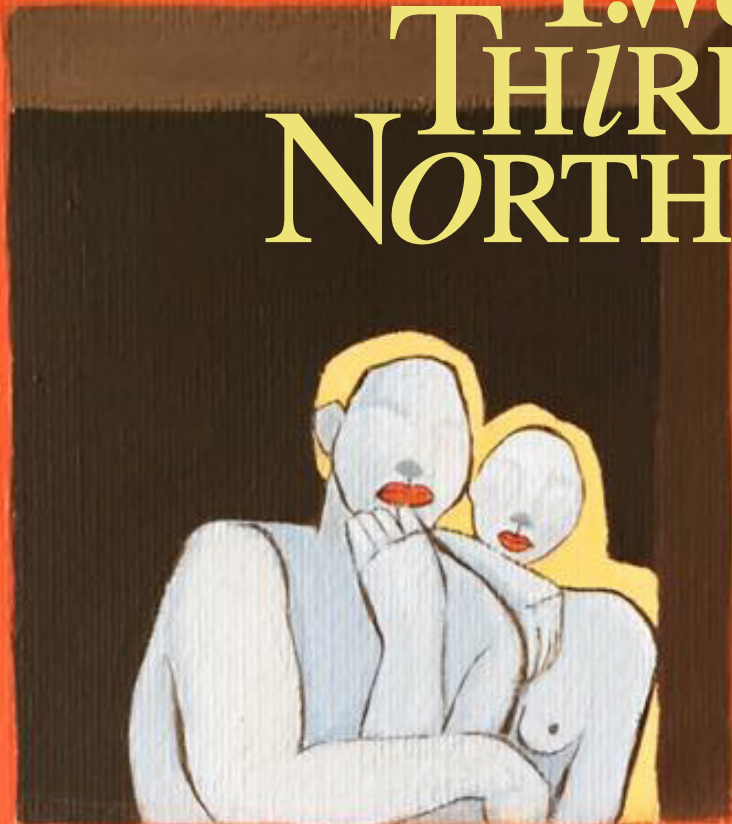


TWO THIRDS NORTH 2020



HOLLY DAY
MARLENE OLIN
ENESA MAHMIC

TWO
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NORTH

2020

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Editor's Foreword

We are in Stockholm, the home of the Nobel Prize. This was one of the major arguments my friend and colleague Paul Schreiber and I had almost ten years ago when we started thinking of this journal. Stockholm was a transnational space where literature was valued so much that it was put on the same level as rocket science. Alfred Nobel knew what he was doing, and he put it in his will that the committee should look for the best writers from nations beyond our gulblåa (the yellow-blue one). That legacy of transnationalism, seeking to bring global attention to those who have brought most benefit to human kind, was hurt this year when the Swedish Academy, following a narrow and obsolete ideology of the task of literature as well as revisionist conspiracy theories about the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, gave money and social capital of the Nobel to a genocide denier Peter Handke.

It would have been easy to cave in, let it go by without so much as a remark. After all, the previous year's sexual harassment scandal did not seem to have left so much as a dent in the minds of the perennial members. Instead, we have witnessed a global flood of literature lovers and lovers of historical truth coming to rescue what the Academy was hell bent on destroying. Writers, academics, war correspondents infused the media with the most amazing, tough, and dignified responses. The Academy members who disagreed with the ideology implied in Handke's win left.

Following an article I wrote for *World Literature Today*, “Surprised by Handke,” a few of us locals decided to organize a demonstration, *No Nobel for Genocide Denial* on the Nobel Prize Day, Dec 10, 2019. On a cold night, when the laureates were eating their dinner, we stood in central Stockholm and listened to powerful speeches by veteran journalists like Florence Hartmann and Roy Gutman, whose reporting on concentration camps saved a lot of lives. We listened to academics and translators like Vahidin Preljević and Alida Bremer. We listened to poets and actors. We listened to Civil Rights Defenders. And, to top it all, we listened to Christina Doctare, the first female Swedish doctor to join the UN, the woman who not only helped female victims of the war in the 90s, but also made sure, through her testimony in the Hague, that rape be recognized as war crime. Christina Doctare, on that night, in protest, returned her own Nobel Peace Prize.

The Swedish King did in the end shake that hand of Handke’s, but as so many have told me, the demonstration made it easier being Swedish that night. It was not really a protest, they told me. It was a testimony. It was a stand for literature and for history. A stand for our legacy. As a famous Bosnian poet Mehmedalija Mak Dizdar wrote, “Ako nam glas i nije stigao duboko do neba / Vrisnuli smo bar / Kako treba” (If our cries didn’t rise to the depths of the skies / At least our shrieking was in keeping).

Adnan Mahmutović

Transformation
&
Resistance

Metamorphosis Points

YUAN CHANGMING

I would paint my skin
Into a colorless color, & I would dye my hair
Wear two blue contacts, & I would even
Go for plastic surgery, but if I really do
I assure you, I will not remove my native village
Accent while speaking this foreign tongue (I began
To imitate like a frog at age nineteen); nor will I
Completely internalize the English syntax &
Aristotelian logic.

No, I assure you that I'll not give up
Watching movies or TV series, reading books
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hate them
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat dumplings
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak Mandarin
Though I write in English. I assure you that even if I am
Newly baptized in the currents of science, democracy &
Human rights, I will keep in line with my father's
Haplogroup just as my sons do. No matter how
We identify ourselves or are identified by others, this is
What I assure you: I will never convert my proto selfhood
Into white Dataism, no, not
In the yellowish muscle of my heart.

Step One

HOLLY DAY

We pass notes back and forth
as though our daughter were a messenger pigeon
and we lived in a time before telephones
before shouting. I tuck scraps of paper into her school folder
for her father to read when he picks her up
reminders about doctor's appointments and requests for new shoes
while he sends back answers attached to checks and paper-clipped
singles.

I think this is a step towards actual conversation, that any day now
I'll be able to pick up the phone and remind him
to buy milk, or take our daughter to the park or something
equally unnecessary and meaningless. Eventually, these requests
will segue into real conversation, something close to what we once had
something casual that doesn't make my heart grow distant and cold,
any day now.

Living in a Senior Citizen Apartment

DAVID LEWITZKY

Well now, here I am
Empty scrotumed and alive and well
More or less, and pretty much pain free

I'm allegory Dave
A wobble-winged albatross, muttering arias and blues
Deserted on an island made of dust motes
(Meaning lassitude, or pallid comfort, or a parched malaise)
In the center of the universe
In the middle of the last mile of the road

I cook my very own red meat
In my dandy toaster oven
Transformation strip steaks, pork chops of creation
Savoring with gusto my solitary feasts
And reading while I eat

I'm too feathered and deboned
To intimidate my loved ones
Too naked and too jaded
To wear a cloak of indignation
But I still shit okay, thank God
Thank you for caring

Cancer doesn't scare me any more
Nuked it in my oriental microwave

Zenned and zapped and Tae-Kwan-Do'd it
Into dust motes, ions, smithereens

I spend wistful hours with poetry and porn
Chasing Venus and Calliope
Looking for heroic life beyond my life
Like a run-on sentence
Like a wounded soldier
I try to stroke myself to ecstasy
Now and then succeed
And breathe a brittle victory

Death's intimate these days
A bold and amorous barracuda
She circles me, crowds me, circles me
Like loyalty, like infidelity
She crowds me, circles me

She lies in bed beside me now
She cuddles me, she spoons me
I must put up with her
But I don't like her very much

Although intrusive death thoughts mess with me
Invade and occupy my life
It doesn't matter. I spite them, spit at them, survive
Survive to satisfy my receding appetites
Survive to juggle seaweed in unsteady hands
Survive to keep on reaching for an angel's tongue
To sing my songs of Job and me
To sing my songs of endurance and of knowingness
My songs to dedicated, cherished life
My songs to splendid Fallen Man

Glass and Other Glass

CHRIS DIKEN

A jar of sweet pickles plucked from the dusty shelf of a premodern grocery emporium has the potential to do tremendous damage. You may think instinctively of the skull-walloping, but from a broader society-walloping standpoint please consider the thickness of the jar's glass, and how that glass could penetrate other glass. Say for instance if the jar of pickles were lobbed into the air, as high as the tops of the linden trees, and left to plummet into the UV-blocking windshield of the Mercedes-Benz, causing not just the shattering of the windshield, but the scattering of pickles and the splattering of pickle juice into the remote hand-stitched crevices of the Mercedes-Benz's burgundy leather interior. The windshield was designed to block ultraviolet radiation, but it cannot block pickles. Such an event would set off a parade of palpitations in the hearts of Mercedes-Benz owners, who do not want their sedans soaked in that which can never be unsmelled. The owners would exchange their Mercedes-Benzes for rusty bicycles, which, the more they are soaked in pickle juice, the more of a rich and satisfying patina they earn. And let us not forget that damage is the precursor to development. What the tabloids call the sour gesture of a craven manchild might be more accurately described as the start of the age of seeing

ourselves as mature, equal gurka — entitled to live freely outside of cramped jars, celebrate our bumps and ridges, and move from side of plate to center, thus displacing the hamburger — all encouraged provided we don't insult the monarchy and always, always file the correct paperwork with the state.

American Ninja

MARLENE OLIN

We live in an old-fashioned neighborhood, the sort of place that's hungry for gossip and starved of crime. Think black-and-white movies. That kind of neighborhood. Ringed on one side by the highway then a half a mile down by the local elementary. A city within the city. In the middle of Miami, a hidden gem!

But even our little square of heaven gets interesting. Take me and my sister Bettany.

I'm a guy who's vertically challenged: a whopping fifty inches tall in my John Deere boots. They're kiddie-sized, of course. On good days I weigh a hefty eighty pounds. And that's not the least of it. Big ears. Pointy chin. Twiggy arms. It's a one-in-a- million chromosomal disorder that plays shit with my immune system. Since I just turned thirty, I'm living on borrowed time.

Meanwhile my baby sister lives the life of Riley. She went to college on a basketball scholarship. Runs Ironmans. And while I look like the Keebler elf, she looks like Miss America on steroids. Tall. Tan. Toned. For the last year she's been in training for that TV program, you know, the one where you fling yourself through an obstacle course and the person with the fastest time wins. Dad's built her a practice setup in the backyard – salmon ladder, rolling logs,

ropes – the whole shebang. He’s beyond excited. Hell, the whole neighborhood’s excited. Maybe that’s why they never noticed the stuff that went missing. At least not at first.

“Funny,” said Mom one bright and cheery Sunday. We were eating bagels at the kitchen table. “I left my gardening gloves out on the patio. And now they’re nowhere. Absolutely nowhere! I looked high and low.”

Bettany, a veritable bread and brownie machine, was slathering cream cheese on her second bagel, carb-loading for her big debut. “Funny,” she said. “You know how I always keep my sneakers on the porch? Well, now the left one’s gone.”

Then it was Dad’s turn. As usual, he talked with his mouth full, the lox flip-flopping like a second tongue. “Maybe... it’s a cat.” Then he stared at the ceiling like the ceiling had the answers. “Or a possum...or a rat.”

I rolled my eyes. There was no doubt about it. My family was slowly losing brain matter one neuron at a time. “I heard Selma Plotkin lost her cane. The nice one. The one with little monkeys swinging up and down the stick.”

But while curiosity killed the cat, it certainly wasn’t fazing my parents. Life was good. Their daughter was two months away from flying to New York and making it big. They trusted their friends and their neighbors. The glass was more than halfway filled. It was brimming over.

When the whole world acts like it’s still in kindergarten, someone has to be the adult. So at night I started cruising the streets. Of course, most people think I’m just Carlton the paper guy. Picking up the stacks at midnight. Sorting. Bagging. Then after catching a few hours of shut-eye, hitting the road at five to make deliveries.

This is a public service announcement: there are all kinds of paper guys. Most are slackers and slugs. But our neighborhood’s blessed. Picture a stealth drone. I’m dressed

in black. The radio's off. The headlights dim. As I make way from block to block, tossing those papers out the car window, I see everyone and everything.

Take that fat kid Herkie Schwartz. Every morning before sunrise he hits the treadmill. He's backlit like some fucking angel, head bobbing to his earphones, stomach jiggling up and down, the sweat flying in all directions.

Francesca Vamirez, a twelfth grader at St. Johns. You can set your alarm to her routine. Six a.m. every morning she peels off her nightie and, oh so slowly, dresses in front of the window. Plaid skirt, knee high socks, the whole Catholic shebang.

I've seen Pinky Carter get slapped by her husband.

Norm Fishbein kicks his dog.

But even the most vigilant avengers have to be careful.

There are three enemies you have to watch out for. One, cats. I hate cats. The way their eyes shine like two glowing pennies. Their blood-curdling screams. Two, ducks. Stupid fucking ducks. Waddling in front of fenders. Crapping over driveways. Three, rats. Enough said. But armed with my trusted BB gun, I'm invulnerable. Untouchable. A ninjutsu legend. In and out! Whoosh! A glint of a knife in the dark.

Meanwhile one by one more items disappeared. The Plasky's hose. Mrs. Truman's flowerpot. Itchy Berman's skateboard. And no one was saying a word. So I grabbed the bull by the horns and reconnoitered the neighborhood. Life's full of opposite poles, right? For every villain, there's a hero.

I chose dusk, the time of day when everyone heads home. Since the sun sits low, my shadow's ten feet tall and growing. Unfortunately, no one appreciated my services.

"Can I walk your dog, Mr. Fishbein?"

"How's Bettany doing, Carlton? Your sister ready for the show?"

“Can I wash your car, Mrs. Carter?”

“Can’t wait for the big night! The popcorn is ready to pop!”

“Need help with those Trig problems, Francesca?”

“Screw you, Carlton.”

Clearly action had to be taken. Lighting never strikes in a fog.

We found the dead duck on a Saturday morning. It was on our front lawn, its neck twisted, its eyes bulging. Usually I can’t hit the side of the barn. But accidents happen, right?

Mom freaked. “Omigod! That duck’s dead! And it’s lying on our lawn!”

I kicked it with my boot. Yup, dead as a doornail.

Next Mom about-faced and disappeared. I heard her foraging around. Then five minutes later she came back with rubber gloves and a garbage bag. She gave me a look. I knew that look.

You’re kidding, right?

Suddenly, we both heard the sound of our landscaping guy’s truck. Juan does a neighborhood loop every Saturday, mowing and blowing every other home. Only this time, he had a new guy standing on the running board. Shoulder-length hair. Tank top. The guy’s muscles were rippling in the breeze.

Mom glanced at the sky like the sky had all the answers. Mumbling *Thank you*, she ran into the house, snatched a twenty from her purse, and chased the truck.

News travels through our neighborhood faster than fat Herkie gobbles up a taco. Between the dead duck and the new guy, a crowd began to gather. Muscle Man didn’t even bother with the gloves. He lifted the duck with his bare hands and dropped it into the bag. Me and Mom were speechless.

In one swift move, Muscle Man tossed the garbage bag

into the truck. Gliding over the grass, he confronted us. He was practically spitting distance, and the closer he got the more flustered Mom became. Her face turned red. Her hands fluttered. By this time *el jefe* Juan had shuffled out of the driver's seat.

"You meet *mi primo*, Tomar?"

Tomar, of course, had perfect teeth, teeth that could be in a whitening commercial. When he smiled, glass shattered.

Mom. Juan. Juan's brother Jose. Everyone was quiet while the spell lasted. Then all at once Tomar spoke.

"*No problema.*" He took his ducky hand and messed my hair. "*Un ratoncito!*" he bellowed. Then he scrunched his face and lifted his hands like they were paws. "*Un ratoncito! Un ratoncito!*" The performance wasn't over. After making assorted chewing noises, he started laughing.

Around a million people had now converged in front of my house. I was itching for a lifeline, an escape route, anything. Some way to propel myself upward, to vault the tree, to disappear, to slip between the cracks! Instead my father and sister showed up.

"Hey!" said Dad. "What's happening?"

Ever since my sister passed her audition, it was like he was living on Mars.

A ray of sun burst through the clouds. My sister and Muscle Man made eye contact. You could practically hear the violins surging and their DNA humming. For some people life is always good, you know? Life is just peachy keen.

Until it isn't.

The next week, in the cover of darkness, the neighborhood experienced a new rash of thefts. Things went missing left and right. And by morning, tongues were wagging. Smokes Weiner had no idea where he left his favorite pipe. Cookie Simon's new bike had disappeared. Izzie Shapiro opened up

her Camry door only to find that her garage door opener, her expressway pass, and \$12.60 in loose change had suddenly vanished.

Bitsy Johnson's entire collection of garden gnomes! Poof! Gone.

But everyone seemed to have memory issues. Nothing stuck. No one whined and no one complained. It was like collective amnesia.

Instead the neighborhood buzzed with excitement. When the following Saturday night rolled around, around fifty people gathered in our backyard. The air was electric. Every possible kind of junk food was splayed on a folding table. Dad had put out a dozen folding chairs while the rest of the crowd brought blankets. It was a one-time only exhibition: Muscle Man versus Bettany. Juan even hooked up a klieg light. Dozens of phones were poised in the air ready to shoot.

But like all watchful warriors, I was ready. After all, even vermin have to eat. Little did they know that someone had gnawed his way through assorted ropes, leaving the tiniest shreds intact, shreds that were guaranteed to tear with any tension. And while the crowd was hooting and hollering for their favorite, a pair of hands had furtively carried assorted bikes, gnomes, and flower pots and placed them in the bed of the landscaping truck.

We live in an old-fashioned neighborhood, the sort of place that's hungry for gossip and starved of crime. So when things go wrong, everyone notices. The crowd roars. People gasp. A man soars. A woman falls.

And then—like that last limp heartbeat—it's over.

Memories
Against Histories

She Exists

ENESA MAHMIĆ

“History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am
trying to awake.”

James Joyce

There is an invisible history
Hipparchia, the wife of the Crates of Thebes
life without property, without conventions
naked bodies in the squares
disturbing as the truth itself
in the squares mobs are lynching
Hypatia of Alexandria
peeling off her flesh and skin with sharp shells
Sinestus,
you can not question your beliefs
I have to.
Conical sections, neoplatonic books
vanishing in flames
Rosa Parks refuses to get up on the bus
for a white man
there is a violent history
life and death in Sorghaghtans hands
great Emirs and Mongolian troops
They were not allowed to step out of the line
Which she set out.
Ahhotep, empress of all lands
she guarded the soldiers, returned the deserters,
transformed the prisoners
Zoe with the poison

Lucrezia Borgia, more poison
magic, revenge and meaningless fights
the latest archaeological discoveries
the bones of a mighty Viking warrioress
age: 30 years, height: 170 cm.
There is an unwritten history
Saartie Baarkman, Venus Hotentotkin
an exotic behind exposed
in the cage, in London
black skin, myths of savages
woman cunt
all possibilities vanish

All she could have been
before they pushed her into the cage
there were human gardens
in Brussels in 1958.
Nineteen fifty-eight!
Like a monkey, a child tries
to get milk from a skinny tit.
The elite observe
the ticket is cheap.
There is Nadia Anjuman
verses alienated by the hands of a husband
Professor of Literature
without any penalty or judgment.

Home
when I was leaving the morning was foggy.
Faces pale from insomnia
wandering toward offices, schools, banks.
Cats wailed on the roofs
A hunched old man was collecting leaves.
Nothing could have moved that eternal order

neither could awaken lulled mass
and I went like that is possible.
I walked for a long time:
masks and traps
and sore feet.
Soil accustomed to clattering invaders
does not tolerate soft step.
Ghosts of the past choked me with tough hands.
Trust me
there were all kinds of beings
who naively were grinding too much
ironically expressing themselves because they can not be accepted.
There were a fleeting, perverse, idiots
most of them were lonely.
It should be adapted to make a deal, bend the spine, lose form.
The voice on the radio repeated:
Folks. Common will. Person. Force.
The words fell like dead birds.
I went so far
under this sky
while my being did not cry: Home!

Dream Job

CLIVE DONOVAN

He used to write verses for birthday cards
till he got the dream job;
taking scenic photographs
for the jigsaw trade.

He stays in Alpine chalets
and tropic beach-side huts,
castles of Bavaria and Canadian cabins
in the Fall with all its mapled glory.

There is never too much solid blue,
he always gifts a cloud or two,
his straight lines are a boon to those who are lost
in a clueless sea with impossible waves

and the lifelines of his foliage are the stems that weave
out of the forest of leaves with their difficult greens
and propensity of flowers to morph
unfocused to faces of those he loved;

the woman he left behind
in a garden of tall hollyhocks
with a watering can and a fake robin,
jumbled forever in a box.

Frank the Redeemer

ROBERT MCGUILL

Frank drove to Joey's apartment that morning on a mission of goodwill. The Robe was playing across town at the old Rialto Theater, and in the spirit of Good Friday and the holiday weekend, he thought it would be nice to show a bit of unexpected brotherly love. He looked forward to visiting Joey, which hadn't always been the case, but within minutes of walking through his younger brother's front door the entire enterprise fizzled.

"It's a simple yes or no proposition," Joey said, when Frank winced at the notion of lending him five hundred dollars. "Either front me the money or don't. But please, Frank, no lectures."

Frank slumped briefly in the face of Joey's rebuke, but quickly propped himself up again, demanding to know what sort of trouble Joey had gotten into this time and how that magical sum was going to get him out.

"Why do you always assume the worst, Frank?"

"I'm your big brother, Joey. I know what's what."

Joey shook his head. "All right then." He sat back, the smug look of acquittal on his face, and pressed his fingers together. "I met a woman. I'd like to take her to dinner, if it's anyone's business. So there's your conspiracy, Frank."

“That’s it?” Frank said, warily. “You need money for a date?”

“I want to take this girl someplace nice. Nice places cost.”

Frank pursed his lips and nodded. He wasn’t ready to open his wallet yet, but Joey had piqued his interest. A date? All right, he could see that. His little brother could use a woman in his life—to keep him out of trouble, if nothing else—so who knew, it might be good investment in the long run? No way he was doling out five hundred, not under the sunniest of circumstances, but he could, maybe, afford to toss a few bills the kid’s way.

“Full disclosure, Frank,” Joey added, leaning sideways and plunging his hand between the sofa cushions, rooting for some unseen object. “Her name’s Jasmine.”

“Jasmine.” Frank mulled this, nodding again. “Okay.”

“And she’s an escort.”

The head bobbing came to a halt. “Escort?” Frank’s face crinkled. “What do you mean, escort?”

“She’s a call girl, Frank. And don’t look at me that way. It’s her job, okay? It’s how she pays the electric bill. Anyway, before you go getting all self-righteous on me, you should know she also happens to be an accomplished linguist, and scholar.”

“Let me get this straight.” Frank pawed at his temple. “You want five hundred dollars to take a streetwalker to dinner. So you can impress her.”

Joey continued to dig among the cushions, a distant look on his face. He paused, smiled briefly and produced a crumpled pack of Marlboros. “Further impress her, Frank. But I need to up my social game.” He shook a cigarette from the pack and lit it, tossed the pack on the coffee table and put up his feet. He worked the cigarette between his teeth, took a long drag, and turned his bloodshot eyes to the ceiling. “I like this woman, Frank. I like her a lot.” He looked at Frank, openly. “She could be the one.”

“The one.”

“Yeah, the one. I’m tired of living alone, Frank. I’m ready for something different. Something steady.”

Frank stretched his neck, uncomfortably. What was it, the old joke about prostitutes? You didn’t pay them to stay, you paid them to leave? He stared at the stain in the middle of the rug that had once lain on the hardwood floor of their father’s study, wondering how it was he and Joey could have been born into the same family yet come away with such different moral sensibilities. “Why can’t you see this is a terrible idea?” he said, looking up after a long silence. “Why do you insist on sabotaging your life?”

Joey’s eyes narrowed, lids falling. He sat up and tapped the ash from his cigarette into a half-empty beer can on the coffee table. “Jesus Christ, Frank. Can’t you, just once, do me a solid without climbing into the pulpit?” He shook his head and took another drag on the cigarette. “You’re a banker, for Christ’s sake. Who died and made you Pope?”

Frank looked on, quietly imagining the disaster the loan would help finance: a candle-lit dinner littered with gin and cigarettes...a bottle of port for dessert...a blunt or two on the ride home, and if all went as expected—how could it not?—an eightball after the hapless paramours tumbled through the door of Joey’s apartment.

“I’m trying to protect you,” he said, “Can’t you see that? I’m trying to save you from yourself.”

“Yes or no, Frank.”

Frank lowered his head. “I’m sorry. No.” He didn’t feel good about turning Joey down, but he didn’t feel bad about it either. He was the big brother here.

Joey said, “Fine.”

Frank, reddening at the curt dismissal, said, “Look—” his voice bore an odd mixture of sympathy and anguish, “don’t you realize how cliché this whole thing is, Joey? How

embarrassing it sounds? The tired old story of the hooker with a heart of gold?”

Joey stared at him, unfazed. He plucked the cigarette from his lips and said, “She holds a Ph.D. in enigmatology, Frank. She speaks three languages, fluently. One of them Mandarin. Why would I be embarrassed?”

Frank’s shoulders collapsed. “I dropped by to invite you to lunch. I thought we could spend some time together. Catch up. Have a few yuks. You know?” He reached into his pocket and produced a pair of theater tickets. “What do you say? You and me. Lunch and a movie.”

Joey dismissed the offer with a brusque wave. “No thanks, Frank. Not interested.”

“Come on!” Frank urged, mugging a goofy face. “It’s Good Friday! We’ll celebrate the simple miracle of a fish fillet sandwich! Spend the afternoon in a nice cool theater watching an Easter classic!”

Joey raised one eye, cigarette dangling from his lip. “Fish sandwiches make me sick Frank.”

Frank leaned back, blinking. A weight settled against his chest. “Joey. I’m begging you. Please, in the spirit of lost grace and personal atonement, clean up your life.”

“Clean up my life?”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean, Frank? Clean up my life?”

“It means take stock of what you’re doing before you run afoul of the law. Again.”

“I’m too fast for the law, Frank. You, of all people, ought to know that.”

“Well what about the law of averages then, huh? You think you can outrun physics? You think you can play around with dirty people and not get dirty yourself?”

Joey laughed. “The law of averages isn’t physics, Frank. It isn’t even science.” He dropped the cigarette, hissing, into

the beer can on the coffee table. "And as for the rest? Who I choose to run with is nobody's business but mine."

"Joey," Frank persisted, "I'm trying to help."

"Money helps, Frank. This? Not so much."

Frank sighed.

"I'm a bon vivant, Frank. You're the bean counter. We have different worldviews. I like trouble. To me, trouble is fun."

"You realize that isn't normal, don't you?"

"Says who?"

"Joey, whole generations of men have passed through this life without ever being pepper sprayed or tazed or beaten with truncheons. Entire lineages of fathers and sons have wandered this earth without ever having been indicted for a crime, or locked behind bars. There are people on this planet who've never had their wages garnished, or spent a night in jail, or smelled the inside of a rehab facility. They're the norm!" Frank pressed his hands together and shook them, gently. "Your life is chaos, Joey. Your friends are bottom feeders. Can't you see that?"

"My life is my life, Frank. It's mine to do with the way I want."

"I know. But we share the same blood, Joey. The same last name."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning when bad things happen to you, they happen to me."

Joey took another cigarette from the pack and lit it, saying nothing. He picked up the remote and turned on the TV.

Frank understood he was being dismissed. He rose from his chair and picked up his car keys. Whatever calamity lay ahead there was nothing he could do about it.

The study of puzzles. Those were Joey's final words as Frank left the apartment. They'd offered one another a strained goodbye, and when Frank paused at the door and asked him what enigmatology was, Joey turned from the television and said, "The study of puzzles, Frank. What else?"

Frank looked down and contemplated the last of his fish fillet sandwich, thinking it had sat better on the imagination than it did in the gut. But he finished it anyway despite the soggy fixings, his fries, too, and chased them down with the last of his lukewarm coffee.

The restroom lines at the Rialto were notoriously miserable (the theater drew hoards of leaky old men with prostate problems), so before heading there he detoured to the men's room. There, halfway through the door, he stumbled over a heap of filthy clothes. Clothes inhabited by a young man with a scraggly black beard and long matted hair.

The young man's eyes fluttered, blue, straining to stay open under a pair of desperately heavy lids. His arms were spread to either side, as if he were whisking up snow angels in the back yard. He clutched a belt in one hand and a homemade needle, fashioned from a bottle stopper, in the other. His face was childlike, radiating a blissful cherubic glow.

"Hello," he said, his thin, colorless lips shaping themselves into a smile.

"Hello yourself," Frank said. "Happy Easter."

The young man groaned in satisfaction.

With a nimble bit of footwork Frank hopped over the prostrate boy and sauntered up to the urinal as if he were Gene Kelly capering through the mists of Brigadoon. He supposed he should have been horrified at the sight of the young junkie sprawled on the tile floor. But he wasn't.

Years of playing nursemaid to a derelict younger brother had numbed him to such debaucheries. The only thing that interested Frank was whether the theater's balcony would be open for the matinee, and whether he would arrive in time to find a good seat.

He closed his eyes and exhaled. The cares of the day began to drain away in a long slow gratifying wave. His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled, imagining himself in a velour recliner in the Rialto's darkened mezzanine, a box of warm popcorn in his lap.

"Ain't but one train runs this track..."

His brow rose and he opened his eyes.

"It runs to Heaven and it runs right back..."

He glanced around the room, searching for the source of the music, thinking someone must be piping it in over the restaurant's PA. But the singing was coming from the heap of filthy clothes on the floor. It was so sweet and tender and full of longing that it raised the hair on Frank's arms.

"Bravo," he said gently. "Bravo."

Encouraged, the boy beneath the heap of clothes sang on, putting himself deeper and deeper into the lyrics, and as Frank listened his heart unclenched its worried grip on the world. The music was alive. Full of hope and wonder, and he couldn't help himself. He broke into applause, a happy little outburst that caused him to water the leg of his trousers.

"St. Peter waitin' at the gate..."

Closing his eyes, Frank raised his voice alongside the boy's, "...says, 'Come on sinner, don't be late...'"

He sang as if he'd been waiting his whole life for this day, and for a single transcendent moment the miserable morning he'd spent with Joey felt as long ago and far away as the execution at Calvary.

The bathroom door banged open and Frank turned to look, the song still on his lips. A man appeared backlit in the doorframe. Squat, broad shouldered. The man wore khaki trousers and polished oxblood loafers, and his cropped gray hair sat on the flat of his head like a patch of rock wool. He said nothing, but his expensive aviator sunglasses flashed contempt.

The singing ceased.

The door swung closed on squeaking hinges, and the man stepped forward into the light. He paused in front of the sorry-looking heap at his feet and lowered his head.

Before Frank had time to consider the severe angle at which the man held his chin, or fully appreciate the ferocious, hup-two precision that had been imparted to the creases of his crisply starched, button-down shirt, he was struck with the notion that the fellow was military. Career military. A retired officer.

“Son of a bitch.” The man looked up from the stricken boy, setting his shaded eyes squarely on Frank. “I don’t believe this.”

“I know,” Frank said with a mild shake of his head. “He’s good, right?”

“Good?” The man bristled. “He’s holding a needle, for fuck’s sake!”

The smile on Frank’s face dissolved, twisting the corners of his mouth into tight little knots. He looked away.

“Well?” the man demanded.

“Well, what?”

“You think maybe we ought to do something?”

Frank nodded at the urinal. “I am doing something.”

“I mean about this!” The man snapped an accusing finger at the boy. “Look at him!”

Frank did, briefly, then turned back to the urinal, pursing his lips. It was Good Friday, for crying out loud. What did

the guy want? If you couldn't forgive a junkie his trespasses on Good Friday, what was the point in the resurrection?

The little man scowled. "This is a goddamned disgrace! You're a goddamned disgrace! Singing a song, in a public bathroom, with a—"

"It was a duet," Frank said, defensively.

The man seethed, pressing his fists to his hips and spreading his short muscular legs as if he might block the doorway. Frank ignored him. He wasn't going make it to the Rialto, he could see this now, and the thought of missing the movie caused his heart to plunge into a deep, dark funk. He ran his hands under the water. Shut off the tap and dried them. Before he left he looked in the mirror, but the reflection that came back at him was that of the little, military man.

He couldn't say why he decided to rescue the boy-junkie after the little man went off looking for the restaurant's manager. It might have been because it was Good Friday, or because the junkie was a dead ringer for the Risen Savior, or even because he hoped to derail a tragic, modern-day crucifixion at the hands of the police. It could have been any of these things, or a combination of a million other altruistic impulses flashing through his conscience. But it wasn't. When he hustled the boy through the emergency exit and sped away with him in the backseat of his sedan, his inspiration for doing so had been simple: he'd saved the junkie in order to save himself. He'd seen the reflection in the mirror. He didn't want to be that man. Now, or ever.

"Here," he said when Joey opened the front door of his apartment. "Take him."

He delivered the withered heap of flesh into his brother's fumbling grasp.

“Who is he?” Joey demanded, eyes going sharp and suspicious. “Why are you bringing him to me?”

“Don’t you recognize him?”

“No.”

“He’s the least of your brothers.”

Joey frowned, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. “Don’t fuck with me, Frank. What are we doing here? I can’t have this loser hanging around my joint. I happen to be busy. I’m entertaining a lady.”

Frank dipped into his pants, produced his wallet and removed five crisp hundred-dollar bills, which he stuffed into Joey’s shirt pocket.

Joey pulled them out and looked at them. “What’s this?”

“Money.”

“What for?”

“I’m paying for your sins.”

Joey looked at the bills, the junkie, Frank.

“You help him, I help you, we all help each other,” Frank said. “That’s the deal.”

Joey thumbed the bills and said, “I’ll do what I can.” He stuffed the money in his pocket, rolled his shoulders and raked his fingers through his hair.

Frank started for his car, which was idling quietly at the curb, when a young woman in a camisole appeared in the hallway. She was stepping into a pair of heels, and when she saw him she combed a wispy strand of hair from the corner of her mouth and smiled genially.

“Frank,” Joey said, as the woman walked up to them, “I’d like you to meet Jasmine.”

Frank put out his hand.

The woman took it.

“Pleased to meet you,” Frank mumbled.

The woman bowed slightly at the waist. “您好。”

Jasmine's Mandarin, as best as Frank was able to determine, was flawless. But even more impressive was the way she seemed to understand his brother. Joey had always been a puzzle. A man torn by demons. Yet this woman, this beautiful, tri-lingual enigmatologist/streetwalker, had fallen into his bed and put him back together, piece-by-shattered-piece. Frank still had trouble imagining Joey in a committed relationship—hooker or not—but the two lovers appeared enamored of one another and he supposed that was all that mattered.

“And what about Muskie?” he asked one afternoon, inquiring after the kid-junkie he'd rescued from the men's room. “How's our musical friend faring? You guys still getting along? No more shooting up in bathrooms, I hope. Not public ones anyway.”

Muskie had moved in with Joey and Jasmine. The arrangement was supposed to be temporary, but they'd been together two months and counting.

“I think Muskie might be moving on soon,” Joey said, darkly.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Jasmine's a little concerned about him.”

“Concerned?” Frank began mixing himself a drink. “How come?”

“Turns out people are looking for him.”

“What sort of people?”

“You know. People.”

Before Frank could inquire further, Joey changed the subject. Everything was cool, he insisted, sunshine and lollipops. He told Frank he was making serious headway with his year-old worker's comp claim, his romance with Jasmine was off-the-charts (his only reservation being she still worked nights, which was absolutely murdering his circadian clock), and if things kept going as they were with his finances, he'd have the five hundred dollars paid back

in no time.

“No, no, no,” Frank said. “Forget the dough. It was a gift.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, of course.” A sly smile found its way to Frank’s lips. “You’ve really turned things around, little brother. I’m proud of you. You’ve got a steady girl now, you’ve made a new friend in Muskie. You’ve got some spending money in your pocket. Hell, the chips are all falling your way.”

A week later Muskie moved on, just as Joey predicted. Only, along with the extra set of clothes Joey had given him, he’d helped himself to two silver candlesticks, a vintage Radiohead poster, and Jasmine. Joey had been at the unemployment bureau duking it out with some state-employed pencil-neck when the great Exodus took place. So coming home to an empty apartment was a bit of a shock—even to a man who claimed to embrace the high-voltage lifestyle.

Joey’s early morning call had roused Frank from his warm bed, interrupting a happy dream and, worse, casting an early cloud over the entire day. He groaned inwardly as Joey related the news, sensing he and his troubled brother were now back to square one. “Jesus,” he said, pulling open the French doors to the patio and staring up at the sky. “That’s awful.”

“You’re telling me.” Joey sighed into the mouthpiece. “I don’t want to sound dramatic, but that Radiohead poster was irreplaceable.”

“You going to be okay?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Frank walked to the breakfast counter. “I suppose not. But are you feeling all right?”

“I feel murderous, Frank. But that’s to be expected.”

Joey ceased talking and Frank moved the phone to his

other hand. He tightened his robe and looked out the kitchen window at the begonias in his flowerbox. He was thinking about the tiff he and Joey had gotten into on Good Friday. The strange happenings it inspired, and the classic movie he'd missed while trying to put things right. It was as if he could see Richard Burton in his tribune toga at that very moment, standing in the backyard next to the birdbath, eyes raised to heaven...mumbling, Stop it! Why don't you stop it!

Let it be Enough

PAUL SCHREIBER

We said two thirds was enough to put the lie to purity.
Like polar explorers coming this far and saying,
“this is enough, I’ve seen enough.”
The lie of perfection might lie in its dead crystal cold
of race, of nation, the one true faith.
My grandfather, mid-nineties and teased by a century, asked me
“why should I want more?”
Now I am two thirds there, have come to know only the partial thing,
and feel its blessing.
Is not the good of a day,
the good of a friend, a dear colleague,
the good of a life-wrapped tale,
the good of a poem
enough?

II

—

III C

Church Big

TIMOTHY ROBBINS

“Aunt Sally’s heart’s as big as
a church.” I’m 13, small for my
age but my nonfiction looms
high as a cathedral. When the
feelings and the movements

are childish enough to be
called love...But the movements
were long ago and required by
the script, for he was and
wasn’t the slave called Jim and

I wasn’t and was Tom Sawyer.
My feelings are like the stir in the
audience when the houselights
relax. What if a fellow player
or Miss Young (our director)

notices? What if cruel miracle
makes it as visible as my bony
arms, ribs and clavicle, as his
rounded biceps and pecs left
bare by our Missouri overalls?

Should a shop kid notice from
the clouds, I can say it’s jitters.
But Jim/Not Jim must know
his picking me/unconscious
Tom up in the quiet dark off-

stage is the feeling's cause. He
must be pretending not to recall
two years ago in our rooms, in
tents in our yards, in our fathers'
garages, we played at love as


11-year-old boys have done
since the first adolescence.
Now I am only I. He is only
He. We shake hands on his
parents' patio. Elvis and Nixon.

Harold Ray Brown

KITTY STEFFAN

used to live across the street
& 3 houses down
from the Smiths on South Pierce Street
in New Orleans, and he once said
the city
is like the uterus of a woman.

I know that woman.

 I wrote her name here,
then I crossed it out because
why should you know
who and how I love
or why, but know
that she loves me too and
God loves her
so we're alright.

And it's true
what Harold said.
He saw her and thought, There
she is,
God-fearing, fallen
risen, born
again, her childless Womb
was meant for us,
the poets insatiable
yearning for *That*,
That Something
in her soul, her

icebox key lime pie Sweet
Soul.

He must have thought, Oh Agape!
She loves me and I know it and I bet
she makes killer ambrosia
and Jello 1-2-3
and keeps her man in line and
happy mad in love
for sure, and if I talked to her we would
be happier for it and for sure
I, too, would be anointed with
her Luzianne sweet tea,
her casserole communion, her heart, her
good, good heart and I
surrounded by her seafoam walls
would jam to the Music of her Womb
with happy mad in love
Uncle Snarly
who once won eight grand on TV
and played with Rockie Charles and Coco Robicheaux.

Harold Ray Brown
no longer lives across the street
& 3 houses down
from the Smiths on South Pierce Street
in New Orleans, but she remembers
Him
playing his drums on the porch.

Punto In Aria

DARCY SMITH

In the dim of one thousand mornings
we're knotted, not quite summer

more like an early mist
drunk on daylilies tipping

light into lace,
set free of scaffolds.

We left parchment
nights stained

screams inside
fingers, folded wishes.

We were stitched seams lifted
like an old pattern torn

twitching heat, your evening
hands, iron spun in swells

you tamped
with fists and left

my arms aching—to cage
each surge with a safety lock.

Our eyes lit by the blood moon,
we hide in a rent of lace.

You taste like daylight
a dozen long stem reds,

balloons that said
Get Well Soon.

The Ruins of Knossos

WILLIAM DORESKEI

in memory of JG

You knelt in the ruins of Knossos
and prayed for your broken life.
Something answered, showering you
with elegiac rage. The window
of the palace overlooked the sea,

but distantly, a line etched
on a cloudy-bright horizon.
Although you rejected flimsy
and inconsequential writing,
so much San Francisco remained

you could hardly remember Pittsburgh,
where the mythical rivers meet,
site of your most eloquent disdain.
Maybe Crete and the smaller islands
also lingered beyond their use.

Maybe your lover, dead of cancer,
flowered like a prologue rather
than flail in violet shadows.
No one can say, since your death
has canceled your dementia.

Maybe you've returned to work
in steel. Maybe your degree
has finally taken root

and grounded you inside yourself,
where there isn't a sea-view

anymore. The islands drift
on the edge of the known world.
The modest skyscrapers of Pittsburgh
punctuate the unknown world
and skewer your heart. The fuzz

of beard you sported at last
framed you in the palest light
to commemorate the distance
between Knossos and the heavens
you tried so hard to endorse.

Careless

TIMOTHY ROBBINS

I was careless with the pictures. I thought they were all alike. All carcasses. All harmless. That was me at the Luxembourg airport. Sad eyes

in a sad face looking at the young woman behind the camera, Petra, whom I was leaving behind, who wanted me to love her as a straight man

would but wouldn't have loved me if I had been straight. Chris Robinson stands blurred on the left. The longer he stayed in Europe, the

more American he looked. Here he is, pointing to a presence beyond the shot, a sign the rest of us should have heeded,

an escape route, a truly duty-free shop. Right and further back, Thomas Ludwig solicits a tardy traveler who should be annoyed by

the delay. To this day I wonder if Thomas, stunning statue that he was, knew how eagerly strangers surrendered their smokes, spare

change, shortcuts to him; how honored they felt to touch the hem of his his breathing, feeding, wandering. Petra's lens, like a swollen

eye and my pitying gaze have roped us
off from the scene, isolating us like picture
in picture on today's state-of-the-art screens.

How Boy-me loved himself. He'd been raised
to it, like a prince to uselessness, a sumo
wrestler to the tussle, Kobe beef to the plate.

I was careless with old snapshots. Now
it's too late. Longing for a former me that
should be but isn't requitable, strands us both.

Carpenters' Land

JOHN HORVÁTH

We have arrived like summer's clouds
seen approaching, amassing, that drift
slowly off as we wonder,
 “when will it rain?”

Ours once a nation wove life from grass
plains whose fibers and tinctures ours
before crescent sword, before cities.

Ours once a nation peopled by neighbors
rattled from towns to forest tall timbers
we wasted on homes become houses.

Ours once a nation never fallen to ruin,
torn down; replaced further west, then
further west from where we had been.

Ours once a nation of down-trodden,
outcast, homeless (some against our own
will), starving for hard wood and pine.

Miscreant carpenter's all of us.

Ours now a nation of splintered, cheap,
multiples of rusted processes, cinders.
Ours now a nation of sawdust compressed,
galvanized muscles, wrought-iron tendons.

Ours now a nation of soft walkers under
canopied corporate tree farms, evenly
spaced for comfort.

Insights
in
Sightlines

Bluebirds

ELOISE BRASON

We grew up in the white Victorian farm-house on Marsh Road, about a mile from Johnson's corner where the American bomber pilot, Bill Johnson, crashed his Flying Fortress in 1944. People used to joke that you could send a postcard from anywhere in the world to The Big White House in Hamstreet, England and it would reach us. Our kitchen walls were lined with cards from friends visiting the world, and in the beginning, there were so many. In the beginning, the house was full. There were parties and dinners and spontaneous visitors; we hosted bonfire night and boxing day, always, at our house.

Before they built the bypass, lorries used to thunder down our road on their way to Ashford. Due to the boggy foundations, our house began to lean, sinking a fraction as the ground shifted beneath it. It stressed my father a great deal, and he spent many a weekend finding new ways to dig beneath the front of the house to try and save it. Ultimately, though, the projects were abandoned as water pooled in the holes and was absorbed into the brickwork. My Dad would sit and brood, festering in the clammy corner of the garden room as he drank and stewed in the dark, listening

to the rain. Gradually the paint began to flake away in white, chalky clumps exposing the claggy, saturated stone underneath. We could never keep books on the walls and one by one, the postcards spoiled and we threw them away.

Some nights, I would sneak out to lie in the dark road and look at the stars. In the summer, invisible frogs croaked in the ditches, but in the winter the ground lay silent and cold around me. I'd focus on the chill that iced my skin, slowly sinking deeper into my bones. I'd test myself to see if I could endure it long enough for a frost to settle, watching my breath swirl in with the clouds and the stars. For hours, I tracked satellites as they glided across the night sky and watched the lights on the bypass skim over the horizon and disappear into the darkness, feeling the vast, empty space of the black, marshy fields expand between us. When the screaming stopped and the back door slammed, I could go back inside. A damp, sour silence hung heavily in the house. Cautiously, in case he returned, I'd creep through the shadows up to the room I shared with my sister. She'd take off her headphones, blow me a kiss, and snuggle back under the covers. One by one, my brothers would emerge like wandering spirits from their hiding places. We'd never speak about what we'd heard.

In the Spring, my father would drive us through the countryside to Dover. "Tunnels or bunkers?" he would call over his shoulder with a knowing song in his tune. "Bunkers!" we'd all cry, "Bunkers! Bunkers!" The tunnels were an official National Heritage site. Miles of secret war tunnels, built into the cliffs of Dover under the medieval castle. Before the tour you'd gather in a mock air-raided shelter to watch a film about the underground hospital and Churchill's command centre. You'd hear about the genius of Ramsay and Operation Dynamo, and watch old footage of Spitfires flying over the white cliffs as Vera Lynn sang

about bluebirds. The smell of antiseptic ointments and boiled vegetables that matched the props were piped into the tunnels, helping to bring history to life.

The bunkers were the unofficial site. We'd discovered them whilst on a trespasser's picnic by the lighthouse where you could catch the fresh wind coming off the channel sea. There were 3 main spots: the big mouth, the rabbit hole and the ladder room. My dad tricked me into going down the rabbit hole first once. "It's like Alice in Wonderland" he said, holding the thick, long grass to one side as I squatted next to the pit. A rusty plate ineffectually sealed the entrance, but I could slip around the edge and dangle to the rubble in the darkness below. Once inside, I stood at the top of a long concrete staircase that plunged deep into the ground. Frilly crops of mould and fungus lined the walls, and spiders scuttled about my peripherals. "See you later, Kay!" my dad called from the outside, laughing as he stomped the earth, faking walking away. I knew it was a trick, I knew he was still there, but as the cold rose from the depths of the tunnel, dragging with it a paralysing silence that made the pitch black twitch, I froze. If I screamed, I'd be stuck with its echo as unmentionable horrors reacted, crawling and clawing their way up the staircase to find me. I was sure that the moment I turned around to escape would be the moment that they lunged, so I stayed put, watching the darkness, waiting for ghosts. Of course, Dad startled me. In a low and quiet voice that slammed into me so violently that it still wakes me from sleep, he said "Boo."

The ladder room was the smallest bunker but we liked it because usually, we could go alone. The big mouth tunnel was for playing hide and seek. It opened up the side of a hill and led to a large room with eight off-shooting tunnels that you had to crouch down to run through. We would disperse - some with torches, some testing their bravery without - and

when you caught someone, you'd start a hunt team. We'd emerge after hours of playing, dusty and happy, tousling each other's hair to shake out the dirt and the rocks. Plumes of ancient filth billowed off our bodies and settled on the bright meadow like scattered ash. On a bad day, this meant stripping off and sitting naked in the back on the way home. When he beeped at other cars, forcing them to smile and wave, I'd retreat: head down, heart clenched. On a good day, he'd pick dusty poppies for my Mother to hang in the kitchen.

In between the three bunkers was an above-ground bomb shelter that we could never get into but we'd clamber on top, all six of us and use rocks of chalk to draw pictures on its black, tar roof. The brambles and hawthorns that grew thick around the shelter made it tricky to climb, but a small concrete ledge on the bank beside it provided a handy step up. My two older brothers would stand on this ledge and haul us smaller ones straight up from the ground, sling-shotting us onto the roof. Afterwards, the boys would leap across the gap, racing each other to get there first. The day I made the leap myself was a big day. I'm not sure that my little brother ever did. Mum and Dad would sit below, lounging on woolly checked blankets, quietly drinking French beer as the hawthorn blossom blew about them. When the black of the roof was covered in chalk drawings, Dad would heave himself up and judge our efforts. Depending on who was in his favour at the time, a winner would be selected. He'd stroll the length of the roof stroking his beard and scuffing his heels over the lines we'd carefully traced, attempting to fuel a competition that we never really cared for. He fell once. We all went home.

There was a time, when I should have been too young to remember, that we drew an SOS sign. One huge, glorious, chalky signal. We spent hours colouring in the letters, and

were covered from tip to toe in squeaky powder that clogged the torn skin around the shiny pink grazes on our knuckles. There were no winners that day, and I couldn't tell you why. I probably shouldn't tell you at all. Just like I can't tell you why, in the end, he bricked up doorways in our house so there was only one way through. I can't tell you that he beat a kid by mistake, thinking he was his or what he said to me on my big brother's wedding day. It doesn't fit. And you won't ask. Instead, what I talk about now, what I tell you, what I can say, is that at home, we eat chips on windy pebbled beaches. At home, we go to pubs on Sundays and pick blackberries by the side of the road. I have five siblings and my Mum lives in a cottage by the sea. And you won't ask for anything more. So I will never need to tell you that last night, and the night before that, I've dreamt about finding him, sitting there, dead in his chair, fingers clenched around his empty glass, skin slack and grey around his long, crumbly skeleton, and that I lifted him, with ease, like a sleeping child and carried him up the dark, quiet staircase into their cold, dewy bedroom and lay down his bones. As a pathetic, wet breeze wafts through the rotting window and dampens the sheets around him, I lay brick on cement and sealed the tomb.

Lights

DANE HAMANN

Lights wander like cotton in the window
of my squint.

Hundreds.

Thousands.

Short-lived stars

fumbling into the harsh night
to tally the final business.

But the minutes rebel,
sorting themselves into hard blues and greens.
A forest of concrete.

Sidewalk shining
like milky glass.

My body continues
to chop a line through the air.

The sky toes

over the horizon.

Time sings its song,
and I've become a disciple of this
confusing orbit of myself.

The lights
blossom and I emerge as an echo.
Never do I catch the previous me.

On the Bulgarian Hairdresser's Countertop

SUSAN E. GUNTER

For Nadejda

A geode

emblem of her craft
her rituals of iron instruments
and burning acids that crack
women open to reveal
their jeweled insides.

A vibrator

reminder we can climax
turn ourselves inside out
in virginal whites as we glance
behind to make sure no one watches

A lime

for our fertility,
our juices squeezed until
only bitter rinds remain.

An eyelash curler

medieval torture object
reminding us that beauty
comes at a high price.

A Christmas box

still displayed in June
proof we forgive her
for the pain she causes
as she transforms us.

An angel

so small it almost vanishes
behind the geode the
vibrator the lime the curler,
the box.

Above My Ceiling

DAVID HEIDENSTAM

Above my ceiling a baby's howling.
Someone, a woman, the mother prob'bly

Starts back shouting

"Stop

the crying

Stop

the crying

Stop

the crying."

Then they go, and there's silence,

And I lie there waking

Then all around begin to hear a sighing

Through empires, ages, an endless mourning

Of voices young and old; and others, stronger, calling

Through hope, love, anger

Power and fear

"Stop the crying

Stop the crying

Stop the crying."

Montparnasse

IAIN TWIDDY

Maybe in Montparnasse, when the drapes give
into a morning of long-fingered rain,
where the cars unzip the film of the streets,
and the gutters suck the twigs and the muck,
and beads caress the plumping breast of the crow,
and the heat swells in the open window,
they dream that they're making love in Ise,
where the thick-treed foothills nuzzle the mist,
and tatami mesh fleshes the reed-bank scent,
and a kimono eases aside, heels
grind, and the breath embeds at the mirror
of the window, like haze above Ise,
the reflection on days of warm rain like this,
they're making love, surely, in Montparnasse.

Sexy Blues

IAN C. SMITH

Just Like Uncle Cyril

As a small boy irritating my mother I often heard her say I was like Uncle Cyril, a man I never met until he was aged, who became a kind of legendary desperado of boyhood imagination wrought by maladjusted behaviour. In infancy I likened him to a charismatic murderer in a B-grade movie seen with my parents in a smoky cinema.

A little older than my father whose South London family my mother constantly put down, Cyril was a veteran of Dunkirk, the ragamuffin boys, their father, all soldiers during war, that schismatic blight on so many lives, ours included. Sorely bereaved by those tumultuous times, my mother refused to explain about despicable Cyril when inveigled to tell me the worst. He apparently 'did things'. Mystery always intrigues.

A highly-strung hot-tempered woman tortured by many a bane, my mother forbade me from playing with the girl next door after we compared genitals, squeezing weewees for each other just as my furious mother came upon us. I was about two, the girl slightly older, therefore culpable by my

mother's reasoning. I also infuriated my father loosening door handles suspended from them rubbing my soft penis against the door's edges. Just like Cyril, I was.

Their coaxed smiles in a photograph near my computer, maelstrom of troubles all quieted now, remind me I fulfilled a boyhood fantasy, a quest to unite this scattered and battered kin in my brief cat's whiskers time of life, a backpack my office, researching an episode of a popular TV programme featuring reunions. My mother at last opened up about Cyril, just a little. I knew he left his family for another woman – they attended the reunion, still together, still chirpy – but hadn't known that his first wife, long dead before this edgy retirees' shindig, had been close to my mother, telling her, she said taking a breath, whispering, Cyril asked his first wife to do certain things in the bedroom.

Edited Memories

In and out of menial work, we moved into a bungalow behind a house. Another building with a tall aerial contained equipment of the landlady's brother, a middle-aged unmarried radio ham. My bride, seventeen, cooked her first married meal after our three-day honeymoon at a lakeside guesthouse, the most luxurious three days of my irrevocable life then. Skin peeled from her saveloys like the ruined skin of burns victims, and I struggled to swallow, anxious to retreat into word games I invented.

I had booked the train – satisfying wheel clatter, swaying carriage – and accommodation, an escapade costing most of my money, wanting future approval when asked about these things, perhaps by someone who talked softly at night to people in faraway places. Then the lake we had to ourselves, enclosed by dark hills dense with trees, sentinels casting shadows, echoes of arrhythmic rowing splashes dousing my

Camel as I thought of past lives, in love with a world of possibility.

That radio ham, who kept his distance from his sister, a harridan, and her son, a hulking oaf our age, was also a photographer, befriending us before asking if my wife would pose for glamour shots. He gave her prints of these, failed to persuade her to bare her breasts, she told me, offended, yet thrilled. We had long shared automatic sex needy adolescents crave for comfort. When married only two hours I had met, danced with a guest, her voluptuous friend, wishing we had met earlier.

In wan light, heart still beating under these old ribs, mind chafing back over blisters, those people, us, when rural railway platforms were glimpsed in the present tense, reminded of Diane Arbus's marginalised subjects captured in time, requiem's sadness steals over me. We didn't live there long, swept on, eventually drifting apart, annulled, draining like flood detritus into the dark lake of memory.

Bittersweet Exile

A beginning: engraving my thoughts, seeking Lowell's grace of accuracy, in this new place of withering cold after my flight from home, disapproval, responsibility, bastardry, betrayal. Sparse nest-egg a rationed lifeline, I exchanged dollars, climate, culture, friends; cutting off contact. Freedom is a thick notebook, this tiny rented inefficient heater, an attic room under rainfall muffling distant incantatory sounds of city sirens, everything I attempt building a fresh start.

I have landed with a landlady who cares only for profit, the hairy bathroom challenge, camping gas stove, bare slanting walls where I blue-tacked the comfort of maps,

enabling what I believe many desire yet suppress; a state of nerves on high alert, another chance at the mad tango before their bones whiten, my only enemies now, some regret, time's passage, and the electricity meter.

Words I have wrought, light stabbing the pitch black unknowns of life, shall represent memories as others' collected photographs do when I reach old age, that shadow speeding towards me I cannot imagine, its accelerated momentum. I know I should, and do, savour this accounting as rich men enjoy sun-dappled days aboard yachts, venturing into the streets' girdered hive once more, precious notebook pocketed, collar turned up against a blur of rain while I possess the strength to resist, hunched in the traveller's jacket I shall keep forever, shriven by words.

In Focus
Omar Sabbagh

Review of
Omar Sabbagh's
*But It Was An Important
Failure*

ROWAN FORTUNE

The wild cry of this undulant night
Whose blue's more silver than purple
Slides like a voice in search of signs
Like words, foils of the brave sublime—
The flesh of many minds like symbols. (p.51)

The title of Omar Sabbagh's *But It Was An Important Failure* responds, via W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Auden described Bruegel's depiction of Icarus's fall not as momentous, but backgrounded, trivialised against the foregrounded concerns of the everyday slog, "everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may/ Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, /But for him it was not an important failure." The relevance this has for Sabbagh is suggested by one of his epigraphs prior to being developed by the

poems themselves. In a quote from Robert Skidelsky's book on John Maynard Keynes, the biographer laments that we have not so much "lost our beliefs as that we have lost the belief in the possibility of having true beliefs." Icarus, here, stands in not just for belief, but for sincerely believing our capacity to believe, for the conviction and therefore daring of taking flight with wings of wax and braving the sun.

In "Loving Vincent," Sabbagh most precisely unpacks how such a failed fall is important. A film about the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh allows this figure to assume something of the Icarus archetype, with the poetic voice confronting the 'artist, sweatiest, whose right was rightly wrong.' The first person voice concludes as if taking the vantage of a different type of onlooker from Auden's, the figurative ploughman now turning towards (rather than away from) the scene of Icarus's descent: "I cannot slash/
Across a canvas with such visceral, filmic truth—// My
licks, my daubs are meagre; they serve to serve the reign/
Of radical wand-strokes of a madly better man." However, this is juxtaposed in the preceding stanza with a declaration that stands in contrast to such self-deprecation by elevating the poetic voice over that madly better man, "In the cinema
of our lives, in the desert of the same,/ My love has more
panache." We all exist, this suggests, to achieve such important failures. And the most important occur in the desert of the real.

It is in this way, through back and forth reformulations, that Sabbagh's verse often carries on a conversation with itself. It approximates the train of thought, a seeking after truths of love and art that finds in them Skidelsky's sincere beliefs and those important failures Bruegel and Auden miss. For example, in the poem "Pangloss" Sabbagh continues to engage in indirect conversation to tease out the meanings and importance of that titular failure. Here,

this is done by encountering the theodicy of Gottfried Leibniz, re-rendered by Voltaire's satire. Each stanza of the poem engages in the problem of evil at a different level, so that we begin with the 'uncoiled cogs of the disaster' and move to the thought 'of how sadness might be a permanent place' and then glimpse a new life, which can "remedy all." This coalesces in the last lines, which are thick with implied redemption, "Winter my wits, once burdened with that bony sadness—/ Choosing to un-remember the Life in a life's dun remit." The collection encompasses awe, and how human bonds set the transcendent limits of worlds: "It's hard to fathom a future farther than this woman" (17) It further encompasses the melancholy of "the cloth of a death-dyed world," (34) but more often Sabbagh is fixated on joy in others, on transforming pains into a prefigurement of hope.

One of the most touching pieces is from "Three Sonnets For Faten" (dedicated to his wife). It begins with "a positive sum" of the poet's existence: "*Of a good life, better, best—we cohere to the call: Pleromatic...*" (45). Theological references like this are often returned to in Sabbagh's work, deployed to grasp the elliptical, but also because the problems Sabbagh engages—problems such as the meaning of suffering—are traditionally religious. This attention to containing the whole shape of life, especially as miraculous and redemptive, is a frequent anchor, "All my nightmares have led to the dream of you," writes Sabbagh in the exquisitely titled "Heartbeat," continuing on the next line, "All the lived, the viscid horrors, turn at the beauty/ of one who cannot be anything as yet" (50). Particular places as much as particular people are important in Sabbagh's poetry and this collection is not an exception. His poems are confessional, they might touch on grand subjects with universal resonance, but they only make sense when located and bound. Whether we are

taken to Dubai or Beirut, where winter rain “is like the glamour of the people” (58), places as much as people—their textures and specificities—give ground for Sabbagh’s reflections to land before again taking flight.

The poetry of *But It Was An Important Failure* is nestled between self-interrogations in prose, the latter of which is personal look at the act of writing itself. It begins with an observation: “Nearly all of the poetry that comprises this collection was written within the space of half an hour, if not less—and very rarely ever revisited” (75). Sabbagh says that this method does not signal a lack of care, but that he is “impulsive, impatient and lucky enough to have a facility with language and the configuration of senses that allows me to write, on occasion, good verse quickly and easily.” This is borne out not only by the novelty and vividness of imagery and meaning, but how the rawness and quickness of thought is captured. The “pre-verbal experience” is present in so many of these poems, and what Sabbagh dubs the urgency associated with a story that needs telling. This serves a more fundamental purpose in writing, which is ultimately “to cultivate my private garden” (76). It is a return again to theodicy. Such cultivation, achieved through confessional, autobiographical poems, embraces the goodness and importance of a life lived with true belief. To try to circumvent that urgency, to revisit and re-render the poems and excise what’s spontaneous about them, is an error, as “whatever else a man might mean to possess/ In the way of true deep grip—to live like that,/ Knowing the end, might be to fear the sea for its wet” (35).

Excerpts From

Omar Sabbagh's
*But It Was An Important
Failure*

On Digging

OMAR SABBAGH

For my father, Mohamad Sabbagh
Dubai

He passed many years ago, now, parked and glossed.
I teach his poems nearly every day. I trust the sparks
Of all his embers still glow, glimmer; I have to.

And through the eddies, the heartening ebb and flow
Of the rug and weave of all this time, textures passed
In the company of the angles of the angel-dark,

I have realised a truth filled with the violin's mark –
You know, the unlucky one, sublime, perhaps, a thorough
One that lasts. The years since have lifted the curse

And I feel better speaking to you now. The rasp
Of all the digging done, now as then, then as now,
Comes up twenty years away – and the effect, filmic

As it ever was. In this sunk, son-bit movie, though,
The emanations revolve; beams turned upwards, they ask.

White Noise

OMAR SABBAGH

Strange to say it, but I've a nose for such things,
Smelling the whiteness, greenness, and so on...

I teach Plato, for instance, and the platonic folly
Of seeing that you see, the light, the lightest worry,

And I dance across the stage of the dapper class
Raging wrongs, kinds of error, lessening in kindness,

And I dance like the eye does / like the other one,
Too, where two eyes make one, make two, make

That seam that seams like with like, with unlike.
And with unlike, I teach my pupils to grow, blacker

And blacker, till they return to their origin of white.
I've a nose for such things, though it's strange to say it.

And the white noise, and the white noise muddles along
To the middle of the flesh that meets the dark laughter.

Writing On The Wall

OMAR SABBAGH

For Faten
Dubai

We have paintings of course, and scented photographs
That smell of the different colours that have coloured
Our pasts. And I have drummed against the walls
As well the biggish bookshelves. The creamy light
From the windows' skies boasts itself, brags itself
As of a better timber than the yellower, less-woodier
Kind the lamps provide. What more, what else? Well...

There are these lines, ascending from the smudgy white
Of my new and old machine – and there is my wife.
And therein lies the lie-less find of my life – there, in
The russet-brown redress, there, the aching redemption.
It's hard to fathom a future farther than this woman;
The bachelor was a mask, always, for the married man –
And I, who have asked all the questions, ask none more.

Contributors

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Rowan Fortune is a freelance editor and writer with passion for poetry, utopia, the gothic and philosophical fiction, and has recently edited *Citizens of Nowhere: A Utopic Anthology*.

Timothy Robbins has published three volumes of poetry: *Three New Poets* (Hanging Loose Press), *Denny's Arbor Vitae* (Adelaide Books) and *Carrying Bodies* (Main Street Rag Press).

Kitty Steffan is a Romanian-born writer whose juvenilia is scattered across elementary, middle school and high school publications. Her first poem appeared in *Two Thirds North*.

Wen Tang is a southern Chinese, living in Sweden, painting sporadically.

Omar Sabbagh's latest books are: *Minutes from the Miracle City*, *To My Mind, Or, Kinbotes: Essays on Literature and Reading* and *Fiona Sampson: A Study in Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. He teaches at the American University in Dubai (AUD).

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