dysentery and "nervous prostration." During the first part of 1918, he was confined to rooms in Yichang and Hankou by martial law, because of internal revolt (the Constitutional Protection War). World War I was raging abroad. He almost ran out of writing paper, which caused him great distress. His notes from those months mention looting and burning, "robber-bands and outlaws," and soldiers ripping the hearts out of people's bodies. He was later able to garden, and he read the same Whitman book over and over to "keep from going crazy."

His loneliness is through-the-looking-glass from my own. I'm buried in an endless supply of text during lockdown and rarely outdoors; protesting hasn't started yet. Meyer's take on humanity is pessimistic and biased to the point of derangement, but some of his impressions from spring 1918 seem to have crystallized from the same cyclic fog of world uncertainty that now engulfs 2020. I start mailing postcards with quotes to my kids, who are in Berlin and California. It hasn't occurred to me yet that I might not see them for six months, a year even, the longest we have ever been apart. One of them gets COVID. One of the postcards is lost.

"One cannot live for months in an atmosphere of suspension without feeling the effects."

"We do not live ourselves anymore but we are being lived by uncontrollable forces."

"One gets the feeling that one's work is of not much account any longer and one gets that loose feeling of a homeless child in the street."

The nights are hard.

In the first week of April, my phone rings and because it is a number from Oregon, where I grew up, I answer it. Maybe it is my school friend again, "checking in," and she will tell me stories about goats in the yard and a motorboat in the river just across the street. But it's an employee from Harry & David on the phone: Can they do anything for me? A friend who works

for a digital ad auctioning company once showed me how it works on her laptop—how I was grouped into a particular audience based on my location, demographics, and browsing history. And then she clicked on a really funny tampon ad, the best and most feminist tampon video I had ever seen, and said "but this is for a younger target," and I had that feeling of missing out, except that the ad was missing me—so I have a mental image of my data being bought and sold with "lightning speed." I hadn't thought about my phone number circulating, too, and the intimacy of this phone call, reaching me while I am still reading about pears online, disturbs me.

I ask my boyfriend (who goes by "any pronoun but he") if she thinks these things are all connected. I've moved in with her for a month—this is before *The Social Dilemma* docudrama is released and everyone is talking about it. She has never lived with anyone before and we have never spent more than a few days together. "Chips"— she has started to call me this, for the same reason that we have started to drink diet Coke in the afternoon and fernet in the evening—"Shouldn't you be working on something else?" We are eager for habit. When I pull the wool blanket over my lap in the small living room, it means I am "in my office." We tell each other that our dogs are going to miss spending so much time together.

I order gift boxes for my kids. Harry & David ships to Germany: they were American mail-order pioneers, and still at it. In the 1920s, they learned how to "pre-cool" fruit after a harvest, to remove something lovely called "field heat" before packing, but that's what has to happen for pears to make it all the way to Europe. I start to receive paper catalogs in the mail and I tear to the back pages to read the potted corporate history. If I am paying Harry & David to research this essay for me, and letting my gaze wander from Google Scholar to search engines where I elaborate a shadow database of myself, and if I otherwise rely on the diary of a Dutch explorer who hated Chinese people, I will learn more about predatory global capitalism than I will about Wuhan. And that is the point.

Meyer made several forays from Hankou into the hills to collect wild pear seeds between 1916 and 1918. Reimer joined him in Jingmen for a brief period the second autumn. Callery pears were "weedy" and could be found in almost any landscape, a trait Meyer admired in trees, at least.

Pyrus calleryana is simply a marvel. One finds it growing under all sorts of conditions; one time on dry, sterile mountain slopes; then again with

Pyrus calleryana. A specimen of Calleryana pear in full flower, with its divided roots standing in water, a few feet deep, although a strong horizontal root may be seen firmly anchored in the earth bank. Compared with photo 13267 it seems almost beyond belief that the same species of pear can thrive under such widely different conditions. (Meyer.)
Reg. No. 13268, Koo moo shu, Hupeh, China, April 4, 1917.

Callery pear growing in water, photographed by Meyer in Hubei, 1917. From Frank Meyer, "South China Explorations"

its roots in standing water at the edge of a pond; sometimes in open pine forest, then again among scrub on blue-stone ledges in the burning sun; sometimes in low-bamboo jungle...and then again along the course of a fast flowing mountain stream or on the occasionally burned-over slope of a pebbly hill.

Although the trees "sprouted lustily," they tended to be small and scattered rather than growing close together. The fruits were also small and sparse. These features made seed-collecting a painstaking process. After months in the field, Meyer would return to Hankou to carefully pack seeds, fruits, and twigs for shipping to Talent, to Harvard, and to another research station in Chico. When his packages reached the U.S., if they weren't lost at sea, the "plant immigrants" were quarantined, even held in detention houses. Although Callery pears were recruited as orchard healthcare workers, an immigrant is an immigrant is an immigrant: they had to be checked for insects, mold, and disease themselves. All those long, hot days of hiking and harvesting by Meyer often ended with incineration. A life's work.

Callery pear growing in sand, photographed by Meyer in Hubei, 1917. (Translator pictured.) From Frank Meyer, "South China Explorations"

Street Tree

On May 31, 1918, Meyer boarded a steamer in Hankou, heading to Shanghai where he planned to spend a month to escape the summer heat. He felt ill; one night he vomited and dreamed of seeing his father. On June 2, he disappeared from the ship. His body was later fished from the river and it was never discovered whether he had been pushed, fallen, or jumped.

Postcard of the old Hankow Train Station, 1927. In the public domain.

Thousands of seeds made it across the ocean. And Reimer's plan worked. Callery pear trees became rootstocks for Comice, Bosc, and other varieties; the Rosenberg brothers were saved. One hundred years later, my children open cardboard boxes, heavy with perfectly ripened fruit, a single pear wrapped in gold foil, a glint of rarity within mass-produced life.

The sociologist Georg Simmel, who died the same year as Meyer, published an essay at the end of his life "on the essence of culture" that opened with a meditation on the cultivation of pear trees. "The wild pear tree," he wrote, "produces hard, sour fruit. That is as far as it can develop under the conditions of wild growth. At this point, human will and intelligence have intervened and, by a variety of means, have managed to make the tree produce the edible pear. That is to say, the tree has been 'cultivated.'" He contrasted the human cultivation of latent traits in trees with *culture*, which he argued was proper only to people. Culture was external, an immersion in society and a continual adaptation to new styles and group forces. If the trunk of a pear tree "is made into a ship's mast, this, too, is undoubtedly the work of culture," but the cultivation of fruit from that same tree, he argued, was rather an expression of immanence.

Simmel turned out to be wrong, dangerously wrong, that nature and culture are separable, and that each plant contains a singular potential, perfectible by humans. Evolution is much more chaotic than that, and plants participate in the give and take of culture alongside people. Farmers orga-

nize orchards, and graft species to one another, to suit industry—the marketing of taste at a given moment. And still many aspects of pear-growing remain out of human control, emergent rather than immanent to plant life itself: pears migrate and hybridize with other varieties of their own accord; they are opportunistic; and they respond to culturally-induced environmental changes, including temperature and disease, with changes in their physical forms and interspecies relations.

In the 1950s, the Callery pear made a dramatic move out of the understory and into the boulevards of American cities and suburbs, when horticulturalists began to view it as a tree in its own right, rather than merely an orchard rootstock. Working in the postwar period, when "a broader interest in horticulture resulting from the development of suburbia" encouraged the mass planting of ornamentals, USDA scientist John Creech restaged Meyer and Reimer's quest for a hardy pear tree. In his own "street tree study," Creech grafted a Meyer-Reimer rootstock to a Callery scion (shoot or branch) from a later expedition to China. He named the resulting cultivar (cultivated variety) the Bradford, admiring its grow-anywhere abilities, its resilience to pollution, and most of all its profuse white blossoming at the very start of spring. The Bradford is the tree I see outside my window, on which my sister pins her happiness in March.

The Bradford variety of the Callery pear was "cloned by the gazillion," says gardening journalist Adrian Higgins. "Like the cookie-cutter suburbs themselves, the Bradford pear would embody that quintessentially American idea of the goodness of mass-produced uniformity." It stayed popular for many decades, even as aesthetic complaints about the tree mounted. Some people dislike the odor of the flowers, comparing it to chlorine; others call Calleries "the semen tree." The branches break easily in storms; the tiny fruits of some varieties leave messes on the smooth poured concrete that pear trees now share with humans.

Unexpectedly, at the end of the twentieth century, the Callery pear became, as Higgins puts it, an "environmental time bomb" ready to explode. "We brought it to an alien environment, selected one for unnatural propagation and then fused genetically different individuals together. We planted it intensively across the entire continental United States, seeding its eventual spread." Bradford scions with genetically different rootstocks are able to self-sow if the stock sends up a shoot; Bradfords also cross-pollinate with

other varieties of Callery pear. By the 1990s, the Callery was dispersing exponentially across the continent, biologist Theresa Culley explains, "escaping" the cities and suburbs and moving into what "natural areas" remained. Its hardiness and its genetic diversity meant that it outcompeted most other plants.

What we hoped would be a remedy and a thing of beauty was rebranded a weed, an invasive species, an aggressive foreigner. A "Chinese Callery pear" devastating the "native" environment. Something viral.

Callery pear photographed by Meyer in Hubei, 1917. From Frank Meyer, "South China Explorations"

What Survives

How calm and immobile the green dots seem on the map of street trees in New York. Some have nationalities: the Norway maple, the American basswood, the Japanese pagoda tree. I know the names of these trees and where they are planted, but not how they got there, or where the fruits and seeds will travel. It's an irony of cartographic history: in Meyer's day, dot maps were pin maps, designed to represent movement. A manager with a map on his office wall added and subtracted pins to show the accumulation of supplies—seeds maybe—or the movements of trains and salesmen, boats and explorers, throughout the week. But now we want to imagine the permanence of trees. In its weekly

The 9/11 Survivor Tree, a Bradford cultivar of the Callery pear. Image from The Treeographer

effort to keep isolated residents inhabited by the city, The New York Public Library circulates an email on May 11 offering a virtual walking tour of ten famous trees—"our most venerable and impressive landmarks." Two are pears.

Surely the most memorable dot map published in spring 2020, and one truer to historical form, was "How the Virus Got Out." An interactive feature in the online *New York Times*, the map opens with a close range view of the Hankou train station, across the street from the Huanan seafood market. A pink dot appears—hot pink—and then another. The dots multiply frantically. The image zooms out to the map of China, on which Wuhan is now a massive oozing boil. Another order of magnitude removed, we are shown international flight patterns. Dots teem from Wuhan: are they people or the virus? The credits explain that the image is rendered from the estimated movement of cell phones. Anonymized, made numberless—this is how a swarm is conjured. Weeks later, in the same paper, I read that the outbreak in my city was more likely seeded by tourists from Europe.

The way the street tree map is designed, viewers "can mark trees as favorites and share them with friends, and they can record their tree stewardship activities." One Callery pear in particular is the darling of New York City, a Bradford that was found living beneath the rubble of the World Trade Center in 2001. *Pyrus calleryana is simply a marvel*. In September, I learn that the 9/11 Memorial gives a seedling from the "Survivor Tree" to "communities that have endured tragedy in recent years" as "a symbol of resiliency and hope." Where to begin in 2020? But also: who wants a gift they already have in abundance, the gift of an "invasive" species?

Living memorials are as conflicted as military statues. I imagine giving a seedling to Talent, Oregon. "Here: try again." Talent is one of the towns most ravaged by the unprecedented late summer wildfires and drones fly along Highway 99 in the aftermath. Pear research was moved to Medford Station in 1931, but I pore over the drone footage anyway, looking for the field where Reimer first recruited Callery pears from Hubei.

Perhaps another seedling to Minneapolis, to plant in the concrete at the corner where Cup Foods is located, where George Floyd was killed? The northern region is still too cold. Although climate change is making inroads, for now it's one of the few environments where the Callery pear doesn't grow. Not all violences can receive this commemoration.

And last but not least, a Survivor Tree seedling for Wuhan. "Take it back."

After a century of Callery pear commerce and public health, "We don't know what to do with it."

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VISUAL ART

A Portfolio by Shizu Saldamando with Commentary by Iván Ramos

Shizu Saldamando and Iván Ramos

Embrace Series, (Ripples Long Beach) 2009 ballpoint pen on found bed sheet 72"x96"

Embrace Series Detail (2nd View Grandstar, Chinatown), 2012, ballpoint pen on bedsheet 72x96"

Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: On the Works and Worlds of Shizu Saldamando

IVÁN A. RAMOS

During some of the grimmest moments of the last year, I found myself looking for a sense of relief in Shizu Saldamando's work. Born in San Francisco in 1978, Saldamando and her carefully drawn portraits of friends, objects, nights at shows, and other quotidian moments of a world from which we had been locked away offered a hopeful glimpse of the forms of intimacy to which I longed to return. Saldamando has always been especially adept at capturing the imperceptible moments that bring the building blocks of relationality into form. Her images recalled memories of people, of hangouts, of

embraces that now seemed distant, replaced by the immediacy of phone, computer, and television screens. I perhaps returned to Saldamando's drawings hoping to be hailed by her sense of observation, the gaze of someone whose loving generosity translates into drawings that portray a variety of intimate worlds.

The daughter of a Chicano father from Arizona and a Japanese mother whose family was interned in the Japanese American concentration camps during World War II, Saldamando moved to Los Angeles to complete her undergraduate art degree at UCLA and received an MFA from CalArts. Throughout her career, she has expanded the borders of her practice, which begins with the act of drawing and becomes suffused with experimentation. To find oneself before one of Saldamando's drawings is to become enveloped in the worlds she depicts in part because of her constant play with her materials. She deploys pens, pencils, glitter, and other tools to bring her subjects into being, carefully choosing each in a kind of beautiful specificity. She also plays with the limits of surface, using paper, canvas, napkins, wood, and other materials. Yet the formal inventiveness of her drawings never brings attention to itself. This is because Saldamando cedes these surfaces to the people and objects she depicts, more interested in letting us perceive the details of how someone holds a cigarette, or another person, in a specific moment than in imposing upon us an admiration of her formidable skills.

Some of Saldamando's most striking pieces belong to her Embrace series. Using a ballpoint pen to draw on bed sheets, she depicts in this series various moments of intimate embrace across spatial and temporal contexts. During the last year, these works have gained even more meaning, as many of us have found refuge from the chaos outside in the sanctuary of our sheets. As we grew bound to our bedrooms and our contact with the rest of the world became limited to short outings, time and space were defined as that which happened between getting up and returning to bed. Sometimes the getting up was hard because there seemed to be not much to get up for.

But even in the darkest days of the pandemic, I would be reminded of the Embrace series and the new sense of intimacy this work now had. As the distinctions between idleness, depression, and boredom collapsed, I would try to escape by daydreaming. I like to think that the Embrace series helped me…well…embrace idleness and retreat into memories in order to

sustain some hope that the world could suddenly return. Idleness points us toward non-productivity, the feeling of not wanting to do anything, but also toward the possibility of daydreaming as a way to pass the moment without falling into despair. And although Saldamando's work is certainly prodigious technically, drawing and doodling are two of the most common activities of idleness, strategies for retreating into the self in a public space, or finding a moment that seeks nothing but itself. As we became stuck to our sheets, I looked at these images in order to sketch my own memories of embraces and hangouts, to remind myself how lucky I had been to experience them, how lucky I would be to return to them eventually.

I read the *Embrace Series* as an invitation to wallow in idleness as a creative endeavor. *Embrace Series, Morrissey Night, Underground LA* (2009) uses a flower-patterned sheet. Drawn over it are two figures, a lesbian couple perhaps. A long-haired femme looks at her nails, holding a butch lover in embrace. Her forearm has Morrissey's name tattooed. We are not sure if the butch partner is staring off into the distance or is perhaps about to whisper something, but in the embrace and the pattern of the sheets, the two figures become united, their bodies grafted onto the background, the flowers becoming their own shared tattoos as both are engulfed into the pattern and arise out of it.

The embrace need not be only between lovers; it can have to do with our displaced memories also, always in the process of becoming, a faint line that recalls the many nights that have come before. Saldamando never gives us the names of the couples in embrace, but only where they were. This serves in some ways to reflect the intimacy of the embrace, maintaining our exteriority to it, while at the same time inviting our participation via engaging with the space. *Embrace Series, Ripples, Long Beach* (2009) shows two Latino gay boys embracing at a Long Beach club. There is no context for the embrace; it could be on the dance floor, a broken stumble, the midst of a kiss. The rose patterns again mark the subjects' bodies, breaking the separation between drawing and canvas. These sheets recall for their viewers a queer appeal to memory, and although these memories may be minor, they still sustain us even as the world may fall apart.

I wonder what the world will feel like when we are done returning. What will it feel like to look forward to returning to bed instead of dreading its inevitability? My attempts to interact with others through screens inevitably ended in exhaustion. But in my daydreams, the world yet to come re-

sembles one of Saldamando's drawings. If one of the greatest gifts that the aesthetic has to offer is the ability to show us how to bring attention to the world in order to perceive it differently, then the refuge I have sought in Saldamando's work and worlds has prepared me to welcome a new reality, always coming into form.

Embrace Series Installation View at Moore College of Art Philadelphia, 2012

Embrace Series Detail (Ripples Long Beach) 2009

Embrace Series Installation View at Chinese American Museum, Los Angeles, 2012 edition (Grandstar Chinatown, 2nd View, Morrissey Night) 2012 ball-point pen on bedsheets Dimensions Vary

Embrace Series, L-R (Grandstar Chinatown, Ripples Long Beach, Frida's House D.F.) Installation View at CAM Contemporaneo Guadalajara, Mexico, 2009, ballpoint pen on bedsheet, laundry line, clothes pins Dimensions Vary

POETRY

“Club,” “Oizys, Goddess of Anxiety,” “Lines En Route to Pennsylvania”

Maggie Millner

CLUB

Always I have wanted to be
one of those women
who curse in transatlantic accents.
Who win or lose at dice.
Who eat casserole and touch
themselves furiously.
These women write the kinds of books
I tend to read, full
of perspicacious naming.
Who ulcerate at book events.
Who share with their cats
bright tins of herring.
Who offend the doorman and postman
and most men and many women.
What do you mean, perverse?
What do you mean, beyond the pale?

They write terrible characters
on whom they never pass judgment,
characters who do the world
no particular good
with their pocketbooks full of hard pears.
They keep cured meats in the pantry
with the Nexiclon.
The women marry or don't.
The women have skillful editors
who understand their readership
of women like me,
who ate candles as a child.
Who gets aroused in Macy's lingerie.
Who is so literal-minded sometimes
she wants to remove
her literal mind
and spend the night without it,
playing rummy with the ornery,
the willing, and the strange.

OIZYS, GODDESS OF ANXIETY

All winter the wind is an animal,
pawing at my nape. Then the wind
is a melted drug. I wear my dread

in every weather, believing worry
can prevent the worst from happening—
stay where you are, it whispers

to the glue that sticks the houses
to the earth. I fret religiously. I lease
my life to fear. Sometimes images

bloom behind my eyes like music,
terrible images. I'll leap above my self
and watch it do something extreme

in the conditional—the self
crumpling like a kite or dissolving
into panicles of ash. Oh,

I have always had rituals. I count
the bricks in multiples of three. In threes
I clicked my milk-teeth till they fell

like heirloom seeds across the grass. Some
days I am a woman with a beautiful face
and a body like a knotted bag; other days

I'm all body and the bag is my face.
One night, in the grips of this, I saw

myself in a great hall with a gleaming

sheet of water for a floor. From
overhead I watched my body glide
across its surface like some kind

of incredible swan. When I pumped
my wings and stretched out my neck
the panic wafted off of me like steam—

and where there'd been a hide
were many feathers, and where
there'd been a gyre was a mind.

LINES EN ROUTE TO PENNSYLVANIA

The snow is particle and wave
On Highway 80
Drawing long lines
Across the windshield with its flakes
I'm driving away from New York
And my lover who
Beneath her giant eyelids is asleep

When I left
I pressed into her fist
A wad of woolen blanket
To replace my hand
And dialed up the thermostat
And stepped into the still-black air
Like a child in winter
Traveling to school

MUSIC

Salidummay

Ina Cariño

Indigenous peoples of Kalinga and other Cordilleran descent in the Philippines sing and dance to a folksong called "salidummay," which has no direct translation into English but which speaks to the idea, "this is life." The samples used in this track are from recordings of mountain workers singing and dancing on the way home.

—Ina Cariño, 2021

You can listen to the track at this URL: https://airlightmagazine.org/airlight/issue-3/salidummay/

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The Memory Demos

Alistair McCartney

The Memory Demos

Write a book that is the equivalent of a music demo. A book in which I demonstrate and record some memories and ideas I have about music and literature. Keep this book minimal and raw around the edges, like PJ Harvey's *4-Track Demos*. Lo-fi and intimate and imperfect like SoundCloud rap or the bedroom recordings Witch House bands did in the aughts. Trust the alternate take, the approximate take: the provisional nature of memory and thinking in general. At all costs, avoid the mistake Courtney Love made not trusting the rough magic of *The Rehab Demos*, the result of which is the turgid *Nobody's Daughter*. Don't bury the voice in effects; don't overproduce the prose into oblivion. Let the book leak out into the world for a select audience before it's ready to be sold.

PsychoEliot

On the night before his year 12 final English Lit exam, he went to see the Jesus and Mary Chain. He thinks it was either at the Old Melbourne Hotel on Milligan Street in the central business district of his hometown of Perth, Australia, or perhaps the Red Parrot, just north of the CBD. On the internet, the date is listed as September 9, 1988, the venue as *Unknown*. His

memory of the gig is as follows: the band wore black, as did he and the entire audience. He stood close to the stage, his head nestled into the speakers, so he could fully appreciate the honey-drenched noise.

The next day, as he wrote his final paper on symbolism in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which he had by necessity memorized so he could quote it verbatim, as he wrote of peaches and caution and Michelangelo and hesitation—naturally employing the New Critical methodology—his ears were still ringing and buzzing. Inside his etherized brain was a neural mash-up of post-punk pop with high modernism. To this day, whenever he recalls this poem, which he can now only quote in fragments, it's as if the Reid brothers are T.S. Eliot's back-up band. Beneath each image and line there is a wave of feedback, smoky and foggy.

Feedback

Pay attention not so much to the writer's voice as the feedback produced by the writer's voice. That is to say, when the writer is plugged into language in such a way that the sentences loop back on themselves endlessly, so that images are distorted and repeated, compressed and fuzzy.

Courtney Love Triptych

1

What was the most memorable gig you ever went to? Not the greatest, but the one most ingrained in your memory? For me, that's easy: Hole, Brixton Academy, May 4, 1995. It was their *Live Through This* tour, and Courtney's *fuckedupdness* was at its most immaculate and pure. I was 23 and also immaculately fucked up, just back from a passionate and doomed rendezvous in New York with a guy I loved madly. I remember snatches from that night: Oasis's "Live Forever" playing on the pre-show…Hole's cover of "She's Lost Control"… making out with a cute boy in the mosh pit to

the churning disorder of "Teenage Whore." If you want a more accurate account of the show, there's a partial BBC recording online; recently, as I sat at my computer and listened to Courtney's banter between songs, sarcastic jokes about Pearl Jam and Menswear, every detail of the gig came uncannily back to me. But this isn't about accuracy: what I most recall is the feeling inside me that night, a feeling not even the BBC could capture, the catharsis I experienced, Courtney's fragile, damaged state echoing and mirroring my own. Later that night, as I walked up the five flights of stairs to my council flat in Brixton, my calf muscles ached so eloquently.

2

I've been to so many readings they blur into one another, but let me tell you about one: Book Soup on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood in 2012. (Rewind: turns out that love affair wasn't so doomed and I ended up with the guy, here in Los Angeles.) The readers have read and another writer is asking them questions. I'm not paying much attention, until who should walk into the store but Courtney Love. Dressed in a full peach silk slip, barefoot, she starts walking around, accumulating book by book. More than once, she walks right in front of the readers as they're in conversation; *Sorry*, she says, a Pisa-esque stack of books under her arm. I watch until she slips out the door into the black limo waiting for her on Sunset. I guess this counts as the most memorable reading I ever attended. Though what does it say about me that the readers themselves were extraneous, inconsequential?

3

The only thing more unmemorable than a literary reading is a graduation speech. Back in the mid-aughts, I was attending the graduation ceremony for the university where I teach—incidentally, or not, its campus at the time was just around the corner from Kurt Cobain's last rehab, the one he unceremoniously fled before he went back to Seattle, to do you know what. The graduation was at Shutters, that fancy hotel on the beachfront in Santa Monica, and I recall literally nothing about the event itself. What I can say is that afterwards, as I left the function room, Courtney Love was sitting in the piano bar, by herself, at the piano. I like to think this intentional and accidental proximity I've had to Love three times means something, but of

course it doesn't. And to answer my own question: it's not that readings bore me, exactly, it's just that I'm so much more present at a gig; books just don't plug into my emotions or memories the way music can. Though I'm sure you've noticed by now my memory is not so great. So even though I'm going to tell you that Love was playing the piano, singing let's say, "Softer Softest," I'm pretty sure she was just sitting there quietly. I'm almost certain she wasn't playing anything.

Notes on Music and Aesthetics

Sure, in his later teens, when he was all about Sonic Youth and My Bloody Valentine and Einstürzende Neubauten and the Butthole Surfers and the Young Gods and the Swans, he was a connoisseur of music, a discerning and dogmatic aesthete. But he finds himself more interested in his pre-teen and early teenage musical tastes, when he knew no such discernment, when he bought records from the Smiths *and* Howard Jones, the Jesus and Mary Chain *and* King, Felt *and* Hipsway, Echo and the Bunnymen *and* Haysi Fantayzee, This Mortal Coil *and* Curiosity Killed the Cat. His love of music, veering between variants of so-called alternative and glittery, disposable pretty-boy pop was dictated by nothing but yearning and delight. He is increasingly drawn to those days when his musical aesthetic was anarchic and still in formation, much as his literary aesthetic still is today.

Record Destruction

I'm the youngest of seven children, and my family has never been big on passing down stories. Though one of my sisters did tell me that once, before I was born, or when I was still a baby, our father brought home a carful of old 78 records from one of the houses where he gardened, on the other side of Perth's Swan River. The records had belonged to the occupant, who had recently died. My siblings and their friends were somehow disturbed by the strange old records with their limited playing duration and took them out of their cardboard sleeves and threw them against our asbestos fence,

reveling in the destruction, shattering the shiny black slabs into shiny black shards, until they could not be played, until they were unlistenable.

Electric McCartney Controversy

One day soon, when I amplify my images and sentences, when my writing goes electric, it will surely alienate and confuse my legions of obsessed fans, just as it did the fans of Bob Dylan when he performed his first electric concert at the Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965. Though I suspect my fans, who are even more obsessed, will feel far more betrayed and be considerably more hostile.

INTERVIEWS

On Writing—Writers in Conversation: Maggie Nelson and Hari Kunzru

Maggie Nelson and Hari Kunzru

On April 14, 2021, under the auspices of the Levan Institute for the Humanities at the University of Southern California, Maggie Nelson and Hari Kunzru sat down with one another, via Zoom, for a wide-ranging discussion of Kunzru's work, the amorphous territory of genre, and their thoughts on the role and responsibility of the writer in both the academy and the public square. The conversation was the sixth and final event in a year-long series, On Writing, curated by Emily Hodgson Anderson and David L. Ulin. *Air/Light* is delighted to present a video and a text transcript (below), of this interview.

You can find the video at the URL: https://airlightmagazine.org/airlight/issue-3/hari-kunzru-interviewed-by-maggie-nelson/

Emily Anderson: I'm going to give a very brief introduction to this particular event, but I want to thank all of you so much for joining us for what is our final event in a year-long series sponsored by the Levin Institute called On Writing.

This series was suggested to us by Danielle Bleischmar, who's the director of the Levin Institute, who unfortunately can't be with us today. She indicated that of all the topics that she had polled USC faculty on, related to the humanities, people seemed most interested in just wanting to have more conversations amongst each other about writing, as it were. So this is the sixth event now. If you haven't been able to join us for some of the previous ones, there are links to the recordings on the Levin website.

David Ulin and myself have co-convened these and they've really been the bright spot for us in this year. We've talked to an amazing range of people on an amazing range of subjects including process, form, flexibility thereof, editing—the list goes on. It gives me incredible pleasure to wrap up this year-long series, as it were, with a conversation that is itself a conversation between two brilliant preeminent writers about how they enact all the various topics that we've spent the year looking at—in a more granular way. So I'm going to turn it over to David Ulin to do those formal introductions and kick us off. And I'll just say, finally, again, a resounding "thank you" to the Levin Institute and Daniella and Isabella for facilitating this, for inspiring this, and to all of you for being devoted participants in this series as we've coordinated it throughout the year. Thank you.

And David…

David L. Ulin: Thanks Emily, and welcome to everyone, particularly those of you on the west coast. This is a breakfast conversation and I'm really grateful that everybody's here.

I just want to very quickly introduce Maggie and Hari—this is a real pleasure and I think a privilege for me. These are two of the most exceptional writers working at the moment and to have the opportunity to see them in conversation about writing and craft and wherever the conversation goes is something that I think is really thrilling.

I first want to just thank Maggie and Hari for being here, and then I want to echo what Emily was saying about the series. The series has gone in all these interesting and unexpected ways, like I think all of my favorite collaborations, and has created its own narrative over the course of the school

year and this feels like a really compelling and vivid way to close it out. I will not belabor things —I do want to mention that Maggie Nelson has a new book coming out in September called *On Freedom: For Songs of Care and Constraint*. A brilliant theorist, brilliant narrative writer, brilliant non-fiction writer. And Hari Kunzru is I think one of the most interesting and provocative novelists working now— his most recent novel *Red Pill* looks into paranoia and alt-right politics and identity and all kinds of things—also the author of *White Tears*, *Gods Without Men*, one of my favorite books about the liminality of experience, and a number of other novels. I'm gonna get out of the way now and let Maggie and Hari take it away. And thank you both for being here and thanks everybody in the audience for being here. I'm really looking forward to this.

Maggie Nelson: All right, I'm going to try and make Hari bigger because we've never met and so I can't bear to meet you, Hari, in a box this small, so one second, let me see, okay–

Hari Kunzru: I see you, Maggie, and I've made you bigger.

MN: Okay. Now I see you bigger and I'm thrilled. I'm so glad to meet you and it's very funny to be doing things like this, like meeting people for the first time amongst others and on Zoom but I'm thrilled, so thank you so much for talking.

HK: Likewise. I'm a big fan and it's a real pleasure to have this chance to talk to you.

MN: Well, I see, and you guys can probably see, like if you were on Room Rater. I'm gonna, we're gonna, give you like the big thumbs up because Hari has his book, as I do, in view—and it's so great and I want to talk about the book, but I want to talk about a lot of other things, too.

Like I said for all of you guys listening, we don't know each other, so it's like I have so many things I'd love to talk about, and you guys will get a chance to ask questions later. I see a lot of people I know, so there's a lot of smart and interesting people who are going to want to ask things, too.

I'll just start off where I want to start off because I get to do that. I just thought, you know, ironically, because we're meeting each other on Zoom,

as I said, in the presence of other people, but I thought we could start off talking about privacy. Just because one of my very favorite parts of *Red Pill* is the description of your narrator. For those who haven't read it, arriving at a writing residency in Germany and then realizing with slow rolling horror that all the writing is supposed to be done in this shared setting, with all the other residents' eyes upon him. So he's not going to have the writing privacy that he dreamed of. I just wanted to say that these passages alone would make Red Pill qualify for an award for the best horror writing, in my mind. It's just such a horror show. But it made me think a lot about writing under surveillance and/or under the feeling of being observed, and I was also thinking of Emily co-hosting who wrote this great essay earlier this year about the pandemic and about having kids around called "No Room of One's Own" and I just thought, I wondered how, you know, on a pragmatic or even domestic level how the toll on privacy, if that is what there has been, has played out for you.

HK: This is where I have to, first, 'fess up that some good moves got made before the pandemic. You know, I have two smallish children, eight and four, and my wife Katie Kitamura is a novelist as well, and we're very used to being at home and working at home in a domestic space so I think the shock for us has been rather less than it has been for some other people. Back when we first got together, we did both write novels in the same room at desks facing in opposite directions. That's not because of some, you know, performative wish to say how great our relationship was, it was just because we're in a tiny New York studio with no money to rent office space, but as you can see from my authoritarian wall of books behind me, I now have a proper writing space. It's even got a window. It's everything that I could want for my little pod-like world and the thing that I've always felt. When I'm asked this question, I'm slightly embarrassed to admit that the sitter lives down the stairs so we have been quarantined with child care and that is the invisible part that actually has made it a productive year rather than a year of total meltdowns. So, it has been not as bad for us as I think it has been for a lot of other people. I'm intermittently social. I would say—I can do it and I like to drift off back into my own thing. I'll mainly be in my head and with the ones close to me that I love and then, you know, I will crawl back out into the light and remind myself what it's like to be, you know, drinking room temperature white wine at a book party.

MN: Yeah, well actually, that is one of my other questions—I'm curious about, you know, my partner released a book in pandemic times although sadly on March 17th, which was really like not as good a time as maybe the fall but I've, you know, as I'm sure you've been doing many things like this and so have I, you know it's made me think a lot and I'm really curious to know what you think about, as all the procedurals of the public aspect of a writer's life—like the dinners, book fairs, book signings, weird Q&A's with people stumbling over to a microphone—as all that has evaporated and we're here alone in our chambers. I wonder—have you thought about—like—do you feel like this, do you need and want this exchange—as nourishing to an intellectual life? Do you feel the action of it can be had in these forms? If this were all we had, would it be good enough, or what do you make of the loss of that interstitial experience?

HK: I know the terrible sadness will come when the leave meeting button gets pressed. That's always the thing that I find slightly traumatic. Because normally, we're on right now, like here we are, we're being our sparkly best and we're performing ourselves. Hopefully in an interesting way for an audience and you put all that energy in and you're talking. You talk to someone and it's like you form a staged conversation and then the button gets pressed and then you're just back on your own and whereas normally you'd go to the bar, maybe somebody nice would take you out for dinner, it would have a much more natural rhythm to it and certainly for me. I published this novel last fall and I wanted to feel, I wanted an experience of bringing it out into the world rather than still being in my room. This is the experience I have when I'm teaching; this is the experience I have when I'm talking to my family in England, who I haven't seen for a year and a half. This is everything and it doesn't have all the different textures that you need for a fulfilling social life, you know, as a straightforward tool for having a conversation of this kind. For doing things like seminar teaching, I think it's pretty good. I think I've managed to do some good things in this format, but I do miss the… yeah, I miss sitting in a restaurant and what we would probably do afterwards, if this was a normal year.

MN: Do you feel like, then, that the part of the publishing where after the solitary sojourn where there's a public enmeshment is—do you conceive

of them as part of two sides of the same coin that you, that you desire, or would you be happy if the latter one, I mean like…

HK: Like I said, I'm intermittently social, so I do quite like the bit where I go forth into the world and slightly random things happen to me. I like the strangeness that happens when you encounter people and you have a sense of what it is that your work is. You know, I know the world that your workers got involved in. After going through that process of writing a book, I need to take some lap out in the world to wave at everybody. Then I just feel sort of slightly cowed and embarrassed and need to go back in and write another. But I'm looking forward to other things more. I'm looking forward to just being able to travel and see family, and the grandparents haven't seen their grandchildren since 2019 and that's tough on them, and I would quite like to stand on a high hill far away from other people.

MN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Still thinking about privacy or surveillance just because it's so at issue in *Red Pill*. You have to forgive me because twice in these questions, I'm quoting my forthcoming book but that's only because it's just the quickest way—I've already said it so I don't have to re-say it again. I just wanted to read to you something that I have in the chapter I have about art and freedom. I write, "As Adam Phillips notes, we can never be entirely free of surveillance of some kind or another and not always from the usual suspects. But that doesn't mean we don't have a real need to create spaces or forms wherein we can temporarily suspend its grip and practice a certain fugitivity from cops in the head. As Augusto Boal, founder of the Theater of the Oppressed, put it"— and then I go on to quote Augusto Boal saying—"The cops may be in our heads, but the headquarters of the cops are in external reality." Boal says it's necessary to locate both the cops and their headquarters and I just I kept thinking about this quote when I was reading Red Pill, and I know that I'm putting you on the spot because I'm just reading it to you for probably the first time, but I just wonder if it brings up any ideas that relate to the book?

HK: Well, absolutely. The starting point for the novel was exactly that question—the reduction of our space of privacy because of electronic surveillance and so on. I think we've got so used to the idea that we are always, at least potentially, being overheard and being watched. That it has reduced

the scope of our sphere of privacy and that's important because we… it's a space to experiment; it's a space to try out things before you have to bring them into the world. And I think that act of stepping forward out of your privacy into the public space is the fundamental act of freedom. It's to choose when to show yourself to, choose how to show yourself, and alongside the very straightforward things of somebody knowing where you are, or being able to hear things that you say. There is a sense that I think that the social media landscape, the tech landscape more generally, is making channels, is providing a grammar in which we are being taught to express ourselves so that even inside in this private space, we're producing versions of ourselves that at least potentially will be usable by these systems. It's all about metrication and measurement, isn't it? It's all what is useful to the tech companies. There's a behavior that can be aggregated and packaged and analyzed and sold, or the information about it can be sold so things that are unresolved, things that don't have names are not useful. So we are encouraged very strongly to name things, to give things numbers, to put things in these terms. There's something Foucault says somewhere in *The History of Sexuality* about how in a sense, people are freer before sexual practices and particularly orientations are named, when your feelings and desires exist in this unreflective way. They can just be. But if you say "I am straight," "I am gay," "I am a person who likes this—those contact ad lists of fetish preferences," or whatever they could be, there's a sense in which that's a grid that is imprisoning even though in that post-'60s way, we feel that openness and being able to speak our truth is a kind of freedom as well. I think that those two things are in tension with each other.

MN: I love the part of this book that's the long story about the young punk rocker being corroded or recruited by the Stasi and East Germany. When I was reading it and reading in other books of yours—because obviously several books [of yours] have an interest in psychological ops on people that bring them into systems of surveillance, on others or on revolutionary groups or on different things. I wonder, without a facile, better or worse, thumbs up / thumbs down with the internet, I do wonder, since you've been a student of these other forms of surveillance. Something I've noticed, at least with my kids is that when they're taught in their tech classes about social media surveilling you and the loss of privacy, their first reaction is just like "You guys all feel so unfree like what is wrong with you, just give it

all over and actually you're free," like they just don't give a crap. And they'll say like "God, Mom, like why are you freaking out over your touch id on your iPhone, like just touch it, just touch it, just get in, get in." It's tempting to think, "Oh, they just don't know, they just don't know what's awaiting them." Other times I think maybe they're on to something. I don't know. I just wonder if you have thoughts about it.

HK: There's a sort of self-consciousness, isn't there? Somewhere in *Red Pill* I quote Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. He has this example of a Peeping Tom, somebody looking through a keyhole in the dark corridor at something they shouldn't be seeing, and they're completely focused on what they're doing, they're unself-aware, but as soon as there's a noise in the corridor, they're suddenly hyper-aware of themselves. There's possible shame, possible discovery, and so on and he describes that as having their freedom suddenly drained away from you because you are the object of the other's gaze and I think that's exactly what we're describing here, isn't it? If you don't feel that gaze, then you can behave as if you were free, and whether objectively you are free or not is actually not an issue. There's somebody I was speaking to yesterday who's tutoring teenagers who was so surprised how un-self-conscious fifteen-year-olds were in these Zoom meetings. Now here we are, we're slightly making sure that we're, you know, looking correct and professional, whatever it would be for a conversation. It seemed to be partly just familiarity. They're used to just sitting online with their friends all day doing homework and nobody's been able to see each other so that's the social world, but also these considerations that the non-digital natives have are not there for them. But this is just the experience rather than any kind of objective reality about who's being tracked and who's not being tracked and I think, yeah, you know, we really have only to look at the uses to which this infrastructure is being put in China to understand how a very meaningful and radical way freedom is a threat from pervasive surveillance. You know, at a point where you have networks of cameras, you have face recognition software attached, AIs attached to those cameras. You have a list of people who you want to track. You have certain behaviors that you want to flag up. You have systems that are many, many times as powerful and efficient as hand watches that can detect behavior anomalies. Absolutely, we are heading into a period, and I think it's naive to imagine that these things will not come to us and will not be used on us. They may come to us in a

way which appears that we've given our assent to them, you know, it may not be imposed by the Central Politburo, it may be that it emerges out of everybody's desire to be safe, but it's coming. And I think in that very practical way how freedom is ebbing away. And what that means for the future I'm not sure; I suspect that it means nothing good.

MN: It's interesting because your Twitter feed has been recommended to me many times and I don't have any social media accounts and my moment of revelation of what you're talking about is when I learned not so long ago that Facebook also keeps files on people who don't use Facebook. That to me was like, oh my god I thought I was off the grid—but they're actually more interested in people like me and they also keep a file on [me]. . . like, why wouldn't you use Facebook? There is no, there's no pure space of invisibility left. You can throw away your smartphone and use your virtuous flip phone or whatever—but there's no outside. I want to move on a little bit but I just want to underscore something you said because I just thought it was so interesting because I've been reading a lot of Hannah Arendt and writing my own book on freedom and she talks so much about freedom taking place, for her, only in the public sphere, which I have a lot of issues with, but something you're articulating about freedom transpiring precisely when you step out of privacy into the public space as a liminal event is very interesting. . .

HK: It is that. It's being able to choose when you present yourself. Slaves and prisoners are not free, partly because they don't have that ability. Being forced to involuntarily present yourself is always experienced as a violation of freedom and being able to withdraw as well. We've joked on this call, but in a room of your own, but that's a concrete material form of being able to assert privacy when you need it. It's not just the practical thing of no sound and no distractions. It's a lack of not being observed, not having to be in dialogue with the *they* or the *you*. Others' sense of who you are. The freedom from having to make a coherent presentation of yourself allows you to experiment and allows you to *become*, rather than just to be fixed according to your previous actions. We all know the horror stories for younger people now. The terrible thing that you post as a teenager that follows you around for the rest of your life. You know, these slightly botched experiments in Europe with the "right to be forgotten," which is a beautiful idea but very dif-

ficult to implement practically. I'm extremely grateful that I did my teenage years before this global memory was dropped down over us all.

MN: One nice thing about having kids though is as I just mentioned, when I express all my anxieties about this change—they remind me that—that's not how it's going to be for us and they're just blithe about it and they're forging on. A lot of my book about freedom, some of it, is concerned with what you just described as the difference, or lack of difference, between feeling and acting as if one were free, and then so-called "being actually free." And someone like Hannah Arendt would be very hard on the "as if" model. Whereas others like the anarchist anthropologist who unfortunately passed away last year, David Graeber, [feel] like most of all the action is in the "as if," the "acting as if" space. And it reminds me of writing, only because, again with this Boal quote…there's cops in the head, and then there's the headquarters, and when you're writing, you know that there's all kinds of cops in the head and you know that they're outside the head, but you're also trying to create a space as if you could explore what you wanted to explore. And again, when it comes out and you go around, it's as if everyone's trying to discipline you into all the ways you weren't free when you wrote it, but there's something about doing it that has to preserve a space, no matter how phantasmagorical.

HK: You mentioned the section in the novel where it deviates into the story of a teenager in the 1980s who grows up in East Berlin, a teenage punk who becomes the object of Stasi's surveillance and then forced into being an informant. I wrote that partly because I was interested in this difference between a twentieth century totalitarianism and the mechanisms that are around for us, say in the U.S. now, where a lot of it is happening, at least formally with our assent, but then later on for a podcast, I went back and actually sought out one of the very first punks in East Germany who was a sixteen-year-old at the time. He wasn't even really certain about the music, but he just saw a picture of The Sex Pistols and he decided that looked great, and so he spiked his hair up with soap and tore some of his clothes and off he walked out of the door and into a world of trouble, because the Stasi were fairly convinced that punk was some sort of CIA-backed plot to undermine the morals of the workers' and peasants' state. And so he said, he would basically just go down to Alexanderplatz and hang out with other

teenagers who were dressed like that. They would manage to get hold of some of the music, people were bringing in tapes or whatever; they were just doing the things that teenagers do. But because of this assumption by the Stasi that there was something behind it, he was picked up almost every day and interrogated. And he developed a relationship with his Stasi interrogator, who would ask him things just trying to work out if he was being fed particular political views. So he said, "What do you know about anarchism?" and this guy would say, "Nothing!" but then he'd go and look it up. So, effectively he was being educated. But the point of bringing him up is to say that I asked him, well, what do you make of the present day, what do you make of cell phone surveillance? We don't live under totalitarianism anymore. And I was expecting him to rail against the abrogations of freedom that there are, and firmly, he said, you must live as if you are free and that's the first thing and then you go forward into the world, behave as if you're free and take it from there, you know, if you worry so much before that, you don't act at all, then they've already won. And I see limits to that, but at the same time, I think existentially that has to be the way that you make that space for yourself.

MN: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me, given the "as if" feeling—in some ways, it's a feeling, right? So, as Arendt would say, it's not a demonstrable fact about freedom, she wants the facts about freedom, not a feeling. But one thing I found really interesting is, in certain interviews I've read with you, at some points I've read you correctly and hilariously talking about liberals' obsession with feelings as opposed to certain forms of structural change. But then on the other hand, the experience of reading *Red Pill* is certainly a journey through the emotional life of our narrator and obviously that's something that novels excel at, and yours in particular. And I guess I just wanted to talk for a minute about the role of feeling in the novel, because while I think you've said, and I think I get this, too, about the narrator, he's having a crisis of self, that the self seems to evanesce when he looks for it, [yet] he certainly has a lot of affective feeling, [as] he goes through this meltdown. I guess that's just my first question, that compared to the things that you have thought or felt about an overemphasis on feelings in the political sphere, do you think of the novel as something different?

HK: I suppose the first thing to say about feeling in the political sphere is

that I specifically mean feelings [of] innocence.

MN: Gotcha, okay, that's very helpful.

HK: I think there's a well-worn, let's call it a liberal route, through the political to say, *How can I absolve myself of my feelings of guilt about my structural position in this situation?* Like, oh no, I have wealth and whatever it would be. And that's the thing that I wish to disrupt, because I think the attempt to be innocent or to feel innocent or to untangle yourselves from the implications of your structural position leads people off into some very strange, unhelpful politics. And it seems to me much better to look objectively, to use Marxist language, about your structural position, about your class position, and so on. There are things that you can tell about what's going to work and what's not going to work. That said, I don't think there's anything wrong with feeling per se…feeling is part of human flourishing. I'm certainly not interested in some sort of cold objectivity or some sort of unlocated, positionless experience of the world. But then we get into what is it to write and you know it's an honest observation in the book, to say that the novel is a bourgeois form, because the novel deals with individuals and roots its questions and its ways of understanding the world through making characters. I suppose I square that circle slightly by thinking of myself as a systems novelist, as someone who tries to see their characters as implicated in these larger social economic technological systems and to try and make those things visible through telling stories. I think that is a thing the novel can do, and I have a case that I make for the novel based on that. To get to the guy in *Red Pill*, the narrator of *Red Pill* allows me to have some fun with somebody who's close enough to me for me to be able to work some things through, but also is far enough away that I can mock him for some of his pretensions. He's irredeemably individualist; he goes through this whole crisis, the crisis of selfhood, the crisis of politics in the book. Never once does he really think of trying to reach out and make community or solidarity with others. [It's] all rooted through his sense of himself and eventually his sense that he is dissolving, and that becomes a mental break. But you know he never thinks, "Hang on, my solution for my feelings of fear and isolation would be to try and make meaning with other people, or to make community with other people." So he's a bourgeois to the absolute end in the book, and he moves in these fairly well-heeled Brooklyn intellectual circles, and

it's no real spoiler to say the book ends on election night in 2016, and it's a milieu in which firstly the Trump victory comes as a terrible surprise, as a shock, rather than as a as a product of processes that have been going on for decades, and secondly is experienced as a crisis of selfhood, in that it's a crisis of the kinds of meanings that this group of people, and the narrator in particular…it's their picture of the world that's been disrupted. I think that the libidinal energies that were released by that, and the source of the glee for some of the frog Twitter Trumpist types who were all passing around pictures of liberal ladies crying was the experience of this break, of this rupture of a complacent set of norms. And my experience of the last years has been of gradually watching this thing coming from the outside. I don't claim to have predicted quite how dominant it would become in mainstream American politics, I was surprised that the world of the [4-chans] turned out to be able to elect the president that they did, but I had this sense that this was out there, that this was coming, and I didn't see it reflected in the discourse that was being conducted in the more rarified echelons of the of the media. And so that was another reason to write the book, to write about somebody who undergoes a shock, who undergoes an epistemic crisis, I suppose, a crisis of the structures of meaning that he lives inside.

MN: One thing I like about the end, and I hope we're not giving too much away…I mean, whatever, you just gave whatever there is to give away, Trump got elected, we know that! But the narrator, on the one hand, no matter how debilitated he's become, there's a sense in which he could be feeling at the end his own sense of mastery, his own sense of…Trump's election was the red pill to his wife and her circle of people, right, except for that, I wouldn't still choose him as my Sherpa, to the next life. He might be feeling like "I told you so," but we're not feeling like his "I told you so" is necessarily fruitful, either.

HK: Absolutely. The fact that he feels that he saw something coming and they didn't doesn't change the fact that it's coming, and he still has no resources to combat it or deal with it. One or two people online who don't credit me with self-consciousness have said what a terrible book it is, because it's just a resistance novel. It exemplifies this elite liberal hand-wringing. And that's partly what I wanted to portray—it's this particularly individualist character, he's almost congenitally incapable of collaborating or being

in community with people. What do you do when the only way to make political power is to form alliances and to make political blocs? It's a set of habits that you saw people trying to acquire in real time; lots of people who had never really been attending political meetings were [kind] of scrambling to make the structures that would have needed to be in place long before if the danger was to be warded off.

MN: I agree with you, and I understand what you're saying about his congenital capacity to move towards community or solidarity, but it also seems like my read was also that it wasn't just like bourgeois individualism. It was particularly also… filtered through a homosocial obsessional mindset, whereby first with Edgar—this annoying guy at the writing retreat—but then later obviously with Anton, that the structure, which is cathexis onto a male who in some ways seems to challenge [or] threaten whatever it is to you, remains the principal cathexis. Just when you're thinking that he has identified that this show and the things that Anton is doing [are] mainstreaming alt-right stuff, laundering them through Hollywood, his big answer is to go be like a crank at Anton's Q&A's, and you're just thinking, "Oh god like, no, not that!" But partly "not that," not because it's not politically constructive [or] whatever, that can all be argued. It's more like "not that" because it just felt like a further doubling down on male competition.

HK: Absolutely. You know this is a hard one, [but] I have come to understand that. Very much…how I was socialized as a teacher…setting yourself up in competition against an antagonist and another man and the absurdity and impotence of that is also precisely there. I can't quite remember, it might even have been a Slavoj Žižek thing, saying [that] there's always a moment of political breakdown, and then in the narrative of, let's say, Hollywood films, where a question becomes so complex to face that that it just can't be dealt with within the narrative economy of the film, so they have a fistfight. And you know that's the point where certain things become impossible to deal with within the form and then precisely that. In this novel, he's faced with his very, very large questions and a set of realizations that would require him to move beyond this, but instead, as you say, he falls back into, you know, "Who's actually smarter?" [inaudible] You know, in a way it's a bit like conspiracy theories. I've written a bit about conspiracy theories recently, and the conspiracy theories are simplifications; they're ways of under-

standing very complicated, slippery processes that imagine that there are just ten guys in a boardroom, and then if you kick down the door and took them into custody, the world would be saved and would be a better place. And that's naïve, because clearly that's not how power works…we don't have these satisfying resolutions. And so that's sort of another theme of that book, is the way that obviously the character falls short, and the way that any personalized look for the villains will fall short. Trump is just the face that that thing wears right now. Trump in himself is fairly trivial.

MN: I have one more question about Q[Anon] and conspiracy theories, then maybe I'll ask you a couple questions about writing and then we can ask other people to jump in. So my question, I really like the piece in Harper's—is that what you're talking about? About conspiracy theories and Q?

HK: Yeah…

MN: I was thinking you could summarize that better than I can, but for the people listening, what you just described is that it seemed like you were trying to emphasize the difference, at least at the start of the essay, between the conspiracy theories of yesteryear, which did offer grand and simplifying explanations, like the ten guys at the boardroom, but that Q[Anon] offers a fractalizing web that, the more you are led into it, it can even actually…have an overwhelming, even terrifying, complexity. And you write that, with Q, what starts off as heroic fantasy ends up as horror. And this was super interesting, and I just wondered if you had watched the documentary recently about Q, and if you had, what were your thoughts? And then secondly, I didn't watch it, but something that bothered me just as I was looking at the aftermath of people talking about Ron Watkins and whatever—maybe we're already too in the weeds for some of the people here—but if we're not, I saw a lot of people saying like, "Oh, I wonder how everyone feels that they got owned by like a man-child pig farmer in the Philippines," or something, and I was like…that scarcely is the point! I mean any shepherd of libidinal energies, it doesn't matter where they are or what their face is, I don't know. But it almost was as if the reaction to that to me sounded like an almost nostalgia for conspiracy theories of yesteryear, as if there were an Oz; everyone would see the Oz and say, "Oh my god, I was had," but that doesn't seem to be what's happening at all.

HK: Yeah, it's kind of like the Kennedy assassination is the Reagan to Q's Trump, isn't it? You know, we feel faintly nostalgic for it. I didn't actually see the documentary, but I've spent way too much time in this zone, so you know for people who don't know, it seems that father and son pornography team, Jim and Ron Watkins, based out of the Philippines, had control of the account on 8chan that was doing the Q drops, and it's likely that Ron, the son, was—on a day-to-day level at least lately—the person who was controlling the account, and they drove a lot of traffic to their site through that.…As you say, the focus on him as an individual, it seems to domesticate this thing in an unhelpful way, because he's neither here nor there. If it wasn't him, it would have been someone else. The part of it that interests me particularly is the way the Q thing emerged in the earlier days on the chans. It was an accepted, almost a literary form of post, you know. People have always written these little, almost like in-character posts on these chan sites, and there was an accepted format where someone would say, "Hey I'm a super insider in place x, and let me tell you it's all going to go down, and you'll know because of this."

Even whoever was controlling the Q account in the beginning was making these posts that seemed to…there was a genre of them, a type of post that one made. And for whatever reason, finally one of those things got traction, and then it jumped the species barrier out of chan world into boomer YouTube world, which was when it really took hold. And I spent a certain amount of time watching people's YouTube channels when there was a drop, and it was an experience of community for people. It was a community; it was very much like the slightly crackpot numerological Bible exegesis that people will do in a lot of places. People would come on somebody's channel, and everybody would have good ideas about what the drop meant, and you know some of these people have status and authority because they can interpret particularly well or make particularly baroque stories around it. But you could see that it was a lot of people who were finding a shape to their lives, and it was a very attractive thing to think that you're a warrior for children, for saving children, for a deeper truth.… And you can see why people got so enmeshed in it. And I hope people are looking now on the downward slope of this thing, as the storm didn't happen, and the narrative is quite hard to maintain. There are still people saying, you know, "Trump is playing 16-dimensional chess, and soon the arrests will take place." But by

and large, it's diffusing now and becoming more inchoate, and falling back into the soup of references out of which it came.

The web-like quality of it is fascinating, and it expanded to take in everything from Atlantis to Area 51 to Kennedy to all the things, the Illuminati, everything that's been around in that part of existence. In the Harper's piece, I called it "folk scholarship" or "folk research." The figure of the researcher, you know, the person with an internet connection who can go forth and sift through the complexities and pull out truth is, I think, one of the dominant figures of our time, and relates back to older things, but is really important now. It's becoming less organized, but those energies are still there, the desire for meaning is still there, the feeling that good people are down and bad people are up is still there, the suspicion of elites and so on. And there's no reason to imagine that it will not coalesce again in some form, presumably in a very, very unexpected, unlikely form. Nobody would have predicted that would be a narrative that could gather such cultural momentum, especially internationally—there's a lot of Q in Japan and Germany, and places that are not very connected with American politics.

MN: That's super interesting…and it's so interesting that I want to ask you one more political question before I ask you a couple questions about writing, but that's just because you're here and I don't want to miss my chance. So in thinking about what you've described just now, and then other times about this libidinal channel that has been opened—and in my own forthcoming book, I have spent a bit of time with political theorist Wendy Brown, who I think has been very…she's just been very excellent on describing what she calls "the brilliant campaign of the alt-right to associate anti-egalitarian, anti-immigrant, and anti-responsibility sentiments with freedom and fun, while casting left and liberal commitments as repressive, regulatory, grim, and policing." And her concern is that this campaign seduces its would-be converts with the feeling of release from responsibilities of all kinds, and a feeling of disinhibition. And then she says that the fusion of that libidinal freedom and fun with an authoritarian statism, she says, has a formidable power to appeal to the young, the immature, the reckless, and the wounded. And then her warning is this fusion will land us in more trouble than we knew and requires that we think very hard about what strategies would most successfully counter it. I'm not doing that interview thing where you're like, "Well, Hari, what are the strategies?" but I just…I mean that's stupid, but I

just wonder, maybe because it is a fool's errand, but I have spent time trying to imagine those strategies and I wonder if you have any thoughts?

HK: I think they've emerged. I think you know…the news on that front is good. First I completely recognize that characterization, and you know we've got…Hillary as mom, and the boys are going like "Ah, mom"—that it's those kinds of things that were very straightforwardly visible. But I think the transition in far-right culture, it has been…it's been a cultural transition and there's been a kind of…the far right of my youth were joyless skinheads, you know, parroting rather tedious propaganda points that were stale in the 1960s, but it's certainly the discovery of irony, I think, and the discovery of humor and playfulness that came out of the chan culture, that came out of this arms race of grossness that was a feature of the chan culture. I was spending time on the chans as an appalled observer, I should say rather than an enthusiastic participant, but I was lurking around on these sites in the early aughts and seeing this arms race quality and…seeing a lot of like racist and misogynistic material being presented as "How gross can it be? How shocking can I be?" and what then happened is that the, you know, the suburban teens who were driving this… the high school boys, for one reason or another, got fused with a much more serious group of far-right activists. There's a very good book by Dale Baroon about 4chan and its rise, and he suggests that what happened is that…the chans raided a site called Stormfront…a Neo-Nazi site…and that the Neo-Nazis were intrigued to discover that there was this breeding ground, and they made active attempts to recruit.

So, you know, you cut to 15 years later, the kids have all grown up, the irony has fallen away, and then…people are asserting…extreme biological racism, for example, as a serious position, but it's all packaged with this plausible deniability. You know, the thing about the okay symbol [makes an OK hand sign]…every liberal who hand-rings and says, "That's a Nazi sign," and you can say, "Pffft. You've lost it. It's just, I'm just saying okay," and that exists—that space of joking-not joking, serious-not serious, is the space in which this has grown up…but it was very successful, as Wendy Brown said in that quote. "The presentation of the opposing position is essentially censorious and authoritarian and clamping down on…the irrepressible libidinal energies that want to be free". And you know, and also that there's…I think there's something going on with male groups and that you can point back-

wards into a more traditionally fascist formations. You look at something like the Proud Boys gradually looking more and more like the Nazi…by the month. But they're not…they're not the only people who can be funny on the internet. They say commies don't know how to be, but actually it turns out they do. And you think of things like the emergence of Gritty, that hockey—a Philadelphia hockey symbol—Gritty as a meme figure from the left, and then there's a lot of very successful trolling and outing of people and forcing people into the open. If the space of action for a lot of these people is anonymity and deniability, you know. Basically, there's been a very concerted anti-fascist campaign to put these people's actual beliefs and identities in front of their employers… in front of other public spaces and to say, "Well, is that acceptable or not? Yes or no?" Forcing people into actually either siding with it or not. Reducing that sort of "Oh I was just joking. I was just being ironic" space.

So I think there's an online war that's been going on for years, and is down and dirty and being conducted with viciousness on both sides, and in public discourse the left is learning to be a bit less easily baited. The baiting into outrage is an old tactic and it's become clearer over the last five years or so how ineffective that is, and how certain sorts of moral panic and certain sorts of outrage just serve the alt-right agenda. Being able to eye-roll and not take them seriously when they wish you to take them seriously, is a good judo move in that fight.

MN: That's super interesting. Well, I have all these questions about form and stuff that we're not going to get to, so I'll just ask one question about writing and then we can open it up. But I just…I read in an interview that you said that some of the best advice you'd ever gotten about writing was like "This feeling, it will pass," you know, and what made me laugh about that, was that when people ask me the same question, I often note something that a mentor of mine once told me, which was a variation on the theme saying that my feelings about the work, my work, didn't matter. The work was what mattered, but that my feelings would change day by day. But whether or not…now this is true, and I think this is very, to me, that's been very, very useful. However, I also asked somebody different at some point, like I asked a friend, "If I'm writing something and I feel really bored while I'm writing it, like does that mean it's boring?" and they were like "Yeah, like it does." And that was also really worrisome to me because I… So I'm just

wondering about like when you're working and this notion of A. "Why is this feeling, it will pass," why is it some of the best advice? and B. How do you chart judging what you're doing based on how you're feeling about it, or how you feel while you're working?

HK: It's the difference between a fleeting feeling and a consistent feeling…

MN: Right…consistent is bad.

HK: I sit down and read what I did yesterday and I think, "You know you're a fool and a dolt, and you should do another job," and then, you know, I'm…on occasion, I sit down and think, "That was quite smart, actually." And neither should be trusted in a straightforward way, but if you sit down every day and you're bored by your project, well…maybe that is a sign that… certainly there's a sign that you should find another way of approaching the project, if not junking the project all together. But I think one of the hardest parts of writing is learning. You're using your own reactions in such a finely tuned way to judge the choices that you're making, and you know there are days when we're off, and there are the days when, you know… it's why it's not a good idea to press send on the essay as soon as you finished it. You know, you let it sit… I find one of the most useful tools that I have when writing a longform thing is to put it away and then come back to it when I've slightly forgotten what it was like reading it. Certainly, like a draft of a novel…if I, I often …how many times do I have a fresh draft of a novel? In the times…

MN: …A good bunch of novels.

HK: …but a good tactic for me is to go away and do something else for a few weeks, then print this thing out and take it to a cafe or to some place where I don't write. And then just read it as if I'm a person reading a book in a cafe, and like alienating myself from the thing. And often, I discover things about the rhythm…all that wood for the tree stuff that's impossible to get to when you're in the midst of a project. That's when I'm like "Oh right! It reads like that, it flows like that, or this clearly I failed to explain that." Whatever it would be, that's when I can discover a lot of things that can be fixed that I hadn't understood before.

MN: Yeah, I'm definitely a big fan of the self-alienation factor. Sometimes I almost joke with myself like, I'll actually be almost play-acting, like "Oh! What is this thing I've found! Oh! It appears to be a piece of writing. Let me see." Yeah, exactly! "Who could've done this!" But like the more I can do that, the better I feel like the read is of the work. But anyway, David, I don't know if you want to step in and have some questions for Hari from the people who are here, many of whom, like I say, I know are very discerning people.

DLU: Yeah, I'm gonna jump in…actually before we do that, I just want to follow up with both of you about that, Maggie. Because one of my favorite pieces of sort of writing advice, which I think comes from *The Argonauts*, is about how you're reticent on the first draft, you're not as bold on the page as you are in life in the first draft, and then in revision, you make it sharper and bolder so that you actually enact a boldness that isn't necessarily yours in how you carry yourself—that question of being more authentic on the page, and I wonder if you both can address that question.

And then while they're addressing that question, we have about twenty minutes left, so anyone in the audience who has a question, either use your little virtual raise hand thing and/or just simply put a question in the chat and we'll share them.

HK: I certainly think that, yeah, revision for me is often a process of, you know, admitting that that's what I want to say and then saying it in a straightforward way rather than with five different images or five different kinds of parallel clauses… just striking them all out and saying like that's actually, you know, what I want to say, and I'm going to stand behind it.

MN: Yeah, I would just totally underscore that, which is that I think—and actually this relates a little bit to our more political conversation about libidinal…you know output or is that…I think we have this idea that we're all like a cauldron of things that are just, you know, transgressive and impermissible to say, when in fact, most of our immediate output is just full of these interminable clauses, and the unsureness, and the cops in the head and the like—you know for myself, like academic obfuscations—and it's only after, you know, taking the whole page. And often I find that I'll just put like a cir-

cle around the subject, verb, object, in the middle of it, and I'm like, "Okay, that's what I wanted to say." You know, and then…I once had a mentor—the same person who told me about the feelings actually—Wayne Koestenbaum, whom I adore…but Wayne told me once also that I could… I should say the impermissible thing and then I could spend the rest of my essay running away from it, but if I never said it, then I would never have….I also think that, too, but the last thing I'll say is I think this links actually also to the question of the "boring," which is that…you know, the problem with writing is that writing all that boring, not alive stuff is also like a burning off process, so it's like if you don't ever do it, this idea that you could just get the needle in the vein is not going to allow you to burn off defensiveness, obfuscation, unclarity. Like you're not gonna…you won't find the vein, so you have to… you've gotta dick around for a while. You know, yeah…

HK: Yeah, yeah, that's so true.

MN: …and bore yourself, and then you find out that you're bored, and then you're like "Why am I so bored?" and that all can be part of it, you know.

DLU: So it's the experience…I don't want to say the writing is performative, because that's overstating, but it's the experience of being in the moment with the writing, living with the writing as you're producing it, rather than imagining what the writing is going to be at the glorious end, you know, that you're driving towards.

Uh, we have Claire…you have your hand up…do you want to unmute and ask away?

Claire Michie: Sure, thanks…this has been a real treat. I think the boon of the pandemic for me is getting to see authors I wouldn't necessarily otherwise get to see, so thank you both for this.

Red Pill was one of my favorite books of the pandemic reading so far. And I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about how you situated it in mental health narratives. I think the politics is super fascinating, but for me, a lot of what I experienced in there was that mental health crisis, and that moved from seeming sanity to a different place and then back to a neutral zone.

HK: One of the things that I wanted to write about was what happens after..after this, you know; as a younger man, I was interested in these towering moments of disillusion or grandeur or whatever it would be and… but what I wanted to do…it's a book about somebody who's…who's trying to get back to his life…to the person he loves, and to his child, and I wanted to… to try and think about what…how you would rebuild trust, and how you would attempt to remake domesticity after you had trashed it in such an extreme way and…and that, that sense of crampedness that he has, that he's, you know…of knowing that he has so much to prove…and the difficulties of being seen as somebody who's not trustworthy…were very much where I wanted to leave it. I didn't want to leave him on a mountaintop, you know, romantic…. Though, it's funny that we… I wanted this Caspar David Friedrich picture, *The Traveler on the Sea of Fog*, to be the cover partly because it is such a cliche of exactly that man alone with his, you know, towering thoughts kind of narrative and the designer was terrified of the idea of that because he said, "You know how many books have this on the cover?" and I was like "Well yes, exactly." And so we found a way to displace it and obscure it with this…with this shape which I, you know, I really liked…but yeah it's…I didn't want to make it a literary crisis. I wanted to make this a real sort of lived crisis for a person that …who would have to pick up the pieces afterwards.

DLU: Uh…we have another hand up. Manar?

Manar Moursi: Yeah, hi, and thank you so much for sharing with us today. I had a question about working productively with the affect of shame, which I've read a little bit…Maggie, in an exchange with Moira Davey, talks at length about this and I just wanted to hear more about… her thoughts on shame and working productively with it, and the power of reversal that happens…I guess when we are the writer as the writer, and the power that happens with the different forms of writing…so let's say as an academic versus writing fiction or auto-fiction…and how she deals productively or not with this power reversal or how…how aware or not she is of this power reversal, and then the authority that the voice also that she writes with has…

DLU: Okay, I think Maggie that was directed at you, if you want to take it. And then Hari if you want to…if you have any thoughts on that, by all

means, please feel free to jump in.

MN: Manar, was the "she" in your question Moira or me or somebody else? I just got a little bit lost at the end.

MM: Sorry? Uh…what…

MN: Was the "she" in your question Moira Davey, or was it me, or was it somebody—when you were saying "she feels" about this or how "she feels" about that, I just wasn't sure who the "she" was…

MM: Oh! Sorry, yeah…I think I was talking about the exchange. In this exchange, how both of you were considering…were considering this…

MN: So me and Moira?

MM: Yes.

MN: Got you. I think that she's… I can't remember what it was, for maybe *Art Forum*. A number of years ago, I did a conversation with Moira Davey, who's a really great artist and writer that you guys should know about—" D-A-V-E-Y" if you don't already. You know, in that conversation, I think, if I remember correctly, Moira was occupying the "shame place" and I was talking more about a post-shame type of writing or something, but I…so I think she would be better to speak to shame than I, but I would say that…so Silvan Tomkins, who is a psychologist, who Eve Sedgwick, a queer theorist, injected into a more… mainstream theoretical milieu. Tomkins talks about pairs of affects, and the affect that he pairs with shame is interest. The interest and shame are like the opposites, and so to be very interested in something, it makes you available or vulnerable to being…to feeling shame, you know. To me, this is very useful because I don't tend to think about shame as like in a Foucauldian sense of the secret of yourself is the secret of your sex or something like that. I tend to think of it as more like, you know, to have an…to admit an activated interest in something is a vulnerable-making activity…and what else is writing? But writing is an expression of interest, of showing the world what you care about. And for me, that's why any writing…like people often talk to me as if personal writing is shameful,

but to me, it's the activity of interest, it's not the content that is the thing to struggle with. And I think that that's…you know, I think that's as it should because if you're not putting anything on the line or you're not feeling some sense of something mattering, and all of the possible vulnerability that goes with that, then you're not working probably at the spot that's most important for you.

HK: I think that's such a…such a useful formulation. I think [inaudible]. I sometimes say to people that I think…I think there should be something at risk for the writer in a piece of writing, and I think that's why…that's what I mean by that, that the risk is shame and exposure or vulnerability rather than other…other forms of risk necessarily. But showing that you care… showing that you care enough to make this thing and to go and put it forth into the public sphere is a potential shaming, you know, it's to risk shame… and that's, you know…I suppose you only have to go on to your review sites or whatever. If you want to indulge in self-hatred as a writer there… Goodreads is there for you in order to let you really beat yourself up. And there's a cost to… I don't know… it seems that in order to be able to maintain yourself as a writer, you have to also be able to walk through the marketplace with everybody throwing dirt at you, and you're in sackcloth and ashes.

MN: It's like I have to unmute myself because I'm laughing so hard, but maybe…maybe you might feel ashamed if you don't know how accompanied you are, so I will laugh with you. I've written down "walk through the marketplace with mud thrown at you" and "Goodreads equals indulge in your self- hatred as a writer." These are the tips I'm taking away. Very good tips.

DLU: I think…I think Goodreads and Amazon reviews are, you know, the best ego deflation tools in the history of ego-deflation tools.

MN: That's amazing because they're like a…they're also like an inflated version… a comedic inflated version of you know, your most…it's not like somebody's making something up entirely. It's just like a Macy's balloon parade version of you like walking down the street, you know.

HK: Yeah, nothing my mom could ever come up with is as…is as terrible as that. And there's a whole genre: "You owe me 20 dollars!"

MN: "I read the first ten pages and put it down, so you owe me the rest." Yeah.

DLU: Yeah, my favorite I think, Hari—you were referring to something along these lines early in terms of emails—is when you get the comment that's trashing your book for doing exactly what you wanted it to do, you know. It's like, "Oh, I guess that was a success, then. Even if it's not coming across."

HK: My favorite online review of…of Red Pill so far has been "It doesn't even mention NAFTA."

DLU: Well, you know where to start for the next one. …I actually want to jump in with a quick question for you Hari, since you were talking about risk…that question of risk, which I think is really essential. But I wonder since you are…you're primarily a novelist but also an essayist/nonfiction writer-commentator…I wonder is that sense or quality of risk different for you in the essay form than it is in the novel form?

HK: It's a different sort of utterance…sort of obviously, isn't it? I think the game with an essay is to not say anything that you wouldn't wish to defend in debate. But the novel…in a novel often what I'm doing is trying to stage something very uneasy, or to make it exist in a…in an unresolved place, rather than…I don't want to have characters that are just carrying these backpacks of points of view around with them and…and are just there as vehicles to stage some debate which I already have an opinion on. I'm interested in something much more… it's like going to the difficult place, going to the bad place in a way…and that has…the risk of that is obviously being deemed by readers to believe something, or to hold some sort of point of view, you know, if you're—the depiction of racism, for example. I have a lot of white friends who are writers who find it very, very hard right now to… to stage things like that because of the question of what…what's deemed to be, you know, the writer's own point of view. And there's another complicated question about what are people's libidinal investments in staging things…

so you know if you have a…you know…why do you want to write a twenty-page rape scene, what's in that for you? That's another, another thing; but…where am I going with this? But yeah, I certainly think there's…there's value in using your chops, such as they are, to push out into…into areas that are uncomfortable and are complicated because otherwise why would you bother with the furniture of a narrative? Why if you have a…if you have a clearly articulated point of view, that's…that's an essay.

DLU: Right, sorry I was muted. I've got gardeners and barking dogs on this end so…. Well, I think that that's actually a great place for us to end this conversation, and I think it's a great place for us to end the series, just on that…that question of risk and responsibility, and the porousness of those ideas. So first of all, I want to thank Hari Kunzru for being here, and for this brilliant conversation, and Maggie Nelson also—this is just…I've still got many hours of work today, but this is definitely the highlight of my day for me. And I want to thank my co-curator Emily Anderson. I want to thank the Levin Institute for allowing us to put on this series, and I want to thank all of you for coming both today and also throughout the series. The…the performance…the interview has been recorded and will be available for people to see. We'll also be publishing a version of it on *Air/Light* over the…in the spring, later in the spring and….I think that's…that's it. Thank you all so much. This has been really, really wonderful.

HK: Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to do this. It's really…It's really cool.

MN: It was a total pleasure. I presume this will not be the last time that we talk, so I look forward to the next time.

HK: See you again soon.

MN: You too.

DLU: All right, thank you everybody.

FICTION

The Wife Writes

Amanda Montei

From 19 to 28, there was a lot of turmoil in my life, but in a stuck way. Then, around 28, my life started to get shaken up. I realized I wanted to grow more and that anything that wasn't working in my life, I could fix it. I feel like I came into my womanhood. And that was when I got married.

—Alicia Silverstone

Open on. Normalization of love and battle. Mother's dogmatic sobriety. The well-worn preface of a girl's drunkenness and sex and abuse. The Wife writes. Excess, but of a different kind. The kind she learned about as a girl. She will have a pregnant body, but it's not yet stated in the narrative. It's understood, or assumed, what difference does it make since it just is?

Youth. The women she loved as a girl unconcerned with death. The obvious necessity of sweaters over gowns on a desert winter night, ignored for the sake of shoulders. Spaghetti straps. Broken dress codes. Santa Anas surprising. Hidden suffering. Dreams of little children, as a child. Time passing. Cut to. Reliance on others for emotional certainty.

Cut to. Narrative uncertainty. It arrives as memories do. This story. Somewhere in there, she married. What choice did she have? A woman standing alone in the snow, frozen. Long plaits. Ambiguous lesbianism. Its promise skirted. A prince disrupting possibility. Winter came, as it does for each girl. An extended metaphor that never quite flatters. Quick, deep cuts.

The little boy, long before, staring up at his mother. Beside her, the man who coked her up. She might have been a girl in a village, though she was a woman in Hollywood. Details on the cutting room floor picked up, re-felt. Her childhood has a mythic quality, perhaps because she grew up in Los Angeles, when it was still a town. Mothers appearing on the hillside as their own origin stories, disappearing, reappearing.

The cook's fat husband asking her mother and her twin sister to jump on his belly without their undies. *Again! Again!* he'd say. The girls giggling unknowingly. A sexual exploitation that covered over other forms.

Later, the dumbness that comes with place. Heteronormative romantic love dominating sexual development. Womanhood as bad fashion after aging and plucking chin hairs, marrying and leaving the city to be run into the ground by domestic labor. The war, on and on.

We never quite fit the narrative, but it's all we have.

*

This is a story about loving elsewhere, meaning dying. When you are a man, I am The Wife in a domestic thriller, little girl covering her mouth. Disbelief at what she has seen and said. Or perhaps done. What she is really thinking about, it is clear by her expression, is her mother.

She thinks, *Should I just sing doo wah diddy instead, like the sad woman in the rain in the LA story?* Flashes of billboards that talk. Her own emotional responses always estimating some film.

I'm sorry. I cannot not. I cannot love you that way.

*

A maternity ward. Rain, a symbol for snow in the West. Girls and mothers and winter are still an everlasting love triangle. As in a sitcom, The Wife finds herself repeating to the husband, *please, just listen for once*. The genre, the medium, slipping. She hears the voices of other women, but that's too crazy. The narcissism of plot and form.

She, babe in arms now, gazing out a large window. The way he looks at her. The way they all look at her. Coming and going. Bringing flowers and cards and things for the baby. Why won't anyone bring her more food? Why won't anyone let her rest? She was slow and full, and now what? It's much

more than the male gaze. It's the way he asks about the general state of things each day, like the answer is not always the same. It's not the cruelty of the baby, how could it be, she's so kind. Her cry outlandish, but she's trying. More than can be said for anyone else.

The men that abused her mother. The saga of him tying her up. Her story as duration. Time as fairy tale. Sexual difference as itself part of the epic tradition. Womanhood as conditional clause. Narratives like second bodies. She sees it all, imagines herself somewhere in the other room, with the nanny. Does her mother play along or call for help, and did it make a difference? Two hot bodies just trying to hold it together.

This is not an allegory. Or fantasy. Oh God. I wouldn't dare. We will make our own way. It is post-fact, by which I mean post-myth. By which I mean the end is near. She will in time become the mother. By which what is meant again.

*

The Wife, now technically a mother, is speaking to the child who is not yet. *The ocean is far away, but no one swims in it*. When The Wife was a girl, she lived in a village in a tattered corset dress. It's represented or implied. Her father a fisherman, watching her bathe, do laundry, do domestic labor, creepily. *You're looking so good these days*. In the memory, over and over, at a very public dinner table. Salt. Wind. Each time he speaks, this way. Is that when she realizes? In that familiar line of dialogue that structured how she came to know her own flesh? Repetition of a narrative line defining childhood? She was barefooted but not yet pregnant. Hot LA sun beating down.

The wars are far away and the kids in the village don't know any better. Historical temporal cultural specificity locating narrative in time. In a post-apocalyptic world that looks just like history. Of course it was destroyed. Are they the only ones left in this world? Love likes to think so, which is why she finds it hard to participate.

Before the baby, The Wife and the husband drove for nine days across the ravaged countryside trying to get away. From? Everything? Looking for sun. In doing so, only reenacting. He, like a spoiled child, starved for her body like marriage gave it to him. As they drove, men fought on old television sets in store windows. Routine violence. A radio host called for all female

politicians to be shot in the vagina. Life went on, as it does. They came upon a new location.

*

Exterior village. Timeless setting through which we might understand where we are in history. Night. *I do not want to be anywhere but the ocean. But isn't everything written for the screen now?*

Gazing into ether. She sees the little boy, the cook's husband, who both represent something but also just are. Everywhere. *I want the little boy to die, to be ashamed of what he's done, to apologize to my mother for looking up her dress. His identity cannot hold, but he needn't blame her! Why was he looking anyway? A rape scene staged in an apartment, that's what I saw up there. A trap. Each fold speaking a new tale. How did he miss it? Had he even been looking?*

All the while, marriage and war, evolution and history, forgetting and ongoing. We cannot say without consuming. And making, after all, is a kind of consumption.

POETRY

“Rock Garden in the Back Yard with a Ghost Tree and an Evergreen,” “Stay,” “Disappearing Act”

Diane Mehta

ROCK GARDEN IN THE BACK YARD WITH A GHOST TREE AND AN EVERGREEN

On sun-drenched slats of wood, the muddled air casts
blue shade, prehistoric smells, leaves petrified in shadow.
It’s all invisible and felt. I wonder if this back yard
landscape can cut away my clacking feelings of everything
corrupted in myself: the damned uncertainties, the fine print,
high-tide low-tide moods, the rut of muscles seizing up.
And then the shined oak bends below my feet as I descend
unstable stairs creaking. I stride fortissimo in joy
forth and back, into sun-erasing shadows
in my bright square yard. On a small table by a green chair
which for its angle and tilt seems designed for those devoted to light
is a soft round nest of twisted kindling and two white fur tufts

that fell in our yard, though the birds were gone,
in this way an artifact, historic and true, a downbeat
heartbreaking me as usual. I memorialize the unknown bird
and her birth-blue eggs fallen upon by storm, squirrel, cat.

The stormcloud god is always overhead with his bolts.
No sound is quiet here during the insect-invading sun-boiled rout.

Today it is a cold day warmed by a triangle of sun
angling down like an annunciation; I listen to the racket of sparrows,
cardinals, and blue jays just beyond the fence in a green-dark evergreen.
Its leaves rattle and toss the blood-red berry bombs
on woodgrain slats. In the heart of the tree, where four branches
uphold a broad blue sky, a child, who has since moved out, yelled
happily on the square platform his father built. The mother came out once,
looking impatient, and said don't trim the branches, just tell me
and I'll do it, but I never saw her again and the father and child also
disappeared. We cut off several branches this spring, tired of the splatter
and stink of those bright berries, the slime slippery below our feet.
Each week, we shaved off more branches, white flesh screaming O
what have you done with my arm, only the worst kind of woman
scuttles about so, Medusa locks jangling, and causes havoc.
You have stolen my beauty for a grassless yard that you presume to think,
fenced off, is not spacious enough, though it is sky-flooded.

We wanted a yard unmarred by the blood of everywhere
else. My son, growing into realities, clipped off ever-larger branches.

One day out back, a tiny leaf pops up in grand anticipation of spring.
I look up from my reading, dazed at how life is reincarnated
so easily in a patch of soil. I stare at my book and wonder why
I revel in stories of slaughter, and worry that ordinary
blood-reviving carnage feels profound: spear-skewered lungs,
limbs cut off and heads rolling about in Homer's descending
hexameter heart; I cower like Hector before Aías,
Diomedes before Hector, Hector before Achilles, Achilles
before his anger and the organizing shape of honor he is destined for

(so much blood spilled, and buried, in the life-giving earth).
I know my marauding mind is too easy about slicing limbs off
to rid my yard of shade and the disarray of splatterberries
staining my yard, so ordinary there is nothing to it—
woodgrain and masonry, a stump from a tree with a trajectory
like a beanstalk into heaven. It died, years back, of some disease.
All day, the chainsaw buzzed. The tree came down in puzzle pieces.

Eight summers have come and gone now with my stump-life,
my still life, my spirit-tree, and oxygen leaves on my neighbor's tree.

Sideline the old myths that say time on Earth is just a plot
you are expected to do something with; fixed, akimbo—
places imbued with mourning and break-the-fast, with fast love
but who is counting? I take out the axe.
It is time to fell the stump of this dead tree blossoming
spores and fungi as if saying what happens was never up to me.
I lift the axe high above my head. My son sees how a body
yields to murder and clears out rot in the same motion.
It is a matter of syntax and exchange; the verbs feel conditional
before they harden into nouns. To chop, to disarray, to make
a new garden. How quick the remains revert to soil.
How quick the hand rake, shovel, and broom come out,
come out. I labor in my tinpot yard, digging with vengeance.
Scabrous creatures and worms dive deeper, into underground spaces.
We steal varieties of rocks from the park up the hill for our small yard
inside a yard. In the mineral soil of my old ghost tree, three small plants set-
tle.

STAY

At least until the Iliad is over. I linger in the lines, barely turning
pages to slow what's coming: Achilles dies after the book is over,
he meets the fate he chooses; armor cannot even shield a half-
god warrior. I cannot shield you in my caring.
Stay until the snow has melted in the mountains where you live.
"I know my ashes and bones will go into the earth and I feel fabulous."
How can it be that anyone can yield so happily?
Truer expanses I may not see, mired in expansive truths
philosophers, deciding what the world is not, color into centuries
defined by kings, geometry, chiaroscuro, constellations, countryside.
Which brings me to the mountains where you live: light, uplift, love—;
All remains in grays for me; you rapture into colors unseen on this planet.
When is time you're switching into? How do you keep switching
keys for me in the piano I keep wanting? I will buy it when you're hiking
Jupiter with your ski poles and angelic wings to buoy your steps.
I memorize your face, consumed with whitening illness.
I reveal the first time I took ecstasy was in your house on a clear cold day.
The snow was a meter fallen, enough to tromp through in a daze,
hours elated by a rambling brook, so endless was snowstorm and love
it seemed to me then. You have been such a blessing in my life, you said,
and I practically yelled

You are a blessing

I write through tears, I write, you are beautiful
inside you tell me when your youngest son brought me
home to you that sometimes you just know. Because of you
I know how a woman can be. I know there is a sparrow
fluttering inside the free and vicious eagle of me.
The shield Hephaestus forges for Achilles promises balance
(season, dance, harvest, cosmos) even in war; a new season
arrives on the heels of death, on the heel of Achilles when the Iliad is over.

You are upbeat, feeling lucky that long life has been so full of love.
Patroclus is dead. Achilles avenges his love in fields of blood; he won't stop
grieving. Will this be me as well? My soul in two.
Desperate Priam begs for the body of his son and only then Achilles
weeps. He returns Hector to his father. He is becoming more human
by which he is dying of anger, choosing unfading glory over old age.
You have gotten the better of the bargain, at eighty-eight.
Turn the page, I tell myself, and turn it,
crying. The story of Achilles is a tale of rage inside the battle
to live. Deaths pile up. Soon, you'll greet your lover, who died last year.
I inch through sentences, pretending time rewinds, but it does not.
There is a kind of peace. Each warrior rests his head upon the soil
differently, as if saying we are unlike in how we die but equal at the end.

DISAPPEARING ACT

Tell wrong tales to disappearing ears
devoted to stories sweeter and more contemporary,
or, fortune-bright,
shine with shocked tears,
your inconsolable verses in knob-knuckled fists.
Return to primeval sentences carved in old books
sewn to spines so strong they cannot say their words.
Care for what lingers: scents of time.
What riches of ancient oaks are ravaged,
Art Deco-decorated, here; unperturbed, we howl
through teeth what we have found is only
what we, expecting divinity to sparkle fast
and on time, surreptitiously believe.
Nothing except the treason of years lasts;
the end will arrive with diamonds
that cut you clear in half.
Listen for laughter blood-boiling on the stove,
ask your soul what is it you have apprehended
and was it worth it? Melodious pages
flutter down to sing us tales of when they were trees
out of breath, waltzing in breezes.
In bodies sprung forward
doing and undoing heavenly dances;
is footwork the labor of elegance encircling itself
or a dream of walking free
under orange-awe sun, lit from within
and refracted from whatever intentions it began with?
We are skeletons of time and spent love,

we want that brief momentous back flip,
Rilke said, noting the acrobats, to muscle against gravities of age
and, flying there, to color our blank faces.
We hedge for fate. If it were a transmutation of blood or gods
the disappearing act would lift us in love with listening
and give our stories perfect pitch; we would be all ears.

The Neighborhoods Project

David L. Ulin

Judith Freeman and Anthony Hernandez's "The Afterlife of Detritus: MacArthur Park" inaugurates a new initiative at *Air/Light* — the Neighborhoods Project, a series of text/image collaborations. Developed in conjunction with the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, the Neighborhoods Project collectively seeks to map Los Angeles through the perspective of its communities. It's a way of looking at the city that, we believe, is overdue. Los Angeles has long been defined in terms of its sprawl, which is real enough. But this is also a landscape made up of more intimate spaces, neighborhoods abutting one another, each with its own personality and voice. What better way, then, to cut through the stereotypes, the received perceptions of the city, than by considering it through the filter of its component parts? And how better to achieve this than by reimagining the landscape of the city through a couple of necessary and often overlooked lenses: first, that of the streets, the sidewalks, the microcosm that leads to the macrocosm, and second, that of its artists and its writers.

The notion of an impressionistic, essayistic approach to the city seems ideally suited to Los Angeles. This is, after all, a collage city, built not so much on a single vertical or linear narrative as on horizontal cross-pollination; with its multiple perspectives and aesthetics, the Neighborhood Project encapsulates this point of view. At the same time, the hope is that these pieces, which will appear semi-regularly in *Air/Light*, will reflect the transition Los Angeles has been going through for nearly a generation now, in which density, public transportation, social justice movements, and other developments have provoked a necessary reimagining of the city. Artists and writers are essential to this process, to this conversation, both because

they can evoke Los Angeles as it is, a community (or series of communities), and also because their work offers a necessary sense of connections between past and present, personal and collective experience.

Think of this project, then, as a series of maps tracing Los Angeles's soul.

— David L. Ulin

NEIGHBORHOODS PROJECT

Echo Park

Judith Freeman

1.

The first time I went to see him in his apartment in MacArthur Park, it was an April night in 1985. I didn't really know the neighborhood; I was living on the other side of the city, in Santa Monica Canyon, although I had spent some time in the area years earlier when I first moved to Los Angeles and I often went out with friends to openings and performances at the old Otis Art Institute. The performances at Otis are some of what I remember best from those times in the late 1970s when I arrived in the city, fresh from Idaho: how riotously open it felt to see artists work so freely, with so little inhibition, like the performance artist I saw one night who sang a wildly crazy version of "It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To" while sticking Ritz crackers covered with Cheez Whiz to her naked body. Another time, an artist I met in a writing workshop painted his penis with a little face and delivered a soliloquy with it as if it were a finger puppet. It was the era of performance art. Body Art. Actions involving almost anything but especially, it seemed, nakedness. Only once do I remember something getting out of control at Otis, when a pyrotechnic stunt went wrong and caused a fire and we were hurriedly evacuated from a smoky room.

Years later, looking for his apartment that night on Carondelet, not far from Otis, I remember thinking how dark the neighborhood was, and how old. I passed apartment buildings that looked as if they had been there a

very long time, some with their names written in beautiful neon signs on top, like the Asbury on Sixth Street near Coronado. His apartment was on a side street in a smaller complex built in the 1930s: two-story pink stucco Spanish-style, meant to resemble a little villa. He lived in back in a duplex that overlooked a busy alley. I remember how dark it felt that night walking along the side of the main building, looking for his apartment in the rear. Coming from the beach to such an old part of the city was like walking backwards into history, what Los Angeles must have felt like when it was becoming Los Angeles.

Street picture (woman near Big 6), 1988, Judith Freeman

2.

We had met a few weeks earlier at the new Temporary Contemporary Museum in Little Tokyo, a benefit to raise money for a local artist. He had

donated a photograph for the auction. A friend I was with pointed him out as we arrived and said, *Oh, there's Anthony Hernandez, a serious photogra-*

Desecrated sculpture, 1988, Judith Freeman

pher, a serious guy, and later, after the music had started, he walked up and asked me to dance. Oh, I thought: It's the serious artist. I gave him my number that night and later he called and invited me to dinner at his apartment where he'd been living, as I would learn, for more than twenty-five years, since he'd returned from Vietnam, where he had served as a medic in the late 1960s. He had come back to the city and picked up his camera again and started taking black and white photographs on the streets where he had grown up as the son of Mexican emigrants. At the time, I had just begun to publish my first stories in small magazines. He was an established artist who

had been photographing his city for many years. What I did not know that night was that less than a year later, we would marry and I would move into that apartment on Carondelet in MacArthur Park where we would live together for the next 32 years, until a dishonest new landlord drove us out. By that time, we had both sunk deep roots in the neighborhood, and it would show up over and over again in our work.

Street picture, woman on pay phone, 1988, Judith Freeman

3.

There was a time when MacArthur Park was regarded as one of the most elegant areas of the new city of Los Angeles, located at its western-most edge. Originally known as Westlake Park, it had been developed in the 1880s, transformed from a stinking marshland used primarily as a garbage dump, into a beautiful 35-acre recreation area. By the early 1900s, Westlake Park had become the most popular open-air resort in the city, built around a lake, with palm-lined paths and a cactus garden and an architecturally stunning two-story Victorian boathouse that featured an elaborate staircase, which flowed down to the water where wooden canoes and rowboats and little sailboats could be rented for a tour around the lake.

Cops arresting kids, 1987 Judith Freeman

Graceful promenades, fashioned in the manner of grand parks in Europe, wound through the landscape, and a series of bandshells offered free outdoor concerts and dances. Some of the city's most influential citizens, including Harrison Gray Otis, Ida Hancock, and Gaylord Wilshire, built mansions adjacent to the park. Westlake became Los Angeles's new exclusive neighborhood, but the park was easily accessible to all via the streetcar. For forty years, Westlake Park flourished, in a city that had few public parks. Raymond Chandler enjoyed walking there with his wife Cissy—they made their first home together in the area in 1920.

Then, in the 1930s, with automobile culture burgeoning, a decision was made to route a new wide boulevard through the heart of the park. In spite of deep resistance, the cars eventually won out, as cars always win out in Southern California. The lake was drained, massive amounts of earth moved, hundreds of birds and wildlife displaced, the ecosystem disrupted, and now a wide river of concrete, Wilshire Boulevard, bisected the park, changing it forever. By then, the richer residents had moved west. The park lost not only its physical integrity and its prosperity, but, in a final blow, it also lost its name. Thanks to a campaign by William Randolph Hearst, who wanted to promote General Douglas MacArthur for president, the park was renamed in 1942, and a statue of the general was erected in front of a reflecting pool dotted with concrete lumps meant to depict the islands of the Philippines. Thus, the General Douglas MacArthur Park was born, and it pursued a disheartening and precipitous decline over the decades to come.

4.

By the time I arrived in the 1980s, MacArthur Park had become one of the most crime-ridden and densely populated districts of Los Angeles, a first stop for newly arrived emigrants, a place to find fake IDs and other illegal items, an impoverished neighborhood that would in the late 1990s become known for the Rampart police scandal, in which officers from the LAPD's anti-gang unit boldly harassed the community's largely Hispanic residents, stealing and planting drugs, extorting and terrorizing and abusing the population until an investigation exposed their criminality and shut them down. Some seventy officers were ultimately implicated, making it the largest police scandal in American history.

George Herms sculpture, MacArthur Park, 1988, Judith Freeman

Street picture, Rampart Blvd women and kids, 1988, Judith Freeman

I used to walk the neighborhood a lot. I'd see the cops in their mirrored sunglasses standing on the Rampart Boulevard sidewalk near Tommy's hamburger stand, smoking cigars while frisking some teenager, looking for the drugs they would steal or plant. I walked between MacArthur Park and Lafayette Park almost every day, strolling Sixth Street past the old Elks Build-

ing and the Big 6 Market, where I shopped because the fruit was always ripe, and the tall apartment buildings with the lovely neon signs on top. I got to know a group of homeless people who lived in the park, especially a sweet man named Tommy and his dog Lady. Tommy limped badly, the result of a childhood accident. He'd been a short-order cook in Canada before ending up on the street. Over the years, I took him to the county hospital when he developed skin sores, gave him money and food, helped him find homes for the puppies Lady birthed in the park, and felt relief when a woman who worked in the neighborhood invited him to live in her house in Watts in exchange for his cooking. I continued to visit him there.

Not long after I moved to Carondelet, I joined a swim club at the old Ambassador Hotel and rode my bike to and from the pool. When I finished writing for the day, I'd swim laps and afterward use the sauna, feeling for a while like I'd entered the glamorous world of a much older Los Angeles. The gardens were still thriving and although the hotel was in decline, it was a beautiful place with its Mediterranean styling and rich history. I began carrying a 35 mm camera and would take pictures on the street as I biked to and from the pool, cutting through the park. I was learning to see the city in a different way because of Anthony's street pictures. I was learning how to look, how to observe. I photographed public statues, like the marble male nude figure in Lafayette Park, which I shot over a period of years, watching as it lost first its head, and then its torso, leaving only a perch of folded legs. I took pictures of families and couples, made portraits of people on the street or waiting at bus stops. (Bus stops had been a subject of Anthony's since he began making his large format black and white *Public Transit Areas* photographs in the late 1970s; they feature also in his most recent *Screened Pictures*.)

Then, in 1989, the Ambassador closed, the casualty of a "changing neighborhood," and two years later, Donald Trump bought the site, planning to tear down the hotel and replace it with a 125-story tower that was never built. The hotel was largely demolished in order to construct six schools on the site—schools that would be named after Robert F. Kennedy, who had made the Ambassador his headquarters during the 1968 California presidential primary, only to be shot there by an assassin.

After the Ambassador closed, I found another swim club not far away at the old Sheraton Townhouse across from Lafayette Park. It was a hotel where a lot of European travelers used to stay, and I swam there, in a beau-

tiful pool surrounded by lush gardens. Mostly, I saw only the hotel guests, like the members of the Russian ballet troupe with whom I chatted in the sauna. Then that hotel too closed in the aftermath of the unrest that erupted following the police beating of Rodney King, and my MacArthur Park swimming days ended.

Modeling session for amateur photographers, LA Photo Center, MacArthur Park, 1987 Judith Freeman

5.

When I first moved into the neighborhood, I loved to go to Bullock's Wilshire, the old art deco department store on Wilshire Boulevard, once the city's premier shopping location. There was a grand old tearoom on the top floor, presided over by a flamboyant maître d', and I would meet friends

there for lunch. We liked to dress up and wear hats, the way the ladies did in the 1930s and 1940s when the store was a glamorous spot. "Matron" models roamed around at lunch time, showing off the latest upscale fashions. The hat department downstairs had one of the best selections anywhere in the city and we often stopped there to try things on, although the matron who ran the department knew we weren't serious buyers and could hardly hide her disdain. In 1993, Bullock's Wilshire closed, another loss to the neighborhood.

Nobody came here to shop now, let alone to dress up for lunch.

Sculpture across from LaFayette Park, 1988 Judith Freeman

6.

There was a grand old house on the corner of Third Street and Lafayette Park Place that I admired. It had a rose garden where flowers still bloomed

every year although the house itself had long since been abandoned. I often slipped inside the gate and cut roses from that garden, feeling as if I were pruning them for an absentee owner while creating an amazing bouquet for myself. I never saw anyone, not even in the guest quarters above the old carriage house in back. Somehow the house hadn't been vandalized even though it was empty, and one could still appreciate its stately beauty, the leaded windows and carved front door, the second story balconies, the graceful craftsmanship. It had a huge porte cochere protecting the front entrance, like the one Raymond Chandler describes in *The Big Sleep* when his detective Philip Marlowe visits the corrupt district attorney. This was the sort of mansion that used to line Lafayette Park Place, but now it was the only one left. The rest had been demolished, replaced by nondescript apartment buildings. Then, with astonishing swiftness, the old house was razed, and the magnificent old pine trees and rose garden destroyed as well. The true story of MacArthur Park is the story of what has been subtracted. A park desecrated, cut in half. A graceful boathouse and lake destroyed, reduced to a fetid body of water. Great hotels closed. Buildings abandoned. Otis Art Institute departing for less blighted ground in 1997. And all the old neon signs gradually going dark, letter by letter, over the many years of decline.

Portrait of Tommy, homeless friend, taken in Watts where he went to live with Sharon, 1989, Judith Freeman

You reach a point when so much is behind you. As a city. A person. The places you knew are either gone or unrecognizable.

7.

There is a phrase in a film about the writer W.G. Sebald that has always called out to

me: *The afterlife of detritus*. It could describe the massive sculpture by the Los Angeles artist George Herms, erected at the western end of the park in 1987, just across the street from Otis. Called "Monument to the Unknown," Herms's sculpture is comprised of a tall rusting metal clock tower with its hands frozen in time, surrounded by three enormous rusting metal balls. It looked like detritus when it was newly erected and it seemed out of place to me then, a brutish installation in a park that had already lost so much beauty. This was during the time when a police substation had been created out of a shabby little cinderblock boathouse—the elegant Victorian one having long ago been destroyed—so cops could constantly monitor crime and gang activity. But looking at the Herms sculpture now, I can't help but think that it appears to have grown into itself and become more appropriate for the site. It has worn into the times.

8.

O, as it turns out, is usually the last letter to disappear in those old neon signs that remain perched atop so many older buildings in the neighborhood. It was the final letter to stay lit in the sign above the Strathmore Hotel on Hoover and Rampart, and also the last to fade on the Sheraton Townhouse sign after all the others had died. *O Townhouse!* I used to think, looking up at it, remembering those lovely times when I swam in the pool there, mingling with tourists, sunning myself on a chaise, feeling as

My friend Rebecca and me, parking lot Bullock's Wilshire, on our way to lunch in tea room, 1988, Judith Freeman

if I, too, were enjoying a little vacation. Later I was given a color photograph in exchange for writing an essay for a catalogue of work by the Los Angeles photographer Richard Miller, who shot a very young Marilyn Monroe floating face up in that pool in March of 1946, when she was still using the name Norma Jean Dougherty and working as a model. The print hangs in my house, reminding me of other times. To swim in that pool was to feel like a visitor to an old world L.A.

Anthony made many photographs around MacArthur Park but one of my favorites is a black and white picture of a man adjusting his tie while looking into his reflection in a store window on Alvarado Street. It was taken in 1970, just a few years after the song "MacArthur Park" was recorded by Richard Harris and became a hit. The lyrics can still dazzle me with their mystery. That cake *left out in the rain*. . . for which we'll *never have the recipe again*. It's a line that haunts. It could be a lament for a lost love or the end of a world as we know it. Punctuated as it is by the wailing refrain of *Oh no! Oh noooo!* it has a disturbing immediacy.

The statue of MacArthur is where some of the most hardcore residents of the park are found, camped in front of the general's rigid figure: those little islands of the Philippines have all cracked and crumbled in a dry reflecting pool that has reflected nothing for many years, deprived of water and of care. The interior of the old bandshell is blackened from the cooking fires of the homeless, who leave messages for each other scrawled on the domed walls. *Fuck you Carlos. Nobody cares and that's too bad. When did you call your mother the last time? And what happened?* No one plays music here anymore or holds dances. The park is crowded with tents, the free food lines are long, and the trash bins overflow as if no one can be bothered to keep up with the garbage. Try to imagine the place as it once was,

and then adjust the picture to what it has become, and nearly a century and a half of Los Angeles history will pass before your eyes and you too might find yourself thinking of the afterlife of detritus.

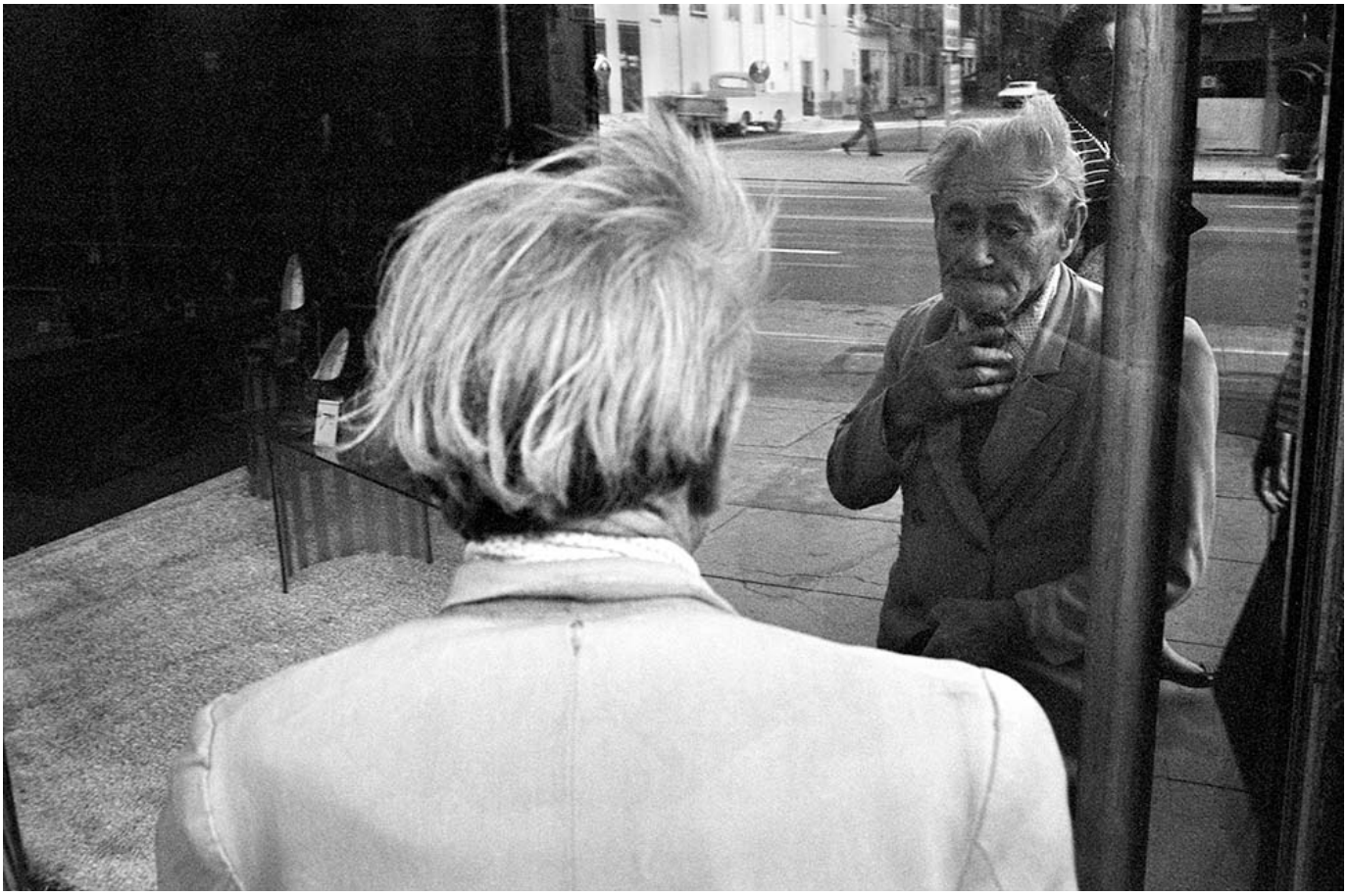
Rampart Boulevard, 1988, Judith Freeman

NEIGHBORHOODS PROJECT

MacArthur Park: A Portfolio

Anthony Hernandez

MacArthur Park, 2020, Anthony Hernandez



7th Street and Alvarado, 1970, Anthony Hernandez

7th Street and Alvarado, 2020 Anthony Hernandez

8th Street and Alvarado, 1978, Anthony Hernandez

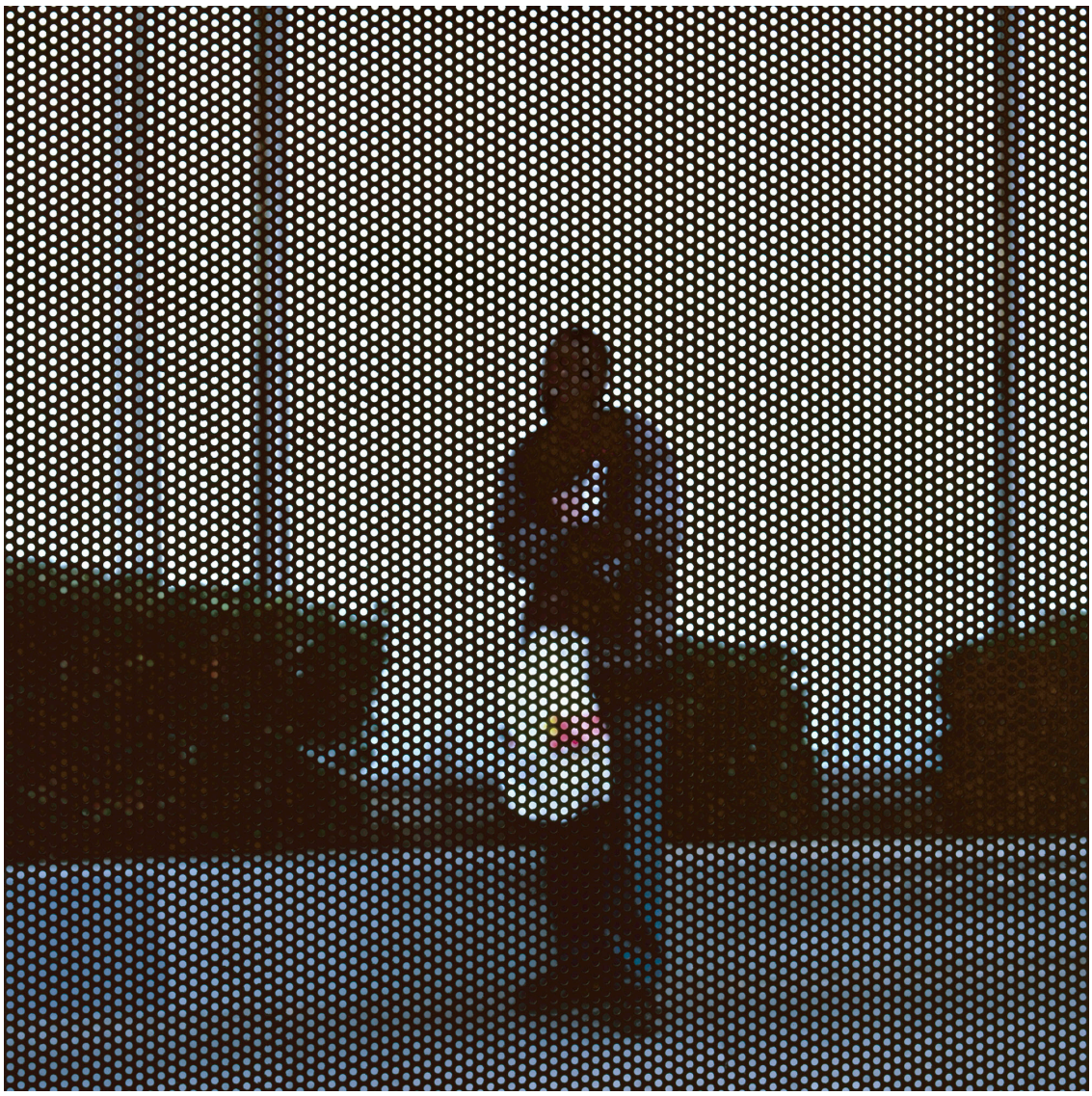
8th Street and Alvarado, 2020 Anthony Hernandez

Bus Stop, 1978, Anthony Hernandez

Bus Stop, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

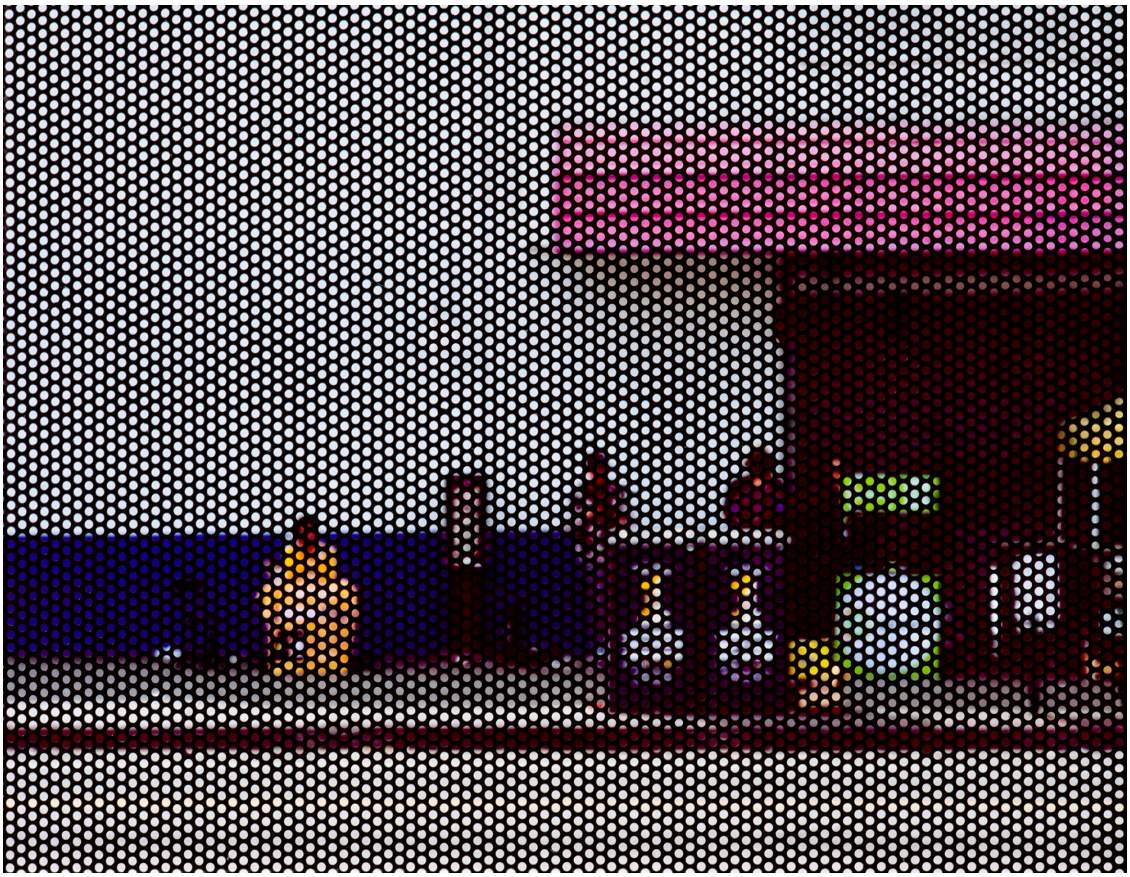
Screened Pictures, 2018/2019, Anthony Hernandez

Bus Stop Screen, 2020, Anthony Hernandez



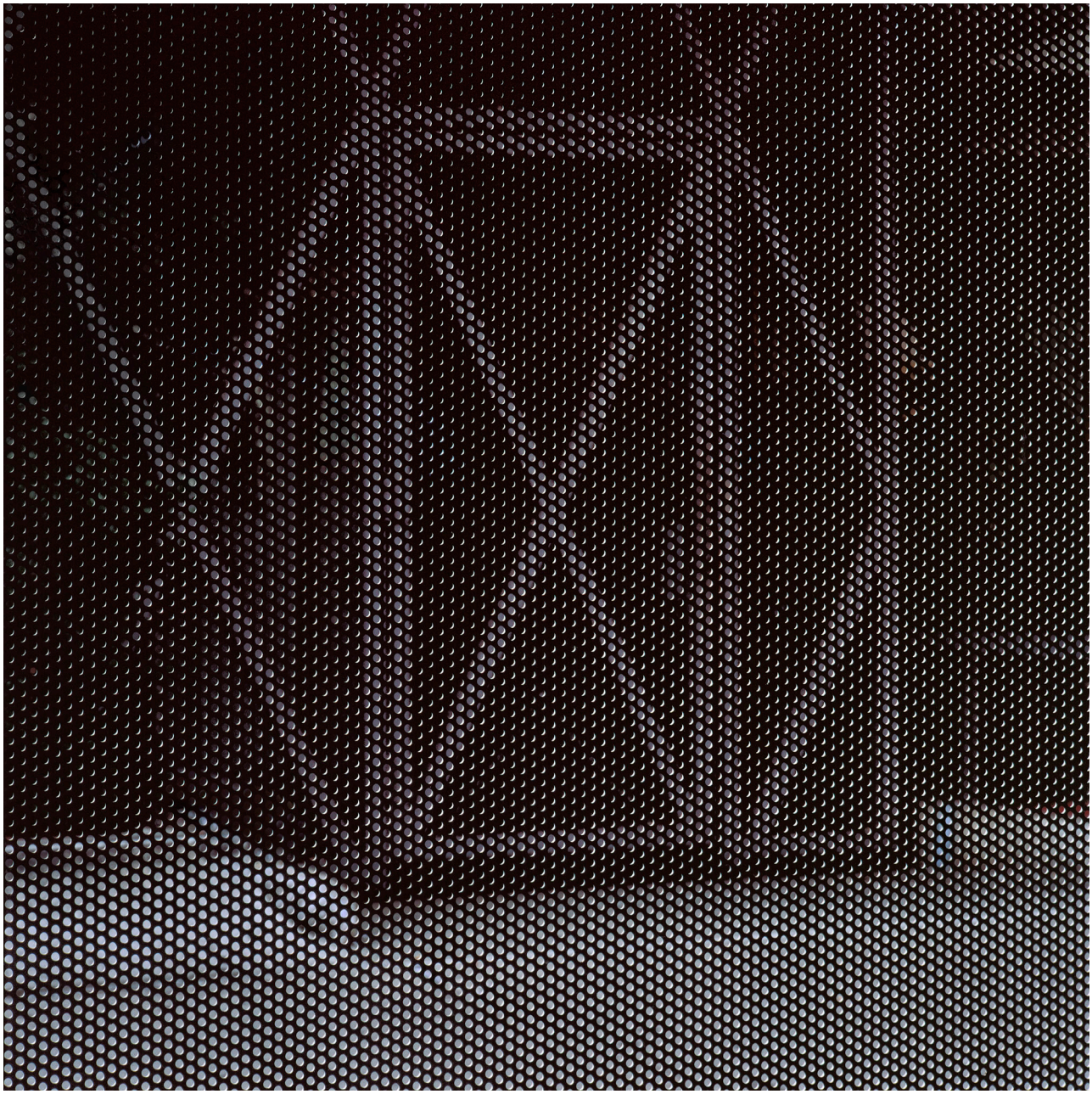
Screened Pictures, 2018/2019, Anthony Hernandez

Bus Stop Screen, 2020, Anthony Hernandez



Screened Pictures, 2018/2019, Anthony Hernandez

Screen Pictures, 2020, Anthony Hernandez



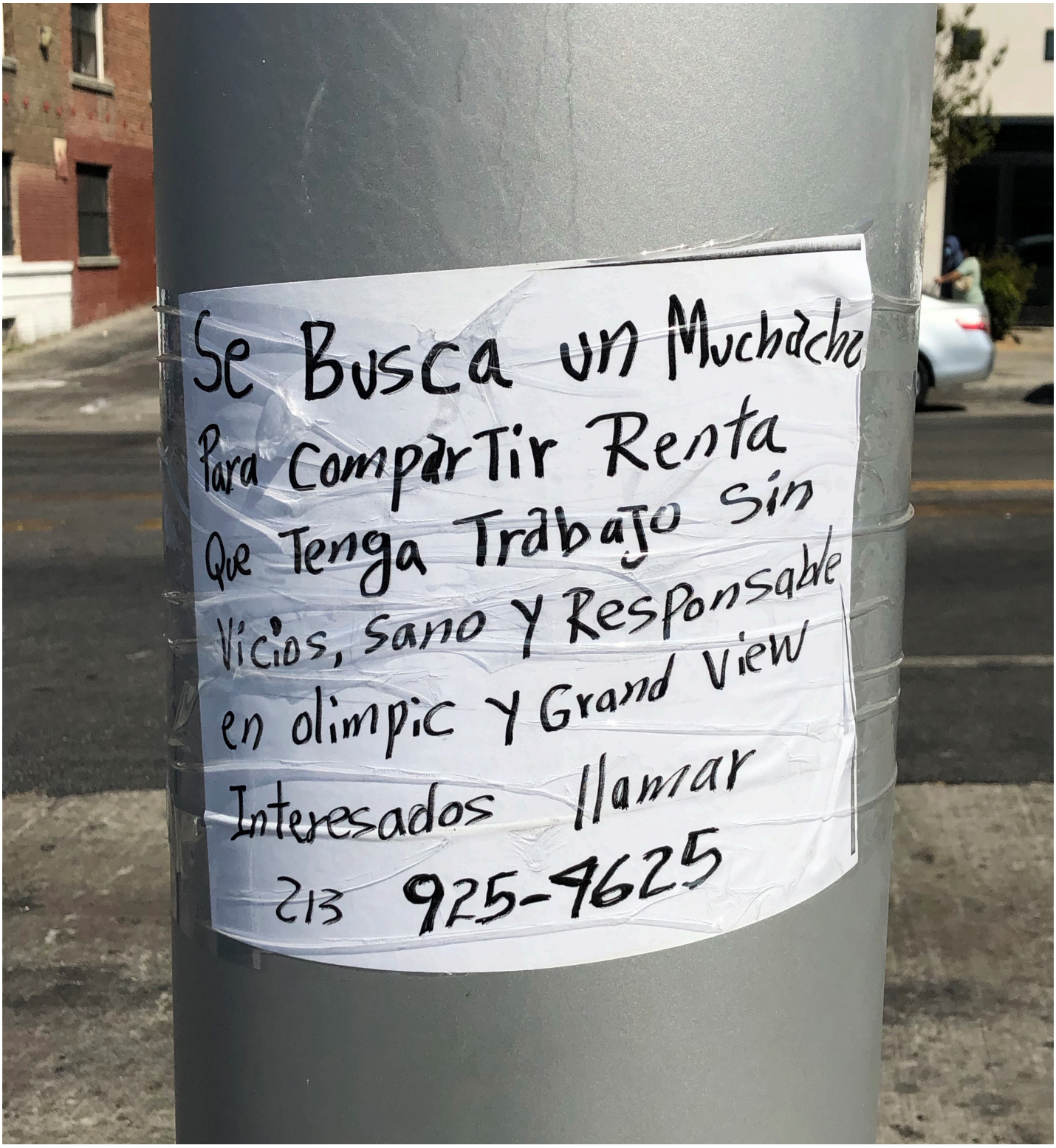
Screened Pictures, 2018/2019, Anthony Hernandez

Screened Pictures, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

7th Street and Alvarado, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

The Old Bandstand, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

Monument to the Unknown (installed 1989), 2020, Anthony Hernandez



7th Street, near Alvarado, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

The Park, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

7th Street and Bonnie Brae, 2020 Anthony Hernandez

The Park, 2020 Anthony Hernandez

The Park, 2020, Anthony Hernandez

FICTION

Re: The Devil's in the Details

Lincoln Michel

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: The Devil's in the Details – Final Qs

Father Conover,

We hope you're as excited as we are about this proactive and forward-thinking partnership between GloboGen and Holy Trinity Church! Our CEO likes to say that "the tripod of America stands on family, business, and religion." As you know the devil is in the details, so we have a few final Qs to get in writing before we can execute:

1) Total number of "clients" buried in Holy Trinity cemetery?

2) Number of "clients" > 100 y.o.? (Decomposition becomes issue at this point)

3) Confirmation cemetery will be free for sampling between 6:30pm and 8:30pm weeknights?

As agreed, we'll be depositing the tithes (I kid) in four quarterly installments. Lastly, we want to offer your departed parishioners a hearty welcome to the GloboGen family.

In prayer and profit,

Byron Tomar
Regional Acquisitions Manager
GloboGen East

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Re: What is this about? EXPLAIN!

It's a good thing I turn off phone notifications during my lunch break or I wouldn't have gotten through a single bite of my low-carb veggie wrap! I can see that many of you are wondering why you received a sensitive and—I must stress—PRIVATE email communication? I think I figured out what happened. Apparently, when I tried to email Father Conover, F.Conover@holytrinitychu.org, it auto-populated with the address for the Holy Trinity Full Congregation listserv, F.Con.Lists@holytrinitychu.org. (Digital data is included in every acquisition package.) Technology, am I right? I can promise our scientists will be more careful when they're extracting genetic samples at your cemetery!

On behalf of GloboGen, I apologize for cluttering up your inbox.

With thoughts and prayers,

Byron Tomar
Regional Acquisitions Manager
GloboGen East

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Re: GRAVEROBBER!!!

Hoo boy. Seems my attempt to clarify things only confused the matter more. I guess that's why we pay the PR people the big bucks!

If I'm being honest, we're dealing with some regulatory headaches right now thanks to a recent (and ill-advised) Act of Congress. Everyone's tense in the office these days. Just this morning, when I was refilling my Best Regional Manager mug with coffee (splash of milk, 2 sugars), I asked Courtney, that's our VP of Sales, if she could pass me a bag of Wink's Chips (a brand of puffed rice chips in our snack cabinet that I particularly enjoy) and Courtney thought I said "pink slip" and broke down in tears. To put it another way, the bosses have been riding our asses like Satan hounding Jesus in the dessert. So what I'm proposing is I answer a couple Qs, then we all forget this whole kerfuffle.

Deal?

Let's start with the basics: GloboGen is a multinational corporation that operates a variety of data-forward biotechnology brands that deliver the promises of tomorrow to consumers today. My job is acquiring DNA samples to increase the number of genetic assets our scientists can work with. How can I put this? It's kind of like being a football scout and deciding which of your local Centerville High wide receivers should get recruited for Division I. (Go Centerville Cougars!)

Don't worry, if you're alive enough to read this email then Father Conover didn't sell us your DNA. Haha! That would be illegal thanks to a rather unfortunate bill rammed through Congress this year. Rather, GloboGen has acquired "first genetic serial rights" to the occupants of the Holy Trinity cemetery. DNA is a genetic code that contains all the information to guide your cells to make you into you. It's kind of like the Bible of your body. Our scientists study these "Bibles" and use the information to produce a range of products including designer organs, bio-organic robotic assistants, and

food-grade modified porcine farm units. Did you see the news story about the athlete who broke the 100-yard dash record after surgically implanting new lungs? Those were GloboGen lungs!

Sadly, because of Congress's Genetic Liberty and National DNA Patriotism Act (GLANDPA)—which we believe was passed without proper analysis thanks to pressure from radical special interest groups like doctors, public school teachers, and "ethicists"—GloboGen can't sell any products or services that utilize the genetic code of any living or recently deceased (<15 years) American citizens. Luckily, church cemeteries contain a cornucopia of corpses for our curative cravings (sorry I was an English major :P). The new law also prevents us from growing "cognitively functioning humans" on U.S. soil. So our scientists have developed a proprietary process to form "cognitively-dormant humanoid organ gardens." This process allows us to provide customers with organs freshly harvested from actual humanoid bodies instead of grown in petri dishes like our competitors! "If you want organs, go organic." These cognitively dormant humanoid organ gardens (or CHOGs as we affectionately call them) have all sorts of uses. Did you watch the holovideo of Sister Wowow's pop song where she stands in a stadium filled with breathing, nude bodies piled on top of each other that sway eerily to the bass line yet otherwise are an immobile, pale, and unblinking mass of flesh? Those weren't CGI, those were GloboGen Body Buddy® rentals! While I never had the fortune of meeting the departed Holy Trinity parishioners who now reside in your (if I may be so bold) lovely cemetery, I believe they would be proud to add their genetic data to a basket of innovative biotechnology brands such as those held by GloboGen.

Putting this to bed,

Byron Tomar
Regional Acquisitions Manager
GloboGen East

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Re: Cool! But What About Vampires?

To Timmy Snyder: Interesting question! I can say that we use a three-part drilling process: 1) a 12-inch steel auger to dig through the ground 2) a four-inch hole saw to enter the casket 3) two-inch "extractor" for sampling. However, no, Timmy, I don't believe that our drill would "count as a stake" in order to "slay any draculas hiding inside the coffins." (Can Dracula be pluralized?) Don't let your imagination run too wild!

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
CC: Father Conover
Subject: Re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: No Holy Trinity Zombies!

Wow, okay, first off, this isn't the kind of language I would expect from honest, church-going Americans. I would like us all to CALM DOWN and remember we all want the same thing here: a robust American economy that rewards innovation and services consumers like you. While I should be heading home to eat dinner (long day), and my blood sugar is dropping (I am a diabetic), I'm going to stay here with my rumbling belly (we are out of Wink's Chips) and respond to more of your comments. I do this in the interest of building trust in our financial partnership.

MRS. MELINDA DILL: Your accusation is VERY unfair. I did not make it sound like "our lord Jesus Christ was lost in a banana split and saving souls from a bowl of brownie batter" when I said that "the bosses have been riding our asses like Satan hounding Jesus in the dessert." I simply made a typo. Desert. Dessert. The words are very close! Let ye who have never made a typo cast the first stone…

CAL CALVIN: I will not pretend to be a scholar of the scriptures, but I

find the claim that using a deceased person's DNA means "their soul will be trapped in torment stuck between heaven and earth, never living and never dying, damned between dimensions for all eternity" to be extremely dubious. Perhaps Father Conover can weigh in? If he ever checks his email(!)

PAULA GREEN: As a matter of fact, no, I wouldn't say that CHOGs are "science fiction zombies." Just because our CHOGs have nonfunctional cerebral matter doesn't mean they "hunger for brains and could kill us all." I think it is quite prejudiced for you to say so.

MR. OSCAR MORRIS: Yes, I'm aware of the viral video of CHOGs stumbling around a playground and falling into a ball pit you refer to, but A) this was a test in our facility and no children were present B) the video was released without permission by a disgruntled former employee and C) the footage is completely out of context. That's all there is to say about that.

TIMMY SNYDER (again): No, the drill doesn't "splatter apart a brain like the zombies in Undead Uglies." I have not played the video game—I work 60 hours a week—but our drill doesn't enter the skull at all. The human body's organs begin to decompose within 72 hours of the cessation of blood circulation and within a week the cadaver is overtaken by bloat, blood-foam, and death gas. Unless we catch a "Live One" as the technicians call a >30 hour cadaver, we don't take samples from organs but rather large bones (femur, pelvis, etc.)

MRS. CLIFFORD: WHO, exactly, refers to deoxyribonucleic acid as "the devil's scripture"???

Father Conover, maybe it's time you contributed to this dialogue?

Patiently,

BT

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Re: re: What sickos buy these?

Mrs. Melinda Dill, our CHOGs, as outlined by Congress, are not "people." Unlike some of our competitors, we do not pretend they are by, say, giving our models human monikers like Belinda, Tyrone, Juan, Chad, or Yoko. (Looking at you, People Tech Inc.) Our models are designated with impersonal yet descriptive titles to serve customer clarity when purchasing. Our most popular models are Short Grandma #9, Fat Uncle #5, Little Girl #13, Jolly Boy #8, and Handsome Man #3.

Why would people want our products? I feel like you, Melinda, frankly, are not even trying to think through the exciting opportunities CHOGs provide. The medical benefits of freshly harvested organs with no risk of rot or disease are obvious, I would think. Additionally, haven't you ever had a party you were worried would be poorly attended? Haven't you ever been alone and wished you could rent a warm body to lay beside you (in a completely non-sexual way, the CHOGs are incapable of arousal) through the night? Haven't you ever just wanted a friend who would listen instead of talk talk talk, blab blab blab? Haven't you ever wanted to just reach out and feel something, another humanoid entity, who would be there for you without judgement, desires, or ulterior motives?

If not, I'd say you are a lucky one! Count your blessings. Let the rest of us find the comfort that we can afford.

BT

From: Byron Tomar
To: Father Conover
CC: Full Congregation

Subject: Re: Jesus teaches us to keep an open mind

Yes, thank you Father Conover for weighing in. Finally. While I'm not sure "torments afflicted on the laboratory concoctions" is how I'd phrase it—there are no torments! The CHOGs do not even have brains!—I do agree "the eternal souls of Holy Trinity parishioners are secured by God in Heaven and immune from the base, worldly dealings of man."

As the Father hints at when he mentions "the financial trials with which the Lord is testing our faith," but is too polite to state directly, the reason that Holy Trinity is partnering with GloboGen is that your church is experiencing a cash liquidity problem. You're broke! Let's just be honest, okay? So really, if you think about it, this is all YOUR fault. Yes, you Melinda Dill and Oscar Morris and the whole sanctimonious lot of you. If you were a little more generous when the little wicker basket went around, maybe none of us would be in this situation, okay?

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
CC: GloboGen PR-Alison, Father Conover
Subject: An apology and a confession

I would like to take a step back and express regrets for any hurt feelings that may have been caused by any previous infelicitous comments. Having finally eaten (leftovers) and slept (a few hours, tossing and turning) I can see I was speaking out in an anger that is not representative of Christ's love or the values of GloboGen.

I want to be open and honest with you fine people, just as we are asking you to open up your coffins to GloboGen. I have been in a rough patch recently. The lord is really testing me right now. My wife died this past May from cancer, although I believe it was really due to heartbreak: our precious daughter passed away shortly after birth last year. We'd been trying

for a long time to get pregnant. We had a whole list of names ready. I won't bore you with them. But suffice to say, Allison, Nora, and Sasha were on the short list. Mrs. Tomar and I had always believed in the American dream of stable careers, a house with a little backyard, and two or three children filling the halls with laughter. We'd scrimped and saved our whole lives. Put our money in IRAs and 401(k)s. Now, I'm alone in a three-bedroom house and the only sounds that fill the halls are my own tears. Yes, a man can cry. We live in modern times.

You know what hurts me the most? In both cases, the doctors told us that if they had GloboGen Portable CHOG Freezers in the hospital then they would have been able to transplant fresh and reliable organs so that my wife and child might still be here today. I cannot help but ask myself what my life would be like if people were a little more forward-thinking and open to disrupting outdated paradigms? It haunts me. I would just ask you to think about my wife and my child that never got a chance before you condemn GloboGen for the work we do.

Sincerely and solemnly,
Byron Tomar

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
CC: GloboGen PR-Alison, Father Conover
Subject: Re: Lying GloboGen Necromancer Rot In HELL!

No Melinda Dill, I am not a liar!! I don't care what court records you checked that "prove Byron Tomar of Nassau County, New York was divorced three years ago and never fathered any children." It's not a lie! It's a parable! JFC, do you people really think Jesus went around multiplying fish like some bargain basement magician? Abracadabra here's a barracuda? No! But the STORY is powerful.

And you know who DOES multiply genes with advanced laboratory techniques? GloboGen. If Christ rose from the grave today (with or without the help of our patented processes) I'm quite sure he'd be on GloboGen's side!

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Re: re: re: Lying GloboGen Necromancer Rot In HELL!

No, Melinda.
Fuucckk
yoooooo
ooooooo
ooooooo
uuuuuuu!

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Fwd: Legally Binding Notice To All Recipients

Please see below.

———- Forwarded message ———
From: GloboGen Legal

Byron. Send this ASAP. We'll have a long little chat later.

LEGALLY BINDING NOTICE

In accordance with the recently and faithfully executed contract between

GloboGen and Holy Trinity Church–Centerville, section 14C-2, "all communications between GloboGen employees and addresses, phone numbers, or email accounts operated by Holy Trinity Church are privileged information and legally protected from disclosure." If you were not the intended recipient or the message was addressed to you in error, or messages were sent in response to an original unintended message, then any use, dissemination, or storage of the messages is prohibited. Violations past or present may result in legal fees and/or forfeiture of your genetic code to GloboGen for a period of genetic exclusivity of no less than fifteen years.

From: Byron Tomar
To: Full Congregation
Subject: Fwd: Stop Replying, Byron!

———- Forwarded message ———
From: GloboGen PR-Alison

Byron,

We'll be having that "communications strategy review" at 12:45. You sent them the notice from legal, right? Please stop replying! Just send them a discount code and be done with it.

Say something like: "As a gesture of goodwill, I'm happy to authorize a 10% discount code for DNA Detective, GloboGen's direct-to-consumer genetic testing service. Send us a simple cheek swab and we'll track down the story of your family tree. DNA Detective is on the case! Use code: HolyTrin10. Code expires in thirty days."

But put it in your own words. Actually, let's not even risk it. Just send that. You really did it this time, Byron. Christ.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Dual Existence: Writing the Conscious Child

Marisa Silver

Earlier this year, I published a novel called *The Mysteries*. It combines an omniscient voice with close third person, and dips in and out of the interiority of a variety of characters, some of them adults. The story's center, though—the character around whom all the drama revolves—is a seven-year-old girl named Miggy. Writing a seven-year-old did not, at the outset, seem particularly challenging, or rather, no more than writing any character. Miggy appeared almost instantly on the page. I grabbed her voice, her attitude, and I thought: *I've got her*.

Think again. It turns out that writing a child, especially a pre-adolescent, requires different considerations from those we bring to writing adults. To make a schematic generalization, we develop characters from two directions. First, there is the outside—what they look like, how they behave, how their world, family, society, politics, weather, terrain, affect them. Then we come at them from the inside—dwelling in their interiorities, listening to them think, wonder, figure, desire, decide, regret. Somewhere in the intersection of these two perspectives, we locate them. We bring to our inventions our experiences and knowledge about life and its vagaries, our understanding, both psychological and empirical, of all the ways in which humans are, well, human. But as much as I thought I had some reasonable understanding of children, I found it difficult to access Miggy in a way that felt entirely credible.

Why? Well, a few reasons. Children are not busy self-analyzing and they do not always have language to express what's in their heads. In some fash-

ion, therefore, the narrative has to do that work for them. There is also the issue of time, the consideration of which is elemental to narrative and consciousness. Children's sense of time is limited because of their relative lack of perspective. The future is near-sighted. Eventuality is what's immediately ahead, not what's unseen and unexperienced. The now is urgent, precise, and fleeting. Like childhood itself. Writing my girl, I had so many fundamental questions I could not answer: was her universe self-enclosed and non-referential? Did she make associations? Did she experience nostalgia? Was she conscious of the performance of childhood that adults require of her? Was she inherently moral? Could ideas of badness and goodness exist for her separate from her perception of her parents' and teachers' values?

What were the narrative strategies I could use to create a child who was not simply a projection of my adult ideas about childhood?

That last question is knotty. When I write adults, no matter how different they may be from me, we share, to greater or lesser degrees, an adult awareness of time, memory, loss, and mortality. But what does my consciousness share with that of a child? I have memories of childhood but they come filtered through my adult perspective, reflecting less what actually occurred than what I need to create meaning. My memories are symbolic, part of the mythology of me.

For as long as children have appeared in stories, they have figured as symbols. Think of the naîf, who represents purity and innocence. This child is viewed as mostly passive. She is not considered willful or ill-intentioned—even when her actions lead to challenging outcomes. Often, such children are thrust into a kind of "underworld," replete with all sorts of adult sordidness; think of *Oliver Twist*. The child's innocence, fidelity, and moral neutrality are pitted against the corruption that surrounds them. The result is often a critique of society rather than a fully developed portrait of a child.

Another symbolic trope is that of the lost child, who encounters the uncanny and must find his way home. *Little Red Riding Hood* is an example, as is *Hansel and Gretel*; more modern instances include Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and, in a fascinating twist on the convention, Emma Donoghue's *Room*. These narratives offer a projection of adult anxiety about complexities and corruptions both personal and societal, as well as the yearning for a return to some idealized before.

"The [lost] child," Mark Froud writes in *The Lost Child in Literature and Culture*, is "always both immanent—ready to be drawn on in various ways—

and, at the same time, always representative of a lost realm, lost in the individual past, and in the past of the culture. This split makes the figure of a child into an uncanny double—a double of the adult self but also of the culture and society in which he or she has been produced. The figure of the child is at once ever-present and instantly retrievable, in memory at least, but simultaneously lost forever: the child who haunts history and our self." The ghost child, the feral child, even the evil child—we see these symbolic configurations across the history of literature. The child as an expression of adult hope, despair, and dread.

Few would argue that an adult writing a child is guilty of appropriation. Yet childhood is another country altogether. It is a vanishing point, a thought on the tip of the tongue, a dream vivid upon waking that disintegrates in seconds. Memory is illusory. And psychology is reductive in the end. Once again, it all represents the adult view. The child as specimen in a petri dish. What is most marvelous about children, and what is most compelling in writing them, is that we must hold two opposite truths in our minds at the same time. The first is that a child is simply a projection of a series of adult obsessions and, as such, useful primarily to reflect an adult world. The second, is that a child is sui generis, which is to say that she exists apart from the adult imagination as her own, inscrutable being. In *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*, Carolyn Steedman describes it this way: "... the historical dilemma ... is that children were both the repositories of adults' desires ... and social beings who lived in social worlds and networks of social and economic relationships, as well as the adult imagination." What this means is that "[i]t is this dual existence ... the muddied relationship between desire and social being ..." that is at stake.

Froud's "uncanny double." Steedman's "dual existence." As I set about writing my novel, I looked at a handful of authors to see how they negotiated this duality, how they moved beyond the symbolic to delve into a credible and robust interiority of a child.

In *What Maisie Knew*, Henry James portrays an innocent in the underworld—and in the process creates, what for many, stands as one of the first modern novels. That's because in giving his child a complex inner life, he asks that we reimagine what innocence is. Six-year-old Maisie is the subject of the bitter divorce settlement between her parents, Ida and Beal Farange. A judge has decreed that Maisie will move at six-month intervals between the two. This Solomon-like proposal proves complicated as both parents

are selfish and spiteful. Although they give lip service to loving their daughter, they are clearly using her. Not only is Maisie passed back and forth, she's made to carry messages of enmity between her parents, and later, to witness and bear the burdens of their adult manipulations and immoralities. The adults in the novel treat Maisie as an empty vessel, a non-person with no feelings that require attention. They call her "wretch," "a little monster," "bad," and "horrid": perverse and dehumanizing terms. Often, they refer to her as a "chap," erasing her girlhood altogether. They want to use her. But what fascinates me about James's novel is his insistence that Maisie's innocence is neither fixed nor flat.

In his notes on the novel, James writes of Maisie, "I should have to invest her with perceptions easily and almost infinitely quickened. So handsomely fitted out, yet not in a manner too grossly to affront probability." He continues: "The one presented register of the whole complexity would be the play of the child's confused and obscure notation of it, and yet the whole, as I say, would be unmistakably, should be honorably there, seen through the faint intelligence, or at the least attested by the imponderable presence, and still advertising its sense."

You can hear, in these sentences, the author coming up with a strategy to formulate the consciousness of a six-year-old child, a consciousness that receives and processes information as a six-year-old would. He writes: "I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness materially and inevitably saw; a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand at all or would quite misunderstand—and on those lines, only on those, my task would be prettily cut out." What's important is that James does not propose Maisie to be just any six-year-old, a reduced type; rather, she is Maisie Farange, a particular girl with particular powers of observation and a particular way of thinking about what is going on around her.

Because she is taken for a non-entity and is exposed to sophisticated adult desires, hypocrisies, and venalities, her understanding and attitude become increasingly complex. James resists the imitative fallacy of creating an innocent who knows and thinks and behaves as a generalized ideal of innocence. Her parents conclude that "either from extreme cunning or from extreme stupidity, [Maisie] appeared not to take things in." But, of course, she does. The great tension of the novel grows out of this duality: the vacancy the adults perceive in her and her very present, watchful and ultimately quite knowing consciousness.

"Small children," James writes in his notes for the novel, "have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary. … Maisie's terms accordingly play their part—since her simpler conclusions quite depend on them; but our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies … the difference here is but of a shade; it is her relations, her activity of spirit, that determines all our own concern—we simply take advantage of these things better than she herself." What he is speaking about is the flexible omniscient point of view. The narrative voice acts as a kind of camera. It zooms in close to Maisie's interior thoughts and feelings, as articulated by an adult mind; it watches her behave, hears her speech, the language of which is purely a six-year-old's; then it zooms out to the actions and thoughts of the other characters. Finally, it pulls back one step further, providing a distant commentary on the proceedings.

James announces the terms from the beginning of the novel when, taking the most distant point of view, the narrator says, "It was the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than, at first, she understood, but also, even at first, to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before." The effect is to create a tone that is sometimes ironic and comic. But the judgment of that voice, the satirical edge of it, is always made humane when the "camera" descends from its perch and moves inside Maisie's mind, a particular consciousness we are invited to know not from an ironic distance but intimately.

We see the world through Maisie's eyes.

Maisie has a first intimation of her consciousness after she "begins to perceive that hers is a world full of the unknown, the mysterious and the clandestine." In response, she discovers that she too has secrets to keep. "Her parted lips locked themselves," James writes, "with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted the pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own." This awareness of secrecy is essential in James's rendering of the child's interiority. In his notes, James writes of his character that "her

former unconscious ability to alternate her psychology completely between first one household and then the other gives way to a series of more conscious methods of her psychologically containing the divided reality of her existence." In other words, part of how he engages Maisie's interior is by recognizing that her "self" is an ever-changing construct.

Her secrets are at first passive. She simply keeps certain knowledge to herself. But as the novel progresses, we begin to see her use this hidden knowledge in a way that could be called cunning were it not for the fact that James never lets go of the child in her. From early in the book, Maisie is aware that she is the reason certain interactions have occurred. Frequently—as when Sir Claude meets Mrs. Beale, for instance—she can be heard exclaiming that "it is because of me!" We sense a kind of unknowing wonder in her words. Later in the novel, though, Maisie uses the expression with a different nuance. Wonder is replaced by a kind of insistence, and we start to see that Maisie is not simply aware of herself as a catalyst, but that this recognition affords her a certain agency, which she will, at novel's end, finally exercise.

One of the most beguiling scenes comes late in the novel, when Maisie's father approaches her with the news that he is moving to America with a new lover. He then asks if she'd like to come. Maisie is aware that the offer is insincere, but rather than backing down as she once might have, she says that she would very much like to go. Her innocence is part of her impulse: she is a little girl who wants to go where her Papa goes. But the way James structures the dialogue makes it clear that Maisie is turning the manipulative skills she's observed on her father. She watches as, backed into a corner, he tries to convince her that she doesn't really want to go with him at all. Although Maisie is never less than agreeable, the comedy of the scene lets us know that she recognizes the irony of the situation. Still, throughout all this, James never loses sight of the fact that she is six. Her knowingness is driven by desires that are believable. She wants love. She wants protection and constancy. She wants to believe that what people tell her is true.

But she learns that people do not mean what they say and they do not say what they mean.

The great question posed by the novel's title is, of course, *what does Maisie know?* By using flexible omniscience, James reveals that what Maisie finally knows is what the novel has insisted all along. As the book ends, she is, for the first time, given a choice in the outcome of her life. She must

choose with whom to live. "Somehow," James writes, "now that it was there, the great moment was not so bad. What helped the child was that she knew what she wanted. All her learning and learning had made her at last learn that." She has come to know her *self*.

*

James creates a complex innocence by triangulating his three narrative positions so they meet in Maisie's character. In the novel *Shipwrecks*, Akira Yoshimura comes at his child protagonist in an almost entirely opposite manner, but the result on the page is a character no less palpable and rich. Isaku is a nine-year-old boy who lives in an impoverished fishing village in medieval Japan. During the months when the villagers cannot fish, they rely on the rice from ships that have foundered on the rocks near their island. If the year is favorable, and there has been a wreck, the villagers will survive the lean season. If there has been no wreck, they are under siege. Food is scarce. Children go hungry. People die. Many adults are forced to cross the mountains and contract themselves as indentured servants. This is the case with Isaku's father, who has left his wife and children alone. As is true of Maisie, Isaku's world is entirely about survival, but while Maisie's survival is emotional, Isaku's, at least on the surface, is physical. The terms of his life are blunt and brutal. His overburdened mother is a taskmaster, rather than a source of solace. There is no room for sentiment in her life. Isaku's days are taken up by work. He knows that his family's survival relies, in part, on him.

Yoshimura's third person omniscient narrator could not be more different from James's. Although it focuses almost exclusively on Isaku for the entirety of the novel, we are offered very little access to the boy's interiority. The narrative observes him, but it does not, overtly, "know" him. Or rather, it knows him only by his actions, most of which are codified; he is following the dictates of both his mother and the community. Here's a typical example: "Isaku engrossed himself in catching squid. They would not be eaten right away but would be split open and dried. There were squid hanging everywhere—on ropes, under the eaves of houses, in nearby open spaces. From the water the village looked like a hive of activity." The tone

and stance reflect that Isaku's interior life, his desires and emotions, are less important than the needs of the group. The final sentence appears to place the narrator outside the village, perhaps even on a boat looking toward the shore. The tension of the novel, then, derives from the distance between the individual and the group. How will we get to know this boy for whom self-assertion is essentially forbidden? Dual existence once again, the duality always present in the configuration of the child.

Yoshimura's masterstroke is that he does not allow the controlled and distant tone to conjure a controlled child who is distant from himself. That would ring false. Instead, we begin to know Isaku not as a boy who has no emotions, but as a boy whose emotions reside deep inside. He is not a vacancy, in other words, but a stoic. If James uses a maximalist approach, engaging with Maisie's every thought and feeling, Yoshimura's spare technique succeeds just as powerfully in making Isaku's interiority present to us.

The how of it, I think, has to do with Yoshimura's narrative restraint, his willingness not to show everything that goes on with the boy. This gives surprising power to the few moments when he does offer a glimpse of the character's inner life. After Isaku's younger brother Teru dies, the narrator tells us: "Several men and women from neighboring houses gathered, walking behind Isaku's mother as she carried Teru's body wrapped in straw matting up the mountain path toward the graveyard. … Isaku looked out to sea, tears streaming down his face. His father had entrusted him and his mother with the lives of his younger brother and sisters, and now he anguished because they had not been able to keep their promise." The moment lands precisely because we have not been invited into the boy's emotions in such a way before. The language is unemotional until we get to "anguish" and the heartrending image of Isaku turning to the sea to hide his reaction. He is nine, grieving his brother, but he knows he cannot display his emotions in front of a community that expects him to suppress his private needs and rise to the demands of collective survival.

We see this again a little later in the novel, when Isaku is, for the first time, given the responsibility of fishing for his family. "Isaku felt himself losing his composure," Yoshimura writes. "His father was gifted at catching saury, but for Isaku it was a trick he could not master for the life of him. … This year, he thought, he had to catch some fish, even if it wasn't a lot, for his family." Again, the tension between the plainspoken voice and the knowledge that Isaku, like any frustrated child, is trying not to cry. At this fragile moment,

he thinks of his father and the wound of his abandonment. That these explicit references to Isaku's emotions appear so rarely gives them a kind of knock-out power. The combination of what is hidden and what is expressed delivers a credible interior life for this nine-year-old boy.

*

In *We the Animals*, Justin Torres creates interiority for his young characters by making a set of narrative choices entirely different from either James or Yoshimura. Told in retrospect—and in chapters that also stand as discrete stories—the novel charts the early lives of three brothers who live a chaotic, exuberant, often violent life with their parents. The world of these boys is unstable. Their father hits their mother, who alternates between rage and debilitating depression. Money is scarce. A fierce parental love is always twinned with fear. Like Yoshimura, Torres allows us to know the boys through their actions, but his narrative voice is anything but restrained. The tone is kinetic, pulsing. Bodies play a huge role in the narrative consciousness: the boys naked in the tub, being rubbed clean by their father's powerful hands, peeing outside, witnessing their parents having sex. The brothers wrestle and tumble; they wallow in mud pits, and they run. When they need to express anger, they hit, sometimes pounding on their father, whom they love and fear. They feel some peace when he leaves, but they are relieved when he returns. As opposed to Isaku, whose passions must remain largely hidden, these boys' passion is on full display. They are pure *id*.

What fascinates me about *We the Animals* is the way Torres negotiates two first person voices. Although the book is narrated by the youngest brother, Jonah, he often uses the first person plural, treating the consciousness of all three brothers as one. Bit by bit, he begins to present, and integrate, an understanding of his consciousness as separate from his brothers, not only in our minds but also in his own. This creates a new set of conflicts as Jonah becomes aware that his individuality may imperil his connection to the family.

This, of course, happens over time. The first chapter, "We Wanted More," exults in the undifferentiated we. "We wanted more," Torres writes. "We knocked the butt ends of our forks against the table, tapped our spoons

against our empty bowls; we were hungry. We wanted more volume, more riots. … We had bird bones, hollow and light, and we wanted more density, more weight. We were six snatching hands, six stomping feet; we were brothers, boys, three little kings locked in a feud for more." We meet this trio, then, as a collective drive and desire. There is safety in numbers; the we offers protection from uncertainty and violence.

Yet slowly, the first person singular begins to assert itself. In a chapter called "Seven," the boys' father brings their mother home. Her face is swollen and bruised. His unlikely excuse, that a dentist hit her in the face to loosen up her teeth, only affirms that he has beaten her. The chapter begins in the collective point of view. "In the morning," Jonah tells us, "we stood side by side in the doorway and looked in on Ma, who slept open-mouthed, and we listened to the air struggle to get past the saliva in her mouth. Three days ago she had arrived home with her mouth swollen and purple." As things progress, we learn that it is Jonah's seventh birthday. The "I" makes its first declarative appearance. The mother wakes up. "'My beautiful boys,' she said, the first words out of her busted mouth in three days, and it was too much; we turned from her. I pressed my hand against the glass, suddenly embarrassed, needing the cold. That's how it sometimes was with Ma; I needed to press myself against something cold and hard or I'd get dizzy."

For the first time, we are inside Jonah's particular experience. His brothers are not included in his I. Torres will return to the we, but now that plurality is distinct from the singular child whose individual consciousness emerges through this deft juggling of first person voices. Torres also hews very closely to Jonah and his brothers' childlike perspective; they remain unaware of the implications of their actions and impulses. After Jonah sees his mother bruised and beaten, he has the impulse to press himself against something hard. The child's felt but unanalyzed impulse makes Jonah's interiority both rich and believable.

A stunning example comes when Jonah's mother tells her older sons that at seven years of age, they began to move away from her. They became hard, she says, as they began their journey toward the kind of masculinity their father represents. They began to smash things, she says, and the inference is that they will smash the faces of their women, just as her husband has smashed hers. Jonah responds, "I don't want to smash nothing. … I want to study God and never get married." He and his mother joke about

him staying six years old forever. The appeal of remaining her baby, identifying not with his brothers and father but with her, creates an anxiety Jonah does not understand. "I turned into her," he tells us, "saw the swollen mounds on either side of her face, the muddied purple skin ringed in yellow. These bruises looked so sensitive, so soft, so capable of hurt, and this thrill, this spark, surged from my gut, spread through my chest, this wicked tingle, down the length of my arms and into my hands. I grabbed hold of both her cheeks and pulled her toward me for a kiss. The pain traveled sharp and fast to her eyes, pain opened up her pupils into big black disks. She ripped her face from mine and shoved me away from her, to the floor. She cussed me and Jesus, and the tears dropped, and I was seven." The boy acts, but the narrator does not interpret. He leaves that to us and this brings us inside the particular boy that Jonah is.

In the final, coda-like chapters of the book, Jonah is a teenager. These sections are narrated almost entirely in first person singular. Jonah has fully separated, not one of three but an individual with a private interior life. We learn that he is gay, and that he has been visiting the bus station at night to have encounters with men. When his parents discover this, they send him to a psychiatric hospital. The narrative doubles back to his first sexual encounter. "I was made!" he exults. "I'm made!"

He is fully and only *I*.

*

What is often true about children in a retrospective narrative is that they are instrumentalized by the adult. The configuration of the child character, in other words, is not independent; it is the projection of an adult consciousness. What happens to such a child can be so viscerally summoned that we forget the adult is present in the telling at all—we see this with Torres. But the adult is there, in the tone of retrospection and the use of adult diction and analysis. Additionally, we have access to the adult's sense of time. Carolyn Steedman writes that "the idea of the child was used both to recall and express the past that each individual life contained: what was turned inside in the course of individual development was that which was already latent: the child was the story waiting to be told." I think of William

Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. An elderly man recalls a moment when, as a teenager, he ignored a boy he knew in the hall at school. His adult guilt about this encounter leads him to recall his childhood and what created the emotional terms that caused him to ignore his friend. The tone is elegiac. Like many retrospective narratives, it is a story of loss.

But these retrospective narratives need not always be so wistful. They may offer an elegy of a wholly different—and troubling—kind. That's what happens in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, which comes filtered through the barely controlled chaos of a destabilizing interiority. "When I was a young lad twenty or thirty or forty years ago," the narrator informs us from the outset, "I lived in a small town where they were all after me on account of what I done on Mrs. Nugent." The vagueness of the time frame (*twenty or thirty or forty years ago*) is humorous in its casual disregard for specificity, but it also suggests a callousness of feeling. The insinuation is that the narrator did something bad to Mrs. Nugent, but his adult self doesn't seem to have much remorse. McCabe's narrator is placing the present and the past in an amorphous relationship, one in which time doesn't really matter. We laugh but at the same time, we are suspicious because we know this isn't true. Furthermore, what kind of mind doesn't differentiate between two or three or four decades? Who are we at the mercy of?

Quickly, McCabe pulls back from the adult perspective. It does not reappear until the end of the book. Instead, the narrative is handed over to twelve-year-old Francie, and we are plunged into his youthful, close first person stream-of-consciousness. Francie's voice is marked by a joyful exuberance embodied by very long, run-on sentences, which suggest the uninterrupted thoughts of a boy with a lot to say who wants to get it out as fast as possible so he can move on to the next exciting thing. His diction is full of vernacular and slang. Grammar and punctuation are occasionally present, mostly not. This allows us to experience the boy's interiority. We hurtle through comma-less space only to be brought up short by an unexpected period. Subjects are missing. Verbs are odd. We don't always know what the slang means, but we get the sense of it through the sheer zest of Francie's thoughts. Soon, though, his interiority begins to feel claustrophobic. We are trapped within his limited purview, which lets us experience more viscerally what he feels. At first, this provokes a sense of intimacy and sympathy, but as the narrative progresses, our entrapment begins to feel dangerous. We want to separate from Francie's limited interiority, escape his troubled and

troubling consciousness.

But we can't. And, as it turns out, neither can he.

Francie is trying with all his wits to cope with a challenging environment. His father is a rage-fueled drunk. His mother is unstable and later suicidal. Francie seems to survive by being generally ignorant of the implications. His perceptions suggest a tension between the child's state of unknowing and a kind of self-protective emotional remove. "I didn't know anything about ma and all this but Joe filled me in," Francie reports on his mother's situation. "I heard Mrs. Connolly saying breakdown what's breakdown Joe. I says, Oh that's when you're took off to the garage, Joe told me, it's when the truck comes and tows you away. That was a good one I thought, ma towed away off up the street with her coat on. Who's that, they'd say. Oh that's Mrs. Brady they're taking her off to the garage."

His thoughts often exhibit this uneasy blend of humor, pathos, and a kind of moral disengagement that we accept at first as that of the child who sees more than he understands. Later, however, McCabe alters the tone of this interiority. Francie meets a boy named Philip Nugent whose mother—the Mrs. Nugent from the novel's opening—refers to Francie's family as pigs. Francie becomes obsessed with Philip. The brashness of the earlier interiority becomes more disturbing, indicating the dissolution of his moral center. In one scene, he appears at Philip's house wearing a pig mask. "At first Philip didn't know what to do," he recalls, "you don't usually expect to come out of your kitchen and see a pig wearing a jacket and trousers crawling round your front step. … I looked right up at him. A game of football. Me and you against the rest Philip what do you say? Then I gave another snort and poor Philip didn't know what end of him was up. Snort. Then off I went laughing again."

Francie has turned a corner. Something in him has become unhinged. His antics scale up, becoming more dangerous. He breaks into the house. He defecates on the floor. He has violent fantasies. His interior monologue turns ever darker and amoral. Whatever empathy he might have once engendered disappears. The traumas mount for him, as well. He is sent to a boy's home, where he is repeatedly assaulted by a priest. But his response is less emotional than coolly pragmatic; he uses the abuse to win his freedom. We are watching a sociopathic mind emerge into its fullness.

What's fascinating is the problem of identification. We know how Francie has been wounded. And yet his response makes it hard to feel about him

as we might about another child in such circumstances—Jonah, say, in *We the Animals*. At the end of the novel, we return again to the adult narrator, who reveals more. "That was all a long time ago," he reminds us. "Twenty or thirty or forty years ago, I don't know. I was on my own for a long time I did nothing only read the Beano and looked out at the grass. Then they said to me; There's no sense in you being stuck up in that wing all on your own. I don't think you're going to take the humane killer to any of our patients are you? … next week your solitary finishes how about that hmm? I felt like laughing in his face: How can your solitary finish? That's the best laugh yet."

Francie is telling this story of his childhood from what seems to be a psych ward or a prison. He has been imprisoned for the brutal murder and dismemberment of Mrs. Nugent. She called him and his mother pigs, and he butchered her for it.

The great achievement of a voice that moves seamlessly from childish perceptions to dark humor to affectless dissociation is that it does not allow us to bring our normal pieties to bear. What do we do, the novel asks, when a child proves to be more depraved than anyone? What if the child is not the victim? What if we look for forgiveness in our childhoods only to find reflected back at us someone as terrifying as Francie? Mark Froud describes "American modernism's literary efforts to disenchant adult and child readers alike of the essentialist view of childhood as redemptive, virtuous, originary, and universal." In *The Butcher Boy*, McCabe has created an adult projection of his child self that flies in the face of every trope of purity and innocence, transforming the retrospective novel from an elegy for loss into an accusation.

In *The Copenhagen Trilogy*, Tove Ditlevson writes that "Childhood is dark and it's always moaning like a little animal that's locked in a cellar and forgotten." The challenge and pleasures of writing the child in fiction exists in letting the character loose from that dark cellar of adult memory to bring her to light on her own terms: with the immediacy of felt experience, language resonant enough to capture the complexity of consciousness, and reverence for the mysterious knowledge that even the youngest of us possesses.

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FICTION

The Concertina Effect

Inna Effress

It turned out that it was a woman, the subject of Picasso's painting, and for good reason. Her squeezebox, its arrangement of folds and so-called bass, to say nothing of its fluent discharge of sound, how every inflation collides with its double, collapse: Two warring motions, one force bound to the other, one giving life to the other. It is no wonder then that Japanese strippers are known for the erotic act of Doing the Accordion*, though such vulgarities are best not aired in civil society. In this case, where the fragments most thickly steep the canvas, color exists without tone, like the drained skin of a lover against a clear night sky. Here the shapes fan out in a savage grid. Here the sounding body and the human body melt and are allowed to wed and evaporate down to the artist's signature. Threadbare. That is to say, tenuous, while also describing a finely spun web.

The human eye masks useless images. Saccade means sweep of the eye. A prison guard presides over shadowed players, among them a quiet man. Ragged. An inmate with a cosmic gift for cards. The gendarme thumbs the poker deck, his soft breasts straining their stiff checked suit, ring finger pressing, he drags his right hand backwards and each card goes along for the ride, each flush face frozen, an arc in the air like pleated bellows, the way time elongates at will, the way a snake forms volutes with its body, contracting or expanding like a spring from one anchor to the next by means of fragments fused smooth by sleek design. Officers smoke around the white

**From A Life of Picasso by John Richardson.*

hewn table. Their appraising gazes grunt at the ragman in their midst. The still of his hand, its infinite silences, proof of the will still lodged in his folds. These men cannot deny it. His gift transfigures their game. But nothing reconciles their clashing visions of what he is or what he wishes or if his existence – once the landscape of night is switched out for day – even matters at all. What else is the sky above, but an endless band wound loosely on a roll, lit to give searching creatures inside the comfort of motion and illusion of time.

One more round, he is promised, in exchange for release. He instructs his son, a boy of nine, to hide behind the old barracks. There, to one side of the barbed fence, animals in pens feed on shiny fruit. On this side, a stew of human waste stagnates in a ditch. Here, the child is to remain, in perfect silence, until his father has won at cards. At a distance along the fence, hollow notes of a folksong crackle from an open doorway. The makeshift brothel hums with copulating clients. Laughter carries, intact, on the wind.

In the enclave of men in buttoned brass, the prisoner eats from a plate of peelings. He is faintly aware that his son will need food for the long walk ahead, but in the thralls of his own hunger, he spares none. Fire purrs against the grate in the parlor. Ice flowers frost the edges of windows. Orange light from the house shrivels fast behind him. Along the fence crowned by concertina wire, he drags his way to the waiting boy. Tortuous wind slithers through night's arteries. He approaches the bordello, and, across from the animals, where ground meets fence, it is the spilled apples he spies first.

Every frame the brain discards, every blank space is replaced by filler, a fake, a violence merciful to the senses, an elongated reel dragged backwards in time. But the bloodless eye of the moon doesn't miss a thing about the small body heaped on a helix of barbs coiled high above the animal pen. The subject changes everything. The brown sow grunts at rotting apple cores lying in her trough. Art is life stilled. Not moving but poised to move. The artist knows that an instrument makes a body whole. To paint strings or keys into likeness of flesh is to endow it with a mote of eternity, what it is to be a nature morte. What it is to see nothing. To dream nothing. Not through pupils but graven stones for eyes. Brambles from the wire embedded in skin without tone, or a final resting countenance, a release from the commotion of endless asking. To submit to this scene is to live for a moment beside the eye and the eye's perpetual blind spot, to attune the fork

to that primordial sound before any body was there to hear it. In a remote corner of sky hangs a fraying seam where the roll both ends and begins – not quite provenance – and a pleat of one's selves against this backdrop of constantly unfurling firmament, one self perpetually folding into the next, each one *sui generis*, in a class by itself, and the inexhaustible sky painted, as it is, of colliding stars, pulled through history, back and back, by the very music that consumes them, with the subject's changing body, with the subject's rippling sound, at every turn.

At every turn.

POETRY

“Good Morning,” “Wrong Question”

Jordan Smith

GOOD MORNING

I drink coffee so strong it burns.
The leaves scatter across the lawn, currency from a failed insurrection.

In the drawer of the fake colonial desk in the living room,
Canadian loonies, Swiss francs, even a few marks and drachmae,
Keepsakes.

Athena’s owl on one worn coin, worthless, wings folded.
If she needs darkness to fly, she needs only the little patience
The world is asking of all of us.

Patience, not wisdom.
A few brown leaves still on that oak that should come down.

It must be fifty years now since that coin came to me, change
For a coffee while I waited for the ferry in Piraeus.
As dark as this, as bitter.

The colonels were just gone. The students in the lounge quoted Ritsos.
It was easy to get a taste for the grit left at the bottom of the tiny cups.

WRONG QUESTION

— for Paul

Was what the *I Ching* replied
When all you asked was *What should I intend*?
It wasn't much of a spring for intentions.

Later I opened the *Tao* at random.
Give up learning, and put an end to your troubles.
You see how well that worked out.

And irony? I picked up Auden—
All the little household gods have started crying—
And learned only what he and Cavafy already knew.

Those trivial unnamed, unlettered deities, freeloaders of hearth and threshold,
When did they ever help, after all,
With their routine greed, with their promises of better times?

I have left their sacrifices for the mice to enjoy.
I have stashed the pennies for the hexagrams
In the spare change jar.

Over and over, I am telling the way that cannot be told to no one.
My friend,
When you next send me your broken lines,

Let me construe them for myself.
Let me understand how you found the heart
For another throw of the coins.

FICTION

Tegucigalpa

Mark Haber

The miraculous paintings of Emilia Zúniga Guitiérrez alter a person, said the critic, the abstract and merciless brushstrokes for which she's now known and celebrated change the viewer on a fundamental level, the critic added, the critic a houseguest spending the night on her way to Tegucigalpa for the world's first exhibition of Emilia Zúñiga Gutiérrez's paintings at the Museo Nacional de Honduras, severe and haunted paintings, opined the critic, paintings that take no prisoners, she elaborated, which offend as much as they anoint, which repel while at the same time, almost absurdly, invite viewers to *search their souls*, yes, she said, her paintings compel observers to take stock of themselves, paintings the world wasn't ready for while she, Emilia Zúñiga Gutiérrez, was still alive, a glass of macuá sitting untouched before the critic as she crossed her long legs, legs I saw before the rest of her when she arrived hours earlier and I glimpsed her leaving the taxi with an elegance I'd seldom seen, before we walked downstairs, that is, my wife and I, to welcome the art critic, a world-renowned art critic, my wife had boasted, a critic whose opinions had *changed the course of art criticism*, she'd explained in a tone that, after years of marriage, a marriage that long ago felt ancient and remote, couldn't be confused with anything but the utmost sobriety, a tone informing me I would be wearing my best suit and finest shoes, shoes long ago placed in a box and that I hadn't worn in years, probably since our wedding, which I was expected without a word of complaint to have shined and slipped on as we welcomed the art critic

simply because our home was the safest stop before the last leg of the art critic's journey to Tegucigalpa and the Museo Nacional de Honduras, a two-hour drive through countryside rife with police and guerrillas, the police either loyal to themselves or to the cartels or some other nefarious entity, all sorts of warring factions whose loyalties changed like the weather, everything in a state of ceaseless conflict, and my wife and I knowing next to nothing about art or art criticism but there we sat across from the art critic who hadn't yet taken a single sip of the macuá, the rim garnished with an orange and a cherry, who opened the book containing a comprehensive collection of Emilia Zúñiga Gutiérrez's paintings, her most revered works as well as her most obscure, the art critic explained, a book she herself had edited that accompanied the exhibition itself, the first serious exhibition of her work in the world, chosen to take place in Tegucigalpa, the city Emilia's paintings always harkened back to, works teeming and awash with Tegucigalpa, her native city, a city she left because of the violence and the poverty but that her paintings evoked or attempted to evoke, and one must ignore those later years in Paris and Berlin, said the art critic, cities where Gutiérrez became notorious for her drug use and violence, yes, violent outbursts and a recklessness bordering on delirium, violence that skirted the abyss, said a famous critic, a critic not as famous or well-known as me, said the art critic, but nevertheless a well-coined phrase, and all of us should focus instead on Gutiérrez's shape-shifting, phantasmagorical paintings, said the art critic, paintings that all said *Tegucigalpa*, whispered or shouted Tegucigalpa without ever saying *Tegucigalpa*, paintings that forced the observer to sympathize and reflect on Emilia's sorrowful youth, a youth submerged in the mud of hardship, lost in the miasma of time, yet captured and forever frozen in her works, in her paintings that murmured Tegucigalpa like an incantation without ever saying the word Tegucigalpa, and later, said the critic, when she committed herself to the asylum in Zürich where she painted the flames of God and the trilogy of murals, known later as the *Zürich Triptych*, which, after first laying eyes on the paintings I'd anointed them *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit* because there was something sacred and sublime about those three works that made me weep, yes weep, because I wept the first time I looked at the three murals, they looked ready to take flight, paintings that sent meteors into my soul, that contained supernatural omens or distant planets, and working on the book, the stories I'd heard from the other patients I interviewed, lost souls whose limbs shook and eyes

trembled, whose faces sought happiness and sanity but found, in this world at least, only abandonment, yes, they recalled the *Spanish girl* who'd stayed so briefly in the asylum, her stay like a dream, said one, her stay like a visit from a heavenly messenger, said another, all of them affectionately dubbing her the *Spanish girl* because why in the world would a Honduran be a patient in a mental hospital in Europe, Switzerland no less, and the *Spanish girl* never spoke a single syllable, they explained, only requested in small handwritten slips of paper paints and canvases with which she was graciously furnished because the asylum in Zürich had minimum security, in fact the patients had come voluntarily, that is of their own volition, and Emilia Zúñiga Gutiérrez was brought to Zürich by her artist friends after the episode in Cologne, the smashed windows and house fire and flipped car, all that hellish lunacy, those same friends claiming to see Emilia's impending death fluttering before them like a prophecy, with wings and talons and unflinching brow, and they decided to send her to the hospital in Zürich, having no idea that sending Emilia to Zürich would result in the *Zürich Triptych* as well as other celebrated works, works hailed later for their influence on the younger generation, especially the *Bergen School* with their brash and experimental style that invoked turmoil and cataclysms and revolution, not social revolution but *spiritual revolution*, and I'd had enough with the art critic and her endless exhortations about Emilia Zúñiga Gutiérrez, enough with the paintings that she claimed whispered or shouted Tegucigalpa, like who gives a shit, I thought, like who really cares, I also thought, those paintings inside the book that looked like crime scenes or massacres or something painted by an obvious nutjob, which she undoubtedly was as her time in the hospital in Zürich testified, and my wife, the book across her lap, turned each page as in a trance and I couldn't tell if she was genuinely interested or merely humoring the art critic because my wife's interest in art went no further than the still lives she'd purchased once at the market, the first a painting of some purple figs and passion fruit, everything bruised and the color of night, the second a painting of what I'd always assumed was Lake Yojoa with the lush tree line and hazy mountains, their tops adrift in the low-hanging clouds, and perhaps that wasn't a still life but a landscape, neither of us knowing the difference or, for that matter, caring, both paintings promptly hung and forgotten in the dull catalogue of days and all I wanted was to go upstairs and watch the match, Olimpia versus Choloma, the finals no less, and my neck felt tight in the collar of my suit because I wasn't the

same weight I'd been when we were married, not even close, because that's marriage, I think, a burden, an invisible weight that accumulates with time, each year the waist widens, the heart gets heavier and I wake up now with new and obscure pains, pains I can't quite pinpoint, I thought as I watched the art critic uncross her long legs, the ice in her macuá melted completely while she continued to talk with that absurd Spanish accent about the artist's childhood, her upbringing in the slums of Tegucigalpa, a constant thrumming throughout her work, said the art critic, sometimes vague and sometimes accomplished with dogged precision, with a meticulousness that followed her into the asylum in Zürich where she painted what became known as the *Zürich Triptych*, fiery apocalyptic works, which I baptized at first as *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*, said the art critic, mentioned in my introduction to the very book you now hold in your hands, and my wife made a small, hardly discernible gasp, like a hiccup, as if the book was hot to the touch, as if the paintings inside would steal her soul and I glimpsed at the clock above the art critic, saw that it was still the first half of the game and *Jesus Christ*, I thought, I prayed Olimpia had scored because Olimpia needed an early lead to win the game, without an early lead, I thought, they're doomed because those asshole forwards Ojeda and Lopez, they couldn't find the goal posts if they were stuck between their girlfriend's legs, and meanwhile the art critic was talking about the *final tragic* years of the artist's life, years teeming with her best work but eclipsed by dementia and pills, the whirlwind trips across Europe, the nightclubs in London and Madrid, endless episodes, countless lovers, the fistfights and jealous rages, the works painted while moving from lover to lover, trading murals for cash or drugs and her final, iconic death, her death like a staged performance, said the critic, *performance art*, she'd added, but I refuse to discuss Emilia's death because too much attention has already been given to that *tragedy*, that *farce*, and I detest how the indignity of her death plunders the works themselves, and the critic finally lifted the glass and sipped the macuá which by then was watered down, but she nodded and then asked with the thinnest veneer of concern about her drive through the jungle, the trek from our house to Tegucigalpa and how dangerous was it and my wife continued looking at the book, gazing at those disastrous paintings that felt like sins even though I'm not religious and I told the art critic she'd be fine, that her driver knew the best routes and was familiar as well with the different gangs, deciding to use the word gangs over cartels as it sounded less threatening,

sounded more like a club or a group of nondescript hoodlums whereas cartels sounded organized and riddled with intent, which indeed they were, but I didn't tell the art critic this, didn't talk about the neighbors disappeared, the pacts and ceasefires between guerillas and police that lasted a day, sometimes less, police who wouldn't hesitate to shoot a person, anyone at all, or take a bribe, and I also didn't mention that once she arrived in Tegucigalpa it wasn't much better, that reaching Tegucigalpa only earned one a little anonymity among strangers and once more I looked at the clock and saw it was almost halftime and I swore to God Olimpia had better be up by at least two goals or we were fucked, I thought, and my wife closed the book and suggested the art critic leave before sunrise, around four in the morning, get a good night's rest, she said, then depart, adding as well that she was happy the travel agent, a childhood friend, recommended the art critic stay with us on her way to the capital because we rarely had guests, said my wife, we rarely *entertained*, happy too that you chose to stay the night in our house or we wouldn't have had the chance to meet or see those marvelous paintings and my wife was lying, I could tell, because the paintings inside the book disturbed my wife in some fundamental way, the look of dread that darkened her face like a menacing cloud, and later that night she told me the paintings inside the book were cursed, the exact word she used, *cursed*, even though cursed is not a word I ever remember my wife using and the day was a wash, a total loss, because not only did Olimpia lose to Choloma, by three goals no less, but the car with the art critic was ambushed the next day, not far from our house, a dirt road enclosed by jungle, and the driver was found, injured but alive, but no word from the art critic who my wife and I know with certainty is dead or disappeared, words interchangeable at this point, because she'll never be found and the exhibition of Emilia Zúniga Guitiérrez was delayed out of respect for the art critic who dedicated years of her life to working on the book, over half of her career, but three days later, with no news, no body, the exhibition commenced with rave reviews in both the national and local newspapers, everyone suddenly ecstatic about the work of Emilia Zúniga Guitiérrez and a general consensus that no one in their lives had ever seen paintings like hers before.

POETRY

"Stilled Life," "Through a Window in Winter," "Labyrinth," "Columbarium"

Michelle Bitting

STILLED LIFE

Dear Younger, you weren't born yet when the four of us went camping, wetting our heads and horses beneath cragged cascading falls—the Green Mountains, Wyoming. I was eight, our elder eleven—a child on the brink—but no man yet by a long shot. It's possible you were conceived in our parents' tent under a canister of stars, a soft explosion while big bro and I slept. Let's freeze this picture in time—pretty images of them fucking, the aspens sighing, a proffered candy like the torrid dime store comic books brother laid out on floral bedspreads to entice me, make me touch him in motel rooms while they drained glasses—Dad with his Jack Daniels holster, Mom preferring daintier fare: chardonnay or Russian vodka at highway taverns boasted on the map. Our long trek home. Does only half that news not surprise you, Little Brother? The drinking part, the run-of-the-mill abuses? The rest we're trained to snooze through. Absence and excuse—there were many—and still not enough to fix love's breakage, forge the bonds you craved and never got.

You two were once sparks in Mom and Dad's eyes, a milk spill between

them. She lightened his load, whitened shadow, so gifted at wringing sweetness from her martyr udders, her farming muscles, her ancestral hands. You could drown in it, and we did, in the wine and whiskey torrents, the evening rants about his infidelities or money she'd spent on antiques dragged from small towns discovered on Didionesque drives around San Bernardino's edge. At night we'd watch them grow kindling with gas: Jose Feliciano's haunting *Light My Fire! Light My Fire!* cranked so high the neighbors complained. We watched them swoon and crash until glass shards got ground into every swelling surface of us—awed, we'd soon find, by our own skin's absorbency. We're a trio that way, my Brothers, my Dearly Departed. We learned to open wide and swallow it all—liquor, pills, the barrel of a gun, When it came to that.

I can't not admit it. *You know that it would be untrue. You know that I would be a liar*. Will you speak now from the suicide sink hole that's swallowed you both, from the shore of a sorry sibling history where I walk my lonely story, my smoking mind, another drag off this dwindling cigarette, night falling fast into the Los Angeles Pacific? See how the tide opens its ink-soaked hand, a sea of bobbing black dahlias I dive into with moonlight and my undertaker face. To surface. To love it all anyway. I kick off Mother's shell, wash my feet of Father's tar, his skull pit plank I'm sprung from. I labyrinth my days around memories of you two in my best funeral suit: dark armor of sequined water, each radiant point filed for my body's shapely flame. This cloth of night and our love become a funeral pyre cut from a vast, unglamorous sky.

THROUGH A WINDOW IN WINTER

(for my son, post-top surgery)

…and so she comes to dream herself the tree ~Hart Crane

The sycamore has shaken off its leaves—
        Sheered and smooth, the trunk festooned,
Stained a pale and subtle tea color—
        Shape of party balloons.

        What a pleasure, says our son—
To take in rain and light
        Unfettered. What joy!
To glide two palms down denuded planes.

        No slalom or mogul riot.
        No commotion of brown or verdant peaks.

An honest presence…
        Bathed and beamed in overflow
        Of moon.

A baby could drink and drink—
        Launched from its mother realm that way,
Shivering and perfect.

        Oh tree…
        Oh bare and startled beginning.

LABYRINTH

Here we are at the entrance again.
Depending on how much sleep I lost last
night, it will eventually act like an exit. All
the debacles—political, familial—are
health-related. In fact, this spiral is really
a stethoscope I press to my heart that's
wrapped in tissue with half a Tiger's Milk
bar and some thread. Also inside the
pocket, a severed red lipstick and a
minotaur I'd better feed soon. Between the
two of us, it's hard to say who's more
stumped and terrified by circles. Somehow
the walls manage to know when we're
hungry and claustrophobic at the same
time. They shift back a little, like clouds.
And we eat them clean to the center.

COLUMBARIUM

I should visit my brother's grave more often,
bring a simple sprig of daylilies, make
a tidy corsage of sweet peas and pin
it to the iron lapel of his name, prom date-
esque and formal. But the cross is so complex
and my innards ever-channeling, my blood
buckles under rein, little corpuscle asses
that kick and bray along their burdened route
inciting my veins' better sense. Brother, when
they burned you, naked, in the oven, didn't light
have the last word? Riled flames painting orange-red
heat over a canvas of skin, your bones' bright fire,
the final womb? Once, you'd rush to catch sun sliding
late into the sea, for you, the only god worth worshipping.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

Fall 2011: A Journal

Kazim Ali

Early November. I spent my morning being photographed in the square, lonely against backdrops of emptiness. A rough oak trunk, a shimmering white wall. The photographer kept requesting that I change looks: an orange t-shirt, a mirrored kurta, a blue blazer, a yellow leather jacket. I made him photograph me wearing the kurta and leather jacket together. Then another, full-length, showing me wearing the kurta with blue jeans and sneakers. Who am I?

The photographer raves about one particular picture taken against the huge trunk of an old oak, its ruckled bark in contrast to the deep sadness in my face. He says I am beautiful but more than anything I think I look ravaged, old. It makes me think of the opening of *The Lover*. Maybe what people think is beautiful is what is gone? Beauty is death, the void, the forgotten?

When I look at the dark space of his camera lens for the first time, I see in my face my father's face. I do not like being photographed by someone's phone or digital camera. I like the old dark space, the void that could be god or death, just before the shutter opens to see you, to record you, that terrifying moment of annihilation.

On the way home, my scooter skidded on the leaves and I fell. My helmeted head banged against the concrete. When I fell, I grieved for the body: the weak one, the stupid one that makes always the same mistakes, this one: mine.

Not often sentimental, I weep at one other particular moment: when I

move out of a house, I walk through each room to say good-bye. What is it we leave behind? And when we leave this body, this tender one, the stupid one, how do we bear its pain when it loses other bodies it dumbly loves?

*

Young gay and trans boys are killing themselves. I start to talk to my friends and family about my own experiences in school. Even my younger sister, who knew me more than anyone and from whom I thought I had hidden nothing, said she had no idea I was being bullied in school. It was silence that kept me in pain and weariness at the fact that no one could see.

My friend Craig, who is a graphic artist and novelist, was invited to contribute a comic to a magazine on the theme of censorship and free expression. He wonders if I can write about being gay, about being unable to tell anyone. He asks me to write the story, which he will draw. I agree, though I don't know if I will be able to do it.

Why did I never tell anyone I was being bullied? Not fear that they would hurt me more. No, fear of course, at that time, of the truth. That what those boys were saying about me was true. That I was weak, ugly, gay, or whatever. And it took years to know: that I never deserved to be treated in such a way and by those very same cruel and beautiful locker-room kouroi, their delicate faces and lean bodies that I loved and learned how to love.

*

The trees in spring smell rotten and strange. Broken magnolia flowers litter the sidewalks and the crushed gingko fruit ice it dangerously.

Beneath the nude light of unshuttered street lamps, we walk talking on and on. Hanging man, halfway through a storm-dark day, the street of the city is a page, a body, a boundary.

This bending down in front of *why*, this speaking underneath the world: like the basement of the church in the lot next door to the jazz professor's house, which was once the parsonage: when the church was demolished,

the basement was sealed off, covered over. The rooms still exist there, his wife tells me, under the sodden green.

And the skin of this, the pulling of threads means you want something to unravel and reveal. Reveal, reveil, revile, reveille. "Can God be approached in language?" asks Christian Wiman. Or do we use the name of "god" as a gesture toward the place meaning stops. Says Fanny Howe about "god": "The longing is the part that's real for me."

INTERVIEWS

Whose Land Is This?: A Conversation with Kazim Ali

Abbie Reese

A few years ago, Kazim Ali became curious about a place he lived four decades prior. As he began searching online for information, he became fixated on the small, temporary town of Jenpeg, where his family lived after immigrating to Canada. Ali was a child when his father, an electrical engineer, took a job with Manitoba Hydro to work on construction of a dam that provided hydroelectric power to the province. He returned to the area in 2017, visiting Cross Lake for the first time; the Pimicikamak First Nation community had signed a treaty in 1977 that granted Manitoba Hydro easement rights for the dam.

Ali thought that when he returned to Manitoba the story he would tell would be about his childhood, the forty years that had passed since he left, the damage to the region from the dam, and his complicated feelings around its construction and aftermath. Two days after he arrived in Cross Lake, Ali realized, "It isn't my story. It's actually the story of these people." His 2021 book *Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water* (Milkweed) integrates this narrative with that of his family's immigration.

Ali was born in the United Kingdom and received his MFA in Creative Writing from New York University. A professor and Chair of the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego, he is the author of nearly twenty books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, and he has translated

work by Marguerite Duras and Sohrab Sepehri.

There's a recurring tension throughout Northern Light, involving themes of dispossession and belonging. You write about how you have been pulled to Palestine, to other people's dispossessed spaces, but hadn't considered your role.

Right, my own identity as a settler. I think when you're an immigrant, maybe it's easier to forget because you're coming into a national space that has been determined. We came into Canadian national space and viewed ourselves as Canadian. We sang the national anthem. We didn't have a flag, but I wanted one at home, and so my dad actually got a white towel and a red magic marker, and he created a Canadian flag for me. We loved our new country. But lo and behold, on the other side of that Canadian national space was the indigenous … the historical nation of the Pimicikamak. There was an archaeologist—I write about this in the book—who found archaeological evidence in Pimicikamak going back 4,000 years. Across Northern Canada, in terms of a culturally unified Cree presence with implements and other cultural objects, there is archaeological evidence going back 12,000 years.

I mean, any nation needs a narrative. As Harold R. Johnson says: Canada is a story that we tell. It's a story a lot of people believe in, but it's only a story. In America, too, we have that sense of historical erasure. As immigrants, I think we always talk about coming to the United States and what it means. But the *United States*—that's a legal entity, not a historical nation. It's now going on 250 years, right? But is it a historical land? Land is different. The Napa Valley is a real valley, so you can say that valley is a place that has a history. Or the Great Lakes region, that's a real place; the lakes are extant. But the states, like New York state, that's not real; that's a legal entity; those borders, those lines were drawn. Some of them are natural borders; the Saint Lawrence River is a national border, but the rest of them are not. The New York-Pennsylvania border is not a real thing; it's just a line.

So when we start talking about nationhood, what does that really mean? And what does it mean to be a citizen of a place? It means you might have rights under the legal entity. But if you live in a place and you work in a place and you were born in a place and die in a place, aren't you of that place in every way that matters regardless of what the paper says? All of

these issues came into question for me because here I was, the son of Indian parents, one of whom—my father—was displaced because of political unrest, and then for whatever reason went to England, then came to Canada. What do we belong to? Who are we? What are we? Those questions are at the center of the book.

And then to discover the indigenous—that there really are people who've been from a place for however many millennia and we sort of inserted ourselves into their existence for three or four brief years, however long it was that we were there before we packed up and left. The town of Jenpeg doesn't exist anymore. The one permanent—and it's still there, I went back and I looked at it—was the concrete pad that was the floor of the holding cell in the RCMP outpost. That was the barred cell where offenders were kept and it had a concrete pad as a floor to be secure. And that pad, maybe ten by ten by ten or something, is still there in the middle of the forest.

There's a powerful moment when you address how belonging, in a sense, is sometimes tied to where our people are buried.

Yeah, my grandfather and my uncle—their graves are in Winnipeg and there are very, very few members of my family who still live there. My mother's brother—my uncle and aunt—do. But other than the two of them, the rest of the family has moved to other places, so our ancestors are on that lonely hill. Who is going to tend those graves?

At the end of the book, I ask: Are we landless people? Is that true—we have no home? I'm from nowhere, I'm nobody, I'm a nomad? I think those are powerful questions in the modern world, especially because people don't feel rooted; they move around a lot and the causes of migration are complicated. There are political refugees but being an economic migrant, you know, coming to America for work to support your family, that's not less of a condition. It's very complicated the reasons why people leave one part of the world and go to another.

I wonder if, for you, the sense of belonging has more to do with people, those with whom you have an easy affinity, than it does with place.

I think that is why I was asked to go into the sweat lodge at the very beginning. It was almost like I wasn't going to be able to do anything else until I

did that; that was going to be the point of entry. I was told: *We want you to experience this because it's going to show you what our culture is—the most important thing here. It's not about land possession, it's not about mineral rights, it's not about profit sharing from the dam for the sake of having money*. Which is not to say that money's not important. They need profit sharing from the dam in order to build cultural institutions and provide for youth and education. There is no revenue from the dam that goes to that community, and it's an issue that needs to be addressed. …The community of Cross Lake has provided cheap electricity to the entire province of Manitoba for the past forty years, and morally the Pimicikamak First Nation community deserves support and remediation, and ethically they deserve compensation. …But equally important, I think they wanted me to be initiated in a sense, to come back to the land in that profound way. And then to go from that to being taken by the elder and historian Jackson Osborne into the land, where he showed me the shore and the lake and the tree line. That was really powerful. It was not until I did those things that I could then go to the school and talk to the teachers or go to the band hall meeting and talk about the child welfare legislation—all of that policy stuff had to come after the actual initiation into the place itself. …The real critical moment—the first and most important moment—was sitting in that sweat lodge.

Before going to Jenpeg and Cross Lake, you asked yourself: Am I going as an ethnographer, as a memoirist, as a journalist, as a poet? You really do cover the gamut.

Well, throughout the book, I'm resisting being a journalist. I bristle whenever someone says, *Oh, Kazim is a journalist, he's going to write about Cross Lake*. I'm like, well, I don't know what I'm doing. But by the end, I'm like, okay, yeah, I'm a journalist. That is one of the many things that I have to do here. The story of this book is an important story, but it's not just a story to be told. I, as the writer of it, have to continue to work with this community. We don't always know what the ripples are, you know? But it's my hope, always, that people will think more about where they live. Whose land is this? Where does my electricity come from when I flip the switch? Where is that current coming from? What happened? Is it coming from a dam? What happened because of the dam? These are questions we have to start asking ourselves because, as we move into the new era…the climate

will require us to become more sustainable in every aspect of our lives. Our relationship to electricity might change. We might not have as much access to it anymore, or we might have a different kind of access.

The poet Layli Long Soldier suggests that you were called.

It hadn't occurred to me, but when she said that, it felt true. I was just confused. And I couldn't escape it. It kept coming back and then I was writing to the chief and then I was buying tickets and then I was going. I was like, oh my God, this all feels so inevitable. How did I get myself into this? And I'm actually not a journalist. If I was a journalist, it would make a lot more sense, you know. I'm a poet and a teacher. What the hell am I doing? I was on sabbatical then, and I was supposed to be working on another book and I'm like, *Why am I flying to Manitoba right now?*

I was scared. I was apprehensive, as I explain in the book. I was nervous about going back and Layli and I had been friends for a bunch of years, so I called her out of the blue. I really needed reassurance.

When I told her that the elders performed this ritual, all the pieces fell into place for her. And so she said, "They called you," and I realized, oh, God, is that what happened? Is that what this is about? I don't disbelieve it. I kind of believe it. It felt real to me. It felt like, of course, of course that's why I'm suddenly obsessed forty years later, and randomly getting on a plane to fly back there in the middle of everything else that's going on. It just made perfect sense.

FICTION

Our Mother Told Us

Diana Wagman

Our mother told us she would soon be dead.

*

She told us she had stage four lung cancer and there was no point in seeing a doctor. I was ten and I cried. My fourteen-year-old sister elbowed me sharply. The light came through our suburban kitchen window and our slender, graceful mom had never looked more beautiful. Or tragic. Or healthy. My sister asked questions as pointy as her elbows. Our mother had no answers.

*

It was not her first terminal illness. There was congestive heart failure and a suspected stroke, a brain aneurysm, a rare form of diabetes. It was always something.

*

Some part of her believed what she told us. She certainly expected to come down with a fatal disease at any minute. She lived on the edge of death, the romantic edge, Greta Garbo's *Camille* chaise lounge of death. She could be dying. She might be dying. More significantly, she wanted to be dying. I'm sure she didn't want to be dead. Her curls of blond hair and big blue eyes, her pale Irish skin and shapely (her word) legs wanted to live. But gingerly, carefully, and with our full attention.

*

A year later, our mother told us she was pregnant with our stepfather's child. She wore maternity clothes. I bought a rattle with my own money. She sighed and looked dreamily at advertisements for baby clothes and cradles and high chairs without buying anything. One day I came home from school and she said she'd lost the baby. It was gone. She told us first the firemen came and then the paramedics and they delivered her dead baby. She was sad, but it was probably for the best, she said. She was too old at thirty-eight to have another baby.

*

Was there a baby? Did the firemen come? My father said it was all horseshit. I don't know what my stepfather believed. He was at work when it happened. She cooked dinner like always.

*

Our mother told us she saw people no one else could see. I couldn't prove otherwise. I saw her talking to nothing. I saw her look over my shoul-

der and nod at someone behind me, but when I turned around, it was only the rocking chair or the living room curtains or the sky in the backyard.

*

Our mother told us often how lucky we were, my sister and I. She said her mother tied her to the piano and made her practice. She said her father slaughtered her pet lamb and forced her to stay at the table until she ate it. They beat her legs with a switch, made her wear too small shoes, and hated her, their only child.

*

Our mother told us our grandmother was a witch. When we went to visit every summer, I saw with my own eyes the chants and rituals before we ate or went to bed at night, and all day on Sunday. The Missouri farmhouse where she lived was filled with totems. That they were Christian didn't matter to me, brought up with no religion. Christ on the cross was as terrifying as any image of Dracula. Grandmother said the footsteps we heard going back and forth over our heads in the empty attic were the saintly spirits watching over her.

*

I believed it all because spirits overhead were like miraculous recoveries from cancer and lost babies and invisible friends and the incantations our grandmother performed on her knees.

*

I was the believer in the family. I believed because I knew our mother loved me. She was a good mom in so many ways. We danced in the kitchen together. We made crazy art projects just for fun. She was the best nurse when I was sick and comforted me when I was sad. She liked to cook and loved to entertain, and people—especially men—enjoyed her wit and jokes and amazing stories. Every trip to the grocery store, every encounter at the bank or phone call from a salesman was a story—and if she embellished a little, told the same story three different times to three different dinner parties in three different ways, each more fantastic than the last, that was just Mom. My sister says her stories are why I am a fiction writer.

*

If she believed what she said, is it fiction? If I wanted to believe it, why does it matter?

*

One day, I came home from seventh grade and Mom was sitting at the kitchen table with my grandfather's shaving mug in front of her. She kept it on a shelf in the hutch in the dining room, red with speckles of white like a metal camping mug, but it was porcelain and our mother told us it kept her and her father connected. She wrapped her hands around the mug.

"Your grandfather was here," she said.

He'd been dead for seven years.

"We have to go to Missouri. It's not safe for us here."

Stepfather Number One had left us six weeks before. He was not the violent man who would come next, but malleable, beige, quivering, the color and substance of vanilla pudding. I was glad to see him go, but Mom seemed to drift without him. She was wispy and frowning, like a ghost who had been assigned to haunt a house she didn't recognize.

"What's not safe?" I asked.

She waved me away, saying I would never understand. She knew and that was enough. She would keep my sister and me safe at great personal risk.

*

The next morning, she made us breakfast as usual, but didn't dress for work. She was in her weekend clothes. My sister and I didn't ask why. Instead of seeing us onto our respective busses, to middle school for me and high school for my sister, my mother said she would drive us to school—strange enough—and then she passed our usual right turn and got onto the highway.

"What is happening?" my sister said.

"We're going to Missouri," Mom answered.

"Now?"

"Right now."

Our grandmother still lived in the one-stoplight farm town where our mother had grown up, in the same house where she and our mother had been born. It fascinated me that our grandmother, her two sisters, and then our mother had been born not in a hospital, but in the big bedroom upstairs. Not only in that bedroom, but in that same bed with the massive, dark wood frame and the headboard and four posts carved with garlands of fruit. Apples, peaches, strawberries. Fruit to promote fruitfulness, my mother said, a charm against being barren. My grandmother still slept there. Her child had been born in that bed. Her husband had died in it when I was five years old. Was it the same mattress? Probably. I was both afraid of the bed and drawn to it. I poked my hand under the covers to see if I could feel where my grandfather had died. I imagined blood and bodily fluids. I wondered if Grandmother had grabbed the carved round peach—my favorite—as she screamed in childbirth. Did she sweat and swear like they did on TV or did she call on her spirits to help her? I had nightmares about that room, that bed, that tall white Victorian house and the flat fields all around. I still do. When I'm running from monsters, it's always through that house and they always come from under that bed.

*

We were on the highway heading west from our house in Maryland. Mom had packed for us and put our bags in the trunk. When? I wondered, but I didn't ask. Like many things she did, I didn't have to understand.

"If there's anything that I've forgotten, I'll buy it for you there."

Extravagance was new. Our mother was frugal. She embraced poverty, even though she worked full time and Stepfather Number One had been successful and my father even more so.

"No meat for dinner tonight, I'm sorry to say. End of the month." But we had hamburger in the freezer and my sister and I preferred eggs and waffles and most vegetables anyway. She said she didn't buy herself new shoes so I could get a warm winter coat and my sister could have that school trip. She reminded us often of what she had given up for us. That was the kind of suffering she liked: a mannered, practiced self-sacrifice. It was as if our mother was a character in one of the old-fashioned, unhappy novels she liked to read.

*

Somewhere in Ohio, we stopped at a motel. It took a day and a half to get to Grandmother's house from the Maryland suburbs and we always spent the night in Ohio. We'd made the trip many times, every summer, but this was unlike those vacations. It was October. We were missing school and she was missing work and we wore jackets and corduroys instead of shorts and T-shirts. The pool at the motel was closed, a rusty brown puddle in the bottom. My sister and I sat on the creaky swing set while Mom did whatever she was doing in the room.

"I have a test tomorrow," my sister said.

"I have soccer tryouts." I was the jock in the family.

"I left my textbook in my bedroom because I thought I'd be back to study."

"What do you think is so dangerous at home?"

My sister sighed. "Nothing," she said. "Or everything. Our mother is what's dangerous. Maybe I'll go live with Dad."

That was the worst thing she could have said. I told her I would die if she left me. It never occurred to me I could go with her. One of us had to stay

with Mom and it would definitely be me.

"If I could find a phone," my sister said, "I'd call him and tell him what's going on."

We thought the phone in the motel room only went to the front desk. There was probably a pay phone in the office, but we were not sophisticated kids. And we didn't really want to call him and have him come or force our mother to turn around. We wanted to see where this adventure would take us.

*

In the room, our mother had laid out our pajamas, run a bath for me—I was twelve but she treated me like a child—and turned on the TV to a nature program. She had washed up and changed her blouse. She was pretty. That was one thing, she was always pretty—maybe that's how she got away with as much as she did. Men liked her. Our father threw up his hands but he never really got angry with her. He missed her. When he left, he always paused outside on the front step and kept his hand on the doorknob. That was how much he wanted to come back in.

*

I was supposed to take a bath while she went to get us dinner at the restaurant down the street. French fries, my sister said. Milkshakes, I said. Our escape from the ghostly danger at home took on a celebratory air.

"It's too early for pajamas," my sister said. It was barely seven o'clock.

Mom gave us her *what I say goes* look and left. Reluctantly my sister and I started taking off our clothes. Then Mom was back.

"On second thought," she said. "Let's all go. It will feel good after driving all day. Wash your faces. Comb your hair. Let's have some fun."

*

We rarely went out to eat. Mom didn't like other people's cooking. She distrusted food she hadn't made herself—especially at a restaurant. She often believed it was poisoned, or would be the moment they knew she had ordered it. Sometimes she would just get a can of Coca-Cola she could open herself or a package of Saltines after inspecting the cellophane to make sure it hadn't been tampered with.

We walked into the restaurant. It was a diner with chrome and red vinyl stools at the counter and booths along the window in front and the smell of fried food and overheated coffee. I didn't know what our mother would do in a place like that. But I saw a table of four men by the door turn and look at her. They always did. They passed over my seventeen-year-old sister, plump and frizzy-haired, and me, still a flat-chested child, but their eyes lingered on our mother.

She did this thing I'd seen her do before: she turned to them and gave a brief, bright smile—like she was saying thank you—then tilted her head and hurried on as if embarrassed. She looked sweet, innocent, and fragile. Exposed. Vulnerable. If it was an act, it was a good one. It made her twice as attractive, a hundred times as appealing. She was a woman who needed a man's care. She put her left hand up awkwardly to push back her hair on the right side of her head, the side where the men were sitting. In retrospect, I think she was making it obvious she wore no wedding ring. The men shifted in their seats. I saw them swallow. I could almost feel them clench their thighs. I was completely inexperienced—had never even kissed a boy—but I recognized their rush of desire; it warmed me and I blushed.

*

Later, when we were back home in Maryland, I would stand at the bathroom mirror and try that quick smile followed by that incline of my head. I tried it off and on for years—in high school, college, and after—but I never got it right. I was too aware of what I was doing. For our mother, it came as naturally as anything else.

We sat at a booth and the waitress gave us menus. She looked like she was a flesh-colored crayon forgotten in the hot sun. Her jowls, her ears, her

arms, all of her skin sagged, slid toward the floor. She had a single shelf of bosom that hung so low it rested on her stomach. What did they look like, I wondered, her breasts, her boobs? I had only seen my mother's ripe peach orbs and my sister's spongy beginnings. I giggled and whispered to my sister behind my menu that I thought the waitress was melting. My sister snickered. Our mom gave us her *shut up* look.

"Where you all from?" the waitress asked.

"Maryland," my mother said. I knew the men were listening. So did she. She spoke loud enough for them to hear. "We're going to Missouri. My mother is ill. Actually, she's dying."

She was? I thought we were leaving because my dead grandfather had said we were in danger from demons only he and our mother could see. I started to protest, but my sister nudged me. We were watching another performance. Our mother's sad eyes blinked quickly, preventing tears.

"I'm sorry, honey," the waitress said. "Your mom'll be so glad to see you. I know she will. And you took the kids out of school and everything."

"I had to. There's no one else to look after them."

The waitress tsk-tsked and shook her head, impressed and sorry all at once. The reaction our mother wanted. Most people gave her what she wanted.

Unexpectedly, she ordered a hamburger. So did I. So did my sister. After my sister and I ate, plus French fries and chocolate milkshakes, our mother pushed away her nibbled burger and sat sideways at the edge of the booth so she could straighten her skirt and cross her legs. The waitress came to take our plates and Mom ordered a cup of coffee and took out her cigarettes.

In a flash, one of the men was there to light it for her. He wasn't the youngest or the handsomest, but there he was. Short, dark hair salted with gray, a belly straining against that lowest button on his flannel shirt, worn jeans, lace up work boots. A farmer? A construction foreman? I will never know. I would have chosen a different one for her, but she seemed to like him. He slid into the booth beside her. He asked our ages and if we liked school. Then he ignored us.

*

You might know where this story is going. Let me just say this first: I loved my mother as much as she loved me. Years later, when I was married and had my own children, my father told me she was a slut. She wasn't. She just needed a man to make her real. Without one, she never really saw herself as flesh and blood. So when the man sat down in our booth, we watched our mother become corporeal. Once again she was a living woman. Just not necessarily the one we knew. With this man, his rural twang, and his blue-collar life, her master's degree in English literature and her advanced vocabulary fell away and she was just a plain country girl going to see her mama. She was more solid, but she was also a different person. We had seen her do it before. We didn't know how long it would last.

*

My sister and I walked back to the motel alone. It wasn't far but it was unusual for me to be out at night. There were stars in the cobalt blue sky, many more than we ever saw at home. I made wish after wish. On the first star, on the tenth star, on the thirty-eighth star. Our mother's age. I still believed in wishes coming true. The cold air was good; the breeze blew away the fried smell lingering in our clothing. My sister was annoyed, but I wasn't sure why. I was glad our mother was happy. I'd seen her laughing through the window as we left.

*

Our mother didn't come back to the motel that night. My sister and I watched TV until very late, a weird movie with girls in short shorts and a man with a moustache driving a loud car. We got chips and Cokes from the vending machine and ate and drank in bed. My sister pulled back the other bedspread and sprinkled crumbs deliberately into our mother's bed, then made it up again. She sat upright against the headboard, the light from the television turning her angry face blue. She would be very beautiful one day

after she left home and I saw it that night for the first time. I think I even told her she was pretty and she looked at me like I was crazy. How could she be pretty, how could either of us be attractive, living beside our mother? I finally fell asleep in my clothes, but I don't think my sister slept at all.

*

In the morning, our mother told us she had spent the night alone in the graveyard at the edge of town.

"Weren't you cold?" I asked.

"Alone?" my sister said. And a few other things.

"What do you mean? I needed to commune with the spirit world." She told us her father had reappeared and said it was time to go home.

"What about Grandmother dying?" That was me again.

"Nonsense," our mother said. "I never said she was dying. We'll see her in the summer like always."

She stretched out for a moment on the bed where she hadn't slept and twisted her hips from side to side. It made me uncomfortable to watch her move that way. I laughed nervously when I heard the chips crackling beneath her. She smiled. The smile wasn't for me or my sister, only for herself, a secret she was thinking about. She nodded. Sighed.

"I can't believe you," my sister said and left the motel room, slamming the door behind her. That would be her refrain from then on. I can't believe you. I don't believe you. I won't believe you.

Our mother ignored her. "Let me take a quick shower," she said. "Pack up. It's time to go home."

*

We were all quiet on the drive back to Maryland. I got to sit in front because my sister didn't want to. She was still mad. She was so angry she never got over it. She was furious with our mother for the rest of her life. I was happy to be going home. I hadn't missed soccer tryouts after all. Mom

hummed as she drove, then tuned the radio to a Top 40 station and sang along. Overnight the leaves had begun to change. Fall had happened behind us while we were heading west. When we turned around, the wind was moving through the trees and the red and golden leaves swirled past us. I saw a V-shape of geese migrating south and Halloween decorations and candy when we stopped for gas. It was my favorite time of year and the saddest time of all, another year done and over and never to return, and only the holidays—never easy in our family—ahead.

*

Our mother told us our house was secure when we pulled up in the driveway. The danger had passed and all would be well. My sister laughed at her. The next day she had to make up a reason she had missed the test—she couldn't say our mother had taken us halfway to Missouri so she could have sex with a man she met in a diner. That's what she wanted to say to her teachers and that's what she wanted to tell our father, but she only told me. For school, she wrote a note saying she had food poisoning and Mom signed it.

*

Our mother was calm for a while. She went to work and she cooked dinner and she played the piano without crying. I was made goalie of the girls' soccer team. It was a hazardous and difficult position and I liked it. I liked the solid thwack of the ball against my hands. The right and wrong way to play. The winning and losing. It was all so clear and concrete. I asked for my own ball for Christmas and the man who was about to be my next stepfather gave me one that was blue and white.

*

Eventually, that stepfather left and our mother called our father to tell him she was dying. To tell him she couldn't move her arms. To tell him she'd been bitten by a spider and the venom was coursing through her bloodstream and would soon reach her heart. My sister stayed in her room. I brought her soup and crackers and covered her with a blanket on the couch. Dad came over every time, his voice gentle and low, telling her she was fine, fine, fine. His song only made her angry and she was just as sick—even sicker she called to tell him—after he went home.

*

My sister moved out when she was eighteen and stayed away. Occasionally she showed up for Christmas and she came when I graduated from high school. She didn't live far, but for her it was light years. She needed hyperdrive and maybe even suspended animation to make the leap back into our mother's dimension. When she did, she sat at the kitchen table, arms crossed over her chest, and I was reminded of her in the blue light of that motel room. She was exquisite, but hard where our mother had been soft. She glittered and our mother glowed. But our mother's shine was fading. I know my sister liked to flaunt her beauty. She'd been the ugly duckling. Not anymore.

*

One Christmas when my sister was home, our mother told us to be prepared. She was about to die, her heart was bad, it fluttered and stuttered in her chest. She had used it up. It had been broken too many times. She complained about being light-headed and out of breath. Our mother told us her eyes weren't working well. She couldn't read and that bothered her. She didn't like books on tape and she hated Stepfather Number Four's reading voice. She was ready for him to go.

We'd heard that all before.

*

Then our mother told us stories we hadn't heard about her mother planting vegetables and the sharp, summer taste of her tomatoes and picking corn off the stalk and bringing it right in to cook. Her mother was a wonderful gardener, she said. Our mother told us about our grandfather and his practical jokes and his hypochondria and how the town doctor gave him sugar pills. He thought he had every disease, our mother told us. From malaria to leprosy.

"Ha," my sister said to me. "It runs in the family."

Our mother told us about her pet lamb and how Grandmother wouldn't let it be slaughtered and let her keep it for years until it died of old age. They buried it in the orchard after a lengthy funeral. She told us about her father taking her to the county fair and riding the Ferris wheel with him and how he shouted to the operator to "send them round again!" because she loved it so much. She told us life on the farm was wonderful, with the warm eggs under the chickens and the kittens squirted with milk direct from the cow's udder. She told us her childhood was perfect. Magical. It was news to us.

"I'm not feeling well," she said. "I wish you girls would stay home."

She always asked us to stay.

It was different when she said, "So much I haven't told you. I have so many happy stories."

*

Our mother told us the truth finally, the unvarnished, ordinary truth, but we didn't believe her and the day after Christmas, she died. She died young as she had always imagined. She never saw my sister become a doctor or me publish my first story. She died before any of us expected after telling us for years she would. It snowed the day of her funeral and inside the church

it was dark, but then the sun came out and the ice on the trees and the mound of dirt by the grave sparkled. Afterwards we all went back to her house, our Final Stepfather's house, not a place I had ever lived and I saw Mom sitting in the old rocking chair. My sister didn't see her, but I did. I saw what no one else could see and I heard our mother say, "I told you so."

Contributors

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Marvin Bell was the author of more than twenty books of prose and poetry, including *Stars Which See, Stars Which Do Not See* (Atheneum), a finalist for the National Book Award, *Mars Being Red* (Copper Canyon Press), a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and *Incarnate: The Collected Dead Man Poems* (Copper Canyon Press).

David Ian Bickley is an award-winning media artist whose body of work spans the primitive technological of the 1970's to the digital cutting edge of today. His media work has manifested as television, installation, electronic music and video art.

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Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain (Random House), and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood* (Trinity University Press).

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