

THINK

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

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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. It was housed at Western Colorado University, affiliated with Western's MA and MFA in Creative Writing Program, from 2013-2021. *THINK* is currently a publication of Think Journal, LLC.

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.

Besides poetry, we publish works of literary fiction, as well as creative non-fiction, the latter, pieces that focus on the natural world. *THINK* also publishes essays about the art and history of poetry, and we are highly interested in analyses and criticisms of poetry and poems. We include reviews of newly released books of poetry in every issue. To request a review, or if you are interested in writing one, please contact the editor.

THINK welcomes previously unpublished work from both established and emerging writers.

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SUBMISSIONS: Submit online at THINKJOURNAL.ORG, via SUBMITTABLE.COM. (For reviews of poetry books, we ask prospective authors to first query the editor.) Please read guidelines carefully. We accept simultaneous submissions. 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.

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From the Editor

Occam's Razor

“The purpose of art is to impart a vision.”

I heard this statement recently while attending the “The Critical Path,” a poetry symposium sponsored by Western Colorado University, and nothing could have registered more clearly with me. Or more fittingly. It untied a knot I’d reached in trying to answer the ever-compelling question: *What is a poem for?*

Answer: *To impart a vision.*

No modifying phrases are needed. No “. . . of a better society” or “. . . to increase spiritual awareness” or “. . . with which to help individuals live a better life.” The actual vision imparted depends on the hearer/reader. It might be a small yet satisfying clarification of some subject or object. It might unravel a feeling. Or it might revolutionize someone’s world view or perception of self. Importantly, this answer implies that a poem, once the poet’s mental and physical energy is expended in its creation, continues to exist quite freely, traveling perhaps far and wide as a verbal artifact with a conserved power to affect distinct individuals and catalyze myriad diverse visions.

Moreover, seeing poetry’s purpose in this light, which is to say, not entangled with an explanation of *how* the vision is imparted, avoids the endless debate over form as an indispensable element of poetry; it supersedes it. This is not to say that form doesn’t have a profound impact on its audience. Rhyme, rhythm,

meter, and other formal considerations act upon the mind in definite, sometimes enigmatic, almost visceral ways. Often the actualized beauty of a well-wrought poem can be found in its form; yet the vision imparted is not elicited by the art alone but rather by a synergy of the poem's meaning and sound and the mind of the person receiving it.

The purpose of poetry is to impart a vision. This feels intuitive, honest, simple. It leaves out everything superfluous—a splendid example of Occam's Razor.

The question of poetry's purpose, I believe, is central to undertaking an artistic project such as *THINK*. Our overall goal is to present to readers a curation of styles and voices that we as editors hope will quicken minds and even, at times, produce a real physical reaction. Building each individual issue is a metamorphic process, as one sees dimly, in the crepuscular hours of morning, forms that may acquire shape and value finally in the full light of day. It reminds me of Thoreau's essay "Night and Moonlight" in which he asserts that valuable is the time spent in the shadows where thoughts can wax especially creative and run deep.

Of what significance the light of day, if it is not the reflection of an inward dawn? —to what purpose is the veil of night withdrawn, if the morning reveals nothing to the soul?"

Indeed, the night is not empty, nor the day the enemy of night. Both are needed to receive the new. Thoreau goes on to affirm the excitement felt when things are revealed, stating "we see through the shadow of the earth into the distant atmosphere of day, where the sunbeams are reveling."

*

THINK, which was for several years a part of Western Colorado University's MA and MFA Programs in Creative Writing, is now once again an independently owned journal. We are grateful for *THINK*'s solid foundation, built upon our enthusiastic readers and innovative contributors over the past eight years, and we'll continue the traditions and mission of *THINK* with vigor. We do envision some changes and will share some exciting plans as we move forward.

THINK had the pleasure of being a part of the Poetry Symposium sponsored by WCU in Gunnison this past July, and we'd like to remind our audience that links to the two days of presentations are available on our website at THINKJOURNAL.ORG. We highly recommend them. We are also pleased to publish in this issue work of each of the symposium speakers: Tyson Hausdoerffer, p. 12; Jan Schreiber, p. 20; Susan Spear, p. 29; Daniel Brown, p. 50; Frederick Turner, p. 61; and Wendy Videlock, p. 119. All are not only scholars with great insight about literature and language, but also, and foremost, established writers of excellent poetry and prose.

We hope you'll enjoy this newest collection, and that here and there you will encounter visions that will shed light on the past, clarify the present, and illuminate what lies ahead.

—**Brian Palmer, Editor-in-Chief**

POEMS

ROBERT FILLMAN

Job Description

*“a man
whose words will
bite
their way
home . . .”*
—William Carlos Williams, “The Wind Increases”

We want our poets to name things
for us, simple things, like the words

that grow in our backyards, the plants
we’ve seen a thousand times before

but never bothered to behold,
weeds like steeplebush and yarrow

whose pods and calyx we carry
on our clothes and boots, because we’re

ignorant of the seasons for
milkweed and starthistle, because

it’s too much work to look beyond
the dandelion and because

“a poet—if any / exists”
will italicize what we’ve missed.

ZARA RAAB

The Coming Rain

Any hour of day or night, the master goon
of infelicity, untimeliness,
or surprise may come. Disaster—tuned

to earth or air and sky—comes
unasked by us, hatless, without our overcoats,
umbrellas, scarves, away from home.

But when I wake to sounds of rain against
the window of my sleeping nook
at 2 a.m., my world unsilenced

by gushing waterfalls, then how rain lulls,
more than my coverlets of wool and down.
All's well, it says, threshing the words, and dulls

the noises at the outer edge of solitude,
obscuring views beyond the looking glass.
This time of joy's your last. That thought's subdued

and washed away by steady falling rain.

DAVID DANOFF

Watercolor

I waited underneath a red brick arch,
watching the rain erode the campus trees,
the pathways, lawns, the people. On the porch,
I loaded up the paper, let it bleed,
letting the colors wash into a blur.
Everywhere so many shades of grey.
The others from the class were gathered somewhere,
nailing slippery pieces of the day.
And later in their study groups they'd drill,
memorizing terms from anatomy,
organic chem, preparing for what's real:
for graduation, jobs, autonomy.
The rain was in my fingers and my skin
couldn't keep the colors out, or in.

Cicada

The tree has roots at work.

Do I?

Encased beside them,

hungry, shy,

I take what little

nourishment

oozes through. Am I

content?

I sense there is a world

of light,

an expectation to

take flight,

a time when I must split

the skin

all my life I've

hunched within.

DAISY BASSEN

Lych Bell

Here, where we were young,
We never noticed ghosts outnumbering stone.
We recall the sound of bells silent, bells rung,

Alarms that could not trouble the day
Whose minutes were all unmarked, unknown.
Here, where we were young,

Our rude newness was unfired clay,
Scaled seraph wings rooted in bone;
We recall the sound of bells silent, bells rung

In our ears, unfamiliar music we couldn't play,
Hardly perceived, notes stretch apart, alone
Here, where we were young.

You have come to join us, you never left, you say,
Wave away our apology, our small attempts to atone.
We recall the sound of bells silent, bells rung

For every heartbeat, yours, ours, that tell us to stay,
Urge us to go. Scatter seeds, blossoms blown.
Here, where we were young

We recall the sound of bells silent, bells rung.

HOMER

TRANSLATED BY TYSON HAUSDOERFFER

Iliad Book 19, ll. 356-424

. . . τοὶ δ' ἀπάνευθε νεῶν ἐχέοντο θοάων.
ὥς δ' ὅτε ταρφειαὶ νιφάδες Διὸς ἐκποτέονται
ψυχραὶ ὑπὸ ῥίπῃς αἰθρηγενέος Βορέας,
ὥς τότε ταρφειαὶ κόρυθες λαμπρὸν γανώσσαι
νηῶν ἐκφορέοντο καὶ ἀσπίδες ὀμφαλόεσσαι
θώρηκές τε κραταιγύαλοι καὶ μείλινα δοῦρα.
αἶγλη δ' οὐρανὸν ἴκε, γέλασσε δὲ πᾶσα περὶ χθῶν
χαλκοῦ ὑπὸ στεροπῆς: ὑπὸ δὲ κτύπος ὄρνυτο ποσσὶν
ἀνδρῶν: ἐν δὲ μέσοισι κορύσσετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.
τοῦ καὶ ὀδόντων μὲν καναχὴ πέλε, τῷ δέ οἱ ὅσσε
λαμπέσθην ὡς εἶ τε πυρὸς σέλας, ἐν δέ οἱ ἦτορ
δῦν' ἄχος ἄτλητον: ὁ δ' ἄρα Τρωσὶν μενεαίνων
δύσσετο δῶρα θεοῦ, τὰ οἱ Ἥφαιστος κάμε τεύχων.
κνημῖδας μὲν πρῶτα περὶ κνήμησιν ἔθηκε
καλὰς ἀργυρέοισιν ἐπισφυρίοις ἀραρυίας:
δεύτερον αὖ θώρηκα περὶ στήθεσσιν ἔδυνεν.
ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρ' ὄμοισιν βάλετο ξίφος ἀργυρόηλον
χάλκεον: αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα σάκος μέγα τε στιβαρόν τε
εἵλετο, τοῦ δ' ἀπάνευθε σέλας γένετ' ἠὔτε μήνης.
ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἐκ πόντοιο σέλας ναύτησι φανήη

Achilles Arms Himself for Battle

Out of the swift ships poured the Myrmidons. . . .

Picture the way thick snow flies fast from Zeus—
bitter-cold flakes, chilled by the bright-sky blasts
of Boreas—that is how thick and fast
the shining helms, the large-plate corselets,
the bossed shields, and the ash-wood spears poured forth.

The radiance of arms blazed to the skies,
causing the earth to laugh within their glow,
while from their feet, a thunderous din was raised.

And there amid the troops, Noble Achilles
armed himself for war: he gnashed his teeth,
his eyes blazed forth as if they burned with fire,
and grief beyond all bearing seized his heart.

Moved by fierce wrath, Achilles donned the gifts
which Hephaestus had toiled to make for him.
First he cinched the greaves about his shins—
fine greaves, fitted with silver ankle-guards—
then he strapped the plate upon his chest,
slung his bronze sword with silver-studded hilt
across his shoulders, and hefted the shield—
that massive, sturdy shield—and from it shone
a brilliant light, just like the full moon's gleam.

Envision how a gleam of fire seems

καιομένοιο πυρός, τό τε καίεται ύψόθ' ὄρεσφι
σταθμῶ ἐν οιοπόλω: τοὺς δ' οὐκ ἐθέλοντας ἄελλαι
πόντον ἐπ' ἰχθυόεντα φίλων ἀπάνευθε φέρουσιν:
ὧς ἀπ' Ἀχιλλῆος σάκεος σέλας αἰθέρ' ἴκανε
καλοῦ δαιδαλέου: περὶ δὲ τρυφάλειαν ἀείρας
κρατὶ θέτο βριαρῆν: ἦ δ' ἀστήρ ὧς ἀπέλαμπεν
ἵππουρις τρυφάλεια, περισσεῖοντο δ' ἔθειραι
χρῦσαι, ἃς Ἥφαιστος ἴει λόφον ἀμφὶ θαμειάς.
πειρήθη δ' ἔο αὐτοῦ ἐν ἔντεσι δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς,
εἰ οἷ ἔφαρμόσσειε καὶ ἐντρέχοι ἀγλαὰ γυῖα:
τῶ δ' εὖτε πτερὰ γίγνεται, ἄειρε δὲ ποιμένα λαῶν
ἐκ δ' ἄρα σύριγγος πατρώϊον ἐσπάσατ' ἔγχος
βριθὺ μέγα στιβαρόν: τὸ μὲν οὐ δύνατ' ἄλλος Ἀχαιῶν
πάλλειν, ἀλλὰ μιν οἷος ἐπίστατο πῆλαι Ἀχιλλεύς:
Πηλιάδα μελίην, τὴν πατρὶ φίλω πόρε Χείρων
Πηλίου ἐκ κορυφῆς φόνον ἔμμεναι ἠρώεσσιν:
ἵππους δ' Αὐτομέδων τε καὶ Ἄλκιμος ἀμφιέποντες
ζεύγνυον: ἀμφὶ δὲ καλὰ λέπαδν' ἔσαν, ἐν δὲ χαλινούς
γαμφηλῆς ἔβαλον, κατὰ δ' ἠνία τεῖναν ὀπίσσω
κολλητὸν ποτὶ δίφρον. ὃ δὲ μάλιστα φαεινὴν
χειρὶ λαβῶν ἀραρυῖαν ἐφ' ἵπποιον ἀνόρουσεν

to sailors out at sea: the fire flares
bright from a solitary mountain lodge
while storm winds bear the hapless sailors far
across the swarming seas, away from those
they love—so from Achilles' ornate shield
the gleam reached all the way to heaven's heights.

He lifted up the mighty helmet last
and placed it on his head—just like a star
the horsehair-crested helmet shone, and all
around it waved the golden plumes the god
Hephaestus had set thick about the crest.

Noble Achilles tested out the armor,
checking to see how well it fit his form,
how freely he could move his limbs in it,
and it became like wings, lifting him up,
elating him, the Shepherd of the Host.

Out of the rack he drew his father's spear,
heavy, massive, thick. No other Greek
could wield that spear of ash from Pelion's peak
that Cheiron once had given to his father
to be the bane of heroes—no, Achilles
was the only man with skill to wield it.

Automedon and Alcimus then rushed
to yoke the steeds—they ran the harness straps
about them, set the bits, and drew the reins
behind the chariot.

Automedon
grasped the shining whip—fit to his hand—
and leaped aboard.

Αὐτομέδων: ὄπιθεν δὲ κορυσσάμενος βῆ Ἀχιλλεὺς
τεύχεσι παμφαίνων ὥς τ' ἠλέκτωρ Ὑπερίων,
σμερδαλέον δ' ἵπποισιν ἐκέκλετο πατρὸς ἐοῖο:
“Ξάνθέ τε καὶ Βαλίε τηλεκλυτὰ τέκνα Ποδάργης
ἄλλως δὴ φράζεσθε σαωσέμεν ἠνιοχῆα
ἄψ Δαναῶν ἐς ὄμιλον ἐπεὶ χ' ἔωμεν πολέμοιο,
μηδ' ὡς Πάτροκλον λίπει' αὐτόθι τεθνηῶτα.”

τὸν δ' ἄρ' ὑπὸ ζυγόφι προσέφη πόδας αἰόλος ἵππος
Ξάνθος, ἄφαρ δ' ἤμυσε καρῆατι: πᾶσα δὲ χαίτη
ζεύγλης ἐξεριποῦσα παρὰ ζυγὸν οὔδας ἵκανεν:
αὐδῆεντα δ' ἔθηκε θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη:
καὶ λίην σ' ἔτι νῦν γε σαώσομεν ὄβριμ' Ἀχιλλεῦ:
“ἀλλὰ τοι ἐγγύθεν ἦμαρ ὀλέθριον: οὐδέ τοι ἡμεῖς
αἴτιοι, ἀλλὰ θεός τε μέγας καὶ Μοῖρα κραταιή.
οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡμετέρη βραδυτήτι τε νοχελίη τε
Τρῶες ἀπ' ὅμοιιν Πατρόκλου τεύχε' ἔλοντο:
ἀλλὰ θεῶν ὄριστος, ὃν ἠῦκομος τέκε Λητώ,
ἔκταν' ἐνὶ προμάχοισι καὶ Ἔκτορι κῦδος ἔδωκε.
νῶϊ δὲ καὶ κεν ἅμα πνοιῆ Ζεφύροιο θέοιμεν,
ἦν περ ἐλαφροτάτην φάσ' ἔμμεναι: ἀλλὰ σοὶ αὐτῶ

Achilles, fully armed,
stepped up behind him, blazing in his gear
with all the brilliance of the sun, like Bright
Hyperion.

Then, in a dreadful tone,
he spoke directly to his father's steeds:

“Xanthus and Balius, you Famous Offspring
of Podarge: consider how, this time,
to do a better job of bringing back
your charioteer to camp, after we've had
our fill of war—don't leave him dead out there,
the way you did with Patroclus!”

Xanthus, the Steed of Flashing Hooves, spoke up—
he bowed his neck, and all his flowing mane
streamed out from underneath the yoke and reached
the ground, and Hera granted him a voice:

“Mighty Achilles, yes, we'll bring you back
for sure, *this time*, and yet your day of doom
draws near: a mighty god and forceful fate
will be the cause of it, not us.

Nor was
it on account of laziness or lack
of speed from us the Trojans stripped the gear
from Patroclus: it was the best of gods,
the one whom Fair-Haired Leto bore—*he* slew
Patroclus in the foremost ranks and gave
Hector the glory.

As for us, we two
could run swift as the gusts of Zephyrus—
and his are said to be the swiftest winds—

μόρσιμόν ἐστι θεῶ τε καὶ ἀνέρι Ἴφι δαμῆναι.”

ὦς ἄρα φωνήσαντος Ἐρινύες ἔσχεθον αὐδήν.
τὸν δὲ μέγ’ ὀχθήσας προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς:
“Ξάνθε τί μοι θάνατον μαντεύεαι; οὐδέ τί σε χρή.
εὔ νυ τὸ οἶδα καὶ αὐτὸς ὃ μοι μόρος ἐνθάδ’ ὀλέσθαι
νόσφι φίλου πατρὸς καὶ μητέρος; ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔμπης
οὐ λήξω πρὶν Τρῶας ἄδην ἐλάσαι πολέμοιο.”

ἦ ῥα, καὶ ἐν πρώτοις ἰάχων ἔχε μώνυχας ἵππους.

but still you're doomed to die in battle, vanquished
both by a god and by a man.”

When he had had his say, the Erinyes
cut off his voice for good.

Moved in his soul,
Achilles Swift of Foot replied:

“Xanthus, why prophesize my death for me?
You waste your breath: well do I know my doom's
to die right here, far from my father and
my mother. All the same, I'll not hold back
until the Trojans have their fill of war!”

With that, he loosed a cry and drove his team
into the foremost ranks.

JAN SCHREIBER

All the Bright Illusions

Sam Fox, 1941-2020

In a charmed summer garden
among the fruit trees where
we walked along the wall
we barely noticed it.

At one point when you leaned
against it, it gave way.
There was a sudden breeze.
You were no longer there.

Bird cries did not abate
and the stream went on flowing.
Small creatures scurried. How can
a man evaporate?

Time turns a corner and
the world is as it was
yesterday afternoon
but for that sleight-of-hand.

I'm wise and damaged now.
Give me some time to rest.
All the bright illusions
I loved are giving way.

LINDA ANN STRANG

The Shipwrecked History Class

The waves whirred like the pages
of textbooks, and the sea monsters'

heads had little fountains of method.
The sound of the sea—opiate,

Goa gunpowder, cinnamon—
was a corposant girl with a curling

blue scarf. She pulled us closer
and we laughed out loud. In league

then, we were ten East Indiamen
in the dip and lift of a chat, moored

to a wooden table, or a dead man's chest.
Warren's jersey was gunwale, shale,

Polaris. Aletta's slippers were aglitter
with pieces of eight. Dan was Odysseus

drawing faces with driftwood.
But time was at another table with bait.

So, we weighed anchor, walked
through the blackboards of our disparate

fates—with our barnacles, binnacles,
sea roses—windbound,

every moonraker a partner to shrouds.

KYLE POTVIN

Woman Across the Way

In dead of night, pacing, there's my mother
across the way, balcony of another.

Hair white, in moonlight, bleached as a toddler.
I watch her, suspicious as a daughter.

She, almost familiar, walks forth and back.
One step strong. One raised, avoiding sea wrack.

I'd heard stories of that and this, and laughed.
Oh how forgetful she became! How daft!

Mother-twin. Old friends sense sand in her mouth,
gulls in her brain. What remains? Last trip south.

She moves inside, lies silent as a grave,
face salty, wishing for a tidal wave.

Memorial of Bone

A friend died last night, one today, a sign
of what is to come. I don't mean death, more
a solitary ghosting as I pour
each night—alone—my cold, light-bodied wine.

*

I walk into the lake, each step a stone
sharp as a wolf's fang. Friends, where are you now:
Suspended in this ashen air somehow?
Beneath my toes, memorial of bone?

*

A small animal, lungs full, water frail,
drowns herself in a tempting skim of seed.
Her nails click against the smooth wall of need,
unable to escape the brimming pail.

MORGAN STRAWN

The Gardener's Complaint

Planned on scale grids, our garden beds prepare
For thrusting, budded stems' pastel emergence:
Spades arrange; pruners shape; and spray-guns spew,
Hoping to sterilize the earth and air
Of all its tiny agents of disturbance—
The ones begetting clover nursed on dew,
Wild growths of weedy, yellow-umbelled greens,
And that bent, thread-thin orphaned maple tree.
Yet on they trespass, up through mulch and stone,
Unchecked by even our most trusted means
Of ruling riotous fertility
And guarding cherished patterns from what's sown.

Seven Observations on Rain

I.

Streaking through the air,
showers show us how the world
is made with brushstrokes.

II.

In the glossary
of nature, the smell of rain
has no synonym.

III.

Voluble gutters
murmur their many secrets
undecryptably.

IV.

Summer rain abates
and the sun summons phantoms
as soaked shingles steam.

V.

With anxious pauses,
drops rappel from each green twig
to clutch one lower.

VI.

The downpour billows
in the wind like gauze curtains
reaching heavenward.

VII.

Night chills fall air: drops
turn to downy snow; freefall
turns to swirling flight.

COLEMAN GLENN

Diagnosis

The good news is, no endometriosis.
I'd thought we'd find some, so I looked around
and your appendix—see, this picture here—
you see how white it is? It would have burst
in days. I called a colleague in; we cut
it out, along with this, a tiny growth
I noticed on your lower pelvic wall.
Pathology results came yesterday.
There were two tumors: one that filled the whole
of your appendix, one metastasis.
They're known as "carcinoid." It's very rare.
Forgive me, I've been reading up all night.
It is malignant. Cancer, yes. I'm sorry.
It moves more slowly than most cancers do,
but still. . . . I wish I could say more but this
is not my field; I have no way to tell

that in a month you'll leave this continent;
that two months after that a surgery
will leave you bleeding out and clutching death—
that you will watch as others watch your kids
while your recovery drags on for months
and years, until you reach a slowly rising
stasis where your days are filled again
with small annoyances and snorted laughs
and arguments and reconciliations,
and then a baby girl, her birth at home
a miracle of muscle and God's grace,
the outpour of a body that will work,

whatever hells might lurk within its walls.
So send back word, please, when five years from now
you labor yet again, and let me know
how life keeps going on as life goes on.

SUSAN DELANEY SPEAR

Summer Solstice Matins

Earth, as ever, tilts.

Tongue-tied

by loss and languor,

my soul wilts.

To perfume

a path to prayer,

to slip the grip

of grief, I strike

a slender match

to rouse

a burned down wick

—jasmine, myrrh—

then turn and splash

some coffee in my cup.

A second hand ticks.

The wick flickers, fails.

I turn back

to the scene

that steals my breath.

A burnt offering

hangs, suspended
in sun-soaked air,

a host of clear-cut wisps
of artful smoke.

So, so slowly
each thread

lengthens, whorls
puffs and curls

into a tableau
of prayer.

NATHAN MANLEY

The Tomb of Tulliola, Daughter of Cicero

For Spence

In the pontificate of Paul III (1534-1549), the same who convoked the Council of Trent, a tomb was opened at Rome which contained the body of a young woman in a remarkable state of preservation . . . a burning lamp hanging in the vault was extinguished as soon as the air entered.

—H. Carrington Bolton, *Legends of Sepulchral and Perpetual Lamps*

World leached in, hissed along the plastered cracks
where peasants pierced her sleeping centuries.
What lacerating light frets and spindles
through the curtains of the After? Her ghost,

humming particulate in the anteroom,
swept back into government—Tullia
with the crude sublunary elements.
What dauntless philosophy moils to fix

the secret of inexhaustible flame:
sublime equal parts sulfur and alum;
convert to blossom and crush its petals
in a mortar of Venetian crystal.

Cicero retired to the country—knew,
for all our acts of eloquence, the lamp
goes out. There's no alchemical gesture,
no republic, even, to turn back to.

VERGIL

TRANSLATED BY NATHAN MANLEY

Eclogue VII, ll. 574-92

*Forte sub arguta considerat ilice Daphnis,
Compulerantque greges Corydon et Thyrsis in unum,
Thyrsis ovis, Corydon distentas lacte capellas,
ambo florentes aetatibus, Arcades ambo,
et cantare pares et respondere parati.
huc mihi, dum teneras defendo a frigore myrtos,
vir gregis ipse caper deerraverat, atque ego Daphnin
aspicio. ille ubi me contra videt, "ocius" inquit
"huc ades, o Meliboe: caper tibi salvus et haedi;
et si quid cessare potes, requiesce sub umbra.
huc ipsi potum venient per prata iuveni,
hic viridis tenera praetexit harundine ripas
Mincius, eque scara resonant examina quercu."
Quid facerem?*

Invitation to the Song

Daphnis, embowered in the cool gossip
of an ilex, chanced to sit. Corydon
and Thyrsis had driven their flocks to blend—
Corydon his sheep, Thyrsis his she-goats
laden with milk; men in the bloom of youth,
Arcadians both, prepared there to sing
and to make answer in song. To this place,
while I steeled my myrtles, tender of limb,
against the frost, had strayed a billy goat,
my flock's little monarch—when here I spied
Daphnis, who, spotting me across the glade,
hailed:

“Quickly,” he waved, “O, Meliboeus,
your animals are safe! If you can spare
an idle hour, tarry a spell with me
under the shade. Through the meadow, young bulls
will come of themselves to drink: the Mincius
hems his flowering bend with pliant reeds;
a beehive hums, swarming out the hollow
of the sacred oak.”

What was I to do?

Georgics, Book IV, ll. 538-58

*“quattuor eximios praestanti corpore tauros,
qui tibi nunc viridis depascunt summa Lycae,
delige et intacta totidem cervice iuvenças.
quattuor his aras alta ad delubra dearum
constitue, et sacrum iugulis demitte cruorem
corporaque ipsa boum frondoso desere luco.
post ubi nona suos Aurora ostenderit ortus,
inferias Orphei Lethaea papavera mittes,
et nigram mactabis ovem, lucumque revises:
placatam Eurydicen vitula venerabera caesa.”*

*Haud mora: continuo matris praecepta facessit;
ad delubra venit, monstratas excitat aras
quattuor eximios praestanti corpore tauros
ducit et intacta totidem cervice iuvenças.
post ubi nona suos Aurora induxerat ortus,
inferias Orphei mittit, lucumque revisit.
His vero subitum ac dictu mirabile monstrum
aspiciunt, liquefacta boum per viscera toto*

Aristaeus' Swarm Resurrected

The shepherd Aristaeus seeks the counsel of his mother, the naiad Cyrene, in order to restore his beehive—a swarm wasted by disease and drought. She prescribes this ritual.

“Take four choice bulls of surpassing sinew
of those now pastured on Mount Lycaeus’
verdant rise, and take likewise four heifers
of never burdened neck. Erect for these
four altars at the high and hallowed shrines
of the goddesses, and let of the throat
their sacrificial blood, abandoning
the slain bodies to a lush-arbored grove.
Once a ninth Dawn has brandished her lights, send
Lethean poppies as funeral gifts
to Orpheus, and slaughter a black ewe:
you’ll revisit then the grove to honor
Eurydice, pleased with a calf cut down.”

At once Aristaeus acts, no delay,
on his mother’s command, comes to the shrines,
and erects there the appointed altars.
He leads four bulls of surpassing sinew
and likewise four heifers, never burdened.
Once a ninth Dawn has ushered up the day,
he sends offerings down to Orpheus
and returns to the grove. Here they behold
a sudden portent, astounding to tell:
over the carcasses, molten with rot,
bees hiss through the ruin of each ribcage,

*stridere apes utero et ruptis effervere costis,
immensasque trahi nubes, iamque arbore summa
confluere et lentis uvam demittere ramis.*

boiling up the entrails in a vast cloud,
trailing skyward and converging at length
in the height of a tree; they sag like grapes,
clustered now darkly on its supple boughs.

Aeneid, Book XII, ll. 574-92

*dixerat, atque animis pariter certantibus omnes
dant cuneum densaque ad muros mole feruntur;
scalae improviso subitusque apparuit ignis.
discurrunt alii ad portas primosque trucidant,
ferrum alii torquent et obumbrant aethera telis.
ipse inter primos dextram sub moenia tendit
Aeneas, magnaue incusat voce Latinum
testaturque deos iterum se ad proelia cogi,
bis iam Italos hostis, haec altera foedera rumpi.
exoritur trepidos inter Discordia civis:
urbem alii reserare iubent et pandere portas
Dardanis ipsumque trabunt in moenia regem;
arma ferunt alii et pergunt defendere muros,
inclusas ut cum latebroso in pumice pastor
vestigavit apes fumoque implevit amaro;
illae intus trepidae rerum per cerea castra*

Aeneas Stirs the Hive

Aeneas leads the climactic assault against the capital city of Latium on the Italian peninsula, where Aeneas' descendants are destined to lay the foundations of Rome.

At Aeneas' call,
the men of their striving souls together
fashion a siegework, borne at the ramparts
in a crowded mass. Without warning,
ladders and sudden flames erupt. Some rush
the city gates, slaughtering sentinels;
others hurl their iron, darkening heaven
with spears. Aeneas with his thundering voice,
himself among the first beneath the walls,
extends his weapon-hand and castigates
Latinus, calls the gods to witness him
urged, once more compelled into the fray,
the Italians now twice his enemy,
a second treaty destroyed. Thus Discord
rises among the rattled citizens:
some cry out for opening the city—
to spring wide her gates to the Dardan force,
drag the king himself onto the bulwarks;
others take up arms, move to fortify
the city walls.

Likewise, the shepherd tracks
a swarm of bees, their portent, to its hive,
lurking in some hidden crag, and floods it
with pungent smoke as the panicked insects,
flitting about their fortress of wax, whet

*discurrunt magnisque acuunt stridoribus iras;
volvitur ater odor tectis, tum murmure caeco
intus saxa sonant, vacuas it fumus ad auras.*

their anger to a lacerating buzz;
a black miasma rolls beneath the roofs,
stones sounding of a dark murmur within;
smoke floats and winnows on the empty wind.

MARGARET B. INGRAHAM

Shenandoah Nights

Year after year I stand here
above the field where edge
of indigo descends behind
the darker ledge of cobalt ridge
while pale moon genuflects
beside sheer clouds as scattered
constellations spill cold stars
along the crests of distant hills
and drop into the valley seam.
As I trudge back down
the timeworn graveled path
I pass inside brambled shadows
where knots of sighing cattle
hide beneath bright planets
that remain unfazed
by both my long quiet gaze
and the low bellowing of bulls.

The Lingering Light

A few years past 70 she found
she had little time to mince
her words or model metaphors,
only enough to capture or repeat
what memories she had
or sage advice she'd saved
but knew she still could lose
to the heritage of dark forgetfulness
she had come to dread.

No need to clear the saucers
from the sink, although she thought
she would, and stopping
for a moment then she tried to grasp
again the marvel and the majesty
of words and how well they'd kept
her safe and guided her into
imagination's welcome space.

But today it was the color of the sky
that led her away to conjure once
again the songs of quickly swooping
fork-tailed birds looping straw
into the nooks of boathouse eaves,
barn swallows whose clear warbled notes
she'd learned and carried home
from those few summers he and she
spent by that mountain lake
where words, although she did not need
them then, had always come to her

as naturally and unrehearsed as flight
to butterflies and bees, as dusk to wipe
away the lingering light of day
and soon, she feared as well,
all the words she still had left to say.

Reprise

The dull gray pair-bound dove,
tint of so many autumn mornings,
bird that my father most loved
waits, silent, while throngs of passerines
begin colorful overtures to beckon mates
as they wait for spring light to break.
When all the songbirds are self-satisfied,
have finished what they have to ask
then patient mourning dove alone
commences his soulful treble serenade:
“who, who, who?”

So as each vernal dawn steals in,
it beckons me to reminisce again
about how quietly he always listened
as my mother would recite to him
the full litany of her daily tasks,
and then how gently he would lean
in toward her to kiss her ear before
he'd whisper-sing with perfect pitch
the only lyric that she longed to hear,
the refrain that she knew by heart:
“you, you, you.”

MICHAEL SANDLER

Staple or Paper Clip

Not just belying degrees of separation
or compressing a distance between
my grievance list and yours, these hold
the discrete in an embrace, more or less.

Though I don't regret being bound,
at heart I favor clips. I suppose
a more tentative bent, as if attachments might end
spotlessly, like a surface left by painter's tape.

A staple pierces through indecision
fluttering at the rim of liberty—
if mistaken and impatient to decouple,
its grapple shreds a flawless margin.

An enduring schism mars my personal
philosophy: should the human mind,
Zen-like, bind itself with all,
or disengage and wrestle with estrangement?

I'm going through old boxes today.
Letters and notes, clipped. And toss them all,
crumpled, ripped, sentiments blurred, wondering
if I've the mettle to secure

your love in a committed, durable clasp,
watching my hands straighten a pliant oval,
admiring a looped wire's grace
that, in parting, lets each text slip free.

JEAN L. KREILING

The Tightrope Walker (Il funambolo)

After the painting by Franz Borghese

The men below look up in fascination,
astounded by the walker's bravery.
Earthbound, their own steps marked by trepidation,
they envy him his poise and dignity.
But now, distracted by flapping blue wings,
the walker looks up, too, facing a threat
to balance, courage, and the other things
that he pretends to—and he has no net.
The only woman in the audience
does not look up, and she is not astounded.
She knows this daring act has precedents
in ordinary deeds, in lives as grounded
as her red shoes. It takes some grit, she knows,
to walk with grace, wherever your path goes.

Startled

After Benjamin Britten's "Hymn to St. Cecilia"

*"Blessed Cecilia . . . come down and startle composing
mortals with immortal fire."*

—W. H. Auden

Not just the saint, but also Auden's words
may well have startled him—the swan, the sin,
the sea, a realm of goddesses and birds—
did Britten tremble like the violin?
Each week's rehearsal startled us, the notes
as warm as blood, and no one could explain
the children's cries that slid out of our throats
to plead for splendor fashioned from a stain.
You need no faith in saints or their designs
to listen and be startled by the fire
that Britten made for Auden's ardent lines.
As sparks of hope rise from the funeral pyre
of dread and silence, you hear the ascension
of startled rapture from mortal invention.

Lake George

After the painting by Georgia O'Keeffe (1922)

You see the blue—of hills, you think,
but large blue masses also sink
into the lake, in their reflection.
Pale blue sky, on close inspection,
also fills the water. Blink,

and nothing's there to climb or drink,
just shapes and colors you might link
to other things, some fresh connection
you see. The blue,

pale blue, and tree-ish green hoodwink
the eye, led only to the brink
of knowing what it sees—detection
less the point than introspection.
Nothing's spelled out in black ink;
you see the blue.

DANIEL BROWN

Toward a Thought about the Beautiful

“Hummingbirds are picking up on multiple colors beyond those we can see.”

—New York Times, 6/19/20

“Multiple” (the number left
Unspecified). So we’re bereft
Of x much extra plenitude
Of beauty. . . . Although one wonders: could
A buzz of hover-loveliness
With blazonings that irridescence
In ruby, emerald—could, yes,
A hummingbird—be lovelier
If colors came in *millions* more?

Saying that it could would be
To relegate to illusory
A sense in which the beautiful,
Wherever it exists at all,
Is ipso facto maximal . . .
In which, if beauty’s but extant,
It billows to its full extent . . .
I’m groping here (I’m too aware)—
Which needn’t mean there’s nothing there. . . .

DAVID CULWELL

Sleeping to Sink Away

*“The slow Pacific swell stirs on the sand,
Sleeping to sink away, withdrawing land”
—Yvor Winters*

Midmorning and the beach empty; the tide
Has swept away all footprints. Seagulls glide
Shrieking above the surf; cloud shadows skim
The blue-green water, and I picture him
(Here from this hotel balcony) beneath
The surface, flailing, nearly out of breath—
The boy who drowned yesterday afternoon.

This beach could be the surface of the moon,
That white-haired woman with headphones its sole
Inhabitant. She’s on my right; her goal,
As she approaches slowly, is to find
The treasures that the luckless left behind.
Moving her detector here and there,
She zigzags, seeking a resounding flare,
A graph of a heart’s rhythm in her wake.

The people! Almost more than I could take.
(Almost: I’m vacationing alone,
Prefer a thousand voices to my own
Inner one’s near-constant plaintive tone.)
I left the shore; a whim to test the sea
To find just where it tried to master me
Led me far out to tread indulgent wave
On wave. (Don’t tire! You’re surely too far out to save.)

It was the farthest that I'd ever gone,
Though swimming back I knew I could go on
And planned to do so after resting some.
On shore I sat down, weary, my mind numb,
Ten feet or so from where his parents lay
Before a rip current pulled him away.
As he ran toward the sea, his mom cried, "Ned!"

He turned and, backing up, said, "What?"

She said,

Under a floppy white hat, "You forgot
To put on sunscreen."

"I put on a lot
A while ago; I'm good."

"Put on some more."

A hand dismissed her, and he turned and tore
Into the waves.

On the year's longest day
Of light, the treasure hunter's made her way
To the wet sand, a gull behind her, riding
The wind. Perhaps it eyes another gliding
Beneath it, mirroring its shifting flight
Before the sea surges and hides the sight.
The bird veers off. The surf covers her shoes
And the detector. Soon she stops and views
The sea. Perhaps she thinks, A blue expanse

Seemingly endless, whimsical as chance.
Today, storm driven, it will inundate
A city and displace both small and great.
She sloshes on, and I, impelled to go
Down to the sea and, closer to the slow
Blind swell, ponder Ned's drowning, head downstairs.
The lobby holds few souls. A TV blares.
I walk outside.

Yesterday by the sea,
Eyes heavy, lulled by the monotony
Of waves, I dropped off. Once or twice I rose
Toward consciousness; the surface sounds were close,
But sleep, as if to keep me trapped below,
Pulled me back down, refusing to let go,
Until a girl's cry woke me. On my back,
Barely awake and watching one cloud track
Its twin, I thought, Where am I? Nothing came
To mind. My name is . . . Ned. That's not my name!
My name is. . . What? I nearly screamed. But then
I settled, knew myself and place again.
Still groggy I sat up and grabbed some sand
To verify that I was fixed on land.
Yes, firmly so.

Ned's mom said, "Are you sure?"

Ned's dad said, "Honey, trust me: we're secure."

"Okay, I trust you."

“Good.”

“What time is it?”

“Why? What’s the rush?”

“Tonight I’d like to hit

Dinner early, get Ned down early too.

He’s beat, and so am I. We’ll start anew—

Oh, God, please no!

“What’s wrong?”

She didn’t say

But rose and ran seaward. I peered that way.

A man, wearing red trunks, was carrying Ned

To shore.

The search for what’s been lost has led
The white-haired woman back to the dry sand.
She’s far off to my left, passing a stand
Of palm trees, one of which droops to the ground,
And ambling toward the small, striated mound
Where I’ve been sitting, lost in sight and sound.
In time she’s inside twenty yards or so,
And shortly the detector starts to slow.
She stops, the pulse of metal in her ears—
Perhaps an heirloom hidden from the years.
She kneels, sets the detector down, takes off
Her head phones as a gull traces a rough
Rendition of a figure eight above her,
Seemingly to see what she’ll discover.

A trowel in her hand flashes like a mirror
As if, aware that she's not one step nearer
To navigating through some wilderness,
She catches sun to send an SOS.
She digs, takes something from the trowel, and blows
On it.

I say, "A gold coin, I suppose?"

"Hey there! No, it's a watch without a band."
She holds it up. The gull dives toward her hand;
She pulls it down; the gull shrieks, lets her be.
"Did you see that, or was it only me?"
He thought the watch was food, that crazy bird!"

"What kind is it?"

"Can't tell; the brand is blurred.
No hands to help a thoughtful soul redeem
The time." She tosses it. "I just don't seem
To have much luck this morning, but that's life.
Hey, why's the beach so dead? It's usually rife
With people; we're the only two."

His lips

*And skin were blue. The lifeguard said, "Those rips . . ."
His dad just stared at him; his mom caressed
His head, weeping. She said, "You were the best
Piece of me, dear son; now you're gone."*

"A boy . . .

Can't say."

 "And I can't say I don't enjoy
Walking wherever on the beach. Take care."

Soon she's off again for something rare.
I rise and go pick up the watch. Gold face;
No hands, numbers, or date—nothing to trace
The hour or day, as if time's lost its place.
I pocket the watch, turn, and face the sea,
Alluring in its sensuality.
On this midsummer's day it will subdue
A swimmer somewhere, somewhere a ship's crew,
But I myself will cling all day to land,
Just beyond the sea's slow-reaching hand.

BRADLEY R. STRAHAN

Shadow Dance

Why does your shadow
keep circling 'round me?
I will give you a tune
so you might dance away.

Why must you stay?
I taste you still
feel your breath
on the nape of my neck.

I could have been
at your beck and call.
but all you wanted
was to dance and sing.

That wide red mouth
must be silent
as this shadow now
that refuses to dance away.

I Wanted It All

A Memory of Galveston

A pier scratching at the gulf
A sailboat rocking on the bay
 a woman's song
 'ccompanied by gulls
A longing so slim
The thought of her is bone

The Gift We Want

Xmas, 2020

We really want to have
our lives all over
without the bad parts:

Without the fits and starts,
the cruel words, blood
spilt unthinking

Without the sly winking
at gifts ungiven,
free to keep our dreams unriven;

Every evil borne away to heaven
by several handy angels,
earth purged of all its many dangers.

MATTHEW BRENNAN

Sunrise at Turkey Run State Park

In Memory of Anita Coleman

You've now been scattered ashes for a year,
but what will not be soon forgotten is
the January morning when we shuffled
and slid along the slippery frozen crust
of Sugar Creek, which inched within ravines
as if encased in crystal. Cliffsides loomed
above us, and their jutting piers of ice
buttressed the vaulting walls of sun-struck stone—

a splendor met at Chartes or Sainte-Chapelle,
but this cathedral of the light and cold
burned no candles, offering instead
from a glistening ledge, a row of icicles
arranged like glasses of champagne
raised high to toast all living things that pass.

FREDERICK TURNER

Mesophysics

A sudden shiver. Nakedness and shame.
The information flowing through my phone
Is flowing through my body just the same,
Arriving at the tip of my light-cone—

All the vibrations of the universe,
Caught in their stories where I'm writing this,
A fleshly instrument to make it verse—
And so begins its mesomorphosis.

The matter of my body, blood and bone,
Is only trapped and spinning hums of charge,
Harder than light, more flexible than stone,
Midway between the tiny and the large.

Black holes are not, then, crematoria,
The waste-bins of spacetime, but its Sunday,
Repositories or libraria,
The garner house of cosmic DNA.

The fiery tidal tumult of its fall
Where knowledge is interred and gathered in,
Is but the bardo and the interval
That tracks the outcome to the origin.

Acceleration into stillness, time
Compacted from a line into a whole,
As in a verse the echo of the rhyme
Makes out of words the music of the soul.

One day we'll enter that peculiar space
That is both one dimension, and is all,
Event horizon, library, the place
For all the sumptuous volumes at our call:

This universe is paradise, that we
Must grow to recognize and sense;
Our griefs and rages, all that agony,
Just the equipment of experience.

BETSY MARTIN

Snow and Smoke

From her window on the eleventh floor
she follows his sheepskin-coated figure,
its slanting stride,

his right hand trailing a cigarette
with its tiny glowing ruby.

The smoke from his lips mixes
with the mist of snow falling,
snow that always seems to be falling
in this far north city
where red is so rare
that it has to be plucked from your chest,

and he vanishes beyond the gray slab
of the neighboring building
so there's only
snow and smoke,
and then just snow.

FICTION

ANDREW PETERS

*A Shorter History of the Battle of Alexandria, and
Three Maritime Disasters*

Millie Fingerhut said she wasn't going to stick around if there wasn't going to be any wind, she would go straight home and have a siesta.

On the terrace of the Greek Club. A towering melt of an afternoon, and everyone red and irritable and not talking.

—Don't go, we all said.

The table was full of leftovers. The flies were looping and figure-eighting and landing cleanly on the rims of the wine glasses. It was only two o'clock.

Millie said —No, I'll go. I'm just about through with today. I expected great things from today, but I am just about through with it.

The screaming started as she was speaking. Down on the square of beach there was a lady in a swimsuit and sarong and a floppy sunhat, running to and from the edge of the water. We stood at the railing to watch. She took high steps in the deep sand, like one of those jittery dancing horses. She was pointing into the harbour, the broad scoop of walled sea and its herds of sleeping boats.

—What's going on? someone said. People moved towards the rail, curious, mumbling, wiping the corners of their mouths with white napkins.

The shape in the water was fifty meters out and looked like a fishing buoy. It turned slowly, was tugged from beneath, it seemed, so that it disappeared and reappeared and disappeared again.

An arm came up beside the shape. An elegant movement, a swan's neck rising from the surface.

—That’s some old guy drowning, someone said.

Millie Fingerhut, who had been fooling around with her Ouija board all year, said —I knew it, I knew it, I said something big was going to happen today, didn’t I? Didn’t I say, Ben?

The waiters went running and tripping over the sand. A couple of them dropped their trousers at the waterline and plunged as cleanly as dolphins into the water.

—The board said it, clear as day, something big, said Millie.

She was white in the blue shadow of the terrace. Years of sun lay deep under her skin, submerged freckles, pigment stainings. None of us knew her real age.

—Those waiters sure can swim, someone said.

They laid the old man on the beach while he caught his breath. Then they returned him to his family on the terrace. The woman with the hat was his daughter. She wasn’t at all surprised, she told everyone. She hated to see her old papa paddle so far out, but he had been doing it for sixty years and he wouldn’t listen, whatever you said to him. Someone draped a towel over his shoulders. He didn’t say anything, only shook and dripped water from his chin, and stared at his family with a look of wasp-stung shock and wonder and outrage.

—Well, said Millie, that wasn’t so very exciting after all.

Ben Fingerhut sat up and said —You didn’t get your *something big*, dear. That board isn’t always right.

—I thought that old man would go under. I was expecting something fate-altering, a death would have been fate-altering, said Millie.

—He was lucky those two waiters were such good swimmers.

—You sure as hell weren’t going to get in the water. You are the Cowardly Lion himself around water.

—You know, there is a curious precedent to this near-drowning, said Ben.

—What do you mean?

—Well, I am thinking of Julius Caesar, of course.

—Oh no. Oh no you don't, said Millie.

—I'm sure not everyone has heard the story.

—Oh no you don't, said Mille.

Ben turned to the rest of the table. He said —A little more than two thousand years ago, Julius Caesar was fighting for his life in Alexandria. And he jumped into the water just about here. A stone's throw from where we are sitting. Amazing, huh?

He was at the head of the table. We all turned to listen.

—Caesar beat the crap out of Pompey, in the civil war, and Pompey escaped in a boat, thinking he could have another go at it. You know, make a comeback. But Pompey arrived here at Alexandria and got his head chopped off for his trouble, and when Caesar finally caught up with him, expecting a fight, the locals, the wily old Ptolemies, served Pompey's head up to him. On a platter, as it were.

—Charming, said Millie. She stared at the fish carcasses. There were three of them on the table. White combs, the silk gowns of their skins thrown off, wrinkled on the oval plates. At the Greek Club they served them with their heads on.

—Well, said Ben, the beheading displeased Caesar mightily.

—This story displeases me very mightily, said Millie. It must be about the hundred-and-tenth time I've heard it.

Ben turned to the girl on his right.

—Pompey was Caesar's son-in-law after all, so receiving his head on arrival was a shock, and embarrassing.

—Family fights are the worst, said someone.

Millie reached for a bottle of wine, her face shining, grim around the mouth.

—Caesar wept, apparently, said Ben

—I feel like weeping, God help me.

Millie poured the wine for herself. She used one of the big water glasses. She spilled a little onto the tablecloth. A waiter

came to help, but she waved him off, her bracelets clapping at her wrist.

—Caesar demanded the return of all the money that Rome had lent the Alexandrians. And I guess he threw his weight around a bit, to show how he was displeased.

—I am displeased, said Millie, I am very displeased. Is this going to take all afternoon?

The sunken echo of her voice in the glass.

—And the Ptolemies were arguing amongst themselves at the time, so that complicated things further. Caesar chose to support the young and beautiful Cleopatra against one of her brothers. So, you see, a fight became inevitable. And Caesar was in trouble, he had only the men he arrived with, and a small Italian militia that was posted here. When the Ptolemies marched on Alexandria they came with twenty thousand foot and cavalry. They surrounded him here, at this bay.

We looked across the bay. From the terrace of the Greek Club you could see the swiipe of the city, crumbling, itching with traffic, all the way to the opposing promontory. The water had the brassy sluggish indifference of the windless day. It had already forgotten that old man's struggling and splashing.

—Over there (pointing towards the opposing promontory) was where Caesar was camped out, in the palace compound. Over here, where we are now, was the island of Pharos and its famous lighthouse. This restaurant sits on what was once a sliver of land that ran between the island and the light. Caesar was cut off from it by the Alexandrian forces, which were ultimately controlled by Pothinius, the eunuch.

—Ha! Eunuchs! said Millie, don't talk to me about eunuchs.

Ben leant back in his chair and his eyes disappeared behind the flash of his glasses.

—Are you going to bitch like this all day? he said. He pushed his glasses up his nose. He was sweating. His glasses slid down

again. —Because I am not sure that I could stand it if you are, I'm really not sure at all.

Millie pulled her head back to look at him, like she was examining a complicated menu.

—Oh hark! she said, oh hark at Benjamin! He cannot stand it, he says. Well get used to it, Benny Boy, 'cos I'm not sitting here and listening to you tell that crappy Caesar story again. None of us here is interested, are we kiddos?

*

A little older than most of us, the Fingerhuts. And had lived in the city for a couple of decades, teaching English at the kind of schools that struggled for a few years, and then got turned into apartments or a hostel or a creche.

Ben Fingerhut was head of English at the Lotus School of Languages. Two floors of a sand-colored block in Chatby. From his classroom he looked out over the British Protestant Cemetery and thought of the time when the city's foreigners died in great numbers, enough to have cemeteries of their own.

He was from New York. She said she was from Boston. She screwed her vowels like a Kennedy. Once, when she was introducing herself to someone as a Bostonian and talking like a Kennedy, Ben leant into the conversation to say that she was *actually* from a place called Buttfuck Nowhere, quite a long way from the city, and that he doubted, *actually*, that she had been to the city more than a dozen times.

She slapped his glasses sidewise, his crooked face was further derailed, and he said, *Ouuuch my darling ouuuch*.

They never intended to stay. But years ago, when they landed from somewhere and were supposed to move on, something about the place put them in a heroic mood. They decided to live there a while, and marry.

There was no Jew to perform the ceremony in Alexandria.

They took the train to Cairo and were married on a smoky autumn night in the synagogue on Adly Street.

She was a Bogoraz. The name Fingerhut, she said, was a sideways move. She took the name because it would make the paperwork easier, but, really, she was still a Bogoraz.

She told you all this while Ben looked on. His flexing smile. Her minor betrayals amused him.

Their parties were famous. They were never announced. Maybe once a week, usually a Thursday or Friday night, Ben and Millie led chains of people to their apartment on Saleh Salem Street. Back from the Cap D'Or or Spitfire or Elite, which were their drinking places. They picked up stragglers on the way. Word got out. Or people heard the splinters of drunken conversation from the balcony and looked up to see the firefly drift of cigarettes, and ran up the stairs to try the door.

Scroungers arrived late, without beer or wine. Millie turned them around by the shoulders and slammed the door on them. *We've got enough of your kind in here already.* It didn't matter who it was.

It was once the deputy governor of Alexandria, the story went. Or, it was once Omar Sharif, was another version.

She was stringy and pale and powerful in her long body. She wore tight sleeveless dresses that showed the dark scurry of veins, the narrow muscle. She spoke, and the streamers of her strong arms trailed the air, up and down. A cigarette jimmied into the corner of her mouth. At night she wore kohl, her years were pooled around her eyes and their banks of powder, when she squinted there was a leathery silent batlike folding.

She looked you up and down, appraising. Then from behind the tumbling smoke, the flash of judgment. *You don't say? How absolutely and tremendously un fascinating.*

Her look flat and black as her hair. The local hairdressers were Frenchified and tried to give her a pompadour, she hated all that. She got Ben to cut her fringe straight across her fore-

head, and then she dyed it jet for her Cleopatra style. The plastic curtain that ran around the Fingerhuts' bathtub was glyphed and daubed with black dye.

He thought she could be more careful with the bottle. She threw the bottle at him and told him he needed it more than she did.

—The way you're letting yourself go. Your hair was the best thing about you. With you it was all about the hair, really, nothing else.

True, it was drying and bleaching like hay. Ben combed it forwards from the oily circle at the crown. The plain style bugged her, she used to drive her hand into it to rough it up.

—Why do you wear your hair like a waiter?

In good light his long dented broken face was noble enough. When it wasn't opened by his sloppy grin. And down at the Montazah beach, where they lay around like lizards on Sundays, when he got up from his lounge and trailed his towel over his shoulder like a toga, the thin legs pushing him to his long-boned stoop, people turned to look as if he was a senator preparing to speak.

They knew everyone. If Millie wanted to know you she approached and said —Excuse me, were you trying to attract my attention?

She smelt of wine and smoke and lemons. Some guy she had been talking to came frowning to pull her away.

I turned to Bertrand, who worked at the French consulate. He and his wife Sylvie thought the city was a kind of hell. Bertrand said —That was Millie, your hostess. And over there is her husband, Benjamin. My advice to you is to keep them at a distance.

—So why do you hang around with them, *mon ami*?

We were *amis* already, as much as we would ever be. Bertrand shrugged his round shoulders. He was only thirty, but his cheeks hung around his mouth and there was a glossy pudding under his chin.

—Because there is nothing else going on most of the time, but the Fingerhuts.

—This city is dead, quite dead, said Sylvie.

*

Not everybody wanted to know the Fingerhuts. They were trouble, up close. Bertrand and Sylvie knew everything. Someone was once stabbed on their balcony, and nearly died. Millie, a week after her fortieth birthday, paid for an illicit abortion in Cairo. She had one every couple of years. Ben Fingerhut was an Israeli spy, he was only pretending to be a klutz and a dreamer. Or maybe Millie was the spy and Ben the clueless patsy. There were no decent parties in the city any more, but the Fingerhuts at least tried. The thing was to go to their parties and then forget them. Bertrand had dark tracks carved under his eyes. Sylvie was afraid of germs and waited at doors for someone to open them for her. Her mouth turned down at the corners, she looked mean but she was terrified of everything.

I met the Fingerhuts again, on Saad Zaghoul. They were peering into a shop window and disagreeing about something they saw there. Ben had his arm in a sling. He chopped the air with his good hand. Under the coils of her white turban Millie was placidly superior, her nose lifted.

—Hello, I said, stopping behind them.

Millie turned and shielded her eyes with her hand and looked me up and down, squinting.

—I was at your party a couple of weeks ago, I said.

Millie brought her cigarette to her lips.

—Well, I hope you'll come along to the next one, Ben said, turning away.

Millie looked me up and down again.

—Well . . . I said.

—What do you think of these shoes? said Millie. She wag-

gled her cigarette towards the window. —The ones at the end there, first row.

The window was full of shoes. The ones she pointed to were black, snub-toed, with a tall heel and a buckle.

—Nice, I said.

—There, see. Nice, he says. I'm getting them, anyway, whatever the pair of you think.

When she went into the shop Ben kicked at the grit of the pavement and turned to lean against the glass.

—They're bloody witches shoes, she's going to look a hag in them.

—I did think they were a bit witchy, I said.

—Well, whyever didn't you say so? Now she's going to go around in them like a hag.

—I don't know much about shoes, really.

—Neither does she, that's the whole point. That is the *whole point*.

There was a blood spot on the white of his eye. When Millie came out of the shop she was smiling, swinging a plastic bag. She said to me —Why don't you come by early tonight? People always come too late. And bring beer.

*

You could be with the Fingerhuts and know that you didn't have to be there; that was an attraction. Whatever Ben and Millie did they could do without you. It was weeks before they knew my name. There was sometimes a light in their eyes, a kind of sunken treasure glint that made you think they were at play, some sad and complicated game, with diminishing enjoyment and the shadow of an end approaching, their lives pulled out, hand by desperate hand, from a dressing-up box.

Everything a show. The heavy and oversized contents of their apartment. Their landlord's furniture, dark and ungainly,

and their vases and rugs, the ferns and the unfashionable ruffled silk of their lamps and the worn Turkish carpet with its animal tracks criss-crossing. Ben propped, at their parties, on the broad arm of the leather couch, a hand tucked against his ribs, a giant grey-barred bird of the night.

He talked, and people filled his glass. Millie watched the door. Her cats ran out of it, scattering from the tramping feet. Later, she went out to the balcony. There were potted palms and cat litter trays and drying clothes. She drank straight from the bottle, observed the street life. The seabed trundle of the small hours, the sweet potato sellers and the strolling *bowabs* and the shuffle of the beggars through the slow roll of traffic.

She had affairs most years. They were short and passionate, they flared up like toothache. Sometimes she brought a man to the quiet end of the balcony, where the single dusty bulb couldn't reach. When she returned to the press of the living room her lipstick was worn away and it was a game then to see whose face it was left on. Ben never complained. He was caught on the roof of one of his schools with a secretary, a married lady who wore the veil and had two grown children. A doctor's wife in the building next door, watering her plants, saw them disturbing each other's clothing and threatened to call the police. Sometimes it was a teacher, or a maid. Bertrand and Sylvie knew everything.

—He's as bad as her, really he is, said Sylvie.

But there are people you want to love, despite everything. They seemed above things. Each discounted the world so easily you had to know how they did it.

Once, watching Millie come back from the balcony with her lipstick gone, Ben said —Which one do you think it is?

Contemplative, drunk, the room full of shuffling dancers.

—That guy over there by the sideboard, I said.

He was tall, young, with a scimitar of a nose that made his eyes look small. Pouring himself a glass of gin and monitoring us

tensely from the corner of his eye, like a dog guarding its food.

—I think you are correct, said Ben.

—Don't you mind at all?

He sighed. Nothing was said for a while. Then —Not at all. Not the thing itself. Only that it has to happen again and again for all eternity.

*

He began to call me in the afternoons. —Come on over, let's have a drink.

Their apartment, in daylight, was grimy and foul-smelling. The spore of the ashtrays and stale booze. The cats added to it, not all of them used the litter trays on the balcony.

Millie didn't like the sun. She did her best with the shutters but the place was always knifed by blades of golden teeming light. Without the crowd of a party the apartment was roomy, oversized, and we sat on the giant furniture between the bars of sunlight and talked and drank.

Millie wore a blue silk kimono in the afternoons. The Fingerhuts' maid did vegetable soups and cheese and tomato sandwiches. After we ate, Millie would go to her room to lie down. Ben put a bottle of gin on the table and rang the store for tonic and ice. If there was going to be a party the maid got the salon ready for the evening, moving the Fingerhuts' best ornaments into their spare bedroom. There was a lot of brass and heavy ormolu and watery-painted pottery

The longest wall of the room was lined with books. Ben talked about things he had read, or politics or music or other people. He kept a record player by the drinks cabinet, and took the records out of their sleeves and twirled them between his palms and dropped them onto the platter. He tapped his long foot to the music. Charlie Parker. Duke Ellington. Art Blakey. He could go on for long minutes at a time about a certain chord

change. He could be boring while he was being interesting. He knew things, had an angle on everything. He had been around, he said, for a very long time.

Around sunset Millie came out, puffy-eyed. If one of her affairs was going well she would laugh and drink. Other times, she just asked us where we were going to eat and found ways to hate the idea.

The Fingerhuts preferred to have dinner out. At Elite it was entrecote or *kibda iskandarani*. At the Cap D'Or they ordered plates of *besaria* and lined them up along the table. Their tables were always full, the Fingerhuts knew everyone. People sat down to talk for a while. When they left other people took their places. Nobody stayed long, as if they were measuring their exposure. Ben tilted his head back and dropped the little fried fish into his mouth.

A few of us, always, were there at the end. We were all drifting. We were close, talking loudly around midnight, and isolate as sea wrack.

Bertrand said to me one evening —Sylvie thinks you should change your name to Billie.

—Oh?

—Ben and Millie, Billie, you see? She thinks you're spending too much time with them. That they are a bad influence.

—In what way?

—I don't know. That you will end up not caring about anything, like the Fingerhuts.

—But that's exactly why I like them.

—That is their appeal, I agree. But Sylvie thinks you're in trouble.

—What do *you* think?

—I think Sylvie is right, of course. You spend far too much time with them. But what else is there going on in this hole, but the Fingerhuts?

Ben started something with Liza Zayed. Whose father was an industrialist. Liza was rich and twice divorced, and had the kind of beauty that goldenly resides on the surface of power. Austere, hammered expensively to greatness.

Her family was old, she was related to King Farouk. She was a patron of the arts. She intended to work with Ben on the establishment of a literary review for original works in English and translations from Arabic. The title was yet to be decided. Ben ran the proposals by us. Sylvie rolled her eyes. She thought Liza Zayed had found a clever way to fool around.

Liza never attended the Fingerhuts' parties. Ben was seen with her at the Opera House and the Four Seasons. Bertrand and Sylvie knew everything. Ben and Liza were seen on the corniche, holding hands. At Delices they shared a millefeuille and Liza brushed some of the icing from the corner of his mouth with a paper napkin. Liza's industrialist father was outraged. He offered Ben money to disappear, vamoose. But Ben was too noble for that.

—And, of course, he's making a mistake, said Bertrand.

—He is worse than she is, said Sylvie.

—Why? I said.

—Because he is not playing by the rules. It's not a secretary with kids or some teacher. It's not make-believe anymore.

—Then what is it?

—It's real.

—Isn't everything real?

—Not the Fingerhuts. The Fingerhuts aren't real.

I talked to Ben one afternoon. Millie was asleep in the bedroom. The maid was carrying a bronze of Zeus and Hera down the corridor. I asked him straight out. He was affronted, in the murk of salon he gasped and showed the round gloss of his eyes.

—Well, I said, that's what people are saying.

He folded himself on the couch and put his fingers in his ears and said,

—I will pretend I did not hear that. There are some things . . . there are some things. . . .

*

At the parties, the Ouija board was the last thing. Millie waited until the place was almost empty before she brought it out. Six was a good number. And both sexes, for a sharper connection to the spirit world. She switched off the lights and lit a pair of red twisty Christmas candles and pulled chairs together. Everybody sat with part of the board on their knees.

She warned us about the negative energies. You kept them away by thought alone. It was a matter of having the right attitude. Then she prepared herself to call up the dead. Her fingers on the planchette were heavily jewelled. The sun had laid down wrinkles, her hands were tracked and rutted over the knuckles and slick jumping ball of the thumb. She pushed the planchette around the board, warming it up.

If you weren't right for it she told you to go. —Sit this one out, darl. You've got the wrong attitude, you're fucking up my atmosphere.

When the room was quiet she raised her chin a notch and closed her eyes. The person she spoke to most was Ahmose, once a priestess to Queen Twosret, who lived more than three thousand years ago. The formal waver of Millie's séance voice —Tonight we are gathered to summon Ahmose, loyal servant to Queen Twosret, Daughter of Re, beloved of Amun. We entreat you to join us, Ahmose, at your convenience.

Ahmose answered through the trundling planchette. Zig-zags, circles and loops, wide orbits of the board. Millie asked the questions.

Have we disturbed you? Are you content? Can you move on, or

are you trapped in this universe?

The planchette moved, our hands piled on it. Millie's were always at the bottom. She had strong arms.

Then it was our turn to ask a question. Our eyes were closed. Millie kept an eye open to make sure there was no fooling around.

Ben said, one night —Oh most holy Ahmose, would you be so kind as to spell fuchsia for us?

It was one of Millie's favourite shrubs, but she could never spell it.

The planchette stopped moving. Millie said —Ahmose, priestess to the Queen, I have a better question. Tell me, have I met my eternal partner?

There was a struggle, somewhere, in the pile of hands. We all felt it. The planchette rolled towards the 'N'.

Ben stood. Everything was broken up. Only Millie's hands were left on the planchette. It was rolling slowly towards the 'O'.

He left the room without saying goodnight. Millie said loudly, turning her head towards the corridor he had gone down —He thinks he is the fucking *omphalos*, that's what he thinks, but he's the *omphalos* of nothing, nothing at all.

Later, when we were all leaving, she grabbed me by the belt and told me to stay. She went into her bedroom, where Ben was sleeping, and came out in the blue kimono she wore in the afternoons. She sat in one of the armchairs, the kimono open at the front.

It was dark without the candles, there was only the thin grey wash from the balcony. Between the falls of silk, luminescent skin. The half-smile of her breast before it went under the lapel.

—He's hardly touched me for months, she said.

—I'm sorry, I said.

—Come and sit over here, next to me.

There was no room on her chair. There was only her lap.

I didn't move. She got up and walked out of the room. Then she came back and said,

—You needn't think he's your friend. Nobody need think that. And I'm not even sure we're married. I don't think that guy down in Cairo was a proper rabbi, and I sure as hell don't remember signing any papers. You can let yourself out.

She went down the corridor to her bedroom and closed the door.

*

Pharos, was what Ben and Liza Zayed called their review. Millie thought it was unimaginative. There must have been thousands of reviews called after that old lighthouse. There was only one issue. Ben contributed an essay on Cavafy's holiday in Greece. Liza disappeared while the second issue was being planned, and when she reappeared she was engaged to one of the board members of Banque du Caire, whose first wife had died on the Cairo-Alexandria road.

—A terrible crash, said Ben.

We were sitting in the salon while Millie took her siesta.

—A head-on collision. The chauffeur survived somehow, and is in prison for it. I see the whole business as a reminder that our lives are governed by disaster. Millie told me you tried to seduce her, by the way. At the last séance.

—Well . . . I said.

—Of course I don't believe her. She is disgustingly honest in everything but that stuff. It's the only thing she lies about.

—Why do you two stick it out? I said.

—Millie thinks the Liza thing was a crossing of the Rubicon. Now she's going to have to fight me to the death.

—What's the point of that?

—What else is there to do?

—You could find other people.

He had a lopsided smile, an inheritance from his grandfather, who had been called "Moony Fingerhut" on account of the crescent shape of his face.

That afternoon at the Greek Club. Bertrand, Sylvie, Ben and Millie, and a girl whose name I didn't get.

The table went quiet as the waiters cleared the leftovers away. Millie ordered a gin and tonic to have with her wine. Sylvie said she had the beginnings of a headache and would like to go home. Bertrand and Sylvie were already thinking of their next posting. China, maybe, or India. For weeks our conversations had been empty rooms, luggage tags. It was something like a wind abating, what we all felt then.

Ben said —So Caesar is surrounded over there (pointing to the opposing promontory). He is camped out in the Palace and he holds the Theatre and a little of the Eastern Harbour wall, where his fleet is at anchor. He is under siege.

—I thought you were finished with that, said Millie.

—There are a couple of skirmishes. Caesar manages to burn some of the Alexandrian fleet. And then the first of his reinforcements begin to arrive. Their ships get blown past the harbour entrance and Caesar manages to go out there and tow them in.

—Whoop-di-doo, tralalalala tralalalala. Somebody pass that bottle, there's no need to hog it down there.

—And then he makes a decisive move. He comes here, to where we are sitting. He rounds this little headland with his boats and his forces attack from both sides. Success. Pharos is his. He makes the island his headquarters.

Millie grabbed one of the passing waiters by the belt. He turned, surprised. She jabbed her finger towards the empty bottle of wine.

—What came next is generally known as the Battle of the Dyke.

—I wouldn't mind so much if you could tell a story. You've never been able to tell a story.

—The island of Pharos was connected to the mainland by the Heptastadion, a long causeway built by the Ptolemies. Hepta, meaning seven. Stadion, a unit of length used by the Greeks.

—Benny dear, look at their bored little faces. Do you think they want a lecture in this heat?

—There were some arches built into this causeway, and the Ptolemies were using them to travel between the Western and Eastern harbours, to harry Caesar's troops. The first thing Caesar did was to block the arches up. In this, he was successful, and put a stop to the Alexandrians' maneuvers. But then he tried to force his way into the city, and that was a disaster.

—What is it about Caesar? You got a crush on the guy? He wasn't so hot in the end, was he? Got himself stabbed in the back, the dummy.

—Caesar threw too many troops into the battle for the city. They marched down the Heptastadion and were held by the Alexandrians. And then the Alexandrians, realising Caesar was vulnerable in the rear, attacked him there, causing a general panic.

—Vulnerable in the rear.

—Discipline was thrown aside. Caesar's men ran for the boats, looking to escape back to the Palace. Some of the boats were overloaded, and capsized. Caesar's boat was one of them, he was forced to jump into the water and swim to safety. He must have been close to drowning, he discarded his purple robe and the Alexandrians found it and took it as a trophy. The Romans lost around 800 soldiers, and the Alexandrians recaptured the Heptastadion.

—What a fuck up. No wonder you love the guy. One fuck up loves another, it's the oldest story in the book. Christ, I'm sick of you, I really am. You needn't bother coming home tonight, I'll be entertaining.

Ben said —Millie, you're being rude.

—I'll tell you what's rude. Do you want to know what's rude,

children? Throwing your wife over for a society bitch who can hardly spell her own name. I would say that's pretty rude.

Ben dipped his head, blinked at his beer.

—And do you know what's ruder still? Crawling back to your wife when the bitch kicks you to the curb. That is the height or rude, I would say.

Ben said —You know what I would never do, children? I would never invite a lover to a bar where I was eating with my spouse, and have him sit at the counter so I could look at him as I stuffed my face.

The girl to Ben's right leant forward and said,

—What happened to Caesar? That wasn't the end, surely?

Ben stared over the bay.

—Ben, surely Caesar won the Alexandrian war? she said.

—The Alexandrian war was finally resolved outside the city.

Hardly more than a whisper, and unthinking, as if he knew the words by heart. —When more of Caesar's reinforcements arrived from the south they were intercepted by the Alexandrians. In the ensuing battle Ptolemy XIV was drowned in the Nile, and Caesar, who had joined the fray, returned victorious to the city, and his waiting Cleopatra.

—Oh yes, I was sure he won, said the girl.

Millie, leaning past her, said —Then he went back to Rome and got himself killed, the dummy, the stupid, useless, worthless dummy, and Cleopatra came back here to have a good time with Mark Anthony. Three cheers for Cleo.

Ben took a couple of hundred *guinay* notes from his wallet and slid them under his wine glass. His chair scraped loudly as he stood.

—Now where do you think you're going? said Millie.

He placed his wallet on the table. Then he took off his watch and left it beside his wallet.

—Oh, I see. Now we want to put on a show. A lecture wasn't

enough, you're going to treat us to a little opera.

—Goodbye, Millie, he said.

On the way off the terrace he shook hands with the three waiters standing by the door and kissed the manager on both cheeks.

The table was silent. A waiter arrived with a bottle of wine and Millie slid her glass over the cloth. —Fill her up, why don't you?

The waiter filled her glass and went around the table with the bottle. Sylvie, by the balcony rail, pointed to the beach.

—Isn't that Ben down there?

We went to the rail. Ben was walking into the water, kicking through the shallows. He did not stop to remove his shoes or his jeans. Halfway across the friendly turquoise already, heading for the deeper blue.

—He's going for a swim with his clothes on, said Sylvie.

Millie, still at the table, squinted to light her cigarette. —He won't get far, he can hardly swim.

—He's going out quite a way, said Bertrand.

—He's swimming now, said the girl.

We saw his grey head low in the water. The flash of his hands milling the surface. He was a scrappy paddler, jerky, stiff-necked. His legs, weighted with his jeans and shoes, trailed in the jelly of the water.

—He's a long way out, said Bertrand.

Millie sighed. —He'll be turning around about now, I would say, right about now.

—He doesn't look very comfortable, the way he's flapping around like that, said the girl.

—Well, what am I supposed to do about it?

Millie didn't turn her head, but I saw the nervy roll of her eye towards the railing and the sea, the filter of the cigarette balanced on her lip.

Sylvie said —Oh, I think he's in trouble. I mean, he's got all

those clothes on, and it looks so deep out there. . . . Millie, I'm sure Ben's in trouble.

—Where is he, the idiot? said Millie, coming to the railing.

—Out there, past that blue boat.

Thrashing, his arms breaking the surface, the long dish of his face tilted to the sky.

—Oh, said Millie, Oh my.

She turned and ran down the terrace, shouting for the manager —Hossam! Hossam!

We followed Millie and the manager and the waiters to the beach. Ben seemed more distant from there. The head, the ribs of water rising, weakly collapsing, like a garden fountain.

The waiters didn't want to go into the water again. They smiled, as if to say that history, if it must repeat itself, would never turn over so quickly.

Millie shouted —You don't understand, he can hardly swim, he'll drown, he'll drown.

—We'd better go in, said Bertrand. He was unbuttoning his shirt and levering himself out of his shoes, wobbling in deep sand. The waiters put their arms out for our clothes.

The memory of winter in the sea, the deeper currents came up to us as we went out. We made for the shoots and spurts of water. There were weedy anchor ropes to go around, and the slapping bellies of the boats. I was surprised to feel something brush my foot, and I turned to see Millie powering forwards with her upright breaststroke. Her mouth was clamped shut and she was breathing through her nose. As we neared Ben she passed us.

Ben saw us coming. He turned in the water to wait. His mouth was under. He seemed very calm, looking at us. Then he went still and blinked a couple of times and disappeared beneath the surface.

—Oh, said Bertrand, Oh my god.

Millie, ahead of us. Where her hair was dry it trembled on

the beat of her kicks. Over her shoulders it was glossy, streaming. She rolled, there was a flash of her tucked rear, her pointed feet went down straight.

I tried to follow her. She was deep, a pale flicker in the shadows. When I got back to the surface Bertrand was swimming in a circle, dipping his head into the water.

—I see them down there, I see them, he said.

I dived again, and saw the Fingerhuts together, slowly revolving, down where the water was black ink and the clouds of silt drifted the grey bottom. Too deep, I rose.

—No way, I said.

Their return became a legend for us. The slow rise through the water (Bertrand shouting, slapping the surface, *I see them, I see them*). It took hours, days, weeks, an eternity. They held hands and their feet worked beautifully, like Atlantans. Ben had lost his shoes or kicked them off. They came up from the dark and into the upper mists. Ben's summer shirt rippled in the green bend of the light. Her dress glistening like fish skin. They broke through the surface and he was obedient, rolling onto his back, half-conscious, and Milly hooked him under the chin with her arm and began to pull him back to shore.

The waiters helped her bring him out. They laid him on the sand and turned him on his side and he coughed the sea out of his lungs. The manager sent a waiter to fetch his old Peugeot. Sylvie clasped Bertrand and wept with joy and horror. The terrace railing was crowded. People clapped and shouted out prayers as the waiters carried Ben over the beach. We followed them through the empty downstairs of the club. The car waited at the front door. Ben groaned as they curled him onto the back seat. Millie got in beside him. I went to open the passenger door but she put her hand out. —No, you stay, you stay, she said.

The engine started after a couple of tries and we watched the car bounce and weave along the road.

The Fingerhuts left the city the following month. As with their parties, they made no announcement. They gave a forwarding address to their *bowab*, a school in Kuala Lumpur. The Bunga Raya Institute of the English Language. I sent a letter but received no reply.

Their apartment was taken on by a young French couple, acquaintances of Bertrand and Sylvie. We called around to the place, Bertrand and I, and found that their clothes were gone and a couple of pictures were taken off the wall. Everything else remained. Ben's record collection, their books and pottery, the heavy ornaments and old newspapers and drawers full of receipts and creased photographs.

Millie's Ouija board lay folded on a shelf in the sideboard. The French girl who lived there didn't like it. Bertrand took it and dropped it in a bin on Saleh Salem Street.

Years later, in London, I met someone who had briefly known the Fingerhuts in Singapore. They had moved there after Kuala Lumpur. They had caused a stir, apparently, in the expatriate community. The woman who had known them did not give details, only raised an eyebrow and, examining me closely, said—How do *you* know the Fingerhuts?

More years later, I received a letter from Ben. He got my address from Bertrand and Sylvie, who were living in Washington. They ran into him in New York, outside Bergdorfs. He covered both sides of six pages in his leaping, unstable hand.

A crazy, wonderful letter. After Singapore there was the Stella College in Kuala Kangsar, the Alpha School of English in Brunei and the Highlands Academy of Port Moresby. *We got about as far east as we could go*, he wrote, *without heading west. That's the problem of living on a globe.*

They stayed for a year in San Francisco and were Americans

again. Millie left Ben for a defrocked priest and unsuccessful poet. All this was true, all this was real. The priest-poet was more sound than he at first appeared. Ben had considered him a friend, and still did.

They were apart for years, but when Millie got sick they reunited for her last days. Ben always knew they would. They rented a house in upstate New York. He was glad to be there at the end. Her hands were so light he couldn't feel the weight of them. She accused him of keeping her prisoner, and cried whenever he left the room. There was nobody like her, nor would there ever be. He often thought of his times in Alexandria and other places. He missed the heat, or the kind of heat you get next to a warm green sea.

And I thought it strange, that it ended that way. I had assumed Ben would go first. Millie nursing him into frailty, and then oblivion. But, of course, that his how I remember them on the beach below the Greek Club.

Ben's head resting in her lap. The tongue of sand on her dress. The weed of her hair hanging over his face. The waiters standing around them and the clapping from the balcony. And her words as the air crept into his blood and his eyes searched for something in the empty sky —Don't go my lover. My lover, my lover, my Caesar.

SUSAN TAYLOR CHEHAK

Nestled In

It sits on a small rise of lawn at the end of the block, towering over the neighborhood like a mother in her chair holding her baby in her arms, rocking him to sleep while the other, older children gather at her feet, gazing up at her, enraptured by her plenty. She's their mother and her love for them is unconditional, made manifest in her eyes, her lips, her breasts, her hands. At least that's how Irma sees it, and she ought to know because it's her establishment, The Nestled Inn Bed and Breakfast, offering comfort and respite to weary travelers. It's a home away from home where, as her ad in the town paper says, "Every moment counts."

Right now the place shines. If Irma was to step outside and stand there in the street as though she was just another tourist who doesn't belong here in this place at this time, if she could look at it as if it was all new and unfamiliar to her, then maybe she'd be able to pull back the curtain of gloom that has been blurring her vision lately, just enough for her to see what you would see. The warm, yellow glow in the windows and the twinkle of tiny lights suspended from the rails and the eaves all around the porch. Cars pulling away from the curb one by one, heading off for the more genuine comfort of a home of their own. Snow has begun to fall, and so now what we have is a postcard, a winter watercolor, a scenario that might just be too perfect to be true.

Go on, then, and creep up onto the porch. Sidle over to the window. Cup your hands around your face like a curious child and peer inside. Look beyond the fairy-tale façade to discover your own vision of the wretched woman who abides within. She's a scrawny old thing with a limp, bad hips, aching knuckles, swollen joints. Her hair is long and gray, just witchy enough for the children of the neighborhood to have labeled her and passed

around dark stories that keep their younger siblings sleeping with the door open and the light on, just in case. Her jewelry isn't the real thing, but it glints against the pallor of her flesh as if it was, because she's fancied herself up today for the ladies' tea party that's just ended.

She knows they talk about her, those women with their fancy dresses and their styled hair and their pretty shoes. Once upon a time they might have been her friends, but now, she knows, they smile and shake their heads to see what she's become. Irma Bates, not an old maid, not even a widow, but a hoary hag nevertheless, unloved and alone.

Night has folded itself over this house now, the music has stopped, the guests are gone, and here this woman sits, the only living creature inside the Nestled Inn. For the moment all is quiet, but there will be overnight guests arriving soon, and she should be busy clearing up the mess in the dining room and the kitchen before they get here. Just now, though, she'd rather not. Irma prefers to wait a bit and relax. She's fixed an evening toddy—vodka with cherry bitters, over ice—and plopped herself down in the chair by the window, where she can be soothed by the gentle wafting of the snow outside. A ceramic deer gazes back at her from the moonlit yard across the street. She'll make a note to refill the birdfeeders on the porch in the morning. The grandfather clock in the front hall chimes the hour, and now she's beginning to wonder whether maybe tonight's guests won't show up after all. The reservations have been paid in advance, no refunds, so that might be more than just fine with Irma, if it wasn't for the emptiness of the dark night still to come.

But now, even as that melancholy thought has crossed her mind, a surge of white light glares against the windowpanes and headlights scan the room. One car door closes and then another, followed by the thump of footsteps on the porch. As the doorbell chimes the first measure of "Joy to the World," Irma is putting on

a smile and struggling to her feet. She pulls her fingers through the tangles of her hair, squares her shoulders as best she can, and opens the door to see, standing there side by side with the twinkle lights framing them against a background curtain of snow, a man, tall and thin, in a gray wool coat of apparent quality, and a girl, also thin though not so tall as he. Her face is pale, her hair is black, and the pink beret askew on her head matches her corduroy coat. Her cheeks are rosy and her lips are full, but a weak chin and that snaggle-toothed smile betray what beauty she might otherwise possess.

Irma finds she must revise her expectations. She's been under the impression that this reservation was for a couple with a child, and yet the man is alone, and the girl is not exactly a child. She looks to be somewhere in her teens. Late teens. Maybe even early twenties.

Irma holds the door open for them and the girl steps inside. The man takes off his hat as he follows her into the foyer.

"Mr. Smith, is it?" Irma asks, and he smiles and nods. She turns to the girl, but her attention has been captivated by the contents of the inn: all the doodads and the knickknacks, the antique furniture, the cushions and the candlesticks—what Irma's husband, if she had a husband, might have judged to be a hoarder's unfettered clutter. The girl's mouth is hanging open slightly, her lips glisten, her eyes are wide with child-like wonder. She helps herself to a peppermint from the crystal candy dish on the table, pops it into her mouth, and buries it in her cheek.

Mr. Smith is watching her, as if to see what Irma might be seeing, and quickly he asserts, to quell any doubts his hostess might have, "My daughter. Dolly." The girl nods, confirming this is so.

"All right!" Irma exclaims and nods her head, maybe too eagerly. And, "This way, then," as she heads for the stairs. She has one hand on the newel post when she stops and turns to

study the pair of them again, as if she might be having second thoughts. They gaze back at her, both of them, side by side, and Irma supposes that now she can see an inkling of family resemblance between the two, and the girl slips her small hand into her daddy's larger fist as if to prove it. He shifts and lets loose a glint of smile.

"What is it?" he asks.

Irma clears her throat. "Well," she says, "wouldn't you like to bring your bags in first?" A reasonable question, she thinks. Save another trip up and down the stairs, at least.

But he shakes his head. "Oh. No. Let's see what we've got first." He steps toward her. "If that's all right?"

She nods and points the way up the narrow staircase. "Yes, of course. Go on then. It's just there at the top, the first room to the left and the one across from it, to the right, with the bathroom in between."

The girl pulls her hand away from his and slips up the stairs ahead of her dad. He smiles again and gives Irma a look and a shrug. He winks then, as if they share a secret of some kind, but she's not quite sure just what that secret is.

*

Mr. Smith has approved of the rooms and fetched his bag from the car, and Irma is in the kitchen, placing the last of the cups and saucers from the tea party in the dishwasher, when she begins to grasp the thing that's been troubling her about the man. He's simply reminded her of someone else. Another man, to be exact. Her own personal Humbert Humbert, though of course that wasn't his name. Still, he was the handsome professor and she his enchanted nymphet, trapped like a butterfly in the net of his well-known charismata and kept there for what were to be the best days of her life, until he took it upon himself to move on to greener grass, brighter skin, smaller breasts, longer limbs.

Oh, but that's ages ago now. Water under the bridge. Or over the dam. One way or the other, it's done and he's dead, so what's it all to Irma now? Beyond this passing twinge of pain in her belly that's not unlike the ache in her hip or the cramping of her hands.

She starts the dishwasher and turns around to see Dolly standing in the doorway, lit up like an angel by the lights of the room behind her. The girl smiles bashfully. She's eyeing the tiny sandwiches left over from the tea, still on their tray. Irma was planning to eat them herself but asks instead, "Are you hungry?"

Dolly nods.

"Well then, help yourself, dear."

And she does. Dolly, in a sundress, white with a pattern of google-eyed frogs. Her hair a cloud of curls on her head. Green satin slippers on her feet. She seems so small, her toes barely touch the floor. It's clear she's just a child after all.

"Your father is sleeping?"

A shrug.

Irma presses on. "And what about your mother? Where is she?"

Dolly frowns. No answer to that, just another tiny sandwich taken from the tray and popped into her mouth. She spreads her hands out on the table. She peeks at Irma and that snaggle-tooth catches at her lip.

Irma leans close. "Are you all right, dear?"

Dolly nods her head and the cloud trembles. "I'm well cared for," she answers sensibly and that settles that. She wipes her fingers on her dress, then dips a hand down its front to extract a folded dollar bill, which she slips beneath the tray. "Thank you most kindly, Missus," she says, and when Irma looks again, the girl is gone.

Irma sighs. There's nothing left to be done now. She's tired. She's had enough cheer and good will for one day. Her guests are going to be expecting some breakfast in the morning. They'll

want the table set for them. Juice. Croissants. Bacon and eggs.

But what was it the girl said? “He takes good care of me”? And then there was that smile. Her lips so red. Was it lipstick? That gleaming snaggle-tooth peeking out. And had Dolly winked at Irma too?

*

The Nestled Inn is a fine old house, well-built with a strong foundation and tight windows and a solid roof, but sounds will still find their way through the plumbing and the vents, the ducts and the spaces, the walls and the floors. Even on a night like tonight, in that muffle of the falling snow with the darkness pressing its body to the windowpanes, and especially so when there are guests. The thud of footsteps overhead, crossing from here to there and back again. One door creaking open and another swinging softly shut. Water warbles in the pipes. A toilet is flushed. And then flushed again.

And here is Irma, downstairs in her own bed, listening to it all. The sheets are cold, the blanket is thin, and the ache in her belly throbs. She’s fixed herself another toddy and taken a sleeping pill too, and then a pain pill on top of that, but she hasn’t drifted off just yet. She’s listening to the sounds the house is making, groping for a hold on the story it’s been trying to tell her tonight.

*

Mr. Smith has made himself at home in the larger of the two rooms upstairs. Dolly is in the bathroom, running a bath. Irma hears the trill of the girl’s laugh and then the murmur of the man’s reply and then that laugh again.

Of course, Smith isn’t his real name. Irma is no fool. Didn’t she have just such an arrangement herself, once upon a time? Back when it was just the two of them together, when he was Dr. Bates

and she was Irma Ratcliff, his best student, the girl who caught him, some would say, the girl who cost him his job, his career. He didn't care, he said. He'd find another position somewhere. And he did. And she went with him. He left his wife and his two sons behind. "I married too young," he explained. "I gave up everything for them." As Irma curled against him and promised never to ask him to give up anything at all for her.

Was that how it went? Or was she already pregnant and was there a scandal? Did she tell the truth and was he fired and was she scorned and did he take off and did she stay put so she never saw him again but she lost the baby first and then she lost him too and her life went on and on from there and now here she is?

And there they are too, her guests, upstairs. Mr. Smith with his Dolly asleep in his bed, a child afraid of the dark, all alone in a strange house, with a finger in her mouth, her hair on the pillow, soft and warm, and he beside her in his crisp, blue cotton pajamas, a man and his daughter, and what if they were to stay? What if, when Irma wakes in the morning, she's feeling fresh and fine, renewed somehow, young again or at least not so old? And here is the breakfast she's made and a funny dream recalled by the girl, and music, Christmas music, with harmony and bells, and too much snow, so much that they can't get out. The power snaps off and the town is still and all the roads are closed so there's no place else to go.

Well then, you must stay here for a while, dear. Nestled in, like this, with me.

EUGENE RADICE

Breaker Boy

“Old timers claim that the paths the boys took home after work could be followed by the drops of blood in the snow.”

—Donald L. Miller, The Kingdom of Coal

When I was ten years old, the neighbors of my mother marched me to a plank-and-batten house I had never seen and deposited me with two burlap bags on the front porch. Mr. Zwolinski placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “You’ll do all right, son.” His wife rapped on the door, then they backed into the cover of a dark November night. When a light appeared, they hurried away, decent people not wishing to be seen there, explanations unwinding as their voices became distant, “We had to, didn’t we? No choice, was there . . . ?” I didn’t blame them. Five children were a burden to feed, and taking me in after my mother died was an overwhelming strain.

The door was unbolted and slowly opened. Two nicely dressed women looked down at me. They studied me, I studied them, a stand-off. The taller one crossed her arms and frowned. “I knew this would happen.” She pursed her lips and squinted as if I were a far-off object coming into focus.

“We have to take him in,” the other said. I stared at both of them, not knowing what to say.

“Why? What do we know about children?”

“He’s your kin. What’s his name, David Comoroski?” She winked at me. “Kinda cute isn’t he?”

I figured if they turned me away, I’d haul one of the sacks down to the culm bank and huddle with the homeless men where the coal waste catches fire. I faced a woman I believed was my aunt. This new-found relative was a surprise. A real looker, like

someone out of an advertisement. Her hair was black and pinned up, the way my mother wore it. Otherwise, I had to look closer to find a resemblance. The same narrow ears, the same upturned nose, such features I did not realize at the time I was destined to pass on. Maybe this was how stunning my mother looked before I was born, before she aged hard and fast like other women in the coal patch whose children drove them to constant fretting.

My mother rarely spoke of her sister, never wanting to admit the same blood, never wanting any of us to lay eyes on her. For years I thought she was a family myth, the kind of relation parents made up to scare you, threaten to give you to the boogie-woman to be tortured in unimaginable ways if you were bad. I had seen this woman at the funeral, Mrs. Zwolinski pointing and calling her ugly. I did not understand why, or who she was. She was shunned, standing alone, yet turning every man's head and drawing their smiles.

"Are you my Aunt Rose?" I asked shyly.

"Congratulations," the other woman said. "You're the proud owner of a nephew." She placed a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle.

My aunt bent down until her nose was an inch from mine. "See the edge of that porch?" She pointed; I nodded. "Your little butt is going to be kicked right off it if you ever call me that again. You will call me Rose. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Rose."

They picked up my bags and led me into a room called the parlor. I was seated into the fanciest chair I had ever touched while they inspected me. A light perfumy smell filled the air which I would come to know as lilac, the scent blooming all year long from herbs poured into a tin on the mantle. Curtains with images of red peacocks framed the fireplace, knickknacks and

dried flowers covered whatnots, and a ticking carriage clock on the stand beside me couldn't keep up with the pounding of my heart. I remember nervously rubbing my hands over silk armrests. The parlor felt unbearably cozy.

"I'm Mary," the other said. "I'll be your aunt too."

After a nasty glance to Mary, Aunt Rose proceeded to tell me the rules. This greatly amused my new Aunt Mary who sat nearby on a red velvet loveseat. "You do not speak unless spoken to. We feed you only at the times we ourselves eat. Until you can earn money to buy your own, we will supply clothing which you will wash every Sunday out back on laundry day." She ran her fingers along my sleeve then touched the breast fabric where a few buttons went missing. "Your wool coat will do for now." Her eyes fell to my feet. "Damn. We have to buy him shoes too? Did you see the holes?" I looked to Mary, her arched eyebrows and bright blue eyes offered sympathy. She had thin blond hair falling around her dimpled cheeks, delicate strands like a lace veil. She winked at me again.

"We will see about getting you a job to earn your way," Rose continued. "We will give you a room where you will remain out of sight, especially at night when our men are visiting. You will not speak to the men." I remained silent, chin down, staring at the feet of a chair carved like bird claws squeezing little glass balls, thinking I'd bide my time until I could run away. "And one more thing, stay away from sink holes and the empty mine shaft in the vacant lot behind the saloon. No place to be carousing." She seemed to be waiting for a reply. I nodded. "Do you have anything to say?" she asked with one eyebrow raised, her expression a dare.

"I have to piss."

"*Jee-zus!* Ten minutes and already a nuisance."

"Which way to the outhouse?" I stood and removed my coat.

"We don't have an outhouse. We have a bathroom!" Mary gushed. "Wait till you see it!"

I was shown a room full of green tiles and shiny pipes. Although the Zwolinskis had a sink with running water, these women had a white bathtub with animal paws. But the most amazing thing was the commode. One pull on a cord and the water swirled out of sight. Rose became irritated with my every pull and with each, "Oh!" I exclaimed. "Where does it go? To the outhouse?"

"No. To a sump."

Not knowing what that was, I let it pass, thinking maybe some sort of bottomless pit.

"We bought this house from the saloon owner's wife after he died," Mary said. He put plumbing in the house the same time he did the saloon. Electricity too!" She waved a hand toward the ceiling where a single glass bulb dangled from a twisted cloth-covered wire. Rose pulled Mary by the elbow to keep her from talking any more and closed the door as they left.

I stood and aimed carefully through the wooden seat, not knowing if sitting might be the proper way, but I was anxious to see the water spin again.

*

The aunts prepared my meals like they were running a boarding house with one rentless renter. At night I went to my room before their men arrived, but through my keyhole I watched them pass by. After a time, peeping was not necessary. I could tell the man by the clomp of his shoes, the smell of his tobacco and the eager tone of his voice. If I could not fit into the routine of the house, at least I tried to stay out of the way. I spent my days wandering the vacant lots, chasing rats with sticks, and exploring along the culm banks. Where the ground subsided I dallied around crooked buildings whose chimneys, if not yet reduced to a heap of bricks, tilted enough to defy gravity. Rocks I collected lined the windowsill of my bedroom, bright limestone and razor-sharp shale. On my dresser I placed pieces of anthracite to encircle a small picture of my mother and father.

I went to the mine shaft behind the saloon, the only way I could think of being defiant. I ducked under pieces of twisted metal and stepped through rusted hulks. Lopsided concrete slabs surrounded a ragged hole where the ground looked bitten instead of dug, the edges crumbling morsels of root and dirt. I threw a chunk of wood from a railroad tie into the opening, never hearing it hit bottom, and trembled. I could not stop staring down. The deep darkness had a grip, a hand stronger than anyone living or dead seemed to offer me. The world became still. I was not the only one to seek refuge here. This desolate place attracted the homeless too. I noticed ashes of old fires, scraps of clothing and bits of chicken bones. A pair of shoes left on the ground; maybe the owner took one big leap out of them. No one knew what to do with old shafts. Putting a mountain of rock back into the ground seemed pointless, so the company abandoned them. They were like open graves with the bodies of miners long since robbed.

One day when Rose noticed my idling, she told me, “Tomorrow we will take you down to the coal company and sign you up.”

“Have I been a bother?” I asked, hearing my own voice suddenly meek. I skipped school when my mother was sick, no one to take care of her after my father died. Eventually we would have been evicted, unable to keep up with the rent. The company gave no hand-outs to widows. I liked school but I knew for me it was not to be. I’d have to work.

She put down her wooden spoon after stirring the soup and shook her head. “You’ve been all right.” I searched her eyes for my mother’s tenderness but Rose didn’t hold my gaze and left the room without any sign of my mother’s caring. I did not consider Rose mean, only *strict*, as they say, in the same category as a school teacher.

On the other hand, Mary grinned warmly and said, “It’s okay. Rose is afraid you’ll hurt her in some way, or deceive her. If you were a girl, it might be easier for her to show affection.”

“Mary—”

“Aunt Mary,” she said, coming over and placing a hand on my shoulder, her face turning patient.

“Aunt Mary. The men at night. I don’t understand exactly.”

“I’m a miner’s widow. Rose is too.” She sat me down in a chair at the thick oak table, pushed away the bowls to make space and pulled up a chair for herself. “Do you see the immigrant widows down on the culm banks picking?” I nodded. “All they have to keep warm is coal they carry back to their stoves. All they have to wear are black rags. All they eat are handouts and scroungings from trash.” I bit my lip. She looked to the window as if poverty was a reflection on the other side of the pane. “Once I was one of them. Rose too. To survive we sold the last thing of value we had: ourselves.” I wanted to run but she put an arm around me. “It’s a business. Started out with the company cops, then we went on our own. We do what we have to. Everyone has their lot in life.” She forced a smile and dabbed her eyes with her apron. “Anyway, that’s how we could afford this house.” She brightened. “With running water, no less!”

I nodded and returned a smile to cheer her up. She seemed such an opposite to Rose. Taken together, maybe not so different than two parents.

*

At night I dreamt about the past, my mother kissing my father and handing him a lunch pail on mornings when the streets were still empty and dark. He’d comb warm fingers through my hair, turn and join the file of men sent from porches and neighborhood stoops, all their footfalls becoming a patter of boots headed to the colliery. When the breaker’s shadow loomed large in the sunrise, I’d tug at my mother’s hand until she tightened her grip and said, “Be still, child.” I wanted to chase after him. I was frightened he’d never return. And on a day the breaker’s whistle wailed the

alarm, he did return from a cave-in, limping and hurt, saying the timbers collapsed when someone set the charge too close. He fought through a stampeding crowd of men yelling and bringing shovels and picks to help the rescue, women racing into the street, asking the lucky ones who escaped if they'd seen a husband or son. When a name wasn't enough, desperate words were shouted with hands spread wide in gestures. Fat! Thin! Tall! Short! Yes, a scar on his forehead! That's him! He's where? Oh, my *God*, no! In time carts of bodies came out of the mine.

My father never went back. Instead, he wheezed and wasted away from a miner's consumption. I'd hear him at night grunt for air. As it did then, the noise made me sit bolt upright, awakened after dozing off. Now the grunts came from my aunt's bedroom, a man loving her. Suffering and loving sounded the same to me.

*

Aunt Rose dressed me in dungarees and old boots that must have been a donation from one of her men friends. She packed a lunch into a pail and walked me down past the saloon and ramshackle houses standing in rows behind slatty wood fences. Chapel Street was dirt, worse in summer rain, broadening and rutted at the bottom where horses and wagons hauled timber and machinery in and out of the company gate. Old timers passed along the story about an Indian path running through here, Pennsylvania land belonging to the tribes of Six Nations before coal was discovered, a deer trail eternities before that.

Rose said my father started as a breaker boy and accommodating the customs of men seemed to be another rule of life in her house. At the main office while she discussed employment with the boss, I stood on the steps outside the door, looking up at the coal breaker where I would work, a wooden building strangely slanted, towering like none other. The surrounding company property resembled a prehistoric landscape of slag piles

and desolate culm banks, slick pools of oil and fossils of decayed machinery. Whatever vegetation once grew here had been strangled long ago. If the temperature dropped, snow might add the only beauty by covering the craters and rocks.

The boss came around to sit on the corner of his desk, flirting in a pantomime I watched through the window, Rose never giving him a chance. I was handed over to a foreman whose dour, scarred face told me the kind of work done here. He led me up endless steps through the breaker, never saying a word, swishing me along with a stick. Oddly spaced windows covered the building, many busted out and never replaced. I stopped and hung over the railing to spot any hope of escape, to see how far I'd come. Far enough to become dizzy and draw an extra swish to move along. We zigzagged to the top where coal from mine cars was dumped at the tippie. I held hands over my ears from this beast in constant roar, whose jaws coughed plumes of black smoke and whose timbered skeleton shook from the vibrations of steam engines. The foreman showed me which plank to sit on. There I watched twenty other breaker boys kicking their feet against the furious rush of coal down the chutes, their fingers frantically picking out unwanted rock to discard by a flick of the wrist.

"I'm Jimmy," the boy next to me yelled over the noise. He had a gap between his teeth and a wry smile he flashed for one split second. He was a black cat at night, his eyes and teeth the only white left on him. "You're new! Gotta be quick! Don't get caught scoopin', just grab."

"Does anyone get hurt here?" He heard the fear in my voice.

"Every fucking day." He shrugged. "Don't fall into the chute or you die in the rollers. Didn't you see the crushers when you came in?" I slid to center myself for a sense of firmness. When I looked around hopelessly, he said, "If you do good work, someday you'll get promoted down to the mine as a mule driver or nipper to work the doors." He showed me how to kick my feet,

slow the rush of coal, pick out the shale passing by. "Watch me for a while."

I caught on. After an hour my fingers were red and sliced. My face joined the others in a sooty grimace. By lunch time I was wrapping my fingers in a scarf. By the end of the day I couldn't stop bleeding. "You'll get used to it. Your fingers will get hard and callused." Jimmy said, walking me out the gate. I had a chance to look him over although both of us were covered in dust. He was an inch or two shorter, but muscular in an enviable way. His eyes remained in constant motion, like he never left the chute and rocks still rushed at him. I was bone tired so I only waved a limp thanks.

*

Every day when the breaker blew a quitting whistle, miners burst through the company gate and wearily headed home, dark shadows swinging lunch pails under threatening gray skies. Us boys got out a little ahead when the breaker shut down, the last of the railroad cars loading coal below. My aunts waited on the porch, content, it seemed to me, that I returned without their needing to go looking or be summoned to the company office for trouble.

Mary would usually put liniment on my hands and wrap me up. One day she left it for Rose, deliberately I suspected. At the kitchen table Rose took my hand. I didn't expect her touch to be so soft or her look so forlorn. "It's okay," I said. "I'm used to it by now." She didn't say a word.

That night I slept lightly. Usually no commotion awakened me, but Rose was screaming at a man to get out. At the bottom of the steps she stood in her bathrobe facing a disheveled, ogre of a man. "Oh, I'll be back," he said, raising a hand and slapping her, "'cause your thighs are always open for business." I stepped into the hall, ready to fight. "Who's this?" He pointed to me. "You got a boy?" I could smell the liquor on his breath when

I approached him. “You watch yourself, bitch! Don’t make me no bastards just for using your fat ass.” I looked to her for an explanation. In what desperation did she let this man touch her? I began to realize her lot in life cracked the soul as cruelly as working the coal.

Rose made a fist, hauled back and slugged him square in the face. He went down, out cold. “Wow,” I mouthed the words. With each of us manning a foot, we dragged him toward the porch. He had the typical miner’s build, muscular shoulders, powerful hands. His shoe slipped off and I fell backwards. Rose stuck a hat on his head and relieved him of a two dollar payment. I put his shoe back on and tied the lace. After a few minutes of listening behind the door, we heard him scramble away. Rose wouldn’t meet my eyes, only staring down at her bare feet. “You know, your ass isn’t fat,” I said. “Everyone thinks you’re beautiful.”

“Oh, yeah? Who’s everyone?”

I shrugged. “All the breaker boys I know.” I almost got a smile out of her. Instead, she flashed my mother’s tender eyes, wide and brown, banjo eyes my father called them, the ones holding back tears. She turned and walked silently back to her room.

*

Aunt Rose seemed grudgingly content with my presence in the house. I would test her patience at times. I’d sneak into the parlor to sit in a fancy chair. One day I realized too late they had received guests. Perhaps I had a crafty look on my face. Everyone turned their heads and stopped talking, eyeing me suspiciously until I backed out. Whenever I was caught alone in the parlor, she’d say, “Boy, you got ten minutes to wash and get to bed,” tapping her chin and twitching her nose, all family traits. “Who do you *think* I’m talking to? Your mother never discipline you?” I came to be fond of her bluster. “Don’t you go making eyebrows at Mary. You two are in cahoots, laughing behind my back.”

In the same way I accepted this life as bearable. Other boys had it worse. I could tell the times when business was slow, when my aunts stayed up at night, playing cards in the parlor, marooned in their fancy dresses, ruffles of white lace scarcely hiding the lower halves of their breasts. I felt ashamed, aroused by the curves of their bodies.

Those days we ate soup and cabbage, waved the milkman's wagon on past our house in the mornings, and skipped a trip or two to the market. I think my weekly sixty-five cents helped a little, silver coins dropped into my aunt's palm on payday. Boys like me were known to keep families afloat.

*

After a while I got to know the other boys, playing ball in the breaker's shadow at lunch or just sitting around talking while we ate, the only relief from the monotony of work. That's where I really learned to curse a dictionary, a whole nother world beyond *shit*. I learned to chew tobacco to keep the dust out of my throat. When they found out where I lived, I became a brief celebrity.

"You've seen it *all*," one of them said.

"Seen what?"

"*Everything!*" The boys leaned in, holding their breath. "Sex."

"You bet. You can't believe it!" I wouldn't say anything more and every day they begged me to tell. I wanted to make up stuff, wild scenes of wickedness. But not about my aunts. Walking home with Jimmy, I told him, "I see nothing at my house, ya know?"

"I figured," he said. It was a bad day and we were both sore. "This whole place ain't worth shit. Nothing for us here." I nodded in agreement. What *did* we have?

I'd seen retired miners sitting on porches or wasting away in saloons, their skin pale from servitude underground, their fading voices good for tall tales but not questioning the lives they'd led or the lives they passed to their sons. These immigrants were

not weak men, nor lacking in pride. Their wives pinned lines of laundry and swept out houses that never came clean, bathed their children in back porch barrels and made ends meet. No one saw beyond the edge of man-made mountains of culm and coal and slag and ash. Their lot was told never to try.

“My mother used to say, ‘Coal is king and we’re the knaves.’”

“Mine too.” Jimmy said. He lost his mother as well, and maybe that was part of our bond. His father was a mechanic, fixing the kind of steam engines that drove pistons pumping water and air. Not a nice man, one who slapped children around instead of using words. Maybe out of defiance, Jimmy turned out unabashedly friendly. Maybe he just needed a friend. Me too. “I’d do anything to get out of the shitty breaker,” he swore. “Freeze in winter, roast in summer, cut you all year. Some days I want to kill myself. I’d do anything to get out of this whole fucking coal patch.” He turned to me. “How about you?”

I shrugged. We walked on.

The next day at work the breaker boys were frustrated with me. I kept silent as long as I could. “You live in a whorehouse with two fucking hussies,” said Rooster McGinley, the kid with red hair, pink face and hard Irish knuckles. “You gonna tell us about it?”

“I live in a home with my aunts.”

“Maybe you ain’t talkin’ ’cause you fuck the Polish bitches too.” He licked a thumb and put up his fists.

“They’re business women and they know how to handle customers. I saw one of those Polish bitches flatten your old man with one punch!” Everyone laughed. Rooster jumped me and we rolled in the dirt to the whoops and whistles of the others. I only landed one good punch to his nose before a couple of miners broke up the fight. The foreman sent both of us home that day.

In the kitchen Aunt Rose said, “Uh-ooh, nasty shiner,” and took a chip of ice off the block, wrapping it in a dishrag and put-

ting against my eye. "I bet you were defending some girl's honor."

"Right," I said, pleased with the attention. "That must've been it."

"Sure." She smirked. "I'll bet."

"Don't be toying with the boy," Mary said.

"Why not?" She dropped an elbow on the table and lazily propped her chin on her hand. "How else are we teaching him to become a man?"

"He already is."

*

I got up to use the commode about midnight and headed back to my bed when I heard knocking at the front door. Both my aunts were asleep with their doors closed. I tried ignoring it, but the knocking persisted, so I went down.

A tall, thin man stood on the porch when I opened the door. He was dressed in a fine suit of clothes. He dipped his chin to look at me. The neatly trimmed moustache and beard made his smile that much more striking. "Is Miss Rosemary available?" he asked. "I'm a little late."

"She's occupied," I said. "Go away." My eyes landed on the gold chain, following the way it looped from his vest to the watch held in his hand. I'd only seen men dressed like this when my mother took me into the city.

"I know she will see me. Don't you know who I am?"

"No," I replied, moving to close the door. "Go away."

"And who exactly are you?" he sighed and snapped the watch closed.

"The pimp," I said, too sleepy to laugh at myself.

He thought for a minute. "A little young for that, aren't you?" He reached in his pocket. "Well, then give her this so we can schedule a proper appointment." I took his business card and the next morning, handed it over to Rose.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped. “I forgot about our date!” She scowled and glared at me. “What did you tell him?”

“Go away.”

“Christ, you didn’t?”

“Oh, yes, I did. I said you were occupied.”

“Damn! The only real gentleman I know. Damn, damn, damn!”

I could tell Mary was hiding a laugh, the way she quickly turned away and buried her hands in the sink.

“Who did you tell him *you* were?” Rose asked, turning his card over and over in her fingers. “Not my nephew, I hope.”

“The pimp.”

Aunt Mary burst out laughing and splashed herself when she slapped the water. Rose let out a stream of curses the likes I heard only from breaker boys, then stomped around the kitchen like an ornery mine mule throwing a tantrum. “Sorry,” I said and meant it. “I was half asleep.” That only made Mary laugh harder.

*

On a Sunday morning, the Sabbath without work, I came into the kitchen quietly without anyone noticing after hanging my laundry on the line. The sun was out and the weather mild. Church was a distant memory of mine, the aunts refusing to attend, telling me they were cast as filthy and unrepentant heathens in sermons by the priest, and destined for hell which Rose quipped would be a vacation from earth. The women were sitting in the parlor and I could hear their chatter.

“I fear we are leading the boy into sin,” Rose said. “Our perversion should not be made his.”

“He’s okay. Smart kid. Rather honest, I’d say.”

“That damn bathroom latch. You know how the door swings open a bit.”

“What? He overflowed the tub and used all the hot water?”

Mary sounded amused. "I filled the bucket-a-day with coal yesterday. The fire will be out by now."

"No, that's not it. He had himself by the fist in the bathtub."

I sat down at the kitchen table, mortified to hear the rest.

"Did he—"

"Yeah. Like Mount Vesuvius."

"Oh," Mary said, "like men coming never happens around this house." Her high-pitched laughter rang out like a bell from plaster walls and loose windowpanes.

"Be serious! We are a lousy excuse for a family."

"There is *no* perversion if it's not hurtful. There *is* family if there is caring."

"You know what I mean." Rose sighed. "How is he ever going to be taught love between a man and woman, as if we'd ever know how to do that?"

"So you do care, down deep in there somewhere? Besides, all boys to this. Consider it practice."

"Says who?"

"Says me. I had three brothers. I washed their stained sheets and scrubbed their headboards. Better onto the ceiling than into some schoolgirl."

"You're terrible."

"In God's good time we all find love in our own way. Even you."

After a long silence, I peeked around the corner and saw them kissing, the sewing having fallen to their feet.

*

I didn't remember what the day was like before the accident. One day hardly any different from the other. Cloudy when we came in to work, not even a little rain to settle the dust. No sign of snow. I took my place on the plank. Coal rushed down the chutes full tilt. If I worked too long at a stretch without looking

up, concentrating too hard, I felt like I was falling instead of the coal. I jerked with a start, suddenly gashed on my left palm. The chunks of stone seemed bigger and sharper than usual. I let a lot go by and the boys behind me were bitching about it. Light from the windows cast a checkerboard pattern on the floor. Between the squares walked a foreman, prodding me with a stick, threatening to smack me if I slacked off.

Mine cars feeding the snout of this breaker took no pause; the roaring, snorting creature was hungry as usual. It was the pace of a typical day until it wasn't. Until Jimmy screamed, flailing like an animal caught in its jaws, his bloodied hand suddenly held in the air, two fingers missing. Until I yelled and a foreman came running, throwing a rag over the bleeding, and still it wouldn't stop and Jimmy kept bawling. Other boys shrugged like they'd seen it before, averting their eyes, resuming their work. Someone said Jimmy was lucky if he never came back. I was beside him when he collapsed into a whimper, trying to tough it out, holding in his other hand two mangled fingers cut loose from their birthplace. His face was melted into anguish when I helplessly reached out my hands to embrace him, not knowing what else to do. Two men raised him up by the arms and led him out.

The foreman pointed to me and said, "Get back to work!" When I shook my head, he struck me with a leather switch and I kicked him in the nuts. I ran down the steps, down and down the backbone of the beast, trying to catch up to Jimmy, but when I reached bottom, they had already taken him away.

I trudged the length of Chapel Street, not looking up until in front of the saloon. Two young barmaids, friends of my aunts, waved to me, leaning idly over the railing, business slow in late morning. Other times I'd wave back, get them to throw me a kiss, calculate the years I needed to catch up, fantasize the prettiest one splashed in my bathtub. I lowered my head and moved on, turning into the vacant lot next door.

I sat on a broken concrete slab overlooking the abandoned mine shaft, calmed by gazing into the darkness. I picked up a piece of coal the size of my fist, rolling it over in my hand, wondering how a prehistoric rock had enough power to drive the country into a new century or maim so many who mined it. I dangled it over the hole then let it drop. After a minute or two, I swore I heard it hit bottom halfway through the center of the earth. I dropped my lunch pail, gone instantly. My boots kicked off easily, fun to see them disappear one at a time into nothingness. The light is what felt unbearable, not the darkness. I remembered the last night I blew out the oil lamp on the bed stand beside my mother, how her breathing eased and she was finally at peace. Now I envied her. I shimmied closer and tipped over the edge.

Moments of most days were hard to recall exactly, either passing by in a frantic blur or so boring your mind never bothered. But I vividly remember a hand clamped on my shoulder and another clutching my arm when my aunts dragged me off the slab and we collapsed into the dirt behind the shaft. Rose was cursing and huffing, Mary trembling so hard she shook me until my teeth chattered.

For a crazy second I said, "You'll never take my fingers alive!" as if I didn't know where I was, as if pieces of the world still rushed at me. Then I sat up and stared at the spectacle of two women splayed like fancy rag dolls thrown on the ground.

"We thought you were the injured one until we heard it was your friend Jimmy," Mary said, surveying me up and down and taking inventory.

"I can't go back," I said, watching the women struggle to their feet, brushing off dresses, wrapping their shawls and straightening their hair. "I have nowhere to go."

"Yes, you do." They exchanged conspiring glances. "You're going back to school." I wondered which one came up with the idea. "We decided," Rose said with Mary nodding vigorously.

“The first step out of this coal patch.”

“No pay in that.” A violation of the house rules, wasn’t it?

“We’ll manage,” Mary said, beaming a smile.

I looked through Rose’s pent-up tears and into my mother’s eyes, seeing the same hurt, the same desperate longing for another future.

“Rose—”

“Aunt Rose,” she corrected, taking a moment to compose herself. “We’re kin. Ain’t no other.”

“Aunt Rose,” I nodded, taking her hand in mine, “I want to go home.”

ESSAYS

WENDY VIDELOCK

The Language of the Land: By the Light of the Moon

Out west we're well acquainted with the phrase *fire danger*, which just means it's hot, it's dry, and the winds are blowing—which further means any stray ember can quite suddenly turn to a great blaze of destruction. If we think of language as landscape (and who among us doesn't?) then it might appear we inhabit a landscape in a state of severe fire danger. Which puts the poet in an interesting predicament.

Here in the west, whatever

one's pain,
one never complains
about the rain.
What's good for the plains
is bad for harvest.
What freezes in spring
is sugar-beet borrowed.
The river depletes.
The groves expire.
What blooms
in summer is wildfire.

Emily Dickinson famously said, "Tell the truth, but tell it slant." It should be said she wasn't addressing the talking head. The poet knows this, considers her audience, and weighs her words against the climate in which she places them. To preach to any choir is not in the inherent nature of poetry. So what do we do when it appears increasingly obvious that the intellectual

climate of our time is one of fire—in which anger is the default emotion, knowledge is considered opinion, opinion is the same as fact, and anything we might call “truth” is lost in the process? It might help to know that as far as civilization goes, it has likely always been so. It might help to know the slippery nature of truth is what the artist has always been up against, and I imagine much like the fated moth to the flame, always been drawn to.

Like a sleuth,

I watch for the moon
to slip up.

Here in Palisade, those same winds which fan the wildfire’s flame, travel up and through De Beque Canyon, cooling considerably the hot night air, resulting in a sweetness of peach, a good hard cider, a crisp, deep grape. When conditions are difficult, the farmer says, the right winds make miracles. The elements guide our speech in the west, as I suspect they do throughout the world. This is hardly news, but I find it needs saying in many conversations about poetry.

In the Wind,

by the lake, a friend
turns around
to say,

just so you know,
the wind carries your words away.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard insists, “localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of

dates.” What we call the natural world: fire, water, air, and earth—in other words, the landscape and its changing conditions, the very stuff of which we are all made—these are the core facts of our existence. From these shared truths, we cultivate a language, discern some kinds of patterns, absorb all kinds of rhythms, create some kind of culture, derive some kind of meaning. It seems therefore a fair request that modern poets learn the names of their neighboring trees and native flowers, the kinds of critters hunting and nesting among them, the stone that marks the turn in the river, the scent that brings the change in seasons, the peoples and multiforms that came before them, the stars that burn and vanish overhead.

I'll trade you a drop of snow

for a lyrical poem,
a parking lot for a muffled moan,
the justice card
for the nine of swords
a soldier's heart
for a kettle of gold
a kindly verb
for the face of your lord,
a Persian word for an off
chord,
a thousand tears,
a million tomes,
a drop of snow
for a lyrical poem.

I do not advocate a return to the pastoral, but rather a return to the elemental. Without any investment in the language of the land, the modern poet is no different from the politician or the

advertisement. Poetry at its best belongs in the public square precisely because it *doesn't* mimic the language of the politician. The great poet Wendell Berry reminds us, "if you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are."

And we tell ourselves

the glass
is where we find ourselves.

The natural world compels us to shared understandings, projections, anthropomorphism, the very animating forces of literature. And yet I've actually heard aspiring poets say things like, who am I to speak for the bumblebee? Such sentiments confuse the poet with the politician, and worse, betray the sacred spirit of our art. Keats tells us the poet has no Identity—s/he is continually . . . filling some other Body—the Sun, the Moon, the Sea. . . Or, as modern poet Alfred Corn says, "the cold diamond of truth is multifaceted." Contemporary perceptions of the poet as a navel-gazing, self-involved, frustrated rockstar banging out platitudes are all too often apropos. It is no wonder the reading public has little interest in poetry these days. Perhaps it's time we revisited the antiquated notion of the poet as vessel, witness, and wordsmith, and not primarily as persona, preacher, or analyst.

If it ain't got that inner thing,

if it turns its back on the hoof
and the wing,

if the thing reeks of someone else,

and the line is glued

and the words don't move
and the verbs plucked
from a deck
stacked

with what you haven't
drunken or
thirsted for,

don't blame me, save your teeth;
I can breathe

some words into a heady stew
or realign
a wheel as the mechanics do

but the dark spark

and the clear bead

at the center of all reflecting pools
is tireless,

and tirelessly

up to you.

The author wishes to acknowledge the journals in which the following poems, in *differing* versions, first appeared: "If it ain't got that inner thing," (formerly "A Tribute") in *Able Muse*, "I'll trade you a drop of snow" (formerly "Merchant Culture") and "Here in the west, whatever" in *Rattle*, "In the Wind," in *Hampden Sydney Poetry Review*.

LAURA PRITCHETT

Dearest Estella

Dearest Estella,

A month in your home, Estella—I mean, in the first home you and Aldo Leopold shared—doesn't have me thinking of his *Sand County Almanac* as assumed. Instead, I'm constantly thinking of *you*. Maybe it's because I'm in a remote area and it's windy, or maybe it's because I harbor a belief that it's often unsung women who let men shine—who knows, but I talk to you so frequently that it's getting weird. I'm a forward-looking person, never much interested in the past, so this is odd. It borders on obsession.

*

As I make my dinner, I picture you learning to cook—you didn't know how when you came here from Santa Fe in 1912, a new bride of 22—and I'm 48 and still haven't learned how, not really, mainly because I prefer simple meals like an avocado and a slice of cheese because then I have more time to write. Food has never interested me much anyway, though that's an unhip thing to say, and I tell you so. While washing the dishes, I picture you doing the same in practical shoes and apron, though you came from great wealth. And when I do laundry in the sink, I know you too once looked around, deciding where to hang wet clothes if it was windy, and it is often windy, so I consult you in my mind. As I mop up mouse droppings, I know you certainly must have done the same—mice have always been a drag—and then I wonder what word you'd use instead of "drag." This is what the mind does in isolation—circles around questions like this.

*

Outside, too, I think of you: I go on a hike and imagine you

scrambling up these same *piedras* in Tres Piedras, staring at the distant Sangre de Cristos, visiting the hot springs that burble out near the Rio Grande—Oh, New Mexico! —and I wonder if you climbed in naked, and if there’s something about nature that made you a bit lusty, as it does me. Nature always turns me on.

*

This house, as you know, is fabulous. A bungalow Aldo built with the \$650 given to him by the newly created Forest Service, and which he situated carefully at the base of granite outcroppings making sure it would offer a panorama of sagebrush and stars. You called it “Mi Casita,” and so I call it “mi casita,” and I wash the windows to clear the view. I’m not usually a fan of window cleaning—it’s right up there with cooking—but here it brings joy because I’m talking with you while I work, about things that really matter to me. Can you imagine life without the Forest Service or Park Service? Or the Wilderness Act of 1964! We take these things for granted now, but protecting land was one truly great thing this country got right. Although, of course, much of it was stolen first. . . .

*

And how was that marriage of yours? I love that you only knew Aldo for four months, mostly through letters, when he proposed. You didn’t say yes or no—you asked him to wait. There were issues to be discussed—religion, ethnicity, backgrounds—you from a Catholic sheep ranching family with roots to Mexico, so different than Aldo. No one knows much about you, and that really bothers me. Anyway, as he awaited your answer, he was lovesick, unable to eat and, as he put it, overcome with “a restless discontent gnawing.” He wrote his mother letters about love, its lack of logic, its being a “blind daring guess” into the unknown. I speak aloud in the quiet house, tell you I’m divorced

and pretty happy about that, way less lonely, and proclaim that *all* of life is a blind daring guess with a restless gnawing, and I imagine you'd agree.

*

I am an unapologetic romantic—I think humans thrive with the right supporter and intimate friend-lover—and so on October 9, your wedding anniversary, I toast you with expensive whiskey. It was here that you and Aldo began your journey together, after all, and it seems you had a rare true-companion relationship. *To love!* I shout to the Milky Way, *Love of place and people and to ethics!* Your wedding photo hangs in my bedroom here—you in a white dress, your hair dark, holding a bouquet that looks like white stars. Very feminine—and there were certain struggles you faced in that regard. How did you deal with cramps? Hot bath, a splash of whiskey, some grumbles about absurd biology? I wonder about sex, pregnancies, motherhood. I've got two great grown kids, both readers and nature lovers, and you'd like them, I think.

*

Because I'm thinking of my kids, I write to your daughter, another Estella, now in her 90s, to tell her I'm at your old house. She writes back—she's working on a book about you—and I like the idea of us, two women, conjuring you up. You live on, Estella.

*

Which, exactly, is why I'm writing. Funny, who you connect with, and why, and when. Who knows how this happens, but thanks for your constant company in the wind, with the chores, with the mice, with the cramps, with the view. Aldo wrote that falling in love with you was like “a great and sudden perception of beauty.” I think so too, and I just wanted to tell you so.

***Estella Bergere** (1890-1974) was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico to a wealthy and cultured family of Spanish-Cuban descent. She married conservationist Aldo Leopold in 1912. The two began their life-long journey together in New Mexico and would later move to what are known as the “sand counties” of south-central Wisconsin. Along the way, Estella and Aldo nurtured a deep understanding and love of nature, which eventually developed into the concept of—and the vital need for—cultivating a “Land Ethic” on the cultural level if the earth and its bounty is to be sustained. This became one of the central ideas of the conservation movement the United States in the mid-20th century. Estella was a cultured woman with many interests and talents, including classical music, singing, and archery. A rugged outdoorswoman, too, she loved and studied the natural world. All five of her children were conservation advocates, and each made their marks in various fields of the earth and biological sciences; most renowned perhaps is her namesake, Estella Leopold, of the University of Washington.*

—*THINK* Editors

REVIEW

JAN SCHREIBER

Enter at Your Own Risk

That Was Now, This Is Then

Poems by Vijay Seshadri

Gray Wolf Press, 2020

55 pages / \$24.00

If you wanted—if you believed you were entitled—to adopt an air of jaded wisdom, you could say (if you were in fact tired of the imagination’s long-running charade) that we’ve seen it all before, in poems stretching back over centuries. We’ve seen allegory, detachment, revelation, self-revelation, communion with nature, confession, celebration, and complaint. We’ve seen ideas about the thing and we’ve seen the thing itself (or so it’s said). And yet we’re suspicious and discouraged. We’re anxious and troubled and disillusioned. Who can possibly speak to us in our frayed condition? Anybody? Maybe only someone who doesn’t trust us any more than we trust him. Someone who hears the Angel of Death in the guise of a little girl say, “Beauty and sadness are never far apart” and responds, “Bullshit.” Who hears her say “Some birds are real, some are invisible, but which are which?” and growls “Back off, bitch.” (“Your Living Eyes”)¹

In short, someone who’s not seduced by his own imagination and is not out to seduce us. Or even to have much to do with us. Someone who begrudges the merest encounter:

I’ll meet you if you really want to meet.

1 The words quoted do not purport to be the poet’s but those of his father. But they’re endorsed and, in effect, seconded by the poet, as the poem’s last lines make clear. As for the sentiments so rudely refuted, the first will be found in Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy,” the second in Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

I'll even meet you in some small café or some
park across the way. But I won't meet for long,
and not for a minute will I look at you in your
isolation. . . .

—“Meeting (Thick)”²

So who is this guy? Well you might ask. “Who Is This Guy?” is the title of one of the poems in this collection, and one of the more transparent ones at that. In it, the author sees himself as the dead remnant of a once-living self. Safely killed, he can tempt the still-living (and himself) with the seductive tokens of a remembered vitality. But, he asserts, he can withstand the temptation himself because he's safely dead. The dead, it seems, are those who, cut off from the maelstrom of sensation (such isolation being a necessary shield for a writer, some would argue), are yet able to use elements of it to awaken the still living. Who is this guy, then? You might say he's a partially anesthetized, sober-voiced reincarnation of Hilda Doolittle, who cried (in “Orchard”) “spare us from loveliness.” And in his own poem he evokes suspiciously lovely details like “that summer night. / The long shadows. The risen full moon / [that] casts a veil of leaf shadows over a face,” only to shudder:

The longing is as if it were a knife, and for that
longing alone—
piercing and inevitable—
the living, the beautiful living, would, if I weren't
already dead,
kill me again and again.

2 There are two versions of this poem. The other (immediately following) is “Meeting (Thin)” which contains roughly twice as many lines, each of roughly half the length. The versions are identical in content except that “uninflected” in the first poem is replaced by “thin” in the second.

Are you beginning to see the program? Seshadri is neither cynical nor insensitive to the beguiling wonders around him. He is as susceptible as anyone else to natural beauty, human warmth, and the unanswerable losses we all must face. In fact he is in constant danger of being overwhelmed and destroyed. So he erects barriers. He will not be demonstrative. He will avoid display. His defense is irony.

As he says in his opening poem, he has tried to communicate directly, but “I’m sick of being slaughtered in my life’s mountain passes, / covering my own retreat, / the rear guard of my own brutal defeat.” And so “I’m just going to drive away down the coast / and not come back.” (“Road Trip”) If he has special knowledge or perceptions, he’ll take them with him rather than share them with others: “The secrets I was planning to floor them with? / They’re already packed in my trunk, in straw.” Henceforward his wisdom, such as it is, will no longer be spoken in his own voice. “I’ll scatter those truths to the sea breezes / . . . and then I’ll just be there, in the sunset’s coppery sheen. . . / Look at the clouds. Look how close they are.” It may be a little hopeful, but that’s his program. You can take it or leave it.

I’m spending time elucidating this poet’s attitudes because the poems are difficult and often complex. They speak through many fictive voices, and most of the voices are heavy with irony. It should be clear by now that Seshadri is not out to make friends with us. His book is a constructed thicket of thorns with a sign posted that says Enter at Your Own Risk. Some readers experience a certain frisson in venturing into hostile territory, just as some adventurers experience a surge of triumph in scaling K2 in winter without supplemental oxygen. A poet (who despite apparent insouciance is less indifferent than a mountain) relies on their intrepidity. All right, then, reader. Once you’ve reached the top, what do you find?

Let’s start with the physical layout. The poems tend to be

written in long, unmetered lines that break off whenever the poet chooses. They're long enough that the book designer decided to make the book extra wide to accommodate them. The poem called "Meeting" in its "thick" and "thin" versions was evidently an experiment by the author: which version might work best? He couldn't decide, apparently, so he included both. (I prefer the "thin" version because it slows the reader down, but most of the other poems use longer lines that must seem more congenial to Seshadri.)

There's little regular rhyme, except in the poem called "Nemesis," but there are many instances of what we might call casual rhyme that crops up here and there like the smile of the Cheshire cat:

The black wine is aerating.
The pasta is limp and waiting
to be sauced and tossed.
There is a clue to find.
There is an innocence
to establish and an anguish in
him he needs to destroy
before it destroys him, an
anguish so pure it almost
feels like joy.

—"City of Grief"

Because rhyme and meter are captivating, a way of bringing readers into line and enlisting their sympathies on a visceral level, it's understandable that Seshadri avoids these devices most of the time. He's not out to make the reader a friend or an ally. He poses as one who doesn't expect to be liked, though I'm not altogether convinced by the pose. He's capable of evocative descriptive language ("obsidian tide pools that cradle the ribbed limpet,"

“goshawks rising on their thermals,” the latter observed as he contemplates falling from a plane without a parachute), though he keeps such flourishes severely in check. He indulges an odd verbal tic, in which an assertion is made, then repeated at once with an intensifier: “I am. I guess I am.” “Yes, it is, it really is.” “I would, I know, I surely would.”³ But mainly the language is challenging, tough, as if to say “You wanna make something of it?”:

You keep complaining that there are two people
inside me—

The one confident, decisive, ironic;
the other a raging cripple
who never took to the nipple,
whose life has been one long
episode of colic.

Just admit you don't know which one you like better,
which one rings your bell.

I happen to like them both.
—“Marriage”

You can see from these examples, and indeed from most of the poems in this book, that the author is focused intensely on himself—his stance in relation to the world, the way he is perceived. It's a position continually under negotiation, on his side at least.

Behind every poem, by any poet, lies a choice its author has made, consciously or not, about how to communicate with the reader. The options are myriad: in the poet's own voice or in an assumed objective tone; ironically or with evident sincerity; as a

3 From, respectively, “Commas, Dashes, Ellipses, Full Stops, Question Marks,” “Collins Ferry Landing,” and “Cliffhanging.”

friend, an advisor, a plaintiff, or one aggrieved. You, the reader, are placed under a corresponding obligation to discern or intuit the author's intent. But first—are you engaged? Intrigued? Seduced? Repelled? Willing to follow despite complexities? Will you join the dance? Your decision may depend on your finding a way in: a poem or passage that will compel you to read further, to follow the writer into his own territory where, you hope, something important will be revealed.

Surveying this varied, multifaceted book, I find it hard to single out one poem as a masterpiece, a beautifully achieved object. But beautiful achievements are not what they're about. They're documents in the writer's struggle with himself and with the world around him. That in itself may be worth our attention. To get a closer look at the nature of that struggle, and the stakes involved, consider "Cliffhanging," a poem dedicated to a dead friend, the poet Tom Lux, whom Seshadri obviously admired. It begins:

The forces out to kill us with their benevolence
are more crazed now than they were when you
were alive.
And more focused too. Our ingratitude excites them.
They're bubbling with remedies.
Their providential impulses are a nimbus of knives.
Their need to tell us they love us, love us,
with all their love in vain. . . .

These are the meliorists with easy answers and too-quick sympathy, against whom one must be on guard. The poet goes on to address his dead friend: "You said before you died that this would happen. / Thanks for the warning." But, he adds, he didn't realize that even the perceptions recorded in their poems ("our phantom selves") would come after them, "crawling out of the

poems we made.” These heightened sensibilities, zombie-like, “see more than they can stand,” things “we could never really bear to see”—and as such they threaten to destroy the pair. “They’ve cut the phone lines, / and are chain-sawing the front door.”

With a certain bravado, he confesses that “all this hostility from every quarter bothers me / much less than it should.” (There’s a good line break!) He feels himself lifted by a great wave, dragged inland, then dropped on a cliff’s edge, hanging on by one arm. “I won’t let myself fall, but I don’t want to pull myself up.” So is his friend in a kind of paradise, outside this world, or is he someone who’s made his peace with things as they are? The readiest interpretation is that he’s offering to pull the author into the land of the dead—an offer the latter is inclined to accept (though he’s ambivalent, for that land is unlikely to be a paradise). Whatever it is or isn’t, the implication is that it’s preferable to present reality:

But if you were here, looking down on me and saying,
“Grab my hand, grab my hand,” I would, I know, I
surely would.

Would he like to be with his friend, or would he like to be dead?
Or both?

“Cliffhanging,” rife as it is with ambiguity, is one of the more successful of the poems. The author asserts that he doesn’t want to feel what he has felt, perceive what he has perceived. While he claims not to be unduly troubled, he also states that he’s overwhelmed and almost ready to give up. A poem like this recalls us to the land, and the state of mind, of Robert Lowell, who cried out (in “Skunk Hour,” echoing Milton’s Satan), “I myself am hell; / nobody’s here—” except that Seshadri filters his undoubtedly genuine disquiet through layers of irony and self-scrutiny that keep readers in constant

doubt as to just what is sincere interior turmoil and what is performance.

The problem with that stance, maintained with some variations throughout the entire book, is that it threatens to become a shtick. Does hostility truly come at him from every quarter, as he claims, and if so, what is its source and its nature? How, in the world of the poem to which we're granted access, can we distinguish paranoia from rationality? Where should our sympathies lie? Is the poet drowning or merely waving?

Somewhere behind the postures and protestations is a remarkably acute and reactive sensibility who feels himself, as he says in "Soliloquy," coming face to face with horror. He hastens to qualify that statement: it is "the moment before the last," which, he believes, "stretches across eternity." This is a particular kind of horror that Seshadri is not the first to observe. A century ago Paul Valéry complained:

Zeno, O cruel Zeno of Elea!
You've pierced my center with your feathered lance
That vibrates, flies, and never can advance.⁴

We are caught forever in the moment just before the end. It's a perception we often manage to ignore—except when we cannot.⁵

I will not return often to this book for its beautiful phrases or its wisdom or even its flashes of insight—though insight is not lacking here. I may go back on occasion to reacquaint myself with a record of the anguish felt by a perceptive man who feels nearly overwhelmed by his world. But I will remain frustrated by

4 From "The Graveyard by the Sea," my translation.

5 A not irrelevant tangent: in "Man and Woman Talking" a dramatic dialogue in part 3 of this book, after a married couple's exchange of mutual hostility and misunderstanding, the husband "walks across the stage while reading" Henry Vaughan's poem "I saw Eternity the other night," implying that he too is trapped in that endless penultimate moment.

the record's failure to explain just what were the forces arrayed against the sufferer. I expect I will be alternately entertained and annoyed by the feints and disguises laid out to obscure the writer's position. I will wish, and I'm sure the author wishes, for more revelation than is granted by a fortune cookie picked up at the Milwaukee airport: "Life cries out to *Be*." But that's all he wrote.

Or almost all—except for an envoi addressed "To the Reader" in which the poet asserts that "what you're thinking / about me is exactly what I'm thinking / about you." He undercuts that statement by claiming that all these words (both the writer's and the reader's) "have no meaning, / only form." It's one more barrier, mask, disguise, this time in the form of a mirror. Like similar devices scattered through the book, it's an unneeded disavowal.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Daisy Bassen is a poet, novelist, and practicing psychiatrist who graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University's Creative Writing Program and completed her medical training at the University of Rochester and Brown. Born and raised in New York, she lives in Rhode Island with her family.

Matthew Brennan taught literature and poetry writing for 32 years at Indiana State University. He currently lives in Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of *The Colosseum Critical Introduction to Dana Gioia* (2020), as well as several books of poetry, including *Snow in New York: New and Selected Poems* (2021) and *One Life* (2016).

Daniel Brown's poems have appeared in numerous journals. He has published two collections of poetry, *Taking the Occasion* and *What More?* A book of literary criticism, *Subjects in Poetry*, will be released soon and can be pre-ordered at Amazon.

Susan Taylor Chehak's most recent publications are two collections of short stories, *This Is That* and *It's Not About the Dog*, and a novel, *The Minor Apocalypse of Meena Krejci*. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of publications. Susan has taught fiction writing in the MFA program at Antioch University and the University of Southern California and has been an instructor in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and the Summer Writing Festival at the University of Iowa.

David Culwell holds a bachelor of journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and an MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University.

David Danoff lives in the Washington, DC area and works for the federal government. He received his MFA from the University of Maryland. His poetry, he says, is often rather formal, but not always.

Robert Fillman is the author of *November Weather Spell* (Main Street Rag, 2019). He earned his PhD in English from Lehigh University, and he currently teaches at Kutztown University. He lives in eastern Pennsylvania with his wife and their two children.

Coleman Glenn is a chaplain and assistant professor of religion at Bryn Athyn College in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, where he lives with his wife and their four children (plus a dog and several chickens).

Tyson Hausdoerffer is the Director of the Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Western Colorado University and the Interim Director of its Poetry Concentration. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley and an M.A. in Classics from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He recently completed a translation of Homer's *Iliad*, which is now in search of a suitable publisher.

Margaret B. Ingraham is the author of a poetry collection, *Exploring this Terrain* (Paraclete Press, 2020). Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in several publications. Ingraham has participated in numerous residential Fellowships at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Jean L. Kreiling is the author of two collections of poetry: *Arts & Letters & Love* (2018) and *The Truth in Dissonance* (2014). She is Professor Emeritus of Music at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts, and she formerly taught English at Western Carolina University in North Carolina. Her articles on the intersections between music and literature have been published in several academic journals.

Nathan Manley is a writer and erstwhile English teacher from Loveland, Colorado. He is the author of two chapbooks, *Numina Loci* (Mighty Rogue Press, 2018) and *Ecology of the Afterlife* (Split Rock Press, 2021). He holds an MA in English literature from the University of Northern Colorado. He's currently a JD candidate at the University of New Hampshire, where he serves as a senior editor for *UNH Law Review*.

Betsy Martin's chapbook, *Whale's Eye*, was published by Presa Press in June, 2019. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in a wide variety of journals. She worked for many years at Skinner House Books in Boston. With advanced degrees in Russian language and literature, she lived in Moscow studying at the Pushkin Institute during the transitional period of glasnost.

Andrew Peters's short fiction has appeared in literary magazines and prize anthologies in the UK, Ireland, Hong Kong, and the United States.

Kyle Potvin's debut full-length poetry collection is *Loosen* (Hobblebush Books, 2021). A Powow River poet, she is an advisor to *Frost Farm Poetry* in Derry, New Hampshire and served as assistant director of the New Hampshire Poetry Festival for five years. Kyle lives in southern New Hampshire.

Laura Pritchett's work is rooted in the natural world. Her five novels have garnered numerous literary awards. She's the author of two nonfiction books and editor of three environmental-based anthologies. She directs the Nature Writing Concentration in the Graduate Program in Creative Writing Program at Western Colorado University.

Zara Raab has published poems and essays in a wide variety of journals. She has an MFA from Lesley University and an MA from the University of Michigan. In recent years, she has traded the rural counties of California for coastal Massachusetts, north of Boston, where she is a Powow River poet.

Eugene Radice is a former editor of the literary magazine, *Mediphors*. Grandparents on both sides of his family worked in the coal mines, sometimes as breaker boys. The uncle he was named after was killed at 16 years of age in a mine explosion.

Michael Sandler is the author of the poetry collection *The Lamps of History* (FutureCycle Press, 2021). For much of his adulthood, Michael wrote poems for the desk drawer, while working as a lawyer and later as an arbitrator. He began to publish in 2009. Since then, his poems have appeared in scores of literary journals. Michael lives near Seattle.

Jan Schreiber was Poet Laureate of Brookline, Massachusetts from 2015 to 2017. He has published several books of poetry, most recently *Bay Leaves*. His criticism is collected in *Sparring with the Sun* (2013). He also publishes translations of poetry, including *The Poems of Paul Valéry*, which appeared this year. Jan teaches in the BOLLI program at Brandeis University and runs the annual Symposium on Poetry Criticism at Western Colorado University.

Susan Delaney Spear is an Associate Professor of English at Colorado Christian University. Her poetry collection, *Beyond All Bearing*, was published by Wipf & Stock in 2018. She co-authored a poetry creative writing textbook (with David J. Rothman) *Learning the Secrets of Verse in English*, which will be available in fall of 2021 from Springer. “The Messenger,” her sonnet crown, won the Kim Bridgford Memorial Sonnet Contest in 2020.

Bradley R. Strahan taught poetry at Georgetown University and at the University of Texas at Austin. He has seven books of poetry & over 700 poems published worldwide. His two latest books, *This Art of Losing* and *A Parting Glass* (a book written in Ireland), have been translated into French.

Linda Ann Strang is the author of the poetry collection *Wedding Underwear for Mermaids*. She has an MA in English from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. She writes poetry, short stories, and academic papers. She is also a rookie visual artist. Linda lives in Port Elizabeth, South Africa and teaches academic writing at Nelson Mandela University.

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Frederick Turner, Founders Professor emeritus of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, was educated at Oxford University. He is a poet, critic, interdisciplinary scholar, philosopher, translator, and former editor of the *Kenyon Review*. He has published over 40 books, including recently *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem*, *More Light: Selected Poems 2004–2016*, and *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems of Goethe* (with Zsuzsanna Ozsvath, co-translator).

Wendy Vidlock lives in a small agricultural town on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies. Her work has been published widely, recently, in *The Best American Poetry 2020*. Her books are available from Able Muse Press and EXOT. Her upcoming collection of essays and prosimetra, *The Poetic Imaginarium: A Worthy Difficulty* (Lithic Books), will appear in early 2022.