



# **THINK**

**A JOURNAL OF POETRY,  
FICTION, AND ESSAYS**

**WINTER/SPRING 2020**  
**VOLUME 10.1**



## *THINK: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, and Essays*

*THINK*'s first issue appeared in the winter of 2008 under the leadership of founding editor and publisher Christine Yurick. Since 2013, it's been housed at Western Colorado University and is loosely affiliated with Western's MA and MFA in Creative Writing Program.

In keeping with its original mission, *THINK* publishes poems that emphasize craft as well as content. We are responsive to metrical verse, to strategic rhyme, to inventive uses of nonce forms, and to free verse with a clear organizing principle.

*THINK* encompasses all concentrations in WCU's MA and MFA in Creative Writing Program. Besides poetry, we publish genres of popular fiction and excerpts from screenwriting. We publish creative nonfiction, especially pieces that focus on the natural world. *THINK* also publishes essays dealing with the art and history of poetry, and analyses and criticisms of poetry, poems, and prose pieces. We are interested in essays on film and television, along with thoughtful essays about opera and about the world of publishing. We will consider reviews of poetry and other books, but ask that prospective authors query the managing editor before submitting.

*THINK* welcomes work from both established and emerging writers, but all work must be previously unpublished.

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**SUBSCRIPTIONS:** *THINK* is published biannually with a Winter/Spring and a Summer/Fall issue. Subscription rates are \$18/year, \$32 for two years, \$45 for three years. Gift subscription rates are available at 50% off with one full subscription. Single copies are \$10.

**SUBMISSIONS:** Online submissions only please, via [SUBMITTABLE.COM](http://SUBMITTABLE.COM). We accept simultaneous submissions. Please include a short cover letter and a brief statement (50-75 words) about yourself. Payment is one copy. Rights revert to the author upon publication; we do ask for the option to reprint and that *THINK* be acknowledged as first publisher when work is published again. For more information, visit us at [THINKJOURNAL.ORG](http://THINKJOURNAL.ORG)







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## *From the Editor*

### *Again and Always*

Spring is here again, and that's always good.

One of my favorite poems about spring is Frost's "To a Thawing Wind" with its exuberant exhortation to the wind to bring back spring and transform all that abounds in nature, including the author himself who exclaims: "Burst into my narrow stall; / Swing the picture on the wall; / Run the rattling pages o'er; / Scatter poems on the floor; / Turn the poet out of door."

Here at *THINK* we continue to pursue the mission of scattering poems and turning poets—and all writers—loose. We're attuned to the many voices of those who with their creative use of language add to the human record in poems and stories and essays. We always appreciate the people who submit to the journal, and we are grateful to those who have contributed their work in helping us create this current issue. It is a pleasure to read the fascinating words of so many different people, from many walks of life, from all over this country and abroad.

As managing editor, I am thankful for the small staff of readers and editors who volunteer their time to put this journal out twice a year—John Steele, Tjaden Lotito, and Josh Williams. I'd especially like to thank Jan Schreiber for his invaluable support and advice. I'd also like to thank our Advisory Board, including a few who after many years of support have stepped aside for now, and welcome our two new board members, Christine Yurick, the founder of *THINK* (what a boon for us!), and Wendy Videlock, a

most imaginative poet. We are honored to have both of them as contributors, consultants, and friends.

We'd like our readers and potential contributors to know that while *THINK* remains steadfast in its commitment to primarily publish formal poetry, we have of late been more open to poems of all kinds that possess a strong sense of cohesion and an air of originality that makes them stand out. With a focus on providing an exhilarating reading experience, we look for poems that, collectively, exhibit variety in subject, style, and tone.

We continue to expand our coverage of nature writing to reflect Western Colorado University's newly minted MFA in Nature Writing. This is hardly a radical departure; for at least two centuries writers have linked the imagination with the natural world. It's no wonder that our most touching, fearful, and sublime experiences as individuals and as a society have derived from our association with nature.

A topic that comes up more and more frequently is *THINK*'s choice of publication venue. In these times, when so much can be done electronically, we have been asked and even encouraged to abandon print and join the ranks of online journals. While we are aware of the obvious advantages of doing so and recognize and admire many of the literary journals to be found online, *THINK* will remain a print journal into the foreseeable future.

Even so, we are working diligently to increase our presence online, hoping to reach out to and cultivate a broader group of readers and writers. Our website provides a sampling of poems and prose from each issue as it is published. And overall, online or otherwise, we are working to extend the journal's reach. To this end, we encourage you to share *THINK* with friends and family and urge them to submit and subscribe. (And by the way, remember that with every full yearly subscription, you can give a gift subscription to someone else at 50% off.) Also, we ask that you use social media to communicate the value and need for supporting

not only *THINK* but all online and print journals. No amount of advertising can take the place of a passionate community of readers spreading the good word. We can—and must—keep creative writing journals vibrant and viable.

I'd like to end with some lines by one of the great poets of our time, W.S. Merwin. His poem "The New Song" simply and eloquently distills the springtime power intrinsic to words and song, set free in the wind and always in the air:

there is no time yet it grows less  
there is the sound of rain at night  
arriving unknown in the leaves  
once without before or after  
then I hear the thrush waking  
at daybreak singing the new song

—**Brian Palmer, Managing Editor**



# POEMS



FREDERICK TURNER

*What Is a Poem?*

What is a poem? A musical conjecture  
Wrought in the form of words, our DNA;  
A metamorphosis that builds a structure,  
An anchor lest our vessel drift away;

It is a memory, a mental rhyme,  
That tells us where we've been, and where we're going;  
It cuts a blaze upon the edge of time  
That makes a new time there, and sets it growing;

It is a natural kind, a living species  
Whose blood and bones are paper, ink and air;  
It is a new whole built of broken pieces,  
It is a home when we're we know not where;

It names for us our virtues and our sins  
And marks out where philosophy begins.

ZARA RAAB

*Doves in Autumn*

This is how you live when you're exposed and split,  
as am I: twigs and a bit of moss or lint  
tucked in at the elbow of the sumac.

With my small heart, I am almost weightless.  
Something stirs in the needle of my compass.  
Hour by hour, weathers unsettle and pass,  
clear light swept in from the Atlantic  
or wind currents twisting through the dusk,  
menace to the small button flowers late-  
blooming in the too-green, wet-summer grass.

Penned beneath this dome of sky, we flit,  
alert to topographies of coming snow.  
We'll carry word to the others. For now,  
you know as well as I to watch and wait,  
know what will be is always uncertain.  
Clouds mass, a sudden downpour. Split again,  
the wind dies down, the sumac leaves drip rain,  
silky fisher-martins after squirrel run  
by the stone wall at the field's sloping end  
that any year a rising sea may flood.

## *Feathered Rain*

*After a phrase by William Strode*

It falls lightly now on our town,  
time gives and takes, days  
stack up, like the *Times*  
daily shelved away.

Steam fogs the library glass.  
Outside, the wide-mouthed trucks  
push snow aside in barrows like  
graves. I turn back a page.

Backs to camera un-shuttered  
to sun, some workers on a row  
pick and bend, pick and bend,  
soil laced with chlorpyrifos.

Below the fold, a Trenton bridge  
smelted in furnaces that spoiled  
the earth below. And here's a girl,  
still-warm, but just, peering

from her field of forest green,  
not trees—they've seen the plough—  
but U.N. tents for refugees.  
I look away—turn back to snow

falling on the day. Slumberous  
and low, I doze. Headstones

crowd the hill above each nest.

We'll soon run out of rooms,

feathering, un-feathering. Flakes,

no two alike, fall and fall.

Slow-crawl, the yawning trucks,

slow-falls, the glittering veil.

## *Songbirds*

If our hearts weren't so small, we'd pity you,  
laboring to draw breath in this stifling air.  
Snug in those wire cages, we once knew

first-hand the lowest, bitter caverns where,  
in a dark lit by the clicks and whirs of a tram,  
a thunder of drills, we smelt the flare

of methane as just now we saw your barn  
blaze, ricks light like candles in the field,  
the allee of old oaks crackling on the lane.

You stumble in the smoky dark, a large child,  
following the others out into the line,  
men with pails, the water already half-spilled.

In times long before yours, we knew this delirium,  
knew, as I've said, the seams lit by spirit-lamp—  
the kind that works with wire coils. No flame—

just spirits to light a fast-burn firedamp.

J. KATES

*Dædalus to the Sicilians*

*For Chris Fiore*

You who have seen me drop out of the sky  
and hailed me as a god have bound your feet  
with wings more subtle than even I  
have known and run to see the wonder out of Crete.

I am from Crete: believe me by my speech.  
I am an artisan: these hands have made  
a giant of bronze to guard King Minos' beach  
and flowers of gold that flourish in the shade

of wide rich palaces of my design.  
I have been greater than any man save one  
who broke my bounds (limits that were mine)  
to higher greatness—and he was my son,

Icarus, who followed with his hands  
all that I dared, who wove with broken wire  
intricate toys that moved at his commands,  
who sought (when I forbade) the brazen fire,

who chided me that I would never dare  
to teach my skills while he had skill to learn.  
My forge flamed hotter than he could bear  
and only his safety moved me to concern.

I was the Bull-King's blacksmith, but he feared  
my cunning grown to strength beyond his own.

I was his architect, who engineered  
his battlements, his cities, and his throne.

Trembling, he drove us from the forge and shop  
into the Labyrinth which I had wrought  
to house his bull-wife's bastard. There the stop  
of lost amazement blocked my ready thought.

For days we wandered, following in my head  
the scraps of blueprints I had long forgot.  
We wished a princess with a spool of thread  
to help unravel my most subtle knot.

Only the crying hawks above our eyes  
gave us the inspiration to contrive  
such wit and tools we needed to improvise  
a means of flight, and so escape alive.

At last our wings were made, of wood and wax  
and feathers fallen or gleaned from royal geese.  
We mounted the wind, leaving the double ax  
to guard the king and set our course for Greece.

Icarus flew ahead and would not mind  
my warnings to ride the wind and stay between  
the heavy ocean and the unrefined,  
unshielded sun. I kept the golden mean,

while Icarus climbed hawk-high until my eyes  
could just discern a dot against the sun

or glint of a wing. Now I watched him rise  
higher than any man since Phaëthon.

And then he fell. The fire unseamed his wings.  
Unfledged, he hurtled by me with a scream  
of triumph. (Still my body sings  
with that last cry, as part of a holy dream.)

After him danced his plumage, light and soft,  
down to the sea and vanished in the foam,  
while I continued my steady course aloft,  
coming at last to Vulcan's smoking dome

Where I descended, slept, and found you here  
touching my folded wings in reverent awe.  
I am too mortal for your simple fear.  
My son—my God!—but him you never saw.

WILLIAM CONELLY

*Autumn's Kiss*

*In forested Massachusetts*

A cavalcade of moons has passed this week,  
each variant more brilliantly unmasked,  
the shining pupil of a midnight eye  
peering the ages through our skylight glass.

Tonight its brightest look has swept the lawn  
and bare tree limbs as with an acid wash,  
etching the woodlot's jackstraw jumble on  
the crosshatched earth, branch by phosphorous branch.

Raptly we kiss. Then comes the pleading of  
our will to listen: one faint step on downed  
leaf clutter. Slow, dry, trampling ensues,  
and falters, as an antlered shadow moves  
almost in sight of mind—and there, for love,  
we'll cast the sound with moonlight's cryptic ground.

ED GRANGER

*Lichen's Grip*

You're two parts fungus, one part alchemy,  
a land-locked reef, a Rorschach blot that wears  
its symbiosis on the forest's sleeve.  
My daughter's glitter might be everywhere,  
but it can't hold a candle to your fire-  
like grip on anything in reach—sublime  
persistence, metaphor for our desire  
for home. I should avert my eyes before I'm  
one more stone from which you've shed the dust  
of your intransigence. I'm hopeful we  
can work this out. It's not your brittle crust  
that I'm concerned about, it's your serene  
insistence on my role. I'm just here for  
the afternoon. You dream of so much more.

LISA BARNETT

*The Balance*

If heaven's watchers keep a tally sheet,  
and every good requires counterpoise,  
the time to fear is when your life's most sweet;  
for notice will be taken of your joys  
and envoys sent to engineer defeat.  
Your plans will come apart like Tinkertoys

you spent a lifetime building—bric-a-brac  
dismantled in a moment to repair  
the universe that you've put out of whack  
with all your caviar and camembert.  
It's not that hard to bring the balance back—  
one slip and soon you find yourself stripped bare.

You'd think that this would mean there's cause for hope:  
an upwards dispensation would obtain  
to people at the bottom of the slope,  
and yet misfortunes link up like a chain,  
and good luck's nowhere in the horoscope.  
They're down, and down's the place where they'll remain.

Smack in the middle plodding on is best—  
not much to gain, but not that much to lose  
from any unseen, arbitrary test.  
Still, it's not as though you get to choose  
your station—to be miserable or blessed  
or somewhere in between. It's hardly news

at this late date that fortune's just a whim  
and all your striving won't amount to squat.  
Accept your fate, however bright or dim,  
and get on with your predetermined lot.  
You find this point of view constrained and grim?  
If so, then keep in mind this caveat:

it's only hypothetical; you're free  
to guess at what is nonsense, what is true;  
or if the skies contain infinity  
or nothing in the distant, blankest blue.  
So disregard this bleak cosmology  
and pray there's no one up there watching you.

## *Anticipating Dust*

*The 77-year-old Andrew Wyeth  
paints a landscape featuring his late father's studio  
Chadds Ford, PA 1994*

The winter trees  
like silent mourners stand  
out from the boundaries  
of snow and sky and land.

Parked in his truck,  
he paints the scene he knows  
inside his bones. With luck,  
before the daylight goes,

he'll catch what breathes  
across the windowpanes;  
the cold that seethes and grieves  
through winter's long campaign.

His memories mesh;  
his father's studio  
to him a ghost made flesh.  
He feels the undertow

of winters past—  
so many things unchanged,  
so many gone at last,  
or lost and disarranged.

Light dies as it must;  
he turns at last to leave.  
The snow falls down like dust;  
the trees still stand bereaved.

## *Open Air Theater*

Like the apron of a stage; my balcony.  
Stage left—cicadas. Stage right—more of the same.  
They drone in turn their ancient Gregorian  
mating chant. Bit players, they fade as birds  
soliloquize the events of this so far  
ordinary day. But wait! They're up-  
staged by a groundling (my downstairs neighbor) shouting  
imprecations at "Amanda" on the phone.  
I'm sure he'd throw things at her if he could.  
I try to keep the proper place in my  
bucolic script but everything has changed.  
Backstage, my husband's on the couch, the soup  
is on the stove. I part the proscenium curtains  
(the sliding doors) and leave the show outside.

DUANE K. CAYLOR

*Walking the Dead End Together in Late Autumn*

Oaks trickle skyward like meandering tears  
defining channels on a mourner's face.  
Immobile, they have cried this way for years  
in stubborn, solid sorrow. Absent grace,  
we, too, are firmly rooted into place—

this place, where dead grass scratches at the air  
and streams of sunlight slowly filter down  
over abandoned fields and gardens where  
time melts residual colors into brown,  
the muddy hue in which all colors drown.

On limbs above us, crows converse. Their voices,  
more cutting than November breezes, seem  
to mock attempts to remake April's choices  
and find some present that past might redeem.  
We crush dry leaves like desiccated dreams

with almost every step we take toward where  
this old road ends a course it can't explain—  
as if its future vanished in gray air,  
as if it were a song without refrain—  
and then we turn and go back home again.

BETSY HULICK

*Sestina: Insomnia Revisited*

If you are a person who is unable to sleep,  
here is a suggestion that might lead to action  
(for will is to sleep when it fails at night  
what legs are to going up and down stairs):  
It will inconvenience no one who lives in the house  
and does not, like a pill, interfere with the mind.

Of course, you may—quite reasonably—mind  
the imputation that you cannot sleep:  
It may be you are so at home in your house  
that falling asleep is an unconscious action  
as easily repeated as climbing upstairs  
or wishing others, still up, goodnight.

And you do not resist the onset of night  
so that it is something like noon in the mind  
when you have turned the lights off and gone upstairs  
to the bed where you customarily sleep  
and your muscles are flexed for some kind of action  
like immediately, definitively, leaving the house

for some other, unknown, unknowable house  
where the windows are festively lit every night.  
But if, like a watch with a circular action,  
your thoughts keep repeating their tick in your mind  
and the harder you try, the less you can sleep,  
and counting is futile, whether sheep or stairs,

and you have already tried going downstairs  
to drink hot milk, and elsewhere in the house  
everyone has long since gone to sleep,  
and it looks like an endless, starless night  
has fallen over the landscape of your mind  
where you examine the possibilities for action,

as detached from them as impulse from action  
when these are two floors unconnected by stairs—  
then it is time to construct in your mind  
a large, spacious, well-appointed house;  
and since no house can be built overnight,  
before you have finished you will fall asleep

caught in mid-action, like Beauty, to sleep  
for a hundred years in the mind's enchanted house  
until Love climbs the stairs, to kiss away night.

JANE BLANCHARD

*Traffic*

*West-central Rochester, late September*

Once garbage trucks have lifted dumpsters and  
street-sweeping vehicles have finished runs,  
there comes a noise more difficult to stand  
before day breaks. Some birds nearby—which ones  
we cannot tell till exiting downstairs—  
are crying bloody murder, so it seems.  
Ah, look—all crows, of course—dozens! Nightmares  
are made of such cacophony—rude dreams  
which cause disquietude for days. Each limb  
of one still-undetermined tree is full  
of scavengers at half past six AM.  
At dawn they leave, and smells of breakfast pull  
us back inside, as Mayo employees  
walk on to help the living feel at ease.

*Pastime*

*After "The Brahms Waltz"*  
*by Robert McGill Mackall, 1923*

She needs no audience besides herself  
this time of day while playing with such ease  
a piece much practiced. Books upon each shelf  
stand straight as open windows let a breeze  
move curtains. Nothing can compete for her  
attention, though, since music years ago  
became the favored method to defer  
dull duties. Pillows, all abandoned, show  
an artful lack of care. Both an arm-  
chair and a rocker rest unoccupied.  
A desk awaits fair use. Whatever charm  
lies in piano cannot be denied.  
How fitting that most flowers in the vase  
lean toward the lady who put them in place.

MAX GUTMANN

*The Road*

No one  
anywhere near a bus station  
from Wendover, Nevada to Lincoln, Nebraska  
has ever heard of whole wheat bread.  
The gas station in Rock Springs  
carries a single loaf,  
white. "It's wheat,"  
bursts the teen behind the counter.  
"What do you *think* is in it?"

In Cheyenne, I spot a supermarket  
several blocks away.  
Shelves and shelves of bread, sheet-white,  
tanned, but inside: ghostly.  
I burst onto the bus panting  
just before the driver flips the door closed.

The acned student who gets on at Rawlings  
dreams California—Someday—  
his cartoon questions  
full of oranges and movie stars.  
Cheese greens in my pack;  
the bus growls on, each mile  
a full mile further  
from real bread, and you.

"Whole wheat? Sure," nods a clerk in North Platte.  
"Second aisle, bottom shelf"—

a loaf of caramel-colored cotton,  
fluffy and insubstantial  
as a promise.

## *Buildings*

My father dreamt of being a millionaire,  
a refugee's ambition. As a child  
his goal had been to, like *his* father, scale  
the city's heights, gaze fearless down at birds,  
rooftops, and traffic. Childhood's views, though, fade.  
In stuffy tenements, shut tight against  
the noise so he could study, Dad inhaled  
how Grandpa's window washing didn't raise him.  
Each day's work earned descent; his makeshift English  
of narrow planks and gaps and flimsy ropes  
confined them all. For other ways to rise,  
Dad shut out each new dream of high adventure  
to focus on the best ways to provide.

What *I* grew up observing was a man  
who scaled no heights, but one who, nonetheless,  
climbed others' buildings—one who climbed for me,  
so someday I'd climb buildings of my own.  
I wouldn't. Up was never my direction.  
Books were not tools; I loved them for themselves.  
I've clung to them, meandered, building nothing,  
just like the son of any millionaire.

## *Cards in the Park*

The old men passed around scuffed cards with dry,  
loose-fingered hands—an easy way to mark  
the slow, familiar hours until dark—  
and argued play with cartoon rancor or  
spoke lazily of other things, re-read  
what they'd been dealt, and watched the shifting sky.

A younger man, whose mind sought patterns, I  
would see them as I hurried through the park,  
my steps at times impeded by the stark  
resemblance of their day to that before,  
and how both days were like the lives they led,  
the wait for dark so bald a wait to die.

The sorrow wouldn't last; I couldn't stay  
to touch it. I, too, had my games to play.

## *The Night Orson Welles Wrote Casablanca*

There are things more important than true love.  
The night Orson Welles wrote *Casablanca*  
the main thing was cabernet, a Tuscan vintage,  
rich-scented, with a sour aftertaste  
that left one ever thirsty. He had bought  
four bottles and he drank them all that night.  
(Don't let the wine deceive you: this was not  
the bloated shill for Paul Masson. No, think  
*The Lady from Shanghai* or *The Third Man*:  
the wunderkind.) His terrier asleep  
on the oriental rug, he filled his mind  
with refugees, corrupt officials, armies,  
a cynic, lovers, heroes, and such hokum.  
His true work called. There wasn't time  
for inspiration. Typewriter keys flew;  
the cabernet, in waves, directed his fingers.  
On the radio, a hit parade of idiots  
read news about the war. It wasn't good,  
but it would change. Toward three, needing a break,  
he stopped, uncertain how the movie finished.  
He leaned his elbows on the windowsill  
and let the night-time cool his burning fingers,  
considered giving up, unwinding, sleeping.  
Instead, he poured again.  
A little after six, he typed "The End,"  
convinced the script would please that dope Hal Wallis.  
It did, for Welles was Rick and Welles was Ilsa  
and Laszlo and Renault and the girl  
who sings "The Marseillaise." If only we  
could screen that version in his head. Here's looking.

SUSAN DELANEY SPEAR

*Ode to a Shamrock*

O, Emerald Queen  
of upstairs plants,  
Lovely, you preen  
on stiletto stalks  
in noontime's blaze,  
but in that ghetto  
day calls night,  
you purse your regal  
lips and fold  
yourself up tight,  
Her Majesty denied  
the due spotlight.  
When your realm  
grows cracked and dry,  
your slender threads  
swoon and droop  
their three-jeweled crowns.  
I douse your round  
domain and move  
you near the glass.  
O, fragile green  
Thespian Queen,  
toss your tiny blossoms  
to the light!

*Ode to a Bone*

O, middle child  
of my right foot,  
the salt blue sky  
and sea-sogged sand  
seduced me,  
so, I ran  
one hundred  
barefoot miles.  
I sought out  
moon jellies,  
shoals of minnows  
in the shallows,  
and the erratic  
rise and fall  
of dolphins' fins  
among the waves.  
I avoided  
rusty fishhooks,  
invisible taut  
fishing lines,  
and razor-sharp shells,  
while all the while  
you, unsung  
slender centered  
one, worked to  
keep me grounded  
as I ran.  
Then, from nowhere  
surged an ache,

a stinging crack,  
an odd pop,  
an awful snap,  
O, forgive me,  
middle metatarsal.  
I was unfaithful  
to my bones.

*Mercy by the Sea*

The sisters air the rooms with arms of mercy,  
opening the windows to the sand.

We note the regal allium by the sea

and watch a gull dive for a delicacy.

We ache for the ineffable—*Lord, have mercy*—  
scratching lines of verse into the sand.

Glasses in our hands, we stroll the sand,  
sipping wine and listening to the sea,  
whose quiet crashing murmurs, *mercy, mercy*.

Mercy comes in waves by sand and sea.

KRISTIN DAVIS

*Ubi Caritas*

The gift of youth, not knowing what's forgiven,  
Guileless child, her messes wiped away.  
No family will survive the grace not given.

Young mother does her best with narrow vision,  
Fails and fumbles, learns the hardest way,  
The gift of youth, not knowing what's forgiven.

Late-night rescue, a wordless acquitting,  
Advice dismissed, and scant attention paid,  
No family will survive the grace not given.

She must atone her own regrets that thicken,  
Never to reveal how much the burden weighs,  
The gift of age, knowing just what's forgiven.

The elder's thoughts are tangled, words hard-bitten,  
All that's grieved and buried rises again,  
No family will survive the grace not given.

Tougher than love, to forge each fresh beginning,  
We come to know how much we can sustain,  
The gift of grace, knowing how much is forgiven,  
No family will survive the gift not given.

## *Bells of Ireland*

Native to Syria, crossing the sea,  
shaken from all that's familiar,  
tight in a packet, shellflowers, these  
seeds want a garden, a gardener.

Dreaming of full sun, stems arching up,  
bracts hung like bells with white  
clappers, carrying little but hope  
for bouquets of tall emerald spikes.

First they will burrow in soil hard and dark,  
trust in spring rainfall and warmth,  
endure winter's frost and unwelcome,  
adapt to root deep in strange earth.

August is solace, season to redeem,  
a calyx of luck, of blossom bearing seed.

## *Desert Bones*

Dry cholla draws its moisture from the sand,  
on brittle frame, skin shriveled over flesh,  
her greening like a bruise, her arms upstretched,  
upon the mesa, supplicant she stands.

Old bones discarded, severed on the ground,  
cactus spine pierced like woody lace—  
this piece of her, this found thing to embrace  
a greying beauty, relic of the wound.

Swelter and parch are far from my home now  
mid-spring and its impossible new flower,  
this desert totem held as if to savor  
its rooted grit, its porous thirst and how

when smooth and solid might have been her ruin,  
she kept her center hollow to endure.

WILLIAM DORESKI

*Yoshiwara*

A narrow tree-hemmed causeway  
creeps between rice paddies,  
plotted through a lengthy S curve.  
We can't pass the brown pack horse,  
its iron-shod hoofs gouging the path.  
How did Fuji get on our left?

A tsunami swept the village  
in the seventeenth century.  
The surviving citizens rebuilt it  
two miles inland, where flat ground  
sprawls for miles, the rice crop  
brimming in the palest aqua.

The tree roots clutching the trail  
look prehensile enough to strangle  
anyone passing after dark,  
when mist rising from the paddies  
would conceal the lack of motive  
and absorb the liberated ghost.

## *Telephone Pole in Permafrost*

Propping the pole in a tub  
of corrugated steel filled  
with the local stones avoids  
the sin of delving below  
the permafrost, opening  
a wound that would never heal.

The poles march from here to there,  
from power plant to last house  
overlooking the mountain notch  
where the fjord bends out of sight.  
The treeless Arctic landscape  
mumbles and mutters and groans.

No one outdoors. Biographies  
unfold in dusky bedrooms  
where bare light bulbs flicker  
in the daily gale, the poles aloof  
in memory of living wood.

PETER ANDERSON

*Ghostland*

This town, once your town, has forgotten you.  
You pass through anonymous and unnamed  
by all the people whose faces you do not know.  
So what will you do with the artifacts that linger?  
The cottonwood tree split by lightning, ranch house  
ruins where the water rights were sold, your dead  
pal's horse trailer on the edge of town. This museum  
harbors other ghosts: The Lariat Ropers—you still  
remember the line-up, summer nights under the lights  
running the ballfield diamond, Juanita and Angel,  
the lovely bartenders who sold and serviced  
hangovers for you and your good-timing teammates,  
one of whom introduced you to the sexy flagger  
who came by for John Lee Hooker slow dance,  
hot and dirty after a long day on the highway,  
the same road that reminds this town as the river  
has always done and always will do, that everything  
and everyone, comes and goes, comes and goes,  
just as you have come and gone.

DANIEL GALEF

*A Salmon to the Sea*

The sun is setting, the jeweled world set aflame  
With the fire and with the jewels that burn in me:  
A silver meteor in a sunlit sea  
Like twin mirrors reflecting back the same  
Pink and gold and gold and gold and pink  
In infinite return. A river flows  
From source to sea. It gathers and it grows  
And then unbraids itself at ocean's brink.  
But life is not so linear. Up falls  
And over mountains, leaping, I return,  
The dim sense-memory of spawning ground  
My only lodestar. Where rapids churn,  
I'll churn against them, surge up river walls.  
Farewell, safe sea! I've grown beyond your bound.

*Nossis, to a Traveler Departing for Mytilene*

*Based on epigram A.P. VII.718 by Nossis the Locrian*

May all the sea-gods watch over your journeys;  
    Bear Locris' name like a warrior, his shield  
Among pale, thin-thighed Athenian attorneys.  
    May you meet with Spartan wits but never yield.

But if Mytilene your quarry, may you find it,  
    Land of lovely dances, where the ground  
    Seems afire with flowers. If you don't mind,  
Bear me gifts of sweet words once you've found it:

And, traveler, should you meet great Sappho's band,  
    Whose lyric verses brought fair Lesbos fame,  
If you should set your foot upon the sand  
    From which those songs, like hymns of honey, came,  
You tell them there's one better poet—*and*  
    You tell those scribblers Nossis is her name!

E. R. LUTKEN

*The Truel*

*Luc bat for Sergio Leone*

Three pairs of restless eyes  
read faces, analyze grim odds,  
a tic or subtle nod,  
cracks within fixed facades, the fear  
concealed in knitted sneers.  
Thumbs tucked in bandoliers drop back,  
touch hammers' tongues, enact  
a lightning sequence, track pistols'  
arcs, feather-triggers' pulls,  
trivial options, bullets loosed,  
permutations induced,  
then mark the box of useless death.  
Even played close to chest,  
probabilistic bests just keys.  
Nothing can guarantee  
a gunman lives to see new skies.

## *Hallowing an Interval*

*After Sylvia Plath*

*Twin Prime Conjecture: There are infinitely many primes  $p$  such that  $p + 2$  is also a prime.*

A bursting meteor floods the tepid sky  
with crackling fire. Rare descent, then we  
wait; no more miracles anytime soon.  
Thunderous lightning seldom strikes twice  
in time and place. But sometimes

it does. Radiance blinding eyes,  
flames streak in twain over warm seas  
at night, under a broad moon;  
Kahlo and Rivera, binary astral slice  
of incandescent genius, prime

numbers linked amid a line of sighs.  
And the dark burning of Hughes and Plath gleams  
in a rook's paired iridescent wings, feathers hewn  
from pain and molten words. Ages of ice  
await, but fiery twin-angels appear upon a time.

EMILY GROSHOLZ

*Letter to Grazia and Donald, from Emily  
(with thoughts from Robert)*

Here are the things we love in your apartment  
Where you so kindly let us stay this fall,  
Tracking the end of summer over the hill  
That rises along the Villa Ada Park,  
Learning how Rome at last gets chill and dark  
As late November turns the year around.  
Priscilla's catacombs however stay  
The same nice temperature all year: they're caves  
That lay beneath the park two thousand years  
Warming their cold inhabitants with tombs  
And murals from the time of Augustine.  
Up on their lovely ceilings the Good Shepard  
Shoulders a lamb while charming a ram and goat,  
Flanked by immortal peacocks, two small quail,  
And a sea-monster, gobbling up untroubled Noah,  
Who looks more like a dragon than a whale.

Every new day, I love looking out the windows  
Over the terrace towards the umbrella pines  
That blazen the hill and sometimes shelter a parrot,  
Noting all the red flowers you left in the pots  
Still blooming as if it were summer, flourished by rain.  
Grazia's notes remind us to light up the spirals  
That scare off mosquitoes, in case we might somehow decide  
To recklessly sit on the terrace as evening descends,  
And urges us both to consume the pasta and rice  
And coffee and tea left behind, and offers a look  
At the latest Brixton Review in which she discusses

Gissing and Somerset Maugham, with a tip of the hat  
To another hill repossessed for artistic purpose,  
Herne Hill, imposing still on the outskirts of London.  
Donald's notes have helped us uncover the keys,  
The washing machine on the terrace, as well as the two  
Sofas that magically double their size into beds.  
They also explain the mysterious Roman process  
Of allowing the heat to turn on in every apartment:  
The Mayor decides on the date, which often can fall  
Quite a few mornings after the city gets cold.  
But then when the heating returns, we all re-discover  
A stronger respect for mayors, radiators and pipes,  
And renewed appreciation for staying warm!

But there is more to love! The photo of your two  
Grandchildren riding a swing-set out in a park,  
Looking remarkably sweet and animated,  
And each in different ways like both of you.  
Then everywhere the Great Books! One by Maria  
Torelli on *The Etruscans* we're trying to read  
Before we go visit the Villa Giulia's famous  
Etruscan Museum down from the Villa Borghese  
And close to the Tiber. (You see we've been walking around,  
And our cell phones tell us how far!) Another on Ducio  
Written by John White with heavenly reproductions  
In two clear senses. Likewise, the equally earthly  
And ethereal tome *Michelangelo The Painter*,  
By Valerio Mariani, brightly inscribed  
To Grazia from Donald, with much love.  
*Omero Iliade*: Homer's great epic  
Translated by Vincenzo Monti, and starred

By images from ancient pottery: the Greeks  
Regularly traded with the Etruscans,  
So maybe those pictures came from Villa Guilia?

We also love the marble floors, and learned  
That Italy was blessed with vivid limestone,  
(Sedimentary rocks stuffed with the skeletal  
Fragments of many creatures of the sea:  
Coral, mollusks, starry amoeboid protists)  
Cooked at high temperatures and pressures, thanks  
To so many volcanos. Good for something,  
Despite Vesuvius and lost Pompeii.  
Gold and yellow marble in one bathroom  
Also alive with accurate reproductions  
Of six Historiated Miniatures  
(Narrative pictures from medieval texts)  
With Mary in each one of them: sometimes  
She's happy, sometime sad, and even once  
She's up in heaven, which is also gold!

The marble in the other bathroom's black  
With long striations colored white and green  
As if when stepping from the shower you land  
On ferns that stretch beside a darkened field.  
The elegant light-brown and white that leads  
Across the living room and down the hall  
Is harder to describe: what are those shapes?  
Vortices with clouds? Winged lions? Dragons?  
The kitchen granite is ironically  
My favorite and most beautiful, arrayed  
Both on the floor and over the countertops.

Especially in the morning, I often feel  
As if I were admiring the ocean floor  
When all of the creatures floating by came down:  
Purple, mauve and green, dark blue and black  
And even pink, in funny shapes and sizes:  
Another kind of immortality.

The only problem is, because we're here  
Basking in clouds and sun and marble floors,  
You're far away, in London near Herne Hill,  
So, we can't ask you questions or invite you  
Over to share a drink of wine or dinner  
Concocted from the wonders of the market  
That stem from Puglia (Bari and Altamura!)  
As well as Umbria and the Alban Hills,  
Sold from open stalls in Piazza Crati.  
And we can't wish you closer, since in between  
Lies our beloved France and bits of Spain,  
Milan, Bologna, Florence, even Venice:  
We can't wish them away. And yet, dear friends,  
We wish you both could magically appear.

JOYCE WILSON

*Beirut Garden*

We walked the city streets, arm in arm,  
And talked of ways our common history  
Unlocked the stories of our family,  
The tribes and feudal lords, the olive farm;

Past windows, where the fragrances of thyme  
And allspice, cumin, pepper, coriander  
Spoke of celebrations with the grandeur  
That flavors of the East and West combine;

Past the garden of the busy unmarked church  
So far from home, and what we hoped to find  
Among the many things we'd leave behind:  
The answers to the questions of our search.

*What will become of the Syrian refugees?  
What will become of the Syrian refugees?*

## *The Sacred Cedars*

“The Cedars know the history of the earth  
Better than history itself.” So wrote  
De Lamartine in Eighteen Thirty-two.

What makes them prosper where the others fail?  
Diminishing in number, they endure,  
Even as their groves bear yellow leaves.

The villagers who come to pray beneath  
The oldest canopies of their great boughs  
Have long believed in their intelligence,

Which knows the thing better than the story of  
The thing, the dark core within the body of  
The form, embraced between the green branches.

ANDREW FRISARDI

*The Ideal*

You can't not take him anywhere:

    His mimicry's sublime,  
And he is knocking at your door  
    Eternally on time.

His suit is white, his hair is black,

    As yours was recently.  
He is your younger look-alike,  
    Your on-demand esprit.

He's heading to the party now,

    But you don't want to go,  
Since unlike him you don't know how  
    To say what's apropos.

He sits with you while you relax

    With wine or chamomile.  
You laud and envy that he lacks.  
    The shyness you revile.

*Is there a chance you'd take my place?*

    You timidly begin.  
He says: *I'll be your carapace,*  
    *Your nothingness within.*

## *Aubades*

When I woke up today, my lips  
Smooshed against your shoulder,  
Your face's outline was a blurred eclipse  
Of yesterday, a light that had grown older.  
My palm and fingers curved atop your breast  
Like effigies at rest.

Our sleeping in the course of years  
Has made our bodies fit  
Together as a rippling current clears  
In passing over depths that ballast it.  
Your wedding dress was cloth we had to forage  
With little left in storage,

In the home where we first lived together,  
When we called off all bets  
Of change for change. We didn't know yet whether  
What we had in store would pay our debts,  
While whooshes on the distant interstate  
Sustained a constant rate,

And at the window-box we fed  
The finches' great insistence,  
As we were making plans to get ahead  
Of where the future swallowed up the distance.  
Unwitting cowbirds, ad-lib and uncouth,  
We gave away our youth

As winter light began to leach  
From the sky. The unemphatic  
Sun was an ancient hand that couldn't reach  
A lamp for being tired or rheumatic,  
The mornings we held close each other's skin  
As we watched time begin.

## *Francis and the Weaver*

*Isola Maggiore, Lake Trasimeno, Lent c. 1210*

One day, when yellow crucifer was in flower,  
The gravel lurch of a boat disturbed the shore.  
A girl was out to watch the waves awhile  
Before she sat down at her loom to toil.  
She hid herself nearby: the man looked rough,  
His shepherd's smock in tatters. He beached his skiff,  
Slung his pack on his shoulder, and trudged upslope.  
She prayed her rosary as she walked home.  
Later, that day of ashes, she thought of the stranger.  
Grimy, he'd seemed like a barely smothered cinder,  
Or the soot part of a wick, the part that reddens.  
His legs and arms were strong, his expression hidden.

During the forty days, sometimes they met  
When he'd come downhill carrying the dust  
That haloed him. Her father paid a debt  
Of bread for work, and he'd leave. He never fussed  
Or asked for more, too gentle to pose a threat.  
She felt a pull whenever she caught his eye,  
Like falling upward in a starry sky.

They let him be, demented up in the copse,  
Where scattered branches were the drifter's fuel.  
They thought that voices were taking up his talk.  
The ash of him by day; at night, a small,  
Red flame that pierced the hilltop like a flickering  
Flower. From her window she'd see it leaping,

And ponder what kept a man outdoors that long  
And in that season. Her father, uncles, siblings  
Were silent too while there were chores still left  
To do, tending the crops until they sat  
Together inside a gauzy circle of light.

She'd sit and weave her cloth like light in the weft  
Of darkness where their island home was spread.  
She could inhabit the silence of her kindred:  
A cottage with walls, a hearth, and doors that fasten.  
The stranger's seemed like woods where she'd get lost.  
Or Trasimeno when the sky turns ashen,  
And buckles with heavy clouds that touch the hills,  
The lake aroused like flesh in a sudden gust.

JANET POWERS

*In the Time of El Niño*

The rains come day after day  
greening the grass—such a green  
I want to roll in it and hug  
the earth tight. The river brims.  
Along the Susquehanna, trees  
ride low, trunks submerged  
in brown impatient water.

A burst of flowers in the median:  
a startle of magenta to admire,  
put there to keep me awake.  
Honey locusts spill white clusters;  
I want to stop and finger them,  
breathing the deep sweet scent  
of wiresprung country fencerows.

In the time of El Niño, no seabirds  
make their way from the Chesapeake,  
no small boats carry fishermen,  
sinking lines for a bit of dinner.  
The river is strangely unquiet,  
pressing hard against its banks,  
shamed that it keeps on insisting,  
but full, too full, with all that rain.

ALFRED NICOL

*His Eyes Rest on Julia, Sleeping*

*“’Tis Julia’s bed, and she sleeps there”  
—Robert Herrick*

To themselves, the olive, fig and grape  
are cargoes tight-sealed in their darkened holds.  
No matter if its tang is brassy-bright,  
the tangerine is tongueless in its sphere.

Likewise, the hollowed stone that cups the rain  
can’t know its coolness on the wrist or nape.  
The willow’s shade does nothing for the willow.  
The stars don’t preen themselves when skies are clear,

nor is the cherry blossom given sight.  
The trickling stream is silent to itself.  
All music’s owed to love, that wakes the senses;  
those strings are mute that none can ever hear.

So love, that turned this world and gave it shape,  
has need that I should keep watch through the night.





**FICTION**



DAPHNE KALOTAY

*Viewfinder*

His father's funeral reception was still in progress when Manuel wove past the faces of long ago, the grave pats on the arm, the overly-respectful remarks, out to the hotel's front steps. It was a cool January afternoon. Woodsmoke wafted from the courtyard where the reception carried on. Manuel took long drags on his cigarette and watched the stupendous mess of traffic. Cars snaked along the boulevard, past the Plaza Fernandez, down to the school.

It hadn't been like this before he left—but that was fifteen years ago, when he was still in his teens. Even the cars were different now, Japanese and American, no longer the VW Beetles of his youth. The school looked as he remembered it, pale yellow with white pillars. Since it was a Monday, the weekly fanfare was blaring from loudspeakers. Manuel had heard it once already that morning, from his room in the hotel. Same chest-thumping military music from his childhood, though now the blast of trumpets merged with the shrill whistles of the policemen attempting to direct the traffic. Blue-sweatered children sifted onto the sidewalks.

"A new family every day," said Ivan Reyes, joining Manuel on the front steps. He had been his father's closest friend and was now deputy to the mayor. Manuel instinctively stepped away. Ivan lit a smelly cigar and jutted his chin toward the swarming students. "They begin a new life here."

They came from the failed states further north. Resettled in this historic town built by Spaniards. A small city, really, with colorful houses tumbling up into the mountains. The town had a respectable museum of historical artifacts, a university fronted by Doric columns, and a good number of scenic plazas shaded by harshly pruned plane trees. "We're the safest state north of the D.F.," Ivan announced, as if on a podium.

Manuel said nothing. The region was safe because cartel bosses built their villas here—in the hills, where defunct foreign embassies had been transformed into private mansions. When Manuel was a boy the abandoned embassies had been lavish eyesores, huge and splendidly rotting. Only in his teens had they begun to be restored, guarded by tall spiked gates and hard-muscled dogs trained to bite and not let go. In order to keep their property safe, the bosses kept a tight lock on everything, including the town's police force. As a result, the crime rate had gone well down—and the population had doubled. Which meant the elementary school was now too small.

But the barons would not invest in a new school. Their children were educated elsewhere.

“Your father,” Ivan was saying, “was a great supporter of our administration.”

“I’ve not yet had a look at the will, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Ivan sputtered something into his cigar. Manuel had already resolved that if he did receive an inheritance—and he could not be sure of that, not after fifteen years without even a brief visit back here—he would give it to charity.

Ignoring Ivan, he watched the sea of blue sweaters, the girls with white flowers pinned to their hair. What had happened was that rather than expand the school, the mayor had come up with an alternative: two sessions per day, half the students in the morning, the rest in the afternoon. And so, every midday, this spectacular traffic jam.

There were other changes, Manuel had noted. A raised pedestrian crossing by the bus stop, and a multi-level parking garage where the big chain store had stood. A strange bronze sculpture in the main plaza. In a former bakery, an extremely fit man now jumped around calling out dance moves, with a sign by the open storefront: *Zumba Sport!* Yet much was as it had been when he followed Ruben through these streets. The motley dogs skulking in packs. The gordita lady at her cart by the footbridge clapping

dough into shape, serving up fried pork skins and cactus tips. The water man clanging his bell through the winding alleys, bawling “*Aguaaaa*,” his voice echoing up the high, close walls.

Those narrow, zig-zagging alleyways remained the sole access to many of the adobe houses that spilled up the sides of the mountain. Up they stepped, into the tiered gray cliffs, where as a child he had been forbidden to play. Because up there were witches who turned children into birds, and then let them fly away.

\*

Back then the blue-tiled fountain in the hotel courtyard spouted water year-round, and glass lanterns hung like jewels from the eucalyptus branches. The hotel was of white stucco, with wood-framed doorways, flowerpots propped in metal coils, and bougainvillea casting lacework shadows. The open-air restaurant vibrated with the trills of Manuel’s parakeet swinging in her cage, and with the mysterious phrases of the expat poets who gathered daily at a corner table to read their work to each other in droning voices.

It was not a grand hotel. In the States, Manuel understood now, it might have been something more like an inn. The dark jackets the restaurant staff were made to wear lent the place a patina of elegance, but the quarters were modest, the cuisine merely fair. Manuel hadn’t quite known this growing up, running from room to room as the maids swept through—waddling women with aprons stretched across their abdomens, or skinny, scurrying ones who never seemed to stay long. The workman, a roguish-looking fellow named Andy, was always making repairs in some precarious manner, balancing on the clay roof with his faded baseball cap and leather holster of tools.

Not until he was twelve or so did Manuel understand that the fat, waddling maids were pregnant, the skinny ones barely older than himself.

His first memory was of that courtyard, of his father’s grasp and

of hot chocolate from a ceramic mug. They had moved to the hotel following his mother's death, when Manuel was barely two years old. "This way," his father told guests, "I can work from home!" Manuel's grandfather had built the hotel; now it was Manuel's father who spent afternoons in the courtyard winnowing his way through the newspaper in carefully pressed pants, cotton pullovers, and leather slippers, while the wait staff stood at attention in their stiff, dark jackets. The hot chocolate memory carried with it the way his father had held him, as if to make sure not to somehow lose Manuel, too.

There had in fact been a spate of abductions when Manuel was in primary school. It had happened to one of his wealthier classmates, the parents paying up their life savings in ransom. Other cases, he understood later, were retribution killings. The hotel maids, protective, told the stories about the witches turning children into birds, to keep him from straying. His father, less imaginative, simply said that Manuel was to stay close to home, out of the alleyways and away from the hills.

Ivan Reyes was often there in the courtyard, the two men playing dominoes and discussing adult matters. They had grown up together, and when Manuel was still very small, Ivan would say that as soon as Manuel grew big enough, he would teach him to play soccer. Manuel hoped he would grow up fast, since Ivan also couldn't wait to teach him how to drive a car and to dance at his wedding.

If ever a waiter fumbled, or a napkin or silverware fell to the floor, Manuel's father would just laugh: "You know what they say, the dirtier the tastier!"

Later on, when he had started wearing finer suits, Ivan would add, "Same goes for women." When he laughed, you could see his gold fillings, from a dentist in Mexico City.

\*

Back in the courtyard, the shade umbrellas had been folded shut. Tablecloths twitched in the breeze. Men were buttoning their suit jackets, women wrapping themselves in scarves. One by one they said their goodbyes, until at last Manuel was alone, just the waiters clearing the food away and sparrows dive-bombing for crumbs.

He took a seat in one of the heavy wooden chairs. He did not regret not having seen his father again. He did not regret the cursory letters, the tight-lipped phone calls on holidays. What more would he have said? That he could not stay in this place where appearances mattered more than truth. That he refused to live off of his filthy money.

Across the courtyard, a janitor was sweeping up brown dried-out fern fronds. They looked like enormous deformed hands. The place hadn't changed much. Bougainvillea peeking over the balcony, and big clay pots of wilting poinsettias. The tiles around the fountain were chipped. Odd that no one had bothered to have them repaired. And that the fountain was no longer running. Surely Manuel's father had the money. A room here cost three times what it used to.

Manuel let his eyes close. Heard the murmuring of the waiters, the chink of dishes being stacked. If he kept his eyes shut, he might be back there. Leaning from the balcony, searching the courtyard. Hearing, like magic, his own name floating up.

\*

Early the next morning he headed out to the alleyways that cut into the mountainside, up to the house where Ruben had lived.

Though each alley-path had a name, few could be found on any map. Wedged into the gray rock walls were squat adobe houses the colors of Easter eggs. Their flat roofs bore cable dishes, tanks of gasoline and water, hand-rigged antennae, and morose dogs barking across the sky at each other.

At first the paths were broad, the stones smooth from centuries of foot traffic. It was refreshing to rise away from the street noise and car exhaust, from the roving automobiles blasting recorded advertisements, the clanging church bells like an angry cook rattling copper pots. But soon the steps became high and blocky, the alleys maze-like, intersecting at each plateau. Manuel had to pause every minute or so to catch his breath. It was the altitude, he told himself, not that he was out of shape or smoked too much. He was only thirty-two. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he could glimpse the outer loop that led back down the mountain—an incline so steep, parked cars propped heavy stones behind their rear wheels.

He was up high enough now to have reached a tiny convenience store, the sort found at these heights, just some soda and basic necessities. Tacked to the façade, a jumble of flyers advertised cellphone services, missing persons, used cars. Drawn by muscle memory, Manuel turned onto the next alleyway, where the houses were taller, narrow, two stories instead of one. He heard voices, the scuffle of feet. Not far from the house where Ruben had lived, children were playing soccer. Three of them, kicking the ball as if the ground were horizontal and the alley a stadium, then running frantically as the ball threatened to plummet into the abyss.

They wore the blue sweaters of the school uniform and glanced only briefly at Manuel. He continued to Ruben's house. No longer the proud establishment he remembered, with the enamel nameplate declaring *LUIS MENDEZ, SHOES*. A poor dwelling now, painted a dirty purple, grilles over the windows, its flat roof strewn with scrap metal, rusting barbed wire, and a gas tank that even these days would have been hauled up strapped to a man's back. The concrete steps were chipped, the metal door rusted. The iron bars of the windows guarded pots of grey-green cacti. As Manuel drew closer, the door opened.

A little girl stepped out. She wore the school colors, and a big white ribbon-flower in her hair. She said, "He was waiting for you."

Manuel felt faint.

“For a long time.”

Breathless, Manuel said, “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re too late. He left.”

Manuel was still having trouble breathing. When he again asked what she meant, the girl seemed wary and hurried away.

“Wait!” He meant to follow her, but the pace at that height made him dizzy. He had to pause to steady himself. When he looked down the alley, there was no one there.

He squatted and dropped his head between his knees. He could hear the boys at the other end of the alley scrambling after the soccer ball. Waiting for his pulse to slow, he reconsidered the girl’s words. Clearly her parent or relative had simply been stood up by someone. She must have assumed Manuel to be that person. He felt ridiculous for having tried to follow her.

When at last he had regained his breath and the throbbing in his head subsided, he cast his gaze across the other houses and rooftops. Searching. As if Ruben might be here.

\*

It was the high season then, too, the courtyard garlanded in red and gold, when Ruben entered his world. The restaurant needed extra hands. With his waiter’s jacket, Ruben looked proper, dashing, not quite the tousled boy Manuel had seen at school. They were both fifteen years old. Manuel glimpsed him on the first day of the holiday break, from the table in the courtyard where he was pretending to do his mathematics homework. “Look at my boy,” Manuel’s father boasted to Ivan Reyes from where they sat with their dominoes. “Studying even on holiday!”

Really it was an excuse for Manuel to eavesdrop on the expat poets. He was determined to erase the distance between the mincing English he uttered at school and the version he heard on television. Encamped at their corner table, the expats sounded

nothing like his teacher, who spoke with a mortifying accent. From what Manuel could gather, one couple was American, one British, the other two a Canadian and a German.

“Sublime,” the Englishman would say when he liked something. “My, my . . .” he proclaimed when he did not. The Canadian woman wrote about her garden in Vancouver, where she returned each summer to grow wisteria, clematis, day lilies, pansies and other flowers whose misspelled names Manuel jotted into his notebook.

That Monday, it was the American husband’s turn, a poem entitled either “When I First Saw a Robin” or “Birdsong”; he welcomed input on the matter. Manuel was listening when he noticed a new face in the courtyard.

At first he didn’t recognize him. At school Ruben’s hair was perpetually ruffled, and he was always laughing, playing at some sport, making dramatic saves and theatrically falling to the ground, joking loudly until he was scolded by a teacher—briefly, indifferently, because teachers didn’t expect much from alley children.

All Manuel knew, in the way that townspeople knew these things, was that Ruben’s father was a cobbler and his mother, like Manuel’s, long gone. Now here he was, balancing tumblers on a tray. When Ruben smiled, Manuel looked down at his dictionary.

It was later that day, as Manuel returned from the restroom, that Ruben said, “I know you.” Flustered, Manuel said, “I guess we’re both trapped here.” It was disingenuous, as if he too had to work for his bread. Ruben seemed about to laugh—but the head waiter barked an order and he had to return to work.

Over the next days, Manuel spent hours in the courtyard, waiting to glimpse Ruben, trying to think of something clever to say. Since Manuel’s friends were mainly acquaintances whose parents were friends of his father, he was glad to avoid them.

At the end of that first week, rains came, confining the wait staff to the indoor restaurant. With fewer tables available, Manuel was discouraged from lingering. He took the parakeet to his room

on the second floor and tried to teach her to say, “I’m hungry.” He read about key battles in the revolution. He reviewed his growing vocabulary list from the poets. All the while he kept his door open, in case Ruben stepped out to the courtyard. But it kept raining and no one came.

Even when the rain let up, it was too wet to sit outdoors. Plump droplets plunked from the vines onto the tiles of the courtyard. Manuel brought the bird back down, hooking her cage back onto its branch. She loved the water splattering from the leaves and flapped her wings so that beads of water rolled down the feathers of her back.

“Say ‘I’m hungry,’” Manuel ordered, loudly, hoping Ruben would hear and come out.

“Good day.” It was the first phrase Manuel had ever taught her.

“I’m hungry,” Manuel pronounced, loudly. “I’m hungry.”

“Good day.”

Manuel heard someone—but it was Andy the workman, who fetched a forgotten hammer and returned inside.

Manuel’s hair and sweater had become damp from the mist. He lingered, willing Ruben to step out, until he gave up and headed back up the stairs. Even then he took his time, wishing Ruben might somehow materialize. He couldn’t have said what had come over him. At the balcony, he paused, leaning to gaze down at the courtyard.

That was when the awful thought came to him: that with the rain slowing business, Ruben had been told he was no longer needed, and sent home.

Hopelessness gripped him. He turned away.

“*Psst*—Manuel!”

In all the years since, never had he experienced anything like it. His own name rising to meet him. The quick bright shooting leap in the core of his chest. There at the foot of the stairs, Ruben with his winking eyes, grinning.

He said, "I'm off until seven if you want to get out of here."

Stupefied by the granting of his wish, Manuel just nodded. Since he knew how his father would react to see his son and the busboy together, he suggested they meet at the fountain. Ruben would know which one, in town center, the giant shallow goblet where pigeons congregated and streamlets of dirty water trickled over the edges to the corroded basin below.

The afternoon sun was chasing the last clouds away when Manuel reached the fountain. Seeing Ruben, he felt awkward and threw a pebble at the pigeons.

"Now why would you do that?" Ruben gave an exaggerated pout. "They get a bad rap because they're city birds. But if you don't think of them that way, they could be beautiful."

Feeling chastised, Manuel said, "C'mon, let's go," though he had no plan and suspected Ruben didn't either. From the fountain, they headed up to the scenic overlook, where a plaque listed the names of men who had lost their lives fighting for independence. Tourists from nearby towns slid coins into magnifying viewfinders and bought bottled water from pushcarts.

This really was the best view of the town, everything at just the right angle, the church spires and white columns of the university appearing, from this distance, clean and bright, rather than covered with pigeon droppings. Ruben lit a cigarette and went to peek through the unclaimed viewfinders. "Sometimes there's extra money left on them." At the third one he said, "Ah, here you go," and stepped away so that Manuel could look. "Our beautiful homeland."

Manuel couldn't tell if Ruben meant it sincerely or not. He peered through the binoculars, startled to find his world suddenly magnified, and caught sight, shockingly clearly, of one of the expat poets. Frizzy red hair, baggy pants, and the cloth bag she carried at all times. Though he supposed he should be taking in the pan-

orama, he instead looked to where the north tunnel burrowed out of town, and heard himself say aloud what he had never confessed to anyone. “I want to go to Denver, Colorado.”

Ruben looked about to laugh. “Denver Colorado! What wonders await you in Denver Colorado?”

Manuel had a second cousin in Denver, from whom they received an annual Christmas card containing a few bland words. “Or maybe Fresno, California.” The head waiter had a sister in Fresno and said the tamales there were better than here. The furthest Manuel had ever gone was Léon. “I want to see the world.”

Really that wasn't it. The truth, if he were to admit it, was that he had feelings, sometimes, that overwhelmed him. A deep longing and strange elation that he didn't want his father, or anyone else, to know. That he felt right now, with Ruben beside him.

“You mean,” Ruben said, in his winking way, gesturing out at the panorama, “this isn't the whole world right here?”

\*

Ruben's father, it turned out, was not a cobbler but a shoe manufacturer. He had bought the equipment, Ruben explained, for almost nothing, from an American company upgrading to automated production. The old machines filled the first floor of Ruben's home and allowed Lucho to double his output of the sturdy black shoes he was known for: clunky ones of inflexible leather, with reinforced lace-holes and nearly indestructible soles. Devoted customers returned every five years or so to replace their old battered pairs with new stiff ones, and everyone in town knew in one glance not just who made their shoes but whom they voted for or against.

This was because—Ruben explained that first afternoon, as Manuel followed him up the alleyways—Lucho headed a proletarian group known for its anti-corruption campaign.

Manuel had never followed politics, though his father, as the town hotelier, was friendly with the local administration. Ruben,

meanwhile, said Lucho didn't want him participating in his activities until he was out of school.

A heavy-set man, Lucho worked for long stretches at his shoe-making operations, fortified by toxic inhalations of epoxy glue and polyurethane. Visiting Ruben, Manuel would steal glances into the shop, where narrow shelves held rows of wooden feet in each size, and the walls and countertops displayed animal skins spread and waiting to be cut. In exchange for his politely muttered "Good day," Manuel would receive a nod from Lucho, then head up to Ruben's room. On days when Lucho used the hole-punching machine for the lace-holes, Ruben's bedroom shook.

That first day, dizzied by the fumes, Manuel followed Ruben up the narrow staircase. His heart thumped horribly as he entered Ruben's room. Ruben shut the door and, as if it were the simplest thing, said "Come here."

\*

Manuel was back down at the hotel in time for his meeting with the lawyer. They sat at the corner table where the poets used to convene. What had happened to them? Perhaps time had aged them so that they could no longer make the trip. Or was the spiffed-up town now beyond their reach, the rent too high, the restaurants too dear?

There was a new set of expats now. A middle-aged man with an Irish accent, and three well-preserved American women wrapped in shimmering scarves. They sat closer to the chimney and instead of reciting poetry were discussing a novel they appeared to have all read on their Kindles.

The lawyer, from the firm that managed Manuel's father's accounts, took the pages of the will from his briefcase. "You're a lawyer, too, I hear."

Manuel was the in-house council for a large advertising firm in New Jersey. Lucrative, uninspiring work.

“They say that bar exam is tough.” The lawyer looked to Manuel for confirmation. “Why bother, when here you finish law school and right away are free to start making mistakes!”

In law school Manuel used to dream of returning on behalf of justice. Now he listened to the lawyer explain that, according to his father’s will, the hotel and all assets had been left to Manuel.

No matter that Manuel had left and not come back; he was still an only child. His mother’s relations in Denver had quit sending their Christmas tidings after his aunt’s death.

What surprised him was the figure the lawyer quoted. The amount seemed to Manuel oddly low. It must have seemed so to the lawyer, too; he mustered a false-sounding joviality, as if to cover for the meager life’s savings.

“There is also a small sum left to a Mr. Nelson Schiller.” The lawyer seemed to expect Manuel to recognize the name. “Of Hastings, New York and Naples, Florida. We have been unable to reach him.”

Manuel had never heard of him.

The lawyer showed only brief consternation. “Not to worry. An inheritance tends to bring even the most long-lost relatives out of the woodwork.”

“I imagine so,” Manuel said, a sick feeling inside. Shadows of ferns nodded at the edges of his vision.

“If you think of anything that might help us, please let us know. And we’re available to help with any negotiations in your absence.”

Manuel stood abruptly, overtaken by shame. The lawyer took his cue and followed him to the front exit. Now that it was midday, the traffic jam had started up; it would be tough going for anyone to find their way out of that mess.

Manuel watched the tide of blue, the bobbing white flowers, bright voices caught one in another as parents ushered their children back and forth from the school.

When he was a child, he had just one block’s walk from the

hotel. But now, watching the lawyer take his leave, he understood: Only alley children made their way to school on their own. Everyone else was chauffeured back and forth, whether on foot or by car. Because parents didn't trust that their children wouldn't be snatched away.

The great knot of traffic was fear. A parent's fear, multiplied many times over.

\*

At school he and Ruben rarely spoke. When the last bell rang each afternoon, they would separate and begin the climb up the blocky stone steps of the alleyways.

They had a meeting place. A small overlook along the first tier, not far from the ring road. From there they would continue on, buy snacks from one of the high up corner stores and head to one of their hideaways, which were not secret but felt that way, perhaps because Manuel had been forbidden to venture there.

He knew by then that the fear was not of witches who turned children into birds but of the dirt and rust and darkly etched poverty of those alleys. The desperation and casual violence of people who had never known good luck. "Witches," he understood as shorthand for all unspeakable things.

*The birds fly away and can never go home.*

Some afternoons they went off with Ruben's friends to play soccer, but other days were for Manuel, wrestling out on the cliffs, or in Ruben's room. The pleasure of it didn't diminish even when these meetings had been going on for one year, for two.

His father no longer asked about girlfriends, had stopped mentioning the names of his acquaintances' daughters.

As for Ruben's father, Manuel spoke to him only in greeting, always trying to look serious, since surely Lucho knew who Manuel's father was. Everyone did. In the past, Manuel had liked that his father was on a first name basis with the mayor, included

in town planning meetings, often present at ribbon-cuttings and ground-breakings. Now, though, there was a plan for a casino that his father supported, which Lucho's group opposed. Manuel's father was angling for the casino to be built as an extension of the hotel, though there was little space for expansion, not to mention the elementary school so close.

One afternoon Manuel and Ruben found an envelope propped against Ruben's front door. Lucho's name on it. When Ruben handed the envelope to his father, Lucho's face paled.

"There was another one like that last week," Ruben whispered as they climbed the stairs. "Anonymous."

Manuel asked what it had said.

"He won't tell me." That was all they spoke of it. But Manuel thought of the letter a month or so later, when he and Ruben found, in the same spot, a mangled pigeon. It lay there like a gruesome offering from an overzealous pet. Then the bird twitched. Ruben whistled through his teeth. He reached down, took the bird in his beautiful, perfect hands, and in one swift movement broke its neck.

\*

Nelson Schiller. For hours that day, and again the next morning, Manuel searched his father's rooms, his desk, the thick address book. Must be someone from after Manuel left town. He went through all recent accounts and ledgers.

Nothing.

Just as strange was the fact that, according to the books, the hotel had indeed been making an enormous profit.

The increased income had started back when the defunct foreign embassies were first renovated. Manuel's father, too, had decided to upgrade. Every day, it seemed, Andy was tiling, painting, refinishing scuffed wood, lugging in some new piece of furniture.

It was Ruben, with an offhand comment about "your handsome *narcotraficante* guests," who caused Manuel to understand.

He meant the men with thick wallets who breezed in and out of the hotel, paying in cash. Because the hotel was where they stopped in town to monitor progress on their properties in the hills. Manuel had watched his father transform for them into an obsequious host, understood in some primal way that he had little choice. With Ruben's comment, he thought of the motorcycle his father had given him, and of the hotel's newly renovated kitchen.

"Open your eyes, friend," Ruben said. He was wearing the green Adidas jacket he had saved up for and rarely parted from. Then he touched Manuel's temple, lightly, to show he didn't judge him.

Going through his father's account books, it seemed even now the hotel continued to turn a profit. Yet there was little money left. An even smaller sum of which was to go to this Nelson Schiller.

If anyone would know who he was, it would be Ivan Reyes. Who, it occurred to Manuel, had not been mentioned in the will. Only now did he savor that fact. Well, Ivan wasn't family (though he had been the one, after tracking him down, to inform Manuel of his father's heart attack). And yet this Mr. Schiller *had* been included.

Manuel picked up the office phone and pressed the button with Ivan's name on it. Just touching it felt like a betrayal of himself. When the voicemail picked up, he left his number, asking Ivan to please call him back.

\*

They were seventeen before the first of the embassy renovations was completed.

The crumbling mansions leaned against the hills at the other end of town. Years earlier Manuel and some classmates had snuck into one—creeping across marble floors, past half-boarded-up windows, beneath ceilings fifteen feet high. Now construction teams hammered at roof tiles and balconies. "Those guys have so much money," Ruben said, "their biggest problem is what to do

with it. They need ways to hide it as much as hiding their drugs. My old man says they'll have full hold of this town in no time."

Manuel understood by then about the newspaper headlines that disappeared within days, the crimes never solved, erased from official record. People joked that the main work of the local police was not safety but public relations. Pep rallies and concerts, school children singing on bleachers in orderly rows. Public forums with a microphone passed around—to boost public morale when tensions bubbled up.

"Building trust and confidence," Manuel's father called it. He was in a delicate position. He had stopped advocating for a combined hotel-casino and now lent his support to a gaming place to be constructed near the tourist overlook, with a funicular running up the mountainside.

Ruben said the narcos had the administration in their pocket. Observing the mansion renovations, Manuel sometimes imagined he and Ruben were spies—though all they saw, usually, were laborers on ladders, sweating, and an occasional boss monitoring their progress. Until one day, as he and Ruben lounged on an overlook above a ruined mansion, Manuel glimpsed someone he knew.

Ivan Reyes. Standing on a terrace with another fellow in smart clothes.

Sunshine bathed the hillside, making Ivan Reyes all the more visible. Manuel realized he recognized the other man, too. Had seen him at the hotel. And then Manuel saw, stepping into the pool of sunshine, his father.

He wore a suit and stood with his hands in his pockets. If he said anything, the throbbing in Manuel's ears made it impossible to hear.

Ruben remained silent. Manuel forced himself to watch. When the three men had finished their discussion, they went round to the other side of the building.

Ruben looked almost shy. He touched Manuel's hand. "Let's go."

Ears ringing, Manuel followed Ruben up the alleyways.

\*

It was a few months after they saw Manuel's father at the mansion that a new memorial was unveiled at the scenic overlook. A series of busts: martyred heroes of the revolution. Manuel's class was made to attend a ceremony where names were read aloud while students who didn't care if they got in trouble snuck off—which meant Ruben was nowhere to be found.

They were nearly eighteen by then, Ruben lanky, his muscles tight. Any time he skipped class, petty thoughts besieged Manuel—of Ruben off with the flirty guy who worked in the cheese shop, or one of the determined, misinformed girls who flitted about him at school. These were not mere imaginings. He knew Ruben did such things, had even caught him, once, with the cheese shop guy.

Awful thoughts overtook him as he waited through the ceremony, the mayor and his entourage under the throbbing sun. Ivan Reyes was there. He held some titular post representing the tourist district. In fact, Lucho's group had named him in a complaint alleging some kind of collusion between the town and a city magistrate. Manuel's father said the charges were baseless. The newspaper had stopped reporting on the subject.

When at last the ceremony was over and the officials had dispersed, and the students were allotted a break, Manuel bought a soda and watched a couple trying to appease their children by giving them a look through a viewfinder. The children squirmed at the binoculars, and the parents gave up.

There would be money left on the timer. Manuel went to look through the binoculars. The colorful houses, the white pillars of the university, the pointy spires of the church. He peered left and right, and realized he was searching for Ruben.

He couldn't help it. Even as he peered through the lenses, he recalled that first day here. And in that moment of recollection

saw, in the distance, Ruben, in his green Adidas jacket.

The timer clicked off, and the view disappeared.

He must have imagined it. As if he could will the vision into existence.

\*

At school the next morning, milling around out front, his classmates seemed oddly quiet. Manuel asked why everyone was whispering.

“They found Ruben Mendez. Out by the embassies.”

The world spun. The classmate was still talking, said laborers at one of the mansions had noticed vultures fighting over something. A body. Already picked apart.

Somehow Manuel managed to speak. “Then how do they know it’s him?”

“They cut off his feet. Left them at his house. With a note telling his father to stop his meddling.”

Manuel ran, then, out past the plaza and up into the alleys. He didn’t stop running until he had arrived at Ruben’s house.

The nameplate declared **LUIS MENDEZ, SHOES** as if nothing had changed. Perhaps if he wished hard enough, nothing would have. Manuel closed his eyes. His heart hit hard at his ribs as he tried to slow his breath.

There came a sound—whispering. So soft, he strained to hear it.

It came from above. From the pale gray rocks of the alley wall.

He looked up, at the grey stones jutting from around the house. The rocks were whispering.

One of them moved.

A mourning dove. Pale, purplish gray. Must have been there all the while, roosting between the rocks.

Manuel stepped back, and there came more rustling. Three, four more birds nestled among the jutting rocks, camouflaged by their dark grey mottling. Manuel’s movement had disturbed them.

The sweep of their feathers against the stones made a *sbbb, sbbb*

sound. *Sbbb*. Clucking softly, they tucked themselves back into hiding.

Manuel was shaking. The front door was open, and he forced himself to step through it. Paused before the stairs he had climbed countless times. In Lucho's shop, the wooden feet sat along the shelf, the animal skins splayed on the walls. Manuel continued up to the main floor, where people were speaking in low voices. Lucho was seated on the sofa, looking somehow smaller than his actual size.

Heads turned toward Manuel. They would know him as the son of the hotelier—some would have seen him in the restaurant over the years, just as they saw his father and Ivan Reyes leaning over their dominoes.

Andy the handyman was here. For a moment Manuel was confused.

Lucho pushed himself up from the sofa. He came to stand before Manuel, his eyes bloodshot, his face grey. He reached out, and Manuel waited to be strangled, punched, dragged out of the house. With a heavy arm, Lucho pulled Manuel close, and a great sob rose between them.

Manuel felt Lucho's thick hand rubbing his hair, his heavy arms clinging to him. He let himself be held, let the sobs escape. From across the room, a voice rose up.

"But his father . . . !"

Lucho tightened his grasp.

Manuel felt their eyes on him, their hatred, until at last Lucho loosened his grip and stepped away. Without looking up, Manuel fled.

\*

At the hotel, wrung dry from crying, he told the maids he was ill and went to bed.

He knew no one cared what happened to the son of a shoemaker; even if Lucho found those responsible, there was little anyone would do about it. He thought of the carcass picked apart, told himself it might not have been Ruben at all. But then he would

see Lucho's eyes and know it was true.

The maids brought him broth and rice, as if he had the flu. When his father poked his head in, Manuel pretended to be sleeping.

He heard his footsteps, felt the mattress shift as his father sat beside him. Lying with his back to him, Manuel tried not to move. In his mind he heard the voice from Lucho's, saying "his father . . .!" He felt his father's hand brush his hair. The hand was trembling.

The mattress shifted again, and his father laid his cheek against Manuel's temple. Manuel shoved him away.

"Son—"

"Go away!"

The mattress shifted again, and his father left the room.

Manuel waited until the third afternoon, when his room had taken on a close, dank smell and his father would be at his weekly luncheon, to go downstairs. It was a gray day, and the poets were in their corner. They nodded gravely.

So, they too had heard the news. Of course; it wasn't every day that a student was murdered. Though who knew what the newspaper would call it.

Manuel ate his soup gingerly. Already it was late enough that the poets were finishing up. The English couple left first, then the German and the Canadian. The American wife, with the messy red hair, came to take a seat at Manuel's table.

"He was your friend," she said, in passable Spanish. "The boy who died. I'm very sorry."

Manuel found he could not speak.

"We used to see you in town sometimes. We've watched you boys grow up."

Manuel felt a fly on his cheek and swiped at it. His hand came back wet.

"There's a program we're involved with back home. For international students." From her cloth bag she pulled out her notebook full of poems. She tore out a page, scribbled a name and a number.

“In case we can be of help.”

Manuel heard himself thank her. With his napkin he wiped at his eyes, his nose, his ears. It seemed everything was wet.

Manuel looked at the piece of paper. Stared at the number, trying to make sense of what the woman had said. It seemed too strange, the timing too perfect. Probably some religious thing, like those groups bussed into town center.

Though he was the hotelier’s son, he had no money of his own. Everything in his daily life was paid for, yet he could afford little more than a train ticket. He thought of his relatives in Denver, wondered if he might somehow contact them. No, they would surely tell his father.

It would be years before he understood all it took to bring a foreigner legally to the States. All he understood, after calling the number the woman had written, was that there was an opening in a two-year college in California, a work-study program with a scholarship for room, board, and tuition. Because of the woman’s connections, Manuel need only apply.

He packed little, wrote a terse note, and called his father only after he had arrived in Los Angeles. The Americans, who had paid for his ticket, had a friend meet him. After that, a chain of generosity and serendipity allowed Manuel to swim instead of sink. When he transferred to the university, he somehow qualified for full funding. At the time it was simply a blur. Only after being hired for his first job did he appreciate the ridiculous luck involved—that the American couple, by giving him that number to call, had set it all in motion.

He hadn’t seen them since.

\*

Manuel was leaving the schoolyard when his cellphone rang. Ivan Reyes. “If you want to speak,” he told Manuel, “come by my office.”

Manuel made his way to the main plaza, where the municipal

building stood across from the fountain. Tourists sat on benches munching corn on the cob, taking photos, some posing with the strange new statue. A bird, he saw now—sleek, abstract.

Inside the municipal building he was directed to Ivan's office, wondering vaguely if Ivan still expected to have been named in the will. It gave him a bitter pleasure to ask, instead, if Ivan knew anyone by the name of Nelson Schiller.

Ivan looked at him without expression. Then he nodded, slowly. "Ah. Yes."

Manuel waited. Ivan said nothing.

"Well, who is he?"

"Those writers. Used to come for the winter, always sat at the table in the corner."

He didn't remember anyone called Nelson Schiller. They had all gone by other names—comically short ones, single syllables. *Skip. Chuck.*

"Your father worried something would happen to you. He asked them to get you away from here." Ivan's voice turned sharply triumphant. "You didn't know that, did you? How your poor father worried. I'm not surprised his heart finally gave out."

He was speaking louder now. "Who do you think made sure you could attend college? Law school? Your father gave the funds to those Americans, had them arrange everything."

Impossible. Mexican pesos couldn't support an American college education. How could there have been enough money, with the hotel in disrepair? The missing tiles on the fountain, the chipped bricks of the fireplace. The same heavy wooden chairs needing varnish.

Manuel hung his head, then, understanding.

Ivan seemed to be standing taller. "You think good things just happen? That they aren't paid for in some way?" Ivan laughed, then—a mean, sad laugh. "I will miss your father, boy. I already miss him. Now maybe you will too, hmm?"

\*

Manuel's legs somehow carried him out to the corridor. Sounds from other offices echoed down the hall.

His father had known, then. Which schools Manuel was attending, where to send money. And Manuel had known nothing. Just the grudging vows to visit, never fulfilled. His father could have cut off his assistance, even come to find him. Instead he left Manuel to his freedom.

Shaking, Manuel stepped back outside. A concert was taking place on the green, schoolchildren standing on risers, singing some warbly song. People sat in folding chairs, listening stoically. Manuel made his way toward the other end of the plaza, the children's voices following him.

Manuel began to run. Up the narrow paths, terrace by terrace, into the alleyways. It was nothing his mind told him to do; his body carried him forward. A few times he had to pause, to catch his breath, but his feet propelled him forward.

As he neared Ruben's alley he saw her—the little girl. She stood in her blue sweater, the white flower in her hair, and slipped round the corner before he reached her.

He was panting now, trying to keep up. He even thought he heard her voice just ahead of him. *You're too late, he left.* Yet when he rounded the corner, the girl wasn't there.

Only as he neared Ruben's house did he see it, on the ground a few feet away. The white flower from her hair.

He reached down to pick it up—but it wasn't a flower at all. Just a crumpled piece of white paper.

He unwadded it. From behind the creases emerged a child's face, a name. One of the missing person flyers.

*Sbbb, sbbb.*

Manuel closed his eyes.

*Sbbb.*

*Ruben,* he meant to say. He meant to whisper, but his voice broke loudly.

*“Papi!”*

Birds shook themselves out from the rocks. Manuel felt the paper escape his grasp, and watched it follow them up into the air.

GEORGE R. JUSTICE

*Flash Gordon*

Twilight always came early to Caney Creek, the crests of its mountains running at some three thousand feet—their mass and elevation majestic in Appalachia's overall swell—and enough to interfere with a dropping sun and put us into long shadows much sooner than flatlanders.

Twilight was a quieting time, with colors fading and paling as if the earth's light source was being strained through a curtain; a time that lingered in the fullness of spirits and made us pause to feel its hush, its spell, when even the slightest utterance seemed to be an assault to the peace it afforded. It was the promise of night and mystery, a time that made us feel a little less steady, a little less certain, that lent itself to searching the things that lay deep within us, for wading in our own dark springs. But for those forces that kept us shuttered, that lay along river bottoms and in the soft dark earth of hollows, it was a time for the cats, a time that seemed to define their very existence, that triggered in them a heightened frenzy and sent them scurrying in a way mothers search for their young at the threat of a storm—their eyes locked in eerie luminance and their voices tinged with the sounds of dread. For them it was a time of readiness, when instincts and the silent reach of shadows filled them with anticipation and the urge to mate and hunt and feed . . . and all just before we slipped into the infinity we knew as night, before we slumped ourselves behind closed doors and into the glare of coal-oil lamps.

I don't believe there was ever a dusk when the cats didn't openly defer to the mountains, to their abundance and the spirits that stalked them. They were like scattered souls at such times, left to their own devices and caught up in madness and lessening light. We didn't pay them much mind, Mary Olive and me, except

when darkness threatened to overtake them and they were caught up in the pull and pall of “haints.” Mary Olive was my great aunt on my mother’s side, and the one who took me in right after I turned fourteen, just a short time after mama died of the fevers and daddy decided her being gone was reason enough for him to take leave of his own. It was Mary Olive’s promptings that brought us together, as much for her sake as mine; her affirmations that gave me a home within the sphere of her splintered cabin, her superstitions and wilderness ways; her wit and wisdom and weakness for bootleg liquor. We shared the cabin with Mary Olive’s daughter, the scrawny-boned but lion-hearted Seriann: whose spirit was many-layered but mostly powered by sheer strength of will.

I understood early on that the cats belonged to Seriann, strays that they were: always en route, but never seeming to bother with hellos or goodbyes; their ramblings as erratic as they were immoral, and trying to keep track of them about as hopeless as it was pointless. Characteristically deviant, forever slinking about and stalking, they seemed to aspire to the level of vagabonds, scoundrels and scamps. I never knew one kind from another, or one breed from the next, and with them coming and going in such profusion, never bothered to care. They were just strays. Just cats. Each with a personality as divergent and one-of-a-kind as snowflakes. There were striped ones, spotted ones, ones that looked like patch-work quilts, and ones with hair so wild they looked like the progenies of firecrackers. There were those so starved looking their skins hung on them like sheets draped across a picket fence. And big ones whose viciousness helped support their size: taking what they wanted when they wanted it. There were bushy ones and slick ones, solids and calicoes, shaggy and mangy, young and old, combed and ragged, yellow and orange, black and white, silver and blue, mottled and gray, and every manner in between. If it was a cat, it had been Seriann’s at one time or another.

Enchanted as the cats were with themselves, having refined

aloofness into an art, they strolled in and out at all hours of the day and night, announced only by their pleading tones. And they came in every imaginable condition. Some dragged themselves through the front gate, mewling and wheezing, cut and bleeding with pieces and parts dangling, with large patches of shiny flesh and scars where fur used to be, and hobbling as if on their ninth life. They came as a last resort, knowing full well what a struggle life was without a home, and with torn and missing parts to prove it. They were the ones most like relatives: the ones temporarily down on their luck who came to stay until they could get back on their feet, then conveniently forgetting to leave – staying long past the time they began to smell.

Then there were the elite, notorious for their grand entrances: arched backs and tails at high mast, with an entourage of their best friends and lovers in tow, and caterwauling as if fully expecting to be ushered in with silk banners and pails of warm milk. They walked upright and poised, each step measured and precise so as not to stir the dust, and with their noses pushed to attention – high and away from odors close to the earth. They were like displaced club members searching for a place to belong. They would join us for simple diversion and their own particular brand of rest and relaxation, stay until the enchantment wore thin, then stroll off without as much as a backward glance, victims of their own wanderlust.

And there were those *great with litter* who found it completely necessary to travel halfway across the county to do their birthing under our porch or behind our kitchen stove, even at the height of our stirring breakfast gravy. It was always a blessed event, even though we had to contend with their attitudes and the looks they gave us: a combination of “Come near me and I’ll scratch your eyes out” and “Lend a hand for God’s sake. Can’t you see what’s going on here?”

I never knew there to be any less than a dozen at one time.

Ever. After a time, I developed a natural indifference: saw them without seeing them, actually expected them to be there at every turn, and before long simply accepted that they were part of the texture and fabric of our lives, as much a part of the landscape as the crows in our garden. *Stepcats* I called them.

Ol' Bartley, our redbone hound and protector against "who-and-what-all," remained altogether complacent with the cats and their numbers until they took over the cool spot he dug for himself under the porch, until they snatched up what few victuals we tossed in the yard, and until they stood eyeball to eyeball daring him to do something about it. It took spilled blood, most of it Bartley's, to let him know that survival of the fittest oftentimes came down to who was the hungriest. But of the endless stream and assortment that assailed us, the one that remains most vividly in my mind is a giant tom we called Flash after *Flash Gordon* some moving-picture star Parson Wingate talked about like he was Daniel Boone of outer space. Parson was our neighbor to the north, his sturdy log cabin at the mouth of Big Bug Hollow where he spent most of his retirement reading what he called *the classics* and writing scathing editorials in the Pike County News. Parson was a good soul, kind and quick to share from his garden, who relished keeping anyone who would listen informed about the world and its stage (his thirty years at Pikeville College never fully loosening its grip even after retirement, his devotion to academia indelibly tied to his everyday commerce with life and living). And although committed to a life alone, Parson took great pleasure in looking in on us, seeing us as family, and keeping us apprised of things greater than ourselves. But then there was that wily fox that roamed about inside him, the one that kept his gizzard stirred when confronted with things like abject poverty and social injustice; the very same fox that so roundly brought him to laughter at the least bit of mischievousness. A displaced scholar, he loved to crow about being a self-proclaimed anarchist, a revolutionary and treasonous enemy of the state. This

was never more true than when he pushed the limits of Bingo Tims, deputy sheriff and sycophant of the Old Regular Baptists. Bootlegging is what Parson did, now that he had time on his hands, when he'd answer the door at all hours for those seeking his special sweet blend of pure-corn liquor. Testing the boundaries of the law gave him great pleasure, always daring to go one step beyond what we knew to be common sense. Money was never the object, only the consequence of a concentrated understanding of independence. *Self-rule* he called it: an indulgent comprehension that pushed him to embrace the seeds of commerce without the cumbersomeness and ambiguities of taxation. It was commerce at its most organic level.

He came often, Parson did, sometimes to share a plate of beans, sometimes just to sit and rock and share his *corn-squeezings* with Mary Olive, but then never failing to slip a little half-pint bottle into her apron pocket upon leaving. We loved Parson, and not in a contrite way, and knew as far inside us as we could reach that he saw us in the same light.

Parson's accounts of Flash Gordon were entrancing, calling him hero and champion of planet earth. "The one man," he said, "who strives tirelessly week after week from the starched and mottled mirror of the silver screen to save us from the atrocities of the universe and the Ming dynasty." We were often left without a sharp understanding of the things Parson talked about, but he painted the air with such words and with such breath that we had to believe that Flash was the only name befitting a cat so perfectly muscled and bearing the burden of knowing that each adventure might be his last.

Flash appeared at the front gate in the swelter of late August and in the dead quiet of a Sunday, with the temperature steady in the nineties and each day more oppressive than the last. Except for an occasional trip to the water bucket and the outhouse, I felt altogether justified sprawled in the shade of the porch alongside

ol' Bartley. I had been there, barefoot and stripped to the waist since mid morning, caught in the stupor of a half sleep and the incessant whirl of jar flies, and with Mother Nature daring anything to move. The only perceivable movement was the wave of heat shimmering up out of the earth and a squadron of green-headed flies dive buzzing between the screen door and where ol' Bartley and I lay comatose. It wasn't until a couple of them, in a frenzy of mid-air copulation, did a tailspin into my ear that I came off the porch like I'd backed into a hot stove. After I kicked the yard into a small cloud of dust, spit and cussed and dug inside my ear for the horrors I imagined to be there, I noticed this orange-colored monster poised reverently just inside the gate. He stood frozen in mid-stride as if he had suddenly come upon a snake. His yellow-orange fur was brilliant in the sunlight despite a patina of road dust and a look that said he had been a long time coming.

Flash was the biggest and possibly the most beautiful yet vile-looking tom I had ever seen, his stature and girth befitted a cat that had swallowed a good-sized dog. We were straightaway under each other's spell, and I knew without doubt that he had played this game before stood his ground time and again with those who dared to try him.

For the longest time we stood locked in each other's stare, impervious to the heat and lack of movement around us. That's when I first noticed the brown stain covering part of his ear and trailing down the side of his face. Dried blood was unmistakable. Around here, dried blood on cat fur was about as common as chicken shit in a barnyard, but it wasn't until I knelt and leaned a little closer that I noticed his paw arched gingerly off the ground, oozing thick and crimson.

I wanted to go to him, but knew he was not mine to fix. He simply needed a place to rest and the chance to fix himself, the way he had undoubtedly done many times before. But it was his stillness, the way it mirrored the day, his sides only faintly rising

and falling with each breath, that made me believe he had been put to the test once too often. But in both our minds, we knew there was no mistake about where he was or why he had come.

For the next three days I watched him poke his head out from under the porch, inspect me with great caution, then lumber arthritically to the edge of the creek. Thirst seemed to be the only thing that brought him into the sun. At the creek's edge, he would settle, wait and search for the longest time for whatever might move, then drink from the pathetic little trickle running between the rocks. I tossed him table scraps now and again, none of which went uneaten. Finally, on the fourth day, Seriann coaxed him to her with some milk she had poured in a lid from a Mason jar. That was only a few minutes before he allowed her to stroke him and turn him with due consideration. She talked to him all the while as if she knew him, as if her probing his bruised and battered parts was a thing most common. He never flinched, even when she lanced the large swollen pocket behind his ear, even when she squeezed and swabbed it over and again with an old camphor-soaked rag, finally digging out a claw. And he never whimpered, even when she dug into his front paw and into all the puss and dried blood before finally pulling out a thorn the crabapple variety wedged like a wood plug between cartilage and bone. It was a delicate but dogged process and one I hadn't had much stomach for, but one that helped me understand what was both hardwearing and fragile in each of us.

Flash's slow march back to health kept him knotted for four long days. The step cats self-indulgent and pruned in the way of kings and queens remained unconcerned but for their own wilting pleasures, coming just close enough to satisfy some feral curiosity, as if Flash were something far too intruding for their humors, but far too substantial to be ignored altogether. They milled about, silent as ghosts, as if walking on air and making no bones about their contempt, sniffing and inspecting, then withdrawing to places less tied to angst.

After the fourth day Flash emerged silent as a dream, inching his way into the sun and what it might do for his wounds. He stepped gingerly and with frequent pauses, with little thought to the skulking about of strays, their nuisance and annoyance, availing himself, instead, of the warm dry planks of the porch stretching out like a black snake warming itself on a hot rock. I favored him with chucks of cornbread and rations of milk to choruses of mewling grievances, but then neither of us cared enough to give them a second thought. I grew used to Flash over time: the way he waited for me outside the schoolhouse and walked with me all the way home; grew use to him watching me hoe in the garden, waiting for me to finish so we could reclaim our rightful places on the porch with ol' Bartley; grew used to his gentle pawing at my pant legs when I knew he was capable of tearing a hole in them with a single swipe; grew to like the fact that Seriann had relented his care and ownership to me. That's why it was so difficult when he cried out to me one day from the middle of the road, mid-October and about the time the hillsides began to dazzle us with color. I stood watching him, not knowing what he intended, but had the deepening feeling he was about to give in to promptings primeval. He stood braced and staring at me as if grieved that our time had come and gone, that he was left to the beckonings of nature, bound by what he was and what he'd been ingrained with from the beginning. It was a reality I had no way of affecting, and after a time, and with a heaviness I wasn't ready for, raised my hand in a way that let him know I'd heard his cry. It was only seconds later that he turned and sauntered off like some cowpoke riding off into the sunset. I knew the sting of goodbye as well as anybody. Momma and Daddy leaving the way they did all but guaranteed its bite and haunt would remain with me forever and even more so in the whisper of dusk and long shadows, when the sun slipped behind the blue of the mountains and the strays began to stir themselves into a frenzy.

Flash stopped just before his image was swallowed up altogether by the alder bushes along the creek; gave one last glance over his shoulder and cried out for a final time. I took it as his *Thank you*, but there was that hesitation, that moment of lingering that intangible something I knew all too well as goodbye.

\*

I never saw ol' Flash after that, never heard his cry or saw any evidence that he had come and gone in the night, but I still wonder about him, where his trail might have led him, where and when he might have taken a final breath. The only remaining reminder was the scurrying myriad of stepcats Seriann insisted on mothering. Like things programmed from the beginning of time, by reverential and ancient bloodlines, they were day after day stirred to yet another life by lengthening shadows and the expectations of night. Parson said the domestication of cats could be traced back to ancient civilizations, back to the Egyptians, even to the Phoenicians. A hundred thousand years, he said, back to when they were revered as having mystical powers, and when their demise, should it be at the hands of man (whether on purpose or by accident), was punishable by death. I took Parson for his word. They were, in the same vein as the mountains, reminders of one so worthy a name as Flash . . . and, in the strictest sense, as reassuring and resilient as his long-held memories.





# **ESSAYS**



SEAN PRENTISS

*A Cabin, a Woods, a Mountain*

In the pre-dawn hours on Islet Mountain, before the sun pulls itself over Colorado's Continental Divide, I roll over in bed.

On the dark edge of dawn, Islet Mountain remains shadowed in night. The chipmunks, the soon-to-be-chattering squirrels, the gray jays in the trees continue to sleep. Sarah rolls into me and falls deeper into her country of dreams. She is smart enough to follow the examples of animals.

\*

Quietly, I pull myself from our warm bed.

Quietly I dress in workpants and hickory shirt.

Quietly I climb down our pine-wrought ladder.

Quietly I ease open the cast iron door of the woodstove.

Quietly I lay a piece of aspen atop a round of pine, softwood that will burn bright and quickly so Sarah can wake to the popping and crackling music of flaming wood.

\*

As I step from the cabin this early August morning, the air on Islet Mountain wears like a cold set of sheets. Because we are so high, nearly two miles above our oceans, the chill air whispers, *It is time to split wood. It is almost winter.*

The air doesn't know that Sarah and I do not winter on Islet Mountain. Come September we return to another world and other lives. Come September we drive from Islet Mountain on the rutted Silver Spiral two-track road until we return, dozens of miles of dirt and pavement later, to that world of commuting and stoplights, sodium-vapor streetlights dimming the night sky, billboards beseeching us to *buy buy buy* fast food, bail bondsmen, summer vacations, fake tans, dollar stores.

Come September, we return to city lives. Lives of paychecks and hours in the office staring out at the thin edges of trees. Lives of emails and phone calls and bills so we can have summers spent here on Islet Mountain.

It is not that I hate that world. It is not that I hate the way it spins so wobbly around the sun. It's just that that world is so loud. The din, the racket accumulates until my mind is a cacophony of noise, a band of children playing pots and pans in my skull.

So for these August moments, I ask for—and receive—the quiet of the world, the quiet of the mind.

\*

This morning, with that other world weeks away, I grab the two-bit maul from the shed. The heaviness of the metal head pulls the maul, the oak handle, even me toward earth. I heft all its weight onto my shoulder, my arms weary and slow from sleep.

My soul loves these dawn moments. The world silent except for my booted feet scuffling woodchips. Alone to thoughts, or better, to those moments when my body is little more than muscle arcing maul through air, the swosh, the splintering and snapping of wood. The repetition. Muscles arcing maul through air, *swosh*, splintering, snapping wood.

After I have swum in a sea of split aspen and fir. After I have stacked the wood beside the little cabin. After I have hung the maul in its resting spot in the shed, I wipe sweat from my bearded face with sap-stained hands. Anywhere else in America, I'd be dirty. But on Islet Mountain, I am woods-clean and smell of treeblood.

\*

Sarah lounges on the porch, looking east as our Colorado sun greets her. Steam rises from her mug of tea, corkscrews into the air, disappears into the fractured rays of sunlight. Oatmeal simmers on the propane stove. A chipmunk scurries across the porch, finds

a small puddle of water, and drinks deeply.

\*

After the dishes have clanked their way clean in the outdoor sink, Sarah curls in the corner of the cabin on the bench we built last summer. She reads. I climb the ladder to the loft, sit at the little desk and write a poem entitled “I Never Wear My Elk Skin Gloves” into the morning, my pen scribbling across paper.

Because I want no distance between  
The earth and me, nothing separating  
These cracked fingernails from soil,  
No space between my hands and the  
Heft of my hoe, for the straight  
Grain ash, polished by the sweat  
And oil of my palms, is merely an  
Extension of these trail-weary arms.

Sometime later, I startle from the page, surprised by the silence, deep and absolute, circling this little cabin. The only noises—the occasional breeze snaking through an open window, the sound of Sarah turning her pages, a pen scraping across paper as I write a poem. I lift my pen. Pause. Adding to the world’s hush.

On Islet Mountain maybe the beatings of my heart are the loudest sounds. I learn again that silence is obtainable. It can be found, even if it can never be held.

\*

Before lunch, Sarah and I work our five acres. This hillside has been scarred by prior hands. In the 1970s, bulldozers carved into the hill to create a pad so someone later could build a cabin. Their mechanical work has led, over the years, to a building pad that more resembles a dirt parking lot than a home.

Thirty-five years after that bulldozer tore the land so we could

turn it into a transaction, Sarah and I did just that and purchased the deed so we could build a cabin, log by log and two-by-six by two-by-six. Though I am unsure how one purchases land, how one can own another organic thing.

We get around that larger question of ownership by partnering with the land and seeing the deed as a marriage certificate. We try, as all lovers, as husbands and wives do, to heal this mountain. We shovel loads of topsoil from there to here. We build checkdams to stop erosion. We transplant firs and hope their roots clasp what little topsoil remains. We plant aspens with gentle hands and pray that their fallen leaves nourish the dirt. We hope in ten years the cabin will be swallowed by aspens and firs, by sage and lupine.

We realize, with every arc of the sun, how this land, how this gentle breeze, how the sun, each of them, heals the wounds Sarah and I have accumulated. Each day the land nourishes us. Each day the sun turns our battered souls to fertile land again. Each day Islet Mountain's quiet washes over us. It is a slow process. But we have a lifetime. The mountain has longer.

\*

Islet is nothing much compared to her sister-mountains. West Mountain is sun-kissed every evening in a subtle display of last light. Terrible Mountain arcs above the krumholtz and is dotted with silver mining ruins. Fairview Peak, our citadel, is a plug of rock that rises above it all and offers hundred-mile views.

But Islet Mountain at 10,998' is more ridge than peak, more a shoulder of Terrible Mountain than a mountain itself. Islet Mountain is almost forgotten. Almost nothing. Islet Mountain is so rarely visited that it is a tiny pin stuck into the dark empty part of a map. To the outside world, Islet Mountain is little more than nothing. Those of us who summer on Islet Mountain, we like it best this way. And when I arrive at Islet Mountain every May, I pray that I too can move toward nothing.

\*

For lunch, Sarah and I sit on the downstairs deck and eat sandwiches on cabin-baked bread. We stare off toward Arp Mountain and the serrated Continental Divide. In the space from Islet to Arp, I think about turning forty this year. About the busy hands of time. My beard speckled gray. My hair more gone than growing. My forehead a thinning peak. Slot canyons eroding into the corners of my eyes.

I think about this cabin. Just a thing of lumber and nails. Just a 10' x 12' cabin. Just 180 square feet of terra-cotta-tiled floors and rough hewn boards for interior walls and oil lamps casting evening glows and aspenwood ceilings and two small decks and hand-built shelves to hold our foodstuff, our life-stuff.

If I have created little else after forty years on this earth, still I built this cabin on Islet Mountain from the hard ground to the woodstove chimney. This cabin is a carapace, something we can live within. It is also something that can protect us from the wind and the rain and the hot sun, and also from the noises of that other world, the noises that race my heart, the noises that clutter and crack my thoughts until I am little more than tension, sweaty palms, desperate for a long drink of beer—or if I can get away from the city, then a long drink of air.

\*

In early afternoon, Sarah and I grab trail tools—a Pulaski and a hazel hoe—and stroll into the aspen grove. Under the hot sun, our tools cut into the grass and dirt of the earth. We move forward a foot at a time. Soon, after a number of days, we have created trails that we give names to.

Rusty Bucket Trail loops from the cabin to an overlook then meanders back to the cabin along a mining road so old that it is now little more than an idea. Silver Spur Trail weaves from the cabin to the dusty road that scrambles toward Fairview Peak. Cabin

Trail, a trail we've built with our friends up the hill, connects our cabin to theirs.

We marvel at the paths we've built. Some people build highways. Some people build sparkling towers. Others build subdivisions with lawns of emerald green. Others build shopping malls filled heavy with commuting cars buying food and cellphones and tee shirts and trinkets.

My hands never want to build those things. These trails meander us right back to home or, if we hike up Cabin Trail, then we can venture to our friends' cabin up Islet Mountain. Cabin Trail offers no exit ramps, no options other than friendship. Can any highway to any massive grocery store claim that?

\*

My goal each summer on Islet Mountain is to wash away all that is unneeded. Sarah and I strip away internet and movies. We strip away eating out at restaurants and nights polluting ourselves at the bar. We strip away the radio's music and paved roads and convenience stores. We strip away washing machines and flushing toilets and showers. We strip and strip and strip until Sarah and I stand naked beside Quartz Creek on a hot afternoon.

We step into the snowmelt river. This bath is cold and bites against our skin. Still, we lay our dirt-covered bodies into the creek and let the mountain's flow wash over our legs, our hips, our chests, our faces. When we rise from this riverbath, we are cleansed. The water helps us become even less than we were before.

\*

This afternoon, friends from high on Islet Mountain hike down the Cabin Trail. At the table, we break bread that has risen in our oven and eat chili that has cooked on their stoves. The four of us eat and drink and talk as their little girls play in our sunflowers and wild roses and blue flax. Their black dog runs up and down

the hill, barking at a squirrel in a tree.

With the giggles of Aya and Sol filling the air, with the bark of their black dog, I realize that it is not that I am in search of silence. It is not that I am running from other humans. It is that I am desperate for intention, for every action to have purpose and meaning.

\*

After dinner, our friends hike into the trees on the Cabin Trail. After they disappear, I stand outside the cabin in the dying night. The alpenglow climbs West Mountain until all that remains is a flash of light on the highest crowns of the highest pines. In an instant even that light is lost to the rotating earth. Then darkness hugs all of Islet Mountain. As I turn to head inside, I am startled to see the cabin aglow. A luminous radiance that bathes barnwood walls in yellow. Sarah has lit the lamps.

I peer through the windows of our cabin. Sarah stacks enamel plates. Hangs cast iron pans from the ceiling rafters. I stare at this quiet moment of no importance. A lover uncluttering a cabin. A cabin radiant in oil lamp light. A world turning from dusk to dark.

This is all I ever want to see. These mundane moments of beauty. How do I keep opening my eyes further? How do I keep seeing more of these moments that so many of us find meaningless? How do I balance the need for career with the need for intention?

\*

Sarah and I crawl beneath the heavy down blanket. In this pause of night, in this yawn of darkness, I think about how Islet Mountain is removed from the rest of the world, almost a world alone. Yet four hours northeast of here, Denver grows with its millions. Grand Junction and its sixty thousand wait less than three hours west. An hour away Montrose with its twenty thousand. And these cities, we are tied even to them by roads and rails and airports.

When I pause to think about them, I hear the click-clack clatter of the trains. The honking of horns. The screeching of brakes. The riotous purr of a motorcycle's engine. The people yelling over each other and the music at the nightclubs. I hear my other world.

Here on Islet Mountain, cougars slink around the trunks of our trees, deer feed on our aspen shoots, and woodpeckers rattle upon our snags. A woods music. Give me the full moon washing through a little cabin's window. Give me Islet Mountain, quiet at night.

\*

I pick up a book of poetry. Tonight James Wright. As Sarah sinks deeper into the space between arm and body, the moon showers us. More softly than even Quartz Creek, I read to Sarah, I read to myself, to the chipmunks asleep beneath the cabin, to the elk wandering our night woods, to the aspen trees, to the fairy slipper orchids. To all of Islet Mountain.

Sarah is silent on my chest. Maybe asleep. Maybe listening to my voice quavering from my ribs.

I read the final lines of James Wright's poetry for tonight: *I have nothing to ask a blessing for, / Except these words / I wish they were / Grass.*

LEEANNA TORRES

## *Adobe*

1.

*Adobe Morning* is the name of the coffee I purchase; its name is lovely, but clichéd. Maybe it's the name itself that gives the coffee such flavor, suggests we take each sip slowly, with delicious care. Turning the red, glossy bag of fresh grounds in my hand, I wonder at the marketing that helped imagine such a name—and the beaming faces it conjures. It's a name with foundation, allure. It suggests place and space. Taking in the smell of this coffee, some still brewing on the kitchen counter, I realize it *does* remind me of an adobe morning, an earth-tone summoning me into the soft place of beginnings.

2.

Miguel's family dog was named "Dobe." The cherished dog's name was a shortened from the longer word—ADOBE—and each of the three gleeful children squealed "Dobe, go get it!" as they tossed a ball into the wide *llano* serving as their back yard. Dust flavored their days as the children grew up with a dog named Dobe. Even now, when he speaks of the dog in the past tense, my husband's tone is loving and full of fondness. He loved that damn dog. But his father had to put Dobe down one afternoon. The dog's two back legs were crushed when a minivan backed up in the yard, an irreparable injury. Deciding to end Dobe's suffering, my husband's father took him out into the southern New Mexico brushlands, the *chamisa*: an ending quick and deliberate, the dog's name moving into memory and blood.

3.

Our priest recites the prayer that turns bread into flesh, wine into blood, and as his voice lowers in prayer and consecration, I am

distracted, looking into a crack in the wall beside me. And I see it there, exposed—adobe—an epiphany disguised in mud and stick and earth and water. During holy mass, as the flesh and blood of our living God is venerated on the altar, I focus on that cracked wall, adobe subtly seen. Covered by plaster and paintings and décor, the walls of this church have stood since 1750. People of the community took earth from this valley, organic and malleable mud from the Rio Grande floodplains, and over the centuries crafted their homes and buildings with bricks formed from it: “adobe.”

*New Mexico is one of the oldest inhabited places in the United States and boasts an original, authentic architectural heritage known simply as ‘adobe.’*

(Official New Mexico tourist website)

As the priest raises the body of Christ in the ceremony of the Mass, it isn't the sacrament in his hands that reminds me to bow, but rather the wall at my side, and I lean in, quiet but intent. Adobe. One of the oldest building materials on earth. The priest continues the mass, and I continue to lean in. Adobe. A hidden and whispered stillness. A deeper prayer.

4.

Rebecca's father was an adobe maker, and he raised his family on this career—making and selling adobes—a profession, a way of life, an art as much as a skill. He is dead now—a stroke in summertime—and I want to ask her about the craft her father perfected, that brilliant art of creating walls out of dirt and sticks and mud. I want to ask her if she ever watched him pouring mud into molds, forming bricks out of earth, letting them bake dry and strong in the sun. I want to ask her, but perhaps the memory will be too much for her. So instead, I offer her the usual and polite *pesame*, condolences, and ask about her children, work, the usual chit-chat that comes from a grocery-store conversation in the aisle between cereal and baking goods.

5.

Laura's father was also an adobe builder. I imagine him now, coming in from a day of work, beating his wife, terrifying his children. Laura never talked about the beatings her father gave to her mother, but everyone in the community knew it was the truth. A hushed and whispered truth.

6.

I want to color myself, all stillness and earth.

7.

The architecture of adobe is as much science as it is art. Over the centuries, organic and malleable mud from New Mexico's river valleys has been transformed by the Southwest's cultures, including Native American, Spanish, Anglo, and others. There are classes, experts, books, courses, and history. But when the day becomes night, it is the essence of adobe that remains—silence and solidity. Adobe is the building blocks, the mud bricks holding up our houses, churches, public buildings. But is adobe a form of art, architecture, or just the unspoken material of our daily lives?

8.

But adobe is also a stance, a foundation made of earth, a dwelling of the mystery we cannot define.

9.

Adobe is all color and cliché. I drink its name in the coffee I choose. I study its mystery in the walls of my childhood church. But in this desert landscape, where water is life and land is abundant with sky and space, it is the adobe that combines the elements—water and earth—to form the building blocks of our living. I let it define me in more ways than one.

10.

In spring, at the *cursillo* retreat, we are told to close our eyes, to trust, to enter into the ceremony and prayer with willingness. A woman identifying herself as my “sister” in this retreat embraces me softly, gently, then slowly leads me by body and hand. We are told to keep our eyes closed, even as we are taken and led out to a place we cannot see. I lean into the prayer.

*“Now without opening your eyes, gently reach out and touch the space in front of you,”* directs the voice of the woman leading the retreat. I reach out, silently, hesitant. Instantly I feel the solidness, the cool. Slowly my hands explore the material, sensing fingertips touching earth.

They have led us to a wall. An adobe wall. Each brick is intimate, earth in palm, an outline of brick against my seeking hands. I keep my eyes closed. The retreat facilitator explains something spiritual, something about how walls are metaphors for the barriers we put up in our hearts. Her explanation and prayer are inviting and true, but her words fade into a blur in my ears. It isn't the wall itself I am meant to experience. It is more. It is adobe—earth and water, stick and sun, craft and care—and somehow it is all there, revealed in silence and touch. My hands remain at the wall, eyes still closed, the ringing of a prayer I've never heard before. It is the adobe that speaks. I listen.

JOHN CLAYTON

*A Place No Longer Special*

The road pirouetted up the deep wooded canyon. It was a side road, paved but lightly traveled, narrow but safe, beautiful and yet thrilling to drive at high speeds. I knew it well. About ten miles up the valley, deep into National Forest lands an hour into my four-hour drive home, I always slowed. The pullout appeared with no warning, with an easy-to-miss sign pointing to a trail up a side-drainage.

It was spring of 1994. I had a contract with a software company in Helena, Montana. Every Thursday or Friday at 5:00 pm, I would start the long drive home. The side road added twenty or thirty minutes to my journey, but offered fun driving and a mid-trip meal at a renowned backwoods diner. The first time I climbed up this valley, letting nature's exuberance unwind the stresses of my week, I passed the pullout, looked at the dog in my back seat, and said, "We need to go for a walk." I found a place to turn around.

I had never heard of the trail and had no map of the country. But I was going to be out only five or ten minutes: let the dog do her business, get her some exercise, stretch our legs after the long week in the city. I wore only sneakers, brought no water. The trail was well defined and the topography easy to read: to get back to the car I could head back downstream. I ambled out—and soon became enveloped in an experience like no other I've ever had.

I was on the relatively wet, west-facing slopes of a limestone mountain range. The setting produces vegetation unusual for central Montana, and although I wasn't enough of a botanist to put names to the plants, I did know that the setting transfixed me. It was a perplexing form of beauty: not vistas, not waterfalls, not expanding across a vertical or horizontal plane. Instead the splendor seemed to permeate the humid air. The fecund plants

exploded with a rich perfume and an infinite variation along a single shade of green. As I walked forward the world unfolded slowly, subtly, enticingly. This would be no mere five-minute diversion.

I spent probably two hours there that day. I turned around, reluctantly, only because I felt the weight of real-world responsibilities: the approach of the restaurant's closing time, of darkness, of a desire to get home before bedtime. But I returned almost every week through the contract's duration. I explored some other trails, and once took a dirt road that curved unpredictably through the back woods. But this place remained my favorite.

Was it "recreation," what I was doing? The forest was not designated wilderness, so I could have ridden a mountain bike. As a runner who'd spent a week cooped up in an office, I could have jogged. But I wasn't seeking adrenaline or perspiration. Indeed I tended to walk at half my typical pace. I needed to let the beauty sink in. I wanted to merge with it. It felt to me like not recreation but worship. I wasn't literally praying; I'm not the type to say, "Nature is my church"; I didn't then understand what the word *spirituality* meant. But the experience was deep and inexplicable in a way that I would later tie to that value.

At the time, the place felt like mine: more nature-oriented than my programmer colleagues would care for, farther from town than most Helenans would bother to drive, not published on some magazine's list of favorite hikes but discovered serendipitously, at a golden hour. I never saw another person up there. The trail felt like a little charm I could hold in my hand, a talisman of a better life. Like other visions of paradise, it struck me as timeless. Since it was "just nature" rather than developed into a park or subdivision or some other component of ever-changing human society, it would always bring me this feeling because it would never change.

Then one day I arrived at the pullout and discovered a difference. The dirt was churned, the trail widened, beaten down. Somebody had trailed a big herd of cattle up here.

I couldn't be too surprised. I'd discovered some open meadows a few miles up the trail. Springtime was when ranchers moved their cows from winter range in low elevations to summer range atop the mountains, where nutritious grasses emerged as the low country dried out. I knew that such meadows had co-evolved with grazers—granted, maybe bison and elk rather than cows and domestic sheep, but I accepted my rancher-friends' scientific argument that occasional grazing made for a productive ecosystem.

However, I was dismayed to realize that I couldn't accept cows as part of my spiritual quest. As I walked the first quarter-mile, stepping carefully around cow pies, I no longer felt enveloped by nature. The wider trail, my knowledge of its heavy use this past week, and the smell of manure put me at a distance from the sensations and experiences I had previously treasured. I debated turning around, debated calling the Forest Service office to express outrage. Instead I kept going, hoping that the effects would become muted, or that the first fork, where I could exit the bovine superhighway, was closer than I had remembered.

It wasn't. My experience had been decimated. In subsequent weeks I would nose the car into the pullout, hoping that the manure smell had dissipated and I could return to my paradise. But one look at that wide trail and I would give up and drive on.

\*

How should society resolve this conflict? In the near corner, a software contractor undertaking recreational activities from which he claims spiritual benefits due to a vaguely-defined specialness. In the far corner, a rancher and some cowboys (perhaps young relatives), trying to make a living the way they and their neighbors have for more than a century.

As I see it, this is the *preservation vs. conservation* divide that has bedeviled the environmental movement since the days when naturalist John Muir argued with U.S. Forest Service founder

Gifford Pinchot. As a forester, Pinchot wanted to use resources such as timber and grass in a sustainable fashion, such that they could never be collectively exhausted. (Next year, the cows could use a different summer pasture and allow this valley to recover.) But Muir, who consistently talked about the way a holistic nature brought spiritual benefits, argued that some places needed to be preserved rather than used. Yosemite National Park topped his list. The two men clashed most famously over Hetch Hetchy, a dam proposed inside Yosemite. And I think the clash still resonates because so many of us feel it inside ourselves.

We want the two perspectives to coexist. We want our inner Pinchot to say, “Sure, we could preserve the Yosemite valleys and use resources from elsewhere.” And we want our inner Muir to quickly agree on a landscape to forfeit. But our inner Pinchot is too hungry for resources, and our inner Muir too rigid to compromise.

I had found spiritual fulfillment not in the epic scenery of Yosemite but in the subtle spring of an obscure forest valley. I suspect that Muir the evangelist would have been delighted. (His father was an itinerant preacher, and although Muir rejected the family’s joyless Christianity, he clearly inherited a desire to inspire others to a higher spiritual plane.) My inner Muir, worried only about an individual relationship to a higher power, was vulnerable to the argument that you’d better preserve *everything*, because there’s no telling when or where enlightenment might strike. But my inner Pinchot, worried about fairness and equity for all members of society, knew that this approach couldn’t work in the real world. Lock up every bit of land against all but recreational uses? Hey, we can’t *all* work for software companies.

The Muir-Pinchot debate, or preservation vs. conservation, has over the past century been complicated by new developments. New recreational technologies—mountain bikes, rafts, ATVs—have made it easier to play in natural settings. Other transportation advances—cars, jets, Jeeps—have made it easier to get to remote

places. Meanwhile, deeper understanding of ecological science has presented other reasons—wildlife habitat, ecosystem health—for preservation.

Still, I believe that at its heart this divide is not really about bikes or habitat or cows or scenery or sustained yield or the sanctity of a national park. I think it's about the inner clash between our relation to spirituality and to society.

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Essays like this one are often prompted by the author's discovery of a spiritual bond with nature. And to counter the many ways that economics fails to measure that bond, most such essays simply (and justifiably) argue for its primacy. *How can we pursue mere physical comforts when life can mean so much more?* But my attempt to resolve the conflict took me in a different direction.

I remembered the career of my father, a liberal Protestant New England pastor. Because he was good at his job, he usually served vibrant, wealthy communities. And because his career came after the 1960 peak of U.S. religious affiliation and investment, his churches always had more facility than they needed. They were big, beautiful buildings in valuable locations that sat largely vacant for six and a half days every week.

Although he wasn't familiar with Pinchot, my father embraced a similar philosophy: let's use these resources to help society at large. Sunday-school rooms were offered to a secular preschool, extra offices to a counseling center, meeting halls to Alcoholics Anonymous or the Boy Scouts or any group that needed space. Dad had a special admiration for churches in immigrant communities that took advantage of the opportunity to loan out even their sanctuaries, serving some other denomination that spoke some other language. "It's just a building," I can hear him saying. "Our relationship with God emerges in the community of other people, regardless of where we gather."

Dad did love a beautiful cathedral. I recall many a childhood

vacation that included a detour to a marvel of religious architecture. Had he been in Muir's shoes, he would have fought for the cathedral of Yosemite. But he also believed that the spiritual path can coexist with society's other needs, that individual enlightenment is actually intertwined with helping others. Without diminishing the experience of spiritual connection, he did believe that the setting is secondary. Indeed for him any sacredness of the setting resulted from the experience, rather than the other way around.

And in fact I will go one step further. I will admit that my spiritual hunger on that trail arose in part from what I was literally fleeing: a contract with a software company, executing a project for a state bureaucracy, boxing me into a cubicle, housing me in a cheap apartment in a rundown neighborhood by the railroad tracks, looming over me with a deadline that nobody on the team believed we could meet. I needed a counterweight.

Or, perhaps, I needed to eliminate my need for an counterweight. In the past twenty-six years I've gradually stopped taking contracts like that, and have better integrated my need for spiritual connection into my everyday life. There are now plenty of places in my neighborhood that can fill me with a sense of wonder—maybe not with the highs I experienced back then, but neither accompanied by those lows. Today I can practice rituals almost anywhere that give me the sense of release and connection that I once felt only in that valley.

John Muir never really liked politics, instead seeing it as an unpleasant prerequisite for the more important spiritual quest. If I can fulfill the larger quest while minimizing the political battles, wouldn't Muir the evangelist be pleased? Meanwhile Gifford Pinchot, who loved politics as a vehicle for balancing societal values, might appreciate my capacity to coexist and compromise—to preserve the grandest cathedrals while accepting that other places can serve multiple functions for multiple constituents.

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Last fall, I went back to my trail. After such a long absence I was of course driving a different car, with no dog. I hadn't driven that road in years, but I did catch the pullout. And my idyll was still unmarred by other humans' presence, or their detritus.

But I didn't achieve the same feeling. The experience was hot and dry. The first thirty yards felt like a totally different trail, as if repaving the road had involved redirecting both stream and path. Then when the shape of the landscape became more familiar, the vegetation looked wrong—too much juniper and sage. Without that deciduous fecundity, it was just another trail through central Montana hills.

Was the difference that I was here at the wrong time of day, the wrong time of year? Maybe. But if so, why was I just now realizing how fleeting that experience had been? Why had I attached my feelings to the place rather than the moment?

As I walked up the trail, my predominant emotion was nostalgia. It was like revisiting my elementary school: it spurred memories of what fifth grade felt like, but not the ability to re-inhabit those feelings. My fifth-grade experiences were unique to the ten-year-old me, and now appear unmoored from what seems to be objective reality. So too with my 1994 life. I thought of my Helena colleagues, now scattered. Would they have changed? Or would I find them unrecognizable because I had changed? In the long run this place must not have changed, but because I now encountered it from a different perspective, my experience of it had not proved timeless.

It all made me feel a bit sad. This place had once meant so much to my soul that I had despaired at its apparent destruction. Now I found it not destroyed—but also not meaningful. What had happened to that feeling, the one I had then failed to recognize as my spirituality?

Then I remembered. I sat down under a pine tree. It was a

tree like any other, providing shade without remarkable sensory experiences. Nothing special except to the extent that any patch of nature is special, that the world is special. Once I was comfortable, I was ready for that wider connection. I closed my eyes and began my favorite yoga breathing exercise.





# **CRITICISM**



JAN SCHREIBER

*Serpent in the Tree: Poetry of a Fallen World*

*“Horseness is the whatness of allhorse.”*

—Joyce, *Ulysses*

From an infant’s first rejection of a proffered spoon, dissatisfaction is probably the most common and most universal human response to the world. Small wonder that attempts at systematic thought often start by noting the gulf between what we can imagine and what we find before us. Justification for this disdain for the phenomenal world, the one we perceive with our senses, goes back at least to Plato. Our ability to imagine an ideal entails a reciprocal awareness that any particular exemplar fails in some respect to measure up. For Plato, in Albert Stöckl’s summary:

Ideas alone have real being; they alone are perfect, unchangeable, enduring, eternal, imperishable. Unchanging in itself, the ideal world moves in viewless majesty above the world of phenomena, representing within itself the full perfection of Being. The phenomenal world, on the other hand, is the sphere of imperfection, of change, of transition, the region where things exist in time, and begin to be. . . . Nothing ever attains perfection, for at each moment things cease to be what they were a moment before. All things are at the transition point from Being to Non-being, and from Non-being to Being; they are, and are not, at the same time. It follows that there can be no question here of Being in its perfection.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Albert Stöckl, *Handbook of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, 76.

The Scholastics found this line of thought readily adaptable to a theological setting. God represented the perfection of being; creation, on the other hand, manifested a lesser kind. The perfection of the universe, according to Aquinas, “requires that there should be some [beings] which can fail in goodness and which sometimes do fail.”<sup>2</sup> This modification—or rationalization—would become the prevailing theology, surviving even the Reformation, upon which Milton would build the edifice of *Paradise Lost*.

But an even more radical idea had long lurked in the background. Preceding the Scholastics by many centuries, the Gnostic heresy maintained that “The blame for the world’s failings lies not with humans, but with the creator.”<sup>3</sup> To put it crudely, the creator (the Demiurge) had bungled the job, and our present deprivations are a direct result.

That heresy was long suppressed, but once the grip of established religion was loosened, the Gnostic idea became a fertile ground for poets. J.V. Cunningham offers a characteristically unadorned summary of the issue, couched in the language of morality, rather than theology, in his poem “Haecceity”:

Evil is any this or this  
Pursued beyond hypothesis.  
It is the scribbling of affection  
On the blank pages of perfection.  
Evil is presentness bereaved  
Of all the futures it conceived,  
Willful and realized restriction  
Of the insatiate forms of fiction.  
It is this poem, or this act.  
It is this absolute of fact.

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2 Summa Theologica I, Q48, 2.

3 Stephan A. Hoeller, “The Cosmos,” *The Gnosis Archive* (<http://gnosis.org/gnintro.htm>), accessed 11/12/2016.

The argument now, as set forth here by a lapsed Catholic, gives a moral coloration to the philosophical reasoning. In Cunningham's extreme formulation, any actuality at all is not only flawed but morally abhorrent. Taken seriously the doctrine would suggest that total obliteration of the physical world is the only cure for the evil of existence. The poem is a provocative intellectual exercise but hardly, I hope, a program.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the radical disparity between the known reality and the imagined ideal has proved a powerful motive for many poems, particularly when it can be expressed in terms of a plausible human situation. Innumerable sonnets have played on the notion of the love object as unattainable ideal—or the lover who is all too human and therefore far from the ideal. Sidney clearly expected a negative answer when he asked, "Hath this world aught so fair as Stella is?" but in Sonnet 141 Shakespeare addresses his unideal lover frankly: "In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes / For they in thee a thousand errors note." He goes on to conclude that love steers not by the senses but by the admittedly foolish heart.

Far more comprehensive, philosophically, is a recasting of the Genesis myth of the "fall" as an attempt to deal with a fatally flawed universe. This was the approach of Paul Valéry in "Ébauche d'un serpent" ("Sketch of a Serpent"). The poem's narrator is the Serpent of the title, who shares with Milton's Satan a ferocious antagonism toward the creator, stemming in part from jealousy and a sense of unjust personal deprivation. Valéry's Serpent, however, has a more elaborate rationale for his resentments, one closely resembling the Gnostic scheme. In the poem that comprises his extended monologue, he tells us with a kind of intellectual disdain that God erred in creating the universe out of nothing, because actual being is inevitably flawed.

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4 My personal acquaintance with Cunningham suggested that "evil" for him often meant little more than "damned inconvenient." Asked once for an example of evil, he offered "a New England winter."

Bored by his pure tableau,  
God became He who mars  
His own perfection. Hence  
He saw his Principle  
Dispersed in consequence,  
His Unity in stars.<sup>5</sup>

These lines demonstrate Valéry's remarkable ability to combine abstract thought with a visceral awareness of the phenomenal world. "Principle" dispersed in "consequence" is a completely abstract notion; but "unity" dispersed in "stars" is suddenly concrete and vivid—as well as consistent with contemporary scientific understanding of the origins of the universe.

In particular (to continue the argument), human beings are far from the perfection of their creator; in the Serpent's telling God projects his sense of failure onto his newly formed creatures. "Look deeply in my shade," the Serpent admonishes:

Your tragic image there,  
The pride of my dark mirror,  
So tortured you, the air  
You breathed upon the clay  
Was your sigh of despair.

Valéry is fond of the notion that light is visible only in relation to darkness—a notion treated more extensively in his other great poem, "Le Cimetière marin." The Serpent vaunts himself as the means by which God, who is all light, can see his own image and thereby recognize his error.

We must pause at this point and consider the vast philosophical gulf between the narrative Valéry sets forth and the traditional

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5 "Sketch of a Serpent," my translation (*Hudson Review*, 1976). All other quotations of this poem are from the same source. The French original is in octosyllabic verse; the English version is in iambic trimeter, which to my ear retains the quickness and lightness of the French poem while sacrificing very little content owing to the generally greater concision of English.

Christian legend as articulated by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's story is based on an ancient, simple concept of justice: when an offense is committed—particularly an offense by a subordinate against a superior—there must be a reprisal. So the offense of disobedience (eating the fruit of the forbidden tree) calls for a punishment seemingly far in excess of the transgression: not only the offenders are to be punished, but all their offspring in perpetuity. Thus all mankind is contaminated by the original sin of its progenitors.

But in Christian theology there is a loophole. The ancient practice of sacrifice may be invoked to allow a symbolic victim to step forward and bear the punishment incurred by the offenders. Here is the crucial passage in *Paradise Lost*. God is the speaker:

Man disobeying,  
Disloyal breaks his fealtie, and sinns  
Against the high Supremacie of Heav'n,  
Affecting God-head, and so loosing all,  
To expiate his Treason hath naught left,  
But to destruction sacred and devote,  
He with his whole posteritie must dye,  
Dye hee or Justice must; unless for him  
Som other able, and as willing, pay  
The rigid satisfaction, death for death.<sup>6</sup>

Milton's universe is not the result of God's error. Its seeming imperfections (human and angelic fallibility) are rather part of the divine plan:

Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere  
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,  
Where onely what they needs must do, appeard,

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<sup>6</sup> III, 203-212. Adam and Eve, of course, have caused no death, but their mortal punishment is decreed by God, who then announces that their actual and immediate death can be stayed only if another agrees to die in their place.

Not what they would?<sup>7</sup>

Milton's God, it seems, requires sincere, freely-made expressions of adoration and voluntary conformity, and he will visit eternal damnation on those who fail to comply. The mills of justice grind without pity— unless a suitable sacrificial victim bears the punishment on mankind's behalf. Christian doctrine generally stipulates further that the sacrifice (i.e. Christ's crucifixion) has its desired effect only on those individuals who repent and have faith in the resurrected Christ.

Far from exemplifying the grand plan of Milton's vision, Valéry's universe, as characterized by his Serpent, is closer to the Gnostic conception: it is the flawed product of a cosmic mistake. There is no rectifying it, because it has departed fatally and finally from the ideal state of unrealized potentiality. Awareness of this degraded condition evokes in the Serpent equal parts of sadness and abhorrence, made more acute by chagrin that he himself has not been accorded the pre-eminence he feels is his due.

But the first breath of his Word  
Was ME! The grandest star  
The mad creator spoke.  
I am! I shall be! I  
Light up his waning sky  
With the Seducer's fire!

God's error extends to and is compounded by the newly created human beings. They offend the Serpent by their complacent stupidity as well as their favored position in the order of creation. Out of resentment and a desire for revenge, he resolves to instill in these malleable creatures his own restless passion for knowledge—and thus to challenge, through them, the primacy of his silent and seemingly imperturbable divine rival. He addresses the new interlopers:

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7 III, 103-106.

Made in that loathed image!  
I hate you as I hate  
The Name that would create  
All these flawed prodigies.  
I'm He who modifies;  
I retouch trusting hearts  
With sure, mysterious sense.  
We'll change these flaccid works,  
These slippery garden snakes,  
To reptiles of revenge!

His method will employ verbal persuasion, following the model of a sexual seduction and utilizing both acute psychological probity and deftly deployed rhetoric. In a series of remarkable stanzas he works slowly on the impressionable Eve, flattering her and dropping subtle temptations in “The downy labyrinth / Of that amazing ear.”

“Nothing’s less sure,” I breathed,  
“Than God’s pronouncement, Eve.  
Live knowledge must exceed  
The enormity of this fruit.  
Ignore the old Absolute  
Who cursed the smallest bite.  
But should your mouth conceive  
A thirst that longs to receive  
This half-withheld delight—  
All time’s dissolved here, Eve!”

The object of this rhetoric is not the “fall” or corruption of mankind—since human beings are represented as deeply flawed to begin with—but the instillation of an insatiable thirst to know everything that can be known. And Eve, therefore, is not merely a weak vessel serving as a conduit to Adam; she is about to be the first human being to be seized by an intellectual passion.

However, we do not see her in the throes of that passion;

she occupies our attention only while attending to the Serpent's allurements:

An eyelid struck the silence—  
But breath swelled the dark breast  
That the Tree's shade possessed.  
The other shone like a pistil.  
—Hiss, hiss! it sang to me.  
And I felt energy  
Run through my whip. The thrill  
In every cumbering coil  
Vibrated from the beryl  
Of my crest out toward peril!

While we infer a mounting interest on Eve's part, we have little doubt that the Serpent himself is sexually aroused. To our contemplation of the ironies in the prescription of intellectual craving as a response to a flawed universe made by an all-knowing creator, the poem thus adds a moiety of Gallic sexual titillation.

Eve, of course, finally succumbs, and the Serpent experiences—and witnesses—a moment of almost orgasmic triumph—

Delighting in temptation,  
Yield to the lures you see.  
Let thirst for transformation  
Ring the Forbidden Tree  
Round with a chain of poses.  
Come without coming! Step  
Vaguely, heavy with roses.  
Dear body, dance and forget!  
Here pleasure's sole decree  
Justifies what will be.

—followed by the inevitable regret:

O foolish to indulge  
This sterile dalliance;  
To see the long back quake  
In disobedience . . .

But Valéry's Serpent, despite his implacable resentment toward God, acts out of a motive more evidently rational than Milton's Satan, who expressed a commitment to Evil in all its forms and yet—in one of his most human moments—from a welter of conflicting feelings proclaimed, "My self am Hell."<sup>8</sup> If the Serpent indeed wishes to torment mankind with an unappeasable thirst, it is a thirst for knowledge that can help the seeker address the deficiencies in his being. A trio of stanzas near the end of the poem comprises an unabashed paean to the Tree of Knowledge, seen as striving endlessly toward an unattainable ideal:

Press back the infinite  
Marked by your rising crest,  
And know yourself to be  
All Knowledge, grave to nest!

Since the poem from the beginning has been narrated in the Serpent's voice, these stanzas must also be understood as spoken by him. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe their sentiments are not also Valéry's own. The workings of the mind, and knowledge of all kinds, were at the center of the poet's concerns for his entire life.

Such knowledge, of course, is not necessarily gratifying. The Serpent's glare shakes loose from the tree "the fruits of death / Disorder, and despair." These too are facts of the human condition. Nevertheless, the poem ends ambiguously: the Serpent sounds a note of triumph, saying he is repaid by seeing "Huge hopes of bitter fruit / Madden the heirs of flesh." But in the concluding lines he also announces:

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8 IV, 75.

Their thirst exalts toward Being  
The strange and absolute  
Power of Nothingness.

(Jusqu'à l'Être exalte l'étrange / Toute-Puissance du Néant!) If, that is, the created universe is at best a degraded form of Being, perhaps the pursuit of knowledge is a pursuit of a more complete Being and thus an enhancement, or exaltation, of the power of the original Nothingness out of which it was formed.<sup>9</sup> Or is Nothingness the end of all? Is the Serpent, in the guise of a savage nihilism, offering in a veiled form an optimistic, albeit long-range, vision of human destiny? Or is he telling us that the pursuit of knowledge will lead humanity nowhere and that the void will triumph?

The obligation to avoid ambiguity weighs far lighter on the poet than on the philosopher.

In contrast to the dynamic and vengeful God of *Paradise Lost*, Valéry's God remains silent and inscrutable in the face of the Serpent's—and Eve's—provocation. There is no edict, no pronouncement, no banishment. It seems we will have to wait and see whether the radical plan to give human beings access to the secret mechanisms of the universe has improved their lot or sealed their doom. The jury, one might say, is still out.

Clearly the idea of existence as essentially evil, or at least a radical degradation, is a fraught one; the human fondness for existence (what else do we have, after all?) generates a natural sympathy for those who embrace or exploit it. Blake said that Milton, because he was a true poet, was of the devil's party without knowing it. Old Nick has often seemed the sort of fellow one could have a friendly conversation with. Goethe in *Faust* has Mephistopheles chat with God and afterwards remark, "Es ist gar hübsch von einem grossen

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9 This may be once again a restatement of contemporary theories of the origin of our universe. But of course in the scheme of the poem the creation of being out of nothingness recapitulates the original fault that the Serpent protested from the outset. His own machinations thus threaten to trap him in an endless repetitive cycle.

Herrn / So menschlich mit dem Teufel selbst zu sprechen.”<sup>10</sup> And Valéry’s Serpent, whose impatience with mankind’s limitations many of us can share, seems an urbane and clever creature who may even have our long-range interests at heart.

As confidence in a scientific model based on testable hypotheses began to outstrip faith in religious rationales, the presumed gulf between the ideal and the actual began to seem less troublesome. Of course actuality differed from ideal mathematical perfection: the difference could even be quantified. If a component could be machined to small enough tolerances, it could fulfill its purpose elegantly, however minutely it might deviate from the theoretical norm. Imperfection, a fact of life, was real but it could be managed.

Similarly, a government of checks and balances could, it was believed (or hoped), counter or elide such flaws as zealotry, fanaticism, and the inevitable human lust for power. The old religious concept of sin<sup>11</sup> was replaced by various identifiable and treatable pathologies. Human institutions, imperfect as they were, served as the best bulwark against barbarism and anarchy. The time-honored elaborate system of unimaginable rewards and all-too-readily imaginable punishments dramatized by Dante moved in our collective consciousness from the non-fiction to the fiction category.

It took W. H. Auden, working from a human model practically before his eyes, to give us, in “Danse Macabre,” a truly frightening representation of evil at work in a debased world. In such a place

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10 “It’s very pretty of such a great gentleman to speak so humanly with the devil himself.” Prologue to *Faust*, part I.

11 As still recognized with psychological acuity by Robert Bridges in “Low Barometer”:

And Reason kens he herits in  
A haunted house. Tenants unknown  
Assert their squalid lease of sin  
With earlier title than his own.

Unbodied presences, the pack’d  
Pollution and remorse of Time,  
Slipp’d from oblivion reëact  
The horrors of unhouseld crime.

the vestiges of elegance and culture are stripped away:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's mannerly cry,  
The professor's logical whereto and why,  
The frock-coated diplomat's polished aplomb,  
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.

Although the traditional figure of the devil is invoked in this poem, Auden makes no further reference to the apparatus of Judeo-Christian myth (God, heaven and hell, temptation and fall). The ideal state, of which our world is traditionally seen as a degradation, is treated not as a metaphysical concept on a par with Plato's Forms, Aquinas's Heaven, or Milton's prelapsarian Eden, but as the civilized and sheltered milieu of the educated class:

The works for two pianos, the brilliant stories  
Of reasonable giants and remarkable fairies,  
The pictures, the ointments, the frangible wares  
And the branches of olive are stored upstairs.

And that seemingly impregnable milieu is intruded on by, of all things, the figures of an all-but-forgotten morality play:

For the Devil has broken parole and arisen,  
He has dynamited his way out of prison,  
Out of the well where his Papa throws  
The rebel angel, the outcast rose.

Even stately iambic rhythms are jettisoned; the poem proceeds at an anapestic gallop to develop a picture of a world in the clutches of a psychopath. And unlike Valéry's *Serpent*, this devil has no interest in "retouching" human beings; he seeks only to destroy them.

O were he to triumph, dear heart, you know  
To what depths of shame he would drag you low;

He would steal you away from me, yes, my dear,  
He would steal you and cut off your beautiful hair.

Halfway through, the poem switches into the first person, and from then on the evil one speaks in his own voice.

I shall ride the parade in a platinum car,  
My features will shine, my name will be Star,  
Day-long and night-long the bells I shall peal,  
And down the long street I shall turn the cartwheel.

The end times are upon us but none will be saved:

For it's order and trumpet and anger and drum  
And power and glory command you to come;  
The graves shall fly open and let you all in,  
And the earth shall be emptied of mortal sin.

The poem was written in 1937—fifteen years after the publication of Valéry's poem—as, with the German invasion of the Rhineland, Auden foresaw Europe being engulfed by war and a rapacious dictatorship. It required no leap of imagination to see the actual world as a hideously deformed reflection of the ideal. Wholesale destruction was already widespread, and all that people held dear would be shortly put to the sword.

The fishes are silent deep in the sea,  
The skies are lit up like a Christmas tree,  
The star in the West shoots its warning cry:  
“Mankind is alive, but Mankind must die.”

So good-bye to the house with its wallpaper red,  
Good-bye to the sheets on the warm double bed,  
Good-bye the beautiful birds on the wall,  
It's good-bye, dear heart, good-bye to you all.

Auden's poem can be seen as a direct descendant of Valéry's,<sup>12</sup> but it is equally effective when read with no knowledge of its French predecessor. It does not depend on our familiarity with a philosophical framework that views the world of the senses as a degradation of the ideal, even though it does employ a stock figure (the devil) of traditional Christianity. Its success lies in its ability to tie the ancient and to many people no longer quite credible apparatus of that religion to the undeniable facts playing out on the pages of the newspapers.

To summarize: the ancient problem of the disjunction between the ideal and the actual—a problem that some see as deriving from a linguistic confusion between a type (signified by a word) and any particular instance of the type (often signified by the same word)—has long been cast in moral and religious terms and re-expressed as an earthly degradation of heavenly perfection. We have seen the problem dealt with in three ways, depending on how fault is assigned:

1. *Milton's universe*: Human beings are responsible for their own fall, though they were led by Satan to violate a divine commandment. The only hope is to repent and believe.
2. *Valéry's universe*: God is responsible for the flawed world and flawed humanity. The Serpent uses Eve as a means of revenge, giving her (and Adam) an unquenchable lust for knowledge by which they aspire to rival their creator. It is not clear how that works out for mankind.
3. *Auden's universe*: The force of evil in human form is responsible for the imminent destruction of all we hold dear. No remedy is proposed.

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<sup>12</sup> See W.H. Auden, "Valéry: L'Homme d'esprit," *Hudson Review*, 22:3 (1969), 425-432.

A single philosophical premise lies behind all three poems, but the conclusions drawn, and the modes of argument and imagery by which they are reached, are as different as were the poets' motivations in writing them. Poetry may make use of a philosophical or religious framework at times, just as it may make use of a myth or legend, for its human meaning and the emotional power that can be drawn from presenting the component details with imagination and artistry. But in our day a poet rarely aims to elaborate a philosophical argument in the medium of verse. Rather the human implications of the premise develop out of a lifetime of perceptive observation and reflection. Inevitably, then, the poem becomes a form of prophecy—both a moral pronouncement and a foretelling—which may amount to a warning.

That the foretelling and the warning may be ambiguous should not surprise us. The point of a cautionary message is that the dire future might be otherwise, if only we will take heed. And the unresolvable question is at what point the feared outcome becomes inevitable and the prophecy bends toward tragedy.

FREDERICK TURNER

*“Among School Children”: Yeats’s Definition of Art and Beauty*

*Work and Beauty*

“Among School Children” is a meditation on the nature of beauty and on the art and labor of creating it. It is also an example of its subject.

As a senator in the government of liberated Ireland, one of Yeats’s duties is to serve as a school inspector. The fact that Ireland puts a poet in its government means that the country is betting on him to do something that a mere politician or administrator could not do. He is being made partly responsible for the education of a new nation. How do we prepare children to be creative citizens? Is poetry of any real use? Thus begins a propulsive series of questions that continues to the end of the poem.

He is immediately distracted from his task—shocked and smitten by the beauty of one girl, who reminds him of his own great love, Maud Gonne, when she was a child. Where does this schoolgirl get such beauty? What is beauty? What does his work of governing, and the schoolchildren’s work of training, and the nuns’ work of teaching, have to do with this amazing beauty?

She’s only a common girl, not like the aristocratic Maud—but Yeats knows, as a democrat and a modern man, that we are all one species, and the daughters of the swan share a genetic heritage with ordinary paddlers like geese and ducks. In the old myth, Zeus raped Leda in the form of a swan, mixing divine with human blood, and begot Helen of Troy, who hatched from the egg that Leda bore. If Maud is Yeats’s Helen, then she inherits her body partly from Leda, partly from the god. Do we all have divine blood? It’s only a myth, though, an image; but isn’t the

miracle of beauty like the entry of a god into the world?

This image of the egg inspires a further mass of imagery, which then becomes a language for pursuing the original questions further. When Yeats and Maud were intimate, it seemed to him that youthful sympathy had made them biologically one, like the yolk and white of an egg. They were like the original happy human beings in the myth that Aristophanes proposes in Plato's *Symposium*, before they were severed into alienated halves by the jealous gods, driven to seek out their missing halves. Or perhaps he and she were like Helen and her divine brother Polydeuces—or was Yeats the *other* twin brother, the mortal Castor, who died and must be rescued from the underworld?—only a half-brother and not semi-divine?

And these questions raise the idea of labor—the work of giving birth, the work of making. The children are being taught to be citizens, to be workers, to be mothers—to read, write, sing, sew, and create order around them. Is it more important that they be beautiful people, or effective workers or mothers? Their mothers labored to give birth to them. Can work make them beautiful, or are they innately beautiful? The word “labor” contains a vital ambiguity: is this work a making or a begetting? Is art—the making of beauty—a work or a birth? If the labor is a kind of work, then it has the virtue of intentionality, but at the cost of spontaneity. If it's an automatic spasm of the body from which the pregnant girl wants to escape, then how can it be beautiful? Isn't the “honey of generation”—the drug of sexual pleasure promised by the beauty of the lover—just a betrayal, a bribe by nature to endure the pain and effort of childbirth? Is the nectar, which the flower offers, but the wages of the bee for its work of matchmaking? Is beauty itself just an enticement to do the work of the species?

But nuns and mothers and poets are not just being *pushed* or *compelled* by a biological urge, but *pulled* or *drawn* by images that we recognize as higher than our individual interest or value. And

Yeats now begins to meditate on the inspiring role of images: his own image of his youthful lady-love, the schoolgirl as an image of that lost love, the images the teaching nuns worship, the image that a mother has of her child. But what would his own mother think of the official old man he himself has become? Can the reality match the image? And what is this beauty, this quality that makes an image so compelling?

To pursue his investigation, he must honestly discount the kind of arguments and attitudes that are all-too-characteristic of sixty-year-old-smiling public men, who are far away from the passionate beauty of their former days. Though he has endorsed—by accepting for use—Plato’s Aristophanic myth of the divided unity of the sexes, he rejects Plato’s philosophical division between nature and the ideal forms. Nature is not a random passive spume that makes visible the undying determinative Idea to which it clings. He rejects the authoritarian Aristotle, who educates by corporal punishment, even when the pupil is Alexander himself. He even finds Pythagoras’s prosthetic unification of physics and music lacking—the music is not the same as the physical measurement of it. All these claims are what an old scarecrow—the tattered coat upon a stick that is an old man—*would* say.

Yet in the old man’s defense we might note that Yeats’ poetic technique in this poem is absolutely masterful, the threefold alternating rhyme-pairs concluded by a couplet, forming a stanza of his own invention. The scarecrow has within him the artist. To handle such a form and make it conduct a coherent argument with astounding grace and economy is a labor indeed. But still, which kind of labor is it? Making or begetting?

He is looking for something else—not just matter in play, not just abstraction either. It’s a heartbreaking force of love and desire, something that is of time, alive and moving and dying, not dead and eternal, even as it paradoxically symbolizes heavenly glory. The heart must be broken open if it is to feel, and that feeling has more

authority than the philosophical distinctions of the scarecrows. He finds that force in the Presences that passion, piety or affection knows, in the images that animate the dreams of the nuns and the mothers (and by implication those of Yeats about the young Maud inspired by the lovely Irish child). Certainly, those tender little church images of the virgin and child in the nuns' chapel are fixed and inanimate, unlike the beloved shape on the lap of the living mother. But they are no less heartbreaking; and how can a made thing like a statue (or a poem?) arouse such passions? Here he must again turn to the question of what is art itself, and since what makes art into art and not just some other activity is beauty, he must turn to the deepest question of all: what is beauty?

“Glory” is the divine word for “beauty,” and glory in this sense is what Kant claims as Jahweh's final and conclusive defense in response to Job's implied accusation against Him. God may not be just in this instance, nor even good, in the sense that He is willing to put Job through all his suffering to win a point against Satan. But when Jahweh gives Job a glimpse into the grand workshop of His creation, and instances the neighing horse and the eagle and the morning stars dancing over the mountains, Job must concede. Beauty overwhelms both justice and goodness as a rebuttal to the charge of life's pain and brevity.

So Yeats comes down to it, faces the challenge, and gives us two images of his own, that may perhaps resolve the question of which kind of labor is art. These images are what I call “chijikijilus,” after my Ndembu teachers in Africa—blazes that mark the shamanic entry into new linguistic and real territory, and provide landmarks by which we can find our way back with our spoils. The blossom and the dance.

Labor is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,

Nor bleary-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the root, the blossom, or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Let us now try to unpack these symbols, these images Yeats has thrown together (symbolein)<sup>1</sup>, these metaphors (carryings-beyond) that sum up not only this poem but all his previous work. Yeats, as I have said, was a modern man, and well aware of the philosophical and scientific issues of his day: it was part of his duty as a senator in a new nation. So I will use ideas of evolution and emergence that are familiar to educated people today as a way to explicate what Yeats means and to show its philosophical usefulness.

### *The Chestnut Tree*

If the flower, the blossom, is Yeats's first "blaze" upon the boundary of existing definitions, why choose that of the chestnut-tree? Surely the more traditionally hieratic flowers would be more promising material—the rose, that Eliot uses as the mystical omphalos in *Four Quartets*, so full of rich cultural associations, or the less cumbersome lily, or even the day's eye, the humble daisy, the exquisite triune iris, or the royal Japanese chrysanthemum.

Yeats has bigger fish to fry here. He wants to see the process whole, as Goethe does in his great poem "The Metamorphosis of the Plants," so he chooses the hugest flowering he can think of, and includes the whole plant, lock, stock, and barrel. Plato uses the same technique to talk about justice: display it on the grand scale of a city.

The chestnut is, of course, a nut tree, and we can not only see clearly the beautiful brown testicular "conkers" of the horse-chest-

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1 Our word "symbol" derives from from two Greek roots: "sym" (together) and "bolein" (to throw).

nut bursting from their prickly green scrota every autumn, but roast and peel and eat the sweet chestnut at Christmas time. The nut is the tree's seed, its potential for new birth. Natural beauty—in this case the chestnut flowers that often attract clouds of bees—is the way living organisms propagate themselves. Beauty for *life* is to have a *future*—a future that not only *inherits* what you are, but also *shares* yourself with your conspecifics, and *creates* further meanings—unique individuals—as your progeny. The nut is the tree's investment in another dimension: not the closed timeless ones of space, but the strange, open, hazardous one of time.

The tree is “great-rooted.” It dies if it is uprooted or if it is cut off from its roots. Yeats is a traditionalist, and knows that the past is the source of our sap, our vitality. Yeats felt that the modernist rejection of the past, like Maud Gonne's mess of political shadows, could kill the life of the nation. If the present is to make a new moment, it can only make it out of the past.

The tree is a “blossomer.” The blossom is the essence of the tree, its sexual organ, its most intimate statement of what it is. The chestnut tree bears huge conical white or pink panicles, colloquially called “candles” (harking back, perhaps, to the candles that light the images worshipped by the nuns, the candles of Nativity), and they are a powerfully suggestive sexual image too, not only visually but also in their fragrance. Sexual reproduction—the reshuffling of the genes in meiosis and fertilization—is the most powerful and swiftest (and riskiest) agent of evolution, as opposed to the “safe” policy of reproduction by division or cloning, which leaves the work of variation to random mutation. Sexual reproduction produces *individuals* that have their own especial character. When pollen and ovule come together, the result is a nut that will make a tree that is of the chestnut species, but is also unique in a way that makes it a candidate to be an ancestor of a new subspecies and perhaps a new species. Sexuality is the potential branchiness of the history of living things, the great refutation of the idea that

one-line determinism rules the future. The family tree reconciles the one with the many: many roots, one trunk: one trunk, many twigs and leaves. Beauty, perhaps, has something to do with this branchiness.

Look closer at the panicle of the blossom. The individual flowers rotate about the almost woody main stalk in a modified 3D Fibonacci spiral—a gyre, Yeats would have said. Each flower is carried by a tiny tender green stalk of its own, a pedicel, related in length to the main stalk as the main stalk is related to the larger twig that supports it (which may also carry other panicles). The whole raceme is a geometrical microcosm of the tree as a whole. Here we have a physical example of the “strong” middle term, A is to B as B is to C, A:B::B:C, in Emily Grosholz’s terms (as opposed to the weaker A:B::C:D, whose middle term she suggests must be mathematical proportion itself). And the clever chestnut tree has generalized the idea from the bole to the branch to the twig to the flower, individuating each branching according to sun and wind and rain and damage as it goes along.

Are we looking at the fine print too closely? Is the fine print actually there, or are we imagining it? Poets are not supposed to be such sticklers for detail, or are they? Consider Gerard Manley Hopkins’s exquisitely detailed disquisition “On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue”:

“Now where shall I begin?” said the Professor. “I will begin here”, and he pulled off one of the large lowest fans of the chestnuts. “Do you think this beautiful?”

“That? The chestnut-fan? Certainly: I have always thought the chestnut one of the most finely foliated of trees.”

“You see it consists of seven leaves, the middle

largest, diminishing towards the stalk, so that those nearest the stalk are smallest.”

“I see,” said Hanbury. “I had never noticed there were seven before.”

“Now if we look about we shall find—yes there is one. There is a fan, do you see? with only six leaves. Nature is irregular in these things. Can you reach it? Now which do you think the more beautiful, the one with six, or the one with seven, leaves? Shut out, if you can, the remembrance that the six-leaved one is an anomaly or imperfection: consider it symmetrical.”

“Well I daresay the six-leaved one may improve the foliage by variety, but in themselves the seven-leaved one is the handsomer.”

“Just so,” said the Professor; “but could you give any reason?”

The dialog goes on for many pages, yielding richer and richer insights. Poets are obsessive about this sort of inner hidden consistency. I don't care whether Yeats had read Hopkins's marvelous dialog—he could have, Hopkins published it in 1865. Poets arrive at the same place often in their wanderings. Anyone who must struggle with a thousand possible ways of saying something while keeping to the meter, rhyming with utter naturalness, having the images resonate together rather than dampen each other, making a clear argument and preserving the plotline, must have internalized the analog of some kind of amazing factorial-finding quantum computer and acquired a bulldog tenacity about exactness. Yeats's poem is quite happy to wait for those who will really take his images seriously. So let us press on, using what vocabulary we can to trace

the almost prelinguistic course of Yeats's meditation.

The Fibonacci spiral—based on the Fibonacci series: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55...—can be described as the simplest of all fractals, the basic algorithm of generativeness. All living things grow more or less according to its gentle constraint—the next phase of growth cannot exceed the sum of the two previous phases. The series can also be seen as a progressive way of getting a more and more accurate case of A:B::B:C. 1 is to 2 only roughly as 2 is to 3; but 13 is to 21 fairly exactly as 21 is to 34, and 34 to 55 is even closer. If you go a hundred or so steps further along the series, the analogical relationship gets so close that it approaches the exactness of the mathematical constraints of the universe. The series is aiming at a ratio, about .618 to 1 (but expressible only as an unrepeating irrational decimal)—and this is the famous Golden Section, the human eye's favorite proportion.

Fractals are generated by an iterative, self-organizing algorithm that can invent an infinite variety of forms (all, though, in the same "style," depending on the particular algorithm). An algorithm is a mathematical procedure—we use one to do long division by hand. Our long division comes to an end with the answer, but this kind of iterative and self-referential algorithm doesn't. Instead it maps out an amazing territory, a terra incognita that can never be fully known. The recipe for the Mandelbrot Set, for instance, looks like this: take a complex number  $Z$ , multiply it by itself, add one, and then do the same thing with the result, and keep feeding back the answer into the equation as the new  $Z$ . "Rinse and repeat," as the old joke goes. Make a collection of such numbers and plot them on a graph according to whether they explode into infinity or bounce about on the edge between nothing and infinity. The simple recipe gives an extraordinary result: the "Radiant Snowman" with his infinitely complex aura that can be blown up forever, revealing new novelties of shape.

The Mandelbrot Set is one of the foundations of chaos theory,

which has provided us with an alternative anthology of definable forms to the Euclidean collection of straight-edged and simply curved shapes, and to the later Newtonian/Leibnizian collection of regular complex curves. These fractal Forms are dynamic rather than eternal or determinate, discontinuous rather than continuous, a place where space morphs into time. As a poet I would argue that the quest of such poets as Goethe (with his metamorphoses), Hopkins (with his inscapes), Thoreau (with his fractal melting sandbank), Rilke (with his orphic tree), and Yeats himself, to find an alternate geometry for the living world than the ones provided by the science and math of their times, was answered in the twentieth century by the new mathematicians of chaos and complexity. Math can sometimes follow poetry.

The basic iterative algorithm of life is, according to the theory of evolution: Mutation → Selection → Heredity → Mutation → Selection → . . . It, too, produces a wild variety of forms—but in real moving 3D physical fact, not just on a paper or electronic graph space. There is no limit to the potential combinations that can be generated out of its simple DNA-RNA-protein seed. Plato saw his Ideal Forms as attractors for physical processes such as growth, and Aristotle developed the idea with his conception of the formal and final causes. But nature was passive before those determinative rulers, a spume playing randomly upon a paradigm. The new attractors, the new images, derive from and react upon the physical and temporal process itself—nourish'd, as Keats said about love in “Endymion,” upon its proper pith, nurtured like a pelican brood. Or, as Yeats says even more economically, “self-born.” These are attractors that do not return us to a “ground state”, a *Grund*, as the Germans say, but draw us on to new living forms.

Which brings us to the dancer.

## *The Dancer*

Although Yeats has surely seen chestnut trees colossally swaying in the winds of June, he needs a more perceptibly dynamic and autonomously active image—a sort of fast-action movie of the process he is trying to define. And he wants to insist on the continuity of the human with the living history of the world, and avoid any sense that he is depreciating human beauty to elevate natural beauty. He is being exact as well as passionate—the true sign of the poet.

The dancer, unlike the church images, does not keep a “marble or a bronze repose.” Yeats has been on the edge of a very old dialectic throughout the poem. The contrast between the living motion of the flower and the dancer and the hard stillness of more durable materials like brass, bronze, and marble has brought him back to Shakespeare:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o’ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
 (“Sonnet LXIV”)

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme  
 (“Sonnet LV”)

Yeats’s poem is explicitly about aging, after all. Time is traditionally the enemy of beauty; the youth’s beauty fades, to leave a mess of shadows, a scarecrow. Even stone and metal corrode and fall to dust. And poetry is traditionally the way to “keep/Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away” as Hopkins puts it in “The Leaden Echo.” Poetry, unlike statuary, is not the hostage of its material embodiment; it is the same

sonnet whether written in iron gall ink, or printed, or projected by electrons onto a computer screen.

But the poem's beauty is not a ghostly paradigm of things either. For Shakespeare it is an action, for Yeats it is a movement of piety, passion, affection. The dancer is a living being. She is a body, but a body swayed to music. She is an animal, but an animal that has become conscious, and with the "brightening glance" she gives the poet as she sees him looking at her as she dances, she looks back when she is looked at. The ambiguity of "swayed to music" expresses an important distinction: as a dancer she is deliberately swaying, but she is also being ruled, or swayed, by the music. And the music itself is not a "ghostly paradigm;" we are back with the singing schoolchildren of the first stanza, very real children singing their hardest for the important gentleman from the government. Music is the most transient of all the arts, and yet the most memorable.

Notice that the poem, which had begun as an autobiographical meditation, has suddenly become an ode. "O chestnut tree," "O body swayed to music." It's in the second person, and in the form of address—"O"—that we use for the divine and in the presence of the glory of the divine. The world's process is not an it but a thou. Just as the girl had shocked Yeats out of his third-person role of smiling public man, so we are shocked by Yeats's shamanic invocation, his archaism and personal engagement.

We realize that we are more like a flame than like a rock, more like a dance than like a body, more temporal and transient. Not that rocks and bodies are unnecessary. Dance needs the physical constraint of gravity to give the dancer purchase and consequence. Gravity—here an acceleration of 32 feet per second per second—is our immediate reminder of the link between space and time. Dancers use it to defy it. The limits of temporal existence are the language by which we express the divine. And this is precisely what makes us divine. Only through time time is conquered, to go back to Eliot.

It's not that existence precedes essence, as the existentialists say; rather, growing emergent process precedes existence, act precedes being. Goethe's Faust, struggling to translate the beginning of the Gospel of John, finally decides to translate it as "In the beginning was the ACT." Yeats is questioning three thousand years of commitment to the idea of unchangingness as the stamp of "real" reality. Real reality for him now is not the ground but the fruiting, not the *arche* but the game that grows out of the *arche*. Or rather, it is both. We cannot know the dancer from the dance. Another ambiguity: we can't *tell* or distinguish the dancer from the dance, or we can't, just by seeing the dance, know the mysterious inner nature of the dancer.

Time, then, not eternity, is the great divine gift of the world.

### *The Cosmology of Beauty*

It is here, I believe, that Yeats locates his conception of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world—exactly in its cumulative transformingness. It's important to note that it is a cumulative, not just an arbitrary process of change. The chestnut tree is great-rooted, and that is where its life comes from, the Earth, the physical history of the universe. Yeats's tree joins all those other world-trees whereby our species has traditionally depicted the growth of the world: the Norse Yggdrasil or Barnstock, the Hebrew tree of life, the Hindu Akshaya Vata, the Buddhist Bodhi tree, the Egyptian Iusaaset, the Persian Haoma, the Chinese Fusang, the Mayan Wacah Chan, the Ndembu Mudyi tree.

So far we have been following Yeats's thought about the tree of life (for us moderns, the tree of geological and evolutionary descent) on an elevation view, so to speak, looking at the tree from the side and understanding its diagrammatic/poetic meaning in terms of its upward and downward growth. But just to push this odd exercise further, let us look at the tree in plan view, from the

top or even from the bottom (as in Georgia O'Keefe's amazing painting *The Lawrence Tree*). The tree is now an exploding ball of branches, and since the blossoms tend to lean outward from the trunk, the explosion is tipped all over with white or pink darts or arrowheads pointing toward its future growth. We have here a pretty good diagram of the expanding universe: the trunk is the location of the big bang, and we are the very pistils and stamens of the flowers.<sup>2</sup> In between is Darwin's great branching tree of living descent, speciation, heredity, mutation, and selection.

The old core is not lost, notice. The whole history remains, buried safely below its new layers of growth. "... I came to believe," Yeats says in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, "in a great memory passing on from generation to generation. . . . Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea."<sup>3</sup>

Without sawing the tree down, let us look with the eyes of the mind at the tree-rings beneath the dead bark of the present and the living phloem and cambium beneath, down through the xylem to the heartwood. Do we not have here a powerful image of the history of the universe itself? At the center is the big bang of the tree's germination, the pure mathematics of its code. The first ring is the physics of the universe, the mathematics that actually got realized into light and energy. The next ring is the chemistry that sprang into being as soon as the universe, in its expansion, cooled enough so that stable atoms could exist and combine according to their Mendeleev grammar. Then comes the ring of self-replicating matter, the realm of life, and above it the regime of living organisms that can control their own evolution by social selection and sexual reproduction. And above that ring is the

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2 "Among School Children" was written in 1926. Alexander Friedmann proposed the basic concept of the expanding universe—the constant negative curvature of space—in 1924, and Georges Lemaître, using the observations of Edwin Hubble and the mathematics of Einstein, in 1927 formulated the Big Bang theory that still holds force today. (Georgia O'Keefe's *The Lawrence Tree* was painted in 1929.)

3 "Anima Mundi," paragraph 2.

world of conscious beings, ourselves, contemplating our history through the methods of epic memory and evolutionary research. The final ring is the ring of poetry and the arts, where the living cambium makes new tissue for the tree and puts out branches of possibility into the future.

Beauty, then, is our experience of the creative self-generation of the universe, particularized in life and further particularized in human life. The feeling of beauty is the “honey” that rewards us for this achievement of recognition. Art and poetry are the actual participation of human beings in that creative process, and the experience of art and beauty is but a swifter and closer version of what we see in nature’s profusion of generation. Poetry is fast evolution; evolution is slow poetry.

We may now be in a position to interrogate the current modernist and postmodernist answers to the question of what is poetry. Those answers include:

1. Poetry is a way of making political morality graphic and persuasive, an ideological tool.
2. Poetry is a therapeutic exercise of self-expression.
3. Poetry is part of whatever prevailing economic hegemony (e.g. feudal, mercantilist, capitalist) is in play: a class-marker, a system of gender hierarchy, a justification for colonialism, racism, sexism and imperialism: part of a regime of power and knowledge.
4. Poetry is a disruption of our inbred expectations and sensory and perceptual habits. A novelty, practical joke, or circus trick.
5. Poetry is a way of knowing the truth that is the great alternative to science. Science has reduced the world to dead facts, mechanistic determin-

- ism, lifeless parts, and mathematical abstractions: poetry is the organ of phenomenology.
6. Poetry is an obsolete form of social entertainment, now engaged in only by a small number of hobbyists for its remaining social cachet— together with an esoteric game of fashionable explanations of it.
  7. Poetry is a way to hone students' language skills.
  8. Poetry is a form of language that is about itself, an examination of its own hermeneutic box.

Whatever truth these formulations may have, perhaps they look rather beside the point in the light of Yeats's poem. As we walk through the long schoolroom, questioning, the beauty of the poem, like the Irish girl in the second stanza, shocks us with its dismissal of all such explainings-away. If our work is to educate a nation, as Yeats's was, we have to ask the right questions, as he does.

# Among School Children

by William Butler Yeats

I

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;  
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
The children learn to cipher and to sing,  
To study reading-books and history,  
To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
In the best modern way—the children's eyes  
In momentary wonder stare upon  
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she  
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event  
That changed some childish day to tragedy—  
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent  
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,  
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,  
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage  
I look upon one child or t'other there  
And wonder if she stood so at that age—  
For even daughters of the swan can share  
Something of every paddler's heritage—  
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,  
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—  
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it  
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind  
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?  
And I though never of Ledaean kind  
Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,  
Better to smile on all that smile, and show  
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed,  
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape  
As recollection or the drug decide,  
Would think her son, did she but see that shape  
With sixty or more winters on its head,  
A compensation for the pang of his birth,  
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;  
Solider Aristotle played the taws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;  
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings  
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,  
But those the candles light are not as those  
That animate a mother's reveries,  
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.  
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences  
That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—  
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(1926)

DAVID SOUTHWARD

*Labor Relations in Robert Frost*

Many people view poetry as an intellectual or leisure pursuit, something to be studied in school or dabbled in when there is no real work to be done. Because it produces nothing essential to our survival, poetry is considered a pastime for dreamers and idlers—a charming extension of childhood play into adult life, tolerated mainly because it is harmless (and possibly therapeutic). Real work, by contrast, concerns itself with necessities: the food we consume, the clothing we wear, the structures we build, the waste we produce, the suffering we alleviate, the disputes we settle. These hard facts of existence naturally take precedence over the mercurial daydreaming of poets. Thus college students who major in engineering or agribusiness will find their skills in higher demand than will their peers in the arts and humanities.

If one were to build a case for the necessity of poetry to contemporary life, it might start with the poetics of branding. Imagery and symbolism are indispensable to the fields of advertising and graphic design, for example. Marketing requires that every new business or product be given a memorable name, which in turn requires a certain facility with metaphor. Consider the latent metaphors in “iPod,” “Facebook,” and “Twitter.” Retail chains have notoriously figurative names, as anyone who has ever shopped at Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel, or Victoria’s Secret can attest. Automobile naming is practically its own genre, alongside that of names for fragrances, cosmetics, and house paint. To the extent that consumer goods need an identity to compete in the marketplace, poetry is essential to their success.

Somewhat harder to prove is the relevance of poetry to mathematical or scientific work, such as accounting or statistics; and only the most tenuous link exists between poetry and the many

forms of manual labor that underpin our economy. The work of a stone mason, mechanic, or dish washer affords little scope to the creative imagination; the materials are too obdurate, their function too limited, and time too dear. Necessity does seem to weigh more heavily on such work than on any other kind. Of the many ironies we encounter in the pastoral poetry of an earlier age, most striking is the rampant idealization of a sort of labor few poets would willingly undertake.

Few poets, that is, except Robert Frost. No one has worked harder than Frost to debunk the myth of the poet as idle dreamer. His lyrics of agricultural labor repeatedly connect the work done by poets with the work done by farmers—such as mowing, planting, woodcutting—of which Frost had firsthand knowledge. These poems give unique insight into the challenges and value of human labor; they bridge the apparent gap between mind workers (including those trained in the liberal arts) and hand workers. A close reading of the anthology favorite “Mending Wall” reveals Frost’s ultimate ambition: to help us think more imaginatively about the tasks we perform out of necessity—and how they actually profit us.

The poem has so many surface oddities, it would be easy for students to overlook how mundane its setting and central task are. They may need to be informed, for instance, that hand-laid stone walls have lined the farms and pastures of rural New England since colonial times, and that, being hand laid, such walls are easily upset by wildlife, other humans, and what we now call weather events. “Spring mending-time” (11) is thus an annual routine, rather like the setting up of road repair signs all over Wisconsin after the last snow. Once students see that the poem is about infrastructure and the disputes that can arise from it, they are in a better position to identify with Frost’s farmers. Specifically, the questions of what purpose an infrastructure serves and what stake each citizen has in its maintenance, make the poem’s conflict more tangible.

Based on our experience of property owners, we would prob-

ably expect Frost's speaker and his neighbor to acknowledge that their boundary wall needs mending, but to squabble over when and how to apportion the labor. What I have called the poem's oddities stem from the speaker's rather unorthodox questioning of the wall itself, beginning with the first line. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall": the inverted syntax calls attention to the preposterous idea of love for a wall. Of course there is something that doesn't love a wall: *nothing* truly capable of love could love a wall! Walls are necessary evils, as is the effort we expend to maintain them. But the incompatibility of walls and love troubles Frost's speaker, for it suggests that our labor is somehow at odds with our humanity—a concern which develops over the course of the poem.

The speaker's ambivalence toward the task of wall-mending is felt most keenly in his affection for the wall's gaps. Though "No one has seen them made or heard them made," it is through these fortuitous ruptures that "even two can pass abreast." The courtly decorum of this image is contrasted by the severer one that follows, in which the speaker and his neighbor dutifully plug every gap:

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.<sup>1</sup>

A sort of plodding parataxis marks the neighbor's entrance into the poem. Repetition of the phrase "The wall between us" (14-15) underscores the repetitiveness of wall-mending. The strictly iambic lines create a rhythmic drone, mimicking the soulless industry of the two men. By insisting so heavily on it, Frost invites us to think of this meter as the wall that he and his reader "keep . . . between" them as they "meet to walk the line" of verse. Suddenly the value

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1 Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall." *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Henry Holt, 1975. 33-34.

of gaps becomes clear: they allow musical variety and imaginative play to enter human communication. Insofar as a wall (or poem) has a fixed, unchanging structure that can't be questioned, its gaps are oases, spaces for wonder and speculation about their maker's purpose. We sense this in the little gaps left in Frost's poem by willfully vague pronouns, for instance in line 23: "There where it is we do not need the wall." Does *it* here refer to the wall, as in "This wall is exactly where we don't need it"? Or does *it* refer to the "outdoor game" played by the men, as in "We don't a need wall while occupied with our game"? Or does *it* refer all the way back to the "Something" that doesn't love a wall, as in "This thing I've been talking about, it can easily take the place of a wall"? *It* and other ambiguous pronouns leave gaps throughout "Mending Wall," in effect aligning Frost's creative efforts with the seemingly destructive (but potentially humanizing) forces of nature.

The neighbor apparently has no sympathy for these forces. "He is all pine," the speaker tells us: upright, rigid, prickly, perhaps a shade mournful, as in "to pine away." The Greek root for this latter meaning of *pine*—*poine*—is the same as that for *punish* and *penalty*, suggesting that we might situate the speaker's "apple orchard," by contrast, squarely in Eden. Whereas the speaker lives in a spiritually animated realm, in which even the stones are spoken to ("Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"), the neighbor lives in the fallen world outside—where nature is understood to be man's nemesis, and labor, his burden. Seeing no point to the speaker's harebrained speculation, the neighbor takes refuge in a proverbial piety, "Good fences make good neighbors." It is a not-so-polite way to cut short their conversation.

Although the neighbor "will not go behind his father's saying" (the speaker informs us), "He likes having thought of it so well" that he repeats it, closing the poem. By presenting the neighbor as so insufferably complacent, the poem tempts readers to "go behind" his homespun dogma, teasing out its numerous implications in

ways that he is unwilling or unable to. The results are surprisingly rich. I find at least five distinct, if interrelated, meanings behind “Good fences make good neighbors”:

1. fences make the best neighbors, because they don't pry, gossip, or invade our privacy;
2. firm boundaries between people promote mutual respect and autonomy, making outbreaks of hostility less likely;
3. the structure of an environment can shape and moderate the behavior of people within it;
4. the quality of our products ensures the quality of our relationships;
5. (inverting the syntax:) it is the nature of good people to make good fences, as an expression of their character.

It is hard to imagine Frost quibbling with most of these meanings. Unpacked in this way, “Good fences make good neighbors” is a perfectly fine, even poetic expression of a complex truth (one which the poem ironically affirms, if we take Frost's blank verse to be an example of a “good fence”). What seems to irritate the speaker is rather the mistaking of a relative truth for an absolute law, applied uniformly and unquestioningly to all situations. Fences are not necessarily good, as the speaker implies when he muses, “Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out.” That the neighbor will not entertain this question for himself, nor recognize any mischievous, playful, or destructive tendencies (call them “elves”) in his own nature, is appalling to the speaker. He is “Like an old-stone savage armed,” lugging rocks about his property as clumsily as he sorts the thoughts in his mind. Forever mending the stone walls that surround his imagination, he cuts himself off from the intangible goods of human fellowship and creativity that his father's saying was intended to protect.

If I read Frost correctly, he is alerting us to a risk involved in human labor—and not just the manual varieties. The materials we work with, and the attitude we take toward them, can, over time, petrify our minds. The nimble play of thoughts that do not love a wall can be subjugated, even deadened by our work routine. The very language we speak can lose its supple expressiveness, becoming just another thing we cart around in our wheelbarrows (or smart phones). Understanding the real world may be essential to human survival, but if we allow *ourselves* to become part of it—that is, reified objects in an inhuman landscape—we have missed the point of surviving. Poetry is valuable because it activates and disturbs the mind; as demonstrated by Frost’s ingeniously quizzical text, the poet puts notions in our heads that send ripples through our mental bedrock. By keeping language alive—as a mode of discovery and interaction, not isolated repetition—he sustains our imagination through the most deadening labor. And while a spirited mind and language may not be necessary to our survival, they are crucial to our prosperity and, more important, our happiness.

# Mending Wall

by Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'



# **NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS**



**Peter Anderson's** most recent books include *Heading Home: Field Notes* (Conundrum Press, 2017), *Going Down Grand: Poems from the Canyon* (Lithic Press, 2015), and *First Church of the Higher Elevations* (Conundrum Press, 2015). His work won the 2018 non-fiction award from the Colorado Authors League. He lives with his family on the western slope of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in Crestone, Colorado where he helped launch the Crestone Poetry Festival, an annual gathering of southwestern poets.

**Lisa Barnett's** poems have appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Measure Review*, *Poetry*, *Snakeskin*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, the anthology *Sonnets: 150 Contemporary Sonnets*, and elsewhere. She is a three-time *Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award* finalist and is the author of two chapbooks.

**Jane Blanchard** lives and writes in Georgia. Her poetry has appeared in venues as varied as *Aethlon*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Anesthesiology*, *Anglican Theological Review*, and *Arion*. Her third collection, *After Before*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

**Duane Caylor** is a physician in Dubuque, Iowa. His poems have appeared in various publications, including *Able Muse*, *Blue Unicorn*, *First Things*, and *Atlanta Review*.

**John Clayton** is the author of *Natural Rivals: John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and the Creation of America's Public Lands*. His previous books include *Wonderlandscape*, *The Cowboy Girl*, and *Stories from Montana's Enduring Frontier*. His articles appear regularly in the *Montana Quarterly*, *Big Sky Journal*, and other publications. Also an independent business writer, he lives in south-central Montana.

**William Conelly** was in the military service, and then took both bachelor's and master's degrees in English at UC Santa Barbara. He has served in the US and the UK as an associate professor, tutor, and seminar leader in writing and in English studies. Now retired, with three grown sons and dual citizenship, he resides with his wife in the West Midlands town of Warwick. In 2015 his poetry collection *Uncontested Grounds* was published by Able Muse Press.

**Kristin Davis** is a poet and retired journalist based in Washington, DC. Her writing has appeared in numerous popular magazines and newspapers, and her poetry has appeared recently in *Passager* and *Bay to Ocean 2019: The Year's Best Writing from the Eastern Shore* and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**William Doreski** has published three critical studies and several collections of poems. His work has appeared in many print and online journals. He has taught at Emerson College, Goddard College, Boston University, and Keene State College. His most recent books are *Water Music* and *Train to Providence*, a collaboration with photographer Rodger Kingston.

**Andrew Frisardi** is a writer, translator, independent scholar, and editor from Boston, living in central Italy. His most recent books, both forthcoming in 2020, are a poetry collection, *The Harvest and the Lamp* (Franciscan University Press), and a prose study of Dante's poetic gnosis, *Reading Dante in the Book of Creation* (Angelico Press). His dual-language critical edition of Dante's *Convivio* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2018. His work has been awarded with a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Hawthornden Literary Fellowship, and the Raiziss / de Palchi Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets.

**Daniel Galef** lives on the edge of a mountain with his cat Carson, also a poet. These poems are part of a series called Imaginary Sonnets, some of which have appeared in *Measure*, *Raintown Review*, *Christian Century*, *Snakeskin*, and *J Journal*, among other publications. He also writes short stories and plays and is listed in the dictionary under the word “interfaculty,” which means “gullible.”

**Ed Granger** was raised in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where he still abides with his horse-loving teenage daughter. His first chapbook collection *Voices from the First Gilded Age* was published in 2019 by Finishing Line Press. His work has also appeared recently in *Poets Reading the News*, *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*, *Loch Raven Review*, *River Heron Review*, and other journals.

**Emily Grosholz** teaches philosophy at Pennsylvania State University. This year, she worked with her brother Ted Grosholz (a marine biologist), her friend Ruth Geyer Shaw (a population geneticist), and colleagues at the University of Rome, “La Sapienza,” on the philosophy of biology. This work sparked poems about Rome, the mudflats in the bays above San Francisco, and the prairie remnants of Minnesota. Her two recent books are *The Stars of Earth* and *Great Circles*.

**Max Gutmann** has contributed to dozens of publications, including *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, and *Cricket*. His plays have appeared throughout the U.S. His book *There Was a Young Girl from Verona* sold several copies.

**Betsy Hulick** writes and translates plays and poetry. Her version of Gogol's *Inspector General* was produced on Broadway and her translation of Chekhov's major plays is a Bantam World Classic. Translations of narrative poems by Pushkin and Blok have appeared in *Cardinal Points and Fence*. A small book, *30 Poems by Christian Morgenstern*, also includes her drawings. Forthcoming from Columbia University Press is her translation of *Woe from Wit*, a classic verse comedy by Alexander Griboedov.

**George Justice** holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Detroit. He has published both short stories and poetry. He was a movie critic for Oakland County's *Daily Tribune* (1978-79). A U.S. Army veteran, he has written numerous articles for *Stars and Stripes*. His first novel, *Greezy Creek*, was published in 2019.

**Daphne Kalotay** has been published in over 20 languages. Her work includes the award-winning novels *Sight Reading* and *Russian Winter* and the fiction collection *Calamity and Other Stories*, shortlisted for the Story Prize. Her latest novel, *Blue Hours*, was published in 2019. She teaches creative writing at Princeton University but makes her home in Somerville, Massachusetts, where she is working on a new collection of stories.

**J. Kates** is a poet and literary translator who lives in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire.

**E. R. Lutken** worked as a physician for many years, the majority of that time on the Navajo Nation. After that, she taught 7-12th-grade science and math in rural Colorado for a few more years. Now she spends her time writing and fishing in the swamps of Louisiana and in the mountains of New Mexico.

**Alfred Nicol** collaborated with Rhina Espaillat and illustrator Kate Sullivan to create the chapbook *Brief Accident of Light: Poems of Newburyport* (Kelsay Books, 2019). His most recent full-length poetry collection, *Animal Psalms*, was published in 2016 by Able Muse Press. He has published two other collections, *Elegy for Everyone* (2010), and *Winter Light*, which received the 2004 Richard Wilbur Award. His poem “Addendum” was included in the 2018 edition of *Best American Poetry*.

**Janet M. Powers**, Professor Emerita, Gettysburg College, taught for 49 years in the fields of South Asian literature and civilization, women’s studies, and peace studies. She has published poetry in numerous journals. Her chapbook, *Difficult to Subdue as the Wind*, appeared in 2009. She still stands on street corners with signs—trying to change this world of ours.

**Sean Prentiss** is the author of *Finding Abbey: the Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*, which won the National Outdoor Book Award, Utah Book Award, and the New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. He has also published *Crosscut: Poems, Environmental and Nature Writing*, and *Advanced Creative Nonfiction* (2021). He is co-editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction* and of *The Science of Story: The Brain behind Creative Nonfiction*. He lives in northern Vermont and has a cabin in Colorado.

**Zara Raab’s** full-length books are *Swimming the Eel* and *Fracas & Asylum*. She has two chapbooks, *The Book of Gretel and Rumpelstiltskin*, and *What’s in a Name?* Her work appears in *Hudson Review*, *Dark Horse*, *West Branch*, *River Styx*, *New Verse News*, *Stand (UK)*, and *Arts & Letters*, with book reviews in *Poet Lore* and elsewhere. She lives north of Boston.

**Jan Schreiber** was Poet Laureate of Brookline, Massachusetts from 2015 to 2017. His full-length poetry books include *Digressions*, *Wily Apparitions*, *Bell Buoys*, and *Peccadilloes*, as well as two books of translations: *A Stroke upon the Sea* and *Sketch of a Serpent*. His chapbook, *Bay Leaves*, was published in 2019. His critical essays have been collected in his book *Sparring with the Sun* (2013). He teaches in the BOLLI program at Brandeis University and runs the annual Symposium on Poetry Criticism in Gunnison, Colorado.

**David Southward** teaches in the Honors College at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His first poetry collection, *Bachelor's Buttons*, was recently published by Kelsay Books. *Apocrypha*, a chapbook of sonnets based on the Gospels, was published by Wipf & Stock in 2018. His poems have appeared in *Light*, *Measure*, *The Lyric*, *Gyroscope Review*, and the anthologies *Van Gogh Dreams* and *Love Affairs at the Villa Nelle*.

**Susan Delaney Spear** is associate professor of English and Creative Writing at Colorado Christian University where she serves as English Department chair. She earned an MFA in Poetry with an Emphasis on Verse Craft from Western Colorado University in 2012. Her collection, *Beyond All Bearing*, was published by Wipf & Stock. Her poems have appeared in *New Criterion*, *Christian Century*, *First Things*, and other journals.

**Leeanna T. Torres** is a native daughter of the American Southwest, with deep Indo-Hispanic roots in New Mexico. Her essays have appeared in the *New Mexico Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Tupelo Press Quarterly*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Minding Nature*, and the anthology *Natural Wonders* (Sowing Creek Press, 2018).

**Frederick Turner**, Founders Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, was educated at Oxford University. A poet, critic, interdisciplinary scholar, public intellectual, translator, and former editor of the *Kenyon Review*, he has published over 40 books, including recently *Paradise: Selected Poems 1990-2003*; *Epic: Form, Content, and History*; *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem*; *More Light: Selected Poems 2004-2016*; and *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems of Goethe* (with Zsuzsanna Ozvath, co-translator).

**Joyce Wilson** has taught English at Suffolk University and Boston University. She is creator and editor of the online magazine, *The Poetry Porch*. Her poems have appeared in many literary journals, among them *Salamander*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *Salzburg Poetry Review*. Her first poetry collection, *The Etymology of Spruce*, and a chapbook, *The Springhouse*, both appeared in 2010. Her new chapbook, *The Need for a Bridge*, came out in March 2019, and a second full-length collection, *Take and Receive*, was published in May 2019. She and her husband John have visited Lebanon several times to explore their heritage.

