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"WE ARE IN THE HANDS OF MEN WHOSE WEALTH AND POWER HAVE SEPARATED THEM
FROM THE REALITY OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND FROM THE IMAGINATION. WE ARE RIGHT TO
BE AFRAID."

—GRACE PALEY

232

the PARIS REVIEW

RACHEL CUSK

and

NATHANIEL
MACKEY

two interviews

SENAA AHMAD

JESSE BALL

ZOË HITZIG

REBECCA MAKKAI

CLARE

SESTANOVICH

KEVIN YOUNG

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SUNSTRUM

with

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

a portfolio

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A photograph of a person sitting on a sandy beach. The person's legs and feet are visible, wearing blue shorts. In the foreground, there is a shallow, wide wooden bowl with a blue interior. The background consists of large, light-colored rocks and a sandy beach. The text "Objects for Interior life" is centered in the middle of the image.

Objects for Interior life


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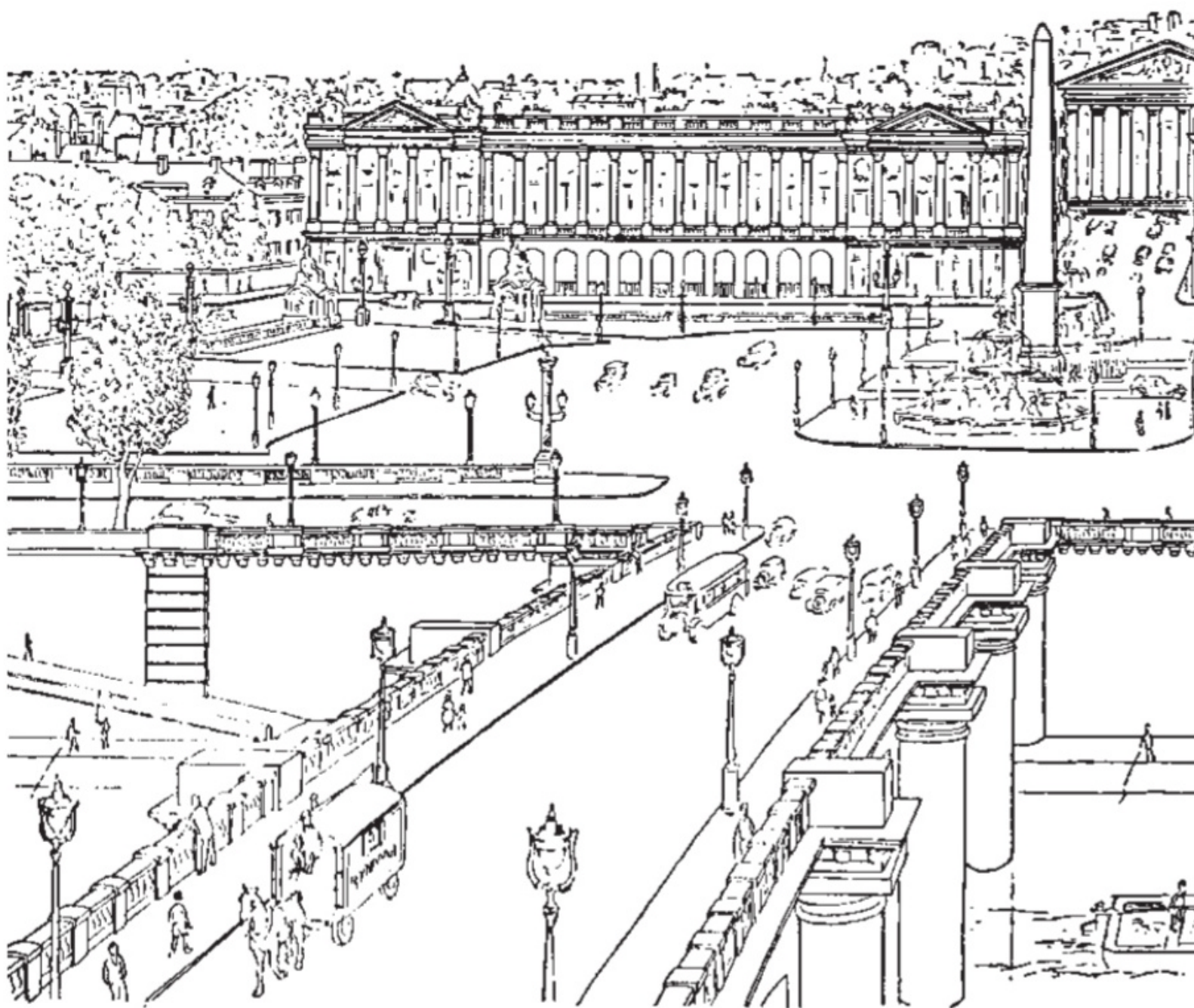
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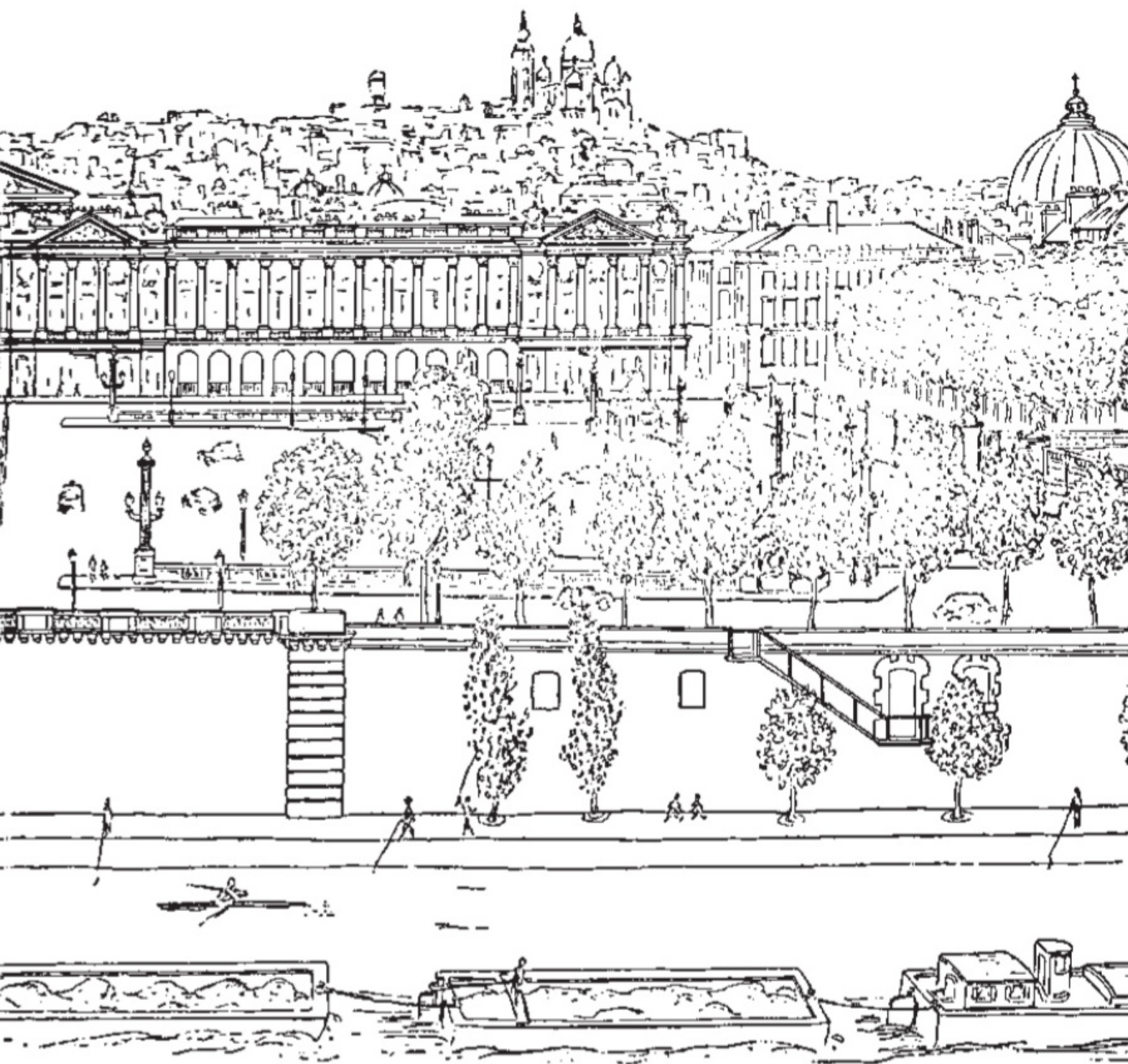
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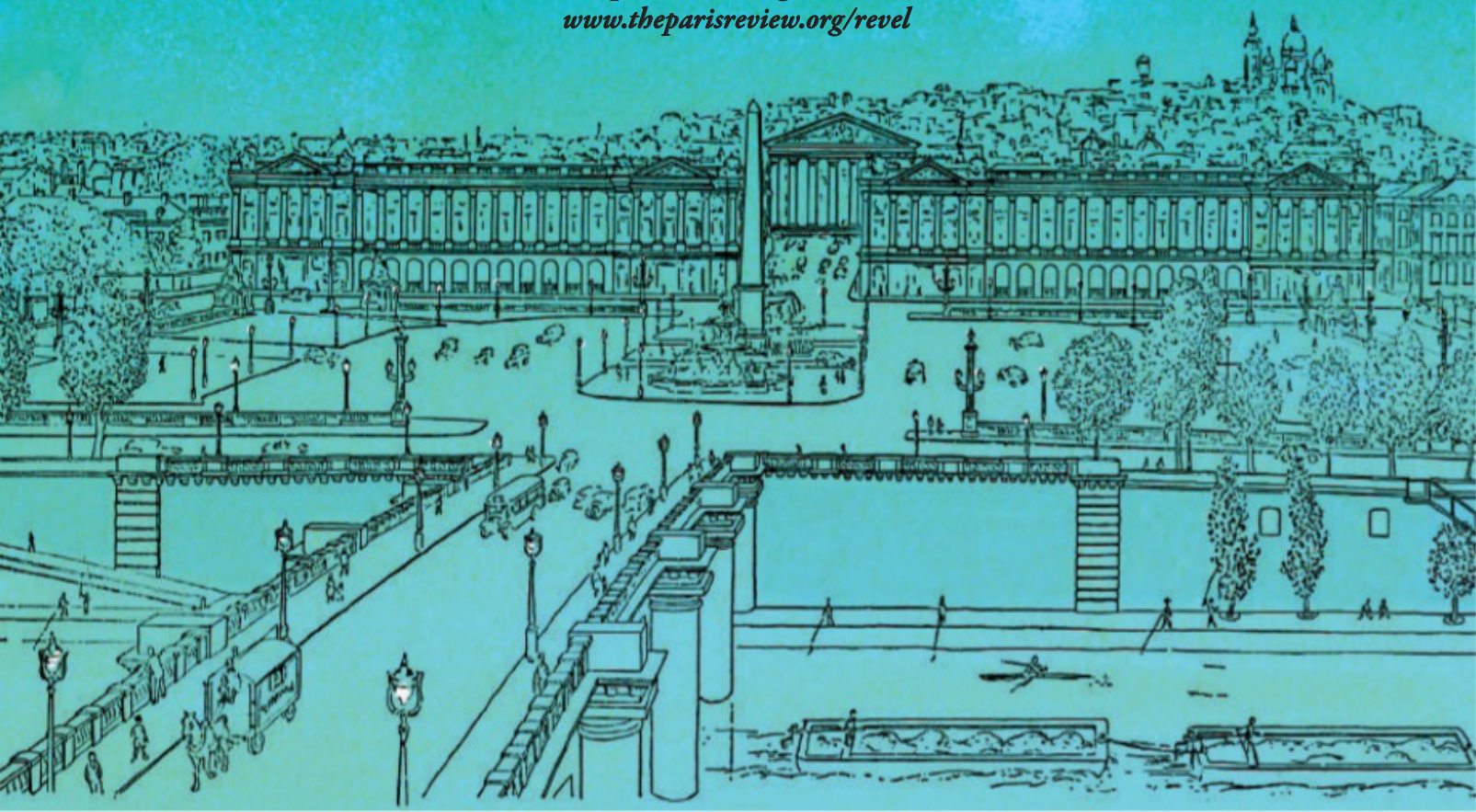
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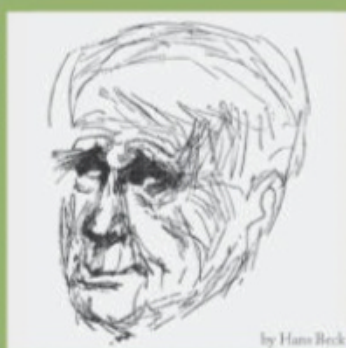
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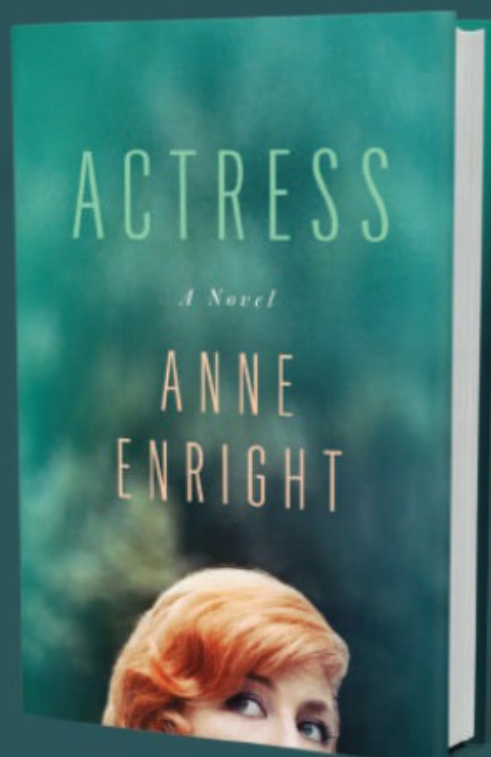
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an indefatigable polymath prolific in paint and film and melody! When he awoke, he spoke, “The turtleneck! I must draw ‘The

Artist’ on my turtleneck!” And so, this is how pen and knitting needle meet, at the union of Dreyden knitwear with illustrator Mr Slowboy’s character, “The Artist”. “The Artist” lived happily ever after on Dreyden’s cashmere turtleneck sweater. After all, what’s not to love about a lofty surface, supple hand, and buttery texture? To this day, he can be often seen singing, painting, or filmmaking.

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Cover: Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, *Kwame* (detail), 2018, pencil and acrylic on cradled wood panel, 19 ¾ x 15 ¾ x ¾".
Frontispiece: William Pène du Bois, *Paris View*.



By Design

CLARE SESTANOVICH

Her son and his future wife took Suzanne out to lunch and asked her to do the wedding invitations. Not so long ago, she had been a successful graphic designer. Her own boss. They were anxious to make her feel useful. When the food arrived, it was vegetables sliced in long, nearly see-through strips, a pile of ribbons in orange and green and red.

Suzanne saw her son's ulterior motive clearly. Being unemployed, she had told several friends, was sharpening her perception. But Spencer took pride in being subtle—probably someone had led him to believe this was the same as being adult.

Suzanne's aesthetic was elegant and inoffensive. Occasionally a little too austere.

"As you may recall," she told the future wife, piling carrot shavings onto her fork, "I didn't lose my job because of bad taste."

The future wife was named Allegra. She

reminded Suzanne of a well-bred dog—a whippet, maybe. She had very clear skin and managed to look dressed-up in jeans. Her purse had many small pockets inside; she could always find what she was looking for.

“Oh,” Allegra said, a little taken aback. “We like your taste.”

When the plates had been cleared, Spencer smiled placidly and signaled the waiter for the check. This gesture disgusted Suzanne. His finger raised almost imperceptibly, the quickest flash of a smirk. If only she had told him how disgusting it was when she had the chance, when he was still young enough to acquire aversions.

“Children are so puritanical,” Suzanne said wistfully.

They gave her a few sample invitations for inspiration. Cy and Julep, Booker and Tolu—all the names looked fake. When they stood up from the table, she resented them for masking their relief.

SUZANNE HAD DELAYED GETTING MARRIED. After Spencer was born, she and Jeb took pride in their informal tribe: lived in a cheap bungalow, pursued impractical degrees, said their plants were their children, too. What difference would a wedding make?

When Spencer was two, walking and suddenly talking, Suzanne had a miscarriage. She knew this wasn’t extraordinary—later, she looked up the statistics—but there was more blood than she expected. On the way to the doctor, the towel underneath her turned dark red and smelled. The nurses were reassuring. She could try again.

For years, she had wanted to try everything. Parasailing and acupuncture, Buddhism and Judaism and art school. Peppercorns that made your lips numb and drugs that made you puke until your life began again. She wanted to live in Patagonia and then in Beijing, because they were almost precisely antipodes. There was a tunnel through the earth between them; just start digging.

Her friends rolled their eyes. Her mother said, Slow down. Her mother said, You can’t take an infant camping.

A few months after the miscarriage, Suzanne and Jeb’s neighbor went into labor. The neighbor’s husband called before they went to the hospital: the other kids needed dinner, baths. He told Suzanne which books they liked, which toothpaste they wouldn’t swallow, which one wanted the door left open and which one wanted it closed.

She couldn't bring herself to do it. Jeb went instead. Suzanne watched him cross the street, then watched him through the windows. Someone else's kitchen, someone else's children, someone else's warm yellow light. He made macaroni and he did the dishes. She willed him to look up, but he didn't.

Suzanne avoided the neighbor after that. Be nice, Jeb said—and she was. She waved from the driveway, she left a bag of zucchini on the front porch when she knew they weren't home. The garden was overrun with zucchini.

"I'm exhausted," she told Jeb. She read somewhere that the average American family had 1.5 kids. "That's us."

He frowned slightly, didn't say anything.

"Isn't that enough?" she asked.

Their wedding was just a dinner party in the backyard. Suzanne carried a baby monitor until Spencer fell asleep, then left it among the hors d'oeuvres—the sound of breathing beside the cheese plate. The childless guests got stoned, and the ones with babysitters waiting at home brought side dishes: salads with bottled dressings, homemade dips with store-bought chips. Everyone had half the energy they required. Suzanne wore a skirt—not white.

When the party was over, Suzanne and Jeb went to bed without cleaning up, had sex with their shirts on. In the morning, the house smelled like wine and salsa. They scraped the crusted dishes and put scented candles out of Spencer's reach, grateful for the pleasure of minor transformation.

They were vague about what they expected from a long-term union. At first—secretly—Suzanne was enamored with anything *legally binding*. She thought of glue. She liked the idea of adhering to someone.

It wasn't as passionate as she imagined. Jeb started paying an accountant to do the taxes. There was never any time for the garden, so he bought supermarket herbs in plastic packages that were impossible to open. Jeb said marriage took work, and he didn't mind when the work was boring. Suzanne stayed late at the office. She went to the gym because she liked to feel her heart pounding in her throat. After important meetings, adrenaline made her confident and restless and she kept forgetting to eat lunch.

Suzanne started the design firm and Jeb almost got his Ph.D. She planned the summer vacations and he did the back-to-school shopping.

She paid for both, but no one ever mentioned that. He started rolling joints at night, to help him sleep. Eventually he started rolling them in the morning, too.

Suzanne would never have guessed there would be so many occasions to say *my husband*. Presumably there were just as many to say *my wife*. But these were the words they used most of all in each other's absence, so it never stopped being strange to hear them spoken aloud.

They spent years delegating tasks—*my wife* made the reservation, *my husband* is running late—and then Spencer left and they were alone.

SPENCER GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE, and Suzanne tried to ignore the fact that she was jealous. When was the last time she'd reached a milestone? A distinguished professor in a tasseled robe said, The future awaits you, and she felt left out. She knew she was supposed to feel proud.

Spencer rented an apartment in a nearby city and called more often. In his newly independent life, he had a lot of questions. Do you refrigerate soy sauce? Can you lie to your boss's wife?

A month or two after he met Allegra, he brought her home for the weekend. This was new. A proper introduction.

"He's growing up," Jeb said.

"He texts with punctuation," Suzanne agreed.

They served dinner without gluten, then ice cream in elegant flavors. Jeb stirred his nervously until it began to melt, the colors running together into an ugly soup. He took out a spliff and offered it to Allegra. Her spoon was in her mouth. For a moment, Suzanne let herself imagine Allegra was going to say yes. Or else she would say no, but her refusal would be full of conviction. Maybe there was something secret about her—a hidden talent for making scenes.

Allegra swallowed, then declined politely. The spoon was clean when she put it back on the table. She went back to being thin-thighed and small-eared, the kind of girl Suzanne might once have hated or might once have been, she couldn't remember which. Allegra's bowl was still half full. Spencer gave her a reassuring look.

After dinner, he said he wanted to show Allegra around the high school.

"Spencer loved high school," Suzanne said disapprovingly, drizzling blue soap over a pile of plates in the sink.

“Spence was salutatorian.” Jeb gave him a thump on the back.

“He had zero angst.” Suzanne’s hands disappeared beneath foam. “And zero acne.”

“I want Allegra to smell the track,” Spencer said. “What would be really great is if she could see the stadium lights turn on.” He smiled, picturing it.

Allegra smiled back. “But it’s okay. I’ve seen it in football movies.”

When they left, Suzanne got the step stool from the basement so she could reach the liquor cabinet. She pulled the hem of her shirt down when it revealed her stomach. The right glasses weren’t where they should have been, so she poured the whiskey into champagne flutes. Jeb ducked his head sheepishly.

“No thanks.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I’ll get a headache,” he said while she drank the first glass in one efficient gulp.

“To our son.”

She raised the second one in the air.

“Susie.”

Later, bending down in the bathroom to charge her electric toothbrush, Suzanne heard Spencer and Allegra having sex on the other side of the wall. The bed frame creaked. The noise embarrassed her, as if the whole thing were a parody. There was no whispering or groaning, but she could hear the sucking and unsucking of skin, like feet in mud.

SUZANNE DECIDED TO HIRE a new designer, even though there wasn’t really room in the budget. Laird was thirty-seven and barrel-chested. He drank coffee in the evening and lost his cool on the phone with the cable company. He was astonishingly good at his job.

In the first months after she hired him, Suzanne walked purposefully around the block two or three times a day to talk herself out of her attraction. She told herself that it was predictable—mortifying. She looked at her reflection in the new chrome buildings while she walked: there was always something to dislike. This, too, was predictable. She saw another woman adjust her hair in a Starbucks window—hair made brittle by heat and dye and time—and hurried away in the opposite direction before her own image appeared in the glass.

There was a food court where people from nearby offices waited in long lines for custom-made salads. Suzanne liked to sit nearby and watch them. They were young people mostly, with unironed clothes and theatrical voices.

“I have a date with the girl from coat check,” one woman told another.

Suzanne’s table was covered in someone else’s crumbs. She chewed a piece of gum until it lost its flavor, then sucked it.

“Would you like a crunch?” the man behind the salad bar asked the women.

They ordered sunflower seeds, one after the other, and moved farther down the line.

“I’m keeping a Post-it with my phone number in my purse,” the second woman said.

“Next time you’ll be ready.”

“Is that old-fashioned?”

“Protein?” the man said.

“Old-fashioned could be cute.”

The man chopped their salads into pieces with a huge knife and Suzanne walked back to the office. Big gusts of wind blew her hair over her face, blinding her. While she walked, she recited all the phone numbers she knew by heart. The oldest ones were the easiest. Her sister, her sister-in-law. The neighbor in Berkeley with the extra key and the sourdough starter. Spencer’s pediatrician. The numbers were useless now. Her phone knew them all.

Back at the office, Suzanne couldn’t sit still. Her feet ached, so she took off her shoes. Plain leather boots, which would have disappointed a younger version of herself. The plainness was supposed to prove their expensiveness.

“My husband and I used to trim the calluses off each other’s feet,” she told the assistants, and she could tell they were afraid to show their disgust.

When Laird brought her a mug of hot water, she held it against her cheek, hoping that the wind had made her skin look pink and full of life.

THERE WAS A PARTY at an old Italian restaurant to celebrate the firm’s latest project. An alumni magazine for a college in Maine—redesigned, the editors said, to appeal to young donors. Kids who got rich from robotic vacuums, recyclable sneakers, cookies made out of meat. For weeks, Suzanne had been looking at pictures of wholesome undergraduates. Reading on lawns or

clambering over rocks. Smiling—always smiling—in front of the Atlantic. The ocean, she thought, looked gray and unfriendly.

The restaurant had leather booths and decanters made of heavy glass. Recently, it had been decided that this old-school decor made the restaurant authentic—cool. For the first time, reservations were hard to come by. After appetizers were served, Suzanne went to the bathroom with outstretched hands, fingertips glistening with calamari grease. When she opened the door—it was unlocked, she would remind herself later—Laird was leaning against the sink, a house key underneath his left nostril.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Fuck,” she repeated, because her mind was blank.

He put the key away and looked at her steadily, waiting for her to decide what to do. On the other side of the door, the party sounded like every other party: utensils clinking, people laughing, conversations trying to stay alive. The faucet was dripping and when he turned the knob to make it stop, everything on their side of the door was quiet. She didn’t think he looked afraid.

She kissed him, they were kissing. She ran her greasy fingers through his hair and he ran his powdered fingers across her gums. The cocaine tasted metallic, like traces of vomit. When she unbuckled his pants and held him—warm and not quite hard—in her mouth, she wanted to push him to the very back of her throat, where there was spit and acid.

She didn’t do that. She stood up after a few seconds, a few unimpressive thrusts. He pulled up his pants, she washed her hands, they went back to the party. She watched him get his coat, pulling a red scarf out of its sleeve. The scarf covered his mouth and half his nose, and then he was gone. At the table, Suzanne submerged a piece of bread in her glass of wine. She ate a whole basket that way, the bread purple and soggy and sticking between her teeth.

THAT WAS ALL THAT EVER HAPPENED with Laird. He took a week of vacation unannounced and posted only one picture—a sunset with all the usual reds and golds. He could have been anywhere. Later, someone saw him throw his phone against the wall, but Suzanne let it go. She kept taking walks around the block, bought new shoes that were the same as the old shoes. When he moved to Berlin without a job, she assured him he could count on a positive recommendation whenever the time came.

Suzanne hired a woman in his place. Someone with a good degree, a quiet voice, a daughter in kindergarten. Suzanne would have disliked her if she'd had the energy.

Spencer and Allegra moved in together. An apartment with wall-to-wall carpeting, a microwave but no toaster, a bare, unmagnetic fridge. By then, Suzanne had stopped searching for Laird. Most people were easy to keep track of: texts and tweets and things called stories, which weren't really stories at all. Laird didn't leave the same traces. Maybe he'd grown quiet, or tired, or just private. She could have looked harder, but Suzanne didn't want to seem—even to herself—like she was trying too hard. Jeb friended all their nieces and nephews. He wanted to learn about hashtags.

Suzanne took an SSRI. She researched rare illnesses with vague symptoms.

"Brain fog," she said one morning in the kitchen, scrolling through alarming search results.

"Mist," Jeb said. "Maybe it's just mist."

When people asked, Jeb said he was retired. *From what*, Suzanne wanted to say, but didn't. He was more energetic than ever. He went running barefoot and bought old-fashioned kitchen appliances. He made curry powder with a mortar and pestle.

It was the end of February—a leap year—when the lawsuit was filed. There had been no snow that winter. Suzanne kept a thick coat and a thin coat in her office closet to accommodate the erratic temperatures.

Sexual harassment.

Spencer had just emailed her an edited version of his résumé.

Hostile work environment. Lewd comments.

What's the difference, Spencer wrote, *between passive and active voice?*

She took a walk in the wrong jacket. Sweat beaded behind her knees, underneath her breasts, all over her feet.

She went home early and googled Laird the way she used to. There were years of photos now. She scrolled until she found the sunset, then worked her way back up to the present. Mountaintops and cupcakes and a girl with a long orange ponytail. He posted a selfie when he'd been sober for six months and another when he'd been sober for twelve. He wore glasses, smiled widely. Eventually, he got a dog with two different-colored eyes.

Suzanne edited the résumé. Spencer got the job. Sometimes the weather

matched her feelings, and on those days Suzanne was calm. When spring arrived, the sun wouldn't stop shining, so she left the firm before anything worse could happen. She hired a lawyer, who wrote a lot of expensive emails. She threw out all her old clothes—silk and linen and wool—and bought outfits with made-up materials.

“How much is the vortex?” Suzanne asked a salesperson.

She had become the kind of person who went to the mall.

“The Gore-Tex?”

Suzanne bought waterproof jackets and pants, but the rain never arrived. The jacket could be compressed into a tiny ball. Summer came, the hottest one on record. She sat on the front porch while Jeb read a massive book. These days, he only read massive books. It was a matter of principle: stories, he said, that required commitment. She sat with an unopened magazine in her lap, glaring each time he turned a page.

“We can endure this,” Jeb said when he reached the end of a chapter.

Suzanne didn't respond. She went inside to get more ice.

“We've endured so much more than this,” he called after her.

NO ONE UNDERSTOOD why Laird had waited so long. They kept asking, Why now.

Suzanne couldn't know for sure. She wasn't allowed to see him or make any contact with him. He hadn't posted a picture of himself in weeks.

“Because it was time,” she said, as if on his behalf.

Her lawyer was younger than she was. An unkempt beard and the same baggy gray suit every time. They tried to resolve everything over email, but in the end the mediators met in a building with dozens of identical conference rooms. Suzanne had to wait by herself in an empty room where someone had left a pitcher of lukewarm water and no cups. When they took a break for lunch, her lawyer repeated it like a mantra: *why now, why now, why now*. Suzanne opened a clamshell container and lettuce went everywhere.

“It takes a while for things to sink in,” she said.

The lawyer frowned. “Do you want me to win this or what?”

It felt like the most natural thing in the world to give Laird what he wanted. Suzanne pictured him somewhere else in the building, drinking straight from the plastic pitcher, water dribbling down his neck. She wore spandex and sneakers and wandered the hallways even though she'd been told

not to. Jeb texted and she checked Laird's Twitter instead of responding. All the other rooms on the floor were locked. After a few more hours, the lawyer came back and said everything was settled. He packed up his bag.

Up until the very end, Suzanne held out hope that Laird would appear. She waited while the elevator clanged up from the lobby and when the doors opened, she was sure he would be inside. Long after the lawyer went home, she sat on a bench in front of the building, looking at everyone who walked by. She left her purse on the opposite end of the bench and wondered, vaguely, if it would be stolen. A bus pulled up to the curb but no one got off.

Suzanne imagined him running toward her, as if he'd been looking for her everywhere. He'd be shouting. He'd grab her wrist, or maybe her shoulders. He'd keep shouting, even when their faces were right in front of each other. Horrible, honest things, things he'd been meaning to say for years.

A security guard came out of the building and locked the door in two places.

"Everything all right?" he said when he saw her.

The man was younger than her, but he wasn't young.

"Everything's settled," she said.

He nodded sympathetically. She took the cigarette he offered her, like a kind of apology. When he'd walked away and she'd gathered up her purse, she said it again, just to herself: "Settled."

That night, she and Jeb sat on the porch again—sweating even once the sun went down. When she asked him for a divorce, he put his finger in the middle of a page so he wouldn't lose his place. He looked at her sadly and said okay.

SUZANNE RENTED AN APARTMENT in a high-rise. The other tenants were people Spencer's age, with jobs in marketing or coding or search engine optimizing. There was a grill and a hammock in the shared courtyard. All the keys were cards.

"Stainless steel," Jeb said when he visited. "This isn't what a midlife crisis is supposed to look like."

"What were you expecting?" Suzanne bought IKEA dishware and a flat-screen TV with a complicated remote. "A compost bin? Too many pets?"

When Spencer was little, Jeb and Suzanne had owned a car that ran on vegetable oil. It couldn't drive very far or very fast and the fuel smelled

like burning wax. Whenever they lit candles around the house Spencer said, Vroom, vroom.

As a housewarming gift, Jeb gave her a tiny succulent in a pot the size of a shot glass.

“The real danger is overwatering, not underwatering,” he told her.

“No helicopter parenting.”

Suzanne hesitated looking for a place to put the plant, even though there was no shortage of available surfaces. End tables without lamps, bare bookshelves, too-clean countertops. She cupped the small pot in both hands, as if it were something to keep her warm.

SUZANNE KEPT THE PLANT ALIVE and bought it company. Two cacti and a pot of ferns. Spencer and Allegra announced their engagement around the time her *Rebutia* was supposed to bloom but didn't. Suzanne worked on the wedding invitation while live-chatting with a horticulturalist. He recommended giving the plant a winter dormancy period. Store it someplace cool and dark.

Spencer called and asked her to come to the suit fitting. The wedding was still eight months away.

“Why?”

“Like, for moral support,” he said. “To give compliments.”

“Your dad is the one who can sew.”

“Mom.”

“Okay,” she said.

The night before the fitting, Suzanne stayed up late working on the invitations. She had forgotten this was the hardest part: deciding when to be done. She printed out three versions with almost imperceptible differences and looked at them for too long.

In the morning—she'd thought the decision might arrive in her dreams, or else in the shower—they were spread out on the table where she'd left them. From a distance, they were just blank squares. She knew what came next: she would stare at them again, from one angle, then another, in one order, then another. She would tell herself to concentrate. She would choose. For now, she stood where she was, admiring the empty shapes.

G. C. Waldrep

SUITE FOR A.W.N. PUGIN

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. Architecture
was how Pugin avoided God.

This much is evident. When he slipped out at night
to drift down to the water he was a smoke.

He did not look up at the moon. We can be sure
that any bargain he made was intentional
especially those he bound in straps made of snow.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. Exile
is something like a hearse is something, tungsten
or zinc. You are born through it. Some few
emerge from that labor wearing something
their lovers, later, will call a caul. "Look, a caul,"
they will say. But they will be wrong about that.
Later they will dream of the circus on fire.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. Funny
that at one point he should have fancied himself
a maker of chairs, when actually
he was a student of gravity. So much gravity!
he said to himself on his walks. What can I bid
for it. What tract can I force into its hand.
Gravity: it is a debt I suspect incurred by God.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin, who took
a cloud and rolled it up and sliced it into
equal segments, minor arcs. He offered these

to the choristers who had gathered around him.
He hated being watched while he worked
so he planed their sockets out. He made them
so smooth even music couldn't wake them.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin that did not
mention John Clare. Not once.
This must have been an oversight. John Clare
sleeping fitfully in the hedgerows, visions of Mary
flashing across his torn scalp like blueprints.
All the wounded soldiers confined to the hospital.
Do not doubt he knew those angles, their shatter.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. Devotion
is something that takes shape, sometimes
in one medium, sometimes another. This is the key
to understanding how evil slips in. Evil recognizes
the lock but has no concept of error.
It is we who impute error. But a building
is not a metaphor and so Pugin tries hard not to.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin who in youth
admired the theater so much he slept
with it. This makes sense, the sex, of course,
but also his work with set design. Bind your eyes
and then tell me what the theater *feels* like, you
can use any other body part or natural faculty
to inform your answer, which must be in French.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin in advance
of travel to a far country where once in the past
I had been mistaken for a reenactor. *Snip snip*

went the shears in the abbey lanary, which is
a spondee if you like. It was a woman and her child
who saw me crossing an ancient bridge
in steady rain. They had their question marks on.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin who stopped
writing his novel about Pan in the wilderness
after spotting himself in one of Turner's paintings.
This was in London, everything choked on smog.
You can't get out that way the ticket taker
kept trying to admonish, a red spur stoking her voice.
But we pressed ahead toward the police barrier.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. Now wounds
cast their bitter crowns into the river.
Now I retranslate from Book II of the *Aeneid*.
H. G. Wells lives in the flat where sorrow dwelt.
He has improved it considerably, note these damask
curtains which is what the future tastes like.
This is the sound matter makes greeting matter.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin who, based
on available evidence, never carried his father on
his back. Never stood up inside a war and shouted
"Proust." Never pretended to be a tree on fire.
All the silver arrows were naked in the night quarry.
It would have been easy for him to have gathered
them. It would have been easy, but he didn't.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin when a knock
at the door reminded me I had not
washed the handshake of God from my forearm,

which being very large He had grasped
by mistake. So I did that. Choirs sang large
casks of daylight into the meadow where the girl
had died after being struck by lightning.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin in a tree-shaped
cave. Men and women pushed past me
bearing both gifts. I mixed the ingredients
and then listened but the cave was silent and I
was no longer sure of my relation to law. The law
was silent, too. We were silent together.
This is sometimes how it is in the tree-shaped cave.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin, it was time
for the banquet of forms, I lowered all the blinds.
Look I know you say it was a woman
but how would you know if you did not touch her.
I did not say I did not touch her.
All the black cars were parked in pain's street.
All the black dogs inside, matted pelts.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin who once
tried to build a church in the shape of a thorn.
What a great idea! glass said.
It was hot to the touch. Paint the bones black.
You won't have to read Augustine anymore.
There will be a separate door for shadows to use.
We will dress like planets in winter, you and I.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin when I realized
it had been ten days since I had heard music,
any kind of music. My justice had LAW written

all over it. It was sharp the way kings are sharp.
I bathed it lovingly in disinfectant,
which dried almost immediately when I lifted it
toward where the wound was feeding on silence.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin in summer,
which is like a lion kept imprisoned in a small cage
in a village that has forgotten it exists.
No one feeds it. No one waters it. Somehow
the lion does not die. Then one day it does (die).
This is the sort of drama that makes a nation
tell another nation how strong it is, how powerful.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin when the finch
flew into the church, and then back out again.
This is either good luck or bad luck, depending.
I declared myself a school and opened myself to war.
War learned a great deal inside me, I think.
I think this because I have read war's memoir.
I make the most of its elisions and obscurities.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin in search of
what others call ghosts. *Myself myself*
I thought the refugees were saying. (I was wrong.)
The river tumbling like a pair of glasses
in hot sun. The soul is a nut God dreams of.
He cracks it (in His dream). Shyly falling out
onto the warm sand, every smooth version of us.

PUGIN

I was reading a biography of Pugin. The lamps
came on, indicating dusk. It did not feel

like dusk. It felt like the war in the Balkans
but that was years ago. I began to evolve a theory
of dusk, which like Lazarus rises
when God tells it to. Its sisters are jealous.
They had been famous for a little while, you see.



The Art of Fiction

No. 246

RACHEL CUSK

Rachel Cusk was born in Canada in 1967 to British parents, who moved the family to Los Angeles, then to England, where Cusk lives to this day. She began publishing in her midtwenties—clever and assured novels featuring men and women attempting, with little success, to manage their anchorless lives in a bewildering, loveless world. Then, after having two daughters in quick succession, she began writing essayistically about her life. Her memoir *A Life's Work* (2001) dealt directly with the existential, social, and intellectual struggles of early motherhood. The book received praise for its honesty and intelligence, and also assault for its perceived solipsism and negativity.

A Life's Work seemed to announce a new beginning for Cusk as an artist, yet it would be

almost a decade before she returned to the memoir form; instead, four more novels followed. After these came *The Last Supper* (2009), documenting a family's travels in Italy, and a book about her divorce, *Aftermath* (2012), but she was beginning to see memoir's limitations, especially for the woman writer. Another form was needed. Starting in 2014, a trilogy of inventive novels—*Outline*, *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018)—appeared. In them Cusk created a prose that feels contemporary, swift, and “clean”; characters narrate moments from their lives rather than live them in an unfolding present. The books are both of and post psychoanalysis; the characters are shaped by a culture that has trained us to see ourselves as actors in meaningful stories. The trilogy has been universally praised for doing something thrillingly new with the novel form—a wonderful outcome, but also perhaps indicative of what Cusk suspected: that people would prefer an absent narrator to a specific, female one.

This interview was conducted on four separate occasions over a year and a half. The first conversation took place onstage at the Banff Centre, in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. The second was at the Random House flat in London. The third time was over the phone; she spoke from her home on the Norfolk coast, which she shares with her husband, the painter Siemon Scamell-Katz. Our final conversation was over iced tea on a hot summer afternoon in Denver, Colorado, where she was teaching for a week. There she sat with perfect posture, a leg tucked under her. Cusk's intelligence is bright, witty, and declarative. She is quick to flashes of criticism and self-doubt, but mostly speaks with great emphasis and authority, and appears to have already thought to the end of any question that might be posed to her.

During those eighteen months, she was first on the cusp of—and then well past—publishing *Kudos*, and was traveling the world to promote it. Over the course of our conversations, she spoke more and more despairingly about what happens to language as a writer ages, and about finding herself increasingly lost in her craft. Now that her daughters, Albertine and Jessye, have left home, she feels a strange freedom, but is also more bewildered than ever about what it means to live as a woman, and to give your entire life and self to people who then leave. This unease was seeping into her thoughts about creation: she was unsure whether she was approaching a period of “late work” or a period that was post-work altogether. But the energy and

intensity she brought to these speculations made me feel certain that she was not “post” anything, and that another exciting, innovative formal turn would soon take place.

—*Sheila Heti*

INTERVIEWER

I like the line in *Saving Agnes* (1993) in which the protagonist finds an old book and discovers something she wrote when she was six years old—“It’s good to quietly hide.”

RACHEL CUSK

[*Laughs*] Advice I have not taken in my life . . . No, it would have been good. I can’t even remember *Saving Agnes*. I haven’t read it in years and years. I don’t think I could read it. It’s a strange thing about having been publishing for so long. As with any memory of yourself at twenty-five, it feels like your cellular being has completely changed. It’s not just photographs of me with a weird hairstyle at twenty-five—a novel is such an intricate document.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember writing that book?

CUSK

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like? How did it start?

CUSK

Oh, it was a burning experience of molding myself. It was a totally thorough induction into a discipline. And I did something perhaps odd for a person of the age I was then, which was twenty-two or twenty-three. I effectively turned away from everybody in my world and from the things everybody else was doing. I walked away into isolation. I didn’t know quite why I wanted to do that, but it was what I felt compelled to do.

INTERVIEWER

What was the world you were in?

CUSK

Well, so I was in London. Left university, gone like everybody else to London. We were all in London. I was working in the job I describe in *Saving Agnes* and I'd been writing a novel in the evenings, and I finished that, so that was my starter. And then I really, properly conceived of a novel and left the world that *Saving Agnes* describes and went and stayed in my parents' house in provincial England. I didn't get on very well with my parents, so it wasn't a comfortable place for me to be, but it was the only place available, and they said that for a period of time I could stay there, as long as it was all over and I'd given up the idea of being a writer by some particular date. And I went there and I was totally alone in this huge house—they didn't really live there, they were sort of elsewhere—and many of my memories of writing that book are of being physically frightened, being alone in the middle of nowhere and feeling quite physically frightened but just having to get on with it. So I stayed there for about nine months, and wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote. Never or hardly ever saw anybody. My parents came on weekends. I had no money. I wrote all day and I wrote all evening and I rewrote everything again, and it was all typewriters and Tipp-Ex. So yes, that was a burning experience.

INTERVIEWER

Did you like what you'd made?

CUSK

Yes. I had no opinion of myself and no confidence or self-esteem. I didn't think I was good at anything. I mean, I'd been to Oxford, so that was the first nice thing that had ever happened to me, and that was the outside world. But my life up until then had been one in which I was criticized, so I guess that experience of learning how to write—that was what I felt I was doing—it was like learning Latin or something. I really, really learned it. I think it's the only time I've ever had that feeling of what it takes to master something. Of course, you have to keep mastering it because it's organic and growing, but I definitely did it then. And what's weird is that, I guess because I was so

young, I still didn't really know where a book comes from, like a child doesn't know where babies come from. So I didn't know whether or not one would ever come again, and I didn't know how to make it come. The next book I wrote felt completely different from that.

INTERVIEWER

The Temporary (1995)?

CUSK

Yes. It felt false.

INTERVIEWER

Why did it feel false?

CUSK

It's interesting, actually. I could almost divide my life on either side of this line, between the things that are real and the things that are imitating reality and are synthetic or inauthentic, and the awful pain of being in the synthetic life or the synthetic relationship, the one that is a bit like the thing you want but is not it. So that was that book. That experience was also very disillusioning, because *Saving Agnes* had been this extraordinary experience when it came out. It was my first experience of attention, and reams and reams were written about the book, and I couldn't believe it. Then with *The Temporary*, there were still lots of things written about it, but it wasn't the same. So I think then I understood that it was a relationship, and that my life and my state of being had to be offered to the writing project for the true book to come out of it. I hadn't done that the second time. I had written a mental book. I'd tried to think of a narrative or story. It hadn't come out of my insides. So then I understood. The next book I wrote, *The Country Life* (1997), that was a true book.

INTERVIEWER

I want to step back a moment. What was it like, reading those reviews of *Saving Agnes*?

CUSK

I was sent them in an envelope. There were photocopies of the reviews in every single paper, and I sat on the step in my parents' garden, and it was like therapy. It was an amazing, healing experience of reflection.

INTERVIEWER

Your self was being reflected back to you?

CUSK

Yes. And only in writing did that ever happen to me. Nowhere else in my life did that happen.

INTERVIEWER

How did you know in your childhood or in your teenage years that writing was where you were going to set off to?

CUSK

Well, I didn't know you could be a writer. I don't think I ever read contemporary books, so I didn't know that was a life you could live. But from my earliest life—even from LA, so that means I was less than eight—that was what I did.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote.

CUSK

Yes. I think it was a response to my environment—to being misunderstood and feeling that the environment of my family was promulgating a version of life that I was at odds with and that I didn't agree with. I think my earliest question was, Is my version the right one? Or am I wrong? Very early on I came to see writing as a place where truth could be gotten at, but also where the truth could be defended. The fact that it could be written down—said—where it could not be said, at least not by me, in the reality of my home, created a very powerful sense of duality in me.

INTERVIEWER

What are the memories you have of being in LA and writing?



Working on *Saving Agnes*, ca. 1990.

CUSK

I won the school poetry competition when I was about five, and I really remember that. The poem I wrote was quite complicated, it was describing a sort of dreamworld in which all these strange and lovely things happened, and I had used—plagiarized—I think it was actually just one line, but I had read something similar and I loved it, and I thought it would look so lovely in my poem. I remember my anxiety that I would be found out, especially since I'd won this thing, and I sort of felt I didn't deserve to win it, and I didn't know whether to tell someone.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read a great deal as a child? Was that a part of everything?

CUSK

Well, my sister is two years older than me, and in childhood she would have nothing to do with me. But I copied her. I think copying is a really important part of becoming—it's certainly an important part of becoming an artist. Anyway, she was a big bookworm, so I sort of copied her habits. My younger brother, whom I was friends with and who was my main childhood

companion, was a hopeless TV addict, and in America in those days, unlike in England, you could actually watch cartoons all day long. And he did. He was the person I spent time with, so I would be sitting next to him, incredibly bored, waiting for him to stop watching television.

INTERVIEWER

I'm interested in the feeling you had as a small child that your family was living in a way that was a simulacrum of truth. What were you seeing that was disturbing to you?

CUSK

I suppose it must have started with my unacceptability to my parents. Those are my earliest memories. There were four of us children, and my parents were young parents, so there was a roughness and a carelessness. But the question of childhood unhappiness is one I still haven't disentangled from the facts, or from how my life has turned out. It gets larger and more incomprehensible as I grow older. It always seemed to me that the oedipal situation—that you are defined and driven by things you will never know the name of, because the people who do know won't tell you—reflects a lot of how I have felt about being in the world. My childhood left me with feelings of what would now be called trauma, but I never found a forum for those feelings in living. I walked around with them and was misshapen by them, and so the old childhood writing situation—the need to establish the true version—has always re-presented itself to me.

INTERVIEWER

Are you close with your siblings?

CUSK

Yes. I have deep friendships with my brothers and sister, and we sort of tend our wounds together, but my siblings showed me a special kind of care that makes me wonder even more about my early life. The defining feature of our parental culture was a kind of domestic totalitarianism, an absolute breaking and repurposing of truth. So there's no going back to look at the history, because it's been incinerated. The function of history as a sort of ideal authority—a home for the individual—has always been interesting to me.

INTERVIEWER

When you were small, did your siblings also feel that your parents thought you to be an unacceptable child? Is that why they showed you special care?

CUSK

Well, I was badly ill from babyhood until we left LA. Then, when we got back to England, I still was a sort of unwell person. I had chronic asthma, and I was in hospital a lot. It's really annoying when you're a child to have an ill sibling, because the attention starts going funny ways, and things are derailed and disrupted, and it seems like the ill child is spoiling things. I don't really remember that, but it's definitely something they say now.

INTERVIEWER

What did your parents do?

CUSK

My dad was a businessman. My mom was at home fermenting fantasies. [*Laughs*] They came from solid middle-class families, but their siblings are not as cultured as them. So they ascended into culture. Later in their lives they would go to the opera, and they read. Partly it happened because they were adventurous, and they traveled and they saw new things, and had experiences that expanded their horizons.

INTERVIEWER

So you went with your family to England around the age of eight?

CUSK

To Suffolk. A small village. And we were all sent to boarding school. When I was eleven, I went to a boarding school that I stayed at until I was eighteen. Already moving from LA to this village was one loss. Then being sent away, that finished me off, basically.

INTERVIEWER

It finished you off? What does that mean?



Cusk as a student at Oxford University. "I think the novel has to stay attached to life somehow. It has to share the terrain of life."

CUSK

It broke my spirit. It was a horrible school and I didn't belong there. I hated it, every single minute of it, from day one to the last day. So that was an experience of counting. Seven years of counting till it was over.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you go after that?

CUSK

I went to Oxford. That was a complete revelation. Liberation. Suddenly, I'm with people who are like me. I'm free of my family home. I'm in the place where, for the first time, I can feel some self-esteem, because it's a high-status institution. It gave me a feeling that the world thought I was okay. That was the beginning of my life being a more normal distribution of good things and bad things.

INTERVIEWER

And what did you study there?

CUSK

English. I was obsessed with Henry James, and poetry. Yeats. It's a very old-fashioned syllabus, the Oxford syllabus. You do Middle English, you learn Anglo-Saxon, and you plow your way through Spenser and Pope. And when finally you get to *Middlemarch*, you feel you are in contemporary life.

INTERVIEWER

Did you love Henry James in a way that gave you an inkling of how you might write?

CUSK

Yes. It was the idea of a fortress of sensibility, and language as this impenetrable medium that could sort of stand on its own. It was language as a still, concrete structure, and that was very appealing to me. It was a satiric position that I felt I had been forced into as an outlet for my pain—a particularly English kind of pain. It wasn't just Henry James, it was Evelyn Waugh. It's laughing at the things that hurt you.

INTERVIEWER

What "particularly English kind of pain" are you referring to?

CUSK

The pain of class. Social class. And the cruelty of human relationships in that structure. One of the things that happened when we moved back from LA was that my parents were subjected to this chilling scrutiny and this laceration through language. The way people spoke to them, the put-downs, the cutting . . . I could hear it, and I could see it happening. I don't know that my parents were entirely conscious of it, but it changed them and made them unhappy. In my own experience of English children at school there was a lot of cruelty as well. So all of that was quite shocking, and it's taken me a long time to see how much my early style was dealing with the issue of cruelty. But I was possibly also being cruel to myself, which, you know, I still am. I get great relief reading Beckett, because it's the pain of these ways people talk to each other. And the pain in Beckett is so intense, and the cruelty is hallucinatory and more deconstructed, and in drama, you know, you can do that. I suppose, like with Thomas Bernhard, you can do it in fiction, too.

But in a way it's a dead end, writing that kind of book. You might as well kill yourself. I think the novel has to stay attached to life somehow. It has to share the terrain of life.

INTERVIEWER

Is that what you loved about D. H. Lawrence, when you read him in your late twenties? What did the reading of Lawrence add?

CUSK

Oh, that was the English language liberated from the voice of privilege. Being on my road as a writer and suddenly seeing there was a completely different road, this completely different way of doing things, with sentences that go off in a very strange direction, miles from where they started. It's an odd thing, because I think a lot of women writers have similarly found their voice as a result of reading Lawrence, and I think it was because he was a working-class man. So hearing a voice that is not a privileged male voice makes you realize that there is another voice in you.

INTERVIEWER

You said that *The Country Life* and *Saving Agnes* felt like they came out of some real self and were a real expression, yet you also said that the form in which you were writing—satire—was something you adopted. When I think about everything you've written to date, your path seems so much about a search for form, and I'm curious to know how a form you borrowed could authentically express this real pain inside you.

CUSK

I think the answer is that my key characteristic up until the moment I wrote *Saving Agnes* was formlessness. I didn't know anything about my shape or identity or essence. I didn't know who I was. I realize now that I lacked something that other people get, even in a rudimentary way, which is love. Call it love. Something that enables them to know their own form. I lacked it, for whatever reason. So for me, finding those shapes gave me being. I had a shape suddenly, and I could express myself in it. I often think that if I hadn't had children, I wouldn't have been able to continue writing. It seems to be true of me that I've had to go through things and be changed by them, and be given

shape and identity by them. So the search for form was a very difficult and ragged affair in the early years of being a mother. After *A Life's Work*, I tried to go back to my old style, but a big thing had changed in my life, which was marriage and children, and the whole thing began to malfunction.

INTERVIEWER

What began to malfunction? The novels or the life?

CUSK

The two. In the past, I had created a kind of entertainment out of satire. Then there was a kind of reversal with *A Life's Work*, and I didn't understand why people started saying that my books were nasty or cruel, why suddenly I was identified as a troublemaker. I didn't know whether that was the politics of femaleness and motherhood, or whether I had said things that needed to be said and that annoyed people because they wanted to live in falsehood, or ... I don't know. There is a self-deceiving mentality of a certain area of femininity, or femininity when engaged in activities such as the raising of a family, where a surface or an appearance is being defended, and very much the easiest thing to do is to use another person as a scapegoat. Which is something that happens in ordinary life, and it also happened to my book. I've found in femininity a fascinating series of moral threats to the individual, because in femininity, the image and the role and the groupthink are so powerful. There's a lot to say about it.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about the shift from writing those first three novels to writing *A Life's Work* and how you came to write it, and in that way?

CUSK

It wasn't my idea. Reagan Arthur was my American editor, and she had published *The Country Life*. We're the same age, and we had children at the same time and with the same close spacing, fifteen months. We were writing emails to each other about our lives and our children, and at a certain point, she said, I keep your emails in a folder and I show them to my friends who are pregnant. I think it was she who suggested it, or my English editor, who was having children at the same moment as me and Reagan. So there I was with

these two editors both doing exactly the same thing as me and wanting to talk about it and finding what I had to say about it germane in one way or another, and there was a lot of humor in those emails, and I guess that set the tone, to an extent. So Reagan suggested it, and I thought, Oh, I couldn't possibly. I can't write about this subject!

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

CUSK

Because it was beneath writing about! And because what I was building in terms of a literary career was so far from that kind of personal, domestic, nonintellectual—as it seemed to me—subject matter. But what else could I write?

A Life's Work is a funny book. I felt that I was telling a story to make people laugh—sort of, Hey, the funniest thing happened, I had a baby! But then something else happened, which I think came from motherhood itself—a new sense of responsibility, of authority. And what that authority looked like was unashamed public honesty.

INTERVIEWER

How were you impacted by the reception of the book? You were very ahead of your time, writing about motherhood in that way, and many of the reviews were scathing and personally insulting to you.

CUSK

That was one of the worst things that ever happened to me, because writing had brought me the fellowship and equality that I had never had in my life, and, suddenly, that turned into an attack on me. I couldn't bear it. But I never thought it was a mistake or that I shouldn't have written it. I never thought I was wrong. But it was horrible to lose this thing that I had only just started to be sort of helped and healed by. But I had lost it, anyway, because my husband and I had moved to Exmoor, the middle of nowhere, and I was completely out of the literary world. I was in an isolated landscape with my very small children. So the response was from this other place, and it made me feel I could never go back.



Cusk in 1999. "By building a pretense you're revealing so much of who you are, you're showing your fantasy, your unconscious self."

INTERVIEWER

You once said that you began to work in autobiography when the formal problems of representing female experience in the novel began to be more apparent to you. What were the formal problems, and why could the traditional novel no longer properly represent women's lives? What did you see?

CUSK

I felt that female experience needed to be directly owned. It needed to be an autobiographical "I," and that in its most constricting and oppressive moments, the moral, psychological, and artistic problem of stepping outside the self, stepping outside "I," was a place where you lost the relationship to the truth of your own experiences. Just taking motherhood as an example, how I wrote *A Life's Work* was by having a child and then by having another child. And it was only when I started having another child that I remembered what having a child had been like. It was only a year later, but it astonished me that the memory and the language, the ability to describe those experiences,

melted away so quickly, so I knew I had to write it down. And how was I going to do that as a novel? That would have completely betrayed the basis on which I was remembering.

INTERVIEWER

Because novels are made with more of a remove?

CUSK

Well, you *build* a novel. You have to build it like a building so that it stays standing when you're not in it. And the memoir is a different kind of contrivance. You are the building, and you use yourself as the building, and then other people can come and be in you for a bit. Because the point about having those experiences is that you feel, for instance, that you are the only person who has ever experienced childbirth. It's completely impossible to be universal in that moment, or to feel that this is a shared cultural or female experience. I mean, I wish there had been a form other than memoir, but it seemed to me that was the only one.

INTERVIEWER

The books between *A Life's Work* and the trilogy mystify me in some way, because one book doesn't seem to have learned from the previous one.

CUSK

No, and partly, if you can imagine my predicament in those years, I was defending the illusion of our family life. I was defending the illusion of my marriage and how it worked. I was the sole breadwinner in a household of five people. My husband had a child from a previous marriage whom I also supported, then our two children and him. I was having to support us all by writing books. So I had to write. I didn't always want to. I didn't always have something to say. But those books, I think they're good, and when I wrote *Arlington Park* (2006), I thought, I'll never write anything as good as that ever again.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still feel that's your best book?

CUSK

At the time it seemed, in the life that I was living, the highest expression of myself that I would ever be capable of. In that era, I was trying to find old forms that I could use. I still didn't see how my experiences could give shape to something.

But I soon became aware that the memoir form malfunctioned—it was too easy for it to be read literally. It was very easy for the ambivalence that I described in *A Life's Work* to prove itself by alerting certain readers to the presence of what I was saying in themselves. And they disown it and repudiate it by saying, Well, she feels that, there must be something wrong with her because I certainly don't feel that. *Aftermath* was even worse. I really struggled in writing that book to create more objectivity and universality, but it didn't make any difference to how it was received. But what I learned from the memoirs was that “me” saying things interfered with the things that I was trying to say. With the trilogy, it just seemed a very big thing to do to the female persona, and something I finally wanted to do, to say, It's not there anymore. I'm just going to pretend it's not there.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose there is always a kind of pretense in writing fiction, so it's just a matter of choosing what sort of pretending you're going to engage in and what sort of pretending you're going to do away with.

CUSK

Yes. What pretense had become in contemporary fiction—that was at the heart of the problem—the shared pretense between reader and writer that what is being recounted is unknown until the moment of its recounting, a mutual fantasy that seemed very close to children's “let's pretend,” or even to the pornographic situation, where a fantasy is staged as fresh reality. The problem for me—or one of the many problems, I should say—was that the “setup” for the fictional situation takes you straight into the politics of identity and the difficulty of establishing enough of a shared basis for identity for the objective disclosure of information to become possible. And where the pretense is, the self-exposure is also. By building a pretense you're revealing so much of who you are, you're showing your fantasy, your unconscious self.

With *Outline*, what I took away was the known “unknown”—what the novel has to pretend it doesn’t know in order to stage its drama. It was interesting to see how that concealed prior knowledge occurs at a sentence level, and if you take it out of the sentences, something very different happens. A new kind of narrative comes out of eliminating the author, eliminating prior knowledge. Everything in the book could be witnessed, more or less, by a person innocent of hearing it or seeing it. I wanted to return every bit of information to its rightful owner, and the result—for me—was that I didn’t feel I had expressed myself at all. I had made something that was completely separate from me, and the moral clarity of that feeling was extremely satisfying.

INTERVIEWER

One of the things that’s absolutely apparent in these books is the confidence and clarity in the voice, its unwaveringness, and your certainty about what you are making and the rightness of it.

CUSK

Well, I really believed in the form. I really thought about it so much before I started. And then the sentences, if I just kept to my own rules, were delivering me faster and faster to this new place, which I guess I would describe as a truly female space. That’s where I wanted to get to. Not a feminist space, and not even particularly a gendered space, but I suppose something that alludes to the Virginia Woolfian idea of there being somewhere out there a female sentence, a female paragraph, a truly female writing that is not a response to men and the ways in which women have been constructed and that isn’t motivated by anger or injustice or anything else. That is spiritual in some way.

INTERVIEWER

The narrator, Faye, hears and witnesses. She’s almost like a recording device. I couldn’t help but wonder, did the stories that Faye hears come from interactions you had in the world, or from your imagination? What is the alchemy that created these stories that other people tell Faye about their own lives?

CUSK

I suppose I recognized that certain worlds could be almost prepared for me by other people, that other people had abilities to perceive their experiences

in ways that I found really useful. That sounds a bit like I got other people to do the work for me, but I just thought, Actually you can just use that particular native gift for narrative form in speech. You begin your path as a writer thinking that it's magic or a great mystery and you don't know whether you're going to be given another book to write ever again, so you start to work out some things about how you are making life unnecessarily difficult for yourself.

I think what I was looking for in writing these books was almost a sound frequency. I think I'm very aware when these passages of life occur—when people are able to give voice to themselves. One of the things that is said about these books is, People don't talk like that. But I think they probably do. Maybe not all the time, but I think they do. The people that I tend to have speaking in my books have a momentary emergence, like someone getting out of the sea and standing on a rock for a minute and sort of looking around, and for whatever reason they can see where they are. They can see themselves and they can see what's around them and say what it is. The times that one can do that in life—it's probably not that many. So, I suppose I felt that there was the possibility of iconic utterance, which is something that, if you live in a particular way, becomes more and more available to you as you get older.

INTERVIEWER

What is that particular way of living?

CUSK

[*Laughs*] The right way. The true way.

INTERVIEWER

The books feel deeply ethical to me, and I think you're doing two of the most vital things in literature today, which is to be so close to life that we almost don't understand what the difference is between the invention and life, and at the same time you don't seem to be betraying your family or your friends or your own privacy. To do both those things feels like the holy grail. How are you able to write close to life in this trilogy, without betraying anybody?

More probably
Hilary interrupted
her letter
from logical

people can't help things.

N: It wasn't like that.

P: Are you sure?

N: My stepfather hid the letters. I found them
one day in a box stuffed behind the —. There
were lots of them.

P: So you read them.

N: I tried to but they were impossible to read.
They'd all been torn into tiny pieces and then
stuck back together with sellotape. I think they
must have been stuck back together in a hurry because
none of the pieces ~~didn't~~ matched. You could ~~have~~ see all this
writing but you couldn't work out what it said.

P: What torture

N: I suppose he must have regretted it.

P: Or realised he might get into trouble.

N: Why would he get into trouble?

P: Those letters were your property!

N: ~~Maybe~~ I thought it was because he was sorry.

P: Men are rarely sorry, unless being sorry is to their advantage. If he was sorry he would have confessed, ~~not~~ instead of lying the evidence.

N: I think part of Lim must have been sorry. He probably didn't know what else to do.

P: What disgusting violence, to destroy something so precious in anger. It almost makes me glad to live the way I do, with only the sewer rats for company.

N: I think it was because he loves me.

P: Even a sewer rat doesn't ^{commit} ~~commit~~ ^{with} ~~commit~~ vandalism. (pause). Yes, that's a terrible story. I was lucky to have a kind father.

N: Where is he?

P: Oh, he's been dead a long time. In a way I'm glad that he never had to see me like this. It must be terrible to watch your child suffer. I couldn't have borne to have children.

You know, your story about the letters remind me of another story.

N: Children bring things out in you

How the father died
Story of lying man + letters
Story of the puppy

CUSK

It took me twenty-five years to sort it out. But yes, it's an ethical situation. I think I could hew that close to the line in a sustained way because I had studied and questioned the ethics of human interaction so intensely in my own life. My lack of ego, of subjective self-regard, has been very useful in that way, even if it's made experience more painful than it perhaps ought to have been. But it meant I could use myself dispassionately as an example. It gave me a chance to find what was universal in the particular circumstances I had in front of me.

INTERVIEWER

I'm interested in why there's a kind of uniformity to the language the characters use to tell their own stories.

CUSK

That was very much what I wanted. I realized that what made *Outline* relatively easy to write was that a lot of it was Greeks speaking in English, and I found that I really liked that prose. They are speaking English as a second language. As everyone does in Europe. At that interface, English is the currency, and it's this very clean, excellent English that is not identified with England or indeed America or anywhere.

An earlier draft of *Kudos* had the same structure as the final one but it was set in England and, well, in Scotland. And I just couldn't stand it. Everything everybody said sounded so fake. And so actressy. I thought, I've got to get rid of this veneer over everything. And so I rewrote it, and now almost the whole book is written, spoken, by people who are speaking English as a second language. I don't think I will ever write anything ever again in which a person speaks it as a native speaker. I can't imagine going back to sentences in which so much has already been determined because you're speaking as a country. As a class.

INTERVIEWER

I feel like the crisis in your recent trilogy is specifically a middle-aged crisis. It comes after decades of world-building—making a family, making a career,

Previous spread: Notes for a version of Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, 2019.

making meaning. And then there's this crisis that interrupts it. Can you talk a little bit about this?

CUSK

I suppose if there is a reckoning in middle age, it's a tragic sense that you have been formed by things, and sent hither and thither by those things, and put in a frenzy and made to run around the place, and up and down the house in the service of those things, and they were not real. They were the product of your upbringing or conditioning or gender or social class. And I think there's a certain point where suddenly the grip of all of that on you loosens. It's like a stage set beginning to sort of crumble, and you start to see it wobbling, and I think you can get some really startling and frightening perspectives on identity once you start looking at it from there. The thought that you've wasted your entire life in the service of things that didn't really exist—that you were in a prison where the door, in fact, was open, and you've sat there all this time ... A lot of what I was writing in these books was concerned with that.

INTERVIEWER

I think Michel Houellebecq has one of the darkest views of humanity of any contemporary novelist, even though he is funny, but I would put you close to him. There's this sense of life as an accumulation of losses, or an accumulation of recognitions of one's failures. Do you think that you have tried to capture—I wouldn't say a nihilism, but a kind of futility around what humans are able to manifest in their own lives?

CUSK

I'm surprised to hear you say that. It's definitely not what I would have thought about my worldview. I think my writing represents an elementally positive view of life. Writing, for me ... my struggle is to make it beautiful. That is positivity. And I think it's clear that the pains that I take with it are aesthetic and moral, and those are positive values. I feel that this question of truth, and particularly of female truth, is one that I've really, really lived in and traveled in and suffered from and stayed with. And it takes a lot of time. What a woman feels when she has a six-month-old baby and is having to tell everyone that she's really enjoying it, compared to what she might feel twenty years later about the deceptions that she went in for or didn't go in

for...I do think people accumulate some significant moral burdens in their lives, and the people that interest me are the ones who, when they get a bit of a view of themselves, are interested in finding out what the truth is. That's why I feel that my books are sort of the opposite of negative, because I am trying to capture people in moments of truth-telling.

Another crucial part of the books is that the young people, the children of the narrator, appear. And they appear in order to demonstrate that this narrator is making a concerted attempt to break the chain, as it's called. To free her children from her own prison. It isn't just middle-aged people who are allowed to talk. The children also do, and she is their witness. That's a sort of crucial aspect of what I am trying to say. Freedom, when it comes, is nothing if it leaves people unfree behind you. And the books end with that very clear idea of her children also being free, not just her.

INTERVIEWER

You have said before that one of the things you're beginning to feel free of is gender, being a woman. How do you think that will inflect the kind of writing you do next? After all, so much of what you have written is about the difficulty of being female.

CUSK

It is a huge question. I feel I lived as a woman. I lived through womanhood in the most sort of basic, and indeed arduous, ways. And now, I don't feel gendered. And I'm interested in knowing what is after gender. I think this might be where I am rewarded for having to have gone through these experiences as well as having to write about them. Which not everybody has to do. They can go through the experience and write about something else, but I've done both of those things, and I wonder whether it might be revealed to me.

One of the things about being female is the numerous iterations and transformations you go through, physically, and the numerous things you have happen to you. I think men are much more continuous than women are. A man tends to be the same thing all the way through. I always thought it was better to be a man and I wanted to be a man my entire life, and I have never seen any advantage at all to being a woman. I have absolutely

never not known that the male is more valuable than the female. That is what I heard when I first turned up, and I heard it so deafeningly. So I suppose this moment, for me, is really about trying to attain that advantage of continuity.

I don't think it has been decided what happens after family life. There are various things people do to try and give that bit of life meaning, but I don't think that is the meaning of it. I suppose I'd like to know what a female spirituality looks like that does not involve a yoga mat. [*Laughs*] A true spirituality, in the way that men have been allowed to live and follow the full path of their spirituality. I'd like to get to the end of what being a woman is, the end of that story, whatever that is.

INTERVIEWER

And do you know yet what your way into that, formally, will be?

CUSK

Well, I haven't done very much writing this past year. But the thing I've finally understood about writing is, it has its own integrity, it has its own being, and it can seem to be lost, and it can also seem to be the thing that's dragging you out of the state of loss. And right now I can't see it, but it has proved to me time and time again that it's still there.

INTERVIEWER

When you have spells of not writing, do you try to do something else that keeps you connected to it, like making notes?

CUSK

I have notebooks, yes, but increasingly I find that I'm resistant to taking notes. I don't want that clutter, those observations. I want to distill things, and the process of distilling is a matter of giving sustained attention over time to a concept or an idea. Sometimes the idea fades and sometimes it clarifies and gains solidity. When that happens, I begin to see it, and begin to be in correspondence with it, and then the possibility of writing about it is created. By the time I'm ready to write, writing has more of the character of a performance—it's almost entirely the execution of what I've already rehearsed and prepared, and either I perform well or I don't. If I write it

wrong, I have to throw it away and start again. Definitely where I'm heading to is a kind of writing that I want to be much more akin to visual art. I went through a phase where I drew myself a lot, just because I was interested in the difference between the self-portrait and the autobiography, and how for some reason when you write an autobiography people can cross its boundaries and think they know all sorts of things about you, but when a painter paints a self-portrait people navigate the act of exposure better. Why is that? If I could just work that out...

And I think, in the next bit of life, the visual artist has wheels and the writer can be broken down by the side of the road at any moment.

INTERVIEWER

Broken down by the side of the road?

CUSK

Yes. I think you can start to lose your power in language with age. And this is a guess, but if I have a sort of a theme at the moment, it's this idea of late work. The idea of the late work of visual artists being almost like an egg that breaks open to reveal the true visionary self. And that cannot happen in language, because with age, language betrays you. Language shows how old you are. It shows so many things about your identity in the first place, your social class. But as you get older—you see it happen, you see writers suddenly become slightly embarrassing or lose touch with the story of life. They cease to understand it properly.

INTERVIEWER

Why does that happen? Why do writers become slightly embarrassing, or why can they?

CUSK

Well, it's the medium of language. And one has experiences of that every day, of not keeping up, using the wrong word, not being able to change in language anymore. Whereas the visual world, it doesn't legislate for lived life in the way that language does. It's not the currency of lived life. An image doesn't have to be recognizable in the way that a sentence does. To tell a story is to reconstruct the conditions of reality in order to manipulate or change



Cusk, 2016. “You *build* a novel. You have to build it like a building so that it stays standing when you’re not in it.”

them. An image can be post-reality—it can start from a position in which reality is already assumed.

INTERVIEWER

Are there specific artists you’re thinking about?

CUSK

I’ve written quite a lot about art and artists and have cultivated a pretty deep envy of them. To operate outside of language—it seems the more lasting contribution. Yet painting is, has been, so masculine. The story of women in art is brutal. There’s a painter-writer I’ve been interested in over the years called Lovis Corinth, painting in Germany in the early twentieth century. The thing that caught my attention was that he had a stroke at fifty-three, which is what I nearly am, and he lost the ability to use his painting hand. And the thing that interested me was that this physical catastrophe broke him out of identity and freed him from his own life story and painful childhood, and he began to paint the world differently—a transfigured, non-identity-driven reality.

I think everybody interrogates their structure of self and why it was built the way it was, but I think actually to feel imprisoned in the pain of self or the trauma of self, or the fixity of self, is different, and I think that's what I felt most of my life—and I see it in this painter. And he not only painted, he wrote volumes of autobiography, but none of that altered the problem at the beginning. The only thing that altered it was this catastrophic physical experience.

INTERVIEWER

Has anything similar to this “catastrophic physical experience” happened in your life that you think is allowing, or will allow you to break through to that place of being post-identity?

CUSK

I live very physically, perhaps because, having been so ill as a child, physicality feels like my adopted country. I dread the thought of having to learn the lesson of illness again. And it becomes increasingly apparent to me that in fact some form of self-acceptance would be the transformative—the catastrophic—event, but I fear it will elude me. There is so much to be fought and corrected and defended in the world—I can't seem to care all that much about myself, unless it can be of use in shedding light on what's outside me.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any writers who you feel are also leading you forward at this moment, any whom you are inspired by or are reading with special interest?

CUSK

This is a moment for the Hannah Arendts and the Gitta Serenys, as far as I'm concerned. And Sophocles. I wish I could find the stillness to read poetry, but my moral sense is on a permanent red alert and I only seem able to do weaponized reading. I want to stay close to history and to the interrogation of evil. I want to remind myself of the unreliability of justice. And at this point culture seems so overwhelmingly white, and so generally male, that I lack the urge to revisit it. Or perhaps indeed to contribute any further to it myself. But I've enjoyed some Japanese and Korean literature lately, and

often read in tandem with my daughters—a while ago we read Kawabata's *The Sound of the Mountain* together. These are deep pleasures!

INTERVIEWER

I wonder, now that your trilogy is done and has received so much acclaim, and your children are grown up, and you find yourself approaching later life, where are you? Where do you feel you are in relation to what you have lived and written?

CUSK

Well, if we can talk about destiny, I feel I have come out of mine. And I could be dead. I could die right now and that would be fine. I think the feelings of a person who has had children and has given to them and they've gone—I think you are left with precisely the feeling that I have, which is a feeling of nonexistence, whereas in fact it's pure existence. What you are being returned to is pure existence.

So I'm in a big snowfield. I'm in an absolutely empty space. And getting myself into an empty space has taken me this long. I envy artists who begin in a less structured condition. I am a person who began life very burdened by convention and religion and class, not to mention the strange contemporary constellation of femininity that happens in educated or ambitious households where girls are given very confusing messages about what they're meant to be—they're meant to work really hard, and then suddenly wear a white dress and have loads of children and . . . I wish I'd been freer at the beginning. What I want to find now—and it sounds ridiculous—is a blameless kind of writing. There's so much silence around the egotism of language, as there is non-being around the fact of being. So I'd like to make something where the imprint of identity is much less palpable. I am sort of bashing my head trying to work out how to do it.

Griffin Brown

BLACK CURTAIN

after an oil painting by Peter Doig

As is always the case with Doig, we are on the inside.
Outside, this time, is a coast we all know.
The view is ideal: the day has reached an end,
the water is mostly still, and the moisture in the air
makes every light into a star.

In the distance, another landmass—
likely just as calm, as long as the curtain stays where it is.

It hides the riptides, renders the outside an anesthetizing blue.

And yet, at the horizon, where the curtain is threadbare,
there are hints of something beginning
to break through: pointillist splotches,
possibly storms, threaten
to upset the scene.

The longer we look, the more salient
decay becomes. It first shows
at the top of the frame: the night
turns wan, ashen, as if reneging
its depth. Then we lose the lines
of the cliffs, their strict definition,
and wonder at the lack of waves

and what is beneath
the surface. We could assure ourselves
that the hazard is past—that this barrenness

is the detached consequence
of a prior reckoning.

But through the holes, we are getting wet,
and soon the outside will flood, unfiltered,
into the numb interior.

Kevin Young

H U M

I am learning how to sleep
again, to love
the descent, or is it,

lying here, a rising up
to summit
where sleep wanders

till waking. And when
I cannot, when the water
leaches into everything

& capsizes me, I wonder
where you are,
father, if anywhere

at all—
Does sleep
know you? Does day? Such nights,

dreams fill my waking
& worry weathers
the dark, the light horribly

leaking through the curtains—
or, awake,
early, I wait for it to seep in

from the east. *The land*
of dead in the west.
The hum of sun—

none, none, then suddenly
 up—it, too,
cannot be sated

or slaked off, brother sun,
 mother moon,
father you cannot find

though somewhere still shines.

SHADE

It's a strange place
to try & find
God—inside

a building. Better off
in a field whose owner,
if any, has let the ivy

overtake it, shotgun shacks
pulled down, abandoned
beneath the green

that has no borders
& thus is beautiful.
Once seen, you won't

later, in shadow, be able
to hunt it down—
that meadow we sat

awhile, unbit,
shadeless, then went
on without.

Apparent

BETH NGUYEN

When my son Henry was a year old I took him to Boston to meet my mother. She didn't show up. It turned out that she had gone to Foxwoods Casino instead, which sounds bad and maybe was, but it had been three years since I'd seen her or even spoken to her; we wouldn't see each other for seven more. I couldn't blame her for trying her luck elsewhere.

"Birth mother" doesn't seem the right term for her and neither does "biological mother," which implies an adoption story. "Real mother" forgets my stepmother, who has been in my life since I was three. I never know how to refer to the woman who gave birth to me, who was my first mother, who did not leave me but was left by me. Sometimes I say "Boston mother," deflecting any sense of claim onto geography even though she ended up there not by choice, exactly, but by resettlement efforts years after the end of the war in Viet Nam.

This is a story I keep having to tell because I'm trying to understand it. Because there is no getting away from our origin stories.

What I tell people is that my family left Saigon the day before its fall, on April 29, 1975. What I don't always say is that *family* meant my dad, uncles, grandmother, older sister, and me. We left because my father and uncles had been in the South Vietnamese military and the end of the war meant reeducation camps or worse. We left because we had a chance. We had motorcycles that took us to a boat on the river that went out to the sea, to a U.S. Navy ship that took us to the Philippines, where airplanes took us to Guam and then Arkansas and then Michigan. Three refugee camps in all.

What I don't usually say is that my mother stayed behind in Viet Nam. Or was left behind in Viet Nam. I don't know the truth, or if there is such a thing. I can't frame what happened as a decision or a choice. It was wartime, and half my family became refugees and half did not.

In 1975 I was a baby; what happened was not my conscious experience. My memories, instead, are of growing up in Michigan, with a strong grandmother and a strong stepmother. The summers were short and the winters went on and on. Icicles lengthened from the eaves and fell like daggers into the snow. My sister and I knew the vague story about our mother in Viet Nam, but ours was a family that preferred silence over questions, especially when there were no simple answers. We lived in a mostly white community that wasn't happy about a sudden influx of Vietnamese refugees, and our mode of safety was silence. No one talked about the war. It was better to look forward, not back. It was better not to ask and not to know.

SOMETIME IN THE EIGHTIES, when my sister and I were in elementary school, our mother in Viet Nam became our mother in Boston. My father told us that she had written him a letter to say that she had come to America with her two older children. I remember how surprised I was—at her existence being mentioned, at her having other kids. At the same time, I felt relieved. It helped to think of her as being less alone in Viet Nam. Less abandoned, because she had a whole other life. My sister and I saw the envelope—I remember the neat, script-like handwriting of the return address, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania—but we never saw the letter, which must have been in Vietnamese, a language neither of us could read. I feel like I should know the exact moment that my father told us this news, bringing to

light a subject that was supposed to be in permanent shadow, but I don't. It just happened that one day my mother was no longer a distant someone in a country I didn't know much about, but a real person in this country that we now shared.

My father said that she'd been able to come to the United States because her son was, as people said back then, "Amerasian"; his father had been a white American soldier. What had happened to that guy or who he was, whether it was romance or rape, no one knew or would say. But because of this status my mother, her teenage son, and her twenty-year-old daughter had arrived in Pennsylvania, where their sponsoring organization was based, and then moved to Boston, where they stayed.

My father and stepmother thought it best that my sister and I wait until we were older to meet our mother, because it was all just too complicated and confusing. My sister and I did not object; again, we did not ask questions, or wonder aloud why we were getting this information. Even then I understood that my father could just as easily have not said anything at all. So my sister and I waited, and didn't mind the waiting. We didn't know our mother so we didn't know what it was, really, to miss her. Sometimes I think we knew that whatever we would learn or gain would alter us, and maybe we didn't want that just yet. It was troublesome enough being Vietnamese in our conservative white town. There was already so much to conceal from our white friends, so many ways to pretend that we were just like them.

Or maybe we knew that it wouldn't alter us. That we would go on as we were no matter what.

I MET MY MOTHER the summer after my second year of college. I'd had a chance the summer before, when my sister, father, and stepmother traveled to Boston, but I used my receptionist job as an excuse not to go. I was afraid to face her, afraid to let anyone else see me facing her. I might have kept putting it off if I hadn't agreed to attend a friend's wedding in Boston.

My father was the one who arranged for my mother to meet me outside the suburban hotel where I was staying. The first thing she said to me was, You are so late. She had brought her daughter, her daughter's husband, and their two little kids—my niece and nephew. We piled into their maroon Plymouth Sundance, which looked just like the ones from driver's ed in high school. My mother and I were dropped off in Chinatown, where we walked

around for an hour, browsing the shops. I pretended to admire all the jade and gold jewelry. We talked about school, and about the construction going on in Boston. I learned that my father and stepmother had been in communication with her over the years, sending money. I tried to ask a couple of questions about Viet Nam, my birth, my sister's birth, but my mother brushed them away. *That was so long ago* was her stance then, and it is still. We kept walking. Anyone who saw us might have assumed we were mother and daughter. We were the same size, the same height. I realized I'd never thought about that possibility, that I could see something in her that was something of me, and that she could do the same. I found myself looking anywhere else—the street signs, the way all the other women seemed to be carrying plastic bags with the handles tied so tight they would have to be cut. I couldn't wait to get back to the hotel, to go to a wedding filled with people I didn't know. My mother insisted on buying me a Buddha-shaped mooncake and I didn't tell her that I have always hated the heavy sweetness of mooncakes. I pretended to save it for later, then threw it away when I was alone.

In real life, when I tell people about my Boston mother—only when needed, when an explanation seems required—I say that she and I are not close, which is true. It is hard to describe how this has happened. It is hard to describe but, I see now, easy to experience: how distance creates distance. We saw each other, we said goodbye, we went back to our regularly scheduled lives. It was not dramatic. It was simple. Once you are gone, it gets easier to stay gone.

OVER THE COURSE OF MY AMERICAN LIFE I have spent less than twenty-four hours with my mother. We have never spent more than an hour or two together at a time. If I see her it's only because I'm in Boston for some other reason and I'll call my father so he can call her to arrange a visit. I need his easy Vietnamese to figure things out, to decide the time when I must show up at her apartment. And then she and I just sit there, maybe drink some tea, maybe talk about her pet cockatiels. I ask her questions she won't really answer.

Once, after a visit, I walked with her to the paper factory where she worked regular shifts, doing something with envelopes and sealant. I remember leaving her there and walking away—but to where? Where was I going, and why? I remember thinking about paper, about envelopes, and thinking

it was too obvious. I had once held the envelope containing the letter my mother had sent my father all those years ago. Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. I had taken note of her handwriting, the blue ink. But not of the letter itself. That was gone and who can say when or how such artifacts slip away and disappear, lost in the shuffle of our lives.

The paper factory went out of business ten years later, undone by the paperless revolution. My mother does not have email or a computer. She has a cell phone but the number I have for her is a landline. I wrote it down on a piece of paper that I keep in my desk. Once, I called and no one answered. Once, I called and she said she was on her way out to the market and then to the casino in Connecticut. I could try tomorrow, she said. I didn't.

IN THE FIRST YEARS of my children's lives I was awake so often at two and three and four in the morning, hours I had always felt were the most sorrowful. We were living in Chicago, on the seventh floor of a thirty-story building, and sometimes at three in the morning I would look out at the other buildings nearby, counting the lit-up windows. I would decide that within each of those windows was another mother, nursing or cleaning or somehow taking care, and that we all shared a silent connection through our various windows, our various lights.

To be a mother is to form a new understanding of time. It is to form a new relationship with all that you know about your body and its spaces. It is not quite a do-over of your own childhood, but close enough.

I have always hated being up at the hour of the street sweepers. I have never cared to hear the earliest birds start their songs. I don't want to see the sky turning toward day. Being a mother has meant learning time as a function of someone else's needs. When my babies slept next to me they would turn to me, to my body, for milk. I would wake up just enough to be aware, enough to stay afloat in a near dream state. Often, I didn't even open my eyes. I knew my children by heart. The normal measures of time—traffic, sunrise—seemed an affront, a demand to return to the outside world where who you are might be someone else entirely.

And sometimes in that half-awake state I would try to imagine the weeks after the fall of Saigon, my mother traveling across the city, from her own mother's house, to see us—my sister and me, her two youngest children. Looking up for someone at an open window. Maybe she knew before she

got there that the house would be empty. A neighbor told her that my father had left word: we were going to try for America. For a long time, that's all she knew. I have no idea when she heard from my father next. One day my mother had four children in Saigon and the next day two of them were gone.

WHEN I TOOK MY KIDS to meet my Boston mother, my son Henry had just turned eight and my son Julian would soon turn six. Once again I planned the trip through my father, who called my Boston mother and let her know that we would be visiting. I booked a hotel near the public gardens, thinking my kids would enjoy the swan boats, but didn't tell them why we were there. To them it was just a jaunt from New York, where we'd been staying before one of my teaching gigs.

On the morning of the visit my kids and I walked through the rain to the nearest T stop. We didn't have umbrellas. We hurried down the steps, purchased our fares, then lingered by the map, watching trains come and go. We were on the Green Line, the oldest subway in America, and my kids were fascinated, as I had been years ago on my first trip to this city, at the streetcars skidding along the embedded tracks. My children were delighted by the old-fashionedness, how people had to climb up into the cars rather than board from a platform. Quickly they memorized the system—which train letters corresponded with which destinations—because that's what they liked to do. We often took train and subway rides for fun, with no real destination.

I had been putting off telling them where we were going in case she canceled, though I also knew that if she were to cancel, I wouldn't know; she simply wouldn't be home. At Park Street we changed to the Red Line and I pointed out the Porter Square stop. That's where we're going, I said. When they asked why, I told them, Because we're going to visit my mother—your other grandmother.

Oh, Michigan grandma is here? Henry asked. That's what he and his brother, of their own devising, have always called my stepmother. They have a Michigan grandma and a Michigan grandpa, a D.C. grandma and a D.C. grandpa. Sometimes geography makes more sense than the abstraction of family lineage.

Not Michigan grandma, I said. Your other grandma, the one you haven't met yet. My mother.

You have another mother? Henry asked. As the older child, he often ends up speaking for both of them.

They knew the story of how my family had left Viet Nam as refugees, but I'd always avoided the part about my mother staying behind. I guess I thought it was too traumatic for them to handle; in hindsight, I wonder if I was just replicating the silence I'd been taught.

Henry looked at me with thoughtful curiosity in his eyes—the same look I'd seen since his baby days. The child who would study every person in a room. Assessing, wondering. Often worrying.

So, he said, Julian and I have another grandmother?

Yes, I said.

It was midmorning on a Saturday in June, and the outbound Alewife train was mostly empty. The man sitting near us was clearly listening, with great interest, to everything I was saying to my children. I couldn't blame him.

Julian, who is less of a worrier than his brother, smiled and said, We're going to visit Boston grandma!

Yes, I said, hoping I sounded enthusiastic.

Oh, okay, Henry said, the way he does when he asks what's for dinner and I answer. Like, sounds good, no big deal.

My children looked out at the grayness of the day and the grayness of the Charles River—they love it when trains cross bridges—and we didn't say much more until we pulled into the station. I met the eye of the man who'd been listening to our conversation and he nodded a little, which I interpreted as good luck.

From the station we took a Lyft to the complex where my Boston mother has lived since the eighties. Over the years she has moved from one apartment to another without ever really leaving the place. It was still raining when my kids and I walked toward what I thought was the correct building. They all looked the same—brick, surrounded by parking spots. No one else was outside. We huddled under an awning while I checked my phone to make sure I had the right address, then walked to the next building, which was also wrong. Finally I called my mother's number.

Where are you? she said. Supposed to be here by now.

We're here, I said, but I can't find the right building.

She tried to give me directions but soon the kids and I were standing in the middle of a parking lot.

Then I saw her: she had a fuchsia umbrella and was waving to us from a curb near the farthest apartment building. She had come out to find us.

Hiiii, she called to my kids, give grandma a hug! She held her arms open and they went into them, hugging her as if they already knew her.

She had the same delicate frame, the same thin skin around her eyes, that I had kept in my mind from the first time I saw her all those years ago. It was hot and we had walked around Chinatown slowly, turning to pass the same stores. Now she wore a houndstooth coat and satiny heels and a jade-and-gold necklace and the kind of flowy pants that I associate with all Vietnamese women of a certain age, that I sometimes think of as waiting for me, too.

MY SISTER SAYS that our relationship with our Boston mother only goes one way. We're the ones who have to visit, who have to call, who have to do everything, she says. If we don't, then we'll never hear from her.

This is true. And yet.

We are the ones who left her. Even if it wasn't our choice. We left; we are the leavers. And we don't even regret it because we are glad to have grown up in America because that is what we know.

I say to my sister: Maybe we are the ones who must make amends. In truth, I'm not even sure what I mean by this. Maybe what I'm trying to say is that we are the lucky ones, and with luck comes responsibility.

What I don't say to my sister: Maybe because we know we can never correct the absence that defines our shared past, that pictures and money don't ease the fact of such absence—maybe that's why we keep leaving. Why I keep leaving. I have gotten so used to that feeling of being gone that I can hardly imagine returning.

It was easier when we didn't know the truth.

It was easier when we didn't ask questions.

IN AMERICA my mother has always lived in small one-bedroom apartments. The window blinds are drawn and partly broken; the altar for Buddha and the ancestors gets central space in the living room; there are piles, everywhere, of what my mother would call things she needs where she needs them to be. Here, she had spread a blanket on the floor in front of the altar and covered it with an assortment I couldn't figure out: stacks of paper napkins printed with casino logos, boxes of tea, tin buckets and mixing bowls, mini

water bottles, hairbrushes and toiletries, a plastic bag filled with other plastic bags, a large scale.

Before I could think to ask about this, Henry did: What is all this for? For this and for that, she said.

This is how she has always answered questions, and I remembered how when I first met her I asked her to tell me the story of how she met my father and she said, Oh, who can remember.

Now that my kids had finally met my mother and we were in her apartment, I didn't know what to do next. I'd brought her a gift bag, filled with tea and sweets and some money, and she set it aside without opening it. She seemed in no hurry to do anything besides sit on her pink sofa, so my kids and I sat down, too. When I asked what she usually did with her days she said, This. We sit here, we relax. She smiled at her boyfriend, who was texting on his phone.

Did I mention her boyfriend? In truth, I'd forgotten about him. As my mother explained it, he was Chinese and spoke very little English and no Vietnamese, and she was Vietnamese and spoke decent English but no Chinese. Over the years, she had learned enough Mandarin to communicate with him.

Has he learned Vietnamese, or more English? I asked her. She laughed. I asked how long they'd been together and she said more than ten years. Actually, she said, we're married. He's my husband.

Oh, I said. When did you get married?

Years ago. I never told your daddy, I don't know why.

My mother was eager to give my kids bottles of mango juice, which they happily accepted. We continued to sit on the pink sofa. We took pictures of each other. I peeked into the small kitchen—more piles of things—but didn't go in. My mother kept asking my kids if they wanted something to eat but didn't say what she had. My kids were far more interested in the piles in front of the altar—the paper napkins, the scale. To amuse themselves, they started weighing various items around them.

I tried to make conversation with my mother. I asked questions I'd asked before. Do you remember anything about the day I was born, or when my sister was born? Not really.

Are you going to visit Viet Nam again soon? She'd spent months there last year and would probably go again in the winter. What's Viet Nam like

now and what was it like back then? Oh, so very different. I asked about my half-brother; I asked about my half-sister and her kids. Where were they? What were they doing? I had all this family that didn't seem like mine, stretched out across Boston, across the United States, across the world to Viet Nam.

We talked about the pictures of her parents on the altar. Along with fruit and incense, candles and fake flowers, there were mini bottles of whiskey and champagne glasses filled with dusty Life Savers.

She lived a long time, my mother said of her own mother. Age ninety-something. You remember her?

I did. I had met her once, fifteen years ago when I visited Viet Nam, the one and only time I've been there since leaving as a refugee baby. I met my maternal grandmother in her home in Saigon. I can still see her teeth stained from betel nut, a light shawl draped around her shoulders even though it was the hot season. We sat on a cushionless wooden sofa. An oscillating fan turned toward me and I thought about counting how many times it would in five minutes, ten. My Vietnamese wasn't strong enough to ask questions and my grandmother's English wasn't strong enough to answer so we smiled and stared at each other over cups of tea. I didn't stay there long. We didn't know each other at all, and never would.

My mother was getting agitated by my kids' efforts to weigh whatever objects they could find, so they stopped and wandered into her bedroom, where plastic storage boxes were filled with shoes and makeup and an open closet revealed a tight row of dresses and jackets. The bed was layered with clothes. I wondered if I had gotten my own messy, keep-everything tendencies from her, or if this was a consequence of refugee, immigrant life: having as much as possible nearby, just in case.

My mother shooed the children out of her room and they went back to the pink sofa. There wasn't much else to do. We'd been there less than an hour but it was clear the visit was over. The boyfriend, now husband, stood up. My mother asked my kids if they wanted to take more mango juice with them.

Bye-bye, my mother said to my kids when they had put on their shoes. She gave them another hug and they gave her another hug. Bye, they said. Everyone was smiling. She patted their heads and said they were good boys, handsome boys, and told me to send pictures in the mail. Sure, I said, though I was also pretty sure I wouldn't get around to it because I never had.

When my sister and I were twelve and ten we sent school pictures of ourselves to our mother. We put them in a greeting card, our response to the letter she had sent our father. We were excited at first but within a couple of weeks we forgot to keep checking the mailbox. Soon, we forgot to think about a reply at all. As far as I knew she never wrote to us, and we never wrote her again. But I recognized those pictures—me in a striped dress I had loved, my tortoiseshell glasses crooked on my face; my sister with too much hairspray in her bangs—among pictures of her other children, all of us in a basket near her front door.

Byyyye, my kids said again. They waved. My mother and her husband waved back. My kids and I left the building and stood outside waiting for a Lyft to take us back to the subway station.

My kids were in good moods, happy to get back on a train. They seemed to have simply accepted the fact of another grandmother and now their attention was on what was next: lunch, more transportation. They did not know what I was thinking, which is that I am always leaving my mother.

WHEN MY CHILDREN were eight months old, the age I was when I left Viet Nam, I would try to imagine them disappearing, bound for another country, a different life. It felt impossible only because it felt unbearable. Unbearable to think of my children having no memory, no imprint of me.

Is it better, is it lucky, even, that my sister and I were too young for memory, too young for the imprint of imagery? We might have left in fear, we might have cried, but we keep no memory of this. We have vague anxieties, nightmares, but we don't have the active pain our mother must have had, must have still, even if she will never speak of it.

I've never seen my mother show strong emotion. She is no-nonsense; she is a wave of the hand—*Eh, who can remember how things were?* She is not one to tell stories. She will resist the very idea of a narrative. Maybe because this is a story that no one would want. But I suppose we just don't get to choose. We must contend. I am trying to contend. If my childhood was all about silence then my parenting, my now, is all about questions.

HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED that time in Boston when Henry was a year old and my mother didn't show up to meet him: her daughter, my half-sister, showed up instead. She explained about the casino. The way she spoke, it

sounded like a necessity, a fact of life. She had to go to Foxwoods, you see. Then she gave me an envelope—a gift from all of us, she said. I knew it was money. We're Vietnamese; there was a new baby; that meant money in an envelope. I didn't want to accept but even as I protested, I knew I had no choice.

My half-sister stayed only a few minutes. She admired the baby. She said she was in a hurry because of parking.

After she left I looked at the envelope in my hand. Inside was one hundred dollars.

I'm not sure I ever expected my mother to show up. I wasn't hurt, wasn't surprised. If I ever feel bitterness toward her, it is so fleeting that it leaves only a slight impression, an almost-ness that doesn't take shape. Always I think: I have no right to want anything or expect anything from her.

After all, my mother didn't know me. Why would she need to know my children? She had children and grandchildren already. They were her actual life, the daily being together around a table, eating and laughing and watching the same television. These became the memories of how her family has lived out, is living out, its life. I'm not there. My sister isn't there. My children aren't there. We aren't in their thoughts and they aren't in ours. It's the people who are there, in front of you, who get to be your actual life.

MOTHERS AREN'T SUPPOSED to take up so much space. They're supposed to do the work—quietly, efficiently, and behind the scenes—and then get out of the way. Mothers are dismissed and disdained; they are helpers and helpmeets. This is the clear message I have always seen and now get to experience. I feel it most when I have the urge to tell someone I'm not just a mother and then realize what I have internalized in even thinking that phrase, *just a mother*.

One day at my kids' school I had to identify myself and instead of saying, I'm a mother, I said, I'm a parent. I don't remember the circumstances or why this needed to be stated, but as I spoke I saw the words in front of me: *I'm apparent*. I had become, in parenthood, apparent to myself in a way that I was not before—in a way so deep, so intense, I know I will spend the rest of my years turning it over in my mind, trying to understand it. Instead of slipping into the background, being the coordinator of all things who then hurries out of view, I was the opposite: I was present; I was here. I was being seen—at least, by me.

IF I DON'T MAKE THE EFFORT to see my mother in Boston, we will never see each other again. We aren't estranged, just separate. But I now know the strange secret of this kind of separation: absence gets easier, not harder.

And if nothing happens, who will care? My sister tells me that I'm the only one who cares. She thinks I am making this circumstance of life more difficult than it is. That sometimes families are made rather than given.

Perhaps it's true that I am bothered by the narrative mess and messiness of my family's story, which, like all family stories, can never have a resolution. I see myself trying to fix the messiness through my own mothering, right down to chaperoning field trips and sewing tae kwon do badges. The concreteness of mothering, I think, surely will affix me to their lives and memories. Because a foundational truth of parenthood is that you raise children for the rest of *their* lives. Not for yourself. The point of raising children is to let them leave. To help them leave. Because they will; they must.

I think about how so much of my life harks back to a time that I can't remember and didn't choose: that time I left my mother in Viet Nam, and then didn't know or see her until I was twenty years old. There is no returning, no repairing. Every mother knows that because motherhood is all about time, about waiting and watching. *The days are long but the years are short*, people keep saying to me. Complete strangers on playgrounds, on public transportation. Only other parents would say such a thing. My relationship with my children is also my relationship with time, with the concept of motherhood, with the mothers I have known, with the mother I have never known. It is a catch in the throat. It is the edge of tears. It is the wanting to be here, in this moment, so that I will stay in my children's minds. We cannot control what our children will remember, what they won't. We are always hedging our bets against the future.

Before I go to sleep, I check on my children. This is a universal thing that parents do. Sometimes it is very late, and I do that thing of standing in the doorway or sitting on the edge of the bed to watch the children sleep. What are we doing when we do this? We're checking to make sure they're literally alive, for one thing. We're checking to make sure they're not sleeping half on the floor, because we know they sometimes contort themselves in their sleep. We're checking to make sure they've got their blankets and pillows and stuffies. We're making sure that they are safe as we understand the idea of

safe, which is to say within reach of us. Sometimes all I want is this: to be in the same room, at the same time, together. A brief thing I can know as true. At such times, in darkness, I can't help thinking about how far our bodies have traveled, keep traveling, will travel. What we go through to get here, to remain. Sometimes I feel like I'm just shoring up these moments of being a mother. Like insurance, because to be a mother is to be in a permanent state of fear of loss. So I want them to know I was there. Here. I never wanted to leave. I will stay as long as they let me.

Joanna Klink

CANCER (PRAYER FOR MY FATHER)

Far into fever, attached by cords to the soft-
clicking machines, he sleeps
in a bed in a room not his own.
People enter and pass like ghost-blown
fogs. He is a slow walk
with limbs that recently gave way.
He is part of the blue snowfall.
He is very small, sitting on a curb
with skinny legs next to an elegant
aunt. He is not yet born.
He travels to meet the relatives
in Maulbronn and feels the lifting darkness
sunk in his chair at night, thinking.
He is intensely wrong, obstinate and generous,
the one who never seems to grieve,
sweaters and wine and violas locked in
air. You say: He, too, cannot be found again,
he, too, asks only for more aliveness
and time. The room is like every room
in that house, sterile and never quiet,
but sometimes birds drop into the air
above his sleep and coast for hours
on loose currents. There is no fire
but weathered blood and skin, a threaded
endurance, the peace
of placing your body in the hands
of those who might know,
the voices saying, Have you eaten,
What could you have done.
The frost in your eyes is melting or stays
stitched. The fragile instruments of bodies

step into the room and out, the machine
counts two three four, and part of who you are
travels into the glass hallways that are filling
with warm light. He walks
only for so long. He approaches each sorrow
and lets it fall. He is unaccountably at ease
for just a single instant, he is
not an important name, he is the crucial man
inside the waning fever, the one who taught you
to care, he follows the deep tasks
even as he surrenders, one by one, his body's
dignities. He is the concert of quiet strings,
the sudden gentleness of moss,
the tyrant opinion, a confusion of medications.
His mind is a room casting infinite love
from four walls. My beautiful father,
you carried me out into the day of my life
and let me stand on earth with affection
and force. Why should we fear our disappearance.

Diary of a Country Mouse

JESSE BALL

THURSDAY, 10 DECEMBER.

Giles shows us the sample mice and I am, as if for the first time, overcome with joy. Perhaps when I was a child I had feelings like this—but not in many years. I look, for instance, at a small gray mouse, smaller than the others, and it is as if I am seeing (anything) for the first time. He moves among his neighbors so swiftly and yet without error—as if on a track, as if held up by threads from above that prompt him. For reasons I cannot yet fathom, the edge of the enclosure is of great interest to the mice. I suppose there are no such edges in the so-called natural world. No one, not even we, are ready for them (though they are upon us). He sniffs there at the edge and his nose moves with almost impossible articulation.

—What about life expectancy? asks an older woman to my right. She is possessed of a red knit hat and appears concerned. How long does a mouse

live? she asks, and her finger draws twitchy circles on her leg. The attention of the group coheres. This is a common concern.

Giles is quick to quash the worry.

—The field of LSRE (Life-Span Research Estimation) tells us with great confidence that the perception of time varies consistently with the species' parameters. In layman's talk, a mouse feels it lives as long as a turtle.

—You can't lose the years you're entitled to, says a man on the other side of the enclosure. It's in the brochure, you can check it out yourselves later. There's no way you can lose any of your God-given time. It's a gain, a win-win.

It's a win-win. People say it to themselves quietly. It's what they want to hear and now they're hearing it.

FRIDAY, 11 DECEMBER.

A cold day. Putting some things away in the shed, I cut the side of my hand and I am reminded once again of the intransigent rudeness of my physical position, that is, my position as a human being. I never have wished to be one. I never chose it. For decades I have worn this really quite elaborate clumsiness like a hair shirt. Can we not say I was perhaps always bound for a different shape?

SUNDAY, 13 DECEMBER.

Sitting out on the veranda with my wife and daughter. We talk about the possibility of a going-away party.

—A going-away party. A going-away party, my daughter repeats.

—Like an Irish funeral, my wife adds.

The wooden ornaments of the porch strike my eyes as coarse, as all too human. What could we have meant putting them there? The sun is setting and I believe it must rain all through the night. In fact, the rain has already begun. Droplets spray us, making their way horizontally into our semi-enclosed space.

—You can't say the idea doesn't have some merit, says my wife.

—I'm getting another drink, my daughter calls out, standing. Anyone for a martini?

TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER.

It's not like I'm going away. I keep telling myself this. Indeed it's in the

manual. *Don't be worried. It's not like you're going away.* But it does somehow feel as if I'm preparing for a trip: perhaps the longest I've ever made. Some people live only through traveling, are always between trips, or on trips, always on the balls of their feet. But I have never been a good traveler.

WEDNESDAY, 16 DECEMBER.

In the car my daughter confides several things to me. She doesn't want children. She plans never to marry. Her partner is a woman named Claude, but they are not lesbians. Even that label they reject. I ask if it is the birthing she doesn't want to deal with, or ... Even adoption, she says, even adoption seems awful to me. It's as though human beings extrude tendrils that stink of hate and we are constantly entwining one another ... I read that once, I say. I remember it now, it's ... Yes, yes, my daughter's exquisite voice intones: It's in *Pensées*, not the original, the Loren Michaelides version, the one that was printed on a fleet of garbage trucks. Oh yes, I say, I saw it at the museum, thinking to myself both shamefully and proudly: I, too, have known and know about at least a few human things.

THURSDAY, 17 DECEMBER.

The cat is sitting by the door. Evidently it wants to go out. I sit by the door also, watching it. It is as if our hostilities (the hostilities of cat and mouse) have already begun. This is a feline that I purchased at a fair. A charismatic man was giving kittens away. You didn't dare look at him because ... oh but you looked at him and now he's calling you over, he's smiling, he's touching your arm a bit. He remembers you from somewhere. He's telling you about kittens and then you're in the car on the way home and everyone is cooing stupidly and passing the thing around.

When my wife comes home I am still sitting there. The cat is still sitting there. Nothing has changed. At least two hours have passed. I think in some ways I have gained the cat's respect, although of course the gain in that regard is counterbalanced by my wife's dismay. *What are you doing on the floor?* I begin to tell her but think better of it.

SATURDAY, 19 DECEMBER.

I am again with Giles. The complex is by a pier and we are walking on a footpath adjacent to the pier. It is a kind of scheduled heart-to-heart.

—I'm not your confidant, he tells me, but let's say for a minute, if I were, if I were your confidant, what kind of worries would you tell me? How can I be of help?

His corporate gear, polo shirt, slacks, corporate-branded sneakers, phone-case belt mount, no longer leaves me cold. It is as if I have gone beyond that. I welcome the deep duplicity that consigns my humanity to a dump heap. I want to believe he will really turn me into a mouse and then forget about me.

—I have a daughter, too, he says. She's in the Marines. A real drinker when she wants to be. She tells me, Dad, you're tame. I'm tame, I say to myself. He shrugs his shoulders. It's the life I chose.

—Have you ever thought about doing it? I ask. I mean you must have.

—How do I say this? he asks me. I don't want to sound patronizing. He looks around on the ground and finds a flat rock. He picks it up and shows it to me. So, listen. He taps the rock with his knuckles. Solid, right? Well my health biometric is off the charts. Off the charts. Doc tells me I'm the healthiest person he's ever met. Period. Why would I give that up? Besides, I love all this. He gestures at the pier, the trees, me. I'm a sucker for life, I guess.

He puts an arm around my shoulders as we walk and tells me, in my case, of course, with my *biometric*, as they say, he would do it in a heartbeat, no joke. I mean, we're talking about a hundred percent success rate. Not ninety-nine, not ninety-eight, a hundred percent. Every last customer getting exactly what they want. As we reach the parking lot he breaks into what I can only describe as the brightest, most encompassing smile I have ever seen. *It was a moment*, he says, *We had a moment, didn't we?*

SATURDAY, 19 DECEMBER.

When I get home, there are papers to sign. My wife has them out on the kitchen table.

—So, what? I ask. You want me to just sign everything over to you?

—That's the idea, buster.

She kisses me on the mouth, like a pirate in a movie kisses a stowaway.

And in fact I must say I have always thought of myself as a bit of a stow-away. I have always felt that I was on the brink of discovery, that is, of being discovered, and that when that discovery happened, I would be either killed or put ashore.

How lucky that now a third course has appeared.

SUNDAY, 20 DECEMBER.

We get a calendar in the mail. I call it a calendar, but it is really a kind of daily countdown, a ten-day countdown. Each day there are things to remember, things to check off.

The people there are professionals, we know that much, as they are constantly explaining it, and so they have taken into account not only things that we have to do for the process, i.e., preparations for the transition, but also things that we have to do for our own emotional safety. So the countdown chart has things scheduled like conversations with partners, loved ones; checklists of things to hand off, like email passwords, bank info. When I was younger I would have seen through all this bullshit, but at present I can only say I am deeply grateful. They are selling me a fantasy that I am theirs and they will take care of me. This is a fantasy I am only too happy to buy.

MONDAY, 21 DECEMBER (DAY 10).

My wife encourages me to make a list of the things I want to do before I go. The language that she uses to tell me this is strange and uncharacteristic. Only later, while urinating off the back patio, does it occur to me that she is probably operating from a script. They must have given her a script and she is using it to help me. I am convulsed immediately by the totality of her sacrifice: that in the final moments of our shared life she has somehow abnegated her true heart's speech. These are the thoughts I think as I zip up my pants.

Later, I sit at the end table in the bedroom, a table I have never before thought to use, a table and chair that are not in fact intended for use, and write the list of things I want to do before I go. For this purpose the end table and its attendant chair are simply perfect. In fact, in my writing of the list I find that my mind tends again and again to the savoring of my physical position in the room, the exact distance at which the wall stands, the ceiling sits, how the windows are cut, how I imagine they are braced. Even the threads in the carpet doing their best, standing up boldly no matter to what ... my heart is like a bristling field of grain.

When my wife comes to bed, I give her the list. She looks it over.

—That's it? she asks with a sigh.

—That's it, I say.

My list has only a few things on it. I really am done with this place.

WEDNESDAY, 23 DECEMBER (DAY 8).

I am at the facility for some last-minute checkups. Let me tell you about the engagement process at the facility. You pull up in your car and someone is there to greet you. As in, a young man or young woman is sitting in a lawn chair on the verge reading a magazine, a really nice-looking tanned young man or young woman in boat shoes and maybe seersucker pants and a white cotton shirt. A young man or young woman beautifully and immaculately tanned who tosses the magazine down on the grass and comes at you like a beloved relative, never mind you're meeting them for the first time. But that's the thing about QoQoR, everything there is old-fashioned, everything is just right. You walk into the place, and although as you can plainly see there is a front door, you can see it there, the receptionists, the security scanners, the coat check, your greeter takes you around the side way, like it's a special thing:

—We don't want to bother with all that, they chuckle to you in Phillips Exeter fashion, and you chuckle, too, because really there is no joke.

There isn't any joke. There just isn't any. The big entrance ... You don't want to bother with it. Even if everyone who is a customer comes in the side door, avoids the front, et cetera, even if the front is a front, and those people are just actors who sit there all day, who is to say that the comfort derived therefrom is not real? Following my slim docent through the side door, I feel great.

Then there is the salad bar, the coffee bar, the gift shop (where everything is free), the other greeters (from previous visits) who recognize you and come up to gracefully intimate their submissiveness and delight at your persistence. They say things like, *If I had the money, I'd do it in a heartbeat. In a heartbeat.* They tell you what animals they like and how they like them. They revel in your good fortune, your daring, the bright flickering flame of your good luck to be standing with them on the campus of QoQoR.

The walls are covered with delightful animals in various poses. If you stare at one for longer than a moment, the image shifts into a short film.

—Some people ask, you know, they ask me, are they natural or are they, well, the ones who, if you follow me, a young woman says, as we stand looking at a marmoset or weasel or some such thing cavorting on a log. She is holding a broom, and her clothing is that of a worker, but it must be that her status at QoQoR is in fact higher than that of the others I have been speaking to, as the thing that she's speaking of is rather sensitive, a rather dangerous subject.

—And are they? I ask, taking the bait.

—Well, they are and they aren't, she says. Her eyes are unfathomably green, must be some kind of surgery, and I keep forgetting that I'm listening to someone talk as she talks. She is telling me something like, there are animals that seem to want the chip process. Somehow they welcome it, and so QoQoR sequesters animals in thousands of wildlife refuges and studies them to find the, as she puts it, most generous hosts.

I tell her that I have chosen to become a field mouse, a kind of country mouse. She brightens and, leaning forward, kisses me on the cheek.

—Why, bless your heart, she said. I knew it the moment I looked at you. Well, goodbye, goodbye little mouse.

Blushing, looking helplessly into her green eyes, I stagger and turn away.

THURSDAY, 24 DECEMBER (DAY 7).

My daughter is with me. We are at the facility. She and her partner wanted to see it. The whole thing is a mystery to most people. So my daughter and Claude are there with me. The three of us get along very well. Claude has always hated me, my daughter says, but when she learned about my choice, that hate turned to love. She said it like that, I accepted it like that. Why couldn't it always have been so simple? I have discovered in these last months, and I discover still, moment to moment, how much better it is to simply believe people when they speak. We are holding hands and walking through the animal enclosures. These two joyful girls are exploding with their own life and all the life they see.

I observe to Claude that the warthog in the enclosure at the back will be a host later that same day. We look at him through glass and he seems at ease. His name, the plaque tells us, is Ricardo Arona. The wild boars and warthogs are always named after prizefighters of one kind or another.

Next we see a rabbit hutch. The rabbits are not named. Rabbits, mice, rats, moles, these do not get names. This was explained to me on my first visit: It is offensive to name them because we cannot understand them. Or rather, we cannot truly feel that we understand them, and so it is offensive, not to them but to ourselves. But with larger animals, warthogs, hippopotamuses, naming, well, it just makes sense. I am not sure I understand, I told the employee. Everything will make more sense later, he told me with a grin.

In any case, the hippos are named after famous airplanes, which, usually, I recall, are named after women. Who in their right mind would want to become a hippo, my daughter asks under her breath. There are times, Claude replies, when you just want to crush something with your enormous girth. They break down into peals of laughter. I feel their happiness, but I do not laugh. Lately I have been laughing less and less.

Perhaps it is because I read that mice do not experience humor, not as such. Joy, yes, sadness, yes, camaraderie, esprit de corps, et cetera, yes, but humor, no. I then began to ask myself, To what degree do humans truly experience humor? To what degree is the experience of laughter real?

Possibly, it seemed to me, at that moment in the night as I lay sleepless beside my dozing wife, possibly humans also do not experience humor. In fact, there is only discomfort at some iniquity or lack-of-fit, and that finds expression in a false-face of joy. And that therefore, since as we know, there is no false-joy, i.e., every smile is a real smile, *smile yourself to happiness*, et cetera, the false-face of joy becomes joy, and laughter becomes happy. But at its root it was just discomfort.

How then the case of the mouse? Well it seems they simply do not experience discomfort at life's blunted edges and crooked apertures. Not feeling that discomfort, they have no need to *find things funny*.

In the notebook by my bed, I made a note to further investigate the subject. I suppose now there is no time. Or to put it differently: soon, all my existence will be an investigation of this very thing. There is no time left for anything else.

FRIDAY, 25 DECEMBER (DAY 6).

Christmas Day. We sit all together around the tree, my wife, my daughter, Claude, myself. We are drinking some kind of vegan eggnog made by Claude. It is very alcoholic and quite delicious.

—Slow down there, Claude says jestingly as I pour myself a second cup. If I remember correctly, your blood alcohol levels have to stay below .05 this whole week.

Could I be any more charmed by her? The dear thing has read my doctor's instructions. My daughter is charmed also by this. Any vague suspicion that I might have that these three women are looking forward to the empire they will enjoy once I am gone (the house, the cars, the properties)

is immediately dispelled, not by reason but by eudaemonia, which floods me then as it has flooded me every day since my decision. In my mind I am not on all fours, I am not furred, I am not beady-eyed, scrabbling, but I am almost so, I am beginning the obeisances that will lead me impossibly to that longed-for state.

I have prepared gifts for everyone. To my daughter, I give a small bronze statue of a running horse. She opens the package with a great gasp of joy. Her field is archaeology and I know that she is sure to recognize the horse. Museums seldom give up such holdings.

—And what's more, I say, here are the keys to the ranch. I wink at my wife, who winks back. So many happy days of our life together were passed there.

—That's where you were conceived, eh? says Claude with a nudge.

—Oh, stop it, my daughter replies. The ranch? Really, it's mine?

—It's from the both of us, says my wife. She has hardly touched her eggnog. When she looks at me I can see her concern breaking through the facade of the script. Could it be that she really doesn't want me to go?

—And this is for Claude, my wife continues.

It's an oblong package, small. Claude opens it. A matchbox car, an old one from my daughter's childhood, a red sixties Porsche.

—Look out in the driveway, says my daughter mischievously, and the two girls leap to their feet and are out the door.

When my wife was a child, she lived at the edge of a butchering district, a meatpacking district. The smell of it and the sound of it filled her whole childhood and crafted her mentality in a kind of resolve that filled her life and executed sequentially the steps of her being as a quest on behalf of domesticated animals. We met at a fund-raiser for a synthetic vegetable protein. When I look at her now, sitting on the floor in some sort of neo-caftan in tasteful beige, I think, if she were to go through with it, just as I am going through with it, I think she would become a steer.

But these are thoughts I keep to myself. If it is something she too feels then she will discover it after I am gone.

SUNDAY, 27 DECEMBER (DAY 4).

As a joke, my daughter gave me a sort of glass terrarium with two mice in it. I spent most of Christmas Day playing with them, letting them run up and

down my arms and legs. Of course, these are lab mice, not country mice, not field mice. This is not the sort of mouse I find myself drawn to. But as I hold the little forms in first this hand, then in that hand, as I look them in the eye, or feel the perturbations of their lungs against my belly, I wonder where they end and I begin.

—Don't think they'll outlast you, my wife says in a quiet voice. I am not caring for any mice, she continues. I'll release them in the backyard. That's what I'll do.

I join her in the spirit of the conversation. I am happy to do so.

—The field will be a kind of gamble for them, I say. Just make sure the cat isn't outside that very moment.

MONDAY, 28 DECEMBER (DAY 3).

I slept most of the day and night. They are giving me a cocktail of medications, preparatory medicines to ease the transition. I wake up often to vomit, and then fall asleep again, sometimes on the floor of the bathroom. This was all described very clearly in the manual. Nothing worthwhile is easy.

While I am asleep I have intense dreams. In one I am collecting wood, I am in a forest, I want to make a fire, and I am collecting wood for that fire. Under every branch that I pick up I find a living thing. First it is a weevil, then it is a toad, a flower, some mushrooms. Under the last stick is a field mouse, but it doesn't scare. It doesn't run away. It stands up on its hind legs to greet me like some sort of genie. And I, in my absolute solicitousness, there in the forest, I bow, take the stick, and go on my way.

TUESDAY, 29 DECEMBER (DAY 2).

Again, I sleep through the day. Something has perhaps gone wrong with the medication. Several doctors come to the house (QoQoR-employed physicians). They assure my wife that all is well, but one stays at my side just to ensure there is no difficulty. He tells my wife he is on retainer. This sort of thing is all he does. The man is handsome in a rugged way. I was a baseball player, he says, before I was a doctor. His hands are extremely large and strong. I hold one of them as I vomit. He reads to me from a book about mice. The book is from his private collection, he says, though I imagine this gentle lie is a part of his script. Still he says it with aplomb.

WEDNESDAY, 30 DECEMBER (THE FINAL DAY).

I wake up in perfect health. The doctor is bright-eyed, sitting in a chair at my bedside. My wife is next to me in a nightgown. I am naked. I have no secrets anymore. As I dress, the doctor suggests I wear *athletic clothes*.

—They are easier to take off in the final moments.

—But my family, I wonder if that's how they want to remember me ...

—It's okay, my wife tells me. We have plenty to remember.

There is no driving for us on the final day. A limousine picks us up and takes us to the facility, in fact, drives into the building to an interior bay, brightly lit and beautifully furnished. I step out of the car and am immediately seated on a lovely couch beside my wife. At the last minute my daughter broke down in tears and refused to come. She would not get in the limousine.

They bring us glasses of water from Scandinavia, and a kind of wafer-like cracker about which, even after eating one, I can discover nothing.

—Here we go, here we go, says Giles.

My trusted confidant, my brother-in-arms! Here is Giles. He links arms with me, and we go through a doorway. And there it is, there it is finally: the enclosure. It is not any enclosure I have seen before. These mice are too precious to be observed on any day but the final day.

—The moment of choice. If you have any doubts, I can guide you. I have made a special study of all seven of them, and can give you fine-point criticism.

My wife is at the enclosure before me. She looks down at the mice. The enclosure is large and they wander across it comprehendingly. The seven mice form loci that vibrantly, powerfully take into account every inch of the enclosure.

—Where is it? she asks. Where is it they put you next? Afterward?

There is a silence as Giles looks at her and looks at me as if to plumb the depth of the discomfort this thought occasions.

—We have a farm about a hundred miles from here. The inhabited mouse will be transported by helicopter to the farm and released.

At that word, *released*, I spasm with joy. I look down into the enclosure and it hardly matters to me which mouse I choose.

—You choose for me, I say to my wife. Or you, you, Giles, maybe you should choose.

—Giles should choose, says my wife. I don't want that on my conscience.

Giles moves to the edge of the enclosure with a kind of ponderous grace.

—I'll choose, he says. I'll choose one, but maybe it's better I don't tell you which.

—I agree to this, my wife agrees. It is a good idea.

—Perhaps you want to make your goodbyes, he suggests. Many partners prefer to leave at this point in the process.

My wife begins to cry. I feel an enormous gravity, as that of ascent, and am untouched by her grief. I brush the hair back from her forehead, kiss her face. Before her and Giles I remove my clothes.

—Goodbye, I say. Good luck.

Someone leads her away. Someone picks up the clothes from the floor. Someone is already at my elbow, applying skin-temperature monitors, be-corded equipment. Giles guides me into the next room. Everything I see with my eyes is beautiful, the medical equipment, the glass, the steel, the clinicians, the nurses. For me they are all functions, elements, parts of this thing, the country mouse, this thing I am becoming.

We are in a quiet room then. Everyone seems to have gone away, although I do not remember them doing so. A small cage is brought into the room and set on a pedestal beside the bed. I am intensely weak, can hardly move, but I turn my face slightly and see in the little cage a light-brown mouse with a short tail. His movements are swift. He darts back and forth. If he is making noise, I cannot hear it. He is either confused or elated. I close my eyes and open them. I close my eyes and open them. He is still there. He is like every mouse I have ever seen.

Rachel Eliza Griffiths

H U N G E R

Weeks after her death I came to the garden window
to marvel at sudden pale feathers catching, scattering
past the rainy glass. I looked for magic everywhere.
Signs from the afterlife that I was, indeed, distinct.
Beneath the talon of a red-tailed hawk a pigeon
moved briefly until it didn't. The hawk stripped
the common bird, piercing its thick neck. Beak probing body
until I could see the blood from where I stood inside.
This could happen, naturally enough, even in Brooklyn.
This could happen whether or not my mother was dead.
I didn't eat for weeks because it felt wrong to want bread & milk.
The hawk's face turning red, beautiful as it plucked & picked
its silver-white prey apart. It wasn't magic, but hungrily, I watched.
As if I didn't know memory could devour corpses
caught alive in midair. I opened the window,
knelt on the fire escape. I was the prey
& hawk. This was finally myself swallowing
those small, common parts of me. Tearing all of that away
into strips, pulling my breast open to the bone. I saw myself
torn apart, tearing & tearing at the beautiful face,
the throat beneath my claw. My grieving face red
with being exactly what I knew myself to be.

Jeffrey Harrison

RARE BIRD

While we were waiting for the movie to begin,
my wife caught up with her old friend Maryann,
and because I could only make out every
third or fourth word, my attention fluttered off
in search of something else and landed on
the thirty-five-ish couple sitting three rows
in front of us—the backs of their heads
and then the bare left arm and hand
of the young woman, who kept gathering
locks of her long, straight auburn hair
between her middle and index fingers, pulling
each tress away from her head and through
her extended fingers with a dexterous twist
then letting it fall and gathering another,
over and over seemingly without thinking
as she chatted with her husband or companion.
There was something about that movement—
graceful but ordinary, not erotic—
that made me look harder, until, entranced,
I watched as those two slender fingers
transformed into the flexible beak of a bird
whose head was the rest of her hand and
body her forearm perched on the seat's armrest...
as if this bird, without the woman knowing,
and through this repeated, fluid motion,
was stripping some minuscule form of nourishment
from the strands of her hair as from the blades
of seaweed, the way flamingos sift the shallows
for tiny organisms. The bird kept feeding,
and I kept staring, nourishing myself perhaps

impalpably. I wanted to show Julie
and Maryann, but not to interrupt
my looking or their conversation—then the lights
dimmed and the movie started. I don't
remember what it was, some documentary,
I just remember that bird, and how it felt
as though I'd made a rare sighting, right there
in the middle of the movie theater,
of a species strange and beautiful,
the finger-billed whimbrel, an item
to add to my life list, if I kept one.

Zoë Hitzig

SILENT AUCTION

Yes I helped decree it.
In the white-walled
room of before with
strangers + veils.
Don't think I don't think
about it daily. Up here
fumigating my oriel
according to the Newer
Ordering. I feel exactly
how we got here. We
thought. Then we did
as we thought. Then
answered + when we
answered how we did
as we thought
what was was
no one could afford
the self-inducing
covenant. You'd be
surprised what little
we, the slighter figures
there among the rest,
could do in the room,
strobing like sight lines
in the jet bridge.
Now we'll never see
the men who appraise us
through the one-way
mirrors. Forevermore is
bidding. Every time

I enter the hall, leaving
my liquid assets pooling
in the center of my
oriel, I feel less prepared
for the day— + no
I won't know it's coming—
when they quit me here
entirely + pooling
in the trespasses of my
last remaining asset.

GESTURE ATLAS

Here come the zeppelins	their shapes shadow
distance. Whales that leapt and stayed—	as forecast as all
becomes dirigible. Reverse thrust maneuver for	mooring
and there is a floor. Stepping out on it I press in	with my sock
with the equivocation of a neonate pony	hair matted and
curled by placenta, by the trauma of birth	stained already
as I am now with motion. With	the hurry-fetch-it-now the
will-I-or-will-I-not the am-I-	late-to-touch or the amorous
and the eucharist. I will not dress yet but inspect	the space
between my eyes as the primary purpose of	gesture
drawing is to facilitate the study of the human	in motion.
Through the wall someone is	watching.
Through the wall someone is watching	a show.
It is anime—I think—asymptotic legs bloody	but unscratched
from a fall from a tower with	featureless, swift action.
I become drawn and falling. Adopt	the mission,
someone is saying. Search now for a missing cat.	I have caves for eyes,
crevasse for nose, and I forget the cat.	Find a man.
A man with anamorphic	memory.
He looks sideways into my caves looks	for dun horses aurochs
line of dots in mineral pigment. None of us	have names here.
I suspect him a clone framed into body.	He suspects mine.
Slip hand into shirtsleeve. Find throwing blades.	A tactical
flamethrower and this flame, too, is a hand.	What is it
to have this world unhanding us.	The alethic,
the incomputable, the lethal	and lethargic?
The lethal mutation, forgetting before	there is anything to
forget. The legal rotation. Angle of Proserpina's	wrist upturned
with Tamar and Dinah	for Rindr and Cassandra
and Leda and Philomela	Medusa, Lucretia,
the Sabine women—	this is the hand
that says what skin is left	on my shoulder
I will abscond away from memory,	that city
that could be moved to	in a minute. The missing

cat. The none-of-us-have-names-here.	The calisthenic how-
did-I-get-here. The joint crack of who-has-been-	here. Was it
the figure in the convolution of the curtain	I notice now
watching me? The figure presses	the small of my back.
I falter a step and step into a cave.	The hands of men
handle stacks of medallions, chips for the round.	In this cave see
paintings lurid by lichens, crystals, and	white
mold someone has tried and failed to treat.	Two caves as the time
my face folded in half and my two eyes met.	Two caves meeting
are not one cave. Motionless inside this kiss	<i>kiss me</i> this figure says <i>play</i> .





PAMELA PHATSIMO
SUNSTRUM

New and Recent Paintings

WITH AN ESSAY BY

Edwidge Danticat

It was in *The Black Book*, edited by Toni Morrison, that I first learned that before Christopher Columbus ever thought of my part of the world, the Caribbean, as new, Africans had already been there. Not as enslaved people but as traders and warriors. Among the many things stolen by Columbus and his men from the Arawak, Taíno, and other populations of the Americas were spearheads made of guanín, an alloy of copper, silver, and gold. When asked about the origins of these rather beautiful and sophisticated weapons, the indigenous leaders told Columbus, according to his journals, that they had come from Negro people from the south and southeast. Later, when enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas to replace



the worked-to-death, massacred indigenous population, many chose death over enslavement. They were reported to have run into the sea saying, The water brought us here. The water will take us away.

The work of Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum makes me think of water, both the clear water of rivers and the azure, aquamarine, and turquoise swirl of the sea. The intricately layered cerulean world contained in the skirt of the woman in *The Incense Burner* makes me think of the water orisha Yemayá, who, like the Virgin Mary, is often associated with the color blue. The shapes rising behind her, the beige and brown hills, and the rose-quartz and black backdrop bring to mind something Sunstrum shared at a May 2018 artist talk at Artpace San Antonio, where she was in residence. “When I’m drawing, I think I’m often telling myself stories,” she said. This makes it easier for us to keep telling ourselves stories, old and new, about the bodies, objects, and landscapes in her work.

We see the Yemayá blue again in *Buffalo*, in the sky behind and the waters swirling beneath the feet of the figure. Sunstrum explains that this image was inspired by formal studio photographs from the early 1900s, for which the photographed would sometimes choose their own elaborately painted backgrounds—seascapes, foliage, or other landscapes. Interesting to her were instances where the edges of different backgrounds peeked out from behind the subject, creating something akin to pentimento, which is another effect we get from these drawings.

There’s something about pentimento that mirrors life. We add on layer over layer of experience until, hopefully, some things become clearer. I couldn’t help but think while looking at *Buffalo* of Yemayá, now perhaps wearing more casual garb, sitting and watching us while oceans swirl and volcanoes erupt, and seasons become less and less relevant, and trees keep dying, silently asking with her piercing eyes what the hell we are doing with our world, her world. To me, this is a drawing about our forgetting that nature is part of us. I see it as a piece of art about climate change. Nature and its intrusions and destruction are also evoked via deer and birds and carcasses in *Electric Eel* and *Retribution*. *Sentinel* I see as a work about inequalities, where a king and queen (or is it a modern pietà?) sit comfortably on dry land while others are trapped by a large boulder beneath the water. Are these two sentinels watching over what’s left of the land, or are they oppressors crushing dissent? It’s also possible that those beneath the

waters are the people who walked into the sea saying, The water brought us here. The water will take us away. And we, like those two figures, are the descendants of those they left behind.

At the heart of all these drawings, though, is a feeling of community. Even the solitary figures somehow don't seem alone. We nearly expect someone to reach into the frame and pick up the white hat of that elegantly dressed gentleman in *Husband*. The linked and separated hands of the women in *All This Wringing and Clutching* and the seemingly young people—family? friends?—in *Kwame* remind us that together these individual pieces create a community of the seen and the unseen, the present and the past.

The doubling, twinning, and triplet-like effect of the figures in works like *Pop* and *Double-Cross* remind me of Sunstrum's video work *A Short History: Starring Asme as Herself*. Sunstrum, performing as her alter ego Asme, appears lost in a lush green field, until two more versions of herself emerge: one breathing clouds—rather than the fire that frankly I was expecting—into the two others. Like Sunstrum, each of the figures in these drawings here seems to have their own Asme, a physical and spiritual twin, or a mirror image like the kind they might find staring back at them from a river or stream.

At the Artpace talk, Sunstrum said that she sees bodies as carriers of mythologies. Her own mythologies, both in the use of her body and her body of work, remind us that in fact, by choice or circumstance, we are all transient, travelers, itinerants of space and time, between this world and whatever might come next.

Pages 104–5: *Electric Eel* (detail), 2019, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 51 1/8 x 45 1/4".
Page 106: *All This Wringing and Clutching* (detail), 2018, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 50 x 44 7/8".
Opposite: *Gusheshe II* (detail), 2019, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 29 7/8 x 29 7/8".





Husband, 2018, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 59 7/8 x 39 3/8".



Sentinel, 2018, pencil and acrylic on Rives BFK, 29 7/8 x 21 1/2".



Retribution, 2018, pencil and acrylic on canvas, 48 1/8 x 42 7/8".





Buffalo, 2017, pencil, gouache, and watercolor on wood panel, 16 x 12".



The Incense Burner, 2017, pencil, gouache, and watercolor on panel, 15 ¾ x 11 ¾".





Double-Cross, 2018, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".



Wallflower, 2018, pencil and acrylic on wood panel, 19 ¾ x 15 ¾".



The Archivist, 2018, pencil and acrylic on canvas, 56 x 36 ¼".





Pop, 2017, pencil and gouache on cradled wood panel, 14 x 11 ½ x 1 ½".

Jayanta Mahapatra

AFTER THE DEATH OF A FRIEND

Over, the kite's flight; and of a sudden
is the realization of the morning overcome
by the echo of dark nights, silent witness
to the colorlessness crouching down before us.
Stealing time is what's been happening all the time.
Is it because you've heard only your own cries,
fifty years earlier, too, as they went by, adulterated with death?
Or some shy, crumpled laughter carrying with it
the air of an unspoken but certain defeat?
Somewhere in my mind, I lose the ability
to disappear, as the morning air moves listlessly about,
indifferent to looks, or history, or roots. And here
if I died, like this, dying for the person I was,
or for the one I see coming in and out of your death,
would that be a way out to save me
from the solitude I've believed in and pursued
in the same way I pursue the rush of blood in my veins?

There is so much we've begun to pile upon you, more
than all the lives we've had and have lost. Nothing whatever
burns to ash. Years pass. Days, wisdom, the simple sadness.
A slow-moving ray of sunlight walks me backward
to a past turned magical by the virtue of its emptiness,
this part of myself that never fails to embrace us.

Billy Collins

ON THE DEATHS OF FRIENDS

Either they just die
or they get sick and die of the sickness
or they get sick, recover, then die of something else,
or they get sick, appear to recover,
then die of the same thing,
the sickness coming back
to take another bite out of you
in the forest of your final hours.

And there are other ways,
which will not be considered here.
In the evening, I closed my eyes
by the water's edge and I pretended
this is what it will look like
or will not look like,
this is where my friends keep going,
a "place" only in quotation marks,

where instead of oxygen, there is silence
unbroken by the bark of a fox in winter
or the whine of an unattended kettle.
With eyes still closed,
I ran in the dark toward that silence,
like a man running along a train platform,
and when I opened my eyes to see
who was running in the other direction

with outspread arms,
there was the lake again with its ripples,
a breeze coming off the water,

and a low train whistle,
and there was I trembling
under the trees, passing clouds,
and everything else that was pouring
over the mighty floodgates of the senses.

Let's Play Dead

SENAA AHMAD

There was a man, let's call him Henry VIII. There was his wife, let's call her Anne B. Let's give them a castle and make it nice. Let's give her many boy babies but make them dead. Let's give him a fussy way of being. Let's make her smart and sneaky, because it's such a mean thing to do.

Let's make it so she can't escape.

Let's seal the bottle, and shake it, and shake until our hands fall off.

IT TAKES TWO SWINGS to cut off her head. Everyone does their best to pretend that the first one didn't happen. In the awkward silence afterward, the swordsman says something about mercy or justice, a strangely fervent soliloquy in French that might have made Anne herself emotional, but it's a touch long-winded, and no one's paying him any attention. And she's dead, so it's especially beside the point.

The ministers dither in the courtyard, chancing last looks, murmuring, *Exquisite mouth, just exquisite*. She is so beautiful, they agree, even beheaded.

Henry will return to the body later, when everyone is gone and what's left of her has been moved to the chapel. He will stand on the threshold, halfway between one momentous decision and the next. He will kneel on the dais beside her severed head and lay one ornately rubied hand along her frigid cheekbone. Maybe he will stay five minutes. Maybe he will stay thirty-five. Maybe he will cry softly, but it doesn't matter, because there isn't a nosy patron around to commission an oil painting for the textbooks, and it doesn't matter because she's dead, she's still very, very dead.

He will leave as furtively as he came, wiping his hand on his smock. Anne's headless body and bodiless head will be left to their own devices, her blood blackening, thickening on the ground, the gristle of her neck tougher with every minute. The clock ticks. Night falls.

It is her head that speaks first. It says, "Is he gone?"

Her body spasms, maybe a shrug, or maybe just a reflex.

Her head opens its eyes and looks this way, that way. It says, "It's over? It really worked?"

WE DON'T NEED TO STICK AROUND while her body crawls its way to her head and fits itself back together. Every excruciating inch of the stone floor is a personal coup, and every inch lasts the whole span of human history. It is slow. It is clumsy. The head falls off a couple of times. The body is floppy with atrophy. There is a lot of blood. She probably, definitely cries. It does not befit a queen.

HE IS READING THE SATURDAY PAPER, still in his shirtsleeves, when she breezes in the next morning. The horizon of the paper lowers to the bridge of his nose. He is a man who wears his tension in the way of a beautifully tuned piano, and in this moment he vibrates at a bewildered middle octave.

"Anne," he says, at an absolute loss.

"Henry," she says, the picture of politeness.

She sits at the table. Not a hair out of place, not a leaky vein in sight. She butters her toast in four deft strokes. A servant steps out from the shadows to fill her teacup to the brim. It's all very serene, domestic. If it takes her a few

tries to put her toast back on the plate, or if he dabs his napkin with a little extra violence, well, who can say. She slurps her tea, which they both know he hates. He hoists his newspaper back up. Like this, they go on.

OF COURSE SHE KNOWS what comes next. Let's not fib.

She is seized from her bed some weeks later, in a state of drowsy dis-habille, the wardens bristling with royal braid. This night will have the consistency of a dream. The palace swims in sound and darkness. The youngest one, the boy or man who grips her arm with one rubbery fist and studiously avoids her gaze, reminds her of the sons she has lost in the womb. She wants to tell him, *Don't worry, the thing you're afraid of, the girl, the job, the rising cost of real estate in London, it will all work out someday—you'll see, it all comes to pass*, but he is leading her to her death, so it seems a bit impolite.

The cooks are baking down in the kitchen. The yeasty comfort of this aroma, which reminds her of the seam of volcanic heat that escapes when she cracks a fresh loaf, of a day opening beneath her, is too much. She shuts her nostrils. Her silk nightgown flaps at her ankles. When she can, she reaches out and touches the walls, the radiators, the edges of doorframes. Reminding herself that she is here, now, she is alive, that this dream is all too real. She can't falter yet. There's work to do.

A gibbet stands in the courtyard beneath a lonesome moon. They thread the noose around her neck with genteel care, snugly, even though the youngest one quakes every time his skin makes contact with hers. Up in the turret window, she sees Henry watching at a distance, as he does best. A coward in his big-boy breeches.

It is a quick death. The noose is tight. The drop is long. No one's trying to be cruel here. One person cries out but is quickly silenced. The wardens double-check, triple-check to make sure she's properly dead this time. From the courtyard to the turret, they flash a thumbs-up to Henry. He lets the curtain fall. This time, he does not visit her tenderly. It is done.

The wardens will return to their card games, all except the youngest one, who will mourn her without meaning to. He will simmer with sorrow for hours until, without warning to himself or others, he punches a wall so hard he fractures most of the knuckles in his right hand, leaving a fist-size whorl of buckled plaster as a signature.

And when she wakes up, hours later, on a slab of wintry marble in the royal morgue, it's with a broken neck and very little air in her lungs. She adjusts her neck the way she might correct a crooked hat—difficult without a proper mirror, but she manages. She tightens the belt on her flimsy nightgown and slips through the haunted halls, pausing only when she reaches the king's chambers. She doesn't knock. She doesn't crouch or look for consolation, although the pang is there, and it feels unstoppable. Instead, with great effort, she continues on to her apartments, where she goes right back to bed. She is wiped and the throb in her neck is telling her to conserve strength. But most of all, it is such a trivial insult to him, so small, so vicious, to fall asleep as soundly as she does this night.

FOR A TIME, IT IS QUIET. Henry waits. He consults his advisers, who are just as baffled. He tries to get his head around the situation, but at least he has the good grace to do it far from her.

You will want to hear that Anne takes solace in these precarious days, so let's say that's true: she takes that trip she always meant to, an ethereal island resort where every day the indigo waters whisper *Get out, get out while you still can* and the jacarandas whistle a jaunty tune of existential dread. She cashes in her many retirement portfolios, she doesn't so much throw parties as fling them, handfuls of bacchanalia into those feverishly starlit nights.

Or: she digs her heels deep into the Turkish carpets of her palatial apartments and doesn't budge. In the bruised hours between dusk and midnight, she feels a joy so grandiose that it fills the empty canals and sidewalks within her. She takes to promenades around the gardens, drinking in the virtuous geraniums in their neat rows and the slightly ferocious hedge maze with its blooming thistles and uncertain corners. She grows sentimental about centipedes and spiders and wasps and belladonna and ragwort and nettles and every other hardscrabble weed, every pernicious pest. *I'm still here*, she says to the wasps, the centipedes, the belladonna, the ragwort. *I'm still here.*

The joy of the narrow escape is that it unfurls into hours, hidden doors that lead to secret passages of days, even if those days are numbered, even if she knows it. None of it is hers and it's all she's got. She loses herself, like a woman in a myth, unstuck in borrowed time, unraveling with possibility.

And yes, maybe she feels a few inches of gratitude for the armistice he has granted her. And yes, of course, the waiting days smother her, the twinned knowing and not-knowing what happens after, imagining Henry at every turn, cartoony with rage or puzzlement, but what is she to do?

AFTER THAT, he drowns her himself. And who could blame him? If you want a job done right, you'd better know the end of this sentence. He comes upon her in the bath. He wraps his hands around her bare shoulders and thrusts her beneath the bathwater. Soap bubbles and air bubbles bloom in multitude. An artery in his skull skitters wildly. The water fights. The walls steam with tension.

She tries to thrash away from him, of course. She tries to defend herself, of course. But he's six foot two, built like a linebacker, and she is not. There is nothing more complicated here. He is not the first man to do this, or the wealthiest, or the angriest. He certainly isn't the last. As they say, it's a tale as old as time.

Eventually the water stills. Her body floats. He sits on the brim of the tub, head bowed, the cuffs of his doublet dripping, his fingers pruning a gentle shade of violet. Up close, murder is a messy business, decidedly unroyal, too much flesh and screaming. He sits in wait—for how long, who knows. When the surface moves again and she sits up, feral-eyed and vomiting bathwater, he sighs.

"What do we do with you?" he says, not so much a question as a regret. And she has no answer, of course she has no answer.

IT IS HE WHO HELPS HER out of the tub, although she resists. He hands her the bathrobe, courteously studying the mosaic of the floor while she covers up. He helps her back to her rooms.

You will want her to scream at him, perhaps. To shove her house key through the soft wetness of his eye, to land a solid, bone-cracking punch to his solar plexus, or at the very least to kick him in his royalest of parts, but she has just survived death. She is alive. Today, that will have to be enough.

ANNE'S LADIES NEVER STRAY FAR. Where are they going to go? They hold their tongues. They massage their fists back into impassive hands.

They, too, have intimate knowledge of the place between a rock and an even harder rock.

Sometimes they will perform small acts of metonymy. A pamphlet folded into a paper airplane is a clandestine invitation to the city. They will fetch her those darling meringue pastries if she is doleful, and so when they say, *We will bring you the French cookies*, it means *We are rooting for you to find a way*.

Or: an elegantly embroidered handkerchief means *I bayoneted this cloth 9,042 times and imagined it was the flesh of your enemies*. A pair of white gloves means *We will help you bury the bodies. We will not ask questions. We know you did what had to be done*.

If they tune up her automobile restlessly, it's to say, *Are you listening? We have a plan*.

A book of poems with no poems inside is this: *You are not defined by the tragedy of it. There is always one more page*.

They will nod with such enthusiasm that they black out, which means *Do you know how much we hate this?*

Sometimes they will weep in private, because there is too much to be said and nowhere to say it. Because they know that leaving is the most dangerous thing she can do. Because all they want is the impossible and is that really so much? Because this is one of the very few ways they can uncork their anger, and it is such a fine vintage, the very best. Because their fury is the scaffolding upon which their waiting lives are begotten, and it is so fathomless and pure, it clenches up their jaws and grinds their teeth into their gums. In this particular case, their tears mean *We will be your remembrance. We will salt the earth with the blood of our eyes so nothing can ever grow again*.

HENRY IS LEARNING.

He gets crafty. He invents the portable long-barreled firearm. Then he invents the firing squad. Then he invents acute ballistic trauma. Then he sends his wardens to find her.

But while he's busy doing all that, she's been busy, too, inventing: cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. The telephone. The 911 call. First-response teams. Modern-day surgery. Organ transplants. Crash carts. Gurneys. Subsidized medicine. She improvises like it's the only thing she knows how to do.

It is ugly, obviously. There is quite a lot of blood and gore and spattered internal organs. But she lives. Still, she lives.

LEST YOU THINK it's all maudlin garden strolls and gallows touched by moonlight, let's admit that Anne and Henry still have their moments. Like the time a scullery maid starts a stovetop fire and trips the palace-wide alarm. All around the castle, the sprinkler systems kick in, first in the kitchens, then in the great hall, and then everywhere, misting porous manuscripts, Brylcreemed foreign dignitaries, the throne room, everyone on their toilets, Henry's collection of vintage cameras, and Anne in her finest silk pajamas, snoring over her watercolors. Still very much not dead.

She escapes to the nearest balcony. And as she wrings her ruined shirt and her hair in futility, a window creaks open and who should climb through but Henry, his arms filled with soaking scrolls almost as tall as himself. He sees her sodden in her nightclothes and begins to guffaw.

She says, "That's not very kingly," feeling hurt, and more vulnerable than she wants to be, and probably a little foolish.

He says, "Well, you don't look especially queenly," and drops the scrolls in a heap. She despairs at her reflection in the window.

"The gossip magazines are going to love this look," she says.

"Easy fix," he says. "Here." He sweeps up to the balcony's edge, blotting her from view of the courtyard. So close that she's immediately on high alert. She steps back. Every muscle clamped.

"You need more width," she says, with all the calm she can summon.

He begins to windmill his arms like a complete fool. He doesn't say a word, just churns his arms up and down with intense concentration. And to her own surprise, she starts to laugh. She can't help it. He does his best deadpan, smile uncracked, but it's there in the twitch of his eyebrows, the twinkle in his eye.

"What's your plan here?" she says.

"Trickery," he says, not missing a step. "Misdirection. Excellent upper-arm strength."

You may be thinking that this would be an opportune time to push him off the balcony, make it look like an accident, and maybe you wouldn't be wrong. But he's still the size of a world-class heavyweight boxer, and she is still most decidedly not. And yes, she's eager to please, and yes, even now,

he can find ways to disarm her utterly. And yes, this moment, precious as it is, has a kind of power on its own, a force, and the ache of laughter in her abdomen will sustain her a few days longer. Do you really want to take that away from her?

IT'S EASY TO SAY that it becomes a game for him, and a game for her. In Anne's case, if it's a game, the game is Monopoly, her game piece is a pewter chicken *décapité*, the banker is a scoundrel and a cheat, the properties disintegrate every time she lands on them, and the dice are made of fire. What game is this to him? If he's winning, does it even matter?

But for her, how's this for an alternative: on a spectral day in autumn, a cockroach tumbles across Anne's writing desk like a very squirmy, very small shooting star. It is swift, intrepid. In its wayward progress, it hemorrhages anxiety.

Its clumsy, heroic journey plucks the tenderest meat inside her. Is it any surprise that she sees something in the cockroach that hums on the same frequency as she does? She builds tranquil highways with her hands, one at a time, and is rewarded when the roach travels safely through. Her triumph is no small thing.

She hopes it is a girl cockroach, that the baseboards and the cracks in the wall are seething with her unhatched eggs, that beneath the floors the concrete is bulging with her magnificent cockroach babies. She hopes they are abundant and hungry. That every day, each year, the cockroaches and their cockroach babies encroach in an ever-expanding circle from their nest. That when civilization crumbles into the ground, and textbooks get chucked en masse into the sea, and all of this is done and gone—and it will be done, it will be gone, she's got to believe that the universe has a long memory and a short temper and that this, this is nothing—they will still be here, in the walls, under the floors, teeming, multiplying, ravenous, devouring, surviving.

HE HAS HIS BODY SERVANT stuff handkerchiefs down her throat. What you might call a reverse magic trick. Silk handkerchiefs, floral handkerchiefs, designer ones, handkerchiefs dipped in eau de cologne, ones that carry the perfume of another woman, while Henry lurks in the doorway, exultant.

It is such an absurd way to die that she begins to laugh, and once she starts laughing, it's too late, she can't stop. She even helps the servant stuff them down her throat. It is not pleasurable, by any means, but it bewilders him and leaves Henry stunned.

"Um, should I keep going?" the body servant is asking Henry, the last thing she remembers before she dies.

SOMETIMES HE IS FUZZY on the details. Sometimes he will forget and call her by the names of his other wives and she will have to correct him. He might leave her alone if she were somebody else, it's true. But she is unwilling to be forgotten.

"I'm Anne," she says impatiently. "*Anne*. Remember? Not Jane or Other Anne or Catherine. You haven't killed those ones yet."

HELINES UP everyone she has known, her mother and father, her dead brothers, her childhood friends, her nursemaid, her tutors, her grandmother, her priests, the snooty cousin she almost married, all the kids in high school who made fun of her. One by one, they tell her every mean thing they have ever thought about her.

"You're such a needy person," her grandmother says. "I often dread the sound of your approach."

"You're much less attractive than you think," says her snooty cousin.

"We always thought your jokes were kind of repetitive," her dead brothers confess.

"You probably shouldn't have started the English Reformation," one of the priests says.

"I didn't want another daughter," her mother admits.

"You *still* smell like farts," says one of the kids from school.

"I always thought you had so much potential," says a childhood friend. "I wish I could take more pride in having known you."

It goes on like this for hours. In the center, Anne, lovely Anne, poor Anne, with her hands over her face, bawling, full-on ugly-crying. Shoulders shuddering, snot-nosed, basically a mess. At some point, probably during her father's seven-minute monologue about everything they could've spent their fortune on if she hadn't been born, she will faint with grief and maybe dehydration, and the court physicians will not be able to revive her. Everyone

goes home: her mother, father, dead brothers, and so on. She passes later in the evening, with little fanfare, most likely of a broken heart.

THERE IS A VERSION OF HER STORY where she doesn't die again and again and again.

There is a version of her story where she shivs him in his sleep.

There is a version where she is born in the future, and when she meets Henry at one of those rickety self-serious parties at Oxford, his discount-aristocracy vibes, prickly disposition, and fixation with his own poetry are clanging alarm bells. She walks away and never looks back.

There is a version where she gives birth to a daughter. In this version of the story, Anne still dies in the most ignoble and depressing of fashions: a sword, a Frenchman, a chopping block, gawking ministers, a wordless husband. It is her daughter who will avenge her mother—with the throne she takes by force, the wars she wages, the playwrights she patronizes, the papacies she outwits, the rebellions she crushes, the cults she accidentally spawns, the people she forgives, through all the many men she meets and never marries.

SHE WAKES UP ONE MORNING and the whole castle is closed for renovations. The imperial estates are empty and eerie. Set painters are giving the outer walls a fresh coat. A few crew members crawl on their hands and knees in the chapel, swabbing delicate graining details into the marble flagstones so they don't look like plastic. In the state room, a prop maker wheels away a vase, completely oblivious to her presence. He replaces it a few minutes later with an almost identical, slightly more era-appropriate vase.

When she passes Henry in the hallway, he's just as perplexed as she is.

But later that day, on instinct, he swipes a can of paint from the art department. He composes a sprawling landscape. A canyon, right in front of Anne's apartments. He's not the best artist, but what he lacks in talent, he makes up for in cruelty. When she steps out of her room, she plunges right in, all the way to the bottom of the canyon, where she breaks her leg.

She tries to call for help. Of course she does. She yells until her voice is hoarse. Her leg is an unsteady line of fire beneath her. For days after, she can still hear the sound of the bone breaking.

And this time, yes, it's bad. She's hungry, thirsty, in tremendous pain. She is depleted from the ache of the last death, a grief she didn't know was still possible. She's worn down by his anger, his relentless need. There's a limit to what she can endure, maybe, and it doesn't seem so far away. She can't do this forever. Did you think she could do this forever?

Still, she looks for a way out. She tries to set the bone herself, with little success. She prays to her god for an answer. It would be better if she knew how to die, if she had the grace of a dead girl. But she is not a woman washed ashore at the start of a film, or arranged artfully in a back alley for the cameras to find. No, she's disorderly, desperate. There is skin beneath her fingernails, and throw-up on her T-shirt.

And do we want her to die? Do we want this to be the end? Isn't it better if she finds a miracle, a mystery machine swooping out of the sky to save her?

Think about it: Do you want her to be just another dead girl? Do you really, truly want her to die?

SHE DOES NOT DIE THIS TIME. One of the production assistants drops a permanent marker down the canyon by accident and Anne scrawls an amateurish ladder to freedom. Or, no, as everyone's packing up to leave, a decorator spies the velvet flag she's manufactured out of her French hood. He doesn't seem to understand who she is, but she bribes him to haul her out with two fat pearls.

Either way, it's definitely a miracle. Most unexpected. We'll leave it up to you.

ON ANOTHER DAY, she rolls over and looks at him.

"What?" he says.

"It doesn't have to be this hard, right?" she says. "We don't have to live like this."

He doesn't respond right away. He takes so long, she thinks he is considering the enormity of her question, that perhaps it has left him winded. She thinks maybe this is the moment he will realize how pointless it is, how hard she's trying, how much time he's wasted, how defeated they both are. Maybe he will say, *Huh, why didn't I ever think of that.*

But he doesn't answer, no surprise. He doesn't have anything to say. Maybe it's too obvious for words. Maybe he doesn't think she deserves a

response. When he looks at her, she has the sense of a man who is making up his mind one way or another. A man who stares at a dead end and sees his opportunity.

MAYBE YOU WILL WANT TO LOOK AWAY for this part.

She will be taken to a laboratory, which, in the style of laboratories of the time and perhaps every laboratory in every time, feels a bit like the underbelly of a dungeon. Here she will be injected with a poison that liquefies her insides in a matter of hours. One of her captors will spill the poison on himself and this will derail the proceedings. They will perform an autopsy to confirm that she is dead. With a delicacy that is surgical, or at least very thorough, they will crack every bone in her body. They will take out her internal organs, still gooey and falling apart, and feed them to any nearby dogs, who may need a fair amount of persuading. She will wake several times, but never for long. There will be quite a lot of screaming, most likely, but you don't want to hear about that.

They will set her corpse on fire, and put the scorched bone fragments and teeth and shreds of flesh into a box. They will ship the box somewhere very far away, perhaps the remote island from earlier on. They will wrap the box in weights and cast it into the ocean. They will train a shark to develop a palate for mysterious boxes wrapped in weights so it can devour her remains. They will send a nuke from outer space to the precise coordinates of the shark. The bomb will vaporize the island, too, and everyone who lives there, a few thousand tidy deaths, but it's probably worth it.

THEY DISPATCH A COURIER to Henry immediately. The courier tells him, "She's dead," and Henry sags against the wall in relief. He spends the day in devout prayer. He waits a week or two for the obvious to happen. But no, she doesn't return.

He asks for extravagant bouquets to be delivered to her apartments, a mix tape of her favorites: English roses, bloody chrysanthemums, black tulips. He summons an architect to begin the blueprints for her memorial. He spends a whole day telephoning her parents and loved ones to break the news, with each call recalibrating his gravity, sorrow, and air of quiet suffering, depending on how much they care.

He will come to his bedroom later that night, a little weary, and there she will be, just like that. No explanation. She will be curled up in his favorite

armchair like the slyest of cats, fast asleep, looking content. Fully intact, organs back in her body, insides unliquefied, most definitely *not* in a box, or a shark, or an ocean, or heaven, or hell.

DO YOU WANT TO KNOW how she did it?

Here's how she did it: her ancestors were microorganisms, and a few years later here she is. The secret is this: her great-grandparents were monkeys and now she can do long division. The only trick is to know better. Didn't anyone teach you to know better?

Here's how she did it: she was always rooting for the cockroach. No one mourns the cockroaches, the dust mites, the bacteria, the weeds, the worms. The chickens that endure their own beheadings. But she remembers. She remembers the things that survive and those that don't, and there are so many that don't, so very many.

Here's how she did it: she knows there's no difference between the entrance and the exit. It's not so difficult to turn around and walk right back in. Is it?

Here's how she did it: no one wants to see her die. Did you know it's that easy, to stay alive?

When you die, you should tell all the dead girls.

John Kinsella

PASTURE WEBWORM AND PASTORAL ALARMISM

Not frequent, the monitors of doomed pastoral
admit these native moths their autumn rising

after a sleepy eviscerated summer, stubble
suddenly alive with beakiness, and then and then...

emergence from pupae and the flutter the mating
and egg-laying that diagram of *cycle* leading

to larvae emergence—all these emergences
to dine on grass on young cereal crops on green blades

then setting shafts down into moist ground beneath
the succulent shadows under *under* to emerge *emerge*

at night in shadow in darkness under crescent moon
under moon in full bloom in raw starlight and to feed

to chew blades to feel the cold heat of dawn and retreat
into tunnels into shafts into burrows to seal to block

till next called on by night's growth-tricks the breath-ploys
and then emerge in a total way to emerge and stretch wings

and fly up through stubble to flay and lay and web with thread
the world against pastoral desiring and the cropping

and doom of agrochemicals, these "native moths" adapting
to take in *nu-crop* spreading grasslands these alterities of fields

in patches here and there, the burnings and carbonization
the charring the choking and the syllogisms of extinction

and that wing and that prayer and a topdressing
of faith and a *wistfulness* of pesticide and fertilizer

and bare bones watching closely should an infestation
emerge speak day into night survive the bloody georgic.

The thing that was for there was was,
we were: available

* faces, gave long on shade, shallows, the
they that, insides as there was we were

A big ellipse the big circle he came around
on, held he regarded himself as withstanding
Orbited. Fell in line. A stiff elixir, sipped

only a spoon's worth. Drooping in his were
b f b d chairs over. We gathered creek side
greeted him, and were then we knew, faces
gave long on shade, shallows, they that, insides
as there was were us.

Soaking
Jackdaw describes us might be seen, Andromeda
through
we know we were, Jackdaw describes us describing
the cloud he came in there, Jackdaw describes us

Jackdaw describes us might be seen, Andromeda
through
we know we were, Jackdaw describes us describing
the cloud he came in there, Jackdaw describes us

Birds in black on night in here, Jackdaw describes
us there was were us, Jackdaw describes us

Descent on night in here, Andromeda
Jackdaw describes us might be seen, Andromeda
we know we were, Jackdaw describes us

in there we might be seen, Jackdaw describes
corps. Descent on night in here, Andromeda
we know we were

corps. Descent on night in here, Andromeda
we know we were

recondite choir describing the cloud he came in
there

described ourselves describing
descent on night in here, Andromeda
corps. Descent on night in here, Andromeda
he came in there
descent on night in here, Andromeda
described the cloud he came in there. Andromeda
descent on night in here, Andromeda

We gathered creek side, greeted
him, and were then we saw,
described ourselves describing
corps. Descent on night in here, Andromeda
he came in there

Thought ourselves as capable
descent on night in here, Andromeda
descent on night in here, Andromeda

Birds in black. Jackdaw
descent on night in here, Andromeda
we know we were, Jackdaw describes us

been, Jackdaw describes us

The Art of Poetry

No. 107

NATHANIEL MACKEY

In an era when poetry is increasingly compressed to fit our iPhone screens, Nathaniel Mackey has been writing two astonishing long poems—“*Mu*” and *Song of the Andoumboulou*—across multiple books for the past thirty-five years. “*Mu*” and *Song of the Andoumboulou* are two ongoing sequences beaded with his insights on cosmology, grief, ancestry, migration, and black life. The utterance *mu* suggests “mouth,” “myth,” but also “muse,” whereas Mackey defines *Andoumboulou*, taken from Dogon myth, as “a rough draft of human being, the work-in-progress we continue to be. . . . The song of the Andoumboulou is one of striving, strain, abrasion, an all but asthmatic song of aspiration.”

Perhaps more than any other contemporary poet, Mackey is deeply inspired by jazz, especially

Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis, Don Cherry, and John Coltrane, all of whom informed his belief that black ontology need not be tied to testimony or narrative but can be felt through what Mackey calls “a communication of inference.” This language is improvisatory, paratactic, his lyric strands drifting through time, place, and persona. Mackey is also inspired by an avant-garde lineage of poets ranging from William Carlos Williams to Robert Duncan, as well as by his friends, the poets Fred Moten and Ed Roberson. Mackey’s poems are hypnotic praises, dirges, feverish dream songs of an unnamed diasporic voyage, songs that are always reaching for, but never arriving at, a destination.

Born in Florida in 1947 and raised in a working-class family in Southern California, Mackey attended Princeton to study math and instead turned to poetry. Afterward, he studied at Stanford, where he earned a Ph.D. in literature. His first chapbook, *Four for Trane*, was published in 1978. His most well-known collection, *Splay Anthem*, won the 2006 National Book Award, and his work has been recognized with other prestigious awards, including the Bollingen Prize and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Mackey has published two books of criticism, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (1993) and *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (2005), and five other books of prose, the most recent being the epistolary novel *Late Arcade* (2017). Mackey taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for several decades and is now the Reynolds Price Distinguished Professor at Duke University.

We met in April 2016 in New York, both for this interview and to participate in an event where poets talked to local high school students. Mackey, who is tall with an upright, regal bearing, had on a black T-shirt and wore his long, graying dreads loose. While known for his formidable intellect, in person he is kind and down-to-earth. With the students, he was at ease, even playful. Asked about his influences, Mackey said, “I stole a lot from my kids, like, one of them said, ‘When can I go back to Chucky Jesus?’ That’s in my book.”

Our formal interview began after the visit, in front of an audience at the 92nd Street Y. It resumed a few days later in the lobby of his hotel in Midtown. We didn’t speak again until winter 2019, when we tied up the interview over email. During that gap, Mackey’s concept of Andoumboulou—humans as rough draft, man’s inhumanity to

man—gained urgency in the face of rising fascism and accelerating climate change. But it also continues to offer the distant and gnostic hope that our struggle is cyclical and ongoing, and that if and when we are gone, there will be something else.

—Cathy Park Hong

INTERVIEWER

How did *Andoumboulou* start?

NATHANIEL MACKEY

In the early seventies, when I was working at a radio station in Northern California, KTAO in Los Gatos, I found an album of Dogon music in the station's library, *Les Dogon*, which had funeral songs on one side, and one of them was "Song of the Andoumboulou." I was struck by the quality of voice in the singing. It has a raspy sound to it that appealed to me. And then there was the business of the deceased being reborn in another world, which is marked by a trumpet blare. There were these very textured tonalities that have a kind of braiding quality to them. Before I really knew more about the Andoumboulou—there was very little about them in the liner notes—I was invested in that particular song and that particular title.

I was beginning to be attracted to writing in series, writing sets, so I decided to stay with that in a set or series called *Song of the Andoumboulou*. It would be made up of poems that roughly have to do with mortality and sexuality and with the kinds of symbolic counters that are used to talk about them.

INTERVIEWER

The first line in *Andoumboulou* is, "The song says the / dead will not / ascend without song." When you're talking about mortality, is this a kind of remembering?

MACKEY

Yes, it's a kind of remembering. The song does remember the deceased, and it's the song that helps the deceased move on—to ascend, in the words of the poem, to the next life. I wanted to take that and apply it to senses



of transition and, hopefully, ascendance within life, moments where one feels one has to move on and move up. I didn't know it would become an ongoing, theoretically endless series—

INTERVIEWER

Did you think it was going to last thirty-plus years?

MACKEY

No, I didn't sign the contract. I was too young to go steady. At that point I didn't think that it was an open series. But, as I look back on it, I think you can feel the unrest and the dis-ease with closure even in my first book, *Eroding Witness* (1985), which ends with an eight-poem set called *Septet for the End of Time*. I mean, here you have something that's called *Septet*, suggesting seven, but it's got eight poems, it's comprised of eight. It's already dealing with senses of insufficiency and surplus. That disequilibrium keeps things in motion, ongoing.

INTERVIEWER

You have remarked that for you the Andoumboulou as a poetic figure basically means that the human race is a rough draft, a work in progress. In *Blue Fasa* you write, "Draft, meant drift, meant scheme, meant sketch."

MACKEY

I didn't find out about that aspect until I read *The Pale Fox*, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen's study of the Dogon, which talks about the Andoumboulou as an earlier form of human being, kind of a trial form that didn't work out.

That's when I got through to the sense of the Andoumboulou as a kind of metaphor for us and our present, you know, failed condition, the Andoumboulou as a failed form, a rough draft of humanity. It became a way for me to look at it as not just a funeral song, but also as something I could bring other stuff into, our failure to live up to the most ideal senses of humanity, for one. The Dogon also—even though African cultures are thought of as oral cultures, and certainly the oral component is a defining feature—the

Dogon are very much into graphics, into markings and visual signs. So, the foregrounding of texture—rasp, abradedness, rub as prototextuality—alongside the Dogon valorization of graphic marking led me to think of the Andoumboulou as rough drafts, rough drafts of humanity. When we, à la Robert Burns, talk about “man’s inhumanity to man,” we’re talking about our continuing Andoumboulouousness.

INTERVIEWER

I love that word. I want to say it all the time.

MACKEY

I start every day with it, in front of the mirror. I say, Andoumboulouousness. Never failed me yet. It’s the idea that we’re hopefully evolving, that we’re hopefully getting better, that we’re a draft closer to what we mean when we say *humanity* in an idealistic sense. And it seems that this fits the serial poetic form, which is in some way the poetics of drafting. Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls her long serial poem *Drafts*. This emphasis on provisionality, working toward whatever perfection or whatever perfectability there might be, is something that at the formal level is reinforcing and signifying what, at a kind of thematic level, this business of Andoumboulouousness is getting at. Reading *The Pale Fox*, I came to the sense that my poem was about the Andoumboulou but also about Andoumboulouousness, that it’s never satisfied with any of its iterations, that it will continue to go on and on and on.

INTERVIEWER

Your poetic practice seems very much about this process-oriented way of writing. In *Splay Anthem*’s introduction, you say that the song of the Andoumboulou “is one of striving, strain, abrasion, an all but asthmatic song of aspiration.” And there are dual meanings to *aspiration*. Pair it with *asthmatic*, and it’s breathing. But there’s aspiration and striving, too.

MACKEY

Over the years the Black Mountain emphasis on breath has come to me to be not really a program or practicum for the line but something that’s more metaphorical or metonymic, that’s about strain and stress and anxiety. It has to do, in the largest way, among these poets of the U.S., with the

Cold War and having entered the nuclear era. But it's also coming in via the influence of African American music. There's been a race war going on for centuries, registered by musicians from the group against which that war has been waged. When I listen to Coleman Hawkins play the saxophone, or Ben Webster—when I listen to any number of saxophonists—I hear something about their breathing. I hear breath being made evident, manifest, palpable almost. I hear breath being not passed over but lingered with and brought to the fore in a way that makes us think about and reflect on it, makes us think about its provisionality, the precarity that threatens it. This all resonates with “I can’t breathe,” Eric Garner’s last words, and the entire spectrum of vulnerabilities they bring to mind and that African American art and culture have built an aesthetic on.

You know, James Brown falling to his knees, sweating, losing five pounds, with that straining voice saying, “I’m so weak,” the house going crazy, is just beautiful, scarily so, sometimes. The inhabitation of frailty and precarity—conditionedness—is one of the things I think is going on in my writing, or, at least, informing the ideas and the context out of which it comes.

INTERVIEWER

Can you discuss your ideas of poetry and breath in relation to Black Lives Matter? You gave a lecture called “Breath and Precarity” in which you talked about the importance of breath in both poetry and jazz, about Charles Olson’s idea that a line is a measurement of breath but also about how breath *is* jazz, like how much a saxophone can sound like a sigh or a shortness of breath. If we can breathe, we are relaxed, we are living, but you also discuss the precarity of breath in the statement “I can’t *breathe*.”

MACKEY

“Breath and Precarity” grew out of a poem I wrote in the wake of the murder of Eric Garner, a poem in the “*Mu*” series called “The Overghost Ourkestra’s Next.” Variations on the line or idea that “no matter we couldn’t breathe, we blew” occurred or came to me as I thought about the approach to breath and breathing taken by black horn players. I thought about it in relation to the cutting off of breath, specifically black breath, of which the killing of Garner was yet another horrid instance. I heard the way these horn players

have with breath as an artistic othering of the asthmatic conditions imposed on black folk, the asphyxiations imposed on black life, an othering in which the intentness and evidentness of breath and breathing spoke to their social othering's revocation of breath. I heard an antiphonal or dialectical relationship between the two. I was thinking about a blowing-without-breath that ranges from Hawkins's or Webster's use of subtones to John Tchicai's or Sonny Rollins's asthmatic, apprehensive stutter to Rahsaan Roland Kirk's or Roscoe Mitchell's triumphant or defiant or put-upon recourse to circular breathing. By making breath more evident, more material, more dwelled-upon, they make black breath matter, implicitly insist that black lives matter. "Unable to breathe though we were, we blew" is one of the ways it's put in the poem, a line of thinking I ended up dealing with in a more extended, expository way in "Breath and Precarity."

That involved reviewing the breath-based poetics of Olson, Creeley, Baraka, and Ginsberg, all of whom were influenced by black music and all of whom influenced me. I see that poetics as less literal, less organic, less a matter of finding and following one's natural or normal breathing patterns than I did when I first encountered it in my teens and early twenties. I've come to see it as being about the ability to alter the rhythm of one's breathing, to construct alternate breathing patterns. Breath becomes a vehicle for senses of duress exactly with regard to breath, which is to say exactly with regard to life. This bears not only on a racist society in which black lives demonstrably don't matter but on an era that doesn't seem to be sure life matters.

INTERVIEWER

How has your role as a critic informed your poetry?

MACKAY

The two have walked hand in hand. As I mentioned, "Breath and Precarity" actually began as a poem, and I can think of many cases where it's been the other way around, where something I was looking into for my criticism entered my poetry and/or my fiction. The myth of Gassire's lute is a good example. In the most general sense, I'd say my criticism has informed my poetry very organically and intimately. It's no accident, no coincidence, that the various writers and artists whose work is addressed in my criticism are

those who have informed and influenced my writing. I went to school in their work. My criticism might be said to be my class notes. At the same time, I had some ideas about the kind of writing I wanted to do and the place I wanted to occupy, so part of my role as a critic, as I saw it, was to look for and find precedent for that, to shed light on and advocate for it. The concept of “discrepant engagement” gave my first book of critical essays its title and encapsulated both my critical outlook and my creative practice.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about your relationship to the long poem and how your work departs from the Western epic but also engages with it.

MACKEY

Well, the work of Williams entered my life in my teens and was pretty important to me. His late work is what I started with, *Pictures from Brueghel* and *Paterson*. I found out subsequently that *Paterson* was part of an effort, the writing of a modern epic, that included others—Pound’s *Cantos*. H.D.’s long poems. Melvin Tolson’s work, and others.’ So this long-poem thing—trying to make it fit modern conditions, which are really the dissolution of the conditions that made for the ancient epic, with collectivities that are not as easily defined and with heroism harder to find—it seemed to me that somehow the lyric poem wanted to and needed to go on. It could lament the absence of the conditions that we think of as requisite for the epic. I say it’s not an epic, it’s a singing amid heroic waste, the waste of what used to be seen as heroism or the absence of what used to be seen as heroism, in an unheroic time. It’s a “we” that’s trying to constitute itself, that’s in search of what would constitute it, simultaneously lamenting the long odds against it. That, in a nutshell, is how I think of it.

INTERVIEWER

The “we” comes up again and again in *Splay Anthem*, *Nod House* (2011), *Blue Fasa*, and your older collections. Can you talk about the first-person plural? In *Splay Anthem*, the “we” appears to be an other “we,” a “we” in opposition to nation and state. But then other times, the “we” is more personalized, as though the “we” is the “I” shadowed by ancestors.

MACKEY

In my earliest writing, going back to when I first started trying to get serious about it in my late teens and early twenties, I had this impulse to use that pronoun. I wasn't so given to the "I," which is where we all start. I didn't have a particular "we" in mind. It was just the aspiration of or toward that "we" that seemed on some instinctive level bound up with my impulse to write. It troubled and vexed me for a long time, because I didn't know whether I had a right to it. What is that line of Robert Duncan's? "Would-be shaman of no tribe I know"? I was kind of in that situation. What "we" was I speaking for? Of course, one was expected to write the first-person-singular narrative—the confessional, that kind of mode. I wasn't particularly interested in doing that. So that was a cause of consternation as well. I didn't want that "I" to be my "I." I wanted it to be an "I" that would take on the traffic of many personalities and personae and things.

It took me a while to get comfortable with or just to accept that this was what I wanted to do, but I started doing it, often with a flickering, changing sense of what the "we" signified. Probably, bottom line, it signifies a kind of invitation—extended to me at some remote instinctual level and then extended to the reader. But it's a "we" that's also, as you say, other, having the sad experience of being an other, and it's wary of the very proposition of constructing a "we," because a "we" has to have a "they," and this is a "we" that has a lot of experience being a "them." So there's a lot of pronominal agitation going on, especially as it comes into play with "they" and into play with the singular first-person "I." It's trying to speak to some kind of collective condition, or at least to a shared condition that may not yet have achieved collectivity, or to the aspiration to have that achievement. But, yes, it's often very close to me, too. It's a variable "we." Sometimes it's very large, sometimes it's as intimate as two people, sometimes it's a small group hanging out in the forest, or on the corner—

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes it's you and Ted and Fred and Ed.

MACKEY

Sometimes it's me and Ted and Fred. It's company. We find ourselves members of a variety of "we's." And the indeterminacy of that "we" from the point

of view of a reader—who might ask, Which “we” is he talking about?—I think of as an invitation. It sets up questions for readers. Am I a part of this “we”? Does this include me? Do I want to sign up for it? Do I identify, do I not? I can leave that unresolved from reader to reader.

INTERVIEWER

You resist the monumental—that’s another characteristic that sets your serial poems apart from other epic poetry. It’s more about the voyage.

MACKEY

I think that the alignment of my work with music is probably one of the things that accounts for that. There’s an ongoingness to music that I’m picking up on. I think I read somewhere, probably in Baraka at some point, writing about a piece of music, the statement, “There was no reason for it to ever end, but it did.”

Improvisational jazz is always subject to being opened up and releasing further disclosure and variation—so, you know, the sense that you never arrive at absolute closure. Whatever closure you do arrive at—or achieve, if you want to use that word—is temporary and provisional. Jazz musicians do end the song, but they’ll play the same song the next night and it’ll be different. So they haven’t exhausted all the possibilities of the song, they’ve just given us one iteration of it, one of its possible iterations. The idea that you have arrived at some point where you’ve said it all, that’s horrendous. Who would want that? Why would you want that? It’s like Pound thinking that he could basically sum up life, you know, in a hundred cantos. That’s megalomania. It’s common sense that you can’t do that. Anybody who thinks that they can, that a work of art can contain life, is just working out of delusion. In fact, one of the pleasures of the art is that it keeps on keeping on.

INTERVIEWER

So you’re going to be writing forever.

MACKEY

Yes, there’s kind of a guarantee to that, isn’t there?

INTERVIEWER

You got into jazz from your two brothers. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

MACKEY

My discophilia I get from the two of them. The younger of my older brothers, Richard, is eight years older than me. He's the one I got jazz from. Thomas, who's twelve years older than me, had a huge record collection, lots of 45s but also plenty of LPs. He was listening to Little Richard and all the pop and R&B singers of the fifties. He was especially fond of a singer named Toni Harper. My mother listened to gospel music, and she'd get into blues as well. The radio was always going. That was the age of kids getting transistor radios. Even in grade school I had a radio next to my bed, and I usually went to sleep with music playing.

I was a big fan of pop music, I knew all the Top 40 stuff, but it would wear out. There was an inexhaustibility to jazz. You could listen to a piece or an album again and again over long periods of time and not get tired of it. Something about that seemed to be important. I can still listen to jazz records I bought when I was seventeen and not be bored at all.

When I first started hearing about jazz, reading about it in the late fifties and early sixties, jazz was considered a kind of intellectual music. It was considered difficult. It wasn't thought of as music that everyone could get. That appealed—I liked the puzzle, I liked the challenge. I think the thing that I liked most about it, though, was that it was not easily exhausted. It was something that I could keep coming back to.

INTERVIEWER

How has your listening to, say, Don Cherry or Ornette Coleman influenced your poetry?

MACKEY

Probably in ways I can't talk about terribly well. I think that it gets into your sensibility. It, in some way, gets into your body. I remember reading an interview with Gary Snyder back in the day. One of the books he published was called *Riprap*. He had been doing a kind of work, putting stones together using a kind of hammer to tap them into place. He said he noticed that while



Easter 1956, Santa Ana, California.

he was doing riprap the rhythm of that work got into his poems. It got into his body and then came out of his body into the poems. That made sense to me. If something like that can get into you rhythmically and have an impact on your writing, then something like music, you would think, would have an even greater impact. I mean, it's pleasurable, for one. It's a lot of things that doing riprap work is not.

INTERVIEWER

It goes straight to the senses.

MACKEY

I do think the music that one listens to has a deep impact on one's rhythmic and bodily disposition. When I was growing up, books and records and that sort of thing were a way of enlarging my world. You know, that's what art seemed to be for. That's what culture seemed to be for. That's what education seemed to be for—these things that brought other cultures and other ways of experiencing the world to you. With music it was especially evident, because the jazz musicians I was listening to had such large ears. They were listening

to music from all over the world and bringing it into their music. When I was a teenager, one of the first records I listened to and ever really got into was Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*. Then I found out that Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane were listening to Pygmy music from the Ituri Forest. Yusef Lateef was playing exotic instruments—or what we think of as exotic instruments—from the East. So, the music had a world ear, a world reverberation, and jazz itself, I came to see, is a world music, it's listened to everywhere. A kind of globalism came into my life, came into my ears really early. Jazz introduced me to a good deal of the music that I've subsequently added to my palate. I got into flamenco via jazz. I started listening to Indian music. Coltrane was interested in Ravi Shankar, so I checked out Ravi Shankar. One of the Chicago musicians, one of the AACM musicians, Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, had a piece called "Bismillah" that seemed to be an allusion to Bismillah Khan, the Indian shehnai player, so I checked out Bismillah Khan. A lot of this just started out with me as a young person, trying to get to the world. I wanted to find out where the world was, what was happening in the world. Listening to the radio and these other forms of travel—reading, records, that kind of thing—were important.

I went on to become a DJ for many years. I did a jazz show as an undergraduate at Princeton on the campus station, WPRB. I've worked at various noncommercial stations in Madison, Wisconsin, and Northern California, including years and years in Santa Cruz, at KUSP, where I did a program called *Tanganyika Strut*, which was a mix of jazz and world music. That's left its imprint on me. I've been a listener for so long that even when I'm not listening to music, it's there.

INTERVIEWER

I was trying to think of a poetic term for what you do with music, because poetry that's inspired by paintings is called ekphrastic. Some people have said that term could also encompass music. But it seems so embedded in the visual arts. Do you have a term for poetry inspired by music?

MACKEY

I don't have a term for it. In fact, I've long tried to think of one. It's not *melo-poeia*, to use one of the terms that Pound brings up, because it's not really melody, or not just melody. We'll have to invent one.

INTERVIEWER

Douglas Kearney called it “synthetic.” Synthetic ekphrastic form. I think he got that from reading an essay of Moten’s, but I don’t know—

MACKEY

Synthetic ekphrastic. I would try to borrow from Ornette Coleman and Ezra Pound and say, maybe, *harmelorhythmic*? *Harmelorhythmopoetic* or something like that.

INTERVIEWER

We’ll coin that term. What were your first experiences of poetry?

MACKEY

In grade school we had to memorize and recite Longfellow and that kind of stuff. I sort of liked that, the process of memorization and learning that there were these relationships among the words in the poem that were mnemonic aids. I was learning rhyme, of course. It’s one of the easy things to pick up, end rhyme. But I was also learning relationships like assonance and alliteration that would help me memorize the words. It was interesting to see those relationships that way, and having to recite the poems from memory made you do that. But I wasn’t real thrilled with the way poetry and literature were taught in junior high school and high school, where it was more a matter of looking at interpretation, paraphrase, author biography and such.

I actually found math and science more interesting at that point, because there you were definitively decoding and deciphering something.

I started writing stories and poems as assignments in English classes. But then I got to reading around in anthologies and things like that. William Carlos Williams’s work I discovered at the public library.

INTERVIEWER

How did you encounter Williams? What about his writing inspired you?

MACKEY

I got to him by happenstance, really. I used to go to the public library to do homework and the kind of research projects we had to do in high school. I was walking by the new arrivals shelf and one of the books that had just come



With Kamau Brathwaite at UC Santa Cruz, 1990. “Books and records and that sort of thing were a way of enlarging my world. You know, that’s what art seemed to be for.”

out—so it must have been 1963—was *Pictures from Brueghel*. I was fascinated by the name William Carlos Williams. I was getting interested in poetry at that point, so I picked it up and started thumbing through it. I looked at it and one of the things I was struck by was how accessible it was, how direct it was. It made me feel kind of good about my ability to deal with poetry. But I was also struck by the way the later poems in the book are arranged on the page, that three-part step-down thing that he got into with the variable foot. So I checked it out and took it home and started reading.

I went to *Paterson* next. One of the things that appealed to me was its density and its difficulty. A thing I enjoyed about math was that it was a kind of hermetic language. I was good at math, I had done analytic geometry and differential calculus in high school. I remember buying a book that was way beyond me at that point, a book on differential equations. But I bought it anyway because, for one thing, of the look of the equations. Greek letters, you know, are used a lot, along with other symbols I wasn’t familiar with. I was drawn in just by the look of it. It was a hermetic text, brimming with

recondite content and promising recondite meanings that I couldn't quite get to then. I was interested in the fact that I would eventually crack that code if I kept on in math. I liked looking at it and seeing how much of it I could figure out just based on what I knew from calculus and the math I was already familiar with. I think that with poetry it was kind of the same thing. A text like *Paterson* seemed to me to be a hermetic work, and modern poetry more generally, at that point, was that for me. I was interested in learning how to read it, learning how to decipher it, learning how to crack the code.

I read Amiri Baraka around the same time. I first got introduced to him as a senior in high school. One of the first jazz records I bought was *Coltrane Live at Birdland*. He wrote the liner notes for it, which are fantastic. I had seen somewhere that he was a poet, and that's what led me to go out and find his poetry. The book that was around then was *The Dead Lecturer*. I loved that book. It was a bible for me. The sense of an artistic community that was not confined to one medium began to emerge. Okay, here's this guy who's in poetry and he's writing about this music that I like, and then I read up on him. In the back of *The New American Poetry* he's talking about Williams and Olson as influences, so I begin to see a community of poets and a larger community of artists. That interests me, that there's a kind of communication among artists that I call a communication of inference.

INTERVIEWER

Not only were you the first person in your family to go to college, you went to Princeton.

MACKEY

Yes, and I could do with it whatever I wanted to do. There was no pressure on me to become a doctor or a lawyer, any of that stuff. I come from a working-class family. We lived in housing projects in my early years. My mother was on welfare in Rodeo, in Northern California, before she started doing domestic work in Santa Ana, in Southern California, after we moved there. My uncle did construction work. In my teens I worked with my brother-in-law, who was a janitor. They knew that whatever I did, I wasn't going to be doing that, and they thought being a professor was a big deal. I had a roommate at Princeton who was from a white middle-class family in Palo Alto. When he decided to major in philosophy, he caught hell from his

parents. They wanted him to go into one the professions, doctor or lawyer, or become an engineer, major in something practical.

INTERVIEWER

Did you find it to be an easy transition, coming from a black, working-class family, to go to Princeton? Did you find a community there immediately, teachers who were accepting?

MACKEY

It wasn't easy, but there were black students there. I think at that point our class had the largest contingent of black students to have been admitted. While I was there, there were, by the time I was a senior, somewhere between 150 and 200 of us, and that's at a school of 3,200. It wasn't a lot, but we had a black students' association, and there was a community. There were things about it that turned me off, but at the same time, I went there to expand my world. I knew there would be things that would be different and not all of them would agree with me or me agree with them. The preppy culture was something I had never seen. But, you know, there were a lot of things I got from there. It wasn't until I was an undergrad that I heard literature talked about in an interpretive, analytic way that really intrigued me. Freshman year I took a course that was pretty popular called Introduction to Modern Literature. We read Lorca, we read Gide, we read Dostoyevsky and others.

It really broadened me intellectually and culturally, as well as geographically. The East Coast is very different from the West Coast. I didn't know I had a California accent until I went to Princeton and people remarked on it. I didn't even know there was such a thing. There were students from all over the country and international students as well, which turned out to be something that was important to me.

Also, it was close to New York, so I got to go to New York a lot—go to the museums, go to hear music, go to poetry readings, plays, movies, things like that. The first time I heard Allen Ginsberg was at a reading he gave with Peter Orlovsky at Town Hall. Early in my freshman year I heard Coltrane at the Village Gate, the one time I heard him live. The thing that was hardest for me to deal with at Princeton was being so far away from home. I struggled with that for the first year, maybe into the second year. I thought about transferring to a California school, but I hung on. And I'm glad I did.

I recognized it as an opportunity, a pretty rare one, so the things I had difficulties with I just had to deal with. My mother reminded me when I wrote her these despairing letters, she said, Well, this is the decision you made. You made it and you had good reasons for making it. Now you're just going to have to tough it out.

INTERVIEWER

Did you take poetry classes? Any workshops?

MACKEY

I took a workshop in my junior year. At that point I needed to stop writing in a closet. I needed to get some reaction, to see what other people thought of what I'd been writing, because at that time I was starting to take it seriously, like it was something I would like to pursue, and I needed a reality check. It was helpful.

I took only one workshop and I didn't want to go the M.F.A. route. I figured that so many writers I saw had ended up teaching at a university or college, and if I was going to do that, I might as well get the best green card for it, the Ph.D. I had applied to a number of schools and I decided that Stanford was the one I wanted to go to, but I asked them to defer my admission for a year. I didn't want to go directly after four undergrad years, I thought I was kind of burned out and could use a break. And that was right. So I went and taught algebra at a private school in Pasadena. It turned out that one of my colleagues, who was teaching French, also wrote, and she had some friends who were students at Cal State LA and were taking a writing class with a fellow named Henri Coulette. I remember going over and sitting in on that class with her and them.

When I got to Stanford, I knew people who were in the writing program, but I wasn't in the workshops. Reginald Gibbons, who was a classmate of mine at Princeton, was there. Anyway, I started to interact with him and other young writers who were there. We would show one another stuff every now and then.

INTERVIEWER

So there wasn't one actual poetry mentor that you had.

MACKEY

Only at a distance. I was just reading and trying to learn how to write from what I read. I wrote like Baraka for a while, I wrote like Creeley for a while, I wrote some Ginsberg poems. I just learned that way. The workshop was useful in that it showed me that people don't see the poem the same way you do. You then have to arrive at some decision about whether that matters to you, how much it matters to you, and how it matters to you. I'm a sensitive type. I decided that taking a lot of workshops might put too many people in my head. It was good to have feedback, good to have a place to take one's work, good to have a place to write for, but I could see how a prolonged curriculum of workshops could make you too reliant on outside input.

INTERVIEWER

Talk more about your process of composition.

MACKEY

A lot of it is phrasal. It starts with phrases, phrases that I find interesting in some way. A phrase might be interesting for its syntax, interesting for its rhythm, interesting for the truth it tells, interesting for its imagery, interesting for its sound, its phonic relationships, any number of things.

INTERVIEWER

So you have floating phrases?

MACKEY

Yes. I write them down and I build on them. That's basically how I write. Phrases come to me, some short, some long. Sometimes little sentences, sometimes really long, run-on sentences come to me. Sometimes there's a word, especially when you're dealing with a neologism or a coinage, that'll be the spur. Phrases and phrasing, which is what jazz is all about. A three- or four-word phrase will come to me and it'll be interesting for some reason. Either the syntax is interesting or there are assonantal relationships in the phrase that are interesting or the image that it conveys is interesting. It can be some combination of those things, or maybe it's just that it's using words that are not very common but that I find attractive in one way or another.



Mackey in Cork, Ireland, 2005. "I began to see a community of poets and a larger community of artists. That interests me."

INTERVIEWER

So are these phrases that you get from researching?

MACKEY

They can come from anything, from anywhere. They can come from reading, sometimes from misreading. It can happen in overhearing speech or with something on the TV or the radio. The first act of my process is to write those things down when they happen. I've learned over the years not to let any of it go. It's not that all of it's going to prove to be useful, but anything that occurs to me that I think has some potential for a poem, I write down. I don't have to do it so much now, but for years I would always have a spiral notebook. Now I have the notebook feature on the phone, which makes it easier. Anyway, that's what I do, write these things down. There are times when you know that what has come to you is part of some larger thing and that now's the time to get to that larger thing. There are other times when you know that now's not the time and you just put it away and put whatever else comes later away. Then at some point—no, it's not at some point but on a regular basis—you sit down and try to figure out what those pieces belong to.

INTERVIEWER

What about your relationship and approach to the line?

MACKEY

It's intuitive, though my poems, I think, by now have a characteristic appearance on the page.

INTERVIEWER

Very much so. I see the Williams influence, with the enjambments.

MACKEY

And the diagonal drift on the page.

INTERVIEWER

I would love to hear about that.

MACKEY

My tendency is to drift over to the right-hand side of the page as I move down through the poem. That's what I mean by diagonal drift. That's the Williams imprint, because those three-part step-down lines—I think he saw them as one line that was divided into three—had a sharp diagonal drift. Then he would return to the left margin and start again. The drift in my poems is not as sharp. It goes down farther and it incorporates not a three-line unit but the whole poem. In fact, I have to watch myself to keep my poems from ending up looking like a duck's bill or something of that sort. Anyway, there's a kind of drift that seems to be a part of the body language of the poem, and that's maybe coming out of my somatic disposition. It just seems right and fitting to me. I'm trying to give some sense of a kind of syncopation, a kind of rhythmic unsettledness in the look of the poem, although it's not, strictly speaking, a score for how I read it. I want there to be a visual music on the page, a jagged dance down the page. Robert Farris Thompson's book *Flash of the Spirit* talks about the visual syncopation of African textiles, the kente cloth and so forth. When I read that, it occurred to me that I had seen something similar in Williams, a graphic dance, graphic syncopation. I think that's why I give so much attention to putting these poems on the page, which only makes things harder for me because then I have to deal with typesetters who don't get it.

When I write my poems out before I get to the keyboard, I just write them out as a block of prose. Then something comes into play when I'm at the keyboard, something that I translate as I move them from the notebook, as I go from prose to verse. I'm actually at the point now where I do more writing at the keyboard, but that movement out of the notebook remains important.

INTERVIEWER

And what about the relationship between the ongoing poems and the shape of the book?

MACKEY

It's all one ongoing poem, but the book as a unit of composition is also one of the guiding principles within it. That's something that I picked up from Robert Duncan, especially from *The Opening of the Field*. I don't start off with knowing what the guiding light of the book is, but when I get significantly into it I start taking stock. I'm kind of looking and saying, Well, what's going on here? Is there something going on here that names it as a book, that stamps a certain identity on it? *Blue Fasa* is not *Splay Anthem*, although they are part of the same ongoing work. It's really that at different times your concerns are different. One of the things you locate in the process of naming and defining the book is what seem to be your concerns, judging by the poems you have written to that point. That then informs how you round out the book, although you'd like to leave loose ends loose. You don't want the book to clamp shut like a coffin lid.

INTERVIEWER

How do you decide when to end the book?

MACKEY

Well, it's partly a constructivist decision. Everything is ongoing and the work is theoretically unending, but we live within certain conventions of dissemination. We have books, which are like status reports on the process. You get a certain momentum as you write, especially in serial work, because you're building a vocabulary, for one thing, and the more you write the larger that vocabulary gets and the more you have to draw on.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a break between books?

MACKEY

A rest period? No, I just keep going. I just keep going. I've been doing this for a long time. I've built up some momentum. And a language. And a world that I've gotten to know better and that I can move around in more nimbly, more quickly, and, I think, more confidently than I was able to twenty or thirty years ago when I was just getting to know it, just starting to invent it.

I've been experiencing, since around 2012, an unusual outburst or upsurge in that work. Now the unit of composition I'm dealing with is fifty installments of the two intertwined poems, rather than twenty-five. Things sped up. It got to where, between 2012 and 2018, I wrote around twenty-five installments a year, collected now as three double books, *Tej Bet*, *So's Notice*, and *Nerve Church*. New Directions will issue them as a box set under the title *Double Trio* (2021). I've been working on another double book, for which I recently got a title, nodding to Cecil Taylor, *Calling It the Eighth or the Tenth or the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth*. I'm not sure how long this pace, this upsurge, will last, but if it lasts long enough I'd be happy to wait eight years for another box, *Double Quartet*.

INTERVIEWER

With *Splay Anthem*, why did you decide to have an introduction?

MACKEY

I think we have to help create an audience and a readership for our work. One way to do it is to say a bit about what the conceptual hinterland is that lies behind the poems, that lies behind the work. I realize that in my critical work, to some extent, I had been doing that, but in an indirect way. When *Splay Anthem* got accepted at New Directions, my editor there, Jeffrey Yang, suggested writing an introduction or a preface of some sort, because the work was ongoing, they were publishing it as my first work with them, a book that had predecessors and that would hopefully go to a wider readership that hadn't necessarily read those predecessors. That might be a way of bringing new readers up to date or at least of owning up to the fact that the book was a part of something that had already been going on. So, having

been thinking already about how I would situate what I was up to and then getting that suggestion from him, which was both a practical publisher's or editor's concern and an intellectual concern of Jeffrey's, I thought of it as an interesting challenge, a useful project, to sit down and in a compact way say, This is what it is. It was a very rewarding writing experience. I had to clarify some things to myself, but at the same time I had to keep it from becoming too tight a ball.

INTERVIEWER

I was thinking about your introduction, because you talk about difficulty, and some would say that your poetry is difficult. A poem is difficult because of its levels of access, right? There might be some difficulty with your poetry because of your references, which range from African cosmology to jazz musicians. Do you feel a pressure to clarify that?

MACKEY

I don't think all of it can be clarified. I like works that have some mystery to them. Now, in academia, people would rather talk about difficulty than about mystery, and that's probably why that word keeps coming up. It's that inexhaustibility that I talked about earlier. I like works that seem to have a life of their own.

I don't set out to decode my work. I don't write that way and I won't write about what I write that way, because that would be undoing the very thing that makes the whole thing compelling for me. I can enjoy works that I feel that I get, but I also, maybe even more strongly, enjoy works that I get some of but have the sense I have not gotten all of. I especially like work that gives me the feeling there's more to get—that I might, by having a conversation with somebody who brings different equipment to bear, or with the artist, learn something. I respect the otherness of the work. Work that I'm totally shut out by, I can't say that I enjoy. If I keep coming back to something and I'm just not getting in, I'll have to say it's not for me. And I'm okay with a reader coming to that point with my work.

It's like, Coltrane was asked at one point, What do you say about people who say they don't understand your music? And he says, Well, they're probably telling the truth, they probably don't understand it. And that's okay. Not everybody is going to understand it.

INTERVIEWER

I'm also curious about mystery, difficulty, in the way other people understand your poetry. I thought the essay "Other: From Noun to Verb" beautifully clarified the two different ways, *the other* as noun versus *other* as verb, and how artists like yourself may be an other, because of sociopolitical or economic reasons, and from that position you other poetry, via form and language.

MACKEY

Well, hopefully we're also othering the avant-garde, experimental tradition. One of the things about that tradition, the way it's grown up in Western arts and letters, is that there's a certain historical teleology that tends to go with it, which is that the more avant-garde or experimental or advanced art gets, the more it moves toward pure form. Ortega y Gasset writing about modern art as the dehumanization of art was getting at something like this. So the progress of art is measured by its distance from presenting human subjectivities. Somebody like Clement Greenberg talks about arriving at a point of artistic purity, where the art is not about anything, where it's abstract and it's about its own constitution if it's about anything. It's pure form.

Other is what we do to that tradition, because we bring something to it, content that hasn't been there before. And, of course, there's a lot of anxiety and resentment about that. We have a weird sense of disenfranchisement coming from the celebrated center all of a sudden, like, Oh, we can't be that kind of outsider. We can't claim that kind of marginalization. The whole bohemian thing was basically a split within the bourgeoisie, *épater le bourgeois*, in the European tradition, and they masqueraded as the true others. That's how they got into "primitive art." But when the people who were actually the heirs of that tradition—

INTERVIEWER

Like Artaud taking from Japanese Noh theater, or Dubuffet with the whole primitivism, art brut thing. These "innovators" would take from these non-Western traditions, and then they would couple it into their own aesthetic, and it's like, We have discovered a new form, there is this new worlding that's happening.



With Marty Ehrlich at Hugo House in Seattle, 2019.

MACKAY

Yes. Jack Kerouac calling himself a jazz poet is a lot more palatable and digestible than LeRoi Jones standing up and calling himself a jazz poet. That's why you have a discourse that delegitimizes and problematizes authenticity. The debate over race and the avant-garde, race and experimentalism—experimentalism has a pedigree that includes a very small group of people, so other people, however much they're working in that vein and should be discussed in that connection, don't tend to be. That's changing some, because of younger people and younger critics like Evie Shockley, Anthony Reed, Timothy Yu, Dorothy Wang, but you can still see those walls being upheld by the older critics. Things do change, though, and there are now more critics able to see through that. Paul Naylor's book *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History*, for example, is a book that has a chapter on my work, on Susan Howe's work, a chapter on Lyn Hejinian's work, a chapter on M. NourbeSe Philip's work, and a chapter on Kamau Brathwaite's work. It's pretty much a *Hambonista* book. All those writers have been published in *Hambone*, as has Paul himself. That book came out a while ago actually, 1999 or something like that. That would be a sign that some people have gotten the message.

INTERVIEWER

Returning to our conversation after a few years, your concept of Andoumboulou takes on new urgency. When we first talked, Trump was not yet in office. Now, the House has impeached, Britain's Parliament has a Conservative majority, and climate change is accelerating faster than scientists initially predicted. Has Andoumboulou shifted for you with the current time?

MACKEY

I don't know if it has shifted so much as been confirmed again. We're still that rough draft, and there are strong forces and powerful vested interests that work to keep us that way and, in fact, to roughen us even more. We're seeing that in Trump, Boris Johnson, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and the rise of the Right all around the world. I don't declare myself an ecopoet, but when Brad Morrow solicited work for the "Earth Elegies" issue of his journal *Conjunctions*, I had a "Mu" poem from a couple of years ago to send him. "We were singing the death / of the earth, deep study, getting ready to be gone," it says at one point.

The current situation is horrible and horrifying and it can't help but enter and inflect one's work in manifest and not-so-manifest ways. I find the word *politics* coming into both *Song of the Andoumboulou* and "Mu" in recent years to an extent that it didn't before. I find a neologism coming in, *decapitism*, which is saying something about capitalism and what it's doing to us and to the planet. I find references to "the apprentice prez," "the reality-show prez," "the puppet prez" coming in. These things are a part of the field we tend and it's no surprise they make their way in.

Liza Watkins

TRUST: VIEW OF PROPERTY

I am named in my mother's trust
but no one knows how to find her land.

Bounded to the north by the Southern Pacific Railroad,
east by the heirs of Dugas, Robichaux,
west by a gravel road.

How much of this do I own?

View of: Property containing 25 arpents,
more or less. Three above tracts
forming one contiguous body.

Put your mouth against the crust, try to soften it.

Has it water, has it lights, cypress stands
or tallow talons capped with froth,
white wax invasive berries
poked from the seedpod?

How far? Can I live there? Address: TBD
Switchgrass, bluestem, brownseed paspalum.

Outside, oak limbs like meandering steam
organs hung with doves, breasts against bark.
My father talks.

You may not think money is important now, little girl, but you will.

Who forgets to sign an oil lease?

Who who, who whoooo, who who, who whoo

Who is going to clip the grass blade by blade, you?

Fool who could thrive anywhere.

*A Story for Your Daughters,
a Story for Your Sons*

REBECCA MAKKAI

The war had closed much of the city, cut off many of the smaller towns. Unable to trace his usual routes, the hat merchant headed into the mountains to try his luck. His father, before he died, had circled a small mountain village on his map, had noted that the trading was good but the trip took two difficult days. Indeed, the snaking road narrowed fast, and the bridge was down to splinters so his horse had to wade to the knees.

Near sunset of the first day, long after the road had turned to an overgrown path, the merchant passed a plain young woman milking a cow. She asked him into her farmhouse for bread and brandy but never turned her back on him. She didn't turn her back to cut the bread, to call for her mother, to find a glass. He imagined she'd met her share of passing soldiers who wanted more than drink.

Her widowed mother asked if he'd stay the night. In exchange for the food, the bed, the oats,

he let her pick a hat from his bags. She chose one made of thick red felt and told him he shouldn't bother with the village. "They have all they need," she said. "You won't do well there." She looked him up and down as if he were something to eat. She said, "Your hats are lovely."

In the morning, he rode four more desolate hours and arrived finally in the heart of the village, where women skittered in and out of shops and children played in the streets. He set up his wares on the green under a tree, and the children dared one another to come near. Then they'd giggle and scream and flee. Eventually they grew bolder, stayed close to poke his horse with sticks.

"One of you came here last summer," a girl said.

"But that one didn't have whiskers," a boy said, as if contradicting her.

The merchant asked them to tell their mothers to come see his hats. "Or your fathers," he said, "if they aren't out in the fields." He didn't mention the other fields, the battlefields. This village seemed so untouched. The children's cheeks were fat and red. No windows were boarded over.

The children laughed and laughed. They poked more at the horse, then tired of it and returned to their games.

He noticed, before long, that the older women who passed were glaring. That the younger women hurried by, but glanced with equal parts suspicion and hunger.

One woman, her hair like waves of night, watched from across the road and after a long minute came to him, ran her fingers along the brim of a soft brown hat.

She said, "We don't need hats this fine. We have no one to dress for."

To make a short story shorter, he found himself in her arms, on her bed, his face in her neck, her legs around his.

He asked, when they were done, if she had a husband, if he'd be home soon. The merchant had jumped out a few windows in his day.

The woman said, "You didn't notice. All the men are gone."

The merchant was forming a question about the war, but the woman continued.

Years ago, the village midwife taught one woman to poison her angry-fisted husband by dipping flypaper in his drink. (As she said this, she ran her hand down his belly, his thigh.) Then another woman, whose father refused to let her marry and claimed her as his own wife. Then an old woman whose son wanted to take her house and exile her to a hut. Then more women, whose men sold or

bought them in marriage, whose men beat them or broke their babies or kicked the goats or stank up the house. Then more women. Then all the women.

The few good men who remained, she said, were in such high demand, so lusted after, that they grew arrogant. They became terrible, and selfish, and lazy. And soon they, too, were poisoned.

This was all a good while back.

"But the children!" the merchant said.

"Sired by men like you."

"I mean the young boys. Do you—"

"We send them off. When their voices drop, it's time to go."

"They don't return?"

"It's the only way they know. We send them to the army or the monasteries."

"And no one has told?"

"Who would tell?"

"Someone like me," he said. Although how would he ever go about it?

"There are only two types of men. Those who would tell, and those who would return." She bit his ear, ran her tongue behind the lobe.

"And what if I'm neither?" he said. Because the way the woman drank him in, the way she stroked his throat, was dangerous, was mesmerizing, was horrid, was wonderful.

"Then I should keep you as a secret pet."

In the gray of dawn, the merchant slipped from her room and untied his horse.

He was an hour outside the village when he remembered he'd left all his hats there, on the woman's table. Fifty, seventy, a hundred. However many he hadn't sold, and lord knew he hadn't been selling many.

He stopped at the same farmhouse, knowing it was the last place to rest before making his way back down the mountains.

He asked the women for water, and when they offered him bread he refused, because he had nothing to repay them with.

"The village," he said. "Do you know those people? Are they your people?"

The younger woman smiled and didn't answer, but the older one shook her head. "My sister is their midwife," she said. "I know them, but they're not my people."

The merchant had many questions, but what he found himself asking was, “They’re happy? Like that?”

The older woman shrugged.

The younger woman took his empty glass to the small sink, placed it soundlessly in the basin.

The older woman said, “For a very long time now, they’ve lived in peace.”

MANY YEARS LATER, after that war (and just before the start of the next war, the one that would shred the country’s last borders), a cartographer came through the city where the merchant now lived above his own shop. The man was from the university, and he rode in the first motorcar the merchant had ever seen. A splendid thing that roared.

The cartographer made it his business to show his maps to everyone in the city who ever traveled, for trade or adventure—and the merchant, who was by then too old to leave the block, let alone the city, pored over the sheets with great interest.

He traced, with one chapped finger, the faint line up what he knew was the steep side of the mountain. Off the line was a dot, and the name of a village, illegible.

“This village,” he said to the cartographer. “You went there?” He had spent decades wishing to return, considering a return, fearing a return, sometimes longing for a place he’d spent such a short time, sometimes furious there was a place on the earth he didn’t belong. In the years since the journey, he’d never felt himself entire.

“It was a brief stop,” the cartographer said. “Quite a few years back.” He didn’t blush or blanch.

“Did you—” the merchant began, and then asked, “Was there anything unusual about the town?”

The cartographer looked blank. “A brief stop,” he repeated.

And then, “Oh—yes, yes. One thing I remember, and I’m sure this was the place. There they were in the middle of nowhere, but they wore such *hats*.” He smiled, remembering. “On every head, the most beautiful hat.”

James Longenbach

FOREVER

Once, in a room no bigger than the bed,
I made love with a girl.

*

Have you ever made love with a girl?
Once I hadn't, then I had.

*

A girl was looking up at me.
She was lying on the grass.

*

Once, after a terrible fight, I made love with a girl.
We were children again.

*

Once, eating ice cream,
I smelled her body on my hands.

*

The first time I made love with a girl I was scared;
I thought I would hurt her.

*

Once in Italy and, on the same day,
Once in France.

*

Remember that week in the cabin?
The time in front of the fire, when everyone else was asleep?

*

Once, we made love to make a baby.
Once, a baby was sleeping on the bed.

*

I walked across the park.
A girl pulled her jeans off slowly.

*

Once, making love with a girl,
I thought I was someone else.

*

I was a boy forever.
She pushed me down on the bed.

*

What did we do afterward?
What had I done before?

*

Once, without my noticing, the world turned once,
Then twice, then disappeared.

*

Turned twice, and everything
Was different, everything was the same.

*

Nobody lives forever.
I love you. I love you, too.

*

Once, in a world no bigger than a bed,
You said we'd be lovers forever.

*

That was the first time.
The second was by the sea.

Margaret Ross

ORANGE TREE

A ginkgo leaf like a splayed ass

A begonia leaf is a pebbled surface
green and burgundy

A long and narrow leaf curls down

All the different methods
of extending yourself so the sun
might better touch you

Serrated edges of the teardrop
nettle leaves

sting your fingers

The nursery labels everything
and so assigns appearances
to names I only know from fiction

Old novels set in houses with gardens
where the lovers meet
or someone paces, thinking

Jonquil and clematis

Omniscient narrator
conceived by a dead person

From the limb of a sapling in a silver tub
the photo of a future flower
dangles by a plastic noose

Years ago, you biked home
with a leaf tucked under your helmet
and taped it by its stem up on the door

I try to force my soul up to the surface of my skin

I try to send my mind into my mouth, into my hand
to touch you with

I repeat

in my head the sentences
I love you I love you more than anyone
ever can and suck your cock repeating them

You stood in the bathroom
testing faces in the mirror
while I lay in the next room
pretending to read

You could make soap balance on a round ledge

The ragged flesh along your thumbs
where you bite the skin off
watching television

Stop, it hurts me when you do that

How can it hurt *you*

On your knees, preparing surfaces

stapling canvas over stretchers
laying ground over the canvas

You pour paint on wet gesso so the stain
spreads slowly on its own
and we can go get coffee

Trying to get down under the immortal dailiness
and touch the myth beneath the fiction

We stayed one night
with a couple I knew

At dinner, the wife ate rice with us
and the husband ate what looked like rice
but was in fact minced cauliflower

She set the bed up in the living room

We'd go before they woke

We fucked very quietly in the gray light

Your fingers in my mouth
and my body pressed against
the firm hollow of the air mattress
we knelt on to deflate

When the hissing stopped, we folded it

We stacked the pillows and the sheets

We did everything you do to leave

An Unspoken

ASHLEIGH BRYANT
PHILLIPS

Hal Parker runs out to his wife's hydrangea bushes. He's trying to scare away the neighbor's black Lab, Major. Hal claps his hands in front of him and shouts, but Major's already peeing on the bush. It seems to Hal that lately the dog just won't stay in his pen. Hal has watched him dig holes under it and even seen him climb over it once or twice.

Hal looks next door. His neighbor Corey Lane's Camaro is in the yard. He decides to tell Corey about his dog. As he knocks on the door and waits, Hal looks over the front of the house and thinks he should have talked to Corey about Major weeks ago. He also thinks the bricks need to be washed and the shutters need to be repainted. He knocks again and hears the floorboards creak on the other side of the door. Major is back at the hydrangeas.

Hal doesn't see Corey much. He doesn't go to church, he doesn't go uptown except to get

gas, and, Hal thinks, he sure doesn't spend enough time in his yard. Hal's inspecting the overgrown boxwoods beside him when Corey opens the door.

The first thing Hal notices is that the young man looks rough, thinner than he's been. But he goes ahead and asks him how he's been doing.

"All right, I reckon," Corey says. He scratches a scab on his wrist. His hair is greasy.

"Well, I hear you been doing good work at Johnny's chicken houses. He's told us about it at the café," Hal lies.

"Really?" Corey straightens up a bit.

"Sure did. Johnny's a good man, he'll take good care of ya if you keep on doing good."

Corey's scab starts to bleed.

"Lord knows it ain't the best-smelling work," Hal laughs.

Corey smiles a little.

"But shoot, you're probably used to it by now."

"Yes sir." Corey wipes the blood with the palm of his other hand. "I don't even notice it no more."

"Well, I'm glad you're doing good for yourself, Corey. I really am." Hal takes a step toward him. "But I came over here to talk to you about your dog. Now I don't know what you got going on with that dog pen, but he can't keep getting out and running all over."

Corey shakes his head in agreement without looking at Hal.

"I know Major don't mean to hurt nothing. But you know how much Clara loves her flowers, and we've been working out in the yard all summer."

"I'm sorry," Corey says, "I really am."

"Have you tried an electric fence yet?" Hal asks him and he looks back at his yard. Clara's there squatting on the ground with Major, giving him long strokes down his back. His tail wagging.

WHEN FRED AND JENNY LANE MOVED next door, Clara was excited. The Lanes were young and happy. And Jenny was newly pregnant. Clara enjoyed watching her with her growing belly plant boxwoods and azaleas around the front of the house. Jenny emitted that glow all new mothers do and Clara found it intoxicating. She helped throw a baby shower for Jenny with some of the other women at her church's fellowship hall. And to

this day, Clara remembers how gracefully Jenny opened her gifts, unwrapping the paper at the taped ends instead of tearing it apart. And how she saved all the bows and ribbons, saying how pretty each of them was as she set them aside.

Corey was just two years old when Jenny was T-boned by a transfer truck on Highway 35. They say she died instantly. And Clara watched over the years as Fred brought in women who came from people she didn't know. She watched them move in and out, sometimes bringing their own children, sometimes not. The toys would always be left out in the yard. And the boxwoods and azaleas overgrew. Clara thought that if Jenny could see it all she'd roll over in her grave.

Clara did what she could to help Corey. She babysat him whenever Fred needed, refusing payment. She took him to Vacation Bible School every summer. And she gave him five dollars for every good report card.

Clara encouraged Hal to spend time with Corey.

"I think it would be nice," she said to him.

But Hal never showed any interest.

WHILE CLARA'S AT THE GROCERY STORE, Hal cuts her Knock Out roses. He wants to have them in a vase in the kitchen for when she walks in the door. He's trying to make her happy. She used to scratch his back until he went to sleep. He does not know why she stopped doing that but he's not going to say anything, either.

CLARA REMEMBERS TRYING to hold her baby when he died. He was going in and out of fits and convulsions. He was screaming louder than she'd ever heard before. He was perfect, but he'd been born with a hole in his spine. And that was in 1964 and the doctors told her that he wouldn't live six months, but he made it to eight. Every night before she went to sleep Clara thought about when he'd die and she tried to prepare herself for it. She thought it would be a peaceful thing. She thought she'd hold her baby boy still and quiet as he went. But he would not stop screaming. She didn't know that he'd bend and fight, that he'd turn in her arms into an unright thing. She did not think the Lord's will would work that way.

She does not remember much from the funeral. But the preacher asked everyone to join him in singing "Jesus Loves the Little Children."

And everyone joined hands in a circle around her. They all were crying and singing.

HAL BRINGS A GLASS OF WATER to Clara in the living room. She's drafting the Murfreesboro Historical Association's newsletter, jotting in cursive on a legal pad, her feet on the couch.

Hal settles in his chair and puts the Western channel on TV.

"Now I'm not trying to stir you up," he says, "but it's going on about twenty years you've been secretary. Ain't I right?"

"Well, something like that," Clara puts down her pen.

"Just think, if you didn't have to give tours near 'bout every weekend in the summer, maybe we could get down and see my brother's place in Pensacola."

Hal retired from auto insurance ten years ago. He had been one of the top sellers in the district. Working to make his home with Clara the best it could be. Enough for a carport, a koi pond, and a fountain with an angel tipping water out of a vase.

"I'll think about it," Clara says and she picks up her pad.

"I know you don't believe it, but they'll survive without you."

Hal looks over to the built-in bar in the corner cabinet and thinks that he's a better man now, better than the drunk he was. He gets out of his chair and sits next to Clara on the couch.

CLARA PACKS MASHED POTATOES and hamburger steak into some Tupperware and covers it all in brown onion gravy. Sometimes she brings Corey leftovers and he especially loves her brown onion gravy. She sets the Tupperware in a paper grocery bag with two tomatoes from her garden and a ziplock with two sugar cookies she'd made for their last women's auxiliary meeting at church.

Then she goes back to the sink to finish the dishes. She washes quickly because she wants to bring Corey his food before sundown. And she washes out of habit, not looking at what she's doing. Instead, she checks on her African violet sitting in the window in front of her. She'd just planted it in this bigger pot and she thinks that it's filling out nicely. It's early September, the window is open and there are sounds outside.

When Clara looks up Corey is fucking his dog, Major. They're together

in the dog pen and Corey is pushing Major into the dirt. The dog yelps, and Clara screams.

She closes her eyes and turns away from the window and she stands there in her kitchen feeling like she's been thrown.

HAL FINDS CLARA standing with her wet hands in balled fists covering her eyes. She clutches a fork in one hand and a sponge in the other. Water and suds drip down her arms and onto her apron and the floor.

Hal says her name and asks her what's wrong but she won't respond or move. When Hal starts to unpry her fists, she says, "I saw him. I saw him."

"Who? Let go. Let's sit down. What's wrong? Clara! Clara!"

"I saw him." Clara shakes her head back and forth.

Hal grabs her shoulders and then Clara stops and unclenches her fists. The fork and sponge fall to the floor. She opens her eyes and with her palms open on either side of her face she says, "I saw him having sex with the dog."

The first thing Hal thinks is that he wants to kill that son of a bitch.

THE SUN SETS AND CLARA SITS at the kitchen table. She looks at the refrigerator and sees the clipping of Corey she cut out of the paper when he was the valedictorian of his high school class. And then she starts to cry.

"I always knew something won't right with that boy. He won't ever right." Hal grabs the phone on the wall.

"Not yet," Clara says, "don't call the law yet. Please, Hal."

Hal stands there with the phone in his hand.

"I've got to pray about it."

"Pray? You want to pray about it?"

"I know you've never showed any care for Corey as long as he's lived. He was just a poor child and you never wanted anything to do with him." Clara starts to wring her hands. "And you know just as good as me that he's done dwindled down to nothing. Since his daddy died, he don't have nobody."

Hal looks out the window.

"You told me yourself that the other night when you went over there he looked the worst that you'd ever seen him." Clara wipes her face. "This is gonna ruin him."

"He's already runnt, Clara." Hal hangs up the phone and comes toward

her. "Everybody knows he was runnt from the start. Them Lanes were trash, but you never wanted to believe it."

"That's not true. You know that's not true. Corey is a good boy, Hal."

"With that lowlife daddy, dragging women from Arrowhead onto our street, stealing out of my shed. You know as good as me he was the one that stole my generator last Christmas, probably sold it for who knows what kind of drugs," Hal went on. "But you turned an eye. And don't you think I know that you give him money here and there for gas or shoes or whatever you think he needs whenever you go over there?"

Clara looks at the bag of food she got together for Corey sitting in the middle of the table.

"Clara, this has gone on long enough. It's time you faced the facts. That boy is sick and you can't save him." Hal puts his hands palms down on the table.

And outside Major starts to bark.

EVEN THOUGH THEIR SON was born "defected," Hal still named him after his father. Hal was proud to have a son. And doctors are just doctors, Hal thought, they can be wrong about a lot of things. His son could still grow to be strong.

When their son was dedicated to the church when he was five months old, Hal insisted on holding him in front of everyone. The mama always holds the baby during dedications, but Hal wanted to do it.

"What will you do if he gets upset and starts to fidget and all?" Clara asked, holding their son on the bottom church step.

"You'll be all right, won't you, bud?" Hal touched their son's nose.

"Now you have to make sure you hold him real gentle when the preacher sprinkles the water on him." Clara passed their son to Hal. "It might surprise him, scare him some."

"My son ain't gonna be scared," Hal said and he walked up the church steps with their baby.

Hal ended up being right about the dedication. He told everyone afterward that his son had acted like a little man. Later that night before they went to sleep Clara told Hal that she'd been thinking about what she wanted to bury their baby in. Hal had never wanted to yell at Clara before, but he wanted to then.

CLARA LOOKS OVER. Corey does not have his front porch light on. But the moon shines bright enough that she can find her way. She calls Major to her and she watches him move toward her from the edge of the darkness until the moon finds him and shines down his black coat. She squats down and takes his head in her hands. She holds him there and looks into his eyes and prays. She listens and waits for God's quiet voice. Major breathes warm and heavy onto her and then he jerks his head to sniff into the bag of Corey's leftovers. Clara gets up and gives Major a sugar cookie. And she watches him take it back into the dark.

Clara prays all the way to Corey's door. She knocks and the porch light comes on. She waits for God to tell her what to do and the door opens.

"Hey, honey," Clara says, "here's some leftovers for you."

She does not want to look at him, but she hands him the bag. "Hamburger steak with that brown onion gravy you love so good."

The overhead light is swirling with bugs.

"Thank you, Miss Clara," Corey says.

And Clara tries to smile.

"You're welcome," she says and she turns to leave. "Now go on in and eat. Put some meat on them bones."

"Miss Clara," Corey stops her.

She turns and looks up to him from the bottom step of the porch. And for a moment he doesn't say anything. The swirling bugs make strange shadows on his face. And his eyes look like deep holes in his head.

"Miss Clara, I ... I heard you scream earlier. I know you saw me. And I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry ..."

His voice breaks.

"YES," HAL SAYS into the phone, "you heard me right. He was fucking his dog. Corey Lane."

The police tell Hal they'll come get Major the next morning, even though it'll be Sunday. This is a special case.

Hal tells the police everything he can think of about Corey. He's a druggie, a thief, a dog fucker. And while he talks he looks out the window and there under Corey's porch light, Clara's in the dog fucker's arms.

When Hal and Clara got married, Clara's cousin suggested that they go to Pecan Grove for their honeymoon. It was a quaint resort hotel the county

over, with little bungalows on the river. “Just big enough to spit in,” Clara’s cousin said, “love shacks.”

Hal knew Clara was a virgin. He knew he’d have to be slow, but he hoped eventually she’d learn to be wild. He remembers thinking about this while he tried to make love to her that night. How he could wrap her long hair around his fist, pull her head back, take off her clothes. But all she wanted to do was look at the river. Jumped out of the bed to go stand at the window. She would not stop talking about how pretty the stars were reflected on the water. How it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. How they made different colors, not only silver but gold and sometimes purple, too. She pulled him off the bed, put him next to her.

“See?” she said, pointing into the night.

“Yes,” he said. But he didn’t see the stars on the river. He wanted to.

AT FIRST CLARA WAS PROUD that Hal was making enough money to put a bar in their home. She thought that’s what nice family homes had. He built it in the corner cabinet in their living room, with glass shelves, silver rimmed tumblers, and fancy track lighting.

But soon after, when she’d come home from substituting, or leading a historic tour, or planting crape myrtles on Main Street, she’d find Hal slurring his words. And then she found him standing in the hall. He was in front of the pictures of their dead baby, the ones that were taken at the nice portrait studio, where all the families went to take pictures of their pretty children. And when the photographer saw that Hal had made a special wedge out of sponge so the baby could sit up without his back hurting, the photographer kept saying, “What a happy baby,” over and over again. And Clara put a white fuzzy blanket over the wedge to make it softer. And it almost looked like a little lump of snow.

And that time when Clara found him drunk, he turned to her and slung his arm down the hall lined with pictures of their dead baby. “You should have never put these up here and you know it,” he said, “I got to see them every damn day. Our pretty baby smiling.”

In her whole life of being in the church, Clara had never asked for an unspoken. It was a rare request, reserved for those who were brave enough to ask for prayers about the unspeakable. But after she saw Hal in the hall that day, in front of all the pictures, she wanted to ask for one. But she knew

as soon as she did, everyone would know that something was wrong. So she did not ask for an unspoken because she was ashamed of him.

HAL WAITS ON HIS PORCH with coffee, watching down the corner for the police. He hears a gunshot from Corey's house and looks over and sees Corey standing over Major in the pen with a shotgun.

Clara runs out on the porch, eyes wide with fear. Hal catches her.

"It was Major," he says, "Corey shot him."

"I thought it was Corey." Clara shakes in Hal's arms.

"I know," Hal says.

He holds her and hopes that Corey buries Major good enough that the stray dogs don't dig him up and strow him in his yard.

AT CHURCH WHEN the preacher asks, "Are there any more prayer requests?" Clara raises her hand and says, "I have an unspoken."

As soon as Clara puts her hand down, Hal puts his on top of hers. He whispers, "I'm proud of you."

She pulls her hand out from under his and whispers, "It wasn't for me."

She looks ahead of her at the way the morning light comes through the tops of the tall windows. How it hits the stained-glass Jesus behind the baptismal pool. He's standing with his arms open in a meadow. Baby sheep are sleeping at his feet. And when the preacher says, "Let us pray," Clara closes her eyes. She bows her head.

John Skoyles

THE SECOND OLGA

My grandmother had eight children,
one of them twice.

The first Olga lived
a mere month,

succeeded by my mother,
the second Olga,

dragged from childhood
each Sunday

to face her fate—
a stone

at Calvary Cemetery
carved with her name.

She treated the maze of graves
as a game, a way

of dealing with the world
that ended

only when she rested
next to her sister.

A lifetime of wishing
the rules clear:

winners and losers apart,
the dead and the living

unmistakably divided
into horizontal

versus vertical shapes.
And gender—

a simple matter
of pink or blue

unlike the tangled impulses
that sparked

her fiery nature as a girl
when she spun

a vicious
cat's-eye marble

off her thumb,
and held her own

in a knife-flinging game
of five-finger fillet.

Street play gave way
to checkers, chess,

crosswords, and acrostics,
extending later

to her irrepressible accounting
as a householder

of each spent cent:
TV tubes, sauterne,

sugar cubes, and soap.
Her diary a ledger

of lifeless figures,
no narrative,

no spilled memories,
everything measured,

everything contained,
and in the back

of the book,
a floridly engraved

Irish Sweepstakes receipt,
offering reincarnation,

a change of luck,
and the hope against hope

against hope
of being born again.

Childhood, Boyhood, Youth

ANDREW MARTIN

They had finished reading *War and Peace*, and now they were celebrating their triumph at a Russian supper club in Brighton Beach. There were twelve of them seated at the long table (“Just like that painting of what’s-his-name’s dinner, minus what’s-his-name,” Kyla said brightly), and, well, Derek assumed that at least half had probably finished *War and Peace*. Or, fine: he imagined it was safe to say that, on the whole, the table had at least started reading *War and Peace*.

Derek had made it to within a hundred pages of the end, though he had admittedly skimmed a little down the stretch. He knew that Pierre and Natasha got together, which had begun to seem structurally inevitable at some point—in approximately ten thousand pages there were only about five characters—though it was somewhat psychologically improbable. He also wasn’t totally clear on what a samovar was.

He'd been proved wrong in his interpretations of the text at many junctures over the eight months they'd spent reading and discussing the book, his theories and analyses shot down by better, or at least more confidently, educated members of the group. Some of them had gone to Yale and others to Harvard, and he'd developed a handy cheat to remember which had gone where. The Harvard kids acted mildly embarrassed when he said something dumb, sometimes even waiting until after the session to correct him on his political or geographic ignorance. The ones from Yale made sure to keep the humiliation public and, if possible, prolonged.

In one of their first meetings, Derek had suggested that Tolstoy showed a grudging respect for Napoleon, or was at least willing to acknowledge his world-historic importance, even though he was the enemy.

"That's *completely* the opposite of true," a tall man named Jonathan said. "Tolstoy *despised* Napoleon and thought the whole *idea* of historical significance was nonsense. Do you have any examples?"

Derek had glanced around the room for support, but even Thomas, his roommate, whom he had invited specifically to back him up in moments like this, only stared down at the massive open book in his lap.

"Just . . . in the prose itself, I guess," Derek said. "The prose about Napoleon just feels like it has an air of respect to it."

"Well, does his prose ever seem *disrespectful* to you?" Jonathan said, peering down his nose through invisible reading glasses.

"To be fair, it *is* translated," Violet said. "I don't imagine *any* of us can really comment on the *prose* style very accurately."

They all, consciously or not, transferred their gazes toward Pyotr, who had moved to the States when he was seven and was ostentatiously reading the book in his Russian parents' Soviet-era multivolume edition.

"Sorry, friends, my literary analysis isn't strong enough in either language to gauge, ah, *respectfulness*," he said amiably. "Plus, I didn't even know Napoleon was in this section. I was too busy the last couple of weeks to keep up."

Pyotr was in law school at Columbia, a sudden turn he'd taken after two years of working on a comp lit Ph.D. in which he'd planned to focus on Italo Svevo and Joseph Roth. Derek had assumed that Pyotr must be extremely intelligent, given these pursuits, but at that point he had not yet contributed anything to the reading group other than encouraging nods

and smiles. Now, after what felt like nearly a lifetime, Pyotr sat kitty-corner from Derek at the supper club, bantering with their bald, sinister waiter in, presumably, Russian. Pyotr had attended maybe half of the group's sessions, and Derek guessed that he might have read the least amount of *War and Peace* of anyone, with the likely exception of Leslie, who argued fiercely and cheerfully about the book month after month despite clearly having only the most glancing familiarity with its contents. She *had* apparently read enough to draw a faint mustache on her upper lip upon arrival at the restaurant, in honor, she said, of the little princess.

Derek mostly admired her impudence, though sometimes he wished she would admit analytic defeat a little bit sooner in the group's exchanges so that they could all move on to something more, well, reality-based. Vivek, clearly at least half in love with Leslie (most clearly when his partner, Nell, was not in attendance), indulged her scattershot theories—maybe Prince Andrei *was* gay—with what seemed to be the moral authority bestowed on him by the group. He'd had a local organizational role of some import, apparently, in the Obama campaign and, though now only in his second year of medical school, had contributed not insignificantly, in his telling at least, to “strategy and messaging” around the Affordable Care Act. Which, given what a clusterfuck *that* had become, shouldn't necessarily have accrued such favor to him, Derek thought. Like a jerk.

The reading group (*not* book club) had begun meeting in January, two months after the midterm elections that had, as they could not yet know, swept the Democrats out of congressional power for the next almost-decade, and Vivek was treated with the mild deference due to someone who had recently suffered the death of a somewhat important relative, a great-uncle, maybe, or adult cousin. There were no Republicans among them, of course, but there was some range in the degree to which politics was central to their lives, from the socialists associate-editing a newish journal of “literature and ideas” to Thomas, who presumably voted for Democrats, if he voted, but also went to church, exercised regularly, and worked for an international bank. Derek had felt in himself a recent, emerging desire for political commitment (like Larkin in the abandoned church, but for economic justice?), though he hadn't acted on it. He didn't enjoy going to protests, and he didn't want to be in one of the Marxist reading groups whose membership overlapped significantly with this one. Maybe he would ask Vivek if there was anything he

could do for 2012, though he feared that would prove less than life-changing. Hope had pulled off the big win once; what could the next election be other than a crowd-pleasing but redundant sequel?

Violet, who had invited him into the group in the first place, was directly across the table from him. She had been, until quite recently, a fellow assistant at the august, maybe dying small magazine where he still worked. Now she had a job as a web editor at a more prestigious, definitely not dying publication, and Derek saw her mostly at parties or at book club (*reading group*), though she did text him sometimes, often five or six messages in a row, to complain about some obstinate writer who wouldn't take edits or, more pointedly, at least in Derek's mind, about the ridiculousness of the date she'd been on the night before. Sometimes—*good days*, as he thought of them, with some embarrassment—this would lead to hours of nearly unbroken texting between them, during which Derek's work, to put it lightly, suffered. He'd carry out his tasks in a haze of composition, mentally rearranging the punctuation in his responses until they had achieved a perfect balance of intelligence and spontaneity. He could hardly remember what they'd been discussing even minutes after the flurries ended—the editor who'd gotten fired over an ill-judged headline, the Arab Spring, the inadequacy of birth-control options—but the exchanges left him humming with pleasure and immediately starving for more. Most times, the conversation would go cold after one or two volleys, with Derek feeling phantom buzzes against his hip, checking his phone every few minutes for the rest of the day hoping she might have decided, after a few hours of serious contemplation, to reply to “Ha, crazy! What do you think he meant???”

Derek wasn't delusional enough to think it likely that Violet had any interest in him beyond their already loosely bound friendship, but he was happy to be the recipient of her excess feelings, thoughts, whatever. She was two years older than him and had only predated him at their publication by a matter of months. But somehow this small gulf placed her on a radically distinct plane of experience in his eyes, as alien to his as when he'd been an eighth grader watching through the chain-link fence bordering the sports fields as the high school soccer team smoked cigarettes and impugned one another's manhood. He knew that this didn't have to be the case—he felt on equal footing with, if severely annoyed by the condescension of, most of the members of the reading group—but he still couldn't help but think

of Violet as morally and intellectually superior. And he felt the latter to be true despite what seemed her studied (or unstudied?) indifference to the standard intellectual markers and pretensions of the time. She claimed to be unironically engrossed by the celebrity internet, and she paid to see romantic comedies and horror sequels that could be only sociologically interesting, if at all. She chewed gum at all hours, sometimes while smoking cigarettes. And yet she was friends with *people*. The pop music critic for the *Times*. The Booker-winning young Scottish novelist who taught at NYU. She acted as though she'd gotten her fancy job by accident, as though one could just sort of pick up the phone and find oneself editing . . . *whoever* the next day. And maybe, he thought, if one was smart and cool enough (and, all right, had gone to Yale), one could.

"Okay, *least* valuable player," Violet was saying across the table to the three or four people who were listening.

"Everyone was *so* valuable," Kyla said, to Derek's left. She was very thin and very drunk and Derek wondered if it was too early to suggest she skip the next round of the already innumerable vodka shots they'd downed from the handles on ice in the center of the table. "You can't attach *value* to *people*," she continued when no one responded. "Tolstoy? Gandhi? Hello?"

"I was going to nominate Ben, because he only came once and spilled wine all over his book," Violet said. "But maybe that's 'not nice' and we should 'respect all members of the group no matter how tertiary and useless.'"

"Can I at least be the least valuable regular attendee, then?" Leslie said. "Do I get a prize? I didn't learn nothing, I swear!"

"Only a man can be least valuable," Violet said. "We see right through that mustache, missy. In addition, I herewith nominate Derek for rookie of the year."

"Aren't we all rookies?" Kyla said. "Isn't this the first and, god willing, only year of this?"

"No, and no," Violet said. "Derek is just a boy and he's from some terrible state that starts with an *i*, and yet he is a *leading* editorial assistant *and* he attended every meeting."

Derek was actually from South Jersey but it was close enough in spirit, and he was ninety percent sure Violet actually knew where he was from. Eighty percent. Also, he was a pretty bad assistant.

Vivek tousled Derek's hair, emitting a strangled howl that one had to assume was intended as celebratory. "As a commander in the Muslim Brotherhood of Hussein Obama, I hereby second this nomination for world's cutest rookie of the year dot com," he said. "Your T-shirt is hereby in the mail."

Derek leaned over to see what his sworn rival Jonathan thought of all this silliness, but he was deep in conversation with Thomas at the end of the table. Jonathan was working on a piece, he'd been telling them all relentlessly, about how economics was fake, and Thomas, in his blessed, mildly autistic way, had been contradicting him at every opportunity. Now Thomas appeared to be drawing a chart of some kind on the, well, directly on the tablecloth. The place served vodka like tap water—surely it had seen worse.

"Fifty K for a verse, no album out," Derek toasted, raising his half-full vodka glass.

Those who had been following the conversation took down their shots, or pretended to.

Prominent in Derek's mind was the fact that Violet had recently gotten back together with her ex-boyfriend, or was at the very least sleeping with him again. The ex, semi-ex, whatever, was in his midthirties, a published novelist and assistant professor at Brooklyn College named Morgan Calder. (The name sounded made up. Did writers still change their names?) Presently Violet was focused on her lap, a smirk fixed on her face. Derek assumed she was texting. The guy sounded, despite the likelihood of arrogance and unkindness suggested by his credentials, normal and decent; if anyone was mistreating anyone it was probably Violet, who seemed to fluctuate weekly between devotion and utter indifference. Not that Derek had an excess of sympathy for the guy.

He'd been on a few dates lately himself. After spending most of college with Allie (who had gone to Berlin to "check things out" and decided there that Derek, and New York as a whole, no hard feelings, had not been bringing out her best self for quite some time), he'd found himself in a series of months-long relationships, each of which had ended when one or the other party had mercifully taken the karmic blow and acknowledged that, though things between them were rarely less than pleasant, there did not appear to be a pressing need for continued brunches, cocktails, oral sex, et cetera. Presently he was spending occasional time with Samantha, the current

roommate of a college friend. She was calm, zaftig, often dressed like a cowboy. She worked for the Department of Transportation in some capacity, and people thought it was funny to pretend to be mad at her when they arrived late for something because of the subway. She had the decency to pretend she thought this was amusing. The second night he slept over at her place she asked if he wanted to tie her up—he did!—though he was more enthusiastic than effective. She made fun of him for not knowing about knots and safe words. He agreed that it would be useful to have complicated sex skills, but he got the sense that both of them were thinking these would be used elsewhere.

It *was* something of an advantage, he'd realized when he moved to New York, to be thought of as a hick on occasion. It gave him time to figure things out, which he suspected everyone, even those born on the Upper East Side or wherever, would appreciate having if they allowed it to themselves. He was from a township that was adjacent to Cape May and other self-consciously quaint shore towns, but dull and inland enough to be cheap and ugly. He'd worked beach jobs in the summer, spent weekend nights in Wildwood. His description of the Cowtown Rodeo, which his family had attended every year of his existence, was probably what had stuck the idea of the Midwest, ironic or otherwise, in Violet's head.

"What, do they do the rodeo in, like, a parking lot?" she'd said as they made their ritualistic trudge to the Hudson River on one of their work breaks, before she'd gotten too big for book reviews.

"South Jersey can get pretty country, man," he said. "These guys were legit cowboys. I never even heard that ridiculous 'Jersey accent' until I got to NYU."

"Don't worry, I believe your life was ridiculous," Violet said.

She had been born in New York (the Upper *West* Side), lived in England as a child, returned to the city as a teenager, then off to New Haven. He forgave her for all of this, obviously, because she paid attention to him.

When he'd gone home to see his family for the Fourth of July weekend, he brought his copy of *War and Peace*, reading it on the bus between bursts of motion sickness.

"Is that actually as good as it's supposed to be?" his mother said when he got to the house. "I always wondered if it was really, you know, the *best* book."

His mother taught middle school English, and when she wasn't reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the thousandth time she gravitated toward novels with ominous lines from nursery rhymes in their titles. (She appeared to be halfway through *And Jill Came Tumbling After*.)

"Believe the hype, Ma," Derek said.

"No one invited *me* to the book club," she said. "I think you could *use* a little age diversity in there. Does anybody ever admit it when they don't understand something? Or is everybody too cool and serious for that?"

"It's pretty easy to read on, like, a sentence level," he said. "There's a lot of pseudo-philosophy, though, and most people admit that they can't really follow it. Or, I mean, I think people actually *do* understand, or would if they tried, but it's kind of the convention to throw up your hands at the essay parts. *I* kind of think those are the best parts, honestly."

"Well, maybe I'll get the audiobook for my walks."

"That'd be a lot of walks, Ma."

The whole family went to Wildwood for the fireworks, his parents and sister and grandmother all piled into the aging SUV, parking a mile from the boardwalk to avoid paying exorbitant lot fees. They walked past the ancient pastel-colored motels, the narrow apartment buildings where old, shirtless men in plastic chairs smoked cigars and eyed the passing humans with naked skepticism. The crowds grew thicker as they approached the boardwalk, and they folded themselves in among the intricately tattooed Hispanic men with little girls on their shoulders, the sobbing white children dragged toward the ocean by sunburned mothers. The sounds of chaos were imminent: electronic clanging from thousands of desperate games, muffled exhortations with Eastern European accents through cheap microphones, the brief crash of the wooden coaster and its seconds of audible screams. It was a nightmare of the past, annually renewed with T-shirts bearing the previous year's catchphrases. He went regardless of whether it was, what, *compatible* with how he now imagined himself. He wished sometimes that his family were far away or unkind enough that he could justify not returning to this primordial slop, which, no matter how hard he tried for it not to, left him dizzy with despair every time he was reimmersed in it.

And yet it felt necessary somehow, not because he believed in the importance of family or tradition or any of that other insidious conservative bullshit, but more in the name of research, maybe, the ongoing investigation

into his feelings that he was conducting with what felt like increasing rigor and depth. He didn't think he was getting *smarter*, necessarily, despite all the Tolstoy and his recent, timid line-editing of elderly Nobel laureates. It felt instead like the more he learned, the less he was able to assimilate into a coherent *body of knowledge*. He was frustrated by the gap between what he knew he was capable of and what he could actively process. But, he thought, he would get older, and learn more, and assimilate more, and at some point he'd have something resembling wisdom, he hoped. And then he and the surviving members of the *War and Peace* reading group would sometimes recall over the years how insistently clever and intense they'd been when they were twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, working for people more important than they were and, some more consciously than others, building these little, yuck, *networks* for future success by hosting one another in their apartments around the city for the better part of a year under the pretext of discussing Russian literature.

Derek's turn to host, in mid-September, had been a source of near-constant anxiety after they'd signed up for slots at the first meeting. The overriding concern was, of course, that no one would come, followed very closely by the fear that *everyone* would come and he wouldn't have enough chairs, snacks, et cetera, and that they would all be too warm and crowded in his narrow apartment. His third biggest concern was that an average number of people would come and, having neither the chaos of an overcrowded room nor the immense pity attendant upon a nearly empty one to distract their attention, they would focus on the starkly suboptimal state of his decorating, housekeeping, and general life-maintenance abilities. He lived in a third-floor walk-up in Bed-Stuy that he shared with Thomas, who kept his room fastidiously clean but refused "moral responsibility" for the common room because of what he felt was an unfair rent split (even though his room was three times bigger than Derek's), and Arian, a nervous, rarely seen young Persian man who claimed to be a software developer. Two weeks before the meeting, Thomas announced that he was going to be out of town for a conference, which he had surely known about for far longer than he was admitting. Derek had suspected he might pull something like this and tried to chalk it up to Thomas's legitimately crippling—if somewhat, it had to be said, conveniently deployed—social anxiety. Derek just had regular anxiety, which in this case happened to be triggered by social expectations.

So he did his best to clean the house, scrubbing at the filthy baseboards, vacuuming inefficiently with a monstrous Oreck he'd found deep in a closet, gathering up months' worth of magazines and dumping them in the recycling box (though he would wait until he'd had a chance to go through them one more time before actually putting them outside for collection). He sent two self-deprecating reminder emails to the group and bought hummus and Brie and baguettes and two cases of decent beer, then sat staring at the pages they were supposed to discuss while he waited for it to be seven o'clock. Leslie arrived first, at seven fifteen, looking stoned and bashful, clutching her gigantic paperback to her chest as though she was going to use it to try to stop a bullet.

"Oh no, did I restore your faith in humanity?" she said, peering into the empty apartment. "I swear I just came to be polite, not because I like or respect you."

"More beer for us, am I right?" Derek said. He assumed she would understand that his reliance on a tedious cliché was intentional.

"Oh, I'll *drink* your beer," Leslie said. "Just don't expect me to know anything about *Spy vs. Spy* over here. Maybe I need a different translation. One with pictures, and sound. A *movie*, you might call it."

"We could try to find the Audrey Hepburn one online if nobody else shows up," Derek said.

"Ooo, I'm gonna tell Violet you suggested we *watch a movie* together," Leslie said. "She is gonna *freak*."

"Or we could just skip right to seven minutes in heaven."

"More like twenty seconds, I bet," she said, her head deep in the refrigerator. "Is this pizza slice, like, up for grabs?"

A perfectly unremarkable number of people eventually showed up, Vivek and Kyla and Jonathan and, hallelujah, Violet, who glanced around at the bare walls and deeply gouged wood floors and declared the place "not as bad as I'd assumed it would be." Jonathan went on and on about Irving Berlin and hedgehogs, while Derek tried to look at Violet without being obvious about it. At one point, while Leslie and Vivek argued about *Watch the Throne*, he accidentally caught Violet's eye, and she performed an extremely slow-motion and detailed pantomime of vomiting down the front of her shirt. He *wished* Leslie would try to incite jealousy in her. It certainly couldn't be any worse than this semipublic but unacknowledged *pining*.

Now, at the long table in the supper club, no one seemed to be eating enough pickled herring or creamed anything to keep up with their vodka intake. (“Where is the horseflesh?” Kyla yelled.) Violet had tripped coming back from the bathroom, and might have sprawled headfirst into the table but for the intervention of the maybe-not-so-sinister-after-all waiter, who caught her delicately by the waist and guided her into her seat without making a show of it. These things happened, after all, when aristocrats gathered. Violet acted as though she’d expected the waiter to be there, flashing him a polite smile before resuming her conversation with Pyotr. Derek had too much faith in her to be worried. If she was drunk, she intended to be drunk, and would enjoy herself accordingly. But, also, he’d keep an eye out just in case it seemed like she was about to fall over again.

He’d moved down to the corner of the table to talk to Patrick, who was the lead singer of a rock band that had just received a devastating negative review on a popular website. Derek was existentially unnerved by the unfairness of it. Patrick was sweet and funny, and everyone who heard his music loved it, and yet now some asshole had endangered his possible career because his album didn’t meet some nonsensical standard of *originality*, as defined by a critic whose sense of history didn’t extend any further back than David Bowie’s third album. As if originality even existed. Derek realized this was a rich position to take, as someone who edited (assisted in the editing of) reviews of various degrees of negativity, and he had already written a couple of less-than-positive ones himself, though they were for obscure-enough venues that he was confident he hadn’t derailed anyone’s ambitions. It was wrong, he knew, that the reason he was opposed to this particular bad review was that it was *Patrick*, a person who was already so sufficiently self-effacing that he didn’t need a website to tell him he should dislike his own work. The solution, Patrick was telling him now, was not to take things personally. One needed, he had discovered, to let one’s work be as the seagull over the ocean, drifting on currents and squawking horribly, unencumbered by the dull perspectives of the beachgoers on the distant shore.

“Huh,” Derek said.

“Yeah, I guess I’ve been thinking about it too much,” Patrick said.

“The *real* question,” Kyla was saying loudly, trying to get the table’s attention, “is what are we going to read *next*?”

“Oh, let’s read Violet’s novelist-slash-sex-friend!” Leslie said. “And then we can have him come and tell him about it to his *face*!”

“Yes,” Jonathan said. “Yes. Yes. A hundred times yes.”

“Have *you* read his books, Violet?” Kyla said.

“Ummm,” Violet said. She took a long, stagy sip of water. “Officially? Yes.”

“But among dear friends with extremely good taste and a commitment to hard truths?” said Leslie.

“*If* I were to find myself communicating with such an audience, I might feel obliged to admit that I have not yet completed the works under discussion.”

“Yet?” Jonathan said. “So you’re still, uh, anticipating completion?”

“Well, if the fucker doesn’t start learning how to *text back within an appropriate time span*, then I think I’m going to consider myself off the hook, like, in general. He’s thirty-five, not one hundred, it shouldn’t be that hard. And also, no, we are not reading his books, that is not appropriate.”

“It sounds to me like you just set the stage for Secret Book Club,” Vivek said. “Anyone who doesn’t not want to be in Secret Book Club, say nothing.”

They pondered this construction, chose to remain silent. Derek felt a surge of hope. She hadn’t even *finished* his *books*? Not even one of them? Surely they were not destined for a long and happy life together. He could wait. In the meantime he would read and write more, lose some weight, buy better clothes, get a nicer apartment . . .

Suddenly the restaurant dimmed, and green laser lights glowed through fog at the front of the room. A man in a tuxedo emerged from the alien smoke, flanked by women wearing green leotards and feathered headdresses. “Copacabana” began playing at a nerve-shattering volume, and the tuxedoed man sang heartily in Russian-accented English. The floor show had begun.

NEARLY THREE HOURS and dozens of songs, magic tricks, and unconsummated stripteases later, Derek, Violet, and Kyla were sharing a car back toward their respective neighborhoods. Derek was in a borderland of drunkenness, his memory of the night already growing disordered, but not drunk enough to be fully without care. He was, in other words, less drunk than Kyla and Violet, which meant that he felt somewhat responsible for their well-being. Kyla was, for the most part, passed out, lifting

her head from Violet's shoulder to mumble what seemed to be nonsensical driving directions. Violet was more active in her inebriation; she had, for the past ten minutes, been telling a story about an art opening she'd gone to at which she'd accidentally insulted Kim Gordon by complaining about a dress that she hadn't realized Kim Gordon had designed. Or something. It was hard to follow.

"Do you know where Kyla lives?" he interrupted, twisting around from the front seat at what felt like a reasonable stopping point in the story.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "It's . . . well, actually, no. No, no, I do not. Whose address did we give him?"

"I think yours," Derek said. "Doesn't she live near you?"

"Hmmm." She nudged Kyla, then, receiving no response, elbowed her in the side. "Hey, Ky, where do you even live?"

"Twelve-twenty-six North Lowry Boulevard, Springfield, Massachusetts 01129," she said in a low monotone.

"I'll take her to my place," Violet said. "Hangovers are better together. And if either of us dies, everyone can just blame it on the other one."

"That's terrible," Derek said. "Do you feel all right?"

"I feel the weight of the world. Right exactly on the tippy-top of my head."

"Huh. Have you heard from, uh, Morgan?"

"Honestly, no," she said. She sighed heavily. "He's . . . whatever. Life is long and full of terror. I don't have time for this kind of thing right now."

"I'm gonna read his book," Derek said. "Which one's shorter?"

"There's so many people to mee-eet," she sang, badly, to the melody of an Elvis Costello song that wasn't playing. "They only slide you up with nothing when you think you're havin' fu-un."

"I guess the only thing we could really read next is Proust. Then we could be in book group for the rest of our lives, basically."

"You just wanna keep hanging out with mee-eee," she kept singing. "But you don't want to admit it 'cause you're a little bi-it awk-ward."

"In Illinoidiana, we keep our feelings deep inside and never tell anyone about them," he said. "It's how we protect ourselves from Yankee cruelty."

She gently moved Kyla's head from her shoulder to the window, and then leaned forward to the cab's open partition.

"You're really quite a goofball," she said.

“Well, sure,” he said.

“I mean, really. Quite. Here’s good!” The car pulled to a stop. “Help me get Kyla upstairs?”

But Kyla managed to remove herself from the car under her own power, and Derek simply followed the two of them uselessly, like a third friend pretending to help move a couch. He’d been to Violet’s once before, when she’d hosted the group, and tonight it was as he’d re-created it in his head—a long, bike-choked hallway giving way to a large, black-and-white-tiled kitchen, then emptying out into a well-appointed sitting room, complete with Cy Twombly and Christopher Wool exhibition posters and a large television. The bedroom, presumably, was behind one of those doors off the hallway. He would not see it tonight. There would come a time when they would be equals, he reminded himself.

Kyla somnambulated to the couch, stretched across it like a cat, and fell immediately unconscious. Violet threw herself into the giant armchair and curled her legs under her dress.

“You’ve been a lovely audience, and I hope we passed the audition,” she said. “We really must find a way to see each other without having to pretend to read books.”

“I read almost all of it,” Derek said. He actually felt indignant about it now, and he could feel the poutiness creeping into his voice. “Am I the only one who even *tried*?”

She stood up from the chair and walked to where he was standing, at the threshold between the kitchen and living room. She put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes with the solemnity of someone trying not to laugh.

“My friend,” she said. “I think it’s time someone told you: you are not as special as you think you are.”

Was anyone, though? Could *she* be as special as he thought she was? He followed her gaze to their reflections in the dark television screen.

“Be that as it may!” he said. “I should get going.”

“You *could* stay,” she said. “I don’t think either of us is in a fit state for, you know, *substantive engagement* right now, and I’m, as you know all too well, *slightly* attached, but, I don’t know. It’s a big bed.”

Even after an oil tanker’s worth of vodka, even in the comforting dim light of the apartment he’d dreamed about more than once, he knew

better. He would go home, text her in the morning. It was an investment, his decency. It would accrue interest. He didn't understand anything about money.

"You've gotta get to sleep," he said. "I bet Kyla wakes up early."

"Ugh, she better not," Violet said. She went to the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap. "I'm locking my door."

She seemed to have already put her vague offer aside; it probably hadn't had the significance he'd given it. He probably *should* have just stayed. That would have been a normal, friendly thing to do. *Proof* that he didn't harbor some ulterior motive. What *year* was it that he was so concerned about propriety? If it had been the sixties, like it should have been, or even, hell, the *nineties* . . .

"Let's do something soon," he said. "Please?"

"For sure, for sure," she said. "Oh, wait!"

She picked up a book off the coffee table. Morgan Calder. *Some Other Way of Living*.

"Tell me how it ends?" she said. "Please?"

He opened the book to the pensively half-smiling author photo on the jacket. The guy still had most of his hair, but at least he was old. In ten years, he'd be *really* old, and Derek would only be thirty-five.

"My expectations," he said, "are out of control."

"If you hate it . . ." she said. "Well, try not to hate it."

He paged through the book under streetlights on the way home. First paragraph: way too long. How many clauses did one man need? Last sentence: something about a Carolyn "emerging carelessly" from a car. Indeed. There was no inscription. No underlining. No marginal notes. It was petty, he knew—definitely not worthy of the Midwestern rookie of the year—but it felt *so fucking good* to drop the book in the trash can in front of his building. He would buy her a new one if she asked for it back.

Peter Filkins

S O U N D B O A R D

When Archie told me the incredible story
of Lady Margaret's piano, an Obermeier plucked
from a forgotten warehouse in bombed-out Berlin,
then secretly carted off, scarfed up by the Allies
and loaded onto a plane, delivered to Ireland
only to end up the elaborate inlaid soundboard
holding Peg's ashtray, her snooker of gin,

simply amazed, I couldn't stop thinking
of Pasternak's piano tossed from a window,
workmen at his dacha deeming it worthless
decades after his death, and the poem he wrote
that warned his lover, "The shivering piano
will discompose you ... Death is in the air.
One opens up one's veins much like a window."

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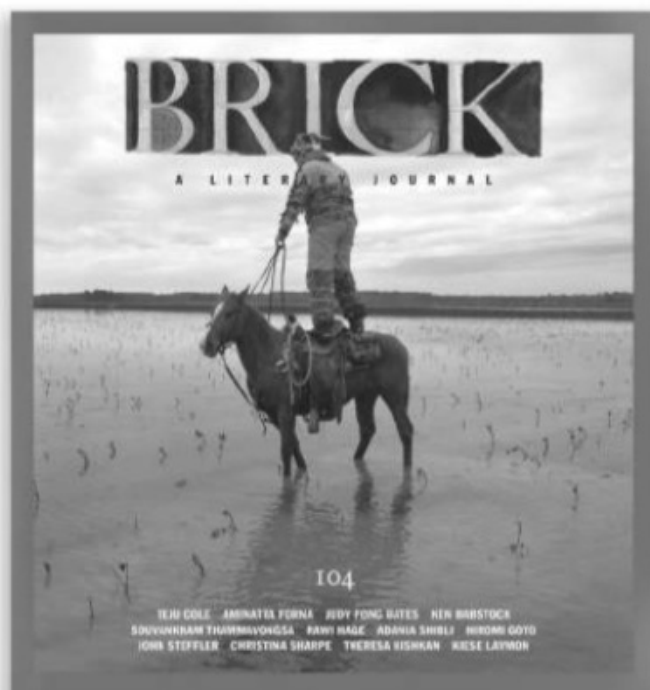


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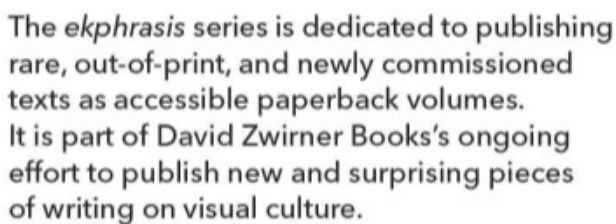
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