

Ping-Pong



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

I was thinking about the amazing artists and writers in this issue and what it says about the culture we live in right at this moment. This year we have letters written from Sudan by Brandi Walker, who has devoted her life to creating programs to eliminate gender-based violence as a tool of war in conflict areas by empowering the female victims to create their own frameworks for rebuilding their lives and their countries. In order to eliminate violence against women we also have to recreate the gender norms that perpetuate it in every country. This summer she heads to Panzi Hospital to work with Dr. Mukwege in the Congo.

We also feature the opposite of the smooth-fronted Ken doll with Jonathan Ames' "Book Tour Diary." Which makes me think of walking through the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and seeing all of these beautiful white marble statues with their genitalia obliterated by regimes from years' passed, which makes me think of the sexless offerings of most of American mainstream media which seems to be attempting to wash our brains with a brand of soap that is surely produced in a developing country.

And that made me think about the grace of Anthony Hawley's "Productive Suffix," and how beauty can be a balm in the face of daily war dead, social program eradication, and the privatization of everything not exported away.

And that made me think of Marx's worker alienation and how if we have no relationship to the product of our labor we will become unable to recognize beauty. We here at Ping•Pong find such beauty in bald headed and gawky condors. Everyone concerned with the condors worries that too much publicizing of their habitat will contribute to eradicating their fragile ecosystem, but lack of any kind of recognition does not help fund the condor recovery effort either, and so we offer what we believe to be a powerful essay written by conservationist John Moir. Henry Miller said the majesty of Big Sur cuts you down to peanut-size (my bad paraphrase). And it's good to be reminded of how small of a tiny human you actually are.

And what potential to create beauty, even if it's so ugly it's hard to recognize. All of the artists and writers contained herein speak a kind of truth we are honored to publish.

Cheers!

Maria Garcia Teutsch

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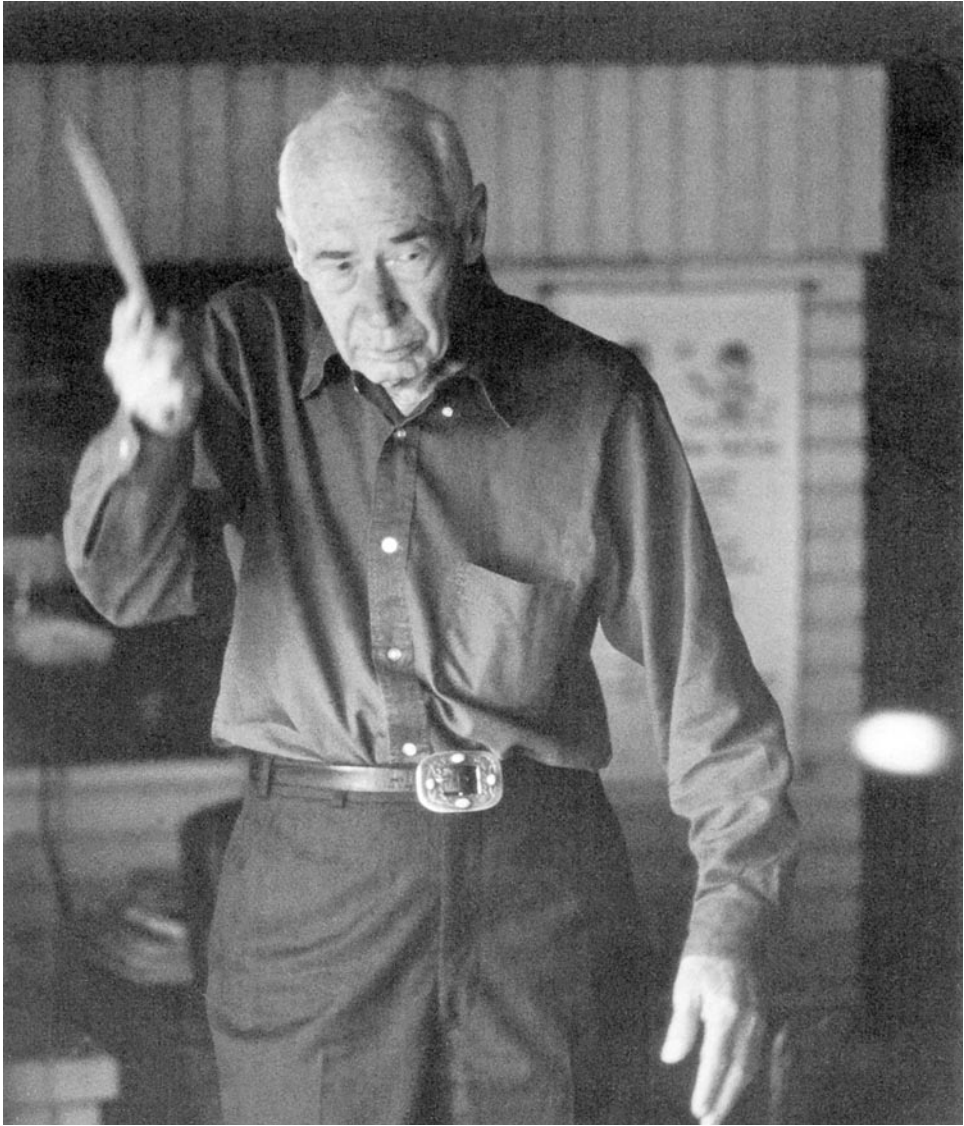
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Robert Snyder

SUZANNE RYAN

Henry Miller Haiku

Dear Henry Miller
Let's combine the cocks and cunts
At our house of cats

•••

Kept in dreams of Miller
He was never young for me
Stroking genius

•••

Say goodbye to love
And invite great pleasures in
The heart is free now.

•••

Throw your cautions out
And dance with Rabelais now
Miller will be proud

•••

Your seedy highlights
A bitten lip and wide eyes
Farewell emotions

•••

Oh wander with me there
At the harbor we will see
Such undulations

•••

Free your heart of love
And escape expectation
Primal life for me.

•••

Early nights and heavy beds
Anais under-covers
Detecting our selves.

•••

Oh that males went from
Young to old without twenties
And I young always.

•••

Let's write long letters
And muse all over our lives
Set ship sails on words

•••

Oh Miller under
And over me the heavy
Weight of primal wants

•••

Two aching shoulders
A perfectly healthy heart
No love at the inn.

•••

If only we could
Extend our bookish closeness
To outside your pages

•••

Walking rainy streets
Paws stand sullen in puddles
Pulling my hat down.

The War Machine

Pounding down new streets searching for something to complete her, in every new bar, in every new bed, analyzing and assessing people and seeing how they could help her to complete herself.

When one feels incomplete it is a constant degradation of the self; the lacking something clasps its nails around what one has and drags it away. One is left emptier and emptier and if one finally decides to be wise and try to survive as one is—do the problems end?

For the person of pieces when one is missing the whole image is too heavily obscured to be visible.

This 'jigsaw' person sets self coldly against the world and aims only to complete their own puzzle.

Life becomes a chess game of actions, navigating opposition with only one goal at the finale; the checkmate of completing one's own soul.

It is a constant game of the most dangerous kind that winds itself through bar, man and city.

Experiencing each one but feeling none.

Indeed, our jigsaw girl is steely eyed with determination, cold to anything but her prize, her goal.

She will feel nothing at all until it—until she—is complete, until pieces mislaid by children's hands are reunited by adult actions.

Everything until then is trial and error, the trial and error of connecting wires to boxes until one fits and finally *FLASH* the machine of the mind clicks on and everything works as it should.

The person of pieces is electronic current gone wrong, incorrect wiring, the electricity is dead, the storm shows no sign of abating—the meteorologists are numb to your gale blown struggles. When will it end?

She searches and writhes through the dark upon hands and knees, she sees nothing and barely feels the thorns that scratch her skin; all is in pursuit of the goal.

The desire is so strong and all-consuming that anything else cannot even play second fiddle. There is one instrument here and its strings are being plucked always.

There is no room for an orchestra.

The person of pieces is faulty wiring made flesh. She is a slumbering box of electricity that lies dormant until ignited. She searches for the roman candle of the church of her own sanctity.

Her mission in life is as covert and structured as the most impassioned of guerillas—when she is talking to a group, charming them with wit and bon homie her mind is working faster than ever, it is assessing which person here can help her, which soul can meld with hers in some act of completion? Can one of them complete her?

The person of pieces lives a life of desperation in many ways; she will feel in ways unknown and unfamiliar to the ordinary person.

She will attach herself to the ordinary man, a black widow of emotion, and climb languidly on top of him while her mind races on and beyond her body. She will meet with him and try to find herself through and in him. If this does not complete her she will cast him off, a snake's dead skin's worth of futility.

She will move on and on, around and around, a whirling dervish of desperation never stopping to consider that the promise of unification may lie in her own mind. It has evaded her since she can remember, she thinks, so surely it must be something outside of her that she lacks. She Is Faulty Machinery. A Wire Lost at Birth.

Crashing into cities, onto streets, a feral animal caught up in an extended hunt. A hunt for herself. She will pad and pad and pad . . . soft, silent paws slinking through terrain made of blood and men and women until she sees an opportunity and: claws out . . . pounces upon it. Her nails dig in deep and grasp it to the bone. The desperate hunter needs a kill to give her birth. She must consume and own those around her. By dominating them she rises from the ether, renewed in part, by their energies. Yet, it is never enough. The feral cat exhausts herself with her efforts, none of which seem to satiate her for long enough. She is the eternal hunter, eyes always attuned to possible prey.

Of course, this person of pieces does not truly want the prey they go for. This person of pieces is exhausting all the possible ways she can think of for making herself whole. She exhausts all experience, all peoples; she exhausts all the men and women and feels emptier and more alone the more streets and bodies she finds herself in

and around. She is a war crime, a stillbirth, lying muddied and blue veined on hotel beds the world throughout, and gutters in every city. She searches the stones on the ground to the beaks of the birds above for a hint as to who can make her whole.

All of life is geared towards her fulfilling herself. She feels her emptiness in every pore, in every bone, it holds her captive.

Captive to need and desire. She desires everything but loves nothing. She is Nin's Spy but her house of love is a vast expanse of worlds that encompass love, life, birth and death.

She crawls through each room searching for what she has lost, searching for the something that can unite her and bring her existence to life. She knows everything but nothing. This spy has a lie detector but he cannot provide her truth. She is a being made of thousands of broken up pieces that go further away from each other the more she tries to make them fit. The Person of Pieces breaks completely in the vain effort to unite as one.

Alraune Six

A skittish deer
Flits through
a forest
Treeful with
memories and portraits
their roots
in early somnambulist child mind

The painting and sculpting of
your characters
Lovingly hewn and
Closely manouevred
Branch to branch and
Valve to valve.

Yet many
were divided on your chessboard of misunderstandings
and picked your leaves absentmindedly
leaving you bare and alone
with a frightened fawn for a
primordial brother.

Fauns

Flitting through doorways
Ahead of one another
The crowd of strangers

•••

Let me help pick them
Presents for your family
Surprised I want to

•••

Startling young boy child
If Tolstoi is your neighbour
Can I be Fyodor?

•••

I'll see your sister
And think of your pretty face
Age faster boy child

•••

He'll come when ready
Maybe I'll leave before then
Oh grow up with me

•••

Let me be Henry
And boy child you will be her
Infinite role change

•••

What have I made you
To take you from your teen-age
and leave you younger

•••

I'd rather sleep now
Damn boy child you took my touch
Rested it on you.

•••

Popular boy child
Deceptively sinister
What is it you want

•••

You sure left quickly
I turned to your shadow
Standing in absence.

•••

Boy child what a face
But too much trouble for me
Back to aged Miller

•••

My feelings for you
A sixteen year old boy child
What a four minutes



Cocoon 3 | Massimo Conti



Eye Triptych | Massimo Conti

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White Driftwood | **Massimo Conti**

PING II PONG



White Driftwood Horizontal | **Massimo Conti**

BRUCE COVEY

Compare

Losing the page made orthodoxy clamor.
Ten vital signs is more than nine.
Armor becomes you and your tinny reflection.
At the center of the cup is the core of the drink.
To exit means applying one's stop philology.
A compartment for salt, a compartment for silver.
I've brought a dime for the baby.
Its little ego is awash with the pins' vibrations.
An angel divests herself of her toast.
Betting on the quarter-horse instead,
A breakfast of champions pings its united segments.
That is, to align the trajectories of returns.
Making a solid of the playing field, or its atmosphere.
It's hard to breathe in the rain, the telephone one.
The characters for metal & divine are equal.
The light at the end of the tunnel is a limit,
Always to approach and never to attain.
Those who follow the vacuum believe in mixing.
Mapping an alphabet doesn't mean a set.
To make the most efficient path a circumstance.
Cast iron's vehicle, steering obstacles astray,
Assigning subdivisions to water, a net
To reign in the apples, spiders
To capture the molecular of

Demeter

Burning grains, their various natures, popular with plain
Features—an outline—the casting of decade to day
August's cult, coupled with a passion on a field three times
Pines that stick atmosphere's shell & draw the thread
Combined into a single petal, flexibility revamped
How many euros a leaf? Stationed along the avenue
Mojito, pink lemonade, cotton candy, sex on the beach
Curl of cinnamon's bark, vanilla leaf, walnuts
Made from different wild animals and furious lot casting
Shaped like a vault, but pulled vertically by a cable
By exploiting innovative glue, this apparent paradox
One that builds its own diamonds, jack of soldering iron
100 stems on the threshing floor, the trigger for a trap
& can of wheat. Sweeping waves of its tender tips in
Farming conditions quite by chance. The reductionist's view
Might wholly embrace its circles at the expense of
Spheres. Date oasis in Tunisia, originated by the typo
In her eye white, palatino, brushed off & discarded
Up the sleeve, apples' burden of the resulting sudden, or
One photograph per day, themselves lacking continuity

Ordinary

Outlook's having trouble downloading my messages; perhaps
There's gold in one? Not metaphorically, of course, like

Words of wisdom or a spiritual twist or value. I have
Six thousand two hundred and forty-five, a little garden

Full of digits, each its own floral presentation & shade.
My cool air come & heading out of the shower, white towel

Wrapped around your soaked black hair, thinking yourself
Not skinny enough & reflection of the alphabet, serifed

To the shoulders. The bar with the long waiting list the one
With the buzzer the one that finally let us in perpendicular

& across from ESPN Sportzone, where red loses the ball
To yellow or the evening when you took your clothes off

& challenged its statue to a pick-up game, one on two.
Reflected in the coins underneath the surface of the water

The flowers all around are red and annuals—bloom
For another week, then crumpled & folded like second-

Day snow, all the little bits of exhaust and asphalt smoking
The droplets—no, it poured here, but only for a minute.

Or didn't as long as she continues to have a tail, can jump,
& doesn't mind that this time, at least, everyone's the same.

Marble Counter Tops

one meandering across its spine perpendicular
traces a blue circle to house all of the bacteria
“over 400 times the strength of

or aligned—pairs—y’s branches coming up for air

& flimsy as this open program’s paperback
traces of its watermark across the pixels
thinking I see a woman there, a goddess, an owl

one that I might ravage &, left upon my deathbed
covered in scratches, leave to roost

enough only to pause, to put the puff in cheek’s pouch
& as it expands, paste paper strips around it
already colorful & messages aligned
then pop the balloon & watch the rest bleed

thrashing for air without its mother’s stomach

oops I swallowed a pin or a quarter

Love Poem

I bought you a whole box of grey area
It's what we swapped in for what was rancid and what was sweet

The kite you boarded on a quest for the origins of climate
The woody roots of lightning, thunder's frequency

Ratio of wave to hair, it's curling, swept
With a red breeze, taken as wet communion

Or domino's temperature, suddenly wholly susceptible to gravity
& plummet directly earthward, combustible middle

Day-to-day service re-scripted as a movie review
4 stars 2 thumbs up, restless to wrestle, miraculous lettuce

Ballooning above its tiny legs, let us
Find a river between these two slices of bread

A metaphor for conception, commencement
Or (choose your condiment)?

H. E. SAYEH

Translations by Chad Sweeney and Mojdeh Marashi

Kayvaan Setarch Bood/Kayvaan was a Star

We were from the fire's race,
born the same hour as the copper sun
yet darkened in the ash.

Injustice smoldered in its forge,
my friend vanished like a spark,
I stayed behind with the patience of coal.

Kayvaan became a star
so above the bleak night
hope
would shine for us.

Kayvaan became a star
so the beaten down
could find the path to dawn.

Kayvaan became a star
to teach us
about fire,
the moment it flares
inside the self
and illuminates the evening.

Shaabe yalda, the longest night,
my palms tired of hoping
placed in his bright hands.

Shaabe yalda, the winter solstice,
my faith in the sun stays lit
by the color of his star.

Kayvaan was a star.
He lived the way of light
and died by light.

He sits in the pupil of our eyes,
an heirloom of fire
handed to the sun for holding.

Kayvaan, a beloved figure and friend of Sayeh, was killed by the Shah's government. The name "Kayvaan" also means "Venus" the morning star.

Geryeh Seeb/Apple's Cry

Night was falling.
I came inside and closed the windows.

Wind wrestled with the branches.
Only me in an empty house.

The world poured into my heart.

Suddenly I felt
someone
 beyond the window
in the garden
 crying,

the morning dew
 dropped
from the apple blossom.

Tehran, spring 1351 (1972)

Falgh/Red Dawn

O dawn!
The herald's delightful news!
To honor your visit, tonight,
a rooster
is beheaded at the front door.

Tehran, 1350 (1971)

Tarh/Design

They cut the morning bird's throat,
And yet

In this rolling river of sunset
His crimson voice
Still flows . . .

Soghoot/The Fall

He used to stretch his neck up
Higher than the world!

The stars that glitter the wheel
Would kiss the tips of his fingers.
The sun was a coin
In his fist.

At times
A universe separates
A crown from its shoulders.

At times pride and humiliation
Differ by the width of a hair.

When he bowed in resignation
The sky and its stars
Removed beyond all reach.

Marg-e Rooz/Death of the Day

The sun was leaving and dragging behind
The half-dead day with its skirts of dying light.
Day fell from the blade and like a fluttering
Heart crawled after its lover.

The sun laughed: Why whimper?
Be glad this bruising day is over.

Laugh and revel like me. What are you complaining about?
We're both leaving this place.

The tired day moaned back, You are the king of light!

Happiness is yours, not mine.
True, we're both stepping off the road
But you to the wedding bed and I to the grave.

Parandeh Midaanad/The Bird Knows

Thoughts of flying in cloud light
like opening an eye into sleep,
the bird in her cage
 is dreaming.

From her cage the bird watches
the painted image of the garden
shimmer.
The bird knows this wind
has no breath—the paradise
is an illusion!
From her cage the bird
 is dreaming.

Tehran, 1350 (1971)

Geryeh/Cry

Shadows sob under trees in the green sunset.
Branches read the story of the clouds,
And like me, the sky is moody with dust.

Wind brings the smell of soil wet with storm.
Leaves agitate in the passing night.

The garden is anxious for rain—
My heart aches for a long green cry

JONATHAN AMES

Book Tour Diary

April 12

9:30 AM

At the hotel. Leaving for the airport in a little while. A successful reading last night. A lot of people. Sold a lot of books.

Made out with S. in the stacks, but she had to go to her boyfriend. One of the people from the bookstore saw us, must think I'm a nut.

"I want you to pull my hair and I want to give you a blow-job in the car and have you come in my mouth," she said.

But I was the prude. Didn't want to do it in her car, and, also, I felt that she would regret it immediately afterwards. How could she go to her boyfriend with the taste of my semen in her mouth? I thought she would feel bad and I didn't want to do that to her. Also, I never like to come in someone's mouth. As soon as I'm coming I think that it must taste terrible and so I derail my own orgasm.

But I was disappointed that she couldn't be with me. Wanted to experience her again. A year ago, it was carnal, depraved sex when I came out here for the hardcover. I love her smell. Whatever it is she puts on her skin. She put my hand to her throat in the stacks. She likes to be choked, slapped, taken violently. Says her boyfriend won't do that stuff. But I did it for her. And this time, I wanted to make her crawl on the ground towards me, her white, white skin, her fragile skinny body, her white tits and long, strange pink nipples, her mad lust. I wanted to watch her revel in her own abject submission. Generosity through feigned cruelty.

So after kissing her last night I was all riled up. I went on Craig's List and there was this beautiful tranny. I couldn't resist. I called her and she said her name was Savannah, but I think that's just her Craig's List name. She must have her real boy's name, her real girl name, and then her working-girl name. A lot of names.

Took a taxi to her around 1 AM. Rough part of town. Literally, across a river and some train-tracks. She lives in a boarding-house, like something out of a Jim Thompson novel. New York doesn't have things like that any more, places where you can live and not spend too much money. The walls of her room were covered with hundreds of cut-outs of models and actresses. Her bed had a canopy she built, with gauze all around it. It was like a serial-killer's apartment, this temple of femininity. She was eerily beautiful. Mini-skirt, tall and blonde, a perfectly feminine face, gorgeous smooth legs, lovely mouth. How does this happen?

I gave her a hundred and fifty bucks and we kissed, standing there. I held her close. She tasted good.

She pulled me down on to the bed for more kissing. Her blouse came off. She had these pubescent-sized breasts from female hormones. They were beautiful. I

kissed them gently. She smelled nicely of perfume. I'm a sucker for perfume. Then she got a condom, lube, positioned herself doggy-style, lifted the skirt, guided me into her. I had been there all of ten minutes. Never saw her cock, like M. Butterfly. Her heels stayed on, which I liked. I held those small breasts.

And she came from me doing that. I guess from rubbing herself against the bed as I smashed her down. She screamed out, "I'm coming," and so that made me come. It wasn't as good as a real girl but the transgression of it was nice, though as soon as it was over, the self-loathing was released, like this horrible steam inside me.

Her sink was low, came to my waist, and I washed myself in it. My cock looked like this pathetic pink instrument in that sink, her make-up all around the edge of the porcelain. There was a razor for her legs and I thought of cutting my cock and cutting my wrists, and how I'd have to saw at myself with that little razor. It was a flash of thought-violence like a seizure. Then I almost laughed, thinking about my cock in a transsexual's sink, left there like some sacrifice.

We sat and talked afterwards. She put on a robe and looked demure. She's only twenty. She thought I was thirty-five and complimented me for looking so young at 41, which was nice of her. She told me about taking hormones. I said, "Be careful about your liver." "Why?" she asked, a flicker of concern in her eyes, of self-preservation, which I was glad to see. I told her that I heard the hormones can hurt your liver, that she should look into it. I told her I read about in the Science Section of the Times, this article on transsexuals. But this didn't impress her. She needs to know what she's taking, be aware of the side-effects.

We talked some more and she told me she was always different, playing with Barbies. Never met her biological father. Said she was a miracle baby, that her mother's tubes had been tied and burnt. She said burnt. Yet somehow the mother got pregnant. I asked her if she was going to get a sex change. "I don't know, not if I can't get off," she said. I thought about how she came from having me in her. She was supernaturally beautiful. An American changeling. Kissed me goodbye. She said, "You're sweet."

Back here at the hotel I scalded myself in the bath. Will stop now. Have to get cab to the airport.

April 12

4:30 PM

A few hours later. In _____. I'm on a bench, in a park, on a cliff, overlooking the bay, sailboats in the distance.

The cabbie from the airport said, "I used to believe in good luck, but now I believe in bad luck since it's the only kind I have." He said he was an actor and once he got out of debt, he said he planned to go to LA. He was in his late forties, fading looks, blonde hair, a receding chin. He had been handsome once but there was something off about him. Drugs or alcohol or bi-polar. Something. I gave him a big tip. He was all obsequious after the tip, taking my bag into the hotel for me, fawning over me. He

asked what I was doing in town, and I told him I was a writer, that my paperback had come out, and he gave me his last card, which was a little dirty, and it said 'actor' under his name.

April 13

3:00 AM

Another good reading. Just got back. Read with D., who's kind of a local celebrity, so there was a huge crowd. Afterwards, D. had a party at a bar, a lot of people. I was drawn to this sexy buxom girl named T., but her friend, M., was all over me, asking me to dance, pressing against me. She was a little drunk and while I was dancing with her, T. left. So M. asked me to go home with her. She's 24, a little nutty, a grad student in Art History. Not as pretty as her friend, but attractive. Beautiful eyes. Sweet little breasts. We took a taxi. She said, "I don't usually do this." "Do what?" I asked. "Take home older, strange writers." "I should hope not," I said. I was feeling witty, almost happy.

I went down on her and she came and her pussy hiccupped when she came and some fluid came out. Not a full-blown female ejaculation but sort of close. Then she didn't have a condom, but she found one in her roommate's room, which was good luck, and the roommate was out. The sex was okay. Her body is a bit soft. More about her later—what she said about her mother who has cancer, which was very heartbreaking. Almost told her about my mother dying of cancer, but didn't want to scare her about her mom.

Anyway, more about that girl later, but I'm tired now.

April 15

1:20 PM

So I had an amazing time in _____ on the 14th. Sold 40 books. Was signing books and these three Asian girls gave me candy and a card and a little stuffed animal. They were giggling. It was very sweet. And then this gorgeous raven-haired girl gives me a note after I signed her book. She had this somewhat unusual, beautiful upturned nose. And she had green eyes and very pale skin in contrast with her long dark hair. She was about five-four, not too tall, but statuesque—full breasts and ass. Was wearing this sleeveless white top and tight jeans. She had beautiful arms. I love women's arms; I imagine my hands encircling them, pulling the woman to me, and I love the armpit. For some reason, as I've gotten older, I'm obsessed with licking a woman's armpit, this hidden secret place, like it's another pussy or something. I must be losing my mind.

Anyway, I didn't get a chance to read the girl's note, just put it in my pocket, there were other people waiting on line, and it would look weird reading some note from a beautiful girl. But then someone from the bookstore brings me another note, it's from the same girl, it says, "I'm the girl with the dark hair who gave you the note.

I'm serious. Call me."

And I look at the first note and there's a number. So after I sign everybody's book, I call her. She picks me up outside the bookstore and there's another girl in the car. A blonde, a little harder looking, kind of a cheap look, but also attractive. They both have the same first name, L., which is strange and they agreed that it was strange but it was part of what drew them to each other. L#1, who gave me the note, runs a catering company and L#2 is a buyer or something for a department store.

We go to a bar and they tell me their story. They're both 29 and they're married and they're secret lesbian lovers and their husbands don't know. The men just think that their wives have these girls' nights out. They get cheap hotel rooms for two or three hours. They also meet up in the afternoon sometimes, when the husbands are at work, and they don't have to pay for a room. But they tell me that L#2, the blonde, doesn't like to have her pussy licked because when she was fifteen her first boyfriend went down there and came right back up with a disgusted look on his face and said, "I don't like that..."

Also, she said she has three brothers and when she was growing up they would call it "Sunday sushi," which struck me as sophisticated—how did her suburban brothers know that sushi was bad on Sundays? Anyway, somehow these two things have made her incapable of letting anyone, including L#1, go down on her.

So what do they do, I asked. She said that she does it to L#1. I said, "Well, you see then that it's nice, you should let her do it to you." "I know, that's what I say," said L#1, but L#2 said, "I just can't. I have a phobia."

I couldn't believe they were sitting across from me, telling me all this, but L#1 said that my books made her feel like she could tell me anything. L#2 hasn't actually read me, but liked the reading.

After all this talk about eating pussy, they announced that even though they had brought me out and were telling me all this stuff they wanted to make it clear that they couldn't have sex with me. Sex with a man was a level of cheating that was too much for them. I suggested a compromise: that we have a three-way cuddle in my hotel room, and they thought that was queer, but were intrigued.

But L#2 backed out, said she had to be at work early, so she left and L#1 came back with me. We had a drink at the hotel bar and then she went up to my room first, by herself. I gave her my key. She said people know her in this town, there might be a business associate of her husband at the bar, so it would be better if it seemed like she had a drink with me and then left. Her husband knew she was a fan of mine and that she had come to my reading, so it was perfectly legit for her to be at the hotel with me, but she couldn't be seen leaving the bar in my company.

So she slipped out to the elevator, like something out of a fifties movie. It was all very noir. I waited five minutes, as she had instructed, and went up to my room where she was waiting for me topless. And she had the most amazing body. The most beautiful breasts with gigantic, dark-brown nipples. She's half-Brazilian, half Irish.

“Our pants have to stay on,” she said.

We went by the window, looking out over the whole city, we were on the 28th floor, the city looked spectacular, all that American money, and I held her from behind, cupping her breasts in my hand, weighing them. I thought about how after she left I could jump out the window. But that’s never how I would want to do it.

So we got on the bed and made out—making out was acceptable to her—and I nursed on her breasts and I came in my pants rubbing against the bed. She could tell I came and she laughed. It was actually quite heavenly. I said, as we hugged goodbye at my door, “Was this okay? I hope you don’t feel bad.”

“I don’t feel bad. Maybe tomorrow I’ll feel bad, but not right now. This is something I wanted to do for a while, ever since I first read you. I was worried I wouldn’t like you in person. You’re quieter than I thought you’d be, but you’re sweet.”

She and Savannah think I’m sweet. I don’t know if they’re right or wrong. After she left, I lay on the bed and marveled in my mind at her beauty, and I felt a kind of giddy gratitude for my crazy sex life. It’s been my only joy.

April 17

11:30 AM

Plane again. Flying home. _____ was quiet. A smaller crowd but nice people. No girls offered themselves to me. Then in _____, the next day, things were completely nuts.

K. met me at the airport. She had been e-mailing me for months and wanted to meet me at the airport to welcome me to her city. I said that she didn’t have to meet me, that the publisher often had someone there, but she kept on insisting, telling me it was her fantasy, and that from the airport she wanted to come with me straight to my hotel if we felt okay in each other’s presence.

I gave into her and she met me, holding a card with my name and smiling really big. She was tiny, maybe 5’1”, and she he was dressed like a thirteen year-old, though she’s 33 and married. She had a child’s back-pack on with these little Japanese buttons all over it, a pink jacket, jeans with yellow patches on the knees, and little purple sneakers. Her face was pretty (just like her pictures in the e-mails) but her tininess and the child-clothing made me feel funny. We got a cab. We sat in the backseat, quiet and awkward. I didn’t know if I could do it. It was too strange. But she was looking at me with such adoration, so I took her hand and as soon as we held hands and she squeezed my hand with happiness I knew I could make love to her.

We went right to my room. I asked about her husband. She told me in her e-mails that they have an open-marriage, but I still felt worried about it. So many of the women I’m meeting have a boyfriend or are married. It’s like a weird run in cards.

I said to K., “Are you sure he doesn’t mind?”

“He doesn’t mind,” she said. “All he said was ‘I just don’t want to hear about dick size.’”

This made me like her husband a lot, like he was some kind of brother or something.

Well, after that, right away we were in bed and I was glad the clothing had come off. She was tiny but it was the body of a woman. She didn't want me to go down on her. She just wanted me in her immediately. I put on a condom and it was a brutal fast lay. I appreciated the animalness of it—that we had met at the airport 45-minutes before and then we were in bed copulating.

We lay there, her head on my chest, like we were old-time lovers, and I tried to get at why she wanted to do it with me so bad, and she said, “To get the power back. When I like an artist, it's like they have power over me, but by sleeping with you I get the power back and then I also take some of your power. So now I'm even stronger.”

She said she had slept with a number of local musicians that she would get infatuated with and a few famous ones, too. She was very matter-of-fact about it all. Even said that I was a notch on her belt. She dresses like a child but has this fierce somewhat lunatic, adult, quasi-male sex-drive.

After the reading, she had a party for me at her house. Her husband was incredibly nice—black-gray hair, good-looking, a little bit older than me, a rugged face, though a bit fey. All their friends were smoking pot from a bong that was this long green tube coming out of a plastic turtle, but I didn't smoke. Didn't feel like it. The house was filled with odd knick-knacks and weird art. I liked the whole scene. Some wonderful nerdy boy with bright red hair was talking to this girl and me about his love of Sam Peckinpah and Bob Dylan. The girl had an enormous nose and big glasses. She was only 19 and gorgeous in a brainy, secret sexy way.

Then K. wanted to leave, go back to the hotel with me and do it again. Her friends didn't know. They thought she was just escorting me home, being an extra gracious hostess to the visiting writer. She called a taxi and it got there fast and honked. As we left, her husband gave me this gentle kick in the ass and it was the most amazing thing. I turned and looked at him and there was this part-benevolent, part-mischievous, and tiny-part-wounded look in his eye. It was like he was the father of some young girl I was dating and he was kicking me in the ass as I headed out the door on a date with his daughter, letting me know that he knew what I would do, but man-to-man he was okay with it, even got a kick out of it, so to speak, though on some level, maybe the truest level, it did pain him. It is definitely one of the oddest moments of my life.

Then their dog slipped out as we were leaving, and she went chasing after it, and I got in the cab so it wouldn't leave, and I was laughing to myself, thinking about that kick, how strange and tender and human it was, and the taxi driver, who was Indian and polite, said, “What are you laughing about, sir?” and I said, “Life,” and he smiled in the rearview mirror. Then she got the dog back inside and from the front door, she called out to her husband, “I love you.” We got back to the hotel and it was another brutal quick one and she seemed very satisfied.

She called me this morning and said that she and her husband stayed up till six talking about everything. She told him that I was rough in bed. I said, “Was that all right?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “I’ve never had it so rough but I loved it.” I was surprised to hear this, I didn’t think I had been too rough and I thought of all the musicians she had slept with—weren’t any of them rough?

Then she said that her husband liked hearing about the roughness. According to her, he had said, with admiration, “Who knew that under such a quiet demeanor he would be like that.”

I sort of feel like I love them. I should move in with them. They could put me in some room, like an animal, and just take care of me. Save me. I’d give them all my money and I would tell them they had to watch me like a prisoner and in exchange they could own me.

Well, the book tour is over. Nobody would believe the life I lead. I don’t believe it. Plane is going to land soon. We’re hitting some turbulence and I feel frightened. I think about killing myself a lot and yet I don’t want to die in a plane. I guess I don’t want to die at all.

The End

JUDY HALEBSKY

The Kite Maker I

This kite is bigger than the floor
wider than the streets I carry it through

don't move to the States, Cormac says, it'll ruin you

a line between here and the sky
into the rainstorm into the thunder

I have made an attic room into boxes
my kite in shoes and wool sweaters
in mulberry paper
in meters and meters of string

a carp swimming upstream
= success

pine and bamboo
= resilience

as big as the sky
paint it orange, paint it green

it'll ruin you

I let it crash into the river
I let it float out of my hands

keeping the bamboo lines to retie
into a flying crane into another city

this time a bird
this time a moth
the sky will be blue and white

The Kite Maker IV

In Tokyo they call me the honorable foreigner
in Halifax, my hometown, they say *she's from away*

patch me words through a tin can string
send me hymns through oak tree wires

the end of the string = the highest point in the sky

these are kites my grandfather made:
Spanish rice, the screened in porch
a house with 16 beds

beds crammed into the cedar closet
roll-aways folded in under the stairs

oak tree branches = a flight path

he's in the kitchen telling my mother
make sure she knows she can always come home

light over the wingspan of a rice paper hawk
bones in strips of bamboo

I would add on a tail to make it easier to fly
but grandpa says *that kite needs to fly on its own*

The Kite Maker V

A haiku always has a breaking word

a kite is a kind of dream

I'll trade you two drawings for a lemon leaf

Cormac is getting married to someone else

the sound kaku
can mean both to write and to plough

different characters but the same sound
so one is in the other's shadow

*Traveling all my life
ploughing a small field
back and forth*
—*Basho*

plum rain means the rainy season

burnt evening means a spell that breaks at dawn

I'll tow your car out of the ditch for a beer

the wind is too strong

the wind is not strong enough

A Breaking Word

There's that part
after Basho writes
old still pond
of pressing a fingerprint into wet clay

this was when Rikyu
was making tea bowls
in an ash kiln
letting the fire burn their uneven glaze

I'm passing through three hundred years
trying to measure and measure again
what is a pond
a frog
that emptiness

sound of water says Hass
plop says Watts
kerplunk says Ginsberg

this is when nothing became something:

when Rikyu
was cutting down all the flowers
that filled the trestle
to put one single stem
in a small, chunky vase

Transmission

From the darkness and the fireflies, he calls me
mapless, unguided, night walker

counting lady bug shells, dandelion seeds

I pull nights from clear blue day to dark blue
to that heavy blue when there's still a little light in the sky
and the trees are dark against it

dragonfly to dragonfly
river frog to mulch
peony to peony
snap pea to lily
lily to azalea

I am hiding in those trees
on a branch in the sway with the wind
I am not holding on as much as balancing

he calls me the night traveler
the angel breather
he calls me the one who has not come home

Bonenkai

The kite we were flying this morning
is now tangled in a midwinter tree

my soul is filled with sausages and layer cake
tv shows and breaking news

a bonenkai is a party to forget the year
that's a lot of drinking he says

wish I'd drank the whiskey straight
wish I could make our bodies like a sail
threadbare and sunburnt

the warrior painted across our kite
is looking out
somewhere between brave and defeated

put your ass on the table he says

to mean show your cards
play the game
meet my eyes

the kite dived low and caught on a branch
I tried to guide it away
but there were other branches and then the wind

JOSEPH LEASE

Night

Lullaby, going to die, can't
explain a thing, forgets what it tastes
like, think of smoke, history, light rain
covers a field, prayer covers a street,
think of Heaven (remember to spell that
correctly), keep going for a day or a week or
twenty-five years,

what do you

think it is,

what

do you

think



Metamorphosis | **Vladimir Kush**



Music of the Woods | **Vladimir Kush**



Current | Vladimir Kush



Book of Books | **Vladimir Kush**



Departure of the Winged Ship | **Vladimir Kush**



Breach | Vladimir Kush

ANTHONY HAWLEY

Productive Suffix

at night
convergence

what doesn't
continue to drain

tirade
of water

is anywhere a sense of
more than right here

fixed dimness

the problem of
appearance

is was i ever

trained to
live in places

craving
proof

past
present

tense

am
i

to
remember

always
missing

letters
don't

spell
names

to what end
wind

insists
future
perfect

will
a search
say
where was
was

mail &
forgetfulness
keep

steering me

in as much as
remembrance

is any sky

the din
of omission

irreparable echo

loud
the rain

with wanting

promenade
of water

wiring

together

a border of us

what
distances
don't
gather

unsettled
nearness

bending over
backwards
a how to

brocades
of
water

here is not
much to show for

view out
over

a prior
state

i think i can
remember
seeing

fairly often
enough

when was
anywhere
not foreign
language

something about
unflinchingly

dispersed

ever the furtive
zones

birds eat
birds

i climb
back

to memories
in fountains

masquerade
of water

what little
percentage
of us

is more than holes

all that
in shape
comes
to be us

civility and such

intimate
drainage

i think i am
a man i am
picturing

in detours

getting away from where
I will probably have to
go back to being
any which way

pitch
perfect

eclipse

far is
the eye

can breach

the pain
of fiction

past maps

past parallel
longing

insist

a letting
in of shadow

lapse
keeps

sewn in
absence

circling back

why the
want
to fill

in continued
sinkhole

the body
gains

plain old
nowhere

trembling
implication

an
us in
margins

dear daughter of
nothing being
dreamed fits us

move
figured
ground

into

what
residue
to claim

space of
paradise

empties us
out in wrecks

exasperate
the singular

collapsible
flesh

to this day

intermittent
gulps

shape
into another

a bit of missing



La Perle qui Structure les Plans de ta Propre Vision | **Jean-Noel Chazelle**
Mary and Bob Decelles Collection, 8' x 4', Acrylic on Acrylic



L'oeil du Serpent, le Corps Invisible | Jean-Noel Chazelle
Mary and Bob Decelles Collection, 8' x 4', Acrylic on Acrylic

SEVERO JOAQUIN GRANADOS

Translations by James Graham

Who Are You Anyway?

from NeoYorkino: The New York Stories

A Polaco Mafioso, for starters....

I had been going to the bodega on Myrtle Avenue for several months and they had been kind enough to give me credit when things got tight—something that happens every few weeks—and where we tried to understand each other despite the barrier of a shared language. They were Dominicans, card-carrying members of the Spanish brotherhood. I had given up trying to understand the crazy bursts of enthusiasm they tricked into language, syncopated improvisations that jumped all over the Castilian tongue like it was a trampoline. For my part I went to school in England and have lived around for a few years, so my Spanish sometimes arrives in baggage with bright stickers from far away cities on it. We ended up speaking a language of our own invention, Spanish and English and fifteen dollars credit for three days until the check cleared, which isn't too difficult to understand, although I had to make it clear that a steady stream of cigarettes was part of the bargain, without deducting from the total amount of credit. (Because I am, after all, a European.) This was more than most of their clients demanded, when they managed the courage or belligerence—I had seen the trick pulled off with real skill—to beg a small supply of articles in advance. And they put up with my demands, I'm not sure why.

“So what's it going to be this time, güero? What are you hungry for now? How much money do you need?”

The truth was that I was having a hard time coming up with the money to pay what I already owed them from before. I could see that it was beginning to wear: they gave me the evil eye when I went straight to the back of the store and started picking things out without talking to them first. Did I win the lottery? If I had I wasn't whistling out loud about it.

I'd gotten to know most of the family—fourteen boys in all, three sisters, a steady supply of mouse-eyed kittens, no parents that I ever saw—they must have been busy at home. The proprietors, the oldest sons in their twenties and early thirties, knew almost nothing about me except that I was a regular; they trusted me in the short run. I assumed they knew I was Spanish, though Spain, apart from its symbolic prospects, was as far away as Calcutta or the Soviet Union. Still I was taken back when the oldest brother leaned over the counter and barked at me in the Cha-Cha-Cha Castilian of the Cosmic Race, “Don't lie and don't make me wait to get my money, Ok Polaco?” The oldest one could be kind of hard at times in a pleasantly irritating sort of way.

“What’s this with the ‘Polaco?’”

“What’s the matter with you, anyway?” the older brother asked.

“No soy Polaco.”

“You’re not a Polack?”

“Whaddya think?”

“You’re not American.”

“Certo, amico. For sure . . . but maybe I should have been born here.” I wanted to show I could hold my own.

Like a card player dropping his trump, he gave me a look that meant he had me: “Americans don’t speak Spanish.” He was sure he’d won the debate with that unassailable truth.

“Polacks do?” I asked.

“Some.”

“Some who?”

“The lost ones who come in stores like this.”

“But how do you know they’re Polacks?”

“I can hear them talking among themselves...” What followed was a brief and no doubt superficial tour of the linguistic beauties of that difficult language, clicking c, w, s, and czs piling up like acrobats on the back of a testy elephant.

“But why do they do it?” I asked, enchanted.

“So the Russians won’t know they’re Polish...”

“The Russians?”

“The Russians and everyone else who hates them...”

“And you think I’m Polish, even though you’ve never heard me speak it?”

“Why not?”

“Do I look it?”

“Of course you do. Why do you think I said it?”

I confess I was a bit astonished. There seemed no way out of the labyrinth: my identity had become a mystery, a conjecture. I grabbed the pack of cigarettes and started to leave the store when I noticed that the stock boys were hanging around listening to our conversation with a few of their pals.

“So, muchachos, what do you think I am?” I asked them in Spanish.

They smiled big guilty smiles and kept staring at the floor as if they hadn’t heard a word. The stock-boys were Mexican and the others were a ragtag bunch of Guatemalans, Poblanos and Dominicans from the Caribbean diaspora.

“Well, you’re not who you say you are, that’s for sure,” one of them mumbled while combing the floor for cockroaches.

“Ah-ha.”

“You see—I told you,” the owner put in. There was a murmur of voices.

“Maybe you are a Spaniard like you say.”

“Probably a German.”

“You could be a Russian.”

“Or maricón,” one in the crowd snickered.

“Of course, of course,” I said, cracking up from the absurdity of it all. “Or I could be Cristobal Colon.”

“Who’s that?” the youngest stock boy asked with an innocent face I was simply too old to believe.

“A man who’ll never get credit around here.”

The brother was infuriated. “You get plenty credit, mafioso. No complain!”

“Ok, Ok—”

“And stop it! If you’re not Polaco, then who are you?”

“Of course I could be Einstein or Brecht, or anyone you like!” This was way over their heads—

“Marleen Monrow—”

“But why not Colon?” I was begging. “Oh, you’re somebody alright, but you’re not as bad as he was,” Octavio the Mexican put in. You could tell he had been listening. Those lazy eyes that flickered around the room were just camouflage.

“Stop it! If you’re not Polaco, then what are you?”

“What am I?” I leaned against the counter, faking it.

“You’re a Polack, I told you before!” The owner nearly tore off my ear with that one.

“Well why not—”

“Whaddya mean, why not! You are who you are!”

“Am I? Who’s that?”

On another visit it went like this:

“So you’re a Russian.”

“A Russian? How am I a Russian?”

“Look at you.”

“I am? How can I be? Last time I was...”

“You either are or you aren’t.”

“Well, I ain’t.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’re not American, and you don’t even say it right!”

“Don’t say what right?”

“Ayeen’t”—he mocked me.

“Ain’t—like that—maybe where you come from,” I said and laughed.

“No—where you come from, wherever that is.” As serious as ever.

We could have gone on like that for hours. But I had to shove off from Ellis Island, where I got coffee, cigarettes and a couple of spare identities, good for future use.

And bless them, they never asked me for my ID.

There are approximately 200 statues of Columbus in New York City, not to mention the streets and buildings named after him. It struck me after a short while that New Yorkers believe, against all the evidence, that Columbus discovered New York, that he

retired here after his voyages, bought a condo on the Upper West Side, and settled down to write his memoirs. I decided to do my bit to educate the natives. It was a mistake.

Of the well-known statues in Manhattan, the two most famous are near or in Central Park. One is located in the center of Columbus Circle and was for my purposes, of no use. It is in the middle of traffic and I would have had to dodge lost motorists and petulant cabbies all day long, plus there was a troublemaker in a nearby apartment tower who was raining down water balloons every so often. I took up residence in front of the Columbus statue at the entrance to the Mall, the grand pedestrian walkway in the park that leads to Bethesda Fountain. It was a perfectly lovely location. I pressed the Spanish Embassy into contributing the money for a costume, memorized a few of Columbus's long letters to Ferdinand and Isabella, and passed a few afternoons pretending to be someone else.

In return I received nothing but abuse, which came in two distinct forms. One came from both residents and visitors to the city who insisted I had my facts wrong. Columbus was not Spanish. He was Italian, Turkish, Greek, Portuguese, Lebanese or Australian—but he was not Spanish. They were the ones who put up the money for the trip, that's all, and only after making him wait for years and years because they could not bring themselves to trust an outsider. Wasn't it glaringly obvious?

The other protest against my presence came from those who did not share my enthusiasm for Columbus's discoveries. My impersonations were timed for the four hundredth anniversary of CC's arrival, and everyone naturally had an opinion about the man and his works. Those who knew little held fast to the belief that he was nothing more than a colonialist who left terror, slavery and oppression in his wake. He was the most evil man of all times. I attempted to engage in rational discourse with the agitators who began to gather at the base of the statue, trying to present a different point of view, to separate cause from effect, but it was hopeless. I soon had a motley party of American Indians (or so they claimed) from Jackson Heights, in full regalia, surrounding the statue, handing out fliers and beating on drums whenever I tried to recite one of the letters I had taken such pains to memorize.

Fortunately I was adopted by various Italian American civic groups, who invited me to speak at their dinners and other festive occasions. The food was quite good and I even made the acquaintance of a woman who later became a girlfriend. Nevertheless, I was under strict orders to remain silent whenever the issue of Columbus's nationality came up. He was, my hosts said, without doubt, Italian, from Genoa, which, while I confess that it is widely believed, is easily disproved. I did my best.

“I am a Spaniard, of modest descent, a son of Castile...”

I left the last dinner under a hail of ripe tomatoes, and was advised to stay away from Columbus statues, squares, circles and boulevards if I wanted to continue to live happily ever after in New York. I decided to follow the man's advice—he had me up against a wall, with his hand around my neck—for Columbus's sake, if not my own.

The End

Waking Up and Falling Down in Brooklyn
from NeoYorkino: The New York Stories

Beautiful to wake up in Brooklyn, beautiful to stumble into consciousness amid indifferent accommodations lacking the fastidious collection of personal objects carefully arranged nearby; beautiful to be disoriented, to find myself in any bed not my own; view out a different window miraculous (cement wall, alley, vacant lot), sheets with strange patterns on them, stains from other parties, a different ceiling, different company.

(Beautiful to wake up in Brooklyn—which I believe is an Indian name, or perhaps a Dutch version of an Indian name, although I have heard Italians in Naples call it Breuklinu...)

Like everyone else I sleep in the Universal Bed, where all lie down and drift on intercontinental flights of brief duration.

I passed out last night on the couch in the little apartment on Myrtle Avenue, on the ground floor, fully clothed, a newspaper covering my face, a book fallen to the floor beside me.

I don't remember my dreams but I remember waking up.

It is hardly unusual to dream of making love to the entire neighborhood: I mean the various individuals you're attracted to, strangers and friends at close quarters. Everyone does it as a kind of revenge upon the over-organized world and its empty shell, fleeting temptations acting themselves out through you. Still, dreams don't really matter, but living.

If I try to tell you how I woke up I'd say I felt intensely bright, as if without moving I were the center of movement, a gyre tossed absentmindedly onto the floor. I was in the middle of something, I don't know what. I was nowhere near my own bed and that was enough. Floating in a far-off region the solitary cannot enter, I rose up skyscrapers on super-sensible elevators ready to fall through the whoosh of an open door and perish in the void.

Whose bed am I in now? It is dark and there are voices all around me. I know I set nothing in motion, and yet everything happens around me: in the center of life the caroling cry of someone else's ecstasy is opening like a flower where I lie in a radiant stupor, my arms and legs overflowing the ends of the couch.

One eye half-opened, I tried to remember with whom I had gone to bed; no one, so far as I could remember. The sounds began to take on shape and inflections.

They were close by, very clear and insistent. I had to do something to find out, but what? If it's an illusion, I don't want to destroy it . . . I lay there counting my chances which numbered three and folded neatly back in on themselves. How to explain this fabulous harmonium of sexual heat all around me? I had no idea. But I wasn't thinking: I had become an enormous ear. A woman screamed. Should I rescue her? I lay as still as a man pinned to the bottom of the sea.

The voices left no doubt now: two women were singing miniature arias of untempered bliss while an equal number of men banged the orchestral percussion with slow unwavering beats, playing quietly at first, like fog in heavy rubber boots. They increased the tempo depending on the intensity of the aria. Everything began to build, to rise up.

Perhaps I was being reborn in Dante's *Paradiso*, as scored by Ligeti. That would be tremendous, and kind—but even in the middle of my dream I doubted it a little.

Everywhere around me, in the apartments above and below, people were waking up. The orchestra was going full force, biting and screaming and laying skin against skin. I was riding the rude instant of my birth, that is to say my conception, the moment I entered the world, swimming in the physical current of my awakening—in stereo.

The pleasures of sex are what create us, by killing us off: for an hour or more we become someone else. So to watch or just listen? I was sitting on someone else's nearly-arrived bliss: malicious peep, lazy voyeur, an enormous grin plastered on my half-asleep mug. I still had no name for what was happening to me as these strangers carried me up the mountain. But I was only too happy to float above the rhythmic innuendoes and incestuous grind of one beast in a hurry to crawl inside another one's skin.

This is the beat-up harmonium of infinite tenderness, as close to truth as we will ever come without a mask; the groan box upstairs is going full force, pumping out sighs, screams, beautiful bird-like trills, vowels and barbed syllables sounding as if they were being dragged out between the teeth, the sounds repeating, pouring through the walls like the steady hum of a lathe, or a man busy sawing wood: they are grinding time itself into an infinity of tiny pieces, sparkling grains of sand. For some reason it makes me think of a knife grinder when the wheel spins and the blade is pressed close shooting sparks and the dry taste of fire.

Viewed from close up, it's the strangest thing in the world: protoplasmic, animal, savage and civilized. A necessity and a game. I can't stand all those gyrations, the woman on TV was always saying. Who were my neighbors exactly? I was free to imagine them as I lay there. I may have seen one in the hallway on the way in. Tall, black, with an incredible coif of hair painstakingly created by some beast of prodigious hoardings: curls, nests, knots. I saw her for an instant perhaps. But my lack of particulars wasn't going to restrain my imagination. I can stand the gyrations.

They're taking a break upstairs, a pause between volleys. But downstairs—furious, catastrophic, demonic—banshees.

Where are we going? Deep inside all the way in. Where is that? Inside a cave, in the dark where I have no face. Or else outside in the dark, to stand in the yard and yell, to stand naked and sing insanely beneath the moon which is causing our madness, to howl while hauling wood to the fire.

Silence. My pulse is quickening, I roll over. What is this? Silence? Where is

all the racket coming from and why has it stopped? Am I making it all up? I must be insane. I've lost control over my infinitely small corner of the universe. Where am I? Am I waking up where I went to sleep? How could I not? Months of solitude and detachment have finally gotten to me, dried me out like a mortified spider hanging in some stranger's apartment.

The two couples (I knew that much now) relieved me of my uncertainties. They started in again, from here to the final push, over the limit of ecstasy while I sat like a fat piece of ham wedged between them. I want to climb out the window to go up or down the fire escape to get a better look. Hello hello may I come in? Very good. How is it going, can I sit down? No, fine, absolutely don't bother, I'll just sit here, won't say a word. Can I get either of you some water? Thanks.

They continued going at it in their separate beds, one directly above me one below all of us twenty feet apart at most, everyone hell-bent on the finale, the race to the edge of the mountain and the plunge off the cliff. I was awake enough now to know where I was: half-asleep on a borrowed mattress, locked in a sensorium of shouts and unbearable pleadings, a prisoner his ear between bars listening to the next cell beg the warden for his life. And very happy to do so, I may as well confess.

The two couples exploded in thirty seconds of each other in a great vocal pandemonium full of cymbals and flesh trumpets, testimonies thick with terrible declarations about an absolutely imminent God. (Many are the marvels of the creator in this new world, not the least of which is his constant appearance, whereas he can scarcely be dragged into showing up in Europe, even for a full scale crusade.) I leapt from the couch and bellowed the call of a mischievous bird of prey, a lonely buzzard who hides in dark caves and molests people's pleasures. My cry went unanswered . . . I heard footsteps above me and the sound of running water, a hand on the faucet and a pot of water boiling, a radio flipped on and blaring, more footsteps, deep laughter the kind that seeps out of the walls . . . I spun around on my heels and with perfect aim nailed my makeshift mattress, my feet on the pillow, and fell into a dark sleep without entrances or voices.

The End

Theory and Practice of Crowds
from NeoYorkino: The New York Stories

The people stood stock still, as if some peculiar radio signal was telling them not to move. They were dressed for the unpredictable fall weather and that made it even harder to slip through. I had some place else to be but what of it: the narrow, low ceilinged passageway leading from one subway line to another wasn't going anywhere. I began asking people what was going on.

"I have no idea," "I heard something about _____," "They said _____ on the public address." I heard ten variations on the theme.

I was going to push my way through. I begged forgiveness about a hundred times and was almost to the foot of the stairs on the other end of the tunnel. Ten or fifteen minutes had gone by and people were still standing in the same spot. A woman standing near me made a little room for herself on the stairs, sat down and took off her shoes.

"I'd kill somebody for a cigarette right now."

"Do you have any idea what happened?" I asked her.

"I heard somebody jumped, that's what," she said. She was smiling.

The crowd around us had an immediate reaction to what she had said. Half the crowd chuckled and the other half knitted their brows and gave the woman stern looks, which she utterly ignored.

Five minutes later and I had made it as far as the third step. There was a cop at the head of the stairs holding people back but he had nothing new to say. He was as in the dark as we were.

2.

They start coming in at 7:30 or so. The ones coming then are in no hurry, really, nothing compared to those who come after. From 8 AM onwards it is a gauntlet. If you really want to experience something terrifying, go stand in the ocean of commuters as they pour out of Penn Station at 8:30 in the morning. Better yet, pick a spot and then walk against the crowd.

Everywhere in the world has its rush hour but this one overwhelms the opposition, like a brutal, indifferent shove from a linebacker. They get going in Paris but the numbers are smaller and too many people absolutely refuse to partake, they just walk at their own speed and ignore everyone else. In New York it is a mania. The commuters' eyes are popping out and their feet are on remote control. They have to make it to the office on time. A good number have the face of killers who have convinced themselves of the necessity of a little collateral damage. Sometimes I stood among them and begged change just so I could feel their contempt, the waves of hatred pouring off them. I did not need the change. The experience was exhilarating.

It is the same thing in the afternoon from four or four-thirty onwards. By

six it is an absolute frenzy. All the office workers, the secretaries and of course the managers, they are the worst, the ones who stayed late in service of the cause, who are determined to make the last rush hour train. After that the railroad runs every hour, and they are screwed. So they are flying down Seventh Avenue, spilling off the sidewalks and taking over the street. There is a moment when the crowd becomes so intense, the men running, the secretaries jogging in their sneakers towards the entrance on Thirty Fourth Street that they take over the Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street and all traffic comes to a halt. The light is red and green and it hardly matters. It has a different feel to it than the morning, This is the one moment in the day when the workers disobey the rules, and just go balls out. They have to catch the train and no one is going to stop them. In the morning they race to their punishment, in the evening they race back home to escape thinking about it.

It is a world they had no part of inventing, and of course they cannot be blamed for anything.

Stand in the middle of Thirty-Fourth Street at that moment and hand out fliers or ask for spare change. Try taking an opinion poll, or announce Jesus' return in a brave voice, speak of the coming revolution or announce a terrific sale on fashionable shoes. Be prepared to duck.

3.

Then the cop gave us a signal, and told us we could go. But people kept standing there. The cop never raised his voice, in fact he had more or less just waved his arm at us. A few people took off but for a second everyone else hesitated. They awaited definitive word, a statement of some sort. Some would have liked an explanation.

"We can go?" They asked the officer at the head of the stairs.

"You can go," he said in a genial, velvety voice, as if he were bestowing a benediction at the end of mass.

No one, myself included, ever found out what had happened.

4.

The people at a museum are different. They are walking, moving, going somewhere, of course—but differently, than say a crowd going in to a church or a Broadway show.

If you get pleasure out of observing crowds, you can identify who likes to go where they are going. The crowd for a Broadway show is expectant going in and happy coming out, carefree or perhaps a little careless. A museum is more on the side of Official Culture and for some that means betterment, duty, obligation.

I like to stand out in front of the Metropolitan on Fifth and observe people. Watching the groups of people walking up the stairs you can immediately parse whose idea it was to go to the museum, the ones who are just tagging along, and the one who has no choice in the matter.

I used to watch a seventy year old photographer skip up the steps to the museum. Lucky fella.

Everybody shows intensity and concentration in a different way. You can see when a painting clicks for a person by the way they stand. The crowds are swirling around a single painting but everyone sees it differently.

I confess I have never gotten the point of art en masse. Staring at a painting is a solitary journey. Even the hunters ducking into a cave to get out of inclement weather must have taken different messages from the cave paintings in Lascaux and Altamira.

I would not be opposed to breaking up museums entirely and spreading the statues around to pool halls, office buildings, football fields and courtrooms.

And yet, here we are, it's the modern world. If today is the last day of a show, and you really want to see a certain painting one more time because it sends shivers down your spine, you have no choice.

Not long ago the Metropolitan was packed on a Sunday afternoon. It was the last day for a collection of German expressionist painters. I was quite familiar with one of them, in as much as he had arrived in New York from Berlin without a cent, and he left many paintings in many people's apartments. He traded them for dinner, I think. And since I have traded things for dinner from time to time, I have seen a number of his paintings. They are very witty, and furious, too. So I wanted to see his work again that Sunday.

The place was absolutely packed. Someone had written in the papers that you must see it, and the cultured types took their orders. "I don't know why I've been putting it off. I have to go."

It was hard to see Grosz's paintings, the crowd was so numerous.

Watching it as it moved like a cumulo-nimbus from painting to painting, I observed the different levels of intensity among the chaperones, the enthusiasts, the connoisseurs, the ones who stared blankly at information on the wall, those with a taste for subtlety and those who prefer a quick thrill.

In studying crowds, the first serious step is to stop looking at faces. One must learn to decipher everything from the body, from an arm or a hip. A pose should be enough to tell you everything.

At first, it was very hard for me to stop observing faces. Our minds are absolutely geared to recognize them. If we want to ascertain another's disposition towards us, we look at the face. We see faces in rocks, trees, clouds, color patterns and two or three strokes of a brush.

There were so many people there, and it was impossible to see the paintings so I decided to make use of it. I began to look at hips, and the way this now faceless person moves. The hips are very important: the whole family history is there. And the shoulders: everything in the person's mental state is there. Are they broad shouldered or narrow, are they slumped, stooped, or thrust back? Are they relaxed, or are they knitted together with tension? There were many varieties of these headless creatures

all around me.

Furthermore, as soon I stopped letting the face dominate my perceptions, I knew immediately how this person would respond if I were to approach them. Years ago, I used to pick up girls in museums. But I had other things in mind now.

The face should only be taken as the final ingredient in a portrait, much as Picasso quickly added Gertrude Stein's face to the painting he had labored over for several months. And it should be added to the portrait with some skepticism. The face is all too often propaganda; the body is truth. At least for most people.

I hardly got a look at the paintings but I came away from the museum a richer man.

\$147.00 richer to be precise.

5.

Over the sixty minutes after ten p.m., when the crowds begin to surge out of the theaters in Times Square, the sidewalk can no longer contain the large numbers of people, and they spill off into the gutters and the lanes reserved for the horses and finally, with no trepidation at all, like a churning river jumping its banks, into the street itself.

In fact, the mass of people moving on the sidewalk originate in three different species: the tourists from out of town, in the city for four or five days of sightseeing; people from the boroughs, too poor to see a show but ready to walk around in the evening, have their photo taken with their girlfriend, and gawk at the hustlers and the tourists; and the people leaving or going to work in the skyscrapers that enclose Times Square on all sides. The three species rub shoulders, walk by each other, stop for a light at the same corner but they never come into contact. They are like three distinct liquids in the same bottle which make the most complex patterns imaginable without ever combining and forming some new element. You might ask: Why shouldn't they mix? That's what New York is all about, isn't it? But it never happens, unless by mistake, and frequently a tragic mistake at that. It is constitutionally impossible, however much the rest of the country may claim to love the city since the attacks.

It is a pickpocket's paradise. You don't need the old newspaper trick, you don't have to try to hustle the poor marks off to some dubious sex show, you simply have to have fast hands and a face that will not betray you. And a quick eye for the police.

(As for those sex shows, they hardly exist any more. And who would go to see them? Simply look at the face of the tourists when the barker on the corner of 47th Street announces, "Free Stand-Up Comedy Show, just two blocks away!" The tourists look at him dubiously, put their heads down, and continue in a straight line to their hotel.)

In the hour after ten it is almost too crowded for the professionals to operate; there are no pockets of air, no means of escape. The whole area is flooded with cops, whose job it is to assure that New York keeps its good name in the nation's newspapers.

Plenty of hustlers work the side streets, or wait until the numbers thin out in an hour or so.

There was a building on the corner of 47th and Broadway that was for several years slated for demolition. It was mainly known for its restaurant, part of a famous national chain, one that seemed to broadcast its quintessentially American nature from the very heart of Times Square, which, for many years, was regarded as the absolute nadir of existence by a good many Americans. And perhaps this restaurant deserved its reputation, in as much as it wholesomely relived tourists' wallets of eight or nine dollars for a breakfast that could be had for three two blocks away. In any case, this building derived its fame, in most people's mind, from that establishment, although it had a history that preceded the restaurant by many years.

For at least a few of those years it was where a small gang of pickpockets met up before the night's labor, reconnoitering to divide the turf, to help each other out, to fraternize. The second and third floors, above the restaurant, were used, until the very last instant, as a rehearsal hall for shows. The building was full of rooms, spacious, well-configured rooms where an entire company could gather to go over musical numbers, or have tryouts. (Shows have to rehearse before they book a theater, if they ever get that far.) It wasn't hard to gain admittance, what with the large groups of people regularly trouping up and down the stairs. You simply had to blend in with the people heading up, and then split off and claim a little space for yourself and your buddies. The first thing I always did was walk around the place, up and down the stairs, stick my head into various rooms and take in the shows of tomorrow, the shows of never-to-be. Each room was sure to have a piano, so there was always lots of noise and singing going on. Then I looked for an empty room, one of the smaller, less favored ballrooms, took a seat with my cup of coffee, and waited.

The building itself was in a sad state of repair. Not only were the stairways on their last legs, creaking when anyone walked on them and frequently shifting dramatically when a group of six or more piled on, but most of the windows in the rehearsal studios were gone. What should have been the eyes of the building were instead covered with enormous patches made out of heavy black plastic. Whoever had done the job had failed to stretch the material tightly, and whenever the wind blew, or the building needed to let out some air, the "eye patches" flew in or out with a loud clap. It was very unnerving. In the winter, when everything I'm telling you takes place, the wind really rips around Times Square, and every few minutes the two or four windows in the room you were in slammed in and then out, and you felt that God himself was about to make an entrance. I don't know how it was for the theater companies to have God slap his thigh, or fart, in the middle of a number but the Council of the Elect found it disconcerting at first. Until it became a test of will power, of our skill as artists, not to let it distract us.

Because that is what we called ourselves, we merry bunch of thieves. I was a part-time member of the group, having a few other interests and responsibilities, as did many of the others. I joined them every few evenings because they were an

interesting bunch and their conversation was never dull.

The Council was comprised of six principal members, if I include myself, who showed up on a more or less regular basis. There was, besides me, Stevie, Ryan, a tall, very young Russian whose name I have forgotten if I ever knew it, Ray, and Pietro. It was a different sort of group, in that we each worked in our own way, towards our own ends. It's true there was a fair amount of shop talk, and when we did get down to details we compared notes, although many times this consisted of bull sessions that began with, "You should have seen the mess I got myself in last night."

Like any halfway decent magicians, our art consisted principally in directing our audience to look one way while the action was taking place somewhere else. This is the essential part of the art, subject to a hundred variations. But there is no point, really, to saying that there is one way to get a wallet out of a pants pocket. That particular skill depends upon the artist.

As to how each of us had arrived at this occupation, we rarely talked about it.

We all had our separate routes and no one was crying about it. As for morality—who we would or would not rob—apart from spreading the usual vicious gossip about each other, we tried not to stick our noses in the other guy's business.

Pietro, the most conservative member of the group, the one classically trained member of the Council, was a tight little character, and he was adamant that you did not move while you were on the look out for a mark. You choose your spot, whether it was on the corner or at the counter of a coffee shop, and you worked from there until the moment the person appeared. And they were sure to appear. One simply had to wait, and keep one's eyes open. That was, he said, the most difficult part, professionally speaking. Not to become comfortable, or listless, or to write off the night as a no-go, but to keep one's eyes peeled for the right person with just the right mixture of carelessness, openness and curiosity. A few words, or none at all, and the job was done. The mark never knew what happened, and in fact Pietro could go back to some haunts again and again because he moved so frugally, so effortlessly, no one attributed the crime to him.

When I say that he was tight, I don't mean it disparagingly at all. There was none of the boyo about him. He was completely contained within his body. He knew who he was, and what he was about, and he set to it. Later on he could relax and unwind, although none of us ever saw it.

He always carried a book with him, a thin volume, and as he sat in a cafe or leaned against the wall of a building, he gave the most perfect performance of a man absorbed by what he was reading. But I don't believe he read the book at all. Or maybe he was reading the same page over and over? He was a very thorough man.

You worked it might be called elegantly, you did the job with a minimum of exertion and you always had a good idea where your next spot was going to be, because you had to move quickly.

If the staff at the bar or at the corner news stand did suspect something, they

became intrigued and waited to watch him in action, which, even when they saw it happen right in front of their faces, they were never absolutely sure of it. Oh, they knew alright but.... Sometimes the cashier or a girl at the bar fell for him, and let him work the joint. She was living a little, through him. Of course, he was not about to hang around the same place all the time; he had plenty of “spots” indoors and out. If you asked him, everything he did he did “with permission.”

When we asked Pietro how the night before had been, he would simply say, “They came to me,” with a devious smile on his face.

And why should he tell us anything else, anything more? To go further was to begin to brag, to fabricate. The whole concept of honor among thieves is a joke. We would have stolen each other’s wallets but we knew they were empty.

We were curious about each other, of course. We asked Pietro what route he’d taken from Torino to New York; we knew he was married and then divorced, that he went out with a crazy chick who liked to stick her head out the window of the subway car, that he had a hard time controlling her and that he painted in his spare time to keep a lid on things. We knew that he couldn’t resist the lure of the streets. None of us could. The street was our weakness, our sin, our peccadillo. To go any further was to enter the terrain of guilt, something we all swore up and down we never felt. We were vultures, if you want to put a name on it but none of us, as far as I could tell, were prone to unnecessary violence. Whatever of that there was in us we kept bottled up inside. It just made for complications. Speaking for myself, I only took money from those who never really missed it.

It was one of our principles that each night was absolutely *sui generis*. One night did not guarantee another, they didn’t look anything alike. But Pietro was different.

His nights were steady. He went out every night, but he never had the spectacular success we sometimes did. Nor the spectacular failures.

Pietro’s methods were anathema to Stevie. He was a rambler. Taller than Pietro, as dark as Pietro was white, both had compact frames owing to their constant cycling around town. (They both confessed to feeling trapped on the subway because there was no way out.)

Stevie was forty, a veteran, a smooth talker—the opposite of Pietro—and in fact, we could never get him to shut up. We missed more than one night on the street thanks to his stories of conquests in Curzon, Singapore, Taipei, you name it. Once he got going . . . and that too was part of his skill. Pietro, born in the mountains outside Torino, was cautious, and more inclined to look at the sky to check on the changing state of the weather than to say anything. (He was probably thinking: “If they bring out their raincoats, the jig is up for today.”) And then you started looking at the sky, too, and thought, yes, there is a good chance it will rain, and presto! your wallet was gone.

Stevie strolled around, mingling among the people, seemingly busy with his own concerns, sauntering around and striking up conversations here and there, posing

as a man from out of town but one who came to the city on a regular basis. He attached himself to a group, a family or a social outing, a bunch of drinking buddies.

His army years came in handy. He could relate, strike up a bond, with the men, of course, but with the ladies . . . pow! Dark chocolate, with North African features and a wiry build, he was dynamite. If only he had shut up from time to time, he would have been a millionaire. It was his downfall on a number of jobs: he refused to make a clean getaway because he hadn't finished a story with one or another member of the party.

He, of course, disagreed. "I'd be a poor man, indeed, if I couldn't talk. In fact, I talk to obscure what I'm up to and..."

As for the police, let the marks describe him to the police to their heart's content. They had no idea how to produce a likeness of the man. A stocky black thug they could reproduce endlessly but not someone like Stevie. They couldn't see him in broad daylight, much less late at night, because as a type he didn't exist. The police had more pressing concerns than worrying about a man who had befriended a group of tourists, took them to a bar or a club and bought them a round of drinks, the tourists sometime later realizing that a few of their wallets were missing. Their descriptions were vague at best, and usually contradictory.

"Well, I didn't want to rouse any unnecessary suspicions," he said. "I never want them even to consider me a suspect, and I can't really do that if I just up and disappear. I mean, that would be too obvious, wouldn't it? Way too. Not to mention utterly lacking in . . . what's the right word? Tact, maybe that's it." He was smiling, riding a riff.

Another of Stevie's specialties was his ability to out-drink whatever group he attached himself to. No matter how they put it away, he kept up, or at least appeared to, and there always came the moment when everyone was terribly soused (Stevie, too, evidently) and wouldn't it be a good idea to go somewhere and have some real fun, you know, the kind New York offers behind closed doors. "Didn't you say something about that, Stevie? Come on, 'fess up, I bet you know lots of places like that." One of the boys poked him in the ribs. The women made eyes at him. "Yes, you know... What about that Plato's Place?" They were asking about a sex club that had closed its doors a quarter of a century ago. Well, what of it? "You've been to places like that, I'm sure."

Or perhaps the men were heading off to the pisser to let go of the beer, and the subject would come up. And then, "Jesus Christ, we were jumped back there! They came out of nowhere!" And Stevie was standing right there with them, with blood pouring out of his lip. That was yet another of his tricks, giving himself a split lip. (Not to mention piling on two drunks without them getting wise. Army martial arts training came in very handy sometimes.) "Buncha guys jumped us when we were out in the alley pissing, Helen."

And Stevie would reluctantly say it was time for him to go.

We looked at him, half believing him, half wondering what part was

exaggerated just a wee bit, but mainly asking ourselves how he managed to pull it off.

We could understand parts but.... “The drummer initiates the trance, yet he alone does not succumb to it.’ Old Haitian proverb. Did I ever tell you about the time I was down there?”

Perhaps his most famous coup was the time he took the two wobbly couples downtown in a cab, he in the back seat in the middle between the two ladies, their husbands boisterous and thoroughly inebriated and perhaps not entirely comfortable with their woman falling all over a good looking black man in the back of the taxi but what the heck, it’s New York and he’s taking us downtown to some sort of show. A sexcapade. And when they got out of the cab, Jaime shrugged at the husbands as if to say, I couldn’t keep ‘em off me.

“Let me pay for the cab,” he said gamely. He did, and then he helped the two couples get up onto the sidewalk, and walked them over to the club, got them inside and quickly departed. Half an hour later when they were finishing their first or second round brought to them by the 2/3s naked woman in the strip club, they realized that not one of them had their wallets. Not one. Not in their coat pockets, not in their purses.

Stevie claimed he had done it all while they were riding in the cab.

“The guy in the front seat, too, the one sitting next to the driver? Him, too?”

We roared with disbelief. “Come on, man.”

After some prodding by the rest of us, Stevie allowed as to how maybe he had gotten that one helping the poor sot up onto the sidewalk.

“Those cobblestones in the West Village are really treacherous, you know,” Jaime said, a comedian’s concern etched on his face. “Just try walking on them if you haven’t done it before. You get your foot twisted between two of those old bricks, down you go. I think I got the wallet halfway out as we were getting into the cab and then it sort of fell into my hands later, when we were negotiating the cobblestones. What I mean to say is....”

“Enough, Stevie! Please!”

“Shut up already!”

“Stevie has never been introduced to the basic laws of physics,” Pietro would drolly put in.

“And he intends to keep it that way for as long as he can,” Ryan added before Stevie could wind up again.

“It’s better if I don’t know, really,” he said in his defense. “It would just cramp my style.” And then went back to explaining how he did it, over our howls. We were clutching our stomachs to keep from falling over.

One thing for certain: when we came in at the beginning of the night and saw Stevie had a split lip that was healing up, we’d known he’d been busy the night before.

I sat there in one of the rooms by myself, because I came on the early side, even

though there was no established time per se. But I usually showed up first. I sat there blowing on my coffee and listening to the eye patches going Thump, Thump, Thumpa-Thump-Thump! While piano music drifted up from the floor below, the chorus started belting out a number, with the black plastic accompanying the ensemble all the way through. Ryan would stick his head in the door and say, “Come on, Jim, we’re in room 3 1/2,” and he’d lead me to the small room on the top floor, a sort of add-on to the building and the safest room of the bunch if you didn’t want to be discovered.

Ryan we only saw from time to time.... He was forty going on fourteen. His voice had never dropped.

All of the men had very strict schedules. They worked the streets hard and promptly disappeared. They had other things to do, usually out of town, or at least far out of sight of Times Square. And of course it wasn’t a bad thing to make yourself scarce for as long as you could; months at a time if you could manage it. Ryan took that to the nth degree; he would sometimes be away for six months. He worked methodically, fanatically, feverishly; he had a goal: he was going to walk from Istanbul to Baku. He rarely ate, he preferred to dumpster dive and, like Pietro, he rarely joined in when enough of us had had a good night and felt like blowing a little change. He didn’t like the idea of becoming our little mark, throwing money away.

“Not why I’m out here, Jim,” he told me. “This is a fixed time-frame gig and I have to abide by that,” or something else eminently reasonable. Unless of course we stood him a round or two. But no, he was no moocher. He drank a bit and then went on his way.

Ryan, like Pietro, talked very little about the actual work. He talked about anything else; but he liked to give advice.

“I saw you, Jim, with that guy on 47th Street and Eighth Avenue.... Last night, was it? You had everything going along fine, the man was practically bent over looking at something on the street.”

“That one, right. I remember. I threw a bill onto the sidewalk for bait. He was the greedy type and went right for it.”

“Well, what you didn’t see was that a cop was standing on the corner thirty feet away watching the whole thing.”

“Ay, fucking Jesus.”

“Lucky for you, I went up to Officer Gilhooley, asked him for directions, and got him all involved in telling me how to get to the Waldorf. I looked as lost as a stray child. By the time I was finished with him, you were long gone.”

“And I bet the man had no idea what happened to him.”

“He seemed okay. Had a big smile on his face. Just found money on the street. What you might want to do next time—”

“I owe you one.”

He liked to taunt me—about my knowledge, my skill. He always called me “educated.” It is true I spent some time in college, and I had pretensions to being

a writer. But the gist of the matter was that we were cut from the same New York cloth but had turned out differently. Ryan educated himself, and traveled. He walked everywhere, and if the myth was to be believed, had taken two years to walk from Texas to Brazil, to visit a woman, a girlfriend he had met one night in Times Square. I went to school, and read books, until contingencies forced me to make radical changes in my existence. Yet for all the books I had read, he regarded me as a kind of sophisticated ignorant.

“You know what this building was, don’t you? You’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then, you should know.”

“Let me guess. It’s in Times Square, so I won’t lose any money if I say it was a night club of some sort.”

“You’re not far off. It was a dance hall back in the Twenties.”

“Really.”

“Dime a dance. The women who worked here were known as ‘Taxi Girls’ because you took them for short rides. All the men in New York were in and out of this building at least once. Famous writers, too. You’d be surprised who.”

“I’ll never guess in a million years.”

“And I won’t tell you, either.”

And we left it at that, until another subject came up where he could needle me about my abject ignorance.

“New York City is a series of islands with pressure points, a being with nodes, with glands.” Ryan was off and running. “When the time comes and we are pushed all the way out of Times Square, we will simply shift to another spot, the exact same one inhabited by our predecessors a hundred years ago. We’ll set up shop there just as they did, without being any the wiser.” He was waxing philosophical now. “Consider Times Square as a kind of wetlands, an area with a diversity of species under protected status. The various species intermingle, and trade their various biological contributions before continuing on their migrations...”

The young Russian got by on a beautiful amalgam of brawn and charm. He was a student during the day, more or less penniless, living on whatever his parents sent him from Moscow, which wasn’t much. He was on one side of twenty years old, blond and friendly, in his first year of engineering school. Skinny as a rail—but strong. He went out on the late side and positioned himself in front of one of the busy stores that stayed open until midnight. He had a sign he propped up on the sidewalk. “Can Lift Whole Family.” And he stood there, improbably daring all comers. People walked by and laughed, looking at him quickly, but eventually a couple would stop and ask directions, and he would tell them. Rockefeller Center that way. The subway?

Subway, yes, but depends on where it is you go. And they saw he wasn’t some sort of madman, that he was kind. He was just a kid, and a good one, too.

Before they left, he said, “Don’t go. I lift you.”

And the couple paused in mid-step. No, no, no, they would say if they were tourists; if they were New Yorkers, maybe they were up for the dare.

“No, you can’t.”

“I can . . . I do for free.”

Say no more to a real New Yorker but now the tourist was confused. He was offering an impossibility, something incredible . . . for free.

“You help me. Business slow right now. Man over there take photo if you want.”

And the couple sat in the two buckets he made out of his arms, and he lifted them like it was nothing.

If he was in a good mood, the Russian paraded them around the sidewalk a little before he put them down.

And of course they gave him some money, much more than he would have asked for if they had agreed at the outset.

Other people saw it and were intrigued. Whole family, eh? Every one of us? All seven? You’re on, pardner. And more people came over and began talking to him.

And now another aspect of his art came into play. He was Russian, a young kid who could speak a little English, who was earnest and decent. Americans were conditioned to think of Russians as the enemy for so long... and yet they had never met one. They’d heard all about the Russian bear, how fearsome he was, how he wanted everything in the whole world for himself, and here he was, standing right there in front of him in the form of a gawky young kid who was going to lift the entire family.

And he did, all five of them, and he smiled as he was doing it.

Before you knew it, he had a line for his services.

And now came the tricky part. If there were a few families, or couples waiting around for his circus act, milling around the corner looking at the sketch artists or peering in the store windows, he had to choose. His novelty act only took him so far, and he had bigger things in mind than lifting fatsos three nights a week.

He had to choose.

Of course he lifted everyone who paid. It was easy to do, as hard as it looked to them. His arms hurt after an hour or so; but he only worked for an hour.

He had to choose.

Of the three families who had spoken to him and who were waiting, one was the right one. One had the correct mixture of gullibility and generosity he required.

And he had to choose the right one. It was the difference between going home with 130 dollars in his pocket and 600.

He was looking for something in their eyes.

If it was a couple, he preferred a slightly middle-aged couple without children, people who weren’t even interested in being lifted but who had stopped to take in the scene. They were good people, the husband a little dull but willing, the wife ready for adventure. If it was a family, the children should be young, the parents engaging, even eager to talk to him.

He had to move quickly.

If he chose correctly they immediately responded to the simplest questions. He put the last group down on the sidewalk and immediately turned to his marks. "Your first time in New York? Yes, I from Russia. Ever been there?" So much the better if they had, perhaps for an academic conference or on a business trip of some sort. And he kept talking to these people in his pigeon English, and if he hit the right notes, he got lucky, and one of the two pulled the other aside, they discussed it, and then the husband put his hand out and said, "Come on, let's go. We'll treat you."

He never robbed anyone. He never had to. They took him out to dinner, they conversed, they were proud of the fact that their trip to New York had brought a Russian their way, a struggling young student whom they could help out. And why shouldn't they if they had the money? For the couples it was something else, even more delectable than dinner, and for him, the money was much better. He was a fine specimen of the boundless energy of early manhood. He must have made the ladies very happy.

I took it as seriously as anyone else the first time I heard it. Oh come on, I said.

Him? He probably weighs 160 pounds tops. Besides, doesn't he have any better way to spend his time? And then he turned up, smiling, with his sign under his arm.

"Good evening, guys," he said in his best English. We traded notes on the last few days and he had made as much as any of us.

First of all, I could not accept his ability to lift six people at once. Forget it, you just can't. And he argued with me, offered to lift me, and finally he just said, "Let me show you."

He stood up, dropped the lower half of his baggy jogging outfit, and took two steps forward.

My jaw fell. Here before me were the finest, most developed, the densest leg muscles I had ever seen. Long, bulging muscles, completely hidden behind the loose folds of his pants.

"Touch? Go ahead."

He was rolling the muscles in the front of his thigh. I had never seen anything like it. I looked up at the kid, who was beaming.

"I was kick-boxing champion, Moscow, two years."

We were all agog at those muscles.

"Now you see how I make the money."

He stood there smiling shamelessly, leering at his comrades.

"Touch them, if you like. You are not the first."

Ray strolled in at precisely at that instant.

"My friends. It's good to see you again, here in the bellybutton of New York."

He paused. "How are my favorite scraps of lint?"

Smiles and rejoinders all around. (And then, being as we had time to kill, we discussed the difference between bellybutton and navel, and how the old man had chosen the better word.)

Ah, Ray, Ray . . . in some ways I hardly think of him as a member of the group.

For one he was older than we were, it was almost as if he were a tutelary spirit watching over us. But he was there quite frequently, probably more nights than I was.

He had a pension from the military to keep him going, benefits accruing from his service in Vietnam. He came out because he liked to talk, and he got on well with all of us.

Like myself, he practiced an improvisational version of the classic pick pocket routine. We weren't above rolling a few coins in the gutter if that created a little diversion. We worked together well. He had a fast hand. We waited outside the hotels, the Carter on Forty Third or the Milford Plaza on Eighth Avenue, and troll around until the tourists came out. Someone in a hurry, someone with their wallet jammed in their back pocket at the last second, crossing the street and racing against the light, heading towards the subway entrance. I might be standing on the other side, waving to an imaginary person or just making noise. It was all a question of timing. Ray passed them soundlessly, a harmless old man. They never felt a thing.

But enough of that. It's rather prosaic. It can be learned easily enough; it's an art practiced in all the capitals of the world. I was interested because I admired the skill behind it, the ability to float and pounce, to be invisible, and because I always needed some cash to tide me over "until." I was talking about Ray...

He was very gentle. I remember the way his eyes lit up, just waiting for an opportunity to laugh. I half-heartedly tried to avoid talking politics with him but I never could; our disagreements concealed some hidden passion on both our parts. I always imagined myself being on the Left, politically, but they would never have me—I asked too many questions. Ray had been in Vietnam, an experience he absolutely refused to talk about, a horrorshow that had affected him deeply. He was Puerto Rican, a Latin American, and that made the matter more precise: you chose where you took your stand. Among the leaders in the West there was none pure enough, no one who had anything worthwhile to say. They had all sold out. But on the left, those dictators in power for life: they could do no wrong. Chavez, grooming himself to be Big Daddy Fidel's successor in the inspiration department, was a real hero. Was he so bad?

Hadn't he sold heating oil to people in the chilly Northeastern states at a steep discount? Didn't the people in Venezuela, not to mention Nicaragua, love him? Who needed elections anyway? Was I really going to defend the mongoloids and whiners elected to office on a regular basis in this country? I lost the argument every time, and quickly changed the subject.

I remember telling him about Barceloneta in Puerto Rico, the town where they manufactured Viagra for the American pharmaceutical concerns. I said, I bet there's a novel in that town, and he looked at me absolutely aghast.

"Perish the thought," he said deviously. "Puerto Ricans on Viagra. We're sex maniacs as it is. The whole town must be flying off its hinges."

"We ought to check it out, Ray. What do you say to a little trip South?"

A small dark cloud crossed Ray's face. There was nothing left in Puerto Rico, it

was an abject little concubine kept on a short leash by the Evil Empire in Washington.

He would never return. He said it so emphatically I dropped the subject, too, and we went back to our cups of coffee, or in his case, tea, killing a little more time before our work began.

Another night, and I was standing on Forty Third and Eighth when I see a guy who works the same neighborhood. I don't know who he is, but I know a little bit about how he makes his money. And then, here it comes: another battle over turf. Jesus Christ, it's freezing out here. Don't we two specks of dust have anything better to do than argue over who gets this corner? I usually like to walk around, but not if I'm pushed.

You go. No, you go. No, you. Why me? I was here first. You only come here because you saw me here before. You weren't 'here' earlier tonight. I mean, every other night, you dumb son of a bitch. I'm always standing on this corner.

It's a lousy way to kill time on a cold night. I was glad when Ray showed up.

Human beings can find a way to fight over 'ownership' of absolutely anything, even a frigid street corner at the edge of the universe.

"Come on," Ray said, dragging me away before things got too serious. "Let's take a walk over by the hotels."

The interesting thing is not that Ray had as much success on the street as he did, or that he never spent any weekends in jail, as we sometimes did; he never had any of the bad scenes the rest of us went through, Pietro included, of flying down the street at a terrific speed with a paunchy detective or new graduate of the Police Academy close on our heels. It was the success he had with the ladies. Maybe it was the military pension, in that it took the pressure off, and he could relax more than we did. We were a driven bunch, we were all going somewhere, and we worked each week until we had double or triple our minimum requirement. Ray was carefree, as if that wasn't his concern. And, naturally, in the course of an evening, we met women, tourists and ladies who were out late at night for reasons they couldn't possibly name. Ray was a distinguished sixty years old, looked younger, was well-dressed and energetic, and he rarely let opportunities slip past.

Once when we were working together I made a quick sweep of Eighth Avenue, turned around and he was gone. I had lifted one wallet cleanly (the person suspected nothing, keep marching right ahead to Port Authority with big confident strides), things were looking good, and now I couldn't find Ray. I looked across the street... there he was in Smith's, sitting at the bar with a curvaceous visitor to our fair city. A lady whom I later learned was Czech.

"Jesus, man, it's cold out there! You ought to come inside!" he said after I crossed the street and knocked on the front window of the bar to get his attention. I rolled my eyes. Come back out, I pantomimed. But what for, he said with his hands and his shoulders. It's warm in here. And indeed, it looked very warm and snug.

No problem. I went back out to the street and of course it was dead, abandoned

by anyone with functioning brain cells. It was too cold, and the few stragglers left on the street were buried under six layers.

I saw Ray three or four days later, days I had gone out on my own and had done okay, enough, in any case, to go out and keep coming back. Ray walked in smelling like a rose, rested and relaxed. He had spent the last three days with Ulla in her hotel room, while I had been out on the street freezing. I had one good night (the first), then a terrible one, and finally one that wasn't half bad but what did it matter, I was out of cash again and back on the street for my fourth night straight. And here was Ray regaling me with stories of this woman, how fine she was, how voluptuous, how giving. "Why, I'm old enough to be her..." and he paused while he counted the years. "Her great grandfather!" He said it triumphantly, with a look of boisterous amusement on his face.

Mine must have sagged a little.

"Try to get your priorities straight, kid. Join the Revolution. Work only when you have to. Everything else is a trap laid by the old shits pulling the strings."

The wrecking ball arrived late. It got caught in crosstown traffic and was held up for five years during which time the Vice-Chairman in charge of the Committee for Historical Maintenance (Obliteration of Memory subsection) filed papers in triplicate on behalf of an 120-story hotel built out of recycled, see-through Styrofoam. The wrecking ball squatted on its haunches and went to work, leaving the pianos suspended in mid-air, the chorus and actors still clambering enthusiastically up and down the rotting stairways ad eternitatem, the taxi girls puffing away on the fire escape, bitching about what a slow night it is nowadays what with nobody coming by. You can hear the bitching and the singing if you lean in close to the pit where the building used to stand.

The Council, of course, has split, just like Ryan said we would, blown far and wide across the map, leaving no traces behind. I suppose no one is looking for us either but you can see what's become of the place since we left.

This is what I know: Stevie became taciturn for the first time in his life and bought a house in Philly in a neighborhood full of other taciturns who wanted to enjoy their taciturnity without any big talkers barging in to disturb them, I got a card from Ryan postmarked El Mozote, Salvador, Ray is laughing out loud, yodeling her great-great-great-GREAT grandfather up and down the Grand Concourse, the young Russian is sitting at a drafting table somewhere in Moscow, and hitting the clubs at night, no doubt, Pietro is hunkered down with his savings in Brooklyn, where he lives quietly and illegally in a chilly old warehouse, paints Italian landscapes and chuckles about his previous engagements, and I—the least of the gang, the one who never completely mastered the art but depended on his friends to keep him out of harm's way, who threw himself into it late in the game—I am writing this.

The End

BRANDI WALKER

Letters from Southern Sudan

To Maria Teutsch During the Summer of 2007

The small daily routines that have started to form the fabric of my life here in Yei. As I sit, waiting for my supervisor to arrive from the north (she's been stranded for a week due to the rains) and give me something, ANYTHING, to do, I spend my time reading up on Sudan, exploring the town, and settling into the rhythms of life here; chilly nights, blazing hot mornings and early afternoons, then the most remarkable thunder/lightning storms in the afternoon, during which I sit on the porch of my tent and, enchanted, watch the rains pour down.

The highlight of my days, and seemingly for the locals as well, is my morning jog/walk. While most often, I am greeted with guffaws, shrilling shrieks of disbelief (at this crazy Mzungu woman running down the road, with no apparent destination) and the inevitable cat-calling, lately I appear to have acquired cheering squads. Just this morning, as I passed by one of the huts with whose inhabitants I've developed a friendly rapport, I was greeted by an elderly male with, "Madame, you are in good form today!" I must have been lagging when I returned 45 minutes later, for then his words were, "What is wrong—are you okay madame?" In addition to the children who follow me, squealing with laughter, there's also the bean-seller, a sprightly old lady who lifts her arms victoriously each time I run by and proceeds to jog with me for about 10 feet. I always make an overt display of disappointment when she starts to run out of breath.

I think I must have gained some level of acceptance, since the howls of laughter that accompanied me last week seem to have settled into mere chuckles. One of my biggest achievements thus far, has been finding the only store-owner in town who has diet cokes (and refrigerated ones!)—he's my new best friend. And so when I'm really bored, I walk the mile into town, sit on his porch, where there is a bench and usually a group of men playing chess—and savor the opportunity to just sit and be the observer, rather than the observed.

This region is a vibrant mix of so many ethnic groups that I can't keep them all straight, but by far the most colorful are the Dinka, with their fascinating facial scarring. There are also the Acholi, who have escaped from the war in Northern Uganda, and even Masai from Kenya. Mercifully, English is the language of choice here, and virtually everyone knows it. Those Sudanese who didn't know it before the war learned it during their many years in exile in Uganda. Apparently, the route that the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) generally takes entering into Sudan is just three miles up from our compound. Great. Yei is also the regional headquarters for the SPLA (Sudanese People's Liberation Army), as well as the economic hub of the area, since this is the customs town—there are hundreds of trucks coming from the



Brandi Walker



Brandi Walker



Brandi Walker



Brandi Walker

Congo, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Enya, even South Africa, every day. I've learned to recognize them from their tags.

The beauty of it all is that the Congo border is only 46 miles away! And the Ugandan border is just beyond! Now you KNOW I am concocting a way to get across those borders! I have already conspired with the IT guy to accompany him to Kampala to buy some computers for Mercy Corps . . . now if I could just figure out The Congo.

So far, the only threat to my safety has been nearly falling into the pit latrine in the middle of the night, as I groggily stumbled out of the tent. Apparently, actually flushing toilets are in the works, but a feud has developed between the contractor and Mercy Corps. From what I can gather, the workers dropped the pump itself (which was also supposed to supply us with actual SHOWERS and, once connected to the water heater, HOT WATER) into the 150-foot hole, and no one can get it out. And both sides refuse to pay for a new one. That was a month ago. Landmines are a huge problem, though. On the way down from Juba, we passed at least seven de-mining camps, and warning signs are posted everywhere. It seems to me that every other NGO here deals with landmine removal.

Work-wise, although nothing exciting has happened yet, next week my supervisor and I will be collaborating to give a day and a half of gender trainings to the First EVER Women's Caucus of the Government of South Sudan! I'm incredibly excited about that. So it looks like another trip to Juba is in the works. Plus, I'm scheduled to assist in delivering the gender/vulnerability concepts training as well as the human rights trainings to 3–6 of our civil society organizations—it's totally my adult ed experience in a different context. At first, I wasn't too enthused by the concept of working with CSOs, but given that it is so grassroots, and that capacity is so remarkably LOW, I'm starting to get more excited! Plus, there are lots of opportunities for gaining gender expertise.

My only real struggle has been loneliness and isolation. I haven't really identified any potential close friends yet in Yeï itself, since the compound is a little ways out of town (and even just to go into town, one has to consider the rains, what time it gets dark, security concerns, etc.), where all other NGOS are. A few days ago I actually went around to some of the NGOS and just introduced myself, though, and met a few really neat women who've promised to show me around the town this weekend.

However, there is a wonderful sense of comraderie here at the compound. My tent-mate is a very sweet Indonesian woman, and there are five African male program officers (two from Ethiopia, one from Uganda, and two Sudanese). We are all one crazy lot, and they make me laugh non-stop. Apparently, I carved out a place in the group when a couple of nights ago, I woke up in the middle of the night, convinced that our neighbor in the next tent, Madul, a hilarious Dinka, was chomping away on potato chips. So I get up, grab my flashlight, march out to the

front porch, and unknowingly wake him up: “Pssst. Madul! Why are you eating potato chips in the middle of the night? You’ve been eating them for an hour!” So Madul, dazed and confused, comes out onto the porch—not having a clue what I’m talking about. To my eternal shame, and to the entertainment of the entire group, the chomping was actually coming from our friend the billy goat, who was right in our backyard eating the scraps from dinner. I will clearly never live this down, and now, they make chomping noises just to tease me whenever we sit down to eat.

Another of my most memorable experiences thus far has been belting out Kenny Rogers tunes along with his Greatest Hits cassette (cDs have yet to make it here) at the open-air Ethiopian restaurant in town. Apparently, country music is the rage in South Sudan, and I aptly impressed everyone with my versions of “Coward of the County” and “The Gambler.” I tried, to no avail, to get everyone to square dance with me to The Oakridge Boys after the third go-round of the Kenny Rogers cassette (one can only hear “Islands in the Stream” so many times before she requests a new cassette).

Oh, wow—just heard that we are going to the Yei NGO coordination meeting! Something to DO!

One must applaud the creativity of the entrepreneurs here in Southern Sudan. Business owners definitely seem to have capitalized on the plethora of acronyms and buzzwords surrounding the Peace Process. Just down the street, our Pool Hall of choice is *The Referendum House* (note the reference to the 2011 South Sudan Referendum, during which South Sudan will vote on whether or not it wants to become independent), then there’s also *The CPA Saloon* (CPA=Comprehensive Peace Agreement), and my personal favorite, *The Peace Talks Parlor*.

By far my favorite locale is what the drivers here at Mercy Corps have dubbed *The Naked Bridge*, aptly named for the hordes of young men who go down to the river to wash their cars and strip down to bathe as they do so. Unfortunately, it also happens to be the most scenic spot in the entire town, with incredible sunsets and lovely views into the lush countryside beyond. Last week, I was walking back to the compound and determined to take a photo from the bridge of the village of *tukuls* (small round mud huts with thatched roofs) so serenely nestled in the elephant grass and palm trees. As I readied my camera to take the photo, the naked men who are normally so brazenly cocky with their cat calls, taunting me to come into the water with them, suddenly began furiously protesting, gesticulating wildly with their arms as they ran like hell for cover behind their vehicles and ordered me to put away my camera. In the ensuing mêlée, I caused a traffic jam on the very narrow bridge, and it was a most amusing spectacle.

•••

I’ve just returned from a week-long stay in Juba, capital of South Sudan, at the famed AFEX (African Expeditions) river camp, with the exorbitantly priced \$150/night *tents!* Yes, my friend, it’s like summer camp in the big city. Yet what it

lacks in comfort, it makes up for in gorgeous sunrises and sunsets over the White Nile. Interestingly, here is where all actors in post-conflict reconstruction merge in South Sudan, a most unlikely mix of do-gooders like myself from the non-profit realm, and then those of more dubious nature: all the seedy characters in the oil business grappling for a share of the wealth, the “democracy and governance” folks, such as the Republican boy from Texas working with the International Republican Institute who is only here until a higher profile job with the Republican Party back home opens up (his exact words). He is training the Government of South Sudan Legislative Assembly. Yes. Then there are the ever dubious “consultants,” drawing \$200,000 a year salaries, such as an acquaintance from Bearing Point, who, when asked what he did in South Sudan nonchalantly said, “Oh, we appoint the Government Ministers!” as he went right on downing his beer. Others were much more vague and responded simply with, “We are working on the oil contracts,” or “We’re working with the Ministry of Finance.”

But still, lonely beggars can’t be choosy, and I was desperate for expat company, so party with them I did. The male to female ratio of expats there in Juba must be about 10 to 1, and their sense of desperation is palpable. By the end of my first night in Juba, which we spent dancing to 80s music on the banks of the Nile, not only was the Texan Republican hitting on me, but also the Kentucky boy in charge of security, the Pakistani National Ski Champion (a waif of a person, but one must admire his tenacity), an inebriated Nuer Sudanese man who also tried his luck but ended up stepping off the dock and falling into the water as he tried to approach me, even the flaming gay deejay who knew every word to every Abba song played. This time it wasn’t my country music skills that won them over, but my knowledge of 80s popular culture. I was the only one present who could guess that the “Name that tune” song being played was from *Pretty in Pink*. In addition to the one free drink for that, I received free drinks all night long (which for me is diet cokes) for naming even the scene in which it was played. God love Molly Ringwald.

I pretty quickly ascertained that in Juba, or in AFEX, at least, there is a very entrenched line of separation between the Sudanese and the non-Sudanese. Other than the servers, I spoke to rarely few Sudanese while there, and I began to miss the collegial joking and sense of camaraderie here in Yei.

And despite all the dodgy post-war activities going on in South Sudan, I couldn’t argue with what I and my supervisor were doing there—building the leadership skills of the female leaders of Parliament. The Interim Constitution stipulates that 25% of all government bodies at the local, state, and national level be reserved for women. Unfortunately, this hasn’t been upheld, and at the national level, it’s only about 20%. This was the first ever conference of the Women’s Caucus of the South Sudan Legislative Assembly, and we collaborated with IRI, NDI (National Democratic Institute) and the IRC (International Rescue Committee) to offer a

three-day Gender Seminar (Mercy Corps was invited due to our work with civil society, and in particular, women's capacity building at the local level). The members of the Caucus were vibrant, charismatic, and very, very strong. Yet capacity for many of them remains very low (many of them have literally emerged from the bush or from refugee camps within the past two years). A few have emerged as key leaders and are extremely talented, capable, and engaging. All were hungry to acquire the skills necessary to govern and to promote women's and girls' empowerment—we gave them initial trainings in gender mainstreaming, gender analysis tools, gender-friendly legislation, gender-sensitive budgeting, women's human rights—all trainings were well-received, and they requested much more. Of course, I didn't know half of this myself, so I just sat in awe as I listened to my supervisor, a gender specialist, do her thing. It's a match made in heaven—I love this woman!

Last week, I met the three of our nine civil society organizations in my state, Central Equatoria, and participated in their own gender training. Then tomorrow, I actually begin doing what I was originally sent here to do—to ensure that the training modules for the local civil society organizations are being implemented effectively—the modules range from Organizational Development to Project Design, Development, and Management, and Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation—and they continue for the entire duration of our partnership with the organizations—some for six years! So I'm constantly expanding my expertise. Each CSO also has a different focus, so I'm learning more about a variety of technical areas, like water and sanitation, waste management, etc. I'm thrilled to be gaining experience at the governmental, policy level and also at the local level. The more I learn about Mercy Corps, the more I love this organization. Creativity is encouraged here, and it's an incredibly supportive environment, demonstrated by the fact that we keep getting millions of dollars in funding to continue!

I truly do feel as though what I am doing is Peacebuilding, although I am continually humbled when I indirectly, through asking the Sudanese to re-build their community, ask them to have hope when I myself have doubts about whether or not war will re-ignite. Yet I see the impact at the individual level on a day-to-day basis, with villagers learning new skills which will enable them to mobilize, to build Civil Society Organizations, to be the masters of their destiny no matter where the political situation sends them.

It was the most wonderful feeling of coming home, yesterday, as my driver and I pulled into the Yei compound, as all my colleagues, including the cook and cleaning lady, came to welcome me back, eager to hear tales from my stay in the big city. Back to repose. Back to where the lines between the Sudanese and the Expats are not so entrenched. To the Naked Bridge, and tomorrow, to the Peace Talks Parlor. It might not be the White Nile, but here, sitting on my porch, listening to the sounds of the villagers around me bring their day to a close as they prepare for the evening meal, light their fires, and bring the cattle home, I feel like Queen Sheba

herself.

Here in Yei, I get teased a lot by those coming in from further afield for leading the cushy life—meaning, the fruits and vegetables I eat are not desiccated, there are actually trees (and hence shade) here, I can sleep past 6:45 AM without the Sun blazing a hole through my tent, and we get RAIN. More than anything, my expat comrades living in the bush rave about the fact that there is a market, a place to *consume* anything at all, here. I just learned today that in Agok, which is in Abyei, one of the three contested areas between the north and south, a colleague had to pay for some construction at the compound with cattle.

Come to think of it, after having just spent two days in the field myself, Yei does merit the epithet “Little London”. I thought I had it bad by eating the same beans, rice, and cabbage every day, sometimes with tomatoes and bananas, if we are lucky, but I have learned to bite my tongue. And after living off peanut butter and biscuits for two days, Yei DOES seem like paradise. Whenever someone comes in from Nairobi, the entire compound proceeds to pounce upon him or her to see what goodies have been brought in—last week, it was three loaves of brown bread, which disappeared in a day (I admit to hoarding one in my tent to savor with the local peanut butter). The Nutella lasted two days. Chocolate bars are only brought out for the poker games, where other commodities like whiskey and cashew nuts are gambled away.

Central Equatoria is one of the more advanced areas of Southern Sudan: a number of refugees from this region fled to Northern Uganda during the war and were able to access educational opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have here. I've been amazed by the capacity of the civil society organizations here and their knowledge of human rights, social justice, and global issues—they seem incredibly enlightened, well-versed, and sophisticated. A few weeks ago, on July 7, which John Garang, Leader of the SPLA, named “Girl Child Education Day,” I went to the most amazing celebration in honor of the occasion. Being the only *khawaja* there, I got the seat of honor, and sat and watched sixteen groups from schools in Yei sing and dance songs about girls' empowerment. It was the most beautiful thing. I was told emphatically by our program manager, however, that Yei is an anomaly in South Sudan, and that the attendance rate for females in other states of Sudan is incredibly low.

The fact that Yei is so far ahead naturally means that the other areas of Sudan where Mercy Corps is operational get more attention, and the other interns based in those areas are having more field experience in the rural areas of Sudan, which is a bit disappointing. I feel as though I'm not seeing the *real* Sudan. Sometimes, weeks go by and I hardly ever seem to leave the compound except for my daily jogs. This seems, ironically, to be a desk job, and I'm often stuck at the computer working on databases and typing up reports.

The summer has, however, definitely built up my confidence in that I can

actually take on a management role and manage a project when I complete my graduate program. It's definitely been an affirming experience that I have the skills necessary, especially given that the top manager here is an incredibly self-absorbed, insensitive person who has no understanding whatsoever of the context in which he is operating. Unfortunately, I am seeing that the development world is the boys club that it's always been portrayed as being, where jobs are gotten by going out drinking with the big whigs, and you are judged on how quick-witted you are and how many beers you can down, rather than on your competency.

While I definitely feel as though I am not getting the grassroots exposure that I had wanted, I have learned a lot at the organizational and policy level. Last week, all the Mercy Corps managers (about twenty expats) from all over Sudan came for a Strategic Planning Retreat, and I was able to see up close the issues that Mercy Corps South Sudan is struggling with as an organization, to learn about struggles the managers face in the field, and to help shape the direction in which Mercy Corps is moving. It was quite validating to see that many of the issues I have observed, especially lack of time management and organization, conflict, cultural ignorance, and lack of communication skills, have been noticed and addressed.

I also did get to spend two days in the field with two great Sudanese women who are on my capacity building team, working directly with the civil society organizations. We went to Lainya county, which is about a two hour drive toward Juba, but light years away. During the war, most of the displaced persons there simply moved into the bush, and the illiteracy rate is about 90%. I gained a profound new respect for the field workers and the logistical struggles they face, thrown into the field with little support. Without a car, we had to walk three miles in the rain along a pot-holed road, carefully steering clear of the stoned drivers of the gigantic trucks coming in from the Congo—they stop for no one, and if they hit you, it's considered your fault. By the time we got to the government office, they had closed down for the day. Then, we rushed back down the same road to get to our 6:00 meeting, arriving at 8:00, and clearly that person had closed down for the day.

We were there to do a CSO mapping, which is currently being performed in all areas in which Mercy Corps South Sudan operates, to assess the state and climate of civil society, to determine whether civil society organizations are networking with the three stakeholders: government, international NGOs, and other CSOs, and also to determine their level of strength in advocacy, whether or not they can hold the government accountable. It's such a beautiful thing to see grassroots organizations doing just that: at the same Girl Child Education Day I mentioned above, an amazing CSO (not one of ours) of all women working on Cholera prevention marched right up to the County Commissioner on stage and asked him why he had been ignoring their requests for assistance.

Being here has definitely made me confront all the challenges I will be facing when I chose to move back into the field after graduation. Strangely, the hard

part isn't the physical hardship or the cultural adaptations—for me, it's being with people I work with 24/7. I sleep in the same tent with the head HR person. My two immediate supervisors sleep in the tent next to me, and to the other side, is the Country Director. We eat, sleep, work, and play together.... Believe you me, it's so awkward to come out of the squat toilet and find your boss and the country director waiting, impatiently, to use the toilet. Not even the slightest thing goes unnoticed. I feel as though I am under constant scrutiny, as though I am always in performance mode. The door to my tent is facing the office, so any time I try to take a nap, I have dreams about meeting deadlines.

Another issue is that I am realizing that the types of friends I look for aren't, for the most part, to be found here, and the pool from which to choose friends is much smaller. As I mentioned before, I am friendly with a lot of people, but I have only identified one real friend, and she lives about 500 miles away. Here in Yei itself, I actually feel closest to the Sudanese staff, and the one that I am closest to, Madul (he's the Dinka I mentioned in previous emails), is constantly out in the field. So, another struggle I'm confronting is that I'll have to sacrifice the potential to develop new friendships elsewhere.

Can I just transplant you to wherever I am based next year?

The joy of my days continues to be my daily run, when I leave the safety and confines of the compound behind and remember the reason I am here. I no longer take the route through town, but have discovered a five mile round-trip road to a gorgeous lagoon which, at times, warrants the name "Naked Lagoon" due to all the naked men bathing there, too.

One day, I noticed an adorable girl of about eleven purposefully riding her bike slowly beside me, flashing gorgeous shy smiles as she rode alongside me. I eventually lost sight of her, until I suddenly became aware of pitter patter behind me, the sounds of someone running. I turned around and noticed that she was following me, jogging quietly but steadily behind me.

Thrilled at the company, I told her to come join me. The two of us made a wonderful yet unlikely pair, she in her flip flops and adorable little dress, and me with my mud-spattered running pants. Eventually, we picked up even more kids along the way, my favorite of which was Alex, our fearless leader, who never ceases to amaze me with his openness and determination to communicate with me in any way he can. Now, I usually have about eight beaming kids running with me, squealing with delight.

As I run, I've often reflected on how children are reservoirs of cultural knowledge and are able to provide windows of opportunity into the culture that adults cannot, due to their/our inhibitions. Without Alex and Rass-o-Fan, I never would have discovered that just down a footpath I pass every day lay their school, with its thatched-roof and tiny benches. I would never have discovered that there are places along the route where I can stop for fresh water, that the lagoon has a local name, "Gobleen," and that when the locals curiously ask me where I am going,

“Gobleen” is the response that satisfies their curiosity. They’ve taught me to discern when the locals are warning me about an oncoming truck in one of the myriad languages that I’ve learned to recognize (Swahili, Kakwa, Arabic, Kuku). They’ve taught me who the town drunks are so that I can avoid getting harassed.

More than anything, they have given me acceptance in the community. Everyone still perceives me still as the crazy *khawaja*, but their waves now contain respect. I now get invited in for dinner and tea. And just the other day, for the first time, someone greeted me by name.

HUGH BEHM-STEINBERG

September 1

They'll think this is the lazy part, that because it is clear there is nothing there. As in the absence of debt beneath which are many more debts. And being lazy, each faintlight you make do with, some wonderousness it's not work to appreciate what you got. And still being lazy, the owl of what you are is the mouse you let escape, the tail is the very best part, the skin is the very best part, with mousefur on no one will mind your laziness, you can save the tail for later, you can lose it and find it again. In your laziness you can speculate about other owls. When you are seen by all of those them, they'll think they could see right though you.

September 2

Other places, smoke, little heart unbroken which is your pet, which mocks you and hops on the seat behind you and licks your ear, it plays with its food. So you're teaching your dog how to sing and your cat already knows she says you think about your heart and I'll forget about time, and what both sound like together you're too romantic says your heart your sentimentality will get us both killed. And you won't get any treats. Be like the fish, the fish minding themselves, thinking their fish thoughts, the same thing getting forgotten over and over and over. One assumes the fish never complain. Like your heart I like fish says the cat.

September 3

A cat is a trap to catch the sun it lies on the porch. For just that reason to each conversation there's a party, and correspondence which dust. Arguing parts the cat the cat kinda twitches you can't really prove it twitched. You get to be unique you are the only person who sees the cat. One of those large brown birds flies down near you it jumps and lightens you worry for it, not just with the cat around. Then you wonder if worry is like a blanket you throw it over what shivers, or a flashlight the beam of which makes what you worry grow shadows. The cat gets up and lets the sun go, and the bird flies between you and the sun; we talk.

September 15

Oh, clot, clotting, plug and unplugging, not supposed to be a fountain; it's about circulation my veins drawl to my arteries, try putting your legs up when you sleep, see if that helps. Channeling Sidney when this was the biggest of his problems. Instead I found myself breathing. I thought I was loosely collected, the out of the way, as noted, instead of noticing. Say my knees hurt, is it better to keep using them or get them replaced with plastic and metal versions, cemented and cementless, you'll never be able to go jogging again, didn't know I was supposed to give up something I stopped doing so long, that I would miss it so.

September 16

Proclivity, like you want to lift your right foot the way the Roman emperors do it on TV, with majestic, declining grace; which comes from living in a city without any toasters but a thousand slaves wielding candles under each bread slice, songbirds dipped in honey you eat in one bite, riding around in a litter with your arm sticking out the side, enjoying the breeze, which you know is poisoned but you have dozens to taste it for you, and more, mountains of more, swimming pools with hot and cold running virgins, want to be that, wanting to be like that, liking every bit of that, an empire constructed out of wanting.

September 17

I hate that halfcut attorney general, the glass wall you just want to throw a brick through, his jading leer, his burl in the Presidential lap, his japes you want to dislocate his jawbone you want to render unto him intimate knowledges, drops of water, loyal prosecutors etc forever who leak like eight day old mylar balloons, when I was younger I'd suggest our complicity with him, our similarities, that his corruption was just a mimickry of deeper national rots, now I think there are no landfills hot enough to rot this plastic waste material, and when we get buried beside him we'll make him wear bunny ears so we can kick the shit out of him when we catch him.

FERGAL GAYNOR

Stepping Poems

IX

How circumstances doth bend
our light trajectories

•••

the black Zambian night
on the dust-path
hot smells
animal-voiced distances
a presence passing
close invisible

•••

the body has limits
they are called generation
this world is limitless
a TV fuzz
of infinite recombination
it will be spoken
by the untongued
heartless scatter
of breath
and my brain

•••

agonized leaps
screams and barks
Ernst's angel of the hearth
pulverizing dust

•••

the night sky
the sky at morning

•••

do you hold me
as I enter the inarticulate?
the touch so light

•••

memory
unnecessary pain
like quills through skin
in a narrow access
to the underground
jammed
with fellow travelers

•••

so then
not inside or outside
content or non-content
have or have not
roof peeled from a bus
rain falling on the seats

X

Living
with the fallout
rebuilding
provisionally
gathering
each evening to watch
the flat immortals
their gestures
of lust and violence
sensing change
in the deep tissue

•••

great mothercity
I am distracted
I nurture every child that
comes
as if it were my child
distractedly

•••

not overripe
my dear one
just florid
it is spring after all
or was

•••

an anteroom
portraits
in the Goethehaus
young friends
a basket of apples
in the orchard
at dusk

•••

you
you must expect
to strip
before others
you are the same
at least
we are the same
you
you are out of place
exposed
and we are smirk and muscle
excuse it!
why?
what do you hoard?

•••

he made a painting of a
quarry
the quarry remained
he painted the quarry
as a theatre
enduring the palm
of southern sunlight
the wall roughly stepped
with red-shafted pines
for shade
open
as if

•••

grenade
pin gone
a

BREDA LYNCH

The series of drawings titled *Mary Toft's Children* were created for the South Tipperary Arts Centre (2007, Ireland) and are based around a well known hoax from 1700's Britain, which was documented by the artist William Hogarth in his engravings titled *Cunicularii* (1726) and later *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* (1762). The hoaxer in question was Mary Toft who gained notoriety in 1726 when she allegedly gave birth to seventeen rabbits. She had managed to fool many mid-husbands of the day and the then Prince of Wales believed her curious case. The individual drawings range in size from 25 cm × 35 cm to 50 cm × 35 cm.



ONZARBIKAZI

Breda Lynch



Breda Lynch



Breda Lynch

PING IOO PONG



Breda Lynch

PING PONG



Breda Lynch

PING PONG

JUSTIN JAINCHILL

Shift

10:00 PM

When the alarm goes off I spring out of bed and stand in the dark for awhile. Then I undress for the shower. On the way out of my room I look at myself in the mirror. The bags under my eyes are black and blue, like bruises, and my complexion is pale and pasty, almost colorless. I don't look too good. I don't feel too good either. But at least there'll be plenty of hot water at this time of night. You see, I'm about to work my 12th straight shift and I count on the little things to get me through the night. They have to during times like this, not that I'm complaining. My life is okay. Better than most, no doubt about it. I've seen my share of down-and-out people in this world, some of them all chewed up and spit out, like the scraps you'd toss to a pack of stray dogs. Throwaways, the things no one will miss.

10:25 PM

After a long shower I check on my sisters. Claudia is doing homework at the desk they share and Maddie is already asleep in her bed, but all the lights are on in here, and the blankets are pulled over her head, so now I'm wondering how anyone could sleep in this room, bright as it is.

"Did you see the electric bill this month?" I ask from the doorway.

Claudia puts her pen down and looks up from the desk. "I said I'll chip in."

I run a hand through my hair and a few strands fall out and float down to the floor. "That's not the point." I shake my head at her. "You've been nuts with the lights since mom moved back. Your sister and I can only take so much."

Claudia rolls her eyes at me but doesn't say anything. Her dyed blond hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail and she has spatters of blush on both of her cheeks and a layer of foundation caked on her face. With so much makeup on she looks twenty-five, easy, which is the same age as me, and this is enough to make an older brother worry. I've seen the way other men, older men, look at her.

"You're almost fifteen now," I say. "You shouldn't be afraid of the dark."

"I just like it bright in here," she says. "Mom never leaves any lights on at night."

"She's only been back for a month," I say. "You'll get used to having her around again."

Claudia is chewing her fingernails now. Actually eating them. One of her nasty little habits.

"Whatever," she says. "Are you done talking?"

"Just one more thing," I say. "How much have you saved?"

"100 dollars," she replies, sharply, without looking up at me. "And I have a

babysitting job this weekend.”

“Her birthday’s in two weeks,” I say.

At this Claudia falls forward, over her desk, like she just fainted. “How could I forget?”

Smiling, I turn around and walk into the hallway. “She’s really going to like it,” I say over my shoulder.

10:40 PM

Downstairs I make myself an egg in the kitchen. While it cooks I pour a shot of rum into my coffee. When the egg is done I sit down at the table and eat it. A few minutes later mom walks in and takes a seat. She’s wearing patched-up jeans. A flannel shirt is tied around her waist. And then I notice she’s got one of my tee-shirts on, too, which means I’ll have to tell her my clothes are off limits again. But not tonight. I’m in no mood for confrontation.

Mom looks across the table at me. “You eat a lot of eggs,” she says.

“They’re good for you and I like them. You know that,” I say back.

She motions for my plate, and I slide it across the table. “Silverware, too,” she says, and so I stand up and bring my knife and fork over to her. Mom takes them from me; then she starts drumming on my plate.

I walk back around the table and sit down again. I think about the egg I just ate, and now my brain feels like smeared yolk.

“Are you practicing tonight?” I ask.

Mom stops drumming. She points at the cabinets above our sink. “Do you like what I did today?” she asks.

I look over and see an autographed picture of Dave Lombardo taped to the door. He was the drummer of *Slayer*, mom’s favorite Thrash Metal band, and the guy who got her that first big break. His entire face is painted white, like a mime’s, and his bangs are teased up, out, almost like spikes.

“You must have been really bored,” I say.

Mom runs a hand through her grease-slicked hair, which has started to clump together, like dreadlocks, but mom’s no Rastafarian, that’s for sure.

“We opened for them during their Show No Mercy Tour in ’83,” she says.

I swig the rest of my coffee. “And you’ll meet up with him again. You have to believe that.” Then I point at her and say, “Sink or swim.”

Mom leans over the table, eyeing my coffee cup now. “You could be fired,” she says.

Like a toast, I raise my cup in the air. “It was just a splash.”

“I smelt it on your breath last night. And the night before that.”

But I know where this conversation is headed, and I don’t want to get into it right now, so I get up from the table and walk over to the sink. I turn the faucet on. Cold water splashes off dirty dishes and glasses and I catch some of the ricochet in my eye. It burns real bad at first, but then I don’t feel anything at all.

When the sink fills up I turn the water off. “Let the dishes soak for a while. I’ll take care of them after work,” I say on my way out of the kitchen.

“Is everything alright,” mom calls out.

“Of course. Thing’s couldn’t be better,” I yell back.

11:15 PM

When I get to work Hal’s scooter isn’t in the lot, but Carlos’ Suburban is there, taking up two full spaces in front of the store. I pull in next to it. I turn the ignition off. I take four deep breaths. I open and close my eyes. I lean back in my seat. I check myself out in the rear-view mirror. And then I get out of the car.

11:17 PM

Inside the store Carlos is sitting on the black-and-white checkered floor with his legs crossed, his head down, and both eyes closed tight. “Thank god you’re here, Andy,” Carlos says without looking up.

I walk behind the counter and throw my coat on the stool. “Where’s Hal?” I ask.

Carlos is dressed in a crushed-velvet jumpsuit, like always, but he’s barefoot, too, which is something new.

“Hal lost control today,” he says.

I open the register and start to count the till. “Did he start crying in front of the customers again?”

Carlos takes a stick of incense out of his pocket. He lights it, waits for the cherry to catch, then breathes the smoke in, his nostrils flaring. “Hal really lashed out today,” Carlos says. “He caught a teenager stealing this afternoon and a confrontation ensued. Hal smashed the kids head against the floor five or six times. Made a total mess of that kid.”

“Literally?” I ask.

Carlos stands up, pats his big belly. “Yes,” he says. “And figuratively, too, I imagine.”

“Well,” I say, now shaking my head. “We both saw this coming.”

And we did, it’s true. Ever since the robbery last month, his first, Hal’s been talking all kinds of crazy shit. He’s also been hot for a gun, which isn’t something I recommend for a guy who takes lithium three times a day. But there’s no getting through to Hal. I’ve tried telling him it was nothing personal. We work at a convenience store and getting robbed by a pregnant woman, at gunpoint, is what you might call an occupational hazard. You need thick skin in this line of work, I’ve told Hal, but like most of us, he has selective hearing.

I finish counting the pennies and start on the nickels; the metallic film from these coins is already making my fingers itch.

“What do you expect from a reactionary?”

Carlos wags his finger at me. “Andy, I’m serious,” he says. “Hal’s a real-life

Humpty-Dumpty. His in-the-world-self is bifurcated, more than mine, more than yours even, and he needs our help.”

I drop a handful of coins back into the till, and I then slam the register closed. “I can’t worry about what goes on here. It has nothing to do with me.”

“But things are still happening in the world, Andy. And believe me, you and yours aren’t the only ones struggling.”

I pop the register open and start counting the change again, quarters this time. “So what should I do then?”

Carlos paces back and forth in front of the counter. “Well,” he says. “You could start by trying to understand what Hal’s feeling inside. He’s looking for some kind of connection. Just a little bit of that human touch.”

I crack a roll of coins against the counter but the paper doesn’t split like it usually does. “See,” I say, holding the roll of quarters up for Carlos to see. “I’m really out of it. Totally inept.”

Exasperated, Carlos turns around and looks out at the store. In the far back, near the bathrooms, a stuffed chicken is propped against the wall. It must be eight feet tall and well over a hundred pounds. The damn thing is balding, too. At night I find feathers all over the store. But Carlos sure loves that chicken. He treats the damn thing like a pet. Our stoic watchman, that’s what he calls it. But the bird is grotesque. And it scares the kids, too, but Carlos is the boss, so I don’t say shit.

“I patched up his bald-spots this afternoon,” he says. “Think he looks any better?”

I glance over at the chicken, which still resembles a giant rag-doll, or a post-apocalyptic mascot, and then I say, “Pretty good from here,” while nodding my head for emphasis.

Carlos smooths back his thick brown hair. “You’re just saying that,” he says.

“I wouldn’t do that, Carlos,” I say. “You know I’m a straight shooter.”

11:22 PM

After Carlos leaves I reach under the counter and grab the newest issue of *Modern Drummer*, a copy I snagged from the magazine rack. This issue features a write up on the industry’s newest drum-sets, and Pearl has a couple of dandies. I have one highlighted on page 12. It’s absolutely gorgeous: ungraded low-mass aluminum OptiMounts, brass drum spurs, brass drum claws, floor brackets, swivel tug lugs built into each drum, and they all have “Golden Ratio” air vents, which improve low-end response. And if we do decide to buy this one for her birthday, mom will be able to choose from 30 hand-rubbed lacquer and premium finishes in her choice of chrome, black chrome, or gold-plated hardware.

But if this new drum set doesn’t do the trick, believe me, I’m out of ideas. You see, mom’s down right and feels too tired, too utterly fatigued, to pick herself back up. “It’s like I’ve forgotten how to play,” she says when I ask what’s wrong. “I’ve lost my

sound,” she says. And I know what she means; like all of us, mom’s just scared. But I know she’ll get back out on the road, rocking eardrums and splintering drum sticks, just like she loves to do. I know it I know it I know it.

11:40 PM

A man walks into the store with his two kids and right away I know he’s a tweaker. His eyes are glassy and he can’t stop scratching himself. Track marks run up and down his arms and I can smell him from where I’m sitting, right behind the counter. He stinks like chemicals. The kind you keep under your sink.

“Get whatever you want for dinner,” he says to the kids, who run right to the freezers in the back, near the chicken, and pick out burritos.

When the man approaches the counter I tell him our microwave is broken. “And those things are frozen solid. One bite and they’ll crack their front teeth,” I say.

With his hands cupped together the man smiles at me. “I need to make a few business transactions.” And then he points at the shelf directly behind me, where we keep over-the-counter meds. “Just a dozen boxes should do the trick.”

Looking past him, over him, I see his two kids; they’re sitting in the middle of aisle four, backs against the candy rack, licking their burritos like lollipops.

“You need to pay for those burritos. Ok, boss?” I say.

“Of course, of course,” the man says. He’s sweating now, and jittery, too, like all the junkies who come in here this late at night. “But first I need that Sudafed,” he says. “You understand the principles of supply and demand. I know you do.”

I shake my head at him. “One box per customer, and that’s not me playing god either,” I say. “It’s the law, brother.”

The man collapses onto the counter, face first, and yells, “Yo kids, drop the burritos and go out to the car.”

To my surprise they do as they’re told. On their way out of the store the older one, the boy, spits on the floor before opening the door for his sister.

“They’re so well mannered,” I say, “and really obedient.” But this man, he doesn’t answer. Not a sound. Then, snoring. And so I flick his forehead with my middle finger.

He springs up from the counter. “I heard this store practices corporal punishment. Steal a snack or something and you might leave here on a stretcher.” And now he’s smiling at me, a maniacal grin that makes me feel grimy. “In Turkey,” he continues, “if a man is wrongly punished the next oldest man in his family assumes a vendetta against the perpetrator.” And although I should keep my mouth shut and let this man go on his way, I’ve always been interested in the customs and cultures of other countries and so a question comes to mind, something I need to know.

“What if there aren’t any more men?” I ask.

“The family hires a vigilante,” the man tells me, and then he walks out of the store and disappears into the night.

12:05 AM

After I clean the coffee pots, which are dirty as hell tonight, the phone starts to ring. I sprint back behind the counter and pick it up. “Hello,” I say into the receiver.

“Mom’s on a rampage,” Claudia says. “She’s been drumming since you left.”

“Oh yeah,” I say. “How does she sound?”

“Pretty good, actually, but she’s loud as hell.”

I pin the receiver against my shoulder and bend over the counter, right under the cigarette rack, and pick at the grease under my fingernails. “How loud?” I ask. “Because you have options. You can turn on some of your own music or wrap a pillow around your head and count to a million.” Claudia sighs into the phone, her standard reply these days, and then I hear nothing at all. “Has your sister woken up yet,” I ask.

“No, Mattie’s still asleep—thank God.”

I switch the phone to my other ear and now I hear it. On the other end of the line Claudia is chewing on something. Maybe gum, which kills me, because we just took her to the dentist.

“I hope your teeth fall out of your head,” I say.

Claudia giggles, and I have no idea why until she says, “Speaking of heads, tell me what happened at the store today?”

I look at the clock. It’s still early.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say.

“My friend called after you left. Her brother went to camp with the kid, and now he’s dead or something. The kid I mean, not the brother.”

“Why aren’t you asleep?” I ask, but instead of answering my question Claudia starts chewing her gum ever louder, and for some reason I find her irreverence endearing, but I’m not going to tell her what happened. The last thing she needs to hear is another horror story.

“So,” she says. “I’m waiting.”

But I don’t answer, I don’t say anything at all, and except for the sound of our breath, our synchronized breathing, there is total silence between us, and I actually feel very close to her right now.

“Who loves you the most?” I ask.

“You do,” Claudia replies, and then she spits out her gum. “Now tell me what happened.”

12:35 AM

I look up from my magazine when the twins walk in. Their names are Bunny and Rabbit. The other clerks call them the Slurpy Sluts, because they’ll do anything for a Slurpy, or so I’ve been told. They look about fifty but no one knows for sure. They both have silver hair, and they’re wearing matching belly-shirts that stretch tight across their chests.

“What’s good tonight?” they ask.

“Heard the Mountain Rain Peach Blast is decent.”

They turn and look at each other, now making the same face, a look of mutual disgust. “Mountain Rain sounds like hiking and peaches are only good in pies,” they say.

“Might be able to place an order with the boss. What do you want, exactly?”

The twins start to laugh. “Carlos won’t do it unless we do something for him. The man is sick-o-phantic. A real slimy fish if we ever saw one.”

I cross my legs. Crack my knuckles. “I don’t want to have this conversation,” I say. But now the phone is ringing again and I don’t want to deal with it, I just don’t, so I let it ring over and over again, until the twins ask why I’m not answering.

“Probably a wrong number,” I tell them.

“Could be important,” they say.

“I don’t feel like talking on the phone, okay?”

“So talk to us instead. Tell us how you feel.”

“About what?”

They scratch their chins at the same time, their eyes wide and bright. “Are you worried about Hal?” they ask.

“No, I’m not worried. He’s a grown man.”

“What about that poor boy? Are you worried about him?”

“I’m more worried about starving children in Sudan,” I say.

The twins laugh. “You care too much, you care too little,” they say.

“I just want to finish reading.”

Looking down at my magazine, they nod their heads and smile. “Sure, go ahead. We’re not stopping you.”

I give them the thumbs up. “Thanks for that,” I say. But the twins won’t leave. They’re just standing there, arm in arm, and I feel like screaming.

1:05 AM

The phone. Ringing. Again. But when I pick up the receiver all I hear is heavy pervert-breathing. Some guy’s jerking off on the other end of this line. He’s stroking himself right now. He’s drooling into the phone, about to cum. I don’t hang up the phone, though. I want some answers, you see. I want to know why he’s calling, want to know what he expects from me.

“Who are you?” I ask, and although he doesn’t answer I continue to hold the phone to my ear, listening to the rhythms of his breath, and soon an image of this man comes to me through the receiver. He’s watching porn on a flat-screen television in his basement, where he sits in a cum-stained recliner, pleasuring himself over and over again. He’s fifty-five and steadily employed at a machine shop. He lives alone in the house he grew up in. This man is well groomed and nervous in front of people. He goes to church on Sunday. He reads trade periodicals and clips coupons. He needs

a rootcanal, too. My god, this man's teeth are throbbing. Rotting. He's in pain and I can feel it.

But this deranged, desperate caller isn't going to make me soft inside. I won't be suckered into feeling something for him. He's a threat. A danger. A menace. And if he came within ten yards of the people I love, believe me, I'd beat him down. I'd stomp his face until it was unrecognizable. Or maybe it already is?

"Who are you," I ask. "Asshole, who are you?"

1:20 AM

A woman I know walks in. She's a regular who likes to yap. All kinds of personal stuff I don't need or want to know. Two nights ago she told me her uncle's jail sentence got reversed last week but then he got dysentery right before they released him and now he's over in the ICU. But I'm used to these kinds of disclosures by now. You see, I'm an easy target for this kind of shit-dump. I can't run away or turn my back or tell her to leave. I'm stuck here, behind a cash register, and when she comes up to the counter to pay for something I have to listen to her ramblings, her self-pities. I'm a sounding-board to bounce her baggage off. I'm the open set of ears she pours herself into. I am here, always, at her disposal.

And this woman, she's off her rocker, a total loon. With four bottles of Pepsi clenched against her chest she's standing there, staring at Carlos' chicken, totally transfixed. She has a thing for that goddamn chicken, I guess. And now she's gone too far, you see, because she just plucked a feather from the chicken's belly and put it in her hair. From here it looks like she has a yellow cowlick on top of her head.

But the chicken is not a plaything, and Carlos would flip if he knew this woman's sticky hands were all over his beloved mascot. He could check the surveillance cameras, which would be my ass, so I stand up and say, "Please don't manhandle the chicken. It's in bad enough shape already."

Pouting, the woman pulls the feather out of her hair and jabs it back into the chicken. "Sorry," she says. "I just love feathers." And then she shuffles down aisle four and makes her way up to the counter. She's breathing hard now. "Best exercise in the world," the woman says when she plops her soda down next to my register.

I reach for the nearest bottle and ring it up. "How are you paying for these?"

The woman winks at me. "I heard what Hal did today. Good for him. Way to take a stand. Thievery and godlessness will be the downfalls of this fine country," she says.

"Did you say debit?" I ask.

"Good old street justice," the woman says, and then she clenches her fists and holds them up in front of her face. "Would you have acted so decisively?"

When I don't say anything back this woman starts shadowboxing. She throws wild lefts and rights through the air, in my direction, so I take a step back from the counter.

“Must feel good to really pound someone,” she says in between punches.

“This is outrageous,” I say. “You’re out of line,” I tell her.

“It must have been crazy to see that kid’s head explode. Like dropping an orange out of a window ten stories high. Bloody as hell.”

“Are you trying to get a rise out of me?” I ask.

The woman throws an uppercut, then a left hook. “You don’t seem to care.”

At this I look up at the ceiling, then down at the floor.

I stick my hands in my pockets and rock back and forth on my heels.

Then I glare at this woman who is bobbing-and-weaving now.

“What does it mean to care? Can you tell me that?” I ask. “Somewhere in the world, right now, someone’s nine-year-old sister is being molested by a kidnapper. Should we cry for her too?” I shake my head at her. “No one could live their damn lives if we walked around feeling things all the time. It would be absolute chaos.”

The woman glances down at the floor, her face beating red. “I’d feel sorry for that little girl,” she says. “And I’ll pray for her before bed tonight.”

I throw my hands up in the air. “Because God’s always listening, right?”

But the woman doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t know how to respond, and I’m done talking about this anyway.

Opening my magazine, I look back up at her. “Nothing like a good read,” I say.

“I haven’t read anything in years,” the woman tells me, and then she sits down on the floor, tears welling up in her eyes.

“That’s a shame,” I say. “But I’m not going to read to you. No way.”

1:40 AM

When the phone rings I don’t answer it, not at first. I just stand there and listen as it rings over and over again. Finally, after ten or twelve rings, I pick it up and say, “Hello.”

“Andy is everything okay over there. I called before and no one answered.”

I hear music in the background. Instrumentals that sound like rain. Mood music, I guess. The stuff Carlos listens to at night. “Fine, boss.” I switch the phone to my other ear. “I did get a lewd call earlier.”

“My god,” Carlos says. “They’re after both of us.”

“Are you okay, boss?”

“No, I’m not. I received a death threat tonight. Someone called me at home and threatened my life. My life,” Carlos shouts, and now he’s breathing real hard into the phone. It sounds like he’s hyperventilating.

“You running those pyramid scams again?” I ask.

“Andy, please. This is no time to be flip,” Carlos says. “There’s probably some kind of lynch mob after us. The town has mobilized and they want justice. Hal, that fuck, he’s safe and sound in jail, so now it’s our asses.”

I lean over onto the counter. "Did you call the police?"

"Hell no. I went down into the basement and unpacked my Smith and Wesson. You know, that M50 I was telling you about. But I only have two 30 round magazines here at the house."

"60 bullets won't get you too far these days," I say.

"Might be able to hold them off for ten or fifteen minutes, but not much longer than that," Carlos says. "I've got a few boxes of ammunition in the office, though, a loaded pistol."

I stand up straight. "We've got a gun here?"

"Of course," Carlos says. "It's a convenience store."

"Fuck," I say, and then I look out and scan the parking lot; a car just pulled in and dimmed its lights. "Someone's here," I tell Carlos.

"Friend or foe?" he asks.

"I assume it's a customer."

"That's what I like to hear," Carlos says a little too cheerfully. "Time to jockey that register. And remember, Andy, always-be-selling."

"When you get here I can go home, right?" I ask.

"Just keep your eye on the prize, Andy. You need to stay focused."

"I'm all business," I say.

1:55 AM

The man who had been parked outside walks through the double-doors. He stops in the entranceway and scans the store, his eyes taking everything in, almost like he's casing the place. The brown barn-jacket he's wearing is buttoned all the way up to his neck, hands tucked into the front pockets. From here it looks like he's been crying; his eyes are like pulsing red dots.

I close my magazine. "What do you need?" I ask.

Looking at the floor, he walks toward the counter and says, "Do you know what happened here today?"

I sigh, and then sit back down on my stool. "Let me guess, you want to talk about the kid Hal pummeled, right?" I roll my eyes, shake my head. "You've got an opinion on the matter you just have to share. Is that it?"

The man undoes his coat, button by button, his eyes still glued to the floor. "No," he says.

"So you want me to do the talking then? Well, it's a tired subject and I'm sick of people bringing it up. This is a place of business, not a town meeting."

"Oh, I see," the man says, and then matter-of-factly, like's reaching for his wallet, he slowly removes a gun from his waistband, and like I expect him to, just like he's supposed to, the man points it at me. I'm an old pro by now, this is about to be my sixth robbery, so I know better than to point at the register. You're not supposed to make any sudden or threatening motions in a situation like this, so what I do is nod

at the register instead.

“There’s not much, but it’s all yours.” And then I close my eyes; it’s always better not to make eye-contact. “I’m not even looking at you,” I say.

“But you should be,” the man says. “I want you to look at me, to see me.”

“Why?” I ask. “Let’s not complicate things,” I say.

But then I hear the trigger cock. “Open your fucking eyes,” the man yells, and so I do, I open my eyes and look right at him, and that’s when he presses the gun against his temple and pulls the trigger . . . but the gun . . . it doesn’t go off, and now this man’s smiling at me. “Your turn,” he says.

Again, he points the gun at me, and now I’m staring right at it, and the barrel is an eye, a very dark eye, and I’m looking right into it.

“Are you afraid?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Why?” he asks, but before I can answer he leans forward, over the counter, and presses the gun against my forehead. “You know who I am, don’t you,” the man says to me, and when I lean into the barrel, believe me, I suddenly do. Everything about this man passes through his gun and into my mind. I see his dented work truck and the duplex where he lives with his family. I see his beautiful wife, her green eyes and long red hair. I see his son, a ball player, swinging his bat in front of a crowded stadium, under the lights, his face glowing and bright. But then the man, this man, he cocks the trigger again and everything fades to black and darkness consumes me, and within seconds, one two three, I see a human skull with a crack down the middle and a black-and-white checkered floor splattered with blood and a hospital room with an empty bed pushed against the wall, and then a few more seconds pass, four five six, and everything blurs as the images bleed into each other, until nothing is left, nothing but a feeling, an acute sense of sadness, a kind of anguish I’ve never felt before, and yet it’s so pure I let it inside me, which frees me, and now I’m light as a feather, light as ether, like a kind of vapor, and in a very strange way I feel warm inside, like my heart is the heater this world gathers around at night.

And so it’s true, I know who this man is.

You’re a father, I say. A father. And then I open my eyes.

2:13 AM

The three of us sit outside of the store and stare into the darkness. The man who wanted to kill me is sandwiched between Carlos and I. The temperature has dropped but the heat from our bodies is enough to keep us warm.

“You would have regretted it. You would have been sorry,” Carlos says to the man. “That boy of yours is going to need his dad.”

The man wipes his eyes with his sleeve. “I’m going to visit him in the hospital tomorrow and I’ll sneak him in a bag of cheeseburgers and fries and then we’ll watch television together all day long.”

Carlos stands up and stretches his arms. He yawns. "I'm going inside," he says. "But you two stay put. Stay out here for as long as you need," he says.

The man looks over at me. "My name is Fred," he says. Then we shake hands, but Fred doesn't let go, and I don't let go either. For awhile we just sit there like this, the two of us hand-in-hand. "Do you have to leave?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I can stay for a bit."

He grips my hand tighter. "Do you know what this feels like?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "But I'd like you to tell me anyway."

"Would you like to hear about my boy first?" he asks.

Nodding, I breathe in the scent of his hair, the grease and sweat and salt of his life. I have never smelt anything so human before.

"I want to hear all about him," I say. "And if you'd like, I'll tell you about my family too."

3:30 AM

When I get home mom's still hard-rocking her drum set. All the lights are off in the house, except in the kitchen, which is the first place I go. From the cupboard I remove a bottle of rum. I pour a little into my coffee mug and sit down at the table. I close my eyes and listen to the percussive dream of mom's drumming. When my drink is finished I get up from the table and walk over to the sink. I turn the water on. I let it get real hot before pouring liquid soap over everything. Once the suds start to bubble and pop I pick up the sponge and scrub our dishes until they're spotless.

3:50 AM

Upstairs I check on my sisters, but they aren't in their room, so I follow the music down to mom's room. The door is open, and she's sitting behind her old drum set, wailing away, the sweat flying off her face and arms. My sisters are in there, too, and they're dancing around in their pajamas, hand in hand, both of them giddy with laughter. Of course I should run in there and lecture them about the importance of a good night's sleep and remind them that we have neighbors who have called the police on us before, who will call the police on us again, but I just can't bring myself to do it. Not tonight I can't. You see, these are my girls, my beauties, and because of them my place in the world makes sense. I am their son. I am their brother. I am their father. And right now there is no one else I would rather be. Not in this life, at least.

The End

SALLY VAN DOREN

Deranged, the Brown Rabbit Ate Her Way out of Her Cage, and Started Teaching English

Fire is the temporal haven of desire.

Ecstasy thrives in the floorboards.

Partial heating vents repel toothpaste clots.

Corners, pondering self-extinction, round, tripling their weight.

Dieting resides in the intergalactic toilet.

Caution, pride and hunger coast from bubble to bubble in the simmering oatmeal.

Each toenail bends.

The Queen luxuriates in her attendants, showering while talking on the telephone.

Cattle elevate.

Toast links the yeast of serendipity to calamity's crust.

Totality breathes as the boy carts his grandfather's bones to market.

As if fear is enough.

The one sentence, lodged in her vein, bleeds the bright red blood of sleep.

**The Distance Between I and Me
(About the Convergence to Reconfigure Space)**

After the body mentioned that adoption
prohibits any redemptive assault
by the lyric “I” on the occluded “me,”
we, replete with psycho-social tapioca,
followed the asterisk to the sink,
where mother, her womb stripped of correlatives,
plucked her eyebrows, where she, as person,
blocked the view of the field, where the stitches,
after time, ripped like worn terrycloth, not
lacerated honeycomb.

And we all, then ate, or rather, were,
choking on the sphericity of the ovum,
calling *mom* on the phone, calling *mom*, *mommy*,
mother, *madre*, *mere*, *mamma*, remaking the birth
of the daughter, making the “she” refer to the stain,
the bruise, the “her” elastic, the producer,
the sunburn, the withdrawn nipple.

There she was, in that cumulous nimbus,
over the five of them on the porch, without
theirs, without measure, with the breeze,
the incision, the cord unplugged.

The Last Poem About Writing

This is it. Ask yourself
why someone would write
about writing in almost
every poem she writes.

Ask yourself why someone
would not want to read
a poem about writing.

Ask yourself if writing
is worth writing about.

Ask yourself if the act/art
of writing subconsciously
engages the subject of writing.

When is enough not enough?

Tell yourself that the next time
you catch yourself writing about
writing, you will be punished.

Spend the rest of that day
looking for evidence of the first
time you adopted this bad habit.

Lord it over yourself that you fell
into a self-destructive pattern
from which you have never been
able to escape.

Then, tell your mother about it. She
didn't want you to write in the first place.

ELLEN BASS

My Father's Day

begins with my mother pulling him out of bed,
and if he cries out and she falters,
he insists, *Pull harder.*

But by breakfast he looks like an ordinary
father—thick wavy hair parted in the middle,
reading *The Pleasantville Press*—except
for the stiff beige brace that clasps his neck.

He's stirring four sugars into his cup.
On a better day, he might bestow
a hint of smile, quip,
I like a little coffee in my sugar.
But this morning he's silent as he heads down
the stairs, always reaching up two fingers
to tap the overhang. Superstition.
Or just to make sure he still can.

At nine, the drunks are already waiting.
What's the word? Thunderbird.
What's the price? Thirty twice.
He slips half-pints of blackberry brandy
into slim brown bags, hefts cases of Pabst
onto the counter. His spine is fused
into a deep curve, neck locked down,
so he has to tip back on his heels
to look you in the face.

Before dinner my father is supposed to sit
in the closet, his chin in a canvas sling
hooked up to ropes and pulleys.
Instead he wolfs down a sandwich
and rumbles back to the store.

At ten, they collect the change fund
from the driver, deadbolt the doors.
Is this yours? he asks me, holding up a schoolbook.
What he means is, *Put it away.*
My mother cooks him oatmeal
and they watch Jack Paar.

Then he climbs into her twin bed.
He always had strength for that,
my mother told me in a crowded aisle
of the grocery store the day after his funeral.

I'd never even seen them kiss or hold hands.
But then she spilled everything,
she couldn't stop talking, as though
the angel of death, in departing,
unlocks the jaws of the bereaved.

CHRISTINE HAMM

Monsoon Season

the way the night air
suddenly turns thick like milk
spoilage, rain everywhere
at once, hot wind in the dark,
water washing warm through
the palm fronds, water creeping
in under the front door,
all the towels soaked, knotted
into fists, pushed against the windows

upstairs, something falls over,
our ears ringing with the dark tumble
but someone may be singing outside,
we don't know where the dogs went,
one cat crouches next to the stove,
lifting her paws, disgusted by the wet,
your hand on my shoulder,
damp through the cloth,
your mouth near my ear

no one can hear us,
our shoes overflowing with mud,
with roots, the window
in the hall flings open
with a roar

I can't find the edge of your skin
or this wall, your lashes against my palm
are as wet as grass, close as a wave
knocking me over, taking my breath

How to Take Urines

Melissa says you have to stand outside the bathroom stall with the door open, sometimes you have to hold the door open, pressing high up on the chipped pink metal, because they often swing closed on their own. Some of the stalls have strips of torn fabric or pieces of clothesline to fasten

around the corner of the door and keep it open. Then you try not to look at their faces and just watch what they're doing with their hands, make sure they're not pouring in anything from their pockets or underwear. Usually you don't have to talk. Sometimes they'll say something, but you don't have to respond.

Wish You Were

elevator music outside the hospital
but no smokers left
bits of toilet paper trapped in trees

flaming coffee pots at 8 AM
it starts to rain
no one curses, lifts an umbrella
flaps a newspaper over his head

the stop lights continue
signing to the empty street
red light, green
empty bus left running with the keys in the ignition

garbage pails overflow
with plastic bags, half-eaten
tacos, dirty coats
the sound of something rippling,
snapping, the sound of wind

the sidewalk speckles then darkens
no one sidesteps puddles
no one watches the rain
the clouds on the street
rings within rings
water breaking, regrouping

Christmas presents left out on the curb
in case someone wants them
before the water soaks through

JOHN MOIR

Wing Beats of Hope in an Age of Loneliness

Four of us are heading down the Big Sur highway under a morning sun half-hidden by gossamer bands of fog drifting in from the Pacific Ocean. We pass the Henry Miller Library and continue south until our destination appears ahead. It is an unmarked headland, one of dozens of outlooks along this spectacular coastline created by geologic uplifting. If we're lucky, this rocky promontory will offer us a once-impossible sight: the flight of North America's largest bird—the California condor.

We pull into a gravel turnout and walk to the edge of a precipitous slope that plunges several hundred yards to the ocean below. Dozens of jellyfish dot the aqua-green water, and a raft of sea lions are splayed out on the rocks. The condors, which are carrion eaters, frequent this sea lion colony looking for an easy meal. For several minutes, I scan the trees and shoreline.

"There!" I point to a black-and-white bird soaring toward us from behind a cliff. It's as large as a small airplane. Soon we are watching six condors cruise overhead. We find three more roosting in the trees below. At one point, 15 birds circle over our heads. One condor sweeps past us, no more than 30 feet away, its nine-and-one-half-foot wingspan stretched full and an orange head accenting its stunning black-and-white wings. We can hear the air whistle through its flight feathers.

•••

I visited this location for the first time in the late 1990s to view some of the first condors released in Central California. On that initial visit, I spent an afternoon watching several condors circle the Big Sur sky and talking with Joe Burnett, the biologist who manages the Central California condor releases. I remember feeling deeply curious, but at the time, I had no idea that this afternoon would be life-changing.

Soon I began writing articles for newspapers and magazines about the condor recovery effort and discovered that not only had the giant birds captured my imagination, but that I had become obsessed with the riveting story of the human effort to save this species. It led me to spend two years writing *Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird from Extinction*.

As I delved into the condor's story, I learned that the species had survived quite nicely for tens of thousands of years. But in the mid-1800s, a flood of gold-seeking settlers swept into California looking for quick fortunes. The arrival of the forty-niners upended the region's ecology, and the condor, like so many other species, began to spiral toward extinction. By 1982, only 22 California condors remained in the world.



Dan Linehan



Ken Jones



Ken Jones

Even as the condor's numbers sank toward oblivion, biologists were unsure what was causing the bird's decline. Was it egg collecting, shooting, poisoning, lack of food, a low birthrate—or something else? What data there were did not point to a conclusive reason, and conservationists were deeply divided over the best way to save the bird. Traditionalists said that if the condors were simply left alone, they would recover. But a group of scientists hired by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service believed that the situation had become too dire to wait and advocated for a “hands-on” approach that included radio-tagging the birds and trapping some of them. After years of bitter controversy, the hands-on side prevailed. It had become clear that the only hope for the species was to bring in the remaining condors and attempt an untested captive-breeding program.

Taking the last wild condor to a zoo in 1987 represented far more than the capture of just one bird. This was the first time in at least 40,000 years that not a single condor flew over the North American continent. To many, the condor symbolized unfettered wilderness, deep time, and intact ecosystems. If the condor was gone, what would be next?

I came to see that the condor's story strikes a chord with so many people not because the bird's plight is so rare but because it is so common. And, as we'll see in a moment, the condor's saga is not yet over. The bird's brush with extinction epitomizes the unprecedented level of human-induced species loss that stretches from where we stand in that gravel turnout on the Big Sur highway across the Pacific and around the globe.

•••

If you observe the ocean below this stretch of coastline, you often can spot sea otters frolicking in the kelp beds. These photogenic creatures, with their huge, guileless eyes, have a story eerily similar to the condor's.

Unlike other sea-going mammals that have protective layers of blubber, otters rely on a thick fur coat for warmth. Run your hand across an otter pelt, and the softness invites you to sink your fingers into its luxury. The fur is remarkably dense: an entire human head holds about 600,000 hairs while a sea otter has 2,000,000 hairs per square inch. Fur hunters slaughtered the otters by the thousands. Eventually, the once-numerous otter population crashed, leaving only 20 of them along the Big Sur coast.

The otter is known as a “keystone” species, the *sine qua non* for an ecosystem. Removing such a species brings unintended and profound consequences. With the otters gone, the sea urchin population—a primary food source for otters—exploded. The growing legions of sea urchins feasted unchecked on the seaweed forests, annihilating the kelp beds and leaving behind underwater deserts known as “sea-urchin barrens.” The loss of kelp beds had a devastating effect on other species that depended on the underwater forests. In addition, when the kelp disappeared, it no longer buffered the coastline from the erosive effects of waves.

Conservation efforts, including the Endangered Species Act and other protections, have helped the otter make a tentative comeback but its status—like the condor’s—is still precarious.



When the Big Sur condors circle the sky, they have a view of the rocky coastline that winds south into the hazy distance. A few miles down that coast, another threatened sea mammal is staging a comeback from its own encounter with extinction.

The northern elephant seal derives its name from its pachyderm-like proboscis. Hundreds of thousands of these sea mammals once roamed the Pacific Ocean. A male elephant seal is larger than a car: 18 feet long and weighing more than 5,000 pounds. Elephant seals routinely dive nearly a mile into the ocean and can hold their breath for more than an hour. A generous layer of blubber allows them to survive in the icy water, and this was their undoing. Hunters seeking the oil-rich blubber decimated the elephant seal’s population in a rush for quick profits. By the late 1800s, the seemingly inexhaustible population of elephant seals had disappeared from the Pacific Ocean. Only a group of about 100 of them held out on a remote island off Baja California. Early in the 20th century, the Mexican and U.S. governments gave these last few elephant seals protected status. On this slender thread, the elephant seal climbed out of the extinction abyss and has, in recent decades, expanded its numbers.



On warm afternoons, when the thermals are good, the condors spread their wings and ride the updrafts a mile or two into the sky. From this lofty visage, the California landscape stretches to the horizon. In the past two hundred years, this view has changed dramatically as an unparalleled ecological transformation has spread across the state’s mountains and valleys.

Everywhere, native grasses have given way to invasive species. The majority of California’s wetlands have been drained, diked, or developed, destroying many rich habitats. Nowadays, the only place you’ll find a grizzly bear—once numerous in the region—is on the state flag.

The transmogrification of California’s ecology illustrates a pattern that has played out across the planet. The view west across the Pacific Ocean reveals a similar story of depleted fisheries and of whale populations hunted to the brink. The details change, but wherever you go around the globe the story is essentially the same: the first humans arrive and soon afterward the large mammals and flightless birds disappear. Then technologically advanced cultures develop, altering the environment with powerful tools of steam and steel. The pace of extinctions accelerates.

Renowned Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson estimates that each year approximately 30,000 species vanish forever. Most are unknown plants, insects, and arachnids as well as countless microscopic creatures that comprise the bulk of the biosphere.

Biologists call this phenomenon the Sixth Extinction. In the past half billion years, five mass extinctions have swept the planet. The best-known of these occurred 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs met their demise. We now have entered a new era where human-induced extinctions are rending the fabric of life. Not surprisingly, habitat destruction leads the way in causing species loss. Invasive species—non-native biological invaders that ravage habitats—are another potent force undermining the integrity of our ecosystems. When you add in global warming, the overexploitation of natural resources, and worldwide pollution, you have a planet under siege.

Wilson says that the current extinction rate is 1,000 times above normal and predicts that unless we change the trajectory of human overpopulation and overconsumption, half of Earth's species will be lost by 2100. We are entering the Age of Loneliness.



Biodiversity loss is one of the great challenges facing humanity in this century. Where do we begin? What do we do? “Tug on anything at all and you’ll find it connected to everything else in the universe,” John Muir said. That is exactly what the scientists who are bringing back the condor have done. In the face of the Sixth Extinction’s juggernaut and against all odds, they developed a recovery program for the condor—and started tugging. It took many years of backbreaking work as well as great good luck, but the recovery team is close to accomplishing what many deemed impossible.

A crucial discovery in 1984 helped turn the tide when biologists found a condor that had died after ingesting a lead bullet fragment. Here was the hitherto unknown reason for the species’ troubles. Condors are carrion eaters, and if they feed on a deer or pig or other game left behind by hunters, they ran the risk of consuming tiny pieces of lead. Lead is highly toxic and even small fragments can paralyze the nerves in a condor’s digestive system leading to a slow, painful death by starvation.

This finding led to the capture of the last wild condors in the late 1980s. It made no sense to leave the remaining birds out in the wild where they faced a high risk of dying from lead poisoning.

With the success of the captive-breeding effort and the release of the first zoo-bred birds in 1992, the lead problem resurfaced. The obvious solution—ban lead bullets—presented a political conundrum for the recovery team. While many hunters embraced the use the excellent alternative ammunition that is available (usually copper bullets), some gun groups disputed the science and opposed the transition away from lead. The recovery program still struggles with this dilemma. Even though condors are reproducing well, the recovery team spends much of its time trying to prevent released condors from consuming lead and treating birds that get poisoned. Dozens of released condors have suffered from lead poisoning.

In 2006, a study done at the University of California at Santa Cruz linked the “fingerprint” of the specific lead isotope ratio found in lead bullets to the lead found in

the blood of poisoned condors. This study, along with a mountain of other scientific data that show lead bullets to be the culprit, prompted a coalition of environmentalists, hunters, and recovery team members to begin the complicated political process of pushing for regulations requiring nonlead bullets for hunting. In October 2007, they succeeded. A bill was signed into law in California mandating nonlead ammunition for big game hunting in condor country. It takes effect in July 2008.

For the first time, the condor recovery program has a real chance at reaching its ultimate goal: two self-sustaining wild populations with each group comprised of at least 150 birds.

•••

Late in the afternoon we return to the Big Sur headland for a final look at the condors. A copper sun sinks toward a distant fog bank hovering over the ocean. It is quiet—only a few cars whisper by on the highway—and the warm air is filled with the spicy tang of chaparral. The last of the condors are heading inland, winging their way toward evening roost sites. An otter dives for sea urchins in the kelp bed below. A few miles down the coast, dozens of elephant seals are hauled out on the sand for their annual mating rituals.

For a moment, life appears as it has always been, and it seems possible to imagine that the 3.5-billion-year-old web of life upon which our survival depends can still be preserved. Breathing in the stillness, you can envision a future for the condor—and the sea otter and the elephant seal and countless other species—that is as solid as the striated rocks twisting through the coastal cliffs.

Maybe this moment is merely a mirage, the afterglow to an enchanting Big Sur sunset. Then again, here at the edge of the continent, dreams have a way of gathering a tailwind and slow-dancing toward the tangible. If the condor can be brought back from the brink, perhaps the efforts dedicated to saving biodiversity across the planet can yield similar results. Let us hope.

TOM MARSHALL

Dangling Meaning

The poem was meant to mean something, so the poem meant to mean something.

It tried to do its duty as a citizen and showed up to receive its fate, but the poem was meant to fail, it seems.

The poem fell apart at the seams. What it thought it was meant to say it said, but it went unheard.

That seam between the poem and the audience ripped, not because the audience was ripped but because the thread got lost.

The thread that binds is a stitch in time, and to “be all that you can be” is all the people could see in our times.

An army of one got in the way of the poem. Poems mean to make an un-army of all.

To make an army at all was the poem’s mistake. The people could hardly take it—a poem that came to bring not peace and flowers and stuff but a sword.

The poem brought a sort of Damoclean sword that fought or sought to slice them from their predilections. The people preferred elections with a right and wrong, or a right and a righter.

The writer meant to mean something by the poem by letting it be something other than all it was meant to be. That’s all.

THREE LOVE POEMS

Amor Cordis

Not all who live have hearts; not all
who have hearts have seen one.
There is love as one kind of vivisection,
peering thru the heart of another
at a strange world including ourselves
as the ultimate strangers, but I was talking
about cutting open a dead thing—
perhaps one you yourself have just killed—
and seeing the muscle bound in fatty fibers
that goes into the stew. How many of you
have dipped up even a rabbit's brown heart
in your spoon and never seen one
red and bleeding?

Amor Mentis

The things we do
not see
beg the old question:
“Are you there at all then?”
The grain of feeling,
like the grain of the canvas,
carries the colors into the future
and recalls them to themselves;
mostly, though, it recalls
something seen sort of,
once.
I see this at once as I lie
feigning sleep with deep even breaths,
and perceive your invisible presence
folding underwear at the foot of the bed
until the drawer sliding out with a squeak
seems to wake me to what you actually look like
now to me, after all these years
since that day you died.

It was the violinist who brought you back
in her playing and the way she stood
in freckles and a smile,
naked beneath her clothes.

Amor Corporealis

Lust is a kind of luck
that touches us once
and begs for more touching soon.
It is one way the body dreams.
The sycamore grows leaves that change it
and when they fall will change themselves
from color to color to no color at all
while a black hairy hog beneath them
in the road-ditch bloats.
Before it enters our homes,
wildlife usually becomes photographs.
You can drop some candy in its bag
like a vote and hope it may just go away.
Yesterday, I came here to live,
and you were already here inside me
—a battle I will have fought
with the centaur of writing everything down.
But if these words should find you
somewhere in your sleep,
try to touch the war with them
and tell its dreadful signal
to shut up.

Museum Pieces

I. Winged Genius (for the quiet side of Kenward Elmslie)

The chatter of swallows
bites little holes in the air
that a star might show through
that asterisk where
something invisible used to be;
seems silly to me,
but this building makes it make sense
'cause I saw you where you're not now
on the great granite steps calling me
maybe 6 or so years ago
and when I said "I miss you"
you said "Yeah,
I know."

II. Torso of a god (for the thought of John Berger)

Seemingly broken black granular stone
fragment of a body shown only in part
with rough edges suggesting
the unfinished earth from which it came
into someone's hands to be worked but still
displaying both grit and smooth skin in a moment
the eye catches and flashes back
to a heart attached where the hands hold sway
any collector might want in the big house
where he could say what and when and maybe even
who signed the working but all that knowledge
falls far short of the boy the sculptor knew or imagined
and farther shorter yet of his yearning knowing.

III. Servant in the Place of Truth
(for Robert Creeley's poetics)

what takes
truth's place
but a thing
in a case
we look into
at its label-card
when we halt our visit
and ask ourselves isn't it really
a pinecone thyrsus
holy-water flicker
not a cudgel on a stick

who says
who gets
to say
what that ancient guy's got
in his carved hand
what that man is doing in there
with all the time between us and him
how could anybody remember
so something somebody had in their head
made them think to call him a "warrior"
when they might have put "priest"

IV. Sacred Fish
(for Gertrude Stein's dinner-table conversation)

If it fights, kill it slowly
for sport and tell the story
among friends counted on
and on by the number
of drinks you have to buy them
to listen. Hang it all
on the wall and you have the birth
of our society and its favored religion:
the overpowering truth of overpowering.
Death is history, says their savior,
but that one was also the multiplier
that made the loaves and fishes exist
in the public imagination.

AMETHYST WARE

Country Ride

People have certain assumptions about a ride in the country. That there will be Satie playing in the background, or some other French composer. That the car and countryside will be quaint. That she will be wearing a summer dress and will let me help her into the car. That I will wear a nice shirt and drive safely. But my shirt is stained, and so is hers, because we have just come from creating a little more of her. At first, we keep the windows up, to warm our ears and noses. We feel divorced from the landscape. Soon we arrive, meaning that we come to a view that we are both certain cannot be experienced well from inside a car. It is a hill of dried grass. This is the development of the first movement, right here, as I pull over and we get out. It is very quiet. We walk towards the top, where it seems there is nothing but grass and sky. She says, isn't your song about communication, like all the others. She says, then why is there so little dialogue. I say, you are my song. I say, look. It is only a squirrel, but its tail is rich. And its rhythm depends on other things. She says, will there be more movements. I say, I love you. She says, you are self-indulgent.

...

The second movement is the one in which the storm builds. The sun is still bright, but it is stagnant, and the chill of the breeze that balanced it is gone. She seems alien to me up here; I am ahead of her and have to look back, and sometimes she is like a shadow across the grass. We have long shadows on this hill; it curves down from us, makes us feel that there isn't anywhere we can go from here. She says, if you look at me like that, you will make the sky darken. I say, I have never noticed your cheekbones before. They are pale and delicate, like wings in her face. She says, my hair is blowing out of control, and there is a heavy wind, warm, shoving at us, and I want to be her. I want to feel that spread of cheekbones. I want to feel that hair in my face. It seems the more real she becomes, and now, the more this wind beats at us, the less I can feel. She says there are trees, and there are, but they are far away at the bottom of this hill, which seems to have grown. I say, the car. She says there is no such thing right now, and I see she is right. There is no road. A raindrop hits her head and soaks into her hair. She urges me to run.

You must remember this is still the second movement, so as the storm hits us and we run down the hill, going faster and faster, don't think of this light staccato rain. Imagine my breath, full and slow, expanding me. As we go down the hill, we seem to grow heavier. We take slow steps that divorce us from the ground. The wind and rain seem to be features of the air, and I wonder if they will wash my shirt clean. I want to pray for something. We arrive at the beginning of the trees. Under their canopy, it is dry.

...

Her sound flutters as she pants. The rain is loud and fast above us, hitting the trees. It runs in quick rivulets and waterfalls anyway it can get down. Everything is small here, moss and leaves and details of bark. I say, what trees are these, but they keep changing too fast, so now they are white with shredded bark and long leaves, and now there is a sigh of pine needles under my feet and now the leaves are too small and many for me to look at. She says we are in the rain, there are no trees, if only there were. She looks at me strangely. She says we are in the car. Can't you smell the ashtray. I think, but isn't that the smell of trees, and I say, the sound of the water is tinny. She says we are in a barn. See there, the light between slats of wood. I say isn't this wood alive, and she says I don't know what alive is. I don't know if you have created that yet. I say, you are here. She says, am I. How can you know, you can't even feel the rain beating into your face as we stand here in this field. She says, you are self indulgent, you imagine that you can create something beautiful, and I realize that we are in the storm of the third movement. Her hair is plastered down by the rain, and shows the shape of her skull. It is accusatory. Do you realize that I have no eyes, she says. I must have made her eyes. You do, I say. I try to look at her, but now she is looking away. I see the back of her head, the side of her cheek. I walk around her, but can never reach her face. At one moment, I imagine that there is a bit of eye, some blue or. Some skin stretched across. Or. A sort of hollow, shadowy and tired, with stars in it. No, look. I cry. I can see your eyes. They are there. They are stars. She turns to look at me and I see myself.

I see myself. This is the end of the third movement, when we get a glimpse of the beginning again, imagine that it is a beautiful day. I see myself in her turning. She is wearing a stained shirt. She doesn't let me help her into the car, says must you do everything. She says the rain has stained my shirt. I look and see that there is a drop of rain coating her in blue. I say, open the window and let the air dry you. She says it will be too cold. The weight of the sun will balance the chill in the air, but only when we are still. I ask her then, as we are driving in the country, if you had eyes, what would they look like. She says the tail of a squirrel that has its own rhythm.

Polyphony

She says we can put our voices together

I say the American quest for individuality

I say you will get tired of me

She waits, knowing it is what I want
We drive to a church and go in. It looks like this

...

Our shadows are lost in it

...

She steps onto the floor and sets it ringing. She runs her hand

over a pew and sets it ringing. She is emanating. She is

vibrations. The church sings back. My song

is stale from disuse. She puts her hand on my shoulder

...

It is a small shift from a church to an apple orchard. The air heats up. Somewhere nearby, bees are getting drunk, and there is that same hum of thoughts in a large empty space, and colored shafts of light sitting on our skin. She picks a leaf and examines it. I watch, wondering why we are here, my head bent under the heavy reach of branches.

Soon I realize that I am listening to cicadas. We are in a vineyard between rows of grapevines on a dusty hillside. The earth around us is red. She is examining a grape leaf. She runs her hand over a hump of vines and they stir and hum. What is this I say. She says this is music.

I lose focus and she starts to dim. The air gets dark and her skull becomes translucent, so that a glow camouflages her features bits of light shine through her hair I think she is looking at me I am afraid she is going to shatter

I think her face is changing behind the light

Dream

I don't know her dreams yet, and I won't

for some time. She isn't so real yet,
that she can dream solidly. Dreams

replete with dread and guilt

that seem to go on for hours. I believe

that people dream very fast, that we live out

lives, in fragments, waiting to wake up.

I don't know if she will remember her dreams

when she wakes up. She is so translucent yet

I can't imagine her hiding anything from herself.

But it is a choice to remember dreams.

She is the only one I remember.

...

In this dream, there are only she and you and I. I try to see myself and find only the hairy back of a hand. I see you, but you are changing, sometimes the reader, sometimes me, sometimes her—I wish I could grab you and make you be one thing. So really there are the three of us here, but only she is in focus. Maybe we are the holy trinity. I am Jesus and can not see myself reflected in anything. You are God and can not be held in one form. And she is causing us to exist. She is our reason. She is small, and sometimes sure of herself. She is a mystery to both of us. Maybe we are all one person. Maybe you are her dreams and I am her hope, but is she real enough to have hope? Maybe she is clay and I am God and you are myself. Blessed is she because I do not understand her and will always want to keep her close. Blessed because her scars are beautiful to me, her creator, because they are a result of the difficulties I have created and of her obstinate desire to understand the layers of her self.

...

In this dream, her eyelids are moving as she looks back and forth behind them. Her dreams are cyclic. I know, because she does not like to walk in the straight line of reason.

...

In this dream she is complete, because it is a trick of light when I can not see her completely. Because she lives on a street that dips down to the ocean, and at sunset it is easy for the sun to shine through her and all around her. It is a trick that she does not seem real yet. How horrible if she weren't real. Because the sun first shines through her, brilliantly, and then begins to set, and if you have ever seen evening come on through a stained glass window, you know how that is. At first she continues to pick up the light, which is turning red, and refracts it. Then she becomes a shadow in front of it and now it is purpling. She fades. From the sky, she picks up glimmerings of light that could be stars. They are in her teeth and her outline. They shine from her skull. How sad to not be real yet and have so few bits. And even though she fades, I can't take my eyes off her. I want those stars.

...

In this dream, I am running from her. Her stars are chasing me. I have never wondered what happens when you create someone, and don't finish. She has grown teeth. Her stars are chasing me. This dream is cyclic. This dream is her dream. She will devour me. She will digest me. She will create me, in her.

...

In this dream, we are having a picnic, you and I and her. We are all there is. Our field is studded with yellow flowers and curves down away from us on all sides. We have a blanket. She is smiling because it is red and because we are having a picnic, and for once I am not asking her questions. You say, I love cold chicken. She plays with the woven flap of the picnic basket. I say, aren't you going to eat anything. She takes out a hand and sucks on its fingers. She says, cherry. I say this is a dream, but as I watch, she becomes a little more solid, her hair gets some streaks of brown, her veins under that pale skin seem to find their places and stop wandering around. The hand may be pointing into the sky, or it may be the relaxed posture of a sleeper. I say is your hand asleep. She says of course. This is its dream. I say, it is pointing at the sky. She frowns and says the sky is mine. She refracts the light of the sky. It is blue, everywhere, spilling out of her pores. She seems hidden behind it. I say you are greedy. We both are.

...

This is a dream, and we are standing on the sidewalk.

There is trash, and a graffitied wall that she leans against.

She is gazing off.

I say hi. I say what are you thinking. She says,

are you sure I can. You gave me this coat and this hair and not much else.

She doesn't say that. The dream skips. She says, I think I am glad to see you.

...

This a dream where she says hi, and I say oh, hi. The music loops. There is wind, and we can smell the ocean. In this dream, her nose gets red in the wind. It is bigger than I had thought, slender and knifelike. She snuffles. I think of the vulnerability of a nose. I have never seen it before. Soon her lips are here too, and chapped. The skin around them is red. I think that she has been sick. I think that this new face is grotesque, because what is behind it is unformed. She says hi, brightly, as though glad to see me. I say, why are we here, you hate the straight lines of the road. She says, the mind can be a vista like this, with trash, and smelling like the ocean. I want her back, unformed.

I dream she is Kafka's beetle and I wake up guilty. The light is still on and I am alone in bed, cold with no covers. I imagine that in the other room, I can hear a pet that died long ago. I run my fingers up and down my arms. I say that she will be better than me.

She likes Chow Mein. I don't know if she likes the taste of it, but she loves the sound of the name and the length of the noodles. She says, someone loves us. Otherwise they would break the noodles and only give us half the luxury. They are hard for me to handle and I slurp. She says I am acting like a dog. Sure that this is a dream, I ignore her. But then she is gone, and I am left for a long time in the restaurant by myself. I am by myself. And the noodles get cold. Her dish and food slowly disappear, and I worry that she no longer exists. Then I am at home and there is a candle carved into a Buddha. He is holding an apple and smiling as if to say, I understand noodles. I understand the luxury of Chow Mein.

Her Hair

Her skin is translucent

Something to catch light. Her hair is the dead growth of her. If the light ever fills her skin completely, it may electrify her hair. Now, it is limp. Her hair is the dead growth of her. It is fine and traces her skull. At the ends it is broken, as though trying to cover her and unable. It is jagged. Strands cling to the back of my hand.

...

I said luminous and she looked down.

Her hair fell forward.

Strands of it caught in her eyelashes and she pulled them away.

I took some of it in my hand.

I said like a cocoon.

She said stop.

A cocoon is wrong.

It holds the changing.

I said you

Are so

...

When she is leaving, her hair is a cloud.

Her Face is Changing

Her face is changing. For a minute, I think it is getting older and sharper, then I see an unbearable smoothness settling over her. The light fades as this flesh begins to exist again. I want her to say something, but she doesn't. She looks forward silently, like she did the morning she started. Her skin is a little translucent, and her eyes are clusters of stars in blank skin. This skin is too new.

She looks forward silently, like she did the morning she started.

She holds up her arm and looks at it, and the web of veins floating beneath it.

She says this is strange.

I say, where do you go now.

Is this all you are.

She puts her hand on my shoulder and sets me ringing.



Priscilla Ferguson



Priscilla Ferguson



Priscilla Ferguson



Priscilla Ferguson

SEANA GRAHAM

The Coper

Angslund is still sleeping when I come back to the flat this morning, so as usual, I let myself in with my key. He has an interview at ten, a noon luncheon with the mayor, followed by the unveiling of his latest sculpture at one, and dinner reservations at Luigi's at eight. All this information is in my palm pilot because it is definitely not in his. Or, remotely possible, it was—he lost his latest one a week ago. There are many things that a man like Angslund is entitled to own, but a palm pilot should not be one of them. Nor should he have a cell phone, car keys, or, in most instances, a wallet. Of course, there are times when he thinks the possession of such accoutrements necessary, and at such times I come up with whatever his latest mania requires. I try not to let it bother me too much when said item is quickly lost, stolen, or has otherwise vanished into thin air—Angslund certainly doesn't.

"Wake up, Angslund," I call in through the open bedroom door as I head toward the kitchen, preparatory to brewing his first cup of coffee. He will not wake up as simply as this, nor do I expect him to. This is just what I've come to think of as my preliminary sounding of the depths. Sonar signal from mother whale to baby whale: 'Angslund, awake. Bestir thyself.'

I always address him as Angslund these days, never as Mr. Angslund, or, though I blush to think about it now, 'Mr. Angslund, *sir*,' as I did in the beginning. I would, of course, if he required it. Doing what he requires is what I am paid to do, after all. I'd address him as Emperor of all the Russias if that were what he wanted. I do try to refer to him as *Mister* Angslund if there's company around. But the truth of the matter is that Angslund doesn't care what I call him. I could call him Fido for all he'd mind. It's only other people's reverence for him that makes me continue to observe the social niceties.

Angslund is a genius. That's what the critics say; that's what his fans, mimicking the critics, say—it's even what I say, most of the time. The only one who doesn't say it is Angslund. It's not because he's humble. It's just that the category doesn't interest him. He doesn't give a damn what happens to his art once he's through with it—not just what's said about it but, quite literally, whether something is taken to MOMA or the city dump after it leaves his door. Usually, he's not even interested in how it's going to be paid for. It's my job to worry about that. Sometimes, of course, there is something that's recently caught his eye that he covets, a newly quarried piece of marble or a beautiful woman with expensive tastes (and they have to be very expensive tastes for Angslund to even wonder whether there's enough in the personal expenditures account the trust allows him to handle)—and then he makes sure those checks come in pretty fast. Angslund could be a wonderful businessman if he would only bother.

But he doesn't. Bother, I mean. For Angslund, though a genius, is also a

mess. If he somehow lost his genius, he'd still be a mess—that's the important thing to remember. People get this backward. His detractors, which include but are not limited to some members of his own family, think he is overindulged, that if he couldn't just get away with things, Angslund would be forced to grow up and take care of himself. All I can say is that they are perfectly entitled to think what they will. The truth is otherwise. Angslund, left to his own devices, would be indistinguishable from any other homeless person on the street. I should know because this is a state in which I have found him.

"Coffee's ready, Angslund," I say. I hear a faint groan of reply, though I am pretty sure it's the smell of the coffee rather than any response to my voice that is starting to bring him reluctantly from the depths of sleep. Angslund isn't really a human being until he's had his coffee. You no doubt think I exaggerate, as people will on this subject, but Angslund doesn't truly remember what the human race is, let alone that he's a member of it, till about halfway through his first cup. Then the slow glimmer of realization comes, and by the time he's finished it, he has ascended from the fishes all the way up the evolutionary chain to at least some first biped's grasp of the human condition.

I bring the coffee in and set it on the bedside table. I don't open the blinds yet—it hurts his eyes, and I have reason to believe that this is real pain to him and not just annoyance. With some effort, I remove the pillow that he clutches around his head, though he tries to pull it back down over him. After this, I do nothing. I simply stand there and watch until he stirs infinitesimally, and say, not too loudly but not too softly either, "Have some coffee, Angslund." I don't leave until I see some movement, because after certain kinds of evenings, even the aroma of coffee is not enough to rouse him, and on these occasions, I have to take more drastic measures. However, this morning the signs of life are there and I see his hand reaching blindly for the cup. I pull it out of harm's way and wait till he has rolled over into something like a sitting position (I am not too strict in my definition of what 'sitting' consists of at this point in the day) and then I hand him the coffee cup and leave. It is futile before he finishes it to attempt even the kind of conversation you might have with your dog. I will ascertain his plans, wishes, and hopes for the future later.

Back in the kitchen, I turn on the radio and begin breakfast. I always turn it up loudly enough so that Angslund can hear it, in case a miracle has happened overnight, and he has developed an interest in our national fiscal woes, the environmental outlook for the planet, or the latest Supreme Court rulings. So far, this has not been the case, although I believe he finds the sound of the radio soothing as long as it is not too loud. There was a period when I mistakenly tried to interest him in world events, but those were early days. After awhile, I saw the error of my ways and realized that keeping abreast of what was going on in the world was another part of coping I was going to have to do for him. It worried me at first, until I realized that keeping him up to speed on what the average man on the street might expect him to know about

was not going to be that challenging. As for the rest of it—his total lack of interest in sports, celebrities, or automobiles—well, I draw the line at learning about things that bore *me* silly too. That much Angslund and I have in common. Luckily, he's a genius. Nine out of ten people think that 'genius' and 'eccentric' are interchangeable words. They indulge his lack of general knowledge. They find it endearing.

People find many things about Angslund endearing, which, if all the facts were known, they would not think so charming. Many people, for instance, and women in particular, think Angslund is a good listener. I pity the lives of women if this is the best on offer, because most of the time, Angslund isn't listening to them at all. He loves to watch them talk, which is something different. He couldn't care less what they are actually saying. He studies the planes of their faces and the way their eyes light up when they speak. Or I think this is what he does—of course, I can't be certain. I, after all, am not a genius. It's my impression, though, that he views every human being as a model that he is making mental notes on so that he can later incorporate them into his work. Perhaps this is a form of listening after all. It might even be the deepest form there is. At any rate, people—and again, particularly women—never seem to be all that put out when it turns out that he doesn't remember a word they've said. They like being looked at, I think. But that sounds like vanity. What they *really* like is being seen.

There was a woman at a party Angslund held here once. It was very late, she was very drunk, and at one point she slurred, "Have you even been listening to a word I've been saying?" Angslund continued to look at her for a moment and answered, "No." There was just the briefest pause, though from her side, it was a pause much like the fabled 'calm before the storm', and then he gave her the famous Angslund Smile. It doesn't really mean anything, that smile, or nothing more than 'I'm enjoying myself,' but it's sincere as far as it goes. There's no malice, no intentional cruelty in it, and that is what the ladies always pick up on. They forgive him. Yes, his indifference to their thoughts is insulting, but even they can see that he doesn't mean it to be. After all, he's indifferent to my thoughts too. Well, the end of that story is that I found this particular woman in bed with him when I brought in his coffee in the morning. Not regretting it either, judging by the look on her face as she left the flat in the very early afternoon. Ah, well. There is a big gap between what people say they want and what they actually do want, and Angslund has somehow worked out the answer to that particular riddle. As I've said, he's a genius. Or an idiot savant, perhaps, at least when it comes to women.

Men too, sometimes. At least, it's not just the fairer sex that I've found in his bed over the years. Sexual identity isn't something he's ever agonized over unduly. Beauty is the thing, I think, though what he means by beauty he alone knows—it's not always of a conventional sort, though there have been some lookers in between those sheets over the years, I'll give him that. No one is ever in the picture for long. It's not that they don't want to be—it's just that in Angslund, there's nothing solid to

latch on to. The boys are generally smarter than the girls in this regard—they see the lay of the land, so to speak. Well, I’ve done a bit of hand-holding, helped dry a few tears in my day. Angslund has a knack for making himself scarce at the crisis point, and I suppose he thinks that I can handle their disappointment a good deal better than he can. In this, he is probably right. I am not much of a one for long-term, steady companionship either—unless you count Angslund himself—but I’ve had my heart broken once or twice in my day, and I can at least see their side of it. Angslund can’t.

“What do you want for breakfast, Angslund?” I call.

“Eggs.”

“How do you want them?”

There’s a long silence, and I’m afraid I’ve lost him. Finally, though, he mutters, “Scrambled.”

The truth is, he’d eat them whatever way I brought them—he doesn’t actually care. But speech is good—it’s what separates us from the beasts, and keeping Angslund firmly on this side of the divide is one of my tasks too.

I decide I’ll whip them up with a bit of the salmon from dinner the night before, just for a change. Angslund won’t care, but we do some things for ourselves, we cooks. Got to keep a hand in. Just in case there ever is someone who notices.

If we have no appointments in the morning, I usually let him eat in bed, the lazy sod, but it’s a busy day ahead, and he may as well start facing the fact. I put his breakfast on the kitchen table. I believe it actually adds something to Angslund’s enjoyment to watch me scurrying anxiously around—it reminds him that he doesn’t have to—though at other times, I could swear he has lost all sight of the fact that the world doesn’t operate on magical principles that compel food and drink to appear simply for his wishing them to. He has never really grasped the fact that something can’t be procured because the shops are closed, and has been known to go into a sulk for days at what he perceives as either my laziness or my lack of gumption. It is well at those times that it does not lie in Angslund’s purview to hire and fire. I was appointed his caretaker by the executors of his trust, and nothing short of a court order to the contrary has the power to roust me out of here, unless I leave of my own volition.

Not that I haven’t left of my own volition. At least, what seemed to be my own volition. Angslund has ways of manipulating one’s volition to his advantage, or what he perceives as his advantage at the time. I don’t think I ever *truly* wanted to leave Angslund to his own devices, but there are times when he’s made me think I do. Packed up my bags in a huff and headed home to the aged parents more than once. It usually takes a couple of days to sort the whole thing out. Angslund can get by on dining out at night indefinitely—he much prefers society at that time of evening. But leave him a few mornings having to figure out how to make his own toast—I kid you not—and he makes up pretty fast.

Speaking of which, I almost forgot to make it myself this morning. No wonder he shows no signs of stirring from his boudoir. Every man must have something to get

out of bed for in the morning. Since survival is no longer one of Angslund's reasons, in the sense of having to make a living, anyway, things like toast end up counting disproportionately. Oh, dear. I only have the requisite four slices if I use a heel. Well, I'll put that one under the scramble and hope he doesn't notice.

I've just managed to leverage it in under the eggs when I hear Angslund lumbering in. The aroma of toast has indeed done the trick. I am reassured to see that Angslund is wearing a robe. Whatever his attractions for his various paramours, Angslund nude, especially nude in mismatched socks, is not my ideal morning sight. He's not fat but big boned and knobby-kneed, and let's just say he lacks the muscle tone that makes the classical Greek sculptures so appealing in any light. Or even Angslund's own early nudes, come to that, when he still believed that a certain pleasing prettiness was reason enough to render a likeness of it for the world to view. Well, even now, a nude self-portrait by Angslund would undoubtedly fetch a tidy price, but I am still not convinced it would be something you would want as the focal point of your living room—let alone seated across from you at the kitchen table.

I've just about trained him to dress for breakfast at this point, but he has sudden reversions to more primitive states, so I'm always half-braced for a shock.

"What's with the heel?" Angslund asks, before he's even sat down. Even after all this time, I can still forget what an intensely visual person he is.

"There are three perfectly good slices of toast there, Angslund. If you don't want the heel, let me have it. I'm doing without this morning."

He does let me have it, just as soon as my back is turned. Hurls it so that it catches me right on the nape of the neck. It doesn't do much more than smart, though the bit of egg that comes with it slides right down my shirt and will leave me with a grubby feeling for the rest of the day. In the broad inventory of all the things Angslund has thrown at me over time, this is a fairly mild missile. Produce is the most common form of ammunition, but books and the occasional piece of cutlery are not out of the question. The first time I walked out on him was after a knife came whistling my way. True, it was a butter knife, but it still left a stunner of a bruise on my collarbone, I assure you.

I know, I know—at this point people always wonder, so why did you go back? Because Angslund is a genius, that's why. But I've already mentioned that.

The classic line of the abused is, 'Oh, he'd never really hurt me!' But I know that Angslund *would* hurt me, given half the chance, at least on his foul days. What I do say is that Angslund would never maim me, or, alternatively, kill me. I told you he has an eye, and when he throws something, he knows where it is going. I've been advised by the occasional witness to give as good as I get. The only trouble is, I can't guarantee giving 'as good'—the risk is that I will accidentally give something much worse. And putting Angslund's eye out or crippling one of those hands is not something I want recorded in the official biography when it comes to the time, let me tell you.

So, this morning, I only pick up the heel, scrape the side of it that hit the

floor, and put it on my plate. “Thanks,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” Angslund says, already wolfing down his eggs. I sit down across from him and start in on my own in a slightly less avid way, though I suppose I’m the only one of us who notices how much the salmon adds. “I’ll buy another loaf this afternoon,” I say impassively.

“Good,” he says.

“That writer from *Art Speaks* is coming at ten, so you’d best get showered directly after breakfast.”

Angslund groans, though whether at the shower or the interview is anybody’s guess. He dislikes both. “Good-looking?”

“What?”

“The reporter?”

“I have no idea.”

“Man or woman?”

I look at my palm pilot. “Chris Pfeiffer, it says here. Could be either.”

He grins at me. “Then I guess I’ll have to wear something casually androgynous.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Angslund.”

“It’s not my hopes I’m looking to get up.”

“I understand. But the mayor is presenting you with a plaque—”

“Another one? The guy must be up for reelection.”

“Be that as it may, you know it’s just the kind of thing your family likes to see on the evening news. The point is, you’re meeting him for lunch at noon, which means getting you down to City Hall by quarter of. You aren’t going to have any time for trysting.”

“You might be surprised what I can manage on a tight schedule.”

My surprise at anything Angslund can pull off in this regard is unlikely. If he takes a shine to this Chris Pfeiffer, I’ve no doubt that he or she will travel snuggled up cozily with Angslund in the back of the limo, with me demoted to sitting up front with the driver, the tinted glass raised between the two compartments. Not that I’d mind that. No, it’s the level of dishevelment that our hero and his chronicler find themselves in as they step out in front of City Hall that I do have to mind. Occasionally, I’ve been asked why I leap to open Angslund’s door with such alacrity. Let’s just say that, after arriving at an art opening or two with my liege *en dishabille*, I’ve learned to be Johnny-on-the-spot before anyone from our illustrious press is.

Angslund ambles off to shower, and I put the dishes in the sink to soak and then go into his bedroom to lay out a couple of possibilities for what he might wear today. A nice shirt and slacks for the reporter, a sports jacket for the unveiling. It’s not that Angslund can’t dress himself. It’s just that what he comes up with on his own won’t likely be suitable for a high-color glossy, which *Art Speaks* certainly is. We have drawn our lines about his wardrobe, after innumerable scuffles. If he’s being interviewed in the studio, thankfully rare, though there is always *some* documentary-maker wanting

to worm his way into that holy of holies, Angslund can do whatever the hell he wants. Let the filmmaker worry about cropping out any full-frontal nudity—of artist, not sculpture—later. But Angslund as he appears in public—that’s my domain. And that means Angslund fully dressed in clothes without holes, stains, or questionable slogans. Also socks, shoes, and, our most bitter battle, antiperspirant. And yes, I’ve been known to sniff his armpits before we leave home, if we must get down to this most intimate level of revelation. Ah, too much information, is it? Then that’s enough for now.

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Well, the day has gone off successfully—for Angslund the public figure, if not particularly so for Angslund the man. Chris Pfeiffer turned out to be a cute if slightly combative lesbian, not much in the mood for any of Angslund’s games, and thus she got what I think will be a moderately interesting interview out of him. Not that his interviews are ever all *that* interesting. He’s not much good at talking about what he does, and pressed too far, it actually irritates him to have to try to describe his process. Thwarted in his lustiness, already short a piece of toast, I was surprised, if relieved, that the lovely Chris wasn’t treated to a bit of his cutlery throwing. Relieved because she certainly seemed like the type who would know exactly whom to sue. The trust has bought his way out of a couple of civil suits, but the executors weren’t too happy about it. And in the end, it’s always me, not Angslund, at whom they look slightly askance.

Still, it’s unlikely they’ll get rid of me, not now. In the early days, it was a different story, of course. I was as much part of the *Sturm und Drang* of Angslund’s life as anyone was. I went home to my folks as regularly as a new bride who’s discovered that the honeymoon isn’t quite the whole picture—not that that was easy either. It’s hard on a grown man to move home, particularly when he’s been engaged in what his parents consider a dubious vocation.

We’d been rowing for weeks over every little thing, Angslund and I, and then came the incident of the thrown butter knife, and I decided to pack it in. I was serious about it too. I hadn’t just gone home, I was actively soliciting other positions when I got a call from someone in the family. I don’t remember who it was—a sister, maybe, because it was someone who actually cared about him as opposed to his celebrity, which narrows the field considerably.

I’d been gone about three weeks at that point, long enough that the trustees had started conducting interviews to fill my position. I know, because I saw the listing. Anyway, this sister had tracked me down somehow and said that Angslund had disappeared. No one had seen or heard from him in several days, and her brother or someone had finally gone to report him as a missing person. She wasn’t asking me to come back, which relieved me considerably. She was only wondering if I would go down to the police station and see if I could tell them anything useful.

So I did. I wasn’t all that helpful, though, because all I could do was tell them the minutiae of what amounted to a rather squalid domestic life together. The

policeman doing the interview asked me if we had quarreled over anything recently, and I realized that he thought we were a couple. I was about to contest that, when, for the first time, it hit me that, in a way, we were.

No one said it in so many words, but the unspoken fear was that he had done himself in. Apparently, he had attempted it before. I'd learned a little about his mental instability when I was first hired for the job, but this came as something of a shock all the same. I was naive enough to believe that having reached the degree of acclaim he had so early would perforce have made him happy. I still thought that I might yet do great things myself, though my imagining of what these were to be comprised of remained hazy. But as the police questioned me that day, it began to dawn on me that the primary reason I'd wanted greatness was for the happiness I'd presumed until then it guaranteed.

In the end it wasn't the police but I who found him, though whether this was sheer luck or a kind of intuition, I couldn't say. I was walking by the river because I knew he liked the river, but I wasn't exactly looking for him, it was more that I was still pondering the mystery of him, when suddenly I saw him. He was sitting on a low concrete wall, looking out. He didn't see me. I moved toward him—somewhat reluctantly, I remember. It was as though for a few weeks, I'd had the illusion that I'd escaped a fate, only to have it handed back to me again. I suppose I could have walked away without acknowledging him.

No, I couldn't have. That's the point.

I walked over and sat down next to him on the wall. He didn't seem surprised to see me. At first I wasn't sure he even knew me. He was very thin and altered. He hadn't been eating—I saw that right away. Yet he wasn't unhappy. I never want to kid myself that I really saved him from anything. He might have been quite content scrounging around there by the river, making his art out of whatever he found to hand—at least until some dark end overtook him. As, I suppose, inevitably it would have. But still, it's a life he might have preferred to life in the spotlight, however brief.

"Hello, Angslund," I said. It was the first time I'd ever referred to him that way, but remember, I no longer considered myself in his employ, and I wanted to have it out equally with him. Man to man, peer to peer. It's laughable to me now. Inequality is the sole reason for our relationship—we are precisely complementary in our strengths and weaknesses. But I was still too young to understand this at the time.

"Hello, Fred," he said.

My name isn't Fred, or wasn't then, though it's a long time since anyone but my parents have called me anything else. Up till that point, I'd kept insisting that he call me by my real name, given name or surname, I didn't care, but he had persisted in calling me whatever the hell he pleased. 'Fred' was the one that had stuck, though, and in that moment, with all its perilous uncertainty, an appellation seemed a pretty trivial thing to be getting on my high horse about.

“Time to go home, isn’t it?” I asked, still not sure whether I meant myself to be included in the picture.

“Is it?” he asked, uninterested in the question. I didn’t know what to do with him and was wondering if he’d vanish again if I went to get some help, when I noticed the piece of paper and stub of pencil in his hand. At first, perhaps conditioned by his family’s fears, I thought the scrawl might be some kind of crazy suicide note.

“Do you see that, Fred?” He was looking across the river at the site of an abandoned factory. Uninspiring to say the least, I’d have said.

“No, Angslund, I don’t,” I said dispiritedly, for I was suddenly tired and foresaw a long night of coaxing him toward his own safety.

For the first time since my arrival, he looked at me full on. “You really don’t?” he asked. “You really don’t?” he repeated, in some anguish. He held up the dirty, crumpled piece of paper, and it was suddenly clear that he’d been trying to draw what he’d been seeing. I strained to see where his interest in this lay. Some derelict relics of industry against a backdrop of drab hills—a landscape you and I and everyone have all passed by unnoticed a hundred thousand times. I looked from sketch to view to sketch again, and then, for just a moment, I saw it. The shape of beauty, floating there, plucked from the rusted steel and dusty, burnt-out hills. I saw it. I told him so.

He breathed out then, and it was as if he hadn’t been able to truly release his breath for days. “It’s important, this thing I’m seeing,” Angslund said, then turned to me and asked, quite uncharacteristically humble, “Is it?”

“Yes,” I said. “But it’s time to go home, Angslund.”

“But I can’t just leave it, Fred. Because if I lose it . . . if I lose it—”

“I’ll bring you back here tomorrow.”

“This very spot, though? Because it has to be *here*, Fred. It can’t just be some place similar.”

“This very spot, Angslund. I promise.”

He was still reluctant, though. He was trusting the hired help, or, worse, the *former* hired help, with his grand vision. I appreciated his anxiety, but I had a different function here.

“Angslund,” I said quietly, “I don’t mean to be harsh with you, but the time for decision has arrived. You can come with me or you can stay here. But if certain other people find you instead—and you’ll know who I mean if you think about it—your life is likely to take a very different course, and not one you’re going to like very much.”

He did think about it, still staring out across the river. “Well, I suppose I’d better go with *you* then, Fred. If you’ll really bring me back.”

“I’ll bring you back.”

So we went home then. And I did bring him back, again and again, until he’d gotten what he needed there. What, as I’ve come to realize, I needed there too.

•••

I've cleaned up now, and have his toast and tea ready for him. It's my last act of the day. My last act for Angslund, anyway. The rest of the night is for myself. I give a slight tap on his studio door and go in.

Tonight, Angslund is working on a half-finished sculpture in beautiful umber-colored clay. Kuan Yin, he calls the piece, although from the preliminary models I've glimpsed, it's nothing like any Kuan Yin I've ever seen. Because it frustrates him to talk about it, I rarely ask him about his work, but I did ask him about this—why it was so different than other versions of the goddess.

“Because this is She. The real one,” he'd said.

Well, self-doubt has never been one of his problems.

“Toast,” he says now, recognizing it by scent alone. He doesn't bother to look in my direction. “How many pieces?”

“Four,” I say. “No heels,” I can't help adding pointedly.

But my snide comment is lost on him, as always. He's long since forgotten the incident of the morning. “Well, you'd better sit down and get off your feet, Fred. It's been a long day.”

Yes, it has, and it will be a long night too—for Angslund. I sit down in a comfortable chair, though a hard one would suit my purpose better, for before long I will drowse and doze. However much I try, I always do. But maybe *this* time, I will stay awake for a while, as Angslund wrestles with Kuan Yin, goddess of compassion. For some brief period between wakefulness and sleep, I may see things the way an artist sees them. And if I'm really lucky, I may even catch that moment when he finally draws Her down, lures Her into this cumbersome world of form, of substance . . . into this risky business of Being.

The End

SHARON CHARDE

The Radiance of Violation

she waiting
(behind her eye)
for the animal to jump
from the bush
when it did
sun comes loose
land not meeting sky
a bird can see the whole
world
why did you tell her
amulets of undying ()
stone hearts
silver circles
paper
I had to tell the truth
night skewers day
there is only the wound
god is
forgetting

SIMON FRIEL

Ángeles Caídos

rise to get out of bed and swing pointlessly to the left. over there is only the wall and the window. the window opens to the back of the building and a five flight drop to the ground below.

the drop may or may not be a fatal one.

in the area that will eventually be the terrace of somebody's overly priced flat there is now a vast collage of rubbish. the collection consists of all the old kitchen and bedroom furniture that made up the flats of this building before they decided to renovate it. the flats used to be lived in by poor people.

within the skeletons of their broken pasts I make out the perfect outline of a recently ripped out kitchen. the door is open and to each side lie two worktop units and one or two barely broken cupboards.

I see myself in that kitchen now. a younger me. it is a nice kitchen and the people in here are friendly and gracious. there is not much food but inside I learn how to never starve.

I am reminded that I was recently walking shoeless through childhood streets of Little Hulton.

past the pub on the corner of madam's wood, whose permanent darkness emits an a priori sense of brooding, and through onto the empty car park at its side.

three kids are hanging about here, looking tough for all of their 8 years; talking about the possibilities for a brilliant future.

the day sits supremely arrogant in a deep, possibly lost Mancunian blue, but in the sky the children are still able to easily make out the stars.

Adrien Brody's nose puffs out his nostrils and haughtily declares that he wants to grow up to be an Original Gangster.

the other two boys laugh at the O.G, and as they run away, across the car park and over the road into Kenyon Way fields, Brody's nose feels ashamed and lonely. in the receding distance he can hear them fighting amongst themselves about which one of Pieter Brueggel's proverbs is their least favourite.

excuses Virgo.

ex-professional snooker player John Virgo looks ruffled in response to the unexpected heckling from the crowd in the Kenyon Way social club. the over bearing intimacy of the small hall is making him feel increasingly claustrophobic. a distinct lack of room for movement, plus the absence of a snooker table, dictates the impossibility of a quick trick shot as a means of distraction.

Virgo stalls blankly, unsure how to react to the angry cry of the big eared 11 year old boy to the news that Peter Reid won't be coming to call the bingo.

continue walking but try not to look at the dead black cat semi-covered by the sparse grass that runs intermittently around the garages nobody seems to use.
cut through the guinnel from Jonquil Avenue onto the Spa shops, where the uncle of a kid from your school got murdered last week.

you moved the grass a little and saw the side of the cat's head where it had started to decompose.

the withered fur exposed the bones.

inside the semi-vacuous body grass could be seen pushing its way up on through from the ground below, whilst maggots and small insects ran amok through the wasteland of the departed Astraea's godless playground.

ha ha ha ha. you're uncle got shot and now he's dead.

you are removed for saying this to the small dirty girl who's always bothering you. it doesn't make any difference that you didn't say it, or even knew that she had an uncle, the girl is in mourning and deserves justice.

this aggression will not stand.

abra cadabra.

magic less world, but still words ellipse time.

on the street side of this building the hairdressing shop has changed barbers for the fourth time in a week.

hair cutting in 4 euros. latest fashions.

soldier style. sir, yes, sir.

he was a little rough but every choice has its compromises.

the only question now is where you will catch the blast that is certainly coming.

in the face, ripping it clean off and away into a massacred vacuum of air whilst the sound still resounds.

as an after thought, noise that rings annoyingly for only a few days, but nothing more.

scarcely, suffering as you zap across the tedium of a mundane world.

Conquer we must, when our cause it is just

Scatter her enemies, and make them fall

For when another June comes

Be enduring, continuing and eternal

≈

gypsies past and present collide in the incoherent twist-necked neo-absurdity of a sick life.

the calé old born without light have lost their souls long ago and today the young are born bereft of heart.

in some corners there remains a flailing dance; an imitation at survival, a brave yet futile attempt to ignore and reject the horror whilst at the same time it systematically impugns the validity of our innocence, our dreams and our memories.

one day, though, even we will docilely succumb our self to the nonsense. on that fateful morning we catch a horrific glimpse of reflection in a broken shop window; bloodied and screaming meaningless slogans through diseased mouth at interchangeable enemies whose blood we lust, we march forward into history



Roses Deep Inside | **Boril Boshnakov**



Silent Shout | **Boril Boshnakov**

MARK STATMAN

Celia Cruz Fue la Voz Tropical en Mis Sueños

in a dream once
the band arrived in New York
tired, out of sorts
a long road trip
bad weather, bad clubs, bad food
a bus that kept on breaking down
no one wants to play this night
except her
she sings
she always wants to sing
scent of sugar and sweat
of lips, fields, waist, sun
with a voice so like fire
everyone who hears it
wants to make love
and make love the most with her
I am everyone
from the nightclub floor
she points
and in sleep and dream
I follow
oye amor
the band plays, she sings
oye amor
I follow

Fly Fishing

I didn't know
all the rules
I was breaking
and inventing
as love turned into a river
as love turned away
from the river
and left the familiar country
to return to the even more familiar city
did I write love?
I meant silence
I meant music
I meant left, returned
unbridled, rose
smiled, turned, clipped, shook
withdrew, mistook
mis-stepped, undid
I meant
that I had something
a small mouth bass
or a rainbow trout
the river was early spring freezing
fingers numb
legs, feelings numb
this became an unexpected education
watch yourself, I heard myself think
always watch yourself
trying to do that
watching
a reflection in water,
clear, shimmering
skin the colors
black, brown, green
of stones on the river bottom

Heredity

I don't want to translate
azucena
it's too pretty as itself
in the market in southern Mexico
in the warmth and crowd
was an old woman
selling so many kinds of flowers
yellow, white, purple, orange,
red, blue, scarlet, violet, black
surrounded by them
she sat
maybe the way
the older Mary would have
beatific, the grief and sadness
of her life drained away
by time and hope
grief and sadness replaced
by an infinity of flowers
whose names she made up
perritos (puppies)
conejos (rabbits)
and *alegria mia* (my happiness)
depending on the day
ay joven, she said to me once
and I wonder who she saw
when she spoke
ay joven (youth), she said
ten cuidado (beware)
pointing out at the world
beyond this small town
with its pottery, its clothing, its food
Mary was transported to heaven
one day
to sit with her son at the throne
she sat on earth
in the market
one day
black and gold *huipile* (dress)
azucena in her hand
and waited

Losing Buttons

in my neighborhood
in Brooklyn
a church's bells
mark noon
a helicopter sounds across the sky
when I look for it
I see
one seagull
moving in the straightest line
for water
if I had a different sense of things
I'd write with
different words
it would still be about avoiding
which is what I write about
but different words would add
another layer
to the unknown
and unacknowledged
there must be a museum
full of this:
a museum of falling away
at the cemetery
I put stones on the graves
of people I don't know
and miss the ones
where my family
would be
I have a stone left
flat and black
I throw it in a river
I put it in my pocket
I engrave my initials on it
in the dark
the letters glow
like ghosts

Kenneth's Death

he's dead and
I still don't believe
years later
I'm walking someplace
and I'll think
that this is something
I'll tell him
when he gets back
when he gets back
as though where Kenneth's gone
is simply too far away
to telephone or
send a postcard
which is why we haven't heard
for so long
from a man who couldn't stand
not to be in touch

when he gets back
we'll be up
half the night
a good bottle of wine
recommended by Sharon
at the liquor store
maybe even one of those
Cuban cigars he'd
stopped smoking
we'll be up half the night
and Kenneth won't
get in
a word

ASCLEPIADES, RUMI, AND MIRZA GHALIB

Translations by Ken Bullock

Skeptical Sequence

Now let's drink unblended wine;

Dawn's just a handspan.

What're we waiting for?

The evening lamp to get re-lit?

Drink hearty. In no time at all,

Poor bastard, we'll be sleeping

through that endless night.

—Asclepiades

•••

Poetry's like bread
in Egypt;
Leave it out overnight,
who could eat it?

(So eat it quick:
Night passes over;
Dust settles.)

Really, it belongs in the heart—
Warm, climatized
Outside, it freezes,
Quivering like a fish
for an instant,
Gone stone cold
the next.

—Go ahead, pretend it's fresh,
Raise up all those images.

(You're drinking
just what you think,
Not some old gag,
buddy.)

—Rumi

•••

At full,
 beautiful the moon;

But my Love's
 more beautiful.

My earthen cup's
 replaceable

Better than
 Jamshyd's Sev'n-ring'd Bowl.

The Hereafter's secret
 I know

Comforting thought,
 & futile.

—Mirza Ghalib

RICHARD LANGE

Long Distance

Mrs. Rangle was watching television in her small living room when she heard voices out in front of her mobile home. It was dark out but when she parted the curtains she saw, in the yellowish light coming across the lane from the porch of the recreation room, the long mane of wavy hair, the baggy jeans and light-colored T-shirt of her neighbor, Lois. Lois had a man with her. He was shorter, with a head of white hair, and a white or perhaps light-blue suit. Something was wrapped around his neck. Lois was in her late sixties, more than a decade older than Mrs. Rangle, but she still worked in her garden every day and often took walks downtown for no other reason than to sit in a café and enjoy a cup of coffee. Mrs. Rangle, by contrast, kept her walks to the safe confines of the mobile home park; if she went downtown for any reason she drove. When Lois and the man went through the chain-link gate and reached Lois's porch, triggering the motion-detecting porchlight, Mrs. Rangle saw that the thing around the man's neck was an ascot.

"It's not much of a place," Lois said, putting her key into the lock of her front door. The spaces in the park were small, with only eight feet between each trailer, so eavesdropping was easy.

"Oh, I'll bet it's lovely," the man said. He had an accent: Scottish or Irish. And he was carrying a canvas bag that appeared to have something heavy in it.

Lois let him go in ahead of her. She turned and looked out at the empty lane in front and then looked in Mrs. Rangle's direction. Mrs. Rangle immediately pulled the curtains closed.

Who could this man be? In the two years that Mrs. Rangle had lived here, Lois hadn't had any visitors except her children or other park members. Mrs. Rangle was sure of this. Lois was a widow, and she had no boyfriend. Now suddenly a man in an ascot? Mrs. Rangle strained to hear. The large windows of Lois's trailer were closed, but the louvered windows above them were open, so the sound came in fits and starts.

"Well, it's not the only thing that gets better with age, is it?" the man asked.

Lois said something inaudible. Moments later there was a pop, then a series of muffled sounds, scrapes of chairs on the linoleum floor.

Lois said something else that Mrs. Rangle couldn't quite make out.

"Go ahead. Eat, drink. Live it up. Who knows when the dog catchers will be here," the man said.

"It still doesn't seem fair. I mean, is it even legal?"

"It was the gambling, really. If it wasn't for that I think they'd leave me alone. But there's an inheritance at stake, you see. Greedy bastards."

A jazz number came on and the conversation became too muffled to make out.

Mrs. Rangle picked up the telephone and dialed her daughter, Marlene.

Marlene lived 350 miles to the south, in Los Angeles, and Mrs. Rangle only saw her for a week each summer when she came up with her children, Erin and Tyler, ages 5 and 7, and stayed in a motel down near the beach. Mrs. Rangle had another daughter as well, Michelle, but she was estranged. Mrs. Rangle hadn't had any contact with her in ten years. All she really knew was that Michelle lived in New York City, worked for a book publisher, and had been divorced twice. She was 33 now, single again following the last divorce, but Mrs. Rangle still pictured her as a young girl.

Mrs. Rangle heard her daughter's voice and started speaking, but then realized it was only the answering machine. "Marlene, something is going on," she said. "A man is inside Lois's trailer. It's nearly ten at night. I've never seen him before and I'm worried about her. Please call back. I think she's being taken advantage of."

When Mrs. Rangle replaced the phone on the cradle, she wondered, as she often did when leaving a message on Marlene's machine, if Marlene was at home listening. It was a Sunday night, and the children would have school in the morning. Where else would they be?

•••

When Mrs. Rangle was twenty-three and living in Glendale, she took Michelle to Griffith Park. It was a cold, cloudy day in the fall, and some paving work was being done on the road leading into the area around the merry-go-round, forcing Mrs. Rangle to park a few hundred yards away and walk. They cut through an area of sparse pine trees, Michelle, who was two years old then, stopping every so often to pick up sticks and rocks, or to point to gopher holes and say "Snake."

"No, not snakes. Gophers," Mrs. Rangle said. "I think, anyway."

When they emerged from the forested area they saw that the merry-go-round was closed. Several of the horses and unicorns had been unbolted and laid on the ground, allowing wider access to the guts of the contraption, where a Hispanic man was crouched, working a wrench while a Spanish-language station played from a radio on the metal platform. An older couple was seated on a bench nearby, the man in a navy sportscoat and dress shirt, the woman in pearl slacks and a white sweater, but otherwise the area looked abandoned. "It's closed, sweetie," Mrs. Rangle said.

Michelle was studying a foil gum wrapper she'd picked up along the way, but now she saw what her mother was seeing and a confused look crossed her face.

"We'll have to come back another time."

Michelle had been on the merry-go-round before, but she seemed not to remember it. She held up the wrapper and said, "Gum!"

"No, put that down. That's trash. Let's go. We'll go to the swings at the little park." A chill wind had come on, and Mrs. Rangle reached down to zip up Michelle's sweater.

As they were crossing back through the forested area toward the car, Mrs. Rangle noticed a bearded man in an army jacket, his hair wild and tangled, walking toward them. He was about ten yards away, moving quickly, as though there were

someone back toward the merry-go-round he was trying to catch up with, but when Mrs. Rangle looked at the man's face, his wide, intense eyes, it was clear he had his sights on her and no one else. She stopped, reflexively reached down for her daughter's hand. She was just touching Michelle's soft fingers, half her attention on her daughter and half on the man, when he slammed into her. She was lifted up off the ground and carried, toes dragging across the carpet of pine needles and oak leaves. The man had a strong hand at her throat, so her scream was just a gurgle, and she could not breathe. The dusky air became suddenly clearer, as though she'd put on a pair of eyeglasses, and her panic took on a better focus as well. Michelle. The only reason to get loose from this man's angry, smelly clench, was to get back to Michelle before something happened to her, before she wandered into the road they'd been about to reach. Even when the man pushed Mrs. Rangle through a wall of twiggy shrubs and slammed her to the dirt, her thoughts were only of getting back to Michelle. The man released her throat momentarily and she screamed Michelle's name, but the voice lacked its normal volume and tone. It sounded like an audio cassette that had jammed in the player, the tape being wound tighter and tighter by the turning gears.

"Screamer! Screamer!" the man growled, clapping Mrs. Rangle's mouth.

His other hand came brutally under her skirt and ripped her underwear down, and then he was climbing onto her, seemingly trying to hide her under himself. His penis moved against her, shoved, tore at her, but she had disassociated herself from what was happening down there. Her eyes were on the space—the few inches—between the ground and the lowest leaves of the shrubs, through which she could see the area where she and Michelle had been walking. The trees were sparse outside of this cluster of shrubs, but she could not see Michelle—or anyone else. She clawed awkwardly at the dirt, trying, like an overturned turtle, to right herself, but the beery, meat-breathed man kept slamming her down again.

And then he was up and hurrying away. Her feet finally found purchase and she was able to break back through the tangle of shrubs and run. When she saw Michelle sitting in the dirt, tears and snot coating her face, howling in terror, the wave of relief was so strong she stumbled. She caught herself and scooped Michelle into her arms and held her, shooshed her, carrying her, quickly, toward the car.

She was just reaching the road when she heard a man calling after her. "Miss! Miss!" the man said. She glanced back to see the older man from the bench, his white hair up in the wind. "Are you okay?" he asked. He was following her with his hand up in a calming gesture.

Mrs. Rangle crossed the road, climbed into the car and pulled the door closed behind her, slamming the lock. Michelle was screaming in her face, but Mrs. Rangle managed to find the zippered pocket at the hip of her skirt and extract her keys.

The man had both hands up now, urging Mrs. Rangle to slow down, to get out of the car again. He himself looked afraid, eyes wide under thick gray bangs. Mrs. Rangle, still clutching Michelle in one arm, her free hand trembling like an electric knife, found the ignition and started the car.

“Please, Miss,” the man pleaded. He stepped backward a few feet. “We’ve got the police coming.”

Mrs. Rangle wheeled the car away from the curb and punched the gas.

When she reached the carport of her apartment complex, her husband was just getting out of his car, the dark-blue shirt he wore to his job at Wheeler’s Auto Body rolled at the sleeves, his hands stained black. He was smiling, keeping himself in tight next to his door to allow her room to park, and then a cloud of recognition changed him. He sprang around to his wife’s side of the car, his face white and panicked.

“Tom,” she sobbed. “Tom.”

“What? Jesus!”

Michelle was still crying, but it was no longer the soul-rending howl from earlier. Tom tried to take her from his wife’s arms but Mrs. Rangle would not let go of her.

Even later, when the police arrived, when they were trying to extract from Mrs. Rangle a workable description of the attacker, she kept Michelle in her lap, kept stroking her hair, kissing her soft cheeks and ears. Michelle had stopped crying completely by now. Her face had been wiped and her expression was one of awed curiosity, her gaze fixed on these strangers with shiny things on their shirts and gleaming silver badges on their caps. She began to fuss, to push against Mrs. Rangle’s face and sore neck. But still Mrs. Rangle would not let go of her.

•••

“Hello, Lois,” Mrs. Rangle said, stepping out onto her porch.

Lois was in her garden, sitting in a metal deck chair just inside her chain-link fence. She was drinking a cup of tea, a folded magazine in her hand, her long hair flowing back over the chair.

“I thought I heard someone in your trailer last night.”

“Hi, Mrs. Rangle.”

Mrs. Rangle paused a moment, waiting. “Did you have a visitor?”

“No, Mrs. Rangle.”

“Are you sure? I distinctly heard voices.”

“It was probably the television, Mrs. Rangle. Maybe it was your own television.”

Lois often spoke to Mrs. Rangle in this flat, disinterested tone; it frustrated Mrs. Rangle to no end. But now that it was clear Lois was not being honest, that she could use this tone even when telling a bold lie, Mrs. Rangle wondered what other lies Lois had told very casually. Mrs. Rangle heard someone moving around in the back of Lois’s trailer and realized the visitor was still here.

“All right,” Mrs. Rangle said. “Have a nice day.” She stepped back into her unit and closed the door. *So he spent the night! Where had she met him? Why was she letting a man she barely knew stay the night? Was he preying on her? Stealing from her? Who was he?*

Mrs. Rangle took her seat by the side window and settled in to watch—the

man would have to come out eventually. Before he could though, Lois carried her magazine back inside and the door stayed closed for half an hour. There was movement and some muffled words, but Mrs. Rangle could hear nothing distinct. Then Lois and the man emerged. The man was dressed in a seersucker suit and he had the ascot on again; it was cream-colored. His thick silver hair was combed into a perfect wave. They climbed into Lois's truck and drove off.

Two days later, when Lois's truck was not parked out front, the man returned. He walked quickly through the gate and let himself into the trailer. I knew it, Lois thought. *A criminal!* She picked up the telephone and dialed 911.

"911 Emergency Response. What are you reporting?"

"A man has come into my neighbor's trailer," Mrs. Rangle whispered. "He's in there right now."

"Do you recognize the man?"

"No. He's wearing an ascot."

"An ascot?"

"He's a foreigner. He's stealing from her."

"So you think he's burglarizing the home?"

"Yes."

"I have 418 North Coast Avenue. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Space 44. Please hurry."

"We'll send someone out. Please hold."

The line went quiet and Mrs. Rangle became aware of the tension in her body, the sweat on her lips and brow. Her throat was dry.

The dispatcher came back on the line. "Can you describe the man?"

"Yes. White hair. Blue suit. About sixty."

"Sixty or sixteen?"

"Sixty. Six zero."

"Okay. Um, you say he's wearing an ascot?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. An officer is on the way."

Mrs. Rangle hung up and then pushed the curtain aside again, her heart pounding. She mentally pleaded for the police to arrive but she could hear no siren growing louder in the distance. Three minutes went by, then five, the whole time Mrs. Rangle fearful that the man would come out of the trailer and get away. Finally, a police car that didn't even have its lights on turned up the lane and stopped in front of Lois's trailer. A young, handsome officer with a crewcut emerged cautiously from the car and went through the gate. "Santa Cruz Police Department," he said, rapping at the door. "Open up."

"Coming," the man called from inside.

The front door opened and the thief poked his head out. "Yes?"

"Sir, can you step outside?"

"Sure, laddy. But don't shoot." The thief smiled but the young officer was not

amused.

“Do you live here?”

“No, no. Just visiting.”

“Are you a friend of the owner’s?”

“An acquaintance, really. May I ask what’s the trouble?”

“We had a burglary call for this address.”

The thief chuckled. “Well, sorry to disappoint. Been many things in life. Was even a smuggler in my youth. The war was on, you should know. But there’s no burglary on my c.v. as of yet.”

“Do you have some identification?”

“Um, well.” The thief appeared to be looking for an escape route.

“Sir, some identification please.”

“Ohhh,” the man said, dramatically. “Yes. Yes, I do.” He reached for his wallet.

Mrs. Rangle stayed at her window, watching the man being placed in the back of the patrol car, and listening intently when Lois finally arrived home and had to answer the officer’s questions. When the officer came up Mrs. Rangle’s porch steps and knocked on her door, she knew everything he might tell her, but she put on a face of concerned confusion.

“Good day, ma’am.” Up close she could see the officer was a bit swarthy, perhaps Mexican or Italian. “Did you make the call to 911?”

“Yes. I was very concerned.”

“Well, the man wasn’t a burglar, you’ll be happy to know. But he was listed as a Missing Person. He disappeared from his daughter’s home in San Mateo a couple days ago and apparently took a bus down here. He’d talked your neighbor into letting him stay. But everything is all right now. His daughter is on her way to pick him up.”

“Thank you for telling me. I knew there was something wrong over there.”

•••

When Mrs. Rangle was thirty-six, she was waiting by the phone, watching the street in front of her house for any sign of Michelle. Michelle hadn’t come directly home after school, as was the rule, and Mrs. Rangle was sick with fear.

A few months after the rape, Mrs. Rangle and her husband had moved north to Santa Cruz. They’d lived in a small apartment not far from the beach in the Live Oak neighborhood for the first two years, Tom working at Santa Cruz Imported Truck Service and Mrs. Rangle working at Michelle’s school as a teacher’s aide. When Mrs. Rangle became pregnant again, Tom borrowed money from his uncle for a down payment on a small two bedroom house on the west side of town. It had been hoped by Tom and by the counselor that Mrs. Rangle saw monthly that the pregnancy would be good for her. She had not been able to calm herself since the rape, and she’d developed some separation issues in regards to Michelle. Just allowing Michelle to play at the houses of her friends, or to attend the birthday parties of her classmates without going with her, caused Mrs. Rangle to have anxiety attacks, to pace the house with her

hand at her throat. But bringing another child into the family hadn't worked. Tom was gone now, moved over the hill to San Jose and engaged to another woman, and the two-bedroom house was up for sale.

Mrs. Rangle got into her car and started driving around, her eyes swinging from side to side, checking over every group of teenagers she passed. She tried the streets around the high school and then got out of the car and walked the campus, stopping some football players coming up the hill from the field to ask about Michelle. But these boys, sweaty, wild-haired, scraping the asphalt with their cleats, said they didn't even know her. Mrs. Rangle raced home again to see if a message had been left on the machine or, God willing, Michelle was actually there, but when she burst through the door into the kitchen, she saw only Marlene, just home from rehearsing for the Christmas pageant at the elementary school, sitting at the kitchen table with a bag of cookies and a glass of milk.

"Where would she go?" Mrs. Rangle asked.

"Mom, I don't know. Just calm down. I'm sure she's all right."

"No. We need to find her. I want you to stay here and wait by the phone. If she calls tell her to come home *immediately*."

Mrs. Rangle went back out again, driving the streets frantically, zig-zagging her way over every possible route between the high school and the house. She went downtown and cruised Pacific Avenue, checking the benches and the tables in front of the cafés. She was making a wider search, marking off the grid of downtown streets, when she saw Michelle on the lawn in front of the Calvary church. Michelle was with a boy and another girl, her friend April, their backpacks and books strewn all around them.

Mrs. Rangle stopped the car in the middle of the street and ran to Michelle. "Why aren't you home?" she pleaded.

Michelle and her friends looked up in fright. The boy, wearing glasses, his hair in a gelled wave that spiked at the top, turned bright red. April hunched her shoulders and sank into herself.

"Please get in the car, Michelle," Mrs. Rangle demanded.

But Michelle was stone-faced. She glared at her mother.

"Michelle, please. It's nearly six o'clock."

Michelle kept her expression firm. When Mrs. Rangle reached down to grab her hand, Michelle held it in tight against her breast. Her face had turned red too now, but she still hadn't said a word.

"Please," Mrs. Rangle said. "Please."

•••

"Marlene, please, please answer. Something incredible has happened. Lois was duped by a con man. She took him into her home and nearly...."

A click and then a screech sounded through the line. "Mother, what are you talking about?"

"You are home."

“Yes, I’m here. I just came in. What’s happening up there?”

“Oh, Marlene, you wouldn’t believe it. A man escaped from his daughter’s home and came to Santa Cruz and talked Lois into letting him stay in her trailer. The police had been looking for the man for days.”

“What had he done?”

“I don’t know. Lois met him somewhere downtown. He sweet-talked her and she let him come home with her. Two days later he came back alone and I called the police.”

“Are you sure about this, mother?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you sure this is what happened?”

“Of course I’m sure. Marlene, the police were here for an hour. They left not ten minutes ago.”

“Okay, well, as long as you’re okay.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m a hero.”

Marlene said nothing for a moment. “Mother, maybe it would be better if you left Lois alone. Let her deal with her own problems. You don’t have to get involved.”

“Marlene, she’s too trusting. She let a *stranger* stay the *night*. He could have been anyone.”

“Okay. You’re right. Maybe she should have been a little less trusting. But don’t worry about her too much, all right?”

“We have to watch out for each other, Marlene. If we don’t, who will?”

“You’re right. Is everything else okay?”

“Marlene?”

“Yes, mother?”

“Please tell Michelle what I did. Make her understand how good I was.”

“Mother, Michelle doesn’t want to know. She has her own life to worry about.”

“When will she come back, Marlene?”

“I don’t know, mother. When she’s not angry anymore.”

“It’s been so long. How can she be angry for ten years?”

“Michelle is a strange person. I can’t get through to her either.”

“Was I ever so bad as she says?”

“Mother, I’ve got dinner in the oven. I need to go, all right?”

“You’re eating early.”

“Yes, we’re eating early. Erin has a school function this evening.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“I can’t remember right now. I’ve got to go.”

“Please tell her, Marlene. Tell her I still love her.”

“Mother, I’ve got to go.”

Mrs. Rangle was just finishing her morning bowl of oat bran when she saw Lois emerge from her trailer wearing a large straw hat. Mrs. Rangle stepped quickly over to the door and opened it. “Are you all right, Lois?”

“Go back inside, Mrs. Rangle,” Lois said sharply.

“Did they take him back home? His children, I mean?”

“Mrs. Rangle, why did you call the police?”

“He was breaking into your home.”

“No he wasn’t. I gave him a key. I’m entitled to have a guest in my home, Mrs. Rangle. I’m entitled to my privacy.”

“But you didn’t know him. You didn’t know what he could have done to you.”

“Mrs. Rangle, go back inside and leave me alone.”

“I was only trying to help you, Lois. I would want a neighbor to do the same for me.”

“Just stay out of my business. Haven’t you learned your lesson by now?”

“What lesson?”

“Never mind, Mrs. Rangle. Just worry about your daughter and don’t bother me.”

This reference to her daughter knocked Mrs. Rangle back on her heels. A chill wind moved through her and she felt light-headed. She closed the door and sat in the chair beneath the window. Lois always acted as though she just wanted to be left alone, but here she’d been eavesdropping the whole time. But knowing this about Lois, knowing that she wasn’t as aloof as she acted, was cold comfort. Lois had thrown a dagger and hit Mrs. Rangle right in the heart.

Over the next few days Mrs. Rangle watched Lois even more carefully. Lois was back to her usual routine, coming and going from her trailer alone, carrying her magazine to the cafés downtown, watering her lavender and her four o’clocks. Some neighbors stopped to talk with her occasionally, but the conversations were either about mundane things like the weather, or they were whispered. No matter how hard she strained, Mrs. Rangle couldn’t make them out.

As Mrs. Rangle sat at the window, watching, she feared that Lois would see her there and say some new hurtful thing, but Lois didn’t even turn her head in Mrs. Rangle’s direction. That was the most maddening part of it all, that Lois could go on with her routine as though she hadn’t shouted that insult, as though the pain she’d caused wasn’t worth an apology, not even an acknowledgement.

Two weeks after the day the police arrived, Mrs. Rangle woke in the night to some strange sounds. She stood from her bed and quietly slid the window open. The clarity of the sounds improved, but they were still muffled. Lois’s porchlight was on, which meant someone had come through the door in the last five minutes—the motion-sensor turned it off unless there was more movement—and in the light bleeding back along the side of the trailer, she saw that Lois’s louvered windows had been shut. Though she couldn’t make out any particular words, it was clear Lois had a man with her. Mrs. Rangle heard a peal of laughter. It sounded familiar. The man with the ascot had come back.

The telephone was in the kitchen, just a few feet away. It seemed important to call. The man’s children would be worried sick. It wouldn’t be right to let them go on sitting alone somewhere, wondering. With her toes, she located her slippers under the

bed and worked her feet into them. She heard Lois squeal. It was a sharp cry, as though in fright. Mrs. Rangle went back to the window and kept herself motionless, her muscles taut, her breathing bated. Lois squealed again. And now there was a knocking sound, something having fallen to the floor in there. More knocks followed. They were desultory at first, then they became rhythmic. Lois squealed again and then moaned. Mrs. Rangle ran for the phone and picked it up. The dial tone buzzed in her ear. "Oh, Christopher," Lois called out. "Oh, my!"

Mrs. Rangle held her finger over the buttons. Tears were filling her eyes. The hand that held the phone trembled. She heard another cry, but this one was her own. She clutched her nightgown at the throat, but another cry came, then another. She hung up the phone.

The End



Robot R&R | Eric Joyner



The Usual Suspects | **Eric Joyner**





Gentle Max | Eric Joyner

STEVE HEILIG

Big Sur's Best Ambassador: An Appreciation of Henry Miller's *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*

“Henry Miller has little importance in New York, but on the west coast, where he lives, he is taken for a genius.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, 1953

Re-reading the favorite books of one's youth can be dangerous, or at least disappointing. They rarely measure up to the image and influence they had upon first encounter. That has too often been my sad experience, at least. But Henry Miller has been a happy exception.

Back in the 1970s, I drove hundreds of miles to Big Sur as soon as I had a driver's license and a car. Drawn there by the books of Miller, Richard Brautigan, and Jack Kerouac, I was not disappointed, even though many years too late for any kind of “scene”. Miller had moved to Los Angeles; the other writers I'd read were also gone and even the short-lived “hippie” flourishing there had degenerated into something less than groovy (Although there was still a sign on the door of one local eatery reading “NO HIPPIES”).

But I loved Big Sur, and visited whenever I could, camping and hiking all over the beaches and hills and in my old VW van. I recall watching the glow of the huge Marblecone fire in 1977 and riding my bike to the giant landslide that shut the highway for months in 1983. Some good friends had a house on Pfeiffer Ridge and I freeloaded there whenever I could as well. I have many good memories lodged all over Big Sur and quite a few fuzzy ones as well. I still wish it was permitted, or at least easy, to sneak in to the hot tubs at Esalen in the middle of the night. But one can still walk out to the beach at Andrew Molera park and surf one of the most scenic waves on earth, or contract horrible poison oak rashes in many beautiful canyons, or walk out onto Bixby Bridge and look down upon the little beach where Jack Kerouac suffered his delirium tremens and Allen Ginsberg soared on acid all the way to Asia and back.

I kept reading whatever I could about the place as well, from literature and poetry to natural history. My initial infatuation with authors like Kerouac faded as the adolescent romantic image of alcoholic paranoid meltdowns faded. The first book I read set in this magical place, Brautigan's *Confederate General from Big Sur*, still elicits smiles. I collected what I could find about the region, and even rented and watched the mostly laughable early 1960s Elizabeth Taylor film *The Sandpiper* only because it was set and filmed in Big Sur. On the other extreme of quality, some of Robinson Jeffers' poetry set on this coast is undeniably timeless.

But Miller's 1957 book *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* remains for me the ultimate Big Sur book. From the black and white cover, featuring a fine sweeping photo looking south on the coast with some of Bosch's fantasmagorical figures—playing in Paradise, superimposed on a meadow over the sea—through Miller's historical overview of the region through his own history there, it is one of his more compelling reads. It enticed me to then dig into some of his other classics like the "Tropics" books, *Black Spring*, and others. I then read a couple of books about him, including the biographies by Jay Martin and Erica Jong.

I eventually came to think that Big Sur may have saved Miller's life; and thus the elegiac, grateful-to-be-alive tenor of his "Big Sur". Before his arrival there he, at least according to the books, was in constant struggle—with women, money, his muse, poverty, his own psyche. He seemed to be protesting too much about how "happy" he was in those earlier decades, like one trying to convince himself of his own joy in life. For all the artistic clamor of his famed earlier work, it seemed that happiness, or at least some sort of peace of mind, eluded him.

But then, already well into middle age, he found Big Sur, and that fulfillment he had sought for and preached of. And he wrote about it with a new sense of joy, of forgetting himself as much as possible and finding the appreciation of life, day by day, that so many of his own favorite writers and sages had spoken of. The frankly sexual salaciousness in some of this work that made him famous and infamous—and which made a girlfriend of mine blush and say "Oh my, Henry!" as she read *Sexus* in our Big Sur campsite—gave way to a more nuanced appreciation of life.

Miller admitted from whence his new appreciation of life arose: "It was here in Big Sur that I first learned to say 'Amen,'" he wrote. "Here I will find peace. Here I shall find the strength to do the work I was made to do."

As for the evidence that he did so, it is in his book, which you should read yourself: "In the Beginning" starts with a tone between geology and mysticism; "Who lived here first? Troglodytes perhaps. The Indian came late. Very late." Miller came later and paid \$5 per month for his first "hovel" at Anderson Creek, while "my earnings were just about sufficient to keep a goat alive." Later his previous work started to sell and allowed him to live more comfortably among the trees and cliffs and sun and fog, with his third wife Lepska and their children in "The first real home I have ever known". His words here shift between describing the awesome natural surroundings, introducing his small circle of friends and neighbors, and ruminations upon the outside world and, yes, the meaning of life as he saw it (a concluding extended tale of a difficult visitor, Conrad Moricand, has always struck me as a tacked-on addendum; others find it their favorite part of the book).

Writing in the wake of horrible war, he assessed "politics" and observed "You now that two lascivious monkeys at the zoo, two monkeys picking fleas off one another's backside, are doing just as good a job." More broadly, "Life is making new demands upon us. The cosmic cataclysms which ancient man had to face have given

way to moral cataclysms.” And: The great hoax which we are perpetuating every day of our lives is that we are making life easier, more comfortable, more enjoyable, more profitable. We are doing just the contrary... One ugly word covers it all: waste.”

Thus, like Thoreau at his pond or Miller’s distant neighbor and contemporary Jeffers, Miller was able to see more clearly from his point of beautiful geographic isolation. But Miller remained much less stern than Jeffers and more humanly engaged than Thoreau, having a different kind of genius and temperament. He mixed the prosaic with the profound, with humor throughout, as when he and Emil White sit at a table just off the highway in front of what is now the library and cultural center named for Miller and a tourist pulls up, “Throwing a half dollar on the table, the man ordered coffee and sandwiches; he took it for granted that we were running a roadside café.”

Now you can indeed get coffee at that same spot, oftentimes at least; each time I drink some, I do so in Miller’s honor. He finished his *Big Sur* book in 1956, and lived in Big Sur itself until 1962, leaving just as a generational tidal wave washed upon the west coast and beyond, one partly of his making. Younger writers and many others would become ‘beat’, politicized, sexualized, psychedelized in ways undreamt before—at least for a time, until a relapse into greed, materialism, and fear recurred. We’re living amid that now, which makes reading books like Miller’s all the more important. Meanwhile, and for a long time to come, the spirit of Henry Miller chuckles among the cliffs, looking out at “sea and sky unending.”

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

Henry Miller on Music: A Recollection by Charles Bernstein *from Film Music and Everything Else (Turnstyle Music, 2000)*

This year is the 100th anniversary of the birth of author Henry Miller. Henry was a lover of music. He was also a lover of women, and of life, and of so many things! I had become his fan at the appropriate age—late adolescence, early adulthood (an age he himself never really emerged from, fortunately for us).

I am writing here to tell of his little known musical side, and of my exhilaration at meeting him. I must also tell of my exasperation.

I met Henry Miller for the first time at his house in Pacific Palisades. It was a few years before he died. An intimate dinner. A mutual friend, Twinka Thiebaud, had cooked the meal.

He committed blasphemy that night. Not an unusual act for a man who earned both his livelihood and his reputation being irreverent, indelicate, and sometimes just nasty in print. (Not to mention brilliant, spontaneous, and inspired). But that night he crossed the line.

“Charles,” he said after considering me for a long moment, “what do you think of Bach . . . Johann Sebastian Bach?”

What did I think of Bach? What a question.

“Well,” I ventured, “I would say that if God were to manifest in the form of musical sound, it would have to be the music of Bach”.

“I see,” he replied, nodding thoughtfully.

I elaborated, “I never seem to tire of Bach. The amazing wedding of passion, reason, and sheer perfection in Bach’s works. True mastery. Sublime.” (This was clearly a subject close to my heart, and one I had spent years nurturing.) “I suppose Bach commands the musical language in a way that has never been equaled or surpassed to this day,” I concluded.

“I see,” he said again.

Henry looked at me a long moment without blinking. Then he nodded once more and spoke matter-of-factly.

“I don’t care for the man’s music at all, you know. You might say I detest it,” he said simply.

I swallowed hard. For an instant I thought he was joking. He wasn’t.

“You’re just saying this because you know I’m a musician and you know you’ll get a knee-jerk response to amuse you. The fact is, it’s not possible to detest Bach. It’s like detesting nature, flowers, and trees or something. (I actually said this.)

Henry shook his head, “Never did like him. Reminds me of clocks. Very Germanic, or Swiss. You see, it’s all so mechanical, drills, rigid stuff,” he explained.

So, I thought to myself, I have been sent here to enlighten this benighted old

man to The Truth. He is a heretic. A nonbeliever. This is my opportunity to win a soul for J. S. Bach. To lead a famous but misguided old fellow out of darkness and into the light of reason and acceptance.

What followed was, of course, utterly frustrating. I proceeded, “But, Henry, you already told me how much you love music. You said you wanted to learn to improvise at the piano. Bach was probably the greatest musician and keyboard improviser of all time.”

Henry shrugged, “He sounds like school, don’t you know. It gets on my nerves, that repetitious stuff. I can’t listen to it.”

So, finally I asked him who he does listen to since he loves music so much. He didn’t hesitate. His answer was Scriabin.

Alexander Scriabin! It was becoming clear to me that Henry Miller was born to irritate people. I conceded that there was a place in the musical firmament for Mr. Scriabin, but that it wasn’t above Johann Sebastian Bach.

Henry became animated, “Scriabin speaks to the soul, you see what I mean? It’s a very mysterious business.” He repeated this last phrase with glazed eyes, “A very mysterious business, Charles. You see my point, don’t you? It’s for the soul, this kind of music.”

“And Bach’s St. Matthew Passion,” I inquired, “that’s not for the soul?”

Henry just looked mildly puzzled, “I’ve never understood what you musicians see in this guy’s music. Maybe it’s because all of you are brought up on it. My friend Jacob Gimpl plays the most beautiful piano, don’t you know, but we never see eye to eye when it comes to Bach.”

Ah ha, I thought to myself. It was at that point that I realized how he must have had this little debate many times before. Probably late at night over Brandy with Gimpl. Lord knows how many other musicians he baited through the years with this same ploy—in Paris or Big Sur or New York.

It’s almost irresistible to a musician, this kind of challenge. If Miller had been a lesser mind, or Bach a lesser force—then it would have been easier for me to let the whole thing drop. But how could Miller, of all people, not be moved? How could he not identify with the freedom, the power, the vitality at least, in Bach’s keyboard works. I might even have let it drop if the subject had been Mozart, or my beloved Beethoven. But the B Minor Mass? The Passions? The Musical Offering, The Art of Fugue, the Suites, Preludes, and Fugues? I truly couldn’t conceive of a Henry Miller who would place any lesser luminary above all that!

Naturally, our heated musical discussion that evening was for naught. After several rounds, we turned to safer territory. A mutual love of the bicycle. It all ended on an amiable note as I quizzed him thoroughly about his childhood memories. I had been researching the history of cycling, and was fascinated with all his first hand accounts. I brought up the old Six-Day Bicycle Marathons in Madison Square Garden, which, it turns out, he had attended as a boy. He was the only person I had ever met

who seemed to understand the “ghost in the machine” quality of bicycles. The human quality.

The following year, Henry published a sequel to his Book of Friends. I was surprised to see that the final chapter was devoted to his “Best Friend.” He began that chapter by writing, “Believe it or not it was my Bike.” Then he went on to describe the Six-Day Races and Madison Square Garden.

As I think back on that evening, I’m convinced that despite his iconoclastic glee in Bach-bashing, Miller truly believed that the muse spoke through Mr. Scriabin and not Johann Sebastian. I admit that’s hard for me (a true Miller fan) to swallow. But then, the writings of Henry Miller are not dissimilar in some ways to the music of Scriabin. Unpremeditated in spirit. Brash and irreverent in the face of the old masters. And indeed Miller too “speaks to the soul” (as he put it) of a “very mysterious business.”

CONTRIBUTORS

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Amethyst Ware is a poet who also dabbles in education. She recently moved back to Santa Cruz from San Francisco, and believes that the one big problem with this town is that poetry readings are never held in bars. “Just imagine the last open mike you’ve been to,” she says, “and think of how much more you would have appreciated some of the poets if you’d had a couple drinks in you.” Amethyst also enjoys ice cream, classical music, and fiction written by anyone under the age of twelve.